

"Legionnaire, Pt. II: Conflict Resolution"

By Kenya Gaede

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Preface

First off: no cheating! If you haven't read Part I, put this book down, step away slowly and go read the first part. Because of what transpires in it, I believe it adds indescribable depth to Part II.

We've gone through fun and games, hardships, trials and mistakes with our primary characters, all of which puts the second part in a state of increased tension right from the beginning.

Our characters are continuing to develop throughout Part II, but in terms of leadership and increased skills in combat. As in real life, no one's perfect, and our characters will still make mistakes.

Side plots involving supporting characters will be developed and we'll see how their tasks affect the war. Rogues and Special Forces play paramount roles in unconventional warfare against the Seditious army. Here we'll see some old, familiar characters and be introduced to some new, fun ones.

We'll get to see the dark lord himself in action, and understand why he's so highly feared.

If you're like me, you're always a bit disappointed in movies or books that elude to the boss or main bad guy as having great and terrible power—but we either never really see them, or the confrontation between the hero and villain isn't at all what it was built up to be. I want to *see* why the bad guys are bad, and not just be told about them.

As I warned in Part I: if you stop there, you'll only be depressed forever. Again, I do believe in happy endings, though the outcome of this tale might not be quite what you expect.

But now, get ready to see the conclusion of war—and rivalry.

"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is

earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every evil practice."

- James 3: 14-16

"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes"

- 1 John 2: 9-11

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering around in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."

- Hebrews 11:32-38

"For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned."

- Hebrews 6:4-8

Chapter 76

Rogue

Running feet pounded over the wet road.

Pedestrians watched the lone figure sprint by before looking back up the street. Four local law enforcement officers ran in pursuit.

The civilians didn't feel obligated to aid their cause. The officers were being strong-armed by the Seditonists, who were slowly encroaching on this town.

The thief was obviously faster, pulling away from the officers before ducking down an alley. It spit him out at the top of a large staircase leading down to another road.

Leaping onto the broad stone railing, the thief slid all the way down the stairs. At the end, he flipped and twisted off, landing lightly on his feet.

And then stopped.

Five officers surrounded him, rifles raised.

"End of the line," said one.

"Set the bag on the ground," ordered another, "and then raise your hands."

Sighing, the thief, hood of his coat pulled up to hide his face, complied. Slowly slipping the messenger bag over his head, he set it down and raised his hands.

Cautiously, three officers approached while the other two hung back to cover their comrades.

Two officers, on the left and right, each reached for an arm.

Exploding into action, the thief spun and slammed his fist into the face of the officer on the left. At the same time, he used his reverse momentum and kicked the officer on the right.

Both were put out of action. The third officer attempted to melee the offender but was too slow.

He dodged the butt of the rifle and struck the officer in the head with the side of his fist. He swiped the weapon away, but was forced to duck as the officer on the left attempted a tackle.

The man's forehead met a sharp elbow, dazing him before he found himself tossed towards his companion on the right.

The third officer jabbed.

The thief stepped sideways and threw his elbow into the man's face before giving him a kick backwards. It sent him crashing into his two friends. They all fell back, into the wall of a building behind them.

I would stay down if I were you, suggested a thought to two of the officers who'd fallen against the building. The most conscious and least bruised, they were the likeliest ones to make a move.

They didn't reach for their sidearms, which they'd dropped. Instead, they merely watched the thief.

Not even winded, he grabbed the bag and slung it over his shoulder. It was then they realized how tired they felt, the weight of their eyelids growing heavy. They didn't even recall which direction the thief ran.

When they opened their eyes again, he was gone and three of their comrades were groaning and holding various areas of their bodies.

Ten minutes later, the thief reached his destination. He slipped inside the poorly lit bar and plopped down loudly on a stool. One of the two men beside him jumped in surprise.

"I didn't even hear you come in," said one.

The thief removed the bag and set it on the bar. Then, reaching up, he pulled back the hood of his sweatshirt.

"Sorry I was late. Ran into some unfriendly law enforcement personnel."

Landon nonchalantly rummaged through the bag's interior. He was a commander of the local resistance forces fighting against the Seditonists.

When he pulled out one of the contents, he glanced at the thief.

"That's the newest version," nodded the thief, raising a glass of some kind of brown liquid. "I know. Things keep gettin' smaller."

The commander put the tiny driver back in the bag and handed the thief a wad of bills, which he pocketed.

"When are you going to get back into the thick of things?" he asked quietly. "We're struggling out there..."

The thief took a sip from the glass. "I'm busy just surviving, commander, and I'm not fighting an entire war for everyone."

"It's been six years," said the commander gently.

"I know how long it's been," replied the thief with clipped words before pausing a moment. "I'm tired..."

The commander's buddy cleared his throat and tried to lighten the mood. "Well, we were quite lucky to run across Miss Shahan when we did. There wasn't anyone else who could've broken into enemy supply quarters and gotten these drivers."

Cadence threw back the rest of the drink, set the glass on the bar and looked at him. "No such thing as luck. It's divine providence."

That made the commander raise his eyebrows. "You...you still..."

"Yes, I still believe in God," answered Cadence flatly. "Frankly, He's the only one I prefer to talk to nowadays, even if He is silent in response. He's the only one I trust...the only person I like."

She paid for the drink, slid off the stool, and gave the commander a slap on the shoulder. "Take care, commander."

In the six years that had passed since Seditonists had launched their campaign, in the six years since her parents were murdered by the hand of her own sister, Cadence had slipped into obscurity.

She had not spoken with any past friends or any of the generals since Chad saw her at the lake during the attack on Elywn. A week later, she'd vanished and dropped off the map.

Since then, Cadence Shahan had gone rogue.

Chapter 77

Menace

The double doors of the large meeting hall blew off their hinges. The local fighting forces opened fire while the dust was still settling.

After the initial burst of fire, they stopped. They could scarcely see the doorway through the thick dust that hung stubbornly in the air.

The lights dimmed before a tremendous force struck the consoles that a group of men were hiding behind. It turned the consoles into shrapnel and threw the men backwards, killing them on impact.

Another barrage of rifle fire filled the lobby. The rounds seemed to be absorbed into the dust before the assailant finally walked through the doorway.

Lance in hand but not engaged, the lone dark warrior stayed her course.

The shots disintegrated into smoke feet before reaching the target. When the men considered this, they began falling back, towards the rear of the building.

The ones who broke from cover were struck with another powerful shockwave, which killed them. Several others were slammed to the ground.

The dark warrior strode towards them, and the three men found themselves unable to move, barely even breathe. When the assailant reached them and studied their faces, she engaged a crimson lance and fell them.

Eyes lifting to the others still fleeing, the dark warrior glanced past them and to the rear doors. They slammed shut and locked from the outside.

A fresh burst of weapons fire came from the balcony to the right. One round hit the assailant in the arm, but she didn't so much as flinch.

Settling a glare on the soldiers, the lights of the hall began to flicker. With one quick movement, the dark warrior removed something from a pocket and flicked it onto the ceiling directly beneath the balcony.

A breath later, it detonated. The force of the explosion ripped through the concrete and the balcony collapsed, burying the soldiers.

The last group of survivors, towards the rear door, futilely opened fire.

The assailant's gaze leveled on the man in the middle and continued forward. In the final strides, the dark warrior deflected the shots before cutting down the two men on either side of the target.

The final man found his weapon wrenched from his hands before a blade struck him across the shoulder and leg. He dropped to the floor, where he glared at the dark warrior standing over him.

"The Seditonist generals don't appreciate you planning an assault on our outpost here," said the dark warrior. "Tell me, where are your forces hiding, commander?"

The commander, sweating from the pain of his wounds, shook his head, defiance obvious in his expression. "No."

The warrior's glowering expression tightened into a glare.

Sharp pain, like a thousand claws digging into his skull, latched onto his head. The pain of his wounds was amplified and a terrible darkness pressed around him.

"Why do the likes of you always have to make things so difficult?" snarled the warrior.

"And why did you turn on us?" growled the commander in response.

He spit at the assailant's boots. "Traitor!"

The dark warrior's eyes narrowed.

Seconds later, the commander felt his ribs beginning to break, one by one, puncturing his lungs and filling them with fluid.

"Know this, commander," said the assailant snidely as the man gagged and coughed up blood, "that I will find your forces, and I will slaughter every single one of your men."

Tilting his head, the dark warrior studied the man as he tried to breathe with crushed lungs.

"Look at where your resistance has gotten you, your hard work...it'll all be for nothing in the end. You picked the losing side for this round."

The commander was on his side, unable to catch his breath.

"And...I...I pity you," he breathed.

Rage flared through the warrior's veins as pain latched onto the commander with a tighter grip. It felt like fire had ignited, tearing through his body, and he unleashed a terrible scream.

Would you have chosen the same side, thought the dark warrior, even if you knew your choice would lead you here?

Panting through a clenched jaw, the man managed to look at the assailant. *Yes.*

The dark warrior clicked her tongue. Twirling the lance, she then struck and killed the commander.

Turning sharply, the assailant stroke back through the lobby. The lights exploded in passing, throwing sparks everywhere.

Passing through the doorway, the dark warrior removed a grenade from a pocket, pulled the pin and tossed it over her shoulder. Walking down the steps of the meeting hall and starting down the road, the grenade exploded, throwing flames everywhere. It ate at the wood furniture and anything else flammable, and the fire quickly spread.

In the middle of the small town, the warrior stopped. Glancing up at the sky that spit down drizzle, the dark warrior, Kiera Shahan, closed her eyes at the biting wind that whipped through the hills.

The fire blew out the windows of the hall, and she shot a look over her shoulder at the building now consumed with flames.

The light of the blaze caught her dark green eyes...and the gold crescent below her irises.

In the six years since turning, Kiera's heart had blackened and hardened until she felt nothing. The only thing that made her feel anything, that filled the hollow void called her soul, was slaughtering the enemy.

Her mind, having long since been darkened, remembered nothing of mercy, of joy or compassion. She went wherever the dark lord told her to, spilling the blood of their foes. She was a feared dark warrior now, to be avoided at all costs.

In the half-decade since she'd fallen, Kiera Shahan had become a menace.

Chapter 78

The Others

“Of course, we could use her help, but no one knows where she disappeared to...again.”

General Ronain paced about the vast conference room of the battle cruiser. He scratched at the back of his head before rubbing his face. Then, with a loud sigh, he planted his hands on his hips.

No one could blame him for being so restless. They all felt that way. The plan had gone accordingly thus far, but that didn't make them feel any better.

“And then there's the task of convincing her to help us,” voiced Mason, arms crossed.

Ronain gave a little shake of his head. “I don’t think she could refuse our request on this. It’s quite personal. He’s very important to her, even after all these years apart.”

“But if Miss Shahan doesn’t aid us, then we must make plans for that contingency.”

Every head turned to see Commander Arthos and his warriors file into the room.

Ronain rushed around the table to greet them. He and Arthos shook hands and grasped one another's shoulders. “It is so good to finally see you again. General Eliezer deeply wishes he could be here.”

“I understand completely,” replied the commander.

Everyone had immediately sprung to their feet upon the entrance of this great commander and his men. They all knew about the assault on Miraz that took the lives of three of his warriors. It was a deep loss, yet somehow he and the others had come out of it stronger, wiser.

There was something about them that demanded the utmost respect.

“Allow me to speak with her,” said Arthos.

Hailey and Tucker, sitting at the table, exchanged a glance.

They’d been with Ronain since the beginning of the war, through many battles. Both had developed into very able warriors, and they frequently worried about their close friend ever since she’d disappeared years ago.

“Well, of course,” nodded Ronain, “but we don’t know where she is. Cadence vanishes for months at a time...”

He paused when he saw Arthos smile a little.

“As it so happens,” said the commander, “a friend of Red’s happened to spot her just a couple days ago. Ain’t that right, Red?”

The big warrior to the commander’s right gave a single nod.

“I’ll go while the rest of my men stay for the fine-tuning of the plan. When I return, it’ll be in time to initiate the rescue.”

With a sigh, Ronain nodded. “Very well, commander.”

Arthos gave him a slap on the arm. “Either way, we’ll get your friend out.”

Ronain managed a little smile.

Somehow, he thought to the commander, I think it will be easier to execute a successful rescue than to convince Cadence Shahan to rejoin the fight.

Chapter 79

Test of Resolve

Adrenaline flowing, hearts racing, they ducked behind heavy underbrush. A breath later, a pair of dark warriors exited the building, which served as their headquarters.

“We’re in position,” whispered the team leader.

“*Standby...*”

He gave a reassuring nod at the others before returning his gaze to the building.

“*Okay, go. Camera footage is looping. They won’t see you.*”

They broke from cover and crept along the walls, setting the charges in place. Several pairs of men broke off and headed for the rear of the structure. Thirty seconds later, they were finished and sprinted back for the trees.

“*Team Three, what’s your status?*”

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“Nearly set,” replied the team leader. He glanced at the low ceiling of the tunnels they were walking through and setting explosives in.

They passed beneath one of the secret hatches in the concrete floor above their heads. They could hear faint footsteps. Lots of footsteps.

The team set the final charge and gave him a thumbs-up. With a jerk of his head, they went back down the tunnel. Once out of earshot of any doors, they broke into a run.

“Team Three is set.”

Ω

“Okay. Alpha will topple the first domino,” said Commander Nestor.

Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at his two warriors, Hawk and Lana. They’d climbed to the roof of the building the moment Archer looped the surveillance camera feed.

The two warriors gave him a nod, letting him know they were ready.

“Go!”

Getting a running start, Hawk and Lana launched themselves over the left side of the building. The ropes pulled taught and swung them towards the side. They punched through a second story window boots first, crashing into an office.

Nestor executed the same maneuver, except off the right side.

The dark warriors in the office never knew what happened. They heard the sound of breaking glass, the familiar crack of lances, felt a flash of heat and then nothing else.

Hawk and Lana met Nestor in the main hallway. Turning right, they jogged down the passage. They hadn't gotten far when two dark warriors appeared in the doorways in front of them, drawn out by the commotion.

Total silence hadn't been the idea of this little mission, so confrontation was to be expected.

Lana already had her lance reengaged and swung. Blades locking with the enemy on the right, she kicked him in the knee. It gave and she twisted over him, whipping her lance around and stabbing him through the back.

Hawk, meanwhile, slid under the blade of the other warrior and nailed him in the legs. The enemy tried to twist away, but it was no use. The Legionnaire had him in his grasp and snapped his neck.

Lana ran onward down the hall as Hawk jumped to his feet.

In his peripheral, he saw the two lances of the fallen warriors fly from the floor and disappear behind him. Throwing a look over his shoulder, he watched the lances engage when they flew past Nestor and hit their mark in the two enemies who appeared behind them.

The commander threw a look over his shoulder and met Hawk's gaze.

They knew they had to be careful. They were in a building with enough explosives under it to clear the entire valley. An exploding grenade or powerful shockwave could set things off before they were ready.

Then again, if they were prematurely incinerated, then they wouldn't have to worry about the escape portion of the plan. It was all about the silver lining.

Another two warriors appeared in Lana's path. She barely had time to slide to a stop and nearly collided with the enemy on the right.

Using this to her advantage, she slammed the hilt of her lance into his diaphragm before elbowing him in the face. She ducked the crimson blade, which nearly ended up in the chest of the wielder's companion.

Lana could sense the strong hatred and anger rolling off them. But she wasn't offended. These weren't the types of people that made good friends anyway.

Whipping her blade up, Lana deflected one lance up and to the side. Bending back to avoid the second blade allowed her to pivot and kick the warrior in front of her. He staggered and Lana sprinted forward. She dove over him and the crimson lance of the other enemy.

Get to the control room, thought Hawk, I'll finish them.

Lana couldn't help but glower. She liked to finish what she started, but oh well.

Hitting the floor, she rolled right up into a run. Flicking her lance behind her, she deflected several bursts of weapons fire until Hawk had a chance to reach the enemy warriors.

Prickly pain rippled across her forehead and she knew a dark commander was nearby. She'd just completed that thought and barely had time to shield herself from the crimson strike.

The force of the hit blew out the windows, but Lana was back in motion even as the glass was still falling. Twirling her lance, she swung it around to meet the dark commander's.

The two opponents matched each other, blow for blow, blades singing with each strike. After trading several swings, Lana spun suddenly into a crouch.

A dark warrior came from behind and swung just as she ducked. He and his commander's blades clashed with a red flash.

Finding herself in a tight spot, Lana jumped sideways and threw herself through a now open window frame. Pulling her legs in, she landed and blocked another crimson strike.

Pressure pushed against her head and darkness tried to grab her mind. *Sorry, fellas*, she thought, *not today*.

The dark warrior vanished from sight when he got pummeled by a blinding streak from down the hall. The dark commander ducked just in time.

But it also left him open to Lana's white strike, and he was sent crashing through the wall of the opposing office.

Hawk ran past, and Lana fell in stride behind him.

Commander Nestor was still back down the hall, holding a mass of dark warriors at bay. While the narrow confines weren't conducive to maneuvering, it forced the enemy to come only one, maybe two at a time if they wanted to risk it.

The room they wanted was straight ahead and they were nearly there when four more dark warriors come at them.

Hawk and Lana hit them with a harsh blow that threw two into the rear wall and dropped the other pair right there on the floor.

Lana spun and sent the blade of her lance smashing against an invisible strike from the dark commander, who'd recovered from his trip through the wall.

Go! I'll keep him busy, thought Lana.

There was no time to discuss the matter as she ran back and met the commander head on.

Hawk tromped to the control room. He reached the door handle then ducked as a lance dashed the wall where his head had just been.

Launching a kick to the side, he slammed the warrior in the solar plexus and nearly out the window at the end of the short hall.

Throwing himself against the door, Hawk avoided a lethal swipe. Whipping his lance around, the blade slashed against his opponents. He then pushed himself

off the wall and got squared away. He met the first strike, then the second before their blades locked on the third swing.

He felt a harsh mental assault crash against his mind. But the pain just pushed him harder.

Hawk shoved his opponent away with a growl and advanced. He struck for the warrior's chest, and then his head before making a swipe for his legs. The strikes were extremely powerful and he felt his enemy wavering with each blow.

Now burning with the zeal of battle, he swung for the warrior's core with all his might. His opponent never stood a chance. The blow knocked him off balance and threw his weapon to the side. Turning sharply, Hawk jabbed his lance behind him, delivering the final blow.

He returned to the door, which flew open by itself.

Hawk stepped inside and suddenly found himself slammed onto his back, feeling like someone had just pulled a rug out from under his boots. Whether it was survival instinct or a guardian looking out for him, he wasn't sure.

But as he tilted his head back, he caught sight of the deadly crimson strike that had just missed him and streaked through the air — right for Lana, Commander Nestor and the dark commander.

Both Legionnaires sensed it coming and ducked.

Fortunately, it was the dark commander who was forced to disperse the blow. If he hadn't, the destructive force likely would have detonated the charges under the building's foundation. Then they would have all been reduced to tiny pieces.

Hawk was back on his feet, blade clashing with another dark warrior's. He parried the first blow, then the second.

It was difficult to search for what he needed to find when he had an enemy trying to relieve him of his head.

They were in tight quarters and it was hard to move their feet. Within three more blows their lances were locked over their heads. The blades snarled and cracked as the opponents pushed against one another.

Each could see the other running through options, but Hawk moved first.

He shoved the lances to the right and kned the warrior in the gut before slamming his fist into his chest.

He ducked as the crimson lance whooshed over his back. It was what he was waiting for. Straightening, he socked his opponent in the gut again, blocked another swipe from his lance and threw his elbow into his temple.

The force snapped the dark warrior's head to the side at an odd angle. But he wasn't about to go down yet. He slammed his fist into Hawk's shoulder. Instead of pulling back, however, he continued to drive it in, pushing the Legionnaire back.

Fiery pain shot in every direction from the point of impact.

Hawk let loose a growl of anger and throttled the dark warrior in the head again.

The force of the blow nearly sent him through the floor. To remove the possibility of any further confrontation, Hawk whipped his lance around and ran him through.

His eyes looked around the now messy office, lined with consoles and monitors. Finally he spotted the board he needed and stepped over to it. He accessed the basic control options and typed in a command.

Seconds later, a warning siren cut through the air.

Ω Ω Ω

Heads snapped around when the first blare of the siren pierced the stillness. Dark warriors on patrol glanced at one another. Turning, another three dozen warriors jogged back towards headquarters from various areas points of the town.

Ω Ω Ω

Hawk stepped out of the office and into the hall. He could barely see Lana or Nestor now because of all the dark warriors that filled the passage.

Hawk charged down the hall, lance crackling. He sent two dark warriors through an office wall. Then, coming from behind, he caught a third opponent looking the other way and cut him down.

Lana deflected a strike and spun, blade meeting Hawk's.

"Duck!" he shouted.

Lana dropped down and he blocked a blow before Lana struck the enemy down.

"Time to go!" called Nestor over the throng.

"Couldn't agree more!" yelled Lana.

Spinning, all three Legionnaires ran through offices on the right. There came a flash and the windows shattered before they dove from the second story.

The landing was a bit rough and they allowed themselves to lie on the ground a moment before getting to their feet.

Once up, they turned and sprinted into the trees, where a hole had been cut in the perimeter fence.

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Several squads had reached headquarters and stormed inside.

A few others were still coming down the road...and suddenly found themselves caught in a crossfire. The dark warriors never sensed the ambush and didn't stand much of a chance.

A few stragglers did manage to slip away. They were going to the main building when the earth heaved violently, followed by a round of deafening explosions.

They came from under the building and the exterior walls. In a matter of seconds, the structure that once held Seditonist headquarters was totally obliterated. Fire and debris were thrown to the sky, followed by heavy plumes of smoke.

Commander Nestor, Lana and Hawk regrouped with the other forces. After quickly assessing the damage, they concluded their mission had been a total success.

A second assault like the one they'd launched had been executed on the other major town on the planet. When Archer reported its success, they all shared a cautious smile.

Kuhal was a small planet, mostly used as a stopover point for the Seditonist forces. After months and months of planning and preparation, and not to mention waiting for the right moment, they'd finally been able to launch a major assault against the enemy.

Following years of getting everything into position, a move had been made to uproot and disrupt the Seditonists. But every move like this was going to take extra effort from everyone.

The main forces were on the frontlines, trading blow for blow with the enemy, while smaller groups like Commander Nestor's unit were engaging in guerilla warfare. These types of "side projects" had to be meticulously planned because resources were already stretched thin.

Today, however, a sweet victory, though small, had been theirs.

They'd just poked the enemy in the side with a sharp stick, to test just how resolved they were at maintaining total control.

Chapter 80

Dark Lord

Inside the black warship, in its innermost chamber, the cries of anguish could be heard. Whispers filled the deepest shadows of the room, and amongst the heavy scent of sweat and blood in the stagnant air, sulfur lingered there also.

Hanging from his wrists in the center of the chamber, and suspended half a foot above the floor, was a Legionnaire commander.

The dark lord's forces had captured him while he and his warriors were being driven from a small town on Fars. The rest of the commander's unit had opted for death in combat.

But the dark warriors had recognized this man was a commander and that he likely knew a thing or two about Legionnaire movements. So they'd captured him—at the expense of lives of many of their comrades.

But true to form, this Legionnaire was stubborn and hadn't revealed a thing. That was even after seven days of non-stop "interrogation."

And now *he* had arrived, the dark Seditious lord himself, unquestionably the most evil being traversing the galaxy. Large demonic generals, under his command, flanked him and wielded jagged, black-bladed scimitars.

Because he was so thoroughly saturated in evil, he'd been given great power and authority over many things by their master, The Deceiver and Traitor. Great and terrible authority, and he could bend his dark will upon even a strong opponent, like an enemy commander.

The powerful generals under the dark lord's command, individuals who also ordered vast legions both seen and unseen, highly feared and respected him. Even they cringed at the depth and tangible evil that surrounded their leader.

The Legionnaire commander sensed a change when he entered the room. A sharp chill fell over the place, the stench of rotting flesh filled the chamber, and a fresh wave of dizziness washed over him.

A lone set of boots walked casually through the darkness before stopping before this pathetic prospect of a man.

Though the commander's vision was beginning to fail, when he lifted his eyes, he found he was looking right at him, the dark one. He stood almost face to face with him, dim light from overhead casting most of his face into darkness.

The commander involuntarily flinched backwards, and he felt the cold hand of Death trail a finger down his spine. Through the fog that came from pain, exhaustion, and a ferocious headache, he considered what an evil turn this was.

He wondered what he'd done to deserve to be in the very presence of the dark lord, of Zair, ruler of all that was vile and perverse and evil.

Zair's jaw was extremely sharp, cheekbones prominent beneath tight skin, his nose straight. There was a jagged black scar that ran from just over his left eyebrow, down over the bridge of his nose and then across his right cheek.

It was his eyes, however, that made the prisoner cringe.

In the darkness, the gold crescent beneath the irises was evident, but the rest of the iris flared into black nothingness. Not blue, not hazel, brown or green, but black. The eyes themselves seemed pitiless, dead, reflecting only the faintest light.

And in his expression he held a potent contempt and hatred that the commander had never before witnessed in another human.

Fear gripped the Legionnaire, cinching his stomach like a vice and making his heart pound madly in his chest. For a second, he forgot about the metal clasps tearing into his wrists, about his bruised and broken ribs, dislocated shoulders and internal injuries. It was just an icy fear he had never felt until now, even when his unit was being overtaken on Fars.

The commander could not hold the malicious gaze more than a breath and he looked away.

"My men tell me you have refused to talk," said the dark lord finally. He spoke softly, but his voice was still deep and thick.

The prisoner trembled at the words, and he felt ashamed at his own cowardice before this enemy, regardless of who he was.

"That's right," confirmed a dark commander with a sneer, "even though we told him no one's coming to rescue him. He's all alone."

That earned a couple cackles from the others in the room.

They'd tried different approaches to try and break their prisoner. Since beating it out of him didn't seem to be working, they were presently trying to tear him down mentally.

While they continued to jeer at him, Zair kept his gaze on the man.

They're right, commander, breathed a sinister voice in the prisoner's mind, you are alone. I'd be surprised if anyone knows you're actually alive. Dying alone and so slowly can be, well...enough to break a man.

The assault came without warning. The strongest feelings of lust, rage and greed snarled to life within the commander, coming from the darkness of his own heart. Then overpowering all the rest came the temptation of hatred and the desire to latch onto dark vengeance against those holding him and torturing him.

Zair tilted his head a little, watching the prisoner with keen interest, waiting to see if he'd take the bait.

But the Legionnaire set his fractured jaw defiantly. He closed his eyes and shook his head as he fought against the assault.

"This one has a strong mind," mused Zair at last, cutting off the assault, "and has great control and mastery over himself."

He wrinkled his nose in disgust, anger burning to life.

Most of the commander's bones had already been broken and his internal organs were ever so slowly hemorrhaging. But new pain flared to life and roared through him, feeling like fire in his veins. It gnawed at every break, every fracture.

The commander's throat was already raw, but the scream of agony could not be contained as it wrenched itself from his bruised lungs.

The dark warriors had fallen silent. They felt the evil in the air, felt it brushing against their skin. Dark currents of electricity hummed and snarled all around them in the darkness.

Then they watched the dark lord close his eyes and lift his chin, as if the commander's screams were a beautiful song and he was savoring it.

Panting, the commander tried to catch his breath. He'd never felt pain at this level. Grunting, he managed to gasp out, "Stop!"

The dark lord kept his eyes closed and replied, *No*.

The others watched, with mild fear, as the prisoner's body contorted in a fresh wave of pain.

The dark warriors glanced at their demonic counterparts amongst them. Because of the great evil that was welcomed and invited aboard this ship, seeing them in such solid form was normal.

Presently, they bared their fangs and cursed and spit at the Legionnaire, filling the air with sulfur. The generals glared in silent malice, vehement hatred burning for this scourge of an enemy.

Darkness pressed heavier against the chamber, a growing weight on the head and shoulders of those present. The lower ranking dark warriors even began to feel dizzy themselves as the weight became heavier.

Then the dark lord opened his eyes and everything stopped.

The Legionnaire's body slumped back against the end of the chains strung from the ceiling. He made no immediate sound, no gasp or groan. Chin dropped nearly to his chest, he merely hung there, drenched in sweat and trembling.

Legionnaires were skilled in battle and exceptionally strong. But that same strength gave them a higher pain threshold and their bodies were able to take substantial abuse.

"There's only two ways this will stop," said Zair, "you give us good information, like what the Legionnaires are planning next, or perhaps where one of their generals is stationed. Or...you join us."

The commander's gaze flicked to him.

"You're strong, and you'd be a great asset," he continued, "Either way, your pain would be over. Just like that."

Or you could kill me.

The dark one smiled, but even that expression was twisted and dark.

Zair sensed the depth of the commander's loyalty. In the midst of his suffering and his physical brokenness there was something in his soul that was stronger, indestructible. He knew what, or more accurately Who, it was and for that very reason he hated this man in front of him even more.

He took a step closer so he could whisper in the prisoner's ear. "You make me sick."

Sharp talons, like knives, latched onto the side of the commander's head as the worst wave of dizziness yet washed over him.

"And you're a fool. You choose to continue in your suffering when you could so easily make it all go away."

The pain was increasing in the commander's head, slowly, but steadily. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

Almighty help me, he managed to pray despite the fog that filled his mind.

A sharp shaft of light pinged through Zair's forehead, and he jerked back with a snarl.

"I curse you," he growled, "and your God."

He drew a dagger from his thigh and drove the blade clean through the commander's shoulder.

But the man now had no more strength to cry out. Instead, he just dropped his head as his muscles trembled.

"And haven't you figured it out yet," snarled Zair, sudden venom in his expression, "that not even He walks the halls of the deepest darkness. So...that does make you truly alone. And it also means He has abandoned you and thus makes Him a liar! Here you are, His so-called faithful servant and warrior, who He let fall into the hands of His enemy. You stayed with your men to the end, but where is He?"

He grabbed the commander by the hair and jerked his head back.

"Do you see Him?" he asked with mocking disdain, "Because I don't."

Then Zair spit in the Legionnaire's face and ripped the dagger from his shoulder. He stood there a few moments to recompose himself, gaze dark with fury.

"The commander won't be with us much longer," said Zair at length, running his hand along the blade so his fingers came away bloody, "but that doesn't mean he should be allowed to die in peace and comfort."

Reaching over, he wiped the blood off his hand on the commander's shirt. Then, turning quickly, he made for door.

"What about the body?" asked a dark commander.

Pausing in the doorway, the dark lord half turned to look at him.

"Burn it. Or if it amuses you more," he shrugged, "burn him alive."

Zair continued on his way and walked down the dark hall.

He didn't feel too disappointed the prisoner hadn't divulged anything because his forces also had in their custody a Legionnaire general. That was much more entertaining and exhilarating. He had just happened to pop over to this ship for a bit of fun, to warm-up before the main event, so to speak.

Zair noticed a faint stinging on his hand and he raised it. He hadn't completely wiped off the commander's blood, and what little was left on his fingers was burning his skin.

Frowning, he spit on his hand and wiped off the rest of it. If the blood of his enemies hadn't tasted so terribly bitter, he would drink it.

It may have been putrid and offensive to the touch, but that wouldn't stop him from spilling the blood of thousands more Legionnaires.

And the dark lord would continue to do so, starting with a well-known Legionnaire general.

Chapter 81

Found

Planet Lusitana in the Ulnun System had remained untouched by the carnage of war thus far. Cadence was glad because it was a beautiful place. She hadn't had the privilege of seeing such serenity in many, many months.

Hills rolled lazily here and there before meeting lush green meadows divided by forests and shallow streams. The weather was always perfect, too. The sun was never too hot in the summer, and the winters were mild.

But what Lusitana was best known for was its horses. That's what Cadence was doing as she sat on a bench beneath a towering oak tree: watching the horses.

They were fine, noble creatures, and even someone who didn't know much about the equine recognized their nobility and intelligence. Perhaps it was the way they looked at a person, the way their gaze cut to the heart and understood the deeper things.

A particularly handsome gray had been following Cadence around since she'd arrived a week ago. Whenever she was trekking the hills or the fields, he followed her, or kept nearby.

Now he stood behind the bench she was sitting on, with his large, slightly convex head hanging over her shoulder.

He'd whitened with age, and the only gray areas were his nose, ear tips and knees and hocks. Scars marked his beautiful white face, from earlier wars, and he gazed at her with liquid brown eyes.

He whickered, touched his nose to her cheek and then blew the scent of grass in her face.

“Oh, thanks for that,” she said, smiling.

Something behind them drew the horse’s attention and he looked over his shoulder, ears perked forward. A second passed and he nickered a greeting to whoever was approaching.

The horse walked around the bench, and flicked his black tail at her in passing.

“Hey!”

The gray whinnied with laughter and jogged down the slope disappearing a few seconds until he started up the next rise, where a few of his companions were grazing.

Cadence knew whoever was coming up behind her was a friend, but she wasn’t expecting it to be who it was. As Commander Arthos took a seat on the other end of the bench, she couldn’t help but gawk a moment.

She knew who he was from photos and, like everyone else, knew about what had happened on Miraz.

They shared a long look, recognizing the other’s soul was worn and battle-scarred. They’d suffered losses and the enemy had taken much from them.

Finally, Cadence gave a slight nod and sighed, turning her eyes back toward the hills. A breeze made the green grass ripple in a wave across the slope before brushing past them.

“You know why I’m here,” said Arthos.

“To try to convince me to get back in the ring,” replied Cadence.

“There’s not much I can say that you probably haven’t already heard, but we need everyone in this, Miss Shahan.”

Cadence smiled weakly at the cordialness with which he addressed her. “It’s just Cadence, commander.”

He acknowledged her words with a dip of his head.

He let a breath of silence pass between them before continuing, “I know you haven’t been idle in your absence, and that you prefer to operate on the fringes. I can appreciate why you want to keep yourself at a distance, watching from afar but not getting too directly involved. But I believe...you’re needed much closer to the center of the fight now. Eventually you will be unable to escape from this war, and sooner or later you’ll have to face the enemy.”

Arthos let his gaze wander across the fields, his voice growing softer. “And no matter how much time passes, some wounds don’t fully heal. But if you don’t face it, deal with it, it will eat you alive, Cadence. It’ll destroy you...trust me.”

Cadence pushed herself off the bench and walked a few steps away before stopping. Her body was rigid, muscles tight, anger flashing through her as several snippy remarks came to mind.

But she let them pass.

She couldn't disrespect such an honorable warrior, and if there was anyone who understood what she'd been going through, it was him.

Her shoulders dropped a little as she relaxed. She looked back at him, the wounded expression in her blue eyes haunting.

"How do you do it, commander?" she asked quietly, "How do you keep going?"

"With strength not my own," he answered, "and by appreciating the warriors I still have, my friends...and knowing I'll again see the ones I've lost."

Arthos got to his feet and stepped beside her.

Cadence never realized how big he was and she suddenly felt quite small.

"I won't sugarcoat it, Cadence," he said, "there are days when it is so hard to keep going. But...we are warriors, the fight against our ruthless enemy drives us ever onward, even when things seem hopeless...or when the enemy has dealt us a crippling blow. Just remember: it is in our weakness, the Almighty's power is made perfect."

Cadence looked away as tears stung her eyes. That was like something her dad would have told her.

After regaining her composure, she asked, "So, what bit of news did you bring that would supposedly help convince me to rejoin the Legionnaire armed forces?"

Arthos drew a breath, clasping his hands behind his back. "I asked General Ronain that I be the one to deliver the news. A very good friend of yours has been taken captive by the Seditonists, a general. We need your help in rescuing him."

Dread slowly grabbed her stomach and hard lines set themselves across Cadence's face. She looked at him. "Who?"

Arthos cleared his throat before meeting her gaze. "General Nathan Chad."

Cadence's legs nearly buckled as disbelief socked her in the gut.

Her expression furrowed. How could that have happened? Chad would never have been taken alive, would he? Besides, there was no Seditonist general that could out-duel him except, perhaps, the dark lord. She didn't want to even imagine what kinds of torture he'd endured at their hand.

Disbelief gave way to determination.

If there was one thing about Cadence everyone recognized, it was her loyalty to friends. No matter how much time had passed, if someone had gained her trust and been a true friend, she'd go to the ends of the universe to save them.

"You already have a plan in place?" asked Cadence as a gust of wind swept up the hillside.

“Affirmative,” replied Arthos, a little twinkle coming to life in his eyes, “my fighter is in town, and our cruiser is a short flight away.”

Cadence gave him a look, knowing he knew what the outcome of his visit would be before he’d even arrived.

As the next breeze hit them, Cadence closed her eyes and tilted her head back, enjoying the coolness of the gust. She drew in a deep breath, savoring the scent of green grass and wildflowers.

Something sparked to life in her soul, a familiar emotion, a determination, the drive...to fight. She was surprised she felt glad at its return, like seeing an old friend after many years.

A loud snort beside them actually made Arthos jump. He hadn’t noticed the big gray gelding walk back up the hill.

“I know,” said Cadence, smiling as she rubbed the horse’s forehead, “it surprises me how sneaky they can be.”

The horse gave a shake of his black mane before dropping his head and giving her a push with his nose, gently shoving her next to Arthos. Then the gray jerked his head to the side, looking from them to the town.

He did this three times. But when the humans didn’t move, he shook his head and heaved a snort in what couldn’t be mistaken as exasperation.

He walked behind Cadence and carefully nibbled at her shirt before tugging her a few steps across the field. He then danced to the side and jerked his head towards the town again.

It’s time to leave, Cadence, whispered a still, small voice that she thought she’d never hear again.

She finally remembered to breathe, eyes flitting to the horse who studied her with those deep brown eyes.

Cadence cleared her throat, composing herself.

“Well then, commander, it seems my time here is finished,” she said, turning to Arthos and extending her hand, “we’d better get a move on before we literally get kicked out of here.”

Arthos allowed himself a chuckle as he faced her and grabbed her hand in a firm grasp. He slapped his other hand on her shoulder and held her gaze.

“I’ve lost exceptional men in this war, but I can’t think of any other warrior I’d rather have fighting beside my squad and me than you.”

“The honor, commander,” replied Cadence, gripping his arm, “is all mine.”

They smiled at one another, like old friends joining together for one more battle. Cadence had forgotten how much she’d missed such a comradeship.

She glanced at the horse, but found he was gone.

Looking around, she spotted him standing beside the bench, under the oak tree. The gray cast a glance over his shoulder at her, soundless nicker quivering through his fine nostrils. Then he gave a shake of his strong neck and drifted down the hill, out of sight.

They started across the meadow for the town, but Cadence paused a moment to look back over her shoulder. Somewhere in the depths of her heart she felt a heavy somberness, a sadness, like she knew this could very well be the last time she'd behold such beauty.

Was it foreshadowing, she wondered, or just a dusty imagination coming back to life?

If my final days are in battle, she thought, eyes drifting to the deep blue sky, *then so be it.*

Chapter 82

Dogfights & Traitor Sorting

“The ground forces are in place, general.”

“Tell them they're clear to engage.”

“We're approaching Fars, sir. Two medium enemy cruisers are sitting in orbit.”

“Prepare to drop us out of hyperspace, but keep us full throttle. We'll come in hot and strike them before they have time to do anything.”

General Necro could stand still no longer and began to slowly pace in front of the main helm of the medium cruiser. He wished he was down on the planet's surface, in the thick of the fight that was going on right now. But presently he was tasked to remove enemy interference in the orbit of the planet.

He and one of his fellow generals were about to engage in a dance of the medium cruisers.

“Sir, General Shemlar is on approach as scheduled,” reported an officer.

Necro gave a nod of acknowledgment. “Let's make our pass. We'll scrape in between the two cruisers and give them both a taste of our upgraded cannons. Drop us out of hyperspace, captain.”

Sensors on the two Seditonist cruisers beeped to let officers know a ship had just come up on radar. But they never had a chance to identify it when the entire vessel shook violently.

The unknown ship roared between the two Seditonist cruisers and pummeled them. It then shot away swiftly and swung around, like it was going to make another pass.

The Seditonist forces were just jumping into action when a second Legionnaire medium cruiser came out of nowhere. It nailed them with a wave of rockets before dropping mines as it passed overhead.

"Get us moving!" shrieked the commander aboard one of the Seditonist cruisers as it shuddered madly, like it was about to break apart. They lost power for a few seconds, several monitors sparking, and the fuselage near the crest of the ship was smoking.

"Swing us around to engage them! We can't take another direct hit!"

Medium cruisers were not nearly as agile as a light fighter, but they were sleek missiles compared to a full-sized battleship. Hence, they were allowed a decent rate of speed and maneuverability in a dogfight.

And thus the dance of medium fighters commenced.

The cruiser *Necro* was commanding was in pursuit of the wounded one when the second enemy ship dropped in and opened fire, forcing them to break off the chase.

The first missile missed completely, the second grazed over the bow and the third struck them broadside.

But the weapons hadn't been the only thing the Legionnaire fleet had upgraded. Their shields had received modifications also, and the force of the explosions was dispersed without causing significant damage.

"Our rear gunners are staying busy back there, sir," said the captain, "that enemy ship has taken a fancy to us, I think."

"Maneuver as necessary to avoid another direct hit," replied *Necro*. "We'll string him along while General *Shemlar* gets into position."

Meanwhile, General *Shemlar's* vessel cut in behind the ship that was pursuing *Necro*. The enemy cruiser unleashed another burst of fire on the Legionnaire's, which drifted out of the way. Any missiles were destroyed before they even came remotely close to their target, the defense systems and manually operated turrets making short work of them.

They all created a rough string of medium cruisers above *Fars*. *Necro's* was leading, followed by the first enemy cruiser. Then came *Shemlar's* and finally the second Seditonist ship.

With an order from *Shemlar*, the captain gunned the throttle. They closed the distance quickly and they came in fast on the enemy ship pursuing *Necro*.

"You know that maneuver we've been practicing all week, captain?" asked General *Necro*.

"Yes, sir."

"Prepare to execute it."

Necro turned so he could see out the large rear window of the bridge. The main deck of the cruiser was elevated just enough for him to see what was going on behind them.

The captain entered in a few commands on the helm.

"Alright, everyone," he said after taking a breath, "hold onto your...lunch."

As Shemlar's cruiser passed over the enemy ship, they scored several direct, and fatal, hits. Explosions erupted from the ship's core, throwing debris and smoke into space.

"Hit it!" barked Necro.

The Legionnaire cruiser cut power to thrusters and pulled back. They passed over the wounded enemy ship at an unsettling closeness, disappearing into its smoke. Just as they vanished from sight, they fired at the second enemy cruiser as it came roaring up behind Shemlar's.

They barrel rolled out of the smoke, punched the thrusters, and passed unbelievably close to the ship they'd just fired on.

It was one of those times in which General Necro was grateful for gravity stabilizers to keep everyone from being thrown across the bridge.

He was also glad he hadn't just eaten.

By now, Shemlar's cruiser was coming around again and they scored a direct hit at the second enemy cruiser.

Necro's vessel pulled a tight circle and swung around for the final pass, delivering the fatal strike that caused the enemy ship to explode and break into three parts.

The Legionnaire cruisers eased off the speed and fell in beside one another.

"A Seditonist battleship just showed up on sensors," reported an officer, "an hour out."

Necro pulled out a small holographic device from his pocket and engaged it.

A few seconds later, the head and shoulders of a man appeared over his hand. He was hunkered down behind a large slab of something and the sound of battle could clearly be heard in the background.

"We have one hour until a Seditonist battleship arrives, commander," said Necro.

"I think we'll have done plenty of damage by then," replied the commander. *"We're laying siege to one of their outposts now, and once the bombers come in that'll help move things along."*

"Sir, the bomber fleet just dropped out of hyperspace," interjected an officer.

"Keep your head down, commander. You'll have air support in sixty."

"Copy that."

Necro ended the transmission and glanced at the captain, “Send in the bombers.”

“With pleasure, general.”

“How long until our own battleship gets here?” asked Necro to another officer.

“Forty-five minutes.”

Necro put his hands on his hips, eyes on the planet before them. The bombers had already shrunk into the distance as they headed for the surface.

There were battles that took thirty minutes and those that lasted days. This one was going to take at least until tomorrow.

“Cloak us, captain, and station us on the east side of the planet. Then the ship is yours. General Hezron will be arriving from the battleship and will retake command.”

“Yes, sir.”

With that, General Necro turned and walked out of the main deck and for the hangar, where his fighter waited.

He had another attack to oversee.



Meanwhile, General Eliezer was busy mingling through local security forces on Timor in the Ulnun System. This was one of the few planets the Seditonists hadn't bombed or completely overthrown.

Since the beginning of the war, Eliezer had dedicated most of his time to two things.

The first was the painstaking task of rooting out internal dissension among planetary local defense forces. The traitorous acts of soldiers turning on their own brothers had dealt a very heavy blow. As he saw on Elywn, that's how more than half the battle for the planet was won: turncoats on the inside.

In the planets that had blatant Seditonist presence, it was obvious who in local security were the traitors. They did not try to hide their treason and openly patrolled side-by-side the dark warriors.

Loyal forces had either been killed during the initial betrayal, or had gone into hiding. In such a case, it was a matter of finding the loyalists, if there were any left.

However, discerning who was friend and foe on a contested planet was a little more difficult. The turncoats had vanished back into the woodwork. They'd disappeared to aid the dark army during the initial uprisings and returned as distraught soldiers. The Seditonists had done an excellent job recruiting their traitors; Eliezer had to give them that.

On these contested planets, Eliezer identified the turncoats. His suspicions were confirmed sooner or later when a suspect contacted Seditonist warriors to update them, divulge Legionnaire troop movements or report suspicious visitors loyal to Legionnaires.

The second task was gauging the attitudes of the various dark warrior squads. By watching and listening, Eliezer could find out what kind of a relationship they had with one another, with their superiors, and exactly how much they backed the dark army's movements.

That last item was particularly helpful. It told him how easy it would be to, for example, incite a coup. One couldn't argue with the efficiency of having an enemy destroy itself.

Having felt his task here was complete, Eliezer exited the office he'd been using and walked to the front doors.

To everyone's eyes, he was just another soldier. It wouldn't do to have everyone talking about a Legionnaire general who'd visited them.

He and a local commander passed each other in the lobby.

Eliezer felt a chill brush over him as the hair on the back of his neck rose. But he didn't need to turn around to see who it was. That specific man was the first he'd identified as a traitor.

Fortunately, this dark commander had been thinking more and more about how much better it would be if he and his squad could strike out on their own. He and his men were getting tired of shoveling dirt, so to speak, and really wanted to do their own thing. They'd fulfilled their years of service.

Once outside the defense building, he headed down the road for one of the hangars. Reaching his fighter, he hopped in, and made for the planet's orbit. When he was safely off the surface, Eliezer played the messages he had waiting for him.

First, Generals Necro and Shemlar were at Fars, where the first phase of the attack was underway.

Second, Ronain and Arthos' warriors had fine-tuned the rescue plan for General Chad.

Eliezer grimaced at that whole situation. It was an extremely risky move on their part but, if successful, offered great reward. Begrudgingly, Council had agreed Chad was the one to be the target and ultimately the prisoner.

Other generals were expected elsewhere, and he was honestly one of only a handful strong enough to take the punishment. Eliezer wished he could have been the one to do it...

A final bit of news was a tremendous relief, even though he'd known the outcome of it for some time: Cadence was returning with Commander Arthos to the cruiser Ronain and some of her old team members were waiting on.

Eliezer shook his head, smile on his face.
Boy, he wished he could be there to see that reunion.

Chapter 83

Reunion

“Would you sit down? You’re making me nervous,” chided Tucker, sitting in the large conference room of the cruiser.

Ever since they'd received word Cadence was returning with Arthos, Hailey had been a nervous wreck. She'd been pacing almost nonstop the past hour, wringing her hands.

But they all felt a touch anxious. How much had Cadence changed in the past six years? What kind of a state would she be in? What would she think of them when she finally saw them again?

“Well, they should've been here by now, right?” asked Hailey.

Tucker just glanced at Mason, sitting to his left, followed by Erika and Jackie.

The door slid open and Arthos' warriors filed into the conference room. None of them could bear to sit down, though. They opted instead to stand against the far wall with their arms folded.

Hailey shot Tucker a look, as if to say ‘see, I’m not the only one.’

Minutes ticked by and Hailey resumed her pacing. There was no conversation, only silence, the anticipation mounting with each passing second.

Hailey stopped with a huff and shot a look at Ronain.

He sat near the far end of the table, head back, eyes closed.

How can he just...sit there like that, she thought.

The door opened again and anyone who wasn't standing immediately sprang to their feet.

Commander Arthos walked in first and fought to keep a smile from his face when he saw their expressions. Turning to the right, he greeted his warriors, and they exchanged handshakes.

Cadence entered a few strides after him. She continued a couple steps along the other side of the table before slowing to a stop. With great courage, she finally managed to raise her head and chanced a glance at her old teammates.

Hailey, just as queen-like and noble as Cadence remembered, attempted to remain formal as she walked towards her. But halfway there she decided to forget about it and ran, colliding with her friend and tackling her with a tight hug.

Cadence remained frozen. She hadn't been expecting such a display of affection from anyone. She'd already felt completely out of sorts stepping onto this warship and was uneasy under everyone's gaze.

Nearly everyone on board had at least heard of her, even though she'd lived for six years in almost total invisibility.

Invisible, but not idle, as they'd all soon learn.

But she'd drawn more stares in the first ten minutes than she had in the previous three years combined.

After an awkward moment, Cadence returned the hug.

At last, Hailey took a step back to study her old friend. She tried several times to find words, but there were none.

She cleared her throat and finally said. "It's so, so good to see you again."

We've all been wondering and worrying about where you were, she finished.

Cadence had been unable to look her friend in the eye, feeling a bit ashamed. But with effort, she met and held Hailey's gaze.

Her friend fell silent, at first in initial nervousness and then in wonder. She was amazed at the potency in Cadence's gaze, her blue eyes reading her as if she were an open book, discerning what she was really feeling.

Hailey grinned and slapped Cadence on the shoulder. *Something special,* she thought, *that hasn't changed a bit since I last saw you.*

As for Tucker, despite his mostly calm demeanor, he was really out of sorts with himself. When Cadence entered the room, he was unable think clearly, hardly able to breathe. He pushed himself to his feet and immediately felt unsteady.

Cadence was still a lean and finely muscled warrior. She'd grown, and was now only a hair shorter than Hailey. Her long blonde hair had darkened to a fine auburn, making her light blue eyes even brighter. She carried herself with the quiet confidence of a seasoned warrior.

But there was an obvious sadness about her now, the easy smile that had once been there was replaced with somberness.

And there was no escaping that chilling gaze of hers. Tucker didn't know if she'd always had it, or it was something she'd developed. The second those blue eyes met his, he felt exposed, unable to escape, like trying to hide his thoughts and feelings was totally pointless.

But all that to say, Tucker had to admit Cadence looked, well, absolutely beautiful.

The sound of Hailey clearing her throat snapped Tucker from his musing and gawking.

Erika, Mason, and Jackie had already stood to greet her. A handshake didn't seem sufficient and the girls shared a quick embrace. Even Mason gave Cadence a one-armed hug.

Cadence shot Arthos' warriors several looks, feeling their gazes on her as they spoke quietly with their commander. When she glanced back at Tucker, she saw he had nearly reached her and his nervousness was apparent to everyone.

He stood a head taller than her now. The dirty blonde hair that used to be a mess about his head years ago had darkened and was now kept shorter. He had filled out, too, all muscle, and he was truly a strong young warrior.

Any previous juvenileness was long gone. He now carried himself well, with a sense of duty and authority, and with keen insight into what others were thinking. Seeing conflict probably had a part to play in all of that. However, his blue eyes still held that sparkle of mischief.

They looked at one another a second before finally Cadence, corners of her lips twitching as she fought with all her might to suppress a grin, extended her hand.

"Good to see you again, Tucker," she said, with a voice that was heavenly, yet full and commanding.

Tucker cleared his throat and took her hand. When he tried to speak, nothing came out.

Finally, he rolled his eyes at himself. "Oh this is ridiculous."

He pulled her into a one-armed hug and whispered in her ear, "I'm glad you've come home."

"Finally!" came an exasperated voice.

Tucker stepped aside as Ronain practically charged over. He and Cadence grasped hands with a slap and gripped one another's shoulders.

"Welcome back, kid," he exclaimed with a grin that made his blue eyes laugh.

His excitement was contagious and Cadence broke into a weak smile. "Good to be back, general."

On the other side of the room, Arthos asked his warriors, "What do you think?"

When Cadence's potent gaze hit Red, he drew a breath. "I'm glad she's on our side."

Arthos snorted and slapped him on the shoulder. "Me too, my friend, me too."

"I hope you're ready to get back into the swing of things right away," said Ronain, touching the com in his ear, "because we're coming up on the cruiser where Chad is being held."

A gleam they'd all missed seeing in Cadence's eyes twinkled to life.

"General," she replied, "just tell me what you want me to do."

Chapter 84

Matched

Kiera was there when Legionnaire forces struck Seditonist headquarters on the Western City of Lunghei. It began not fifteen minutes after an assault commenced on Fars, just a hop north. It was apparent to the dark army that the Legionnaires were attempting to liberate the Kerst System.

The scum, thought Kiera as she strode down a hall of the building they were using as a base. A squad of dark warriors walked in menacing silence behind her.

A nearby explosion shook the city and was answered by a barrage of fire from defense turrets.

An irritating pain shot through Kiera's temple again. It had been there the past few hours and hadn't fully gone away.

A bright flash out the line of windows to the left caught her attention. It was a rocket, on a collision course.

Anger flared through Kiera's veins as she raised her hand.

The shockwave blew out all the windows on their side of the building, but it stopped the missile. The force of the impact detonated it and sent the flames raining down on the street below.

Ω Ω Ω

General Necro had safely landed behind friendly lines and sprinted to join the forces on the front.

The Western City was larger than its counterpart on the other side of the planet, which was both good and bad. The buildings provided more cover, but it almost meant they had to push harder because there were more enemy stationed here.

Dodging under turret fire, Necro slid to cover behind a pile of rubble.

"Good morning, general!" shouted the commander, "How are you this fine day?"

They watched a missile from further down the street launch into the air and then slam into a smaller structure on the right side of Seditonist headquarters.

"I could be worse!" answered Necro.

They cringed as another explosion rocked the street to their left.

"We're gunning for the smaller buildings on either side of the main structure," nodded the commander, "they're outposts with access to headquarters."

"Knock 'em out so you can flank the enemy?"

"Exactly! If we can take those outposts, we'll be sitting pretty."

“Commander!” yelled one of the nearby warriors, “Dark warriors have entered the streets, north edge of town.”

“Is there a Legionnaire commander nearby responsible for running interference for you?” asked Necro.

“Yeah! The closest is a block north. Commander Jorvin. Has a dozen warriors up for the task.”

Necro slapped the commander on the shoulder and then ducked behind the building. He lifted back into a run down a street that had been cleared.

Half a block later, he knew he'd found the right place. He caught glimpses of weapons fire and flashing lances as a squad of Legionnaires held their ground against Seditionist forces.

Necro continued until he reached the next alley and then hung a right. This put him at the outer edge of the enemy squad.

He'd been stuck on a battleship for a week and was more than ready to get out, stretch his legs a little and take the fight straight to the enemy.

The two nearest dark warriors were hit with a shockwave that threw them down the road and forced a few of their comrades to dodge out of the way.

It was a perfect distraction, and the next dark warrior never knew what hit him as the Legionnaire general struck him down.

The fallen enemy's companion was on Necro instantly, his crimson lance meeting the general's jade one.

The dark warrior swung for Necro's head. He blocked it before driving forward, striking once, then again, pushing his opponent back. The strength of this Legionnaire general could not be matched, and he overpowered his foe with ease.

Turning, Necro saw the next warrior already lunging for him. That was, until a streak of light sent the enemy crashing into a burned out building.

Commander Jorvin and his warriors were quite pleased to see the general, and they dispatched the remaining enemies before advancing across the road.

The outpost building on the left side of headquarters was straight ahead now. Rockets had already taken care of most of the perimeter fence, and the pair of enemy tanks.

“Zeke! Ivan! Take out the control tower!”

The two warriors peeked around the edge of the building they'd taken cover behind. Seeing their target, a two story tower diagonally across the street from their position, they lobbed several gray orbs at it.

The devices were feet from their target when they detonated, popping loudly. The flames rolled into themselves, as if consumed by a gust of wind.

That's when the squad saw them: a fresh squad of dark warriors, whose leader they recognized.

Whoa, thought Ivan.

It was Kiera, former Legionnaire now turned dark warrior. Her gaze was harsh, the muscles in her face set hard and her intent clear.

With a wave of her hand, glass and bricks of the building Zeke and Ivan had been behind showered the soldiers on the front side. With a thought, the nearest soldiers had their weapons ripped from their grasp. The only thing that saved them from being shot by their own firearms was the instinct to duck inside the building.

“She’s going to flatten the local fighting forces,” said Zeke, “they won’t stand a chance.”

“Well, then we’d better get a move on!” barked Jorvin, throwing a look at Zeke and Ivan, “and you two still have a tower to blow up.”

The squad broke cover to meet the enemy. Moving as one, the Legionnaires hit them with a powerful shockwave.

But this group of foes was stronger. The strike didn’t kill them, though it forced a number of them to their knees a moment.

Except Kiera. She didn't seem to notice before she returned the favor with a crimson strike.

Jorvin deflected it with a swing of the lance, the two colliding forces meeting with a brilliant flash.

And then the fight was on.

Necro, staying along the edge of the dark squad, hit two with a terrible white strike, killing them. That drew the immediate attention of their nearby comrades.

They locked onto their enemy and advanced to meet him. They could immediately sense the strength of this Legionnaire, and the three chevrons near the left shoulder of his armor confirmed he was, in fact, a general.

Necro's gaze was steady, confident as he engaged his lance again, two jade blades at either end of the hilt coming to life with a low, resonating ring. He twirled it once, listening to the hum of the weapon.

I would run now, he thought to them, *while you still have a chance*.

The dark warriors weren't a breath away from lunging at him when they were driven to their knees by the fiercest headache they'd ever felt.

Legionnaire warriors were desensitized to the darkness, the gruesomeness of war and the tactics of their ruthless enemy.

Dark warriors, on the other hand, hated light, and they couldn't stand to even desensitize themselves against it. That's what the general was assaulting their minds with now, light that exposed the depths of their souls and thoughts of their hearts.

They could not tolerate it and left them unable to fight.

All it took was one swing of the lance, and Necro fell all three of them. Continuing down the road, he hit the next enemy with a blow that threw him into his companion. Their Legionnaire rivals were on them instantly and finished the fight.

A few more stragglers came at Necro, who was finally beginning to feel the heat of battle simmer to life in his chest.

Still, the enemy could not overpower him or pose the smallest threat. The first dark warrior he struck down in two swings, the first swing knocking him off balance and the second to end it.

The next foe unleashed a powerful crimson strike.

Unconcerned, Necro shielded himself with his lance. One of the blades absorbed the blow, crackling angrily before he swiped his hand down the broadside of the lance and sent a blinding flash of light right back at the dark warrior.

It was more than enough to put him down.

As for the final dark warrior, all Necro had to do was duck under the swing and then latch onto the enemy's wrist. Pain from intense heat ripped up the dark warrior's arm and he could do nothing as the general ran him through.

By now, the rest of the squad recognized the power of this threat and a half dozen enemies gathered and advanced towards him.

Beyond the dark mass, Necro saw Zeke and Ivan throwing a second round of explosives at the tower, unable to risk running across the open to set charges.

He saw Kiera spot the devices and raise her hand to dispense of them yet again.

Half a dozen dark warriors were nearly to Necro, several lunging into the air to come in high.

Through a narrow space between two of their bodies, Necro raised his arm, as if reaching for her. *Not this time*, he thought.

The two invisible strikes rippled through the air. Necro's struck from the side and the two blows crackled and snapped when they met.

The flash lit the street the same time the explosives hit the tower dead center. The force ripped through and through, and the structure groaned and then lazily toppled.

Then the dark warriors were upon General Necro.

Ω

Kiera's expression wrinkled with disgust as she engaged her lance, edge of the blade burning crimson.

The street she was on ran between headquarters, to the left, and the buildings facing it, on the right. A squad of soldiers was breaching the barrier of headquarters while another hung back in a building to cover them.

When they spotted Kiera approaching, they grimaced. Even as they rained down weapons fire on her, they prayed some of the nearby Legionnaires would come to intervene.

She deflected the first wave of rounds and then raised her hand, stopping the rest.

Several mines shot from the top windows. She waited for them to detonate and then deflected the shockwave, sending it slamming back into the building.

Anger steadily rising, she reached for the structure. It groaned in protest before she gave a jerk of her fist, as if pulling something.

The entire front of the building was ripped off, large chunks of debris raining down on the rear of the unit pushing through the front gate.

Sensing an attack from behind, Kiera spun to deflect a large rock flying towards her head. That's when she saw a pair of Legionnaires on approach.

I was wondering if any of you were going to be brave enough to come and fight, she thought, haughty smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Kiera twirled the lance once to gain some torque before swinging it around, first strike coming in high. The moment the blades met, she twirled the lance to deflect the strike from the second warrior.

She blocked the next strike from the first enemy and elbowed him in the face, snapping his head to the side. Swinging her lance around, Kiera stabbed at the foe in front of her while simultaneously leaning back to miss a blue blade.

With a flick of her lance, she deflected the blow from the left before spinning and meeting a strike behind her back.

There was a twenty second stretch of nonstop movement between Kiera and the two Legionnaires. They battled back and forth, lances crackling each time the blades met.

Finally, Kiera deflected one blade and ducked the second before kicking its wielder. Immediately whipping her lance around, hers clashed and locked with the other rival.

She'd only gotten stronger the past six years and Kiera was able to muscle her enemy sideways, putting him between herself and his friend. She then swiped at his legs, forcing him to flip backwards. As he was doing so, his companion hit her with a strike of light.

Kiera was able to shield herself, but it still sent her skidding backwards. Swinging her lance around and up, it met the blue blade of her opponent as he flipped over her.

Throwing herself forward, Kiera dove and twisted. Her feet had barely touched the ground when the jade lance of the second enemy struck hers.

They leaned against each other, Kiera knowing his friend would be rejoining them any second.

With a growl, Kiera pushed him away and followed it up with two quick strikes. This brought him in close and she punched him in the face, the impact sending volts of fire shooting into his head.

Even as he staggered backwards, he tried to deflect her next swing. But he received another blow, a crimson strike that sent piercing shafts of pain ripping through his chest. He fell to his knees.

She sensed his friend coming in and she spun, left arm extended, palm outward.

He was striding from her when the shockwave hit, the most powerful one yet. It was the equivalent of getting struck by lightning.

Electricity arced through his body when it hit the warrior. It threw him backwards a good thirty feet, smacking him against the rubble that was once a watchtower. He didn't move.

The other warrior, still recovering from the blow to the chest, staggered towards her.

Kiera backed away, ducking under his first meager swipe, before sidestepping the second. It was a futile attempt, they both knew it.

Kiera's fist collided against the side of his head, nearly knocking him unconscious. Before he could collapse, she grabbed him by the throat and slammed him onto the ground. His weapon flew to her hand and she killed him.

Glancing to the left, she flicked her wrist at another warrior gunning for her. He was leaping for her when he took the hit and he sailed backwards—right into the middle of a group of dark warriors. They were on him in a heartbeat.

Kiera deflected a stream of weapons fire from another pair of enemy warriors, who were closer to where the battle was thickest.

The barrage of rounds was relentless, but she remained unworried as she walked towards their position. At last, Kiera raised her hand to shield herself, and the shots stopped before reaching her. Once enough rounds collected, she threw them, now a torrent of fire, back at the warriors.

They ducked behind concrete slabs, and Kiera broke into a sprint.

Flames still dissipating, Kiera appeared behind them, dropping out of the fire. With two quick swings of her lance, the warriors were down. Turning, she flipped sideways through the air as a blue lance just passed under her.

She rolled when she landed. Using her momentum as she went to her feet, she lobbed her lance at another Legionnaire.

He turned in time to deflect most of it, but the blade grazed his leg.

Lance returning to her hand, Kiera aerialled between two more warriors.

She blocked the strike from the left, then the one from the right. Pushing the one to the right away, she swung her lance and stabbed it up into the chest of the warrior on the left. Then dropping her shoulder just so, she dodged the blue blade by an inch.

Wrenching the blade from the body, Kiera spun and slashed upward. Then, ramming the hilt of her lance into the other warrior's face, she grabbed and killed him.

No time to celebrate, Kiera threw herself backwards in a flip as three more Legionnaires converged from different directions.

She met the first strike, spun to meet a second, before kicking the first warrior and stabbing at the third as he came from behind.

All four were locked in a fast and furious fight, blades mere trails of light through the air, striking, counterstriking, deflecting and parrying. None of them would easily give up any ground or be turned back.

Just as she had when she was once a Legionnaire, Kiera was consumed with the fire of battle. Only it was dark, raging with hatred that could not be put into words.

And cold. Instead of heat, ice water ran through her veins, reflecting the state of her soul: black, uncaring, and having forgotten all forms of mercy and love.

Kiera brought her lance straight down, slamming it against the one in front of her. Quick as a flash, she swung it behind her back to deflect another blow.

She bent awkwardly as one lance hummed over her head and a second cut right next to her shoulder. Bringing her blade straight up, she blocked a third strike before throwing herself to the left.

When she landed, her three opponents found themselves slammed to the ground, compliments of a powerful strike.

But Kiera didn't make an immediate move for any of them. Instead, she remained standing where she was, gold crescent green eyes studying them, asking if anyone was brave enough to get back up and continue.

That's when she caught a glimpse of a familiar someone at the far end of the battlefield, cutting down dark warriors. Kiera's eyes narrowed.

But movement from the three in front of her snapped her attention back to them.

The warriors on the left and right got to their feet. Their friend in the middle had taken most of the strike and was still down. His companion with the blue lance grabbed him by the armor and pulled him to his feet. The other warrior with the jade lance stood between them and Kiera.

She tapped his lance with hers one time, then again, taunting him. The fight continued in earnest as she lunged forward in an attempt to stab him through the stomach.

He skittered sideways before returning the gesture. When she swung for him, he grabbed her wrist, stopping the swing. She grunted against the pain tearing up her arm before he flicked his lance towards her side.

Kiera veered sideways before they shoved each other away. Then they both turned and kicked each other, sending one another through the air.

They landed on their feet and he sprinted for her.

Kiera glanced at his two comrades off her right shoulder. They'd retreated, but that wasn't going to save them.

The stronger one suddenly dropped to a knee under a horrific mental assault and the weaker found her blade in his back.

By now a pair of dark warriors fell upon the other warrior and would likely have him cut down in a few easy swings.

Lance in hand again, Kiera strode towards the warrior sprinting her way. He was a strong one, this enemy.

She ran to close the final distance and they leapt at one another. They passed in mid-air, humming lances as they just missed one another. Pivoting their hips, they landed balanced on their feet.

Then with a swing, he drove her backwards.

Kiera could see the sorrow from losing his comrades in his eyes, but also feel the anger in every one of his swings.

With a skilled and quick double strike, Kiera stopped his forward momentum. It was her turn to advance. The blows were fast and there was no escaping this time.

The first was high, second low before she jumped and spun in the air to gain torque. She delivered a stunning sideways strike. It knocked him off balance, but he managed to bend out of the way of the blow meant for his chest.

On one knee, he brought his lance up in time to block the next swing.

A swift kick to the diaphragm sent him over backwards. He flipped to his feet, but Kiera had too much momentum and power and he stumbled. Plus he was still trying to catch his breath from that kick.

The next swing weakened him, sending more volts of pain up his arms. He anticipated the mental attack that followed, but wasn't expecting it to be so strong.

Unbelievable weight and pressure pushed him down as darkness closed in around him. One more swing from Kiera and he returned to his knees.

Kiera grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head back.

Blood ran from his nose and a cut on his face, which was bruised and dirty. To her disgust, there was no fear in his hazel eyes. Instead, there was pity and...anticipation. Like all Legionnaires, they were confident they were on the right side of the fight, and they did not fear death. It was a mere doorway into eternity.

And the expression made her sick.

Kiera ran him through, and he drew a single sharp breath before he slumped to the ground.

Now, thought Kiera, where was that general...

Ω

General Necro twirled his lance, deflecting several blades before twisting through the air. Landing in a crouch, the lance of a fallen enemy came to his hand and crackled to life.

Swinging both lances, Necro blocked four strikes from various directions. Their blades momentarily locked before he pushed them away. Swiping to the left, he deflected a strike from the side and behind. The lance in his right hand clashed with a third blow.

Necro spun and swung, jade and crimson lances a blur through the air before they struck against those of his opponents. Flipping backwards, he deflected a blow from the right before bringing the double lance around and striking the first dark warrior in the chest.

Turning, his next blow came in high, driving both lances down, one right after the other. They smashed against the crimson blades. Going with the sideways momentum, Necro twisted through the air again, horizontal to the ground. One enemy blade whooshed under him while a second just missed his leg.

Bending his knees, he tucked his legs. His boots hadn't completely settled on the ground as he straightened to block the next blows. With a quick move, he drove his lances into two more enemies.

The three remaining dark warriors stepped back to regroup themselves.

They eyed their opponent who stood poised for more, double lance in his left hand, crimson one in his right. Faint wisps of smoke rose through his fingers from the burning hilt of the crimson weapon.

But he didn't seem to notice. Consumed with the heat of battle, the Legionnaire general's intense gaze bore into his enemies, and there was no missing the faint glow coming from him.

The Legionnaire and the dark warriors advanced toward one another at the same time. Lances ringing, they were nothing more than arcs of jade and crimson as the challengers struck and parried nonstop.

Necro struck with the double lance, and deflected and swiped with the other. In a powerful move, he shoved the warrior's blade aside before giving him a kick that sent him smashing into a building thirty feet away.

Immediately turning to the last two he was holding at bay, Necro shoved them backwards to disengage the blades. Striking with the double lance, he spun, following it with the single crimson blade.

Move complete, he threw both weapons up into the air and arialed over the two dark warriors. They were turning as he was landing and he nailed them in the chest with his fists.

The air itself shook and there was a flash. Their bodies were now twenty feet away, laying still.

The two lances dropped back into Necro's hand. With a flick of his wrist, the crimson blade found its mark in the chest of the enemy who'd collided with the building.

Necro turned, assessing the situation.

Jorvin and his squad were slowly cutting through the dark warriors, thinning them out. He watched the two Legionnaires nearest him, Ivan and Zeke, turn to meet yet another enemy.

Zeke blocked the warrior's downward strike. Ivan flipped and twisted over him. When he landed, he instantly bent backwards as the enemy spun to swipe at him.

The dark warrior immediately returned forward to meet Zeke's lance. Blades crackling, they sent sparks to the ground.

Zeke dodged to the side as the warrior whipped his lance behind his back to deflect Ivan's swipe. Their blades barely made contact before he drove the crimson lance straight to strike at Zeke.

There was a lot of strength behind the swing and Zeke dropped down to a knee.

The dark warrior whipped his lance around with a follow-up strike when Ivan's blade stabbed him through the back. Zeke ran him through the chest.

As the dark warrior collapsed, they pulled their blades from their enemy and turned to see who else wanted some.

They lurched sideways away from each other just as a red strike shot between them. It was aimed for General Necro, and he shattered it with a swing of his lance.

Zeke and Ivan glanced from Necro to the one who'd launched the strike.

It was Kiera, glaring darkly, and with at least two dozen dark warriors falling in behind her.

Neither of them moved as Commander Jorvin finished off the final enemy.

The dark warrior was down on the ground and his weapon flew out of his reach. Then Jorvin's deep blue blade stabbed him through the chest.

As he ripped it from the warrior's now still body, the commander kept his eyes level on the line of dark warriors behind Kiera.

Kiera slowly approached, a second crimson lance flying to her left hand. She eyed General Necro with cautious suspicion.

Necros, in turn, walked towards her, across the road covered with the bodies of the fallen.

Commander Jorvin backed out of the way, shooting Necro a glance.

Reinforcements are getting into position. Will be ready in sixty seconds...

Necro and Kiera stopped a dozen feet from each other, sizing up one another.

"It's been awhile, General," said Kiera with a tilt of her head.

"It has, Kiera," he replied, "though I never thought I'd see the day when one of my students joined the side of the enemy."

"Yeah," mused Kiera, eyes snapping at him, "You must not be as good at that teaching thing as you think."

Quicker than anyone could blink, Necro separated the hilt of his lance, so he had one blade in each hand. He pointed the one in his left at her.

"Beware of your haughty speech, Seditionist," he replied, voice deep, a warning in his eyes, "lest you lull yourself into a false sense of security, and I will exact justice on the traitor who turned her back on the Almighty."

Kiera lunged and swung with a mighty blow. Her first blade smashed against the lance in Necro's left hand. He brought the one in his right down, blocking her second weapon. With a twist of his wrist, he swiped for her head.

Kiera threw her head back, feeling the heat of the blade against her chin. The kick to her gut sent her flipping backwards.

Necro was already advancing when she landed.

She brought both lances up to block his downward blow. The four blades locked and threw sparks to the ground. Electricity crackled in the air around them as they pushed against each other.

Gathering her strength, Kiera shoved him backwards and then swiped at him.

He parried.

She brought the right blade around, over her head in a fiery arc.

Necro deflected it. Still moving backwards, he flicked one lance at her face, before grazing her arm with the other as he brought it across his body.

He leaned over as a crimson blade brushed over his neck and the side of his face. Pulling one lance back across his body, he deflected another swing. With the second blade he met the next blow before she even had a chance to swing.

Whipping her blade around, Kiera took a swipe at his legs.

Necro was forced to jump, but managed to slash at her side. The blade grazed the armor protecting her side and stomach.

Kiera stabbed at him with both blades, and he shoved his lances between hers to keep his head from being removed from the rest of his body.

She shoved the lances away before bringing them up in a low swing.

Necro smashed them to the side.

In rising anger, Kiera swung both lances down together before, quick as a flash, swiping his legs out from under him. Now that he was on back, she swung with the right lance.

He deflected it sideways.

Just as he was doing so, Kiera was already bringing the left lance in.

Necro kicked the hand away.

Kiera had to flip over to the other side to keep from losing a leg.

But it was all the time Necro needed to get back to his feet. He rolled up, pausing in a crouch as a crimson lance whooshed over his head.

He came at her sideways. The left lance struck against her first strike, and then he arced the second one around.

Their blades locked in a bit of a mess and he used Kiera's own resistance as leverage as he flipped over her. As he did so, Necro released the hilts of his lances.

When he landed, Kiera was already bringing both her blades down. Shoving his hands up, he latched onto both her wrists, keeping her from completing the swing.

She grunted at the intense pain that ripped from her wrists, up her arms and into her shoulders. Against her will, her fingers released the lances.

Sounding a growl, she ripped her left wrist free and socked Necro in the ribs.

He winced at the piercing volts of fiery pain that rippled through his lungs and into his side. Before she could do it again, Necro swiped her arm away, released her other wrist and delivered a smart cross jab to her jaw.

The force snapped her head to the side and Kiera staggered backwards, reeling a bit from the blow. But a fresh surge of rage coursed through her and allowed her to keep going.

Kiera and Necro executed the next move at same move. Their left arms were raised across their faces, as if to shield themselves, their right somewhat extended, as if to stop a strike.

The air around them snarled and a flash of electricity, like lightning, branched out over the street. It was reaching its climax and the mere inches of space between their hands began to glow, burning brighter as the intensity grew.

Kiera grimaced against the brightness and had to look away. A single volt of pain shot down her arm, then another, and the pure power of the light nearly drove her to her knees.

What used to be something she fought for had turned into something she couldn't stand.

Necro got his feet under him and fully extended his right arm, as if to push her.

A blinding flash of light split the road with a deafening crack, like a hollow peal of thunder reverberating over the city.

Necro staggered back a couple steps, blood running from his nose. But he'd fared significantly better than Kiera.

She flew backwards before smacking against the concrete and then going for a tumble. She ended on her back, before she writhed onto her side. Teeth clenched against the pain, she turned her head and spit up red.

Mind foggy, Kiera pushed herself onto her hands and knees, the pain throbbing in her bones excruciating. But still, she had to get up and tried to push herself to her feet. She swayed sideways, but a strong hand caught her under the arm.

Forcing herself to stand upright, her vision finally began to clear as she settled her cutting gaze on General Necro. Hate rekindled anew in her heart, and its effects spread rapidly through her body, easing the pain of her wounds.

She glanced at General Bayne, standing beside her, before spitting more blood onto the ground.

They shared a look with Necro, on the far end of the road before Bayne and Kiera turned and walked out of sight.

That was when on the rooftops behind Necro, and in the alleys to his left, dozens of soldiers appeared. They opened fire on the remaining dark warriors, giving them something to think about in case they were considering another charge.

Instead, with hate emanating from them, they jogged backwards and followed Bayne and Kiera.

"General, are you alright?" asked Commander Jorvin, appearing beside him.

Necro gave a nod before wiping blood from his nose. "Could be worse."

Jorvin eyed him a second longer before deciding to leave the man be.

Turning, he and his warriors crossed the road and prepared to take the outpost. Reinforcements took up positions on either side of them.

General Necro slipped behind the building. Once out of sight, he leaned back against the wall, breathing carefully. Awkwardly slipping an arm out of his armor, he lifted his shirt to check on his ribs.

The area where Kiera had punched him was black. The bruising reached several inches in all directions, the edges looking like black veins as the color branched out. And though he could feel his body recovering, the pain of this particular wound had only lessened slightly since the initial impact.

Necro leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. After a minute, he pushed himself up with a grunt and slid on his armor again.

To everyone watching the fight, it may have appeared he'd soundly defeated Kiera.

But that definitely hadn't been true. Necro had won, but it had been an even match. While her skills with the lance would put any general to the test, it was nothing compared to physical blows. This single body shot had nearly crippled him, and it had been a very long time since he'd faced an enemy with such devastating power.

He reemerged from behind the building, bringing up the rear of Jorvin's squad. It got his blood pumping again and the movement would keep him from getting too stiff.

No one would've known the extent of the pain he'd been in when Kiera slugged him, not by the way he was carrying himself now.

Necro had barely beaten her, but there was no way he was going to let on otherwise. If she or any other dark warrior was aware of the damage she could really inflict, even now as a relatively new dark warrior, it would be dangerous.

Kiera, warrior in the Seditonist army, was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

Chapter 85

Haunted

The city was burning, and local forces were being cut down as soldiers of the dark army pushed through the streets. The drone of heavy bombers hummed over the buildings and light fighters roared by in formation.

And as always, he was in the middle of it.

He'd aided in the hostile takeover of a number of planets since the war began, slaughtered hundreds of enemies with his own hand. It was what he did, was his purpose, his role in the Seditonist army. With every life he took, it only made him more powerful. The more blood he spilled, the more his skills increased. It was addictive and intoxicating.

Up ahead, a group of civilians were corralled against a pile of debris. The wounded lay on the ground, while their friends or loved ones tried to help them.

They looked to the dark warriors, to anyone for help, but were only met with apathetic gazes.

He eyed them as he neared, feeling the coolness of the hilt in his hand. The closer he drew, the more his disgust towards them festered.

Strides from them, he engaged the lance, crimson edge of the blade appearing with an angry snarl. When fighting multiple enemies, often everything happened so quickly he was barely aware of what he was doing, as his training and instinct took over.

But this was different. With innocent civilians, he remembered every strike as he killed them.

It was all over in a matter of seconds, and now there was just a group of bodies at his feet. He glanced over them before lifting his gaze as he prepared to continue down the street.

He suddenly jerked backwards. A familiar girl stood a dozen feet in front him, drilling him with piercing blue eyes.

She lowered her gaze and studied the bodies between them. Her expression became puzzled. When she lifted her eyes back to him, he'd expected to see sorrow in her expression. Instead, however, she eyed him with an intense look of warning, as if she were telling him he had no idea what kind of judgment he'd bring upon himself by slaying the innocent.

He backed up a couple more steps. He knew this girl, knew her very well because she was the little sister of Kiera.

Everything faded to black and he closed his eyes, feeling great fear rising inside him. He knew where this was headed...

Scenes of battle came in quick flashes before fading to darkness. They played one after another, the scenes from when he slaughtered innocent lives. Old and young, women, children and widows, all of their faces were branded into his mind.

He heard the bombs in the distance, along with weapons fire, the low metallic ringing of lances...and then the screams.

The wails of the dying grew louder until it was all he could hear. Usually it was a soothing sound to his ears. But he knew where this dream was going next and he braced himself.

He blinked and found himself standing on the front steps of a building, overlooking a square. He sensed Kiera beside him, but she wasn't the one he was looking at.

Before them lay two bodies, a husband and wife, who had been slain at the hand of their oldest child. Their youngest half crawled, half dragged herself over to them.

Cadence.

He felt his heart beginning to hammer harder in his chest and his breathing become labored.

The other screams had quieted and now it was only the girl's, her head tilted back to the sky. The cry she unleashed to the dark heavens cut deep into his heart, like a knife. There was something about it that he couldn't stand, and he fell to one knee, grimacing at the pain he felt come alive in the deepest recesses of his soul.

Maybe it was because the wail was filled with the rawest emotions of anguish, anger...and betrayal. They couldn't be put into words. How could they?

When he finally managed to glance at Cadence, she was looking right at him, the expression on her face the very one that had haunted him for these past six years.

He'd met people who could freeze a lake with a glare, but with this girl, it went much deeper. It was like she looked straight through his walls and into his heart. He felt the potency of those blue eyes...and he could not escape.

He wanted to tell her to go away, or stop looking at him. Yet he was unable to speak.

He couldn't deny the influence of her gaze was an attribute she was created with...

The moment he thought about it, he regretted it. A blinding flash made him wince.

Still on one knee, he raised his arm to shield his face. There was only light surrounding him, its source coming from a Man. But the awesome glory and terrible splendor that surrounded Him made it impossible for him to gaze directly upon Him.

He knew this Man and he began to tremble under His gaze. Those eyes cut right through his defenses and mulled about his heart and soul. And it terrified him because he knew Him, and this Man knew him better than any other.

He felt the immense sadness, a kind that only comes when someone you love has wounded you deeply. Then came the crushing guilt and shame—and incredible fear at his heart being exposed.

“What do you think you are doing?” asked the Man, with a voice so deep, so powerful it put him down on his knees, “and who do you think you are, that you shed innocent blood?”

He couldn't look up and winced at each word. He wished he could die that very moment, anything that allowed him to escape from His gaze.

“Do you think there will not be consequences?” the Man asked again, voice thundering across the expanse, “That I will overlook you at judgment?”

He suddenly understood. The...Creator is righteousness, holiness; a lover of justice. In Him is no darkness at all.

The pure truth of it all stabbed into his heart and soul...

He saw those he'd slaughtered, all laid before his feet. At each scene, he now saw Cadence, drilling him with those eyes, exposing the very darkness of his soul.

Again, the scene stopped at the square on Elywn, as she sat beside her parents bodies and unleashed that wrenching cry to the heavens.

It knifed through him again, this time relentless. The pain and guilt felt like it was ripping his soul apart. His scream now joined in with Cadence's and he cowered on the ground.

He became aware of someone standing close to him. Shielding his face, he glanced over to see the Man beside him.

"I have not given up on you," said the One with the voice like many rushing waters, "even though you have betrayed Me and sided with darkness, with death. Choose Truth and Life and I will save you."

He saw a hand reach down...and he also saw the two-edged sword in his other, down at his side, the sharp edge gleaming in light.

"The choice is yours," He said as a hollow rumble of thunder filled the air around them, followed immediately by another.

A coldness drifted around him, along with falling darkness.

As the Man spoke one last time, His words were mingled with another growl of thunder.

"Remember, you cannot escape...Hadrian, whom I created."

A terrifying peal of thunder slammed against the darkness. He let loose a scream, whether due to terror or pain, he didn't know.

He jerked awake with a vicious snarl, sitting up in bed. It took him a minute to get his ragged breathing under control before he untangled himself from the sheets, which clung to him.

Hadrian got to his feet and walked over to the small bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. When he looked at his hands, they were shaking madly.

He clenched them into fists. *Pull yourself together.*

He walked over to his closet and yanked out a change of clothes. Until about a month ago, he'd only occasionally had dreams like that. But now they'd been coming more frequently.

Normally, it made him angry that he couldn't control his dreams or his emotions while he was in them. Tonight though, they had reached a new intensity that made him uneasy.

Huffing sharply through his nose, he slammed the closet door closed, anger tingling through him. Storming back to the bathroom, he scrubbed his teeth.

When he wiped his mouth on the towel beside the sink, he glanced in the mirror. His heart stopped.

Standing behind him and looking over his shoulder was Cadence, looking at him with that cutting gaze. It was as if she was a reminder of what was coming and that the blade of judgment was already being sharpened.

Hadrian reacted and spun, knife he'd strapped to his leg in hand. But there was no one there.

Rage slammed through his veins, making the light flicker. *You're being ridiculous*, he thought.

The light turned off by itself and Hadrian strode from his room, lance coming to his hand before he slid it in its place on his leg.

Walking down the hall, the final lingering effects of the dream fell away. Mostly. But somewhere in the back of his mind Hadrian, recruiter of Kiera, couldn't shake the feeling he was being haunted.

Chapter 86

Rescue

Cloaked, they snuck up on the enemy cruiser. It wasn't a battleship, just a mid-sized transport vessel.

"I recognize that cruiser," said Cadence, on the deck with the others, "it's commanded under a Seditonist warlord named Alkar. See those big scratches on the left side? Got those in a skirmish in the orbit of Zerge. He was a bit ticked when his new ship got that blemish."

"And how did you come by that knowledge?" inquired Mason, behind her.

Cadence glanced over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. "When you move from one planet to another every few months, you hear and see all kinds of things."

When the others exchanged quick looks, Cadence straightened and turned to them. "What? You think just because I wasn't on the frontlines that I haven't been gathering information, doing surveillance?"

She smiled as apologetic looks flashed across a few of their faces.

"So, are we going to do this or what?"

Ronain cleared his throat before addressing the captain. "Take out the shields and then transport us over. There's a battleship not too far from here, so let's try not to invite them to this dance."

"You got it, general."

I still can't get over the fact that you're a general now, thought Cadence as he stepped beside her.

Yeah, he replied, *neither can I*.

Their ship fired several emp rounds at the Seditonist vessel. The charges hit and rippled over the shields. Not only did it knock out the shields, but it threw the entire ship into darkness.

Cadence blinked and next thing she and the others knew, they were in a dark hallway on the enemy ship. After checking to make sure she had all her limbs, she, Ronain and several of Arthos' warriors jogged down a passage on the right.

Commander Arthos led Tucker, Hailey and the rest of the crew straight. At each hall that ran to the left or right, pairs of warriors broke away from the main group.

The idea was to remain hidden for as long as possible. Once the team retrieving Chad set off the alarms, which they would, the others needed to keep the path to the hangar clear.

Arthos, Briggs, and Hailey were on their own as they crept down a dark corridor. A clicking around the bend ahead came to their ears and they ducked into a pitch black passageway on the left.

A spindly security droid walked into view. It almost passed the hall they were hiding in, but then backed up a pace and looked in the darkness at them.

Masking a single heat signature was one thing, but a group of three Legionnaires was much more difficult because they gave off more heat than the average civilian.

Slowly, the droid turned and walked towards them.

It was nearly on Briggs' toes when it stopped, looking around.

Raising his fist, Briggs smacked the top of the droid's head and it collapsed into a heap of parts at his feet.

He looked at Arthos and Hailey and shrugged.

Ω

On the bridge of the ship, Commander Alkar was pacing about, yelling at his underlings. They scrambled around, rebooting systems to get power back online.

He turned suddenly for the door that led onto the bridge, as if he'd heard something behind him. His eyes narrowed with growing suspicion.

Slowly the hair on the back of his neck rose and his stomach tightened. He scowled.

Someone unwelcome was onboard.

Ω

Ronain, Cadence, Judge, and Scout made their way deeper into the heart of the cruiser. There was a chill in the air that came from evil, and this place was thick with it.

They knew there was no way they were getting in and out without detection, and with each passing minute their anticipation of the alarm going off mounted.

At the next hall, they paused and Cadence peeked around the corner.

Chad was in a room two more halls over, but guards had been placed in the surrounding passageways as well.

She glanced back at Ronain and held up four fingers, indicating that's how many visible enemies there were.

The ship was operating on auxiliary power, which explained...how the warning sirens were able to sound. They cut through the air, jarring everyone.

Judge, at the rear, fired off a couple shots, destroying a pair of security droids that appeared behind them.

"We're about to have company," grumbled Judge, picking off one more droid.

"Better get a move on, then!" called Ronain.

Cadence was already walking down the tunnel, towards the four guards, two on either side of the hall. When they saw her, they turned and faced this lone, unknown person, not quite sure of what to make of this.

The two warriors in front felt a headache zip across their foreheads and then nothing else as they collapsed. The other two shoved their friends' bodies aside.

One found a knife in his chest. The final warrior deflected several shots from the unknown enemy now running at him. A stride from him, the intruder unholstered and drew a lance.

Their lances met with a bright flash and loud metallic ring. The assailant gave two more strikes before whipping the blue blade around and taking his legs out from under him. With a simple flick, the mystery person deflected his swipe before finishing him.

Ronain joined her side and they, along with Judge and Scout behind them, ran down the hall.

An unknown number of dark warriors came around the corner.

A breaker box exploded in the faces of the two leading the squad. The ones behind them couldn't see through the burst of smoke, and they never saw the deep blue lance flying through the air until it struck a third warrior. Several more found themselves thrown backwards.

Two of them sent an invisible strike towards whoever was approaching, to make them pause and also to clear the smoke from the air.

Cadence deflected it as her lance returned to her. She exchanged a quick blow with the first warrior before aerialing over him. She landed on her knees to meet a

hard downward strike from a second. She gave him a powerful shove and he stumbled back.

Taking one step, she flipped from her crouched position and slammed her boots into his stomach. Pivoting at the last second, she landed and jabbed her lance back and running him through.

With a quick, decisive turn, Cadence extended her left arm, palm out at the rest of the squad. The two in front took most of the strike and it dropped them. Those behind were forced to turn and cower away, the flash of light burning their eyes.

Judge and Scout just looked at each other, impressed.

Like Red said, thought Judge to his colleague, *I'm glad she's on our side.*

"We'll meet you there," said Ronain as the sound of more footsteps reached his ears.

Judge and Cadence broke away. They sprinted down a side hall, the electricity humming in the walls as they passed. Whatever security cameras they passed popped in a burst of sparks.

Judge glanced at his small counterpart. Her face was shadowed, mostly because the hall was dark, but also because of the hood she had pulled over her head.

It was decided it be best she hide her identity, so the enemy didn't know she was back in the game. For now.

But in the flashes of light from the exploding cameras, he caught the determination on her face, sharp jaw set, gaze focused.

A group of four dark warriors entered the hall at the far end. Cadence and Judge reached another passage on the right, and she slowed a little as he broke away. He was a bit disappointed; he wanted to stay and watch her in action.

Cadence strode towards them, a woman on a mission. As she drew her lance, she lifted her left hand, palm facing outwards. A white strike lit the hall, momentarily blinding the dark warriors.

They heard the snarl of a lance engaging, and the first warrior never even saw the fatal strike coming. Cadence ran him through, then twirled and slammed her blade into the second enemy before she spun and met the blow of the third.

Sensing an attack from behind, she ducked. A square panel flew in and struck the warrior in the face, instead of hitting her.

Straightening, she held it in place before punching it into the warrior again. It dropped him to his knees and her blade cut through the panel and into his stomach.

As he fell, Cadence met the fourth warrior.

They struck at each other once, then again. She had momentum on her side and she pushed him backwards, looking completely at ease. It was as if she knew each move he was going to make before he made it.

He swiped for her stomach.

She deflected it and then twirled the sword around behind her back to block the second blow. She disengaged her lance as he jabbed at her core.

Cadence stepped sideways and slammed the hilt of her lance in the nook of his elbow. Then, grabbing the wrist wielding the weapon, she helped him bend his arm back. The dark warrior ended up stabbing himself through the chest.

His body was still falling to the floor as she lifted back into a run. She picked up to full speed as she made the turn, hitting another dark warrior. He found himself slammed through the wall and into the next room.

This was the hall of the room Chad was in. Cadence sprinted down it, towards the next string of warriors.

Swinging hard, her lance deflected the first enemy's weapon to the side. It knocked him to the side and she rolled over his back, finishing him with a quick flick of her blade.

She reached the next warrior and blocked his strike. Cadence drove in low, clipping him in the legs and sending him over her right shoulder. Spinning to regain momentum, she met the third warrior's lance. They exchanged a few blows back and forth, but he couldn't keep up with her and he found himself cut down.

Lunging forward, Cadence drove her lance down hard at the fourth.

The warrior was completely surprised by her strength. He tried to brace himself, but his boots just slid across the floor.

She gave him a push and whipped her blade straight down to block his strike. But it left him open. A lethal shockwave nailed him in the chest and he fell.

She was near the room and there were only a few warriors left between her and it.

Cadence merely dodged to the side to miss the first warrior, swinging her lance behind her to clip him in the back. Reaching up, she grabbed the wrist of the next enemy.

In one fluid movement, she kicked his legs out from under him and gave his arm a yank. He flipped over onto his back and that was the end of it.

Ronain, who'd appeared seconds ago at the other end of the hall, watched her. She moved with such ease, cutting down the enemy, much as a farmer wields a scythe at harvest.

They reached the chamber door at the same time, with Scout and Judge jogging into the hall a second later.

Judge surveyed the trail of enemy bodies behind Cadence and was again impressed.

Ronain paused the briefest moment before opening the door. Cadence and the others could understand. Who knew what kind of a state Chad would be in? Assuming he was still alive.

The door was, of course, locked, but opened with a forceful push. The two guards inside found themselves rendered unconscious before they could blink.

Cadence felt like someone had punched her in the stomach. While she wasn't in any physical pain, she winced as she gazed at General Nathan Chad's large frame strapped to the table. Her throat tightened at the sight of him.

His shirt was torn and various bloodstains marked it. There was a fresh, deep wound on the left side of his chest, along with another across his stomach. One of his arms was swollen, likely broken.

She'd heard stories that Seditonist torturers prided themselves on being able to break bones without breaking skin.

They'd apparently abandoned that tactic with this elite catch, however. An ugly gash ran across the bridge of his nose and along part of his cheek. Black bruises marked his face.

But there were two things that caught Cadence's attention. The first was an area on the inside of his lower right arm, near the elbow. His veins were raised and black, as if burned. Some serious evil had been done to this man.

The second thing was the expression in Chad's pale blue eyes. They were half closed, but his gaze was blank; he'd withdrawn deep into himself.

"We're about to have a lot more company," said Scout, head poked out the door. Ronain brushed past Cadence to have a look.

Cadence stepped closer to Chad head.

"General?" she said, voice weaker than she would have wanted.

Judge watched out the corner of his eye as Cadence placed her delicate hands on either side of the general's face. Carefully she turned his head towards her.

"We're going to get you outta here," she said, before praying, *oh please, oh please, dear God, let him be okay...*

Keeping her hands on his face, Cadence looked away, as if unable to bear the sight of him.

But Judge knew better. Red did the same thing when he was praying and there were others present.

Precious seconds ticked by and silence seemed to stretch on forever before Chad drew in a sharp breath. He closed his eyes, cringing against the pain.

"We need to move. Now. If we could get through that back wall..."

The voice sounded distant, but it was familiar to Chad. He sensed movement around him and felt the restraints on his ankles and wrists give way.

Blinking a couple times, his eyes slowly came into focus, and there was no missing the face looking down at him. And there was a touch of frown on the expression.

Cadence watched Chad slowly raise his arm. His bloodied and scraped fingers lightly touched her face, as if to make sure she was real.

She slapped her hand into his. "We're getting you outta here, sir," she said.

A faint, half smile made its way onto his face, like he'd known all along she was the one who would come.

She carefully rested his arm across his stomach before turning and walking to the rear wall.

Pulling out two mines from a pocket, Cadence set them in place then took a few steps back. Glancing over her shoulder, she looked at Ronain and Judge, who were holding Chad up.

"Fire in the hole."

The mines didn't just create a gap; it blew out the entire wall. Cadence directed the force of the explosion outward, clearing the next two rooms.

"Wow," she said, "Lights said they had some punch."

Scout snorted. "Yeah, that'd be Lights."

They walked through the rubble and into the second room.

Moving around seemed to help Chad recover some. He was able to stand up mostly on his own by the time they reached the door and his eyes were more focused.

Cadence, at the door, raised her hand a moment, asking them to wait. Closing her eyes, she listened a second before stepping back and giving a mighty kick.

The door flew open, slamming smack into the face of a dark warrior. His companion found himself rammed against the opposite wall.

Scout came out next and then Judge, Ronain and Chad. This was the hall Cadence had initially come down. Several dark warriors spotted them, and would have pursued if the entire ceiling and walls on either side of them hadn't collapsed in their path.

Turning, Cadence jogged to catch up to the others. The next hall that intersected them was a major passage which wound around the ship. She and Scout peeked around the corner both directions and saw the squads coming from either way.

That was until they saw the flash of a lance behind both groups. Some of their own reinforcements had arrived.

By now the dark warriors knew something was going on behind them. However, they didn't stand much of a chance with Cadence and Scout coming from the front, and Fritz and Mason from the rear.

The situation was resolved and they sprinted back to Judge, Ronain and Chad.

The hangar wasn't much further. They just had to follow this hall, hang a right down a short passage and they were at the bay.

A group of dark warriors streamed into the hall from the left and right. Cadence and Scout took care of the four in the middle, while Mason and Fritz engaged two that tried to sneak in from behind.

A blue blade came from the left, jade one from the right, striking the warriors on the edges of the group. With one more shockwave from Scout and Cadence, the group was taken care of.

Jackie and Tucker, the owners of the lances, fell in line with the others as they continued down the hall.

Cadence shot a look back at Chad.

The general was obviously in pain, sweat staining his shirt, and his breathing had become slightly labored. But his gaze was sharp when his eyes met hers.

He gave her a wink, like he had every confidence she'd help them escape. Confidence, like when she'd been training.

It was as if the six years apart had never happened.

The hall curved around to the right, the passage they wanted not a couple dozen feet ahead on the left. Dark warriors filled the hall, advancing their direction.

Everyone was seconds from acting when Arthos and Hailey stepped in their path. Red and Briggs were somewhere behind the enemy squad.

Cadence turned in time to shield them from the rear as a shower of weapons fire rained down on them. Mason, Fritz, and Jackie ducked, and Tucker shot a look at Cadence.

She didn't seem worried, and stood calmly, left hand extended. The rounds didn't disintegrate, but instead gathered. With a flare, they formed into one wave of flames, which roared back into the faces of the ones shooting at them.

Nearly to the entrance of the hangar, Cadence, walking backwards, glanced back down the hall, before straight ahead into another large passage.

When she blinked, it seemed like the legions of dark warriors appeared out of nowhere. Darkness clawed at her mind as the enemy tried to push her down with a strong mental assault.

"Get the door open!" she heard Arthos bark behind her and off to her left.

Apparently the door into the hangar was giving them trouble. The windows that looked into the bay weren't much of an option, because they were stronger than most of the support walls inside the ship.

Red and Judge took a position just behind her, off either shoulder as the first flash of weapons fire came at them. But the rounds vaporized before getting near their targets.

An angry ping shot through Cadence's temple. A moment later, she saw the reason. The forces divided and there stood Alkar, Seditonist commander.

"We're in!" shouted Ronain.

The lights flickered, the air hummed as the dark commander leveled his gaze on these three challengers. One didn't need to clearly see his face to feel the putrid hatred coming off him, even from all the way down the hall.

The enemy forces were pressing in from straight ahead and from the right. With a snarl of malice, the commander sent a powerful shockwave rippling towards them. All lights in the passage, though not on, popped.

"Cadence!" she heard Tucker shout.

Cadence didn't even lift a hand before the strike hit an invisible shield a foot in front of her. The commander drove the relentless assault, trying to overpower her.

Cadence merely closed her eyes, lifting her chin a little like when one savors a cool summer breeze. She drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Finally she snapped her gaze onto the commander, drilling him with those piercing blue eyes.

They shared a long look, before she brought her hands together with a clap.

A blinding flash and a deafening crash preceded the totally destructive force that roared down both halls. It buckled the walls, blew out the lights, and struck and killed every single warrior, save for Alkar and his strongest men.

With that gesture, Cadence turned and walked into the hangar, Judge and Red behind her. They barricaded the main entrance into the bay before climbing into the cruiser.

The hanger doors had already been opened and everyone else was inside. The engines roared to life and seconds later the ship lifted from the floor and glided out of the hangar.

Ronain opened up the cruiser full throttle, getting them away from the crippled enemy ship. Somewhere behind them, their other vessel was following, cloaked and ready to run interference.

Cadence dropped to one knee beside the cot Chad was lying on and pulled back the hood of her coat.

Lights had brought basic medical supplies and had him hooked up to fluids. He'd also done a once over with that nifty superficial wound repairer device on his

wounds. All except the most serious injuries, including the internal ones, were mostly healed already.

“Hey, boss,” she said quietly, hand on his arm.

Chad opened his eyes.

“Hey, kid,” he replied, “welcome back.”

Despite the trauma he’d suffered, his voice was just as deep and rich as the last time Cadence had seen him. It reminded her how much she’d missed her mentor and friend.

Cadence managed a faint smile. “Likewise. Although, I never thought I’d actually be the one to help rescue my former trainer. Not General Nathan Chad.”

The big man smiled. “Well, it was worth the risk. I learned some important things while in captivity. But more importantly, you’re back in.”

I’m not nearly as strong as everyone thinks, thought Cadence, doubt shadowing her face, *I don’t want to disappoint you all.*

She couldn’t even consider the idea that she might have to face...Kiera.

He must have sensed her burden because he gently patted the side of her face. *You’re not a disappointment, Cadence. We are all proud of you, and will continue to be, no matter what happens.*

“One day at a time, young one,” he murmured.

Such an expression as this, whispered a thought in Cadence's mind, *could only be from love.*

It softened her calloused heart a little.

“You’re the one who looks like he got dragged behind a speeder and you’re consoling me?”

This time Chad's smile reached all the way to his eyes.

You can rest well tonight, general, she thought, giving his arm a light squeeze.

His eyes were already drifting closed again and soon he was asleep. Only once he was did Cadence leave his side.

She trudged to the rear of the cruiser and sat down, back against a couch. She suddenly felt tired. She rubbed her face in her hands before gently massaging her forehead, where an ache had lodged itself.

Cadence was in a place somewhere between sleep and alertness when someone sat down beside her.

“You don’t look so good,” said Tucker.

Cadence didn’t open her eyes as she replied, “Just really tired.”

“I can understand, I mean, especially after what you pulled back on that ship.”

Moment of silence.

“How...how did you do that?”

This time Cadence forced her eyes open so she could look at him. She gave him a weak shrug. “You don’t survive on your own without honing your skills. Practice...and lots of prayer, though it has been mostly a one-sided conversation as of late.”

“He’s been silent, huh?”

“Like a clear winter’s night.”

A particularly sharp pain dug itself in her temple. Cadence pressed her hand against the side of her head and closed her eyes a moment.

“What’s wrong?” asked Tucker in a suddenly frantic tone, as if she’d received a lethal blow from a lance.

It made a smile play onto her lips, despite the discomfort in her head. “It’s only a headache, Tucker. I’m just exhausted is all.”

Cadence pushed herself up onto the couch. It took tremendous effort and Tucker gently took her arm to help her. She didn’t have the energy to protest when he picked her legs up onto the couch so she was lying down.

When she grunted, Tucker sent her a look. “Shush. Years of worrying about you...”

He cut off his tone.

She knew there was a lot of things he wanted to say, that *everyone* else wanted to say. But there’d be a time and place for it later.

You’ve been on your own a long time, he continued thinking to her, *let someone take care of you a little.*

He took an extra blanket from a nearby cot and draped it over her. When he pulled it across her shoulders he thought, *you’re not alone anymore, Cadence. I don’t think you can accomplish what you’ll need to in the days ahead if you’re by yourself.*

Leaning over, he whispered in her ear. “And I’d go to hell and back again for you. Remember that.”

Tucker gently brushed the beautiful auburn hair away from her face, then turned to where the others were. “Get some sleep. You’re going to need it after taking on dozens of dark warriors...crazy woman.”

He passed between a makeshift doorway and a heavy curtain closed behind him, so it would be dark enough for her and Chad to sleep.

Through a gap between the curtain and wall, Cadence could see the rest of the team.

They talked and joked quietly with one another, and it made her smile...and grateful. While she had actually enjoyed sneaking around, working solo, she knew a time had come in this war for her to come back.

At least...for now.

She didn't to even begin to think about Tucker's minutely affectionate gesture, or his words. But she fell asleep feeling thankful for this group of people.

Chapter 87

Secret Fleet

It was morning when they reached a Legionnaire base on Planet Baddon in the Jutland System. General Chad had mostly recovered and the only remnant from his injuries was a bit of stiffness in his muscles.

When they entered the building, a thundering voice greeted them.

“General Chad! Thank the Almighty you are still with us.”

Justin, Hailey and Tucker's father, strode towards them. When he saw Cadence his face lit up even more. He gave her a quick hug that practically engulfed her before giving her a big, jarring slap on the back.

Arthos and his warriors headed off across the lobby as Justin turned and continued straight down the hall in front of them. “Come this way. The information Chad gathered has been sent to other generals throughout the system. We've already located several of their supply stations on five planets, as well as a warship construction site.”

So, thought Cadence to Chad, that's what the plan was when you got captured.

Justin glanced over his shoulder at the group, “We've been analyzing the upgraded shield schematics of the Seditonist battleships, trying to identify the weaknesses. It's a bit of a task.”

Justin stopped and half turned, looking at Cadence. “Perhaps you wouldn't mind taking a look yourself? Unless you're tired and...”

Cadence shook her head. “No, please. Let's get to it.”

“We'll be in the main tech room,” said Justin to the others.

“I'm going to be a bit rusty,” commented Cadence as they rounded a corner.

Justin just chuckled. “I'm not too worried.”

They entered a door on the left and stepped into an expansive room. On the far wall were holographic projections of an enemy battleship and every last stat on its weapons, power grid, everything.

A list appeared on the left wall. “That's everything we've tested so far. We've been attempting to figure out a modification to our weapons so they can penetrate the shield without having to completely disable them first.”

Justin, standing beside Cadence, folded his arms across his chest. “But we don’t want to upgrade our weapons and immediately go out blazing. We want to keep this under wraps until we go into a head-on battle with the Seditonists.”

“I see,” mused Cadence, arms also crossed as she studied the information, “have you played with the holographic projection they used six years ago to disguise their warships?”

Justin shook his head. “No...not really. It’s a simple enough concept though. Why? What’re you thinking?”

Cadence gave a slight wag of her head. “Just something to keep in mind. We may be able to use that to our advantage, you know, a little smoke and mirrors to confuse them...”

She glanced at him. *Are we going to try and take over that construction site? Going into a fight with the notion they’re getting reinforcements when it’s really us would be awesome.*

Justin grinned. *There’s already a team being put together now.*

“Right,” said Cadence, rubbing her hands together, “let’s get started.”

By lunch time they were finally beginning to make headway. And by then, everyone needed a break.

After grabbing a bite to eat at the break room, Justin nudged Cadence’s shoulder. “I have something to show you. This way.”

She followed him through the halls, winding through the building. Finally, they came to a staircase which led underground. Down the tunnel, the passage opened up into a vast room, which actually turned out to be a hangar.

When Cadence’s brain realized what she was looking at, she stopped dead in her tracks.

There, lined up in neat rows were sleek light fighters, almost identical to the prototype Justin had revealed years ago. The prototype of her fighter.

“Your fleet of ships, Ms. Shahan,” said Justin, hands on his hips. When he saw her wide-eyed, drop-jawed expression he laughed heartily.

As they wandered through the fleet, Justin explained, “Six years and we haven’t officially revealed these fighters. We’ve only used them for missions of the utmost secrecy. There are thousands of these hidden in hangars all across the systems. We wanted to wait to unveil them to the enemy until our forces had a bit more of a handle on the war.”

Cadence stood back, eyes sweeping over the vessels. Their sleek and shiny finish reflected what was surrounding them, so they were naturally camouflaged.

“I don’t know what to say, Justin...” she shot him a coy look, “hyperspace capacity?”

“Comes standard. You can go from the eastern rim of the Kerst System to the center of Ulnun in under eight hours.”

“Weapons?”

“More than you’d think possible. Rockets, bunker busters, emps, mines...”

“I can’t wait to take one up.”

Justin slapped her on the back again. “Sooner than you think. Legionnaire forces are going to be making another move on the Kerst System in a matter of days.”

“Well, if we’re going to have our weapons upgraded by then, we’d better get back to work,” replied Cadence.

They headed back to the tech room.

Risky missions, secret fleets, battles to retake planets...Cadence couldn’t help but wonder where Eliezer and the other generals were. She also wondered if Chad would be participating in the push for the Kerst System.

It hadn’t dawned on Cadence until now that Commander Alkar and his crew would likely face consequences for their failure to keep a Legionnaire general in their custody.

Yikes. She wouldn’t want to be there to see that.

Chapter 88

Fallout

“What I fail to understand, Commander Alkar, is how a squad of Legionnaires got aboard this ship, rescued their general, and escaped in one of *your* cruisers.”

The dark warriors stood at attention, backs straight as they lined against the walls of the main hall.

General Bayne had been on the nearby battleship while the rescue had been in progress. The moment he’d learned this vessel had been the one holding General Chad and it had been damaged, he stopped over for a visit. What he found was a damaged cruiser and no prisoner.

Oh and a number of bodies, all dark warriors.

Bayne turned to Kiera. “You are to stay here. Once the ship is repaired, you’ll receive coordinates to rendezvous with the dark lord. He wishes for you to be in command. He was impressed with your strength and fortitude in facing General Necro on Lunghei. You have risen through the ranks in the few years you’ve been with us, and he feels this sort of promotion has been long overdue.”

He was about to go on his way, but paused. “Oh, and one more thing, Commander Alkar...”

Bayne turned and walked towards the dark commander. Stopping in front of him, Bayne put a hand on his shoulder...and ran him through his core with his lance. “The dark lord was anticipating getting to interrogate such a prominent Legionnaire general himself...he’s very disappointed in you.”

With a jerk, Bayne pulled the blade from Alkar’s stomach and the commander collapsed to the floor.

“Kiera Shahan is in command now,” growled Bayne as he walked back down the hall, “if you have an issue with that...I recommend you keep your mouth shut because you can be replaced.”

Chapter 89

Slaughter

The ship was fully operational later that day. Kiera took her position on the main bridge just as an intelligence report came in.

“Commander,” said an officer at a console, “our resources have just discovered a large number of enemy squads on Cerrig.”

Hands clasped behind her back, she asked, “Are there any Legionnaires with them?”

“No. They’re regular military soldiers.”

“Well, we’ll just have to go pay them a visit on our way by, won’t we?”

“Yes, commander. Setting coordinates now. We should be there in thirty minutes.”

Kiera settled her gaze on a dark warrior over her left shoulder, a gleam in her eyes. “Besides, we can’t very well let our brothers already on Cerrig have all the fun.”

The warriors allowed themselves an evil smile. There was something about their new commander that they instantly liked. Alkar had seemed soft, meandering, couldn’t think for himself.

They got the sense that their new leader was an opportunist: see a chance to wound the enemy and take it.

They liked that trait. A lot.

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The sun was setting on Cerrig and the shift change had just finished. Soldiers on the day shift were heading for their cots and the night shift were about to make their rounds.

That is, until the ground began quaking. They barely had a chance to wonder what was going on when an enemy cruiser swooped in low over the treetops and bombed the makeshift compound.

Soldiers scrambled into action as *they* stormed in through the thick forest from every direction. Dark warriors hit the large camp and the soldiers instantly recognized the one leading them: Kiera.

She started at the south end and began working her way north. It didn't matter how many soldiers fired their weapons at her. She merely deflected the shots or made the rounds vanish.

There was no place to run as the enemy pressed in from all sides, and soldiers didn't stand a chance when Kiera finally reached them. She cut them down, one after the other. Some of them pleaded, begged for mercy, but she didn't listen.

With a single sweep of her lance, Kiera struck down three more soldiers, before throwing several more against the trees. They hit with such force their spines broke in multiple places.

Cruel gaze on another group, Kiera strode towards them.

The pressure and weight on their shoulders, combined with the heavy presence of evil drove them to their knees. They fell without being able to fire a shot.

Turning, she struck down yet another soldier on the right, before a second on the left. Spinning, she twirled her lance and shoved it into the stomach of a third enemy behind her.

Kiera's eyes settled on a man near the middle of the camp, a commander. Whipping her lance around, she deflected the sudden shower of rifle rounds.

Pivoting to the right, she flipped through the air, weapons fire zipping past her arm, then her back and leg. She landed and gave a broad sweep of her blade, clipping two soldiers.

Turning, she extended her hand at the next three. The grips of their weapons became hot and they were forced to drop them. Two were dead seconds later, but the third managed to roll out of the way of her strike.

He was quick on his feet, Kiera credited him that. He ducked and dodged out of the way of her lance. She paused to disengage her weapon before advancing forward again.

She punched.

He ducked and gave a jab.

Kiera moved her head just so to miss the blow and then dodged to the side to avoid the next swing. She latched onto the inside of the soldier's arm with her left hand and pulled him forward. She slammed her right palm into his chest.

It pulverized his heart and he dropped.

Kiera hit the commander with a blow he never saw coming. It threw him to the ground, nearly knocking him unconscious.

He was just pushing himself to his hands and knees when Kiera reached him. She grabbed him by the throat and pulled him up.

Volts of pain shot from his neck up into his head and down into his shoulders and chest. He grunted and gasped for air. He could see his camp was now filled with more dark warriors than soldiers.

"So...you just come to kill everyone?" growled the commander, hands on Kiera's wrist to try and loosen her grasp.

"Yeah," she replied, "because in my book, the only good enemy soldier...is a dead one. If we take captives, there's always a chance they'll revolt or something. This is just...easier."

Kiera tightened her grip and the commander's knees began to buckle.

"You'll get what's coming to you," he grunted, defiance on his face.

"Perhaps," she said, "but you'll get yours first."

With one quick move, she snapped the commander's neck.

Letting his body fall, Kiera turned in a circle. Every soldier in camp had been killed, the ground covered with their bodies, soaking up the streams of blood.

The drone of a cruiser came from through the trees and Kiera looked at her warriors.

"Come," she said, sliding her lance onto her thigh, "the night is still young, and we have another place we need to be."

Ω

"We neutralized a camp of enemy reinforcements on Cerrig," said Kiera, "there were only maybe a hundred, but we know that little things add up."

"*Well done, commander,*" said the dark lord Zair, and he meant it. "*I like my leaders to be able to take decisive actions like that.*"

Kiera gave a dip of her head.

"*See you in thirty.*"

Kiera ended the transmission when an officer called from a monitor. "The footage you asked of the rescue is finally up."

As she stepped behind him, he continued, "Most of the memory from the drives was destroyed, so I'm afraid this is all we have."

He played the video from the surveillance camera. It was only a short clip, but Kiera's gaze was instantly riveted to what she was watching.

A lone warrior, face hidden by a hood, was cutting down dark warriors like they were new trainees. Kiera's eyes narrowed and a frown set itself on her face as she studied this mystery person. The swings and parries were precise and quick, to the point, and the way the enemy moved was almost...artistic.

Then she knew, in her heart, who this was. She straightened with a growl, nose wrinkled as fury slammed through her veins so fiercely it sent chills down her spine. "It's...her."

"Who, commander?" asked one of Kiera's head warriors.

Kiera's face contorted a couple seconds, having difficulty even giving the answer.

"It's...Ca..." She shook her head, unable to speak the name, "my sister!"

"What?" barked the warrior, "How can you be sure?"

Kiera glared at him.

"I trained with her. I think I would know how she moves."

She pointed at the monitor as the officer played the footage back, "See. She has a very precise way of fighting. Besides, my gut is screaming at me that it's...it's..."

"Your sister?"

"Yes!"

Kiera jerked her gaze out the front window of the bridge, fuming. Hatred towards her sister burned hot in her gut.

Shortly after Kiera had fallen, her gift of prophetic dreams had grown dull. Occasionally she was given insight into Legionnaire movements or plans, but Cadence had remained hidden for her and every other Seditonist the past half decade.

It was a good thing they were headed into another battle shortly, otherwise there was a chance she'd destroy this ship in an overdramatic fit. If Kiera had had any pity left in her soul, she would've felt it for the enemy forces they were about to rain down fire upon.

They rendezvoused with the large, sleek black battleship which Zair himself was commanding. As planned, it struck the defenses of Poitevin, a planet just northwest of Elywn, in the Ulnun System.

Over the past year, the Seditonists had worked to create more powerful weapons for their cruisers. A breakthrough had come not a few weeks ago. Now they could deliver greater levels of destructive force while using less power.

The main warship was firing off its last rockets on the surface as Zair boarded a medium cruiser with Kiera. With the rest of the bombers and light fighters, they headed for the city.

They roared through the rising pillars of smoke and flames, scraping over the tops of the buildings before landing on the outskirts.

Their warriors were already locked in combat with the enemy ground forces. When they saw Kiera exit the cruiser, it gave them pause. But when they saw the dark one follow behind her, there was no missing the blatant fear that filled them.

Kiera and Zair watched with mild admiration, however, as the enemy soldiers mastered their terror and stood their ground.

Zair leveled his potent gaze upon the squad and a breath later they dropped to their knees with startled cries of pain. They grabbed their heads as the fiercest headaches they'd ever felt latched on, feeling like sharp talons were digging into their skulls.

After watching them writhe in agony for a minute, he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, enjoying the sound of their torment.

Several of the soldiers gasped sharply. It felt like someone had just punched a dagger straight through their backs. They hitched a short breath before coughing and spitting up blood.

They all began to collapse simultaneously. One of the last soldiers to fall managed to raise his eyes to the dark one, who met his gaze.

His dark expression was filled with the utmost malice, and hatred for a man he did not even know, or care to know.

Then the soldier fell to the concrete, and he and Kiera continued onward.

There were a few lone Legionnaires in the city, and Kiera walked to meet them. While the dark warriors formed squads and moved off in other directions, Zair paused to watch her. He wanted to see her in action himself.

She ran the last few strides towards the advancing Legionnaire, her lance burning to life. Kiera came down hard, crimson blade slamming against the dark blue one of her enemy. It was a harsh blow, but he recovered quickly and swung again.

Kiera blocked the high strike, and then the one that came across from the right.

Quick as a flash, he whipped his lance around, from the left.

Lance in her left hand, Kiera deflected it. Lunging forward suddenly, she grabbed him by the throat. He was taken aback by the terrible pain that resulted from her touch, like volts of electricity raging through his neck and into his head. It was more than enough to make his legs give.

With a growl, she turned and threw him to the ground like he weighed nothing. The impact was significant, the concrete underneath him breaking and cracking. He never stood a chance after that and she slew him.

Kiera looked up in time to hit another enemy with a crimson strike. He was lunging for her when it struck and he was thrown back.

She continued across the square when a group of soldiers drew her attention. They were moving briskly into position behind a short perimeter wall created by intervals of trees and white stones.

Sliding the edge of the lance across her hand, a crimson and black flame roared to life before being shrouded in thick smoke. Kiera hurled it at the portion of wall the soldiers had taken cover behind.

The strike didn't so much as obliterate the stones and nearby trees as it merely disintegrated them into a heavy wall of ash. Then came a mighty whoosh of air as the dark gray veil ignited into a torrent of flames that consumed the soldiers.

It all happened so quickly they never knew what hit them.

The Legionnaire Kiera had sent tumbling returned for more, jade lance engaged.

A mental assault rippled across Kiera's forehead, but she shrugged it away like it was nothing. She swung her lance around and pointed it at her enemy.

The most powerful strike anyone had yet to see from her flashed across the square. It tore through the warrior's body and drove him to his knees. He remained immobile as Kiera approached, as any movement from his muscles amplified the pain.

"That was a new trick I just learned," she said, coming to a stop.

As she stood over him, she saw the major veins in his arms had blackened, as if burned. He was drenched with sweat and blood ran from his nose, mouth, and fingernails. The depth of his anguish was in his eyes, along with something else....

Kiera twirled her lance and cut him down. A war cry came from across the road on the far side of the square.

Her gaze snapped up to see three more Legionnaires headed her way. Eyes narrowing, she focused on the one in front a couple seconds. She glanced down at the corpse at her feet, and then back to him.

The warrior she'd just killed had been the man's brother.

The fallen Legionnaire's lance came to her left hand and Kiera twirled the jade and red blades, making them crackle.

Moments later, Kiera would fall the brother and his two companions in a few meager strikes.

Next came more soldiers. The more foes she struck down, the hotter her hatred for them burned.

The pain that snarled in her own blackened soul was only soothed by the bloodshed of her enemies. In her darkened and twisted mind, they were the cause of the inner turmoil that raged inside her, of her suffering...and of the nothingness that often consumed her.

Before she realized it, the square was covered by the bodies of the enemy. Hot from the fight, Kiera looked about her, fuming.

And still she wanted more.

The dark lord stepped beside her as another squad of soldiers peered out of the building across the road. He studied Kiera a moment, an evil sneer of pleasure forming on his face. *I think I just found my new trainee*, he thought to her.

He lightly touched Kiera's shoulder and a frigid chill raced down her veins, branching off into the rest of her body as it passed. It flooded her muscles with impossible strength.

Both settled their gazes on the building. They extended their arms, as if reaching for it. The entire side of the structure blew outwards, throwing soldiers into the road before raining down debris on top of them.

With fighters roaring past overhead, rockets exploding, pummeling the enemy, Zair and Kiera continued through the city.

Word would spread quickly after this day that Kiera had again been seen in battle...and the dark one was with her.

Chapter 90

Perseverance

While Poitevin was being overthrown and cast into darkness, the Legionnaires successfully retook Kuhal, driving out the Seditonist forces. Also, additional reinforcements were being put in place on various planets, in preparation for a larger move against the dark enemy.

The forces that were going to hit the Seditonist battleship construction site were assembled. Commander Arthos and his warriors would be part of this assignment and would meet with other units en route to said construction site.

General Ipos would also be joining the Special Forces commander for this mission. Because Ipos' tasks were to be kept secret, where he had been and where he would go afterwards was not discussed. He was still as mysterious as ever when he arrived at Baddon.

While he was greeting everyone, he heard Cadence had returned. At the news he actually smiled, which was something no one could recall him actually ever doing.

In the midst of their reunion, however, an officer rushed into the lobby. “Sorry to interrupt, but...we’ve got some footage we need you to look at. It just came in and it's rather important.”

Ipos, Ronain and Arthos, along with Hailey and Tucker, followed the officer. They went back to one of the surveillance rooms, where Chad was already waiting.

Judging by his face, he’d already seen whatever they were supposed to watch.

“This was routed from one of our local military allies on Cerrig,” said the officer, nodding to his companion at a console.

The video appeared on a monitor in front of them. It was a forest, of the camp where the soldiers were based. Dark warriors came from every direction, swarming out of the thick trees.

The footage jerked all over the place as the soldier recording attempted to evade the enemy. But they were surrounded, and that’s when the soldier focused on her: Kiera.

She was cutting down the soldiers like they were nothing. One of the wounded tried to crawl away from her, scooting backwards as he pleaded for mercy.

He didn’t get any. Seconds later whoever was recording must have been cut down because the screen went black.

The officer cleared his throat. “And this just came in from Poitevin...”



Cadence rubbed her aching forehead. After another day and endless hours of work, they finally had some very plausible weapons modifications. Now they just needed to test them.

But first she had to take a break.

Justin was off somewhere else, and Cadence moseyed over to the large break room. Finding it empty, she checked a few other gathering places and still found no one besides the regular officers and employees.

“Hey,” she said to one of the officers in the lobby, “where is everyone?”

“Oh, they were out here. General Ipos just arrived, and then some of them went back to the main surveillance room I think.”

“Thanks.”

Cadence headed down the hall. She was nearly to the room when a very bad feeling came over her. She paused a second to gather herself before continuing towards the door.

You don't want to go in there, whispered a thought.

Cadence frowned and ignored it. The door slid open and she walked inside. Apparently, none of the group heard her enter because they kept their backs to her. She slowly approached, and Hailey finally turned. Her eyes grew wide. “Oh, uh...”

The others glanced over their shoulders before drawing a breath.

“Cadence,” started Tucker.

The group was half turned and she could see part of the monitor.

Rather suspicious at their reaction to her being there, Cadence took a few steps closer so she could see better.

It was video footage, and whoever had taken it had done so from a building, several floors up. The view was of a square, and there were already a few bodies strewn along the ground.

A dark warrior strode across it, cutting down enemies, crimson blade trailing through the air.

An icy knot settled in the pit of Cadence’s stomach when she realized who this dark enemy was. She could see enough of the face...and there was no mistaking that gorgeous red hair. It was Kiera, her sister.

Tucker watched the color drain from Cadence’s face, lines on her face hardening as she watched in disbelief at the horrific events playing before her eyes.

She felt herself grow cold as she watched Kiera strike down a Legionnaire with a terribly vicious blow. Seconds later a figure, shadowed in darkness, stepped beside her.

It was one thing to know your sibling was fighting alongside dark forces. It was another thing entirely to actually see it.

Nausea hit her and she suddenly didn’t feel very well.

Aware everyone was looking at her, she managed to uproot her boots from the floor and turn. Her legs felt unsteady, but she forced them to move as she exited the room.

Chad held up his hand, signaling the others it was best to let her have a few moments to herself.

Cadence wasn’t sure where she was going, just that she needed to get away from the others, to walk somewhere. The pounding in her head grew worse, as did the sick feeling lodged in her stomach.

A fine sheen of sweat had broken across her forehead when she reached a quieter area of the ship. She pulled in sharp breaths through her nose and shook her head, trying to remove the scenes from the video that were still playing in her head.

Headache throbbing in sync with her heart, she suddenly felt rather unsteady. Placing her hand on the wall for support, she doubled over and dry heaved.

Cadence let her head hang a couple seconds. Then she took a few slow breaths to steady herself, her shock quickly giving way to anger.

Come on, she growled to herself, pull yourself together. What did you think your sister's been doing the past six years anyway? Playing patty cakes with her dark minions?

Tears burned hot in her eyes, which only made her angrier. *What do you think you're doing, Kiera? Do you even care?*

Fact was, Kiera had taken her job with the Seditonists seriously. She was growing stronger, becoming a threat.

Just wait, whispered a voice in the back of her mind, *sooner or later you're going to have to confront her.*

Cadence was angry at Kiera, angry she even had to entertain that idea. Her own flesh and blood sister causing this much pain in others, and what made it worse was she didn't even care. The universe was about her now and the dark one with which she had aligned herself.

Giving a growl, Cadence turned and slammed her fist into the wall behind her, denting and cracking it. She knew why the thought of fighting Kiera was so difficult.

She'd once been her best friend, one she'd been loyal to. She'd always thought she and Kiera would fight side by side, to the very end.

But now she was pitted against the very one she would have died to protect.

Cadence glared out the windows as they passed a bright cluster of stars. She didn't know how long she'd stood there fuming, shoulders rising and falling with her sharp breaths when Chad showed up.

He'd been standing at the entrance to a side hall, watching. He could see the fury in her face, sense it, with the reawakening of a feeling of betrayal.

After a few more minutes she closed her eyes and shook her head. When she opened her eyes again, fresh tears slid down her hard face.

Cadence wanted to raise her fists to the heavens and demand to know why Almighty would let this happen. She wanted to scream.

But she didn't. Instead, her shoulders slumped slightly as her sullen gaze focused on something out in the far reaches of space.

Chad allowed himself a long, quiet breath. He wondered why this burden could not have fallen on someone else. He knew the answer, actually. Cadence was the only one he knew who could bear this weight.

He'd always been fond of Cadence, ever since she'd skipped into his life years ago. Chad thought if he had ever gotten married, he would have wanted a daughter just like her.

So, when he saw her in pain, he shared in it also.

"You going to be alright?" he asked finally, stepping beside her.

Cadence drew a breath and straightened. Resolution had returned to her expression and she gave a nod in response to his question.

"Some days I just want to give up," she said, eyes still on the bright stars the ship was passing, "is it really worth the fight? But...after seeing that footage...something will have to be done. Letting evil have a free rein without putting up any sort of a fight would be worse than putting up a gallant effort only to fail."

Cadence finally let her gaze drift to Chad. "I'm just not sure I can entertain the thought of actually fighting Kiera."

There was a nobility about her, Chad saw, not in spite of the admission, but because of it. She was aware of the larger scheme of things and focused on the vital points, even though it hurt. And yet she did so with calm and composure.

Resilient, thought Chad to himself, *that's what she is. A true warrior...a true commander.*

Looking down at her, he said, "It's alright, Cadence. Don't try to run too fast or too far ahead before you're ready. The Almighty will work on you along the way, so that when the time for a large trial arrives, you'll be ready."

Hearing those reassuring words eased her tension and soothed her inner turmoil a little. It was good to be reminded of those truths.

Cadence took a deep breath and looked up at him. "I...don't know what I would do without you, general."

Chad smiled a sort of sad smile. "We'll just take it one day at a time, kid. One day at a time."

Chapter 91

Battle for Fars

After waiting until the enemy forces had gone to the planet's surface, the Legionnaire battleship rocketed out of hyperspace and slammed the Seditonist warship with a wave of missiles. Four medium cruisers roared in from different directions, two engaging the two enemy cruisers, while the other half struck the battleship broadside.

Pops and explosions cut through space as the two sides exchanged fire. The medium cruisers were maneuvering with much more agility than their larger counterparts, cutting around the warships.

By then, Legionnaire light fighters were disembarking from the main ship. Some engaged the sparse light fighters of the enemy, while others joined in the chase of the medium cruisers.

These Legionnaire light fighters weren't part of the secret fleet, because those were still being reserved for a more difficult battle. However, they were still evenly matched against their opponents.

Half a dozen fell in formation with a medium cruiser and made a pass on the enemy battleship. Coming from behind, they pummeled the right side. Another medium cruiser ran interference when an enemy vessel tried to swoop in and cut them off.

A third medium cruiser, with accompanying fighters, raked the other side of the warship. The shields had a difficult time handling the multiple attacks and began to flicker as they weakened.

But the black Seditonist ships, though a touch smaller than Legionnaire warships, were sleeker and quicker. It circled around in preparation to make a pass.

The light fighters regrouped and converged on it. When it fired on their warship, they took out the rockets before they had a chance to reach their target. Then the fighters scattered as the enemy vessel returned fire at them.

"Hold course," barked General Hezron, commanding the Legionnaire warship, "wait for them to get closer..."

The ship shuddered madly as the enemy landed a hit. While they hadn't been able to upgrade their weapons, they had been able to make a few modifications. Like to the thrusters.

"Prep the mines."

"Mines ready and thrusters are on standby."

The ship jerked again and the lights flickered a second.

When the Seditonist ship was almost right on top of them, he gave a nod. "Drop the mines and punch the thrusters!"

No one had yet gotten used to the increased thrust, so when the Legionnaire battleship shot forward, anyone who wasn't holding onto something got thrown across the bridge.

They slipped away as ugly black mines collided with the Seditonist battleship. The explosions rippled over the shields, causing minor damage.

By now the medium cruisers were advancing again. The Seditonist battleship was fast, but they were faster.

They were about to sweep up either flank and drop mines when a medium enemy cruiser attacked from above. It forced two cruisers to divert off course or risk serious damage. The enemy wasn't going to let them merely escape to line up another attack run either, and gave way to the chase.

The medium cruisers attempted to string the enemy along, to lead him closer to Legionnaire battleship. But the pilot caught onto their tactic and kept breaking away. When the cruisers approached the Seditonist ship again, he circled around to reengage them.

"A smart one, eh?" said the pilot of one of the two medium cruisers.

"And quick," added the other pilot.

"This is base," came general Hezron's voice through their helmets, *"See if you can lead him past the bow one more time. We'll take him off your hands."*

"Roger that. Ready, Bravo?"

"When you are, Alpha."

The two medium cruisers swung around and raced for the Seditonist battleship, which was busy trying to outsmart the second pair of medium cruisers behind it.

As expected, the enemy cruiser was waiting for them.

The three mediums ships whipped around the battlefield, exchanging fire while simultaneously dodging other fighter craft. When they cut precariously close to a squad of light fighters, Alpha broke away in a feigned evasive maneuver to avoid a collision. Hopefully the Seditonist medium cruiser would become more focused on a single enemy now and be lured easier.

"Coming around for you, general," said Bravo.

The medium cruiser barrel rolled to miss the enemy fire and pulled a tight one-eighty. The enemy followed and they raced along the space between the two battleships.

As for Charlie and Delta, the second pair of Legionnaire medium cruisers, they'd grown tired of the Seditonist battleship's antics.

"It won't be perfect, or pretty, but we're going to have to go."

"It's risky, but stay in close to the fuselage. Ready?"

"Let's do it. Quick and clean."

The pilots gunned the throttle, sending their ships rocketing along either side of the battleship. They were so close they were nearly trading paint with it. They dropped the mines, which latched onto the black fuselage.

The battleship cut left and nearly bashed into Delta. Cutting power, the pilot yanked the controls back.

The cruiser went vertical and slid backwards before rolling away from the Seditonist ship. He leveled off in time to meet an enemy fighter. He was bigger and smashed into it, roaring through the flames.

“*Whewie!*” he declared as he rejoined Charlie and they distanced themselves from the enemy warship.

The mines detonated, ripping holes into the side the ship and disabling primary shields.

They were about to ask Alpha and Bravo if they were still having trouble with one medium cruiser when the enemy vessel burst into flames with a bright flash. Its shields may have been able to deflect rounds from other medium cruisers, but it was no match for the rocket that came from the Legionnaire battleship.

“Hit it!” shouted Hezron as they advanced on the Seditonist warship, “Hit it now!”

Their medium cruisers and light fighters dropped out of the way as they unleashed another round of missiles. This time they made direct contact, hitting the enemy’s fuselage in brilliant flashes.

Ω Ω Ω

While the battle in orbit was getting started, the ground forces on Fars had also begun. Legionnaire and ally squads attacked five major cities with the purpose of finally driving Seditonists from this stronghold.

Ronain, Cadence and several other team members were aiding in the push for the city of Elbis. It held one of the heavier concentrations of Seditonist forces.

They jogged through the intersection, rockets whistling through the air and turrets churning nearby. The ground shook and another column of dust and smoke was thrown into the air when a mortar hit behind them.

Hanging the next right, the team spotted a temporary command post set up by a squad of fellow Legionnaires. It was wedged between two buildings, behind concrete barriers lined in front of a strip of debris.

The commander turned when they approached.

“General Ronain!” he shouted over another explosion, extending his hand, “Good of you to join us on such a fine afternoon!”

Taking up a position along the barrier, Cadence surveyed the sky.

A thin sheet of clouds in the upper atmosphere didn’t take the edge off the sun’s brightness. Aside from the smell of dust and burning metal, a cool breeze blew through the buildings. It actually was a fine afternoon, especially for a battle.

Ronain shook the man’s hand.

“Commander Elliot! So nice of you to invite us!” he replied with a broad smile.

“Alright!” barked Elliot. “We want to push for that building across the road. We’ll have better access to headquarters from there. But they’ve got us pinned down with those dang turrets...”

“I hate turrets,” muttered a warrior beside Cadence.

He grinned at her, “I’m Liam.”

She shook his hand. “Cadence.”

She watched his grin disappear and his eyebrows furrow.

“Yes,” she sighed, turning her eyes back to the road, “*that* Cadence.”

“Here’s the plan!” called Ronain over the noise. “Jackie, they could use another sniper in this building to our right. Cole, go with. They’ve got rocket launchers and other artillery. We’ll lay down heavy cover fire while a team cuts across the street to that structure...”

Before he could finish, rifle and turret fire rained down on them from the building across the road. Ducking, they heard the rounds pelting the barriers, occasionally kicking up bits of debris and tossing it down at them.

When there was a lull in the shooting, Cadence and Liam peeked out from their hiding spots. The enemy had taken up positions along the windows of the three story building.

Heavy fire from a neighboring team came from half a block to their left. A couple seconds later, half a dozen warriors sprinted across the road, ducking under enemy fire.

“Tank!” shouted the commander.

Quick as a flash, Liam and a teammate stood as tall as they dared and threw emp grenades at the vehicle as it turned down the street. The grenades hit, damaging but not disabling it.

It was directing its attention at their location when a pair of rockets roared out of a pair of windows above the team. They struck their target, reducing the vehicle to a flaming pile of metal.

“Whoo!” exclaimed Liam, “Connor and James, scoring one for the home team!”

His excitement was contagious and Cadence couldn’t keep from grinning.

She slapped Ronain on the shoulder. “I’ll go with the team across the street! If we can get one or two on the roof, we can converge on the enemy from different directions.

Ronain nodded. “My thoughts exactly!”

“I’ll go, commander!” called Liam, “Miles and Aiden are in too.”

Hailey and Tucker looked ready to go.

“Alright, Liam,” nodded the commander, “but let’s try to not blow up every building in the city. We’d like to leave a couple standing.”

Liam grinned again. “Got it, commander.”

Someone crouched just off Cadence’s right shoulder, behind her and Liam. She glanced once, then twice.

“You,” she said in mild surprise.

Liam looked over his shoulder. “Whoa! Where’d you come from?”

“Nice of you to finally show up, Ajax,” muttered Cadence.

There was a coolness in her voice, and Liam guessed they already knew each other. Well, that was mostly because she knew his name.

Ajax had finally introduced himself not long after Cadence broke company with the others after the war began. He came and went it seemed whenever he pleased, and she gave up trying to keep track of him. Sometimes he showed up when she got herself into exciting situations, other times she fended for herself.

“Ready to move out!” shouted Elliot, “Pay attention to the turrets!”

The second the fire from across the street stopped, the squad cleared the barrier and sprinted across the road.

There was a crack from a rifle and the man behind one of the turrets dropped out of sight.

Yeah, you go, Jackie, thought Cadence.

That got the enemy rather excited. Springing to action, the first turret opened a barrage of rounds at them while another soldier took a position at the second one.

Cadence was bringing up the rear. She watched as Hailey, Tucker, and Aiden leapt and flipped sideways, the rounds just missing their legs. They dove behind a disabled tank for temporary cover.

Glaring, her eyes fell on a rifle beside a fallen soldier. It came to her hands, an older model, heavier, just right. Bracing the stock against her shoulder, she raised the weapon and sighted through the scope.

She felt a spray of rounds brush past her right arm and side. Liam shielded her from the ones aimed square for her chest.

Unworried, Cadence continued walking across the road. Squeezing the trigger, her first shot nailed the turret man in front of her and on the second level.

In her peripheral, she saw the rest of the team running from cover and for the building.

It was one thing to deflect regular weapons fire, but it was a completely different game when it came to turrets. The rounds were heavier, faster and packed significantly more punch.

Behind the barrier, Ronain was barely able to watch. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he thought to himself, *if Chad knew what I was letting her do...*

Chambering the next round, Cadence popped the man to the right of the turret. The third round took out the guy on the left.

A pair of hands grabbed onto the back of her coat and pulled her behind the building. She was frowning when she turned to see Tucker scowling at her.

“You crazy woman, what are you doing?” he asked, arms raised, palms up in an incredulous gesture.

Cadence looked at the rifle in her hands, then back at him. “Shooting! What’s it look like I’m doing?”

Tucker shook his head and took up his sidearm.

“Why?” she asked, blue eyes snapping at him, “you jealous?”

His jaw dropped as Aiden and Miles worked on getting the side door open.

“I’m headed to the roof!” she called as the turrets started up again.

“I’ve got your six!” answered Liam.

Ducking around the far side of the structure the team had entered, Cadence, Liam, and Ajax ran to the end. A couple enemy soldiers showed up, but the Legionnaires popped them while in motion and kept going.

Skidding to a stop at the end, Cadence looked around the corner. The side of the building they wanted to climb met the edge of the one to their backs. They didn’t have to worry about cover.

Jogging to the building, Ajax kept watch while Liam and Cadence holstered their sidearms. Spotting the little ledge that would be her first handhold, Cadence leapt a few feet off the ground, fingers grasping the edge. In one fluid movement she pulled herself up, toes of her boots gripping what little ledge there was.

Staying balanced, she stood up, eyeing a real ledge some feet above her. She glanced back down at Liam, who still hadn’t started his climb.

“Coming sometime today?” she asked.

Liam’s eyes narrowed, but there was a smile in his expression. Cadence tilted her head and raised her eyebrows before leaping and grabbing the ledge.

It only took another couple seconds before she reached the roof and swung herself over the edge. Crouching, she kept watch while Liam and Ajax made their ascent.

To his credit, Ajax kept pace with his companion and they both joined Cadence in less than thirty seconds.

The turrets were whirring below them from the second story. Somewhere in the adjacent structure the rest of the team was clearing it. Jogging across the roof, they made for the hatch in the center that would drop them inside.

They had just reached the hatch when it popped open and a soldier poked his head out.

Liam was standing behind it and he slammed it closed with a sharp kick, bashing the top of the soldier's head.

When they reopened the top and peeked through, they saw the soldier below, unconscious. When Ajax and Cadence glanced at him, Liam just shrugged.

Cadence stuck her torso through the opening and peeked inside. The friend of the soldier was still staring at his body when he looked up at Cadence. Before he could say anything, he smacked into the wall and collapsed.

Not bothering to use the ladder, Cadence dropped in, the others following. They were in a long, wide corridor lined with windows on one side. There were no immediate threats, but they jumped when they heard the turrets almost directly below them.

"I say we drop in to say hello," said Liam.

"Couldn't agree more," nodded Cadence.

Sliding the windows open, they climbed out onto the broad ledge. They knew where the turrets were because of the long barrels of the machineguns poked out the windows.

Cadence and Liam glanced back at Ajax, but he was already sprinting down the hallway. His lance flared to life, edge burning a deep bronze as he advanced toward a squad of the enemy at the end of the passage.

Cadence whapped Liam on the arm. "Leave him. He'll be fine."

Each pulled out a smoke grenade and, once Liam was in position over the second turret, they lobbed them through the windows.

Shouts of surprise and waves of smoke came out the windows seconds later. Gripping the ledge, Cadence and Liam swung themselves inside.

The soldiers didn't know what was going on as blue and jade lances flashed amongst the fog. With a snap of her fingers, Cadence dispersed the smoke.

The commander at her feet was glaring up at her, but when she leveled the lance under his chin, his expression became more respectful.

"They're just regular soldiers," said Cadence to Liam as he corralled the others.

"Could still be a lot of trouble," muttered Liam.

With a flick of his wrist, he leveled the blade at one of the enemy's chests, "Might be easier to kill them."

"Whoa, we'll cooperate," blurted the commander.

"Yeah, sure," replied Cadence in a flat tone.

She glanced at the double doors behind the commander. They blew open. "Everyone inside. Now."

While the enemy officers scrambled to comply, Cadence asked, "Team One, what's your status?"

"*We've entered the main building,*" came Tucker's response, "*making our way through the main hall.*"

"We're right above you," answered Cadence as Liam closed the doors behind the last officer. Bringing his lance up, he slowly ran it along the entryway, melting the metal and fusing everything together. Hopefully that would keep anyone from leaving prematurely. Although, they could always jump out a window...

Sharp pain shot through their heads and they grimaced.

"Ow," said Liam, "we're about to have more serious visitors."

Turning left, they jogged down the hallway. They were nearing the end, where it intersected another passage when the first two dark warriors appeared.

Liam grabbed Cadence by the back of her coat and threw her down against one of the concrete pillars that separated the windows.

A rocket slammed into the building, blowing out the glass and ripping out a section of the wall and floor.

The dust hadn't even begun to settle before Cadence shoved Liam down, reaching over him. A white shockwave struck the warriors in front, sending them flying backwards.

With a growl, she ripped off her coat and tossed it aside. She didn't much care about hiding her identity at the moment, and the hood was obstructing her peripheral vision. Besides, it was too hot to have lots of layers.

Cadence and Liam then glanced at each other and smiled. In unison, they got to their feet and engaged their lances. Striding toward the enemy, they twirled their blades once and swung.

Swiping her blade down, it clashed with the warrior's. It pushed him down and she lightly rolled over his back. Liam turned and finished him while Cadence threw his nearest opponent against the wall and cut him down.

Spinning, Cadence brought her lance in front of her face to block a downward blow. Throwing her elbow into her rival's nose and then twisting her wrists just so, she ran him through the stomach.

Another enemy flew backwards, and she glanced at Liam. He parried one swipe, then a second before kicking the warrior in the gut and stabbing him. He had a precise, fluid way of moving that Cadence could appreciate.

But back to her own problems, she turned to meet two more dark warriors. Whipping her blade in a silvery blue arc, she blocked the strike from the left. She immediately spun and deflected the blow from the right. Back to the warrior, she twirled and thrust the lance behind her back and into his stomach.

Turning on the balls of her feet, she met a strike from the other warrior sideways. It was a jarring blow and it left him open for the fatal strike.

As Cadence eyed another squadron of dark warriors just entering the hall, Liam was finishing business to her left. He aeriaded over his previous opponent and landed and spun to a crouch before ramming his blade into the next warrior's core.

Liam straightened, determined gaze on the next enemy.

That is, until Cadence raised her hand outward, palm glowing with light. The strike hit so fast the dark warriors never saw it; there was a flash and then half a dozen warriors lying on the marble floor.

"You know," whined Liam as they jogged about the bodies, "it's just no fun when you go and...do things like that."

Cadence rolled her eyes.

When they reached the doorway, a dark warrior appeared out of nowhere. She stepped back, almost to one knee as she brought her lance up.

Their lances met with a flash before a bronze blade punched through his back and out his chest. The dark warrior dropped and standing behind him was Ajax.

"You guys are no fun," concluded Liam, shaking his head.

Cadence glanced the way Ajax had come before they hung a left. The hallway was strewn with fallen enemies.

She raised her eyebrows, looking at Ajax, off her right shoulder. He merely met her gaze with those pale hazel eyes.

They met and overpowered several squads of enemy soldiers, and then locked them into various rooms and offices. They'd be dealt with later.

Reaching the stairs in the northeast corner of the building, they jogged down to ground level. Pausing behind the door, they listened.

"Sounds like quite the party out there," whispered Liam.

"Well, we don't want to miss all the fun, do we?" replied Cadence. She flung the door open and punched a dark warrior in the side of the head.

Around the curve of the hall, another passage intersected the one Cadence and company was in. It was where Tucker, Hailey and the others were currently located. Ronain, Commander Elliot and the rest of his unit were coming from the other point of entry, further around the bend.

It was feeling a bit crowded at the moment, even as dark warriors began to trickle out the back doors.

Tucker and the team were in full battle mode. The hall was filled with the sound of crackling and ringing lances as the Legionnaires drove the enemy back.

They pushed the enemy into the main hallway, and Tucker finally caught glimpses of Ronain on the left.

The enemy didn't stand much of a chance with a Legionnaire general on the scene. A flash came from a shockwave and dropped the remaining warriors in front of them.

Ronain, Tucker and the others acknowledged one another with a nod. No one had moved towards the group of dark warriors down the hall on the right. The enemy had their back to them as Cadence, Ajax and Liam were on approach.

Tucker didn't make a move to lend a hand and instead put a hand on his hip. He wanted to see what Cadence was going to do.

Coming in low, she clipped one enemy, flipping him onto his back before turning away and slamming her blade into the gut of another behind her.

Having dispatched those two opponents, Cadence straightened and looked at the eight or so that were left.

They slowed their approach as recognition flickered across some of their expressions.

A little smile tugged at Cadence's as she raised her left hand and snapped her fingers.

Lights and wiring in the walls and ceiling exploded, raining down on the enemy in fiery sparks. The sprinklers kicked on, but instead of water, fire rained down on them.

Ajax, always to Cadence's right, whipped his lance around and pointed it at the enemy. Cadence and Liam had to glance away as intense heat flared to life around the blade and then streaked towards the enemies.

The heat of the blow struck them dead in the chest, the force taking them back a step. Between the scorching strike and the flames raining down on them, the hall became like an inferno.

Then came a flash and the heat and flames vanished, leaving only the still bodies of the dark warriors. On their vests, right over their chests, were charred, smoldering holes.

Cadence and Liam looked over at Ajax, who returned their gaze with his unwavering stoic expression.

"That's a new one," said Cadence as they walked down the hall to meet with the others.

Local forces jogged past them. They would deal with the enemy soldiers and hold the building they'd just taken.

Out the rear doors, a covered walkway went across to the main building, a Seditonist base. The lobby was more like a vast cathedral with high ceilings and multiple archways that allowed numerous exit and entry points. It was already well under siege, soldiers and Legionnaires engaged with dark warriors.

As they exited and made for the lobby, Cadence was well aware of a cold feeling settling over her. A strong headache gnawed at her forehead.

“Anyone else feel that?” asked Cadence, lance still in hand.

“Big time,” replied Tucker.

“Eyes open,” warned Ronain, “there's a Seditonist general here.”

He shot a look at Cadence as she reengaged her lance. He knew they could use her here, but they also needed to make sure nothing seriously bad happened to her.

They were going to need her later. Plus it had been easy to see Chad had grown fond of the girl. He'd go on the warpath if anything terrible happened before due time.

Then again...Ronain admitted, only to himself of course, that he'd do the same thing.

Entering beneath the tall archways, Ronain and Cadence sent six dark warriors tumbling.

Cadence felt a thrill of adrenaline shoot through her as she beheld the sight before her. It was an absolutely expansive hall with a ceiling that arched impossibly high. And it was filled with dueling Legionnaires and dark warriors.

Her blue eyes locked on the nearest enemy. He felt her gaze and shoved his opponent away before facing her.

With a swing of her lance, Cadence sprinted towards him. Launching herself high into the air, she was already swinging her lance, smashing it against the warrior's. Pulling her arms in tight, she completed the full spin and struck him in the side.

She dropped and rolled to a crouch. She paused just long enough to let the crimson blade pass over her head before fatally wounding her opponent.

Turning to her right, she slid her hand down the broadside of her lance and sent a blinding strike at two more dark warriors.

The impact of the hit sent them back a few steps before down to a knee. They tried to push themselves up but couldn't, their bodies suddenly unable to follow the command of their wills.

At last, with effort they raised their heads.

Cadence was approaching, burning lance in one hand, the other pointed at them.

They winced against brightness of the glow in her palm, and for a split second they were actually...afraid. They feared another strike, and especially the authority with which she held them at bay, immobile. They couldn't remember the last time they had felt genuine fear.

Fortunately for them, a third dark warrior was charging towards her.

Cadence released the two before her so she could turn and meet this new foe.

He clearly had the momentum and Cadence jogged backwards as they fought. His strikes had some power to them, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle.

The dark warrior brought the lance straight down.

Cadence blocked it and whipped her blade for his side.

Shoving his lance across his body, he deflected it before he and Cadence both lashed out at one another with a kick.

The momentum twisted their bodies and they turned and flipped forward, away from each other.

Pivoting around, the dark warrior caught an invisible strike to the shoulder. Snarling, he was forced to retreat as Cadence fell upon him. He didn't have time to try and figure out how she'd recovered so quickly as they danced back across the lobby.

Cadence sensed her two friends from earlier were coming from her right. Ducking under her current opponent's blade, she pivoted her body sideways and swung at him. The moment he moved to block it, Cadence socked him in the diaphragm.

She didn't have time to do anything else before she spun around and met the second warrior. Blades locked over their heads, they leaned against each other. At least their third friend was now busy with another Legionnaire.

Shoving the blades to the left, Cadence threw herself to the right. This move helped her avoid the blow from the other warrior and gave her a little distance. She advanced first and ran to close the gap between them.

Lunging into the air, her lance struck the warrior's to the left, throwing his weight forward and down. The second warrior's blade just brushed past one of her legs. On her way over, though, she throttled him in the back of the head with the heel of her boot.

Landing, Cadence slid and spun around, snapping her gaze onto them.

They weren't expecting the intensity of the mental assault that gripped their minds. They remained where they, on their hands and knees as she strode back over. Again they were afraid, but a surge of hate drowned out the fear. They hated that she knew she had the authority to take command, and that the unseen forces guarding her had overtaken their own demonic allies.

One made a feeble attempt to swat at her, but Cadence flicked the blade aside. Both dark warriors were finished a second later.

She crouched just as the third warrior of the group flew over her, compliments of the other Legionnaire he'd been fighting.

He tumbled across the marble floor.

Cadence was instantly in pursuit. She threw herself into the air and twisted onto the other side of him. He leapt to his feet as she landed and the other warrior, which turned out to be Hailey, came in hot.

The dark warrior's blade was a trail of crimson. It flashed back and forth, between his two opponents.

When they pressed in on him, he flipped and twisted away. Blade aiming for her core, Cadence flipped over to his other side while Hailey flipped to block off his escape route.

They landed, paused a moment to assess where one another was and then reengaged in combat. But the two young Legionnaire warriors quickly wore him down.

An incredible pressure slammed down on his head and shoulders, and his legs buckled. Hailey swiped his lance aside and fell him.

She and Cadence looked at each other and shared a quick smile. Turning, they glanced around to see how things were going.

Legionnaires and soldiers were making steady progress. A dozen squads had already entered into the building itself to begin clearing it.

Cadence's eye fell on Tucker, near the center of the lobby.

He'd just finished throwing a dark warrior to the ground. Running him through, he spun and met the overhead strike of another foe. Then another came from his left.

Kicking the first warrior away, Tucker turned and swung his jade blade up. It clashed with the enemy's, throwing him off balance. Turning again, he deflected another strike. Whipping around, he struck the second opponent with another stunning blow, knocking him off balance again.

Tucker dodged the blade of the enemy behind him before launching a kick and nailing him in the gut. He was still stumbling backwards as Tucker turned on him. One more blow and he was veering sideways and unable to escape the final swipe of Tucker's lance.

Spinning, Tucker struck to the left, then right. He knew he had his enemy and must have been a bit disappointed because a kick to the hip re-centered the dark warrior's balance.

He was giving him a sporting chance.

His opponent struck, but Tucker's parry nearly ripped the lance from his grip. There was the flash of a jade blade and then the dark warrior saw nothing else.

Cadence couldn't help but be impressed at the sheer strength behind every single one of Tucker's strikes. It left most of his opponents crippled before him and unable to defend themselves.

“Glad he’s finally good for something besides standing around and eating,” said Hailey, nudging Cadence’s shoulder and sending her a wink.

Hailey jogged off towards Mason, who earlier had been dueling with two warriors and was now facing four.

A prickly little headache rippled through her temples. Cadence’s sharp eyes drifted over the scene of the battle.

There was still a strong gathering of dark warriors off to the left, where Ronain and Elliot were. Ajax was...somewhere.

Her eyes locked onto a dark warrior a short distance from the main group. He had a smattering of friends around him, but he was looking at her.

Most importantly, however, lying on the ground near his feet was a half-conscious and wounded Legionnaire warrior.

You want him, asked the dark warrior, eyes taunting, *come and get him.*

Oh, please don’t, Cadence, thought Ronain to her, *I’m closing in. I’ll get him...*

Cadence jerked her head to the side, popping the kinks out of her neck. She lifted into a jog, twirling her lance once, then twice as she considered her approach through the three dark warriors that stood staggered behind one another.

The first sprinted towards her to close the last dozen strides. He anticipated her to jump to gain momentum, and he leapt first.

Changing her plan at the last second, Cadence dropped to her knees and slid under him. She flicked her lance behind her to deflect the swipe aimed for her neck.

Pitching forward and dropping her shoulder, Cadence rolled. Straightening, she went to her feet before launching herself through the air. She parried a strike on the way up and then kicked the second warrior smartly in the face, snapping his head back.

The third warrior was a stride behind him, blade precariously placed to run it through Cadence’s ribs as she landed.

Cadence, only halfway through her twist, swatted the blade away before landing on him. In spite of the armor, he made for a soft landing. Springing into a crouch, Cadence grabbed his wrist before he could stab her.

After a couple seconds of a power struggle, Cadence pushed her foot back and let her shin smack him in the nose. Diverting the lance away from herself, he ended up stabbing himself through the chest.

Turning as she stood, Cadence met a powerful strike from the dark warrior, a commander, as pain ripped through her temples.

Don’t I know you, asked the dark commander as their lances locked.

Cadence shook off the mental assault and lifted her fiery gaze to his. *Maybe,* she replied.

They pushed each other away, and Cadence skidded back onto her toes to avoid a swipe across the stomach. Then the fight began in earnest.

He struck hard once, then again.

She blocked both blows with a quick flick of her blade before kicking him.

He flipped backwards and threw an invisible strike at her.

Cadence dispersed it with her lance and returned the favor. By the time it reached him and he deflected it, she was closing in. Spinning to gain torque, she took the first swing.

They danced backwards, deeper into the lobby, lances ringing. Strikes and parries coming faster and faster, the air began to hum around them.

At last, their lances locked again. It was awkward because they were crisscrossed stomach height, edge of the weapons close to their opponent's sides, free hands on the other's wrists. One wrong move and either one would be dead.

Neither warrior could overpower the other, and their muscles began to tremble. After a couple agonizing seconds, Cadence risked being thrown off balance and kicked him in the knee.

It weakened the commander's grip just enough for her to shift herself. Moving awkwardly, Cadence ducked underneath his arms, shoved both lances up and turned and slammed her back into him.

The commander fell.

Cadence couldn't turn in time to defend herself from the invisible blow he threw at her on his way to the floor. It struck her in the back and she flew forward, tumbling across the marble.

She was still dazed when she rolled up to her knees, just in time to shield herself from another strike. Deflecting it with a flash, she sent one back as she pushed herself up and into a run.

Somewhere along the way, Cadence and the commander had lost their lances. But there was no time to search.

Cadence slowed, allowing her boots to slide across the floor as she feigned a left jab and threw a right cross into her enemy's jaw.

He grimaced at the pain that ripped through his head. It wasn't enough to keep him from blocking her next punch, though, and landing a strike to her shoulder.

Volts of fire shot through her arm, and the force of the hit dropped her shoulder down. Going with the momentum, Cadence twisted her torso as she turned away and slammed her heel against her enemy's neck. Unable to complete her rotation, however, she received a punch to the back, which slammed her to the floor.

Hands up, she threw an invisible strike up into his face before she sprang to her feet.

They started off across the lobby, drawing plenty of stares now. They swapped jabs and swipes, moves just a blur of arms and fists.

What I wouldn't give for a knife right about now, she thought to herself.

Cadence sidestepped a swing then latched onto his elbow to keep him from throwing it back into her face. Then she punched him in the side of the head, dazing him.

But he was a commander and didn't go down easily. Before she could blink, he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck.

Cadence's vision blurred a second from the shock of pain that shot through her neck and shoulders. She found herself thrown onto the floor, wind knocked out of her.

However, she still had a grip on his arm and she slapped her other hand onto his wrist.

The dark commander snarled as fire ripped into his shoulder. He was a big brute and yanked his arm back.

Cadence didn't let go as she was pulled up and used the momentum to her advantage. She slipped around behind him and kicked him smartly in the back of the knee. Feeling his weight give, she grabbed him and, using her hips as a pivot point, threw him over her shoulder.

He slammed onto the floor with a lot more force than he anticipated. But despite his breathless state, he whipped his hand up, grabbed Cadence by the arm and threw her over him.

Sliding on her stomach, she stopped a dozen feet from the dark commander. Both shook their heads and stiffly got to their feet.

As she staggered forward a step, Cadence glanced at the wounded Legionnaire, still near the center of the lobby. The other dark warriors hadn't harmed him further, but it was going to be another minute before reinforcements reached him.

Mind refocused on her mission, she straightened and raised her hand in time to shield herself from a harsh crimson strike. But Cadence would not be intimidated and would never be turned back. The shield deflected the strike right back at the dark commander, only now it was a blinding white light instead of crimson.

Growling, he dispersed the blow. It pushed him back about a foot, the after effects flaring pain through his arms.

Cadence was already in motion and hit him with a second, even more powerful blow to keep him where he was.

This one struck with a bright flash and the commander had to keep his hand raised to push back against the sharp mental assault. He ground his teeth, hating this Legionnaire.

All Seditonists knew that Legionnaires believed the authority they had trumped that of dark warriors. But Seditonists stubbornly refused to believe that, and quickly came to believe that the darkness they held could swallow up the feeble light of their enemies, no matter how strong. Now, however...

Cadence continued to close the distance between them, left hand still pointed at him.

Dropping to a knee, the commander shoved his other hand up to try and shield himself. He felt himself doubt the darkness for just a second, a bit ironic since doubt was what he thrived at in instilling in his enemies.

But where were his demonic allies when he needed them? They'd always been there before, why couldn't they destroy this wretch now, or at least weaken her?

The air between them crackled.

A sharp headache snapped through her head, and Cadence stopped and closed her eyes a moment.

The dark commander was pushing against her, the enemy retaliating. It felt like someone was slowly twisting a dagger right through her forehead, and oppressive darkness pressed down on her shoulders.

Then it came, a familiar consuming heat that spread from her chest and surged down her arms, into her hands.

No, she thought, opening her eyes and drilling the commander with a glare, *I will never yield.*

Then she uncurled the rest of her fingers and opened her hand.

A hollow clap of thunder sounded through the vast hall and the commander's body was wrenched backwards. Two dozen feet later it tumbled to a stop and remained still.

Cadence dropped to one knee a moment to allow herself to recover, blood running from her nose.

Kneeling in that second was what saved her from receiving the brunt of a crimson strike.

It came from behind, clipping her across the right shoulder. Pain roared through her body as the force of the hit dropped her to the floor, to her back.

That's when she saw him, already in mid-air, coming for her. This wasn't any dark commander, she could tell by the darkness that surrounded him. But Cadence didn't have time to place his face.

The strike she sent was just to keep him busy an extra second. Her eyes searched for and spotted the hilt of a lance, her lance. She knew it was hers because of the etching on the side.

It came to her hand and rang to life just as Cadence rolled out of the way of the Seditonist's landing.

The floor shook and cracked beneath his boots. Turning, he was on her in an instant.

As they exchanged a couple strikes, Cadence felt a familiar sharp pain, like talons, trying to latch onto her brain. She disregarded it with a thought as she ducked back to avoid a swipe.

Their blades locked the briefest second, but before anything too serious could transpire, Cadence kicked him in the hip. It restored a somewhat safe distance between them and they sized one another up.

“Well, if it isn’t Cadence Shahan,” said the warlord with mock admiration.

Whispers went through the surrounding ranks and they gave them a wide berth.

Cadence studied the man a few more seconds before it finally registered. “General Ammon.”

“I’m flattered you know my name,” he replied with a sneer.

Drilling her with his gold crescent eyes, he continued, “But why are you holding yourself back? That commander you just fought could’ve been killed in a few simple strikes. But you let the duel drag on instead of ending it quickly and moving on to the next enemy.”

“Well,” shrugged Cadence and tossing a few loose strands of hair from her face, “I like a bit of sport. I’m sure you understand that.”

“Oh and I do,” Ammon smiled tightly, darkness flickering in his eyes, “but allow me to give you some advice: when you’re facing an enemy general...it’s best to get right to the point. There’s no time for games.”

If Cadence hadn’t been expecting something, she might have been struck down there. But she was anticipating a move from Ammon long before he whipped his lance straight down, right for her face.

She blocked it, deflected the second strike, and then parried a third. Ammon drove her backwards, slowly, deliberately, and the cold darkness that surrounded him pressed in close to Cadence.

Every one of his swings was powerful and sent pain up her arms. But Cadence could get close to matching it.

Squaring herself up, she focused on her opponent, and mirrored his next several blows. When their blades met, they clashed with bright flashes and sent low resonating rings over the cathedral.

Their strikes slowly increased in speed now and Cadence made the mistake of letting him in too close. His lance just grazed her upper right arm.

He kicked her away, but she came right back swinging, anger flaring through her veins. She had natural speed and used it.

Ammon skittered backwards, watching her intently as the air around them began to flicker and crackle. Darkness surrounded them as they now battled at full speed.

As Cadence focused on her dark enemy, this general, thoughts of Kiera's deception tickled at the back of her mind. And the more she thought about it, the more her anger grew.

With three more powerful strikes, Cadence and Ammon shoved one another away a step. Cadence leveled her darkening gaze on him.

She twirled her lance and lunged at Ammon, an old and familiar fury simmering to life and adding to her strength. This personal demon that had given her trouble in training, and was never too far away, wanted to resurface. It was one thing to be angry, but it was another to let it turn into something darker. And it was easy to do, so easy...to let malice and hatred come in.

The next time their blades met, electricity snapped overhead.

Cadence's blade was just a trail of deep blue arcs as she hit Ammon one strike after another.

The air hummed ominously and the shadows around them grew darker. Cadence hit him with the most powerful swing yet, and when their blades met, light flared and electricity arched between the two lances.

With a mighty shove, she sent Ammon staggering back several steps. He was still going backwards when Cadence made her next move. She strode forward and jumped, twisting at her core as she swung.

The force of the maneuver slammed Ammon's lance to the side. Going with the momentum, she spun and deflected his counterstrike. She was then in the perfect position to slam her elbow into his sternum.

The impact sent him stumbling.

Cadence completed her turn and, with something of a snarl, extended her left arm towards him.

There came the sound of electricity crackling before it was followed by a deep blue flash of light.

Ammon was falling and barely raised his lance in time to block the strike. It wasn't a regular shockwave, and not one Cadence had ever delivered before.

It didn't just disperse in a flash of light. Instead, when it struck, it engulfed the crimson blade in a dark blue flame, from guard to tip.

And Cadence stood poised, ready for more, heart pounding, but not from the exertion of the fight. She'd unleashed only a little of her wrath and fury was surging through her veins and darkly exhilarating.

In that moment, she was ready to fight this general to the death.

Sometimes the lines of justice and revenge were blurred. Ammon knew Kiera, likely worked beside her on occasion, and instructed her.

But that wasn't what truly had Cadence fired up. At the heart of the matter, she was still furious at Kiera and she was using this situation as an excuse to act on her barely contained rage.

Either way, however, Ammon was a Seditonist, one of the enemy. He had slaughtered hundreds of innocent lives without a second thought and, in fact, actually enjoyed it. Anyone not in the dark army were merely sheep to be butchered. He would not stop.

For the briefest second, Cadence felt a flicker of confusion over what her true motives were and what was driving her against this dark general. No time to seriously consider it now, though.

So she steeled herself and met her opponent's gaze.

These thoughts all occurred in the span of a second, and Ammon saw the eerie darkness in her eyes, the rage on her hardened face. He also saw the winged shadows that stood on either side and behind her. Cadence was on the knife's edge of crossing into dark waters, and he only felt so obliged to give her a shove.

Cadence caught the faintest trace of a smile pull at Ammon's mouth before it vanished. But it had been there.

This instantly aroused her suspicion, which seemed to break the tunnel-vision of her anger. Her vision blurred a moment and she was suddenly aware of a headache pounding madly against her forehead.

Cadence took an unsteady step back, eyeing Ammon as he got to his feet, the edge of his lance still smoking from her strike.

But before Ammon could make a move, someone tackled him hard to the floor. He growled in anger as he twisted around and kicked Ronain off him.

Both generals jumped to their feet and engaged in combat. Ajax was there a breath later, sprinting in from Cadence's right.

She was still coming out of her infuriated state, the ache in her head growing worse. In mild confusion, she took a few more steps back as she watched Ammon's crimson blade whip between Ronain and Ajax's.

A wave of dizziness hit and Cadence dropped to one knee, heart still pounding from lingering rage. In her peripheral she was aware of the dueling Seditonist and Legionnaires, striking, parrying, twisting out of the path of one another's lances. Reinforcements pressed in, driving the remainder of the dark warriors back.

Blood was running from her nose again, and Cadence wiped it away. She glanced at her hand and then lifted her gaze...

The air was pushed from her lungs as her eyes locked on a familiar face. Standing in a dark archway off to the left was him, the young man who had been with Kiera on Elywn.

Vengeful fury ignited anew in her chest and Cadence, still unsteady, pushed herself to her feet. She swayed a little, but managed to right herself.

Eyes remaining fixed on her target, she slowly walked towards him. In the first few steps, her legs didn't want to cooperate, but that festering anger pushed her forward.

And then he spotted her and his expression changed to like one who's seen a ghost. He visibly drew a breath and took a step back.

You, she thought to him in a growl.

Hadrian winced and jerked back, as if he'd taken a punch to the stomach.

What was interesting to Cadence was the sheer terror in his expression, and also a trace of...regret?

Didn't matter.

I'll still rip him apart, she thought as her wrath continued to build into near-blinding rage. Her head had stopped throbbing and a constant pressure had wrapped itself around her forehead.

Ajax was suddenly beside her.

"Don't, Cadence," he said quietly, "not yet."

She shot him a vicious look, before continuing to walk towards Hadrian, who stood rooted like a statue, expression one of terror.

Ajax stepped in her path, hands raised.

"Cadence," he warned again, "now isn't the time."

He'd forced her to slow and she glanced at him threateningly. But in that second she looked away, Hadrian had disappeared. She resettled her furious gaze on Ajax.

"Move," she growled.

"No," he replied evenly.

A fresh burst of fury exploded through her with a surge of adrenaline, chasing away any lingering weariness.

Cadence sprang into action, engaging and swinging her lance with such speed Ajax didn't have time to blink.

Yet, he was prepared for the attack anyway. He parried the strike, then the next and the next, always keeping himself between Cadence and the archway Hadrian had been standing under.

Urgency added to the speed of Cadence's next attack, knowing every second that passed meant her target was getting further away.

Ajax deflected a swipe and dodged the next one, but wasn't anticipating the kick. Cadence may have been tired, but she still had enough strength left to make the blow count.

Ajax staggered back a few steps while Cadence drove down on him again.

Tucker and Hailey rushed up, but stopped a safe distance away. They swapped a look, totally confused at what was happening.

Ajax only parried or deflected Cadence's strikes, but never returned them. He also never gave up more than a few inches of ground at a time.

Their blades finally locked and he gave her a hard shove backwards.

"What is your problem?" she snapped, twirling her lance.

"Now isn't the right time to take him," repeated Ajax sharply.

"What?" exclaimed Cadence before lashing out with a powerful downward strike, blades sparking when they met. She managed three more hard swings before their lances locked yet again.

"Why is now not the right time? How would you know?" she grunted as she pushed against him.

"Because your head's not on right," he replied, an edge now in his voice. He threw his elbow into her face that sent a tremendous volt of pain slamming through her skull.

It sent Cadence reeling.

"And you don't know the larger role he has to play in the war," finished Ajax.

Cadence, bent over with blood still running from her nose, glared at him.

"If you keep this up," warned Ajax, pointing at her, "you're going to get yourself hurt."

She spit blood onto the ground and moved again with surprising speed.

But this time every strike seemed to take Cadence's energy. She only landed three blows this time before Ajax kicked her square in the gut.

It slammed her to the floor and knocked the wind clean from her lungs.

Gritting her teeth, Cadence rolled to her hands and knees and finally back to her feet. She still couldn't really breathe, but didn't take much notice.

"Cadence," said Ajax, warning still in his tone and expression.

"Wait a second," called Tucker, not knowing what was going on or exactly how to intervene.

Ajax had to hand it to Cadence: she'd been given an extra large streak of stubborn audacity.

She struck hard from the right, and then feigned a left swipe. It left Ajax open to receive a stunning punch to the chest, the force sending him staggering.

But now he'd about had enough.

Her second strike was fast, but Ajax moved faster. He latched onto her wrist and a shock of pain shot straight to her shoulder. Even as she growled at the sting of his grip, he socked her in the stomach and sent her tumbling to the floor.

This time she didn't get back up. She couldn't. Whatever he had done had drained the strength she had left from her body.

Tucker stepped between them and drilled Ajax with a hard look. "Okay, easy. What is going on here? What's this all about?"

"He was right here," said Cadence as she tried to push herself to her hands and knees, muscles suddenly aching terribly. Her arms worked okay but it was her legs that wouldn't cooperate.

"He? Who?" asked Hailey.

"The guy who was with Kiera," replied Cadence with a groan, forcing herself onto one knee, "with her on Elywn when...when she...he watched her...kill our parents."

Explaining it to them seemed to take more energy than Cadence had and she had to sink back onto her side.

After taking a couple breaths, she ground her teeth and managed to get herself to her knees and sit up, though she leaned to one side.

Her eyes, which had darkened, settled on Ajax. "He was right over there and you..."

I really, really don't like you right now, she thought to him.

But Ajax didn't seem angry now, or upset. There was only patience in his expression, and a marked sadness.

When Cadence tried to push herself to her feet, pain pinged through her legs, like her muscles were tearing.

"Ow," she growled, refusing to yield. She tried yet again to get up, but only got to her hands and knees before a wave of crippling agony struck.

Tucker couldn't stand to watch any longer. "Please, Cadence, stop. You're going to kill yourself."

He threw a sharp look over his shoulder.

Ajax was standing at the far end of the cathedral, looking like he was explaining things to Ronain.

We'll look after her, thought Hailey to the Legionnaire general, *and catch up to you later if you don't return to the ship first.*

Ronain nodded in acknowledgment, eyed Ajax warily and then turned and exited the cathedral, with Ajax beside him.

"I'll go find us a transport back to the cruiser," said Hailey, turning sharply and jogging away.

Cadence could barely push herself up with her arms now, but that didn't keep her from trying, or attempting, to still get her legs under her.

"Cadence, stop," chided Tucker, kneeling down beside her and putting a hand on her back, "you're only hurting yourself and I won't stand by and watch."

He stood and slipped an arm around her waist. "Come on, let me help."

With great effort on Cadence's part, she got to her knees and from there Tucker put one of her arms over his shoulder. Then as carefully as he could, he lifted her up to her feet so she was standing. More or less. Tucker took most of her weight, which was next to nothing.

"Over here," he said, slowly turning for the nearest pillar.

Cadence thought getting to her feet would help her recover. But it didn't and she about crumpled back to the floor.

"Easy," said Tucker, quick to steady her, "I've got you."

It only took a few moments to reach the pillar, but it felt like an eternity.

Finally, Cadence sat down, back against the column. The flurry of emotions had gone and all that was left was exhaustion. And an aching head.

The setting sun threw its light through the archways, gracing them with its warmth. It was appreciated because a cold wind now slithered through the cathedral.

Tucker, sitting right beside her, studied her tired, distant expression.

"You're disappointed?" he ventured.

"Only in myself," she replied quietly, gaze on the floor so she wasn't looking directly into the sun.

"I just got so angry...I let myself go too far. It's like we've gone back to the days when I struggled with it in training."

"We're not perfect, Cadence," replied Tucker, "and we're all still learning and we all have our own struggles."

"But I was treading on very dangerous ground and I should have known better," she bit out, smacking herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand, "you'd think I would have learned by now."

"Enough of the self-flogging," chided Tucker lightly as he put his hand on her arm to lower her hand from her forehead.

"On the bright side...you took on a Seditonist general and survived to talk about it. How many of us could have done that? I mean, seriously."

Cadence would have laughed if she'd had the energy, but could only manage a weak smile. Suddenly aware his hand was still on her arm, she shied away like she'd been shocked.

Tucker didn't seem to take offense. He merely studied her, her expression now haggard as she crossed her arms and let her eyes drift closed. The warmth of the sun made her even more tired.

A stretch of silence passed between them, the evening breeze bringing the sounds of battle, which had moved to the far edge of the city.

When Tucker looked at Cadence again, she was nodding off, chin tucked nearly to her chest. The lines on her dirtied face were still hard, in a faint glare even in her half-conscious state.

"You're not alone in this, Cadence," sighed Tucker quietly, "I hope you'll see that one day."

A large explosion cut through the air and Cadence jerked awake, sitting upright. Her gaze searched the cathedral for signs of danger, her body rigid.

"You're okay," whispered Tucker, concern on his face.

Living alone for the previous years had created an understandable edginess. Who knew how many times she'd been awakened by gunfire, patrols, or bombs going off.

Again she was nodding off, but it was clear she was fighting it. An icy wind cut through the cathedral, bringing an instant chill to the air and making Cadence shiver.

"You're safe, Cadence," he assured, wishing with all his heart she would believe him, "I'm going to move closer and put my arm around you, okay? Can't have you getting hypothermia now."

Tucker knew she wasn't someone who condoned physical contact, except during fights of course. He hoped she'd heard his explanation and wouldn't break his arm or anything.

Carefully he put his arm over her shoulders and scooted as close as he could. "Please try and rest," he said, "and show a little trust. You can sleep well knowing I'm keeping watch."

Cadence's tired gaze flicked up to him, and in that briefest moment he saw the deepest suspicion in her eyes, but a trace of sadness also. The latter especially got his attention, but she broke her gaze, her eyes now as heavy as ever.

Don't get too attached, she wanted to warn him, but was just too tired to speak, *war brings so much uncertainty.*

Tucker wondered how long she'd keep fighting to stay awake, but it turned out he didn't need to wonder too much longer. Finally, Cadence stopped fighting sleep and, with a sigh, she drifted off, slumping against his chest.

Tucker himself sighed with relief, and he gently rested his chin on top of her head.

But he was not tired. His mind was alert and eyes sharp as he kept an eye on their surroundings, looking out for any danger that might befall Cadence.

Chapter 92

Dark Ideas

The dark lord Zair watched Kiera as she paced back and forth, like a wild animal in a cage. Presently, she was toying with a dagger she normally kept secured at her thigh.

General Ammon stood, arms folded, near the table. He and a few dozen warriors had escaped from Fars during the invasion. His face was bruised, which added to the darkness of his brooding mood.

The major attacks by the Legionnaire forces were complete, and there were only a few minor skirmishes still occurring. But the Seditonists had lost control over one of the planets in the Kerst System.

More interesting, though, was the news Ammon had brought with him. News about Cadence Shahan.

“I knew it,” grumbled Kiera, still pacing. She was agitated, antsy...nervous.

After hearing the outcome of Fars, she'd searched and petitioned for any news of Cadence's whereabouts. But no one, whether Seditonist or demonic commander knew where she'd gone, or which Legionnaire battleship she was on.

Clearly, Cadence's ability to remain obscure hadn't faded.

Zair's eye lingered on Kiera a second longer before he looked back at Ammon. “So she was quite skilled, hmm? Hadn't lost her touch?”

Ammon tenderly touched a bruise on his face. “Not in the least. But I sensed she was holding herself in check.”

“Not using her full potential.”

Ammon nodded before flashing a devious smile. “And the darkness is still alluring to her. When she started giving into her anger, you should have seen it.”

Zair considered this, rubbing his chin. A sinister gleam twinkled in his eyes as several, rather dark, ideas formed. Then a smile played onto his lips before growing into a grin.

Kiera stopped her pacing and faced him, expression hard. “What's there to smile about? She's a serious threat to our plans. If we'd known the Legionnaires were going to launch such a big offensive, and Cadence was involved, I would have been there.”

“No,” said Zair evenly, “the Legionnaires planned their assault well and you wouldn't have been able to do anything. Besides, I need you for other plans.”

Zair pushed himself to his feet. “Your sister is a threat, even I recognize that. But you know we can’t go at her head on. First, there are too many other Legionnaires with her. Second, she’s too strong...at the moment, anyway.”

Ammon’s smile returned. He knew where the dark lord was headed. “If you want to cut someone down and isolate them...”

“You strike the things that person holds dearest,” said Kiera, finally calming, “so they are alone with no place to go.”

She nodded, thinking, “My sister has a big loyalty and protective streak in her. If you pick off the people closest to her, one by one and place the blame on her...it’ll rip her apart.”

Because what’s worse than being alone and surrounded by an enemy so unfathomably powerful you can’t imagine you stand a chance at winning, thought Kiera, there’s nothing worse than the death of hope.

Zair gave a knowing smile. “Exactly. Allow me to worry about the initial plans, and I’ll tell you each your roles when the time arrives. By the time Cadence’s end comes, she will have realized that her return, all her efforts...will have been for nothing.”

Chapter 93

Questions & Answers

She dreamed about the battle on Fars, the fight in the vast cathedral against all those dark warriors. She distinctly remembered dueling with the dark commander, every move.

And then came the confrontation with Ammon. She watched herself fight him and recognized the moment she started to unleash her deep-seeded rage, using it to strike him down.

Alarms started going off in her head as she watched darkness close in around them, and the shadow that fell across her face. She shoved him away with a mighty push and then delivered that incredible strike.

It made her grimace as she watched, feeling a chill run over her. But what froze her where she stood was the icy darkness in her expression and in her eyes...before a gold crescent gleamed to life beneath her irises.

Cadence bolted awake, sitting straight up. Disoriented, she looked around a bit frantically, trying to figure out where she was. Apparently, she was in some kind of medical room. Half of it was dark and there was no one else here.

Well, at least she hadn’t been taken captive.

Sliding her legs over the edge of the bed, she realized they felt normal again. That’s when she remembered what Ajax had done.

Eyes narrowing, she stood and marched out the door and into the hall. She had a touch of stiffness here and there, but that would go away after another day or two. She did have a nice pink scar on her arm, compliments of General Ammon.

Cadence decided to turn left and headed briskly in that direction. She was mentally arranging the choice words she was going to exchange with Ajax when she nearly collided with Chad, Ronain, Tucker and Hailey.

Why is there always a crowd that comes to see me, wondered Cadence.

Looking at them, the first thing she asked was, "Did we win?"

Ronain smiled a little. "Uh, yes. We've driven most of the Seditonist forces from Fars and have established a solid presence there. I've sent Cole to oversee some minor skirmishes in the Eastern City of Lunghei."

Cadence nodded, thinking out loud. "The Seditonists probably want to reestablish themselves there so they can launch a counterattack on Fars to try and reclaim it."

"Likely. You know they don't relinquish their grip easily. We're headed over to Delta and Surgese to hopefully route the Seditonists there. Then it's finally on to Miraz where, hopefully, Cole will rejoin us."

"So, basically Legionnaire forces are going to try and uproot the enemy base in the Kerst System? That'll be quite a task."

"But at least it looks like you've recovered well," said Chad, breaking into the conversation, "especially after having fought with a Seditonist general."

There was a scolding undertone in his voice, not surprising due to his big protective streak.

"Well, technically, general," replied Cadence "he started it."

A thought snapped her to attention.

"Has anyone seen my friend Ajax?" she asked, walking between them and heading down the hall.

She wasn't familiar with this ship and didn't really know where she was going. But it was uncomfortable just standing there with people staring at her.

"No," replied Ronain, following, "your mysterious friend disappeared shortly after we took Elbis."

Figures, she thought.

"Tucker and Hailey told me you recognized one of the dark warriors," said Chad, "in the cathedral."

Cadence nodded, turning down another hall. "Don't know his name, but I'll never forget his face. Where's the tech room on this cruiser?"

She paused when she didn't get an immediate response and turned around.

Everyone was exchanging quick glances before Chad answered, "This way."

Once in the tech room, Cadence pulled up photos and information they'd compiled on all the known Seditonist generals, commanders and other important associates. She was scanning the pictures, six at a time, scrolling through the faces.

"You're going to identify this person so you can track him down?" inquired Chad.

"Yes," replied Cadence absently, preoccupied, "any one of you would if our situations were swapped."

Hailey shot a glance at Tucker and asked, *aren't you going to do something?*

Seconds later Cadence sucked in a breath and straightened. Tapping on the monitor, all the other pictures fell away, save for one.

She'd found her mystery person. He was a young man by the name of Hadrian, a former student under the dark lord himself. She knew where she'd last seen him, so it was a matter of finding possible escape routes, or rendezvous points used when he escaped Fars.

Cadence mentally paused a second to consider her actions. Yesterday she'd fought beside her former team, as a unit. Today she was bent on tracking Hadrian.

But he was connected with Kiera. He'd aided in guiding her to darkness and the slaughter of her parents. To not pursue him was out of the question.

It would be like she wasn't interested in justice and might as well as spit in the faces of her mom and dad.

But there was something else, something deeper. She hadn't really settled back here with the others. Despite initial warm greetings upon her return, she did not feel connected with her team—outside of battle that is.

Back "home" on the ship though, in downtime, she felt there was a gap as big as an ocean between them. She felt the lone wolf in her was still dominant.

Deep in the back of her mind, words spoken to her years ago resurfaced. *I have put in you a spirit as wild and restless as the wind that tears through the very mountains you climb and wanders across the plains searching for a place to settle...*

That was the reason right there that explained her need to go, to do something. *It's something I want you to keep in mind in future days, He'd said, and do not listen to others when they write off this trait as a flaw. In their ignorance, they will not understand it is an important attribute that I Myself created you with.*

Cadence turned for the door. "I'm going to go find the monitoring room."

"Wait," barked Tucker, "you're going to hunt him now? We need you here, with us."

In the past six years, she'd gotten used to, and rather enjoyed, not answering to anyone. And having even an honorable person like Tucker question her immediately sparked the rebel streak inside her.

Cadence stopped and spoke over her shoulder. "Last I checked, I could make my own decisions. I helped on Fars, aided in the rescue of General Chad and..."

A thought sparked her mind and she slowly turned. "Who's idea was it, exactly, that General Chad be the one captured?"

Now highly suspicious, Cadence took a couple steps towards the group.

"General Eliezer's," replied Ronain while trying not to grimace.

Suddenly Cadence understood. "Oh, I see. So, the Legionnaires decided to take a risky move to gather vital information on the enemy. General Chad was chosen for the task because Eliezer knew he was strongest, and also that I could not refuse to help in his rescue. And this move ultimately, which he also knew, would bring me back to the Legionnaire ranks."

She exhaled sharply, glaring at nothing. If there was one thing she hated, it was being used as a tool.

Well that, and being punched in the face.

No one said anything as Cadence looked them over. "Well, you have reached the means to your end, and I have fulfilled my task. So, if you'll excuse me."

That made Tucker straighten a little and brought him to attention. He glanced over his shoulder at Hailey, who shook her head a little, as if to say, 'tell her that's not true.'

Cadence, thought Chad, it's not what you think.

I'm not angry at you, she replied gently, you know I'd be lost without you.

Cadence turned back for the door. Before Chad could say anything else, Tucker stepped forward and asked sharply, "So you're just going to leave us again?"

He was still confused and unsure about the feelings he had towards her. But there were other issues that had been bothering him. And there seemed no time like the present to bring them up.

Cadence froze. If she'd had hackles, they would have risen.

Slowly, she turned and faced him. Her face was hard, like it had been set in stone.

"Alright," she said with surprising calm as she folded her arms across her chest. "You want to go there? Let's go there."

The two officers at the consoles at the front of the room exchanged a look. Before things went any further, they quickly excused themselves and left.

"Well," she said, clipping her words. "What's on your mind?"

Tucker took another step. "Six years and we didn't hear a single word from you. While we were out fighting, where were you? We lost friends, Cadence, people we trained with. We were waging war against evil itself, and where were you? Kicking back at some remote vacation spot while our warriors died?"

Cadence almost punched him right there. Rage flashed in her eyes but she didn't explode. There was no mistaking the subtle shaking, though, as it took every ounce of her control to rein in her temper.

She stepped closer to Tucker, her jaw muscles flexing.

"You want to know where I was?" she asked, the edge in her voice jolting them all. "You think I was hiding or on vacation when the enemy slaughtered all but ten of our warriors on Burgin? You think I was sitting on my butt when our training centers on Surgese and Surrik were flattened? Dozens of young warriors killed?"

Cadence edged a little closer still, viciousness in her eyes. "Who do you think got you all those drivers so you could upgrade the fleet? Who supplied you the information about enemy movements so you could intercept them before reaching Nordoc? Or Zerge? Or Timor? How about all those supply shipments you were able to intercept because someone gave you the times and routes?"

She was almost nose to nose with Tucker now. "And let me tell you something, pal, none of those things came easy. I didn't get all the scars I have on my body from sitting around doing nothing."

Silence fell over the room.

Hailey, half-hidden behind Tucker, spoke up. "But...if you were helping us, why not come and join us?"

Cadence did not calm any and her anger was still just as evident in the lines on her face. "Because I couldn't very well be advertising to the Seditonists where I was. I wasn't, aren't, ready to take on a full-scale assault, and if they thought I was out of the fight, I'd be able to sneak around easier. Everyone, friend and foe, had to believe I was staying out of the conflict. Besides...I'd be concerned about bringing the entire Seditonist army on you all if I were with you...as I am now."

Her tone softened just a touch as she looked at Hailey. "And...every time I looked at you all, I saw Kiera. I was reminded of her treachery."

Her blue eyes flitted back to Tucker and her hard tone returned. "So yeah, I took a little time for myself, to heal up some, and I'm sorry I didn't want to bare my heart and soul to you."

Cadence huffed through her nose, eyeing him with disgust...and betrayal. "But thanks for thinking so highly of me in my absence."

She still looked like she'd like to punch someone. Instead, however, she excused herself, turned and walked briskly out of the room.

"Cadence, I'm sorry," called Tucker, running after her. There was still no way she was getting away easy.

"Wait a second," he said, a couple strides behind her, "it's not all like you think, and it doesn't change the fact we still need you here with us."

You're still our friend...and our leader, he thought to her.

"Never asked to be in the first place, Tucker," she replied curtly, still walking at a quick pace, "I never understood that. I'm not the leader type."

"You're wrong," said Tucker sharply. He was still right behind her.

"You never saw how other students watched you, wanted to be on your team, wanted to work with you. Warriors are naturally drawn to you. But all of that aside, what happens if Legionnaire forces fail? The Seditonists will eventually find and destroy you."

Cadence stopped and spun to face him.

"And?" she bit out, "They don't scare me. I was actually doing quite well staying off the radar until you all sent Commander Arthos to recruit me."

She studied Tucker. "I have yet to see anything from anyone, besides General Chad, that says any of you want me here because I'm supposedly your friend. Besides...what's it all to you, anyway?"

Cadence by no means was fishing for compliments, and she honestly meant what she said. In her years alone, everyone she'd met or worked with always had an agenda. She understood it, but not a single person had wanted to befriend her just for the sake of being her friend.

Now, it was nearly impossible for her to believe what Tucker and the others were telling her. They couldn't seriously want her to stay because they liked her.

Tucker didn't answer Cadence's question right away and instead dropped his head a moment.

That's when Cadence understood and discerned that Tucker himself was wrestling with a number of emotions towards her. He was trying to figure them, and her, out. Trying to understand what he was feeling.

The last thing Cadence was interested in was a relationship of *that* sort. Besides, everyone needed to keep their heads in the game.

Leaving to hunt Hadrian was looking like a pretty good idea.

"Well," spoke Cadence at length as she turned, "if you'll excuse me. I have a Seditonist to track."

"Fine then, leave," said Tucker with some smartness, "abandoning your friends is what you're good at."

Cadence jerked to a stop and was barely able to believe what she'd just heard him say. An instant before she spun, he picked up on her sudden fury—and pain.

He didn't even see her turn. There was a flash of light and Tucker tumbled and slid across the floor. He stopped feet from the boots of the others, who'd picked that moment to step into the hallway.

Tucker admitted he'd used that taunt strictly as a way to try and get through to her. He didn't believe it himself.

However, he decided, it may have worked a little too well.

Hailey wore a wide-eyed expression; Ronain and Chad were both grimacing. But Cadence didn't seem to notice them, her harsh gaze locked on Tucker.

“Don't you *dare* question my loyalties or my honor,” she seethed, face dark with rage as she stood poised for a fight, muscles taut.

“I don't know what's with you people!” she shouted, throwing her hands up, “Labeling me as some kind of leader and thinking I can single-handedly take on the enemy? There's no way I believe you need me as much as you say.”

Tucker was still clearing the fog as he unsteadily got to his feet, sternum aching a bit from the strike. Turning his head a little, he listened and studied her closely.

“And did it ever cross your mind,” she continued, jabbing at the side of her head, “did you ever think that if, by staying, I'd be putting you in direct danger? If I was ever the cause of your deaths, it would destroy me!”

Cadence let that statement hang in the air.

Both Ronain and Chad exchanged a subtle look, and understanding fell upon Hailey's face.

This was the most they'd gotten from Cadence since she'd returned to them. However, the two generals seemed content to allow Tucker to continue handling the situation. No need to ruin or stop the progress he was making...in spite of the fact he might have some bruised ribs.

As for Tucker, Cadence watched him closely. He wasn't angry. In fact, his expression was one of the faintest satisfaction, like he'd finally gotten something he wanted.

Observing this, she realized what the *something* was: he'd finally gotten her to open up and talk to him.

“You're crazy, you know that right?” she asked, unimpressed with anger still flickering in her eyes, “pushing me like that?”

Tucker held her gaze with his blue eyes and rested his hands on his hips again.

“Don't you think, don't you believe, that we'll cross Hadrian further down the road, at the right time?” he asked, voice calm now.

“I think I've been waiting six years to pick up his trail,” she replied evenly, “and now seems like the opportunity to finally find him.”

They shared a long look, and Cadence watched a glimmer of sadness cross Tucker's face. “Don't you believe...what happened to the warrior who once walked with the Almighty and was so in tune to His will and plan?”

“She has become jaded and calloused from life's loss and cruelty, and fear that if she gets too close to the ones she cares for, they'll be taken also.”

Tucker lowered his head a second and took a breath. When he met her gaze again, there was a sullen understanding on his face. He was finally getting where she was coming from, at least a little.

Well, we do care about you, he thought, honestly. You were on our minds a lot while you were gone.

"Cadence," said Tucker, searching her face and hoping she'd finally believe what he was saying, "we've been waiting with anticipation the day you finally came back. We do need you...we *want* you to be with us. Doesn't that carry any weight with you?"

Cadence let her gaze fall on the floor few long seconds as she considered his words and formulated her answer.

Her face softened and her posture relaxed some as she returned her eyes to Tucker. "It does carry great weight. I've just grown accustomed to working independently. I see or hear something that needs to be done, sabotage a Seditonist cruiser, divert a weapons shipment, anything, and I just do it. I've learned to take initiative because I have to just to survive."

"And that's exactly what draws us to you," said Hailey, as she took a few steps forward, "aside from the fact your combat skills are unmatched save, perhaps, by our generals. You've always been a dear friend and we missed you so much...we don't want to lose you again so soon."

Seconds ticked by and Tucker didn't know if they'd finally gotten through to Cadence. Silently he prayed she would listen instead of leave, something he sensed wasn't the right move at the moment.

Your faith in people has obviously been shattered, he thought to Cadence, please, let us prove to you that you can trust us, and not because we see you as a means to an end. Trust us...trust me, just a little. Let me prove that I'll cover your back, no matter what, no matter where you lead.

Cadence's expression had grown stoic and no one could get a clear read on her thoughts. At length, she again studied Tucker, having appeared to have made up her mind about something.

Then, the sadness he'd caught a glimpse of on Fars returned for the briefest second.

Don't get your hopes up too high, she replied to him, I'm not destined for teamwork my whole life, and I don't think you yet fully understand me...or what I was made for.

Then she finished out loud, addressing everyone. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that I was unhappy or lonely in my years of solitude. I will remain here with you..."

Her eyes flicked back to Tucker. "...at least for a short awhile longer."

When she watched him rub his sternum again, she winced a little. Clearing her throat, she squared her shoulders and said, "Sorry about that."

"Well, I did have it coming," he replied.

Cadence raised her eyebrows as if to say, 'you think?' But their argument seemed to help her reset her priorities and her mindset. Yes, she'd stay with the group for the time being.

"So," she said, a dark flicker of fight gleaming in her eyes as she looked at General Ronain, "to Delta?"

A faint smile pulled at his mouth, and he gave a nod. "To Delta."

Chapter 94

Uncertainty

Kiera walked in total silence down the dim hallway, darkness following her. She mulled over the possible plans Zair might have in store for the fall of her sister. He wouldn't give her details, but she was tired of sitting around. It had been a week since she'd been on the battlefield and she was restless for violence and bloodshed.

She was certain if they could track Cadence's position, she could take a few strong warriors and meet her head on. Then they'd be done with it all.

Kiera's simmering anger flared hotter the more she thought about Cadence.

She'd always been the more talented one, the stronger one, the more adored one among family and friends. It didn't matter how well she trained or performed, Kiera never got the attention or praise she deserved.

Turning sharply down another hall to the right, a glare settled on Kiera's face. She would not be outdone again, not this time.

It was Cadence's fault anyway, that Kiera had turned out the way she had. Instead of staying by her side, Cadence had kept her distance just like everyone else when the darkness closed in, tempting, luring her.

So much for family loyalty, thought Kiera.

Not that any of it would matter much longer. Kiera had grown so much stronger, so much more powerful in darkness than Cadence would ever be in light. People respected and feared her now, as it should be. And the more enemies Kiera struck down, the stronger she became and the closer the darkness drew.

As was what Hadrian said would happen.

Kiera hung a left, heading for his room.

In the aftermath of what she'd done on Elywn, she was initially angry at him, at his trickery. But he'd also been the one who'd built her up and trained her afterwards.

He told Kiera that gaining power was about allying oneself with evil.

"The more you embrace the darkness," he'd said early on, "the more you commune with it, then the more power and authority you will be given. Unseen forces will walk beside you, be placed under your command and engage the enemies that confront you."

Hadrian had been right.

In the depths of her initial internal despair and turmoil, Kiera distinctly remembered the exact day and time she knelt in the darkness. She remembered when she first invited the forces of evil to come, to meet with her...and help her.

Kiera almost couldn't bring herself to say such words, as if something deep in her soul was resisting—and beckoning her to reconsider. It was like she was being given one more chance to turn off the darker path that was under her feet.

You've already pledged your allegiance to Another, whispered a reminder that she'd barely heard in her groggy mind.

But where is He then, she'd wondered, feeling stubborn indignation rise up inside her.

Far off, she'd answered herself, *like everyone else I lived and trained with, people I called my friends...He's gone, turned His back on me.*

That was when another voice had whispered in Kiera's ear, *We want to help you, and we won't abandon you. We take care of our own, unlike those self-righteous Legionnaires.*

"Then come," she'd said. When the words had left her lips, the sharpest pain she'd ever felt cut deep through her. It was more than her heart breaking; it was as if her soul was being torn and the deepest anguish she'd ever felt consumed her.

Kiera had broken a promise, and a most important allegiance had been shattered. But her mind was too muddled to understand that was the true cause for explosion of agony that nearly had her writhing on the floor.

Kiera had barely whispered the words, but apparently it was enough for the demonic forces that had been hovering.

Darkness that came from sinister evil filled the room. When she'd lifted her gaze, tears streaming down her face, she saw them standing about her: large demons with strong arms, massive wings and cunning eyes.

Kiera remembered feeling mild surprise for a breath when she took in their sheer size. The last time she'd seen a demon was near the lake on Elywn, when she thought she was hallucinating.

That memory took her to the moment when she'd rounded the bend and first saw Matthew and Cadence. It left a bitter taste in her mouth, seeing her little sister and her dad, all buddy-buddy...

A fresh surge of agony had brought Kiera back, though the memory had only fueled her feelings of self-righteous anger and malice.

"Aren't you going to help me?" she'd asked weakly, a pleading expression slowly making its way onto her face.

That was when a particularly large shadow stepped over and crouched in front of her. There they'd shared a long look.

The demon himself had known neither he nor any of his minions could actually possess her, like they could the unbelievers who were willing to give them total control.

No, with fallen Legionnaires, despite their treachery, they still bore The Seal of ownership to the One they'd pledged allegiance to. They could not contend or overpower or force out the Spirit that would remain in her for the rest of her pathetic life.

But that was definitely something they'd avoid mentioning to the girl.

In spite of that minor hindrance, the darkness could still use and manipulate a Legionnaire to devastating ends if the individual was willing.

At last, the demon had then placed a clawed hand on Kiera's shoulder.

The coldest shaft of ice pierced her, and then her internal pain and agony dulled, if only a little.

"Will it ever fully go away?" she'd asked.

"Yes, dark little warrior," the demon had replied, with such a deep and grumbling voice it sent chills over Kiera. But not chills from fear...it had been from exhilaration. She sensed the sheer strength and might he possessed just by the words he'd spoken.

"Your teacher, Hadrian, is a wise and powerful leader," continued the brute, "and he would be the first to tell you that your turmoil will be eased after you've struck down your first Legionnaire in battle."

And that had been true also. The moment Kiera had fallen a Legionnaire, the pain and aching in her soul had been immediately soothed...and replaced with intoxicating power.

After a year, when she was strong enough, Hadrian left her mostly up to her own. Which was fine. She'd never had as much freedom as she had now than when she'd trained as a Legionnaire.

Hunting small parties of Legionnaire spies and rooting out sympathizers taught Kiera how to track, strategize and keep hidden until the time for the kill arrived.

Kiera rolled her tight neck as she rounded another corner.

And once she was rid of her sister, the thorn in her side and tormentor of her soul, Kiera was convinced she would finally be able to have rest.

It was no longer possible for the both of them to be alive and be at peace.

Ω Ω Ω

The cathedral on Fars was finally emptying. He stood near an archway on the perimeter, watching the final dueling enemies. But it wasn't the Legionnaire general driving Ammon back that gave him an uneasy feeling. No, it was the feeling he was being watched by a terrible threat...

Eyes sweeping the expansive lobby, he jerked back when he saw her, Cadence. Her blue eyes drilled into him and he immediately felt like his heart was being ripped open.

"No!" he snarled, looking away, raising a hand to shield his face from her gaze.

But it didn't help. Like always, the pain, the guilt and anguish in his soul roared to life. It didn't matter if he ran or tried to hide, there was no escaping.

"Unless I kill her," he thought.

Yes. He was a high commander in the dark lord's army, one who always kept his emotions in check. He couldn't very well have that jeopardized because of one girl.

"Kill her," whispered an angry voice in his ear. In this occasion, he let hot rage rip through his veins.

Straightening, he took up his lance and started across the lobby. Shadows on either side walked in front of him. Because of the blackness surrounding them, it was difficult to make out their shape. But they had large wings and cutting yellow eyes, and each wielded a black-bladed scimitar.

They focused on Cadence, who remained unalarmed as she watched them approach. They bared their teeth and cursed at her. The two nearest to the girl raised their swords, metallic edges glinting in the sun streaming in high through the arches.

A blinding flash! Streaks of piercing light!

Hadrian stopped as a warrior appeared, putting himself between Cadence and the demons.

He blinked. He recognized this warrior, he'd seen him beside Cadence; black hair, pale hazel eyes.

Only this wasn't a mere man. He was much bigger, stronger with large, beautiful wings, and he held a mighty sword.

A brilliant being of light, he cut down the demons like they were nothing and drove them back. His gaze finally landed on Hadrian and he glared at the dark commander with righteous fury.

Hadrian's eyes widened in sudden fear as this terrible warrior moved towards him, intent clear.

He tripped backwards out of the cathedral, the big angel dangerously close now. Pointing his sword, edge dripping with black blood, he glared down at him.

"She is not your property, little man," thundered the warrior of light, fury snapping in his eyes, "and over her you have no authority."

Hadrian stumbled and fell to the ground.

The angel swung his sword around over his head and down.

Hadrian raised his lance to protect himself, but the sword shattered it and flashed down into his chest...

Hadrian started awake with a snarl and sat up. He blinked hard a couple times, chasing away the angry face of the heavenly warrior that stayed in his mind.

Sensing someone to his left, he snapped his glare to that side of the room and saw Kiera leaning against the wall.

"You've been starting awake a lot lately," said Kiera, mostly shadowed in the dark, "something on your mind?"

Hadrian grumbled something as he kicked the sheets away and stood. "Does the boss have orders or are you just randomly inviting yourself into peoples' rooms while they sleep?"

The single, overhead light of the room blinked on and he grabbed a clean shirt.

"He wants us to test the newest trainees," replied Kiera, "make sure they're combat ready."

Hadrian rolled his neck, cracking it. But when he closed his eyes all he saw were those haunting blue eyes...and that big, unfriendly angel frowning at him.

He'd seen Cadence in person just a few days ago and the nightmares had grown worse. Now he was seeing those haunting blue eyes every time he closed his own eyes, and felt the cool edge of the blade of final judgment on his neck.

Fortunately, engaging in battle and training chased away any weakness he felt. Sparring first thing in the morning was like an electric shock and got his head screwed on where it should be.

Opening his eyes, Hadrian realized he was still bare-chested. In his peripheral he caught Kiera's eye lingering at his core, solid, like it was carved from rock.

It wasn't an uncommon sight. Every dark warrior kept himself in excellent shape.

He shot her a disproving frown as he slipped the shirt on.

There was no denying Kiera was a beauty, but he wasn't interested at all. She'd been a former student of his, and his mind was too focused on the war.

But there was also the fact she was plotting her little sister's demise.

It was odd. Normally, the darker and more treacherous the scheme, the better. This, however, seemed different somehow.

That, and being aware Cadence had a guardian angel with a really big sword, gave him pause in regarding plans for her death.

"I'll meet you in the training room," said Hadrian as he turned for the bathroom.

He stopped halfway and sent her a chilling look, "And next time, stay out of my room."

Kiera matched the coolness in his gaze and made for the door. "See you on the playground."

Chapter 95

Commander

The conference room of the battle cruiser held a number of people.

Ronain and Chad, of course were there, as was Cadence, Tucker and Hailey. General Ipos was present, and General Necro, who'd arrived from Dumas. Commander Arthos was there also, along with Judge and Red.

To Cadence's surprise Isabella was there, looking like she'd walked a week through a dust storm. But her face and eyes were just as bright as the last time they'd met.

After initial greetings, they got down to business.

"Our primary concern here is that Zair has gone silent," said Chad, "and it has been a week since anyone has seen his ship. We're familiar with this type of pattern, and know silence precedes a harsh strike by the enemy."

"Seeing as how the Seditonists know Cadence Shahan is fighting alongside us again," continued Ronain, "we believe it's quite plausible this strike will be against her."

At this, Tucker shot a look at Cadence, to his right.

She didn't seem the least bit worried at this possibility as she leaned back comfortably in her chair, listening indifferently.

"No one can get close to the dark commanders without being sensed by them," said Arthos. "How are we supposed to find and keep tabs on their master?"

"It can be done," replied Isabella, "it just takes the right kinds of warriors to go on the hunt."

She shot a look at Cadence and gave her a wink, “We lone wolves know a thing or two about tracking, and how to get close and listen in without being seen.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Cadence mouth, but she saw Tucker shift a little in the chair beside her. Glancing at his expression, she was interested to see he hadn’t liked something Isabella had said.

“While we deeply appreciate the Legionnaire army and its generals respecting our need for solitude,” continued Isabella, “we did train as warriors and we are at war. Just tell us what you want done. Give us a little time to initially get set up and we’ll accomplish any task in the time it takes for the army in the eastern sector to mobilize.”

“We’ll leave it to you then,” nodded Necro, “just let us know if and when you need assistance. We look forward to finally being able to track these enemies.”

A bunch of rogues working together, thought Cadence, *now that would be interesting to see.*

That idea was actually quite exhilarating.

“What are we going to do in the meantime, though?” asked Arthos, “Tracking the dark lord himself is going to take...”

“An inside job?”

Eyes went to Ipos, sitting near the end of the table between Chad and Necro.

The others wanted to argue, but knew he was right. Ipos, the powerful and mysterious rogue general, still carried a dark air around him, in his expression and in his eyes.

Cadence noted his words snapped Isabella to attention, who was sitting across the table and a few chairs to the left of Ipos. She fixed him with a harsh gaze, but remained silent.

“My friend and brother, General Chad,” said Ipos, looking to the general on his right, “made his sacrifice when he was captured. Allow me to do my part.”

Cadence watched the lines in Isabella’s face harden.

“You know I’ve done it before,” he continued, steel eyes sliding over them, “and I’ll do it again.”

That finally drew half-grunt, half-growl from Isabella. Cadence thought she might march over there and slap him.

The sound didn’t go unnoticed by Ipos and he met Isabella's hazel eyes.

She was leaned over the table, hands spread on the surface, jaw set.

“I don’t mean to question your abilities, general,” said Isabella, clipping her words, fire in her eyes, “but are you sure you’re ready to immerse yourself in darkness after what happened last time?”

If this had been a city council meeting, the exchange might have been awkward. But they were a family here, and with such a risky consideration, honesty was best.

“I know what I’m doing, Isabella,” replied Ipos evenly, “I’m fully aware of the pull of the darkness, and its particular affects on me. I am not strong enough to fight it, but the One who lives in me is.”

Isabella was nearly on her feet. “And what’s going to happen if I’m not there to pull you from fire *again*?”

She leveled her gaze on him, stubborn anger in her eyes, but if Cadence wasn’t mistaken there was something else...affection, maybe?

“Evil nearly consumed you,” she continued, “and what happens if it’s too much this time? You do understand how devastating it would to us, to Legionnaire forces? And what about Cadence? You do realize she’d be the first one they’d send you after.”

Ipos did not appear angry. There wasn’t a single flicker of it in his expression or body language. Instead, there was only quiet resolve.

“It’ll work, Isabella,” he said, before turning his eyes to Cadence, a few seats to his left.

Elbow on the table, she had her hand over her mouth as she watched and listened to the exchange.

This was the connection Cadence and Ipos shared, Chad realized. It explained how and why he'd looked at her with understanding those years ago in training, when she was struggling with being pulled by darkness. They both understood it, its intoxicating power. Cadence had danced with it just days ago.

Ipos and Cadence shared a long look. She wished he wouldn’t do this, but the benefits of the move were enormous. She wished someone else could perform the task, but there wasn’t because she honestly saw him as her friend.

Ipos himself beheld her with an expression of respect and admiration. Now that was something she *didn’t* understand.

“Do you believe I can do this, Cadence?” asked Ipos.

Cadence just blinked, wondering why her input mattered.

Closing her eyes, she let out a breath.

She remembered what it had been like sparring with him in combat exercises. She recalled the distinct shadow that always seemed to linger around him, sensed how badly the darkness wanted to pull him in.

But they all had their crosses to bear, their personal struggles. In considering this particular plan, however, Cadence felt a distinct peace settle over her heart.

She met Ipos’ gaze again. “Yes, I believe you can pull this off.”

That actually made him smile faintly. He tilted his head in gratitude at her words.

Isabella practically threw herself back into her chair in a huff. She sent Ipos a fierce look and pointed a finger at him. No verbal words were exchanged, but they knew she was probably giving him the what for.

In response, his smile broadened, steel eyes twinkling.

Isabella frowned in return.

Yes, indeed, thought Ronain, *these two definitely have a history.*

“May I suggest you wait until after the assignment to Militara?” asked Chad. “The other generals and I would like you to lead that mission.”

Ipos gave a single nod. “I’m ready and able.”

Their discussion jumped right from Zair to Kiera.

“Kiera and I exchanged blows in the Western City of Lunghei,” said General Necro, “and I can say she’s earned every bit of her sinister reputation. She hasn’t been blindly wallowing in darkness. She’s been embracing evil, using it, training in it. She’s exceptionally strong and can clear an entire battlefield by herself alone. Though she hasn’t yet reached the level of Seditonist generals, she’s nearing it.”

He glanced around the table, a touch of dread in his expression. “Kiera is a direct threat to us. It takes very powerful warriors to stop her once she’s on the warpath. She could easily undo the progress we’ve worked so hard to make.”

Necro placed his holographic device on the table and turned it on.

“At one point we were engaged in hand-to-hand combat,” he continued, going through some still photos he’d taken, “and this is the result of a single blow, even through my armor.”

A picture of his side appeared over the table. His ribs and the surrounding area were black, the edges flaring out like little veins.

“It still hasn’t completely healed,” he said, “and I say this in strict confidence: this single strike nearly crippled me. Kiera’s barely at commander status right now. Could you imagine the havoc she could cause if she reaches the same level as a general?”

Silence settled over the conference room. After another couple seconds, Necro disengaged the device and returned it to his pocket.

Tucker glanced at Cadence beside him.

She sat back in her chair, elbow now on the armrest, fingers lightly on her lips. Her expression had grown cold as a gleam of darkness flickered in her eyes. She was processing what she’d seen.

“Would you suggest she be confronted?” asked Ronain quietly.

Necro shot a look at Cadence. “Yes, sooner rather than later. Before she has more time to strengthen.”

All other eyes went to her.

Cadence's gaze remained stoic. Her eyes settled on Chad and they looked at one another for a time.

Tucker would've paid big money to know what they were saying to each other.

Her eyes then fell to the table a couple seconds before Cadence finally cleared her throat and looked at the others. "You are asking me to confront...and kill my sister, one who has the same blood running through her veins as me. But why, may I ask, do you think I'm the one who should, or even could, take her down?"

Cadence looked from Ronain to Chad, Ipos and then Necro. "Surely all eight of the Legionnaire generals together could defeat her."

She rubbed her aching forehead before pinching the bridge of her nose, "I understand you all already have parts to play in the war, but..."

She sighed and gave a shake of her head.

"When siblings are at war with each other, they're, well...it's difficult to explain," answered Chad gently. "The same strike Kiera landed on General Necro would just seem like a normal punch to you. On the other hand, you're the only one who can duel with her on a level playing field. When you fight her, your strikes will have significantly more impact than anyone else's. Blow for blow, you are evenly matched. Do...you understand?"

Cadence gave a nod in response, but her eyebrows furrowed as she glared at the table.

Before the harshness of war had come, she had been much more fragile emotionally.

But Tucker could clearly see now that surviving on her own had brought a toughness to her; it had been required. What would have likely driven her to tears six years ago was only greeted with a cool demeanor now.

"My only fear," she said finally, voice even, "is that when the time to face Kiera comes...I will be too weak to fight."

Tucker's split-second reaction to this admission was one of shock, that Cadence would admit feelings of any sort to everyone here.

But this was a difficult topic and one that was directly related to this war with the Seditonists. Kiera was a powerful asset to them, and a lethal threat to any Legionnaire not fully equipped and strong enough to engage her.

Cadence's gaze drifted to Hailey, who sat on her right and had been watching her nearly the entire meeting.

It's what I saw with my parents, thought Cadence to her friend, they couldn't fight her, even in their defense as she struck them down. They couldn't fight their own daughter because they were too brokenhearted.

Hailey felt her throat tighten and sent her brother a look.

Cadence's gaze fell back to the table, letting her thoughts wander a moment. If her parents couldn't even manage a single swing, how could she think she could?

Who was she kidding, anyway? She probably couldn't do it, would probably fall to her knees the second she saw her sister. Maybe that was for the best, though. Kiera would strike her down, and then she could be together with her parents again...

No.

The sharpness of the word jerked Cadence from her thoughts. That, and Tucker grabbing her wrist.

Don't even think things like that, he chided.

"We're not committing to any plan at the moment," said Necro finally. "There are too many things that need to happen in the present. But we need you to consider this. Please....for us?"

Cadence looked from him then to the others. There was no anger or resentment, even doubt. Instead there was only acceptance, confidence.

She still couldn't fathom why they looked at her in such a way, or held her with such admiration. Cadence saw herself as a nobody, no one special, and the least of everyone in this room.

At length, she gave a sharp sigh and a single nod.

"I will," she replied resolutely, "for you."

Who knew such a response could bring so much relief? The mood seemed to instantly lift.

And it was a funny thing to Cadence. While she couldn't ever see herself as having the guts to go against Kiera for her own reasons, could she quite possibly do it for these people? For the ones she deeply respected and admired?

Like I told you before, kid, Isabella thought to Cadence, *you're something special, and I look forward to working with you in the near future.*

Before Cadence could further inquire about that statement, Isabella looked at Ipos and made a face at him.

Conversation picked up around the table and Cadence studied the various people.

Necro, Ipos, Chad and Ronain were chatting, Necro giving Ipos a good-natured slap on the shoulder. Ronain grinned and Chad's laugh rumbled deeply in his chest. She wondered how long it had been since there had been so much light in their eyes and expressions.

At the other end were Arthos, Red, and Judge. The two burly warriors were sitting beside each other, beaming at her with pride, though she couldn't understand why.

Both were leaning on the table, and Red gave Judge's elbow a nudge. Judge returned it, shoving his comrade's with a little more force. It quickly turned into a brotherly pushing match.

That is, until Commander Arthos stood up and slapped both of them up the backside of the head.

That made Cadence laugh for the first time in...she couldn't remember how long. She met Hailey's gaze and gave her friend a wink. Hailey beamed in response.

Tucker had been right about what he'd said about these people, Cadence realized. Their concern was genuine, and she saw them as family now more than ever before, in spite of her wanderings.

Speaking of Tucker, he still hadn't let go of her left wrist and maintained a firm grip on it. And, like his sister, he'd been watching her the entire time.

Clearing her throat, Cadence glanced down at his hand.

He'd forgotten all about it and hastily released her wrist. There was no anger or fear in her expression, as Tucker might have expected. Instead there was only that kind sadness in her beautiful blue eyes.

But before Tucker could ask what was on her mind, Chad's thundering voice jarred them all.

"Of course!" he declared, "We nearly forgot."

General Necro pushed himself away from the table and stood.

"Cadence," he said, "would you come here, please?"

She'd always hated a lot of attention and at first she moved a bit hesitantly. She also wondered if she was about to be reprimanded for something, like for sending Tucker for a tumble down the hall the other day.

As she walked towards him, she saw Chad pull something out from under the table. Because he'd been one of the first to arrive for the meeting, she didn't know he'd had anything with him.

When she stopped a few feet from Necro, he took the item from Chad. Cadence immediately recognized it: it was her light armor.

"Based on your performance in the field," he said, "and on your conduct, you're officially promoted to Commander status...class D."

Necro turned the armor around so the front was facing her. "You will see we've already taken the privilege of adding the chevrons."

He handed it to Cadence and extended his hand.

Still a bit shocked, she took the armor and shook his hand. He gripped her hand and grasped her elbow. There was no missing the pride in his expression as he said, "Congratulations...commander."

"Thank you, general," said Cadence, barely remembering her etiquette.

Whoops came from Mason and Tucker, and if Hailey had been grinning any harder her face would have split.

Cadence looked back down at the armor, at the pair of chevrons on the left side, just below the shoulder.

A commander, she thought to herself, *and Class D at that.*

D was for Delta, the top ranking class. Tucker had referred to it as the "elite teeth-kickin' class of commanders."

Cadence snorted a laugh at the thought, but her gaze quickly furrowed as she looked at the badge. She hadn't been back long at all and had only been out on a few assignments with the others.

Granted, she'd been aiding Legionnaire forces off the radar during her six year absence. Promotions were given to warriors regardless of job description; even rogues were granted elevated ranks.

But surely, she thought, this honor was more deserving of one of the other team members.

And this didn't just mean Cadence now had elevated rank and authority.

There was something more to this. It signified a commitment to a team, her team. She was responsible for what happened to them. Just as importantly, however, it meant she was going to have to stay here, for the time being.

That understanding made her stomach tighten a little.

When Cadence had been on her own, she came and went as she pleased. In dicey situations, she could easily vanish and disappear from sight.

Now as a commander, she immediately felt the added weight of responsibility to each warrior that would be placed under her. *Yeah*, she thought, *no pressure.*

Class D, just like your father. He could have been a general, but he turned down the promotion because he was content where he was.

Cadence looked up to see Chad watching her intently, with that knowing little expression on his face.

It was so funny. Before the war, she remembered thinking something like, *Maybe, just maybe, one day I'll be a commander.*

Chad stood and stepped over to her and gave Cadence a one-armed hug. "I'm proud of you," he said quietly, "you've more than earned it."

I wouldn't have without you, she thought to him, *without you I would have been lost.*

Feeling eyes on her, Cadence glanced around to see General Ipos looking at her. Admiration gleamed in those steel eyes and a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. It was the first time she'd seen any warmth in his expression, which also exuded confidence in her.

The smile broadened just a little and he sent her a wink before returning his attention to Isabella.

Ronain then came up and slapped a hand on her shoulder, making Cadence jump.

"You've always been a quiet leader," he said, "we all saw this trait begin to emerge near the end of your training. You lead by example, by how you conduct yourself. You exhibit quiet strength and have a will of steel, which naturally draws warriors to you, though you likely don't know it, or see it."

Cadence flushed, but managed to reply, "You honor me with your confidence, general. And you're right...I don't see it."

"You will," he smiled, eyes twinkling as he gave her a slap on the back.

In the meantime, conversation had resumed. Jackie and Mason were discussing the art of long distance shooting. He apparently said something funny because Jackie threw her head back and had a good laugh. Nodding, she and he shared a fist bump.

Erika, Red and Judge were in a deep discussion about something, probably war tactics. Hailey had leaned over and joined the conversation between Mason and Jackie.

Tucker stepped beside her, a smile pulling at his mouth. "Commander," he said, with a tilt of his head.

Cadence met his gaze with a cautious smile.

Being by my side is quickly becoming dangerous, she thought to him, are you sure that's where you want to be?

I was sure from the moment you came back, he answered, turning to fully face her, his expression one of determination.

Neither were romantics, and warriors weren't anyway. There were no "ushy gooshy" drooling over each other types. For Legionnaires, through actions and attributes like loyalty, trust, duty and protection was affection recognized and shown.

And knowing Tucker, he'd likely sworn to fight by her side until the stars fell from the sky.

Whether it was out of strict loyalty or deeper feelings, Cadence didn't know. It was something she wished to avoid and definitely a topic she wasn't going to think about for the present...or in the future, for that matter.

And now that she was his commanding officer, it was something definitely not to be encouraged. She'd have bigger things to worry about, like leading and doing her utmost best at bringing everyone home safe from every assignment.

Another thought struck her then, though Cadence kept it to herself. *But now I officially outrank you, Tucker. If, or when, I order you to stay put while I break away to advance into certain peril... would you heed my command?*

She wouldn't ask him that very moment, however, not today. Though it was an important question to consider, and she'd ask him at a different time.

But no need to spoil a good afternoon.

"Well then," she said, blue eyes snapping at him, "it's an honor to have you on the team."

Squaring his shoulders, Tucker straightened and saluted her.

Fiery fight flickered to life in Cadence's chest as she returned it.

While the conflict between the desire to leave or to stay had been pulling her back and forth ever since she'd arrived, she realized that presently, this was right. She was where she needed to be.

Just the right place at just the right time...

Her resolute, determined gaze settled on commander Arthos, who had been watching her with a twinkle in his eyes.

Cadence didn't know what her role would be tomorrow, but today it was here...with her team.

Chapter 96

Old Nemesis

Ipos, Isabella, and a small scouting group reached the primary site on planet Militara, in the Lone Planet System. The Legionnaire intelligence network had stumbled upon this place just two weeks ago.

The planet itself had once been one large military installation, used during the last war. Now it was abandoned, or so everyone thought. It had been a smart move by the Seditonists, using this as a construction location. All the necessary facilities were still here, waiting for someone to utilize them.

Ipos and the team sat hidden beneath the trees atop a nearby hill and watched the activity for a while.

Three enormous free-standing hangars created three points of a rough triangle. In the center stood an observation tower with smaller structures, bunkers of some kind, behind each hanger.

Security regularly patrolled around the buildings, in groups of four. Some were dark warriors, others were regular soldiers.

Isabella nudged Ipos and pointed. "I'm thinking most of that work force was brought in from other planets. You can tell by the ragtag uniforms of different colors

and badges. They're just locals, probably recruited from planets the Seditonists have overtaken."

Ipos raised the rifle scope. He focused on a group of men being escorted towards one of the hangars by a squad of dark warriors.

He then swept his gaze over to the right, towards one of the bunkers. There he saw several local security officers entering and exiting the structure.

"Those bunkers are likely barracks," he said, "but right now there's no telling how many soldiers there are."

"Well, it's nearly lunch," chirped Isabella, "it would be a good time to get a little closer."

"While you do that, we'll begin transporting the squads," answered Ipos.

Because they only had two available medium cruisers with cloaking capabilities, all the warriors they needed for this assault had to be shuttled over from Calrissian. Barely twenty minutes for each round trip, but it would take time.

Ipos turned to Isabella to remind her to be careful. But when he did, he saw she was already gone.



They sat down to eat their tasteless lunch in a decently sized pavilion, sides completely open with the exception of the support beams.

At least the Seditonist troops left them alone for the most part and didn't harass them unless the workers started the trouble. They were also strict on the other security forces, ordering them to leave the mechanics and technicians alone.

It allowed for a more or less relaxed atmosphere. The workers knew they weren't going to be beaten for sneezing.

A crew at a particular table near the outer edge of the pavilion were discussing when they might finally get to leave, or if this would be a more permanent occupation.

Movement drew the attention of the man on the end. He glanced across the narrow road towards the barracks and then jerked his attention back to the table a second. Slowly turning his head, he looked out the corner of his eye at a young woman who was standing in the shadows of the barracks building.

She raised a finger to her lips.

When he blinked, she was gone.

He had the sense to keep what he'd just seen to himself. As he turned his attention back to the conversation at the table he thought, *perhaps we won't be here much longer after all.*

At least, he hoped so. Like many of his other colleagues, they were just ready to go home to their families...assuming they were even still alive.

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They moved at twilight, when the odd light made it difficult to clearly see in the shadows. Initial breaching squads snuck onto the grounds and got into position. Simultaneously, another team jammed all communications so the enemy couldn't call for outside help.

Speed and stealth were priority here. One by one the teams snuck in and struck the patrol units walking around the perimeter. Taking them out was one thing, but the Legionnaires were distinctly aware the dark warriors were housed at some location yet to be discovered.

Ipos led one of the breach teams and quickly fell a patrol squad, which consisted of dark warriors. It had been a near thing. The enemy was able to sense something was up and had almost turned before Ipos and the team reached them.

Black armor in place, Ipos and two other Legionnaires in disguise strode through the near darkness for the observation tower.

Just because they'd jammed the communications didn't mean they still couldn't sound the alarm to all the other security. Besides, they needed to take it as their primary post.

Before deploying for the mission, Ipos had looked at Isabella and said, "Consider this part of the plan a dry run for my later assignment."

She'd scowled in response.

But Isabella hadn't told anyone else about the odd feeling she had in her gut. She didn't know how to describe it, but there was a familiar darkness nearby, and she couldn't shake it.

Ipos reached the double doors of the watchtower and they opened by themselves. Obviously, no one was worried about the workers revolting and taking over. What exactly were they going to do, anyway? Attack the dark warriors with fusion cutters?

A single security officer sat at a desk near the steps, near an alarm switch. He glanced up from a holographic pad he'd been reading from and jerked to attention.

The warrior who'd just entered eyed him with dark eyes and a disproving look. The room felt like the temperature dropped ten degrees instantly and an evil air surrounded him.

The officer blinked, and that was the last thing he did before blacking out.

One of the two warriors secured him and stood at the base of the stairs as Ipos and the other ascended.

At the top of the tower, five warriors manned helms which pointed different directions, looking out the windows. They were on their feet before Ipos even appeared. They sensed the power of the warrior who'd entered the building and stood out of respect.

Ipos stepped into the middle of the room, frown on his face, malice emanating from him.

In a flash Ipos and the other warriors whipped out their lances.

The enemy never saw or sensed it coming. A heavy and oppressive weight of evil settled over the room and the only thing they wondered was if they'd done anything wrong. Then came the first flashes of lances, followed by nothing.

The accompanying Legionnaire warriors plopped down at one of the helms and set to work. They'd have help in another few minutes, once more teams entered the grounds.

They would surf through the transmission logs, reviewing the language used in communications between this site and other Seditonist generals and commanders.

They needed to know exactly what to say and how to say it if someone checked in for a status update. Last thing they wanted was to bring half the Seditonist army down on themselves.

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Meanwhile, in other parts of the site, the regular security forces were discreetly locked inside the barracks. They'd be dealt with later, and there was no use killing anyone unless they started the fight.

Isabella and the other squads had secured most of the immediate structures, except the hangars. They knew their time of secrecy was nearing an end though, they could tell by the steady tightening of their stomachs.

Dark warriors were sensing that something wasn't right and they were suspicious and on high alert.

The twilight had faded to total darkness, and the only light was provided by the lights in the hangers.

Isabella and her team were presently sneaking along the backside of a storage structure behind the center hangar.

A lone set of boots crunching on the gravel drew their attention to the corner ahead. The shadow of the dark warrior appeared before he did. A few strides later he stepped around the corner and stopped, eyes sweeping the surrounding blackness.

One of Isabella's warriors, who'd climbed onto the roof, jumped him. He'd just taken him down when Isabella saw a second shadow sprinting towards her warrior.

Strides before reaching him, the enemy was tackled from the side and the two went tumbling across the gravel.

The commotion in the darkness drew more attention with each passing second until finally they heard the ring of the first lance being engaged.

This was the cue for the second team of warriors who'd been waiting on the perimeter. They converged from all directions and within a minute the grounds of the construction site was filled with dueling lances and random bursts of rifle fire.

Isabella and a partner were busy fighting with a dark warrior. He was quick as he spun back and forth, whipping his lance just so to parry their strikes.

Isabella saw the opening she was waiting for as he turned from her to her companion. Ducking sideways to miss his blade, she struck him across the back.

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He was in the central hangar when the first sounds of a fight reached his ears. In a matter of minutes, Legionnaires were swarming the place.

He'd known something was wrong just before they'd appeared. Now he felt a familiar presence, one he recognized from the construction site on Darses...

And then she came into view, on the far side of the hangar near the two nearly completed warships. Blue, jade and crimson lances cut brightly through the air in the darkness behind her. The dark warrior's eyes narrowed as he walked towards her.

A sharp pain stabbed through Isabella's temple. Shaking her head, she searched the hangar as duels began between other Legionnaires and Seditonists commenced.

That's when she spotted him, a dark warrior near the center of hangar bay.

He glanced at the ground around him before returning his dark gaze to her.

"Just making sure you didn't leave any more mines for me, Isabella."

Recognition flashed across her face, and she snapped her fingers. "Right. We crossed blades on Darses. I feel a little put off that you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Sidon," replied the dark warrior with fine black scars on the right side of his face. "I've been looking forward to our next meeting these past few years."

Isabella gave her lance a twirl. "Sorry I can't say the same."

Sidon engaged his double-bladed lance. He leveled his hateful gaze on her as they slowly circled. Dueling warriors fought nearby, moving amongst the ships, flashes from their lances dancing off sleek fuselages and ringing across the hanger.

Isabella, expression taunting, tilted her head a little. “What’s the matter? Don’t think you can beat me with a single blade?”

Sidon wrinkled his nose and swung.

Isabella blocked the blade from the left, then the right before flipping sideways as the left blade cut under her. She landed and gave him a push that sent him off balance.

Her blade was already arching towards him as he squared himself up.

Lances nothing more than crimson and blue trails of light, they danced across the hangar floor, their strikes and blocks matched in strength and speed.

At last, Sidon parried with enough force to stop her forward momentum.

Isabella blocked the first strike and then the second as it whipped around for her core. An angry mental assault tried to latch onto her head. With effort, she slid her lance left and then right to parry the third and fourth swipes aimed at cutting her in half.

This gave her time to flip backwards away from him and shake off the mental attack. But Sidon was already driving for her, blade just missing her shoulder.

She gave him a push back.

He delivered a stunning kick to her stomach.

Isabella flew backwards, smacking and tumbling against the hard floor. She rolled into a crouch as sharp pain dug into her skull.

Grimacing, a heavy weight pressed against her shoulders and Isabella had to look away as she tried to drive back the attack. But she was aware Sidon was still advancing, coming for her.

With a grunt, she reached for him. The weight fell away, pain vanishing as her strike hit him and he went tumbling backwards.

Isabella stood, wiping blood from her nose. It was obvious he’d grown in power since their last meeting.

Excellent. The more difficult the challenge, the sweeter the victory.

Lance coming to her hand, she strode towards him as he sprang to his feet.

She swung her lance once and sprinted towards Sidon to close the distance. Bringing her blade in high, she landed the first strike, and they began the duel again with newfound speed.

They jogged across the hangar, lances mere trails of light, blades crackling with each meeting. They were on an intercept course with another dueling pair of warriors, and Sidon was at the disadvantage because he had his back to them.

Nearly to the other pair, Isabella delivered a quick one-two parry before kicking him in the gut.

Sidon slid backwards about a foot, nearly right between the two warriors. He ducked under the blades before flipping backwards.

Isabella ran forward and slid underneath them.

Just before landing, he and Isabella, still sliding, exchanged a swipe. She was going to send him a powerful strike, but he sensed and blocked it, stopping her momentum. When Sidon landed, Isabella found herself on the ground before him.

He brought one blade around, slamming it against Isabella's in a bright flash. He had the weight advantage and pressed down on her.

It had been a long time since she'd felt this much hate and contempt from an enemy.

The air around them hummed and electricity snapped between their lances.

Sidon was nearly on his knees now, leaning hard.

Isabella kicked the inside of his knee, dropping him. She shoved him to the side and rolled away, but caught an edge of his lance down her back, blade cutting right through her armor.

Growling in pain, Isabella pivoted at her hips and twisted around to face him. With a quick downward flick of the wrist, she severed the hilt of his double lance, breaking them.

They rolled away from one another and leapt to their feet. Sidon glanced around, spotting the body of a fallen comrade. The lance flew to his hand.

Isabella hit him with a powerful blow.

He shielded himself from the brunt of the strike, but it still sent his boots sliding backwards and shafts of pain down his arms.

She came in fast.

They swapped a few strikes before he flipped backwards. He landed in a crouch and his blade locked with Isabella's for a second before he swung.

Now Sidon had her backing up.

She blocked his first swipe from the left, then the second from the right before bending to miss the stab to her stomach. Putting her hand down, she kicked her legs over backwards. When she rose, she brought her lance up fast, deflecting Sidon's weapon with a flash.

Isabella threw her elbow into his face in a quick, sharp movement. It snapped his head back and to the side, but there was no missing the rage that burned in his eyes before he flipped back again.

Sidon brought the lance across in a low strike, forcing Isabella to jump. She was in the air when she blocked the next blow from the blade. But she wasn't anticipating the incredible power from the crimson strike he hit her with not half a second later.

There was a lot of anger and tremendous hatred behind it. It punched the oxygen clean from Isabella's lungs and sent volts of pain rippling through her body.

She struck the floor hard, barely able to move, edges of her vision darkening,

Isabella rolled onto her side and instinctively struck behind her to deflect his swipe. She was able to get to her knees before the next one came.

Sidon leaned over her, his malice and rage adding to his might. Darkness, evil, pressed in on her mind as a weight pushed against her ribs, slowly suffocating her. Excruciating pain shot through her arms and stabbed at her head.

Jaw set, Isabella met his gaze. There was no fear in her eyes, only dogged determination, and something else. Something Sidon hated with every ounce of his being.

A fresh burst of fury ripped through him and he drove down harder.

Accept defeat, he thought to her, their faces close, *you cannot win this time*.

Isabella had to drop her head a second to gather her remaining strength.

The splitting headache was beyond words, but still she wasn't afraid. Heat churned in her chest and raced through her, the fire of battle igniting in her soul.

When she met Sidon's gaze again, he wrinkled his nose in disgust at what he saw.

Her hazel eyes had lightened as a brightness that had nothing to do with natural light flickered in them. A faint glow seemed to come from her very being.

Never, she replied.

Then Isabella grabbed onto the edge of the crimson lance.

Pale yellow flames snapped around the enemy's blade and what felt like fire burned Sidon's hands. He gave a mighty growl as he backed away, ripping his lance from her grasp.

Isabella pushed herself to her feet, a single purpose set in her expression.

Sidon swung first.

Isabella merely stepped aside. The second one she swatted away and the third she met with a tremendous swing.

It sent terrible pain shooting through his arms, as did the second blow, and the third. Pain rippled through his head and Sidon staggered a step. Every one of her swings seemed to take his strength away.

He was nearly down to his knees when he threw an invisible strike at her.

It vanished before reaching Isabella as she continued to push him back. She was striking at full speed now, leaving him barely able to keep up.

With one final swing, Sidon lost his lance.

A devastating punch landed in his jaw, sending volts of pain through his head. Isabella went with the momentum and turned, landing a solid kick in his chest.

It slammed Sidon to the floor. He did not have the physical strength to try and get up again. He lay there, covered with sweat, panting and fuming as he glared up at her.

Isabella stood over him with a displeased expression on her face. Blood ran from her nose again and from her left hand, but she didn't seem to notice.

A gleam caught her eye and the faintest smile tugged at her mouth. She twirled her lance once, blade resonating with a low hum as it cut through the air.

They shared a long look...before she delivered the final strike.

Ipos appeared at the end of the hangar and spotted Isabella.

She stood looking down at an enemy she'd fallen. When she raised her gaze and looked at him, there was no missing the light in her intense gaze, nor the glow that came from her.

Ah, the consuming heat and joy of battle.

Turning, Isabella locked onto the next dark warrior and advanced. She was in full battle mode, when a Legionnaire was totally consumed by the zeal and fire of war. Impossible strength not their own burned through them and they could not be defeated as their foes wavered before them.

Isabella would fall many more warriors that night.

When all was said and done, the dark warriors were dead, local security officers detained and the workers freed.

Once it was safe to do so, those who wished to return to their home planets could. However, to the Legionnaires relief and gratitude, a number of them stayed on. The warriors needed the black battleships completed for the biggest move against the Seditonists, to come later.

Most everyone except those on the first watch turned in. A large number of reinforcements would be coming in the next few days to relieve them.

Isabella stood on a catwalk along the front of the central hangar, giving her a great view of the rest of the compound, the airstrip and forest beyond it.

The wound to her back was already healing, as was her hand, though she'd likely have scars. But that was okay. Wounds like these were worn with pride by warriors.

Lifting her chin a little, she took a deep breath of the cool night air bringing the scent of evergreens.

Movement to the right caught Isabella's attention. She didn't need to see the face to know, and sense, it was Ipos.

Darkness that had nothing to do with the moonless night shrouded him. But it didn't alarm her because it was normal with him.

Nice work, he thought to her as he stood twenty feet away.

Likewise, she replied, *when are you leaving?*

Tomorrow or the following day...after we all get some rest.

Isabella nodded, though she knew he couldn't see it.

Being immersed in darkness while behind enemy lines required heavy prayer in preparation.

Before she could voice her dislike for the idea, Ipos thought, *this will likely be the most difficult thing I've ever done, but knowing that you'd pass through the fire yourself to pull me out will be what keeps me right.*

Isabella grimaced. She hated it when people said things like that to her, because it added more pressure to make sure no one died. It also awoke a small twinge of fear, fear at failing to be able to come to their aid.

Ipos sensed her struggle.

She heard his deep chuckle before he thought, *I never said you had to do it. In fact, I wish you wouldn't. If things go badly...*

Isabella snorted softly. *I've never left a friend behind. Like I'm going to start now because you say I should?*

There was that laugh again, rumbling in his chest. *That's the warrior I've come to admire and respect. Good night...Isabella.*

Good night, general.

Ipos moved off into the darkness and Isabella decided she could really use a drink.

The only time Ipos was in an almost-jovial state was when he was about to do something incredibly risky.

Chapter 97

Into Darkness

Legionnaire forces in the Ulnun System converged and struck Seditonist strongholds on the planets of Delta and Surgese. The battles ran into the night, but the enemy was routed and chased from both planets.

Though the people had been liberated, squads of Legionnaires remained, with rotating units, just in case the enemy returned.

In the meantime, a Legionnaire warship passed through the shipping lanes between the Ulnun and Kerst Systems. As they hoped, the pair of Seditonist battleships near Miraz turned and gave way to the chase. Now they would just have to keep them busy until other Legionnaire generals struck Miraz.

Cadence, who'd fought in the Delta assault, stood looking out one of the many windows running down the exterior wall of the ship. She and Justin were still working on weapons modifications, something that could more easily penetrate Seditonist shields. But right now her head was aching from crunching numbers and needed a break.

They were passing an enormous red nebula with columns of gas billowing all around it like thick columns of smoke. As she gazed at it, Cadence's mind drifted, processing recent events.

General Ipos was gone. After helping take a Seditonist warship construction site, he'd vanished the following day. Like everyone else, she didn't like this plan, and it troubled her. But there wasn't a whole lot she could do about it.

Cadence was mildly surprised at how large a void he'd left. Though he was indeed dark, and honestly quite dangerous, that was perhaps what she liked about him. Her great respect for him had only grown.

Plus, she and Ipos shared a unique understanding. They were both distinctively aware of the pull, the enticement, of darkness. It had quickly formed a strong sense of comradeship between them. There was something particularly alluring about darkness, the incredible power that came when they focused on their rising malice and unjustified wrath.

Feeling emotions such as anger was a natural part of being human. But it was when one let it fester and grow into something darker that there was a high potential of doing something one shouldn't.

Cadence stirred from her thoughts, realizing there were two someones standing beside her.

Red stood on her right, Judge to her left, muscled arms folded across their broad chests as they gazed out the windows. They were a head and shoulders tall than her and Cadence felt very small standing between them.

No one said anything. There wasn't anything to say.

Cadence knew the last time Judge and Red had been on Miraz, they'd lost three of their brothers.

Well, they're not losing this time, thought Cadence to herself, *not if I can help it.*

The two warriors must have noticed when the look of determination set itself on her face, because when she shot another look at them, there was a twinkle in their eyes.

A little smile played onto their faces as they each slapped a hand on her shoulder, jarring her.

A smile spread across her face as Cadence looked from Judge to Red and clasped their shoulders.

What an honor it will be, she thought to herself, *to fight beside warriors such as these.*

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He walked down the dim corridor, the dark floors and walls absorbing the light. Lesser warriors gave him a wide berth, standing off to the side as he passed, and able commanders acknowledged him with a respectful nod.

This was a dark warrior who'd shown up from beyond the outer planets, from somewhere in the massive Orlov Cloud, north of the Jutland System and Planet Exodus. He called himself Zephyr, and that was all anyone knew about him.

Except that he was aware of Legionnaire plans and likely future movements, thanks to his abilities to extract information from enemy prisoners.

The only other thing they knew was that he was a large warrior who walked with the silence of a shadow. Head shaved, features sharp, he wore no expression except a slight scowl on his face. His slate colored, gold crescent eyes drilled through every being he laid his gaze upon.

In actuality this was Ipos. In a matter of two days, he'd traversed from one Seditonist-held planet to another, picking up the trail of several dark generals.

Unfortunately, he'd been unable to locate Zair thus far.

Stopping at the lifts, Ipos slowly rolled his neck and took a deep breath.

The darkness wasn't nearly as bad as he remembered it being. Perhaps it was because it was familiar, in its own way, and it was comfortable. It was like an acquaintance welcoming him back.

Taking another breath, he closed his eyes. The evil that surrounded him was so thick he could feel it, awakening his senses, filling his very being.

The door opened and he stepped into the lift. There were two other warriors waiting for it also, but they decided to wait for another. It felt oddly crowded as it was.

Ipos took the lift to the main level, which put him just down the hall from the bridge. Heading for the double doors, the shadow that shrouded him choked out the light in the hall even more.

When he stepped onto the bridge, everyone straightened and snapped to attention.

"Commander Zephyr," said the dark warrior in charge as he approached, extending his hand.

Ipos took it. "Commander Argus."

"What can we do for you?"

"As you know I've been tracking Legionnaire movements," replied Ipos, "and I have reliable information the enemy will be making a move for Miraz very soon."

Argus raised his eyebrows. "Reliable?"

A dark smile twisted onto Ipos' face. "A Legionnaire commander himself told me."

A devious light flickered in the commander's eyes. "Interrogation?"

Ipos gave a tilt of his head. "While I pride myself on successful interrogations, in this instance the commander thought he was talking with a friend. You don't always have to get what you want through force...sometimes it just takes a powerful illusion."

Argus gave a single, slow nod. "Operating from within enemy ranks..."

Ipos drilled him with his eyes. "It's difficult to stay hidden for more than a few days, otherwise they get suspicious. But if you've maintained contact at regular intervals..."

"You establish credibility."

"Anyway," continued Ipos, getting back on track, "as you know, our generals have been difficult to keep track of these days, and I need to get this information to them quickly."

Argus nodded, growing uncomfortable now under this warrior's gaze.

"Pull up the channels on monitor two," he ordered an officer at a helm to the right.

On a large screen, a map of both the Ulnun and Kerst Systems appeared. Different colored lines trailed from one planet to another, and upon closer inspection Ipos saw they marked the paths of Seditonist generals.

It appeared Bayne, Cyrus and two other generals he didn't know, Jett and Najiv, were all on Miraz right now. That was going to be exciting for the Legionnaires.

Ammon was cutting across Ulnun, but there was no sign of Zair on here. Either he wasn't in either system or...

"I would have expected the dark lord to be flaunting his presence," said Ipos.

"Mm," replied Argus, folding his arms, "he prefers to come out of nowhere. Likes the shock-and-awe factor. Besides, he has Kiera to do his bidding, and she's proven she's more than able."

The commander glanced at his officer, "Send a message to all the generals Miraz should be expecting a major enemy assault any day."

"Yes, sir..."

"I've been in deep cover the past few years," said Ipos, "last I heard Hadrian was the dark one's trainee."

"Oh, he was. But after he was strong enough, he was Kiera's recruiter and trainer. He prefers the commander status though, otherwise he'd be a general by now."

Ipos considered this a moment before Argus looked at him. "Speaking of your interrogation skills, we picked up a courier, enemy intelligence officer just yesterday. He hasn't been very helpful and we can't tell how much he knows, if anything. Perhaps we could...utilize your skills before you leave."

Ipos glanced at the time on one of the monitors. "I have a few minutes."

Argus led him off the bridge and down several hallways. A pair of sentries stood outside the room, eyes flicking to Ipos a second before returning straight ahead.

They stepped into the interrogation room and, secured to a mostly reclined table, was the intelligence officer. He looked like he'd been worked over pretty good, face and arms bruised and cut. Dried blood marked various areas of his shirt.

Ipos glanced at the floor as he walked over to the table. It was surprisingly clean and the room smelled of disinfectant.

As he reached the small tablet hanging from the head of the table, he said, "You keep it clean, that's a plus. Some don't understand how hazardous it can be to leave blood on the floor..."

Argus gave a dip of his head. "We've also kept a log of the techniques we've tried already."

Ipos scanned through the holographic list. After a couple seconds he glanced down at the captive. "You're a stubborn one for not being a Legionnaire."

But he knew that's exactly what this man was, sensed it. He was a warrior, but thus far had been able to hide it from his captors.

"As an intelligence officer," he continued, stepping beside the man, "you must know quite a bit about us, and we're all curious about your operations and how you're obtaining your information."

"Just a courier," answered the man through a clenched jaw.

Ipos frowned and shrugged off his coat, revealing powerful arms.

"You know, one of the problems with Legionnaires," he said, "is that they don't desensitize the people they recruit."

Setting his elbows on the edge of the table, he leaned forward, steel eyes studying his subject. "Nor do they tell the whole truth about...how much interrogation by the enemy can hurt."

Argus and the two warriors in the corners eyed this menacing man, eyes catching the edges of scars on the back of his neck that disappeared under his shirt and armor.

"They say that we're deceptive," said Ipos, straightening, "but if you think about it, so are they. Pain is a natural part of life, and in war there's always a chance you'll get caught by the enemy..."

His potent steel eyes settled on the man in a dark glare, "You all start off the same, with delusions of gallant endurance in which you resist even the most excruciating torture. But in reality, the body can only take so much, and the spirit can only hold out for so long...before it breaks..."

Invisible weight punched the air right out of the man's lungs and was followed seconds later by shafts of pain ripping through his veins.

The first screams came seconds after that.

Ipos closed his eyes and lifted his chin a moment. The shadows in the room grew darker and an oppressive presence settled over the chamber and slowly became heavier.

Not hours after Ipos had left Legionnaire company on Miltara, the old shadows that had followed and tempted him nearly all his life had returned.

It was a necessary evil to invite them to return to his side, and they were only so elated to oblige. Terrible darkness that haunted his dreams from a previous, treacherous path from earlier in his life returned to him also.

Now it bent under his malicious will and tormented whomever he desired.

Releasing the captive from the mental assault, Ipos returned his gaze to him. Sinister expression in his eyes, he grasped the man by the shoulder.

It was a guttural cry of anguish this time.

Argus and the others watched in awe, and mild fear, as the veins in the man's right arm turned from blue to black. It slowly reached down the arm and when it got just past his elbow, Ipos removed his hand.

More interestingly still, as Ipos moved to his head, they saw older wounds had reopened and begun to bleed again. Sweat drenched the man's shirt as he panted for air. The weight still hadn't been removed from his chest.

Ipos looked down at him. "Are you going to cooperate?"

The captive said nothing.

Ipos brought his hands up, on either side of his head.

"I don't know anything, I swear," said the man, "I don't know anything."

There was no missing the plea in his voice, or the request for mercy in his eyes.

But Ipos felt nothing towards him, only the edges of contempt and disgust pushing into the recesses of his soul.

"Wrong answer," he growled.

Index and middle fingers together, Ipos touched them against the captive's temples.

There was no scream this time, only a gasp as he fell into half-consciousness.

This was a trick Ipos learned from his old days in darkness, a type of mind regression. But one had to be able to overpower the victim...which wasn't usually difficult for him to do.

After another few seconds, he clicked his tongue in disgust and opened his eyes, releasing the man on the table from his grasp.

“Everything he knows about the Legionnaires is old news,” continued the general, eyes on the captive, “he’s been at the Helda Station the past two weeks compiling reports, not out in the field.”

Disgust settled on Ipos’ face. That second statement was actually a lie. This warrior did know very sensitive information about Legionnaire movements and which planets they were going to hit next. He also knew where Zair had last been seen.

But those in his presence didn’t need to know any of that.

A stab of anger ripped through Ipos as he glared at the warrior. There was a sickening crack as one, then two of his ribs broke, snapped like twigs.

The man groaned and coughed against the pain.

“Shame you knew so little,” he grumbled, walking towards the door.

His coat drifted to his hand and he shrugged it back on. Turning, he snatched a sidearm from the holster of one of the dark warrior’s and shot the captive three times through the left side of his chest.

Before Argus could say anything Ipos hit him with a fierce look. “He knew nothing else. Unless you wish to question me...”

The commander cringed a little under his glare and the weight that pushed against his chest and shoulders.

“No, not at all, commander.”

“Besides,” said Ipos, glancing over his shoulder at the dead captive, “did you want your men working...or playing?”

Argus gave a nod of his head.

Ipos strode from the room.

After ordering his men to clean up the mess, he joined Ipos’ side.

He’d killed the poor soul as an act of mercy, but also to remove the risk of him divulging sensitive information.

Plus, he couldn’t help but feel aggravation at the captive’s stubbornness, as backwards as that was. Ipos was aware a shadow was slowly sinking its fingers into his mind...and still, it didn’t bother him.

“I appreciate your accommodation on this fine vessel,” said Ipos, rounding the corner.

“Any time, commander,” replied Argus, though Ipos sensed some relief that he was departing so soon.

Argus stopped when they reached one of the lifts and Ipos stepped inside. “Off to do more intelligence gathering?”

“Perhaps, though I may stop in to visit Legionnaire reinforcements on Baher,” answered Ipos, a dark gleam in his eye, “I’m in the mood for a little carnage.”

The door of the lift closed and took him down to base level, where the hangars were.

When Ipos had told Argus he was headed to Baher, he'd lied then too. In actuality, he was now hot on the trail of Zair, who'd last stopped on Denton, just south of Miraz. The intelligence officer whom he'd killed knew the projected route would take Zair to Triton.

That one, small planet was the ultimate Seditonist stronghold in the entire Kerst System.

However, the local captives had been giving the enemy problems, rebelling, sabotaging vehicles, things of that nature. A visit by Zair would put all that nonsense to a rest...likely because he'd just slaughter everyone.

If Ipos could get there in time, he might be able to plant a tracking device on the cruiser, assuming Zair used that ship as primary transport.

Otherwise Ipos would have to shadow him everywhere he went.

That idea didn't unnerve or frighten him, either. He didn't think one way or the other about it.

Taking a breath, he exited the lift when it stopped. Darkness lightly rested on his shoulders, evil thick in the air around him. He was fully aware of various thoughts of killing and maiming the enemy that filled his head. And he was aware he was completely comfortable with it.

It was at that point that Ipos knew his transition back into darkness was now complete.

Chapter 98

Seditonist Warship

Cadence practically had to jog to keep up with Ronain and Justin. The entire battleship was a bustle of activity as they neared Miraz.

"One of the warships lured away by our cruisers is turning back for Miraz," explained Ronain as they ducked around a corner.

"Since you've been one of the masterminds behind our weapons modifications, the other generals and I would like you to lead a fleet of fighters to intercept the Seditonist ship before it even gets close to us. We have to have already established supremacy in the air and on the ground before we can think about taking on a warship over Miraz."

"But..."

"You and three dozen other light fighters will escort two medium cruisers to intercept."

Cadence tripped.

“Wait, we’re supposed to keep a battleship at bay with only two medium cruisers and a couple dozen light fighters?” she asked, unable to keep the incredulity from her voice.

Justin glanced back at her. “The models we’ve run show one hundred percent success with the upgrades.”

“But they haven’t been tested in real life,” she countered.

They stopped near one of the entrances to the hangars.

“Cadence,” said Justin, “the last calculations you made were spot on. I have faith they’ll work.”

Yeah, she thought, or we’ll just blow ourselves up when there’s a malfunction.

“Have a little faith in your abilities,” added Ronain with a reassuring nod.

They entered the hangar of the battleship and there lined in rows were dozens of the sleek stealth fighters. It did make Cadence smile a little.

Warriors were already grouped near their assigned fighters. In passing some nodded, others offered a little salute to Cadence, addressing her as “commander.”

How long does that take to get used to, she asked Ronain.

He smiled. *Oh...a few years.*

Ronain and Justin led her to a vessel in the front row, where Tucker and Hailey were waiting.

“Commander,” said Tucker with a nod, “this one’s yours.”

Cadence looked at the ship he was referring to. She cleared her throat a little and tried to hide her smile. Someone had taken an artistic touch to the nose of her fighter.

“Nice,” she said, “shark teeth?”

“Though she be little, she is fierce,” grinned Hailey.

The warriors close enough to hear didn’t bother trying to contain their laughter.

Yeah, thought Tucker, touching his sternum, wouldn’t I know it.

Cadence managed to contain most of her mirth.

“Well, thank you,” she tilted her head towards Hailey, “I appreciate it.”

Hailey looked quite pleased with herself and then smiled smugly at her brother.

“Uh, have you both been briefed by General Chad?” asked Cadence.

Hailey and Tucker nodded.

“Affirmative,” replied Hailey, “we’ll rendezvous with you once you reach the surface.”

“See you then.”

Hailey, still smiling, saluted Cadence before turning and skipping away a couple steps. Tucker also saluted her and then followed after his sister.

“Oh and hey!” called Cadence, half turning, “Leave some dark warriors for me!”

Tucker laughed. “No promises, commander!”

“Yeah, yeah,” smiled Cadence before turning and walking around her ship towards the large group of warriors.

She gave them a few last minute updates on the plan, and then they climbed into the cockpits of their fighters. In spite herself, she laughed again when she glanced at the nose of her plane.

Plopping down into the seat, she harnessed herself in and slid on her headset.

“Alright, I hope you fly as nice as you look,” she muttered to the ship.

Once everyone was set, the hangar doors opened. As they engaged the engines, Cadence smiled. The engines hummed and rumbled deeply, telling her they had torque. Or as she used to put it, “had some muscle.”

“I haven’t even gotten you out of the hangar,” she said, throwing a few switches, “and I like you already.”

Ω Ω Ω

The descent to the surface of Miraz was an exciting ride. While their battleship took out the heavy air defenses, the medium cruisers and light fighters encountered enemy fighters, turrets and ground-to-air missiles.

The ships Ronain, Necro, and Arthos and his squad were on had some close scrapes with inbound enemy fighters. Fortunately, the pilots of the light fighters escorting them were on top of their game and either shot down the enemy or led them on a chase.

They landed at a temporary post on the southwestern edge of the city of Hesna, the primary stronghold on the planet.

Arthos cut straight east with his warriors. General Chad had fully recovered and couldn’t stand the thought of staying in orbit. He accompanied Arthos’ squad.

They ran down the street, heading for a contested outpost. The idea was to hold a line on the south and eastern edges of the city and drive northwest, towards headquarters.

The local underground forces were still being told to hold until backup was closer. Judging by Commander Scott’s tone, though, he and the others were getting antsy.

A couple blocks east, the contested area came into view. Not slowing their pace, they advanced. Half the squad broke up and turned left so they could approach from two points.

Coming in fast, they struck the enemy convoy from the side.

Lights stopped just long enough to kneel and take out the tank with a rocket launcher. Scout took out the officer manning the machine gun before Briggs destroyed it with a well-thrown sticky mine.

Like a well-oiled machine, thought Arthos.

They nodded to the friendly forces entering the building to the right across the street.

Turning down the road, they saw a line of enemy soldiers advancing their direction, likely backup for the tank that was now afire.

Arthos, Lights, Fritz, Briggs, and Scout were seconds from engaging when an invisible force struck the enemy from behind, flattening them.

Chad, Judge and Red appeared at the far end of the road.

Arthos and the others were only mildly disappointed as the group reformed and they cut north.

But there'd be plenty of opportunities for combat deeper in the city.

Ω Ω Ω

In space, the new light fighters, all cloaked, were escorting the medium cruisers. The Seditonist battleship was in view, though difficult to see because the blackness of the universe behind it helped conceal it.

“Okay, you all know the drill,” said Cadence, hand on the steering column, “eyes up, stay sharp...let’s blow this thing and get back to Miraz.”

Most of the cloaked fighters broke off from the medium cruisers. Some drifted wide and circled around, coming from either side of the enemy ships. Others flew past so they could come from behind.

Cadence stayed with the cruisers. Tapping a few commands into the control panel in front of her, she took a breath. Every weapon had received some kind of modification or upgrade. They just hadn’t been tested.

Oh please let them at least work, she prayed.

This could be disastrous. Upgrade the weapons only to find that there was a problem in the electrical system and nothing worked except thrusters.

“Bombers, engage at your leisure.”

“Copy, commander.”

Cadence pulled a loop and settled behind the pair of ships.

By now the warship had spotted the medium cruisers. They fired off a couple shots, but the pilots maneuvered to avoid them.

Then they opened up more speed and rocketed towards the enemy ship, approaching the bow from the left and right.

“All other units, it’s time to see what our fighters can do.”

The squads coming from the left and right uncloaked and unleashed a barrage of fire, pummeling the side of the cruiser as they passed over and underneath it.

This provided just enough a distraction for the medium cruisers to make their pass. Running the length of the battleship, they laid down dozens of mines before cutting away.

The explosions popped loudly in space, setting off bright little explosions. The heavy shields rippled madly before resetting. By now the second wave of fighters arrived and made a pass

“Their hangars are opening,” reported one of the pilots, *“looks like we’re going to have some company. Bravo team on me. We’ll hit them as they come out.”*

Cadence armed one of the heavier rockets and launched it right at the main bridge as she scraped over it. The missile collided with a brilliant flash and shorted out the shields a few seconds later.

The others, including the medium cruisers, instantly picked up on it and pulled around for a mass run.

Yanking the controls to the side, Cadence sent her fighter dropping down towards the base of the ship. Gunning the throttle, she smashed right through an enemy fighter as it exited the hangar.

Circling around, she watched Bravo team make a pass along the hangers, hitting the enemy before they had much of a chance. That’s when an idea formed.

Light fighters took out the rockets from the battleship and the medium cruisers dodged around the second wave. Swooping in, the cruisers, along with a number of fighters, let loose a string of rockets.

The mass of weapons hit, overwhelming the shields and temporarily disabling them.

“Shields are down! Go, go, go!”

They converged on the warship, with one group breaking off to engage the enemy fighters still trying to exit the hangers.

Cadence swung around and followed them. Those who made it out of the hangar gave way to chasing the Legionnaire fighters.

There were still too many enemy coming from the bay, so Cadence pulled around, flying close to the battleship. She picked off three enemy fighters in front of her before barrel rolling away as a fourth pulled in behind her.

To test his resolve, she roared through the middle of the battlefield, thick with warring planes. Passing dangerously close to both friend and foe, Cadence's follower didn't keep to her exact path as he dodged around other fighters, but he wasn't going to just give up.

Yanking back, she sent her fighter over backwards as she rolled over the enemy fighter, nearly clipping him. Engaging the thrusters, and pulling some serious G's, she whipped around behind the fighter and gunned him down.

Another fighter approached from right overhead.

Cadence sent her ship into a vertical climb, right for him. Before he had time to consider this, she gave him a taste of the front cannons.

Roaring out of the flames and debris, she shot back towards the Seditonist ship.

"Cruisers, what's your status?" she asked, arming some mines.

"Making the main run in thirty."

"Copy that."

Passing through the chaotic scene of fighters, Cadence ducked out of the path of one pair before spinning out of the way of another. She shot down an enemy ship before clipping another, taking off one of its wings.

In her peripheral she saw the medium cruisers lining up for their run. Now they'd find out just how effective their upgraded "bunker busting" rockets worked.

Turning upside down, she passed just under the belly of the battleship, but not before releasing half a dozen mines directly into the hangar.

Cadence opened up her fighter full throttle to put as much space as possible between herself and the ship. Rejoining a squad of friendly fighters, they circled around to watch.

The medium cruisers roared in from the bow, following the route of their first flight path. They pummeled the warship at full speed, passing along either side of the vessel before breaking away and getting out of there.

Each rocket struck, resulting in magnificent explosions that ripped off massive chunks of the ship. By the time the missiles reached the rear of the ship, the mines in the hangar detonated.

The combination effect was enormous explosions of flames and debris, the force completely tearing the Seditonist battleship apart.

"Whoo!" exclaimed Cadence, giving her fist a pump while silently thinking, *Thank you, God, that it worked.*

"Delta leader," she said, breaking formation, "I leave the squad in your command. I'm heading back to Miraz."

"Be careful down there, commander," replied the captain from one of the medium cruisers, *"there's still plenty of air defenses active on the surface."*

“Copy that,” she answered, throwing a few switches, “and nice work everyone.”

Cadence sent her fighter into hyperspace. It would only take ten minutes to reach the orbit of Miraz, and then it was game on for part two of the fight.

Looking over the cockpit, listening to the engine rumbling as it idled along, she gave the helm a loving pat and thought, *I could get attached to this thing.*

Ω Ω Ω

Arthos, Chad and the unit were pinned down not half a block from Seditonist headquarters. A massive line of machinegun nests had been built on the other side of the road.

At least their tanks had been taken care of. It was unlikely reinforcements would be arriving anytime soon because the heart of the city was surrounded by Legionnaire forces.

As Arthos stood behind the corner of the building currently being assaulted by hundreds of rounds, he figured they could use a little air support. But their fighters were being kept busy. If they weren't engaging enemy aircraft, they were trying to avoid the ground-to-air missiles.

A mortar shell struck the building, making the wall at Arthos' back shake violently. Dust settled over him and his men.

“Any ideas, commander!” called Fritz over the noise of battle. A pair of planes roared overhead.

Arthos peeked around the corner again before ducking out of sight. “We have to wait until one of the other squads comes from behind!”

Once they got behind this defensive line, the going would be much easier. The security in the grounds itself wouldn't be as heavy, and then they could finally get into some real combat.

Another rocket struck the building, sending rubble on the warriors. It would have buried them if they hadn't shielded themselves.

Briggs, glare on his face, jaw set, stepped out of the alley with a recently acquired rocket launcher and fired. The missile passed through the narrow opening and right into one of the machine gun nests.

He backed around the corner as the explosion lit the street.

Looking from Arthos to Chad, he said, “I *hate* waiting!”

Ω Ω Ω

Cadence's fighter slid through the atmosphere of Miraz, towards the city of Hesna.

Even from this high up, she could see the thick plumes of smoke rising from bombed-out buildings. Forces were pushing towards the heart of the city now, from all sides. But she also noticed the dog fights.

“General Chad, I’m on approach to Hesna,” said Cadence, keeping an eye on an approaching enemy fighter, “what’s your approximate location?”

“*Cadence!*” came Chad's voice through her com, “*We’re at the southeast quadrant of the city center, pinned down by a line of turrets.*”

“Keep your heads down. I’ll make a run on my final approach,” she replied, veering right as the enemy engaged her.

“*Be careful! Their air defenses are still operational...*”

“Don’t worry, they won’t get a clear shot. Besides, these new shields are pretty strong.”

“*Cadence...*”

“Sir, just keep your head down and don’t worry.”

She ended the transmission.

Reversing thrusters, her ship slid vertical and backwards, just missing her follower. When she got going again, he was already rolling away.

They engaged in a bit of a game of hide-and-seek, rolling and looping around each other through the clouds. They finally broke through the cloud cover barely five thousand feet over the city.

Cadence slammed the thrusters into reverse again and the enemy fighter rocketed past her. Pulling up, she vanished back into the clouds.

Watching him on radar, he drifted to the right, and then left before deciding to circle around to look for her. He was reaching the peak of his arch when Cadence shot out of the clouds, striking him when the belly of his plane was exposed.

She dropped sharply towards the city, the buildings growing larger, streets wider. At her one o’clock was the headquarters building, and it seemed the entire block was still locked down tight by the enemy.

As she passed along one of the streets running North-South, Cadence plinked a couple tanks and machine gun nests with the front cannons. She went wide before pulling right, to check out the southern street.

That’s when a pair of planes drifted into her view: a Seditonist fighter was on the tail of a friendly ship. But that pursuit only lasted a few more seconds before Cadence took out the enemy jet.

Moments later, she spotted the line of machinegun nests that created an arch across the intersection of the road.

The onboard computer beeped a warning at her. Glancing at one of the monitors, she saw an anti-aircraft post was positioned on the backside of the nests. *Figures*, she thought.

Cadence went vertical to avoid the first missile and that's when another enemy fighter came at her, nearly scraping her as he passed from the right.

By now, more missiles from the surface were en route. Tilting her head back to look for the enemy, she saw he was almost to her.

Cadence gave just a light pull on the stick. She passed over him as one of the rockets struck the enemy fighter dead center.

"Computer, shift all primary shields to the bow," she said, "and arm one mine."

Spinning back around, Cadence nose-dived back toward the street, coming in behind the machinegun nests.

Several anti-aircraft rockets struck the bow, but the shields held and dispersed the force of the blasts. She returned the favor, unleashing a string of fire.

The shots destroyed one of the big guns and sent shafts of dirt, concrete and metal dozens of feet into the air. She was coming in hot, but that was to keep any other nearby guns from locking onto her.

Pulling up at the last possible second, she released the mine, which latched itself perfectly at the base of the nests.

These were designed to take on battleships, so one would be more than enough. Due to the proximity of the Legionnaire squads, overkill wasn't a very good idea at the moment.

The fighter roared down the street, right over the building Arthos and Chad were hiding behind.

"Set primary shields at default settings," she ordered the computer.

That's when she saw the enemy fighter from her left. With a hard yank of the controls, she sent her plane up over the buildings. She slammed smack into him and sent the fighter into a nearby structure where it erupted into a ball of flames and thick smoke.

Simultaneously, the mine behind the machinegun nests detonated. It totally obliterated the nests, the building to its right, as well as the perimeter fence behind it. It also left an enormous crater and blew out every window in a two block radius.

Just before she circled out of view, she saw Arthos and the others breaking from cover and advancing down the now clear street.

Cadence came from the north. A mobile enemy squad was advancing towards the intersection that used to hold the machineguns. There was just enough room to fit and she dropped in behind them over the street.

The fighter hovered inches over the street, shields damaging the tank before the stomach of the plane flattened it completely.

It finally set down and was sliding into the intersection when Cadence leapt out, flipping off the side and striking down one of the remaining enemy soldiers as she landed.

The squad jogged up and paused to take in the scene.

Cadence gave them a sharp salute.

“Well,” she said, eyes snapping with fire, “are we going to get a move on?”

Judge chuckled, and Red grinned.

Chad and Arthos both merely gave a little shake of their heads before jogging onto the grounds of the headquarters.

Chapter 99

Battle for Miraz

Several big names in the Seditonist ranks were present in Hesna. Generals Bayne and Cyrus watched Arthos' squad enter the grounds, the first Legionnaires to do so. They also gazed intently at Cadence and had seen her little stunt.

Perpetual glares on their faces, they turned and exited the room, flanked by two other generals.

If the Legionnaires thought they had them surrounded and on the run, they were sorely mistaken. The buildings in these four blocks were one big Seditonist stronghold. Crawling with snipers, gunners, dark warriors and commanders, the real fight was just about to begin.

Most of the other commanders had been positioned along the three other sides of the block. These four generals had an appointment to meet with Cadence.

Bayne threw his companion a sharp look. *Don't get too carried away*, he thought to him. *Keep in mind Zair's orders.*

Cyrus merely rolled his eyes.

Yes, yes, I'll remember, he gave Bayne a darkly mischievous smile, *and I may even leave a couple Legionnaires alive for you on the battlefield.*



They divided into two groups and were set to enter the first structure. The sounds of explosions had mostly quieted, though a few turrets whirred occasionally, followed by the sound of rapid weapons fire.

Legionnaire forces were pressing in on the Seditonist headquarters, but they knew the real fight was about to get started. There was a tremendous gathering of evil here. The fact they'd retaken the rest of the city was a minor detail; the majority of enemy forces were here.

“Units are ready to breach from the roof,” reported one of the commanders. It was agreed coming up from the ground floor and down from the roof simultaneously would be an efficient way to quickly clear buildings. So long as they didn't end up shooting each other.

Chad and Necro looked at one another. They exchanged a nod before Chad said, “All teams at the southeast structure are a go.”

Chad and Necro, followed by Cadence, Hailey and several of Arthos' warriors entered through the double doors at the back of the building. Weapons raised, they walked stealthily into the hall. Main power had long been knocked out, so the only light came from lights in the ceiling via emergency power.

Because they were at a rear corner, the hall continued straight and also ran to their immediate right. Since they'd already studied the schematics of the buildings that made up enemy headquarters, they had a plan in place.

Chad, Cadence, Hailey, Judge, and Fritz turned right, breaking away from the others. A few dozen feet ahead was another main hall on the left. After making sure the path was clear, they took the passage.

It led them deeper into the building, towards the main entrance where the lobby was situated. This hall was darker than the one that ran the perimeter. As they moved quickly and quietly, weapons up and ready, they all felt a sense of foreboding, inevitable confrontation. An enemy was drawing closer.

Somewhere above them, on one of the upper levels, muted weapons fire gently interrupted the stillness of the main floor.

Cadence could feel adrenaline, not from nervousness, but from rising anticipation, beginning to steadily flow through her. She felt her muscles tighten just a little, her senses pulling together. The rifle in her hands was the perfect weight, right at home and aimed just to the right, off Chad's shoulder.

A faint smile crept onto her lips as she sensed the others moving in silence around her, as a single unit. It was a beautiful and powerful thing.

They hadn't yet engaged any enemy inside the building but she could already feel the fervor for battle burning in her chest.

A faint explosion made the building tremor. Apparently, things upstairs were getting exciting.

Straight ahead was the lobby, cast in weak light. The area itself was quite large, as the hallways gave way to large support pillars that ran into the lobby.

They stopped in the darkness at the end of the hall. The building gave another heave, dust from the walls and archways in the lobby drifting down to the marble floor.

General Necro's voice came to them through their com's. *“We've engaged the enemy on the eastern side of the building. Mostly regular security forces so far...”*

“Copy,” whispered Chad.

Eyes on the large room before them, Chad pushed a button on the com in his ear twice. “Commander Scott, please feel free to join the party.”

A few seconds of silence passed before, *“Finally! Moving now, general. Look forward to seeing you on the field.”*

Cadence threw a look over her shoulder at Hailey when she felt tremendous pressure brush against her forehead. *Some very powerful generals are here...*

Hailey gave a nod. *I can feel it too.*

Movement in the lobby before them drew their attention forward again. They wore dark armor and moved with stealth: enemy security forces.

Blinding flashes of orange! A barrage of weapons fire came from the balcony above and from halls to the left and right. Squads of Commander Scott’s forces had arrived.

“Leave them! They can handle this,” called Chad over the noise. “We’ll start clearing the other floors!”

Ducking down a hall, the group found the entrance to the stairs and climbed the steps in silence. Upon reaching the door that opened to the second level, Chad paused.

He signaled to Cadence and Judge, telling them there was someone on the other side of the door—and not a friend.

Nodding, Cadence took a knee while Judge stood off her right shoulder.

The door swung open by itself. It didn’t even take a second to identify the pair of dark soldiers standing feet from them, waiting.

Cadence opened fire while Judge struck them with a blow that knocked them backwards. The group entered into the poorly lit passage. A hall ran to their left and right, with another running straight ahead.

“Top three floors are clear,” reported Necro.

“We’re on the second level,” answered Chad.

“Commander Arthos here. We’ve entered the second level, opposite end of the building. Other forces have begun clearing the other structures in the square, but we’ve still yet to meet any dark warriors.”

Cadence glanced at Chad, to her left. They had no doubt legions of dark commanders and generals were here. There was also no doubt they were lying in wait somewhere, patiently waiting to spring an ambush at just the opportune moment.

With a jerk of his head, the team split into two groups: Chad, Hailey and Fritz, and then Cadence and Judge.

Since it sounded like Scott’s men had the front portion of the level covered, Chad and the others continued straight. Cadence and Judge broke to the right.

They jogged down the halls, the building trembling beneath their feet. Each door they came to along the way, they entered and checked the room. By the time they'd cleared two halls, Cadence could barely contain her anticipation. She also felt slight disappointment at not yet having engaged any enemy soldiers.

But she wouldn't have to wait much longer. Their hall met with another that branched to the left. She saw the shadow in her peripheral and raised her hand to deflect the blow just before it struck.

It was like a ravenous bird of prey locking onto its next meal.

Cadence turned to the pair of dark warriors and started towards them. She was aware of doors on either side of the hall up ahead, and that there were likely more waiting to ambush her once she passed.

It was a trap, but one that she was more than ready to spring.

Behind her, she heard Judge opening fire down the hall that continued left. Seconds later she heard the ring of a lance, and caught its faint glow on the walls. It faded quickly as Judge moved down the passage, now fully engaged.

The pair of dark warriors at the end of the hall fired off a couple rounds, just to test her. The shots didn't get halfway to Cadence before they simply vanished.

As she passed doors to the left and right, they opened. Even as they did, she hit the pair of enemy before her with a powerful blow. Spinning down to one knee, her lance engaged and she cut the dark warrior's legs out from under him.

She deflected a strike behind her, then parried another aiming for her chest. Pushing herself up, she flipped behind the group of dark warriors pressing around her. But they were quick to turn on her.

The deep blue and crimson lances were a blur as she deflected and countered the strikes of her enemies. It was an intense twenty seconds or so as she turned back and forth from one dark warrior to another.

Yet Cadence seemed unworried and in complete control. At last, she turned with great speed. She ducked under one crimson blade, stabbed one warrior and then flicked her lance at the next assailant, mortally wounding him.

Taking up an enemy weapon, she advanced upon the remaining warriors, unaware the hilt of the crimson weapon burning into her left hand.

The lances of the battling rivals cracked through the air, but the dark warriors could not overpower this Legionnaire. One by one the remaining warriors fell and with one last decisive strike, Cadence struck down the final enemy in the hall.

Using her momentum as she turned, she threw the enemy lance in her hand at the pair coming from the far end of the passage.

The warrior on the left struck it aside, but he wasn't prepared for the streak of white light that hit him in the chest. His companion returned the favor, but Cadence, now strides from them, deflected it with ease.

When they met they exchanged a quick series of blows, the clashing of their lances reflecting off the walls. It was obvious in the first few seconds the dark warrior was no match for Cadence.

They mimicked one another, executing the exact same moves, like she knew what he was going to do before he did.

The enemy would strike, and so would Cadence, only her swings had twice as much power behind them. Each blow sent shafts of pain up the warrior's arms.

He struck from the left, then from the right, and finally swung from on high.

Their lances locked a moment before Cadence kicked him in the stomach.

The force sent him staggering backwards. He swung to keep her back, but she merely ducked sideways and then latched onto the wrist holding the weapon.

He dropped to one knee, grunting as the bones in his wrist snapped. What felt like fire raced up his arm and into his entire shoulder.

He glared up at Cadence with the utmost malicious expression.

She only gazed back at him with mild disdain before punching her lance through his chest. She stepped over his body and cut down his companion also with a quick flick of the wrist.

She walked into the hallway that intersected the one she'd just come from. Chad, Hailey, and Fritz were coming from the left and Arthos and his squad from the right. Judge appeared out of nowhere beside her.

"Scotts' men are taking care of the rest of this floor," reported Arthos.

"Right then," nodded Chad, turning back down the hall for the stairs, "let's continue on."

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He struck down one foe after another, crimson blade in continuous motion as he fought the enemy squad.

Cyrus killed the fifth soldier and sent the sixth tumbling backwards. The man skidded a dozen feet before rolling to his feet, undeterred.

The Seditonist general had to hand it to these soldiers: they may not have been gifted like the Legionnaires, but they'd acquired significantly more skill, and resolve, over the past six years.

There were plenty of conflicts going on around them, but the soldier wasn't concerned. His was still focused on Cyrus and started for him.

Cyrus spun to block a strike from a Legionnaire who had attempted to sneak in behind him.

The warrior delivered a swipe from the right.

Cyrus deflected and returned it with an upward slash towards his face. But before he could follow that up with another move, he was forced to step away and deflect the rapid fire coming from the soldier.

The general was temporarily locked in battle between the Legionnaire and soldier, one on either side of him. He was in constant motion, parrying a strike from the warrior and spinning in time to deflect the rounds coming from the soldier.

Growing irritated at this game, the next time Cyrus faced the soldier, he struck him with a powerful blow. Turning immediately, he blocked one strike from the Legionnaire, then a second. The third he swiped to the side and gave his opponent a swift kick in the diaphragm.

The Legionnaire flew backwards before smacking against the wall lined with windows. The force of the impact blew several of the panes out, shattering the glass.

Cyrus was already focused on the soldier again, striding towards him.

The man was still trying to get to his feet when the dark general assailed him with a tormentous mental attack.

Growling against the pain, the soldier dropped to his hands and knees. But like every other scum Cyrus had dealt with, this foe was defiant and unafraid.

Feet from the man, Cyrus spun, deflecting the Legionnaire's lance which the warrior had thrown across the room in an attempt to save his comrade.

With a snarl of hate, the general shoved his left hand towards the warrior. Electricity crackled in the air before the most devastating blow yet came, striking the Legionnaire in the chest. He never had time to even think about shielding himself and he crumpled to the floor.

Turning, Cyrus grabbed the man by the throat and ran him through the chest. Nose wrinkled in disgust, he shoved the body away and surveyed the chaotic scene.

"They're on the third floor," reported a dark scout.

Cyrus stepped over to the line of windows overlooking a walkway that ran between two of the buildings. "Just make sure you lure her outside."

"Yes, sir. Moving now..."

He felt a sharp sting shoot through his temple and Cyrus turned to see a pair of Legionnaires on an intercept course. A twisted smile formed onto his lips as he walked to meet them. He still had time for a little more fun.

Jogging the final few strides, Cyrus hit the one on the left with an impressive crimson strike to preoccupy one enemy for a moment before jumping and swinging at the other.

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Things were finally getting exciting on the third level of the building. A large number of dark warriors had been waiting for Chad, Arthos and the others—with a number of regular security forces. Fortunately, the front side of the third floor was open, like another lobby, with a set of double doors leading out onto a broad walkway. This allowed for optimal maneuvering.

The scene was a fine mix of weapons fire and burning lances. Thanks to all the windows letting in abundant natural light, more and more of the enemy became aware that Cadence Shahan was on the battlefield.

Consumed with the fire of battle, she could not be defeated.

Aerialing away from a dark warrior, Cadence landed in a crouch, blocking an overhead strike. She rose, pushing him off balance and then whipping her blade around and catching him in the side.

His body was still falling as she turned and blocked a crimson strike from a pair of dark warriors near the double doors.

She returned the favor, the strike a mere flash of brilliant light. It hit the warriors and sent them through the windows and down to the courtyard below.

Cadence scanned the fight around her. Their forces seemed to finally be getting the upper hand on this situation.

Chad appeared to have returned to full strength and was effortlessly turning back any foe that dared cross him.

Hailey was on the warpath, continuously in motion as she struck down the dark warriors that came at her.

Tucker was in top form and always seemed to have two or three enemies surrounding him. But unworried, he overpowered each of them in turn and when he was good and ready.

Pushing back a mental assault, Cadence locked onto a particularly dark looking commander and a few of his friends. Feeling fiery heat spread through her, she braced herself, lance in hand.

Strides from her, Cadence hit them with a powerful white strike. The flash and force of the impact made them grimace and look away while temporarily causing them to slow. By the time they recovered, Cadence was upon them.

Using the flash of light to cover her approach, she sprinted and leapt, coming in high. As she landed, she cut down the warrior to the right before swinging her lance over her left shoulder to block a strike. Pivoting to face him, she shoved his weapon to the side and then promptly elbowed him in the face. Before he had a chance to recover, Cadence grabbed him by the armor and pulled him towards her, where he found a lance stuck through his gut.

Cadence spun to the right to meet yet another warrior when he went tumbling backwards.

The big Legionnaire, Judge, appeared beside her. Movement on her other side drew her attention and she glanced over in time to see another Legionnaire, Red, dispatching his enemy.

Dark warrior reinforcements arrived and focused on the threesome.

Focusing on the enemy in front of her, she saw them cringe seconds later beneath the mental assault pressing against their heads. Using this distraction, Cadence sprinted toward them and hurled her lance at the warrior in the center, nailing him in the chest.

She flipped up and over his body while it was falling, her weapon returning to her hand in time to land and face the next opponent. She parried the strike from the left and then instantly spun to deflect the blow from the right.

Cadence went back and forth several seconds before the warriors on either side struck at the same time. Stepping back at the last second, all three blades locked in front of her.

Mustering her strength, she shoved the lances up. Turning slightly, she stabbed her blade back over her head, striking one warrior right in the neck.

Quick as a flash, Cadence whipped her blade straight back down where it met the other enemy blade...a second before a lance punched through his back and out his ribcage.

When his body collapsed, Cadence saw Red standing behind him. Mild distaste on her face, she called over the noise of the battle around them, "But he still counts as mine!"

Red looked at her a moment, before breaking into a smile.

Both turned suddenly, arms extended as they sent a blinding shockwave towards half a dozen warriors. Then they descended upon the ones that hadn't been killed in the initial impact.

The remaining dark warriors surrounding the three Legionnaires were outmatched, and their numbers diminished quickly.

Fighting beside Red and Judge, she thought to herself, now this is where it's at.

Cadence flung herself through the air, away from an enemy behind her. She passed over Red's back as he crouched and spun to meet the assailant's blade. Landing, she used her momentum to pivot and meet the lance of a dark warrior on the other side of her comrade.

She swung hard once, then again, and a third time, their clashing blades sparking. Every one of her strikes sent shafts of pain down the warrior's arms and he could feel himself weakening quickly.

But that physical pain in his body was nothing compared to the incredible pain that latched itself onto his mind.

Grinding his teeth, he shook his head defiantly and swung his lance blindly.

But Cadence merely stepped out of the way and blocked his next strike. The third and final blow she merely swatted aside, leaving him completely exposed. In one fluid movement, she twirled her lance and struck him down.

She instinctively ducked as Judge and Red, twenty feet apart and facing each other, unleashed a powerful blow.

A single, mighty flash lit the lobby and both strikes rocketed over the other's shoulder. One hit a group of enemy behind Judge, the second a group behind Red, flattening the dark warriors.

Five dark warriors in front of Cadence had just noticed her and the two big Legionnaires.

The leader sent a strong strike of his own towards her as she straightened. With a single-handed swipe of her lance, she shattered the blow and shoved her hand towards the enemy, pointing at them.

The force of the strike blew out the windows and dazed the warriors. All but one suddenly found themselves yanked off the ground and tossed out of the lobby, down to the courtyard three stories below.

The remaining dark warrior, a bit taken aback by what he'd just seen, locked his hateful gaze onto Cadence. Dark defiance written all over his expression, he was going to push himself to his feet when an invisible something threw him back against the wall. Blood running from his nose, he was thinking some rather derogatory names when his neck snapped at a grotesque angle and that was that.

Red glanced over at Judge and raised his eyebrows. Judge looked at his comrade and gave a bit of a shrug as he raised his eyebrows too. Who knew a Legionnaire could perform that trick?

It was then they noticed how silent it had become. They were also aware of a heavy presence in the air, and it didn't take long to see the source.

The fighting had thinned out, with a few groups still battling nearby. Most of the forces had drifted down a passage on the right, continuing to clear the floor. But there, appearing in the middle of the lobby, out of the fray, was a dark commander and two warriors.

Judge and Red's gazes were drawn to Arthos as he stepped forward, hard glare on his face.

Cadence looked back and forth from the new arrival and Arthos. She watched Red and Judge walk over to their leader and take up positions on either side of him. Their demeanors had darkened, expressions hardened.

"Welcome back, commander," spoke the dark commander with smugness, eyes gleaming. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have the courage to risk the rest of your warriors' lives to return to Miraz."

Arthos was too professional to take the bait the dark commander was dangling in front of him.

Instead, he replied coolly, “I hope you enjoyed your years of destruction and terror because justice is about to be executed for the blood you have shed...and for my fallen men.”

All six of them launched a powerful invisible strike at each other, the air humming and crackling.

However, Cadence didn't have time to watch any longer as she became aware of someone approaching from the left.

Chad appeared by her side, lance engaged, stern expression in his face as he glared at the enemy line.

They'd only begun engaging the first warriors when two things happened.

First, Hailey jumped in and joined the fun. Second, a brilliant flash of light lit the room.

Throwing a look over her shoulder, Cadence saw Arthos, Judge and Red righting themselves and immediately sprinting after the dark commander and his two companions—who found themselves thrown out the double doors and onto the broad walkway.

The duels began out there and they quickly moved away from the building. But Cadence's eyes narrowed when she saw several more enemy appear and try to sneak up behind the commander.

Turning, she sprinted for the double doors, ducking beneath a crimson blade along the way. A second enemy looked like he was going to step in her path, but he found himself sliding back across the floor.

Chad kicked away the current warrior he was fighting to restore a little space. This gave him enough time to chance a glance over his shoulder, where he caught a glimpse of Cadence as she barged through the doors.

Almost immediately more enemy seemed to press in around him and Hailey. Somewhere behind him he sensed Ronain on approach, for which he was thankful.

But now he was effectively cut off from Cadence. And Chad felt deep in his gut that the enemy was up to something, that they had a plan for her.

And now Cadence was out in the open with no backup.

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The dark commander that Arthos, Judge, and Red were engaging was playing a half-hearted game of chase.

Every dozen strides or so he and his two companions stopped just long enough to exchange a couple blows with the Legionnaires. Then they broke away, running across a broad, flat roof for the entrance of another building to the right.

Cadence was making up ground, but slowly. There always seemed to be an enemy getting in her way.

She was nearly across the walkway to the roof of a shorter structure when yet another foe jumped in her path.

Simultaneously, a pair exited a door from a building on the left. They glanced at Cadence and her opponent before deciding she wasn't the immediate threat. Lances in hand, they focused on the three Legionnaires on the far side of the roof and ran towards them.

Their strikes were quick and sharp and Cadence became suddenly aware of a heavy evil on approach. Darkness prickled her mind and tried to settle on her shoulders.

The two dark warriors were nearly to Red and Judge, coming from behind.

With a growl, Cadence deflected another strike from her opponent and threw a left hook, catching him smartly in the jaw.

It jerked his head to the side, but he was still able to adequately wield his weapon. He swiped at her once.

Cadence sidestepped.

He struck a second time and she blocked it. The third blow came in low and dangerously fast, but she countered it with an overpowering swing of her own.

Blades of their lances smashing together with a flash, the dark warrior found himself off balance—and a sharp little elbow bashing into his nose.

White hot volts of fire shot through his head, which snapped back against the force of the strike.

Using this distraction, Cadence turned and reached for the pair of enemy, who were strides from her comrades. *No you don't*, she thought sharply.

It was like someone pummeled them. The two warriors went tumbling backwards a great distance along the roof.

Cadence, in the meantime, flipped forward and away from her current challenger as he swung at her, blood running down his face, hateful anger burning in his dark eyes.

She skipped backwards, dancing lightly on her toes, making her way more towards the middle of the roof. Throwing a look over her shoulder, she saw the other two dark warriors on fast approach. Turning and reengaging the enemy in front of her, she couldn't keep the little smile from pulling on her lips.

Cadence and the warrior had continued sparring only a handful of seconds when the other two arrived.

Flipping sideways, she landed and immediately blocked a blade from the left, then the right, then from the left yet again. The third enemy was lunging forward when Cadence gave a mighty swing, right to left, deflecting all three blades.

She aeriaded over the mess of lances, landing just behind the dark warrior who'd formerly been facing her. This now put him more or less between her and his other two friends.

Ducking to the side, Cadence missed the lance as he sliced it over her head. Hilt of her weapon in her left hand, she slammed him smack in the sternum, punching the air from his lungs.

He swung, but before he could fully bring his lance around, Cadence latched onto his wrist in an iron grip. Searing fire roared down his arm. But that was the least of his worries.

Cadence engaged her lance, still pressed against his chest, and the blade ran him through.

Ripping the dead warrior's crimson lance from his hand, Cadence flicked the blade behind her, protecting her back from a strike. At roughly the same moment, she met the lance of the second warrior with her own off to her left.

Pivoting around, Cadence faced them as the three set off in a flurry of strikes and parries across the middle of the roof. No matter how much they tried, neither of the warriors could get around behind her this time.

The two were beginning to get frustrated when the one to Cadence's right suddenly stumbled to his knees and grabbed his head.

His friend on the left didn't allow himself to get distracted, but it didn't matter. A powerful blow sent him staggering backwards.

The dark warrior on his knees was crippled beneath an amazing mental assault. He could barely see, barely breathe, as the light he hated and dreaded filled his mind and left him immobilized. It only last a few seconds longer, before Cadence finished him.

Dropping the crimson lance from her now burned hand, she turned her full attention to the third enemy.

He was still standing a distance off, glaring death at her, but not advancing. Keeping his eyes on her, the dark warrior turned to spit blackened blood on the ground.

Then, to Cadence's great surprise and suspicion, the enemy slowly backed away from her. A unit retreating was one thing, but she'd never heard of a single dark warrior turning back after initially engaging his foe.

Seditionists had very severe internal punishment, and a dark warrior who yielded to a Legionnaire faced extremely harsh discipline. Ultimately, dark warriors were driven by either fear of chastisement or hatred for their enemy.

But Cadence didn't have to wonder what was going on for long. The darkness she'd felt earlier hadn't left and now grew heavier. Over the city, partly cloudy skies had given way to a dark gray sheet and began to spit down raindrops.

A wave of dizziness hit her just as *they* appeared.

Double doors at the end of the walkways, to her right and in front of her, flung open by themselves. Four generals, two from each door, walked towards her with dark and haughty expressions on their faces.

Cadence instantly recognized Bayne and Cyrus, but the other two generals she didn't know.

Looking behind her, she saw Commander Arthos, Judge, Red and their opponents had disappeared, likely inside the building.

A warm breeze swirled across the rooftop, smelling faintly like death and sulfur. A hollow rumble of thunder rolled around the dreary sky, answered by a gust of hot wind.

The lone dark warrior had disappeared as the four generals took up a makeshift semicircle around Cadence.

"Cadence Shahan," sneered Cyrus, dark turquoise eyes flickering, "we've been wanting to catch up with you for some time."

"Mmm," was all she replied as the crimson lance she'd previously wielded returned to her hand.

Taking a deep breath, she jerked the knots out of her neck and held the lances at the ready, gaze steady as she studied each of the generals.

It was evident she wasn't going to let them distract her focus by taunts or jabs. She was a warrior prepared to simply get down to the business at hand.

Bayne and Cyrus shared a discreet look.

Cadence looked stronger than ever before, mature, calm and confident. But what made them hate her all the more was her total lack of fear and doubt. Her blue eyes burned with fiery determination. She didn't seem the least bit phased by how clearly outnumbered and overpowered she was.

And if their eyes weren't deceiving them, in the slowly waning light of an approaching dusk, the young woman appeared to have a faint glow about her. This only occurred with powerful warriors attuned to the voice of their Creator—and utterly consumed with the fire and joy of battle.

This made them grind their teeth as they took up their weapons.

All five stood, four dark generals facing one small Legionnaire warrior.

To the average passerby it might have looked like they were in a standoff, but they weren't. The battle had already begun as all the generals launched a single, incredibly intense mental assault on Cadence.

She stood her ground, unwavering even as darkness that had nothing to do with the clouds pressed in around them. Seconds ticked by and the air began to tingle. Every so often she could feel a sharpness, like a talon, cut through the side of her head or a wave of dizziness wash over her.

She could feel the evil trying to get a hold of her mind. When it wasn't snarling at her, it was whispering in her ear, telling her just to let go; tap into that malicious anger she wrestled with daily towards these men for turning her sister and just...let it take her. They tempted her with revenge and unsurpassable power and authority.

Taking a long, steady breath Cadence closed her eyes, just holding the darkness at bay. In the recesses of her mind, she could feel doubt, fear trying to sneak in.

But it only fired her up and solidified her determination.

In her mind's eye, she could see herself there on the roof, facing these four generals. Inky darkness filled the air behind and directly over them, reaching towards her. And just like at the lake on one stormy morning six years ago, she saw demonic forces surrounding her. Demons, just waiting to pounce on her the moment she yielded to them.

Never.

Large winged beings of light suddenly appeared all around her, mighty angels wielding shining swords.

A familiar heat burned to life in her chest anew, and spread like wildfire through her veins, flooding her entire body.

Electricity crackled and popped all around them, and the generals exchanged a quick look as the humming grew suddenly louder.

Then Cadence opened her eyes, fierce determination and defiance on a whole new level hardened her expression.

The Seditonist warlords wrinkled their noses and snarled at her. She was driving back their attack with what they perceived as great ease. They could very much feel her countermove, feel every sting as light knifed through the darkness and struck them.

Lightning flashed close by. Thunder answered at a distance, again sounding hollow as it thumped around the clouds a couple seconds before everything fell silent.

No one saw the strike, but moments later a deafening peal of thunder slammed overhead and was followed by a blinding flash.

Cadence struck first, at the nearest general on her left, delivering a quick swipe with the lance in her left hand. Going with the rotation of the move, she swung her right around and hitting him with a devastating invisible blow.

And thus the fight began.

Chapter 100

Justice

Arthos crashed through the wall and into the dark passageway. The dark commander was already lunging for him, crimson lance burning hot.

Arthos made a grab for him, pulling his enemy closer so he could plant his feet into his stomach. He kicked the commander through the wall behind him and into a broad hallway lined wall to ceiling with windows.

Leaping to his feet, Arthos found his lance and it flew to his hand. Striding towards his foe, whom he learned was called Faren, he brought his arm up, shielding himself against a crimson strike. It struck with a flash and he sent one of his own when he'd nearly reached the hole in the wall.

It shook the entire level and rained down concrete and debris onto the dark commander.

Using the distraction, Arthos was on him in an instant. They moved along the long corridor, every strike hard, lances ringing and sparking.

Faren dodged a swipe and brought his lance in low and quick, aiming for his rival's stomach.

Arthos blocked it and struck at Faren's chest.

The dark commander deflected it and countered with a lightning quick swing for Arthos' neck.

The Legionnaire bent sideways just in time and could feel the intense heat of his enemy's lance as it passed over his shoulder. This left Faren open to receive a breath-taking kick to the gut.

Staggering backwards a few steps, he managed to deflect three quick blows from Arthos, one from the left, then the right, and finally overhead.

This locked their lances over their heads. The two commanders pressed hard against one another, muscles taught, faces close. The blades sparked and electricity popped around them, the warring forces amongst them making the air hum.

They leaned slowly closer and closer until finally their arms touched. The contact resulted in a burst of light, the force throwing them backwards from each other and blowing out all the windows in the lobby.

Arthos hit the marble floor with a grunt and rolled back and to his feet. Eyes on his opponent who was picking himself up, he spit a mouthful of blood to the side.

Though his body was aching, the Legionnaire warrior wasn't disheartened. He'd suffered far worse in the past. For now, his enemy had given up trying to launch mental assault on him. He was too experienced to fall for it.

The air continued to hum as they approached each other again. A dozen strides away, Faren broke into a sprint.

Arthos watched as thousands of shards of broken glass appeared and shot towards him. He remained unalarmed as a volt of light streaked across the hall and reduced the glass to fine grains of sand, which was blown into the face of the dark enemy.

Faren faltered momentarily as he shielded his face. But he didn't need to clearly see Arthos to know he was almost on top of him now.

Indeed Arthos was. He sprinted the rest of the distance between them and, gathering his strength, he leapt.

Faren still had enough momentum to slid across the floor as he dropped to a knee and he swatted Artho's lance away as he passed beneath the Legionnaire.

When he stopped and spun to his feet, Arthos' boots were just touching the floor.

They were in very close proximity. They exchanged a couple quick blows, which came to an end when Arthos deflected Faren's lance to the side and flipped backwards to restore some distance.

Landing half crouched, Arthos blocked a downward strike from Faren. His stance afforded him more leverage and he began to drive his opponent back. He struck once for Faren's chest, then again at his side and finally swung for his neck.

Faren deflected the strike, though weakly, before turning hastily and aerialing away from Arthos.

The Legionnaire was right on his heels, lance humming, fire of battle consuming him. Nearly to Faren, he jumped and twisted through the air to gain momentum and torque for when their lances met seconds later.

Their lances sparked magnificently in the fading light, and the heavy scent of rain and sulfur wafted through the broken windows.

Standing nearly sideways to his opponent, Arthos deflected a strike that came in front of him. Their blades had just met when he stabbed his lance over his shoulder to block a second blow intended for his spine. After meeting a third strike aimed for his core again, Arthos spun to meet the fourth, coming from the other direction.

When Arthos swung, he put everything he had behind it. Faren found himself open, but before the Legionnaire could do anything, he threw his elbow right into his face.

Pain rippling through his head, Arthos went with the momentum of the blow and bent back as the crimson blade flashed over his chest. Straightening, he blocked a swing from the left and punched Faren smartly in the face.

The Seditonist grunted against the pain. He took a swing at Arthos, but then a powerful force slammed him hard against the floor. It knocked the wind clean out of him and fractured ribs.

It also weakened his grip on his lance. Instantly, he found it no longer in his grasp, but in the hand of his enemy.

Faren managed to disperse another streak of light from Arthos before he scrambled to his feet.

All the hatred he ever felt towards the Legionnaires he focused on this one warrior. He knew his demon cohorts were with him, he could feel their presence. Drawing strength from the darkness he'd long sold his soul to, he shoved his hands towards the Legionnaire commander, unleashing a powerful assault on his rival.

Red light snapped through the air as electricity knifed through the darkness, almost too quickly to see.

Arthos, calm and unafraid, stood a dozen strides from Faren. He raised his lance across his body as the crimson light hit.

But it wasn't just a single strike, it was a continuous attack. The corridor hummed and arcs of red light crackled in the air.

The dark commander snarled with utter disdain and disgust as the brunt of the strike was dispersed by the lance. His hatred burned even hotter when, in the brief flickers of light, he saw who was with his foe.

Large angels, mighty and terrible with broad wings and gleaming swords stood on either side of Arthos. Scars from previous seasons of war marked their powerful arms and they leveled their cutting gazes on the dark commander and his vile companions.

Standing unmoved and unshaken, the Legionnaire commander, with blood running from his face and other wounds, merely settled his own riveting gaze on the Seditonist.

Faren then bared his teeth and unleashed a guttural war cry of hatred, looking more like some wild beast than a man.

"I hate you!" he screamed with every ounce of his being.

Crimson volts of light crackled between them when Arthos twirled the lance once and leveled it at Faren.

A hollow crack echoed down the hall. The light from the dark assault focused itself along the blade, making it glow brightly. Then the crimson strike reversed itself and ripped through its maker's body and dropping him back to his knees.

"Will you yield?" asked Arthos, strong voice deep and booming like thunder.

Faren flinched, but his malice did not lessen, nor did his self-righteous indignation. Fiery hate that could not be put into words raged through him.

He spat black blood at the Legionnaire and bit out the answer to his question. "Never."

No emotion registered on the face of Arthos.

They shared a look a few moments longer before Arthos said, "So be it."

He snapped his lance to the side, breaking off the assault. Immediately there came a brilliant flash of light, followed by another loud, hollow crack.

When it faded, Arthos saw the dark commander Faren had fallen, having sustained a single, lethal strike to the chest.

Taking a breath, the Legionnaire lifted his gaze further down the hall as Judge and Red approached. As they drew closer, he saw they held in their hands the lances of their fallen enemies, the pair of warriors who had been with Faren.

The three Legionnaires stood and faced one another, looking at each other a moment. While Seditonists hated their enemies, Legionnaires did not hate even the darkest general or warlord. They couldn't. Did they burn with desire for swift justice for the wrongs and evil caused by the Seditonists? Yes. Did they long for the day when every last one of their foes was wiped out? Absolutely.

But they did not hate.

The hilts of the three crimson lances lifted into the air. With a quick flick of their own weapons, they cut the lances in half and let the metal remnants clank to the floor.

Then the three Legionnaire warriors took to a knee and, grasping one another's shoulders, dropped their heads in a prayer of thanks.

Chapter 101

Fallen General

Cadence was finally settling into a rhythm despite the nonstop striking, parrying and twisting through the air she was doing to avoid being cut in half.

It was like doing battle in the middle of an angry swarm of wasps. She could feel the sharp, angry pings of pain stinging her temples as she waged war with the four generals.

Though the lightning flickered faintly and thunder rumbled in the distance, a tempest was growing all around them. A fine mix of hot and cold gusts of wind tugged at them and threw a steadier rain across the immense flat rooftop.

With a mighty clash, four lances locked: the two Cadence held, along with Cyrus's and one of the other generals called Najiv. She felt Bayne coming from behind her, feel the increasing pain pressing on top of her head.

Muscles trembling, she threw Cyrus a glare before gathering her strength and pushing the enemy lances away. She flipped backwards, high as she could.

Twisting around, she passed over Bayne, and tucked her legs as he took a swipe at her. Cadence parried it, but she was going to be over-rotated for her landing now.

She let her legs give when she hit the roof and rolled onto her back. She could feel the proximity of the enemy, feel the intense evil surrounding her. Cadence had just enough time to raise her lances, wrists crossed to provide herself more leverage.

Bayne's lance glanced off her blades.

She rolled away to avoid the second swipe, deflected the third with her left lance and swiped for his legs. It forced him to jump away, providing her just enough time for her next move.

Pushing herself forward into a crouch, Cadence dropped both lances and hit Cyrus with an impressive white strike. He deflected most of it, but the residual effects sent a ripple of pain across his head and pushed him back a few steps.

It was a high-risk, high-reward maneuver because while it kept Cyrus at bay, Bayne was totally focused on Cadence. She wasn't within reach, so he hit her with a crimson blow.

It struck her squarely in the side and she went tumbling sideways. The air seemed to have been sucked from her lungs as electricity shot through her ribs. Vision blurring from the pain, Cadence gave a growl of defiance as she kicked her feet beneath her.

Blue lance flying to her hand, she thrust it towards Bayne as he sent another crimson strike at her.

This time it smashed against the blade and she answered with a powerful blow of her own, sliding her hand smartly down the broadside of the lance.

The streak of light rocketed towards him and nearly caught him off-guard.

By now Cyrus had reached Cadence and he lunged at her, crimson lance flashing.

Cadence blocked it, parried the next blow and ducked the third. The enemy lance she'd had was behind Cyrus and her eyes flicked to it as she dodged his blade.

With a powerful upward swing, she deflected Cyrus' next strike. The force sent both of them off balance. Cadence leapt away and twisted through the air, and Cyrus flipped backwards.

The second lance shot through the air and engaged, clipping Cyrus in the shoulder as it passed and reached Cadence's hand just as she landed. It arrived in time for her to turn and meet Bayne.

She parried his first strike and whipped her second blade up for his core, forcing him back a step. But she had no time to continue.

Cadence jumped Najiv's lance as it hummed for her legs. The toes of her boots were just reaching the roof again when she simultaneously deflected Bayne's blade.

Extending her right arm, she blocked Najiv's next swing and ducked as Bayne's lance hummed precariously close over her back.

Cadence knew she was in a dicey spot and that the fourth Seditonist general, by the name of Jett, was dangerously close. But there wasn't anything much left to do, save the move she was going to perform next.

Using Najiv's lance for torque, she pushed off it and threw herself back, pulling in her knees. After completing the rotation, she kicked out hard, punching Jett square in the chest. The force knocked him flat, and she landed on him.

But Najiv and Bayne gave her no time to recover. Cadence was forced to bend and spring backwards, away from their blades, and off Jett, who was coming around quickly.

When she landed, she locked blades with both Najiv and Bayne, their crimson lances crossed horizontally with her deep blue one. Swinging hard, she brought her second lance down, disengaging all the blades.

Cadence knew she was getting into a bad spot again, and she pivoted sharply to the right. It was this action that saved her from being run through by Cyrus, with whom she found herself face to face. His blade just grazed her side.

They blinked at one another a second before Cyrus suddenly flew backwards.

Cadence hadn't done anything to him, but didn't have time to consider it. She ducked and stepped under Bayne's blade. Straightening, she met Najiv's strike before spinning and blocking Bayne's next swing.

This sort of frantic dance continued several seconds longer. All the while, Cadence was aware of another jade lance clashing with Cyrus's in her peripheral.

She'd also been vaguely aware of dark warriors, whom appeared one by one on the various rooftops surrounding them.

Vultures arriving at a fresh kill was the analogy that came to her mind.

With a growl, Cadence missed Bayne's strike and then brought both her lances up and swung to meet Najiv's blade. The force behind the blow sent him reeling. Cadence went with her sideways momentum and kicked Bayne in the side, restoring decent space between them.

She was instantly on Najiv again, her crimson and blue blades crackling as they lashed at him.

Finally, when he brought his lance up to block her strike, she stopped it with her blue blade before bringing her second one on the other side.

Trapping his lance, she pushed her right one forward, left one back, pinching his blade with a decisive snap. At the same time a mental assault, in the form of a flash of light, stabbed through his head.

Najiv couldn't keep a hold on his weapon, especially after the hilt suddenly became terribly hot.

Cadence dispersed his mental assault and drove him down the roof, where she had him.

Or would have had him.

She sensed the crimson strike from Cyrus, but it was nearly too late. She only managed to block half of it and the impact was equivalent to a horse kick to the side.

She let loose a loud snarl as white-hot pain punched through her, dropping her sideways to one knee. Cadence had enough sense to push off and roll out of the way of Bayne. But his blade caught her upper arm.

That's when Bayne received an amazing strike to the chest from someone behind Cadence.

Bayne was still staggering when the owner of the blow sprinted in, launching into an unbelievably quick series of strikes. He drove the general backwards and once Cadence could see again, she saw that it was none other than Ajax, her mysterious friend.

Off to her left Necro, and now Ronain, were dueling with Cyrus. Along the roof lines also, battle had continued as familiar friends engaged the enemy. Tucker and Hailey indeed formed an unbeatable team and they easily cut down one after another.

Jett was on approach, coming straight for her until he spotted someone else behind her.

Feeling a little better now, Cadence pushed herself to her feet and looked at him a moment before glancing over her shoulder.

General Nathan Chad, muscles tight and glistening with sweat and rain, and burning so hot with battle he held a rather noticeable glow, stepped beside her.

Just then the double doors, and a good portion of the wall, behind Jett seemed to explode. Several bodies of dark warriors tumbled onto the roof...and on the scene strode Arthos, Red, and Judge. From the right the rest of his unit appeared.

Chad hit Jett while the dark general was distracted and he found himself thrown backwards before he landed harshly on the roof. But with speed he leapt to his feet to engage the Legionnaire.

Their lances were nothing more than arcs of blue and crimson. Chad not only had skill and experience on his side, but also sheer height and strength. Every one of his strikes was jarring.

But Jett had his putrid hate, which gave him enough power to equal his opponent's might.

As they moved steadily across the roof, amidst the other dueling rivals, a pair of dark warriors came at Chad from either side.

Unconcerned, the Legionnaire ducked under Jett's lance, parried his second swing before kicking the dark warrior on the right. After deflecting Jett's next move, Chad gave a smart flick of the lance and a streak of light hit the dark warrior on the left and sent him completely over the edge of the roof.

Now he could return his full attention back to Jett.

In the meantime, Cadence's gaze locked on the dark warrior Chad had kicked away. He was getting to his feet when a lance suddenly struck him, running completely through his lungs.

The lance returned to Cadence's hand as she surveyed the roof.

It was still a chaotic scene with various fights raging on. She knew, however, that things would soon be sorted because the dark warriors didn't stand a chance now.

But her blue eyes searched the crowd around her...before finally spotting General Najiv. He was trying to sneak away quietly.

Hey, coward, Cadence thought to him as she walked towards him, giving her blue lance a twirl, *afraid to stick around and try to finish what you started?*

His dark eyes narrowed as his gaze found her.

The young woman's face was dirtied and streaked from the rain. She was moving a bit stiffly and blood flowed from the wound on her upper arm, and from other minor scrapes and scratches. But her resolute gaze had lost none of its potency.

Cadence wanted another crack at him, since she'd had him earlier—until Bayne had landed an exceptional blow.

Not wanting him to flee, she goaded him a little more. *You're a sorry excuse for a general if you're running away like a girl. Abandoning your troops? You ought to be ashamed of yourself.*

That about did it. Najiv bared his teeth and threw an impressive red strike at her. It flashed with great speed through the air, cracking.

Dropping the crimson lance and glad to be rid of it, Cadence raised her left hand, shielding herself from the attack. It struck before her with a blinding flash. But she was already sprinting hard, knowing Najiv would use it to cover his own approach.

She was right. The dark general was almost to her by the time the light from the flash faded.

They lunged towards each other, both pivoting around once to gain torque. Their blades met with a clash, the impact accented by a hollow growl of thunder.

The first swing was high, second more centered towards the core and the third came in low.

These fast strikes kept Najiv and Cadence close and following the third blow, Cadence forced Najiv's lance around in a broad arch. This allowed her to safely step forward and throw an elbow into his face.

Najiv growled in pain as he moved back, swiping angrily at her.

Cadence jumped just out of the way of the blade before taking her own swing at his legs.

Najiv jogged backwards. To give himself an extra second to fully recover, he glanced across the large gap between the roof and the next building. There was a pop as the windows shattered and then thousands of glass shards drove angrily towards Cadence.

Stopping, she turned towards the shards, gave a single, decisive twirl of her lance before leveling it at them. Lightning flashed, the glass reduced to sand and blew angrily into the face of Najiv.

But he sensed this distraction and the sand was dispersed in a gust of hot wind. Then he met Cadence's lance again as she drove against him.

She had momentum on her side and pushed Najiv back along the edge of the roof.

They exchanged a quick series of strikes and parries, lances crackling through the air and sparking with each meeting.

At last, Najiv blocked a smart strike from Cadence and delivered a lightning quick stab towards her core, finally putting a stop to her forward drive.

She stepped sideways to avoid the blade and flicked her lance at his face.

Najiv dodged to the side, swatted it away, then struck at her side.

Cadence had just enough time to bend backwards, fiery heat of the lance brushing across her cheek. But this allowed her a quick swipe at her opponent from below and her lance clipped him in the side.

The evil general growled in pain, but did not leap back. Instead he drove hard and fast against Cadence. His next few strikes would have been devastating, if she hadn't taken to dodging and ducking out of the way of his blade.

This infuriated him even more. The air hummed and electricity arced in fury around them. An evil, enraged Seditonist general was nothing to be taken lightly.

With a roar of anger, he delivered two impossibly fast swipes.

The first Cadence could avoid, but it set her up so she was forced to whip her lance around and block the second. The impact was jarring, and the second the blades met, Najiv hit her with a mighty crimson blow.

Cadence was shielded from the brunt it, but it still made her wounds feel like they were afire. It also shoved her back a couple feet, boots sliding across the wet roof.

When she raised her gaze, she saw Najiv held a mine in his right hand, one of several he probably kept on himself.

The mine detonated, the force of the explosion erupting into a massive ball of flames, which roared towards Cadence, threatening to engulf her.

Defiance on her face, she pointed her left index and middle fingers at the flames. *No*, she growled.

The air seemed to shift and an invisible torrent of wind turned the flames back on itself and into the face of Najiv.

The dark general growled with utter disdain. He sensed Cadence coming in fast and he strode forward, swinging with all his might as the flames dissipated to smoke.

It cleared just as their blades met. But there was a little something behind their swings and a loud crack echoed across the roof. Volts of pain ripped through both their arms.

The force behind Najiv's swing was notable, and Cadence flipped back with the momentum. Najiv, also, was forced to take a few staggering steps backwards.

But each straightened and engaged one another again.

Meanwhile, Chad had mostly settled the rivalry between himself and Jett. The big Legionnaire general was supercharged, burning from the battle and seething with protective fury. He could not be turned back.

In a single, powerful swing, Chad deflected the crimson blade and slammed a boot into his enemy's stomach.

Jett tumbled across the roof again, before finally coming to a stop on his side, where he glared at the Legionnaire. But the dark general was very weak now and couldn't do anything when he found his lance torn from his grip.

Spitting at the big Legionnaire, Jett was thinking about getting up when an invisible hand slammed him back against roof.

Chad, pointing at him with his left hand, found Cadence in time to see the ordeal with the mine. Now they were back to dueling at full speed and strength.

Chad frowned.

He and the others had finally come to Cadence's aid, intervening in the confrontation with four generals that would have surely resulted in her death. He had hoped after that she would've kept herself out of trouble.

Why couldn't she just stick to fighting the regular dark warriors, he thought, even the commanders! Why a general?

He watched Cadence crouch beneath Najiv's lance and shove her blade up towards his stomach. Forced to step back, this gave Cadence enough time to spin once to regain momentum and swing hard, holding the hilt of her lance like a bat. She also had an invisible strike directly behind her lance and it resulted in a sharp one-two jab.

This knocked Najiv wildly off balance, pivoting him sideways.

Stepping forward, Cadence delivered another powerful strike.

Najiv managed to deflect it, but it put him precariously on the roof's edge. One more blow from Cadence and he was beginning to fall.

Chad thought it would be over then...until an invisible hand seemed to grab her arm and yank her over the edge too.

His frown deepened as he returned his gaze to Jett, still being held to the ground.

The evil general, drenched in rain, sweat, and blood glared death at the Legionnaire.

But before he could do anything to loosen the invisible restraints, Chad opened the rest of the hand he was pointing with. A crack sounded, followed immediately by a streak of light that struck Jett.

And one of the Seditonist generals was dead.

A minor explosion seemed to answer Chad's lethal blow.

An enemy fighter, smoking badly from one of its engines, made a low pass over the buildings. When it was almost directly overhead, a friendly fighter roared in behind it and unleashed fatal fire from its front cannons.

The enemy fighter erupted in a ball of fire as it broke apart. One of the rear thrusters passed uncomfortably close and collided into the building to Chad's left. The impact resulted in a deafening, ground shaking crash that threw fire, metal, and concrete into the air.

Lowering his arm with which he'd protected his head and face, Chad immediately spotted General Necro nearby, striding about, searching through the thick smoke.

It only took Chad a few seconds to realize Cyrus had slipped away, using the distraction to his advantage. Another couple seconds after later, he saw Bayne and two other dark commanders were also absent.

Typical.

But Chad's primary concern now was Cadence.

Ω

Cadence hadn't quite realized just how high up three stories was until she felt someone grab her arm and pull her over the edge of the roof.

Her initial thought as she entered free-fall was "*oh dear.*" But then she saw Najiv, nearly directly beneath her, and she forgot all about her nervousness regarding an unpleasant landing.

As they dropped, Cadence took a swipe at Najiv, grazing the side of his left calf. Grunting, he returned the favor, missing her face by not even an inch.

Cadence had just started another swing, one that certainly would have been a devastating blow, but quick as a wink, the evil general grabbed her arm.

Sharp volts of pain shot through her arm and into her shoulder. But Cadence could see the ground coming up fast and Najiv was under her.

Tucking her legs beneath her, she planted her boots firmly in his stomach.

Knowing what she was trying to do, Najiv hit her with a weak blow. It threw them away from each other...mere feet from the ground.

The blow sent Cadence against the wall of the building and then to the grass. Both landed with tremendous force, the earth giving a heave, cracking out in all directions from their points of impact.

Slightly winded, Cadence staggered to her feet in time to swing and smack an invisible strike sent from Najiv. He stumbled away from her, with the appearance he had every intention to flee and escape.

It was darker down here in the broad gaps and walkways between the buildings, and Najiv was rather difficult to see. But Cadence didn't need to see him with her eyes. She could sense the heavy evil that surrounded him.

She slid her hand down her lance and sent a flash of light his direction to give him something to think about while she covered the ground between them.

With each step she felt her body recovering from the tumble off the building. However, she was also keenly aware she was finally, slowly beginning to tire.

But she still had plenty of strength yet to finish this fight.

Weakening faster than his opponent, Najiv turned away from the blow. His strength hadn't yet regenerated enough to counter the power of the move.

He couldn't completely avoid it, however, and it hit him in the side. He growled in pain, spinning and nearly falling to the ground. But he regained his footing and saw he was nearly to the building that ran along the back of the rooftop they'd formerly been on.

Cadence ducked in time to miss a chunk of broken wall that was thrown through the air. She dodged another, and yet a third.

Quickly growing tired of this game, Cadence reengaged her lance and cut the next piece of wall in half. She did not slow her long-strided gait as more, rather large chunks of rock and metal lifted into the air before her.

Eyes locked on her rival, she merely snapped her fingers...and the objects in the air dissolved to fine particles of dust and blew away.

Najiv snarled at Cadence, mustered a great crimson strike and hurled it at her. It streaked through the shadows towards her, snapping angrily.

Stride unfaltering, Cadence just raised her left hand, palm out. Feet from her, there was a flash and the strike seemed to double back right for Najiv. It missed him by a foot or two, but slammed the building and blew out a large section of the wall inside.

Cadence was almost to him now.

Najiv looked down the path, which turned to his right. Unfortunately, the walkway at the third level had collapsed on itself, blocking an immediate escape route. It was a steep pile of rubble at that, with large chunks of concrete and marble slabs stacked vertically.

Gathering his strength, he jumped up and grabbed the long window ledge on the second story. Swinging his body sideways, he missed getting another nasty gash on the legs as Cadence took a swipe at him.

He cursed the girl as she leapt lightly up onto the same ledge he was on. Why couldn't these warriors just give up for once?

The ledge was quite narrow, but that didn't keep them from testing one another's resolve.

They exchanged a couple jabs and parries before Najiv threw himself to the third level ledge. Before following, Cadence hit the ledge beneath his feet with an invisible blow, making it crumble and give way.

Najiv backed up several feet, and Cadence had enough time to safely leap to the third level.

They were now in view of the others still on the main rooftop. But before anyone could aid either of them, Najiv gave a mighty swing of his lance.

The blade cut into the debris of the broken walkway beside him like butter. A torrent of wind roared out of nowhere and blew away the debris, now turned to ash.

Now the only possible way anyone could reach them was from inside the building they were standing outside of, or by jumping the twenty foot distance.

He threw a streak of red light at Cadence, which she deflected and returned.

Leveling his lance, in his right hand, he extended his left arm towards her.

The blade of the weapon began to glow brightly as red flickers of light arched around it and between the lance and his left hand. Finally the dark general unleashed the fury of the strike. It rippled through the air, like a red comet, straight for Cadence.

She threw out one of her own, the two blows meeting roughly halfway between the opponents. It shattered Najiv's strike before she followed it up with a second, stronger one.

The clashing of forces resulted in a brilliant flash, making the building heave and dissolving the walls and windows between Najiv and Cadence. It also made the ledge they were standing on begin to crumble.

They looked at one another before leaping to the fourth floor ledge.

Najiv climbed up first and threw a quick crimson strike at Cadence, who managed to parry it in time. With haste, she flicked one at her enemy with her lance, who dispersed it.

But they didn't have time to do anything further. The ledge beneath their feet began to quiver as the effects from the lower level continued to eat up the side of the building.

Simultaneously, Najiv and Cadence leapt and pulled themselves up onto the flat roof of the building. This was one of the tallest buildings in the square, leaving them exposed to the rain and wind as it drove upon them with growing intensity.

They stood a dozen feet apart, panting lightly from their climb, blood running from their wounds, and rain dripping from their faces. The sky was growing darker by the minute, but there was still enough light to see.

Lightning flickered in the ever darkening clouds above them, intertwined with the droning of fighter jets as they maneuvered over the city.

Najiv, slightly bent over to catch his breath, continued to pant.

Cadence watched him with that relentless gaze, which had grown suspicious. Eyes steady, jaw set with resoluteness, she swung her lance once, making it hum through the air.

She'd just started towards him when Najiv lunged forward with an angry war cry. He hurled a crimson strike at her, which she merely broke with a swing of her lance.

And then they engaged in combat once more.

In the remaining light, they were mere silhouettes to the spectators watching from the rooftop below. The flashes from their blades were startlingly brilliant, brighter than the lightning that drew nearer.

Lances trails of crimson and blue, the rivals dueled at incredible speed, pushing their tiring bodies to the limit. They moved back and forth, swapping strikes and parries but refusing to yield to one another.

And with the arriving darkness, the evil surrounding Najiv seemed to grow stronger, thicker and regathering its strength. It pressed against Cadence's head and shoulders, trying to drive her to her knees.

But she would not let it distract her. Mustering her strength, Cadence struck twice in immediate succession, the first blow low, the second high.

Najiv flipped backwards to avoid a third swipe for his core, landing in a half-crouch to meet Cadence's lance.

They locked blades a second, lances popping.

Najiv's putrid hate boiled and raged through him as he glared at this girl. Fury flooded his body and, with a low growl, he shoved Cadence backwards. He delivered one hard strike after another from overhead, hitting with everything he had.

Each blow sent volts of pain down Cadence's arms, and the darkness trying to envelope her seemed to steal the energy from her muscles. Memories of her first encounters with General Ipos surfaced in the back of her mind.

This was a Seditonist general she was dueling with, not a pawn.

In a quick move, Najiv slipped his arm forward and slammed his elbow into her face.

It sent her staggering.

He drove at her, unyielding, pushing her backwards with every blow. The first strike, directly overhead, nearly put her to her knees. The second came from the right, threatening to topple her.

Cadence dodged the next strike before whipping her lance around and slashing at his chest.

He deflected it. As he did so, she lunged forward and punched him squarely in his wounded side.

Fire erupted from the injury and up into his chest, but his countermove was so surprisingly quick it caught her off-guard. Before she could even pull away, even blink, he slammed his fist into her shoulder, making full contact.

The force didn't throw her backwards; it pummeled her hard against the roof. Ribs cracked and the air was pushed from her lungs. Out of survival instinct, Cadence lashed out with a kick.

Najiv went with the force of the impact and flipped backwards. When he landed, he was ready for the strike of light from Cadence. But he didn't immediately retaliate after that.

She was just getting herself to her hands and knees, moving rather awkwardly, flinching in pain. Unsteady, she forced herself to her feet. But in spite of it all, her expression was still resolute and unafraid.

It made Najiv burn with even more anger. How he hated Legionnaires!

Lance in his left hand, but pointed at the ground, he extended his right hand towards her.

Lightning flashed in the sky, mirroring the brightness of the red strike as it shot towards Cadence.

Swinging, she dispersed the first one.

But Najiv hit her with a second.

The third she deflected, but the force of it sent her to a knee. She dropped her head a moment, shivering as a chill washed over her.

“That was your mistake,” said Najiv, taking a few slow, casual steps towards her, “thinking I was running out of cowardice. I was just drawing you away from the others so I could separate you...wear you down. And now, Cadence Shahan, it has been your undoing.”

Half a dozen feet from her, Najiv unleashed his most powerful strike yet, relentless and furious.

Cadence dropped her lance and, raising her right arm, shielded herself. She was forced to look away from the stark brightness of the clashing forces. She held the assault just at bay, though she occasionally felt sharp wisps of pain shoot along her arm.

Several long seconds passed, with Cadence on a knee and Najiv towering before her, occasional arches of light snapping between them. Finally, it seemed she was going to give out and collapse.

Another second or two ticked by and yet she remained where she was. Najiv’s eyes narrowed a little. Now it was his turn to grow suspicious.

Cadence drew a deep breath, ignoring her wounded ribs...and slowly lifted her gaze to Najiv.

That was when he realized the oddity of the scene. Cadence wasn’t shielding herself from the attack; she seemed to be absorbing it through her hand.

Pushing herself up, she stood and turned Najiv’s attack back on itself with an outstretched arm, palm outward, like a centurion telling an intruder to stop.

He wasn’t aware of what was happening until it was too late. The red arcs of light flashed blue as it raced back to him and struck, dazing him.

Left arm drawn back towards herself, hand near her hip, it looked like she was holding something back. That’s when he noticed the glowing light in her palm.

Then she opened her fingers.

Najiv never saw the strike. All he knew was he was suddenly flying backwards. He tumbled hard across the wet roof, and very much aware of the snarling of a lance.

Cadence didn't seem tired at all as she charged across the roof, lance returning to her hand. She twirled it once, then twice, leaving a trail of silver and blue light.

Najiv was barely up to his feet when she came upon him. She gave a leap in the air, twisting for momentum, then landed and struck. The second blow swept in from the right.

Najiv deflected it, but barely.

Cadence hastily delivered a smart strike from the left, followed instantly by another downward swipe.

Najiv ducked under the next swing and lashed at her core.

Cadence stepped away, and he used the opportunity to drive her back. She deflected his next swing and blocked the next.

Najiv pressed right into her space and she had to bend backward awkwardly to avoid getting cut in half. He kicked her in the gut and she flipped backwards, landing in a crouch and sliding backwards a couple feet.

Pushing off, Cadence deflected a red strike from Najiv. She was on him again, and it was quickly apparent who was in control of this fight now.

In two broad strokes, Najiv was left open and she elbowed him in the face before kneeing him in the side. As he bent over in pain, Cadence aeriaded over his back to dodge his swipe.

Najiv spun to countermove, but she was right there. He stopped, not because of her close proximity, but because he became suddenly aware of intense pain.

The first source was from his right wrist, which held his lance, the one Cadence had clamped her hand on. Searing heat consumed his arm and shoulder and he could not hold onto his weapon any longer.

Puzzlement, disbelief, followed then by hate crossed Najiv's face. The second source of pain came from his right ribcage...where a blue-bladed lance was thoroughly lodged.

His face twitched and he cringed. All the while he glared up at Cadence, who stood over him in the near-darkness.

"And that's the problem with you Seditionists," said Cadence coolly, nothing more than a shadow now, "always underestimating your opponents."

She gave one more decisive twist of her lance. "Oh and by the way...it's 'Commander' Shahan now."

Then she ripped the blade from Najiv's body, and his body collapsed to the roof.

Cadence kicked his lance away before taking a careful sigh. She shivered a little and could feel exhaustion descend on her. But she remained where she was a few moments longer, listening to the silence that had fallen over the city.

Moving stiffly, she walked across the roof to the ledge. The last of the adrenaline had dissipated and with growing weariness, she sank to one knee as she surveyed what she could see of the area.

Buildings that had suffered mortar attacks or other kinds of destruction glowed with flames and burning embers in the darkness. Occasionally she caught a flicker on the edge of town as pockets of the enemy clashed with friendly forces. It would be a long night of securing the area, but still, the initial drive had proven successful.

Letting out a quiet breath, Cadence lifted her face towards the dark sky.

Closing her eyes a moment, she savored the icy coldness of the raindrops as they splattered against her face, and felt the coolness of the wind now gently brushing against her.

Silently she gave a prayer of deep thanks for this hard-fought victory. It had been quite a day, from destroying a Seditonist battleship to taking down a dark general. All of which, she could not have done by her own strength.

Feeling someone approaching, Cadence glanced over her right shoulder. There were several forms moving across the roof in the dark.

You just can't seem to keep yourself out of trouble, can you? asked Chad. But she heard the laughter in his voice, and Cadence smiled weakly.

She would have pushed herself up, but she was rather tired and a bit stuck now, muscles already stiff.

That was when a strong hand took her by the arm and lifted her to her feet.

It was Red. Turning her towards him, he looked her over. In the glow of a burning structure across the street, Cadence could see the stern concern on his face.

"No worse for wear, I see," boomed Judge's voice from behind her, making her jump. He laughed heartily and gave her a slap on the back.

She never recalled him being so vocal or jolly.

But Cadence then became aware of the gentle warmth moving through her arm, which Red still had a hold of. Quickly it spread into her shoulder and washed through her cracked ribs, easing away the pain.

Eyes wide, Cadence looked up into the big warrior's face. She could see from the weak light nearby a trace of a smile on his lips, eyes dancing. He gave a slight tilt of his head before stepping back.

Chad appeared at her right, as well as Ronain and Tucker.

"Leave it to our commander not to back down from a fight with an evil general," said Tucker, and she could hear the grin in his voice.

"A mighty warrior, indeed," added Ronain, "you've had a busy day, commander, taking on Seditonist battleships, dueling with generals."

In the weak glow of the nearby fire, there was no missing the pride in his expression.

A single “mmm” was all Cadence could manage.

Flickers of lightning revealed Ajax standing a distance behind Tucker and Chad.

She couldn't catch any of his expression, but if she wasn't mistaken...he had a large sword, tip resting on the ground and arms resting on the butt of the hilt. But when lightning flashed a few seconds later, she realized she must have been mistaken. There was no sword; his arms were at his side, hilt of lance in hand.

Congratulations on falling your first general, he thought, it won't be your last. But you sure make looking out for you rather difficult. Remember...you are still needed for events yet to come. So try not to kick too many hornets' nests, eh?

His final statement was in a light tone and Cadence smiled.

There was a magnificent flash of lightning behind Red, and that was when Cadence finally caught sight of Commander Arthos, a dozen feet away.

Red half turned and followed her gaze to see who she was looking at.

Arthos stood tall, chin level, face stern, looking like a centurion keeping a sharp eye out over his territory. This had been a very personal victory for him, and it hadn't just been about justice for his fallen warriors. It had also been about closure.

Feeling eyes on him, Arthos glanced over to the group.

Gaze falling upon Cadence, she straightened a little and squared her shoulders. Then she lightly touched her right index and middle fingers to her forehead, in a salute.

Faint smile tugging at his lips and eyes twinkling, he returned it.

It had been an eventful day, eventful...and victorious.

Chapter 102

Sinister Plans

None of the Legionnaires could be certain if it was direct retaliation for their victory on Miraz or had been merely part of the Seditonist campaign. Almost immediately afterwards, Seditonist battleships attacked Legionnaire allies on Nordoc in the Jutland System.

The tiny planet of Iklil in Ulnun, a suspected Legionnaire hideout for reinforcements, was also ambushed. Its cities were completely flattened until the entire planet looked like nothing more than a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

While the dark lord Zair knew it was likely Nordoc wouldn't totally fall at the moment, he unleashed his full wrath on Iklil. If they'd had the firepower to obliterate the planet itself, he would have done it.

His personal cruiser followed the large asteroid cluster at the outer rim of Ulnun. Presently he was in the dark conference room, discussing details and results of his force's movements with three holographic images standing in the middle of the table. Miraz may have been a major battle, and defeat, but the larger scheme of things didn't revolve around it. There were many other plans in motion.

It had been a day since the battle at Miraz, and Zair was wrapping things up when, as expected, Bayne and Cyrus entered the conference room. They moved a bit stiffly, scrapes and bruises marking their faces.

"Thank you, commanders," spoke Zair to the holographic figures, "let me know when you're in position."

They acknowledged the order and then disappeared.

Bayne sat down moodily in a chair at the end of the table. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd been forced to retreat. Every time he'd been forced to, he loathed his enemy all the more. But this last occasion, on Miraz, he hadn't been forced.

He'd been *ordered*.

Zair sensed his thoughts, but his eyes flicked to Cyrus, who paced along the side of the table. He could tell his other general wished badly to ask questions regarding their orders.

Zair smiled inwardly at his restlessness. Looking at Bayne, he asked, "How many of our forces got off the planet?"

"A thousand commanders," mumbled Bayne darkly, "not including their subordinates."

Zair mulled this over a moment. It was a significant loss of numbers, at least, for a single attack.

Cyrus could not stand it any longer and finally blurted, "Why didn't you let us take her? There were four of us! We could have done it easily."

Zair didn't often explain himself, feel the need to, and almost never tolerated it when someone did question him. But for one of his top warriors, he let it slide.

Gesturing at the panel on the wall behind Cyrus, he replied, "I will show you why, general."

Zair walked past Cyrus towards the screen as it turned on.

Individual boxes popped up, from security cameras. They looked out at the flat rooftop from several angles and all began to simultaneously play. Clips from the fighting went into motion, most of which Bayne and Cyrus remembered since they'd been there.

“First,” spoke Zair evenly, an edge in his voice, “you really think you could have taken her then and there?”

He half turned to throw a cold look at Cyrus. “She fell Najiv by herself. Look at you four there and at Cadence, how she maneuvers and counters your moves. You underestimate the power she has in that small, lean body of hers. Besides, she is too strong mentally and spiritually for you to fall her. Again, though, that's only for the moment.”

Nodding at the panel, the video boxes were replaced with still images and photos. “As I expected, you had the strongest, most infamous Legionnaire generals very close by, en route to Cadence. And I could tell by the video, and can see now by your bruises, they offered you quite a challenge once they arrived on the scene.”

Zair's gaze flicked from Cyrus to Bayne and then back to Cyrus. “But I gave you your orders to engage but not kill because I wanted to see who was closest to Cadence. This is how we will break her: destroy every single person close to her.”

More photos appeared on the screen. “We have the team she trained with while at on Elywn, and plans have already been set into motion to take them down. But the most immediate threat is General Nathan Chad.”

Cyrus's expression formed into one of utter disdain. He remembered his little dance with that particular general on his own battleship six years ago.

“Jett could have attested to that,” muttered Bayne, “Chad is extremely protective, and obviously, powerful. I got the sense he'd made it his personal duty to look after Cadence.”

Zair gave a nod. “That's correct. The key will be to remove him from the equation.”

Cyrus folded his arms. “But how long is all this going to take? Cadence is only getting stronger. By the time this plan plays out, will it have a significant effect on her? Enough for her to be killed?”

“These plans will have to be played out in perfect time,” answered Zair, “but I know if everything is done right, Cadence will be crippled. The blows will come not all at once, but one after another, relentless and grinding. It is difficult to do anything, let alone fight, when you are in so much pain you can hardly breathe.”

Smiles of evil pleasure twisted onto the faces of Bayne and Cyrus. They liked the sound of that.

“But that still leaves us with the problem of Chad,” said Bayne, “he won't fall easily.”

“We'll have to play it by ear,” replied Zair, “but if we can isolate Cadence and Chad from the others, we'll have a much better chance.”

A sinister light gleamed in the dark lord's eyes. "And I think the perfect person to come up with ideas for Cadence's demise will be Kiera...her very own sister."

Chapter 103

A Thief & a Traitor

She hadn't been to her home planet of Elywn since the Seditonist attack six years ago. As Cadence snuck amongst the shadows, she did her best to keep back the deep sorrow she felt.

While the Seditonists had rebuilt the necessary structures, various buildings still lay in ruins. Large portions of the forest immediately surrounding the town had been flattened also. But now young saplings were doing their best to replace the massive pines that had been obliterated from shellings.

Low gray clouds pressed closely to the town, hiding the mountains and ridges beyond. The entire place had a dreary, gray hue to it now, and Cadence wondered if her home would ever see the sun again.

But back to the task at hand.

Cadence ducked beneath a dark archway as a pair of security officers walked past. Once they disappeared around a corner, she continued in the opposite direction.

Jogging quietly, she made her way along the building, towards the security complex. Coming to a square, Cadence paused, listening and searching for any security officers that might be posted here.

After she was positive it was clear, she slipped between the rows of trees running along the inside of the square. She was halfway across when the sound of voices came to her. A light breeze was blowing, moving between the buildings in various directions, so it was difficult for her to pinpoint where the trouble was coming from.

The voices grew louder.

Adrenaline spiking, Cadence sprinted for the building in front of her. With a leap, she jumped and grabbed onto some thick vines which had once created a beautiful terrace. Hastily she pulled herself up to the second floor. Most of the windows had been blown out, and Cadence slipped inside.

As she did, a large group of officers, who'd just finished their shift, appeared through the narrow gap between the building Cadence was in and the one adjacent to it.

She was about to head for the front door, but something told her to wait a moment.

“I don’t know why they had to send in a dark commander to snoop around,” one officer was saying.

One of his companions gave a bitter laugh. “I know! Them thinkin’ there was actually a Legionnaire general walking around here with us, spying. What does upper management think we are? Idiots?”

“Like we wouldn’t be able to spot an enemy general!”

This gave Cadence something to think about as she walked away from the window in search for the stairs.

A Legionnaire general walking amongst the ranks of the enemy unseen? The only one whom she knew of who could pull that off was Eliezer. As for a dark commander “snooping around”...

Pale light bathed the small lobby of the building. The windows that hadn’t been shattered were coated with a thick layer of dust.

Cadence paused in the shadows of the entryway. The bare street before her was quiet. She knew that would change, though, on the backside of the next building. That alley she wanted to reach would drop her nearly at the perimeter of the security complex.

As quick as it would be to just charge through the streets firearms blazing, stealth was vital here.

The enemy was fully aware that Cadence was back in the thick of the war. Those who didn’t flee from her wouldn’t hesitate to try and kill her. Or capture her. And right now she didn’t want all of the security and dark warriors on the planet coming after her.

It had been a few days since Miraz was retaken. A twenty-four-hour campaign ensured any remaining pockets of the enemy had either been chased off the planet or killed. The planet had been secured.

Most of the warriors returned to their cruiser and drifted towards Ulnun while next moves were discussed and planned. That was when they received an intelligence report that the Seditonists on Elywn had obtained an order of cloaking devices.

While this was an age of advanced technology, cloaking devices weren’t readily available. If Seditonist battleships were able to hide themselves, it would spell definite disaster for the Legionnaires. Cloaking had been a distinct advantage for them, an edge they needed to maintain at all costs.

Cadence had been the first to pipe up, saying she could sneak in and steal the devices. They were small, light and could easily fit in a small messenger bag. On top of it, she knew the town, its secrets and little known passageways.

Naturally everyone had balked at this proposal. But they also knew she was right. It wasn't like the place was packed with dark generals; just squads of regular security and a handful of Seditonists.

This didn't keep some of her team from insisting they accompany her.

"Well, you can't," Cadence had answered, pointing at the left shoulder of her armor, "and you see these stripes? That means I outrank you. So as your commander I'm giving you all a direct order to stay put."

That settled it, and it was then she'd realized the perks of being a commanding officer.

Besides, like she was going to sit around and relax on a ship for another week when she could be on the ground doing something?

Really, thought Cadence as she nonchalantly started across the road, *I don't see why this is such a big deal.* She'd been doing stuff like this half a decade.

She was nearly to the far side when she saw a security droid down the road to her right. A small black sphere, it drifted through the air as it patrolled the town.

If someone was actually watching the live footage it was sending back to the complex, just shooting it wasn't an option.

The droid hovered twenty feet over the street as it lazily moved along, swiveling and pivoting back and forth as it scanned. In the lower right corner of its "eye," a heat signature popped up and then vanished just as quick.

Turning all its attention to the building on its right, it descended cautiously, panning the structure. Reaching the narrow alley, it jerked back suddenly a dozen feet...as a pair of patrol officers stepped out onto the road.

They scowled at the droid and muttered something about it needing a maintenance check. Then they turned right and started down the road.

After the droid confirmed their identities, it returned to its original altitude and hung a left at the next intersection.

Cadence stuck her head out of a side door and checked the alleyway. Seeing it was clear, she turned right. The southwestern-most edge of the complex came into view and she paused in the darkness to survey the scene.

The entrance was guarded, but not heavily; just a guard in the office between the entrance and exit gates. A second man stood at his post, on a walkway fifteen feet high, behind the top of the security fence. A third man was at the same post, just on the other side of the gates, only visible from the torso up. The machinegun nest at the corner of the courtyard appeared empty.

In a head-on assault, it would have been easy enough to breach. But Cadence had never intended to use the main entrance.

A vehicle approaching drew her attention, as did the sound of shuffling boots. The guards at the gate jumped to attention.

A small patrol coming down the street on the left sprang into action and lined up along the roadside. The officer on the far right end was a mere foot from the narrow alley Cadence was hiding in.

Carefully she backed up and gained entrance into the small structure on her left via a side door. She moved quickly, only slowing when she passed any windows with a view of the street. The vehicle, a lightly armored cruiser, went by and was followed by two rows of foot soldiers.

They stopped behind the vehicle as words were exchanged between the driver, a commander, and the guards at the entrance.

One of the soldiers near the rear just sighed. *Let's just get on with it*, he thought. He was tired but mostly bored. He had been the past three years, the last time they'd seen any action.

He was just thinking about whether he was going to sleep first and then eat when a flicker of movement through the window on his left drew his attention. He eyed it suspiciously.

Nudging his comrade beside him, he nodded at the building. His friend looked past him at the window. He was about to shrug when he saw something move inside too.

The soldier looked at the two others behind him and gestured for them to follow. Slightly on edge, they entered through the door on the left. It opened into the small entryway, which led into a larger room through an open doorway.

Hands securely on their weapons, they approached the doorway. A noise, like a faint scuffing of a boot, brought their rifles up.

Since this was his idea, the lead soldier stepped into the room first. His friend followed on his heels.

The sound came again, in the darkest corner of the room. That's when he caught a flash of movement. The closer he got, the harder his heart hammered in his chest.

Then it appeared! And the soldiers realized it wasn't a scuffing noise...it was a fluttering.

The lead soldier lowered his rifle, frowning. "Stupid bird."

That's all it had been, a sparrow flying around in the room.

"How'd it get in here?" asked one of the men.

"Who cares," snapped the leader, "let's go. I'm starving."

Cadence had long exited the building, but had needed a distraction to get the soldiers in the rear to move. This allowed her to sprint across the road, down a short alley and into the heavy woods.

But this mind trick had also let her see just how strong, or weak, the local security was mentally. Now she had her answer.

She raced through the trees until she was near the northeastern corner of the complex. Slowing, she cut back and forth, searching for something on the ground. A few minutes later, her foot finally struck something hard under a particular patch of moss: a metal bump.

Pulling back the carpet of moss, Cadence uncovered a hidden door. The bump had been the handle to open it.

As with most kids, when she was younger she'd explored every inch of her hometown. This included the woods around the security complex, and the hidden entrance had been discovered when she was only eight.

Kiera had also been there when it was uncovered and Cadence hoped her sister had forgotten about it. If Kiera had told the enemy about this entrance and they'd taken heightened security measures to keep it secure...it would greatly complicate matters.

The latch was still kept locked with a basic lock, now rusted.

Squatting over the door, Cadence held her hand over the lock. Seconds later the lock began to glow red. A minute after that, she drew her knife from her thigh and cut through the lock like it was made of butter.

Shouts from atop the complex wall, forty feet from Cadence's position, snapped her head up. There was more shouting and movement by the soldiers.

She watched keenly until she saw they were lined up, facing into the compound. When she saw them salute, she returned to her work; whoever had arrived in the vehicle was obviously a high ranking officer.

Brushing the lock aside, Cadence cracked the door open far enough to peer down into the darkness of the tunnel. No alarms sounded, and no one opened fire on her. Excellent.

Cadence closed the hatch and hid it with the moss. Taking a stick, she stabbed it into the ground. She'd use this as a marker so she could find the door quicker next time.

Standing, she started off for the north side of the compound, the rear side. *Where is an enemy soldier when I need one?* she thought.

At the back of the complex was another pair of gates. But those hadn't been used in decades and were sealed tight. There wasn't much need to guard a barricaded entrance. And the forest had grown right up against the wall, so no way was an enemy going to be able to get heavy vehicles close.

Cadence was forced to wait three whole minutes until a pair of soldiers appeared, walking unhurriedly through the thick trees.

A twig snapped near their position, and they stopped. Another snap, this time louder.

"Probably just an animal or something," said the first.

Another snap, followed by some rustling. The trick was to draw them in without worrying them too much so they reported back to base before investigating.

Together, the two soldiers started up the steep hill, where the forest was denser. They reached halfway up the incline before stopping.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” said the second man, “just an animal.”

They never even saw where the attack came from. Both soldiers slumped on the ground and wouldn’t be waking up anytime soon.

Pulling them behind a thick stand of trees, Cadence donned the uniform of the smaller soldier. After tossing their weapons over the crest of the hill, she quickly jogged back to the secret hatch.

She threw the stick aside, pulled back the moss and opened the door. Dropping down in the tunnel, the hatch quietly closed and the moss carpet returned to its normal place over the hatch.

The passage was pitch black and as Cadence jogged along, she kept her right elbow lightly touching the wall. If her memory served her correctly, the tunnel would put her behind one of the guard shacks close to the wall.

Forty feet later, Cadence reached the steep stairs. When she felt the door above her head, she carefully pushed it open, hoping 1) it wasn’t locked, 2) nothing heavy had been put on it, and 3) that she wouldn't step completely out into the open.

It was not locked and as she cracked the door open, she saw she was behind a guard shack. Even better, a supply delivery must have just been made. Large plastic containers were stacked high beside the shack, providing further cover.

Quickly, Cadence slipped out of the tunnel. Calmly assessing her situation, she noted the light activity about the complex. But no one seemed alarmed or suspicious. No swarms of officers left the main building complex, a two story structure in the center of the compound.

Spotting the digital clipboard setting on top one of the crates, Cadence grabbed it and pretended to scribble something on it. Then, putting on a deep scowl, she tossed the clipboard back onto the container and strode off across the complex.

Cadence would put money on the guess the cloaking devices would be kept in the secured supply storage unit on the western side of the facility.

Unless they were already being installed. But the large cruiser base was on the other side of the planet, so they were likely being kept here until they were retrieved.

No one seemed to take notice of Cadence. Passing by various posts, she hung a right at the next little road. The storage unit should be on the west side of the main building.

“Hey, where’s Tony?” asked a soldier in passing.

“How would I know,” growled Cadence gruffly, “I’m not his mother.”

That seemed to be the right answer. The soldier glanced at his friend and raised an eyebrow before they continued on their way.

Down another narrow path between a row of bunkhouses and sure enough, there was the storage unit. A single guard sat in a chair by the door and was doing his best to stay awake.

Cadence didn’t slow her pace as she marched up to him. “Late night last night?” she asked, taking the security card from her pocket.

The soldier yawned, only able to keep his eyes half open. “Double shift...you’re awfully dirty. Where’ve you been?”

Cadence swiped the card through the scanner above the handle of the door. She threw him a displeased look, “Cleaning archives.”

The soldier snorted. “What’d you do to deserve that punishment?”

The lock on the door disengaged and Cadence pulled the handle. “I may have...mouthed off to the commander.”

The soldier allowed himself a good laugh. It seemed to be quite taxing on him though, because he finally took a breath and yawned yet again. He felt even more tired than ever before, in fact, his eyelids were growing quite heavy.

“When I’m done here, though,” continued Cadence, “I’m going to go take a nice, long nap...”

The soldier was already slumping against the corner created by the shack and the building behind him. He mumbled something, and she walked into the unit. By the time the door closed behind her, he was out like a light.

Smiling to herself, Cadence began rummaging around the various lockers. Near the back, she found a large locked safe, complete with electronic keypad. *Of course*, she thought.

Well, there was nothing else for it.

Cadence pulled out the hilt of her lance, hidden in one of the pockets on her cargo pants. She paused a second, very aware that breaking into a safe in this manner may set off an alarm.

Sure enough, she’d gotten halfway finished with the door when an alarm cut shrilly through the air.

Another ten seconds and the door fell off.

“Hello,” she said when she spotted the clear container holding the cloaking devices. They were hardy pieces of technology, so she didn’t have any reserves about dumping them into the tactical messenger bag she’d been carrying with her the entire time.

On her way back to the door, her eye happened to fall upon remote detonating mines. Smiling at an idea, Cadence snatched up a couple with their detonator and slid them into her pockets.

She exited the unit hastily, found the soldier still asleep, and started off briskly for the row of bunkhouses. She'd only just disappeared when a squad of soldiers reached the unit.

Since nearly everyone else was jogging around, Cadence figured it was safe to do so also. Lifting into an easy gait, she made her way along the north end of the compound.

Ω Ω Ω

The commander who'd been sent to investigate rumors of a Legionnaire general in town was none other than Kiera Shahan. She wanted nothing more than to be in battle, but it seemed Zair wanted to make sure she didn't get into too much trouble right now. He had a bigger plan for her, though he still neglected to share.

So he had her trying to track down Eliezer; she knew it was his way of giving her something productive to do. Being idle for more than a day put her into quite a frightful mood.

And she'd tracked Eliezer here after many hours of pouring over intelligence reports and questioning spies and intelligence officers.

Kiera had been making her way to the intel room when an alarm sounded. She'd sensed something just a little off the past hour or two and wasn't that surprised at the alarm.

The first thought that came to mind was: cloaking devices. They'd gotten the delivery not twelve hours ago and soldiers from the cruiser base were supposed to be here tonight to pick them up.

Reaching the ground floor, all Kiera had to do was throw the soldiers a look and they fell in formation behind her.

Ω Ω Ω

Cadence had made good use of the charges. In passing, she planted two on a pair of cruisers and another pair on transformers providing primary power for the complex.

She was making her way back to the tunnel and was nearly there, just reaching the guard shack. That was when...

She'd been keeping a wary eye, scanning the soldiers as they ran here and there. But there, emerging from the headquarters was Kiera.

Their gazes met at the exact same time.

Uniform or no uniform, Kiera knew her sister when she saw her.

Cadence stopped and half turned to Kiera, fifty feet away. Jaw set hard, she glared darkly at her big sister as the anger she'd been keeping at bay these past years growled to life in her soul.

Now isn't the time, whispered a voice in her mind, *get out of there now.*

Hello, thief, said Kiera.

Hello, traitor, replied Cadence.

Cadence hadn't known until this moment how she'd feel towards her sister when she finally saw her. She'd been afraid she'd feel weak, crushed, powerless.

But instead she felt anger, betrayal, and righteous fire for justice burning hot in her soul.

Cadence...

The still, small voice cut through her thoughts.

Get out now.

Cadence ground her teeth, heart pounding hard against her ribcage in rising fury. Forcing herself to take a breath, Cadence felt the detonator in her left pocket, hidden from Kiera's view.

The whole exchange between the sisters took only a couple seconds. Kiera was a breath from taking action when several deafening explosions rocked the complex.

Shards of metal, glass, and clouts of dirt rained down on Kiera and any nearby soldiers. Thick, black plumes of smoke billowed into the sky. And that's when she realized the security lights around the perimeter of the compound were no longer on.

"Commander!" shouted a soldier as he ran up, "the intruder blew the transformers! We've lost power!"

Blood boiling, Kiera looked back where Cadence had been, but saw no one. Marching over towards the shack, she quickly found the hidden door, years of dirt having been removed when the thief had entered and exited.

With a growl, Kiera leapt atop the crates and climbed onto the roof of the guard shack. Here she had a view over the wall and into the forest. But she could see no one, especially now as the sun, hiding behind the clouds, was headed for the western horizon.

"Do you want us to deploy search units?" called a soldier from below.

"No," replied Kiera darkly, "you'll never find her."

A slight commotion at the front gates drew her attention. A pair of soldiers, surrounded by their comrades, approached. One of them was missing his uniform, which explained where Cadence had gotten her garb before entering the complex.

Not waiting to hear an explanation, Kiera drew her firearm and shot both men.

“Clean up this mess!” she bellowed to the others.

Her once beautiful green eyes, now darkened, returned to the forest outside the wall.

One day soon I swear I'll kill you, she thought to Cadence, I swear I will.