

## **“Parallel, Book I, Pt. I: Genesis”**

By: Kenya Gaede

Copyright 2014 Kenya Gaede

### **Dedication**

*To those going through a time of darkness and struggle, who have been broken, or wounded deeply and have yet begun to heal. While it doesn't help in the very moments of devastation, as your life lay in ruin all around you, know you're not alone. You aren't the only person going through, or struggling with, what you are.*

*There is also One Who can truly heal, repair and comfort the exhausted soul, and is the only One Who will always be there. You know His name. It sparks controversy and heated debate; it heals; it makes demons run and flee in terror; it is the only name that saves.*

*He is my light and hope in the deepest darkness, Who guides me through this confusing world; the only One Who has never hurt me and is the One who repeatedly saves me from myself.*

*He will help, and all you have to do is ask. He is mighty to save and will never abandon, the only friend who won't ever leave or fail you.*

*You aren't alone.*

*To my cousin (you know who you are): the butterfly is for you.*

"Keats was wrong, then, when he said he was certain of the holiness of the heart's affections."

"I doubt if he knew clearly what he meant. But you and I must be clear. There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels. It's not out of the bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels..."

Excerpt from Chapter 11 in "*The Great Divorce*" [C.S. Lewis]

## **Preface**

I will not specify just how "close to home" the prologue and beginning of the opening chapter strikes. Obviously, the situation in the story was drastically altered from the real-life event, but the heart of it remains intact.

There wasn't any debate over whether or not I was going to keep the beginning once I wrote it. I decided to leave it unaltered solely in the belief that there are many other people who have experienced a similar event and can relate (to the family drama—not the being transported to another dimension).

But believe me when I say there is absolutely no malicious or vengeful intent behind it.

I'm "speaking" cryptically, and in actuality, there isn't a single person who knows the full story of the events behind the beginning of this novel. No one asked for my side and I didn't, and don't, feel any desire to divulge. What's done is done, and is a thing of the past.

As I just mentioned, I know other people can relate, and that's the purpose for the opening. Just because a work is fiction doesn't mean there aren't parts applicable in real life. I want to write stories that aren't only a great and exciting adventure, but also have areas that others can share in, in some way.

Please note the main character is a young adult and will be maturing gradually throughout the story. It doesn't happen overnight. By the end of Part I, when you think back to how the character was at the beginning, you should be able to see a big difference.

I'd originally written Part I, and part of Part II in first person. However, as you see, I actually rewrote it in third person. I know some people don't like how 1<sup>st</sup> person reads, so I wrote it in a different version also. It's fun to see the thoughts of the other characters and they can be developed deeper quicker than in 1<sup>st</sup>.

The things I do for you!

Please keep in mind, especially for the 1<sup>st</sup> person version: just because the main character thinks something in a certain scenario, doesn't necessarily mean it's correct—or that I support that idea or thought. As in any other story I write, the character(s) have to make mistakes or have struggles, otherwise we won't be able to relate.

The specific struggle our main character faces will show up later in Part I, and it was one that was put heavily on my mind. In addition to saying that, the way our character deals with certain hardships may not be the right way to handle it.

Most of the time, we know the right way of dealing with a situation. That said, we also know choosing the right way can be much more difficult than simply choosing the wrong way.

Lastly, you won't see every character, animal, or beast, in the opening chapters. Little by little they'll be introduced as the story goes on.

As much as I didn't want to, I'm going to have to publish the first book in two parts. Part 1: Genesis, and then Part 2: Traverse. If I keep it as one "lump sum" it'll be quite long.

Part I is mostly about exploring the other dimension, character development and setting up the plot there.

Part II shifts from character development and now focuses more on the plot of the antagonists in both realms, and seeing how they affect one another.

One final random, yet informative, note: you'll notice I use directional bearings (north, south, etc), and that sometimes they'll be capitalized. There's a difference between upper case and lower case in the story. The capitalized words (i.e. the North) refers to an actual geographical area, such as the region where the dark king and high king live. It'll make more sense in the story as you read.

Just a warning: in Part I, make sure your seatbelt is tightened when you reach "Chapter 26: Sheep's Clothing." That's when it's all about to hit the fan!

All illustrations were created and drawn by me and are my property.

I did have a great time writing this story, otherwise I never would've finished it. As always, I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Cheers!

## **PART I: Genesis**

### **Prologue**

*Excerpt from an old journal entry by Jada Serbin:*

*I never did figure out why my immediate relatives resented me so much. All I knew was that I was considered a disappointment.*

*Of course, that wasn't how it was when my parents were still here. Back then I was a bright and aspiring young woman, destined for...whatever.*

*But everything changed when they disappeared one day, vanished from the face of the earth. I was only in my mid-teens then, and I learned just how much shock and pain someone could survive.*

*All three of us might've been independent in our ways and work, but we were still a close family. Sure we had our problems, but they always seemed like minor storms that eventually blew themselves out.*

*I didn't believe my parents abandoned me. There wasn't a reason for it, no reason to leave. I also didn't believe they were dead. As close as we were, I think I'd have known in my soul if they were.*

*How I prayed to God that I wished I hadn't had to live with my relatives after the disappearance. I knew I could've survived on my own, knew the way of the woods and mountains. Growing up on a ranch gave me a work ethic and broad range of skills. Plus, with all the traveling my parents and I had done, I was familiar with various customs, how to blend and how to find work with a relative safe employer.*

*Our travels and exposure to different cultures gave me an unusual sense of maturity. I wasn't easily conned or played. I was also graced with a large dose of common sense, and adults were often surprised by the soundness of my words and insights on serious matters.*

*But it was unfortunate I had to live with my relatives, because I immediately came to realize the endearment I'd been given by them had merely been a farce, a rouse.*

*The veil of warmth and encouragement was torn away, and I saw their true attitudes and heard what they really thought of me. If I hadn't been so naïve, which I guess comes from a child's innocence, then I would've seen earlier that their smiles were really sneers, and the light in their eyes was not love, but contempt.*

*And yet...I'd truly loved and respected them all deeply. Or, well...maybe "blindly" would've been a better word.*

*They told me I was ungrateful, a disrespectful child who'd never truly appreciated what my parents had done for me. I also had a deep-seeded sense of entitlement and had never done a real day's work in my life. I guess manual labor doesn't count for anything.*

*There was also something majorly wrong with me. It probably had to do with the times I'd go a couple days without speaking a word. This was always when I was in a philosophical mood and thinking deeply about life, the ways of people or a problem on my mind.*

*But instead of asking me if anything was wrong, or if I was upset, some assumed I was being a snob and putting them off.*

*Perception really is a tricky thing and jumping to conclusions is faulty.*

*But after a short time, my silence was because I was afraid of opening my mouth in front of my relatives. I was afraid my words would be twisted and used against me in some way. Stored away to be brought up and manipulated during an ambush.*

*Truly, there was very little love in that house, because perfect love drives out fear, and my fear grew into terror of my very own family.*

*It didn't matter that all their accusations were false. I'd loved my parents deeply, which was why I was so shattered by their disappearance.*

*I'd heard that people can cry themselves to sleep, and I can tell you it's true. You can cry yourself to sleep, cry in your sleep, and wake up with tears on your face. I would know.*

*As the weeks dragged on, I admit I sank deeper into myself. It happened automatically, as a means of defense. The words of my new immediate family still wounded me, no matter how outrageous.*

*I thought about running away more than once. I figured it'd give them one less life to stick their noses into. It'd be easier for everyone if I'd just...disappeared, like my mom and dad.*

*But thank God for Zander, the one real friend I had at the time. Though I never told him, he kept me from...from self-destructing. Yet, I believe he knew, by words he said to me later on.*

*Zander, and my almost daily walks in the woods, kept me sane. Like most kids who'd been raised in believing families, I was keenly interested in God and the ways of angels and demons. So as I walked amongst the mountains, away from those who tormented my soul, I talked with and asked Him about all kinds of things. I also asked Him for wisdom and guidance in my present, almost unbearable, situation.*

*Things only grew worse the older I became, and the fiercely independent streak in me was raging.*

*Life had to be more than this mere existence of anguish.*

*It was on a particularly dark day, one of the darkest I ever remember while in that household, when it all began...*

# **Chapter 1**

## **It Begins**

*I'm going to die...or go insane, whichever happens first,* she thought as she stared out the bus window.

Her eyes went from rolling hills blurring past to the mountains beyond and felt the strong desire to flee to them.

It was the end of a horrific month. Actually, it had been a horrific year. But at least that day marked the last day of Jada Serbin's time in high school. The last day, and now summer had officially begun.

Maybe anyone else would've been excited and more than ready for a break. But she wasn't. Until that day, Jada hadn't realized just how much of an escape school had been for her. She'd preferred coping as an outcast during the week over the freedom of weekends.

Why? Because weekends, holidays and summer breaks meant she had to be home.

Jada wasn't sure how she was going to literally survive the summer, or fall, or anything after that. Now that high school was finished, she wasn't sure what she'd use as an escape.

It had been nearly two years since her parents had disappeared, fallen off the face of the planet without a trace. The last twenty of those months had been, well...there was no word to describe it.

Because she hadn't legally been an adult, she'd been forced to live with her relatives, which was an unfortunate turn of events. She quickly learned just how unfortunate a few months following her parents' disappearance.

At first, the ridicule and resentment were subtle, the faint jabs and inferences. But by the third month her relatives, or "tormentors" as she called them, openly told Jada what they thought of her. The people she'd once respected and loved turned and attacked.

She'd long gotten over the initial shock. After so many strikes and stabs to the heart, she'd become somewhat desensitized to the pain. She'd also mastered the skill of instantly putting up walls to shield herself.

The jabs still hurt when one of her relatives lashed out at her. But she was determined not to show the pain. Plus, her agony and sadness had slowly begun to give way to anger.

*So I guess it all works out,* she thought.

The bus stopped at Jada's road, a random stretch of dirt that cut through the green hills.

"Give me a call later, Jade," said Zander, Jada's best friend who was sitting across from her.

He was the son of a rancher, so he was raised right and proper and actually had a work ethic. He was a bit of an outcast, too, but not because he lacked social skills. He was just one of those people who was already comfortable in his skin and didn't determine his status by how many so-called friends he had.

However, if one wanted to play on stereotypes based on appearance, then a person would think Zander was one of the most popular people in school. Tall, athletic and well muscled from hours of work on the farm, he's what comes to mind when people talk about the "star quarterback of the football team."

One day years ago they'd just started talking and instantly became friends. Though she'd never admit it to him, Zander was the one who kept her sane in light of her torment, and he kept her from completely withdrawing into herself.

Jada thought he was pretty good-looking, too, with his sandy colored hair, easy smile and blue eyes that always twinkled with laughter.

But that was based strictly on observation, of course.

"Jade" was Zander's nickname for Jada, which was pronounced *Jay-da*. She'd never gotten around to asking her parents why they'd given her such a strange name.

*I'd probably just been born, she surmised, when my parents looked at each other and realized, 'oh wait. We never came up with a name! Think fast!'*

"Will do," replied Jada to Zander.

Standing, she slapped a hand into his in a firm handshake. It was standard rancher procedure when greeting or saying goodbye.

Jada heard the bus roll away behind her as she started down the road. It was a good two mile walk to the house, but she always enjoyed it, even in rain and snow. The walk was typically the highlight of her day, because she savored the solitude, and the fresh air helped her think.

Besides, it was better to walk thirty minutes alone, than to sit in the same vehicle with her aunt a whole sixty seconds.

The day was stormy, with a late spring storm brewing in the mountains. They sat off her left shoulder, to the west, and ran parallel to the road for miles. Their rugged peaks were laden with snow, and the forested ridges below were carpeted with spruce and aspen. The trees stood erect along a number of vast fields, which had been cleared by farmers.

A sharp gust of wind tore down the road and sent a dust devil swirling across Jada's path. It tugged her dark brown hair away from her face as she turned her green eyes to the sky.

The clouds were roiling in shades of dark grays and blues, and the atmosphere was unsettled.

It was during weather like this when she often wondered if something sinister was brewing, like darkness was moving or there was about to be some clash between good and evil. Jada knew that sometimes it was merely the result of the hyperactive imagination she'd been made with.

Other times, like in that instant, she had a sense of foreboding, as if something bad was about to happen.

She wouldn't have to wait much longer to understand that the rising dread tightening her stomach wasn't the result of her creative mind. There was a real reason for it.

By the time Jada reached the front door of the house, the wind was gusting angrily. Lightening flickered over the mountains, and low but distant rumbles of thunder answered.

Wrestling with the screen door, she finally got it open, and then the main door. The wind sucked it shut with a loud *kerslam* before she had a chance to stop it.

"Jada..."

Her aunt stood at the island in the kitchen, down a short passage and to the left. Her cousin, who lived nearby, was beside her.

Her aunt's tone, and perpetually steely gaze, suggested Jada had slammed the door on purpose.

"Sorry," she muttered before trudging up the stairs and down a short hallway.

Her room was large and open. Numerous windows allowed a view over a large field that backed right against the forest and mountains. She had a front row seat to winter storms, and also to the sunrise from the other side of the room.

With another sigh, Jada dropped her backpack beside her desk. After rummaging through the drawers, she discovered she hadn't restocked on snacks.

*Idiot*, she thought to herself. Usually she stashed snacks in her room, so she didn't have to go downstairs when hungry. It was a strategy to keep contact with her relatives to a minimum.

Steeling herself, Jada headed for the kitchen, where her aunt and cousin had resumed their conversation.

While Jada didn't intentionally eavesdrop on peoples discussions, she did have a knack for accidentally overhearing things, like, "being in the wrong place at the right time."

More often than not she thought it was a curse, and she thought it again as she started down the stairs.

"I don't know what we're going to do with her," said her aunt.

"Well," replied her cousin in a hushed tone, "can't you send her to live with Jill? I know she's kind of far away, but there's a nice college there. Maybe time in the city would do Jada some good."

The aunt clicked with her tongue and gave a shake of her head. "If only John and Carla had made her get a real job when she was younger, instead of letting her run around in the woods or on the farm all the time..."

Instant fire simmered through Jada's veins. Loyalty and defending family honor wasn't something she took lightly. She could handle personal attacks alright, but any remote assault on her parents set her blood afire.

While perception could be fickle and tricky, Jada had survived living with her relatives to clearly see, understand, and even be told a few things. So she wasn't misreading looks and words when she came to some conclusions regarding her new immediate family.

First, her cousin and aunt looked down their noses at her because she wasn't raised like, nor behaved like, their children when they were her age. Having not been brought up in the same ways made them think lesser or ill of her. Somehow, she wasn't as good, as smart, or as something as their children.

That was on top of the fact that Jada preferred manual labor over sitting at a desk worrying about paper cuts.

Thus, in short: office work meant a real job. Laboring on a farm equaled simple fun, or something stupid people did because they couldn't do anything else. Nevermind that it was the laborers, farmers and truck drivers who produced, harvested, and delivered food to the store, to which everyone else could simply drive over to buy.

But Jada was now well-practiced in patience, self-control and holding her tongue. By the time she reached the bottom step, she'd checked her emotions.

As she walked into the kitchen, both women turned and regarded her as a ruler might a slacking and incompetent servant.

"Have you decided on a college or university yet?" asked her aunt.

“No,” replied Jada as she pulled a loaf of bread from a cupboard. “I’ll probably just go to the community college.”

Her aunt huffed through her nose before asking with some indignation, “Well, do you at least know what you want to study?”

“Yes,” answered Jada as she took peanut butter from the pantry. “Agriculture or criminal justice. Haven’t decided yet.”

“Criminal justice would give you a lot more opportunities to...”

Jada drew a quiet breath and ignored the rest of the lecture she received countless times in a given week.

This was also another one of those details she’d learned while staying with her tormentors.

In the eyes of some relatives, until a person acquired a four-year degree they were worthless and unintelligent. While Jada acknowledged people with a degree earned more than those who didn’t, that didn’t mean they were worth any less or more.

Yet, apparently obtaining a degree was just one of those things people did in America. Although, having a degree, or all kinds of stuff, didn’t make a human more valuable. It didn’t add real value to them.

Or so Jada believed. Needless to say, the dreams, aspirations and gifts she’d been made with were second to acquiring a degree. Thus, she might as well as forget about them.

So Jada did. She’d given up and let her dreams die. Or be killed, which would be much more accurate, and with much thanks to the two women standing in the kitchen.

“You going to work this summer?” asked the cousin with an expectant tone.

*Yeah*, thought Jada sarcastically, *I was thinking of running away to the circus.*

Instead, she answered in a flat tone, “The two farms down the road are going to need an extra hand...”

As usual, the two grown women sighed and rolled their eyes.

“Don’t you aspire to actually...do something with your life?” asked the aunt. “Something that you can make a living on and be independent?”

“The pay is very competitive,” replied Jada. “But I’m more interested in helping people for the sake of helping them. Anyway, if I do that, Zander can give me a lift to and from the college. He’s planning on taking classes there, too.”

“Sounds like more mooching off the generosity of friends,” countered the aunt with much scorn.

*Easy, Jada told herself, don't take the bait.*

"Excuse me?" she asked and managed to keep her tone neutral.

"Just like you did with your parents," she continued, as an unsettling darkness fell over her expression. "They let you do whatever you wanted, but what'd you ever do to show your appreciation?"

Jada stood there for a moment. She was unsure if she'd heard correctly, but she was also slightly unnerved by the change on her aunt's face. She'd never seen such an eerie expression on a person. It was like some unnatural and dark mood had settled on the woman.

"I carried my weight on the farm," replied Jada, feeling herself waver. "They never asked me for help, but I did anyway, because I wanted to."

"Out of obligation more like it," huffed the cousin with heavy resentment, like she couldn't possibly believe the sincerity of Jada's response.

But that was when Jada understood what was really going on.

*Oh, she thought, even as she felt her throat tighten, this is one of those 'attack my character' events.*

Growing up, Jada had been one of those people who earnestly wanted to live rightly. She wanted to behave, because it was the right thing to do and it pleased and honored her parents. Even when she was younger, the most blatantly disobedient, conniving thing she recalled doing was sneaking cookies before dinner, after her mom told her she couldn't.

She wanted to live correctly, and not just because she "had" to or "the Bible said so." Life was hard enough, so why intentionally screw it up and make things more difficult for yourself?

The most important reason of all was she wanted to grow closer to the one true God. Thus, Jada's intentions, the way she lived and conducted herself, came from pure motives.

So when someone jabbed at her and told her she couldn't possibly want to keep living as she was, or accused her of faking her right conduct, it cut her straight to the heart.

It was the best way to land a devastating strike that left her instantly crippled.

"I never asked them for anything," said Jada, voice growing weaker, "and I worked as hard as I did because that was how I repaid them."

The aunt and cousin laughed lightly with disdain, and their eyes were cold as they smiled.

*This is a nightmare come to life, thought Jada.*

“Jada,” said the cousin, “you can say that, but no one here is going to believe you. We know how manipulative you really are, and how much you resented your parents. But you can tell yourself whatever you want. Whatever helps you sleep.”

“And you can walk around here, pretending to be all high and mighty,” added the aunt, never one to miss out on a jab. “But you aren’t fooling anyone but yourself.”

Jada had heard that bitterness and jealousy were dangerous poisons, and looking at the two women, seeing their expressions and hearing their tones, she believed it.

She was right and not misperceiving things. She’d been graced with wisdom and insight in her young years and could accurately discern a person’s intentions, and what was behind their words.

The two women were jealous of her, of that Jada was certain. But she had no idea why. She didn’t think she was anything special, and definitely didn’t think she was better than anyone.

*So why do I matter? Why do they resent me so much?*

Jada had never done anything to these women, other than be extremely tolerant and respectful, no matter how many times they’d talked down or belittled her.

But this was by far the harshest assault she’d faced yet, and the assailants knew right where to strike. The attack came out of left field, so she hadn’t had her defenses up. She’d anticipated more meager jabs about how lazy she was, but not this, not something so harsh.

Jada had to get away from these two women, but she was still in shock. Her feet stayed rooted to the floor.

“I talked to a psychologist friend of mind,” continued the aunt, the eerie darkness fading from her eyes as the typical expression of contempt returned. “I told him about you and your moods, and he thinks it’s quite possible you have some kind of personality disorder.”

Jada just stared. *Am I actually hearing this?*

Generally she was even-keel emotionally. She made especially sure to keep herself in check around these two, so as not to give them anything to use against her. As far as Jada knew, the only mood she’d displayed had been consistently stoic.

*Woman, she thought as she stood in stunned silence, you’re one to talk about mood swings. Did you even notice the once you had just seconds ago?*

“That would explain a lot,” nodded the cousin. “But good luck getting a decent job with that on your record. You’re difficult enough to work with anyway, though...”

Jada's hands were shaking from her wrath, and the feeling of the remaining shards of her heart being ripped out of her chest.

Appetite completely gone, she put away the bread and peanut butter. Her tormentors continued to speak to her, but she'd tuned them out.

Walking calmly out of the kitchen, Jada returned to her room, careful to shut the door quietly. Then she paced about the room for a good minute, trying to compose herself.

*Come on*, she growled to herself as she fought hard against the tears, *don't be such a pansy. Just suck it up.*

But both angry and wounded, the tears came anyway.

*Dear God*, she cried, *oh dear God in heaven, this hurts!*

It had been a very pointed attack, but in the back of her mind, Jada had known it was coming for some time.

And here it was, along with the breaking point. Everyone has one, and the abused can only take so many beatings before something gives.

After throwing on a change of clothes, Jada grabbed her heavy duty pocket knife, jumped into her good hiking boots and slid on her coat. Quietly, she slid open one of the windows, stepped onto the roof over the back porch and then shut the window.

On the main floor on that side of the house was her aunt and uncle's room, and they usually kept the blinds shut. Therefore, they wouldn't see her.

Jada jumped from the roof and then took off for the trees.

For some months, she'd begun stashing stuff in a hideout in the woods. Her good backpack and other essential gear were there. She'd also thought out several possible plans for seeking work and lodging.

But presently, it was all about escaping.

The storm over the mountains continued to build as a strange mix of hot and cold air tore at her clothes. Thunder grumbled somewhere in the clouds that now hid the peaks.

She sprinted into the forest and swiped her sleeve across her face, down which tears still streamed.

A mile out, Jada reached her gear stash, well hidden in a small rock alcove. Grabbing her backpack she slid it on and started along a rocky path that would take her to her secondary stash. That one held her heavy-duty gear: mainly axes, extra rope, and camping equipment, all things

that she'd bought with *her* hard-earned cash. Her dad's hunting rifle was also there, with an abundance of ammo.

Halfway there, Jada stopped on a rocky flat near tree-line as heavy mist began to fall from the clouds. She wasn't out of shape by any means, but she had to stop.

Never before had she been in such emotional anguish that she actually felt physical pain.

She collapsed to her knees and doubled over, hitching several breaths. Her chest ached from pain that couldn't be put into words, and the wounds inflicted were now beyond bringing more tears.

Yet over and over again, she heard the accusing words, and they continued tearing at her heart.

For some time, Jada remained where she was until a noise made her turn and look over her shoulder. Drawing a sharp breath, she slowly pivoted up to her feet and slid her knife from her pocket.

There, meandering towards her was a black bear.

Though not nearly as big as his brown counterparts, she'd rather deal with one of them than this guy. A brownie that charges might just be bluffing, and there was a chance a person could escape by playing dead if they were pinned. But if a black bear attacked, good luck.

*Why can't I just be left alone?*

With her thumb, Jada flicked the knife blade open as she slowly began backing away. There weren't any nearby trees; the terrain was entirely rock on both sides of the broad passage.

Watching the bear in her peripheral, she thought maybe he'd check out her pack first. What food she had in there was completely sealed, so it shouldn't have attracted him or any other animal.

*I knew I should've put my rifle with my pack,* she thought, mentally kicking herself.

But the bear wasn't interested in the gear. He continued straight for Jada and at a quickened pace.

She spun and ran, keeping to a narrow ledge that hugged the ridge cutting right. Knowing she was about to do some climbing, she closed the knife and jammed it into a pocket.

Close behind was the sound of claws scrambling over rock and huffing breath which grew louder as the beast quickly closed the distance.

Sliding to her side, Jada let herself go over the edge and grabbed the ledge at the last second. Twenty feet below her boots was a shelf. Fortunately, this section of the ridge wasn't a sheer drop but angled and allowed for some sliding.

She let go of the ledge and slid to the shelf.

Above, the bear huffed and snorted in disgust. Then it began to weave back and forth, attempting to discover a way to get to her.

It didn't need to search long. The ledge was just a rock shelf, and half of it crumbled right out from under the bear's paws. It scratched and clawed, almost pulled itself back up...and then lost its grip.

Bear and rocks slid right for Jada.

She sprinted across the short shelf and launched herself for a large rock jutting out over the ridge. But she didn't jump soon enough.

She felt rocks brush past her and the bear caught her in the legs. It turned her and she slammed on her side against the rock she'd been jumping for. She started to slide, grappled along the rock before her right hand and found a handhold.

But for only a second. The rock gave beneath her fingers and she slid over the edge of the rock. Then Jada closed her eyes as she fell...

Ω      Ω      Ω

It took her a few seconds to realize that she hadn't hit the ground or any trees. Plus, it was lighter outside now.

Jada opened her eyes and gaped. Enormous pines towered overhead, their tops disappearing into streams of sunlight coming through the canopy high above. The forest floor was covered in moss and thick layers of pine needles, which created a heavy, earthy scent.

But there wasn't any more time to further consider the scenery. A black arrow shot out of the trees and sank into the ground beside her.

Scrambling to her feet, Jada ran up a short rise as a several arrows shot in the direction the black one had come. An instant later, a hideous screech cut through the air, and the forest seemed to come suddenly alive.

Arrows whistled past and Jada sprinted down and along a shallow creek. Behind could be heard the sound of heavy footfalls and the drumming of horses' hooves.

More shouts, answered occasionally by an unearthly roar of pain.

She cut left for a short, steep bank when an ugly black beast appeared on the crest. Jada gasped and backpedaled as she stared wide-eyed at the creature.

Whatever it was stood man high. Black armor was across its chest, its arms were thick with muscle and in its clawed hand it wielded a black-bladed scimitar. And it gazed with great malice in its yellow cat-like eyes at the little wisp of a human.

*Of course,* thought Jada as she continued to back away, *if I was that ugly, I'd be in a bad mood, too.*

Still in a confused and mildly unsteady state, her foot caught a rock and she tripped, falling back into the stream.

The big brute advanced and was half a dozen steps away when an arrow plunged into the left side of its back. The creature collapsed onto the rocky bank.

Jada was still sitting in ankle deep water when soldiers came up swiftly on foot and horseback.

That was the first time any in this realm beheld the new traveler, though they didn't know that's what she was in that moment.

Akin, leader of the band, thought her a rather pitiful sight from where he was atop his fine bay horse.

There she sat, a willow wisp of a young woman. She was physically strong, he could see that. Though she had a lean muscle type, he thought her still to be a bit too thin.

The first thought that came to mind was that she had been neglected for some time, especially by the trace hollowness in the cheek.

Still, she was beautiful, though those words would never come out of his mouth. Her skin was clean, but tan, as if she spent hours under the sun. Her sharp jaw was clenched tight, against cold or fear he didn't know. Her narrow nose was straight and her fine mouth was pulled into a line. Though her hair was an extremely dark and rich brown, it was currently burning red in the late afternoon shafts of sunlight. A few strands had fallen into her expressive aqua-turquoise eyes, and it was the expression in that gaze that would stay with him for some time.

Hers was the gaze of a hunted and wounded animal. There was still fight in her, but it was the type that comes from desperate flight and the need to escape.

The sound and movement of his warriors surrounding the young woman broke Akin from his thoughts. Straightening in the saddle, he cleared his throat and then asked, "Who are you? What business do you have in the South?"

There was marked sharpness in his tone, but he couldn't very well pick and choose which strangers he was going to be nice to. Consistency and impartiality were important. Besides, he couldn't have his companions think he was soft or was so drawn to this unknown person.

He'd never hear the end of it. So, he had to keep up appearances.

Jada just blinked up at Akin, his face hard and eyes cold.

"Are you a spy for Gilead?" he pressed.

Jada had no idea what he was talking about, let alone where she was. "Wait, what? No...I'm not a spy."

Akin managed to keep the stone-like expression firmly set on his face. But it took effort. In spite of her shaken condition, her voice had strength in it. It was deep also. Not abnormally deep, but full and rich and different from a typical female voice.

It really grabbed his attention.

*A commander type*, thought Akin with mild indignation. *Great. Just more competition.*

Meanwhile, Jada shivered. The water in the creek was exceptionally cold. On top of it, her head was beginning to ache, as well as her ribs from slamming into that rock back on the ridge.

That's when she, and Akin, noticed his bay horse looking at her keenly. It was strange. As she held the animal's gaze, she'd never sensed such intelligence in an equine before; it was as if he was looking right into her.

At length, the bay whickered softly. A sorrel with a flaxen mane to her right answered.

Akin glanced down at his horse, which snorted and gave a toss of its head. *A traveler*, thought Akin. It had been a long time since a new one had arrived...

"Take her to Jordan," he said. "He'll decide what to do with her."

One soldier pulled the stranger to her feet before another bound her wrists with a short piece of rope.

By now, Jada had gone completely numb. *I have to be suffering from some major hallucination or break down or something. What's going on? Why can't everyone just...go away?*

That's when a big black and yellow butterfly appeared. It fluttered about in front of her a moment before gently landing on her bound hands. It rested there a couple seconds, opening and closing its wings. Then, taking flight again, it did one more circle overhead and then gracefully floated away.

The sorrel whickered and another bay horse, on the other side of Jada, answered. She shot a look from one horse to the other, both of which were watching her.

Apparently, it was time to get moving and a soldier behind Jada gave her a shove forward. She wasn't prepared and stumbled to one knee. On a positive note, at least she managed not to go face down in the water.

A sharp snort came from Akin's horse and it pinned its ears and bared its teeth at the soldier who'd pushed her. At this threat, the soldier backed away.

The bay then returned its gaze to Jada and gave a shake of its mane and bob of its head.

Jada had spent nearly her entire life around horses, so she spoke horse. But at the moment she was too disoriented to begin to try and figure out what was going on.

What she didn't know was that the horse was responding to Akin. In this realm, they're exceptionally sensitive to their rider's demeanor, mood and mindset.

When the soldier shoved Jada, Akin's horse had sensed his rider's sudden wrath at the gesture towards the stranger. It then reacted accordingly.

The soldier who'd bound her hands gently took her by the elbow and helped her back to her feet.

Now looking completely dejected, and cold, she was too shy and withdrawn to meet the soldier's eyes.

The trek lasted half an hour, and the sun was sinking and shadows lengthening when they reached the town. Moderately sized houses sat here and there amongst the giant trees, and smoke rose from their chimneys.

A woman appeared with sudden swiftness out a large, lone structure ahead on the right. Even from a distance she was tall and moved with unsurpassed grace.

That was the first time Jada saw Merida. Her face was fair and fine-featured, but at the same time she seemed stern as steel, for she carried herself with resolve and authority. Wavy brown hair reached nearly to her waist and her hazel-green eyes were clear, bright and unbelievably keen.

Merida was old, but she didn't look it. It was merely something Jada perceived. The expression in the woman's eyes was wise and like one who has seen many lifetimes.

*Maybe people here live longer than on Earth,* thought Jada, as she took stole glances at the tall woman. That was then followed by, *that's it, that sounded totally crazy. I've lost it and gone insane.*

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Merida firmly as she drew nearer. "Akin, have you so much free time on your hands that you're tying up strangers?"

Truly, Merida held the authority of a general. She also had the combat skill of one, so she wasn't to be argued with. On top of it, she was his elder.

All that said, because it took every last effort for Akin not to flinch, though his horse did take a step or two back.

"She was in the middle of a raid and I thought it suspicious," he answered evenly.

Merida threw a cross look at Akin before she stopped in front of the strange newcomer and lowered her eyes to Jada.

She involuntarily shrank back under that deep gaze.

When Merida saw that Jada's hands were bound, she *tisked* with her tongue.

"For the love of all things sacred," she muttered to herself as she drew a knife from her hip. With an expert flick, the blade sliced clean through the rope.

"And she's soaked," she stated, eyeing the other soldiers, who backed away a step. "What'd you do? Try to drown her?"

"Easy, Merida," came a voice behind her. "These are strange times. Akin has reason to be suspicious."

Merida stepped to Jada's side and turned. There stood a tall and strong man, someone Jada instantly recognized as an authority figure. One other, slightly younger man stood beside him.

Jada couldn't remember the last time she literally felt so small. She was always the shortest in her class and had the body type of a twig.

Indeed, in the midst of the soldiers and their horses, she was barely visible. It wasn't helped by the fact that she was hunched slightly, in an attempt to make herself smaller.

She became even more so under the merciless expression in the man's hazel eyes as he bent his gaze upon her.

"Who are you?" he asked, the strength of his voice startling her.

"Jada...sir," she replied, thoroughly intimidated by him and her surroundings.

"Where are you from?"

Jada had no idea how to answer, so she went with, "Uh...far away."

He turned his head a little. "Are you a traveler from the other dimension?"

"I'm sorry? The what?"

"We've had some strange people coming and going lately," he said, "and strange things have been happening..."

He looked Jada up and down again, and she shivered in spite of her best efforts not to.

“You don’t look like one of Gilead’s spies, though you’re thin enough for one. Or perhaps you’re a thief.”

*Oh wow, thought Jada. Thanks for that.*

Jada was one of those people who normally couldn’t cry in front of others. But his sharp accusation, on top of everything else that had happened, brought fresh tears that burned her eyes. However, she’d also grown tired of people poking her and her character.

He watched her eyes glisten and then flicker with a briefly rekindled fire as she set her jaw a moment. Then, drawing a breath, squaring her shoulders, and taking up great courage, Jada finally looked the man in the eyes.

“I don’t know who Gilead is, sir,” she replied sternly. “But I’m not a spy or a thief or...anyone!”

People in that realm have keener insight into others, much more than in Earth’s dimension. That’s partly because they know how to truly listen and observe people. But the other part is that it’s merely the way of things in the other realm.

When Jada’s gaze met the man’s, it was in that instant he knew she was a traveler. It was the expression in the eyes and the air that surrounded her.

And he also saw just how deep her torment and brokenness ran.

Here she was, a young woman who had been flying from some great terror, and who had been dropped into a strange world she’d never known. A fair and innocent child, but wise beyond her years.

His heart softened and the harshness in his expression melted away instantly.

“Now, if you don’t mind, Jordan,” said Merida, voice now much calmer as she gently rested her hands on Jada’s shoulders. “I’m going to take our newcomer home. She’s cold, wet and probably starving. Clearly, she hasn’t been here before.”

“I can see that,” replied Jordan, rubbing his stubbly chin thoughtfully. His face had softened and any aggression was long gone, replaced with empathy.

As Merida guided Jada along, one of the soldier’s horses whinnied.

Half turning, Jada saw the sorrel looking at her, its ears perked forward. Then, lifting its head, it whinnied again, call echoing through the trees.

In her shocked and dazed state, Jada didn’t understand that it was an announcement. A new traveler had arrived and news of her coming would quickly spread. In mere days word would

cross the forests of the South, into the wilds of the West, hills of the East and across countless leagues to the high king of the North.

The coming of a new traveler was always extremely newsworthy, and men and creatures, birds and beasts, took note.

Several whinnies answered the sorrel's call. A small herd in a nearby paddock raced to the edge of the fence and slid to a stop at the last possible second. With heads over the top rail, they looked at Jada with great interest.

As for the rest of the horses in Akin's group, they whickered and bobbed their heads, as if in agreement.

The soldier atop the sorrel said something to it in a language unknown to Jada, and the horse snorted in response.

The soldier and his companions glanced at Jada a long moment. Any hostility towards her had been replaced with curiosity, except for Akin. He maintained a highly suspicious expression and said nothing as he turned his bay steed.

The others followed. The sorrel turned its head and looked at Jada once more, before tossing its flaxen mane and walking after the leader.

Jada glanced up at Merida, who was still looking at the riders with a knowing little smile. She then met her gaze and gave a tilt of her head. "This way."

They walked a short distance up the broad, dirt path to the house Merida had come. It sat at the end of the main road and overlooked a valley. The front and rear of it faced east and west, to catch both the sunrise and sunset, though now dusk was upon the town and everything was in shadow.

Up the few steps to the porch and inside they walked. The entryway was open, with the living room and small dining nook to the left, near a stone hearth. Across from the living room sat the kitchen, and to the immediate right was a short hall. The rear of the house had a great many windows, and a door led to a back porch.

Merida sat Jada on the couch, in front of the hearth, and had a roaring fire going in seconds. She told her to remain sitting and then disappeared into another room.

When Merida returned a short time later from the rear of the house, she paused a moment in the hallway entrance.

Jada hadn't moved an inch and sat staring into the fire, with silent tears running down her expressionless face. She only stirred when Merida crossed the living room and knelt in front of her.

Great concern was in Merida's eyes and on her face, so intense it looked like she was in pain. Gently, she brushed away Jada's tears and then rested her hand on some clothes she'd set beside her.

"Here are some dry clothes," she said. "They should do until what you're wearing gets washed."

Too tired and drained to speak, Jada gave a feeble nod.

"Now, are you hungry?"

Jada shook her head.

Merida put a hand on her knee. "I really wish you'd eat something, Jada."

But Jada had no appetite whatsoever, and the thought of food made her nauseous. Again, she gave no answer, other than to drop her head.

"It's okay," said Merida quietly, placing a hand on the side of Jada's face. "It'll be alright. You need sleep more than anything right now."

She stood. "The spare bedroom is at the very end of the hall and is ready for you."

After Merida walked into the kitchen, Jada looked over her shoulder and watched the woman a moment.

Who was this person, really? Jada still had no idea where she was or if this was all just a dream. Yet even if it was a delusion, it was a relief to be reminded that people could be kind. She'd forgotten people like this existed...and she hadn't realized just how jaded she'd become.

She'd also forgotten how much she missed her mom.

Taking the clothes, Jada stood and started down the hall. She'd just passed the kitchen when she heard the thought, *still taking advantage of other people's generosity, huh? What are you going to do tomorrow? Or next week? You're not going to stay here and mooch that long, are you? Then again, it's all you're good at...*

A heavy sense of shame and weight rested on her then, and she was reminded of the words and accusations of her relatives. The weight and agony of it all nearly took her breath away.

Jada remained where she was for a couple breaths, before taking up the last bit of courage she had. Stepping back out of the hall, she looked into the kitchen.

"Merida?"

The moment she spoke, her throat tightened and tears stung her eyes. Jada felt ridiculous, being unable to compose herself.

But at that second she understood: it was as if she was grieving over the loss of someone dear.

She guessed that's what happened when you've been so badly wounded by people you love.

Merida stopped and faced Jada, with a patient demeanor that said she had all the time in the world. *Poor little lamb*, she thought, as she watched Jada and fought hard against the tears burning in her own eyes.

*Who is she?* thought Jada again. *Why is she so nice? She doesn't even know me...*

Jada cleared her throat and tried and failed to straighten up. She glanced down at the clothes she was holding, then looked back at Merida.

"Thank you," she managed, though her voice was strained and broken.

Merida crossed to her swiftly and put her arms around her.

Normally, Jada didn't trust strangers in the least. However, there was something about Merida that told her she could trust her. Strange as it was, she had the sense she knew Merida, though they'd never met.

But all Jada cared about in that instant was that she was finally safe.

Then, like the weak coward she was, she broke completely and wept.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Genesis**

Chick-a-dees chirped happily outside and sunlight made the curtains on the east side of the room glow.

When Jada woke she was relieved to still be here, even though she didn't know where "here" was.

The heavy weight that had been on her was gone, and for the first time since her parents had disappeared, she felt peace. It had something to do with Merida, the house, even that realm.

The relentless personal attacks had created an increasing burden on Jada's shoulders and distressed her soul beyond words. But that weight had been lifted and her soul calmed.

She hadn't realized the depths of her agony until that moment, with all the turmoil finally gone.

After making the bed, she jumped into the clothes Merida had let her. The pants fit like jeans but were made of a comfortable, somewhat loose-fitting material. As for the shirt, it was like any other plain shirt.

Oddly enough they fit her perfectly, and she wondered if Merida had had kids at one time.

Jada's pocket knife had followed her here and she took it from the nightstand and slid it on. Quietly, she opened the door and tip-toed down the hall.

When she reached the kitchen, the back door opened...and in walked Jordan.

Both froze and stared wide-eyed at one another. Jordan had a stack of firewood balanced in one arm and held an axe in his other hand.

After an awkward moment, Jordan walked to the fireplace and dropped the wood onto a rug. He then crossed to Jada in three giant strides. He was fully aware his sheer size made him imposing, and he watched as the newcomer tensed and shied back a little.

To Jada, he appeared to have grown since the previous night. He was built like a lumberjack, solid with broad shoulders and strong, tan arms.

She eyed the axe and panic shot through her. *What if he's a serial killer or something? And I was fooled by Merida's kindness and lured here to be his next victim?*

"I didn't properly introduce myself yesterday," he said with a commanding voice, as he shoved a calloused hand towards her. "I'm Jordan, one of the elders of the town."

"Jada," she replied as she hesitantly shook it.

Again, she was taken aback by his piercing gaze. His hazel eyes were rich and clear, and they now held a twinkle.

"Glad to see my husband is behaving himself," said a familiar voice behind Jada.

"I always behave myself," replied Jordan, smile tugging at his mouth as Merida stepped beside Jada. She raised her eyebrows at her husband, as if to say 'is that so?' But there was no missing the sparkle dancing in her own eyes as she regarded him.

Husband and wife held one another's gaze a moment, before both broke into grins.

As Jada watched the exchange she sensed, almost felt, the love and affection they shared with each other. That in itself brought a weak smile to her lips.

“I apologize about yesterday,” continued Jordan, looking at me. “But that was the closest an attack squad has come to the Western Village. It made everyone a bit edgy.”

“Yeah, what were those things, anyway?” asked Jada.

“Ah,” answered Merida. “I will explain everything after breakfast.”

She walked with swift elegance into the kitchen and removed a plate of food from a stone oven. Setting it on the little counter, she slid the plate towards Jada, before pulling a fork from a drawer.

Jada half-turned to step into the bathroom to wash her hands, but paused.

“I’m partial to a mustache axe myself,” she said, gesturing to the axe Jordan held. Then, taking courage, she managed to lift her eyes to his.

The big man grinned at Merida. “A laborer, like you said.”

Merida lifted her chin. “Aye, I did. She’s a woman who knows how to swing an axe.”

“Aye, it’s the working man who’s the happy man, as we say around here,” said Jordan, winking at Jada. “I wager you’d give our young men a run for their money.”

Jada figured he must’ve just been being nice when he said that. She wasn’t bulky by any means and never had been, even after long summer hours of farm labor.

“We ought to keep an eye on this one, Merida,” smiled Jordan, in quite a jovial mood as he headed for the front door. “I know a heartbreaker when I see one!”

Jada blushed.

Merida gave a laugh, grabbed a dish towel and threw it at Jordan as he reached the door. “Get out of here, man, and go do something useful!”

She apologized for him, but her eyes were laughing.

Jada managed a half-smile. “It’s okay.”

She stepped into the bathroom and washed her hands. But when she glanced up into the mirror over the sink, she drew a sharp gasp. That was the first time she’d been able to see that her eyes were no longer green. They were a deep, aqua-turquoise.

At least she still had her long, dark brown hair, which, according to Zander, burned deep red in the sun. His powers of observation had surprised her at that moment, because she didn’t think guys paid attention to that sort of thing.

“What’s wrong?” asked Merida, alarmed as she appeared in the doorway.

“My eyes,” blurted Jada. “They used to be green...”

That knowing smile appeared on Merida’s face. “I will explain everything during our ride.”

That perked Jada up. "Ride?"

It had been a couple weeks since she'd been in the saddle, and seeing the horses yesterday awoke her desire to ride.

Needless to say, Jada inhaled her breakfast and then threw on her hiking boots.

Merida emerged from the master bedroom with a bow and quiver of arrows slung across her back.

Together they left the house, crossed the dirt road and started up a narrow trail. It hugged the hillside before leading up a steep rise.

Jada stumbled once or twice as she looked around, wide-eyed. She was amazed at how sharp the colors were, the greens in the grass and leaves of the trees, even the browns of the bark on the pines.

One would think she'd never used her eyes before and was seeing everything for the first time.

On top of it, the air was clear and sharp, almost shocking the lungs. A cool breeze brought earthy scents and over the treetops stretched an impossibly deep blue sky.

"May I ask you, um, what this place is?" asked Jada as they crested the rise. "I mean...where?"

Merida stopped at the edge of a small clearing. "Here? You mean this world?"

Jada looked at her. Merida and Jordan hadn't been surprised to see her and hadn't thought her clothing was weird or out of place. Not that it differed much from theirs.

It just seemed they knew she wasn't from there and that was normal.

"Yes."

"From what I understand from other travelers," Merida replied, eyes searching the trees ahead, "this place is like Earth, I think you call it. In our own native tongue, we call this place Zora. Peoples further north call it Aurora, and still other more ancient dialects refer to it as 'tekoween.' It means 'dawn' or 'beginning.'"

*Genesis*, thought Jada, before asking. "So...people like me just showing up isn't...unusual?"

"No. We've always had travelers, as we call them, come from the other dimension. Some stay and reside here, but only a select few go back and forth regularly."

"Oh, thank God," breathed Jada. She wouldn't have to worry about them thinking her an alien or something.

Merida laughed, and its fair sound was caught up on the breeze.

“These other travelers wouldn’t have introduced basic plumbing, would they?”

That was one of the first things Jada had noticed: the guest bathroom had running water. It wasn’t exactly hot, but still. A flushing toilet and water in the sink was never something she’d ever taken for granted.

She’d also found an extra toothbrush in the cupboard under the sink.

“Aye, they did, and have taught us many things,” answered Merida. “We’ve learned a number of skills in the fields of medicine, science, mechanics. You’ll find the average person here has knowledge of these things.”

She grinned. “I bet you were anticipating living in the Dark Ages.”

She then raised two fingers to her lips and gave a sharp whistle.

A whinny answered, followed by the sound of cantering hooves thumping against the earth. Moments later they appeared out of the trees, a pair of horses, one fiery sorrel, the other a faded grey.

They stopped half a dozen feet from Merida and Jada and snorted.

“This is Astor,” said Merida, pointing to the red horse first, “and Balo, two of our horses. They are faithful and loyal creatures, and as you’ve already seen, they have keen insight and understanding.”

Astor bobbed his head.

“I know you ride and I thought it might do you some good,” she continued, walking over to Astor. “Besides, I wanted to give you a rough lay of the land.”

Grabbing a handful of mane, she swung effortlessly onto her horse.

Jada could only stare at her. “How do you know so much about me?”

Merida smiled. “You’ve been in my dreams a lot lately. But more about that later. Come!”

Jada walked over to the grey and let him smell her hands. Balo had a kind, honest eye, as they say. He inspected her briefly, before nudging her shoulder and nickering quietly.

She gave him a pat on the neck before stepping to his side, grabbing some mane and swinging up.

At some unseen signal by Merida, Astor turned and started back the way he and Balo had come. Balo walked beside him.

“Most horses here can be ridden without bridle or saddle,” said Merida. “But if we’re traveling or patrolling the territory, we ride with tack, for the sake of carrying weapons and other provisions.”

The trail dropped halfway down the ridge before leveling off again. Astor, head up, ears forward, snorted and swished his tail.

Merida glanced at Jada...before signaling her horse faster, and he leapt into a canter.

Balo's transition was so smooth, Jada barely felt it. They kept stride with Astor as they flew out of the trees and into the late morning sun.

Horses snorting lightly with each stride, their manes flared away from their strong necks. Jada could feel Balo's powerful churning muscles as he pulled himself faster and faster now, hooves drumming over the earth as they raced back into the trees.

To Jada, nothing in the world came remotely close to this: galloping on a good horse. Riding was sheer exhilaration and total, unhindered freedom.

Ahead, a massive pine lay across the trail. But their mounts didn't slow or falter in stride. Instead, they pricked up their ears and charged straight for it.

By far this would be the highest Jada had ever jumped. But she felt no fear, because she was sure of the animal beneath her.

Balo hit the approach perfectly and cleared the tree in a smooth leap. Landing, he galloped onward, with Astor right beside him.

The trail now curved and cut steeply upwards. Undaunted, Astor and Balo powered effortlessly up the incline.

At last, they broke above the treeline and came to a large, flat plateau. Astor and Balo, breathing lightly, stopped on the far side, which dropped steeply back into the trees. From this vantage point, the four had a clear view of the forest and ridges to the west, north and southeast. A cool current moved up from the forest below and brushed past them.

"First thing first," began Merida. "The town we live in is called the Western Village. While we have good relations with most of our neighbors, we're especially close to the Eastern Village, two hours ride east of the creek, and Silverthorne, to the northeast."

"Yesterday Jordan mentioned someone called Gilead or something," commented Jada. "Who's that?"

Merida nodded. "Gilead is the leader of a small settlement to the northeast of us. It consists of maybe twenty people, most of whom are renegades who've broken away from towns...or were driven out because of misconduct. Anyway, they're known for thievery and there have even been reports that they strike deals with gath squads so they won't be attacked."

“Sounds charming,” she muttered. “Wait, gath squads? Is that what I landed in the middle of?”

“Yes,” answered Merida and gazed into the distance. “Gilead is nothing compared to the real threat. Residing to the far northwest, in a diseased land of desolation, is the dark king known as Cassius. From his borders come all things vile, though he himself isn't permitted to go beyond the edges of his territory. That doesn't stop him, or his demonic general, from sending out raiding parties to harass and attack towns.”

She cast a glance at Jada. “The creatures that you saw are the creation from a powerful darkness, beasts made for evil purpose. We call them gath.”

“Gath? Like...Goliath of Gath? The Philistine?”

“Exactly right,” smiled Merida. “There are different ranks, of course. But the ones you want to watch out for are the chimera, high-ranking officers. Skilled in battle and merciless. You'll know one when you see one.”

Astor whickered, and Merida stroked his mane.

That's when Jada noticed a jagged scar that ran from under his mane and down his shoulder.

“From early skirmish,” explained Merida, when she saw Jada looking at the mark. “But even now, Astor is no less wary about charging into battle or hunting down an entire squad of chimera.”

The red horse nodded his head and stomped the ground with a snort. Fiery light was in his eyes as he gazed across the valley, and it was in that moment Jada understood that these horses were made for battle.

Then something Merida had mentioned returned to her. “This dark king has a demonic general working with him?”

Merida nodded, a trace smile on her lips. “You believe in the reality of spiritual warfare, and the workings of angels and demons. From what I know of your realm, where you came from, you rarely see either, though believers like you understand to an extent what goes on in the unseen. You don't see it, but you see the effects of the warring good and evil, or sometimes you're the direct target of an attack.”

She gave an upward nod of her head towards the North, and Jada followed her gaze to the far horizon. “Here we see evil in solid form, and are directly involved in the fight. The conflict is

very tangible. That's why your eyes are a different color here: you're really using them and seeing things as they truly are. The veil between what is seen and unseen is thinner here."

She let out a breath. "Cassius was appropriately named, for in the ancient tongue it means 'destroyer of peace.' He himself is exceedingly evil and his general is a demon prince. Both have great authority and terrible power, though for the time being it is contained. The high king and his army in the northeast keep an eye on the dead land and do what they can to stop attack squads."

For some reason, the phrase "high king" snapped Jada's gaze back to Merida.

"Our king," said Merida, with light dancing in her eyes. "The high ruler of all."

For some reason, just the mere mention of him sent a thrill of excitement through Jada's soul and made her heart pound. It didn't make any sense, because all she knew about him was that he was the high king.

But there was something in the title, or about him, that her spirit immediately recognized. It longed to go see him.

That fact right there gave her a clue as to who he might be.

"When the time is right," continued Merida, "I'll take you to him."

"Do you think he'll tell me what I'm going here?"

If the king was who Jada thought he was, or at least who he was portraying in this realm, it was unlikely he'd reveal his full plan for her.

As she'd matured in her faith and relationship with the living God, she learned He only revealed segments of His plans, like pieces of a puzzle. Then, at last, everything would fall into place and she understood what was happening, or why, to a certain point.

Merida studied the young woman intently as she considered what she'd heard. *More like a child, she thought, innocent, yet at the same time, she has seen many things in her young life and faced brutal hardships.*

She could also tell that Jada was extremely intelligent, by the expression on her face as she continued to ponder things. But there was more to it than that. There was a certain light and life about Jada, light and life that surrounded those who belonged to Him. She had sharp discernment and could read people's intentions, hidden or not, at a glance. She was also rooted firmly in her faith and would not be easily shaken by any attack or plot by the enemy.

That right there was key. It would prove vital for what was coming in the days ahead.

*She has walked with Me*, said a still, small voice to Merida. It was the voice of One Who had counseled her all her life, of the One who gave her gifts of prophecy and foresight.

It was also the voice like that of an old friend, and one that instantly brought peace.

*Instead of turning from Me in her torment, she ran to Me. This one will do great things, Merida, My warrior and friend, and the one with whom I've entrusted a mighty little soldier. She'll inspire others to fight, many others. But...she will turn even more enemy back with her blade and bow.*

An “mm” from Merida broke Jada from her thoughts. Looking at the woman, Jada saw her expression mirrored the one she'd worn yesterday, when she felt like she was looking through her.

“You have great faith for one so young,” said Merida quietly, before answering Jada's question. “I don't know. Maybe he will, maybe he won't. Most likely as you train and reside here, you'll discover why you were brought to this dimension. In the immediate future, I will take you to Halden, one of the two wisest counselors our world has ever known. He resides in a city southeast of here, where he advises the people. Perhaps he will be graced with insight on you.”

Silence again fell over the conversation.

For some time, Jada sat and considered everything Merida had said. She wondered what she was doing here, what her purpose was; this all still felt like a dream. Not that she wanted to leave and go back home, not in the least.

“Can he at least tell me how I was...transported or whatever?” she asked and began to feel like an inquisitive little child with all these questions.

Merida grinned as she turned Astor and began walking along the plateau. Balo fell in beside him.

“Halden, and his companion Ambrose, are wisest second only to the king. But I'm not sure even they can answer that question. The comings and goings of you travelers has always been a mystery. What happened leading up to you arriving in the forest?”

Jada didn't, or more accurately, wasn't ready to go into details about that day. So she started with, “Um, well...I was out hiking in the mountains and a bear chased me. I slid down a ridge, caught a ledge, but then lost my grip and fell. Next thing I knew, I was in the forest getting shot at.”

Merida looked over and studied Jada for some time as they rode along. In a brief moment, when Jada met the woman's eyes, Merida had a vision.

A house sat amongst green hills by the mountains, and storm and darkness shrouded and hung all around it. Then Jada sprinted out of the house. She wasn't just running, she was fleeing for all she was worth. The tempest lashed violently at her and winged shadows pursued. When she drew closer, Merida could see scars and bruises, though not from physical blows, on her arms and face. But her shirt was stained crimson in a large area over her heart and shoulder.

Jada ran and ran, as tears streamed down her face. Even when she began stumbling, she pushed herself back to her feet and kept going. And still the shadows pursued and harassed her, until at last she fell to her knees and couldn't get up again.

The further she ran and the more she was harassed, the more transparent Jada seemed to become. Now, as she sat doubled over, she was easier to see through, more transparent, if that made any sense. She'd been beaten down until she was hollow and void, a wisp of mist that threatened to be blown away by the wind and simply...disappear completely.

When Jada glanced at Merida again, she saw the woman's face soften as sadness fell over her expression.

"You've been tormented a long time by people you trusted," she said quietly, turning her gaze back to the horizon.

Jada's mouth went dry. How could Merida have known? Was it that obvious? The last thing she wanted was for anyone to be inconvenienced because of her stupid problems.

*That's a quick way to wear out your welcome,* ran a thought through her mind.

*She and Jordan will probably kick you out,* said another. *You can't stay forever. Then again, you're great at being a burden to people...*

"No," said Merida gently, placing a hand on Jada's arm to get her attention. Her expression had grown stern and she looked right through her with those sharp hazel eyes.

"Don't listen to those lies," she continued. "They're only trying to keep you down."

Jada could only gawk. "How'd you—"

"Like I said, you've been in my dreams lately, though we've never met. I know a lot about you, Jada. You are here for a reason that will eventually become apparent. I also know I was supposed to find you when you arrived. Almighty grants me insight and I dream about things before they happen."

Merida searched Jada's face. "I know of your parents and the relatives who have been attacking you for no reason."

Jada looked wide-eyed at her. “You know about my parents? Do you know where they are and if they’re alright?”

Merida’s gaze fell a moment and she answered softly. “They’re alive, but I’m not allowed to discuss them, not presently...I’m sorry.”

*Why isn’t she allowed to talk about them?* thought Jada. *What’s the big secret, and what could be more important than us being together again?*

She couldn’t understand and didn’t know what to say or think. However, Jada suddenly felt uncertain about Merida; not her spiritual gifts, but Merida herself.

Jada desperately wanted to find her parents or learn more news of them. Just as desperately, she wanted to believe everything Merida had said. She wanted to believe she really had a purpose other than being a punching bag, and that she was going to do something that mattered.

*But what will happen when I disappoint her,* thought Jada, *make a mistake or make her angry?*

Everyone in recent history had lashed out viciously, belittled and tore her down to the point where she truly believed she was worthless and couldn’t do anything right. Her initial aspirations and desires were meaningless and wrong, so she might as well as forget them. She’d never amount to anything.

Jada feared the harsh words Merida would speak before throwing her out.

She hadn’t realized how much she’d been craving someone’s acceptance. She wasn’t an emotional person, but Jada wanted to know that one single person halfway cared.

She deeply wished to trust Merida, needed to, yet at the same time she doubted her and was afraid of her rejection.

The pain Jada had seen on Merida’s face last night reappeared then, as if she sensed her struggle.

“Poor child,” said Merida quietly. “But it’s alright. In time, I’ll show you that you can trust me, and my husband.”

Then she smiled and Jada’s fear fled. “Jordan’s already quite taken with you, though he’ll never say it. You know how men are...”

Jada smiled too before, for no reason, she just started laughing. There was something about Merida and being with her that eased her pain and rekindled long forgotten joy in her tattered soul.

Balo tossed his head and whinnied, as if to join her.

Merida chuckled and rubbed the grey's forehead.

Astor snorted and swished his tail.

"Oh, a little jealous?" laughed Jada as she leaned over and stroked the red horse's sleek neck.

"You have a way with horses," smiled Merida. "We'll see if we can't find you your own before we head north to see the king. Emmet should be bringing in the next crop of three-year-olds in another month or so. It's still a bit early in spring to bring them down the mountains."

It appeared then, a big black and yellow butterfly, like the one Jada had seen yesterday.

Balo stopped as it circled above them, and Jada hesitantly held out her hand.

With the grace of a falling leaf, it glided down and landed on her palm. There it rested a good thirty seconds, opening and closing its wings. When it took flight again, it fluttered right in front of her face a moment, before catching a gust of wind and drifting away.

"It's your sign," whispered Merida, still smiling. "How Elohim encourages you and reminds you He's with you."

They continued along the plateau a short distance as Jada mused over everything Merida had told her. She was still deep in thought when a cloud passed in front of the sun and an instant chill settled over the ridge.

Balo and Astor stood still like statues, heads up as they looked into the forest below. Lifting their faces into the breeze a moment, they began sorting scents that rode on the wind.

Balo snorted suddenly, spun a one-eighty and then reared as a black arrow just missed him and Jada. Fortunately, she had a sense of balance, and had been expecting him to do something. So he didn't unseat her.

Balo's front hooves had barely returned to the ground before he gathered himself and launched straight into a gallop, like a racehorse out of a starting gate. When they hit the forest, they heard Astor thundering up behind them.

Balo and Jada tore through the trees, pines a blur as they passed amongst them. Astor, ears pinned, and Merida pulled even with them, twenty feet to the left.

When Balo flicked his ears back, Jada glanced over her shoulder. She could only gawk at the creature that dove out of the treetops and flew between her and Merida.

Catching glimpses of it through the trees, Jada figured out it was...some kind of winged cat. The size of a young lioness, it had a short, rich golden coat.

Jada didn't have time to study it further before Balo dropped down the ridge and swept around to the south and into the sunlight.

Balo cleared a shallow stream in a single bound, charged up a shallow rise and then down the other side, which was much steeper.

Another winged cat appeared on their right and kept pace with them. It blinked at Jada with deep gold eyes before shooting away.

Ahead, the ground leveled out for a good six strides...and then dropped off.

"Oh, uh..."

"Keep going, Jada!" shouted Merida, somewhere behind them.

*I'm going to die*, thought Jada, throwing a look over her shoulder.

That's when she understood Merida's command, for flanking their position were several large gath warriors.

Balo didn't slow, and they reached the edge of the drop-off as several black arrows whistled past.

Jada wondered if the grey was some kind of descendent of Pegasus by how much height and reach he had in his jump. A second later, though, she saw why he'd put so much effort into his leap.

Laying in wait ten feet below were three more gath.

Balo's landing wasn't as punishing as Jada had anticipated. He cut sharply left as more arrows sank into the trees behind him and his rider.

She spotted the three gath again, just before a pair of winged cats dropped in and pounced on two of them. An arrow plunged into the chest of the third.

Several soldiers on horseback swept past and towards the sound of a skirmish.

"Wait, Balo!" said Jada when he turned towards town.

He flicked his ears back in disagreement, but slowed to an easy canter and circled around.

The fight had moved out of view, around the curve of the ridge. Before following everyone, Jada directed Balo to the three dead gath.

*Man, they're ugly.*

Their faces resembled that of gargoyles one might expect to see on statues at ancient cathedrals.

While studying them, something on one of their belts caught Jada's attention: a tomahawk with a black edge.

When she was little she'd followed her dad around the woods with a small hatchet. As she grew older she finally graduated to a mustache axe. Thus she was skilled and experienced with wielding both axe and tomahawk.

Jada dismounted, managed to keep her legs from buckling, snatched up the weapon and then leapt back atop Balo.

Clearing understanding her intentions now, the grey lunged into a swift canter.

She really didn't know what she was doing. By all reasons, she should be riding away from the fight, not towards it. Yet she somehow felt this was what she had to do. She was answering a call that she couldn't ignore or resist.

Around the bend in the hill she caught a glimpse of another rider.

Balo eased his speed as he took them on a path that led up onto the ridge and ran parallel to the main scene of the fight.

Below, riders raced in and out of the trees, galloping past one another, or drawing the attention of an enemy so a comrade could line up a shot. It was like a well-choreographed, fast-paced dance.

Loosing their arrows with great skill, not a single horseman missed his target.

The gath squad diminished quickly, and the survivors spread out and ran in different directions.

All except the commander, a huge, ugly brute. He ducked and dodged under several arrows as a rider atop a blood bay galloped towards him.

Black sword in one hand, tomahawk in the other, the commander strode to meet the horseman.

Strides from the gath, the rider drew his sword, its sharp edge glinting in the sunlight.

The gath commander brought his left arm around, to swing with the tomahawk first. But an arrow plunged into his side. The force spun and dropped him to a knee just as the horseman passed.

With a single swing of his sword the rider struck and killed the commander.

That's when Jada spotted Merida atop Astor, her bow in hand. She shouted a command and everyone turned in pursuit of the fleeing gath.

Astor, neck and shoulders gleaming with sweat and now burning an even darker red, lengthened his stride as he charged forward.

That's when a gath who'd been hiding behind a fallen tree broke from cover and made a run for it.

In one fluid motion, Merida drew an arrow, strung her bow and lined up a shot as Astor galloped for the tree. He leapt the pine, and she released the arrow as he reached the peak of the jump. It found its mark in the back of the gath, and his body fell as Astor landed.

The feat was awesome in every sense of the word and totally inspiring.

Balo put on more speed now as he flew along the ridge. He was feeling good, ears forward as he snorted lightly with rising excitement. Up there, they quickly caught up to the other riders in the forest and passed them.

After searching the trees ahead, Jada spotted several dark running forms.

"Come on, buddy," she said, eyeing a path down the ridge.

Balo tossed his head and practically bounded down the hillside. It was steeper than it looked, but didn't prove to be a problem.

Balo and Jada cut in front of the other riders and drifted left as they came behind the fleeing gath. As they neared the first, an arrow dropped him. A second brute, not half a dozen strides ahead, was taken out by a winged lion.

Balo cleared a tree and raced even faster as they neared two more gath.

An arrow came from somewhere ahead of one of the creatures and landed in its chest. This caused the final beast to slide to a stop. It spun and saw Balo coming at him, with Jada astride and feeling like an Indian riding into battle with her tomahawk.

The creature bared its yellow teeth at them.

Jada felt no fear, only a fire burning hot inside her soul. She swung her weapon down an around to build momentum.

Just as she was doing so, Balo slid on his haunches and swung sideways, using his own body to help her gain torque for the throw.

The tomahawk left Jada's hand with speed she didn't think possible. The blade of the head found its mark, deep into the chest of the gath, and the ugly beast fell to the ground.

The archer who'd fired on the other gath rode out of the trees. He was a tall, lean young man and not much older than Jada. His mount, a stunning dark bay, was of obvious thoroughbred blood.

"Not bad," he said in passing, a teasing twinkle in his eyes. "For a girl."

"I'd like to see you do that," muttered Jada.

She'd enjoyed charging into the fray and galloping alone atop the ridge. But that feeling was gone now, in the presence of another person. She was still highly untrusting and saw people in general as rivals. Her defensive mood remained extremely high.

"Oh," he replied as he swung his horse around to face her. "Is that a challenge?"

There wasn't any aggression on his face at all, and his eyes danced. He was like a puppy excited to play with the new arrival who'd come from a neglected home and wasn't interested in anything.

However, Jada didn't have to give a single word in response. Balo instantly picked up on his rider's tension and mood and took it upon himself to answer so she didn't have to.

As Merida had said, their horses were extremely loyal, and they truly had deep understanding and insight. They looked through a person's outer defenses and into the heart. Instead of seeing how someone appeared outwardly, they saw how they truly were—and saw what they were going to be, or at the very least, what they had the potential to be.

When Balo had gazed upon the small human for the first time, he hadn't seen her as frail or fragile. He saw her as a shining little warrior, though one who had long been abused and tormented, and was already bearing scars.

While she was understandably a bit afraid and unsettled at her new surroundings, there was something unique about her. Into the furthest depths of her created being, the grey horse saw she was a loner type, a maverick. She'd become comfortable in her own skin and come and go as she pleased, thoroughly content with being by herself.

Plus...she loved horses and understood them. That was good enough for Balo, and his loyalty to Jada was immediately committed and sealed to her. To the death, if need be.

Pinning his ears, Balo half-reared and sounded a warning squeal. Then he lifted his head and took a couple aggressive steps towards the young man and his horse.

"Easy, easy," said Merida, cantering up with the other riders. "She's new and unfamiliar with our games, Connor."

She and the riders formed a rough circle with Connor and Jada.

Sitting there on Balo, Jada wished she could disappear as the others looked from her to the fallen gath nearby.

"That's the second squad in as many days that we've found within our borders," said one rider, a man with a weathered and determined face.

"And we've spotted more several miles north of the river..."

Jada looked around for the one who'd spoken, because it sounded like it'd come from overhead.

It had. Several winged lions dropped into the middle of the circle.

"I'll head back to town and let the others know," said another rider, a woman with long, sandy-colored hair that she kept out of her face in a braid. She winked at Jada before turning her mount and galloping away into the woods.

"We'll head that direction ourselves and scout the area," continued the largest of the three winged lions.

Not only did his size set him apart from his two companions, but his coat did as well. It was redder, almost rust in color.

In the meantime, Jada was still trying to grasp the fact that the creature was speaking. He glanced at her with those gold eyes and then did a double-take.

"Oh," he said, turning and walking over to Balo and Jada. "Is this the traveler we heard about yesterday?"

Growing anxious, Jada's mouth went dry.

Balo whickered quietly and craned his neck around to touch his nose to her boot, to offer encouragement.

"Allow me to introduce Icarus," said Merida to Jada. "Captain of the stellars, as we call them. We've been friends and allies since the beginning of time."

Icarus reached Balo and leapt atop the grey's rump. He then prodded Jada with a paw and snuffled in her ear.

"Careful, captain," smiled Merida.

"I believe in your realm," said the stellar, as he slid around and stood awkwardly on Balo's withers, "there's a story about a character named Icarus. Yes?"

"Yeah, from Greek mythology," she replied. "It's a story about a young man. His father gave him wings made of wax and warned him not to fly too close to the sun or sea. But he didn't listen. He flew too high, his wings melted and he fell."

Approval flickered across the stellar's face...before he sat down and looked at Jada squarely, leaning so close their noses almost touched.

There he sat for a good thirty seconds.

Finally, Jada cleared her throat and tried to shift backwards a little.

Stifled chuckles went around the group.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” said the horseman beside Merida. “He’s always been extremely interested in new arrivals.”

Icarus kept up his unblinking stare another few awkward seconds before turning and looking at Merida.

“She should be taken to the king promptly, or to Halden at the very least.”

Merida lifted her eyebrows.

“Oh come, Merida,” replied Icarus, as he jumped to the ground. “You of all people should see it.”

The stellar stopped and looked over his shoulder. “There’s something special about this one. The king himself asked me to watch out for someone like her.”

*Great, thought Jada. Am I a violent, psychotic criminal in this realm or something?*

With eyes on her again, she slouched even more. She wanted Balo to back up a few steps, away from the others. But he stubbornly refused and swished his tail instead.

More chuckles from the group.

“I’ll be seeing more of you in the days ahead,” said Icarus to Jada as he spread his wings.

“Wait,” she blurted. She didn’t want to speak in front of everyone else, but she needed to know something.

“Do...do you have any idea about why I’m here?”

Icarus regarded her with those deep eyes, before glancing at the gath she’d slain. “My guess is, is that it has something to do with that. We need all the warriors we can find.”

“Was I supposed to get a hunting license first? No, what...warrior?”

The winged cat laughed. “You can take it up with the king when you see him.”

“No, but I’m...”

With one burst from his wings, Icarus shot into the air, with his two companions behind him. In a blink of an eye, they disappeared through the treetops.

The circle broke, and Balo turned and followed after Astor. Some of the riders dismounted and searched for salvageable arrows in the dead bodies of the enemy.

As they moved off into the trees, Jada glanced at Merida. “Can all the animals here speak like you and me?”

“Only some,” she replied. “But even if they can’t, you will find you can easily read a creature’s intentions. Just as our horses are extremely perceptive, you and I are able to

immediately tell whether an animal is friend or foe. Not all creatures are on the side of our king. Some work for or are under the influence of Cassius.”

The pair rode along silently for a breath, watching the branches of the pines above sway in the breeze.

Talking, mythical animals, the ugly brutes called gath, skilled warriors who rode horses and an evil ruler...Jada was beginning to feel like she was in a dimension where *Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings* were being melded together.

*What's next, she thought. Elves?*

At length, Jada broke the silence. “So...earlier, shooting from Astor as he jumped that tree and everything...that was amazing.

Merida laughed heartily, and the sound made Jada smile. “In time you’ll acquire those skills, too, if you want to train. Nearly every day our young warriors are doing something, archery, tracking, hunting. The four towns in this region including the Western Village, are considered ‘warrior towns,’ meaning our expertise is in combat, both on foot and mounted. We’re also known for our horses, and armed forces from across the entire realm come to buy young steeds. Anyway, I don’t doubt you’d pick up combat training quickly. You have a natural hand for it, I think.”

Jada was about to thank her for the compliment, but when she opened her mouth, a massive yawn escaped instead.

“It’s tiring being in battle unless you’re conditioned for it,” she said as they found a real path and made their way down it. “You’re probably ready for lunch and a nap.”

Jada was about to agree, but stopped herself. “Actually, I was wondering...if there were any chores you might need help with or anything. I can’t stay with you for nothing.”

Merida was truly puzzled when she looked at her. “Why not?”

“Well...”

"Jada, you haven't even been here a full twenty-four hours," she continued, "and I can't imagine anyone in their right mind ever seeing you as a burden. From what I've seen since you got here, you're quiet and keep to yourself. You're very concerned about inconveniencing other people and...you can seriously throw a tomahawk."

Jada managed a weak smile. *You'll probably think differently in time if I don't leave soon...*

"And I know you'll pick up regular chores, just by watching Jordan and me. But...no one's saying you have to do anything. Like I said, just give it a little time and give me a chance to prove to you that you can trust me. I hope you'll soon see I don't help other people because I expect

compensation or am looking for something in return. I believe those who do need to reevaluate their motives and reset priorities."

"Helping people has its own reward," said Jada softly, mostly to herself.

"You speak truly, Jada."

The sound of hooves approached from behind them before, to Jada's dismay, the young man on the dark horse rode up beside her.

"I'm Connor, by the way," he said, extending his hand.

"Jada," she replied, gripping his hand.

"Strong, calloused hands," he observed, before looking over at Merida with that playful twinkle still in his eyes.

When he'd first spotted Jada on Balo galloping through the forest, Connor had right away been drawn by her beauty. It wasn't a romantic, "love at first sight" sort of thing, though.

But she captured the eyes of most in passing, men and women, for all thought, "Now there's a fair beauty, fairer than any this land has seen in a long time."

Of course, Connor would admit only to himself that the first time he saw Jada he did sit a little straighter in the saddle and squared himself up. He couldn't deny he was attracted to her, and only half of it was out of curiosity and interest.

Then when she slew the gath from atop Balo, Connor was instantly impressed. He was a young warrior and came from a line of commanders on both his mother and father's side. He was quick to recognize a fellow warrior or a person who had high potential of becoming one. He knew the importance of every single fighter, male and female, and anyone who had skill like that without training was welcome to run with him.

"Next time we do training exercises," he continued as he signaled his horse faster, "I want you on my team!"

Jada shot a look at Merida and saw she was trying her hardest not to smile.

"For once, Jordan was right," she said, breaking into a grin. "You are a little heartbreaker!"

Astor lunged forward into a gallop as Merida's laughter danced through the trees.

"Hey!" called Jada, laughing despite the fact she was blushing again.

Needing no urging from his rider, Balo leapt after his companion and they reached one another back home.

## Chapter 3

### Trouble

A noise Jada couldn't place brought her back to the land of consciousness. For a second she didn't open her eyes, afraid she'd find herself back in her room on Earth.

Steeling herself, she opened her eyes...and breathed a sigh of relief. She was still in Merida's spare bedroom. She did, however, wonder if she'd ever be able to go back to the other realm, or whatever. Or was she stuck here forever?

But she wasn't too worried.

Sitting up, Jada saw the edges of the curtains had the faintest light glowing around them.

The sound came again, a tapping on the window on the far side of the room. She was accustomed to doing farm work, so waking, or being woken, early wasn't a nuisance.

Flinging her legs over the bedside, she quietly walked to the window and swept back the curtain. There was just enough natural light for her to identify Connor and a girl beside him.

Jada immediately felt insecure and uneasy at the situation, mostly because it involved contact with another human being.

After blinking a couple seconds, she unlocked and slid open the window.

"Hey," said Connor quietly. "A group of us are going to meet up to train. I told them about yesterday and they wanted to know if you'd tag along."

"Oh, uh...sure," replied Jada hesitantly.

"Great. Hurry along then."

As Connor turned to leave, the girl added, "And don't worry about breakfast. We've got that covered."

She sent Jada a big smile before disappearing after Connor.

Feeling anxious about meeting a group of strangers, Jada could barely keep her hands from shaking as she jumped into a change of clothes.

Like a lot of people her age, she was just figuring herself out and was still a touch insecure. She was concerned that the others would have high expectations of her, thanks to Connor. What if they didn't like her? What if she was just going to be an outcast here, like she was back on Earth?

*Well, just suck it up,* she finally told herself as she slid her knife into her pocket.

The door to Jordan and Merida's room was still shut as she tiptoed past. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do before going out. Was she supposed to ask permission? She was a young adult, but still.

*Oh well, guess I'll figure it out once I get back.*

Connor, the girl and two others were waiting outside the house when Jada slipped out the front door. They all had some kind of weapon secured on them, whether a sword, bow and quiver of arrows, knives or hatchet.

The girl with Connor looked to be the youngest of the group. The children Jada had seen upon arrival to town day before yesterday weren't present.

Thank goodness for that. Children scared her.

The girl tossed Jada an apple, and Connor quickly introduced her to the other two members: Gael and Desmond.

The group spoke briefly about the latest news reported by the night patrols. Units of warriors rotated on night watch, and roamed the borders of the territory. Recently, they'd been reporting an increased presence of gath, chimera and dark soldiers to their commanders. They'd also come across a number of recently deserted enemy camps.

By the time the group finished discussing this, Jada had eaten her breakfast.

"I hope you're up for a run first thing in the morning," said Connor to Jada with a grin.

Not waiting for a response, he and the others turned and broke into a jog. They followed a path that hugged a steep ridge at the north edge of town. It led them down into a valley, shadowed and cool as the sun's light had not yet touched it.

The air was crisp, and the sky above the pines was deep blue, though low gray clouds gathered to the north.

Connor picked up the pace as the path curved left and rose sharply a short distance. The group crested the rise and into the morning sun, its light bright and warm as it chased away the night and cold.

Jada personally never grew tired of watching the sunrise. There was just something about the way the light broke the darkness...

They soon left the path and dropped down the back side of the ridge. The others spread out and flanked Connor's position. Jada hung back half a dozen strides and noted how they moved with both speed and incredible stealth through the trees and brush.

She hoped those were skills she'd eventually acquire.

When they reached the narrow valley floor, they slowed. The section they were in was only flat for thirty feet, before the hill on the other side rose abruptly.

In the middle ran a small, shallow stream, and it splashed along happily from one end of the grassy ravine to the other.

What Jada found odd, however, was the fact it was flowing uphill and northward.

Before she could ask about this, the members of her group suddenly drew their weapons with gazes locked on the opposite hillside.

“You sound like a drunken bear crashing through the woods, Namor,” said Connor, who had an arrow set on the string of his bow.

“And I hope you’ve brushed up on your archery skills since our last meeting,” came a fair and clear response, seconds before another group of young adults emerged from the trees.

“Otherwise you stringing a bow isn’t much of a threat.”

Jada felt a surge of panic. Who were these people? Were they a gang from a rival town? She didn’t want to get into trouble on her second day here.

On top of it, everyone besides her had a legitimate weapon. She just had a pocket knife.

The one who’d responded to Connor slowly approached as those in the other group spread out behind their leader. There were four in Connor’s group, and five in the other.

Well, technically five in Connor’s group, including Jada. But she doubted she’d be much help in a fight.

“And I wonder how the likes of you don’t freeze during winter, Gabriel,” quipped Connor. “Since you can’t swing an axe, let alone hold one properly.”

As the two leaders stood glaring at one another, Jada realized...Gabriel was an elf. He stood taller than Connor and was lean. Skin fair and clean, his eyes were hazel-green and keen, but his blonde hair, however, was kept short.

Jada knew he was an elf, aside from the shape of his ears, by his voice and speech.

*So, yesterday, she thought, when I’d thought ‘what’s next? Elves?’ I’d only meant that as a sort of joke.*

Now all she could do was stand there and think, *whoa*.

After studying those with Gabriel, she saw there were two other elves. The remaining pair were of men.

The young man furthest from Jada held her attention, though she wasn’t quite sure why. He was taller than Gabriel and strong, not beefy, but broader over the shoulder and in the chest

compared to his elven companion. Hair such a dark brown it almost looked black, it was kept short and out of his eyes, which were the color of the sea.

By his posture, she could tell he was already comfortable and confident in his own skin. She wondered what his secret was there...

However, there was something markedly different about him. Even though he was maybe twenty, he seemed older, but it didn't show itself physically. Perhaps it had to do with the depth of the expression in his eyes, like one who has much wisdom and seen many things in his young life.

Jada hadn't realized she'd been staring at him, until he glanced at her. She blushed despite her best efforts not to and looked away.

As for Connor and Gabriel, they now stood nearly nose to nose, and as the seconds ticked by, Jada waited with mounting apprehension over who was going to strike first.

Then they laughed.

"We missed you last week, Gabriel," said Connor, grinning as he and the elf shook hands and slapped one another on the shoulder.

"We were patrolling the eastern border of the creek," replied Gabriel, his eyes shining. "We had three attacks on the town just last week."

"You too, huh?"

"Mm, some say the darkness is spreading," nodded Gabriel. "But that's for another conversation."

The elf turned to Jada. "Now, who is this?"

"Jada," answered Connor with a tilt of his head. "She arrived the night before last...from the other dimension."

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at the young man Jada had accidentally been staring at. "Ah, from your neck of the woods, Blake."

The elf looked back at Jada. "Blake is from your realm, moved here about ten years ago."

He extended his hand. "I'm Gabriel."

Jada shook his hand, and he introduced his friends. The other two elves were Ida and Turin, and the remaining young man was called Namor.

Namor actually lived in the Western Village, but he'd stayed overnight in another town. Hence, why he'd come in with the other group.

To Jada's slight discomfort, Gabriel didn't immediately release her hand. Instead, he turned it over and studied her calluses.

*Since when is a woman who enjoys manual labor such a big freaking deal,* she thought.

"Mm hm," said Connor, as if replying to Gabriel's expression. "And she throws a tomahawk like no one's business."

At that, Namor, off to Jada's right, huffed through his nose.

While Blake had a quiet confidence about him, Namor's posture and demeanor suggested great arrogance.

A smile was on Connor's lips as he glanced at him. "She killed a gath from atop a galloping horse."

That drew looks of approval from the others, except Namor. He just folded his arms.

"I've killed fifteen," he answered, and eyed Jada up and down in a haughty fashion. "I dare you to do better."

Jada had pegged Namor as an arrogant brute and bully from the second she saw him. She knew the sort, because she had usually been bullied or picked on at school.

But for some reason, she wasn't intimidated this time. Like the need and desire to charge after the fleeing gath yesterday, she couldn't explain what she was feeling now, or why.

Or perhaps, more accurately, she couldn't explain what she *wasn't* feeling, and that was fear.

Jada scowled as she met Namor's gaze. "Maybe I will."

That drew a visible reaction. Unfolding his arms, he straightened and rose to his full height. He then walked towards Jada, the muscles in his hard and eyes fierce.

Some newcomers Namor left alone for the most part, because he recognized they weren't a threat to his superiority, physical prowess, skill in combat or ego. He could intimidate them easily enough by being imposing.

Others, however, who he saw as a threat demanded a more immediate, direct and aggressive approach. Jada was a threat, though he knew she probably didn't see it in herself yet. But she would—if he didn't try and put her down now.

Namor couldn't, and wouldn't, let himself be even remotely challenged by some new arrival...and especially not a traveler. That was the worst of it.

Connor prepared to intervene. Jada was still quite new, and therefore, protection was merited. He also couldn't have a potential warrior injured right off the bat. Lastly, and for reasons he himself didn't know, there was simply the desire in him to shield her from Namor.

He'd always been a bit of a brute, until people showed they could handle themselves, or pushed back hard enough to the point where he finally respected them.

But Connor stopped when Gabriel raised his hand a little, and there was a faint smile on the elf's face. Connor had known Gabriel for many years, and like all of his kind, Gabriel proved unsurpassably wise.

Blake took a few cautious steps after his companion, who he was presently eyeing with distaste.

He'd noticed Jada the moment the group stepped into the ravine. She was a natural beauty, without question, and seemed to have been graced with an unfair share of it.

He hadn't needed anyone to tell that she was a traveler, like him. He knew it the moment his eyes met hers for the briefest second, before she looked away. Blake had felt eyes on him, considering him with a much sharper and deeper gaze than any he'd known. That's when he'd caught Jada studying him.

While people in this realm generally were keen and had great discernment, travelers had this gift tenfold.

That was how Jada had recognized that Blake was different, unlike the others, though at the time she hadn't understood the reason behind that conclusion.

Also, Blake was strongly drawn to her, much more so than any of the others. This had never happened to him before, and it was rather unnerving and unsettling.

Fortunately, Blake had Namor to focus on, the brute. His companion wasn't sadistic or anything like that. However, his blood ran hot and he ensured that he completely crushed any threat or competition. He was a believer in excessive force and could be rather violent with his peers.

*But if he touches her, thought Blake, I'll tear him apart.*

He was surprised by his own thought, but he still subtly rested his hand on the hilt of the knife at his thigh.

Jada noted Blake moved a bit closer behind Namor, and saw him rest his hand on a knife. She'd once heard that chivalry wasn't dead; it was just on life support.

Yet, with Namor towering over her, that still wasn't encouraging.

*Whatever, she thought, as stubborn defiance burned to life inside her. I can take care of myself.*

*That gave her pause. Wow, I'm turning into a rogue or something...or maybe Merida's independent spirit is already rubbing off.*

"I come from a line of generals and commanders, and will lead men one day," said Namor, like it was supposed to mean something. "And I've fallen over a dozen enemy. So excuse me if you killing one doesn't leave me awestruck."

Even though he was leaning into Jada's personal space, she didn't step back. Instead she raised her eyebrows. "You've killed fifteen gath, but you've lived here...your entire life? I've been here two days and I've fallen one so far..."

She let the statement hang in the air a moment, to allow him to consider that her ratio of living in this realm to killing gath was more impressive than his. Of course, that assumed he could do simple math.

Namor drew a breath to answer, but she cut him off. "And before you waste your breath in saying something to try and intimidate me, know that I can expertly wield a pitch fork and an axe, and I work around half ton animals that can kill me with a single kick. So...you wouldn't be much of a problem, and you don't scare me."

Connor wheezed a laugh and had to turn away.

The edges of Blake's mouth tugged upwards as he fought to keep from smiling.

To Jada's own surprise, her words left Namor speechless.

Before anything more serious could transpire, Connor clapped his hands together. "So! Who's up for a run north?"

"Oh yeah, we haven't been to the river lately," piped Reagan, a girl who'd been with Connor when he'd tapped on Jada's window.

She was cute. A year or two younger than Jada, she had brown hair, freckles, and hazel-brown eyes that danced with light. Already she was taken with Jada, a tall, slender and gorgeous fighter-type. Reagan already saw the warrior Jada would become, and the traveler was already a queen in her eyes, higher than a queen, if that were possible.

Everyone seemed to agree on the idea and turned, leapt across the stream and jogged up the far hillside. Jada brought up the rear again.

The main group followed a game trail that wound through the forest, while some of the others broke off and flanked their position.

As they raced along, the valley continued to grow lighter as the sun rose higher, and more birds awoke and began chirping and singing, while the first breeze of the day brushed through the trees.

Heavy dew settled on the grass of the small clearings the group ran across and it heightened the smell of moist earth.

To Jada's relief, she kept up easily with the main group, led by Connor. Occasionally she caught glimpses of Gabriel, Desmond or Namor off either shoulder as they moved in total silence.

To Jada, it felt good to just run, and through the woods at that. She felt right at home and was sure-footed, naturally mindful of rocks and tree roots hidden by moss or brush. An added bonus was the cool morning air, which kept them all from sweating.

At last, Connor brought them to a walk when they reached a semi-shadowed clearing on the edge of the ridge. It dropped steeply where it met a river far below, dark blue and moving swiftly.

Without warning, Namor flew out of the trees and charged Connor.

Connor, however, was prepared.

The two dueled, sword against sword, the blades ringing loudly each time they met.

Other skirmishes started simultaneously, though Jada stayed on the edge of the action. She wanted to play and join in the fun, but didn't have a real weapon.

Plus, she was afraid of making a complete idiot out of herself.

Something touched her arm and she jumped.

Ida, one of the elves, laughed lightly as she gestured with a bow in her hand. "Come."

Jada followed her a short distance through the trees and to another smaller clearing. Again, she was amazed at the silence with which she moved.

"How do you walk so quietly?" asked Jada, sidestepping a fallen branch.

"You know half your answer already," replied Ida. "Being mindful of what's on the ground, like twigs, or clusters of brush that can snap or crackle in passing. You also want to be light on your feet. You don't want to stomp the ground like an angry bull, but fly over it...does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I follow."

They reached the clearing and stopped. Wooden targets were set up at various distances and littered with holes. Sticking out of the grass were the ends of arrows.

In a fluid movement, Ida drew an arrow from the quiver across her back, and had barely set it on the string before she released it.

The arrow found its mark dead center in the target.

Jada's jaw dropped, and Ida chuckled. She spent the next couple minutes going over the basics of archery, before handing Jada the bow and an arrow.

"Uh, already?" asked Jada.

Ida was on the brink of laughter again, and Jada gathered she was one of those people who laughed easily but good-naturedly.

Or perhaps that was just the way of elves.

Feeling rather self-conscious, Jada took the arrow and set it on the string.

Pulling the string requires more effort than it looks. But fortunately, all those hours of doing chores and tossing hay bales and feed bags paid off, and Jada's upper body and arm strength was decent. So, she didn't have much of a problem pulling all the way back.

Mindful of Ida's pointers about stance and form, Jada eyed the target. After taking several steady breaths, she took one more, exhaled halfway and held it. Then she released the arrow.

It shot through the air with incredible speed. Jada didn't have time to blink before she saw it sticking out of the bull-eye of the nearest target.

"Again," said Ida, after handing Jada the quiver. "But faster."

After practicing reaching over her shoulder and drawing from it a few times, Jada took her next shot, further this time. She moved her shots out further and further, until she knew the effective range for that particular bow.

Eyeing a target in the shadows beyond the edge of the clearing, Jada strung another arrow, guessed how much to adjust for the rate of drop, and released. The arrow sank on the edge of the bulls-eye.

"And again, but this time move around the course," said Gabriel, who'd come up silently from behind.

Jada helped Ida retrieve salvageable arrows and refill the quiver, then scanned the course and mentally plotted a path.

Any anxiety over the presence of Gabriel was put to the back of Jada's mind as she focused on the task at hand. Each target represented an enemy warrior, and if she didn't kill him first, he'd kill her or those with her.

With all the traveling Jada and her parents had done, they'd come to know a number of people in a vast array of professions. They'd had some friends in the military and federal government, and each would tell them at one time or another: when you wake up every morning, you have to decide if you're going to do what it takes to do your job, protect your team, your family and to stop evil men from shedding innocent blood.

She believed it was the exact same rule here. War and conflict are ugly and that's just how it was. It truly is kill or be killed, and even if a person runs, sooner or later they're going to cross a bad guy.

In a smooth motion, Jada strung the bow and almost instantly released the arrow. Stalking forward, and mindful of the rocks hidden in the grass, she strung her next arrow and shot the second target.

Staying somewhat crouched, Jada picked the pace up to a slow jog near the rear of the course. It was strange how natural this all felt.

The final target was at the top of a shallow rise.

Jada had spent her last arrow, but there was no need to worry. As she passed behind a stand of aspen, she moved the bow to her left hand, drew her knife with her right and flicked it open with her thumb. Then, as she emerged from the trees, Jada threw it at the target, and the blade sank into its chest with a loud *thunk!*

Stopping in front of it, Jada gave a nod of satisfaction before yanking out the knife.

On her way back to the clearing, she grabbed any decent arrows. Each one of her shots had been true and hit its mark, which was a complete bafflement to her.

When Jada couldn't find any more good arrows, she returned to Ida and Gabriel.

"Not bad at all for someone who's barely been here two days," smiled Ida as she took the quiver.

"Tell me," said Gabriel, looking at Jada thoughtfully. "Have you had any formal training in archery or anything of the sort?"

"Um...no," she answered.

A shadow moved out the corner of her eye, and she turned. No one was there, but she sensed someone else besides the two elves had been watching.

By his smile and the twinkle in his eyes, Gabriel knew who it had been.

The trio returned to the main clearing, and the group stopped to chat a couple minutes.

But Jada didn't instigate any conversations. She opted to stay on the fringe, in the shadow of a large pine, and watch.

She was an introvert but that didn't mean she didn't like people, as some mistakenly think. She enjoyed observing others, their expressions, studying their personalities and how they interacted with one another.

Of mild interest were Gabriel, Ida, Blake and Gael. They stood in a small circle, talking and joking.

After discreetly studying Gael a few minutes, Jada would tell she liked Blake. It was obvious. She looked at him with great endearment and admiration, and her eyes danced whenever she regarded him.

Plus, there was the minor fact that Blake was particularly good-looking, at least to most red-blooded females.

Jada sighed. *Figures...*

But whenever she shot a glance at Blake, his eyes weren't on Gael. They were on Jada, and she had the sense that he was studying and considering her.

That fact made her stomach tighten.

Gael finally noticed and followed Blake's gaze.

Jada immediately shrank back and looked away. She could almost feel the jealous and vengeful gaze of Gael.

She wasn't imagining either. Gael did like Blake. A lot and she had for some time. But she hadn't said anything to Blake yet because she was still trying to gauge his feelings towards her.

Yet here was a new traveler who'd caught Blake's eye, for one reason or another. Understandably, Gael felt threatened, and she sent an icy glare at the back of Jada's head.

However, she didn't have any need to worry, at the present anyway. Jada didn't want any trouble, and she definitely didn't want to get caught up in any sort of...relational drama.

She didn't like emotional drama or trauma.

*I'd rather get kicked by a horse or suffer some kind of torture,* she thought.

"Alright, so you have some skill with a bow but how about a blade?"

Jada glanced up to see Namor, sword drawn as he stood braced for a duel.

He'd been the one watching the archery lesson from the shadows. And what he'd seen filled him with spite, and a touch of panic.

Jada was a natural, at least in archery. She looked like she'd been born with bow and arrow in hand. The more she shot, the more confident and relaxed she became.

Lastly, he'd realized she was a physical threat. He'd seen the muscles in her arms flex, and she'd kept up easily with the group while en route here.

She might've been lean, but Namor was no fool. There was strength and speed in lean muscle, stamina and power.

"Someone lend her a sword."

"Hold on a second," snapped Blake, protective fire burning suddenly hot in his blood as he strode towards Namor and Jada. "She has no training whatsoever in this sort of combat."

"Well, she picked up archery quickly," replied Namor with marked disdain. "If she's such a skilled and gifted traveler, sword play shouldn't be a problem."

"Whoa," cut in Jada. "I never said I was skilled or gifted."

But neither seemed to have heard her. Blake's jaw muscles flexed before he said something to Namor in a language Jada didn't know. They exchanged heated words, which made her feel especially self-conscious again.

*Okay, she thought, I wish I could disappear...*

Namor and Blake were still arguing when low clouds passed in front of the sun, bringing an instant chill to the land. Jada hadn't realized the clouds to the north had been moving so quickly.

But they were also on the edge of the mountains, which generated their own weather. Jada knew from experience that things could go from sunny and warm to rainy and cold in minutes.

Already the higher ridges were shrouded in fog and mist, and a cooler wind current was moving across the hillside.

A faint rustling in the trees made Jada turn. She didn't see anything, but the visibility was diminishing quickly as the fog thickened. That was when she noticed the birds had stopped singing and everything had grown quiet.

*Uh oh, she thought.*

An arrow shot from behind her and disappeared into the branches of a nearby pine. Seconds later, something small and black dropped out of the tree and onto the ground.

Throwing a look over her shoulder, she saw Ida had another arrow set on the string. Gabriel and Gael also had their bows in hand.

In unison, the archers released their arrows into the treetops, where several shrieks answered. Three more black things fell to the forest floor, while even more flapped and fluttered away.

“Dassous,” growled Namor.

When Jada glanced at Connor, he explained. “Dassous means ‘spy’ in the ancient language.”

“It’s suiting,” nodded Ida, as Jada cautiously approached the nearest black creature. “Since that’s what they are. Spies for Cassius. But in the common tongue we call them ‘gremlins.’”

Jada didn’t venture too close to the thing, and stopped when she could clearly see it. The size of a crow, it was like a cross between a bird and bat.

Body covered with black feathers, its head was the head of a bat, face ugly and grotesque, almost like a gath. Its wings were leathery and it had a thin, long tail like a rat.

The one Jada was studying stared at nothing with black eyes, and it sent chills down her spine.

It came then, a hollow and eerie howl that knifed through the quiet air. It was so loud and sudden in the stillness that it jarred everyone.

“The wolves have come south of the river,” said Gabriel, concern in his voice as he scanned the forest.

“Normally they don’t cross until winter, when they’re hungry,” added Ida.

“Maybe they’ve run out of things to hunt in their territory,” suggested Turin as he met Jada’s gaze. “Or perhaps...something has drawn them here.”

Jada had no idea what he meant by that, or why he was looking at her when he said it. What was even more puzzling was the expression he was gazing at her with: no anger or disdain, but one of great curiosity.

Another howl sounded, this time closer. The fog had thickened considerably, and Jada could’ve sworn she saw a large shadow pass between two stands of trees.

Before she could say anything, Turin released an arrow in the direction of the shadow. They heard the sound of an arrow driving into a tree, and then a snarl of anger.

The wolf was closer than any of them had thought.

Without saying a word to each other, they spun and sprinted along the ridgeline. The branches of the pines were too high up for any of them to grab, so they couldn’t climb. Besides, the wolves could just wait them out, knowing the humans had to come down sooner or later.

The moist air, now driven by a breeze, was cool as they ran. Connor and Gabriel were in the lead, followed by Gael. Ida was beside Jada, positioned so the steep drop of the ridge was on Jada's left, and she was on her right.

Blake was behind the pair, with Turin and Namor bringing up the rear.

Namor gave a shout, and Jada half-turned in time to see him give an expert swing of the sword, catching a large gray wolf across the neck and side of the head. An arrow from Turin's bow killed the beast instantly.

The group stopped long enough for Turin to take a closer look at the wolf and report, "One of Grimm's pack."

"They're strictly a scouting parting," answered Namor, muscles tight and eyes flickering with fight. "And he has broken his agreement to leave us be if we didn't hunt his pack."

"Something is driving them," said Blake. "Or...maybe someone hired them."

Several angry barks came from nearby, and the group jumped back into a run as more shadows approached.

While in motion, Ida shot an arrow into a stand of trees running parallel to the group. A sharp yelp answered.

The attack came then, and four massive wolves, larger than any Jada had ever seen sprinted out of the fog from different directions. Their coats were of thick fur and in shades of grays or tans, and their eyes, deep gold, held a wild and murderous gleam.

Divide and conquer was the plan of the pack, and the aggressive charge by the four scattered the humans somewhat.

Turin, Namor and Blake were kept preoccupied with two, Gabriel, Desmond, Reagan and Connor a third, and Ida and Gael the last.

Namor may have been an egotistical bully, but he was skilled in a fight, Jada gave him that. He drew a second sword secured across his back and threw it like a spear at the wolf coming at him.

The blade sank deep into the right side of its chest, though the wolf refused to go down. The impact of the sword knocked it off balance, but, with an enraged snarl, the beast threw itself at him.

Quick as a flash, Namor dove forward, twisting around so he was on his back. As the wolf passed over him, he swiped it across the stomach with his second blade.

The wolf landed nearly on top of him and turned back on itself, like a snake.

Without so much as a trace of panic, Namor grabbed the hilt of the sword protruding from the wolf's chest to stop its forward momentum. Then, before the beast could latch onto his throat, Namor brought the second blade around and ran it through the side of the wolf's neck, killing it.

As for Turin and Blake, the moment the second wolf broke from cover, they split up. Heading two different directions, they divided the beast's attention.

Blake moved closer, and the wolf turned to him.

Turin shot an arrow and it plunged into the wolf's exposed flank.

The wolf unleashed a horrible growl of fury and spun to snap at the elf. This left Blake available to land a deep strike across the wolf's shoulder with his sword.

As it lunged back towards him, Blake gave an expert swing and punched the blade straight through the beast's head.

Jada became aware that she was staring at him again, and began to wonder if she had some kind of problem.

She also felt totally useless just standing there. She had no weapon, other than her knife. It'd barely leave a scratch on one of these brutes and probably just make them angrier. But what was she supposed to do? Throw rocks?

As for Gael and Ida, they'd gone native on their foe. Or at least Gael had. They'd already inflicted several deep wounds upon the wolf when Jada glanced their way. Its tan coat was matted with mist and blood.

Ida goaded it to draw its full attention, while Gael snuck around behind. It was a colossal beast, the largest of the four.

The wolf lunged at Ida, who dodged lightly out of the way. But not before swiping it across the nose with the dagger in her hand.

The wolf was about to leap again, but Gael moved first. Hatchet in one hand, short sword in the other, she struck fast and hard. She stabbed first with the sword, driving it through the left side and into its heart, before delivering a powerful downward swing with the hatchet, breaking its back.

Wow, thought Jada, honestly impressed, though it made her feel all the more inferior and inadequate.

Gabriel, Reagan and Connor had slain their foe and were turning to meet two more that were approaching out of the trees.

Namor sprinted by Jada and towards his two companions. For just a second, she saw his face, the fierce determination in his hard gaze, and the fiery light that gleamed in his eyes. He may have been a jerk, but there was something about seeing him in action that brought new respect from her.

Another pair of wolves broke cover from the right, as even more shadows approached  
*Okay, thought Jada. We're all going to die.*

Turin leapt in the path of one beast as an arrow from Reagan sank into the skull of another.

That's when Blake appeared beside Jada. Gaze intense, he looked her over quickly, to ensure she was uninjured. Then he held up a tomahawk.

"Here," he said, panting lightly, not from the exertion of the fight, but from the adrenaline.

"I hear you're skilled with one of these," he continued, with a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Jada could feel her face growing warm, and when she took the weapon, their hands accidentally touched. Her stomach then proceeded to cinch into a knot.

*Cut it out,* she chided herself. She glanced back at Turin, anything to break her gaze from Blake's stormy eyes.

The elf, with Reagan beside him, stood braced for battle before three wolves.

Before Jada could do anything, movement in her peripheral drew her attention. When her gaze flitted back to Blake, she knew something was amiss.

He drew a breath and straightened as his eyes fell on something behind her.

Jada shoved him back and out of the way, before turning sharply. She'd already had her knife drawn and had moved it to her left hand before taking the tomahawk from Blake.

As she turned, she swiped with the knife, catching a gremlin in the chest, and then brought the tomahawk around and killed a second.

The creature she'd struck with the knife was still alive, and flopped along the ground, trying to escape.

Without a second thought, Jada strode to it and gave one final swing of the tomahawk.

All thought processes stopped as she stood over the dead creature, with its black blood dripping from her weapon.

*What am I doing? I feel like some kind of medieval warrior.*

"Heads up!"

Jada spun to see that more wolves had advanced onto the scene and isolated her companions into two groups. Blake had already rejoined them, since he'd figured she could handle herself against a pair of tiny, winged assailants.

But walking between the two groups was a big, black wolf, who regarded Jada with eerie, pale yellow eyes.

There was nothing else for it, and Jada spun and ran down the steep ridge. The trees began to grow closer together the further down she went, and the sound of the river gradually became louder. The fog had cleared closer to the water, instead of thickening, which didn't make sense.

*Then again, she thought as she cut between two trees, neither does talking animals, flying bird-bat things or being chased by wolves on steroids.*

Behind her, she could hear steady huffing breaths of her pursuer, who was drawing nearer. Correction: *pursuers.*

As Jada cut left and down a steeper path, she saw glimpses of shadows in her peripheral, to both her left and right. The wolves were flanking her and would be closing the net anytime.

*Yup, she thought as she cleared a fallen birch tree. I'm definitely going to die.*

She could clearly hear the river now, and occasionally saw it over the treetops below the rise.

Ahead the ground dropped away, but she couldn't see how far. There was no time for hesitation, though, because the gray wolf to her right veered sharply towards her.

Pushing her legs faster, Jada charged for the edge of the drop-off and leapt with everything she had.

It didn't turn out to be a sheer cliff. The ground was just at an incredibly steep angle. It was also rocky and didn't suggest a pleasant landing.

But, like when Balo had put extra effort into his jump yesterday, it had been a good thing Jada had jumped as hard as she had. Waiting below was another gray wolf, like he'd known his companions would herd her there.

She overshot him and didn't jump into waiting jaws. When her boots hit the ground, she dropped and tumbled...and tumbled some more until the ground leveled off some.

Using her momentum, Jada rolled backwards and into a crouch. One wolf was nearly to her. It was a sheer, desperate act of survival that made her swing the tomahawk around backwards and then up sharply.

The blade caught the wolf smack in the throat, stopping his momentum and throwing his head back. His body dropped to the ground and did not move.

There wasn't time to consider this accomplishment, because the others were strides from her.

Upon her uncomfortable descent, Jada had noted the thick line of alders beyond the narrow clearing. Now she spun and ducked into them.

Trying to bushwhack through alders is an extremely difficult ordeal. They're tall and grow tightly together. However, Jada wasn't trying to clear a path, and she slipped through them with only minor difficulty.

Behind her, she heard angry snarls from the wolves and the sound of large beasts thrashing around.

The alder stand was only thirty feet thick and Jada emerged from the other side in short order. While the alders slowed her pursuers, staying inside the stand wasn't a permanent option. The wolves would eventually wiggle their way through and get to her.

A narrow, grassy plateau topped the sheer bank of the river, which was wider than she thought it'd be. It also looked deep and cold.

Jada leapt back just as a large black blur whipped past. The black wolf with pale yellow eyes had made quick time and gone around the alders.

Skidding to a stop, he swung around. He'd just started advancing forward, but jerked to a halt as the sound of a horn cut over the noise of the river.

The wolf wrinkled his nose and growled.

"Jada!"

She searched for the owner of that familiar voice and found him standing atop the ledge she'd jumped off of. It was Blake.

*Great, she thought. He probably thinks I'm totally helpless and am no good for anything besides getting into trouble that I can't get myself out of.*

Jada had always held the idea of "damsel in distress" with great disdain. If she got herself into trouble, then she'd get herself out. She wasn't a raging feminist, but she also wasn't some useless woman who didn't know how to take care of herself. She preferred to do things herself, thank you.

Blake's shout made the black wolf turn its head.

Seizing the opportunity, Jada stepped forward and swung with all the strength she could gather.

The blade of the tomahawk struck the wolf and left a deep and ugly wound that ran from its neck to the left side of its face.

It unleashed the fiercest snarl of rage she'd ever heard from an animal.

Jada backpedaled out of biting distance and then turned and sprinted away from the other members of the pack, who came in for swift revenge.

When she felt hot breath on the back of her neck, she swiped behind her. She hit air, and the wolf on her heels growled with distaste.

The stretch of bank Jada was running on became narrower, and when it wound around a curve, she saw the end of the line was approaching.

A sheer rock cliff rose up at least fifty feet, running a short distance into the river on the left, and also up the ridge to the right.

On approach, Jada quickly noted potential handholds.

A second wolf appeared to her right. But an arrow sank into its back, and it stumbled and then fell.

She was nearly to the cliff, but needed to do something about the wolf still on her tail.

Adopting Namor's strategy, Jada slowed just a little, before turning and swinging. The tomahawk sank into the side of the beast's head, and she released the handle, leaving the blade embedded in the wolf's skull.

Jada hit the ground, rolled to her feet, sprinted for the cliff and then jumped and grabbed a narrow ledge. Thanks to a fresh burst of adrenaline over the thought of having a wolf latch onto her leg, she quickly found a foothold and pushed herself higher.

It was an agonizing ten seconds before Jada was out of reach of the wolves. And out of handholds.

The rock face was smooth like shale. It also crumbled like it, too. Her footholds gave way, and she was left hanging by her fingers.

Below, the wolves snarled in their frustration and several jumped for her, but she was a foot too high for them.

*Okay, if I can hold out until reinforcements arrive...*

The rock under her right hand began to flake and crumble.

*Nevermind. I don't think I'm going to make it that long.*

Jada could hear the sound of galloping hooves. But the riders would have to go around the line of alders and then confront the wolf pack.

While attempting to think of a plan, something out the corner of her eyes stole her attention.

It was Blake. The moment he'd found a break in the attack, he sprinted after Jada, knowing his companions would be able to take care of themselves. Urgency had given him added speed, and he broke out of the trees and followed the ridge until it ran into the cliff face Jada was hanging from.

Light on his feet, he carefully moved from one narrow ledge to another, until he reached a shelf fifteen feet above and to Jada's right.

There was another ledge almost directly above her, but there was also a sizeable gap between it and the one Blake was currently standing on. He'd have to make the jump and risk the shelf giving way when he landed.

That would end up with them both in the jaws of the wolves, which didn't seem too concerned about the approaching riders.

Jada was glad Blake hadn't felt the need to say anything stupid, like, "hang on."

*Right, she thought, as if I'd willingly let go, because I want to get eaten alive by a pack of wolves. Or fall and break my legs...and then get eaten by wolves.*

Expression one of the utmost intensity and concentration, Blake eyed the shelf above Jada and any others close by as he tried to figure out another plan.

Meanwhile, the rock under Jada's right hand finally fell away, leaving her hanging by four fingers. She groped for another hold and the toe of her boot found one a few inches to the left.

Blake watched with a knot in his stomach and heart in his throat as Jada carefully maneuvered along the cliff until she again had temporary hand and footholds.

*The girl's got guts*, he thought. He also noted there was no fear on her face, not a single trace of it. She was merely dealing with the situation like she would any other problem. No panic or terror.

He admired her even more.

Unfortunately, Jada had moved ten feet away from Blake. On top of it all, she was now on a section of cliff that began to curve. Glancing down, she saw that she was roughly halfway between the bank and the river.

All at once, her footholds crumbled, as did one of her handholds. As the seconds ticked by, Jada could feel the rock under her left hand beginning to give.

It would come down to the wolves or the river. It was a simple decision.

As for Blake, he chose to take the risk of the jump to the next shelf. There was no more time, and his concern wasn't for himself. He was committed to saving Jada, by any means necessary, even if it meant his own death.

In that moment, Blake was surprised that his own loyalty had been so deeply given to a stranger. That had never happened before.

But there wasn't any time to further consider it. There'd be time later.

If he survived.

When Jada saw Blake preparing to make the jump, she shook her head.

*No, no, no.*

"Don't!" she called. "It's not worth it."

Blake scowled like she'd just insulted him somehow.

Just as the rock beneath her hand crumbled, Jada tucked her legs underneath her and pushed off. She flipped back and away from the cliff and out over the river.

*This is going to be cold...*

She hit the water boots first, and yes, it was definitely nippy. She had experience crossing rivers and deep streams with strong currents, so she wasn't especially worried.

Jada let herself float on her back as the river took her through a broad gully with steep cliffs on either side. A short distance ahead, she saw the cliffs ended abruptly and were replaced with decent banks.

*No problem*, she thought, as she began swimming diagonally across the current.

Unfortunately, she'd incorrectly assumed there would be plenty of bank and that it would stretch a great distance.

It didn't.

When Jada threw a look over her shoulder, she saw the river disappeared over a waterfall.

*Seriously? You couldn't make this stuff up.*

The cliffs ended and narrow, rocky banks ran along either side of the river.

She was still a good thirty feet from the bank and the river was picking up speed on its approach to the drop-off.

But it was also getting shallower.

Forty feet from the edge, Jada's boots scraped bottom once, then twice. She managed to make solid contact with the bottom, slow her speed a little and push herself closer to the bank.

She was maybe a dozen feet from it when the bottom fell away again. The drop was coming up fast and she thought, *well, this is going to suck.*

Since Jada couldn't be in two dimensions at once, she assumed that if she died here, she was gone on both Aurora and Earth.

As she was taken towards the drop, she noted a slight lip of rock that rose just out of the water, right on the edge.

It'd be a last-ditch effort to avoid an unpleasant end.

That's when Blake sprinted out of the trees and along the bank, keeping even with Jada. He was still wholly committed to saving her, and there were no second thoughts about it.

As for Jada, she wasn't sure what exactly he was going to do. She was about to run out of river, and he out of ground.

Feet from the drop-off, the river became drastically shallower.

Turning sideways, Jada made herself as least resistant as possible to the current and drove her boots hard against the bottom.

She slowed. But couldn't stop.

The top of the rock was slimy, and she grappled for a handhold as the water took her over the lip. Her hands found nothing to hold onto, and she went over the edge.

She would've felt stupid if it'd turned out just to be a short waterfall. Then again, it also would've been a relief.

But it wasn't a short drop. It was a massive waterfall, several hundred feet high before it thundered down to a deep pool.

As Jada went over the edge, she glanced up and spotted Blake. She then watched in both puzzlement and horror as he reached the edge of the bank, launched himself off it and drove straight for her.

By Jada's guess, she'd fallen close to a hundred feet when Blake had nearly reached her. The air was beginning to grow hazy from the mist generated by the tumultuous river as it met the bottom of the falls.

After another thirty feet, everything faded to a misty blanket of gray, and she lost sight of Blake.

It was strange. Some people might've been panicking after going over a waterfall, or thinking about all the things they'd wanted to do before dying, or perhaps considering their life's regrets.

Jada wouldn't know because she'd never spoken with someone who'd gone over a really big waterfall.

She was, however, trying to figure out what the heck Blake thought he was doing. Or what he was going to do when he caught up to her.

Seconds later, a hand latched onto her arm, before the rest of Blake emerged from the mist.

"I gotcha!"

Jada clamped her other hand onto his shoulder. But before she could ask what his brilliant plan was, her vision blurred...and then everything went white.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Land of Desolation**

The dark company rode across the pathless plain of desolation, their black steeds kicking up clouds of dust and ash.

The entire territory was like a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Nothing green grew, and the shoots of grass that did strive to grow came up a sickly brownish-yellow. All the trees had died and were mere black skeletons in disfigured shapes as they twisted towards the perpetually gray sky. All the land appeared to have been wholly ravaged by fire, destroyed...but it never again healed.

Most of the area in these accursed borders was covered in black, razor-backed mountains that stood in dark malice. They created menacing borders about the sporadic meadows and plains that lay before their feet or loomed over narrow passages that dared cut through the lower peaks.

The mountains reached high and often disappeared into the smoke-like clouds. But even if it snowed, the purity of the whiteness was defiled and only created ugly gray and brown streaks down the black faces.

What ground that wasn't covered in rock was either brown dust or pale ash. Neither were there fresh and clear rivers, only stagnant pools of gray and dark green.

Beauty, light, and joy were not known here, and instead, they were twisted and perverted. The sun was never permitted to shine, forbidden by the thick haze and clouds, and day seemed like dusk before finally fading into the blackness of night.

However, those who lived here did not care about the sun or light. All thoughts were inward and focus was on surviving one day to the next. For agriculture yielded little crops from the diseased land, and the food, minimal nutrition.

All wildlife had fled, save for vultures and crows. Anything that had remained had been hunted to extinction, and hunting parties had to risk venturing beyond the borders to find game.

If fortune was on their side, they'd come across an animal as it wandered into their borders. But even then, those creatures were often emaciated because this was a land where living things came to die.

A graveyard, that's what this land was, and most of the dust was from bones long decayed.

Yet, no matter how little the people ate, no one seemed able to just wither and die. Only at the end of old age would death finally take them.

It was a torment, a punishment deemed fit for them and the treachery committed by them and their fathers.

The small hunting party cantered down a narrow passage between two sheer cliffs, their horses' hooves echoing off the stone ground and walls. Fifty feet later, the passage and walls ended abruptly and the great plain opened before them. It was the largest within the black borders and laid between two massive clusters of mountains.

The riders spurred their mounts onward, but the tall and lean black beasts needed no urging. Both man and horse were anxious to return to the city because night was coming.

Neither feared the darkness, for they lived in it, owned it. But the nights were treacherously cold, even though the days were searing and humid. The temperatures fluctuated wildly between the rising of the unseen sun and its setting.

All for their torment and punishment.

Lengthening their strides, the horses drove their tireless legs faster. Their dull black coats did not gleam as powerful muscles churned beneath them, and their dark eyes reflected only a trace amount of light. Their hard hooves thundered over the bare ground, and with each great stride, they snorted, blowing ash-like vapor from their flared nostrils.

These were the mounts of the generals and commanders in the army of Cassius, the dark king. They looked like charges that might be ridden by Death itself, massive, but impossibly lean, as if there was just enough skin to stretch over their frames.

Indeed, the steeds themselves inspired fear and great respect from all. They cared not for green grass or the sweetest grain. Instead, trampling, pursuing and ultimately killing the enemy, whether on the battlefield or in stealth, was their one purpose.

Just outside the city, on the other side of the plain, camped vast legions of gath and chimera. Fed and driven by darkness, they were always ready to march to a fight at the king's bidding.

To those on the outskirts of the encampment the approach of the dark company, as they thundered across the plain in falling darkness, had the appearance of a black tide rolling onto shore.

From a gate somewhere on the southern edge of the city, a horn echoed over the meadow in welcome.

The gates and posts were not heavily guarded, save for the main entrance to the east. This was a dead land where the living resided. Why bother attacking or laying siege to this place? There wasn't anything worth plundering.

The riders checked their mounts and passed through one of the broad gates. The residents had heard the horn and already cleared the main street that led up to the stables and residence of the king.

Horses and riders passed up the road, rumbling by the bleak houses like a dark river. Half a mile later, the ground began to rise as the north side of the city situated itself along the base of a mountain.

Up rode the company through another gate and into a stone courtyard that held one of the stables. The horses' hooves clopped and skittered along the stones as they slid to a halt. Those who'd been left behind stuck their heads out their stall doors and whinnied sharply at the arrivals.

As soldiers took the reins of the black steeds, the horses answered their counterparts by pinning their ears and shaking their manes.

Dismounting from an exceptionally dark horse, a mere shadow, was the leader of the company. Tall he was, and strong, evenly built with a great air of command. His gaze was eerily sharp and hinted at exceptional intelligence and insight. It was whispered among his underlings that he could read the thoughts of others.

His eyes had once been the color of the sea, but they'd faded to dark gray following his treason. Black haired, a noble face and clear eyes, he was still darkly handsome.

And he was, in fact, Cassius, dark king of the city and this entire diseased land. For it was because of him, and his attempted treachery against the high king of the North, that this land died, in the wake of his banishment.

"How was the hunt?" asked Merek, Cassius's chief advisor.

Cassius and two other riders each tossed a sackcloth bag to the three men with Merek.

"I guess you could call it a success," replied Cassius with a strong and rich voice before he glanced at one of Merek's attendants. "Once you've prepared whatever meat you can, take it to the East Village."

"Yes, sir."

"You came just in time," said Merek, noting the chill in the air as he and Cassius walked across the open courtyard and down a broad walkway that cut into the mountain.

A row of stalls lined the wide aisle, and a number of black horses poked their heads out to watch them as they passed. But none of them wore friendly expressions or held a kind light in their eyes.

Instead, they snorted ash, pinned their ears and shook their heads. They were hot with fiery wrath and their desire to charge the lines of the enemy gave them endless energy. They circled, weaved and pawed nonstop in their stalls.

If they were turned out to pasture, all they'd do was run the fence or fight with one another. Thus, they had to be stalled to lower the risk of injury to themselves and each other.

But they would not harm their riders, and especially not Cassius. He had great mastery over the beasts because he understood them. Though he was not visibly seething in riotous anger, his rage and bitter malice were veiled. And the horses could clearly sense it.

At the rear of the aisle were broad stairs. They wound up and around to the main floor of the castle. In reality, it wasn't a castle as much as it was a moderately sized villa, built right out of the mountainside. There was much open space on the ground floor, which was primarily a meeting hall. A few tables sat close to a large hearth at the back of the high-ceilinged room. A great line of windows allowed a visitor to gaze south across the plain, and east, beyond the edge of darkness and onto lush and green meadows where the sun showed its face.

Past the tables and hearth was the vast, yet mostly empty throne room of Cassius. Its walls were hidden somewhere in darkness and dark marble floors and support pillars absorbed the light. Here he judged on serious matters brought before him.

Finally, through another door were his room and his study, which opened outside onto a balcony. With sheer cliffs rising behind and on either side, it looked east and south.

Here the dark king could be found when he wasn't hunting game for the residents of the city or holding council.

Cassius was indeed a mighty hunter, and before treason, when he walked the halls of the high king, he was heralded as the greatest huntsman beneath the sun. Unmatched with the sword and bow, he could run great distances at speed and yet do so silently. No one could rival his stealth and he could sneak right up on any creature without them seeing, hearing or smelling him.

But in the dead land, there were no forests to hunt in and the mountains were perilous to attempt to climb.

So now Cassius spent much time on the balcony, standing or pacing as he mused and toiled with malicious thought. It was said his torment was worse than all the others. Unlike everyone else, he was not allowed to step outside the black borders of the dead land.

Other inhabitants could leave, though at their own peril.

Everyone was fully aware of the unseen forces at work in the world. If Cassius set a foot outside the bounds in place for him, he would die within hours, but not because someone was standing guard at the border. No, he wouldn't die by any man-made device, but instead by an excruciating disease given to him by an unseen hand.

Thus, Cassius had to stay within this land, and day after day he gazed beyond the misty veil that hung over the border and far across the meadows to the white city. Here the high king sat, on a white throne in a great citadel built out of the mighty mountains that overlooked the sea.

Occasionally, they strove against one another from their castles, contending with the other's mind and will.

For both men were great rulers and terrible warriors in battle. But one was just and the other was self-conceited. One knew it prudent to show mercy, and the other was cruel. One was true...and the other was false.

But as of late, the air between them had been silent because Cassius had grown sick of hearing the voice of the high king. So he shut him out and no longer heard him.

It was also because Cassius had slowly begun unfolding his plan to strike against the king and rest of world untouched by the poison that had turned this territory into desolation. Cassius could not leave, but he could send others to do his bidding, and not just soldiers.

The gath had been created specifically for Cassius's use, and the chimera were especially fierce and deadly in battle. Terrible they all were, spawns of some darker force.

Cassius's head general was, in fact, a demon prince. He was called Levian, a great black being with massive wings and deep yellow-green eyes that hated everything they looked upon.

He wasn't a shock to the other people because the gath and chimera were actually uglier than he was. Levian, on the other hand, had human features.

Together he and Cassius wrought plans of defeat of the high king and destruction on his subjects. They used gath for raids and general mayhem, though the chimera were kept mostly reserve for the present, so their full numbers weren't revealed.

Cassius and Levian also used beasts for their bidding, especially wolves. Quiet and swift, they could be used as spies, for hunting, and of course, for attacking towns.

There were also the dassous, little ugly winged gremlins. They were mostly for spying and carrying orders to squads of gath. Other animals too could be used easily enough, if Cassius bent his dark will upon them.

Even now the dark king stood on the balcony, looking to the east, where the white city stood, walls glowing crimson in the setting sun's light. Soon, it would be the streets that would be running with red, filled with the blood of his enemies.

If things continued to go as planned, Cassius would be able to walk beyond the borders of this cursed land without consequence.

The sun sank below the mountains and a gust of icy wind bit his face. But he didn't notice. *No kingdom lasts forever*, thought Cassius to the high king, *not even yours*.

## **Chapter 5**

### **A Little Trust**

Jada opened her eyes and found herself...standing in a field of timothy.

*Okay, that's just weird.*

Although, being here was definitely preferable to being pulverized at the bottom of a waterfall.

The fence to a neighboring pasture was a short distance away, and looking over the top rail were three horses. They regarded Jada curiously, and she realized she recognized those faces, and the barn and house beyond the pasture.

This was the property of Zander's parents.

Turning in a circle, she gazed around a moment. "Blake?"

No answer, except a warm afternoon breeze.

Jada vaulted the fence, gave the nearest horse a pat and then broke into a run towards the barn. While en route, she wondered again how she'd been transported, and how she was going to return to the other dimension.

Unless, of course, she'd actually had a psychotic episode, imagined the whole event, and had been wandering listlessly through the mountains for who knew how long.

She reached the barn first and pulled up beside the southern entrance. A four horse trailer was parked at the northern doorway, and the door to the feed and tack room was open.

That meant one person was home, anyway.

A rustling noise came from the loft above the empty stalls to Jada's right, where hay was stacked. Seconds later, Zander appeared with a hay bale in hand. He was tan from spending hours under the sun and his arms were strong from much labor.

When he saw Jada, he jerked to a stop and accidentally dropped the bale, which tipped off the edge of the loft and thumped down the aisle. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Not bothering to go to the ladder, he grabbed the ledge of the loft and swung to the floor.

"Jada, where have you been?" he asked, expression furrowed as he crossed to her.

She opened her mouth to answer but got stuck. Starting again, she gave a shake of her head and answered with, "Long story. How long have I been gone?"

Zander was still trying to grasp the fact that Jada was actually here, and his perplexity didn't lessen as he looked her over. "Almost three months."

She gawked at him. Three months? How was that possible? She'd only counted two days...

Before Zander could ask any more questions, she nodded at the trailer. "You headed somewhere?"

He didn't respond right away and merely continued to study her. There was something different about Jada, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Granted, it had been three months since

they'd seen each other, yet still. It wasn't a physical difference; she was still scrawny. Well, others might've called her that, but he knew she was stronger than many of his male friends.

He'd personally always thought of her as perfect, just right.

But Jada seemed easier to read, or at least, more see-through somehow if that made any sense. At the same time, her own gaze looked deeper, was sharper and cut right into him.

For a breath, Jada thought Zander would keep pressing her for details. She had, after all, vanished without a trace. For all anyone had known, she'd been kidnapped or killed in the woods by a wild animal.

The second possibility had actually been a near thing.

But Zander knew Jada very well, enough to know that if she really didn't want to talk about something, there wasn't anything he could say or do to make her.

His face remained hard set with confusion a moment longer before sadness softened his puzzled expression. "We're moving."

Jada felt like someone had just punched her in the stomach. "What? Why? Where?"

"My dad got a good job offer, so we're headed to a place a couple hours north," he answered, shifting a little. "My parents had been debating it since March, and uh...they decided to finally go for it. Plus, I mean...look, our parents were extremely close, they were my friends, too. With their disappearance and the other ranch families in the area moving, we just figured..."

"Why stick around," finished Jada quietly and dropping her gaze.

Her knee-jerk reaction was to beg him to ask his family if she could move with them. She could live in a shack somewhere, anywhere, and earn her keep. She couldn't go back to her aunt's.

But Jada kept herself together. What about the other dimension? Had it really been a dream? No, it was real, she was certain. However, she still had the problem of: how was she going to get back?

Then she thought, *If I knew how to get back, could I take Zander with me?*

The instant she thought it, she was answered with an extreme sense of reservation. No, that wasn't the right move. He had to stay where he was.

She was sad, though, because Zander was her best friend. Well, her only friend, and he was leaving. She and her parents had used to travel often, but their ranch had been their home base, and they'd always returned.

"I'd been trying to convince them that we should stay," continued Zander. "At least for another season. It's not that I don't want to move, but I wanted to stay...because of you."

That last statement gave Jada mental pause, and she glanced up at him.

“I don’t know everything that’s been going on at your aunt’s place,” he said quietly. “But I know you’ve been having a really hard time. You’ve almost never said anything, but you don’t have to. It’s on your face...you may have thought you’d been doing a good job hiding it. But your pain has been so obvious, at least to me.”

He stammered a little, dropped his gaze a second and then cleared his throat. “And I’ve been...worried that if I left, that you’d, I don’t know...self-destruct or something.”

Zander put a hand on his hip and glanced out of the barn. “But then you simply...disappeared, just like your parents. I, nobody, knew what had happened. Police searched for you for a week, but all they found was a backpack. We didn’t think we’d see you again, and I thought you’d been kil—”

He paused a moment and ran his hand over his mouth. When he returned his gaze to Jada, she saw the hurt in his expression. “What went on that you couldn’t call or...or trust me to help?”

Jada slouched a little, guilty and ashamed that she’d hurt her friend. But she hadn’t been thinking entirely clearly that afternoon. She’d been in a state of desperation and her only thought had been to flee, to escape far away, where no one would find her. Or, more appropriately, where her relatives wouldn’t find her and continue their verbal onslaught.

She also couldn’t exactly have written letters from the other dimension. While Zander had always tolerated her strangeness, he likely would’ve thought she’d finally jumped off the brink of insanity.

And Zander was asking Jada to tell him about what had driven her to run away. Just the thought of telling the story immediately drained and exhausted her spirit.

Jada failed miserably at keeping the anguish of her internal struggle from showing on her face.

Zander rested his hands on her shoulders. Though he’d never even hinted it to Jada, he’d always adored her and held her in the highest regard. While he didn’t think he felt anything romantic towards her, she was still his dear friend, his crazy partner-in-crime. She was one of those people he could be himself around, and she was completely accepting of him.

The feeling was mutual on Jada’s end. She held Zander with the same view, and she’d always admired him deeply.

She tried several times to answer, then gave a shrug as she broke his gaze.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she said, giving a weak smile even as she blinked away tears. “Won’t change what happened.”

She cleared her throat and gathered her courage again to meet his eyes one more time.

“It’s okay, Zander,” she assured with a nod. “I’ll be fine.”

Then, in an unexpected turn of events, Zander pulled her into a hug, and she wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” he said. “If I’d known you weren’t...I don’t know.”

For a long moment, Jada closed her eyes and listened to his heartbeat. Then, she drew a breath and replied, “It’ll all work out. Really.”

She truly believed it. Her sadness eased and for a completely unknown reason, she felt a peace and rekindling of hope. This wasn’t the end. She knew she’d see her best friend again.

They stepped away and regarded one another...before Jada gave Zander a slap on the shoulder. “Well, I’m outta here.”

Zander, bless him, had always been completely accepting of her quirks. A faint smile pulled at his mouth as Jada started off for the southern end of the barn, where she’d entered.

“Where you off to?” he asked.

Stopping, Jada half-turned and glanced back at Zander with a feigned incredulous expression. “On another adventure, of course,” she replied, before breaking into a knowing smile. “I’ll see you later, Zander.”

Zander smiled, also. “See you around, Jade.”

“Hey, Zander!”

“In the barn, dad...”

Jada slipped out of the barn before anyone else saw her. Now, she really had no plan. But she did know the first thing she was going to do, was check out a stand of trees on the edge of the pasture.

When she’d initially turned to leave the barn, she’d noticed the three horses were standing around it.

As she approached the trees, one of the horses whickered a greeting.

Jada cocked an eyebrow as she slowed to a walk and slipped by the horse. Zander’s horses had always been friendly, but never that friendly. The only other times they’d nickered at her was when she’d brought their dinner.

She walked around in the stand a couple minutes but didn't see anything. She was just wondering again where Blake might be when someone slapped a hand over her mouth.

A burst of adrenaline raged through her. Raising her arm, Jada slammed her elbow with everything she had into whoever was behind her. She heard a grunt and the hand fell away from her mouth.

Pivoting around, she firmly planted her feet and raised her fists, the right one holding her pocket knife, blade pointed back towards her elbow.

"Easy!"

She glared a moment longer at the mystery assailant before the face registered. She then glowered and straightened.

"Blake, what are you doing?" asked Jada as she folded the knife. "Don't you know not to sneak up on strange women?"

Blake gingerly rubbed his stomach. He didn't look any worse for wear for having jumped off a waterfall.

Which reminded her...

"And what exactly were you thinking?" she asked, surprised by her own boldness. "Jumping off a waterfall? You have a suicide wish or something?"

Blake sent her a curt look. "Actually, I was saving your life, if you haven't figured that out by now."

Jada *tisk*ed and then asked. "So, now what? How do we get back?"

He gave a tilt of his head and they started walking along the fence line.

But he never had a chance to answer Jada's first question, though, because she blurted, "And what's with the time difference between here and there? Did you know I've been gone almost three months, at least Earth time? Okay... that sounded really crazy just now when I said that."

And then Blake started laughing. She reminded him when he'd first begun traversing and was just figuring out how things worked between the two dimensions. But he was liking Jada more and more, just her personality and the way she was. She was kind of cute when she was excited about something.

As for Jada, she was too captivated by Blake's laughter and interested over his reaction to be put off by it. His laughter was a good sound, rich, uplifting, and it lightened the heart. It made his eyes dance and even made her want to smile.

She fully understood in that instant why Gael was so drawn to him.

“The others!” gasped Jada, stopping dead in her tracks and looking at him. “Do you think they’re okay?”

A grin pulled hard at Blake’s lips, but he managed to contain his mirth, though his eyes still laughed.

He held up a hand to keep her from asking more questions. “They were fine when I left them. Now, I don’t know much about the time differences. Sometimes a couple weeks on Aurora equals only hours here. Or vice versa. If you want to know more, you’ll have to ask the king, because he knows pretty much everything.”

They continued walking, and after a breath, Jada asked, “How long has it been since you were here last?”

“I haven’t looked at a calendar or cell phone, so I can’t be sure,” replied Blake. “Usually though, only a year has gone by.”

He gave a shrug. “I traverse, as we call it, just to see what’s going on in this dimension, catch up on national and world events, and do some reading on whatever topic interests me.”

He threw her a grin. “And to eat pizza.”

That made Jada smile, though she quickly sent it back into hiding. *Oh, Blake’s good. My defenses were lowering and I didn’t even know it.*

Yet she watched with interest as Blake’s gaze fell a moment. His smile faded, and as he returned his attention forward, there was trace sadness in his expression.

There was sorrow here for him, Jada realized, in this dimension.

Typically, Jada wasn’t nosey and didn’t like to pry into other people’s business. Yet she really wanted to ask Blake about his story, how he’d gone to Aurora the first time.

The possibility struck her then, that the reason for his arriving in Aurora was related to the situation that caused the sadness she saw in him.

Kind of like her story.

Blake seemed to read her thoughts because he smiled faintly. “Long story.”

The sorrow vanished from his expression, and he glanced over his shoulder. “So, who was your friend?”

Instant suspicion awoke in Jada, and Blake caught a faint glimmer of it flash across her face. Blake had to have been close enough to see Zander, which made her wonder if he’d been following just to spy on her.

A little warning in the “trust department” went up in her brain.

Jada took a breath to answer but stopped right before speaking. *Since when do I answer to Blake? What’s it to him, anyway?*

She was now very suspicious and shot him a look. “He’s just a friend. Why?”

Blake didn’t meet her gaze directly but studied her out the corner of his eyes. He noted her suspicion had increased, but not necessarily about what he was asking about. It was simply the fact that he’d seen and watched her and her ‘friend.’

Regardless, he sensed her defenses were now completely up again.

*What if he’s a stalker, she was thinking. Maybe I’ll wait until he takes me back to Aurora, and then I’ll make me tell him his true intentions.*

That gave her another moment of mental pause. *Since when did I become so violent?*

“Hm,” huffed Blake. “He didn’t look like just a friend to me.”

It was Jada’s turn to burst out laughing. She laughed even harder when she saw the puzzled expression with which Blake regarded her. She really didn’t know why she was laughing, but it seemed thoroughly bizarre that he would remotely care who Zander was and what he was to her.

After a minute, Jada was able to rein herself in a little. She slapped Blake on the shoulder and shook her head, still chuckling to herself.

When he didn’t continue walking with her, she stopped and turned.

Blake held her gaze, and it was clear he was still expecting further clarification about her relationship status with Zander.

He was sincerely curious—and that wasn’t funny at all. All amusement fled and Jada’s smile vanished.

As Jada had noted earlier, Gael was extremely interested in Blake. As for herself, however, she wasn’t interested in any gushy relationship. Nor was she about to get caught between one.

Jada also decided, in that moment, that she didn’t like people knowing any of her personal business. It was hers after all and didn’t concern strangers. So she’d be ever so grateful if people kept their noses out of her life.

She met Blake’s gaze head on. “I’ll tell you about Zander if you tell me what you think about Gael.”

Blake just blinked before his expression furrowed, as if he was totally clueless about what, or who, Jada was talking about.

Jada blew through her lips, dropped her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. *Guys...*

“Gael,” said Blake, still confused. “What about her?”

“If you have to ask, then you don’t see it.”

Again, Blake blinked at Jada, and she sighed, exasperated.

“Anyway,” she continued airily. “I already gave you my answer about Zander, and if you don’t believe me, well...that’s your problem.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Blake’s mouth and hope was kindled in him. He was then free to pursue Jada if he decided he really wanted to. At the moment, he truly wasn’t sure what he felt towards her, and he really didn’t know her.

Still. For the time being, they were both free.

Jada caught a twinkle of light come to life in Blake’s eyes, and strangely, it made her uncomfortable.

“So...can we go now?” she asked, and then finished in a thought, *before we have any more awkward moments.*

Blake huffed a laugh and reached towards her.

Jada reflexively stepped away. She didn’t know him very well, and just because he’d made her laugh didn’t mean she trusted him any more than she had previously. In fact, her level of suspicion towards him was at an all-time high.

Sure, he’d thrown himself off a waterfall to save her. But that didn’t mean she was going to hand over her pocket knife to him.

Blake understood Jada wasn’t playing around, and he didn’t move towards her again. There was a dangerous light in her eyes now, flickering with warning.

Instead, he studied her with those sharp blue eyes. *Move slowly*, came a gentle thought. *Be patient.*

Understanding came to Blake then. This was like dealing with a horse that, though wild, had been kept, confined and abused before being sent to slaughter, at which it had been snatched from the jaws of death at the last moment. If it had ever known even a kind word or glance, it had long been forgotten. Now there was only a mind scarred by harsh and painful memories.

“Trust me,” he said quietly, as he searched Jada’s face and raised his hands slightly. “Just a little.”

Jada knew Blake was true. She wanted to trust him, like she wanted to trust Merida and Jordan. But, just like with them, she was afraid of trusting Blake.

She knew she was still a bit of a mess and needed to be able to make up her mind about who she was going to trust and not trust.

That's when Jada noticed the worn, dark brown leather band around Blake's wrist. Thin strips of leather were braided at the top and bottom and created an intricate pattern. In between a tiny section where the braids crisscrossed she spied a small stone set in it. It was rich, deep emerald in color.

*Is that how he's able to go back and forth?*

"Yes," answered Blake, reading the question on her face. "All travelers like myself have them, though I don't traverse back and forth on any particular assignments, like some. It was a gift, and I'm sure you'll be given yours soon...if you don't go taking any more headers off waterfalls."

Jada snorted a laugh despite herself. "Who gave it to you?"

Blake's face softened. "The high king himself."

That was enough for Jada, and she gave a nod. "Okay, then."

Blake extended his hand to her.

After hesitating one more moment, Jada put her hand into his, and then everything around them faded.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Right Place, Right Time**

At first, Jada thought she'd gone blind. When she blinked a couple times, it didn't matter if her eyes were closed or open; all she saw was black.

As she turned in a circle, though, a faint flicker of orange and yellow light on the other side of a shallow rise danced off the trees.

*Oh good, it's only night,* she thought.

The air was bitterly cold. It might not have been so bad if it hadn't been for the wind, merciless and biting as it gusted angrily through the tops of the pines somewhere overhead.

But all thoughts of cold vanished when Jada heard voices nearby. They weren't kind and fair, but harsh and cruel. The instant they reached her ears, fear clenched her stomach and she dropped into a low crouch.

With great care, she crept forward to the top of the rise. She was grateful in that moment for the wind because it would mask any rustling she made. She couldn't see brush or branches to avoid them.

Near the top, Jada slowed, dropped to her stomach and crawled until she could just see over the crest. Below in a little clearing was a small, low-burning campfire. Around it sat several large gath warriors, barely visible in the dark.

With them also sat several men.

Jada had thought the primary threat had been from gath and beasts under the command of Cassius. It'd never crossed her mind that men would also be aligned with the dark king, even though he himself was human.

All the men here were as tall as the gath, and stern-faced and adorned in dark armor. They paid no mind to the gath, and it was as if the beasts were any other fellow soldier. Light from the fire danced in their cold eyes, and their expressions were apathetic and contemptuous.

Two beings were standing, one gath and one man, both commanders by their stature. It seemed they were in debate over something as they glared at one another.

Jada wondered how the man could stomach being so close to the big, gargoyle-like creature glowering at him.

"I say we strike the town tonight," grumbled the gath commander, the sound of his voice sending a chill down Jada's spine.

"It's still a three hour run to Lamia," countered the man, matching his counterpart's dark expression. "Besides, all our attacks in this territory have been at night. You don't think there will be extra guards on watch? There's a new moon tomorrow night, so I say we move out just after dusk tomorrow and get into position. Then we strike early in the morning, as the fear of a night attack fades at the approach of dawn—when any guards and soldiers will be tired or more at ease."

Mockery appeared on his face and in his voice as he looked at the gath commander. "Unless you want to try something totally new and launch an attack in broad daylight, like your friend Garik did on the Western Village."

The gath's nose wrinkled in disgust and bared his teeth. "Garik was a fool. I am not."

He growled to himself as he thought over the human's proposal for the raid. At last, he spoke. "Fine. We'll do it your way... at least this time, human."

There was no less disdain on the man's face as he replied. "If you weren't so thick, you worthless heap, you'd have realized earlier that my ideas actually have tact...and they work."

That earned snarls from the other gath around the fire and they instantly sprang to their feet.

The men, however, were a half second faster on the draw and had their weapons in hand before the gath could take up theirs. Also, it seemed like more human soldiers had appeared out of the darkness itself and now surrounded the group around the fire.

But the big gath commander only laughed, the sound deep as it rolled around in his chest. "My commanding officer assured me you made good sport."

Men and gath relaxed and sat down again. A shadow on the far side of the fire, where the two commanders were, stepped out of the blackness and shared a few quiet words with them.

A chill broke Jada from her fascinated state over the entire exchange. She also became aware of the other faint glowing lights beyond the small fire she was spying on. She counted at least seven or eight little fires, as far as she could see from her vantage point. Even if there weren't any more, that meant a fair number of enemy warriors.

It was definitely time to be moving along. Carefully, she backed down the rise and, once it was safe to do so, stood and ran into the trees. At least she could now more or less see the pines or oaks just before running smack into them.

She also had the wind to her back, which meant any crashing sounds she made wouldn't easily reach enemy ears.

But, as the icy gust continued to push her, Jada knew she faced several problems.

First, she had no idea where she was in relation to the Western Village, or how far away it was.

She also didn't have any idea where Blake had landed or whatever. When she'd appeared on Zander's farm, Blake had been nearby. But this time that hadn't been the case.

On top of it was the minor problem that she was out in frigid wind, at night, without so much as a coat.

Lastly, there was the matter of the squad planning to attack a town that...she couldn't remember the name of.

Jada was going over these things in her mind when the ground suddenly dropped and her foot caught on something. Pitching forward, she rolled a couple times before slamming into a

tree. It had been kind enough to stop her mid-roll, so she laid on her back with her legs straight up against the pine.

There wasn't time to think about the aches her body immediately reported because a muffled voice gave a shout of surprise. It was strange, though, because it sounded like it'd come from under the ground.

That's when she felt something brush against her back.

Sounding her own cry of alarm, Jada twisted around onto her feet and settled in a crouch. In the darkness, she spotted a black hole at the base of the tree. Apparently, she'd disturbed something, and she hoped it wasn't a badger or wolverine. Awfully cranky buggers they were.

As she drew her knife, she decided one of the first orders of business upon returning to town would be acquiring real weapons.

Two points of pale green light, eye shine, appeared out of the hole.

"Do you mind?" asked the creature.

Jada's eyes just made out the shape of the upper half of its body as it looked at her. Judging by its small, lean size, large ears and long, narrow face, it was a fox.

"Sorry," she whispered, just now remembering the enemy squad in the area.

"I need your help," she continued. "There's a gath squad not far from here. They're planning to attack a town...uh, I can't remember the name. A guy said it was a three hours run from here to there."

The creature hopped the rest of the way out of the hole and sat down, wrapping a long, fluffy tail around its paws. That confirmed it was a fox.

"Sounds like Lamia," he mused.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"What do you want me to do about it?" asked the fox. "I'm not exactly a stellar or a bear or anything..."

"But you could take a message and warn the people there," she suggested.

The fox laughed. "Are you joking? It's cold out, and I've already had a long day of hunting, thank you."

"Please?" she asked, only now finding it odd that she was having a conversation with a talking animal.

The fox tilted his head back and sighed with exasperation. "Fine, fine."

He walked by Jada, muttering something to himself about why this always happened to him.

“Oh wait!” she blurted. “Which way is the Western Village? And how far is it?”

The fox sighed again. “It’s that way.”

“Uh...sorry, I can’t see which—”

Two small paws gripped her left arm and pointed it almost straight out in front of her.

“You were headed the right way,” said the fox impatiently. “It’s only another hour from here...assuming you don’t take any more detours and wake things that are sleeping. You’re fortunate I’m not a bear.”

“Bear?”

“Now, do you want me to actually deliver the message before the sun rises? Or would you prefer I continue to be a walking compass?”

Jada could picture him rolling his eyes as he continued on his way.

“Oh!”

“What now?”

“What’s your name?” she asked.

The fox blinked at her a couple times, surprised at her courtesy. Normally humans didn’t care much to ask his name.

“Diego,” he answered.

“Diego,” said Jada with a nod. “Be careful.”

Diego made no response and vanished into the night.

It was a rough hour through the woods. Jada felt tremendous relief when she finally saw faint flickering of light through the trees.

Near the north end of the village, where Jordan and Merida lived, was a decent sized bonfire. A dozen people were standing around it when she staggered from between two houses and onto the main road.

They gave a collective cry of surprise. Several of them held bows and had arrows set on the strings before she could blink.

Jada’s legs were tired from the run on unseen and uneven terrain, and her lungs hurt from the cold, clear air as she staggered up to the fire.

Jordan and Merida were present, along with a number of other adults. Connor, Gabriel, Ida and, to Jada’s complete relief, Blake, were there too.

They greeted Jada with a hail of questions while Merida threw her cloak around her. Jada might've been sweating from the run, but she still shivering.

"Wait, wait, stop!" she finally shouted, holding up her hands.

All conversation and questions ceased.

"Okay," she said, but then stopped, unsure where to begin.

After a moment, she shook her head and restarted. "Right. There's an attack squad of gath and men about an hour away."

She pointed into the darkness. "Southeast of here. I overheard them, and they're planning to attack a town called...Lamia, I think. Just before dawn of the morning after next."

The adults exchanged glances, but before anyone could say anything, Jada continued. "I ran into a fox and he said he'd take a message to the town to warn them."

"A fox?" asked Gabriel, eyes ever laughing. "Strange to find one out in this weather."

"Uh, well," she stammered, "he wasn't out, exactly."

"How large was the squad?" asked one of the men.

"I didn't see an exact number," replied Jada. "If I had to guess, at least three dozen. Could have been more. I appeared on the edge of their camp."

Her eyes flicked to Blake, who'd been watching her. But the second their eyes met, he looked away. She couldn't guess what was going through his mind because his expression was stoic. She wondered where he'd landed upon returning.

"I assume your parents are still up, Connor," guessed a woman standing beside the man who'd asked Jada how many bad guys there were.

"Yes, ma'am," nodded Connor.

The woman looked at Jordan and Merida. "We'll go scout the area."

"And make sure we have extra sentries on the village's borders," added the man.

Jordan, eyes gleaming with a fight Jada had never seen in them before, gave a nod. "Make it so."

All the adults, except Merida and Jordan, left the fire and disappeared into the surrounding darkness.

"Now, are you alright," asked Jordan, looking Jada up and down.

"I'm fine," she sighed, even as she shivered. Her sweat had cooled and now she felt a chill clear to her bones.

"Then you'll be ready to continue training tomorrow morning?" asked Gabriel.

Jada blinked at him and then shot a glance at Merida and Jordan. They didn't appear against the idea, though Merida couldn't completely hide her concern.

"Yeah, I'm game," answered Jada.

"We'll head out at first light," said Connor. "And I suggest you borrow a horse. It's a good trek to the training grounds."

Now, Jada was all for rising early. But occasionally she enjoyed having a morning to sleep in. Her aching body was telling her it'd been hoping tomorrow would've been one of those mornings.

Ida saw Jada's expression waver and laughed, her fair voice caught up and carried away by the night wind.

That's when Jada remembered...

She looked at Ida, and then Gabriel and Connor. "Is everyone okay? Last time I saw you all—"

"We're fine," chuckled Connor. "Nothing we couldn't handle. Plus, there was a mounted patrol nearby. Their horses smelled the wolves and brought the riders to us."

Jada looked at Merida. "How long have I been gone?"

"Just since late this morning," she replied. "You've barely been gone twelve hours..."

Merida's voice trailed off as great fear flashed across her face.

Jada hunched slightly, ashamed that she'd caused her any sort of worry or grief.

Thankfully the others sensed it was time to leave, and Connor broke the awkward silence first.

"See you bright and early, Jada," he said with a grin in passing.

"Yeah, bright and early," she answered, attempting not to sound forlorn about it.

Gabriel and Ida were smiling, their eyes twinkling in typical elf fashion.

"We ought to be moving along," said Gabriel.

"What, you're not staying?" asked Jada. "But it's dark."

"Elves have keen eyes in the night," replied Ida. "Blake's village is also on the way, so we'll see him there and make sure he doesn't fall into any foxholes."

Jada gaped at Ida, and everyone laughed. Even Blake cracked a smile.

*How could they have guessed what happened?*

Deciding to sidestep the topic, she asked Ida, "Will you be at the training grounds?"

“I will,” she chimed happily, before throwing Gabriel a playful look. “Gabriel will be, also...unless he has more pressing matters.”

That’s when Jada picked up on the affection between them for the first time, as they shared that brief glance.

Gabriel smiled as his shining eyes went from Ida to Jada. “I’d be honored to train alongside you.”

“Tomorrow, then,” said Jada, smiling in spite of her cold and weary state.

Gabriel and Ida started slowly towards the houses off to the right. Blake turned to follow, but paused.

“Glad to see you back in one piece,” he said, though hesitantly as if he’d had to force out the words.

Jada shot Blake a sidelong glance. His gaze was still fixed on the ground and wondered about the cause of this drastic change in his behavior.

She wouldn’t know the cause for some time, behind his behavior that night and in the weeks ahead. Some of it had to do with the fact that when he and Jada had traversed to Earth, he’d arrived around the anniversary of his loss. He hadn’t known the exact date, but he knew the season. Plus, that was always the time of year he’d arrived whenever he did traverse and found that another year had already passed.

Even after all the years that had gone by the weight of the event, and all its memories, were still heavy on him around the anniversary.

But most of it was due to the fact that Blake instantly recognized what Jada was, or would be: an elite traveler tasked with the amazing burden of traversing regularly to both dimensions to stop plots of evil men.

He knew because of where she’d landed upon arriving back at Aurora. Right place, right time. That was the signature of a high-octane traveler. Also, while Jada wasn’t high-strung, deep in her he saw that she was driven with impossible, inhuman, determination.

A wolfhound that, once she caught a scent, there was no stopping her. She was in Aurora to train, not only to thwart Cassius and his forces but also to stop whatever scheme was brewing on Earth. As she trained, she’d become that wolfhound, and then getting in her way could prove dangerous.

And it was a high honor, to be tasked with such a thing. A high honor, but also an incredible burden.

Yet, while Blake was a traveler, he himself hadn't been tasked with such things. It made him feel much more inferior than he thought it would. Plus, because Jada was high-octane, he knew he'd never be able to run or keep pace with her, not for very long, anyway.

But he realized, as he studied her while she gave her report to the others, that it wouldn't be bothering him nearly as much...if he wasn't attracted to her.

*Give up on that idea*, he told himself as he let his gaze fall. *Let those feelings fade. She's out of your league. She'll go on to big and great things, and always be coming and going. Better just to leave her be right from the start...*

"Likewise," answered Jada to Blake flatly, unable to gauge his thoughts.

*Then again*, she thought, *whatever's on his mind probably isn't any of my business.*

"Goodnight, Jada," he said, and without so much as a glance, he walked away and joined Gabriel and Ida.

Jada's gaze followed him a moment and then fell to the ground. *Maybe he's thinking about my comments about Gael. Or about his return to Earth's dimension.*

Or not.

She was a woman and might've known a lot of things about a lot of things. But she wasn't a mind reader.

*He probably just now realized how much of a hassle it would be to be my friend*, she thought. *And I'm really not good for anything besides getting myself, and those with me, into trouble.*

That thought was immediately followed by, *maybe he really is a creepy stalker or something. Not someone I want to get mixed up with. Well, after some training, he definitely won't want to tangle with me. That's for sure.*

"Come on," said Merida, putting her hands on Jada's shoulders and directing her towards the house. "Let's get you cleaned up, fed and then off to bed."

"But what about Lamia," asked Jada with a yawn.

"Don't worry about that," assured Jordan. "We'll take care of it."

He shot a look at Merida. "It's just a good thing you were in the right place at the right time. Have you always had a knack for overhearing things?"

"Well...yes, but not on purpose. I just have a habit of being in the wrong place at the right time, as I say."

Fear appeared in Merida's eyes, but before Jada could ask what was wrong, Jordan continued. "You haven't even been here a week, and you've already served an important purpose."

"It was just one raid," replied Jada with another massive yawn.

"One raid and dozens of lives saved."

Jada was too tired to grasp the significance.

With great effort, Jada managed not to fall face down in her food or asleep in the tub. It took all her remaining strength to reach her room, where she then collapsed into bed.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Training Grounds**

"You've already picked up the basics of archery, so we'll begin with blade combat," said Connor.

They stood in a decently sized clearing on the side of the ridge. It was still early, and the sun's light was just peeking through the lowest branches of the trees.

Jada was grateful for the brown leather armor protecting their chests, stomachs and backs, compliments of Connor. The swords they were using also had blunted blades.

She highly doubted Connor had anything to worry about from her. Numerous mental pictures of how she was likely going to make an idiot of herself played through her head.

Nearby, Ida, Gabriel, and Reagan were engaged in a three-way duel.

*Thank goodness for that*, thought Jada. That meant they wouldn't be watching.

Blake, Namor, and Gael were absent. Jada was slightly disappointed about this, but she had other things to focus on at the present.

"This form of fighting is like any other type of combat," began Connor. "There are no rules of engagement other than: kill the bad guy by whatever means necessary before he kills you. And do it quickly as possible, so you can move on."

Jada nodded. "Right. So—"

Without warning, Connor swung. It was sheer reflex that Jada brought her sword around in time to parry.

He struck again, and she deflected it, before counterstriking with a swipe at his neck.

Blocking it, he then delivered a sharp swing, putting more speed and torque into it.

Jada gripped the hilt of the sword with her other hand, to give herself more stopping power.

The blades rang when they met. Jada was thrown off-balance and that earned her a swift kick to the stomach. She went over backwards with the momentum and then rolled to her feet.

Connor and Jada faced one another a second, before she moved first, delivering a quick stab for his core.

Connor deflected and swung.

The blade was just passing over Jada's head as she ducked sideways and retaliated, flicking the blade at his stomach.

Connor pivoted out of the way. Then, before she could blink, he latched onto her wrist and pulled her sharply towards himself, so her back was to him.

She froze when she felt the edge of the blade against her neck.

"Remember," he said, "there are no rules of engagement. No need to be polite or stand on ceremony. Don't be nice."

Defensive fire burned hot through Jada. She'd never liked being touched and didn't appreciate people in her personal space.

While Connor had been speaking, she'd decided on her countermove. Throwing her free elbow square into his gut, she broke away and then spun and swung.

Connor, still somewhat bent over, didn't even have time to deflect the blade. Instead, he was forced to dodge out of the way.

Advancing towards him with purpose now, Jada strode forward and delivered a fast overhead strike.

So the duel began again. They started off slow, and Connor allowed them to settle into a rhythm of strikes and counterstrikes. Once things were flowing smoothly, they slowly began increasing the speed.

Jada's muscles were beginning to burn, but at last, she could feel herself relax and mind focus.

Finally, Connor gave a powerful downward swing.

Jada blocked it, but the force jarred her as the blades locked. She knew the kick was coming, and she grabbed Connor's wrist as she fell back. She pulled him over and behind her, and then pivoted around to her feet.

After sidestepping his kick, she deflected his swing before immediately pouncing on and pinning him. When Connor felt the edge of her blade under his chin, he stopped.

*Yeah*, she thought as she glared at him, *how's it feel?*

Connor laughed as Jada stood and pulled him to his feet.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed as he turned and walked to a tree where their supplies sat.

“Many people give up the moment they hit the ground.”

“Well, I say, ‘keep fighting until the bad guy finally kills you,’” Jada replied. She was again surprised at her own boldness and the fight in her tone.

Connor laughed as he rummaged through the gear. “I love it. That’s one of the first things a warrior must understand...and you already do.”

He found whatever he’d been looking for and walked towards Jada.

“Here!” he said, tossing her a second sword.

Catching it, Jada considered its weight and eyed the straightness of the edge. Then they stood, gazing at one another.

Connor’s eyes danced with a daring light, expression like one who’d found a worthy opponent.

It was true. Though he wasn’t old himself, he’d helped train other young warriors for some years. He had the gift of teaching and for combat, so it was blatantly obvious to him that Jada had natural skill. It wasn’t just that she could swing a sword, or shoot an arrow. It was in her demeanor and the very way she carried herself.

Though she probably didn’t yet see it, especially since she couldn’t really study herself, she appeared confident in her posture.

Clouds passed before the sun as a gale of warm wind blew against the pair and sent leaves swirling across the clearing.

Jada noticed the change herself in that moment, though she was never able to put it into words. Maybe it was just her imagination. Perhaps it had something to do with the raging wind and the smell of the stormy air, heavy with the scent of rain, wood smoke, and forest. Or it was the sudden shadow of the clouds that cast the ridge into darkness.

But Jada stood brazenly before her opponent as the wind raged around them. The heat of fight burned hot within her, as it had when she and Balo had given chase to the fleeing gath.

All fear and timidity fled, replaced with confidence and the surety this was what she was supposed to do. That this...was what she was made for.

*There she is*, thought Connor, as a smile pulled at his mouth. *The real Jada, the mighty and terrible warrior.*

He saw what she was destined to be, as she stood there before him unafraid and braced for battle. He'd already thought she was beautiful, but the intensity and focus of her gaze and the fire in her eyes made her even more so.

A true warrior, who's very purpose was to take the enemy head-on.

*And I get to train her, build her up and prepare her to fulfill that purpose*, he thought, his smile widening. *This...is going to be so much fun.*

"Come on!" shouted Connor against the wind.

Jada twirled the sword in her right hand and held it so the tip was pointed back towards her elbow.

They stared each other down until neither could stand it any longer. Lunging at the same time, they both swung for one another's stomachs, and the blades met with a resonating ring.

There was no slow start this time, or for the remaining fights that occurred in the next two hours. Connor and Jada dueled across the clearing as the spring storm continued to brew and roil, and the wind tore relentlessly through the trees.

A majority of the time a duel ended when Connor and Jada became tangled or locked blades. They'd then push each other away, take a few breaths and engage in combat again.

Connor landed more strikes than Jada. But she gave him a run for his money and landed several good jabs of her own.

The final duel wasn't pretty, but that's the reality when one's been fighting for awhile. Exhaustion sets in, your muscles feel like they're on fire, and it takes great effort to deliver one more swing.

At the same time, though, Jada also found it exhilarating. And the more tired she became, the hotter the fire inside her burned.

She pushed Connor backwards as they exchanged several rather sloppy swings. He then unleashed two powerful strikes, one right after the other, in an attempt to stop her momentum.

They didn't, though they did steal a lot of Jada's strength.

She deflected the first swing, stumbled and ducked the second. But before Connor could strike again, she brought her swords around with her last strength and deflected both his blades away.

Then, with a flick of her right blade, the tip rested against his throat.

At the same time, she saw the sword in his left hand was aimed at her stomach.

They held one another's fiery gazes a long breath before Connor lowered his weapons and laughed.

"Very good," he grinned, and Jada let her arms drop to her sides.

Connor sheathed one sword and then slapped a hand on her shoulder. "Very, very good, Jada. You take naturally to this."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say she's already received training," added Gabriel.

*And she has the sentinel streak in her,* thought Connor. He'd never tell Jada about it, though he would discuss it with Gabriel.

Others may have used a different term, but that was the one Connor used.

There were warriors who became utterly consumed with the zeal of battle, like Namor.

And then there were others who had this streak, which made them rogue and elite.

And lethal. They were especially ruthless in combat and warfare. They could kill without consequence, in that they suffered no forms of traumatic stress. Not so much as a bad dream to haunt them after covering fields with the blood of their adversaries.

Not only did they slay their foes when they went to battle and the fight was brought to them, but they were the ones who also hunted and tracked the enemy. They sought them out.

They were the wolfhounds in the warrior group.

These types of warriors were used for special operations or as operators in intelligence. They did the darkest, riskiest and ugliest deeds that the average warrior would avoid.

When an enemy was nearby, beware. These types of warriors would never rest from the moment they caught even the faintest scent of a foe. It instantly put them into "search and destroy" mode, and anyone who got in their way was at risk of harm. Swift and violent they were when they caught up to the trespasser or enemy that crossed into their line of sight.

Connor knew Jada had this streak because he'd seen it in her expression at the end of the duel. For just a breath, there had been an especially wild, and terrifying, gleam in her eyes.

She herself would never take any prisoners, Connor knew. Cold and perilous she would be, whenever she went into battle. And woe to any enemy that she tracked, because their fate was sealed.

Connor himself didn't have this trait. Because he'd witnessed firsthand just how terrible a warrior with this streak could be, he greatly respected them. And, honestly, had some fear of them.

But at least it was for good reason.

At Gabriel's comment, Jada remembered the others, and also realized how drained she was.

In dramatic fashion, she dropped to her knees and then plopped onto her side before rolling onto her back.

"That's not what my body's telling me," she said, sprawled on the ground.

Reagan laughed heartily before Ida dropped to a knee at Jada's side and tugged at her shirt.

"Come on," she said. "Time for herbology, lesson one."

"But—"

"Come on!"

Ida sprang lightly to her feet, while, with a groan, Jada staggered clumsily to hers.

Ida wasn't going to let Jada off easily and took off at a jog into the trees. Jada stumbled the first few strides, but once she got going, she was able to keep up.

That was how the next four weeks went. Nearly every day the group was training. Jada gained countless more hours of experience in archery, sword fighting, hand-to-hand combat, stalking, tracking, and of course, "herbology."

Ida and Reagan taught Jada about the various roots, leaves, and berries that fought infection, promoted quickly healing and could sustain a person if they were literally starving.

"But never, ever, *ever*," emphasized Reagan, "even touch the white mushrooms with red spots. They'll kill you after they make you throw everything up. Blah."

One particularly nice, late-spring morning, they were riding back to the Western Village after a morning of tracking and stalking deer.

"So, are there any good blacksmiths around?" asked Jada from atop Balo, who'd quickly grown to become her faithful and hardy steed.

"I'd like to have at least one other weapon, in addition to my knife. But I also can't afford a whole lot. I've managed a few odd jobs at the stables and stuff, but haven't earned enough to afford a sword."

"You said Merida's going to take you to Asgarod to see Halden, correct?" asked Gabriel.

"Right. Next week, I think."

“There’s an elvish smith in the city,” he replied. “One of the best in the entire South. Depending on how long you stay, maybe you could do a little work for him, learn from him and earn your blade. He goes by Arto and many people know him.”

“Gael mentioned a young upstart blacksmith in one of the nearby towns,” piped Reagan.

“You could ask her about him,” joked Ida. “If you can find her.”

“Yeah, where has she been?” asked Connor, twisting around in the saddle to look at Ida. “I’ve barely seen her the past month.”

Ida shrugged, though her eyes were twinkling. “You should ask Blake. They’ve been spending a lot of time together lately.”

Jada had barely noticed the comment, and it wasn’t what broke her from her thoughts. It was the sudden silence that followed.

Glancing around, she saw the others pretending like they hadn’t been looking at her.

“What?” asked Jada, in total innocence. “Did I miss something?”

The comment about Blake and Gael honestly hadn’t bothered her in the least. She had bigger things on her mind besides mushy, drooly relationships and who was seeing who.

Reagan and Gabriel exchanged a look before Jada shrugged and continued. “I was wondering: is there any type of game that would bring in good money? You know, a kind of deer or something that a village would pay for?”

“I know Highland is always short on kurra,” answered Gabriel. “They’re found mostly on the plains, and when they do venture into the hills, they’re extremely difficult to sneak up on. I hear the butchers pay an exceptional price for a whole one.”

“And Asgarod pays premium for mountain goat or sheep,” added Reagan. “That’s if you want to risk trekking onto the exposed faces of the mountains.”

Connor blew through his lips. “That’d be a piece of cake for Jada.”

He glanced at her. “You thinking of other ways to earn more money?”

“Mm,” she replied, still half in thought, “and work on my stealth skills.”

She smiled at him, before looking at the others again. “Although maybe I should risk a little more danger and start hunting gath squads. I’m never going to beat Namor’s gath count at the rate I’m going now.”

That earned a good round of laughter from the group.

“He’s planning on returning to the training grounds tomorrow, yes?” asked Gabriel.

“Yeah, he’s miffed that he’s been missing out on all the fun,” nodded Connor, before shooting Jada another glance and a wink.

“Great,” she said with feigned sarcasm and felt her mood darken a little at the thought of Namor’s presence.

Connor nudged her. “Hey…”

She looked at him.

“You’ll do just fine. Remember how you stood your ground the first day you two met. Don’t worry about him. I have full confidence in your abilities.”

That’s when Jada caught a glimmer of admiration and respect from Connor. It was evident on his face and in his eyes.

*It’s so time to go before this gets awkward,* she thought.

“Last one to the village gets to clean tack!” shouted Jada as she gave Balo a nudge.

Her grey mount bolted forward like he’d been waiting all day for the command to “go.” Horse and rider were down the trail and around the curve by the time the others got their horses going.

You can guess who *didn’t* clean tack that day.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Warhorses**

A few days later was Friday, the day the next crop of horses were to arrive at the lower pasture, as Merida called it. She and Jada woke before dawn, tacked Balo and Astor, and then rode out as the first traces of light marked the eastern sky.

The morning was cool, but not as sharp as Jada’s very first morning in Aurora. The trees that leafed were fuller, too, and bright green, and all sorts of flowers were blooming along the meadows and hillsides.

As they rode towards the southern edge of town, the birds sang their first notes of the day. A puff of a breeze teased through the branches of the pines, oaks, and maples, and made the aspen and birch leaves quiver. Above them stretched the sky, just as blue and clear as ever.

At the southern border of the village, Merida turned east and started up a steep ridge. It was the one Jada had gone stumbling down the night she'd returned from Earth and appeared on the edge of an attack squad.

The ground leveled after they reached the top of the first hill. They'd just turned onto a broad trail when someone gave a shout in greeting behind them.

Several adults from the village approached on their own horses, all of which were bright-eyed and looked eager for a run.

Jada immediately recognized Connor on his handsome dark horse. Reagan was with the group also and followed beside him on a lean, fiery sorrel with a flaxen mane. Her charge matched her personality perfectly.

"Trying to get a head start on us, eh?" asked Connor's mother, a beautiful dark haired and hazel eyed woman named Eleanor.

From what Jada gathered, she was Merida's best friend. The only way they could've been closer was if they'd been blood-related.

Merida laughed. "Well, we wouldn't have been so early, if it hadn't been for Jada."

Eleanor smiled at Jada. "Eager to see this spring's crop?"

"Yes, ma'am," she replied.

While the adults continued talking, Connor caught her eye and gave a tilt of his head, down the trail. She replied with a subtle nod and shot a look at Reagan.

Connor had already turned his horse and nudged him into an easy jog along the path as Balo turned to follow.

Jada and Reagan were walking away from the main group when Jada overheard Eleanor whisper to Merida, "Jada seems to really have settled in beautifully, like she belongs here. Takes naturally to combat. Connor's very impressed...and a bit taken with her, too."

*I wish I hadn't heard that,* thought Jada. She had her back to them, so they didn't see her cringe.

A giggle came from Reagan, riding beside her. Jada sent her a curt look and raised eyebrow.

Reagan and Connor were usually together, but she was too young for romance. It was more of a big brother teaching and looking after his little sister relationship.

Then again, Jada hadn't met Reagan's parents yet and had never heard her talk about them. She wondered if Reagan had been adopted by Connor's parents.

“Are you girls coming sometime today?” called Connor, who’d stopped. “Or are you just going to swap town gossip?”

His eyes twinkled with a teasing light and he was grinning when he said it.

Jada laughed in spite of herself and they shared a smile.

There was comradeship between them, she realized, innocent and clean, and a bond had begun to form. Connor had been using his free time to train her. Gabriel and Ida had helped a lot, also, but Connor had been Jada’s primary combat instructor.

She guessed...they’d become friends.

*A friend, thought Jada. Who knew?*

Reagan and Jada shared a look before they both signaled their horses faster. They leapt forward with an excited snort, blew past Connor and thundered down the trail.

When they heard him give a shout of surprise behind them, they both burst into laughter, the contagious and uncontrollable kind.

After the initial sprint, Reagan and Jada eased their mounts to an easy canter, much to their horses’ disappointment. They had tears running down their faces, both from the gallop and from laughing so hard.

Connor finally caught up and his horse fell in beside Jada’s. He studied Reagan and then Jada before he smiled. His expression was like one who is happy to see others having a good time. Or like an instructor pleased that a new student has settled in and found their place with the rest of the class.

The first real breeze of the morning brushed through the trees as the sun crested the horizon and flooded the forest with light. Hooves thumping quietly as they passed effortlessly over the ground, the horses swished their tails and snorted, perking their ears forward.

Jada felt Balo give a subtle tug at the reins once, then again.

“Well,” said Jada, throwing Connor a look. “Are we going to actually reach the lower pasture sometime today? Or just look at each other?”

Balo pinned his ears back and launched himself into a gallop.

Together the three raced up and around the ridge until miles later the trees suddenly fell away. They found themselves on an expansive plateau, a sea of green at least a mile long and half a mile wide, backed against a steep ridge to their left.

It was a test of endurance now, as they let their horses have their heads

It was as if they were stretching their legs for the first time. All three bolted forward in an all-out sprint, strides lengthening as they stretched over the ground, thundering hooves loud even over the sound of the roaring wind.

*This has to be what it's like charging into battle*, thought Jada as she stood just out of the saddle and kept low and still over Balo's neck. His mane whipped into and stung her face. She could hear his lungs chugging with every breath and feel the incredible power surging through his muscles.

Balo may have been the oldest of the three horses, but by his great heart he kept up with the handsome dark bay and fiery sorrel. Although, Jada was sure he was glad when they finally slowed and eased to a jog, then a walk.

"The old man still has it," grinned Jada, as she patted Balo's sweaty neck.

The grey snorted at the nickname bestowed on him and raised his head proudly, like he wasn't the least bit tired.

She laughed and stroked his black mane.

"All those trips to the training grounds have done him good," smiled Reagan as she tugged playfully at her horse's mane.

Upon gazing around the plateau, it was the first time Jada noticed all the paddocks and turnout sheds backed against the ridge.

"This is actually one big pasture," said Connor. "We passed through the western gates just before breaking out of the trees."

"I've never seen grass this green," commented Jada.

"Aye," nodded Connor. "And it keeps many months after we cut it. People from the East pay us to allow them to graze their horses here."

They stopped their horses a short distance from a large paddock, nearly halfway between the east and west ends of the pasture. By then, the adults appeared and joined them.

Another group rode in behind the parents, and Jada recognized that some of the riders were soldiers. One of them, to her mild horror, was Akin, who'd ordered her bound and escorted to the Western Village upon her initial arrival to this dimension.

She pretended not to see him and averted her gaze.

Merida checked the placement of the sun. "They should be here anytime, now."

She and Eleanor then picked up a conversation in a language Jada didn't know.

"What language are they speaking?" she whispered to Reagan.

“It’s what we call the ‘ancient tongue,’” replied Reagan quietly. “It’s the earliest one we know of, and a lot of people still speak it. If you want to learn it, start with elvish because that’s where its roots came from.”

Jada sighed and slouched in the saddle. “Another thing to learn...”

Although, now that she listened to the sounds and words use, it sounded Gaelic.

Jada was about to ask another question when all the horses suddenly pricked up their ears and stared eastward unblinking.

“Here they come,” whispered Reagan as a smile slowly formed on her lips.

They heard them a good thirty seconds before seeing them. They came like rolling thunder and the earth trembled at their approach.

The horses snorted and tossed their heads, and a few pawed the ground as fire gleamed in their eyes.

They came then, flying around the east end of the ridge with such speed it was startling. It was a herd of nearly three dozen horses.

Powerful muscles rippled beneath their shimmering summer coats, and their eyes were bright with life as they snorted and tossed their manes.

Then came the sharp crack of a whip, and a rider upon a sleek blood bay raced around the edge of the band. He gave one more expert snap of the whip and the lead horse veered into the large paddock.

After the last horse was in, the rider closed and latched the gate. When he turned his mount towards the others, he was grinning. “A fine spring crop, if you ask me.”

“Didn’t give you too much trouble, did they, Emmet?” asked Eleanor with a teasing smile.

Emmet just laughed. “It was a near thing at the creek. It’s a big high from that rain we had last week.”

Most everyone dismounted to get a closer look at the horses.

Merida had told Jada that they came from the wild bands that roamed the territories. But they weren’t just any four-legged nomads. These horses had been made in the beginning for battle and war. Fiery in spirit and fearless, it made them that much more dangerous to approach in the wilds.

Fortunately, Emmet and his large team of wranglers and trainers had a way with horses. They herded and captured the young horses that broke away from the main bands, and then gave

them basic ground training and taught them to carry and work with a rider. Thus, by the time they arrived at the lower pasture, they were ready for a job.

Jada dismounted from Balo, removed his bridle, secured it to the saddle, loosened the girth a touch and then let him wander and graze.

For some time, Jada walked along the fence and studied the horses in the paddock. The pecking order had mostly been established before arrival, so there was minimal kicking, rearing and squealing.

There were bays in various shades, chestnuts, a few duns, dark grays and a paint or two. Jada knew that all of them had been well taken care of because now that she really looked at them, their coats didn't just gleam. They glowed beneath the sun.

Some held a feisty expression in their eyes, others a softer light, like Balo. But Jada had the sense they were all fearless and as brave as the men and women who would ride them.

They were eager and anxious to work. They looked expectantly at the observers, as if they were employees who'd shown up for their first day of work and were asking, "So, what now, boss?"

A number of horses seemed to automatically pick out their new owners and stood before them at the fence. Jada watched in total wonder as man and beast studied each other and shared a long look...before one after another, the horses would dip their heads a little, in agreement to carry their human they were standing in front of.

Wow. But Jada's awe was broken by the feeling she was being watched. It had been there shortly after the horses had arrived.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Balo a short distance away. At first, she didn't see anything odd...but then she did a double-take and turned.

Balo stood looking back towards the western gate, where they'd ridden in. He was still as stone, ears forward.

Jada followed his gaze...and then felt her heart stop.

There, standing near the edge of the plateau was a young horse and like no other equine she'd ever seen. She couldn't be sure of his color, because it shifted from blue roan to smoky gray, and he was outlined in a silver light as the sun bathed him. His mane and tail were a shade darker than his coat. She couldn't tell what color his eyes were from that distance, but they were dark...and she could feel them boring into her.

Balo whickered, flicked his ears back and tossed his mane.

The smoky gray snorted and jerked his head to the side in response. As he did, the movement made his coat shimmer from blue roan to silver.

Someone grabbed Jada's arm and she jumped, though she kept her eyes on the horse.

"That's the son of the lead mare of the largest wild herd that roams the entire South," whispered Emmet. "I've seen him a few times. He comes and goes as he wishes, and doesn't always run with a band. Moves like a dream, but has an attitude like he owns the earth and sky."

"Yea, well," she answered, still fixated on the creature before her. "You said he is the son of the boss mare..."

"Still," replied Emmet. "I wouldn't waste my time with—"

The colt gave a sharp snort, interrupting Emmet, and walked forward, tossing his mane about his proud neck. When he was within two dozen feet from them, he stopped.

Now Jada could clearly see his eyes, and they held her attention. They were dark slate in color, yet with a touch of blue beneath the pupil that gave him an air of eerie intelligence. And he was, Jada could sense it, like with all the horses she'd seen in this dimension. Their intelligent gazes looked deep and understood much.

She wondered why they couldn't speak.

Then again, she was a fond believer that there's nothing like the bond between a horse and his rider. They didn't need words to communicate.

The colt shook his head and pranced away a few steps, neck arched as he flicked his ears back and swished his tail. He stopped when he was nearly to the gate and looked back at her.

Jada understood. He was daring her to pursue him, to give way to the chase. That's what the arched neck, ears back and swishy tail was all about.

Trusting a human was a big-time affair. How could he be certain she wouldn't lock him in a stall the rest of his life? How could he be sure she wouldn't beat and abuse him? He was meant for action and war, to gallop headlong into an army of chimera.

*Trust is a scary thing, she thought. I'm with you there.*

On that point, horse and young woman understood one another, and a smile pulled at her mouth.

The colt whickered and lowered his head a little, eye softening as he blinked at her. Then he reared back on his haunches and shot across the plateau and dropped into the trees and out of sight.

Emmet cleared his throat but didn't finish what he was originally going to say. Instead, he managed a thoughtful "hmm" and turned away to other business, but not before giving her an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, buddy," said Jada to Balo as he walked over. "I have a feeling it'll start out as a long-distance relationship."

Balo snorted and stopped in front of her.

"You'll always have first place in my heart," she continued, rubbing his forehead.

Balo closed his eyes and whickered in response.

As Jada untied the bridle from the saddle, she shot on more look at the gate the young horse had disappeared through. *But one day, my friend, she thought to the colt, you and I will ride into battle...and no one will stand in our way.*

## **Chapter 9**

### **Hard-Earned Respect**

Connor and the others would be getting a later start the following Monday, but Jada decided to head to the training grounds at the usual time. She'd borrowed some of Connor's gear the previous night so she'd have everything she wanted. She was looking forward to getting in some extra time in archery.

The morning was bleak and drippy. Not necessarily rainy, just damp. A warm and humid breeze was moving from the south even in the early hour, so it was probably going to shape up to be another blustery day.

Balo and Jada made good time to the grounds. But as they crested the final rise and the trail led to the clearing, a scowl fell over her face.

Namor was already there.

They didn't as much as glance at one another as she rode to a large pine on the edge of the clearing.

Namor had been training with the others since last week. He and Jada had never spoken to one another and had yet to "cross blades," as they said.

Not that Jada really wanted to duel with him, and even though they lived in the same town, she rarely saw him. His contempt for her was obvious to everyone, so the others tended to make sure they didn't get too close to one another.

She untacked Balo and turned him loose to graze and do whatever it was he did to waste time.

Digging through the gear, Jada set aside the bow and a quiver of arrows.

She'd just removed the sword, which she'd sharpened the previous night, from its scabbard, when a knife flew past her shoulder and sank into the pine with a solid *thunk*.

"I'da stayed in bed this morning, traveler," called Namor with marked scorn. "None of your friends are here to rescue you today."

Jada remained where she was a moment, glaring at the tree. Maybe a month ago she would've started trembling with fear, or simply left then and there.

Just like when she'd begun training with Connor, though, she felt no fear or concern. Instead, heat raced through her as anger was kindled. No, anger wasn't the right word, and Jada couldn't think of correct one to use. But it was hot, similar to the heat that came with the joy and excitement of a good duel.

Jada had woken that morning with a strange sense of foreboding, like something ominous was brewing. This little meeting had been the reason...yet it had only been a matter of time.

Sooner or later, Namor was going to finally test her.

*And who in the world does he think he is,* she thought, jaw slowly clenching tighter, *he has no right to intimidate or assail me.*

Sword in one hand, Jada yanked the knife out of the tree with the other and spun sharply to face Namor.

His eyebrows rose just a little at the fierceness in her expression as she glared at him.

"What exactly is it about me that you can't stand?" asked Jada, flicking the knife into the ground.

"You don't belong here," answered Namor, settling his dark gaze on her. "Everyone thinks you traveler types are so amazing or whatever. But I don't see anything special...you should go home and never come back."

A lot was revealed in Namor's response. Not necessarily in the words, but by his tone and expression. He was jealous of people like her, and the attention her "kind" received.

He also saw himself, his status, as threatened.

Jada had come along, and the others immediately accepted her. She also had a natural hand in combat, though she'd only been training little over a month.

Namor would not be toppled by some newcomer, and she could completely understand that. Then again, she also knew that there was always someone stronger, faster or smarter.

Like kingdoms and empires, no one stayed on top forever.

"I can't go back," she replied, stopping half a dozen feet from him. "I don't have that...ability yet."

If you've dealt with someone like Namor before, you know it doesn't really matter what you say to them. If they're out looking for a fight, they'll use any excuse to make one up to instigate the confrontation.

She could've said, "I like chocolate," and he would've found a way to use that as an excuse to keep pushing her.

"Just go find your friend Blake," he jeered with a smirk.

Jada tilted her head. "Who said he was my friend?"

That gave Namor slight pause.

"You sure you want to do this?" asked Jada, sword still pointing at the ground. "We can still go our separate ways and keep pretending to ignore each other."

Jada had known Namor was going to strike then and brought her blade up to deflect the first swing.

And so the duel began.

Namor was all business, and the pace of the fight was quick. They danced back and forth across the clearing, swords ringing with each meeting.

Jada didn't know exactly how long they fought before things began to unravel. But by the subtle burning in her muscles, she guessed close to an hour.

Occasionally mist, driven by the wind, danced around them. Or the sun would find a break in the clouds and nearly blind them a few seconds before going back into hiding.

Namor and Jada were in close quarters, pressing against one another, but neither yielded any ground.

Pivoting sideways, she brought her sword across her shoulder, blocking a swing aimed for her neck.

The blades locked before Namor gave a quick flick of the blade and cut Jada across her upper arm.

She barely felt it and countered immediately by introducing her heel to his knee.

As Namor fell back to one knee, Jada caught him across the shoulder with her blade. By quickly backing away a few steps, she was able to square herself up again.

Neither of them was wearing armor, but Jada found that to be all the more thrilling.

Namor's face was hard, set like stone, as he glanced at the wound and then resettled his glare on her. With a snarl, he pushed himself to his feet and attacked with newfound speed.

He drove her backwards this time. Each of his swings was powerful and jarring, sending shafts of pain up her arms.

But Jada could come close to matching it and finally stopped his momentum with two quick strikes.

Now they were back in close quarters and dueling full speed. The adrenaline and blood was flowing, and neither of them noticed the next few blows they landed on each other.

Namor sliced her across the thigh but Jada returned the favor and caught his arm, drawing a nice, long red gash. A few swings later he nicked her arm, before her blade found his right collar bone.

Normally at that point they would've stepped back to take a few breaths before reengaging. But Namor wasn't interested in letting Jada recover. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes now as he continued to drive against her, putting everything he had into his swings.

Jada deflected an overhead strike, the next from the left before delivering a mighty swing that threw Namor off balance. With a decisive swipe, she caught him right across the chest before ducking away.

Namor was infuriated and advanced towards her yet again. He was relentless and his wrath only added to his strength.

Their blades locked overhead, and he latched onto her wrist. Jada knew where this was heading and managed to avoid a cut to the face by jerking backwards.

But Namor kicked her left leg out from under her and as she fell, he landed a solid, deep blow to her side.

That was the first wound that actually hurt. Badly.

Yet the wound only set Jada's blood on fire, and she saw then, by the rage in Namor's eyes, that this had turned into a real fight. This had gone far beyond posturing and mere show of strength.

Jada had never been in a real fight like this before. But if Namor thought she'd cower before him because of a scratch, then he had another thing coming.

Now on the ground, Jada deflected his next swing. After blocking the second, she grabbed his wrist and kicked in him the knee again. As he dropped, Jada used his resistance to pull herself up so she could elbow him in the face.

Namor growled in pain and anger and pivoted away so he could kick her in the stomach.

Rolling back, she landed in a crouch, still very aware of the stinging in her side and of something warm soaking into her shirt.

This awakened a deep desire for revenge against her foe and the urge to counterstrike. Repay him wound for wound, blood for blood. Jada had never been the vengeful type before, but the sense was strong in her.

And she gave into it.

Swatting the next strike away, Jada then lunged and tackled Namor hard to the ground. Sitting on his chest, she pinned his arms with her knees and punched him squarely in the jaw. Thanks to the pointers from Connor, she knew how to make very jab and swing count.

Her second punch snapped Namor's head to the side as her self-righteous wrath burned hotter. She knew she should stop, but she couldn't.

Before Jada could land a third blow, Namor twisted and tossed her off him. He was on his feet in an instant. But as he staggered towards her, she planted both shoes in his stomach and sent him reeling to the ground.

They sat glaring at one another, pulling in ragged breaths when an arrow plunged into the ground between them.

"Okay, who started the party without us?" asked Connor as he, Ida, Reagan, and Gabriel rode up.

When he took in their bloodied states, his expression hardened. "What the heck is going on? What's all this about?"

Reagan jumped from her horse and ran to Jada as she stiffly pushed herself to her feet. Determined not to show how much pain she was in, or how weak she really felt, she leveled a glare on Namor as he stood.

Looking herself over, she wasn't too bad off, except for her side wound. Blood had soaked the entire right side of her shirt and down the side of her pants.

"Sheesh, Namor," growled Reagan as she inspected the gash.

When she shot him a look, however, some of the harshness left her face as she took in his beat up state.

Jada couldn't meet Connor's eyes, and she dropped her gaze, afraid she'd disappointed her instructor.

"Leaving two warriors unsupervised is never a good idea," commented Gabriel as he dismounted.

"Come on," said Reagan. "There are a lot of thelm around here, and hazel root. You don't want that infected, but it probably needs stitches."

"No, she shouldn't move," piped Ida as she jogged over. "Looks like she's lost a lot of blood already."

"I'm fine," replied Jada with some sharpness, thought that was for Namor's sake. She was posturing now, to let him know if he felt so inclined to continue the fight, she was more than ready.

In reality, she really had no intention of picking up where they left off. But you know how it is.

Ida sighed, and Jada nodded to Reagan. "Lead the way."

The girl eyed her side, hesitated a moment and then turned and walked across the clearing for the trees.

Jada followed, though her gait was a bit awkward because her muscles had become stiff. Just before disappearing into the trees, she sent Namor a cool look over her shoulder.

To her mild surprise, the arrogance in his expression was gone. He regarded her evenly as Gabriel checked over his wounds.

She'd proven herself to Namor, and that she could hold her own. She wasn't clear why it had been so important to win Namor over. He was exceptionally skilled in combat, and somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew they'd eventually need each other.

Better to be on as good of terms as possible before dire need came than to wait until a life or death situation.

Plus, bullies needed to know right off you weren't an easy target. If you proved that then they'd move on.

On top of it all, this was merely part of running with other warriors. Posturing and establishing a pecking order, like a herd, was to be expected. Sure, the decent people will be nice, but sooner or later you're going to have to prove yourself. At the least, show that you can take

care of yourself because there won't always be someone nearby to help. If you can't carry your weight or don't like it, then perhaps being a fighter-type isn't for you, which is perfectly alright. Everyone is made for something different.

In the final second that they looked at one another, a light twinkled in Namor's eyes and a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

*Men.* Jada rolled her eyes and followed after Reagan.

*Oh man,* she thought when she studied the gash again. *I can only imagine what Merida is going to say...*

## Ω

Actually, Merida didn't say anything at first. Instead, she merely took in Jada's bloodied and scratched condition as she slouched on the couch.

The fire in her eyes was clear, though. When she saw Jada's side for the first time, she drew in a sharp breath through her nose.

She glanced at Jordan, who immediately left and disappeared down the road.

*Oh no. Namor's going to get an ear-full. Though I wouldn't be surprised if I hear a word or two from his parents...*

She said nothing as Merida heated water and laid out some towels on the end table.

Jada tried several times to speak but was still too ashamed of her conduct, for letting herself act on her desire for revenge.

Merida disappeared into the master bedroom a minute, and then returned with a small box. In it were containers of herbs, roots, and salves.

Jada studied her face and tried to get a read on her thoughts, but Merida wore no expression.

After retrieving the pot of hot water and setting it on the floor, she said, "Now, lie down so I can properly clean your side."

When Jada complied, and Merida again saw the wound, she raised an eyebrow and sent her a look. "It's a good thing this wasn't any deeper, and you haven't lost any more blood. Otherwise, I'd have to find another traveler and have them take you to your realm, so you could go to a hospital."

The water stung something fierce, but Jada managed not to make a sound in complaint.

At Merida's insistence, she told her what had happened at her arrival to the training grounds, and the fight that followed.

“Well,” said Merida at length, “there still wasn’t much you could’ve done. Warriors blood runs deep and strong in Namor’s family line, and sometimes he gets a bit carried away...and can be a brute.”

*Tell me about it*, thought Jada, before replying with, “But I still chose to act on my anger.”

Merida gave a tilt of her head. “Now you know to watch out for it next time. Not every conflict should be handled with a fight.”

She suddenly snorted a laugh as she retrieved something from the medicine box. “But it has been a long time since anyone gave Namor a run for his money.”

Her eyes snapped at Jada. “You’ve turned into quite a little warrior in the short time you’ve been with us. It’s in your blood. Earning Namor’s respect is a difficult thing to obtain, but after today, I’d guarantee you did just that. I suspect he won’t give you any more trouble.”

Merida held up bandaging material and a round canister of salve. “Now, if I pack and bandage this right, you won’t need stitches. But you will have to rest, and that means no training for at least a week.”

Jada frowned, and Merida laughed. “You haven’t taken a break since you started training with Connor. Your body could probably use it.”

When she smeared on the salve, sharp pain shot through Jada’s side. “Ow!”

“Aye,” replied Merida. “It looks like a shark took a bite out of you. I also think our trip to Asgard will be perfect timing because you’ll be away from here and not tempted to train.”

“When are we going to leave.”

“Day after tomorrow.”

The torture was soon over and Jada’s side bandaged. She already felt better as she carefully stood and gingerly poked the area. *It should be healed in no time*, she thought.

As Jada washed up for lunch, she checked out her other scrapes. She hoped they’d scar, because scars meant bragging rights among soldiers and warriors.

They’d been worth it and were proof that Jada had finally won Namor’s hard-earned respect.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Asgarod**

It was a full day's ride to the city of Asgarod, where Jada was supposed to see the counselor known as Halden.

Merida and Jada hit the trail at dawn's first light. As they rode through town, they passed Connor, his parents, and Reagan, working on a broken paddock fence.

"Hey!" shouted Connor, running over and jogging beside Balo. "When you get back we're all going camping!"

"Sounds like fun," replied Jada.

"Yeah, well, it'll be boring without you around," he continued, slowing as she rode away. "So don't be gone too long!"

She acknowledged his words with a wave.

Once out of town, Merida and Jada asked their mounts for a little more speed, and they were more than happy to oblige.

For some time, the trail wound through the trees, and the later the morning went, the more songs they heard being sung in the trees.

At last, the forest began to thin. They crossed through meadows and spooked herds of whitetail, which bounded gracefully away with fluffy tails flagged.

By the afternoon, the trees had mostly fallen away and green hills stretched before them, with the warm sun overhead.

Merida and Jada ate lunch while riding and then picked up the pace again. It was another half an hour before Jada first spotted the city on the horizon. From that distance, she could tell it was large and grand, and its towers and buildings seemed to glow.

The closer they rode, the bigger it became and the more impressed Jada was. There were a few large outlying farms outside the city, and people were working the fields as Merida and Jada rode past on the main road.

Armed guards were visible along the wall and in the two citadels at the corners on that side of the city.

The main gate was an enormous archway, and Jada gawked as they rode beneath it. Immediately they were in the city, with broad stone streets filled with people and vendors, and lined with modern houses of amazing architecture.

It was a city where a person wondered how people could've created such structures with basic tools and their hands.

In the heart of the city rose a great tower, far higher than any other building. Its base was strong, made of staggered structures four stories high and built outwards with various entrances. Out of the structures climbed a single, lone tower, a great citadel that cut into the sky like a shaft of light. Windows marking the different levels allowed a person inside to see over the city in every direction.

The tower, and every building in the city held a warm glow. It was a place where a weary traveler immediately felt welcome and knew this was where they could find rest.

A number of people waved or called a greeting to Merida as they rode down the street. That's when Jada remembered what Gabriel had said about an elvish blacksmith.

Scanning both sides of the road, she didn't see anything that looked like a smith's shop.

As they neared the end of the road and slowed, Jada was about to ask Merida when she spotted an open structure at the last street corner.

Two men were standing just inside, and one of them held a sword, whose edge gleamed brightly in the light. The other Jada knew was Arto, because, well, he was an elf.

Tall he was, lean and fair, and his long, fine hair was such a light blonde it was almost white. But it was his eyes that drew her in. He glanced at her for but a breath, yet she was instantly struck by their depth and clarity.

Then Jada had to turn back around, because twisting in the saddle sent shafts of pain through her side. She loved riding, but her body was glad they were finally finished.

Or, her wounds were glad. The discomfort of the ride had tired her out, and she was beginning to feel sick.

The tower itself was set in a large square, and there was a decent gap of space between it and the nearest buildings. To the left Jada saw stables, from which two men walked over to meet them as they halted their sweaty mounts.

"Evening, Merida," said the taller of the two.

"Evening, Leland," replied Merida as she dismounted. "How are things?"

"Can't complain, can't complain," answered Leland as he took Astor's reins.

Jada managed not to sit down when she dismounted from Balo. She couldn't keep from wincing though, as the sharp pain that stabbed through her side.

Balo whickered and nuzzled her arm. She gave him a pat to reassure him that she was fine.

"Leland and Gavin will look after Astor and Balo," said Merida to Jada as she resituated the backpack slung over her shoulder.

Jada couldn't completely hide her scowl. She'd always looked after Balo following a ride, or upon returning from training, gave him a good rubdown and checked for swelling and injuries.

In her book, it was standard protocol of horse ownership.

"It's alright," smiled Merida, guessing Jada's thoughts. "They'll both rest very comfortably here."

Jada sighed, rubbed Balo's forehead and then reluctantly handed the reins to Gavin.

The horses were led away towards the stable, and Merida and Jada walked for the nearest set of double doors, which were presently propped open.

Inside sat a woman at a large stone desk pouring over parchments of paper. When she saw them, she greeted Merida warmly, and regarded Jada with a kind smile.

But her smile faded and she became concerned when she noted how pale Jada was. "You're hurt."

Jada managed a weak smile. "Just a scratch."

"The journey took more out of her than I thought it would," said Merida gently.

"Well, don't worry. We'll see what we can do," replied the woman. "I'll show you to your rooms and you're to see Halden first thing in the morning."

At first, Jada didn't think she'd be able to walk up dozens of flights of stairs. But her momentary concern had been for nothing.

Thanks to the laws of mechanics and other things she had no idea about, a rough elevator system was in place.

The woman, still unnamed to Jada, stepped inside the elevator first. Once they were all in, she pushed down on a small lever. There came a muffled sound of clanking and grinding gears before they slowly began to ascend. It might've been slow, but it beat taking the stairs.

After a good minute, the woman flicked the lever up and they stopped. She slid the door open, and they stepped out into a long, broad hall that curved hazily to the left and right. Windows lined the entire length of it, allowing the sinking sun's light to bathe the corridor in gold.

All the visitor rooms on that floor were on the inside and facing eastward. Jada was glad because that meant they'd be able to catch the sunrise.

The rooms were much larger than expected, open with tall ceilings. Just like in Merida's house, the citadel also had a basic system for running water.

*Miracles never cease*, thought Jada.

Merida and Jada had their own rooms, though they were connected by a large, single door.

Jada looked longingly at the big bed with a fluffy comforter on it. *Oh yeah*, she thought and could already feel the aches and tension easing from her muscles.

Merida and the woman spoke with one another briefly before she left.

"A doctor will be here shortly," said Merida, standing in the doorway adjoining the two rooms. "I'll wake you when he gets here, or when dinner arrives. Whichever's first."

Lines of concern were evident on her face, but Jada just yawned and waved her off

"I'm fine," she said, trudging over to the bed. "Just need a few hours of sleep."

Jada dropped face down on the bed and was out in seconds.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Counselor & Treachery**

Jada woke the next morning as the approach of dawn paled the eastern horizon.

Sitting up, she noticed right away the pain in her side was gone. The doc had visited last night and put some kind of gooey stuff on it before rebandaging.

She carefully twisted her torso and even then, there was barely an ache. Chuckling to herself, she jerked back the covers and jumped out of bed.

After changing hurriedly, Jada stepped out onto the balcony of the room. There she stood, taking in one lungful at a time of the clear air. In the stillness of the morning, she realized for the first time in a long time that she was content and wholly at peace.

It had also been some time since she'd stopped, kept still and simply prayed. Until she'd arrived here, she'd spent hours walking through the woods, talking, praying and considering life, faith, and people.

At last, the sun finally crested the hills and its light spilled over the land and broke the darkness of night. Feeling the light's gentle warmth, she closed her eyes and let herself get lost in her prayers.

Jada wasn't sure how long she remained there when she felt someone behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Merida standing in the doorway, gazing at her with that knowing little twinkle in her eyes.

"Breakfast is here," she said. "Now hurry along. We don't want to keep Halden waiting."

They inhaled breakfast and then made their way to the top floor of the tower. They only had to wait a few minutes in an outer chamber, and Jada didn't mind. The view from that high up was amazing.

The tall, arched doors leading into Halden's chamber opened and the pair were beckoned to come inside.

Jada kept a few steps behind Merida as she gaped. There were large, arched windows everywhere and massive skylights that allowed one to view the stars at night. A balcony ran around the high-ceilinged chamber, which glowed in the morning light.

"Merida!" said a clear, strong voice. "It has been too long."

"Much too long," she grinned.

As she walked briskly forward, Jada beheld him for the first time, Halden, one of the two wisest counselors and second only to the high king himself.

He was tall and evenly built, and his face was a touch haggard and lined with care, but kind. His hair was kept short and was dark gray in color.

But his eyes, his eyes were rich and blue, as deep blue as the high heavens. That gaze looked both deep and far, and was exceptionally keen.

Jada felt it would be useless to try and hide anything from him because he'd see right through any guise or defense.

Even though she had yet to speak to him, she already knew he was more than she'd thought he'd be.

While he and Merida shared a few words, Jada also sensed that his kindness and care wasn't a farce. He struck her as a pastor who knew each member of his congregation.

A shepherd who knew his sheep.

After a minute, Merida stepped to the side.

“Well, Halden,” she said, as she gestured for Jada to come closer, “Here she is, the younger traveler I messaged you about.”

As Halden regarded Jada, she felt exposed under that gaze, unable to keep her heart and soul hidden.

She also felt very small and insignificant.

Halden held a great air of authority, wisdom, and power, so why would he give a lesser-than-average person like her a second thought? Plus there was the fact he had high favor of the king.

A shiver ran down her spine, but she was able to mostly hide it.

Fondness fell over Merida’s expression. “Jada has quickly become like a daughter to Jordan and I.”

“I gathered as much,” replied Halden, studying Jada a second longer before looking back at Merida. “She has brought light and joy to your household once again.”

“Aye,” she smiled, eyes twinkling. “We don’t know what we’d do without her.”

Before things became more awkward, Merida sighed. “Well, I’m off. I want to make sure I reach the village borders before nightfall.”

“You’re leaving?” blurted Jada, unable to hide her surprise.

“You have much to discuss,” replied Merida, trying to keep from laughing as she looked from Halden to Jada. “Stay as long as you like.”

She stepped over and put her hands on Jada’s shoulders.

“But don’t be away too long,” she whispered. “I miss you already, Jada, who I love as my own child.”

Jada had no idea what to say to that. Fortunately, she didn’t have to think of anything, because Merida lightly kissed the top of her head and then walked swiftly for the door.

Still completely speechless, Jada watched her go.

“You don’t understand what you could’ve possibly done to earn Merida’s love and favor,” said Halden, after she’d gone and the doors were again shut.

When Jada turned back to him, he extended his hand. “But perhaps I should first formally introduce myself: I am Halden, counselor of Asgarod.”

He was more than just a counselor, she knew that much. He was also responsible for the defense of the city, the training of its soldiers, and presiding over the most complicated cases, cases that the regular courts didn’t know how to handle.

Yet, Halden had chosen to introduce himself with one of his meeker titles. There was no posturing or attempt to impress. Nor had any underling of his introduced him upon their entrance, in an attempt to strike awe into the visitors.

“Jada Serbin,” she replied, slapping her hand into his. “But I think you already knew that. Somehow I get the sense that I really don’t need to say anything in order for you to learn everything you need to about me.”

Halden laughed, the sound of it deep and clean as it echoed off the walls of the chamber. Turning, he gestured her beside him as they walked across the room, towards a large marble desk at the far end.

“I wouldn’t go quite that far,” he chuckled. “But I know you have a lot of questions about your parents, how you got here and what your purpose is.”

“That about sums it up,” replied Jada.

They stopped at the desk, which was covered in a mess of papers, with stacks of books at the top corners. It was the first time she noticed all the bookcases lined under the windows, each of them packed to capacity.

“Merida said she knew of my parents,” said Jada, “but wasn’t allowed to talk about them.”

Halden gave a single nod. “Even I can’t say much about them. They are here, very much alive, but in the middle of urgent business.”

Jada just looked at him, not understanding what could be more important than for them to be a family.

“Do they even...know I’m here?” she asked.

Halden didn’t answer right away, and he didn’t need to. She had her answer just by watching his expression.

“They don’t know,” she said.

That stung, and she dropped her head.

The situation was almost intolerable. Her parents had vanished two years ago, and then she’d arrived and learned they were alive. But she couldn’t see them because they were away on some mission?

*How do you cope with that,* she thought.

“Everything will be explained shortly,” said Halden, breaking Jada from her thoughts. “Just not yet.”

*Sure, whatever,* she thought with some indignation. *We've been separated two years, so what's another...twelve months?*

"You will be together again," assured Halden, though when Jada looked at him, she saw a trace of sadness in that keen gaze.

He drew a breath and sat, gesturing to another chair in front of the desk. "Now, before you ask how exactly you got here and how people go back and forth from one dimension to another...I don't know. It's one of the few mysteries not revealed to me, but I think He does that on purpose."

"He?" asked Jada, stepping to the chair and sitting. "You mean...God Almighty?"

"Exactly. Leaving a touch of mystery adds to some of the fun in the way He interacts with His people."

Halden's eyes sparkled as he steeped his fingers. "I have been granted the opportunity to see many lives of man, have been graced with wisdom and many occasions to walk with and take counsel with Him. He takes joy in what He has created and I believe is excited to show off His creation to us, the clear rivers, high mountains and the stars that sing in the heavens. All that to say, Jada, that He has written your own unique story Himself. And especially in the darker chapters, He can't wait to reveal the better and brighter days that follow in the later pages. Do you understand what I'm attempting to say?"

"I do."

He tilted his head a little. "Although I can't imagine the chapter of your life that you're currently in is all that dark, if you're giving the sons of warriors a run for their money."

Jada looked wide-eyed at him. *Are all my doings known to every single person in this realm?*

Halden laughed. "And I can tell you with surety that that is part of why you're here. You have a keen ear for hearing sensitive details of our enemy. You have natural talent with the sword and bow, and tomahawk, from what I know. In the days ahead, we'll need every warrior and you will be a serious threat to the darkness that is coming."

His voice grew quiet a moment, gaze turning thoughtful, as if he'd just received some kind of insight. "Hmm...you're a daughter of kings. You were made to be a warrior and were purposefully created with no desire to settle or for family, though others will misunderstand that and look down on you because of it. Everyone was created for a unique purpose..."

Honestly, Jada hadn't been looking for compliments, and Halden's words made her feel smaller than ever.

Then something he'd said previously came to her mind. "Wait, that's only part of why I'm here...what's the other half?"

The smile returned to Halden's face. "To be with the high king, to meet and have counsel with him. It's a parallel, and mirrors our purpose with the Almighty in that He desires for us to be with Him."

He suddenly pushed himself out of his chair and began to pace slowly. "It's true that He doesn't need us to carry out His will, yet He wants to have fellowship with those He created."

"That's something I've never been able to grasp," muttered Jada.

"True of us all," replied Halden as he faced her. "Our fallen and finite minds can't understand it. He is perfect and we are not. He is pure and light and holy, and we are diseased and would've been destined for eternal darkness had it not been for His Son. Yet, He stays with us, and that right there is love."

Jada's gaze fell to her lap.

Love. She'd long forgotten what it was. Her heart and soul had forgotten, the memory of it driven far away by relentless, cutting words and scorn and jealous contempt by people she herself had loved without question.

"You see an example of that love in Merida," continued Halden. "She found you and welcomed you into her home, not just because it was the right thing to do. But she'd been waiting for you, and she earnestly desired to help and comfort and take you under her wing."

A knowing twinkle danced in his eyes. "You don't see it in yourself, but you're an encouragement to many around you. You uplift the spirits of others in a way few can understand because your own spirit has been so down-trodden."

Jada lifted her eyes to him.

"You're right, sir," she answered. "I don't see it."

Halden again took a seat. "I can see that you have been given much wisdom already, especially for one so young. Don't take this the wrong way, but the expression in your eyes is aged, like one who has already seen a long life and experienced many things. It's the same expression I see in Blake's eyes whenever we visit. There's also something about being a traveler that matures them quicker, not just exposure to different dimensions, but the going back and forth itself. Thus, you're ahead of the curve of your average peer group, because you've seen much in your young life; you've gained experience and much maturity."

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "At the same time, though, you are still learning many things, one of which that you can relate to your peers, make friends."

He laughed. "Although people still puzzle you greatly."

"Like I said," replied Jada with a weak smile, "I don't think I really have to say anything for you to know what I'm thinking, or to understand me. I don't get people, or...I should say, I don't...trust them. When I do think maybe I'm being too cautious, that I should give someone the benefit of the doubt...they always end up proving me right in my caution. Then I think perhaps I just expect too much from people, even though my standard for them is set quite low."

Jada wasn't sure why she was suddenly talking so much, but Halden was one of those people where she immediately felt like they'd been friends forever. She could be completely open with him, and he wouldn't shoot her down and would be perfectly honest in return.

That was something she'd been longing for, though hadn't known it until that very moment.

"But on the other hand," she continued, unable to keep herself from speaking, "I know everyone is going to disappoint their friends occasionally, and have disagreements or miscommunications. Then again..."

Jada let her sentence trail away, but Halden finished it for her.

"You wonder if there's anyone else out there who really cares, anyone who will put forth as much effort into a relationship as you do? Who will truly be a friend, no matter what, and not just when it's convenient for them?"

"Yeah."

"There are, Jada, trust me," nodded Halden, leaning forward to catch her gaze. "There are more than you think, and a great number of people do care about you, and who really will be there if you need anything."

Looking into his eyes and hearing his sincerity, Jada believed every single word.

Then he leaned back in his chair. "And I completely understand. On any given day, one of my friends can say something in jest that I find offense or crass. We still wound each other, though not always on purpose. But we work it out...as is part of being human."

Jada sighed with feigned exasperation and shook her head. "People..."

Halden laughed heartily, and she allowed herself a grin.

"Tell me," he said at last, "has Merida told you when she'll take you to see the high king?"

"No, not yet."

“Mm, it’s a far journey to the North, and dangerous. But it will be more than worth it, when the time comes. Unless...unless he comes here or sends a messenger...”

Halden’s sentence trailed off, and he fell into silent thought for a minute. When he looked at her again, he saw she was already searching his face.

“What’s he like?” asked Jada abruptly. “The...the high king?”

Halden lifted his chin and closed his eyes a breath.

“The high king,” he said quietly. “Eliadar.”

The name sent a chill through her.

“The name given him when he was appointed was ‘Eliakin,’” continued Halden, “or ‘whom God establishes.’ Eliadar is his more common and known name throughout the realm. It refers to one who is made to be a light that all look to. But it’s more than that. The name itself speaks of the holiness and authority of its owner. And to those closest to him know the king as simply Elias.”

A light and fire flickered to life in Halden’s eyes and his voice grew stronger as he continued. “He is my counselor, my ruler and captain. He has ruled for many years now, and he is everything, yet so much more than we ever thought he’d be. Just and right, there is no lie or darkness in him. Wiser than any, he is fair and impartial, takes no bribe and cannot be corrupted. He is the greatest and mightiest warrior, terrible in battle, yet he also knows when to show mercy and grace. There is none like him, no one higher, no one greater and no one who comes close to comparing.”

At these words, heat spread through Jada, and she knew, though she’d never met the king, that he was the one she’d follow. Her loyalty was already committed and sealed to one she’d never met or seen.

“What about Cassius?” she asked, a scowl falling over her face. “What happened between him and...the high king?”

She couldn’t bring herself to speak the king’s name; somehow, she didn’t feel worthy enough.

“Ah,” nodded Halden as he stood again and beckoned for Jada to follow. “Therein lies the tale...”

They stepped out onto the balcony and walked around to the north side as Halden told Jada the story.

Cassius had once been a close advisor to the king and steward over many tasks. But he hadn't just been an employee; he'd been the closest friend the king had. They could often be seen walking the halls of the castle, deep in counsel with one another, or, just as often, jesting and laughing.

They were brothers, though not by blood.

In their youth, and when the world was younger, they were inseparable and spent hours playing in the woods, tracking all kinds of animals and exploring new lands.

As they grew older, they enlisted in the military. They excelled in every manner of warfare and combat, and trained and fought side by side. In battle, none could stand against them.

Now, the king who'd ruled at the time had no heir, so he chose Eliadar to be king after him.

From an early age, Eliadar proved to be exceptionally courteous, interested in living rightly, more apt to show mercy, was exceedingly gracious, and considered the consequences of decisions before actually committing to any action. He was the stereotypical "good kid."

Cassius, on the other hand, had a bit of rebel in him. He didn't overly care about the wellbeing of others, was rash at times and had a cruel streak. Not to say that he wasn't conscientious and gracious at all, but ever there was a cool gleam in his eyes.

Both were granted wisdom beyond their years, and great discernment, so that they knew a person's true intentions the instant they met.

When Eliadar's rule finally began, he appointed eight wise counselors, men right and true. One of them was Cassius, who oversaw training of the military and foreign intelligence.

While they occasionally disagreed, as all friends do, Eliadar was a supporter of his best friend and brother-in-arms. He held Cassius in high regard and did not flaunt his supremacy over him.

But as the days went by, a change slowly came over Cassius. In his youth, even before the military, he was hailed as the greatest hunter, greater than any who walked in this world. A master at tracking and stealth, no prey could elude or escape, nor any enemy that he chose to pursue.

There didn't need to be any evil being or creature that lured Cassius. The darkness of man's own fallen nature, the disease of one's own heart, was enough.

Slowly and surely, Cassius began to question Eliadar and why the previous king had chosen him to rule. Why did he tend to show mercy or grace instead of executing hard justice on lawbreakers and those who opposed him?

Cassius would never allow such things if he was ruler.

Also working on his mind and heart was that dangerous poison called jealousy. Eliadar was soft, yet the people held him with such awe and wonder, loving him all the more because of this "weakness."

Eliadar was king, after all, but Cassius began to realize that he himself never got the full praise or recognition he believed he deserved. Yes, he was called as the greatest hunter and received praise therein.

But the king always got more.

Soon, Cassius thought about resigning and moving to a new territory where he would be ruler and king. However, one day while he was in a brooding mood, which had been occurring more frequently, he crossed paths with Eliadar in the castle.

Normally, just being in the king's presence chased away the darkness of any thoughts, or stress from problems that were bothering Cassius. But not this time.

As they spoke briefly, the thought came to Cassius then, as he looked at his brother: why not rule *this* kingdom? And sit in power in *this* city? Remove Eliadar and take what was long due him.

It was doable. Because of Cassius' discernment, he knew which officers, which servants would support him...and his plans for a coup.

In the wake of this movement, darkness fell over the city for the first time, and the king was troubled. He'd known what was brewing, though he didn't let on.

The more he tried to speak with Cassius, to understand what was wrong, the more Cassius shut him out. Eventually, he was going out of his way to avoid the king and only appeared before him when summoned or when the advisors held counsel.

He avoided him when he used to spend hours talking with his best friend.

Halden had been there, on the night of treason. An out-of-season storm snarled over the mountains, and the night was eerily dark, not just physically, and the air itself was heavy with foreboding.

Fires sprang up all over the city as the coup began and the loyal forces countered the rebels. The storm itself was so violent that Halden thought the world had come to an end and that the heavens themselves would split.

But Cassius didn't have as many followers as he'd originally thought, and Eliadar's people were more loyal to him than the rebels were to Cassius.

And they fought, Cassius and Eliadar, who were once brothers. Eliadar defeated Cassius, but didn't kill him, in spite of everything Cassius had done against him. Eliadar had tried to help him and given him many chances to turn from the darkness he was letting feed on him.

But if Cassius had thought that Eliadar would show him mercy after this, then he'd truly been blinded. At last, the high king was beyond showing mercy now.

Truly, when a merciful leader decides to execute punishment, terrible and cold it is.

So, Eliadar banished Cassius and his followers that were still alive, and sent them to the land of disease and desolation, prepared just for them. There Cassius would stay because death was too quick and easy a punishment for everything he'd done.

Thus, Eliadar wouldn't kill Cassius, at least...not yet, for the time had not come, and Cassius had one more opportunity still to turn from folly.

One more chance, on top of all the other opportunities he'd already had. One more chance...and then the final blade of judgment would fall upon him.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Parting Gifts**

Jada remained two weeks at Asgarod, and she and Halden spent hours talking and discussing many things.

She hadn't a clue about how he found the time to meet with her as often as he did. Sometimes they discussed faith, other times foreign policy, warfare, the types of peoples who lived in that realm and various languages and dialects. They even spoke in depth about plants and herbs and each of their qualities.

*Ida would be proud, she'd thought.*

Jada also learned that when it came to healing the most serious wounds, there was a rare type of tree whose leaves could stop any poison and counter any infection. It was difficult to find and usually guarded by some kind of ruthless beast.

She'd keep that in the back of her mind.

Days were also spent walking around the city and meeting people, who no longer intimidated her.

All other free time was spent with Arto, the sword maker. He already knew who Jada was, which wasn't surprising to her considering how quickly news spread around the realm.

After telling him about her dilemma of desiring a sword, but only had limited funds, he smiled in typical elf fashion and suggested Jada work for him during her stay.

So she did, and received training and experience in the art of blacksmithing. In the short time she worked for Arto, she learned to make one mean dagger...and horseshoes.

The day before Jada left, Arto was in an especially jovial mood. At the end of her shift, he set a sword in a scabbard of intricate design onto one of his workbenches.

Folding his arms, Arto said. "Tell me what you think."

Jada took the scabbard and drew the sword. It was a fine piece of craftsmanship, with a slightly thinner than average blade that curved just a touch near the tip. The hilt had rough leather wrapped around it, to afford a better grip, and the edge gleamed brightly as it caught the sun's light. The blade itself held a faint glow, seemingly to absorb the sunlight.

"It's one of the finest I've seen," said Jada finally.

"And it's yours," replied Arto.

Her jaw dropped, and he laughed. "Just payment for all your hard work. You've more than earned it."

Again, Jada simply gawked as she studied the sword. Finally, she cleared her throat. "Thank you, Arto. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this and all your instruction."

"You're welcome," he replied with a smile as they shook hands. "Please come and visit again, and if you ever need a job...see me first."

Jada grinned. "I will."

That had been yesterday, now it was predawn of the following day. Balo was already tacked and waiting for her when she exited the citadel with her backpack slung over her shoulder, and sword and scabbard in hand.

She'd visited Balo daily, to check on him and give him a good brushing. He was turned out most of the time but always cantered up to her in the pasture.

When he saw her exit the citadel, he gave a joyous whinny, as if they hadn't seen each other in months.

After giving him a pat, Jada secured the scabbard to the saddle and took the reins from Gavin.

"Thank you, Gavin," she said, swinging up into the saddle. "I trust he didn't give you any trouble."

Gavin smiled. "Not in the least. Have a safe ride home."

The stay in Asgarod had not only done Jada good, but her horse, also. Balo arched his neck and danced on his toes as they rode down the street, hooves clapping on the stone.

Jada waved at Arto, already in the shop, and continued for the main gate.

After they passed beneath the grand archways, she brought Balo to a stop. He stomped, pawed and swished his tail as she made sure everything was secure and the girth tightened.

Glancing over her shoulder, Jada gazed once more at the citadel, ever glowing in the light. She didn't know it in that moment, but she'd visit Asgarod countless times in the future and hold counsel with Halden.

Taking a breath of the cool morning air, Jada turned her attention forward. She didn't really know the path home, but her mount did.

"Alright, Balo," she said. "Take us home."

With a snort, the grey jumped into a canter and carried them towards the Western Village.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Black Arrow**

The wind was in Jada's favor when she came upon him, a young buck in the thicket.

It was evening, though it was still fairly light, the summer sun reluctant to set. It played hide-and-seek with the mixed clouds, shining one minute, then hidden the next, making the shadows darken and then fade. A steady evening breeze hissed through the clumps of tall grass and made the trees sway and their branches flail, creating all kinds of movement.

She'd come across a lone set of fresh deer tracks where the stream gathered into a little pool. Following them, she found him nearly an hour later, coming out of a thicket.

*There's dinner,* she'd thought.

Jada had returned from Asgard three days ago, and plans among Connor and the gang were quickly made for a camping trip. Not that there was necessarily any rush because they did a lot of camping in summer.

Still, they were excited to see Jada. Her first question upon dismounting Balo, not tired in the least from the trip, was, "So, when are we camping?"

That night, they'd voted Jada catch dinner, and she didn't argue. Gabriel lent her a spare bow and quiver of arrows, and off she went.

Now she paused in thick shadows a moment and took in the terrain and considered the direction and strength of the wind. Looking back at her quarry, she saw he too had stopped and was sorting the scents brought by the gusts.

Jada didn't know if it was just a myth, but she always avoided looking at animals she was tracking in the eye. For some reason, she thought it tipped them off, that someone was after them, and thus put them on high alert. Kind of like when the hair on the back of a person's neck rises when they felt like they're being watched.

Carefully, she drew an arrow and set it.

She was a breath from pulling the string back when a branch snapped somewhere ahead of her.

The buck gave a start and snort, head up, ears forward as he stood statue-still, ready to bolt.

It was now or never for this deer. She didn't feel like wandering around until dark looking for the next potential meal.

Pulling back, Jada lined up her shot. It would be perfect because his left side was slightly turned away from her. Right through the heart and a lung, an instant kill.

She steadied her breathing...and then released the arrow.

The shot was true, and the buck collapsed into the moss and leaves.

*Thank you, God,* she thought as she jogged over.

She was beginning to get hungry, and by the time dinner was cleaned, quartered and ready to eat, she'd be starving.

She bled him there, though, so he could drain.

While Jada waited for that to happen, her gaze was constantly scanning the forest. She wasn't sure what had caused the branch to snap; could've been the wind, for all she knew.

But when you're in the wilderness by yourself, you can't be too careful.

Finally, she grabbed the young buck and got him positioned across her shoulders. Then it was back to camp.

The gang had hiked out to their first camping spot, so none of them had horses to pack gear or food. They traveled light and would forage and hunt for their own meals.

Connor, Reagan, Gabriel, Ida, and Namor had gone on the trip and were presently around a low-burning campfire. When Jada left, there'd been five, and now there were seven.

*Well, what do you know*, thought Jada as she carefully made her way down a short rise. The two newcomers were none other than Blake and Gael.

"If I'd known we were expecting company," she said as she emerged from the trees. "I'da shot two."

"She comes bearing food," exclaimed Connor triumphantly.

"Wow, nice looking buck," said Reagan.

"Yeah," replied Jada as she dropped the deer beside the fire. "He's been eating well, too. Found him not far from the stream."

Connor and Gabriel set to work on the buck as she straightened and popped her back. Then she removed her quiver and nodded to the newcomers. "It's been awhile. Good to see you again."

"Likewise," smiled Gael, though it was strained.

What Jada didn't and wouldn't know, was that when Gael saw her again in those first seconds, she immediately felt smaller and outdone by Jada.

The young traveler who'd arrived in early spring now held her own in combat. She appeared physically stronger and even a bit taller. Also, she had a confident way about her now, and she fit in perfectly with the others.

There was, of course, also the minor detail that Jada was beautiful, and her beauty had grown with her since her arrival to Aurora.

An independent warrior, a loner, but a queen in and of herself.

*No, not a queen*, thought Gael as she hunched a little under a quick glance of Jada's sharp gaze, *but someone higher than a queen, whatever that would be*.

On top of it all was the fact that Gael had a sneaking suspicion that it had been Jada to direct Blake's attention to her. Ever since he'd returned from Earth, Gael and Blake had been spending a lot of time together; he was giving her his attention.

*But why*, Gael wondered sometimes. She'd seen the way Blake hadn't been able to take his eyes off Jada before they'd traversed. Yet why would Jada do Gael a favor by suggesting she have Blake's affections?

Gael knew she hadn't exactly been nice or welcoming when Jada had first arrived...

"That a new sword?" asked Blake.

Jada glanced down at her left side, where the sword remained until she went to bed. As she drew it sharply from the sheath, the blade rang loud and clear.

Reagan closed her eyes and lifted her chin as she savored the sound. "I love the work of elvish smiths."

Jada handed the sword, a bit reluctantly, to Blake. "My payment for working for Arto while at Asgarod."

He took it and carefully examined the blade, gleaming even though the sun was now behind the clouds.

"Where'd you get the knife?" asked Gael, gesturing to the short blade in its sheath and strapped around Jada's right thigh.

Jada smiled. "Made that myself."

That grabbed Blake's attention.

"Well," she said lightly, as she extended her hand for her sword. "I didn't exactly just sit around during my visit. Too much to do and learn."

Blake handed her the sword and she slid it in its place at her hip.

"Did you see Halden?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Jada, meeting his gaze head on for the first time. "We spent hours every day just...talking. You know how it goes when you meet someone you know you can instantly trust and be open with."

"Ha!" laughed Namor. "You? Talk? Well, Halden must've done most of the talking, unless you spoke more than you usually do...probably said all of two dozen words!"

"Oh?" countered Jada. "I might not talk much, but I'm always thinking about something, unlike you. If you tried a little less talking and more thinking, it might've kept you from getting carved up by a girl."

Reagan burst out laughing before slapping her hand over her mouth, while a chorus of “oh’s” came from the others.

Namor was on his feet in a flash, and he and Jada stood toe-to-toe, glaring at each other. At length, she saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

She couldn’t keep a straight face much longer before they both laughed.

After her return from Asgard, it was like nothing had happened between them. Except Namor now considered Jada a comrade, someone worthy to run with the pack.

“How’s the chest?” asked Jada.

Namor pulled up his shirt, which he wasn’t shy about. Then again, what red-blooded male isn’t? And he didn’t have anything to be ashamed of, either. Jada didn’t see an ounce of fat on him and his core was perfectly sculpted.

As for the scar, it ran diagonally across his chest.

“Beautiful. Bet that earned you bragging rights,” she said before he pulled his shirt down.

“Has your side healed?” he asked.

Jada tugged the side of her shirt up so he could see. He whistled when he saw the size of the scar, healed and smooth.

“Merida said it looked like a shark bite when she saw it the first time.”

Namor gestured to the scar running along Jada’s lower arm.

“Looks like you’ve got plenty to brag about, too,” he said with a wink before returning to his seat by the fire.

Jada shot a sidelong glance at Blake. By his expression, he’d slowly pieced together there’d been an actual fight between Namor and Jada, but things were okay again. His face darkened, though, when he looked at her side.

When Blake’s eyes flicked to Jada’s, he saw she was already looking at him, with a coy smile on her face.

“It’s a pity you missed that dance,” she said as she sat on a stump by the fire.

“So, Jada, how much would it cost me if you made me a knife?” asked Reagan.

“Well, I’ve seen your work with leather, and if you repair Balo’s headstall, I’ll make you a knife,” replied Jada. “Though I can’t say it’ll be as fine as the one I have. Arto has the best material to work with, and I don’t.”

“I’m sure it’ll be perfect,” grinned Reagan, and she nearly popped right up to her feet in excitement. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Speaking of materials,” continued Jada, looking at Gael. “You know of a startup blacksmith nearby?”

“Yeah, he lives in Highland, half a day’s ride north.”

*Guess I’ll be taking a trip to Highland, then,* she thought.

Jada was about to ask what was taking so long with the deer when a chill shot down her spine. Lunging to her feet, she spun, knife in hand. The others reacted at the same time, and everyone had a weapon in hand just as the first black arrow plunged into the ground near the fire.

“Ambush!” shouted Namor as they all sprinted for cover of the trees.

And it was the trees where they met the assault, which was, as expected, a gath squad. They’d probably been drawn by their voices and the smell of the campfire...or the deer.

That was the first real face-to-face fight Jada had with the enemy. But there wasn’t much time to consider it because things happen fast in close-quarters.

You have to be committed to the decision that you will do whatever it takes to defend yourself and those with you.

There was no fear in Jada, or uncertainty, only a calm and cool resolve.

The first warrior fell in two strokes, the first to deflect his strike and then a second to drive the knife through his chest. Shoving his body back into his companion, Jada ducked under the blade of another gath on her right.

By now, the gath in front of her had pushed his friend’s body aside and stepped forward and swung.

She deflected it, the blade of her sword ringing clear through the trees. Pivoting, she sidestepped a swing from the second gath, struck him in the side and then ducked as the first enemy gave a mighty swing.

He ended up cutting off his companion’s head before he found a sword through his chest.

A third gath fell, and then a fourth. By then, Jada realized she’d pushed through the enemy line. They were thick, though, and her companions had their work cut out for them.

After making sure no one was sneaking up behind her, Jada sheathed the sword and took up her borrowed bow. One of the fallen gath had a quiver and she set the first arrow, pulled back and released. The black arrow found its mark in the back of one of the gath around Connor.

Another arrow shot equaled a second enemy down, and a third. That was when the gath in the rear noticed Jada.

*About time*, she thought, spending the last arrow, which plunged into a gath bearing its teeth at her.

Jada figured that if she could draw away some of the ambush squad, then the others wouldn't have trouble finishing off the rest. That had been her plan and so far it was working.

Dropping the bow, Jada took up her sword again...and unbuckled the tomahawk at her right hip. It had been a gift from Jordan and Merida after she'd returned from Asgard. Sturdy and strong, its head was black and its edge silver.

Adrenaline and heat surged through her veins as the enemy advanced. The first to reach her held a round wooden shield in his left hand.

It didn't prove a problem.

They swung at each other at the same time, but Jada's backhanded strike had more power and nearly wrenched the gath's sword from his hand. She was already swinging with the tomahawk as he brought the shield around to protect himself.

The edge of the blade sank deep into the shield. There came a mighty crack and the shield splintered. One more swipe with the sword and the first gath was finished.

As for the others, Jada fought them half-heartedly as she backed further from the main group, drawing them away from their companions. She would exchange a few strikes before disengaging from her current enemy and dodging away a few steps.

At last, they reached a small clearing and out of plain view of the others. However, it seemed Jada had brought more with her than she'd originally planned on.

No matter.

There was still no fear as they tried to encircle her.

The first gath delivered a powerful overhead swing, and she blocked it, supporting the blade of her sword with the tomahawk. Kicking the gath in the knee weakened him. With a push, she shoved him backward and swiped with the sword, removing his head from his shoulders.

The next two advanced from different directions, but there was no need to panic. Jada would get to everyone in turn.

She had a very precise way of moving and fighting in this sort of combat. Precise and to the point, pun intended. No fancy moves, and that's how Jada liked it.

Ducking at the last second, the blades of the two gath met above her. One received a kick, the other simultaneously got a fatal strike with the sword. Straightening and then advancing, she deflected the second gath's swing with the tomahawk and then struck him down.

A third would fall shortly after, followed by a fourth and then a fifth...

As for the rest of Jada's group, they killed the remaining gath squad in short order. That's when they finally realized she was gone and noted the tracks leading away from the scene of the main fight.

"Probably gone and gotten herself into trouble again," commented Gael.

"I highly doubt that," replied Namor sharply as he threw her a harsh glare. The others also wore distaste in response to her comment.

Blake wore no expression, though he just now understood how much respect Jada had gained from Namor. That in itself spoke volumes.

"I agree," nodded Gabriel, taking a closer look at the tracks. "She purposefully led some of them away, leaving fewer for us to deal with"

They hurriedly followed the tracks and picked up the pace even more when they heard the sounds of a fight. Sprinting through the forest, they crested a narrow rise...and then froze.

The bodies of many enemy were already strewn about the clearing below, and Jada was just about to finish off the final gath.

At his next swing, Jada leaned sideways out of reach and used her reverse momentum to kick him in the hip, to throw him off balance. Then with a swing of her sword in her left hand, she glanced his blade to the side and brought the tomahawk around in her right with great speed and fell her enemy.

Except for the breeze, quiet fell over the forest again.

Jada took a few breaths and regarded all the gath bodies around her. Black blood pooled on the ground and dripped from her weapons. She also noticed she was smeared and smudged with it.

Jada felt no remorse or joy. There was only the sense that she'd done what she'd needed to, to keep her friends from being slaughtered by a merciless foe.

She'd been successful...this time.

That's when Jada saw the others, standing atop a small rise and staring. She guessed they hadn't been there long, otherwise they probably would've joined in the dance.

Her gaze flitted over them briefly. Gabriel, Ida and Reagan wore almost mirrored expressions that read something like, "I knew from the beginning you were made for this."

Connor looked at her with newfound respect, but also a touch of fear. His belief about her being a wolfhound was proven correct. She'd held her ground during her first real fight. It wasn't

that she just held her ground; she'd annihilated the enemy. Without thought of risk to herself, she'd drawn a number away from her friends to give them a chance, and then destroyed the foes around her.

And there had been no trace of fear in her, at least when she'd struck down the final enemy.

*A warrior, indeed, he thought, a sentinel.*

For a switch, Gael was both surprised and intimidated.

Blake wore no expression in particular because he wasn't sure what to think. Although, like Connor, he couldn't help but feel a bit afraid of her.

As for Namor...

"Sorry I didn't leave you any," she said to him as she crouched and cleaned her weapons with some moss. "But I just wanted to catch up to your total."

When Jada stood and looked at Namor, a smile pulled at his mouth and his eyes danced. Comradeship sparked between them.

Jada would've smiled too, but her gut suddenly tightened. Turning in a circle, her eyes searched the trees as the light slowly began to fade from the forest. Something was wrong...

A black arrow just missed her right shoulder and sank into a tree in front of her.

The bows of Gabriel and Ida sang as they returned fire. Jada heard the shrieks of pain as she turned in time to see the cause: another gath squadron.

But these brutes were particularly large, and behind them was one greater than all the others. Her eyes went wide when she saw him: a big, black brute with dark crimson eyes that burned with the deepest malice. She could feel the hatred coming from him, even from that distance.

*Oh, she thought, backing up. That must be a...*

"Chimera!" shouted Reagan.

Arrows sent from Gabriel, Ida and now Connor dropped three more gath.

Jada broke away left, towards the nearest trees. A black arrow clipped her in the arm, but she barely felt it. Another missed her shoulder and bit into a pine as she passed it.

She didn't have her bow, not that it would've done any good. She also didn't have any arrows or time to stop and line up a shot.

Behind her, Jada heard a deep and horrible voice rise up in command. The enemy was coming and fast.

Movement in her peripheral drew her attention. There he was to her left and nearly in front of her: a gath wielding a bow and with an arrow already set on the string.

Reacting without thinking, Jada threw the tomahawk. It broke the bow like it wasn't there and nailed the gath in the throat.

Jada could feel someone close behind and turned...as a black arrow plunged into her left thigh. The force of the impact took her leg out from under her and she toppled against a tree. The pain was nearly blinding and felt like someone had poured gasoline on her leg and lit it on fire.

*Come on, get up,* she growled to herself.

With a grunt, Jada grabbed hold of the tree and pushed herself to her feet. Any movement in her left leg sent excruciating pain all the way into her stomach.

Grinding her teeth against the pain, she gimped through the trees. She didn't get far before she had to dive behind a fallen pine as more arrows rained down on her.

Cautiously, Jada risked a quick peek from her hiding spot. Most of the squad was driving around her location and towards her friends, pushing them away. The enemy would have both her right and left flank blocked, before finally surrounding and closing her in.

But only if she didn't keep moving.

Jada couldn't completely stifle her cry as she awkwardly got herself up and gimping again. Another dozen steps and she ducked behind a stand of birch, panting and sweating from the pain as she leaned against a tree.

Searching the forest, she caught a glimpse of her group. They were farther away now, as she'd hoped they would be.

That was when Reagan spotted her. Jerking to a stop, she called to the others.

In the meantime, Jada looked through the trees and saw how close, and how many, the enemy was. There were a lot more than the first squad, and she occasionally spotted the chimera moving unrushed behind his unit.

And every time she saw him, he was looking right at her.

Returning her attention back to her group, she saw them staring at her. There were significantly more gath this time, who were larger, stronger and too much for her small group to handle. Not to mention there was a chimera to be dealt with.

"Run!" shouted Jada, even as she pushed herself forward. "Just run!"

She looked at Blake and their eyes met a moment.

*Run, you idiot,* she thought.

“Go!” she shouted again and then shuddered as pain speared through her.

For a second, Jada was afraid they wouldn't go, but instead stand and fight. Then their deaths would be her fault.

They did turn and run though, and quickly vanished from sight.

Now that, that was done, it was Jada's turn to get moving. With a grunt, she forced herself into an awkward run. Black arrows fell around her, but the forest was thickening and no more struck her.

It was a mile later when she finally stopped a moment to catch her breath and do what needed to be done: break the arrow shaft.

Ripping off a tiny strip of her shirt, she waded it up and shoved it back between her molars. The last thing she needed was a cracked tooth.

Taking hold of the section of the shaft that was in her leg with one hand, she then grabbed higher up with the other. She pulled in a few deep breaths...and then snapped the shaft.

A flash of white hot pain shot through her leg before giving way to numbness.

The sound of her pursuers closing in again jerked Jada to attention and she lurched forward into a run.

As the light continued to fade, misty rain began to silently fall through the canopy. The temperature dropped quickly and ground fog began to form amongst the trunks.

She'd probably gone another mile or two, when she heard it the first time: a piercing scream, so sudden and loud it made her jump.

Yet it wasn't a scream of pain or from a wounded animal.

*Oh great, thought Jada as she made her way down a steep embankment. What kind of killer beast comes out to hunt at night?*

With effort, she managed not to trip or splash loudly through the shallow creek. By the time Jada reached the top of the opposite bank, she was grunting with every step. She couldn't help it, but the pain was excruciating.

Her brain was also beginning to get a bit fuzzy. That was probably due to the pain, the adrenaline, and whatever poison the gath might've tipped their arrows in that was now coursing through her body.

It was nearly twilight, and Jada stopped again, sensing there was enough time between her and the hunters to take a short breather. She was drenched in sweat and mist and the cooler air currents made her shiver.

But now Jada had the time to do another thing that needed to be done: find the right plants to hopefully stop or slow any infection. She didn't want any pain killers because her brain was groggy enough as it was.

It was slow going and difficult to see as she gimped around in the semi-darkness, and the fog, which had become thicker.

After ten minutes, Jada still hadn't found any signs of what she needed, and her leg had had about enough. It kept giving out on her until at last, she collapsed onto the moss.

*Get up, keep moving,* she told herself.

Jada wanted to, she really did and tried. But her body was so spent it wasn't able to follow her command. With a last effort, she managed to half-drag and half-crawl to a large pine and prop herself up.

That's when she found it, what she called hazel weed, because she couldn't pronounce it in the ancient language. A glimmer of hope flickered in her heart as she pulled out her knife and uprooted a small handful of it. Then she slit open the stems and smelled the sweet scent it gave off.

Inside the stem was an almost gel-like substance, and that's what she wanted.

After opening all the stems, Jada squeezed the gel out around the wound.

She still had the piece of shirt clenched between her teeth, which was a good thing, because the gel made her leg sting far beyond describable words. She slapped her hand over her mouth as tears formed in her eyes.

*Wow,* she thought after the initial pain passed. *That sucked.*

Jada spit out the makeshift bite-guard and eyed the woods.

Everything had fallen eerily silent and fog slithered around the trees. Now she had to figure out what she was going to do and how she was going to get back to the village. The temperatures wouldn't drop below freezing, but that didn't mean a person couldn't become hypothermic. Plus she still had an arrow stuck in her leg.

Jada had only been sitting against the tree five minutes tops when she heard the sound of slow, but steady footfalls. Heavy, too.

*Figures,* she thought, gripping her knife. She wished she hadn't had to throw her tomahawk at that archer. At least she still had two blades, and she realized then that could possibly be her last minute alive if the entire gath squad found her.

*Well, it's been fun while it lasted.*

The footsteps grew louder now, and Jada quietly slid the sword from its sheath. In the waning light, the blade shone cold.

That's when it sounded again, that piercing scream, answered by a second from another direction. The sound of deep, rolling thunder rumbled through the earth and Jada felt the ground beneath her tremble.

A gust of humid wind tore madly through the trees, making them bend and groan in protest. The fog writhed and tore apart as several large shadows blurred past her peripheral.

The screams came again, louder and more piercing than ever—and Jada was finally able to place that sound. Indeed, it wasn't human or from a creature in pain.

It was the scream of horses wild with rage, and it chilled her blood.

People didn't scare Jada anymore, but horses? There's something about them, half-ton animals that, if they decide to be ornery, can turn on a person in an instant with deadly consequences.

She'd heard stories of people who'd been attacked and killed by their horses, with responding officers describing the scene as worse than a bear mauling. She'd had hooves flash in front of her face, hooves that can cave a human skull in like a tin can, hooves that can trample and break and crush bones, or puncture and kill.

There was just something about the raw power and expression of fury in the eyes of a single horse that Jada found more unnerving than facing an entire army. They were one of those animals that demanded respect.

Intertwined with the fierce calls came shrieks of terror from the gath somewhere behind Jada.

The screams of fury, cries of fear and rumble of thunder that shook the earth continued for several minutes...before everything suddenly cut off.

The wind continued to howl and most of the fog blew away.

Behind Jada came a guttural snarl and adrenaline shot through her veins as she readied her weapons. The gath was just on the other side of the pine she was leaning against.

Suddenly, something swooped in from overhead. There came the sound of a heavy body hitting the ground, followed by a sickening crack.

Something appeared from behind the tree and Jada started, a breath away from striking with her knife when her brain registered what it was. Or, more accurately, who it was.

"Icarus," she breathed and resheathed the knife. "You about gave me a heart attack."

“My unit and I were tracking several squads of gath in the area,” replied Icarus, looking her over. “Then we saw the small camp and crossed a few of your friends not too long ago.”

“Did you see the chimera?” asked Jada.

“You don’t need to worry about him anymore,” answered Icarus. “I’ll go get some help, so stay here.”

“The village can’t be that far,” she protested. “I can make it there myself.”

Icarus gave a little snort and stepped closer.

“There are some things you need to learn and quickly, young human,” he said with a lecturing tone. “When you’re badly injured, no one thinks little of you if you ask for or need aid...not especially after how you fought, or how your friends said you did. Now, remain here and someone will be along shortly.”

He was gone in the blink of an eye, and Jada was left alone again.

So, honestly, she didn’t think she could’ve made it to the village on her own. Her leg had become stiff and ached something fierce.

It wasn’t minutes later when Jada heard a lone set of hooves cantering through the forest. Another thirty seconds later, her trusty grey steed appeared.

Balo slowed as he approached and stopped suddenly a dozen feet from her. He gave a snort and jerk of his head.

He was focused on something off to her left, and she searched the woods, mostly dark now. She almost missed it, the black form of a horse, but his faint, cool silvery-blue outline gave him away.

*Hello again, she thought, getting closer now. Although at this rate I won’t even get a halter on you for another five years.*

Balo whickered and lowered his head a little.

Jada heard the colt swish his tail before he turned and jogged away with the silence of a shadow, disappearing like a ghost into the dark.

Balo walked over and inspected her with his nose. When he reached her wounded leg, he snorted. He then backed away a few steps and began pawing the ground.

It took Jada a couple seconds to figure out what he was doing.

“No, Balo,” she said. “I can—”

He didn’t listen and lay down anyway. Then he threw her a look and tossed his head, as if to say ‘hurry up, already.’

It felt like an eternity by the time Jada had crawled over to him. She braced herself for the impending pain, grabbed his mane and got herself somewhat onto his back.

Fortunately, Balo was paying attention, and as she pulled herself up, he slowly rose, so her injured leg didn't have to be bent against the ground.

"Okay, boy," she said after a few breaths and took hold of his mane. "Let's get outta here."

The ride was less jarring and punishing than she thought it'd be. Her steed seemed to take extra care in picking his route through the forest, and in no time, they arrived at the village.

As expected, the main group was near the north end of town, where one of the main fires was lit at night.

Icarus and two of his companions sat expectantly around the bright blaze. Jada's group of friends was all there, including, naturally, Merida, Jordan and a number of other parents and warriors.

When Balo and Jada appeared out of the night and approached, she watched Merida's mouth draw into a line.

"Could be worse," she said to her as Balo stopped beside the fire, and she patted his neck.

Merida, and a man Jada knew to be the local doctor, stepped over for a closer inspection of the arrow shaft, still sticking a few inches out of her thigh.

"Don't touch it," blurted Jada.

"Easy, child," replied Merida quietly. "We're just looking..."

Jada glanced across the fire at the others. "Everyone's okay?"

"We're fine," answered Reagan, exasperated. "But we...we just..."

Jada watched with great interest as lines furrowed that delicate face before Reagan dropped her gaze. "I just...why'd you tell us to go? We had to leave you!"

Jada would've laughed, but it required more energy than she had, and probably would've made her leg ache more. It wasn't funny as in 'ha-ha,' but funny of another sort that Reagan was so torn about it.

Her loyalty ran deep.

"It's not like I stayed and fought, or held off the assault," replied Jada. "None of us were a match for that squad. I ran, too. That said, I was honestly relieved when you all ran, because I—"

This was more difficult than Jada thought. Clearing her throat, she shifted a little and forced herself to finish what she was going to say.

"I didn't want to be the cause of your deaths," she said, gaze flitting to Blake a second.

That's why she'd told him not to make the jump on the cliffs during the wolf attack. She hoped he'd make that connection.

Blake understood, to his credit. He was also highly concerned for Jada and had been the moment the second squad appeared.

Even though he'd been hanging out with Gael and hadn't seen Jada in over a month, the instant he saw her again, his thoughts were with her. Then when he saw she'd been shot, a stab of icy panic speared through him, before it was overpowered by a surge of protective fury. It'd taken every ounce of his being to turn and run with the others.

Blake had naturally been drawn to Jada. But apparently the time apart had only strengthened any affection for her, because it came back twice as strong when he beheld her again.

His gaze dropped a moment. *Guess I have a lot of thinking to do about some things.*

"Did you kill the second squad?" asked one of the soldiers to Icarus. "What of the chimera?"

"They were all killed," answered Icarus. "The wild band swept down on the gath...I haven't seen anything like it in a long time. Normally, the wild horses will just skirt the squads, or kill one or two in defense. But this was different."

A chill ran through Jada, and she shuddered again. Balo whickered softly, and reached around and touched his nose to her uninjured leg.

The doctor sighed and shook his head. "Alright, let's get her inside."

Jordan walked to her right side and reached around behind her.

"Really," she said. "I can—"

"Not even walk," he finished, giving her a look. "Come on."

Leaning over, Jada put an arm around his neck.

"You know you only killed twelve gath," piped Namor, purposefully choosing that moment to speak, to distract her from the pain of Jordan pulling her from Balo's back. "You've still got a few to go to catch up to me."

"I'm just trying to slowly get you used to the fact I'm going to beat your score," quipped Jada with a smile.

Namor chuckled, but concern flashed across his face a second. It was quickly replaced with fondness. "Good night, Jada."

"Night, Namor."

The adults would probably continue to discuss things, but the “kids” all headed for home. Jada wondered if Gabriel, Ida, and Blake would stay in town at a friend’s, or risk traveling at night with gath out and about.

As Jordan carried Jada to the house, she asked, “Can we wait until tomorrow to pull out the arrow? I’m not sure I can take any more.”

The doctor opened the door and led the way inside. “That arrow has to come out tonight.”

“But you’ll be asleep,” added Merida.

“I will?” asked Jada. “What are you going to do? Hit me over the head with a two-by-four?”

That made Jordan snort a laugh, despite himself.

Merida or the doctor had laid everything out by the looks of it, and Jada was set onto the couch.

Merida handed her a small glass of clear liquid. “Drink this. It’ll knock you out a good twelve hours, at least.”

Jada took the glass but didn’t drink it right away. “Wait, what about a hospital? Can’t we—”

“No, time” answered Merida, and great worry flickered across her face. “Now hurry up and drink.”

*This must be more serious than I thought*, thought Jada as she tossed back the tasteless liquid.

Her next thought was a question about how long the stuff would take to work. Or she thought that’s what her thought was.

Jada never got a chance to sort it out, because darkness pounced on her and she remembered nothing after that.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Disunity**

Cassius sat on his throne, left elbow on the armrest as he leaned to the side.

Currently, he was presiding over a criminal case. Standing before him was the offender, a tall and emaciated individual, and the victim, shorter, but equally thin.

Several soldiers stood beside and behind them and appeared indifferent about the case.

After listening to the two stories, Cassius pushed himself to his feet.

"So," he began, as he casually stepped down the few steps that ran in front of the throne. "What we have here is a case of one person unlawfully breaking into another's house, taking possessions not belonging to him and beating the homeowner somewhere in there."

He stopped before the two people and looked from the victim to the offender. "Is that about right?"

Neither spoke because they were too afraid. It had been a rhetorical question anyway.

Without warning, Cassius drew the knife at his hip and stabbed the offender through the heart, killing him.

"If you know where he lives," said Cassius to the victim as he crouched to wipe off the blade on the dead man's shirt, "feel free to take whatever you want, as compensation for your trouble."

Standing up, he pointed at two of the soldiers. "Clean up this mess and see the body is disposed of."

He looked at the other two. "Find out where the corpse used to live, then locate one of the homeless families and move them into his house."

"Yes, my lord," replied all four men in unison.

Without giving the victim a second glance, Cassius walked from the chamber and out into the main room, with the tables near the large hearth.

There Merek and a few other advisors of the city stood around a table. Levian was present too, though almost invisible as he stood in the darkest corner of the room.

"What news have the squads reported?" asked Cassius, taking a position on the side of the table where he could have his back to the fire.

The surface of the table itself was covered with several maps, over which Cassius leaned.

"We continue to have success with attacks on towns in the central territories," answered Cassius' intelligence advisor as he traced an area on the largest map. "And of course, here, closer to our borders."

Cassius' eyes flicked to him. "No success in the South?"

The intelligence advisor shook his head. "Nearly every squad has been stopped and their attacks met with failure. The people there are united against our threat, plus the towns themselves consist mainly of warriors. As ordered, we've kept well clear of the major cities for the time being."

Cassius had known for a long time that the South was a strong opposing force. However, he also knew how he was going to weaken them.

"Unity is a powerful and dangerous thing," he began. But before he went any further, a lone, eerie howl was carried through the open windows and into the room.

A minute later a big, black wolf crested the stairs and appeared, pale yellow eyes gleaming. An ugly scar ran from the side of his face all the way down his neck.

"You're almost two weeks late, Grimm," scowled Cassius as he sat on the edge of the table.

"Apologies, king," growled Grimm with a dip of his head. "On my way here, one of your human commanders asked for my pack's aid in gaining control of a new region in the central territory. It took longer than anticipated, but was successful."

"I've heard we're being met with strong resistance in the South."

"It's true," replied Grimm. "Their forces are strong and they are on high-alert. Plus their warriors train regularly and are greatly skilled in combat. About a month ago we ambushed a group of their young warriors out in the forest, but we were thwarted. Even the young ones have deadly skill and I lost several of my pack. We'd been keeping an eye on this group for awhile and there was a new human with them, a young female traveler. She alone killed two of my own."

Cassius considered this a moment. A gremlin had delivered word early that morning about an attack on a young group of warriors just yesterday evening.

The first gath squad had all been killed. A second unit led by a chimera had been nearby and drove the group away, but not before wounding one of the members, a young female.

Unfortunately, the second unit had been trampled into the ground by one of the wild bands of horses. Even the chimera was slain.

However, Cassius didn't give too much thought about it, or the new traveler, although those sorts had to be kept an eye on. They were highly mysterious with all their comings and goings.

Grimm gave the rest of his report in short order, telling him which cities were "asleep," or not on guard, which remained on alert, which ones had good defenses and those that had been abandoned.

"Very good," said Cassius, returning to his feet. "Return to the South and search out the chimera squad led by Milosh. You and your pack will serve as spies and messengers between them and the other squads, gath and human. I want them ready for a larger movement against that territory."

"It will be as you say," replied Grimm before turning and disappearing down the stairs.

"Seems our primary focus remains on the South," mused Cassius, eyeing the maps. "As I was saying: unity is a powerful and dangerous thing. Fortunately, I already know how to solve that problem."

He gave a sharp whistle and immediately a gremlin fluttered in through a window and then nearly crash-landed onto the table.

Cassius cocked an eyebrow at the creature as he shivered and twitched in nervous fits, as if he were either giddy with excitement or just cold.

"Where's Klaus?" asked Cassius.

"Hh, he is still away on...on assignment," replied the creature, before giving a start, as if shocked. "Delivering orders...to the encampment on, on your southern borders! Eee!"

Cassius sighed. His speediest messengers had already been deployed, which left him with the less-than-brightest of the crop of spies.

Wolves could run swiftly, but they still had to navigate the terrain, deep valleys and high mountains, whereas gremlins could simply fly.

"I want you to take a message to my human forces in the South," said Cassius, "find Doran, one of my top intelligence commanders. I have something I want him to do..."

## **Chapter 15**

### **Recon**

*She saw the fire where they'd been camping, just before the assault. She saw the bodies of the fallen gath and then the large brutes of the second unit advancing through the woods.*

*But the forest passed away below, west and then a little north before everything stopped again. There was a large encampment of gath, like an outpost, around some caves in a cliff. From there, various squads came and went.*

*Everything shifted again, and when she blinked, she suddenly found herself on a hill, looking at Asgarod. For an instant, it glowed warmly before a shadow settled over it, like a cloud, and darkness choked out the sun and the city shone no more...*

*All went dark a second, and then she saw villages and towns burning, flames bright in the night. Enemy squads, both men and gath, fell upon the people as the mournful howling the wolves rode on the icy wind.*

*She was standing in the middle of a street when a chimera chieftain looked at her. With a snarl, he drew a black arrow, strung his bow and fired so quickly she didn't have time to blink.*

*The arrow sank deep into her thigh and sent a shaft of white hot pain up her leg...*

Jada awoke with a gasp. Drenched in a sweat and a bit disoriented, it took her brain a second to inform her that she was in her room.

With a grunt, she sat up and tore the covers back to check her leg. Her muscles were a little stiff, but the arrow was gone and the wound stitched shut. The area immediately around it was black and bruised, but not red or inflamed. The best part of all was that the pain was gone, save for a little twinge here and there.

Taking a breath, Jada ran a hand down her face as she tried to remember her dream. Something about a gath encampment and darkness falling over Asgarod...

An idea struck then, and an urgency she didn't understand welled up inside her. Carefully, she slid her legs over the edge of the bed and stood. She could apply full weight on her left leg and only received a quick, sharp ping through her thigh.

Jada's gait was still a bit awkward because of her stiffness, and she gimped into the bathroom. In record time, she cleaned up and washed the grit and crushed bits of blood out of her hair.

Merida and Jordan were gone as she made for the door. Judging by the position of the sun, it was mid-morning, and she wondered how long she'd been asleep.

Stepping out onto the porch, Jada scanned the town. People were going about business as usual, and the day was bright and clear.

She wasn't sure which building to try first, so she walked down the road to the town hall. A few people called and waved in passing.

*Well, she thought as she waved back, at least they don't appear disappointed to see me up and around.*

Jada was lost in thought about the dream when she walked up to the steps to the town hall and not-so-quietly yanked the door open. When she lifted her gaze, she faltered.

Standing around a table in the center of the large room were six men and two women.

She instantly recognized Namor and his parents, and by the resemblance to a few others, she guessed they were his brothers or close relatives.

One of them was Akin, the oldest.

*Of course*, thought Jada before saying, "Sorry to barge in. But I had a thought about all the gath squads that have been attacking lately."

"Come," said Shona, Namor's mother, a fiery redhead. "We were just discussing that very thing. Though first, I think I speak for all of us when I say I'm very surprised to see you up and around. You were shot only yesterday."

Jada shrugged and tromped over to the table. "Fast healer, I guess."

Namor stepped around and extended his hand. She gripped it firmly and then took a spot beside him at the table.

"We were talking about where the gath would be able to establish a large encampment that wouldn't be obvious," informed Erez, Namor's father, a strong and bold commander with intense hazel-brown eyes.

"A base of operations," I nodded.

"Exactly."

Leaning forward, Jada studied the map a few seconds and then pointed to an area.

"This is where we were camping before the attack," she noted, before tracing her finger over the paper. "Has anyone searched in...this area here? There's a deep ravine and caves here, right?"

"Aye," answered the second woman with dancing green eyes and long, brown hair tied back. "No one usually passes that way because of the rough terrain, and it's sheltered by thick trees, so a stellar passing over wouldn't easily spot any gath."

"How'd you come by this idea?" asked Erez.

"Um, well...I...had a dream just before waking up, and I saw their base."

"Were you able to count how many gath there were?" asked Shona, not questioning in the least the fact Jada had only seen it in a dream, and therefore might be completely wrong.

"No," answered Jada. "But there were a lot."

She glanced across the table to see two young men, probably mid-twenties, looking at her with a twinkle in their eyes. They looked at lot alike and bore resemblance to Namor.

"You know, Uri," said the young man with green eyes. "I think we ought to put together a little recon party and go check it out."

That immediate pricked up Jada's ears. Whatever Merida had given her worked wonders, because she felt good, well-rested and eager to get right back into the action. Recon sounded fun, especially with this group, a family band of skilled warriors.

But Jada could never bring herself to ask if she could tag along. She didn't have the right, and it was too high of an honor for a commoner like her.

"You know, you're right, Zev," replied the other young man, with blue-gray eyes. "Recon is in order. We could probably do it, seven or eight of us. Light and quick."

"Aye!" agreed Zev, grinning as he looked at his brother. "Make a family affair out of the ordeal, though we could use one or two more stealthy trackers."

"You're right again," smiled Uri. "But they'd have to be someone who has a lot of know-how in tracking, is exceptionally quiet and has battle experience, just in case."

"Jada!" exclaimed Namor, and her gaze snapped to him. "Do you know of anyone who would be a good fit?"

Zev and Uri laughed good-naturedly, and Namor was unable to keep from breaking into a smile.

Jada looked distastefully at him, but he didn't appear sorry over the joke.

"Boys, be nice," said Shona, though she was chuckling.

"You up for it, Jada?" she asked, turning her feisty gaze to her.

"Ready for anything, ma'am," replied Jada sternly.

"What about your leg?" asked Akin, who'd remained silent to that point.

Jada waved him off. "Almost as good as new. There are only a few stitches. Not even worth mentioning."

Erez gave her a jarring slap on the back. "We'll head out just before dinner. Meet us on the edge of town, and we'll go...explore."

"Remember, this is recon only," emphasized Shona as she pointed from Zev to Uri and then Namor. "Not an ambush on half the gath army."

Namor blinked at her innocently.

"Mmm hm," she said.

"Nothing to worry about, mom," grinned Uri, before looking at Jada and extending his hand across the table. "I'm Uri, by the way."

She shook it. "Jada."

Zev introduced himself, also. There was laughter in his eyes, his brother's too, just like the elves Jada had met. They also held a mischievous twinkle. She could imagine they were the jokesters of the family and innocent troublemakers.

"I would suggest you rest," said Shona to Jada. "But I doubt you will."

"I'm fine," assured Jada, "and there's too much to do before this evening...like find my tomahawk."

She scowled at the table. "Stupid gath archer..."

When she glanced up, she saw Uri and Zev trying not to laugh.

"A patrol went out to that area early this morning," replied Erez, "to dispose of the bodies. Maybe they found it. I can ask when I meet with them later."

"I'd appreciate it," nodded Jada, before looking at Namor. "Have you seen Reagan today?"

"Probably with Connor mending fences in the south paddocks."

"Great," she said, giving him a slap on the shoulder and then nodding to Shona and Erez.

"I'll see you this evening then."

## Ω

Shortly before the dinner hour, Jada met Namor and his family at the north edge of town.

Initially, she'd been worried about telling Merida about what they were planning, and that she might lock her in a closet or something.

But she didn't. Once Merida saw how well Jada had recovered, the mischievous light returned to her eyes.

"A warrior, indeed," she'd said. "It's pointless to try and keep a healthy fighter indoors when there may be enemy nearby."

In fact, Merida was also heading out with another patrol group that evening, to surveil the territory northeast of the village.

Thick leather armor in place, sword at her hip, bow in hand and hair braided away from her face, she looked like a queen of war ready to cause some mayhem.

She left when Merida was about to step out the door. But just before she did, Merida gently placed her hands on her face and kissed her forehead. "Be careful," she whispered.

"You too," replied Jada and gave her a quick hug.

Merida then exited out the back door and joined the group waiting for her, before all disappeared into the valley.

Jordan was staying to oversee the defenses of the village.

Walking outside, Jada greeted Namor and company. The entire group was mounted, as the plan was to ride in the general area of the caves and then continue on foot.

Obviously, she couldn't take Balo, because his light coat would announce their arrival to any gath patrols.

However, that meant Jada had the honor of riding Astor, Merida's horse. She did feel bad about leaving Balo behind, though.

She'd already tacked Astor, and he stood beside the front porch. Her sword and sheath were secured to the saddle, and she subconsciously touched her right hip...where her tomahawk hung again.

One of the patrol soldiers had found and returned it earlier. Jada was still elated over its homecoming.

She swung effortlessly into the saddle and only received a mild ping from her wound. Astor snorted and walked forward.

Balo, who'd been standing beside his companion, perked his ears forward and whickered at Jada.

She looked back and pointed at him. "Stay here."

Balo grunted, put his ears back and shook his head.

"Yes," she said, with added sternness.

Balo snorted and pawed the ground, before turning and jogging in the opposite direction they'd be riding.

*Good boy.*

"Remember," said Shona as they turned west, "This is just recon."

"Yes, mom," replied Uri, Zev and Namor together.

"But once recon is done, we'll have to follow up with an ambush or plan of action pretty quick," said Uri.

"Aye," agreed his brother. "You know there are gremlins hanging around the camp, and we don't want them to tip off the gath that we know where they are."

"That," replied Erez, "has already been arranged."

Namor and Jada exchanged a smile, their eyes dancing with life and excitement. She was thrilled beyond words over getting to ride with this family, who was made for action and adventure. She felt it a high honor to get to tag along with them.

Without another word, the company sent their mounts cantering into the woods. They made good time and blew past the campsite and continued westward.

Quickly they came upon the clearing where Jada had had her little dance with the enemy. In passing, she noted dark patches that still stained the moss and leaves.

The group continued on, keeping their westerly route. Because the evening breeze was blowing from the southeast, they wanted to make sure they kept far enough south, until they were a little beyond the ravine and caves. Last thing they wanted was the sound or scent of their horses to alert the gath to their coming.

Erez the commander led the way atop his dark horse, almost black, and Akin followed behind him on his bay steed. After him and riding beside one another were Zev, on a red horse like Astor, and Uri, atop a dark grey.

Jada came next and Namor rode beside her and on a dark horse like his father.

Shona picked up the rear atop a noble and fiery blue roan.

Erez was sure of the way and his horse cantered on without faltering. Veering a little south, the path dropped down a hill and they picked up the pace.

To Jada, this was awesome in every sense. Every one of the family looked like they'd been born on horses. According to her, there wasn't anything much more beautiful than watching a rider who was still in the saddle and quiet with their hands.

The riders had taken up a half-seat and they barely moved, except to duck or lean away from a low hanging branch.

As for their horses, each had light and daring burning in their eyes as their hooves drummed against the ground. Snorting lightly, they shimmered as powerful muscles rippled beneath their glossy coats. They were excited, but they kept themselves composed, for they were made for war and were on an assignment against the enemy.

The shadows were lengthening when the company halted behind a steep rise. Upon dismounting, they grabbed from the saddles whatever gear they'd brought and then made their way around the side of the hill.

On the other side, they turned back east, traveled a fair distance and then made their way north. It wasn't more than twenty minutes when they saw the first tracks of gath.

A couple minutes later, they reached an exceptionally steep ridge and began the climb.

The ride had actually helped warm Jada's leg up, especially riding in a half-seat, and it didn't give her any problems as she climbed.

At last, they neared the stop and slowed their ascent. Dropping down to their stomachs, they inched their way the final few feet until they could see over the ridge.

*Well, what do ya know about that,* thought Jada.

On a cliff twenty-five meters across from them were several large cave openings. Along narrow shelves and nooks that marked the entire ridge sat and stood gath warriors around tiny fires. Some were at the cave entrances.

Erez turned to Uri and Zev and whispered, "I want you to check and see if there are any camped on top of the cliff. One of you hang back and keep an eye on things."

"And I'll situate myself at the end of the gorge," nodded Shona, knowing her husband's thought.

Those three stalked off to the right and were soon out of sight,

Meanwhile, Jada had done a rough headcount of the enemy. As far as she could see, there were at least a hundred. That didn't include however many might be in the caves or atop the cliffs. Glancing up at the trees, she confirmed that the thick canopy didn't allow easy view from above.

She let her eye linger amongst the high branches. No sign of gremlins. She made a mental note to watch out for them, because they had no reason not to sound the alarm the instant any of Erez's group was spotted. A small army against half a dozen? Jada knew numbers didn't win wars, but in that case, they'd be in serious trouble.

"Akin, Jada, scope out the other side of the valley," said Erez. "See how far they're camped around the ridge and get a headcount."

Akin and Jada went left and quietly made their way down the ridge. They were beginning to lose light pretty quick and couldn't take their time. On the same token, they couldn't just sprint through the forest.

While they crept through the thickets and used tall, brushy trees for concealment, Jada wondered why Erez had paired her with Akin. Doubtless he knew Akin had been the one to "capture" her when she'd first arrived, and there could possibly be sour feelings between them.

However, that might've been the very reason he'd paired them, so they could work out any differences and then get on with life.

Akin had remained stoic during their entire encounter, both at the present and earlier in the town hall. She was mildly curious about what exactly he thought of her.

Then again, Jada was beginning to realize that worrying about what everyone thought of her was exhausting and pretty pointless. Not every person in the universe was going to like her, so why care?

The ridge bent gently to the north and ended suddenly twenty meters later.

Akin and Jada crouched and peeked through the branches of an unknown leafy bush. Groups of gath marked half a dozen spots on cliffs and along the base of the ridge.

By her estimate, Jada counted an additional forty to the others she'd numbered earlier, give or take one to two.

Akin finally looked at her and showed on his fingers how many he'd counted. She nodded in agreement.

He signaled he wanted to move further around the ridge, to make sure there wasn't another camp. He continued forward, Jada a few steps behind, keeping an eye on things behind and above them.

It looked like the last gath campfire disappeared from sight and they moved a little quicker, though they didn't break from cover.

They paused in a small thicket, and Jada took a knee to assess the terrain in front of them.

The end of the ridge turned into rocky and rough ground, and tall elms seemed to grow right out of the stony earth. They stood towering over the ridge and top of the cliffs. Jada wondered if archers would have a clear enough line-of-sight from there and down on the gath units along the edge of the cliffs...

She glanced back at Akin. He was about to start forward again when something on the ground, half-covered in leaves, caught Jada's attention.

Pulling in a breath, she latched onto Akin's shin, to keep him from stepping down, and shoved his weight sideways.

He managed not to crash around in the underbrush when he fell over. He threw Jada a look, but the glare changed as his eyebrows went up a little. He was looking at something behind her.

Slowly, Jada turned so she could see over her shoulder. There wasn't anything on ground level, so she lifted her gaze...

And there, high up on a pine branch sat a pair of gremlins. They hadn't spotted the pair of humans yet.

Searching the trees above their position, Jada spotted another three a few pines over from the first pair.

Fortunately for her and Akin, there wasn't a clear line-of-sight, obviously. Otherwise, they would've been spotted decades ago. Instead, the fading light and movement of the branches in the breeze offered only quick glimpses of the ugly winged spies.

With extreme caution, Akin and Jada crouched and slunk behind two massive elms. He then glared at her again and raised his hands, as if to ask, "what gives?"

She assumed he was referring to when she'd grabbed his leg.

Eyeing the ground where they'd just been, Jada spotted it again and pointed. As if to aid her cause, a gust blew through the trees and tossed leaves from last fall...off a bear trap.

Whether it was used by the gath for food or as a type of alarm system, she could only guess. She then threw Akin a curt look of her own and raised an eyebrow.

*You're welcome*, she thought.

When he met her eyes again, his face softened.

With careful maneuvering through the woods, Akin and Jada returned to where they'd left Erez and Namor. They were still there and it seemed Uri, Zev and Shona had just returned in the falling darkness.

After walking back to where they'd left their horses, they quickly debriefed.

There were two dozen gath camps on top of the cliffs. Uri, Zev and Shona had also discovered several bear traps during their excursion. While the devices added an element of risk to an attacking party, they could also be used, for example, to draw some gath out, to separate them from the main encampment.

Gremlins were also out, but not en masse. At least not yet.

"Now what?" asked Zev, with an expectant tone.

If Jada wasn't mistaken, in the last light of evening, she saw Shona and Erez both smiling.

"Now," replied Shona. "We muster the troops for a little...preemptive strike."

## **Chapter 16**

### **Preemptive Strike**

Upon their return to the Western Village, the troops were already gathered, as Erez had alluded to earlier. All of the warriors were prepared, their horses also.

Messages were sent to neighboring towns, and fighting forces arrived as the hour grew later.

Icarus and three of his warriors were present and ready to aid in the assault.

To Jada's surprise and complete delight, Gabriel, Ida and a number of elves came from their territory. They were all fair with exceptionally keen eyes that never ceased to hold a twinkle of laughter. All were mounted on horses befitting their riders: tall, lean, clean-limbed with good light in their eyes.

*This is going to be quite an event*, thought Jada, unable to keep herself from smiling.

Some might have opposed the idea of "throwing the first swing" in a fight. However, the gath had been attacking towns for some time, so this was more of a counterstrike. Also, there are situations in which you can't wait for the bad guy to hit you first, because if he does, then you'll be totally obliterated.

Jada always thought the perfect example of that was the nation of Israel. They're so small that if they didn't act preemptively, terrorist groups would tear them apart and slaughter their people. Or rival nations would launch a larger offensive. Every day was literally a fight for survival.

Besides, in this case, if the gath camp wasn't wiped out, then they'd just keep striking, killing people and burning towns to the ground.

Sometimes a rival force will surrender. Other times, you're fighting against an enemy who will only stop if they're killed.

The plan was to strike shortly before dawn's first light paled the sky. That would've afforded the company time to sleep...if anyone had actually been tired. But battle was at hand and no warrior could find rest.

Their horses were restless, too, for they knew what was happening and understood clearly what it meant when warriors gathered as they did that night. They could feel the tension in the air, the excitement, and they knew what was coming.

As for Jada, there had been some debate over whether or not to allow her to ride in the actual attack, because of her leg. It hadn't caused any delay during recon and only ached mildly at the present. But it was still a point of concern.

To Jada's surprise, Akin came to her aid and agreed she should be allowed to go. At this development, Namor just winked at her and grinned.

It was an hour before predawn when the company moved out. All would ride to the general area of the caves, before some would dismount and instigate the strike.

Jada rode with the group who'd attack the cliffs. According to Uri and Zev's report, beyond the stand of elms that shielded the tops of the cliffs was a plateau. It rose suddenly out of a line of trees and offered a straight shot to the elms.

As if knowing she'd need one, Gabriel had brought a spare bow, and Jada grabbed an extra quiver of arrows from the armory.

"You need to invest in your own," grinned Gabriel when he'd given her the bow. "There's an excellent bow-maker in my town."

"Well," she'd replied, "a good bow is next on my wish list."

Astor didn't seem the least bit tired from having been out earlier. In fact, he seemed to be hotter than before. All the riders and the type of assignment they were on had him snorting and dancing, eyes burning with fire.

As planned, the primary mounted regiment broke away halfway to the cliffs and cut northward. The evening wind that had been blowing earlier had settled to an occasional puff of air that flicked the leaves.

It meant their approach from the plateau had the potential to be unnerving, as the hooves of their mounts thundered over the ground.

However, it also meant the others who'd be going to the caves would need to slacken their speed a little earlier, because the sound of their horses would travel farther and be louder in the stiller air. It might take them a few extra minutes to get into position.

In short time, the mounted unit reached the north end of the plateau and stopped just inside the trees.

Then the wait began.

## Ω

The company assigned with attacking the caves approached on foot with the silence of shadows. They'd already taken out several gath warriors on patrol in the area. Everything had been taken care of, quick and quiet.

Trekking to the caves took a little extra time because the soldiers had to watch for the bear traps. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be many around and any that were found were disengaged.

At last, one of the front units spotted the steep hill just opposite the caves. Staying amongst the heavier tree and brush cover, the leader of the squad shot a glance at one of Icarus's warriors, who'd been traveling beside them.

With a stick in his mouth, the stellar continued forward to a bear trap, took the stick from its mouth and set off the trap, which snapped shut loudly and broke the stick. The cat immediately proceeded to let out a chilling, wounded yowl.

Then, with a silent thrust of his wings, the stellar lifted soundlessly out of sight and into the trees.

As hoped, a group of five gath appeared from around the ridge, to see what kind of game they'd captured.

All they caught, however, were arrows to the chest.

Just as planned, the fifth gath didn't receive an instant kill shot. The arrow punched through his right shoulder, and he unleashed a terrible snarl of pain that carried far through the forest. After that, he was put out of his misery.

Now, more gath appeared on either side of the ridge, and a fair number at that. They moved swiftly into the trees beyond the ridge and into darkness.

The other half of the gath encampment stayed along the cliffs and waited with rising anxiety. The shrieks from their companions reached them a short time later, and their anxiety rose still more.

That was when a shower of arrows came from the darkness and rained down on the cliffs. The gath scrambled into action as a second wave of arrows came, followed by the first pass by some riders.

They galloped along the base of the cliff, picking off any enemy on the ground before vanishing again into the darkness.

Gath archers returned the volley as some leapt and slid down from the ledges on the cliffs.

That was right when a second pass was made by another group of horsemen, who came from the opposite direction as the first. Their horses trampled down the gath and the enemy was quickly cut down by the riders, before warrior and horse disappeared.

Gath archers fired at them, but no arrows were able to hit their mark.

Finally, as more gath made it into the trees, the first sounds of the fight rose up from the forest.

That was the cavalry's cue: the sound of battle.

*It's about time*, thought Jada, as she tied another knot into Astor's reins to shorten them. It'd felt like they'd been waiting for an eternity.

As soon as the sound reached their ears, the horses shifted restlessly and the riders straightened in the saddles.

Astor pawed the ground, tossed his head and chomped on the bit.

Jada stroke his neck, already warm from rising excitement.

"Easy, fella," she murmured. "Just a few seconds longer."

The red horse snorted in reply.

The mounted company moved just as the first signs of dawn flirted with the eastern horizon. Riding out of the trees, they crested the short, steep rise and up onto the plateau.

It was a short stretch to the trees, which meant they had to get up to speed quickly. But Jada didn't have a problem with that.

Neither did Astor.

He exploded with a burst of speed she'd never experienced and shot across the flat, hot with fire and fight. The pair only continued to build speed and pulled away from the main line. The red horse drove faster and faster, wind deafening as it roared over horse and rider. And still, he gained speed.

Jada wasn't sure he would've slowed if she'd asked him. But she didn't want him to.

The elms were growing larger by the second and in the first hints of light, Jada spotted several black forms running from the trees and onto the plateau.

*Cowards*, she thought, *running away from the fight*.

Unfortunately for them, they were running right into a line of charging horses.

"Take 'em!" shouted Jada to Astor, as she drew an arrow from the quiver across her back and set it on the string.

She'd only shot from a galloping horse a few times, and never in such low light, or when she wasn't sure of the distance. But, oh well.

At Jada's shout and drawing of an arrow, Astor pinned his ears and opened up even more.

Jada stood just a little higher out of the saddle, so she could still her upper body. Then she lined up a shot on a black form, bigger now that they were closer, and released the arrow.

At first, she thought she'd missed, but then her target suddenly collapsed.

*Beginning's luck*, she thought.

Jada had time for one more shot and took it, falling a second gath.

At her success, the red horse tossed his head and sounded a loud, fierce whinny that punched through the quiet air.

Jada had barely secured her bow and taken up her sword when she and Astor flew into the trees. They cut from the left edge of the elms and swept right, driving through the small groups of gath.

They shot out of the far edge of the elms just as the other riders made their run.

The mounted company pushed the gath closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. Finally, the ones that hadn't been killed were either cut down or driven right off the edge.

Astor was a bit beside himself and popped up in a half-rear as they stood along the edge with the other riders. Jada swung him around, and they rode along the ridge in search of a place to get down to the valley floor.

A short distance along, she found an iffy path. It looked a bit steep, but when Jada asked Astor about it, he whickered and practically dove for it.

*Okay then*, she thought, leaning back.

The horse truly was fearless.

When they hit flat ground, Astor jumped right back into a canter, ears pricked forward.

Jada glanced about the dark forest and saw her horse's first targets: a pair of gath, who had their backs to them.

She tugged on the left rein and then swung her sword once. "Take the left one."

Astor snorted and bolted forward.

The soldier holding back the two gath saw the pair approaching and dropped into a crouch at the last possible second.

Astor slammed squarely into the gath to the left, flattening him, and one swing of the sword by Jada fell the other.

It was getting light quickly now, and Jada turned Astor southeast. Moving this way and that through the forest, they encountered what was left of the gath units, who formed only small pockets of resistance.

With speed, Astor and Jada swept in and cut down many more foes, sometimes picking off stragglers or any who were trying to escape.

They'd been going nonstop for a good stretch and morning was truly upon the South when Jada finally pulled Astor to a halt. Nearby were several battling groups, but their soldiers

proved the superior. The element of surprise was also on their side, and the fierceness of the attack had left the enemy thoroughly dismayed.

Astor was chomping at the bit, eager to go again, but Jada needed a breather. Plus, she'd spied Uri and Zev on the other side of a small clearing. She wanted to see how these brothers of Namor fought.

She'd seen them here and there on the battlefield, and they were always on the move.

Working swiftly, they cut down an enemy line and then hastily moved to the next nearest target. While they fought with speed, they were also relaxed, as if they were totally unworried.

Presently, they were just falling upon a group of gath trying to escape. Sprinting up a steep rise, they launched themselves off it, coming in high for the first strike.

The first two gath never heard or saw them coming.

Zev struck his second gath while the brute was still turning. The third was ready and blocked Zev's swing, then the second, before delivering a harsh counterstrike.

The swords rang and the blow was jarring, but Zev remained unworried. He pushed the gath away like he weighed nothing, deflected a swing and then delivered a strike with such speed the enemy had no time to defend himself. The double-edged blade ran through the gath like he was a piece of rotten fruit.

Stepping forward, Zev ducked under the next gath's strike. He deflected the second blow with a tremendous swing of his own and knocked the gath off balance. Going with his own sideways momentum, he pivoted and kicked the brute and sent him staggering. Completing the rotation, he delivered the fatal swing and removed the gath's head from its shoulders.

Uri also made short work of his foes. Following the first gath, he too struck and killed the second as it was still turning, ramming his sword up into its torso.

With a sharp yank, he removed the blade and brought the sword around in a quick, overhead swing. It smashed against the next gath's blade and with such force it left him open. Kneeing the gath in the gut, he then stabbed it in the chest as it doubled over. He rolled over its back just before it began to collapse and met the final gath's downward swing.

Initially, it appeared Uri and the gath were delivering the exact moves at the same time. But after a few more blows, it was evident Uri was in control. He had natural speed and had the gath at his mercy and backing up.

Another half a dozen swings, the gath was dismayed by the onslaught and received a deep strike to the side that weakened him, and then the fatal strike to the neck.

While Jada had been watching all of this with great interest, she spotted something beyond the brothers. As it drew nearer, she saw it was a gath wielding a crossbow.

Astor knew his rider's thought and jumped into a gallop as she took up her bow again.

Zev and Uri were a dozen feet apart when they simultaneously killed their final foe, before turning and facing each other. They saw the arrow pass the air between them, and followed it to the gath with the crossbow, which dropped on the spot.

They looked the other direction to see who'd fired the shot just as Astor and Jada flew between them and jumped the gath's body.

They continued on, moving swiftly through the forest and keeping an eye out for more stragglers.

That's when Icarus, the golden-red stellar himself, dropped down and flew beside the red horse and his rider. In the scattered rays of light that broke through the trees, his coat burned crimson. Black blood marked his paws and streaked his muzzle, and wild light danced in those deep, golden eyes.

Movement ahead and to the right drew their attention. It was a fleeing gath and Jada watched as Icarus immediately fixated on it.

"Ohie!" she shouted. "That one's ours!"

"This time, anyway," replied Icarus, with laughter in his eyes. He barrel-rolled over them and then shot away in another direction.

Astor galloped after the gath, and he and Jada fell him swiftly. Almost immediately after, the red horse eased his speed as his attention was drawn to something to the left.

Following his gaze, Jada spotted what was the final, large group of gath. As they cautiously drew closer, she saw that right in the middle of it all were Shona and Erez.

Shona was fierce and violent, truly a mother, and daughter, of warriors. She struck and killed an opponent before twirling and shoving the sword behind her and into the ribcage of a gath who'd come up behind. It had raised its sword over its head but never had a chance to complete the swing.

Pivoting, Shona ducked under another blade before swiping the offender across the throat.

Erez was a commander indeed. He had sheer strength on his side and no enemy could outmatch or overpower him, or offer the smallest threat. Moving with confidence, he could take

on two or three gath simultaneously without the smallest problem. There wasn't anything to worry about; he'd get to them all in turn.

"Jada!"

Twisting in the saddle, she saw Akin galloping from the west. Icarus flew above him.

"Band of stragglers heading northeast!" he shouted.

He was just passing when Astor lunged into a gallop one more time. They caught up to Akin atop his fine bay and kept pace with him as they raced through the trees.

After several long seconds, they finally saw their quarry. The sun wasn't high yet and it sent shafts of blinding light blazing through the tree trunks.

Cursing the light, the gath stumbled and raised their arms to shield their eyes.

That's when the first two tripped, fell and didn't get back up. This received an immediate startled reaction from the rest...before Akin and Jada rode in. Their mounts each took out a gath while they swung their swords.

But there were still two more, who'd kept running instead of stopping to see what had happened to their comrades.

Akin and Jada were coming in fast on the nearest one when Icarus plummeted out of the treetops and nailed the gath, slamming him into the ground.

Akin and Jada blew past him, and it was a race to the final enemy.

It was more open here and their horses stretched themselves out, reaching with great strides over the ground.

Jada was out of arrows. Akin wasn't, but that was okay.

Removing her tomahawk from its sheath, Jada swung and threw it with everything she had, not a second before Akin released an arrow.

The tomahawk planted itself deep into the gath's back. He was just beginning to fall when an arrow plunged into the base of his neck.

Akin and Jada finally eased their mounts to a walk. When they passed the gath, she leaned over and yanked the tomahawk from its back.

As they turned back the way they'd come, they fell into stride beside one another.

"You're welcome to ride into battle beside me anytime, Jada," said Akin, smiling at her for the first time as he extended his hand.

"Akin," she replied as she gripped the hand, "the honor would be all mine."

## **Chapter 17**

### **Dissension**

"I don't know why she thinks she needs the stalls in the barn redone," said Reuben. "We just built that barn three years ago, and now she wants to remodel."

He looked at his counterpart as they turned down another street. "'Woman,' I said, 'I'm going to have to work another twenty years if you're going to be wanting upgrades on everything.'"

But Rueben laughed and his eyes sparkled. "If there's one thing I learned early on during our marriage it's: if she really wants something, she'll eventually get her way, one way or another. No use arguing."

Borik, twenty years Reuben's junior, just shook his head. "Women...they'll get you every time."

"Afternoon, Durrel," said Reuben to one of the guards on duty at the storehouse. "Been a busy morning?"

The guard, reading the latest news from Asgarod written on reams of parchment, glanced at them. "Aye, the boys have been unloading imports almost nonstop. The first crops are being harvested and the storehouses all over town are being filled. If it's any indication for the summer and fall, we should have a good surplus this winter."

Since they worked for one of the two largest inns in town, Rueben and Borik had keys to the storehouses, so they could retrieve necessary supplies as needed.

After stepping through the gate into the small courtyard, Reuben pulled out his key ring. "You remember what the boss needed?"

"No need to remember," replied Borik, pulling out a slip of parchment. "I brought a list."

"Ah, good lad," laughed Reuben as he found the right key and shoved it into the lock of the moderately sized house. "Rachelle already has you trained to use lists!"

Borik gave him a look as Reuben, still chuckling, led the way inside.

They started down an aisle of shelves, and Reuben was about to ask something when a noise made them both stop. It came from the rear of the house, where the cold rooms were.

The noise came again, like boots scuffing on the floor. The ambush came before either man had a chance to decide on a plan of action.

The assailant struck Reuben from behind and rendered him unconscious. Borik had time to raise his arms to defend himself, but a knife still caught the side of his neck as the attacker shoved past him.

"ey there!" he shouted, hand going to his wound as he pushed himself off a shelf. "Thief! Durrel!"

By the amount of blood seeping through his fingers, Borik knew his injury was serious. But he still ran for the door and burst through it.

The thief, with a knife in hand and bag slung across his back, was halfway to the gate. Durrel charged out then, drawn by the muffled shouts.

The thief skidded to a halt.

Durrel, sword in hand, looked from him to Borik, who was badly wounded, and then back to the thief.

This all occurred in seconds, and before any further action could ensue, chaos erupted. Shouts from various areas of town rose up, followed by the sound of skirmishes and galloping hooves.

A gang of six riders burst through the broad gate and pulled their mounts to a halt.

"Either step aside or die now," growled the ring leader to Durrel.

Durrel glared at them in great anger but sheathed the sword before sprinting to Borik, now slumped against the perimeter wall.

The attackers invaded from three directions, sweeping through the streets. A number were on foot, and some were assigned to plundering storehouses and homes in general—not for precious items, but weapons. Once finished with a structure, they then proceeded to torch it.

The purpose of the attack was gathering supplies and then destroying as much as possible. Obviously, if it were about a takeover, they'd go about things a little differently and establish domination.

But that would've been stupid. Their number was relatively few, and all it would take to remove them was a quarter of the army sent from the Southern Fortress.

Later in the evening, as the cleanup began, a rider galloped into the main square, where local law enforcement was gathered. He reported he'd followed a few of the invaders when they left and tracked them back to Dublin, a neighboring town a few hours away.

Law enforcement, the governor and his associates were all less than thrilled, and the idea of a counterattack was quickly given voice.

## Ω

A few days later, the very first town that had been supposedly attacked by neighbors executed a counterstrike. They knew momentum would be key, and they swept in at twilight. Torches in hand, they set houses and buildings on fire as they galloped down the streets.

This was to keep the main security and guard forces scrambling and busy. It allowed the teams of wagons to charge in through the chaos and empty storehouses.

The plan had been well laid and those who executed it were soldiers with many years of experience in combat and war.

In a matter of fifteen minutes, storehouses were emptied and fires were running wild. The wagons had already departed to a secondary location where the goods would be distributed to riders and carried away. The wagons would continue onward as a decoy in case anyone followed.

Unlike those who had attacked their own village, they left the armories alone.

Nearly every rider was out of the city, save for the commander and a handful of mounted soldiers.

Hot wind generated from the angry flames tore through a large square, where the town hall sat. The governor and other elected officials were standing atop the hall stairs and looking at the ruin around them when the commander and his men galloped up.

"By what right have you done this?" shouted the governor over the roaring wind. "We haven't done anything to you!"

The commander, a grim and gaunt-faced man with cold eyes, looked at him. "This is retaliation against your attack on Cedar Point and the damage your invaders did to us."

"That wasn't us! None of our fighting forces have left our borders!"

"A witness followed you back here," answered the commander sharply.

"Then your witness is a liar," growled the security advisor.

The commander appeared unconvinced. "We would expect you to say as much. Know that if you plan to come back to Cedar Point, we'll be ready, and not a single one of your men will cross alive into our territory."

He turned and spurred his horse. His men followed, and they galloped out of the town as night fell and the reds and oranges of the fires reflected off the gathering clouds.

## Ω

Jada and the other residents of the Western Village had heard of the latest attack. Now the town's elders and leading warriors sat in the town hall, in discussion of Cedar Point's counterstrike. They'd learned of all the attacks via messenger falcon.

"So, brother has officially turned on brother," said Connak, an advisor from Silverthorne, where Gabriel and Ida lived. "Towns who were once loyal and held agreements with one another have broken their alliances."

Jada was with several of her friends and seated near the tables in the center of the room. Listening intently to the discussion, they considered the weight of everything that had transpired. They may have only been young adults, but they understood the seriousness of what had transpired.

"It happens occasionally, neighbors getting into a tiff," acknowledged Bryant, from Highland. "But this is much more widespread. For now the unrest lies in towns and villages, and hasn't yet reached the cities."

Jada grimaced at that thought. *What a mess that would be, if large cities attacked one another.*

"I believe it's important that our four settlements hold alliances with one another," spoke Reynard, from the Eastern Village. "Not necessarily against attacks from other towns, but from whatever's driving these attacks. I know I don't speak only for myself when I say there's something odd about all this. We've had a string of gath attacks across southern territories, many of which we've managed to hold off or, in some cases, strike them before they struck us. Then on the heels of their failures, we see an eruption of violence between towns and friends."

"It smacks of a plot by the enemy," nodded Merida, who'd returned from her excursion the same day of the preemptive strike led by Erez. "They're trying a different method is all. Nothing is as effective as your enemy destroying itself for you."

Jada gave a nod. She'd been thinking those thoughts exactly. Distraction from the real threat was a weapon the enemy knew how to use expertly.

*Then, when we're all at each other's throats, thought Jada as her mind continued to wander, the gath and men under Cassius will sweep in and wipe us out, catching us completely off guard.*

Use dissension as the distraction while gath squads moved into place.

“It would be helpful to somehow get confirmation, though,” said Bryant, “right now this is all speculation. We’ll need proof if we’re going to convince other towns this is all a rouse by the enemy. The settlements already attacked may not just take our word for it.”

*Jada.* That was the only word spoken by the still, small voice to Merida. That was all that was needed to be said. She knew what He meant.

“We’ll get proof,” replied Merida softly, as if to herself.

When Jada glanced at her, she saw Merida’s eyes already on her, and she wore that infamous knowing expression.

Sudden urgency to see and hold counsel with Halden awoke inside her. She nearly leapt to her feet but remembered where she was and rose slowly.

Placing a hand on the shoulders of Ida and Connor, on either side of her, she gave them a squeeze and then silently walked toward the door.

“Until then,” said Jordan, “we’re going to have our work cut out for us...”

His final words were cut off when Jada quietly shut the door behind herself. It was already late, but she couldn’t wait until morning to ride out.

Walking down the steps to the road, she whistled a few times.

She’d learned about the falcons only recently, and that they were used as messengers. That explained how news traveled quickly from one settlement to another, and Jada hoped there was a falcon in the area willing to take a red-eye flight.

She’d just completed that thought when a bird swooped out of the darkness and landed in front of her. But it wasn’t a falcon. It was some kind of owl, small and rather round with gold eyes.

Jada blinked at him a moment before he tilted his head.

“Did you have a message you wanted delivered?” he asked. By his voice, she knew he was quite young.

“Uh, yes,” she stammered. “But...”

“Oh, the last falcon left some time ago,” replied the owl. “But I’m fast, well...maybe not as quick as a falcon or hawk, but I still make good time. Really!”

He ruffled his feathers and then gave a sort of shrug. “I’d always wanted to be a falcon, but...here I am.”

Jada tried not to smile and had to admit he was really cute, both in appearance and character.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Phoenix,” answered the owl. “I know, at least my name is cool.”

Jada gave a laugh, not in spite or anything remotely like that, but he was just so cute.

Quickly, she composed herself. “Well, then, Phoenix, I have a message I want you to take...”

Phoenix straightened and stood at attention. He’d secretly been keeping a close eye on Jada the past several weeks. He liked everything about her, and had really wanted to at least say “hi.” But many times he’d chickened out.

Tonight, however, he’d taken up all the courage he could and responded to her call.

“It needs to go to Halden at Asgarod,” she continued. “Just tell him that Jada will be arriving shortly, and wishes to hold counsel with him, about all the village attacks.”

When she gave the name of the recipient, Phoenix’s eyes grew wide. He stood even taller, puffed out his chest and saluted her.

“I will deliver it as you’ve said it,” he replied sternly, “and will reach Asgarod before the moon sets.”

“Fly carefully,” she cautioned. “There are gremlins about.”

Phoenix, feeling new confidence and importance with having been supplied a mission, laughed. “They can’t match me for speed and often forget...that my talons are sharper than theirs.”

He stretched his wings and then took off, disappearing into the night.

Picking up the pace, Jada jogged back towards the house. As she neared, she whistled sharply and called for Balo.

Ever since the preemptive strike against the gath camp, when she’d ridden Astor, her grey companion had been sticking closer than usual. She was certain it was because he didn’t want to be left out of any excitement again.

Indeed, the whistle had barely ended when Balo jogged out of the trees. Stopping beside the house, he tossed his head.

If he could’ve groomed and tacked himself, Jada knew he would’ve.

Running into the house, Jada grabbed her gear and was back out the door in five minutes. Balo was groomed and tacked in less than that, and as she swung up, he turned southeast, as if knowing where they were going.

When they reached the outskirts, she made sure everything was secure to the saddle and her backpack was in place.

“To Asgarod, Balo,” said Jada, and the grey lifted into a canter.

They'd be extra careful, and avoid any outlying towns on the way. The last thing she wanted was to be falsely imprisoned and accused of being a spy or something.

Oh wait, that sounded familiar...

No one had a remind Jada twice that suspicions and distrust were running high as dissension continued to spread through the towns.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Brief Meetings**

Jada and Balo raced through the night and approached Asgarod late morning the following day. The skies were overcast, weakening the sun's light, but that didn't stay the city from glowing.

People she'd met during her previous visit called a 'hello' as they cantered past. She and Arto shaved a wave.

Gavin jogged out of the stables as she slowed a sweaty Balo to a stop.

"Morning, Gavin," said Jada as she dismounted and untied her gear.

"Morning, Jada. Have any trouble on the road?" he asked, taking the reins.

She shook her head. "It was strangely quiet."

While he led Balo to the stables, Jada made her into the citadel. She'd barely stepped through the doorway when she nearly collided with Katherine, the woman who'd greeted her and Merida previously.

"Oh, pardon me, Jada!" she breathed, stepping back and putting her hand over her heart. "I didn't hear you come up the stairs. Please, come with me. Halden told me to bring you as soon as you arrived."

That surprised Jada. She figured he had plenty of other more important people to talk with, or serious cases to overhear than to talk with some kid like her.

Katherine read Jada's expression and smiled knowingly, the way Merida did. "He regards you with respect, and as one with great wisdom, in spite of your age. When your messenger arrived, Halden said he wanted to speak with you the moment you got here."

For some reason, that made Jada feel smaller, as compliments by such important people typically did.

“Tell me,” continued Katherine, when they reached the lift and began their ascent of the citadel. “Why the owl?”

“Oh, Phoenix? Well, at first he was the only available to carry the message,” answered Jada. “Then I thought...why not give him a shot? Everyone needs a chance, and a little encouragement, to try something to believe they’re made for. Just because he’s an owl doesn’t mean he can’t be a messenger. That’s irrelevant. He might even make a better carrier than ten falcons combined. Sometimes, just a touch of confidence from someone is all you need.”

She smiled and she said mostly to herself. “It’s the weak that are used to lead the strong...”

“Very true, indeed.”

They reached the outer chamber, and Katherine stepped inside to see Halden briefly. A minute later, she returned.

“He’s talking with another, but bids you to please come.”

As she walked past, she smiled. “Give Jordan and Merida my love when you go home.”

“I will. Thank you.”

A bit hesitantly, Jada entered the main chamber and was instantly greeted by Halden’s strong voice. Another answered it, and it matched Halden’s in power and authority, sending a chill through her.

At the far end of the room stood Halden, and another, who held a resemblance to him. Both stood near the marble desk, which didn’t appear any less cluttered than the last time she’d visited.

Jada slowed as she drew nearer, and when Halden turned to her, his haggard face lit up.

“When you said you were coming quickly, you weren’t joking,” he smiled and shook her hand.

“I’m not prone to exaggeration,” replied Jada with a smile of her own.

“Allow me to introduce my brother in counsel, Ambrose, who has journeyed all the way from Kolanthel in the East.”

“It’s an honor,” said Jada, extending her hand and finding it difficult to hold his gaze.

“No,” replied Ambrose, taking her hand. “Truly the honor is all mine.”

Like Halden, Ambrose’s face was haggard, though a touch rounder in the jaw. Tall he stood, and a bit broader across the shoulder, and his hair had a touch more white to it. But his eyes, hazel with grey flecks, were just as cutting and keen.

Just as she couldn't hide anything from Halden, Jada knew it would be the same with Ambrose.

"You came to discuss the attacks that have been occurring in various towns in the region," said Halden.

"Yes, sir," answered Jada. "There have only been a few so far, but I find it very troubling. It seems apparent to some of us that this is just a ploy by the enemy, to get us at each other's throats. The attacks are being instigated by them somehow."

Halden nodded. "We believe the same thing. And then the gath and human squads will move in during all the chaos and wipe out the towns."

"You are right to be concerned with these early warning signs," added Ambrose, as the sun found a part in the clouds and lit the chamber a moment. "Many people typically ignore them or have become complacent already, telling you you're just being paranoid. But Halden and I have been alive many seasons and know these first signs are just a precursor to a much larger move by Cassius and the darkness he has yoked himself with. The onset of these moves must be taken seriously."

"But if we're going to convince other towns, especially those already attacked," said Jada, "we'll need proof somehow that all this was contrived by the enemy. I mean, unless we know which town is going to be ambushed next so we can lay in wait..."

She cut off her sentence when she saw the twinkle in the eyes of both Halden and Ambrose.

"It's nearly noon," said Halden, "and I'm sure you're hungry from your journey. Please, have lunch with us and we can continue to discuss some things."

Jada had forgotten she hadn't eaten since...she couldn't remember. Plus, as if she'd ever refuse such an offer to eat and talk with the likes of Halden and Ambrose.

Thus, they ate and held counsel together for the next couple hours, as the summer sun slowly shifted into the western sky.

For Jada, just being in the presence of those two counselors was a thing beyond honor and blessing. It was so much more, it was fulfilling, uplifting, and she gained much wisdom just in those few hours.

When their conversation at last reached its end, they all stood from the table.

"I suggest you ride home tonight," said Halden, and the secretive light sparkled in his eyes.

“And take the northern path,” added Ambrose, with the same expression. “I believe there’s a town near that route.”

“I’m not going to bother asking ‘why,’” said Jada with a faint smile. “You types never explain yourselves.”

That made them both laugh.

“Ride swiftly,” nodded Halden, “and I’ll be seeing you again.”

“It’s refreshing and uplifting to come and visit,” Jada replied, shaking his hand. “I always appreciate your hospitality...and friendship.”

She then turned quickly and made for the door.

“You can trust him, you know,” called Halden, when she was nearly to the door.

Pausing, Jada half-turned and glanced back at him. She honestly wasn’t sure who “him” was.

She held Halden’s gaze a breath and then continued on her way.

By the time she left the citadel, she was deep in thought about her route and what she might come across on the ride home.

Someone was approaching the steps, and she lifted her gaze...and stopped. It was Blake, on his way up.

*You can trust him, you know*, Halden had said, and Jada knew then he’d been referring to Blake.

*Well, not like it matters much*, she thought as their gazes met, *we haven’t seen each other in weeks*.

“Hey, Blake,” she said. “It’s been awhile.”

“It has,” he agreed, after quickly composing himself. “I hear you’ve been busy, ambushing gath bases and causing mayhem.”

Jada managed a weak smile. “Yeah, got to tag along with Namor and his family, which was... a phenomenal experience. What’ve you been up to?”

Blake shrugged and didn’t hold Jada’s gaze. “Been working with the Eastern Village’s defense forces, because of all the attacks.”

Ever since they’d returned from Earth, Blake had yet to maintain eye contact whenever he and Jada had met. A few weeks ago, she might’ve been mildly curious. But now, her mind was on other things, like gath attacks and keeping her town and friends safe.

*Besides, Blake’s thoughts are his own business, not mine*, she thought.

“Anyway,” he said after a moment, “I’m here to discuss a few things with Halden.”

“He’s popular. I just finished chatting with him...and Ambrose.”

That lifted Blake’s eyes to Jada’s for a breath. “Ambrose is here? Both counselors are meeting together?”

“Mm,” answered Jada, “there’s a lot to talk about. You’re in for a real treat with those two.”

Since nothing more needed to be said, she continued down the steps again, passing Blake. “Have a safe trip home, whenever you go. It’s only a matter of time before one of our towns is attacked.”

“Likewise,” he replied, as he went up the stairs.

Jada had started across the square for the stables when Blake said, “Hey, Jada...”

Defeating the urge to sigh, she looked back at him.

“It’s good to see you again,” he finished, finally meeting her gaze head-on.

That’s when she understood: he had a lot on his mind, and he was greatly troubled. His expression and demeanor was that of one who carries a heavy burden and has been for some time.

It was true. Of the many things Blake was attempting to figure out was his new role and purpose. For the past decade, his role had been to train as a warrior and defend the territory. While he was a traveler, he hadn’t been tasked with stopping specific threats in both realms.

However, upon Jada’s arrival, he sensed his purpose was changing. But he hadn’t yet been graced with the wisdom of knowing how it had changed. What he did know, though, was that it felt like a heavy burden had been placed on him, and it was directly related to what Jada’s purpose was for being brought to Aurora.

Also, he was still trying to understand his feelings towards her. Until about a week ago, Blake had been spending considerable time with Gael. However, he knew he didn’t like her in *that* way. Jada, though, was often on his mind and his thoughts were preoccupied with her.

On top of it all, like Jada, Blake was extremely uneasy at the growing unrest in the South. He didn’t doubt their area wasn’t the only place experiencing these attacks. He’d been created with a fierce protective streak and strong sense of justice, so naturally, the village assaults had stirred up the fire within him.

When Jada recognized Blake was carrying a great burden and caught a glimpse of turmoil in his expression, it softened her.

But only a little.

She gave a nod in response to him. “Likewise. I guess I’ll...see you around.”

*But I won't hold my breath,* she finished in a thought to herself as she turned and continued towards the stable.

As Blake watched her go, he strongly desired to call after her again. He wanted to tell her what was going on, why he'd been avoiding her, and what was on his mind. He wanted to confide in her, but he was also afraid.

The moment passed, and she disappeared into the stable. With a sigh, Blake hung his head and turned and walked into the citadel.

As for Jada, she considered several things as she strode down the barn aisle to find Balo.

She'd never been the least bit interested in gooshy relationships, and all the drama and trauma therein. That still hadn't changed. Plus, she wasn't a traditional romantic type. She was also wise enough to know not to trust her emotions too much, especially when it came to big, life-changing decisions.

Relations are hard work, particularly those leading to marriage. How could a person be certain it wasn't just the emotional high they were really looking for? It didn't last forever, and yet she'd known people who'd drifted from one romantic interest to another every couple months. The euphoria wore off, they thought they'd "fallen out of love," and they move on to someone new.

But love, in its various kinds, wasn't just tied to feelings, but other attributes. Loyalty, commitment, faithfulness, and determination to grit it out during the difficult times.

Jada knew she was no expert, but that didn't mean her thoughts were any less true. She only knew what she did from what she'd observed time and time again. If marriage and that type of relationship were easy, then there'd be at least slightly fewer divorces.

Emotions are tricky, and Jada didn't trust her own. If she became attracted to someone again, she wouldn't trust herself to make serious decisions until after the warm, fuzzy stage wore off. She knew from experience that that phase could be blinding, and you don't take notice to negative, or even dangerous, behaviors and habits in the other person.

*No rushing into things for me, thanks,* she thought more than once. Jada knew she'd also have to consider the odds that the quirks and oddities in the person she originally found cute or attractive would become annoying. Knowing herself, what would she truly be willing to put up with?

On top of it all, was the important question of: how could she be certain that it wasn't merely the "dance" or "chase" that she loved the most?

That all sounded like too much work for to Jada. She preferred to stick with the regular, everyday stress of training and defending her friends against legions of chimera.

However, she doubted she'd ever be remotely involved in another romantic type of relationship. Her trust issues ran too deep, and she honestly didn't want to work on them at the present.

As was one of the many things Jada spent considerable time thinking about.

A warm evening gust followed her down the stable aisles. Horses whickered in greeting, before Balo stuck his head over the top half of his stall door and whinnied a hello.

He could barely stand still while she tacked him. Once that was done, she thanked and tipped Gavin, and then swung up into the saddle.

The weather had turned stormy, with rain darkening the clouds further south as gales raced through the streets of Asgarod.

Once they passed under the arches of the main gates, Balo picked up the pace across the hills.

A few miles out, a broad path turned northward, and she directed Balo along it.

"We're taking the scenic route this time, buddy," said Jada to her horse, and he snorted in response.

So they made their way home, as clouds continued to build and the first rumbles of thunder rolled in the distance.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Confirmation**

The trees writhed in the angry torrents of the wind and were only visible in the flickers of lightning.

Balo and Jada had left the hills and reentered the woods around dusk, which came early thanks to the storm. They'd been riding in the dark for roughly an hour before Balo slackened his speed and lifted his nose into the air.

After a few breaths, he turned straight north.

Jada checked him once and asked him if he was sure.

Balo blew through his lips and gave a forceful tug at the reins in response. He'd known there was a reason they were taking a different route home. By the scent he caught on the wind, he understood why and that he was supposed to carry his rider to the source of the smell.

"Let's move along, then," said Jada, and Balo took off like a shot.

It wasn't another thirty minutes when Jada noticed an odd light ahead, making the low clouds glow gold, orange, and red. The smell came then, of burning wood and grass.

*Uh oh.*

Another ten minutes and they reached the outskirts of a town. Before anyone could accuse them of anything, Jada called to the first person she saw, a weary-looking woman carrying a water bucket.

"Ma'am!" she shouted and rode up to her. "What happened here?"

"We were attacked," she answered, and there was anger in her eyes despite her tired state.

"How long ago did they leave?" asked Jada, eyeing the smoldering buildings.

Groups of people were around different structures and throwing on pales of water to try and put out the flames. By now, some of them had noticed the horse and rider.

"Couldn't have been more than ten minutes ago," answered the woman.

"Why are you here, anyway?" asked a man, stepping beside her and eyeing Jada suspiciously. "How'd you know we'd be attacked?"

Jada looked at him with distaste. "I didn't. I'm on my way back from Asgarod and my horse smelled the fire and brought me here."

Her eyes narrowed and she finished with much sharpness in her tone. "If I were part of the actual attack, I wouldn't be dumb enough to come back...unless I was a complete idiot."

She looked up at the small group that had gathered. "A number of advisors from towns in the area, as well as the counselors Halden and Ambrose, believe these attacks aren't from neighboring villages. They're actually groups of people hired by men working under the dark king, Cassius. So, don't be too quick to believe any reports that point the finger at your neighbors. It's all part of a trick to distract us and get us at one another's throats."

Her gaze fell upon the man who'd questioned her. "And I'd say it's working rather well, don't you think?"

She returned her gaze to the others as lightning illuminated the forest and was answered by a roll of thunder that could be felt in the ground.

“I’ll get you your proof if you don’t believe the words of the high king’s favored counselors,” she continued. “Just tell me which way the attackers fled.”

“Northwest,” answered a young man, pointing in the direction.

“Thank you.”

Nudging Balo, he lifted into a jog, neck arched and snorting with each step, for he was aware of the urgency of the assignment.

“Come, Balo,” said Jada as another flash of lightning lit the sky. “It’s time to go hunting.”

Balo moved at a good clip for over an hour before he stopped atop a steep rise. Even though Jada’s eyes had adjusted, she still couldn’t see much and she’d been depending on her horse to keep them on the trail.

Looking around, she strained her ears to listen, to hear anything besides the wind in the trees and the thunder.

She felt Balo straighten at the same time she heard the faint sound of horses hooves. In the next flash of lightning, which was exceptionally bright, Jada saw a group of horsemen moving at an easy gait through the trees.

Balo lifted into a jog and floated down the rise.

That’s when the rain came. It was unleashed from the heavens and poured from the sky, instantly soaking horse and rider. But at least it was a warm rain. Plus, once Balo was soaked to the skin, his coat would darken several shades of gray, so he wouldn’t be a shimmering white phantom that stood out in the darkness.

Still, it was a long trek through the remainder of the night. Occasionally, Balo and Jada lost sight or sound of the group for awhile, and Balo would put on a little more speed until they saw a glimpse of them again.

Once dawn arrived, they were able to keep further away from the unit, because they could see their tracks.

They didn’t stop once throughout the day, and Jada snacked while in the saddle, and allowed Balo to snag mouthfuls of whatever bushes or plants he found edible.

It was late afternoon when Balo stopped. When Jada glanced at him, he shook his mane and stomped.

Carefully, Jada slid out of the saddle. After securing her sword to her belt, she looked at Balo.

“Don’t wander off,” she whispered and then continued on foot.

The ground was soft from all the rain the previous night. It had stopped sometime around daybreak, but the sky was heavy with more rain and already thunder rumbled around in the dark blue-grey expanse.

With extreme caution, Jada followed the tracks another quarter mile. When she heard voices ahead, she veered off the trail. After sneaking through the thickets and brush, she finally spotted a large encampment of men.

The company of riders, over two dozen, had halted in a clearing. Before them stood a tall man, wearing dark armor and an expression of deep contempt. In his eyes was a darkness that made Jada uneasy. In fact, something about the entire camp made her stomach tighten and sent chills down her spine.

“We successfully attacked the town you ordered,” said the rider in front of the company. “As usual, we placed the blame on a nearby settlement. There wasn’t much to take, except some food supplies.”

“Very well,” said the man of darkness. “There are a few more towns I’ll want you to strike, before my forces and gath counterparts move in to do their parts.”

The rider nodded and stiffly dismounted. The rest of the company followed suit.

“All we’ll need is a bite to eat, a few hours of sleep and we’ll be ready for the next target,” replied the horseman.

“That’s all the time you’ll have anyway,” said the man. “You’ll need to head out soon if you’re to reach the Eastern Village in good time.”

*The Eastern Village, thought Jada, that’s where Blake lives.*

*Her eyes narrowed. Yeah, we’ll see about that, jerks.*

After checking the trees for gremlins, Jada backed away and, once clear, stood and ran back to Balo, who thankfully hadn’t wandered.

She led him a short distance, whistling every now and then.

“Come on,” she muttered. “Where’s a falcon when I need one?”

A gust of wind bent the trees and brought the scent of rain. A deep boom of thunder shook the earth.

Jada was about to whistle again when a familiar creature dropped out of the trees.

“Hi, Jada!” greeted Phoenix cheerily as he hopped to a stop in front of her. “I was just passing over and heard a whistle. Wow! Talk about some downdrafts from this storm, huh?”

“Phoenix, I need you to send word to the Western Village that the Eastern Village is going to be attacked sometime tonight. The group is hired by a squad working for Cassius. It’s the proof we need...they’ll know what I mean. I’m riding to the Eastern Village now to warn them.”

Phoenix, as serious as ever, saluted Jada and took off into the woods.

She leapt atop Balo, and they too took flight through the forest.

The afternoon was growing late as they neared the Eastern Village and by then the storm was raging all around them again. The sky was already darkening as clouds roiled above the treetops, and through the thinning trees they could see the sheets of rain in the distance, outlined in the flickers of lightning.

The Eastern Village was a decent sized town, and spread out like its Western counterpart.

Balo and Jada raced into the town like attackers were on their heels.

“I need to speak with someone in charge,” said Jada, panting lightly from the ride.

The person she was speaking to blinked at her a second before answering. “The elders are meeting in the town hall, just up the road. Single-story structure in a square.”

“Thank you!” shouted Jada, and Balo charged up the road.

Reaching the square, he slid to a stop at the town hall as Jada swung down and ran up the stairs. Nothing bothering to knock, she barged through the doors.

A dozen people stood in the hall, and had been in deep discussion before her dramatic entrance.

“Pardon the interruption,” she said. “But your town is going to be attacked sometime this evening or tonight. The squad is likely already en route.”

Jada quickly relayed what she’d seen and heard, and summed up her meeting with Halden and Ambrose. Thankfully, Reynard was there and agreed about what was discussed at the meeting in the Western Village day before yesterday.

“This is the chance we’ve been waiting for,” nodded Reynard, taking a few steps towards Jada, hope shining in his eyes.

“It is,” she agreed.

“Oh, so you’re Jada,” said one of the men in the group. The way he said it sounded like he knew her somehow, though she’d never met him—or the woman at his side, who was looking at her keenly and with a faint smile on her lips.

“Guilty as charged,” admitted Jada, though she wasn’t in the mood for conversation at the present. Time was of the essence.

“I’ve already sent a message to the Western Village and reinforcements should be here in a few hours.”

“Right,” said Reynard, looking to the others. “We don’t have much time, but here’s what we’ll need to do...”

## Ω

It was proving to be another stormy night, an encore from the previous evening. The wind tore madly through the trees and threw down sporadic sheets of rain at the town. Lightning branched from horizon to horizon and thunder snarled angrily in response.

They swept in like a gale near midnight and laid siege on the Eastern Village. But the attackers noticed something strange about twenty seconds into the raid: there was absolutely no resistance or people for that matter.

They slowed and looked around, then at each other.

A cry of pain made them all jump. The group turned in time to see one of their comrades on the ground with an arrow sticking out of his leg.

Only mild chaos erupted then, for the plan had been well thought out, and the local people were defending their homes. So there was no contest over who had the advantage.

Ten of the attacking group opted for death, including their leader, and another fifteen were wounded.

Those still living were lined up in the main square and questioned. None were immediately too willing to talk, however, which was to be expected.

But Jada had some good ideas about how to make them “spill the beans.”

In situations like this, she preferred just to get to the point, and frankly, she was tired and hungry and just wanted to go home and sleep. However, she wasn’t going to just wait until one of the attackers told the truth.

So, when it was apparent within the first ten minutes they were going to be difficult, Jada asked Reynard if she might have a go.

She forewent speaking with the five healthy captives and walked over to the guy with the arrow sticking out of his leg. He’d been injured first and thus had been in pain longest.

He was sitting on the ground and as Jada marched over, he straightened and uneasiness wavered across his expression.

Stopping beside him, she lightly set her boot on the arrow shaft.

“Are you going to cooperate?” she asked sharply.

When she didn't get an immediate response in the first three seconds, she applied pressure to the shaft.

He grunted and set his jaw against the stab of white-hot pain that was shooting through him.

"I know," said Jada, patting her thigh. "It smarts, doesn't it?"

After another second, she set her boot down.

"It wasn't our idea!" panted the captive.

"That wasn't what I asked," Jada clarified. "I asked if you were going to cooperate."

She squatted in front of him and drilled him with a harsh look. "It's like this: you cooperate, no more pain and maybe even a shot or five of whiskey. You screw with me..."

She grabbed the arrow shaft.

"I'll cooperate!" he shrieked. "I swear."

"I know you will," she nodded, lowering her voice. "I already know a lot, so if you lie...I'll know. I want the truth so everyone can hear it. If you mess around...we travelers know all kinds of methods for getting information out of people that you haven't even thought of. We clear?"

The man, sweating from pain and fear, nodded.

"Okay, good," said Jada with a blithe tone as she stood. "Because I'd rather not make a mess."

In short, they got the truth, which Jada was able to confirm. The captive's group had been hired by men under Cassius to attack towns and blame it on neighboring settlements. Once everyone was out for each other's blood, men and gath would slaughter the towns and villages, catching them unaware.

While the prisoners were taken care of, Jada sat down on a stump near a large fire that had been built before the attack began.

"Quite the interrogation method you have," said Erez, who'd come from the Western Village to aid in the defense.

Jada shrugged. "Where I'm from, we've done a number of studies on things like that. I do a lot of reading and my own research, so I have an idea of what works. Besides..."

She glanced at him and then to Merida, who was speaking with the couple she'd seen in the town hall. "I'll do whatever I have to, to protect my friends and..."

She shifted uncomfortably and averted her gaze. "And my family."

Erez gave Jada a slap on the shoulder before turning away to other business. That was when Merida came over with the couple.

*Ugh,* thought Jada as she forced herself to her feet, *all I want to do is go to bed.*

“I know you must be tired,” said the woman, “but we just wanted to quickly introduce ourselves, since we didn’t get to earlier. I’m Elsa and this is Declan. We’re Blake’s parents.”

That perked her up a little.

“Jada,” she replied, extending her hand.

“Yes, Blake speaks highly of you,” grinned Elsa with a twinkle in her eye.

Jada cocked an eyebrow. *Speaks? As in present tense? He talks about me? How’s that possible since we only crossed paths for the first time in a month at Asgard? Oh man! He really must be a stalker or something!*

But all of those thoughts faded as Jada studied Elsa and Declan. They shared no resemblance to Blake at all...

“Yes,” answered Declan, sensing her thought. “We adopted him. Like you, he showed up out of the blue just over a decade ago. He didn’t speak much at first, and it took awhile for us to learn that his real parents had been killed, some kind of accident.”

Jada understood a little more why Blake was the way he was. He was an orphan, had seen much since he’d moved a lot, and had already experienced the deepest hardship. Hmm...

“Anyway,” said Elsa, breaking into Jada’s thoughts, “we wanted to finally meet you.”

Jada’s smile was so faint she wasn’t sure it actually showed on her face. “Well, don’t believe everything you hear. We passed each other in Asgard just the other day, but that was the first time we’d seen one another in weeks.”

“Actually,” replied Declan, as he leveled his gaze on her. “I believe there’s a lot more to you than he’s able to describe.”

*What’s with these people,* thought Jada. *Why are they so nice? Maybe they’re a family of serial killers, luring me into a false sense of security or something...*

“You have the same type of expression in your eyes as he does,” he continued, “like all travelers, and those who have seen hardship early in life. You’re the first person Blake has really...noticed, paid attention to, if that makes sense. Since he met you, he’s come more out of himself than he has in the ten years he’s been with us.”

*Oh, please don’t tell me any more,* thought Jada and she managed with great effort not to grimace.

“Maybe he’s just finally discovering what he’s made to do,” she suggested, grateful her brain had supplied her with a response, so she didn’t have to stand there staring dumbly at them.

Elsa and Declan both smiled in a way that told Jada they knew that wasn’t the full reason. Drawing a breath, she looked from Declan to Elsa.

“I hope he doesn’t get too attached, in any way,” she said quietly and with complete sincerity. “I don’t stay in one place too long. I love to wander and it’s part of me.”

That only made their smiles broaden.

“A young woman who knows herself,” grinned Elsa, “is comfortable in her own skin and is aware of her calling. A rare thing, regardless of where you’re from, I think.”

Jada just looked at her, incredulous over her kind words. “You give me far too much credit, ma’am.”

“I doubt that,” answered Declan. “Now go, before you collapse and have to be tied to the saddle.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” nodded Elsa. “We hope you see you around more.”

“Ma’am.”

When they were gone and as she joined Merida beside Astor and Balo, Jada groaned and slapped a hand onto her forehead. “Why?”

Merida just smiled. “You can’t escape the fact you influence people, and that others influence you. It’s part of being human. But you know...there is more than one type of love.”

“I know,” muttered Jada, checking Balo’s girth, “and I’m not practiced in any of them.”

Merida tiskied. “Oh come. Your love for your friends is evident in how you go to great lengths to protect them, even at risk to yourself. But don’t think any more of it tonight. Just think about food and your bed, in which you’ll probably sleep for the next twenty-four hours.” Sounds wonderful.”

## **Chapter 20**

### **Gath Company**

“Move, runt.”

“I was here first.”

“No, you took my spot after I got up. Now push off! The other maggots are sitting over there.”

Before the smaller gath could mouth off or protest, his much larger counterpart grabbed him by the back of his armor, yanked him to his feet and then gave him a swift kick in the rump.

That earned throaty laughs from the bigger officers as the small brute staggered towards another fire.

This gath regiment was encamped in a dense stretch of gloomy forest in the heart of the central territory, a two-week march from the South. They had considerably more control over this area and weren't as concerned about attacks or being challenged.

When it came to finding your place in a gath company, the smaller you were, the lower you were in the pecking order. You were just the pawns sent to do jobs no one else wanted to do or were highly risky. It didn't matter if you protested because if you refused orders you'd be killed, even if your assignment was suicide.

Better to follow orders, because if you survived you gained honor and unofficial rank amongst your more brutish companions.

The larger brutes generally ran things and only answered to their commanding officer. Even amongst themselves they argued about anything from who should sit where to whose plan of attack was better. Fights broke out frequently and they often knocked each other's heads in—or off.

Half a commanding officer's time was spent keeping order. They couldn't have every other warrior killed by their counterparts because that wreaked havoc on numbers.

For the rowdiest or largest squads a chimera officer or two was put in charge. Darkness on a whole new level surrounded them and no one questioned their authority or orders. Their senses were sharper, minds more cunning, their deep crimson eyes saw all and their hatred ran deeper than the typical gath. They regarded in-house quarrels with contempt, for their minds were bent only on the killing of their enemies, not about posturing.

Commotion on the edge of the camp drew the attention of many. But the activity wasn't from a fight; it was a large patrol unit returning. In their custody and being half-dragged were three men, a commander and two of his warriors.

Any gath still sitting immediately jumped to their feet, bared their teeth at the prisoners and spit on them.

The men were badly wounded, by human terms at least, and stumbled along. Occasionally one tripped and fell to a knee. He was then dragged a short distance, dropped and given a kick before being pulled again to his feet.

"I didn't think we were taking captives," growled a large gath as the patrol unit passed.

The leader, who operated directly under the commanding officer, sent him a sharp look. "It's part of the next phase of the plan. Don't you think enemy commanders might know a thing or two about regional troop and army movements? How about supplies? Use your brain...or is that asking too much?"

The gath wrinkled his nose with distaste but said nothing more. Instead, he eyed the three men darkly as they were shoved along.

At last, they reached the small clearing in the center of the camp, and the three men each received a kick to the legs to drop them to their knees. Not that they'd be able to stay on their feet much longer anyway.

The atmosphere was especially close and heavy here, and the branches of the trees drooped mournfully. Not even the faintest breeze stirred the stuffy air.

The gath parted and out stepped the commanding officer. He was a tall brute, not broad, but lean and strong. His yellow-green eyes looked at the three men before him with disdain.

"It's simple, humans," he grumbled, "tell us when and where your friends are planning to strike us next in the central region and we'll release you. Resist and we'll draw out your deaths."

The human commander just wheezed a laugh and looked at the gath with defiance. "How can I be sure you'd keep your word, instead of just killing us once you have what you want?"

He hitched a breath through already bruised and broken ribs and continued. "But that doesn't really matter...none of us will say anything. Giving you that information would make us traitors. We'd be betraying our fellow soldiers and would have their blood on our hands."

The gath leader scowled and shot a glance at one of his underlings. "I've heard you humans think honor and loyalty is something of value, traits that make a warrior strong..."

An archer stepped forward, arrow set on the string. Before anyone could blink, he shot one of the commander's men in the leg.

As he collapsed to the ground stifling grunts of pain, the gath kept his gaze on the commander. "But all I see is weakness. You don't stand a chance against our forces. Even the human soldiers that fight alongside us are calloused and hardened."

The gath nodded at the soldier who'd been shot. "The tip went through an artery, but it's keeping him from bleeding out. Shall I have the arrow removed? Or will you tell me what I want to know? If you do, I'll ensure he lives."

"Don't...tell him anything, commander," said the wounded soldier, eyes wild with both rage and fear.

The gath growled and glared death at him before the archer strode over and yanked the arrow from the man's leg.

That drew a fierce scream of agony from the soldier, and laughter from all the gath.

"Come now, commander," said the gath leader, eyes glinting with dark pleasure, "tell me about the troop movements, or you'll watch another of your men die."

The commander and the second soldier shared a long look before the soldier set his jaw defiantly and shook his head.

The arrow struck not a breath later, shot from a crossbow, and punched into his stomach. A second sank in beside it. The wounds drew no scream or cry from the soldier, only a single gasp and then careful, pained breaths.

A few agonizing minutes later, his body finally crumpled to the ground.

With hot tears in his eyes and venom in his expression, the commander leveled his gaze on the gath. "You're not very good at this. You've just killed all your leverage. But a few days ago, I heard news of a traveler who had a prisoner telling all in under five minutes..."

The gath leader wrinkled his nose. His companion to his left snarled and laid a clawed hand on his sword hilt. But his leader raised a hand.

"He wants you to kill him outright," said the gath. "We still have three days before we march again. Maybe the commander will be a little more willing to discuss some things by then."

Throaty laughs came from the onlookers.

"These humans are weak. Remember that. So don't do too much too fast," said the gath leader as several large brutes grabbed the commander and began dragging him away.

"But don't let him get too comfortable either."

## **Chapter 21**

### **Son of Thunder**

It promised to be another perfect summer day. Dawn came clear and bright as the birds broke the silence of the morning from amongst the treetops.

Several days had gone by since the plot of dissension had been uncovered. No towns had been ambushed since then and a momentary peace had returned to the South.

Jada hadn't realized just how tense and heavy the atmosphere had become until it had finally lifted.

She decided she needed a day to herself. So following breakfast, she packed lunch and took off, following a game trail northwest. It was good to get out and stretch her legs, and after warming up, she picked up the pace as the path wrapped up and around the mountains.

Heavy dew brought the scent of wet grass, mud, and moss, and chick-a-dees laughed and fluttered in the stands of birch and aspen. Occasionally, she spooked a herd of deer, which went springing away with tails flagged. Once she came across some quail and they exploded from the underbrush, nearly giving her a heart attack.

The morning was warming nicely when she broke above the trees and slowed along a small, grassy plateau. Stopping for a moment, Jada gazed north, overlooking the valley and the land far beyond.

Whether it was clouds or mountains, she couldn't be sure, but there was something dark to the northwest that just broke the line of the horizon. She wondered if, on the clearest day, it was possible to see the borders of the dark king's dominion, or if what she was spying presently was a normal storm front.

Jada also wondered, as she overlooked the territory, just how many more gath camps there were down there.

Turning, she continued upwards into the mountains. It wasn't long before the way grew steeper and rockier, but not too sheer to where she couldn't traverse the terrain.

By the position of the sun and her growling stomach, she guessed it was close to lunchtime when she stopped again. The air was now a bit thinner, but warm, because of the lack of wind. Low scrubby bushes and tiny pink and yellow flowers tried to grow out of the cracks in the rocks.

Panting lightly from her trek, Jada took note of the sky, partly cloudy now, with clouds moving in lazily from the west. If the weather continued its pattern, there'd be thunderheads building in another hour or two.

She let her gaze drift further up the mountain, her eyes spotting little white dots that marked the brown faces of the lower mountains.

She recalled that Asgarod paid premium for mountain goat or sheep. It'd be quite a trick just climbing to where the game was, period. Plus there was the fact of somehow packing it down the mountain, or having to retrieve it after shooting it and having it tumble down a cliff or something.

It could be done. It was an exceptional challenge, and one Jada was more than willing to take on. But on another outing.

After a quick lunch, Jada explored the immediate area. There were plenty of deer tracks in softer patches of ground, and hoof prints, too, though they were much older.

She spotted a wolverine further up the way, but didn't have any desire to get closer.

In the shaded, north side of the ridge Jada found several streams, clear, shallow and extremely cold. She decided to follow the third one she discovered as it bounded down a more navigable section of mountain.

Jada was getting nearer to the treeline again and had to fight her way through a thin line of alders. Her foot caught on one on her way out of the stand and she tripped and stumbled forward onto a small knoll.

As she regained her footing, that's when she saw it: a single tree in a small clearing at the bottom of the rise. It stood fifteen feet tall, bark smooth and the color of fair skin. Its leaves were the shape of those on an aspen and shimmered silver-green in some unseen and unfelt air current that moved through its fine branches. Although the tree stood in the north face of the ridge, light from somewhere illuminated it, or it came from the tree itself.

But Jada didn't take a single step towards it. If this was one of the trees she'd heard about, a tree whose leaves could stop any poison and heal serious injuries, then that meant it was also guarded by some kind of beast.

Presently, every one of her instincts was screaming at her not to move towards the tree. She felt like she had when she'd accidentally run into a bull elk back home. She'd been running through the woods, rounded a bend in the trail and hello!

Even though she couldn't see the threat, she knew she was being watched by something menacing. The rear of the clearing was sheer rock and the dark trees stood with foreboding around the remainder of the perimeter.

Jada took a steady breath and then slowly began to back away. After climbing through the alders again, she went back up the ridge the way she'd come.

But she made a mental note of landmarks along her route. She'd found one of the trees of healing and in an emergency situation, that could very well come in handy.

It was late afternoon by the time she started back down the mountain, and as predicted, massive thunderheads were building and reaching for the upper atmosphere. It'd likely be a wild night, especially now that the southeasterly breeze had picked up and was feeding the rising storm.

An hour later, Jada paused for a snack near a creek. Sitting atop a large boulder, she listened to the chirping birds, which were becoming quieter, and listened to the breeze play through the birch and cottonwood leaves. Somewhere in the far distance she heard the first, faint rumble of thunder.

Jada smiled. She always loved a good thunderstorm, and she should be home before it reached the village.

In the same instant, she heard a branch snap and felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. Leaping to her feet, she drew her knife.

"I was wondering if you were going to show up," she said, sheathing the knife.

"But you know," she continued, jumping down from the rock, "we're going to have to figure out a few things here pretty quick. Like, are you going to actually work with me at least a little? If you're going to be a complete butt, then I'm just going to find another horse."

The smoky gray colt snorted.

Jada shrugged. "Hey, I can't wait forever. You're the only reason I haven't been seriously looking for another mount."

A breeze brushed past them as horse and human leveled their gazes on one another.

"But, at least we have one thing in common," she said quietly, "and that's that neither of us trusts people."

He whickered in response and took a couple steps closer.

"If you try, I'll try."

The colt walked to Jada until mere feet separated them. Stretching out his neck, he smelled her over and nuzzled her hair. She knew what he was going to do before he did it, and the second his mouth opened, she popped him square on the chin.

"Ah! Ground rules: no biting, grooming, nipping, kicking or striking at me. I'm not a horse."

The colt grunted and then blew through his lips.

Jada dug a coil of soft rope out of her pack, and her spare gloves, and made a makeshift halter.

There's no need to go into full detail and only a summary is needed. As to be completely expected, the colt tried to be a butt at first. He spooked at the other end of the rope when Jada flicked it at his hocks, he initially resisted the pressure of the halter on his face and poll, and did some typical unbroken horse things.

But he was intelligent and remained engaged longer than Jada expected. Once he realized she honestly wasn't going to eat him, he cooperated more. He desensitized quickly to things flicking at his head, legs and butt, and learned to yield to pressure, instead of fighting it.

They also established the rule of personal space. He wasn't allowed to stand on top of her or be in her face.

When it came to picking up his hooves, he understood right away what she was asking. As for his hind hooves, Jada positioned him so he was standing with a tree at his flank. That way, he couldn't cow-kick her.

Just before asking him to pick up a back leg, she grabbed him by the halter, looked him right in the eye and said, "If you kick me, I will kill you."

She'd been throttled in the back before, and it wasn't something she wanted to repeat.

The colt merely blinked at her innocently.

He performed perfectly and didn't give her any problems when it came to messing with his hooves, which were naturally hard and worn from traveling over rocky terrain.

That was more than enough for one day, and Jada untied the halter.

He didn't bolt, as she'd anticipated. Instead, he walked away a few strides, tossing his dark mane about his neck.

The breeze had been building until it was now a steady wind. They'd been hearing the thunder of the approaching storm, and they heard another rumble, deep, that could be felt in the ground.

The colt stopped and lifted his head, ears twitching as he sorted the smells of the wind. At the next gust he arched his neck, pinned his ears, swished his tail and danced sideways as a wild light flickered in his eyes, kindled by his fiery spirit.

Thunder cracked loudly.

The colt rear and, tossing his head into the air, sounded a loud call of challenge which was caught up on a gale that roared through the forest.

Pivoting around, he landed with a thud and took off up the mountain, hooves drumming over the ground, sounding like thunder in the earth as another rumble rolled around in the darkening sky.

Gazing after him, a slow smile formed on Jada's lips as the wild wind tore at her hair. She knew what he was...

*Born on the wind, fearless and made for war...a son of thunder.*

## **Chapter 22**

### **Mighty Hunter**

It was afternoon in the land of desolation. But as always, the light was choked by the clouds and brown haze. The scent of ash and hot rocks were carried by the scorching wind as it rushed down the mountainside.

He didn't heed it or seem to notice the searing air currents that buffeted him, or the fact his shirt was soaked. He ran tirelessly across the sharp rocks, surefooted, boots never once slipping or taking a misstep. Sweat made his forehead glisten and his strong arms gleam.

But his sharp eyes were focused, for he was on the hunt.

A herd of kurra, much like an impala in Earth standards, had been chased across the southern borders of the dark king's land. Three of the four he'd already killed, and now he was on the trail of the fourth.

Every kill was vital, because the more game they had, the more the people could be eased from their hunger.

And the hunger pains were especially strong today and drove him with exceptional urgency. It was always worse when plans were going ill or being met with little success.

Plus, Cassius was in the phase of a merciless cycle in which he was especially tired of his borders. He was restless and hungry, so to speak, for war and to cross over into new territory. Each time he reached this phase, it was a little worse, and it was nearly unbearable now.

It was almost worth stepping outside his bounds and suffering his fate. Almost. But his contempt for the high king was stronger than any other desire or disdain. If he stepped outside and died, then the king would win.

Cassius slowed just a little, eyes sweeping over the ground. He'd lost sight of the kurra, but tracks were easy enough to follow or pick up in the ash and dirt that covered this land.

At last, he spotted the trail and picked up his speed again. Another half a mile later, his keen eyes spotted his prey and he stopped. Drawing a black steel arrow from the quiver, he set it, drew back the string and steadied his breathing.

*You are mine...*

Suddenly the kurra spooked and shot away just as a group of gremlins dropped onto a rock beside Cassius.

"I bring news from the South," spoke the first gremlin, as Cassius slowly turned a rather wrathful gaze upon it. "They figured out the plot to stir up dissension. An attack unit walked into a trap and was captured. One of them talked...admitted they were hired by your warriors."

"Fools," he grumbled, "they probably struck too often. And why did they hire people who'd volunteer information?"

"From what I understand, the truth was forced from the captives."

Curiosity overrode Cassius' immediate rage, and he raised an eyebrow. "How?"

The messenger spy shrugged. "All I know is a young female traveler had them telling all within minutes."

"Is this the same female traveler I've been hearing about all spring and summer?"

Again, all the spy could do was shrug.

A second gremlin jumped in and gave his report. "I bring confirmation a specific group of spies is responsible for infiltrating your human camps to gather intelligence and are ambushing supply wagons."

"Do they have the identities these people?" asked Cassius, already feeling himself losing patience. "Locations for where they live when they aren't spying?"

Blank stares.

"Well, make finding out that information a top priority, and don't be obvious about it. You're spies, so use your heads and...be cunning. Get the wolves to help. And I'm also keenly interested in this traveler who can coerce the truth from prisoners."

Before any could blink, Cassius grabbed the first gremlin by the throat with such a powerful grip he crushed its windpipe.

"And the next time," he growled, "don't ever interrupt the hunt, unless the high king himself is launching an attack on us."

The remaining gremlins shot nervous looks at one another. "Of course, sir, right away, sir," they responded, before taking flight.

Cassius rolled his eyes and continued onward. He quickly found the kurra's trail and took off again. He ran with such swiftness and stealth that if a companion had been running beside him, he wouldn't have even heard his footfalls.

After a mile, Cassius stopped atop a flat shelf on the ridge while the path in front of him dropped steeply. He saw the kurra, a mere brown smudge against the grey landscape.

Resetting an arrow on the string, he pulled back, adjusted to the wind, altitude and distance, and then released the arrow.

Seconds ticked by before the steel arrow found its mark and the last kurra fell.

## **Chapter 23**

### **Parallel**

They'd caught a break from the cycle of thunderstorms, and the late afternoon was warm and sunny when the gang returned from the training grounds. The others waved goodbye and rode on down the road as Jada eased Balo to a walk.

Jordan and Merida were speaking with two people just outside the house, a man, dark-haired, and a woman, with auburn hair that burned red in the sinking sun.

As always with new people, Jada was instantly suspicious. Her suspicion grew when she dismounted and saw the expression on Merida's face when she glanced at her. It was conflicted with both joy and sorrow.

Jada had taken three steps towards Jordan and Merida when the strangers turned. Her legs gave out and, dropping to her knees, she slapped her hands over her mouth.

It was her parents, and they were here. Finally here.

They weren't quite sure what to do. They didn't know whether Jada's reaction was just due to shock, or perhaps harbored bitterness, as if she could possibly be mad at them.

But as they stepped towards her, she pushed herself to her feet. Since her mom was closest, she threw her arms around her. When she felt her dad beside them, she wrapped an arm around him.

Her mom and dad weren't just her parents. They were also her best friends. All their travels had strengthened their bond, as well as laboring alongside one another. That was on top of the fact their personalities were so much like.

When they'd disappeared, Jada had lost most of her soul.

Stepping away a moment, her mom rested her hands on the side of Jada's face and looked her up and down with tears in her eyes.

"You've grown so much and have become even more beautiful," she said with a grin that made her beautiful green eyes dance. "And from what I hear, you've become quite a warrior."

Jada's own eyes burned with tears. There was so much she wanted to tell her, everything that had happened since she'd been in Aurora...but she wasn't sure she could even discuss the agony she'd had to put up with before her arrival to that dimension.

Either way it didn't immediately matter, because Jada couldn't speak.

"I know," whispered her mom, as tears slid down her face. "I know..."

She kissed Jada's forehead and hugged her tightly. "I know and I'm so sorry."

Jada's parents knew every detail of what had transpired during their daughter's stay with relatives. Fierce fire and wrath had been kindled in their hearts, but they were under strict orders not to interfere, or reveal themselves as they traversed back and forth between dimensions on assignment.

Everything had to happen in order and was allowed to transpire for a reason. Plus, they could never disobey the one from whom the orders came: the high king himself.

At last, mother and daughter took a breath, stepped away and wiped away one another's tears.

"Come here, kid," said her dad, and she attacked him with a hug.

"Dad," she smiled as she stepped back and poked him in the arm. "You been workin' out?"

He snorted and his gray eyes danced with laughter. "Well, I can't very well put young, overly confident warriors in the military in their place if I'm not fit, now can I?"

Jada's jaw dropped. *My dad's a warrior...that's awesome!*

Actually, stepping back and taking in both her parents, they seemed stronger and more full of life than they had been in the other dimension. She noted a few scars here and there on their arms, but their eyes snapped with fire and fight.

Then Jada started laughing. *Both my parents are warriors! Oh, we're going to cause so much trouble.*

They knew her thoughts and laughed, too. After a minute, with tears streaming down their faces, they reined in their mirth.

“It won’t do standing out here talking while the mosquitoes eat you,” piped Merida, smiling at the reunion. “Please, come inside and have an early dinner with us. Jada, I’m sure you’re hungry from training all day.”

After hastily untacking Balo, Jada raced into the house.

“We were so sorry we couldn’t come sooner,” said Jada’s mom, once food was ready and everyone was seated. “We’ve been doing intelligence gathering in the central territory. A few weeks ago, we began hearing rumors of a new traveler, a young woman. The more details we received, the more we believed it was you, Jada. We hoped so badly it was. Then, just last week, we received a message from Halden that we should go to the Western Village...”

“When they rode in,” finished Jordan, “Merida and I knew exactly who they were. It’s the expression in the eyes.”

“Yes,” grinned Merida, “that twinkle of mischief.”

Jada blinked at her innocently.

“Mm hmm,” said both Merida and Jada’s mother.

That was when Jada noticed the leather wristbands on both her parents’ wrists, like the one Blake had.

“Wait...have you...you been going back and forth?” she asked her mom.

She hesitated a moment. “Yes...once we learned how everything worked. We’ve been working on stopping a plot in the other dimension, too.”

“What? Are you, like, spies or something?” asked Jada, in a sort of half-joke.

But when she saw her parents’ expression, she burst out laughing. “You are!”

When Jada saw relief wash over her mom and dad’s faces, she understood they’d been afraid over how to tell her certain things, and afraid of how she’d react. Granted, she’d been miffed when Halden told her they hadn’t known she was in Aurora, and that they couldn’t be together right away.

But none of it mattered. Jada didn’t care about any of that now.

“It took us a few months to learn something very important,” said her dad, “once we began going back and forth, or traversing, regularly. What happens in this dimension directly affects what happens in the other.”

That even grabbed Jordan and Merida’s attention.

“For example,” continued Jada’s mom, “a major plot by Cassius succeeds here, such as he takes one of our fortresses and establishes another stronghold. Then the plot of the enemy we’re attempting to stop in Earth’s dimension also succeeds and moves forward.”

*Whoa*, thought Jada. *That would’ve taken me forever to figure out.*

But there was a strange familiarity to all of this...

Her brain chewed on this fact another minute, before she lifted her gaze to her dad.

“It’s kind of like spiritual warfare,” she said, glancing at Merida and then back to her dad. “What happens in the unseen affects the seen. Except we’re kind of, in a way, in the unseen, in a manner of speaking.”

Jada’s mom smiled. “Correct.”

“The dimensions are parallel to one another,” nodded her dad.

That was extremely interesting and complicated, but also very heavy. Essentially, travelers such as Jada and her parents were working to stop two plots, while those who resided in either dimension were only aware of what was going on in their own realm.

“Talk about working double-time,” muttered Jada, unaware she’d spoken her thought out loud.

That made her dad laugh. “That’s very accurate.”

Jada chuckled to herself. “This is either the coolest thing I’ve ever imagined...or we’re all suffering a major psychotic episode.”

They all laughed, before Jada’s brain suddenly made another connection and she jumped to her feet.

“Wait a minute!” she blurted and pointed at the wristbands. “How come I don’t have mine yet? Have you been to see the high king?”

Her parents smiled. “We have.”

“What!” she exclaimed. “That’s just...practically everyone has seen him except me. That’s...I...”

She sat down muttering and then fell silent.

Her dad couldn’t keep from chuckling. “Soon enough, kid. He knows of you and said he would see you at the right time.”

Her parents suggested Jada halt any further questions until they started the ride home...unless she wished to stay with Jordan and Merida. It was entirely up to her.

*Well that's awkward*, she thought, and weighed the question through the rest of dinner and while they cleaned up. Of course she'd go with her parents, but...

Fortunately, Merida knew Jada's struggle and helped her out.

"Don't be a stranger," she smiled. "Though Connor and the others are going to miss having you around."

"It's not like we're half a world away," assured Jada's mom. "We're only an hour, hour and a half ride from here."

"But what about—"

"A mount?" finished her dad. "Don't worry, we have a horse for you, one that'll suit you quite well. Though, from what I hear, you have a follower."

"Yeah," replied Jada, "but it's going to take a bit of work before I finally ride him."

"Have you thought of a name for him?" asked her mom.

"Not yet."

Jada still didn't really have any belongings, which, of course, was good because she'd be riding double with her dad.

"We'll meet you at the south paddocks," he said to her.

He then shook hands with Jordan.

"If you or Carla ever need anything, John," said Jordan, "please let us know."

"We can't tell you how much we appreciate you taking such good care of our daughter," nodded Carla to Jordan and Merida.

"Ah well," replied Jordan, beaming at Jada, "she's become like one of our own."

John looked at Jada and his eyes were dancing. "See you in a few, kid."

Her parents made off down the road, and Jada looked at Jordan and Merida. She had no idea what to say. She felt like she was abandoning them, and she didn't want them to think they meant less to her now.

"Like your mom said," said Jordan, doing his best to shrug things off, though his voice cracked a little. "It's not like you're half a world away."

If the situation hadn't been so sad, Jada might've chuckled. Instead, she hugged him.

"Come and visit," he said finally, and then sniffed and cleared his throat as his eyes glistened with tears. "You're always welcome here, any time, no matter the hour. You hear me?"

Jada nodded.

"Good."

Jordan turned away a moment and cleared his throat again.

Jada still couldn't find words as she looked at Merida. What could she say? How could she express the depths of her gratitude or make her understand that she'd saved Jada from herself? She saved her from self-destructing. She'd also guided her along and helped build her back up.

"Come see us sometime," said Merida quietly, smiling though there were tears in her eyes as she placed her hands on Jada's face. "We're going to miss you a lot...you have brought life and joy back to Jordan and me."

As to be expected, there was sadness in Merida's eyes. But it wasn't only about the current situation. It ran deeper, and there was fear in it. Jada wouldn't understand the reason, not for some time.

However, before she could ask, Merida smiled again. "Now go. Your parents are waiting, and you have a lot of catching up to do."

Jada gave her a hug and then turned and walked down the road, forcing herself not to look back.

## **Chapter 24**

### **Together**

Jada woke slowly, feeling the most relaxed she'd been in ages. She then realized she was drooling.

With a yawn, she stretched and sat up. Panic speared her in a moment of disorientation while her brain attempted to figure out where she was.

This wasn't the spare room in Merida's house. This one was a touch bigger and had windows everywhere, and the curtains on the east side were burning in the rising sun.

Her eyes widened when the memory of yesterday evening returned. Her parents had come and she'd ridden home with them.

Home.

Tearing the covers away, Jada leapt out of bed as another ping of fear shocked her. What if it had all been a dream or powerful hallucination brought on by wishful thinking? She wasn't sure she could bear it if that had been the case...

Crossing to the door, she quietly opened it. It led into a short hall and then to the stairs.

Holding her breath, Jada stalked down the steps. Halfway down, she heard her dad's voice, followed by her mom's sweet laughter.

Her heart leapt and when she reached the bottom of the stairs, all fear fled. Sitting at a small, round table off the kitchen were her parents.

"Morning," said Carla as Jada trudged over. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock," she replied and plopped down at the table. "So, what's on the agenda?"

"Anxious to dive right in, eh?" smiled Carla as she stood. "Well, you have to meet your horse, and then one of us will show you the sights of the town..."

"If you can call them that," interjected John under his breath, and Jada stifled a laugh.

"And after that," continued her mom as she set a plate of food in front of her, "whatever you want. We're not schedule for any assignments, so we're open until the end of the week at least."

Jada gasped suddenly when she remembered something. "Is there a blacksmith in town? One of my friends in the Western Village liked my knife and I told her I'd make her one."

Her dad raised his eyebrows. "You made that?"

Jada nodded. "During my first visit to Asgarod, I worked for an elven smith named Arto. He showed me the ropes and allowed me to make the knife. He gave me the sword as payment. Anyway, I need to get started on that knife."

"We have two excellent smiths," replied John. "Although I'm sure the military would hire you on. You're obviously skilled in that area."

"Of course she is," agreed her mother. "Skilled with all weapons of war if what I hear is even half-true."

Jada fidgeted in her chair and had yet to even pick up her fork. "So...do I get to, you know...go on assignments and do stuff, too? I've helped with recon and attacks! Just ask Commander Erez, in the Western Village, he might vouch for me."

Both her parents chuckled.

"We know," grinned John. "I even heard a rumor that recruiters from the Southern Fortress might be stopping by. But you seem to also have a special knack for being in the right place to overhear sensitive details and plans of the enemy. The intelligence community would love you."

“It runs in the family,” nodded Carla, with a twinkle in her eyes. “And don’t worry, Jada, you’ll have plenty to do, trust me, whether being out on assignment or training with the young warriors in town. They’ll be highly curious about you. Now hurry up and eat so we can go!”

The town of Chugach was rather spread out, and halfway between the forest to the north and bare rolling hills to the southeast. Her parents’ house was situated atop a little rise, half bordered by a few trees with a creek in the rear.

This was their first stop, and as they approached, John gave a whistle. A whinny answered before three horses cantered around the bend in the hill. Jada immediately recognized the dark seal brown that was her dad’s and the blood bay, her mom’s.

A third followed directly behind the other two and when they pulled up at the creek, he walked through the shallow water and right up to Jada. He was an evenly built red tiger dun gelding, a gorgeous animal with kind mahogany eyes. A small round star was the only white marking on his body.

“Don’t tell me his name is Tiger,” joked Jada as she rubbed his forehead.

John snorted. “We call him Garador. Means ‘loyal’ in the ancient tongue.”

“So that’s another thing I still need to learn,” said Jada as they turned and left the horses. “I know a few words and phrases in the ancient language, but not nearly enough.”

“All in good time,” smiled Carla.

Garador the tiger dun looked after the three as they walked away. Like people and other animals, he was naturally drawn to Jada and he immediately sensed her love for horses. While he’d heard of her, heard tales of her adventures and training, he hadn’t known she was the daughter of John and Carla, the riders of his two companions.

He whickered softly as he gazed after the young woman. He was often left behind when John and Carla rode out on assignments, but now he’d have someone who would take him exploring. On top of it was the simple fact he got to be the mount for Jada, the traveler and skilled young warrior. That was a high honor.

Garador’s loyalty to Jada was committed and sealed. He’d do anything for her, scale the pathless mountains, or gallop his heart out from one end of the realm to the other if she so asked it of him.

He lifted his head proudly and shook his mane. Turning, he jogged back across the stream, nipped John’s horse in passing and then took off into the trees.

As for John, Carla and Jada, they took a brief walking tour around Chugach, in which she met several of her parents' companions, those who were part of the intelligence team. They were spies, operators, but obviously neither they nor anyone else called them that.

She met both blacksmiths, one of who specialized in sword making. He had some nice materials in stock and offered to let Jada utilize them for her small project—as long as she made him a knife, also.

It was more than a fair trade in Jada's book.

Near the southern edge of the town, atop a large, broad hilltop a group of young adults were gathered. They were Jada's age, though some were a year or two older or younger.

A man was speaking with one of the young men of the group as they slowed their approach. Judging by their facial structure, they were father and son.

They finished their conversation before the man turned and strode towards the trio. He immediately struck Jada as a military man.

"John, Carla," he said with a strong and authoritative voice. "How are you this morning?"

"Couldn't be better, sir," replied John as he shook the man's hand.

When he turned his piercing hazel-blue eyes on Jada, he said, "At long last, I see your family is together again."

"Aye, sir, it is," nodded John, before looking at her. "Jada, this is Commander O'Brien."

"Commander," she said, extending her hand and meeting his gaze.

The corners of the commander's mouth tried to pull upwards as he shook her hand. "You've made quite a name for yourself in the short time you've been in this dimension. From what I understand, you take after your parents in the spy business...and that you are also deadly with a tomahawk."

"So some say, sir," answered Jada coyly.

"You wouldn't be interested in putting your skills to use for us, would you?"

"Sir," interjected John, "She hasn't even gotten settled here at Chugach. I was hoping she could have at least one week before receiving offers for life-threatening assignments."

Jada picked up on the protective tone in her dad's voice, and she'd forgotten she'd missed having someone like that in her corner.

Regardless, she fought with all her might to keep from breaking into a smile. O'Brien's eyes twinkled as they shared a look and she replied, "I don't know, commander. I'd definitely be interested in work...but only if the stakes are high enough."

Carla huffed a laugh and turned away a moment.

“Now I’m positive you’re the daughter of John and Carla,” said O’Brien, finally breaking into a smile. “I’ll be in touch, but until then...”

Jada took the hint there were some sensitive information that the three needed to discuss. So she gave a nod and then walked over to the group of young adults.

The son of the commander greeted Jada first by stepping forward and extending his hand. “Tavish, though my friends call me Tav. Heard a lot about you from your parents already.”

With names like O’Brien and Tavish, Jada was sensing an Irish theme, and if her ears weren’t tricking her, he had a light accent to match.

“Jada,” she said, gripping his hand.

“Where’ve you been living?”

“Western Village.”

“Ah. Then you likely know Namor. He’s a friend of mine.”

A smile slowly spread across Jada’s face. “Yeah, we’re friends...now, after we crossed blades and drew blood.”

Tavish smiled knowingly, and his blue eyes laughed. “Aye, well, we’re friends, but fortunately, I’m a little more open to newcomers.”

“Glad to hear it,” answered Jada, “because I’d hate to get into a fight my first day here.”

That made a young woman with hazel-brown eyes behind Tav laugh.

“Quit hogging her already, Tav,” she said, walking forward and introducing herself. “I’m Chastity, the brains of the group.”

Tav and one of the other young men huffed and rolled their eyes.

“Yeah,” she said, throwing a look over her shoulder. “Who was it that said ‘don’t go into the pitch black cave, there’s probably a bear in there?’ And who didn’t listen, went in anyway, got themselves into a wee bit o’ trouble? Then who, yet again, had to save your sorry butts?”

As Chastity spoke, the more excited she became and the more her own accent came out. When she looked over her shoulder, Jada saw her ears...

“She’s only half elf,” whispered Tav as Chastity continued to give the young men an earful.

“Aye,” confirmed Chastity, looking at him, “and the best of both halves.”

“Or the worst,” teased a young man.

“Are you gettin’ smart with me, Eric?” she asked, marching towards him as she drew a sword at her hip.

“You’re more than welcome to run with us,” said Tav as his two companions began to duel. “If we’re going to train, we meet here after breakfast and then take a short run to a clearing on the tallest point in the area.”

“I just might take you up on that,” nodded Jada, watching the fight.

“Excellent. We could use another archer.”

That’s when Jada noticed her sitting on a large rock on the far side of the clearing, silently watching the entertainment. A young woman with strawberry blonde hair kept back in a braid, and expressive blue eyes that suggested extremely keen insight.

“That’s Anna,” said Tav. “The quiet one of the group, more of the introspective type and very intelligent. Though she doesn’t say much, that brain of hers is always working on something. She’s unrivaled in stealth and is our top archer.”

Jada glanced at Anna and then to Tav, who was still studying her. A smile pulled at her mouth. “Does she know you like her?”

“What?” asked Tav, voice cracking as he blinked out of his stare. “Why would you think—”

Jada rolled her eyes. “It’s obvious.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw O’Brien and her parents were finishing up their quiet conversation. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she wondered what type of top-secret assignment he was asking them to go on.

Tav followed her gaze.

“Afraid you’re going to be left out of the excitement?” he asked with a smile.

“Something like that,” replied Jada absently, not taking her eyes off them as she tried to discern their expressions and body language. “If they think I’m going to sit at home while they’re out taking the fight to the enemy, then they have another thing coming.”

That made Tav chuckle.

“Tell me,” he said after a breath, “and I don’t mean this in an odd way, but...do you have anyone, besides your parents, who worries about you, you know? Anyone you left in the Western Village? Or in the other dimension?”

Jada blinked a few times as her brain attempted to process what he was asking.

“You mean...do I have a boyfriend?” she clarified, practically choking out the question.

“Yes.”

Jada wondered why that was relevant and who Tav would divulge this information to. As Jada just saw, he was taken with Anna.

“No,” she sighed and watched O’Brien walk away from her parents. “My focus is entirely on hunting gath squads.”

She glanced at Tav and finished airily. “Besides, I’m not a romantic and I’m not good at those types of relationships anyway.”

Giving him a slap on the shoulder, Jada marched towards her parents. “I’ll be seeing you.”

Her parents had some errands to take care of, which was code for “meet with other spies to discuss some things.”

So Jada searched out Garador. The tiger dun jogged up the moment he spotted her through the trees.

Swinging onto his back, Jada turned him east and took off across the hills.

The rest of the afternoon was spent familiarizing herself with the territory, its terrain and understanding the mood of the area. Unlike the Western Village, which was nearer the mountains and thus had more unpredictable weather, Chugach was milder and a bit tamer.

Garador lived up to his name, didn’t try anything stupid and readily went anywhere Jada turned him. Eroded riverbeds, fallen trees, steep, rocky hillsides, it didn’t matter. He took it all in stride and cantered about happily, seeming to enjoy himself.

Jada confessed he grew on her pretty quick. Though he was smaller than his two companions, he probably thought he was the bravest and fiercest warhorse in the entire South.

It was nearing dinner time when they returned to the house and Jada found her parents home. She didn’t think she’d ever again be able to see them without smiling.

They talked and joked all that afternoon, through dinner and late into the evening, catching up on everything. Sitting on the couch with her parents, her dear friends, Jada was confident that they could take on and defeat whatever the enemy had planned in the days ahead.

The enemy would fight, but the three would win, as a family, together.

## **Chapter 25**

### **Name**

The days went by and Jada and her parents settled into their old routine of doing things. Each came and went on his or her own business, while other times they worked side-by-side to

finish chores. Just like the good ol' days, except now they had a new home in this parallel dimension.

When John and Carla weren't traversing between realms and taking down evil men, they taught Jada more in the ancient tongue. She'd always had an ear for languages and she picked it up quickly.

She set to work on the knife she'd promised Reagan, as well as the one for the blacksmith. After hours of labor, things were coming together nicely, and Jada was pleased with the work.

She kept in touch with Jordan and Merida, and hoped they didn't feel like a consolation prize in the wake of her parents' return.

The messages were primarily carried by Phoenix. He claimed that he often passed over Chugach, but Jada was pretty sure he'd unofficially moved there with her because he was never far off when she called.

The gang from the Western Village sent Jada messages often, as did Ida and Gabriel, whose town was nearby. There was talk of another camping trip.

Lastly, Jada also spent her days working with the colt, who'd found her on her third day at Chugach. It didn't matter if they worked in a round pen, if she had him on a line or loose, he lunged and worked willingly.

Like the other "working horses," as they were called, he became extremely sensitive to what Jada was asking in how she positioned her body. He moved off or followed her like he could read her mind.

One of the bigger tests came when she'd tossed a fifty-pound bag of grain onto his back. The only thing he did was start chewing on the bag.

So she threw a second bag on top of the first, so he was carrying nearly the equivalent of her weight.

The colt just sighed and cocked a hoof.

He did the same when she fully tacked him with an Australian-style saddle. When it came to the bridle, he wasn't head-shy, though he found the bit a little strange at first. Jada was confident she could ride him in a hackamore with no problem and had only introduced the bit out of horse training protocol.

That day, after Jada worked him under tack yet again and removed the saddle and bridle, she was tempted then to jump on him. She'd work with enough horses to be certain she'd established a good foundation and sufficient trust with him.

But she still chickened out.

Instead, Jada walked over to him, poked him in the shoulder, and then sprinted into the trees.

“Tag” was a game he naturally seemed to know and liked playing.

That afternoon, the pair explored and raced all over the hills until evening.

Jada hadn’t realized it was past dinner until she finally stopped and noticed how low the sun was getting. It was going to be a beautiful sunset and the high clouds would soon be streaked in pinks, reds, and oranges.

It was also then that she realized she was a good ten miles from home, and she really didn’t feel like running all the way back. They’d probably covered twenty miles at a minimum just that afternoon with all their exploring.

Jada looked at the colt, whom she had yet to name, and he looked back at her.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked, patting his neck. “You trusted me, so I guess I have to give a little, too.”

The colt tossed his mane about his well-muscled neck, coat shimmering in the late sun. Then he looked at Jada with those keen eyes and nickered quietly.

She knew she usually expected too much from special or epic moments, and she had a mental picture of him launching her into a tree the second she settled onto his back.

He gave another toss of his mane and stomped the ground, an obvious sign he was telling her to hurry up.

“If you throw me or run me into a branch, Garador will be my official mount,” she said to him sternly.

The colt grunted.

*It’s no big deal*, thought Jada to herself so she’d stay relaxed as she grabbed a handful of mane. *No big deal*.

In a fluid movement, she swung up onto the colt’s back.

He didn’t immediately bolt off or jump sideways. Instead, he craned his neck and looked at her with an expression that read “now do you trust me?”

Jada ran a hand down his silky smooth neck and then grabbed some mane. “Let’s go home, boy.”

The colt arched his neck and pawed the ground a few times before leaping straight into a canter.

There was smooth, and then there was *smooth* like a Cadillac. The colt seemed to glide as he passed over the ground with impossible ease. By the roar of the air rushing over the pair, Jada knew they were moving at great speed, but it didn't feel like it.

The earth and trees blurred by as the colt moved along, completely relaxed and sure-footed over the rougher terrain.

As predicted, the sky was on fire above the sinking sun when they crested the hill that overlooked the house.

*We're home already,* thought Jada. *Wow, this horse can move.*

She dismounted and gave the colt a good rub behind the ears, his favorite spot.

When she stepped back, he turned and jogged away a few steps before stopping. There he stood, a young warhorse painted red in the setting sun. He heaved a snort, flicked his ears back and danced a few steps, swishing his tail.

That's when the name came to Jada.

"Zohmar," she whispered with a smile.

It was derived from the Spanish name "Xiomar," meaning "famous in battle." She wasn't sure how she knew that, she just...did.

Half rearing, the colt threw his head towards the sky and sounded a war cry that echoed for miles over the hills. Then, pivoting on his hindquarters, Zohmar, Jada's mount, shot away into the trees and disappeared into the lengthening shadows.

## **Chapter 26**

### **Sheep's Clothing**

He appeared around a bend in the hallway just as a young man finished a brief conversation with a long, brown-haired woman.

The young man nodded his thanks and was about to continue on down the hall when he saw Halden, counselor of Asgarod, approaching.

"You're Christopher," said Halden, stopping when he reached the young man. "I've seen you around but haven't had the chance to formally greet you."

Christopher nodded as he shook Halden's hand. "You're correct. I arrived a little over a week ago."

When he saw Halden's gaze flit to something behind him, Christopher glanced over his shoulder.

The woman had just reached the end of the hall when she paused. She must've felt eyes on her because she looked behind her. When her gaze met Halden's, a smile tugged at her lips and the affection in her expression was evident.

Then she disappeared around the corner.

When Christopher returned his attention back to Halden, he saw the affection was mutual.

"I've only spoken with her a few times," commented Christopher and managing to hide his smile. "But I take her to be an extremely insightful woman. Very kind, yet shrewd, I sense."

Halden looked at Christopher with a twinkle in his eyes. "You perceive well and true. I've known Audrey for a long time and many mistake her kindness for total blindness."

He started down the corridor and Christopher fell in beside him. "By your speech, I take it you've come from the north."

"Yes, sir," nodded Christopher. "From Welsh. The town council there recommended I transfer to Asgarod, said I'd make a good fit. Advisor Rafael was kind enough to accept me."

"He speaks highly of you," replied Halden, "says you've been given great wisdom and discernment."

Christopher smiled timidly. "He may say that, but I find the cases here to be slightly more complex compared to those in Welsh."

Christopher tilted his head a little. "Although, at the heart of every matter are the same underlying motives, no? Greed, lust for power, pride, revenge, hatred...all brought by man's fallenness."

Halden regarded him thoughtfully. "Yes, that is true. There's nothing new under the sun, as we say."

Christopher sighed and shook his head sadly as he stopped to gaze out the windows looking south over the city. "It's just a cycle, one we'll go around and around in, 'til the end of time."

Halden remained silent, and Christopher felt the great counselor studying and discerning him and his heart, looking deep.

"I know it's pointless, but sometimes I think if we could somehow make people understand," continued Christopher, before cutting off his statement, shrugging and starting again.

"I don't know. Maybe most people really are completely self-centered and care only about themselves. I confess I have moments where I wonder if it's worth it, my job. People get themselves into the same predicaments because of their choices, but then wonder how they got into the mess to begin with. You try and explain it to them, and then they go and repeat their mistakes all over again."

He shot a look at Halden. "I don't know how you do it, honestly, day in and day out, hearing essentially the same cases over and over. I must tell you that's why I'd be afraid to be a leader: I'd probably resort to authoritarian rule. You've been graced with considerable more patience and understanding of the human condition than me."

Halden smiled and spoke at last. "I also have many more years to my credit than you. With age usually comes a kind of mellowness. I've also had considerably more experiences and interactions with a variety of people. I've seen both how kind and cruel they can be, and I keep in mind my own shortcomings and flaws. Just like no one is above the law, no one is above sin and its consequences. My experiences give me more understanding, so I'm not as quick to deal out harsh judgment and merciless rulings. Sometimes punishment is necessary, but when I make a mistake, I'd rather be granted a second chance over a harsh penalty."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "Granted, some people from a young age choose crime and to do evil to people. Others, however, are just going through life, trying to figure out their role in it all, and occasionally slip up. Ultimately, of course, a person chooses his or her own actions and reactions, and we end up where we are by our choices. And there it is, in simplest form. But that doesn't even touch on the reality of the spiritual side of things and events that occur all around us."

"Truly," agreed Christopher. "I guess that's why there are those like us, to give guidance and instruction to the people."

He smiled. "But like I said before, I'm glad I'm only an assistant."

Halden chuckled. "Well, we all have doubts and can become disheartened when considering the ways of evil and people. It's all part of being human."

"You give me much to think about," said Christopher, "and I should be moving along. I'm sure you have many other things to tend to."

They shook hands as Halden replied, "I appreciate the depth with which you think. We must speak again soon."

"The honor would be mine," replied Christopher with a dip of his head.

He and Halden went separate ways, and as Christopher continued down the hall, a twisted little smirk pulled at his lips.

That had been the first time Christopher had actually met Halden face to face since his arrival at Asgarod. Of course, he'd seen him and had overheard many conversations and rulings.

Christopher believed the words of his previous mentor, that Halden was the wisest and keenest, second to the high king.

Nor was he blind. He'd witnessed himself that Halden could detect the subtlest traces of deceit in a person. In a single glance, he knew one's intentions and how they viewed themselves and others.

Christopher would have to play his cards with the utmost care. But thanks to his own ability to read people, and to both his former mentor and his employer, he knew Halden's weak points.

Or at least, the best angles from which to approach when it came to introducing falsehood and dangerous lines of thinking veiled in what appeared to be truth and wisdom.

It wasn't pride or appealing to ego. Halden had admitted with sincerity he had his own faults.

But Christopher had sensed and seen the flickers of agreement in Halden's expression when Christopher had spoken about the endless cycle of hearing the same cases repeatedly. People never seemed to learn.

Halden had shown the strongest agreement near the end of the conversation, when Christopher had said, "I guess that's why there are those like us, to give guidance and instruction to the people."

Halden truly appreciated Christopher's way of thinking. The high counselor was always looking for a fresh way to view problems and cases, which likely stemmed from occasional boredom.

By the vast collection of books in his chamber, Halden was also eager to ever gain more knowledge. This was evident too, when he'd spend long stretches of time in deep contemplation, during which he didn't sleep and paced endlessly as he considered some serious matter.

That right there pinpointed Halden's key weaknesses: the more veiled one was the desire to somehow make people learn from their mistakes. The other, blatantly obvious was the unquenchable desire for more wisdom.

Wanting more knowledge and wisdom obviously wasn't a bad thing in itself. Humans were made to be naturally curious about an endless array of topics.

But just like everything, every innocent gift, talent or curiosity, it could be turned and used against a person. It had the potential to be corrupted or exploited by an enemy or unscrupulous individual.

Christopher's own "strongest" weakness was definitely the desire to show his own superiority and cunning over others. He was a con man in a way and gained deep satisfaction from playing and deceiving people. Manipulation was a challenging game he'd perfected at a young age.

That's why he'd been chosen to topple one of the two wisest men this realm had ever known. The more skilled the person, the better they could conceal even the darkest intentions from the keen eyes of the wise.

As such, Christopher couldn't have approached Halden as a leader-type, one already extremely well-learned and experienced.

The quickest way to get him to lower his guard was to play the young apprentice, who was wise, yet still had much to learn. Christopher had to appear humble and eager to gain sound and right understanding, yet also be open in expressing his struggles.

If he did this just right, Halden would open his mind and heart to this young, innocent student.

At the same time, Christopher could bring forth "fresh" or different methods of viewing people and cases. He'd encourage and get Halden to agree in their roles as ruling guides.

Eventually, if he planted his poison and worked his deceit well, he could shift to ideas of "what the people need is not only an advisor, but also a strong ruler to help them to understand and learn from their mistakes."

Currently, Halden and his companions were strictly advisors. They had no executive power.

That would change down the road, though.

As for the matter of Audrey and Halden's affection for each other, that piece of knowledge could prove useful, be used as leverage and would definitely be kept in mind.

Christopher smiled to himself as he again looked out over the city.  
He was a wolf well disguised in sheep's clothing and the games had just begun.

## **Chapter 27**

### **Poison**

The predawn was restless. The trees creaked and branches swayed in the gusts already stirring from the southwest. The atmosphere itself felt heavy and the air smelled stormy. It was likely the South was due for another round of storms as the latter part of summer dragged on.

The gang from Chugach was on the hunt again, and it was the fourth excursion Jada had been on with them. They'd already bagged and quartered two whitetails and two kurra by the time dawn glowed to life.

The clock towards winter was beginning to tick, but thanks to the knowledge brought by previous travelers, meat was now stored in cold lockers for extended time. Thus, game for winter could be hunted a bit earlier, to ensure there was plenty to go around.

The groups of young adults were assigned hunting duty on a rotating schedule to help them gain experience in tracking, stalking, hunting and prepping game. All for the purpose of earning their keep, aiding the town and making them well-rounded warriors.

The group slowed their pace and came to a collective standstill in a stand of trees, listening and searching the shadows. Anna had the skill with the bow, and Chastity the sharp hearing from her elven lineage. Those two alone were a formidable team.

Eyes sweeping the sparse forest before them, Jada shot a subtle look at Collin, the youngest by far. While he didn't run with the "big kids" regularly, he'd been assigned to the hunting team to obtain knowledge and instruction from more experienced hunters.

Fair skinned with strawberry blonde hair and expressive blue eyes, no one had needed to tell Jada he was the little brother of Anna. And in seeing how hard he was trying to keep up and prove himself, Jada would say he was constantly in the shadow of his big sister—a proven skilled warrior and a force to be reckoned with despite her generally silent demeanor.

Anna didn't baby Collin, nor did she scoff at him. He was just another part of the unit.

Tav stalked ahead, bent over the ground as he searched for the trail.

Jada surveyed the stormy wind again, sorting the smells of earth and forest. In a casual movement, she looked over her shoulder and eyed the branches above. For some reason, she felt like she was being watched and couldn't shake it.

After a minute, Tav straightened and took off. The gang followed swiftly. They held their pace a good three miles, and by then dawn's light clearly lit their way.

Coming upon a large plain lined with trees, they found themselves nearly on top of the herd. The group reacted simultaneously.

Anna leapt atop a large rock, loosed an arrow and secured the first kill.

While she was in motion, Eric and Chastity sprinted right, to discourage the kurra from breaking onto the open plain.

They spooked left and into Tav, who'd snuck along their left flank without them knowing. An arrow from him killed a second.

Like with most herd prey, the key is the ambush. If you're going to kill any in the group, it'll happen in the initial unfolding of the strike. These kinds of antelope were exceptionally quick, and outrunning or catching up to them once they know you're after them is next to impossible.

All that said because Collin, running beside Jada, took his shot. His bow sang and the arrow shot through the air with blinding speed..and just missed its target by inches.

It had been a difficult shot to begin with, fired while in motion and between the trees. It had also been Collin's seventh attempt just that morning.

Jada watched him slow and hang his head before she gave a sharp whistle.

The groups' horses had been following a quarter mile behind, so they could pack the game back to camp. Garador galloped up in short order and slid to a stop.

Zohmar had been strangely absent the past week or two, so Jada was depending more on the tiger dun.

"Hurry up," said Jada as she jumped onto Garador and then pulled Collin up behind her.

Her mount took off in pursuit of the herd. After the initial sprint Jada eased his speed, and when they swept down the next hill, she saw a glimpse of mahogany through the trees.

"I'll set them up," panted Jada as she pulled Garador to a stop and the kid slid to the ground. "Just relax a little and remember to breathe. You can do this. You're going to get a kill today even if we're out 'til midnight."

Collin nodded, and Garador and Jada took off again. They overtook the herd and spooked them into the open and back southwest. Once that was done, the pair vanished back into the woods and in amongst a stand of cottonwoods.

The kurra continued to bound across the plain a good distance before slowing. Jada wasn't sure where Collin was, but she wasn't about to move and risk spooking the game again. She was certain it would be a long shot if Collin didn't stalk out of the woods and onto the flat.

As the herd stood there, heads up, ears twitching, Jada slowly gathered the reins and applied a touch more pressure to the bit.

"Get ready, buddy," she breathed, and then felt her horse shift his weight and gather himself.

One kurra snorted loudly, then another and another, before the group tensed as a whole, preparing to flee. That's when one in the center collapsed.

Garador exploded forward at the same instant the kurra turned tail and ran. They hit the plain as Collin popped out of the grass and walked towards his kill.

"Nice shot!" called Jada as Garador galloped past and in pursuit of the kurra.

The remainder of the herd was nearly the trees on the far side of the flat, but Garador was pulling closer with every stride.

Stringing her bow, Jada reminded herself of the direction of the wind, corrected and adjusted for distance. She released the arrow as the herd hit the treeline. When she and Garador reached it, she found one dead kurra with an arrow sticking out the base of its neck.

She gave a nod of satisfaction and swung down from Garador.

Collin was still beaming when the group returned to their base camp, and she complimented his stalking abilities. She'd never caught any glimpse of him until he'd stood after making his shot.

At the camp, a handful of men with a wagon waited for the hunters. They'd prep the game and haul it back to Chugach. Collin was to stay with them to learn these things while the rest of the gang took a more scenic route back to town.

Day was officially upon them as they rode along a tall ridgeline, wind buffeting them and pulling at their hair and clothes. Already Jada could see a line of dark clouds building to the west.

"Let's see," began Tav, riding a tall, seal brown gelding. "What's the tally for hunting now?"

"We restarted the count once Jada joined us," reminded Eric as he broke into a grin, "and that was mostly because Anna was so far ahead of the rest of us."

“She still has the lead though,” pointed out Chastity. “You’re at how many kills, Anna? Thirteen?”

“Fourteen,” replied Anna.

“Ooo,” chuckled Eric. “Jada may have caught up to you.”

“I’m only up to thirteen,” corrected Jada.

“But that means she’s passed you, Tav,” teased Chastity.

“Well...not everything’s a competition, you know,” replied Tav with feigned indignation.

“Says the loser,” answered Eric and Chastity together.

Jada laughed with the others.

“Either way,” she said finally. “I’d say we have an exceptional hunting team.”

“Aye,” agreed Tav. “An effective team is invaluable.”

He threw Jada a smile. “We’re glad you came along and joined us.”

Jada snorted. “Yeah, you’re supposed to say that, Tav. Like you’re going to tell an asset in your group, ‘actually you really suck and none of us can stand you.’”

That made Eric and Chastity burst out laughing, and Anna broke into a smile. Tav sent Jada a disproving look, but his eyes were still laughing.

“Oh, so when’s Michael get back?” asked Chastity.

“It was either yesterday or sometime today,” answered Eric.

“He normally runs with us,” explained Chastity, looking over her shoulder at Jada. “But he’s been out on assignment all summer.”

There was something about her smile and the mischievous twinkle in her eyes that Jada found quite suspicious. She shot a look at Tav.

He was smiling until he saw her looking at him. He tried to straighten up but had to look away.

Jada could smell a set up and scowled. She also wondered if Michael had been the reason Tav had asked earlier if she had a boyfriend.

*Great, she thought. Probably just another alpha personality to deal with.*

She knew it wasn’t fair to assume that since she’d never met Michael. But she couldn’t keep the thought from passing through her mind.

“So,” said Jada, ready to change subjects, “how long does summer last around here?”

The birch and cottonwoods were at last just thinking about flushing yellow.

“Usually ‘til the beginning of September,” answered Tav. “Then the leaves turn pretty quick and we get our first frost mid to late October.”

The group dropped down the other side of the ridge and followed a game trail that wound through a narrow valley, still shadowed and blanketed the mist.

Anna’s horse, a plain brown bay, whickered from the front of the line. Eric’s dark gray answered with a snort. Then all the horses tensed and swished their tails, dancing on their toes.

As they rounded the bend, a gust of warm wind swept through the valley, wisping away some of the mist and clearing the air.

Everyone halted. The narrow, flat strip along the valley floor was black, as if burned, as were the trees. But the grass wasn’t gone, or the leaves.

Everything just looked...sick.

Gaze narrowing with suspicion, Jada nudged Garador forward and they rode down and along the valley floor. Something evil had been there. It was long gone, but this pace sent chills through her, and she felt her horse tense.

The tracks were faint now, but it was still easy enough to tell gath had camped here at one time, and a large group at that.

“There hasn’t been a fire in this area since last summer,” confirmed Eric. “The plants and trees aren’t actually burned, anyway. It’s something...else.”

Dread clenched Jada’s stomach as Garador cantered up the opposite ridge. From the high vantage point, they could see over several smaller hills. Those that went northward and eastward from the old campsite were outlined in ash and then black behind the line.

Looking at the ground beneath her horse, Jada saw lines of ash reaching slowly east and disappearing into the healthy green grass and trees.

Chastity rode up beside them and studied the ground before they shared a look.

“It’s spreading, whatever it is,” said Jada quietly, eyeing the devastated landscape. “Like a slow-acting poison.”

Jada wasn’t sure if it was just her imagination, but for a moment it seemed like a shadow passed in front of the sun, weakening its light. A chill ran through her, accompanied with rising dread and fear.

She turned Garador in the direction of Chugach as urgency was kindled in her spirit. “We need to report this to Halden. This is a new warning sign, and both he and Ambrose emphasized they must be taken seriously from the onset.”

She shot Chastity a look, searching her friend's face. "This can't be downplayed, whatever this actually is. We do know its evil or some kind of remnant from a powerful darkness."

Chastity and the others agreed whole-heartedly.

"I have no doubt," said Tav, as the group cantered homeward, "that it's a sign of the growing reach and power of Cassius."

"Aye," agreed Chastity, "and evidence that his plans continue to progress despite our efforts to thwart them. I just hope we haven't entirely underestimated him or the darkness."

## **Chapter 28**

### **Hints & Veiled Threats**

The gang reached Chugach a short time later and each went their separate ways. Before Garador had come to a complete stop, Jada dismounted, jogged onto the front porch and burst through the door.

She was glad to see her parents had returned from their recon assignment and were both home.

Hastily, Jada relayed what the group had discovered and the slowly spreading disease. Both her parents became immediately concerned.

"There have been reports of the same type of disease further north," said John, shooting a look at Carla. "It was first seen along the south and western borders of Cassius' territory. Shortly after we arrived here, there was news that it was beginning to creep outward from his borders and infect the outlying territories."

"We guess that it can form in an isolated area if a powerful enough enemy commander camps in one spot for a length of time," added Carla. "That explains the random patches of disease."

"But...it's growing," said Jada.

"Yes," nodded her mom, "proof the power of Cassius and Levian is increasing. It also shows the generals and commanders he's sending out are also deeper into darkness, and are as such, given more power and authority."

Jada felt her soul grieve within her. "I thought...we've been working so hard to stop him and his plans. I thought we'd been succeeding..."

Her voice trail off a moment. *Does it matter, then, if we fight or not? Darkness still grows and evil plans succeed, regardless of how hard we war against it...*

“Yes, it does,” said her mom, as if reading her daughter’s thoughts and stepping to her. “Whether or not we fight does matter. It makes a difference and has a significantly greater impact than any of us realizes...just like our prayers. There’s always hope that light can turn back the darkness, for another season at least.”

Jada winced a little. “I haven’t been doing much praying lately.”

Carla’s beautiful eyes twinkled. “Ah, you’ve been quite busy, and distraction is a tactic the enemy knows how to wield with exceptional skill.”

“We all need reminding occasionally,” said John as he stood from the table and took a knee in the living room, “that the fight should always begin here. This is where it starts, and prayer is the most powerful and effective weapon we have.”

One important fact Jada had confirmed with Merida some time ago was the belief structure in that realm. A number of people made references to the Almighty, and thus she assumed they were talking about the one true God.

“Aye,” Merida had said. *“Believers in this realm pray to the same God you do, the living God and Creator of all. I serve the same God as you, as does the high king. And every believer here has gone through the same conversion experience. As I mentioned, though evil is more tangible here, there is still unseen darkness, that surrounds Cassius, and unseen light, that counters it.”*

That had been a relief, to confirm they didn’t believe in just some vague idea of an all-powerful being or whatever. Also, prayer here was just as important as prayer back in Earth’s dimension.

Actually, its importance couldn’t be emphasized enough, because by their prayers the plots of the enemy were revealed and delayed, if not thwarted.

As Jada studied her dad’s face, she realized she’d never seen such intensity in his expression grey-blue eyes.

Her mom went to a knee beside him and took his hand.

“For once, my husband,” she said, bringing his hand to her lips. “You’re right.”

Jada about gagged at the gesture and the affectionate way they were looking at one another. Then she too took a knee and grabbed both her parents’ hands.

“Then maybe we ought to wage a little warfare right now,” said Jada. “Before we do anything else.”

A few minutes later, the three stood and John and Carla engulfed Jada in a hug.

“We raised a wise daughter,” said John. “Or perhaps, more accurately, I should say we were graced with one.”

“True again,” agreed Carla with laughter in her voice. “You’re on a roll today, John.”

“Guys,” whined Jada. “Are you trying to make me sick? I don’t think I can take much more mushy stuff.”

Her dad laughed deeply before putting her in a headlock.

“Daaaad!”

“You might have all your peers topped in combat and hunting,” he said, still laughing, “but you’re still no match for your dad.”

“You ambushed me,” countered Jada as he released her.

“Excuses,” answered her parents in unison.

“So are we going to send a message to Halden?” asked Jada. “Surely he’ll be aware of the disease in the forests. You said this isn’t an isolated event.”

“I did,” agreed John. “But we still need to get word about what’s been going on in other regions. All news from the South, East, and West meets at Asgarod. At the least, I’d like to get some updates even if we don’t speak with Halden.”

“I’m sure he’s growing busier by the day” commented Carla.

“Right,” said Jada, slapping her dad on the shoulder. “Let’s ride!”

The trio rode to Asgarod and passed beneath its arches by the afternoon. Jada noticed there were more guards along the walls and in the citadels. Though she wasn’t sure why that might be immediately significant, she filed it in the “keep in mind” section of her brain.

Leland and Gavin knew Jada’s parents, and they shared brief words before leading their three horses to the stable.

They entered the citadel and instead of turning right, continued straight down another broad corridor.

Jada guessed stood were near the heart of the citadel’s base when they came upon it.

On the right were a number of arches leading into a small courtyard. Somehow the building was designed so windows could allow in exterior light, and the large and tall chamber glowed with exceptional warmth. In the center sat a small fountain, with a great number of benches about it where people could sit. Wrapped around all the archway pillars were carvings of rose vines.

It looked like a great place to just sit and think, and just in passing it, Jada could sense the peace that filled it.

“I’ve never come this way,” whispered Jada, afraid to disturb the quiet.

“It’s called the Garden,” answered her mom softly, “and is the perfect place to visit when you’re troubled.”

They turned down another passage and the warmth emanating from the Garden vanished.

Another couple minutes later they’d reached the north end of the citadel base. Armed soldiers patrolled the halls, but they each knew John and Carla.

When they approached a set of heavy double doors, the four soldiers standing guard greeted them with genuine warmth.

“John! Carla!” exclaimed the man who Jada guessed was the group leader. “It’s been awhile since we’ve seen you.”

“It has, captain,” smiled John as he and the captain exchanged a firm handshake. “Just checking to see if there’s any new news from the North.”

A troubled look fell over the captain’s face. “Aye, there has been a lot of news in general the past week or two.”

But when his hazel eyes fell on Jada, his expression brightened again. “And you’re the daughter we’ve all heard much about...though you aren’t necessarily known through your parents. You’ve made your own name for yourself, if the stories I’ve heard about the hunter and skilled warrior named Jada are even half-true.”

Jada couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. *Stories?*

“Well, captain,” she answered. “I haven’t heard any of these stories myself. So I can’t tell you which parts are true and which are highly over exaggerated.”

The big man just smiled. “You’re the daughter of John and Carla. I wouldn’t wonder if the stories aren’t under exaggerated.”

Before Jada could think of a response to refute his statement, the captain stepped to one of the doors and shoved it open.

“It’s good to see you two again,” he said to Jada’s parents before looking at her, “and an honor to finally meet you.”

Jada tried not to gawk. “The honor is all mine, captain,” she managed to reply, before following her parents into a vast chamber that made up a good portion of the citadel base on the north side.

It was busy with activity. People worked at desks while others came and went, some employees, others obviously travelers who'd just arrived to report some vital piece of information.

For the next hour, John and Carla gathered news from a variety of territories, many from regions Jada had never heard of.

*I have so much more exploring to do,* she thought as she studied maps spread out on tables. There were other forests, plains, mountains, even deserts she hadn't traveled.

Yet Jada had the sense that she would tread every inch of that realm, but all in good time.

As far as intelligence reports went, the general consensus was that the central territories were in imminent danger of being completely overrun by large squads of gath and dark soldiers. No, they weren't just squads; they were vast legions, and every warrior was larger, stronger and smarter than their previous counterparts.

It seemed the older models were being upgraded and replaced.

More and more chimera were also being seen. Wolves were amassing and acting as spies and messengers for various companies.

The regiments of men under Cassius remained exceedingly cunning—and just as ruthless as their chimera counterparts. They could move swifter and more secretly. They also knew how to implement a variety of war strategies, thanks to Cassius, who was unmatched in that category.

In short, the momentum of the gath and human companies needed to be stopped and their lines broken, otherwise they'd soon hold the entire central territories. If that happened, it would be that much easier for them to launch larger assaults on towns and cities south and east of the line. It wouldn't take long before those at Chugach, or friends in the Western and Eastern Villages, saw an increase in attacks.

Carla sensed her daughter's despair and took her hand and gave an encouraging squeeze.

As they left the Intelligence Room, as John called it, Jada recognized how easily the oppressive weight she'd felt earlier that morning had returned. It wasn't just about the news they'd heard, it was something more, something larger. A heavy darkness was nearby and her soul was being weighted down by it.

"I know," said John, striding down another hall. "I sense it, too. An especially dark plan is in motion, or multiple plans."

They went up to the second highest level of the citadel, where Halden's advisors worked. The chamber itself was vast, and the center of the oval room was completely open, with various offices on the perimeter.

There was plenty of activity there, too, with a number of people speaking and gesturing with pieces of parchment they held.

Upon initial inquiry before going upstairs, the trio had learned Halden would likely be holding counsel with his advisors. It was something he'd been doing more frequently over recent weeks.

Regardless, he'd known the three were coming and assured them he'd speak with them.

*How does he find the time,* wondered Jada as she gazed around the room.

That's when she saw him, a young man with hazel brown eyes. He stood near a large open door of an office and was in deep discussion with someone.

For some reason, her instincts told her to pay attention to him. There wasn't anything obviously sinister about him, nor was there anything wrong outright. But something was just off...like a veiled darkness, perhaps?

Jada hadn't realized she'd been staring, or more accurately, glaring at him until a strong voice broke her fixation.

"Together at last, I see."

Blinking, Jada looked over to see the counselor Halden approaching.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Just as you told me we would be."

He regarded the three fondly a moment before his face became grave. "You're here about the disease spreading across the land."

John nodded. "Jada and the group she was hunting with found a patch this morning, east of Chugach."

"Just this past month there have been a dramatic increase in reports about the disease," replied Halden. "From what I understand, the main enemy line is moving across the central territories, to cut the North and South in half."

"Divide and conquer," said Carla. "Classic."

Halden smiled tiredly. "Indeed. But Ambrose and I are certain Cassius has more plans in motion than mere attacks and conquests for territory. Doubtless he knows of, or is trying to find a way, in which he'll be able to leave the dead land and more freely again."

Jada frowned.

"But how could he possibly do that?" she asked quietly. "From what you told me, Cassius was banished to the dead land and wasn't permitted to ever leave his borders. If he does, he dies."

“Mm, that is a topic that goes deep into supernatural events, and the laws of good and evil,” answered Halden, gaze growing distant as his voice faded. “It is something Ambrose and I had long studied and meditated over. There may yet be a way...”

“Has the high king sent you any word?” asked John after a breath. “Does he offer any guidance?”

Halden broke from his thoughts.

“No, not yet,” he smiled weakly, “and he likely won’t until just the right time. You know how he works.”

Though the great counselor smiled, his expression remained troubled. Seeing that definitely didn’t ease Jada’s rising worry.

When Halden saw her expression his smile broadened, and the twinkle returned to his eyes. “Don’t let me cause you more concern. I just have a great many things I need to take time to consider. The darkness won’t overtake the entire realm overnight and can yet be driven back.”

He looked from Carla to John with a knowing little expression. “For the time being, I’d suggest seriously considering doing recon directly north of Chugach and its neighbors. You may find a great weakness in your enemy there, though they might be many to count. So don’t be discouraged.”

Jada then realized she was smiling, as were her parents.

“Who’s the new guy?” asked Jada with a tilt of her head.

“Hm? Oh, that’s Christopher. Transferred from Welsh and is an assistant to Rafael, one of my advisors. He does good work and has a unique and insightful way of viewing matters. He fits in right away and is well-liked by the others.”

That put up a red flag, again for an unknown reason, though Halden spoke well of him. One of the things Jada had definitely learned during her time in Aurora was to trust her gut. At that moment, it was telling her definitely not to trust this Christopher person.

What alarmed Jada even more was that Halden seemed entirely accepting of the apprentice, and didn’t hint he thought something might be off.

It’s difficult to be certain of your instincts when someone as wise and sharp as Halden doesn’t sense anything wrong. It makes a person wonder if they’re being paranoid.

In this case, however, Jada was going to stick to her guns, though she’d wait to voice her concern to Halden.

Presently, it was merely a hunch, and one that hadn't been proven true or false. Jada hadn't even spoken with Christopher, but that didn't mean she was going to outright trust him. Just like Blake, or well...anyone else in her life, save for her parents.

The three didn't want to waste anymore of Halden's time and said their goodbyes. Just before leaving the chamber, Jada shot one more look at Christopher.

He was already watching her. The moment she'd entered the chamber, he'd sensed a threat to himself and his assignment. The instant Christopher's eyes met Jada's on her way out, he recognized straight off she was a danger to him.

The feeling was mutual on Jada's behalf. Just before Christopher broke her gaze, she caught a glimmer of darkness in his eyes, and her suspicion was confirmed.

Christopher was a dangerous threat, but well veiled. Perhaps, though, she thought she was greatly underestimating Halden. Maybe he was going to draw Christopher out in a way that the young man would eventually reveal his true nature to everyone.

The general population, in this case, Halden's own advisors, had to see Christopher for what he was, especially since they liked him. They may not merely take Halden's word, and that could create a rift amongst the group.

*Dear God in heaven, may this threat be revealed quickly,* prayed Jada.

This was a serious matter because a smooth-talking deceiver could spread his lies and poison quickly and lead even the wisest astray. The potential danger of this matter couldn't be emphasized enough, just like the onset of the disease that was spreading over the land.

But again, Jada figured she was likely insulting Halden's intelligence and ability to discern by worrying as much as she was. Christopher would likely be discovered and driven out. He couldn't fool all the advisors, although, this development would remain in Jada's thoughts.

For the moment there were other pressing matters, like breaking the line that the dark king's legions held over the central territories. Thanks to Halden, he'd given the trio a hint as to where to find some unsuspecting enemy forces.

## **Chapter 29**

### **Allies**

The night following their return from Asgarod, Phoenix and several companions flew north and did some aerial recon.

His teammates so happened to be falcons. It seemed he'd quickly come to be regarded as a messenger of importance, due to the errands he did for Jada and to whom he delivered the messages.

Figuratively speaking, Jada felt like a proud mother watching him "rise through the ranks." She wasn't a mother and never would be. Ever.

Upon the aerial team's return, they reported a great encampment of men and gath, about five hundred total, north of the territorial borders of Chugach. They provided a brief layout of the enemy company. The main camp was on the tallest point, with six outlying camps surrounding it on lesser hills.

Two additional camps were positioned a half-mile northeast and northwest of the primary camp. One hundred bodies per camp were counted.

However, Phoenix and his team hadn't returned right after surveying the layouts. Instead, they'd opted to settle in the surrounding trees and listen for awhile.

First, they discovered there were gremlins *everywhere*, in the camps and surrounding trees. That would create a problem for sneaking in close.

They also overheard an interesting piece of news. Both gath and man were on edge for three reasons.

First, any wild game seemed to be especially sensitive to their scent and presence. No deer or antelope had been seen in two weeks, and the legions were hungry and grouchy.

Second, the wild horses were in the area and had trampled and killed a number of patrols. *Well*, thought Jada upon hearing this, *that likely explains why Zohmar hasn't been around. He's been causing a little mayhem himself.*

Lastly, some kind of wild beasts were actually sneaking into the camps, snagging gath or man, dragging them off and killing them. Sometimes only remains were found, but often than not, they'd merely been killed and not eaten.

Whatever it was, was unhappy at the intrusion by darker forces.

Icarus confirmed it wasn't any of his kind.

However, O'Brien and others who knew the central lands agreed it was the work of the talos that roamed there.

“Size of a tiger,” whispered John to Jada, filling her in. “But clean and sleek, no excess fat, all lean, with very powerful muscle. Fit like a racehorse primed to run. Eerily stealthy for their size. Coats are usually shades of browns or grays in color, and their pattern depends on the angle at which you view them. Sometimes they have spots, other times stripes. They hold no allegiance to us or servants of Cassius. They govern and are concerned with only themselves and their survival.”

At hearing this, Jada hoped she’d never have to meet or deal with one.

The talos would be a wildcard in the plan of attack. Hopefully, they didn’t have any more ambush plans the night the commanders wanted to lay siege to the enemy camp and thereby spook the enemy prematurely.

Jada also hoped the talos wouldn’t attack any of the warriors.

All in all, the gath company was hungry, grumpy and jumpy. That meant the commanders and warriors would have that much more difficulty sneaking up on them. However, that also meant they could easily create a diversion, make the enemy jump and look one way while the attackers came at them from another.

After the reports came in, the race was on to gather forces, mobilize and execute a plan of attack. Messages were sent to neighboring towns, including Highland, Silverthorne, and the Eastern and Western Villages.

Warriors arrived immediately to a secluded camp on the northern edge of the Chugach borders, in thicker tree cover. They couldn’t mobilize in one town because there was a good chance they were under regular surveillance by enemy spies. Obviously, they didn’t want the enemy camp catching wind of their plans.

It was a five day steady ride to where the commanders and companies camped, near a hidden storehouse so everyone could travel light.

From the moment they learned of the enemy legion, to the night they moved against them, time was of the essence. The commanders wanted to strike during the new moon, which gave them mere days to plan an assault on five hundred enemy.

It was one thing to ambush a group of fifty or even a hundred. But this was a legion that was spread out and would require precise execution.

Jada was allowed to stick close and watch and listen as the plans were made.

One of the first things she learned was: it was extremely difficult to form an effective plan with so many soldiers and moving parts. Clear coordination and execution was obviously paramount, and everyone had to be certain of their roll.

Another problem would be getting around to the secondary campsites. The primary camp was large and warriors would have to go a distance out of their way to get into position.

Plus, there was also the problem of everyone maneuvering into place, period. The ugly gremlins were everywhere in the trees, where the archers would need to take up perches before the ambush even started.

Fortunately, the falcons used for the recon got in touch with their acquaintances, including three dozen hawks at a minimum. Once the diversion was in play, they could quietly remove the gremlins from the trees.

Thus, it all still came down to the need for a diversion, and it was the evening before the raid when that part of the plan fell into place.

Late that night, Jada was dozing at the base of large tree and thinking about a possible solution to the diversion problem. It wasn't as simple as make some noise or draw some gath away. They were on edge and the distraction couldn't make them any more suspicious than they were.

It had to be "natural," if that made sense.

Jada was in that half-asleep, half-awake state when a noise snapped her back to consciousness. Sitting up, she strained to listen, and seconds later, she heard it again: excited yipping.

The idea came then. She sprang to her feet, got caught in her blanket, tripped, unwrapped her ankles and then started into the trees.

Even though it was dark, her eyes had long adjusted, so she managed not to run into anything.

That's when Gabriel and Michael, who has yet to be formally introduced, fell in beside Jada. They'd had the same idea as her and together they followed the yips.

Jada knew those calls very well, but was accustomed to the hearing them on the plains or in the desert—the sound of coyotes on the hunt.

They were closing in on their location when the forest fell silent again. After continuing another fifty feet, the three stopped when they reached a clearing with a narrow creek running through it.

There was no snapping twig, rustling of a leaf or fur through the brush that made them draw their weapons. Instead, it was the sense that someone was approaching.

All three had their weapons in hand quicker than a flash.

A breath later they appeared out of the darkest shadows: half a dozen coyotes. The skies were partly cloudy and allowed the light from the bright stars to play intermittently through the trees.

Eying the pack, Jada didn't have an immediate sense of danger, not like when facing wolves. However, they were still canines and these were known for being exceptionally wily. She wouldn't outright trust them.

"We debated over whether or not any of you would show up," said one of the coyotes.

After another breath, the three humans lowered their weapons.

"You wanted to draw us to you," surmised Gabriel.

The coyote nodded as he sat, and the rest of his pack followed suit.

"And here I thought we'd have to track you all night and beg just to exchange a few words," added Michael. "Neither of our sides has shown interest in the other. We've left each to his own. So why did you want us to come?"

"What you say is true, Michael, son of kings," replied the coyote, "and we've been watching you and your gathering forces. Like the other creatures in the central regions, we don't appreciate the gath and men taking control."

Jada wondered how the coyote knew Michael by name. But then again, it seemed all manner of beasts seemed especially drawn to him and were respectful.

The coyote's eyes caught some of the starlight and gleamed as he looked over each of the three. "They trample everything, bring chaos, death, and a strange sort of disease that kills the land."

He then chuckled. "Besides, they've put Midas in a frightful mood."

"He's the leader of the talos in the area," whispered Gabriel to Jada.

"Do you know if he's planning to strike the gath camp within the next day?" asked Michael with keen interest.

"I haven't heard word of any such plans," replied the coyote before wheezing a laugh. "But I'm also not about to get close enough to ask him."

He gave an interested tilted of his head. "So, would you like our assistance with anything, to remove this threat?"

“How do we know you aren’t working for the enemy camp?” asked Michael. “Or that you won’t betray us?”

“You don’t. But we also didn’t know if you’d just shoot us on sight when we showed ourselves to you.”

“You could’ve betrayed us days ago,” said Jada quietly, almost to herself, “when our troops gathered, or even better, while they were still arriving and were more spread out.”

The coyote smiled, or as well as one can. “Very good. That is also true, Jada, most noble of wanderers.”

She eyed him, and now wondered how he knew her, or if that was just a phrase he used when addressing humans.

The creature chuckled and then stood. “Now come, tell us what you need and we will see what we can do to accommodate.”

Michael and Jada shared a look and smile, before she answered the leader of their new allies. “Actually, we could use some help creating a subtle diversion...”

## **Chapter 30**

### **When Plans Come Together**

The night was dark, for there was no moon, and low clouds shut out light from the stars. A humid breeze occasionally disturbed the trees, and as the hour of dawn slowly approached, fog formed along the base of the seven hills where the primary gath squadrons were encamped.

They’d been hearing sporadic calls from a pack of coyotes in the distance before silence fell for a stretch. But they returned again, closer this time because the pack was on the trail of prey.

The faint sound of somethings approaching from the west drew the attention of a few gath and men. As it came closer, more warriors stood and surveyed the dark landscape.

This wasn’t the sound of the wild horses that had struck two nights prior. No, it was the sound of some kind of deer running from pursuers.

This assumption was proven correct a minute later. They caught sight of faint streaks of movement blur through the trees and heard the light footfalls of deer. They ran right past the north edge of the main camp.

Neither man nor brute thought it unusual that coyotes would be hunting such large game when there was plentiful smaller prey to be had. They also didn't wonder why coyotes, typically solitary creatures, would be hunting in such a large group.

The camps were settling down again when the fog at the base of the hills began to thicken and grow, wafting up like...

The commanders leapt to their feet. That wasn't fog entirely. There was smoke rising from it.

Before that realization had time to fully sink in, shrieks of pain and surprise came from the outlying camps around the tallest hill. Seconds later, several commanders on the main hill collapsed to the ground.

The enemy was forced to light torches to investigate, and thus better reveal their locations. They saw the arrows sticking out of their dead comrades and scrambled for their gear as the sound of thunder swept over the hills.

These weren't the wild horses striking again, as was the initial thought judging by the sounds of rising terror. It was, in fact, the first wave of horsemen moving in from west to east and cutting down both gath and man before vanishing into the darkness.

The enemy archers were stringing their bows when blinding light lit the night. Fires sprang to life around the feet of several hills, cutting off key camps from one another. There was also a great line of flames on the northern edge, to prohibit the enemy from aiding their companions in the secondary camps, or vice versa.

The camps were still in disarray as another torrent of arrows fell among them.

Jada was one of the archers, positioned in a stand of trees around the southwest-most camp.

They'd learned earlier that the diseased land was flammable. It didn't burn hot with fire, but it smoked heavily. The coyotes chasing deer, and the heavy fog, allowed perfect cover for some of the warriors to sneak in and pour oil around the designated hills. They then lit the ground near the oil and snuck away. It had been a guess on timing, but things couldn't have come together better, because the oil ignited just as the riders rode into the darkness.

Also as planned, the hawks and falcons had dropped in stealthily and taken out a large number of gremlins from the trees. There were still a few to be killed as the archers climbed to perches. But it worked out.

Even now in the light from the fires, the archers could see more winged gremlins taking flight. They wouldn't get too far though, not with the aerial support Jada and company had, which now included Icarus and a squad of stellars.

Three of them flew right over the tree Jada was in and towards the highest hill, the feathers of their wings burning gold and red in the flames.

Riders galloped in and made a pass over the two hills nearest Jada. The smoke mostly hid their approach, before they appeared suddenly from the haze full of terrible fury as they fell upon their foes.

They were just fading back into shadows as Jada lined up her next shot. She was fully aware her target was a man, a human like her.

Prior to deploying for the attack, her dad had told her, "You may feel hesitation in killing another human. There's obviously a difference between them and the gath, which seem easier for us to slay without a second thought. But these men have made their choice about whose side they were going to fight on, and if you don't kill them first...you or someone you love will die instead."

*Not today*, she thought, keeping her breathing steady as she released the arrow.

It found its target and the man of darkness dropped to the ground.

The camps on the outer edges had mostly been cleaned up. The heaviest fighting was now on the three knolls nearest the commanders' camp, which was on the tallest hill.

Jada climbed down the tree and spotted a dozen fellow archers who had also returned to the ground. Together they stalked quickly forward through the fog and smoke being carried into the trees by the increasing breeze swirling around the hills.

More horsemen sprinted by, charged through the flames and up the next occupied hill. Gath fell beneath the hooves of their steeds and the swords of the riders sang as they met the blades of their enemies in passing.

A stellar dropped out of the darkness and pounced on a wounded enemy soldier crawling towards a crossbow.

The soldier's companion, sword in hand, appeared behind the winged cat. But one of Jada's arrows found his chest before he could do any harm. A second arrow fell a gath, and then a third. She had her sights on a fourth before reminding herself she was running low on arrows.

There was no need to worry though because a fellow archer killed the fourth foe.

In a collective effort, the archers and half a dozen others rained down arrows on the hill. The final arrow was still falling as the horsemen made one final pass and removed the last of the opposition.

Now the fighting had been isolated on the tallest point and one smaller hill beyond it. Jada had no idea how things were going at the secondary camps half a mile north.

Pressing on towards the tall hill, Jada was thinking about swapping out her bow for her sword and knife when she spotted him: a chimera, edge of his scimitar glistening red from blood and fire, and his dark crimson eyes glinting with malice.

He and several of his strongest companions held the hilltop, and he drove against his next opponent. Even from the distance, Jada heard the ringing of their swords and saw the warrior grimace against each merciless blow delivered by his evil rival.

Jada took all this in as she drew on more arrow and set it. But before she could do anything else, the chimera unleashed two impossibly quick strikes, one to deflect the warrior's sword, and the second...to kill him.

It was the first time Jada had seen a fellow warrior killed and it felt like someone had punched her in the stomach. She hadn't known him personally but he was still a brother-in-arms.

Heat burned through her and chased away any shock. She couldn't contain the war cry that came from deep in her soul as she pulled back the string and released the arrow.

Shooting through the air with incredible speed, it sank deeply into the chimera's leg. It growled in pain and fury, and then searched in the direction from which the arrow had come.

That's when his evil gaze rested on Jada.

Unafraid, she glared right back at him.

*You want some, she thought as she strode towards the hill, come and get it...unless you're too afraid to give up your high ground.*

As if sensing her thought, the chimera wrinkled his nose in disgust. Reaching down, he grabbed the shaft and ripped the entire arrow out of his leg, the tip dripping black.

Before Jada could reach the vile brute, one of his dark human companions jumped in her way.

Ducking under his first swing, she deflected the second before their blades locked over their heads. Puzzlement flickered across his shadowed features as he regarded her a breath, wondering what a kid was doing out in a battle.

However, there was no time for jests or for this to become a test of muscle. Jada didn't let it. Gathering her strength, she shoved him back a step before stabbing him through the heart with her knife.

As Connor, her unofficial instructor, had taught her: close-quarter combat was ugly and happened fast. It was about removing the immediate threat as quickly as possible so you could move onto the next. There was no time for posturing or fancy moves.

Leaping back, Jada just missed a gash across the stomach as a second dark soldier drove down upon her. He had her backing down the hill but it was steep, which meant his legs were within reach.

She caught him across the shins with her knife. She managed to avoid the swing for her head but received a kick that sent her sliding to the foot of the hill.

Jada's rival was on her in an instant. But she wasn't concerned. Pulling her knees in, she missed the swing for her legs and then blocked and locked blades with him.

He leaned his full weight against her, until she kicked in him the knee with such force that she heard things pop. He fell awkwardly on top of her. She elbowed him in the side of the head, then gave a powerful twist which rolled him off and put her on top.

The fight was finished a second later.

Something whooshed past Jada's ear before biting into the ground. Looking up, she saw it was a black arrow.

She spun to her feet to see a fellow warrior strike down the gath archer.

A third dark soldier charged in from the left, but Jada was thoroughly warmed up now and settling into the rhythm of things.

As she struck him down, she felt someone approaching from behind. Turning quickly, she brought up her sword...and locked it with Namor's.

His eyes were bright with fight and he was filled with the zeal of battle.

"We meet again!" he exclaimed jubilantly over the noise of combat.

Namor glanced to the hilltop, where the chimera was still fighting and turning back his foes.

Then he returned his fiery gaze to Jada. "We can take him!"

"From opposite directions," she agreed.

Namor nodded and sprinted off around the hill.

Jada ran the other way and then began her ascent.

There were still two or three commanders beside the chimera, but they were being worn down by her unyielding fellow warriors.

Friendly archers somewhere nearby sensed it was that final push for the hill. With expert precision, they shot their arrows, which found their marks in the enemy commanders. Now badly wounded, the enemy stood no chance and would fall in a few more meager swings.

The final stages of that fight were still on-going when Jada crested the hill.

It was the first time she beheld a chimera up close and personal. He was tall and broad with muscles everywhere. There were no words to describe the contempt in his deep crimson eyes, nor the hatred she felt as his gaze bore into her.

In that instant, Jada wondered just how high up the demonic ranks he'd spawned from, this brute whose only purpose was to kill and mutilate, and twist everything that was good and true.

She hadn't seen any glimpse of Namor, but neither she nor her very big enemy was going to wait any longer to engage.

They swung at the same time, their blades meeting between them with a deep metallic ring that resonated over the hills.

Thus the duel began.

Each of the chimera's strikes was jarring and sent pain up Jada's arms. They were accompanied by the darkness that surrounded him and pressed down on her.

But Jada would not be easily intimidated. She kept pace with him and neither yielded more than a few inches of ground at one time. Yet as they continued to war against each other, she couldn't deny that her strength and energy was fading faster than usual, as steady pressure pushed against her head. There was something about being that close to a strong creature of evil that was oppressive and slowly stealing the life from her.

His next swing Jada deflected weakly and it cost her a gash across the shoulder. She barely felt it, and retaliated quickly, striking him up and across his chest, drawing black blood.

Namor charged onto the scene then, with both blades drawn. He approached the chimera from behind and forced the brute to turn and face him.

While they engaged, Jada allowed herself to take a few breaths, draw her tomahawk and then advance again.

The rest of the duel was short-lived as Namor, son of generals, and Jada wore down the chimera. The brute was in continuous motion, pivoting back and forth between Namor and Jada.

No matter how he tried to maneuver, they stayed in front and behind him, making it that much more difficult on him.

He only had time to block one strike each from Namor and Jada, but not two. The chimera could deflect her first swing, and then was forced to turn while she delivered a second strike.

Namor and Jada drew many wounds as the chimera finally began to crumble. That's when an arrow plunged deep into the side of the brute's shoulder, going clear to the bone.

The chimera fell to one knee and Namor ran him through the back and neck with his two blades.

Jada simultaneously stabbed him down and sideways through the ribcage and then swung her tomahawk, driving the edge of the blade deep into the left side of his chest.

With a growl, she yanked her weapons from the chimera as his body fell to the ground.

"She's a wild woman," declared Namor, eyes dancing. "I like it."

They looked over each other briefly, eyeing one another's new wounds, all minor. Then they each secured a weapon and clasped hands, as warriors who'd just slain an ugly foe.

A terrible scream, not human, cut over the large encampment, which now lay mostly in ruins. They saw in the light from dying flames flicker of gleaming coats.

They were there, the wild horses, and they were galloping north.

But there was still one more major pocket of fighting on the shorter knoll to the left. Namor was already sprinting down the hill, and Jada was about to follow when someone shouted her name.

Looking around a moment, Jada spotted Akin in the pale light of approaching dawn. He sat atop his fine bay horse, which pawed the ground.

"The mounted warriors are regrouping and riding to the secondary camps as we speak," he said as Jada slid down the hill. "The enemy is holding their ground there."

She was about to ask what he thought she was supposed to do about it. But she paused when she saw the admiration on his face as he looked down at her.

"Would you do me the honor of riding into battle beside me, Jada, daughter of warriors...and kings?"

Ever since the ambush on the gath camp near the Western Village, and after getting to know her, Akin saw she wasn't after command or rank. She wasn't competition to him. He recognized she was of sound and honorable character, and was solely and genuinely focused on stopping the enemy.

He had great respect for her, and she was a worthy warrior. Though he'd never tell her, he'd been looking forward to riding into battle with her again.

The comradeship between them burned hotter as Jada held his gaze.

"Akin," she replied, extending her hand, "son of generals...the honor would be all mine."

It was light enough for her to see Akin didn't bother trying to hide his smile. He shook her hand before she turned and looked around, eyes narrowing.

Since the wild horses were nearby...

She gave a sharp whistle, and a whinny answered not a second later. He galloped out of the mist with the silence and appearance of a glimmering phantom, silver one moment and then gray and shadowed the next.

Akin gawked, and his horse moved away a few steps as Zohmar stopped beside Jada and tossed his proud head.

"Enough playing around," she told her charge as she jumped onto his back. "There's a fight to be won."

Zohmar snorted and pawed the ground.

Then, turning north, Akin and Jada sent their horses galloping over the smoldering hills and to the next battlefield.

They reached it quickly and assessed how things were unfolding.

Friendly warriors were holding their own and fire kept the two secondary camps separated. But the enemy was more stubborn than their counterparts that had just been annihilated further south.

As the pair approached, they also saw a number of fellow riders were in the process of passing east to west, to divide the enemy lines in half.

Akin and Jada didn't check their horses, but let them gallop straight on. They didn't need to confirm with each other that they both planned on cutting south to north, to further confuse the dark ranks.

Taking advantage of the distance they still had, Akin and Jada took up their bows. They spent almost every remaining arrow they had from their quivers, and each shot was true, as if guided by some unseen hand.

In the final strides, they took up their blades...and then their horses charged into the fray, unafraid and filled with fierce wrath. Akin and Jada themselves were consumed with the fire of battle, and they punched through the enemy and cut them down like weeds.

As more riders and warriors arrived from the southern campsites, the weaker the odds were of the enemy even escaping. Zohmar and Jada raced about between the two camps and began to see more familiar faces.

Namor, now on his horse, passed by every now and then, and Jada spotted Uri and Zev several times on the ground going toe-to-toe with their foes.

Gabriel and Ida, along with their elven companions, were easy to spot on their sleek and lean horses as they floated over the battlefield.

The rising sun, clear and bright, was finally shining through the trees as Jada slowed Zohmar to a stop. The pickings were getting pretty slim as the remaining gath and dark soldiers fell one by one.

That was when she saw Michael silhouetted in the morning light and beheld him in action for the first time.

He was taller than the average man, even though he was only a few years older than Jada. His size and obvious strength alone could be intimidating. This was proven true as she watched the two gath he was approaching with long strides take a few steps back.

Unlike the intensity that set itself on Blake's face and in his eyes when he fought, Michael's expression was stern, yet confident, but not overly so. He carried himself like one who had great authority, like an heir of mighty rulers. He was also relaxed, seemingly certain that his skill was superior to those of his foes.

And he gazed at his enemies like a great lion might a scrawny trespasser on his land, for the look on his face read something like, "you were stupid enough to cross me, and now I must go out of my way to kill you. What a nuisance."

Michael's strength could easily rival a chimera's, and he drove against the two gath. He did not move with great speed because this occasion didn't require it. Instead, he remained relaxed; he'd get to each of his rivals in due time, so why rush?

With his power, he quickly wore down his two foes and then with a sudden burst of speed and a final swing of the sword, he fell them both.

Turning in a slow circle, Michael checked to see if any more enemies wanted to challenge him. That's when his gaze met Jada's a short distance across the battlefield.

In that breath, as she held those deep and stormy blue eyes, Jada knew he came from a royal bloodline and would sit enthroned one day in a great city.

It made her wonder what he was doing there, mingling with lesser folk like herself.

Then he grinned in typical cheesy Michael fashion. It went with the pattern she'd seen: the bigger the guy, the more jovial and teddy-bear like they are. That's how Michael was, except, of course, when he was in battle.

Against Jada's bidding, Zohmar jogged over to him.

*No, no, no* she thought to her horse, *what're you doing?*

Zohmar shook his head and swished his tail in response to his rider's sudden tension.

"Morning, Jada," grinned Michael. "Fancy meeting you here."

Jada snorted a laugh. "I know, small world, right?"

She surveyed the scene of the fight and took in all the bodies. "It's going to be a long day of cleaning up."

Michael nodded at something behind her before his grin returned. "I think your parents have other plans for you."

True enough. Glancing over her shoulder, Jada saw her parents riding towards them. They didn't appear like they'd been fighting all night and instead looked refreshed, like after a good night's rest.

"Come, Jada!" said Carla excitedly as her blood bay stopped beside Zohmar. "Commander O'Brien has some urgent business for us and we must leave now."

Jada looked at Zohmar and started to ask, "But what about—"

"Garador will find his way home," assured John, knowing her thought.

"Don't worry," said Michael with a nod. "I'll look after him for you."

"Oh, uh...thank you," stammered Jada, taken off-guard by his offer.

"We ride north with all haste," said Carla, still fired up from the battle as she turned her horse.

"Causing mayhem and havoc amongst the ranks of the enemy seems to be what you've been made for," chuckled Michael to Jada, his blue eyes twinkling as he extended his hand.

Jada grasped his hand and her stomach tightened when their hands met. But it wasn't as a result of sudden romance or anything like that.

It came from the way she viewed herself in comparison to Michael. Not only was he an heir of rulers, but he also had a strong character, much honor and deep loyalty. He was like a great commander who warriors were naturally drawn to and held in awe and with the deepest respect and admiration.

*So why would he mingle or even acknowledge the existence of someone like me,* she thought. Jada saw herself as a commoner, if that, plain and no one special. Surely, he should be spending his days in counsel with Halden or even in the courts of the high king Eliadar. Not there, on the battlefield and in the middle of all the gruesomeness of conflict.

She managed to hide the shudder that ran through her as their grasp broke and she turned Zohmar.

Jada and her parents cantered around the edge of the field. They passed O'Brien, Erez and several other commanders who were debriefing.

Namor and his brothers were nearby. When they saw the three, they drew their swords and raised them, in gesture of respect and acknowledgement of honor and valor.

Then, gaze on Jada, Akin brought his right fist, the one holding the sword, across his chest and rested it over his heart.

Truly, Akin was now to Jada what Namor was: an honorable, skilled and trustworthy companion, one who she respected and could rely on.

She just hoped that one day she'd be the same to them.

As she cantered by, Jada drew her sword and reversed the gesture to the group, first touching her fist over her heart and then extending her arm.

When the trio directed their horses north, Jada sheathed the sword. They then picked up speed and shot through the forest as the sun continued to rise, bright and blinding.

It seemed the higher it rose, the more Jada felt her strength restored and the fire for fight return.

Now, she thought as Zohmar cleared a fallen tree and passed glistening through the woods, *time to cause some mayhem.*

## **Chapter 31**

### **Causing Mayhem**

Near noon Jada and her parents met with a group of other spies, most of whom she recognized from Chugach.

After grabbing a quick bite to eat, they traveled to a secret storage unit and replenished weapons. But they didn't carry much as far as provisions because their advantage was in speed.

Fortunately, training and running with the gang at the Western Village had long accustomed Jada to this.

Through the afternoon they rode with great speed and were mere shadows in the corner of the eye of every other living creature. For their horses made light their footfall and sounded no whinny or even a snort as they galloped ever northward.

Close to dusk, the group slackened their speed and halted, with the exception of four scouts. They disappeared and two returned a few minutes later. The other pair was who knew where.

All the scouts did was nod and the company started forward again.

Over the crest of the next rise was a rocky hillside. Several riders dismounted and pushed aside a large boulder, really a door, and revealed a secret weapons cache of the enemy. Although, by the smell that came from it, Jada guessed there was food inside also...or had been. Whatever it was had long spoiled, unless gath didn't care at all what they ate.

One rider walked inside for a brief moment before jogging out. Taking a torch which had been lit by one of his companions, he tossed it into the cave. There was a loud *whoosh* and then flames erupted from the cave.

Everyone jumped back into the saddle just as the second pair of scouts galloped up.

"The second storehouse is clear," whispered one rider.

"And there are fresh tracks heading northeast," said the other. "The dark company isn't too far."

Without another word, the company took off the way the two scouts had come. Not long after, they came upon a half-hidden wooden shack that disappeared into another hillside. It was ablaze seconds later and then they raced onward, veering more north.

Cool dusk was upon the land when the company caught the first glimpses of a gath squad. They were on the move, and since they hadn't made camp, they'd likely run through the night.

Or would have, if the riders hadn't ambushed them. It was a small squad and only took the company three passes before the enemy was mowed down.

Dusk wore into evening and they attacked two more separate camps, catching gath and men completely off-guard. None had a chance to pose even the smallest threat.

The main company was ensuring there weren't any survivors from the latest ambush when another pair of scouts rode up.

“The supply train is right on time,” reported one, panting from the ride. “Three wagons heading to the dark soldier camp fifteen miles from here.”

Ten minutes later, the trail the supply train had been traveling on was a scene of burning wreckage.

Because the central territory was still largely held by the enemy, Jada and company couldn't risk taking time to commandeer supplies. Plus, they had no need for enemy weapons or what little food they shared in common. Their storehouses were already quite full, thank you.

Besides, they were also using this strike method for the psychological factor. It was a sign that said Southern Forces weren't giving up ground easily, knew where enemy squads were, where they were moving and that they could get to them.

It was an interesting experience for Jada to see her parents in action. By themselves they were unmatched by any foe. They were fierce in battle and had a quick and decisive way of fighting that she recognized and appreciated.

But together, side by side, they were unstoppable. Knowing how one another thought, they knew how their partner was going to maneuver beforehand and could adjust accordingly. It was almost like a dance, their strikes and counterstrikes complimenting each other and in perfect rhythm as they fell one enemy after another.

None could stand against John and Carla, or escape, and there was a light in their expressions that burned from a fire deep within their souls.

During the attack, Jada kept to the fringes to ensure no one tried to escape, and it allowed her to witness her parents in battle.

It was both terrifying and inspiring. She respected them more still and thought herself honored to be their daughter.

Barely fifteen minutes had passed since the ambush began, and now broken and burning wagons, long relieved of their horses, lay in ruin on the trail.

The company regrouped off the path, back in the shadows where everyone took a quick breather.

Zohmar suddenly raised his head and gazed east, ears forward. He stood statue still a few breaths before nickering quietly.

Then came a familiar piercing scream. It was in the distance, but still cutting in the quiet night air.

“Looks like the wild horses got the jump on us this time,” said one of the riders with a faint smile.

“One final strike tonight,” whispered Carla to Jada.

The light from the nearby flames made her mother’s hair burn deep red like the richest sunset as her green eyes danced with feisty light. In that moment, she seemed to Jada a queen of war who’d left her castle and was waging battle against her enemies.

And Jada’s dad seemed to her, for just a breath, a king as he sat upon his dark horse and gazed with utmost intensity into the east. There was fire and wrath in his expression that was frightening, even to his daughter. For the king had gone with his queen to war against enemies who had stolen lands they had no right to even tread on and had slain people who had done no wrong.

Jada didn’t think of herself as poetic, but that’s how she saw her parents, as if she caught just a glimpse of them as they really were.

Then the company rode east, still as silent as shadows as they passed through the darkness.

The enemy squad had been in motion when the wild horses came upon them, and they were in total disarray when the company charged in. Between them and the wild horses, it was like landing a one-two punch.

Those who tried to escape were quickly trampled, shot or struck down. One small group of gath who’d been near the front of the squad took off into the trees.

John and Jada galloped side by side after them. An arrow whistled through the air and the first gath fell. Glancing left, she spotted her mom closing in fast.

Father and daughter reached the fleeing group first. One each fell beneath their horses and another pair under their swords. Behind them, they heard Carla fall one more.

They’d turned and were cantering back to the main scene of the ambush when a flash of movement drew Jada’s attention.

A lone survivor was scrambling up a steep embankment.

Zohmar leapt after him as Jada drew her tomahawk. Her horse powered up the incline and charged after the gath. He was half a dozen strides away and closing when Jada threw her weapon. It found its mark in the enemy’s back and he fell face down onto the ground.

After retrieving the tomahawk, Jada rejoined the unit. Everyone was accounted for and only had a few scrapes and scratches as far as injuries went.

They turned back south, but moved at an easy pace this time.

Riding between her parents, they each slapped a hand on Jada's shoulder.

"You've had a busy day," said John, and she heard the smile in his voice.

"Yeah," she yawned, "we'll have to cause more mayhem again tomorrow night."

## **Chapter 32**

### **Revenge**

"Five hundred holding a region of the south-central territories were slain," reported one of the gremlins. "All of them wiped out, including the four chimera leading the regiments. The assault was planned well and we didn't suspect a thing."

A second spy hopped up and down before giving his news. "Two storehouses were burned to the ground, in addition to the dozen we lost within the past month. Hundreds of weapons and pounds of food gone!"

"That's not the worst!" blurted a third. "A small band of horsemen attacked four separate squads, man and gath. It's the same band responsible for the two storehouses, we're quite sure. They also had help from the wild horses!"

Cassius settled his dark gaze on his intelligence advisor. "You assured me we could hold the central lands with little trouble, especially after Grimm's success in aiding the troops there."

"Obviously the enemy spies have been at work," replied the advisor, a man of darkness himself. "That doesn't include these units of horsemen who strike without warning and then vanish."

"And I finally have some answers about that subject," came a response from a small, dark shadow that swooped in through the window and into the main meeting hall.

"It's about time, Klaus," grumbled Cassius, as the gremlin landed silently on the table the group was gathered around.

"It was worth the wait, my lord," replied Klaus with a quick bow. "I assigned a vast number of spies across the central lands and the South to remain strictly hidden to watch only. If anything vital information was overheard or seen, then were they permitted to leave and report to one of my lieutenants."

He scuttled over to one of the maps and pointed out the areas he referred to in his report. "After the last disastrous attack, we were able to confirm some riders that were part of the initial assault on the five hundred are indeed responsible for the two storehouses, three supply wagons, and the slaying of the four squadrons. We now have their identities and know a number of them are part of the spy network that was infiltrating our human camps and gathering intelligence."

His black eyes glinted as he looked at Cassius. "And we have their locations, the towns they live in. Some of them are travelers, and two of the top enemy agents are husband and wife...and we recently learned they have a daughter."

"Is she the lone female traveler responsible for thwarting ambushes in the South?" asked Cassius.

"We strongly believe so, yes," nodded Klaus. "For the sake of Grimm and his lost warriors, we've also learned the identities and locations of the young group of warriors the lone female traveler used to run with in the Western Village."

Cassius rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So the theories that certain traits run in family bloodlines is true. Skill in stealth and being chosen to be a spy...and being put in the right places at just the right moments to overhear sensitive details..."

This had to be the work of the God of the high king, doubtless.

It made Cassius' blood burn hot like fire, but he'd already had a plan in mind for when the identities of these loathsome spies were discovered. It had been inevitable. Even if identification had taken decades and these people were old and retired, that didn't mean they'd escape the consequences for their actions.

For darkness and evil were exceptionally vengeful and would never stop searching for those who thwarted and warred against them.

"Work with our units that are in the area," said Cassius. "Coordinate a strike on all of these spies and their families, if they have any. Move on each target at the same time, so they can't warn each other."

Darkness and sick satisfaction crossed his face. "Wipe out their bloodlines and put an end to their household names. Then there will be no progeny from their lineages to cause us trouble in the future. Obviously, surveillance and counterintelligence runs in families...and we can't have any more of that."

Cassius eyed the maps. "Grimm should still be in the area. I'm sure he'd be more than glad to help."

He turned to Levian, who was leaning against a dark corner. "What of our own deceivers planted in the courts of Halden and Ambrose? How well is their poison working?"

"Slowly, but effectively," answered the demon prince. "My forces report the men are allowing themselves to drift."

"I also want to make sure that the spies we're targeting won't have the slightest bit of warning that we're coming for them," said Cassius with a look.

"They'll be tired from all the running around they've been doing," replied Levian, unconcerned. "So I doubt we'll need to keep them or their guardians distracted from what we're planning. Still, I'll have my warriors keep a close eye on them, now that we know where they are. We'll make sure no one and nothing tips them off."

Cassius looked back at Klaus. "Go now, and be quick. The sooner we execute this plan, the more likely we'll catch them unaware. Then we'll be able to carry on with other business."

Klaus bowed before taking flight and leaving the room, followed by his fellow messengers.

Even if one or two enemy spies survived, it'd make little difference if Halden and Ambrose continued going as they were. With even one of the wisest men no longer in the light, or better, aligned with the dark king, that would spell disaster. Who could the people then turn to for help and instruction? No one, except for the high king, but he was so far away. By the time any aid he sent arrived, the peoples would be dead or enslaved.

So really, with the way Cassius saw things, it was a win-win situation for him.

*In just a few days time, he mused, smiling as the thought came to him, the spies, their families and their friends will be receiving a lesson on revenge.*

## **Chapter 33**

### **Massacre**

The morning was cool, cloudy and blustery, and the air had a crispness in it that hinted at the approach of fall. Some of the trees were finally turning gold, red and even purple.

Five days had passed since the attack on the large enemy camp north of Chugach. Momentary quiet had come to the land as if it were catching its breath after all the excitement.

Jada had messaged Reagan the previous day to let her know the knife was finished. She'd replied that the only thing she and the others would be doing was going to the training grounds.

After breakfast, Jada decided to set out for the Western Village. Her parents had left earlier for a meeting with Commander O'Brien and the others. So, she left a note telling them she hoped to be back by dark.

Zohmar was absent again, and she wondered if he'd finally discovered his masculinity and was chasing mares.

If that were the case, Jada figured she might have to have him gelded.

Garador, however, was grazing at the back of the house and jogged happily over to her.

Upon the initial return from the attack, he'd actually pouted and pretended to ignore Jada for a few days. But apparently he'd finally forgiven her for riding Zohmar to the secondary battlefield, and for the blitz attacks, instead of him.

She'd just finished tacking Garador and was swinging up when she heard a voice ask, "You're not going to go stir up more trouble all by your lonesome, are you?"

Jada looked up to see Michael approaching.

"No," she smiled. "Just delivering a gift to a friend is all."

"Oh good," he grinned, continuing his way up the road. "Wouldn't want you to have all the fun without me. We'll see you tomorrow morning for training, right?"

"Unfortunately for you, yes," answered Jada as she nudged Garador forward.

She could still hear Michael's deep laughter as she and her horse cantered down a side road and then into the woods.

Garador and Jada made good time and reached the Western Village mid-morning. She stopped by the southern paddocks first, to see if Connor or Reagan were there. They weren't, but Eleanor was.

"They're at the training grounds," she said before asking. "Have you come to visit for a few days?"

Jada smiled. "No, just to deliver Reagan's knife."

"Oh...well, you ought to come stay for a few days. I know the others in the group would love to have you around again."

*She must just be being extremely polite,* thought Jada.

"I would've thought you'd enjoy the peace and quiet," she replied with a grin as she turned Garador.

Eleanor laughed and waved before Garador lifted into a jog.

A short time later, they approached the training grounds, and Jada felt her heart begin to beat faster in anticipation of seeing her friends. She was surprised at herself and hadn't realized how fond of them she'd become.

The clashing of swords was carried by the wind and the sound of laughing voices. Moments later, Garador and Jada crested the little rise and reached the large clearing.

A few of the group jumped at their sudden appearance.

"I knew she'd come!" exclaimed Reagan, before slugging Connor in the arm.

"I'm looking for a group of troublemakers," said Jada, leaping from Garador. "Or...I mean, skilled young warriors."

She couldn't keep from grinning as she and the gang exchanged handshakes and slaps on the back. It was good to be connected to such a group and encouraging to Jada that she could make friends with fellow peers.

Everyone was in the middle of excited conversation and laughing when Jada stepped over to Garador and removed something wrapped in cloth from the saddle.

With a smile, she handed it to Reagan. "Here you are, as promised."

The girl drew an enormous gasp when she unwrapped the knife in its custom-made scabbard. Her eyes couldn't have gotten any bigger as she took in the fine etching of the knife's hilt, the design of the guards and the way the sharp edge gleamed cold in the light.

Just like when Merida had told Jada that she didn't help people because she expected something in return, it had been the same with Reagan and the knife. Even if she hadn't offered anything in return, Jada still would've made it.

Just the look on her young friend's face and seeing how much she liked the gift was payment enough.

Without warning, Reagan threw her arms around Jada in a tight bear hug. Then she leapt away and said in a stream of words, "I know I never got a chance to repair Balo's headstall before you left and all, but I made a new one for your horse, Zohmar! It's nice and soft, like it's already broken in. I'll give it to you when we get back to town!"

Jada just laughed. "Alright. I can't wait to see it."

The chill came then with a sharp gust of wind...with an eerie howl riding on it. In the distance, the group heard an alarm raised in town as another howl was lifted up on the gales.

Ida's bow sang as she loosed an arrow into the trees. Connor's answered a breath later and the body of a gath rolled onto the edge of the clearing.

Yet another howl echoed through the trees and told them the owner of its voice was drawing closer.

That's when Blake charged in on horseback, the neck and chest of his tawny-colored horse dark with sweat and eyes wild with fight.

"An attack squad of men and gath are striking the Western Village," he panted, sword drawn, eyes scanning the area. "And the rest of Grimm's pack is with them."

A large gray wolf raced out of the trees and lunged at Gabriel. By the way the beast had its head turned as he slid to a stop, Jada thought for a horrific moment that he'd clamped his jaws onto her friend.

But it wasn't so. Gabriel had stepped toward it and stabbed it through the shoulder with his sword.

The wolf whined and snarled before Jada strode forward and ran her sword through its chest.

Chaos followed. Dark soldiers and gath were spotted approaching swiftly through the trees and several shot arrows at the group of young warriors. All the while, howls danced upon the rising wind.

Gabriel, Ida, and Connor were answering the archers as the group ran for cover.

"Garador!" shouted Jada and spun in the direction of galloping hooves.

Her tiger dun was still trotting when she jumped into the saddle and right as a black arrow just missed her back.

They bounded into the trees and swung around, keeping easy on the speed while Jada tried to pinpoint where her friends were.

She spotted a few of them ahead and to the right, where the heaviest cluster of enemy was massing. Fire fed by urgency to defend her group burned hot in her and Jada sent Garador into a swift canter.

He weaved through the trees as Jada picked up her bow, recently purchased, and set her first arrow.

A black arrow whistled by her head and she returned fire, killing the enemy archer. She picked off two more in the rear of the unit before securing the bow and taking up her sword.

Asking Garador for more speed, they charged right for the middle of the squad.

Blake came from the opposite direction and they plowed through the group.

Their horses trampled or knocked down several, matching the number Blake and Jada slew with the sword.

They reached the end of the line when Garador leapt sideways as another arrow just missed Jada.

“Good eye, boy,” she breathed, as they circled around on the steep incline.

Garador reacted as Jada saw the shadow in her peripheral and lunged forward with a powerful thrust of his hindquarters.

Another gray wolf missed the pair and ran into a tree. Growling in anger, it scrambled to right itself and sprinted after them.

Garador continued straight and followed the ridge downward as Jada shortened the reins with a knot. Then she drew her tomahawk and glanced to see how close the wolf was.

“Get ready,” she said to Garador.

After taking a few breaths, she shifted her weight back and pivoted her hips.

Garador reacted perfectly. He slammed on the brakes and performed a beautiful rollback. The move built torque as Jada swung the tomahawk and its edge landed with a sickening crack into the wolf's skull.

A pair of arrows from Gabriel ensured the wolf was dead.

Garador half-reared as more black arrows flew past. Leaping over the wolf's body, he cantered behind a thicker stand of trees.

Jada's eyes searched for her companions and finally spotted Connor, Gabriel and Reagan. They stood back to back as they finished off several gath, just inside the trees at the edge of the clearing.

There wasn't time to try and spot any others, because several dark soldiers tried to ambush her from behind a stand of oaks.

Garador veered sharply to the left, which put him in perfect position to land a kick to one of the assailant's chests.

While he did that, Jada swung her tomahawk and caught another dark soldier in the neck.

Garador lunged away from the rest quickly, though she received a nice gash across the back. It would've been deeper if she hadn't been wearing her armor.

The three remaining enemy were stringing their bows as horse and rider ducked into thicker tree cover. They wove through the oaks, to come behind them, but it turned out they didn't need to bother.

Namor and Gabriel ambushed the three and would undoubtedly have the situation contained shortly.

Garador and Jada were approaching the pair when she spotted a flash of black through the trees behind her friends. Seconds later she saw the enemy archer, taking aim.

There wasn't time to take up her own bow, barely time to think. Regripping her sword, Jada threw it like a spear as Garador shot out of the trees.

The blade sank deep into the dark soldier's chest and he collapsed where he stood. She retrieved the sword in passing and was drawn to movement on the far side of the clearing.

Blake was cantering out of the trees when a brown wolf lunged straight for his horse. Jada didn't know how they avoided the hit, but the tawny gelding lurched back and reared to full height.

The wolf just missed, and for a breath Jada was afraid the horse would go over backwards completely.

But Blake carefully shifted his weight and his horse returned all four hooves safely to the earth. That was before his mount proceeded to cow-kick the wolf in the flank before it had a chance to make another leap.

Arrows from Connor and Reagan found their marks in the wolf's side and haunches.

Jada didn't have time to aid them because a sword nearly took her head off.

*What the...*

A dark soldier on a black horse nearly rammed squarely into Garador. The tiger dun pinned his ears and squealed with rage. With the speed of a serpent, he swung his head around and chomped on the bridge of the black horse's nose.

The dark soldier deflected Jada's swing with the tomahawk and halfway dodged her swipe with the sword. The blade caught his shoulder and side of his neck.

Garador jumped sideways to provide a little distance and then took off northward. They galloped across the border of the clearing and the black horse stayed hot on their heels.

At the edge of the clearing, and the flat top of the ridge, they cut west. As they dropped down a short incline, Jada saw flashes of movement further down the ridge to her right.

Gael was below on a narrow flat, battling with two gath. Jada had seen her in action before and knew she'd resolve the conflict shortly.

Down a short incline and then up a steep rise Garador charged. Jada could hear their pursuer close behind, but here the terrain was rougher, and she was confident her mount had the slight advantage.

Her confidence was well-founded. Garador was sure-footed, navigating and scaling the rocks and rough hillside like a mountain goat.

He leapt up a short rise, and then stopped and kicked the black horse right in the head.

Jada took the opportunity to strike at the rider.

As predicted, he blocked her sword, but the swing from the tomahawk separated the two blades and drew a red line across his forehead.

Garador jumped away before the dark soldier could counterstrike.

At last, the ground leveled off and a brief chase followed. They cut through the trees, along the top of the ridge. An arrow just missed Jada's head and sank into a pine as they galloped past.

Growling with irritation, Jada secured her sword and tomahawk and then took up her bow. After checking the path in front of them, she twisted in the saddle and strung her bow.

The rider ducked her first arrow, and she had to wait several agonizing seconds before she was able to take another shot. The second arrow clipped his shoulder, but she had no time to fire a third.

She returned her attention forward when Garador whickered. She was glad he did, and it had been a warning of a fallen tree ahead. He floated over it with the grace of a deer and cantered on a few strides before ducking left.

An arrow grazed the back of Jada's shoulders as they turned, but it was only a minor scrape.

Near a thicket, Jada pulled Garador to a stop and listened.

The dark soldier atop his black horse had slowed his charge and now she could hear soft hoof beats approaching.

Jada still had her bow and drew another arrow and set it on the string.

The enemy continued to come nearer, and she heard the horse's labored breathing. Moments later, she saw his shadow appear, and she nudged Garador sideways.

Mindful of his own hooves, he picked them up and carefully set them down, so as not to make any rustling.

*Smart boy*, she thought as she pulled the arrow back.

They continued to drift sideways. The black horse's tail and rump came into view, and after another step by Garador, she could see his side and finally shoulder. He was standing with his near, or left, side to her, as she'd hoped.

The first thing Jada did was shoot the horse, and it was an instant kill shot.

*Sorry*, she thought.

The horse dropped, and the rider never had a chance to figure out what was happening before an arrow struck and killed him.

Turning Garador, he and Jada galloped back to the clearing with all haste. Everyone was still breathing and conscious, though they all had their share of cuts. Connor had a nasty looking gash on his shoulder, and Ida her back, but nothing that required urgent medical attention.

This took thirty seconds to fully assess before Jada asked, "Where's Gael?"

Everyone glanced around a moment, but she wasn't there.

Grumbling, Jada spun her horse and sent him galloping for the side of the ridge. Gael wasn't on the narrow flat she'd been on not minutes ago, though there were two gath bodies.

Jada was studying the tracks when the faint sound of clashing swords was brought to her by the upward flow of air.

She nudged Garador, and he didn't hesitate for even a breath.

The side of the ridge was steep, and he did more sliding than anything else. When they hit somewhat flatter ground, he picked up the pace.

Adrenaline and a fresh burst of anxiety surged through Jada and made her heart pound faster. They drew nearer to the fight with every stride, and she finally saw glimpses of Gael through the thicker trees.

From what she saw, three dark soldiers had her in a semi-circle, with her back to a steep rise, too steep and moss-covered to climb.

The trees were soon too thick for Garador to pass between, so Jada dismounted. After buckling her sword and sheath into place, she picked her way as quickly and quietly as possible through the trees. Skirting the clearing, she snuck up behind the three men.

Actually, there were four. The last dark soldier stood a dozen feet from his companions with a crossbow in his hands. It seemed he would either wait for a clear shot, or for his comrades to wound Gael before killing her.

Anger burned through Jada as she drew an arrow. *Not if I get you first, jerk.*

The three engaged with Gael didn't even notice their companion behind them collapse. He fell, just as a snarl of pain came from Gael.

Jada stepped into the gloomy clearing in time to see her friend drop to a knee. Blood ran from her face, and she had deep wounds on her shoulder, side and leg. Fire was in her eyes as she glared defiantly at the dark soldiers, but her body was breaking down and couldn't follow her orders to get back to her feet.

Jada completely understood.

The soldier on the left brought his arm back to deliver what would've been the final blow when a tomahawk found its mark in his spine.

The other two spun and one immediately fell under Gael's sword, using the distraction to her full advantage.

The final dark soldier and Jada strode towards each other and swung at the same time. He wore down quickly, mostly because his duel with Gael, and a little because Jada as supercharged with protective fury. It and the adrenaline gave her added strength and speed to her strikes.

He never stood a chance, and the fight didn't last ten seconds before her sword punched through his ribcage.

Gasping in pain and for breath, his knees buckled as Jada glared down at him with disdain.

"No one," she seethed, "messes with my friends."

Her knife to his chest finished the ordeal, and he collapsed.

Quickly, Jada secured her weapons and then knelt beside Gael.

"Nothing...too deep," she panted.

"One thing's for sure," answered Jada. "You'll have new scars to brag about. Come on."

Before she could argue, Jada slung Gael across her shoulders and started through the trees. A short distance away Garador stood waiting.

Mounted reinforcements from town met them in the clearing and escorted the group back to the village. It took them nearly an hour to reach the Western Village, which bore fresh wounds of its own from the attack. Gael, Ida and Connor were taken to receive immediate attention, and a number of others met at the north end of town to debrief.

The report of how the ambush unfolded was strange. The assailants hadn't killed everyone in sight, nor had the wolves. They also hadn't torched anything.

That was about when reports from neighboring towns came in, and the message bearer was none other than Phoenix. There was great concern in his eyes as he landed on Garador's neck as he stood by a small, unlit bonfire.

"While your town was being attacked, several others were at the same time," he said. "It was just like here: the attackers weren't interested in leveling everything."

He slouched a little. "So far ten people have been killed..."

"Do you know their names?" asked Jada.

Phoenix had only given four when she interjected. "They're all from the intelligence network. I rode out with them following the attack on that large enemy camp north of Chugach..."

"This isn't about taking new territories," nodded Jordan. "These were specific attacks, pointed counterstrikes."

*Revenge.* The word rang loudly in Jada's mind.

Icy fear grabbed her as she snapped her gaze to Phoenix. "Has Chugach been hit?"

"I, I don't know," stammered the owl. "I didn't pass there..."

Jada's heart thundered against her ribcage as wild panic took her. Dread clenched her stomach into the tightest knot it had ever been.

Phoenix flew to the ground when she jumped onto Garador.

"Wait, Jada," called Merida.

Jada didn't look at her, or Jordan or anyone, and Garador scampered into a mad gallop as another icy gale rolled through town.

They flew past Blake and his horse. She thought she heard him call after her and turned his horse to follow, but she wasn't sure.

What she did know was that no one caught up to her and Garador, and they made it to the outskirts of Chugach in under an hour. The afternoon was dark because of the low, thick clouds, and the sharp wind continued to tear through the trees and across the hills.

They approached from the south and when they were minutes out, they could hear the sound of a skirmish. As they drew closer still, they saw the flickering of flames.

Jada eased Garador's speed and took her bow. It had been a good idea, because a pair of gath appeared from behind a stand of oaks. Both fell seconds later.

They made for town, and once more Jada asked her faithful mount for more speed, and he willingly gave it. He was lathered with sweat, but he pushed his legs onward.

An arrow zipped past them.

Eyes locking onto a dark soldier, Jada strung her bow and answered his shot. The arrow flew true and he fell.

As they reached the actual town borders, she thought her heart would jump out of her chest. Various buildings were on fire and flames were being shredded by the gusts. The first bodies appeared around the next turn, gath and human, dark soldiers and her fellow warriors.

They flew by houses she'd known belonged to spies, and all their residences were ablaze.

Garador raced through town, and they'd just reached the square when he suddenly tripped.

No, he didn't rip. He collapsed, and Jada was thrown from the saddle and onto the unforgiving ground.

Jada had to lay there a long moment before she halfway got her air back. With a grunt, she rolled and pushed herself to her knees...

"Garador?" she asked in a whisper, as shock took her. "Buddy?"

She crawled forward to her horse, who lay unmoving...with a black arrow sticking out of his chest. They'd shot her horse and dear friend, her brave little tiger dun who ran his heart out for her every time she'd asked. Never once had he hesitated, no matter how dangerous or stupid a stunt she'd asked him to perform.

Jada ran her hand down his sweaty neck and onto his shoulder as wind, both sharp from the storm and searing from the nearby flames, whipped over them.

"I'm so sorry, boy."

Tears burned her eyes as she removed the sword from the saddle and then staggered to her feet. She stumbled down the street towards her house as rage and despair consumed her. Yet panic was still the most overwhelming emotion, because the more bodies she passed, the more concerned she was about her parents.

Jada was nearing the house when she found Eric, bloodied and bruised. At first she thought he'd been fatally wounded, because he was on his knees. But...he'd only been sitting beside the body of Chastity.

Many enemy lay around her, gath and men. However, there had been too many and the attack had come without warning. Several people appeared beside Eric, and Jada forced herself forward.

It didn't make sense. Chastity hadn't been part of the intelligence squad...but again, neither had Connor, Reagan or the rest of the gang at the Western Village. This confirmed a targeted attack, backlash, a counterstrike by the dark enemy.

People ran by, some carrying buckets of water, others medical supplies. All the while, the wind continued to tear through town, making the fires writhe. The low clouds above reflected the reds and oranges of the flames being stirred by the gales.

Near an alley that led to the house, Jada came upon Anna and Tav. She was sitting on the ground, with Tav crouching beside her. Before them lay the body of Collin, Anna's little brother, and Jada felt her soul groan.

By the time Jada reached the top of the incline at the far end of the alley, she felt like she'd just run a hundred miles. Part of it had to do with the fact she'd been thrown from her horse and her body, especially her head, was aching. Most of it though, was from shock and rising grief.

In the darkness of the late afternoon, Jada spotted the bodies, near the house, which was engulfed in fire. The first body or two were gath, then a dark soldier and another and another.

Jada jerked to a stop after she'd passed amongst some fifteen bodies. There before her were two more, and beyond them another dozen enemies. But the pair in the middle of it all...was her parents.

There they lay, close to one another, John and Carla, who'd spent nearly half their lives together...and then died together. Both had been pierced with arrows and struck with many deadly wounds, and their blood ran down the street.

It seemed in his final breaths, her dad had dragged himself a short distance and reached and taken her mom's hand in his. And she'd wrapped her hand around his in return.

Jada fell to her knees and covered her mouth with her hands to stifle the cries as her heart wasn't just torn—it was completely shattered.

How, why did this have to happen? They'd been taken from her once, and she'd faced much torment in their absence. When she came here, to this dimension, Jada had learned they were alive. But she'd had to wait for what felt like an eternity before they were together again. Finally, they'd been made whole, their family complete and all the pain and turmoil from previous days had been forgotten.

Now...this.

Taking a few deep breaths, Jada glared up at the heavens somewhere beyond the stormy sky.

*How cruel*, she thought, and then pressed a hand against her aching forehead.

If she'd just stayed and hadn't gone to the Western Village...

*I would likely be dead, too.*

She huffed with contempt, *and that's a bad thing?*

Jada forced herself to look at her parents' bodies one more time, and that's when she noticed just how brutalized they'd been. One, maybe two of the deeper wounds would've been enough to kill them, but this was...excessive.

Jada didn't want to leave them, but her parents were gone now, and she needed to check something.

With effort, she pushed herself to her feet. Forcing her legs to work, she walked down the road. The next fallen warrior she came to, she noticed he also had been brutalized in a gruesome manner.

That's when it struck her: the bodies had been hewed and maimed *after* the kill.

Fiery rage burned to life at this great disgrace and Jada let it consume her. Perhaps it came because what soul could handle so much grief? How could a person think about beginning to heal or even process everything?

One could only cry so much before tears no longer came. Jada knew.

But fury, justified or not, made her feel alive and strengthened her tired body.

"Zohmar!" she shouted into the raging wind.

Turning in a circle, she called for him again and then gave a shrill whistle.

With all the emotions burning impossibly hot in her soul and as her mind darkened with fury, a quote came to her.

It was from *The Return of the King*, after the king of Rohan is found fatally wounded on the battlefield. His nephew, Eomer is made king and even in the moments after the king dies, he also sees Eowyn, his sister, nearby. Thinking she too was dead, he is briefly overcome with horror and grief. The king, like a father to him, had been killed, his sister seemed to be dead, and now he'd been made king of a dying people. Then, not waiting for the rest of the company, he turns and sends his horse charging back towards the lines of the enemy with the enraged cry, "Death, death, death, take us all!"

That's what Jada was thinking, what her very soul was screaming, *Death, take us all!*

Her steed appeared out of the approaching evening, his coat glowing red from the flames of the fires. He jogged to her and stopped with a low whicker.

“Jada...”

Looking over her shoulder, she saw Michael a dozen feet away. He was streaked with blood, mostly the enemies, though a deep gash ran along his upper right arm.

Her eyes met his stormy blue ones, which were filled with sorrow and anger. But he remained composed, and he was steady, calm.

*Sorry, thought Jada, aware of the sword in her hand as her fingers tightened into a fist around the hilt, but I don't come from royal blood, so I don't have as of high standards for myself as you do. I'm just a commoner, a plain warrior...who no longer believes in a code of conduct, or mercy or...anything.*

“Don't go,” he said, searching her face.

Jada held his gaze before turning and swinging onto Zohmar. Sensing her wrath, he pinned his ears and danced on his toes.

“Jada...”

“Find them, Zohmar,” whispered Jada to her horse's twitching ears. “They killed Garador, killed my family and have maimed the bodies of fallen warriors.”

The colt shook his mane, spun north and leapt into a gallop. Somewhere behind the clouds the sun was making for the western horizon, and the entire sky began to burn in deep gold and oranges.

Jada and Zohmar reached the border of town, and then passed through the trees and into the darkening forest.

## **Chapter 34**

### **Digging Graves**

What remained of the squad that massacred Chugach wasn't far from town, still on fire. They were moving at a good clip northward as the color of the sky deepened to an impossibly rich orange and faded to crimson near the horizon.

Beneath the sky, the forest was being ravaged by the angry wind and the grass that blanketed the hills was flattened under the gusts' wrath.

Jada and Zohmar came upon the rear of the company as darkness continued to fall. The first gath fell by an arrow and a breath later his companion tripped and didn't get up. Because of the wind, the others didn't hear the bodies of their comrades' drop to the ground.

Six had fallen before Jada set yet another arrow on the string, pulled back and took her shot. The arrow disappeared into the air and then sank into the neck of the dark soldier at the front of the pack.

By the time the company halted and looked around, horse and rider were cutting around the edge of them. The gath growled and the men shouted to one another as arrow after arrow fell their unit.

They were looking east, where the arrows had been fired, when Zohmar and Jada galloped at them head-on from the north and passed down their western side.

Four more men and gath fell by her sword, edge glinting in the failing light and glistening with crimson and black.

Archers shot wildly as Zohmar dodged back into the trees. But no arrow came close, thrown off course by the wind.

Cutting through a small clearing, Zohmar regained speed before finding the trail again and charging down it. They struck from the rear that time and moved forward.

Those who couldn't get out of the way fast enough fell beneath the hooves of the warhorse while the rider's blade and tomahawk fell even more.

Zohmar veered left before any arrows had a chance to reach him and Jada.

From what she counted in the growing dark, the squad had been reduced to a dozen, if that.

Jada eased Zohmar, whispered a command to him and then jumped down.

Her horse swung around and galloped in one direction while she jogged in the other.

The forest was dark, but the sky above was still bright and the trees were silhouetted against it. Thus, the light reflecting off the clouds provided just enough visibility to locate the remaining squad.

Jada literally felt nothing as she approached the first dark soldier. He was looking the other way, drawn by the sound of galloping hooves.

There was no more fury in her now, no more grief, no cold apathy. There was simply nothing left in her soul.

The first soldier fell without a chance to defend himself. He hadn't given the people he'd just killed the opportunity to protect themselves. So why should she extend that courtesy to him?

His companion turned and met Jada's blade, but he'd fall in a few meager blows.

Her sword sang as it turned away the blades of the enemy like they were nothing, and her tomahawk broke the swords of men and gath. It left them with no weapon, but she wasn't going to show mercy or stay her attack.

They were all killed, one, sometimes two at a time, and at last, the final dark soldier was killed.

Jada turned and paced around the scene of the fight, the bodies of the enemy spread before her. Weapons covered with the blood of her adversaries, she searched the dark forest for more challengers.

But there were none. The only movement were the trees bending in the gusts, and the only sound the wind passing through the branches.

Finally, Jada stopped and let her weapons fall from her hands. Cold pierced her then, and she was brought somewhat out of her daze. She was breathing hard, and her body was reporting pain, intense aches and exhaustion. But she remained standing, barely able to move now that she'd stopped.

Jada had known taking vengeance wouldn't bring her parents back, and she knew she should've controlled herself. But like heck she was just going to let those responsible get off free and clear.

A person reaches a point where they just don't care. They don't care about what happens to themselves.

In the back of her mind, as she gave chase to the attack squad, Jada had hoped they would've killed her, too. She would die, be put out of her misery and be finished with this terrible existence.

But it hadn't happened that way.

Jada had heard that when you go out for revenge, you have to dig two graves: one for the person you're after, and one for yourself.

Well, she had gladly dug her own grave and only needed someone to throw her in it. Yet there she was, still standing. Instead of the enemy slaying her, she'd killed them. Death, it seemed, wasn't interested in her for the moment.

Zohmar walked out of the trees and stood beside her with his head lowered. Whickering softly, he gently touched his nose to her cheek.

It was a gesture to offer comfort, but Jada didn't react or move.

So he stood with her quietly, at her side so as to shield her somewhat from the icy gusts.

Jada wasn't sure if it's possible to fall asleep on your feet, but she must've dozed. When a shiver brought her back to alertness, she realized she'd dropped to her knees.

She didn't know how long they'd been there when she heard Zohmar shift his weight and whicker. Seconds later, she heard a lone set of hoof beats fast approaching.

Zohmar whinnied this time, loud and clear, to give the rider their location.

A horse snorted when it reached the edge of the carnage and stopped. The rider dismounted and then lit a short torch they'd brought with them.

"Jada?"

She recognized that voice, but her tired mind couldn't put a name to it. Either way, she didn't look over to see who was approaching.

The rider reached her quickly and knelt down. A hand gently rested on her shoulder and she shuddered, but still didn't raise her gaze.

"Are you hurt?"

She didn't answer.

"Jada, please," said the voice, now thick with concern. "Will you even look at me?"

He brushed the hair out of her eyes and rested a hand on the side of her face as he leaned forward, to try to get her attention.

Jada blinked out of her stare and met Blake's eyes. He'd followed her from the Western Village and upon reaching Chugach learned which way she'd gone.

Worry and sadness were in every line of his face as he looked Jada over. "Are you hurt?"

She gave a feeble shake of her head. She knew she had some cuts, but there wasn't anything serious. Her head was killing her, though.

Zohmar whickered gently and again touched his nose to the side of her face.

Another gust of biting wind ripped through the forest, and a fierce shiver ran through her. Blake stuck the end of the torch into the moss and then tore off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Jada wanted to say that she was fine. She wanted to push herself to her feet and show she wasn't weak or helpless. But her body couldn't do it. It was worn out, not necessarily from the fight, but from the aftereffects of great grief and rage.

And she wished Blake would go away, partly because of what she'd done. She didn't want him to see the bodies, see the slaughter, the end result of her choice to seek revenge. It wasn't that she was ashamed. Just the opposite: she wasn't. She knew she should be, but...she didn't care about anything.

The other part was that she just wanted to be left alone. Why had he bothered coming all the way out here, anyway?

Blake knelt in front of Jada and again put a hand on her shoulder, to keep her from falling over.

"Can...would you please answer me?" he asked, voice strained. "Or at least say...something?"

Silence fell between them a long moment and the trees creaked in another gale.

"They're gone, Blake," Jada said quietly, voice flat and hollow. "My parents...they're dead."

Admitting it awoke the agony in her soul, and she winced.

"I know," he whispered.

An intense ache washed over Jada and nearly stole her breath away. She doubled over, with her hand over her heart.

That's when Blake put his arms around her and gently pulled her against him. She tensed a moment but didn't resist. Leaning against him, she buried her face into his shoulder, so he wouldn't see the silent tears that were again running down her face.

He murmured something, but she didn't catch what it was as he stroked her hair. Just the mere sound of his voice was soothing.

Jada knew they should be up and moving, headed back to town. But she was just so tired from the cold, and being against Blake with his arms around her was warm. And in resting her head against his chest, she could hear his heartbeat, steady and strong.

Her eyes slowly closed as drowsiness tugged forcefully at her. There on her knees and leaning against Blake, she drifted to sleep to the sound of his beating heart.

## **Chapter 35**

### **Cavalry**

Cassius stood on the large balcony that overlooked the stable courtyard. Searing wind whipped around the mountain and tore through his hair and at his clothes.

He didn't notice. He was focused on the black clouds over the mountains on the opposite side of the wide plain that spread before the city.

The dark king had just received reports regarding the attacks on the enemy spies in the South, and the news put him in a rather good mood. Finally, something had gone right and serious threats to his troops had been removed.

Granted, one or two spies had survived, but that was to be expected. It would take the forces in the South and central territories considerable time to rebuild their divisions of field operatives. Plus, they'd also have to deal with the fact that Cassius's warriors would be more on alert now for such people.

A scorching gust blew past Cassius, throwing grit and dust at him. Lifting his face into the wind, he took a deep breath.

Lightning flickered in the clouds and a deep rumble of thunder answered.

Klaus plunged out of the sky and glided to the ground beside Cassius, because there was no railing on this balcony.

"I bring news that enemy forces in the South and East have joined and are going to make a push for the central territories," reported the spy. "They're going to breach the weakest line of our troops and push north."

"Let them," replied Cassius. "Tell Milosh and the other chimera leaders to pull secondary forces and reposition them so they'll flank the attackers when they break the line. We'll allow the enemy to be drawn in before we surround and kill them. You can also assure my commanders that I will send out regiments of horsemen. They should reach the territory before enemy forces make their move."

"It'll be as you say," nodded Klaus.

The winged gremlin had just taken flight when footsteps from inside the meeting hall approached.

"Sir, the riders are ready," reported the tall rider in dark armor as he stopped beside the king.

"You must ride with all haste to the central lands," answered Cassius, keeping his gaze forward. "Enemy forces will soon be moving against our troops and I want you there to counter the offensive. Don't waste time on any towns or villages you pass. Leave them for another time."

"Yes, sir."

It wasn't a minute later before the balcony began to shake. Sharp whinnies of anger echoed over the courtyard and the mountain itself seemed to tremble.

Then the first riders, adorned in black armor, rode out on their dark horses from the stables. They charged through the courtyard and down the main road, passing beneath the balcony where Cassius was standing.

The thrill of the sight sent a chill through him as he watched horse after horse gallop towards the southern gates. They snorted, they shook their manes and fierce light gleamed in their eyes, for they were going to battle.

All the riders sat quietly, for they were skilled in mounted combat. Though their armor did not reflect any light, the edges of their swords and axes did and glinted brightly.

Mounted regiments from other stables throughout the city converged outside the gates and galloped across the plain like a river of black.

Cassius watched until the last rider had disappeared into a passage through the mountains. Turning, he looked eastward, towards the city of light as a haughty expression twisted onto his face.

*Will you send aid to your people and the towns that have been laid to ruin, he thought to the high king and huffed through his nose with disdain, I won't hold my breath. You've left them to their own, something you've done much as of late. You're afraid of defeat so you're choosing to take no action at all.*

The dark king shook his head and scoffed. *So much for the king who is supposedly deeply concerned about his subjects. Will you leave your forces in the South and East to be slaughtered? Will you offer no resistance?*

No response came.

*You haven't been outside your walls in years, goaded Cassius, and have doubtless lost your skill in warfare. Don't worry, I'll save your kingdom for last, so you can watch your people across*

*this realm suffer and be destroyed. Finally, with all your allies in smoldering ruin...we'll come for you.*

## **Chapter 36**

### **Progressivism & Peril**

Halden and his eight advisors sat around the broad marble table in his chamber. It was one of those days when his appearance was especially haggard.

Among the most wrenching news he'd received was of the assassinations of a number of spies in the South's intelligence network. He'd known each by name and sight, but now all of them were gone, slain by Cassius's forces.

Only three had survived, one of them being Jada. He could only imagine the anguish she was now in and it made him sick. However, he'd known that's how things would end or had a good idea. Knowing Cassius, it had only been a matter of time before he'd found out the identities of the spies. Also knowing the dark king, he'd order their executions swiftly.

But the spies had known the risk right from the beginning and had accepted it.

Still, there were other matters facing Halden and his counsel.

"The last intelligence reports say Cassius's forces are moving southeast," said Roark, Halden's foreign intelligence and defense advisor, "to fill the gap made by the attack on the camp of five hundred. But forces from the South and East will break through that line long before they reach there. We're relatively certain we can hold that territory."

"What about movement by the renegade groups in our outlying borders?" asked Halden with a sigh.

Every fall and in preparation for winter, lone groups of nomads were known to sneak in and steal from storehouses, or just outright attack a settlement and then take provisions. It also wasn't unusual for a single or small unit from these groups to slip into large cities and resort to thievery. In some ways it was easier to steal food and items in a populous town because there were more people to blend in with and disappear amongst.

In either case, knowing these nomads were active understandably made the local inhabitants uneasy.

Roark sifted through some parchments in front of him. "Four of the ten known groups have been seen in settlements to our east and north. Numerous witnesses in eight towns confirm they've been hit by the nomads."

"And as usual," jumped in Rafael, the recognized law master concerning laws among all the peoples in the entire realm, "our closest neighbors are wondering if Asgarod is going to deploy any military forces to patrol their areas, to either deter further thievery or catch the nomads responsible."

"Exactly correct," nodded Roark. "It's the same cycle we see over and over every fall and winter. If these nomads were actually part of an enemy army, then of course we'd deploy troops to drive them out. But these are local issues."

"You've assured me time and time again," said Halden, "that the forces of Asgarod have offered to help train the people of these villages in defense and combat."

"Yes, and only a handful come here for that training," replied Roark.

Halden exhaled a long breath. "So, essentially they want us to fix their problems for them, when it'd actually be more productive, and a deterrent to the nomads, if the people learned to defend themselves. Then when the nomads discovered their soft targets have become hardened, they'd go elsewhere."

"Precisely."

"And the topic of thievery carries right over to a developing matter here in Asgarod," said Keegan, advisor of affairs in Asgarod and all major metropolises in the South and West. He and Roark worked closely together and often brainstormed problems and solutions on local and foreign matters.

"Local law enforcement has reported an increase in burglary," he continued.

"If I read your reports on the matter correctly," replied Halden, "you showed a strong correlation between a decrease in harvest production and the increased incidents of larceny and burglary."

Keegan nodded. "It's not that there isn't good crop harvest, it's that there aren't enough workers. Or, I should say, people *willing* to work and labor. A number of offenders who were captured in the act openly admitted they knew that if they accepted a position on one of the farms, then they'd have more than enough produce."

"But they didn't want to work for it," concluded Halden, with a mild expression of distaste, "and would rather resort to criminal activity."

"Also, the offenders who own shops in the city have either shown no increase in production of their own goods or services, or a decrease," finished Keegan.

"They're getting lazy, but at the same time they're restless," mused Halden, half to himself. "This time of year we see an increase in crime in the city. Everyone tends to get restless after winter and being in close proximity for extended lengths of time, but the season hasn't even started yet..."

"It's all part of a cycle," sighed Raphael, "that comes with the changing seasons."

Halden ran his hand down his face. He held counsel with all of his advisors on a monthly basis and it always exhausted him. The meetings were typically an all-day affair, and they'd been in discussion the past five hours.

The weather didn't help much either. For the past five days, low clouds had pressed over the city and the hills and had been spitting drizzle in random fits.

Upon hearing Raphael's comment, Halden smiled tiredly. "Do I hear the voice of your assistant in that statement, Raphael?"

Raphael smiled. "Perhaps."

He tilted his head towards Christopher, sitting to his left. "He has a sharp mind, asks the deepest questions and has a unique perspective of looking at things."

Christopher smiled feebly. "Advisor Raphael flatters me. I only have keen insight into the obvious."

That earned smiles and a few chuckles from the others. The tension eased some and the weight that had been settling over the vast chamber lifted.

"I do have a question, though," continued Christopher. "If I may?"

Halden leaned back in his chair and extended his hand. "Please."

"This is strictly out of curiosity," disclaimed Christopher, raising his hands a little, "and more of a theoretical question. With this matter of local thievery: we know there's plenty of work in the fields to still be done, and needs to be done before winter arrives, or we'll lose valuable crop. Now, we have these offenders, who we have on record as not contributing to the good of the city. But, as I've read the reports myself, over half the thieves are non-contributors, and by their own admittance, are just being lazy. As punishment, could it not be suitable to detain and put offenders to work? It seems contradictory, that people are growing restless, yet they don't want to work."

Christopher shrugged a little. "Although that isn't unusual with humans. Sometimes we don't even know what we want, or in other situations when we merely become bored, we resort to destructive or foolish behavior. In any case, wouldn't labor be a good solution? At least, a temporary one?"

With some effort, Halden straightened and then leaned over the table. "In some cases, yes, labor and making restitution is a suitable punishment. It does work for some people and is an effective deterrent. But for others, it only makes things worse, and they come to resent you or law enforcement. At the heart of it, though, we can't *make* an adult do something they truly don't want to. As I just stated, forcing people into compliance can produce more harm than good."

His keen gaze took in his fellow advisors. "Plus enforcing such sentences far oversteps our bounds as advisors, to tell local law enforcement what to do and how to run their organization. That is, of course, unless they are clearly overstepping their own powers."

"Is it overstepping?" asked Keegan. "For the sake of maintaining order? There's nothing inherently wrong with stepping in from time to time."

Raphael was subtly nodding as his companion spoke. "Granted, we're only advisors and not enforcers. But to agree with Advisor Keegan, there isn't anything wrong with stepping in occasionally, and there are instances when it would actually be wrong to do nothing or to not press a matter."

Halden was tired, but his mind wasn't any less sharp. He studied Raphael a moment and then Keegan, before his eyes flitted to Christopher. The high counselor then steepled his fingers and let his gaze drift to the table as he fell into silent considering.

Several minutes passed before Halden spoke. Even if he'd sat for an hour in silence, none of the other advisors would've broken his thoughts.

"Does the chief or his captains have any suggestions or solutions to this problem?" asked Halden to Keegan.

"No specific solutions," answered Keegan. "I've been in touch with them frequently the past few weeks and all I know is that the upper management would appreciate a little help right now."

A weak smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Or I should say, they'd appreciate a little more direction and action from the counsel. As previously mentioned, this is part of a cycle, but the destructive phase has begun earlier than usual."

Halden huffed through his nose. "Right, or law enforcement is just tired and wants someone else to do their jobs for them—while they still get paid, no doubt. Is there no interest from other qualified parties in taking up positions of the chief and his three captains?"

"None," replied Keegan, "and there aren't enough personnel in those positions to rotate people in and out, so everyone can catch a break now and then."

"And everyone in our military is smart enough to stay away from work in local law enforcement," added Roark with a wry smile.

That earned chuckles and understanding nods from the others.

"If I may point out," said Rafael, "that Ambrose, your counterpart, is also leaning towards a role of increased authority and action by himself and his advisors in Kolanthel. They're facing similar problems and have agreed it's the best action for now, and their local law enforcement is welcoming the change."

Halden pinched the bridge of his nose and then leaned back in his chair again. "It will just mean more work for all of us, and I don't want everyone in this city thinking this counsel is going to solve all of their problems and take care of them. Last I checked, the majority still believed that each person ought to carry their own load and earn their keep by working with their hands. Sometimes the best course is to do nothing and let things balance themselves out."

A shadow had fallen over Halden's face as he spoke, and an uncharacteristic coldness glinted in his deep blue eyes.

*Dear Almighty,* he thought, *I'm so tired of dealing with all these people.*

Maybe it had to do with the spreading darkness of Cassius and his forces, or maybe it was coming from another source, but a weight had slowly been pressing against Halden. Dark thoughts had more frequently been attempting to occupy his attention, and feeding the contempt he was developing towards the people and all their petty little problems.

Halden was also fully aware that this was a ploy by the enemy to wear him down. Heavy and shadowed weight was on him and his thoughts, but he couldn't shake it.

That itself was highly troubling.

"How about the high king?" asked Keegan. "His city has maintained relative peace during his reign. What kind of structure and laws has he upheld?"

Raphael only shook his head. "I've sent such inquiries to him many times and have asked for guidance...but I've received nothing from him for nearly six months."

Roark gave a faint nod. "Our intelligence network has also mentioned there's nothing but silence from the North. We haven't received a single piece of news for over a year, yet we hear reports from all the way to Cassius's borders, just across the great war plains from the high king."

At the mention of Eliadar, a shaft of indignation speared through Halden's heart. It was so sharp and strong it nearly literally jolted him.

All eyes turned to him as Raphael asked. "Have you heard anything from the king? Or received any insight?"

Halden merely shook his head. "Not a word for many months, from Eliadar...or the Almighty."

Silence fell over the chamber and each advisors' gaze fell with great disappointment.

In that moment, Christopher was able to see the men as they really were: aged and worn from seeing many lifetimes of man and hearing their endless problems.

He also saw that the advisors themselves deeply wished just a word from the high king. They too needed guidance, needed their own souls revived in these darkening days.

They'd been waiting, too, patiently from the king to send aid or advice. They'd waited...and waited some more, but all they received was silence.

It wasn't just from the high king they'd received no response. The One to whom Eliadar belonged, to whom each of these men believed in, had been silent, also. That was likely the worse torment of all.

To Christopher, it was apparent the counselor and advisors were on a tipping-point of some kind.

It was understandable that doubts would begin to creep into their minds and hearts. They were in a time of crisis and spreading darkness, yet they hadn't heard word from their ruler, or received any answer to their prayers.

Complete silence.

More often than not, when one ought to wait just a little longer, a person will instead decide to act and make things happen themselves, for better or worse.

*For a ruler who claims loyalty and faithfulness to his people, whispered a thought in Halden's mind, he sure has a funny way of showing it. You seriously need answers, especially about turning back Cassius. But where is Eliadar? He hasn't even sent a single message.*

This was followed by, *or how about the Almighty? The very One your soul belongs to. Where is He? Like His most trusted servant, He too is far off and silent, busy with other matters no doubt.*

Halden took a breath to try and calm the rising torrent of emotions beginning to fester in him. He knew he shouldn't listen to such ideas, but he still didn't cut off this line of thinking.

*What would happen if the people learn that the wisest counselor and his advisors don't know what to do? Pure chaos and disorder would erupt...*

*Commit to action, encouraged yet another much stronger thought, it's up to you now, Halden, high counselor of the South. You're just reluctant to take the power and authority being openly extended to you because you're afraid of overstepping. But it's not overstepping if these things are freely offered, and sometimes a firmer hand is needed.*

Halden closed his eyes a moment and lightly pressed his fingers against his forehead, where an ache was steadily throbbing. *Who better to guide and rule than you? Who can match you in wisdom and insight? Taking command is just another phase of being a counselor. The people want change and law enforcement wants you to take control...it's just a new, fresh way of doing things. It's a new direction that hasn't been tried here before and how can you expect to know if this is a sound path if you don't first test it? You can always turn back if you discover it's the wrong road. Finally, you have the opportunity to instill something you've longed for: order.*

The oppressive weight pushed down on him harder than ever before and the pounding in his head increased two-fold. *Eliadar and the Almighty have left you to your own. You can't wait for them anymore, and you've wasted so much time already. It's likely Eliadar has disregarded you by now. He has his mind on more pressing issues than the requests of the counselor who once walked in his halls.*

Halden knew evil was tempting him with contempt and apathy. It would be cold and refreshing after all the pain and hardship he himself had suffered in caring for people, who didn't care about him and rarely heeded his advice anyway.

And what of Eliadar ignoring him and his requests for insight? Clearly, the high king didn't care what happened outside his borders, so why should Halden?

At the recurring thought of Eliadar, Halden let himself latch onto his malice. Ice, colder than cold brought by a chill, washed through him, and he actually shivered.

Quickly, Halden reined himself in. In just that second, the surge brought by malice was empowering, intoxicating...and instantly addicting. But he resisted the next temptation to let it take him.

However, the indifference remained with Halden as he finally lifted his eyes, still holding that cold gleam.

"Begin inquiries with the chief and his captains over what exactly they expect counsel to do," he said to Keegan, "and what and how much power and authority they're willing to give up."

Approval flickered across Keegan's face. "I'll see to it first thing after we're through here."

Normally, the advisors would've been in counsel until after dinner. But it was only an hour past lunch when their meeting ended. They had much to get in order, in preparation for their new duties and power that was likely to be given them.

All matters outside the walls of Asgarod seemed suddenly irrelevant, because Halden and his advisors had to get their own house in order now.

*We'll take things slowly,* thought Halden as everyone stood and began to leave the chamber, *and maintain rule until everyone else can get their heads back on straight.*

But Halden very well knew he was lying to himself. There was a good chance things may not go back to the way they were, if they indeed followed through with this change.

*We'll just have to see what the chief and his men say first,* he concluded as he stepped over to one of the countless windows and looked north. *One thing at a time.*

As for Christopher, he walked to one of the lifts and descended for the ground floor of the tower. Raphael had gone straight to the library and hadn't given his assistant any assignments.

He rolled his neck and couldn't keep a smile from his face. He'd seen the struggle in Halden, and both saw and sensed the darkness that was grinding away at the great counselor.

Although he'd been graced with unsurpassable wisdom and seen many lives, Halden was still flesh and blood. He was still fallen and subject to the same temptations, though he'd long learned to master himself and keep his emotions in check.

Halden had slowly been changing, though. Proof of that was seen in the coldness in his eyes and the trace shadow over his face. No one would ever guess, or believe, that he'd become hardened in heart, or contemptuous, and definitely not bitter. Now, however, Christopher was finally beginning to see the fruits of his slow labor manifesting itself.

Slow was how it had to be and change had to come in subtle steps. As was the way of progressivism.

If Christopher had come outright from the beginning and said, "Just take total control of the city and the people, instigate dictatorship and an iron authoritarian rule to keep all the sheep in line"—there was no way Halden would even entertain the thought. He would've shut down immediately and had Christopher banished.

Someone who sees a bad guy coming at them wielding a crowbar, or in this realm, a battle axe, would know right away something was wrong. Defenses would go up.

However, in the way Christopher had disguised himself, he'd been able to gradually work away at Halden and the other advisors. Like the disease that was spreading across the land so was the poison he'd been planting.

This type of tactic worked on all kinds of things. It worked to get people to do things they wouldn't normally want to do. It worked with destroying marriages, families and communities. It also worked wonders in building figurative walls.

It was all about slow and subtle, brick by brick.

Christopher believed in progressivism only in terms as a control mechanism. It was cleaner than using brute force when it came to overtaking and ruling a town or city. Although that was sometimes necessary to remove opposition. There was nothing more thrilling than knowing when you have an elite and unmatched fighting force on your side.

Thus, progressivism worked in some scenarios but didn't in others. It was just about choosing the right tactic for the job.

Christopher also didn't really care about the wellbeing of Asgarod. He was only interested in using it as a distraction, as a means to pull Halden and the advisors off the right path. He wanted them so focused on a fixed point that they'd be blind and useless in a fight against Cassius. He also wanted them so distracted that they wouldn't even remember to pray.

As for the other high counselor, Ambrose, Christopher personally knew who was playing the deceiver in his courts. She was called Thalia, appropriately named, for she could charm her way into getting what she wanted, or easily convince other people to do her bidding.

Oh yes, Christopher was fully aware of the power of her charm—and knew just how perilous Thalia truly was. She had such a way about her, that just being in her presence was overwhelming, and not merely because of her beauty. There was something else, something about her very being that left a person defenseless and unable to defy her.

More than once Christopher thought she might not exactly be human. Dark, almost mulberry colored hair reached her waist and offset her captivating sky blue eyes. Tall and fine

featured, she could catch anyone's attention solely by the graceful way she moved. Dark and mischief danced in her eyes and she usually wore a faint, coy smile on her lips.

Truly, Thalia could have any man she wanted, though due to her cruel nature, she flirted with and teased them only. Men wanted to be with her and other women envied her and her unrivaled beauty.

Yet she cared for no one and did as she pleased. She was perilous because she could effortlessly slip into whatever role she needed to and so deceive anyone. She too was a con artist and manipulated people without them suspecting her in the least—until she got what she wanted and vanished.

Killing, too, definitely wasn't out of the question.

But even if Thalia returned to someone she'd previously offended, they were unable to be angry with or ignore her. They knew she'd just use them again, but they couldn't deny her, much to their torment.

However, she didn't manipulate for the reason Christopher did. She didn't gain any particular fulfillment from it and saw it merely as a game. In her cruelty, she found it fun to topple those who saw themselves as the most powerful, cunning or wise. As she fell them, she laughed at them all with ice and malice in her eyes before going on her way.

She also cut throats with the same demeanor and without conscience, and found it amusing to play Death's emissary whenever the mood was on her.

Thalia traveled wherever and whenever she wanted, never settling because she was truly wild in spirit. She preferred the wilderness and hills over the more modern conveniences of a city, and seemed to be carried by the wind, whichever way it blew.

Christopher distinctly remembered the first time he saw Thalia, and the memory of it never faded from his mind.

He'd been traveling from Welsh to a neighboring province and had had to make camp overnight. It was late and the moon was out, bright and full, when a noise stirred him from sleep.

Sitting up, he'd listened for a second before the sound came to him again. But it hadn't been a sound; it had been a song, eerie and haunting as it carried through the trees.

Christopher had been instantly entranced by it, for the voice that sung the sad melody was heavenly to his ears. She'd appeared seconds later, gait easy and free as she crested the top of the hill. Her hair shone in the moon as it outlined her features and made light dance in her eyes.

If Thalia had told him to cut his own throat or leap from a cliff, he would've done it.

In short, her power and treachery couldn't be emphasized enough.

All that said because Thalia was the wolf in courts of Ambrose. Christopher had known her plan of attack on him. She'd gone in as an innocent assistant, plain and simple, with no romance angles. There she'd whispered her deceit in his ear, and as the meeting with Halden had shown, it'd worked.

Ambrose was taking up more power in the city he held counsel in. Of course, lust for power was his weakness. That, coupled with the high possibility his defenses had already been weakened just by Thalia's presence, and he didn't stand much of a chance.

Knowing her, once she saw her poison had taken, Thalia had probably suggested Ambrose resist the urge to take more power. That gesture likely would've removed all doubt from Ambrose's mind that she was false. What deceiver would try and sabotage their own goal? One who was confident of their con and wanted to remove all doubt by the target that they were fake.

If things continued to progress as planned, eventually Halden and Ambrose would fall and clench dictatorship. With an iron rule, they'd repress the people, not just within the city, but in outlying regions, quelling any resistance. No longer would they be advisors, but dark rulers who unleashed their long-contained contempt towards the stupid little people.

Also, in the misperception that the high king had abandoned them and that they were isolated, the two counselors would abandon their king and strengthen their bond and form a solid alliance.

Christopher would have to wait for further orders to learn what came after those events transpired.

Of course, once the two high counselors made alliance, that meant he and Thalia would likely have to keep each other up-to-date on what was happening. The possibility of that contact made Christopher's stomach tighten.

Yet he couldn't help but shake his head and smile over the lingering hold she still had on him.

*Thalia*, thought Christopher as he left the citadel and walked out into the moist air, *a perilous beauty. Although...next time we meet, we'll test and see if anyone truly can defy you and your commands.*

## **Chapter 37**

### **Asset**

The afternoon was growing late and dusk was coming early to the southwestern lands due to the low, thick cloud cover. The air itself was still and humid, and one would never have guessed it was supposed to be fall.

They came upon the town in total silence. The settlement couldn't have had more than fifty people, but it would serve their purpose perfectly.

The ambush squad, each man cruel and stern-faced, converged on the town from all directions. They kicked in doors of the houses and dragged the residents out onto the single, broad dirt road that cut through town. The people were thrown to the ground in two rough rows, as tall, dark-armored guards stood menacingly over them.

The whole ordeal didn't take twenty minutes. After the houses were thoroughly searched to ensure no one else was hiding, the commander walked along the front row of prisoners.

Some huddled close to one another in fear, others glared defiantly while still more simply sat and awaited their fate.

With a glance from the commander, ten of his men standing at the far end of the row drew their weapons and killed ten of the residents. The visible reaction that came from the remaining villagers brought a sick smile onto the dark leader's face. He could've had his men kill everyone at once, but he enjoyed instilling the fear and dread of impending doom on his prisoners.

Death was inevitable, and they'd have to wait for it to finally take them.

"I don't know about the rest of them, but I think you and I might be able to strike a deal."

The commander's dark grey eyes snapped to the man sitting in front of him and at the end of the row. He threw a look at the next group of men, who drew their swords and killed the next ten people.

He then returned his gaze to the man.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he answered thickly with a strong voice.

The man raised his left arm, and there around his wrist was a braided leather band with a small stone set in it.

The commander's eyes narrowed before he reached down, grabbed the man by the throat and jerked him to his feet like he weighed nothing.

"I wasn't born yesterday," he growled. "For all I know, you could've just killed a traveler and taken that band off his corpse."

The so-called traveler gasped and tried in a futile effort to loosen the iron grip around his neck. "You know travelers' bodies...disappear from this realm when they're killed...so...there's no way...could've taken it. I could prove...I'm a traveler, but there's no knowing...when or where I'd...turn up again."

The commander didn't show on his face whether or not he believed the man. He merely studied him with some amusement as he attempted to pull his hand away.

"Come on," grunted the man. "My boss...in oth...other dimension needs...Cassius to succeed."

Still eyeing him suspiciously, the commander released the traveler.

Simultaneously, the third group of prisoners was killed.

He had at least a head of height on the traveler and the commander took a step closer, so he could tower over him.

"Even if you are a traveler, that doesn't mean I trust you any more," said the commander with some disgust. "I don't trust people whose loyalty can be so easily bought."

The traveler raised his eyebrows before glancing at the growing number of bodies in the road.

"It's not like I'm selling it for a bowl of soup," he retorted. "It's my life we're talking about here."

"Before we go any further," replied the commander, as the fourth group of prisoners was killed, "what kind of assurance can you give me that you won't go off and report the location of my squad to the nearest enemy troops? How can I be sure you won't betray me and my men?"

The traveler's hazel-grey eyes glinted with a darkness that the commander recognized immediately.

"Because, in my dimension," answered the man with a crooked smile, "I'm not one of the good guys, either. I promote war and bloodshed and level entire towns...if someone pays enough. I've actually been quietly trying to help Cassius's forces along ever since I first showed up here a few years ago. "

The two men studied one another as the soldiers around the last nine prisoners drew their weapons.

"Tell me," said the commander, "why is it so important to your boss that the dark king succeeds?"

"Allow me to explain how things work between our two dimensions..."

The commander slapped a hand on the traveler's shoulder and the two of them turned and slowly started across the road.

Behind them, the last of the prisoners were slain.

"What happens here, in Aurora as you call it," began the traveler, "directly affects what happens in my dimension. If Cassius's plot to take more control succeeds, then my boss's plot advances to the next stage. But if Cassius fails, my boss fails. Everything is tied together, victory and defeat...and my boss needs his plan to go through."

"That's all fascinating," said the commander as they stopped. "But that's still no reason to keep me from killing you."

The traveler looked at him with distaste. "Come, commander, I'll be your spy. I'm a traveler, and I don't think anyone in this dimension has entertained the possibility that one of us would be on the side of Cassius. They'll automatically trust me, and I can go on my way and gather information, or whatever you want, and report to you and the other forces."

The commander, still with a harsh grip on the traveler's shoulder, turned. That's when the traveler noted the point of a knife digging into his ribs. He'd never heard or seen the commander draw it.

Upon turning, the traveler saw the dark soldiers were hauling the bodies away into the woods. Knowing how these squads operated, there was likely a mass grave nearby already dug. They wouldn't burn the corpses because they didn't want to risk the fire, or the smell of burning flesh, drawing the attention of buzzards or enemy patrol squads.

The commander gave a whistle and then glanced at the traveler. "What's your name?"

"Aiden."

A large, brown wolf trotted out of the trees and stopped in front of them.

"This is Aiden," grumbled the commander to the wolf. "He's a traveler who will be working with us. I want you and the others to spread the word around the troops to try and not kill him on-sight. He's an asset to us."

Without a word, the wolf turned and shot back into the woods.

The commander suddenly tightened his grip on Aiden's shoulder, nearly making his legs buckle.

"And just keep in mind, Aiden," whispered the commander hoarsely, "that if I even suspect treachery from you, I'll have you captured, beaten, and dragged all the way here. Then I'll let my men have some fun with you before I finally, and very slowly, kill you. We clear?"

"Crystal," grunted Aiden.

The commander gave a tight smile before releasing him.

"Let's hurry it up," he said to his men as he crossed to them, "and then get settled inside for the evening. Dark will come early tonight."

## **Chapter 38**

### **Life**

Nearly a month had gone by since the massacre and the killing of Jada's parents.

Never before had she known such loss, and she didn't know at what point a person could even begin to grieve. She still found it difficult to breathe and inside she was hollow, dead. She felt nothing in her soul now, for all life and joy had been stolen.

She truly believed that people could die from a broken heart and that one could wither away and perish from grief and sorrow.

Jada wished she could, yet her heart just kept beating.

Blake had taken her back to Jordan and Merida's. When she'd finally woken, she'd found herself in a familiar guest room. Merida had been sleeping beside her, and even in her slumber, her face was worn and lined with worry.

Jada recalled she had prophetic dreams, and distinctly remembered the deep sorrow she'd seen in Merida's eyes upon her parent's arrival. So that first morning, she'd asked her if she'd known they would be killed-in-action.

Merida hadn't had to answer. The pained look on her face had been enough. Obviously, she hadn't known exactly what would happen or when. All she'd known was that even though they'd be together again, heavy darkness would soon follow and that John and Carla would be overtaken by it.

It explained why Merida had looked so sad at the reunion of Jada and her parents. The sorrow wasn't for herself...it was for John, Carla, and Jada.

Still, if she had said anything, it wouldn't have changed the outcome. If the enemy is searching hard for you, there's a high possibility they'll find you sooner or later.

Either way, Jada wasn't angry at Merida. She couldn't be. If Cassius' hit squads hadn't killed her parents, then they would've eventually been killed in battle, by some injury, or just slipped away at the end of their days.

As for the burial of John and Carla, there wasn't one. When the bodies of all the fallen warriors had been gathered, those of Jada's parents weren't there. They'd disappeared, though their blood still stained the ground.

Jada couldn't remember who told her, but that was what happened when travelers died in that dimension: their bodies disappeared. It had something to do with the fact that they hadn't been born in Aurora, and as such, it wasn't where their bodies rested in death.

Jada knew, believed, she and her parents would be together again in eternity...but that didn't help her at the moment, did it?

As the days went by, Jada didn't spend all her time sitting in a dark room. She loathed people who did for months at a time because it was a sign they were feeling majorly sorry for themselves.

That was something she refused to be.

So Jada had resumed chores and did a majority of the heavy labor to be done around the house. Pushing herself hard physically wasn't a form of punishment; it was merely how she chose to get through her day.

She was also still determined not to be a free-rider.

Besides, Jada had once heard that work was good for grief. But she wouldn't know because she didn't notice a difference. While she was functioning perfectly in the physical sense, emotionally she'd wasted away.

Jada went about her business in silence and barely spoke three words any given day. She knew full well she'd withdrawn completely into herself, and she only acknowledged someone had spoken to her by giving a nod. She knew she should be trying to be a little more engaged with others, but it required more energy than she had.

She was one of those people who wasn't consoled. It didn't matter what people said, their words weren't going to bring their parents back. Words never eased her pain, and in fact, did quite the opposite and inflicted more agony.

That was if she'd actually been capable of feeling anything. She'd fallen into a chasm of hollowness and didn't know if she'd ever climb out again.

Jada walked through the woods by herself, like she used to back on Earth, and spent hours milling through the pines and stands of birch and aspen. Normally, she would've been taken by the beauty of their golden leaves and been uplifted as they swirled on the breeze to the ground in a colorful waterfall.

But there was no joy to be found in it now.

She went out at random hours because insomnia had grabbed her so that she slept very little. Sometimes when Jordan and Merida woke in the mornings, Jada was already gone. Other times, she was just getting in, after having spent all night wandering beneath the moon and stars.

Maybe in the back of her mind, Jada hoped to come across some wild beast or a squad of gath so that they'd kill her.

It seemed, however, that all creatures fled from her. Or perhaps, she was kept invisible from enemy eyes.

Nothing minded her, except Zohmar.

At least once a day he found her, whether at the house or in the woods. She'd absently stroke his nose or neck for awhile, before getting lost in thought, and turning and walking away.

For the most part, Jada's circle of friends let her be. They stopped by every few days to ensure she was still breathing, but she wasn't much fun. She had no desire to train, and her sword was gathering dust.

In her ever-optimistic view of people, Jada wondered how long they'd keep coming around before they finally gave up on her.

*It's alright, she thought more than once, leave and just let me fade away.*

All other times when she wasn't working or wandering, she sat on the bench on the back porch, as she was now. There she'd just sit and let her mind wander.

At the moment, she wasn't thinking about anything in particular and was mindlessly playing with her pocket knife, flicking it open and then closing it.

Open, closed, open, closed...

That's when the idea was whispered into Jada's head, *try cutting, that might help ease your suffering. Everyone has at least one vice...*

She froze and the sudden urge came on her then to do it: cut. The lie in her mind assured her it would help her feel better.

She knew that she shouldn't because it was self-destruction, self-mutilation, but the desire was almost overwhelming.

Jada had known a number of girls at school who'd cut, typically on their arms or legs. It was a release or escape, a way they coped with stress and hardship. She'd always thought it was a tragic waste, a vice that ruined natural beauty.

But now Jada had that same desire, no, that need to do it. And she already had a knife in her hand...

*Just one little line...*

That's when she became aware of something touching her arm. She'd completely zoned out and when she came out of her thoughts, she saw Blake crouching in front of her. He searched her face with concerned blue eyes before asking, "You mind if I sit?"

Jada shook her head before folding the knife and sliding it into her pocket.

They sat in silence for some time, just watching and listening to the breeze play through the trees.

Jada wanted to ask Blake outright what he wanted and get it over with, but it'd likely come out crass.

She'd only seen him once since returning to the Western Village, but it was just a glimpse before he was off again. She still didn't know what she felt towards him before the massacre, and she didn't know now because she was void of emotion.

*Come on, she thought to herself, make an effort, even if he likely is here out of obligation and not because he wants to be.*

"I never, uh, thanked you...for bringing me back to Jordan and Merida," she said with great effort.

Jada couldn't bring herself to make eye contact with Blake, but out the corner of her eye, she saw him studying her.

He didn't reply.

"Was there something you wanted?" she asked flatly.

"No," he answered. "I just came here to see you."

That didn't make sense to Jada. If her memory served her correctly, ever since their return from Earth Blake had been distant. He'd barely spoken to her and rarely met her gaze, though she had no idea what his deal was.

His response left her greatly puzzled, and she turned her head, though she still didn't look at him.

"You don't believe me?" he asked.

It was Jada's turn to give no response.

"Friends don't need reasons to see each other," said Blake, "and I'm here becau..."

He cut off his sentence, and Jada felt him fidget beside her. After clearing his throat, he finished what he was going to say. "I'm here because I just wanted to see your face, Jada."

A touch of warmth flickered in her heart, but only for a moment before it was swallowed up by the dark pit called her soul. If she'd been her normal self, she would've flushed a dark shade of red.

Either way, she wished Blake hadn't said that.

After a breath, he continued with, "Well actually..."

*I knew it, she thought, he wants something.*

"I also came here to apologize."

*Oh.*

"I know when we returned from Earth, I withdrew and was avoiding you," he explained.

Jada shot him a look. "Being back there had a greater affect on you than you thought."

Blake nodded. "It did and it caught me off-guard."

She too gave a nod and her gaze drifted to the trees.

"I was also just trying to sort out...some other things and make sure I had my head on right. Anyway, I'm sorry. I was being rude."

At that, Jada turned and blinked at Blake a couple times, as if unsure of what she'd heard. Someone taking responsibility for their actions and apologizing? Who knew?

"Oh...it's okay," replied Jada, once her brain kicked into gear. "Don't worry about it. I wanted to ask what was on your mind, but didn't want to pry."

She managed a weak smile. "I just figured you'd had more than enough of me, after the excitement of the waterfall, and especially after the ambush by that gath squad."

Blake smiled in return and it made his eyes dance. “Never. I enjoy bungee jumping off a waterfall every now and then, for the adrenaline kick. Or if I’m really looking for a thrill, I hunt down and ambush entire squads of chimera.”

Warmth and a touch of laughter again flickered in Jada’s heart and tried to take hold. She noticed, too, the fog that had been over her mind had cleared a little.

Silence fell between them again, and for some time they said nothing.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now,” said Jada quietly, keeping her gaze on the forest. “I don’t...I don’t know how to move on. I go through the motions, but the days don’t get any better.”

She glanced at Blake again. “I feel nothing. I mean, not that I’m the emotional type anyway, or rely heavily on feelings. But I’m just...empty.”

Blake’s expression softened at her confession. “I know, and you wonder when you’ll finally begin to feel alive again.”

He scooted a little closer and leaned forward so he was sure he had her attention. “Don’t try to rush things. You can’t rush healing. Trust me when I tell you that even when you think you’re over the worst of it, there will still be bad days.”

Jada gave a little nod, and he turned his eyes to the trees.

“By the way,” he continued, “the other night I was out late in this area, and I saw someone on one of the plateaus in the moonlight...someone who looked a lot like you.”

There was a question in his tone, and she shrugged. “Probably because it was me.”

Blake sent her a look. “What were you doing out by yourself at that time of night?”

Jada didn’t see what the big deal was, and she didn’t answer to Blake about her activities.

Leaning against the bench and propping an arm along the back, Jada replied lightly. “I couldn’t sleep, so I was out walking. If that’s a crime, then sue me.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I’m not sure when you began to care. And what were you doing out that late, anyway?”

“I was on patrol,” he replied evenly. “So I had a legitimate reason to be out. You shouldn’t wander by yourself, not especially with all that’s happened. We’ve also lost track of several dark squads to the north of here, so who knows where they’ll turn up.”

She blew through her lips.

As a general rule, Jada didn't worry about what happened to herself. As she'd continued to mature and develop, gain confidence in her abilities and became more independent, a rather cavalier demeanor in how she viewed her wellbeing had formed.

In short, Blake could tell her there was an entire chimera army coming for her, and she'd honestly just shrug. Part of that, however, was probably due to the fact she was still dealing with heavy loss.

Then again, Jada had never been worried about when or how she'd die, although she hoped it would be an epic death.

At her response, Blake's voice grew sterner. "Forget the enemy. You're lucky you haven't come across a bear or anything."

Jada's laugh came out in a bit of a scoff. "I can take care of myself, Blake. Besides, I think a bear would be more of a threat than gath."

Distaste formed on his face. "You don't care what happens to yourself?"

Jada pretended to think about the answer a moment, before replying, "Uhm...no, not really."

She eyed him. "And I never asked you to worry about me. It's a waste of time. Besides, like I said, I can take care of myself. I'm not helpless."

She could see Blake was getting fed up with her. "I know you're not."

With a huff, he pushed himself off the bench and set his hands on his hips.

Jada tilted her head at this behavior; she'd never seen such a strong reaction from him.

"It's one thing not to care, but another to purposefully go looking for trouble that will get you killed," he continued, managing to keep his voice even, though it had risen somewhat in volume. "It seems to me that's what you're doing when you're out wandering by yourself at night. If I didn't know better, I'd say you have a death wish, or maybe like...suicide by wild animal."

Jada leapt to her feet, mostly because she'd grown tired of craning her neck to look up at Blake. Actually, she still had to a bit, even when she was standing.

"Since when did you ever care?" she asked, keeping her voice even, though she could feel her patient streak coming to an end.

"And maybe I do have a death wish."

Blake dropped his head a moment, and when he lifted his gaze back to her, she was quite interested in the almost pained expression in those keen blue eyes.

"Don't say that," he said quietly.

Jada realized that in the past few minutes, she'd been livelier than she had since returning to the Western Village. Blake had somehow gotten her to engage and pulled her out of herself, although now he was likely regretting it.

"Why shouldn't I say it?" she asked with dark daring as she took a step towards him.

Jada had the sudden desire to go do something stupid, like lay siege to an entire gath legion.

Someone shocking her with a defibrillator wouldn't have had a stronger effect than going toe-to-toe with Blake. She didn't know what it was about this interaction, but perhaps it was solely just the fact she'd pulled out of her daze.

The suffocating blanket that had been on her soul lifted, and it seemed a dark spell that had been on her mind was at last broken.

Blake straightened and almost took a step back at Jada's advance.

"You're with the Eastern Village defense forces," she continued, "and you train regularly for combat."

Jada tilted her head a little and eyed him a way that made him swallow. "We're warriors, Blake, we automatically have a death wish every time we engage in a fight. Like the horses we ride, we're made for war and conflict. They say 'he who lives by the sword dies by it'...but would we really have it any other way? What better way to die than in battle?"

They stood there, noses inches apart. Then, Blake actually blushed and looked away first. It was then Jada noticed his breathing had become heavier.

She confessed she was rather pleased with herself over getting a rise out of him, even though it might've been wrong.

Fighting hard to keep from smiling, Jada finally stepped back.

"Well, this has been fun," she said, and gave Blake a slap on the arm. "We should do it again sometime."

Jumping off the porch, Jada started for the woods.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She turned and walked backwards as an icy gust tugged at her hair. The sharpness in the burst of wind reawakened the desire to explore and race madly across the mountains, to just get away and go...somewhere.

"Does it matter?" she asked, smile growing into a grin as her cavalier demeanor, with that streak of wild rebel, fully returned. "Anyway, last I checked, I didn't answer to you!"

Jada gave a sharp whistle, the first in weeks. A loud whinny, carried by the wind, answered somewhere nearby.

By Blake's expression, he wasn't amused, and he stood with his hands still on his hips.

She laughed. "Come on. I'm not going to go do anything dumb...right now, anyway. Besides, I don't have any weapons. What am I going to do? Go intimidate gath squads with insults?"

Zohmar charged out of the trees with his tail flagged and nose in the air. Jada called it his Arabian impression, and one he did when he was feeling at his best.

When she jumped onto his back, he arched his neck and then popped in a half-rear. Jada didn't immediately ride off, though, but directed Zohmar to the porch.

They stopped beside Blake, and sitting on her horse, Jada could finally look him in the eye.

"But honestly," she said, "thank you for being here. It takes someone special to draw me out of myself, and you've done that."

Blake just blinked at Jada and her admission, and she found it interesting that it hadn't been awkward to tell him that.

Her words had been true and she'd meant them. As mentioned earlier, she was even-keel emotionally, and she wasn't necessarily feeling anything in that moment.

It was just life returning to her heart and soul.

Just like if it hadn't been for Zander, if it hadn't been for Blake, who knew how long Jada would've remained deep in her mind.

"But," she continued with a faint smile, "I'll never stop wandering. To remain restless and unsettled is what I was made to be, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Here one day and gone the next, driven by the wind."

Her smile grew as she gently rested her hand on the side of Blake's face. "I don't want safe and secure...I want adventure and danger, and I will never stop seeking it."

They held one another's gazes for a long moment. Jada became aware then that the burden that had been on Blake when they'd crossed paths at Asgarod was gone. Whatever had been weighing on his mind was resolved. His eyes were again clear and his calm and confident demeanor had returned.

And it was so. Blake's visit with Halden had offered much needed insight and refreshing assurance and clarity. He'd been correct that his role was changing and that it was directly related with Jada being brought to Aurora.

He was charged with keeping an eye on her during her training phase. As best he could, anyway. Halden warned it would be difficult and extremely frustrating at times. Because of Jada's own role and as she continued to mature in her skills, she'd meet great peril and dance with deep darkness. As such, she'd venture into far territories and out from under protection—which wouldn't be required in the later phases. Thus, there would be times when Blake wouldn't be able to keep up with or watch out for her. Part of that, however, was strictly because she was "high octane," as he'd put it. She only knew one speed, and she was born to operate more as a rogue.

But even rogues needed protection from time to time, and someone to cover their backs.

However, what had been the most frustrating to Blake personally were his feelings towards Jada. But, at last, he'd made up his mind and the turmoil on that issue had quieted.

He didn't know what she felt towards him, but for Blake, he didn't want to be with anyone else. As the months had gone by, instead of fading, that sense and desire had only gotten stronger.

Still, he was uncertain yet how deep those feelings ran, or what he hoped it would eventually lead to. But for the near future he knew he wanted to either be with Jada—or no one, even if that meant he was destined to wander alone for all his days.

*"But be careful and move slowly," said Halden, in all things regarding Jada. "You're early thought of her as a wild horse abused was correct. It will be difficult to earn her trust, and if you aren't careful, what you do earn will shatter completely. Not even I can tell you that, with someone like Jada, if you break it you'll ever earn it back again. The wounds and scars from the days before she came to Aurora run very deep..."*

After Blake studied Jada at length, and realized she was going to be okay, his expression softened again.

"With someone like you," he replied with a gentle smile as he lightly put his hand on hers, "danger is never far away."

Jada signaled Zohmar forward and she let her hand trace Blake's face and slip out from under his hand. Then, in passing, Zohmar flicked his tail at him.

Jada threw her head back and laughed into the next brisk gust that collided into her and her horse as they took off into the woods.

It was her first ride in nearly a month, and she and Zohmar would ride far that afternoon. It was her way of apologizing for pretty much neglecting him in previous weeks.

As they raced along the mountains, he didn't seem to have harbored any bitterness towards her.

They rode and rode, until afternoon gave way to evening and then evening faded into night. It felt good to just get up and go, and feel the wind tearing over her and her horse.

High over the forests and out there in the clear air, Jada was thoroughly convinced that her God had not abandoned her. She'd never thought He had. He knew she'd been fully aware of the rut she'd been in, but didn't know how to get out of it. He'd heard her endless thoughts and prayers as she'd walked through the woods, and had used Blake to break her daze.

Now, at last, as she and Zohmar tore across the plateaus that hugged the mountains, He made her spirit fly on the restless night wind and poured life back into her torn and numb soul.

It was as if He was saying, "time to wake up, little warrior. There's work for you to do."

It was also the first time in a month Jada had the sense, the hope, that everything would be okay.

They'd gallop along the ridges through the deepest watches of the night, beneath the inky sky alight with stars shining brightly in all their glory.

That night, it was just Jada and her horse, as they beckoned any guardian angels to keep up as they flew across the mountains.

## **Chapter 39**

### **Upgrades**

They raced through the woods in all haste. But it didn't seem to matter how fast they ran, their pursuers were always right behind them.

A black arrow slammed into the back of one of the group and the gath pitched forward. A second gath fell a breath later, and then a third.

Some members cut up a rise as more black arrows sank into the surrounding trees. The gath shrieked in terror and sprinted even faster. They crashed through the thick underbrush and had just reached a small clearing when they spotted shadows in the trees ahead.

They stopped and spun, but even as they did, two more black arrows fell a pair of gath.

Sheer panic ensued, and the remaining group scattered. One fell on the edge of the clearing, and a second was relieved of his head when he was mere strides into the forest.

As for the third gath, he slid to a stop as one of the hunters jumped in his path. He wasn't a chimera, but was just as evil and bigger, a massive shadow with darkling eyes.

The gath raised his sword in time to meet the first strike, but the jarring impact nearly wrenched the weapon from his clawed hands.

The air surrounding the shadow was oppressive as it strode towards the gath. The gath itself was overcome with terror and couldn't think to defend himself as the shadow delivered one more mighty swing and killed his opponent.

The fourth and final gath stood nearby, rooted in fear as he watched his companion fall. When the shadow faced him, the gath turned tail and ran. He was literally running for his life and barreled through the woods. He got a bit ahead of himself, tripped on a root and splayed on the ground.

As he was scrambling to his feet, he heard a terrible voice laughing. Throwing a look over his shoulder, he spotted a chimera on approach.

Not looking where he was going, the gath's shoulder rammed into a tree. The force spun him and he nearly toppled back to the ground. He recovered though and in time to slide to a stop.

Before him was a narrow clearing, right on the edge of a sheer cliff.

Turning, he blocked the first swing from the chimera, which had been making up ground on him the entire time. He deflected the next strike, and the third before seeing and opening and jabbing at his opponent.

The black blade hit air as the chimera dodged to the side.

On the next swing, their blades locked over their heads...before a black arrow plunged into the left side of the gath's chest.

The chimera gave a swing and cut off the gath's head before kicking the body off the cliff.

"If you're going to kill your opponent, just kill him," quipped a dark soldier atop a black horse. "Quite playing around."

The rider nudged his horse into a jog. "Back to the starting point!"

Riding by several chimera and large shadows, he said, "And pick up your feet. We don't have all day! The others want a go before it gets dark."

Several miles west was the "starting point" in a small meadow. Surrounding it in scattered clusters amongst the woods were camps of the forces of Cassius.

"What do you think?" asked one human commander to another, as they stood in the clearing and watched the first warriors return.

"They'll be a force to be reckoned with," replied the other. "If they ever focus."

"Alright! Next squad up!" shouted the first commander.

A group of twenty regular gath warriors stood in a line, with eight chimera and menacing shadows a short distance behind them.

"Remember," said the commander, "if you reach the safe zone on the far side of this sector, you live. Or if you kill your rival."

The gath said nothing, looking dejected and rather small before their two types of opponents. They had every reason to be both afraid and put-off, because they were the live targets for their counterparts.

In fact, the dark soldiers, the men, now stood taller than the gath. It used to not be so just months ago, but somehow, the growing darkness had added to their height and strength.

"How come none of your warriors are used in these simulations?" grumbled one of the gath.

The commander appeared in front of him and had him by the throat before he could blink. The power in that grip was astounding, and the gath gasped.

"Weren't you ever trained not to question your superiors?" growled the commander, with venom in his gaze.

"I don't have to answer to you," he continued, tightening his grip even more as eerie darkness fell over his face. "But I will. My men are ten times as strong as you and a hundred times more skilled in every form of combat. Second, every one of us was chosen by Cassius or Levian to be part of his army, and every one of us trained under their darkest and most experienced generals, human and demon alike."

The gath believed it, because he became aware of the darkness that had begun to press around him.

The commander wrinkled his nose in disgust. "But what are you? Spawns of mere pawns, no longer any good for anything...except target practice."

There came a sickening crack and the commander let go of the gath, which dropped to the ground and did not get back up. As he turned, the previous hunting squad of chimera and shadows were jogging across the meadow.

After they were clear, the commander gave the order to move out, and the next group of gath sprinted for the trees. Two minutes later, the chimera and shadows gave way to the chase.

Over the past two months, the regular gath squads were being replaced, upgraded as it were. All gath were now seen as grunts, for the ranks of chimera had been steadily increasing.

Also, compliments of Cassius, a new menace had joined the troops.

How they came to be no one knew for sure, except the dark king and Levian. But they were large, larger than chimera and standing seven feet tall. Not particularly broad, their very beings were surrounded by darkness, giving them the vague appearance of shadows. Their eyes were black as a moonless night, save for a sliver of yellow under where the pupil should be. Their skin was pitch black as if burned, and their armor and blades of their weapons were also black.

The terror they brought on gath alone said something. The human commanders couldn't wait to see how enemy human forces reacted upon being confronted by these shadows for the first time.

Amongst the dark ranks, these new menaces were known as kyros. At least in training, they'd already proven they were worth their weight in gold. But they were quickly becoming bored and restless to engage real foes.

It hadn't been five minutes before the first shrieks of gath were rising out of the woods across the meadow as their pursuers fell upon them. That's when an unusually warm wind gusted from the north and blew heavy mist across the area.

All the ranks, men, chimera and kyros shifted and stood at attention. The horses in the camp whickered as they shook their manes and pawed the earth.

At the next gale they appeared out of a thick veil of mist. Horseman after horseman cantered in, every rider dark and fell, every horse black as ebony. All armor on man and beast was black and coated so as not to reflect light, and there was only the occasional clank of a piece of metal on armor. Otherwise, the dark company was as silent as shadows.

There were fifty horsemen total and they formed smaller squads in front of the foot commanders. These weren't just any horse and rider regiments, and they were only a small number from Cassius's prized cavalry heard about only in legends and myths. The last of the dark king's former mounted units had finally been killed some years before, but they'd been recognized by both sides as terrible and skilled in battle.

It seemed the whispers going throughout the troops that Cassius had been mustering a new cavalry had actually been true.

A few weeks earlier, the commanders had been informed that they'd be receiving mounted forces, but none had realized who the reinforcements would actually be. Both the horses and their riders were shrouded in a darkness that easily rivaled that of the kyros.

The vision that came to the commanders when the riders first appeared was that the horsemen and their mounts had ridden out of some deep and fiery pit. They hadn't been picked from among the ranks of regular men or born from the average wild horse: they'd been spewed out of the shadows of a chasm.

Truly, they were in close contact with some higher rank of evil.

"We come with greetings from the dark king," said the leader of the mounted company, "and are here to aid in the defensive against the enemy driving for the central lands."

The foot commanders exchanged dark glances, before one stepped forward and replied with a wicked grin, "Gentlemen, welcome to the South."