

“Parallel, Book I, Pt. II: Traverse”

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Prologue

Old Journal Entry by Jada Serbin:

I hate waiting. It's ironic that while time truly is of the essence when it comes to stopping evil men, there are periods where you have no other choice but to wait. You have to wait for your target to make a move, and the passage of time is necessary before important events actually take place.

Obviously, since I have time to write I've reached a point where I have to stop and be still. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. It gets worse every time my target and I cross paths. We've already had a bit of a dance, and we've gotten to sink our teeth into each other, figuratively speaking, of course.

But as smart, skilled, and sinister as he is...he's a coward at heart. Whenever he finds himself in a slightly unfavorable position, or it looks like I'm gaining advantage in the fight, he just traverses dimensions. What a pansy. But I'm going to catch him, by Jove. And I don't care if he's protected by Cassius's forces. Light still trumps the dark, and my God can't be defeated.

At any rate, he's flesh and blood. I know because I've made him bleed. Catching him is paramount, both in stopping his activities in Aurora and here in the case the team and I are currently working in Earth's dimension.

And I've been able to clearly see and understand that what happens in one dimension truly affects what happens in the other. Though they're separate places, they're still intertwined.

The more we uncover about him and his boss, and the organizations they're connected with, the more...dismaying? No, appalling, it is? I can't think of the right word. But such massively dark schemes are simply a sign of the times, and I confess I never thought the world would be careening into darkness as fast as it is. I mean, not in my time. Believers such as myself know how this present world ends and what comes after, and I

guess it is an exciting time, really. Yet it's still sobering to see such evil things taking form and succeeding.

All of that only stirs hotter the fire in me and it further sets my determination to successfully complete my tasks.

Although, I have to confess that upon traversing back to Earth...I was somewhat disappointed. Everything here is duller than in Aurora. It's like I'd been living in the world beyond the gray veil and then returned into the veil itself. I'm not having difficulties grasping reality. It's just that this reality in Earth's realm...is significantly blander than all things in Aurora. While I was born in this dimension, I belong in the other, and now upon returning here, I find myself only a sojourner, or observer, in the place where I was originally from.

I do miss everyone in Aurora. I hope I may bring this duel of the travelers to a close so that I may spend more time with my friends, my family.

Michael has especially been on my mind. Not in a mushy way. But my thoughts have been more frequently returning to his situation. I do believe that his time is coming, the time when he finally rides back to his homeland and reclaims his throne, he and his father with him. I also believe the time is nearing when I will be directed to prepare the way for him, to visit his home to test the people and the false king who stole the throne.

At the heart of that whole ordeal, it's the injustice that makes my gut burn.

Yet there is an order to things, and there are other matters that must come first.

And I have to wonder...well, no. Let me start over by saying that there has been a question, a disturbing one I confess, that has subtly been surfacing in the back of my mind. What comes after I do finally catch the traveler I've been hunting? Once I have him and hand him over to the proper people...what then?

I can't get my brain past that point in time, perhaps because we're still in the middle of the chase. But I mean...will my role with the team end? Will they take the reins in somehow thwarting the evil mastermind and his team?

Something tells me that very well might be the way of it. And if that truly turns out to be the case...what comes next in Aurora? I mean, what will my role be there? Is it just more fighting, hunting, and countering forces from Asgard and Kolanthel? What of Cassius? What evil things will he send from his borders, and how will we turn it back and fight it?

There has to be more to my purpose than that, than fighting...and that very statement is what both confuses and worries me. I mean, I've always been content with that role before, and it's all I've known. So why would that change?

But I know there's something more, something...above being a warrior. It feels like blasphemy just thinking that. I mean, really, what could be better or higher than that?

I'm not going to think anymore about it right now. It's too uncomfortable, and I need to return my thoughts back to capturing a dangerous wolf.

While there is still breath and strength in my body, and even if I have to cross the entire span of the Earth or Aurora...I'm going to get him. No target or prey has escaped me once I've set my sights on them, and there is no way in high heaven that that is about to change now.

PART II: Traverse

Chapter 65

Repression

The grey sky threw down sleet in fits and starts. The buildings of the city played hide-and-seek amongst the heavy fog, driven by the biting wind. Although it was cold, the atmosphere over Asgarod still felt close and heavy.

Halden, former counselor of the South, stood on the balcony of the citadel and gazed south. Since dawn, he'd been there, heedless of the sharp and mournful gusts, for his mind too deep in malicious thought to notice the weather.

It was the voice of Christopher that finally broke him from his musings.

"The chief is here to see you, as requested."

Turning, Halden saw him in the doorway leading into the chamber. With familiar arrogance in his expression, a haughty gleam twinkled in the speaker's eyes.

Christopher.

Halden had known full-well who Christopher was, or more accurately, *what* he was, leading up to his turning. Even in the fog over his mind, Halden was aware that the young man was a deceiver and quite likely continuing to play some game.

But still he kept Christopher close. In the wake of his decision to grasp illegitimate rule, Halden had actually made him his second-in-command. The former counselor knew he'd betrayed light and truth. Since he was already walking through darkness, why bother chasing the wolf out of the sheepfold now?

Also, the thought had to yet occur to Halden that Christopher was actually working for Cassius. It was simply one of those things that hadn't crossed his muddled mind.

And it was Christopher who'd been left alone to deal with Halden immediately following his decision to give into his weakness.

As a general rule, the higher the status of the figurehead, the harder and uglier the fall. The adjustment to darkness by such a high-ranking and upright individual was always a bit of a mess, and it took some time for the after-effects to completely fade. Halden had overstepped his bounds and forsaken everything that he'd believed in all the years of his life. All the laws, beliefs, and truths that had guided him, that had become a part of his very identity, were abandoned.

In addition to all of that, he'd betrayed and spit in the face of the one who'd first put him in a position of authority. He'd betrayed Eliadar, his captain and dear friend, and now regarded him with contempt.

The light had been corrupted but hadn't simply faded into darkness. It had *turned* into darkness. While evil could not possess Halden, it could still greatly influence him for terrible and destructive uses.

As Christopher knew would happen, everyone else had kept their distance from Halden for the first few weeks. He'd been in a frightfully dark state of turmoil and internal anguish. He'd paced the chamber nonstop and did not sleep. Heavy darkness consumed his mind and blackened his heart. He ate and drank very little, to the point where he physically began to waste away.

But he hadn't had an appetite, for evil thought and poisonous disdain were what sustained him. Indeed, the scorn and malice he'd been battling had returned full force and stronger than ever. They'd initially been overwhelming, intoxicating, to the point where he couldn't think straight or barely even stand.

It had been unnerving for onlookers, but quite enjoyable for Christopher.

Incidentally, most of Halden's advisors had already been deceived and led astray by time he turned. So now they were wholly under his shadow. But that hadn't meant they'd wanted to be near him during the unfolding of those early weeks.

Christopher had trailed Halden along to the tipping-point. Then, in the aftermath and turmoil of falling away, he was there still.

Because the others did keep away, Christopher had been alone to ensure Halden didn't pull back and return to the light. If any doubts ever arose in the former counselor, or there was any subtle sign that he was wavering, Christopher was there to whisper more lies and deceit to calm the former counselor's nerves.

After those initial weeks, Halden became accustomed to the dark power that surrounded him. It was a relief to him, and everyone else, once he was able to rein himself in, regain control, and organize his thoughts.

As the months went on, Halden's contempt continued to run the colder and deeper. His blue eyes, once warm and kind, were perpetually icy. Shadows followed him. People actually cowered and shrank away from him, for it seemed that the darkness had added to his physical stature.

Perilous he was now, when at one time he'd been a concerned shepherd.

Presently, Halden didn't reply to Christopher as he passed into the chamber. In spite of all the lit lanterns and wall-mounted torches, the room was still dim.

Halden sat at his desk, and Christopher stood off his right shoulder as the visitors were escorted towards him. He immediately recognized the chief and two of his captains from Asgarod's local law enforcement.

The three men were surrounded by eight soldiers from the growing military ranks of the city. Half a dozen strides from the desk, they pulled the visitors to a stop.

"Something on your mind, chief?" asked Halden half-mockingly as he sat back comfortably in his chair.

"When you had me layoff half my staff a few months ago," began the chief in a sharp tone, "I didn't think much of it. But then you had me lay off even more last week. And today when I, and what few men I have left, went to the office we found it overrun by the military. The sergeant there proceeded to tell me that our services were no longer needed."

Halden sighed in a bored manner and leveled a scornful gaze on the chief. "If you truly didn't see this coming, especially after last summer, then it's little wonder why you were never able to maintain order in this city."

The chief's jaw muscles flexed, but he kept himself in check.

"Sir," he said, taking a step forward, "it's not the military's job to maintain local law and order. External dissension by the local villages is one thing, but the military has no right to run things within this city's walls. Has Advisor Keegan agreed with this? And what about Advisor Raphael? He's the law master and has surely voiced disagreement over this."

"Keegan left his advisory role sometime ago," answered Halden, eyes dancing with dark laughter. "He's actually managing the military forces in Asgarod. He works closely with Roark, who is now the chief foreign intelligence and defense officer."

A trace of a smile pulled at his lips. "As for Raphael, he was reassigned to...some place I can't remember the name of."

Halden tilted his head a little as he studied the chief with mocking amusement. "At first it looked like he'd been on board with the...change in management and the shift to ruling. But that didn't prove the case, did it, Christopher?"

"No, sir," replied Christopher with an arrogant smile.

The chief and his captains were greatly unsettled by all this. They hadn't known that the changes amongst the advisors had been on-going. It had been nearly a year since any of them had themselves been in counsel with the advisors, not since the military ranks had been bolstered to quell riots by the surrounding villages.

Or so that had been the story told to local law enforcement. Because every one of the local service members resided in Asgarod, they had no reason to linger outside. They'd also been told that doing so could be risky, until the military had a better handle on the external insurgent problem.

This was the story told to the locals living in the city as well. The military presence wasn't something they ought to be concerned about, and because said military had never harassed any civilians, no one was alarmed by their growing presence.

The attacks "outside" that had taken place over the course of the previous summer were blamed on rogue militants. While they were few, they were well organized, hence the numerous skirmishes that had taken place deeper in the South.

The "militants," of course, had been Southern Forces, warriors loyal to Eliadar. They were the ones countering and driving back the attacks launched from Asgarod and Kolanthel.

The lies to the local law enforcement and the population were simply to maintain internal calm, until key players were prepared to shift to full military control of Asgarod.

Because of all this, law enforcement and civilians never saw any warning signs of the trouble that was now upon them. Any high-ranking officers who had heard anything about this shift hadn't said anything, likely because of coercion.

Understanding slowly spread across the chief's face, understanding about the undercurrent changes in the city, and about the lies and the reasons behind them. He also understood what this meant for himself, his officers, and the people they'd been protecting.

He couldn't help but be impressed, in a disgusted way, at how well the advisors had played the lies and kept the secret of this move to themselves.

Move over, police. The military will take it from here.

"The look of realization never gets old," chuckled Christopher in response to the chief's expression.

"You've disbanded the counsel?" asked the chief with dismay and fear.

"You're only about a year late in figuring that out," sneered Christopher.

"You can't just do that, counselor," he continued, giving Halden a hard look. "You don't have the authority to—"

In a fit of sudden rage, at both the use of the title "counselor" and at the chief's challenge, Halden launched to his feet. He didn't lean over the desk. He towered over it, standing tall and menacing with an eerie darkness in his fierce gaze.

The three men and several of the soldiers gave way a little.

"You're late to this little party," answered Halden with anger and marked contempt, "but I'll humor you anyway. I did and do have the authority, chief. Over a year ago didn't you and your captains ask for the counsel's help? Did you not willingly give up

all your power and authority to execute and secure order in Asgard? You handed it over freely."

Halden scoffed as he regarded the chief. "Or perhaps you thought you were still entitled to your position and pay at that time, in spite the fact you gave everything to me?"

Now he did lean forward and leveled his cutting gaze on the man before him. "Well, guess what? You weren't and you aren't. When you gave up your power and authority, your status became just like the rest of the miserable, mindless lot in this city. It has been up to me to maintain order as I've seen fit, and utilizing the military is the way I've chosen to do it."

The chief could think of nothing to say, and if he had, he would've been too afraid to speak his mind. The counselor, or ruler, before him was not the same man he'd known the last time they'd seen one another.

Taking a breath, Halden straightened and looked at the soldiers around the chief and captains. "Throw him and the rest of his staff out of the city. We can't have them trying to stir up dissension and unrest among the people. And if they try to come back in or you ever find them in Asgard again...kill them. Oh, and if any civilians ask what's going on, just tell them that the chief and his associates are guilty of scheming with the militants."

"Yes, sir," replied the soldiers, before grabbing the three men and shoving them towards the door.

Once they were gone, Halden walked to the windows facing east. "How are the storehouses looking?"

"Last summer was good to us," replied Christopher, still near the desk, "and we'll have more than enough to get through this winter. Although, some of the inns have been complaining that they keep running out of basic food items. Some of the larger families are, too."

Halden rolled his eyes. "Hold the food rations as they are. Everyone will just have to cope. Has there been any increase in criminal activity?"

"It's holding steady for now. But that'll change next week when you finally take everyone's weapons."

"Truly," replied Halden. "And once spring arrives, the locals will be too busy working or too tired from laboring in the fields to cause any problems."

"My thoughts exactly."

Halden glanced over his shoulder at Christopher. "You have the rest of the afternoon for whatever duties you need to tend. Just check in before you head out for the evening."

Christopher gave a nod, left the chamber, and closed the door behind him with a smile.

Repression had been working well in Asgarod. Halden had complete control of everything in the city and the immediate outlying towns. He controlled food, commerce, trade, and soon, weapons.

But up to that point, his control and tyranny had been veiled and subtle, to keep the local population from panicking and rioting. He'd received reports just yesterday that the quota for the number in the military ranks had been met and their training was adequate. Also, the commanders and their units were in position and prepared to deal with any rioting within the city that might occur, when Halden's iron rule by way of fear and force became visible as of...tomorrow.

All of the visible changes had thus far been external, as the military gained total control of nearby towns and attacked Southern Forces.

Ambrose in Kolanthel had had the luxury of executing immediate, swift, and violent control of his city and surrounding areas over a year ago. But conditions in his territory and city were much different from Asgarod. Kolanthel had already had a considerable military force, so no time had been needed to grow and train recruits and officers. Since power and show of force was innately his way, he'd also taken control of the city and its people with the same method of removing a band-aid: with one quick yank.

Time had been required in Asgarod, for all the power players to prepare and position themselves. In the previous year, local law enforcement had asked and allowed the council to have a heavier sway in permitting stricter control and discipline in the city. Because of this, additional officers had been added to the chief's force. But what he didn't know was that anyone added to the police force were actually military men in disguise.

This move had been instigated and influenced by Christopher. In the beginning of the counselor's turning, Halden hadn't known that he'd eventually take total control and use a military to do it.

But Christopher had. That had been the plan from the start, and he'd used his influence on the other advisors to add military men to the police force. Thus, by the time officers were being laid off, those being removed were part of the chief's true force. Those remaining were military.

In fact, for the past three months, ninety percent of those on the chief's payroll were actually soldiers. He'd been played right from the start and in preparation for the distant goal of total military control. Everything to that day had been to keep him and the other true officers from raising the alarm to the local's.

Tomorrow the citizens of the city would be subject to the same control as their outside neighbors. They'd been blindly led since Halden took over and disbanded the

council. Now their blindness was about to be removed, and they'd fully understand what was truly happening...and that the change in their city wasn't what had been hoped for.

By the end of that very week, if any citizen even looked suspicious, like they were about to cause trouble or dissension, punishment was swift. There was no set protocol for dealing with a suspicious individual, and he or she was at the mercy of the military squads on patrol.

Typically, the person would be beaten and then left lying where they fell in the street.

More serious offenders were beaten and then taken to the city jail, where they were kept for an infinite length of time.

Basic sanitation facilities were required, and upkeep of basic hygiene of the prisoners, for overall health reasons. Other than that there were no standards for jailers, soldiers who rotated in and out. If those on duty wanted to beat a prisoner, they beat a prisoner. If they wanted to nearly starve them to death, they could do that, too.

But one thing was made clear straight off to all of Asgarod's inhabitants: get caught conspiring treason or devising a coup, and swift death would follow.

Needless to say, it would take awhile for the locals to recover from the whiplash they'd receive. That also was part of the plan in that they'd be too shocked to even try and overthrow Halden and the military.

In regards to Christopher, he'd been given the next phase of the plan by one of Levian's messengers. He had to convince Halden to willingly work with one of the prince's generals, to allow him and his legions entry into Asgarod.

This was a somewhat round-about way of proposing that Halden form alliance with Cassius himself. Christopher had accurately predicted this had been the ultimate goal from the beginning: turning the two high counselors of Eliadar, then sealing their fall by guiding them to a decision to work under the dark king.

The latter act would indeed confirm Halden's fall and cast the South into shadow. Having deceived many upright leaders, Christopher recognized there were two stages to "leading someone astray."

Stage one was the "turning," pulling them away from light and truth, and getting them to commit to "another way." Even if successful, in this stage there was still a slight chance they'd reject the new, darker path and return to what they knew was right. It was unlikely, but occasionally happened if the deceiver really botched a job.

The second stage was the genuine fall. It wasn't just being in the darkness; it was aligning and making a pact with it. *Embracing* and growing in it. This was what would be required of Halden and Ambrose: strike a pact with the generals chosen by Levian and Cassius.

It wouldn't be just any pact of mere agreement by words. It would have to be a blood pact, which made the deal binding according to the laws of good and evil.

Once this was accomplished, the fall of the two former counselors would be complete. They will have plunged so deep into darkness and evil that only One would ever be able to reach them again.

Convincing Halden to take the jump into the "deep end," as Christopher called it, would require more trickery. However, it wasn't for the same reasons that deception had been necessary for his initial turning.

Because Halden was now in darkness, there was increased likelihood he'd continue to do what he wanted. It was typical. A dark ruler didn't usually appreciate others telling him what he should do with his power and how he ought to wield his authority.

Christopher knew he'd have to wait a little before bringing up the idea of making a pact with one of Levian's generals. Halden had finally fully settled into his new role, but still had flashes of "juvenile" behavior from the transition.

But that was okay. Christopher would do as he'd done before: work in his suggestions subtly, slowly...brick by brick.

Chapter 66

Ambrose

Smoke rose in large and numerous columns around the city of Kolanthe in the East. In the immediate wake of the counselor's rise to power, smoke had risen from within the city itself, and its inhabitants had already been suffering under this cruel ruler for a year. Asgarod had it significantly better.

Towns immediately around the sprawling city lay in ruin, in the aftermath of their swift destruction.

When the counselor Ambrose gave in to his lust for power, he swiftly took control over Kolanthe and had no qualms over his decision. In the intoxicating throes of the raging thoughts and emotions in the wake of his turning, he ordered the military to quickly secure the city. He did what Halden had done, and had even yet to do, but in a matter of days.

There was no subtlety or progressivism with Ambrose. Law enforcement had given him their authority, and he gladly snatched it up. His advisors had submitted themselves before him, and he took his position as ruler and superior without hesitation.

The power he'd dreamt of for many lives of men had finally been offered up to him. After all these years of resisting and battling his worst weakness, Ambrose finally stopped fighting and gave into it.

It wasn't as bad as he thought it'd be and wondered why he hadn't done it sooner.

Kolanthel's military forces, who'd long been sitting idle, were more than glad to engage in a little mayhem, terror, and carnage on the local inhabitants. Like their new boss, they too had grown tired of all their endless complaining and inflicting wounds on each other for rarely any good or justified reason.

The territories in the hills and wilderness south and east of Kolanthel were wilder. Towns and settlements were inhabited by self-reliant folk who didn't appreciate others telling them how to live. They especially didn't appreciate military types coming in and telling them to give up most of their food and all their weapons.

Ambrose was aware of this before his betrayal of all things light and true. Thus, he immediately sent a portion of the army to the outlying regions and ordered his soldiers to burn everything and kill everyone who could wield a sword or bow.

The military forces struck fast and hard, and the villages had little to no warning whatsoever.

In the following months, any resistance forces in the area were instantly answered and thoroughly obliterated. Any rumors of an opposing fighting unit were quickly sought out and its conspirators put to death.

Now, slowly, ever so slowly, Ambrose's forces were not only growing, but spreading further south and east...like a disease or poison. Their eye was fixed on the deeper regions of the South and their minds on another summer campaign to take on the heavy resistance forces that came from there.

Presently, Ambrose was headed to a meeting with his chief military advisors. He along with two generals and three commanders, all stern-faced, strode down a broad corridor to his chamber.

Like Halden's, it was at the top of a citadel in the center of the city. However, it was larger and with a smoother design, appearing more like something one would expect to see in Dubai in Earth's dimension.

Also similar to the citadel of Asgarod, the tower of Kolanthel used to glow warm and welcoming even on a cloudy day. Now, however, it was dull and bleak. The shadow, the darkness Ambrose had allowed to take dominion, had long chased away the light.

Ambrose was nearing the doors of the chamber when *she* stepped into the corridor from another hallway. In the instant he gazed at her, his stride faltered.

Thalia had been away on a journey to who-knew-where just a few days ago, and this was the first time he'd seen her since she'd returned.

Like when Halden had known what Christopher really was, Ambrose knew Thalia was a deceiver shortly before beginning his fall.

He hadn't cared, though, because he'd been too taken by her beauty, her grace, everything about her. In the back of his mind, he'd known she was false for some time, but any warning was drowned out by her whisperings in his ear.

It had actually been Thalia who'd suggested such a swift and harsh move against the neighboring towns and villages. She'd toppled enough kingdoms and rulers to know a thing or two about successfully initiating authoritarian rule.

"Because you don't want anyone to threaten your new power do you?" she'd said with that enticing tone.

Ambrose glanced over his shoulder at the military men and gave a jerk of his head. They others continued down the corridor as he stopped.

To their great credit, none of the men allowed their glances to linger on Thalia. One, because she was Ambrose's assistant, and the former counselor had become rather aggressive in his new role as ruler. No one except him was to touch her.

Second, Thalia was more than capable of defending herself against unwanted advances.

Shortly after the military took over Kolanthe, one commander had made a pass at her. She'd retaliated with such swift force that no one had seen her move. One second the commander was in front of her, then before anyone could blink, he was on the ground and barely conscious. The fierce glare she leveled on the rest of the group with the commander literally jolted them.

Thus, no one crossed Thalia, for fear of Ambrose's wrath—and Thalia's.

Thalia eased her pace as she leisurely continued to approach Ambrose.

"Looks like things are going well," she said with that smooth and alluring voice.

"Mm, very well," he replied, "thanks in part to you, I suppose."

Thalia stopped a few feet from him. While she was tall, Ambrose had grown some, like his counselor counterpart, following his turn. Now she had to look up at him a little more.

After studying him with her blue eyes, she tilted her head. "Something on your mind?"

Ambrose studied Thalia a moment and let his gaze linger a little too long, which he wasn't ashamed of in the slightest.

"I'm headed to a meeting with my military chiefs," he answered finally and slowly began to walk on down the hall. "I was wondering if you might have any insight on what comes next."

When Thalia, beside him, received a sidelong glance, she raised an eyebrow.

"Next?" she asked with that coy smile.

Anger flaring through him, Ambrose stopped and faced her again.

"You know what I mean," he said sternly and took a step closer. "You told me there was so much more to come if I took power, and that was over a year ago. I want to know what you're keeping from me. I may be on a different path than I was, but I'm no less blind and still have sharp discernment."

Just as Christopher was now tasked with convincing Halden to invite one of Levian's generals into Asgarod, so Thalia would need to convince Ambrose to do the same thing.

Actually, he was already prepared to do it, judging by the gleam in his eye and the behavior she was seeing from him now. That wasn't unusual with desire for power.

One could never have enough.

Although, she could tell Ambrose still needed to rein himself more. The turmoil and strong side effects from the initial burst of dark euphoria that came upon turning still hadn't completely abated yet. It was also stirred whenever his forces crushed any Southern resistance and achieved a victory over their enemies.

But Thalia couldn't have Ambrose advance too early. He and Halden needed to remain in sync with one another as they progressed deeper into evil's grasp, at least just a little longer.

At Ambrose's remark, Thalia's smile grew and a dark twinkle glinted in her eye. "There's always more."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Ambrose took one more step forward and grabbed her by the arm.

"Don't play games with me, Thalia," he seethed quietly, looking directly down at her. "What are you not telling me?"

Thalia, not in the least put off by the aggressive manner with which he'd taken hold of her arm, slowly lifted her gaze to his. As she studied his face, his grip slowly weakened until his hand was merely resting lightly on her arm.

"You're not ready yet," she said quietly, before lowering her eyes a moment.

When Ambrose drew a breath to reply, Thalia rested her hand on his chest and slowly slid it up and behind his neck.

"Almost," she continued, tilting her head slightly as she regarded him, "but not quite. I heard word this morning there's a sizeable group of resistance fighters just a half day's ride south of here."

She traced the side of his face before letting her fine fingers play over his lips and chin. "Take care of them and finish cleaning up the city...then the time will be right."

Thalia raised her eyes back to his. "Make sure you're established at home first, before executing large campaigns. Take it from someone who has experience in warfare, Ambrose."

Their faces were already close, and the instant she finished speaking, Ambrose kissed her, forcefully.

Thalia neither returned it nor resisted, and it was only a few seconds before he controlled himself and stepped away. Judging by his expression, she could tell he'd surprised even himself by such a bold and rash move.

But it only made her smile inwardly.

"That's why now isn't quite right for the next phase," she said, with a smile as she again closed the distance between herself and Ambrose.

"I need you to regain your focus and not let your emotions go running off with you," continued Thalia as dark enticement danced in her eyes. "You'll need control for what's coming, because what you're dealing with now...is nothing."

Without warning, she kissed Ambrose, much stronger than he had her. She shoved him back against the wall, and he could not resist or encourage her. As it was in that moment, he barely had the strength to stand.

Just as with anyone else she'd conned and used her influence over, Ambrose was utterly defenseless to defy or stop her. If Thalia had so chosen, she could've tortured him, told him to cut his wrists, or give everything he owned to her, and he would've done or allowed it.

When she finally stopped, she braced her hands against the wall and on either side of Ambrose.

"So," she said evenly as she leaned forward and looked at him squarely. "I need you to focus and pull it together."

Wild and fierce light burned in her eyes and she brought her face close to his once more. "Because things are only going to get better."

Then Thalia pushed herself off the wall, turned, and disappeared down another hall.

None of what had transpired had resulted from any trace of romance. Both of them knew it. It had all been a little game, and one about control and showing who had more of it over the other. It wasn't self-control, but control in relation to power, a show of strength and domination. Almost like posturing.

Ambrose's move had been a little about control, but mostly from a fit of sudden rage. He wanted more power, and Thalia knew how to get or give it, but wouldn't.

As for Thalia, it had been entirely about control. In a kind of show of force, she reminded Ambrose just who was really running this show for the moment.

Ambrose took a few minutes to compose himself—and catch his breath.

Finally, he continued down the corridor, mind shifting back to war and breaking resistance forces.

Chapter 67

Mercenaries

Earth

Weapons fire popped over the still predawn, answered occasionally by shouts or cries. But no help came to the village. No one was nearby. Like many areas of Zimbabwe, settlements were far apart.

Half an hour later silence resettled over the scrubby, tree-spotted land. There was no movement, save by the attackers. Any wildlife remotely close by had fled upon their approach.

In the morning light, the bodies of the fallen could be more clearly seen. Some were in their small houses, others in the doorways, while still more lay on the ground. They'd all been massacred, men, women, and the children.

This had actually been an "extermination" job, as Aiden the traveler called it. Hostile takeovers required only some killing. But when he and his highly specialized team killed everyone, it was an extermination.

Standing in the middle of the village, Aiden surveyed the sky.

"Let's hurry it up!" he shouted to the nearest group of men. "Pull the trucks around!"

Aiden wasn't concerned about anyone, government official or rebel group, finding them. It was the vultures. They'd probably be circling any time now, and they were a hassle to keep away when they showed up en masse.

Turning and walking towards his mud covered jeep, he slapped a hand on the shoulder of Lom, his second-in-command. "Make sure all the bodies get to the graves. Oh and double check to make sure they're deep enough."

Lom was of Chechen origin. He was one of those individuals who had an appearance that matched his personality and job description: rough and ruthless. Though he was average height, he was still broad across the shoulder, and well muscled. He held a gleam in his dark brown eyes that hinted at cunning, but they danced the brightest just before, or in the wake of, mass bloodshed.

He glanced at Aiden wryly. "So we don't have a repeat of what happened last time, eh?"

Lom might've been of Chechen descent, but he'd been raised between England and South Africa. Thus his voice was marked with a light, South African accent.

He grinned darkly. "That was a mess."

Aiden snorted, and Lom headed towards one of the five trucks they'd be loading the bodies onto. Mass graves had been dug over the course of the night and weren't too far from the village. So now it was just a matter of hauling the corpses over there and burying them.

The remaining group not on corpse-duty was divided into two units: one to clean up the blood in the houses, and the others to be on look-out. Again, not for officials or rebels, but for dangerous wildlife that might be drawn by the smell of blood and death.

After grabbing his satellite phone from the truck, Aiden climbed onto one of the thatched roofs. He surveyed the landscape a moment and then called his boss.

"It's done," said Aiden when his boss answered. "We're in clean-up now."

"Excellent, right on schedule."

"Aye, quick and clean," replied Aiden with a smile. "So, who's next on our list?"

The boss huffed a little laugh. *"You always surprise me with your energy, but I'm glad you're ready for the next job. You and the team will be heading back to Afghanistan."*

"Ah, warlords and poppy fields..."

"Exactly. They don't have much to do with the actual job, but I'll fill you in later. Let me know when you're back in the city, and I'll arrange your transport. In the meantime, I'll inform our client that the village will be ready for his team by tomorrow."

"Call you later."

The conversation ended, and Aiden studied the skies to the north and west. Already clouds blanketed the land and the air smelt of rain.

If it rained, that'd help wash away the blood and any signs of what had happened in the village. Of course, the squad dealing with the bodies would have a more difficult time.

He glanced over his shoulder at some of the men coming out of one of the houses. Fortunately, only one or two entire families had been killed indoors, so there wouldn't be much cleanup. Sure, they could let the blood stain, but that sometimes made clients and their teams uncomfortable. Aiden and his unit always aimed to please.

He and his colleagues were part of a true mercenary group. They were all highly trained and came from various military forces around the globe: US Special Forces, New Zealand SAS (Special Air Service), Australia SASR (Special Air Service Regiment), and SRR (Special Reconnaissance Regiment) of the British Army.

Aiden himself had trained across all the mentioned forces. He'd also trained with some former Mosa'ad operatives, which gave him an exceptional edge in combat.

He was average height with a lean, but strong build. His thick black hair, olive skin, and overall facial structure suggested Israeli origin. Those hazel-blue eyes spoke of great intelligence, his ears were sharp of hearing, and he had a knack for overhearing sensitive details.

As to be expected with a bunch of alpha-types, Aiden had been challenged once or twice. But no one came close to posing a threat to his supremacy. There was still some posturing from time to time between the other members, but it was to be expected.

However, it was quickly learned that maintaining a steady flow of assignments kept the men focused and from getting too restless.

Some people labeled all private military or security groups as "guns for hire." They worked for whoever paid the most and did whatever they were paid to do: run guns, drugs, and kill anyone if the price was right.

That, of course, wasn't true.

But for the unit that Aiden's boss had assembled, it was. When they weren't hired by a client to remove opposition or, for example, clear villages, they dealt with almost anyone to increase the group's bankroll. They worked with all types of organizations and people: rebels, militias, drug lords, spies, the occasional terrorist, anyone interested in doing business.

Because of their limitless resources and contacts, they also sometimes worked for the CIA, DEA, or any other acronym. The likes of the Agency knew what Aiden's group did. However, that was partly why they used them: for gathering information on assets or for outsourcing snatch-and-grabs of targets.

Most of the time, though, it was first-come, first-serve and whoever paid the most.

As for this Zimbabwe assignment, Aiden and his team had just cleared the village so a client could use it as a base of operations. His boss mentioned something about diamonds. The ones mined in Zimbabwe technically weren't considered conflict diamonds. Not that that'd keep the client from crossing into Angola, mining blood diamonds, and then bringing them back and claiming Zimbabwe as the origin of finding.

Aiden didn't really care one way or another.

Like Jada, and any other traveler, he was high octane and seemed to have an endless amount of energy. He was always searching for the next job, which derived from the fact he was extremely goal-oriented. He detested stagnation and stretches of idleness that lasted more than a few days at a time.

Putting his hands on his hips, his gaze flitted back to the darkening horizon, now flickering with lightning. He smiled as a humid gust of a wind buffeted him from his lookout point on the house.

His team would be finished by mid-morning, and then...it was on to the next job.

Chapter 68

Work

Breaths coming out in ragged gasps, he jumped onto the tall chain-link fence in the alley and scaled it. Climbing over the top, he leapt and then rolled when he hit the ground.

His two pursues were undaunted and determined as ever to catch him. They sprang onto the fence and effortlessly pulled themselves towards the top.

As for the pursued, he was already back on his feet and running, his shoes echoing through the alley. He was nearly to the road at the far end and chanced a glance over his shoulder to check on his followers.

They'd scaled the fence and were sprinting after him.

He thought he was going to make it...until a wooden stake from an ancient picket fence bashed him on the side of the face.

He splayed on the ground, dazed, as Jada stood over him and examined the stake in her hand. "Didn't see that one coming, did you? See, that's why you're not supposed to look over your shoulder when you're running from someone."

The suspect groaned. "You assaulted me, man!"

"Actually," corrected Jada as her two associates jogged up, "you ran into my stake."

"Nice timing," said Jen, grabbing the man and shoving him onto his stomach to secure his wrists.

"Yeah, well," shrugged Jada, tossing the stake to the side, "they always try to run out the side exit."

After the suspect was shoved into a black SUV waiting near the alley, Mark, Jen's colleague, turned to Jada. "So where are you off to now? Bagging our guy marks the end of your contract."

"First, I'm going to go grab a late lunch, because I'm starving," she answered. "And then I have a couple more consulting offers to consider. Or I just might do some more freelance translation jobs..."

"So, basically you're going to do whatever you want?" asked Jen.

Jada considered her question and then nodded. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I called the office," said Mark, "and knowing how efficient our boss is, your money is already in your account."

She shook hands with him and Jen before they stepped back to the SUV.

"Check in again soon," grinned Mark as he opened the rear passenger door. "It's always entertaining working with you!"

Jada chuckled and gave a little wave as Mark climbed into the vehicle. It was just pulling away when someone to her right said, "I like your style."

Turning, she saw the man who'd spoken and was standing half a dozen feet away. Upon sizing him up, she immediately pegged him as a case officer, also known as an Agency field agent. He was in plain clothes, not sloppy, but not in a suit-and-tie either. He stood around six feet with a strong and fit physique, short dirty blonde hair, and sharp, dark blue eyes.

Normally, Jada could read people when she first met them. However, as with nearly all spy types, she couldn't immediately discern his character. He'd been trained not to give anything away with his body language, words, or behavior.

"Thanks," she replied flatly. "I find it's all about following through with the swing. So, what can I do for a presently unnamed case officer?"

He turned up the sidewalk and gave a tilt of his head. As Jada fell in beside him, he answered. "Call me John. I have a case that might be right up your alley with all your various skills and experience."

On any given day, Jada received multiple consulting or contract jobs. Currently, she was mostly interested in cases that her parents had worked on shortly before or leading up to their deaths. As Eliadar had said, the enemy traveler was involved or connected with one of their cases.

So far she'd been unsuccessful at finding any hint of him.

Jada still took on other jobs to keep herself sharp and to hone her skills. Some offers held no appeal, but something about John's opening statement grabbed her attention immediately. Her gut was telling her to pay attention on this one. She had a hunch that whatever case Ryan was eluding to just might be the one she'd been waiting for.

In regards to the "various skills and experience" that John had mentioned, Jada had many, some of which she'd brought back with her from Aurora. Others she'd quickly acquired.

To briefly summarize Jada's return, her eleven months in the other dimension translated to six years of absence in Earth's dimension. Upon traversing back, she'd discovered that she had her own house on considerable land. Her residence was fully furnished, and it appeared like she'd been actively living there.

This had been left to her by her parents, whose will dictated she could still legally obtain everything, even if Jada was gone for ten years.

They'd also left her considerable money and assets, most of which had already been invested for her. Thus, money wouldn't be an issue, unless she blew it on exotic cars, an unhealthy amount of ammunition...or dark chocolate.

On the topic of skills, Jada one day inadvertently discovered she was fluent in a number of languages. She'd been skimming a news webpage when an annoying advertisement in Arabic popped up on her screen. Although she'd never studied the language, she found that she could read the ad.

After going to different news pages and consulate websites, she also discovered that she knew Persian, Dari, French, Spanish, Russian, and German. She guessed it had something to do with the fact that while in Aurora she'd learned the ancient tongue, and two dialects of elvish.

In regards to how she first connected with law enforcement and other agencies, there had been a few random messages on Jada's landline. They'd sounded random, but when she called the numbers back, she found herself chatting with some coworkers of the late John and Carla. For some reason, the couple had mentioned Jada and that she might be both interested and useful to the international intelligence community. Hence, why they'd left messages on her home phone.

John and Carla's friends were interested to know where Jada had been and how she'd managed to stay off the radar for so long.

After giving a few vague replies, they merely concluded that John and Carla had had a strange way of coming and going without a trace, and that trait had clearly passed onto their daughter.

Speaking of Jada's parents, she'd learned a bit more about their deaths. Some close friends of theirs told her that their covers had been blown during an op in Egypt. Everything happened so quickly and nothing could've been done to stop it.

Her parents' bodies, along with half a dozen other operatives, were found near the apartments they'd been living in.

This explained why the attacks in Aurora had been so targeted. Covers of spies had been blown in that dimension, which resulted in them being uncovered here.

The mystery regarding her parents' bodies was also solved. Jada had visited their gravesites once. All she could think about, all she could see was the scene of their deaths, husband and wife bloodied and fallen beside one another, having died hand in hand.

Either way, Jada's various intelligence contacts wanted to know if she'd be interested in consulting, something her parents had done.

It hadn't been an offer out of pity. Jada had travel experience, a work ethic, and was relaxed in group settings. She still didn't see herself as a leader type, but she took initiative when she saw things that needed to be done. Also, although she'd become significantly more independent, she was easy to work with, or so her occasional partners had said.

By Earth's time standards, Jada had been back nine months. In that span, she'd helped shutdown homegrown terrorist organizations, taken on Mexican drug cartels, and to help hone her hunting skills, she occasionally tracked fugitives and bail jumpers.

Jada assumed that she was worth her pay because she'd worked with a variety of local, state, and federal agencies. Now she could barely go a day without being contacted by several organizations at once.

But she enjoyed being able to pick and choose clients. Obviously, she held a security clearance, and she'd breezed through various physical, combat, and firearms assessments.

However, in spite of all her successes, Jada still hadn't found a trace of the traveler. She began to wonder if she'd missed the case somehow, overlooked it. Recently, however, she'd begun feeling ornery and restless, and she knew that her insomnia was about to kick into high gear again. That meant something was about to give in her pursuit of this traveler.

Now here she was with this spy who went by the alias "John." She had a hunch the case he'd present was the one she'd been long waiting for. She also had the sense that the hunt for the traveler would finally commence and understood that the previous nine months had been training in this dimension, so she'd be thoroughly prepared for the hunt and chase.

"Obviously it's on the other side of the pond," said Jada, in response to John's comment.

"Yes, and in a dark and volatile part of the world," he answered.

"That doesn't narrow it down," she smiled. "Darkness and unrest is spreading. Egypt, Syria, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Libya, Russia, the Ukraine...conflict is erupting one country at a time."

This time John glanced at her. "Think Opium."

Afghanistan, thought Jada.

"Ah," she replied. "Now I'm with you."

"It's actually a case we'd presented to your parents just weeks before their deaths," he side-noted.

Okay then, she thought, *here we go*.

"Anyway," he continued, gaze scanning the road, "if you're interested, you're welcome to come aboard. You've done good work since you returned from obscurity..."

He let the final statement hang in the air, in invitation for Jada to expound on where she'd been. When he saw her expression, he knew she wasn't going to elaborate now or ever.

So, John let the matter rest. "So, you interested?"

"Quite," replied Jada lightly. "I am thoroughly enticed."

John gave a nod of approval and then checked his watch. "Good. You hungry? We can talk more over lunch."

"I'm starving," she said, and wasn't joking. She hadn't eaten since a granola bar and Dr. Pepper for lunch the previous day.

"There's a Mexican restaurant just up the road, if you don't mind a short walk."

They moseyed that direction and the walk was filled mostly with silence. It wasn't uncommon among agents, especially one you've just met. You can't discuss personal matters and you can't talk about work, so that leaves not much.

Jada wasn't one for small talk, anyway, and neither was John. So it worked out.

Over lunch, she received a few more vague details of the case, just enough for her to confirm that she was still interested in the job.

John and his team were rotating into an outpost, basically a hole, on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. They'd continue tracking the movements of a terrorist group as they repositioned operatives and weapons over the winter months.

At the end of the brief lunch, John jotted down an address on a napkin and slid it to Jada. "Be here tomorrow morning at 7 and you'll be thoroughly briefed on the situation. And be ready to leave shortly after that."

"See you in the morning, then," she answered.

After tossing some money on the table, John stood and walked out of the restaurant.

Jada took a few extra minutes to scrape her plate of food clean. Then she too left the restaurant and hailed a cab to take her back to the hotel.

During the drive there, she checked voicemail on her phone.

The first message was from a captain with Colorado State Police regarding something to do with a big marijuana case. She'd heard about it on the news and recalled the feds were thinking about taking over.

That sounded sticky and was thus not appealing. Plus, she'd already agreed to another case.

The second message was from some local resident in the city by the name of Juan. He was convinced this number belonged to his ex-girlfriend. Since Jada's arrival in the city, he had left ten angry messages a day to let her know to stop hiding her.

It was little wonder why the woman had left him in the first place. Anyway, it was one of the annoyances of burner phones.

With a sigh, Jada selected his number and punched 'send.'

Juan answered with, "*It's about time,*" and ended with an explicative.

"Mr. Ramirez, this is Special Agent Johnson" replied Jada evenly as she utilized a spur-of-the-moment alias. "I assure you that your girlfriend is not at this number. I'd

think twice before you continue harassing a federal agent. If you do...I'll have some of my friends kidnap you and attack electrodes to some not so nice places. Good day."

Ending the call, Jada checked the time again and attempted to decide if she wanted to hit the exercise room, or be a bum and find something to watch on tv.

When she glanced at the taxi driver, he was looking at her in the rearview mirror with raised eyebrows. "I didn't think that was part of the fed playbook."

"Actually, as of thirty minutes ago, I'm just another civilian again," she answered, "but I still have skills. Besides, some people just need to be shocked with a good dose of fear to be jarred out of their moronic-ness."

The taxi driver huffed a laugh through his nose as he pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. After paying and tipping him, Jada got out and walked inside.

Since she hadn't stuffed herself at lunch, she decided to run a couple miles on the treadmill. Having another job to look forward to had put some spring back into her step.

Work was definitely preferable to having nothing to do and pacing around the living room at home. From that point, she progressed quickly to, as Michael's father had put it, "chewing on things."

Nine months of going nonstop, with only a day here and there to rest, and Jada wasn't tired. She was functioning in optimal condition and hadn't yet reached that upper gear she hit just prior to slowing heading towards collapse.

No, she was just cruising right now and hungry for even more work.

Chapter 69

The Boss

The city of Kabul, Afghanistan twinkled in the cold night. It was just like any other evening as they sat in a small apartment on the Koh-e Pahman Mountain and looked out across the rest of the city.

"So, what's the job?" asked Aiden, feet up on the abused table in the little dining room.

He and several of the team had arrived that afternoon from Zimbabwe. Since he was the chief operator, he got to stay up and meet with the boss while the others were allowed to crash for the night.

That was aside from the fact he was the only one who'd ever dealt directly with the "big boss."

“It’s not really a job, as much as it is a list of assignments,” replied the boss. “The items will take place simultaneously or in immediate succession. I know you’re always ready for more work, but I hope the team is too. It’s going to be a particularly busy fall and winter.”

Aiden picked up his cup of coffee and leveled a keen gaze on the man across the table. “Simultaneous assignments? Sounds like multiple clients, or a group involved in this one.”

Channing, the boss man, threatened to crack a smile. “It is. These investors are working on some grand scheme and our part involves utilizing a variety of our expertise. I’ll give you a detailed list later, but in summary, we have some more exterminations on the list, weapons trafficking, maybe even an assassination or two. The team will split for some of the ops that need to be executed at the same time. But as the point-man you’ll be allowed to pick and choose which jobs to take. There are a few, of course, I’ll want you specifically to oversee.”

Aiden took a sip of coffee and then guessed, “We’re clearing the way for the clients and will help them establish base of operations for whatever companies they’ll use as fronts for their...activities.”

Now Channing did grin. “There’s a reason why I made you my chief operator. Anyway, when I say ‘investors,’ I mean it literally. The people behind this manipulate global stocks and world markets. They’re masters at taking advantage of chaos in the world...especially if they’re the ones instigating it.”

“So the weapons, for example, might be going to insurgent or terrorist groups. But they’ll be given targets and additional funds for recon and surveillance for the attack. Long story short, it’ll then ultimately lead to financial gain on the investors’ end.”

Channing nodded. “The clients are going to monopolize entire regions in Africa and Europe and have their bases covered. They’re involved in banking, gas and oil, infrastructure, even private security. They can set up their own little empires around the globe. Those areas are their genuine businesses. But, obviously, they’re fronts for the other less scrupulous activities they’re involved in. Weapons and drugs, some espionage and human trafficking.”

Aiden made a face before downing half his coffee.

“I know,” agreed Channing. “I’d rather not be affiliated with the latter at all. Too messy. Either way, their plans really aren’t our concern and don’t involve us directly.”

Aiden chewed on this information while he finished his first cup of coffee. Once he’d drained it, he studied his boss. “And I take it you already have several plans on how we’re going to keep the CIA and whoever else from watching us too closely? They know what we do and have used our services before. I wouldn’t be surprised if they already know we’re in Kabul.”

Aiden had worked for Channing for a number of years and knew him pretty well by now. For running a mercenary group for hire, he didn't seem like a stereotypical cutthroat boss or evil mastermind.

Channing was average in height and appearance, and wasn't necessarily someone the everyday person would think was unscrupulous. Yet that was what made him perfect for his line of work. He didn't come across as a sleaze, nor did he have a sense of evil emanating from him.

Channing was highly intelligent and well educated. Like a spy, he adapted his personality and character to any given situation to obtain what he wanted. He could be charming, which seemed to be an innate skill of his. If he needed to be threatening, his six-foot-two frame was large enough to be so. Or he could give the air that he was completely easy-going and nothing could possibly upset or bother him.

As a general rule, he kept himself clean cut. Since a majority of his clients were upper-class, the appearance of professionalism was required. His extremely dark brown hair was beginning to show the first hints of gray, but even as he grew older, he maintained his physical condition. He was also skilled in various forms of combat, both from days of previous military service and from training he acquired afterwards.

One never knew when a deal might go bad, and he wanted to be able to look out for himself.

The only constant about Channing as he went from one role to another was the expression in his eyes. Pale blue in color, they attested to his mental acuity, and they always held a cunning twinkle. Anyone dealing with him had the sense he was always working angles and could very possibly be manipulating the entire deal for his profit.

And Aiden was one of the few who knew the true Channing, the character behind all the roles he played any given day. The man was indeed extremely cutthroat, and he'd never known anyone else who could accurately plan ten steps ahead. Channing's mind was a phenomenon.

Channing also saw people merely as a means to an end, to help him increase his own bankroll. It was more profitable for him to have a highly skilled team, like Aiden's, to achieve this.

But they were just a means, and there wasn't any loyalty beyond the fact Channing needed the team. He would keep and use them only as long as they proved their worth. If the situation ever arose where it'd be better for Channing to cut off all ties with Aiden and the others, he'd do it in a heartbeat. He'd also have them all killed if necessary and without batting an eye over the decision.

Thus, Aiden knew Channing well enough to know what his boss was thinking. Most of the time.

Occasionally, Channing did something unexpected. That was his way of telling Aiden not to get too comfortable in thinking he truly knew his employer.

"Distraction is the name of the game," said Channing in response to Aiden's comment. "That's the primary reason why we're actually in Kabul, aside from increasing our own bank account a little. I have rough plans laid out and we'll need to hire the right people to execute them at the right time. We'll have to find local help for that."

Aiden sent his boss a pained look. "Please don't tell me you want to deal with Mahmoud again. I'm not usually picky about the people we work with, but that guy is really unstable."

He pushed himself to his feet and muttered, "Been dipping into his own crop a little too often."

Channing chuckled as Aiden walked to the tiny kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee. "Yes, he always adds an element of uncertainty. But I'd never dream of using him for this job. We'll need someone a little more dependable...and who holds considerable territory in the region I want."

"You're thinking of Nazim," guessed Aiden, while he began opening up packets of sugar, three at a time, and dumping them into his coffee.

Channing's eyes danced with that infamous twinkle. "I am. In the one time I met him, I instantly liked him. Rough, independent, shrewd."

"Plus he holds extremely fertile land," finished Aiden, glancing back at his boss. "And it's his fields you want more access to. That's further south, right? It'd put the harvest team right on the edge of Taliban territory, if not in the hot zone."

"It would," nodded Channing, before turning his gaze out the windows overlooking the city. "But that's where the best crops have been harvested. We'll need more security, and I'm sure Nazim will be happy to provide that protection, for an additional price."

Aiden added another couple packets of sugar into his cup before stirring it with the plastic spoon on the counter.

"Is he still accepting payments from the Agency?" he asked as he returned to the table and sat down.

"My sources tell me 'no,'" answered Channing. "The last time he accepted payment was shortly after the war began. Presently, though, he doesn't want their money. He's a native to the land, a patriot and rebel at heart who doesn't need outside support...for now. Nor does he want outsiders to tell him what to do, period. I guess business has been good in recent years, so he can make enough to support himself and his group."

"And it helps that his goal in life isn't waging war against everyone," added Aiden. "He isn't spending large sums on weapons, ammo, recon, and keeping operatives in the field."

Channing gave a nod. "On top of it all is the fact he's a warlord who's the leader of one of the largest groups in southeast and central Afghanistan. He's known throughout the tribal regions, or... 'feared' would be a better word. Neighboring warlords don't mess with him."

"So we'll use Nazim until the next big dog forces him out," summarized Aiden, before taking a sip of coffee.

A trace smile pulled at Channing's mouth. "Precisely. Anyway, first thing's first. Nazim is expecting to hear from and meet with you. While you're doing that, I'll use my intelligence network, do some logistics and whatnot. There's a foreign ops team currently in the city that I'll want to utilize for part of the diversion..."

Channing let his statement trail off and when Aiden glanced at his boss, he saw the man studying him.

He was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable under that gaze when Channing asked, "Have you been back recently?"

"No, not since before the Chechnya project a couple months ago."

Channing still hadn't taken his gaze off Aiden when he said, "I take it things must still be going well. We haven't had any problems with our jobs since that near-miss in Brazil."

Channing knew Aiden was a traveler and believed everything he'd said about the parallel dimension. Since this discovery and understanding of how things worked between the two realms, when the group was having difficulty with a job, Aiden would return to Aurora and scope things out. If there was anything he could do to aid the cause of Cassius, he did it, in order to try and help his own team.

Always there was a situation that mirrored what his team was attempting to accomplish. For example, perhaps Aiden and the group were trying to muscle-out natives in a territory they wanted access to, but the competition was proving stubborn. In Aurora, then, he'd find a large squad of dark soldiers pressing against enemy forces in order to take control of a vital region.

At last, Channing got to his feet. "I'll get back to you within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Nazim looks forward to doing business again."

"So he was immediately hooked on your deal then," guessed Aiden.

"Yes, and he gave me a high price for that increased access," replied Channing as he walked to the door.

He cracked it open, before stopping and looking back at Aiden with a grin. "It's a pity you don't have a girlfriend or wife...then we could save money and just trade her for half of Nazim's poppy crop!"

Aiden couldn't help but chuckle as Channing walked out of the apartment.

Yup, he thought, that's the boss.

Chapter 70

Resistance

Aurora

They didn't bother to wait until nightfall to attack the town and instead struck in the afternoon. A large squad of military forces from Asgarod, they were sent to plunder, take weapons, and most of the town's provisions.

The town's people put up some resistance but began to fall back after about twenty minutes. If the soldiers hadn't so quickly fooled themselves into believing that they'd already achieved another victory, then they might've thought that the locals retreated a little too easily.

When the attackers reached the center of the small town, arrows rained down on them from behind. More followed an instant later from everywhere at once.

In that time, the town's people had already disappeared into cover and cleared the way...for the riders. They rode in swiftly from every direction and kept the soldiers from scattering. Once they had the situation more under control, they encircled them in a solid wall of horses and slowly began pushing them closer together.

A dozen soldiers opted for death before the rest surrendered. When the riders had appeared, they almost immediately recognized that they didn't stand a chance.

This squad of particular horsemen hailed from the Southern Fortress and was led by none other than Michael, son of David, heir of kings.

"You ventured a bit too far south for your own good," said Michael, as his horse Johar stepped forward out of the ring of riders. "But at least you had the sense to surrender."

His keen eyes studied the soldiers, now standing weaponless before the horsemen. These weren't dark soldiers, clearly. Heavy darkness surrounded that lot and they always chose to fight to the death.

These soldiers looked up at Michael with both awe and fear. They recognized a great leader when they saw one and understood he held their fate in his hands.

"Tell me," he continued, "is Halden getting even greedier? This is far outside Asgarod's domain and way beyond the fallen counselor's jurisdiction."

"Maybe he's just taking pointers from Ambrose," joked Conner, on his horse behind Michael.

Michael huffed through his nose at that.

One of the soldiers near Johar could stand it no longer and blurted out, "If you're going to kill us, just get it over with, will you? Don't toy with us like a cat does a mouse."

When Michael leveled his eyes on the man, he cowered away a little under the stern authority held in that gaze.

Johar took another couple steps forward.

"You and your forces torment free peoples," replied Michael evenly as anger flashed in his eyes, "and we know that those you don't kill are sometimes tortured—for no good reason other than to provide sport for yourselves. So you have no right to even demand fair treatment or a swift death."

Great fear spread over the expressions of the soldiers, both at his anger and his words.

But then Johar reversed back into the circle of horsemen.

"Fortunately, for you," finished Michael, all the anger in his gaze gone, "my squad and I don't have that authority. Your sentences are a matter to be decided by the town's governing group. What they choose to do with you is their business."

Michael looked at the soldier who'd spoken out. "Maybe the people of this town will prove merciful..."

He glanced over his shoulder at the residents, who'd come out from cover. Faces cold and hard, he could see that not one was afraid. Nor had they been when they'd first requested assistance from the Southern Fortress. They knew Halden's forces were nearing but they didn't have the strength of numbers to hold off a large assault.

Upon seeing their expressions, Michael returned his gaze to the enemy soldiers and added, "Then again...maybe not."

After all the soldiers had been securely detained, Michael and the squad rode east through the scattered trees.

Michael's unit had been tasked with patrolling the areas where Halden's forces were known to be advancing. Thus far, the Southern resistance forces had been successful at keeping the enemy lines at bay and preventing them from expanding.

That success was mostly due to the fact that they weren't battling chimera, kyros, dark soldiers, or horsemen.

Not yet, anyway. But the shadows over Asgarod and Kolanthel were still slowly spreading.

The mounted squad stopped as the eastern sky began to darken.

"So," began Michael, as they formed a rough circle again, "that was the third enemy squad we've countered this week?"

"Aye," nodded Connor, "and we thwarted four last week, and another four before that..."

"Not too much for you, is it Connor?" joked Ida.

Connor smiled. "Just the opposite...not enough!"

The others chuckled, and Connor looked at Michael. "But is this all we're planning on doing in the foreseen future? Wandering around, fighting random enemy squads?"

"For us it is, unless we're reassigned," replied Michael. "Other forces are holding against Cassius's troops that retreated north of the central territories. Holding them, mind you, but that's it. Because northern lands are under dark dominion, our friends are hard-pressed to push them back any farther."

He studied the group. "For now, our primary threat is Halden and Ambrose. We all know what a difficult time we had last summer, when we were constantly turning back waves of attacks from those two cities. I guess it shouldn't have been too surprising in the wake of the counselors' falls. Clearly, they were rather energized by their betrayal of light, hence the relentless assaults."

Michael then returned his glance to Connor. "Maybe our generals are planning a mass move across the South and East, to completely drive the enemy back to the two cities. Perhaps we'll be tapped for that assignment if that happens."

"But we still won't be able to assail the cities of Asgarod or Kolanthel themselves," confirmed Tav of Chugach.

"Correct. Those two cities are under the dominion of evil," replied Michael.

"It was invited in," added Gabriel, "and has taken up residence. Halden and Ambrose are figures of great power and authority, and as such the demonic ranks that now walk their halls are equivalent to their high status. It's not enough to attack the city. Presently, Halden and Ambrose summoned the darkness, granted it admittance. Thus, they're the only ones who can drive it out...for the time being."

"Obviously," said Cora, a black-haired, green-eyed beauty from Highland, "this was all part of Cassius's plan from the beginning: the fall of the high counselors. How long do you think it'll be before they yoke themselves with the dark king? Surely that's the next step in his plot."

"Indeed," agreed Ida, "and it would mean greater ruin for us all. Who knows what kind of dark forces would then come from the gates of Asgarod and Kolanthel?"

"There's no way to accurately guess the answer to your question," replied Michael to Cora. "But my gut says at the most we have another year before that happens. At the least...months."

Silence fell over the group for some time as dusk approached.

"I wish Jada was here," sighed Reagan quietly. "I miss her."

Another bout of silence followed as they lowered their gazes.

It had been over a year since anyone had seen Jada and there had been nothing but silence from her.

“How about you, Blake?” asked Connor at length. “You know anything about where she is?”

Blake gave a feeble shake of his head.

“As we’ve all likely guessed already,” said Michael, “she’s probably been given her band and is now fully engaged as a traveler...if I had to go solely by the fact we haven’t heard or seen any word of her for such a length of time.”

A smile pulled at his mouth and a twinkle danced to life in his eyes. “Typically, a week didn’t go by when we didn’t hear a report of some kind of mayhem she’d caused.”

That earned some laughs and knowing nods from the others.

Except from Blake, who remained silent. As conversation picked up, Michael glanced over at him. He knew, sensed, something serious had transpired between Blake and Jada before she’d gone invisible.

One, Blake’s demeanor had suddenly become silent and sullen just a year ago.

Michael had also known by Jada’s behavior, during their flight from Asgard following the final appeal with Halden. When Michael had said they were riding for the Eastern Village, she’d balked and pleaded they not go there. So, they’d ridden to Chugach, at the expense of prolonged pain on her part.

Either way, and even though over a year had gone by, both warriors and civilians still asked about the lone traveler. Early on, their questioning had been with hope and expectation. But as the months had passed, the hope faded and they wondered now with longing, as one who misses a friend and doesn’t know when they’ll ever meet again.

Where was the young woman who had appeared two springs ago, who’d trained and become a known warrior? Who didn’t fear the enemy, thwarted their plans, and helped drive back the darkness?

Michael wondered it himself on a regular basis, in spite of the passage of time. He missed Jada. There wasn’t anything romantic between them, but she was his friend, a close companion and fellow warrior. It might’ve only been thirteen months since he’d seen her, but it felt more like thirteen years.

Just being around Jada was uplifting, lightened his heart, and brought him courage. She was one of those people whose very being brought life and light, to the point where he wondered if she was really human—or just an illusion, or angel in disguise.

Just like when Jada admitted to Michael that she’d at first felt unworthy to be in his presence, so he felt the same with her.

While Michael felt no romance towards her, he still truly believed that no man could ever be worthy enough for Jada, to be her husband. Not even himself. She was tasked for better and higher things, if that made sense, for plans and assignments that went far beyond his comprehension.

He still found it difficult to understand how Jada made light of the fact that he wasn't a traveler. Not that he thought she'd just been nice or said what she had out of obligation. No, he believed her, but he saw himself as common.

Michael also maintained the belief that to be a traveler meant one had to hold extremely high favor with the Almighty. To be tasked with traversing dimensions and stopping the plots of evil men in two realms, and to be created with an impossibly strong internal drive and determination...what an honor.

Though he quickly saw it was taxing, extremely hard work...and it came at a high price.

At the same time, though, travelers were made specifically for their job. They loved everything about it, the hardship and strife just as much as the times of peace.

Twilight was on the squad and they finally turned, continuing east, but at a slow pace.

As they did, Michael gazed up through the bare treetops to the inky sky, already twinkling with stars.

Where is she, he thought, or more so prayed, like he had on so many starry evenings, where is my dear friend, the traveler, and will she return to aid our plight? Will You bring her back to us to fight the darkness yet again?

Chapter 71

Warlords & Poppy Fields

Earth

The winter sun had finally risen over the eastern horizon and into the clear blue sky. To the north, the mountains had received a fresh dusting of snow, and a chill breeze brushed across the grass and shrublands of central-eastern Afghanistan.

Because he was in the throes of jetlag, Aiden didn't have a problem getting an early start from Kabul to make the meeting two hours south of the city.

They met in one of the half-dozen squat buildings clustered in the borderless compound.

"I take it the deal is good, then?" asked Aiden, as the unit of men inspected the three crates of rifles and ammunition.

"Yes, weapons for access to another ten percent of our croplands," replied Nazim, one of the regional warlords.

Aiden sent him a look. "That was fifteen percent, Nazim."

The warlord grinned wryly. "Yes, yes, fifteen, you are right."

"My boss will be adding three more workers to the team when it comes time to harvest. So please keep that in mind and try not to shoot them when they arrive."

"You know," said Nazim, picking up a small cup of tea from the end of the table beside them, "when spring comes, the Taliban and other groups will be more active...your team might want protection. We can provide that."

Totally predictable, thought Aiden. "What's your price?"

"Food rations," replied Nazim as another slow smile formed on his lips. "Winter is difficult, yes? You pay us half in rations now, and the rest after harvest."

Aiden rubbed his chin, darkened with stubble. The day he'd heard the next assignment was in Afghanistan, he'd stopped shaving. It had to do with both blending and the regional culture. He could grow a decent beard, but it didn't happen overnight and it was still in its early stages.

"I'll talk to my boss. We should be able to agree on something."

While drinking their tea, the two men discussed how the opium crop had fared last harvest. When they'd finished, Nazim gestured towards the door. He and Aiden stepped into the crisp air and moseyed a distance from the building.

"Now, about this...other thing you are suggesting," said Nazim. "I'm not so sure about it. You want me to take over Adam's territory?"

He shook his head.

Now it was Aiden's turn to *tisk*. "He's been a little thorn in your side for a long time. You and I both know that, Nazim. By far, your group is superior in training and numbers. Adam holds a small, but exceptionally fertile strip of cropland...and since when did you let an enemy steal from your fields without executing justice?"

Nazim eyed Aiden suspiciously and wondered how he'd known about that detail.

But Aiden gave nothing away by his expression.

Silence fell between them for a minute, before at last Nazim asked, "And why exactly do I need to be doing this now?"

"When did reasons matter if the price was right?" answered Aiden with a question of his own. "We'd be paying you twice what the Agency was at the beginning of the war."

After the two men sized up one another, Nazim said, "I must be thinking about it more. I am not liking this so much."

Aiden knew Nazim's response was mostly to posture. It was his way of saying, "I'll do what I want, when I want, and I don't need you to tell me what to do, thanks."

Aiden wasn't surprised. While Nazim was more dependable, he was also more independent and difficult to persuade. Additionally, because he was the alpha dog in the region, coercion didn't work on him.

But Aiden was sure he'd come around. The sum of money he was being offered couldn't be easily ignored, no matter how well the drug business was going.

So, Aiden didn't press the subject and concluded the meeting, before walking to his much-abused work truck. Once behind the wheel, he headed down the isolated road that wound across country.

The day was still young and he had another warlord or two to chat with.

What Nazim didn't know, and would never know, was that he was being set up to play a pawn in Channing's plan. The warlord, nor any of the other pieces, could know the plot, in the event the Agency questioned them about Aiden's visits.

Based on Channing's intelligence network, the Agency had settled along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to watch Taliban movements over winter. So they'd be around for a while. Naturally, there were likely countless other ops on-going that no one knew about.

Thus, the boss's game right from the start was to misdirect possible attention by the CIA and whoever else was in the area. He needed to give the intelligence community something to focus on, and a little territorial dispute in the dreaded tribal regions should do just that.

Such events like civil wars and clashes over territory had been manipulated and even instigated by foreign intelligence operatives.

So, all in all, this wasn't uncommon.

If the warlords did as they'd been paid to do, it would add to the role that Aiden would play. Part of the plan was for him to be an informant to the Agency, which he'd done in the past.

Therefore, he needed events to back up his intel. He couldn't simply say that some of the regional warlords were looking to expand their territory and things might become exciting soon. He needed to be proven correct.

Manipulation was the name of the game. Being able to make people, in this case, tribal warlords, do what you wanted, without them realizing they were doing it was even better.

It was the most fun when you had multiple pawns moving simultaneously, each without being aware anyone else on the board was playing. It was genuinely beautiful, like when all the different instruments in an orchestra came together to create a symphony or watching a perfectly choreographed dance.

It took a master to assemble such a work of art, and Channing was one of the best.

Chapter 72

Reluctant Alliance

Aurora

They rode in at first light. Not the entire legion, or even a quarter of the troop, but only one dozen riders. Compliments of the spies they'd sent in the previous day, the horsemen knew exactly which building stop at.

The earliest risers of the town watched them suspiciously as they rode past.

It only took a minute from Nokota's borders to reach the administrative building, nothing more than a large two-story house.

Half of the company dismounted and their leader led the way up the steps. He barged through the front door and made the two women at a pair of desks jump.

"We're here to see Governor Jacek and his councilmen," said the leader of the mounted squad.

The woman on the left opened her mouth to speak, but he interjected before she could say anything. "And we've been watching Nokota for the past three days. We know they're already at the office, so don't bother telling us they're not here."

Neither of the women had to say a word because the sound of footsteps came down the stairs. Moments later, the governor and four of his five councilmen appeared and walked into the room.

"Well, what can I do for the military men in Halden's forces?" asked Jacek with sarcasm and fierce defiance on his face. "Escort you right back out of my town, perhaps? Or would handing you over to the Southern Forces be more preferable?"

The company leader smiled and his eyes glinted as he regarded the governor.

Jacek was an evenly built man, weathered, but hardy like the rest of the people of Nokota. As with many towns in the South, he and the others were extremely independent. Life in a medium-sized town was difficult, especially further north where winters were harsher. But they didn't take their freedom for granted and never appreciated outsiders telling them how to do things.

Even now, Jacek's brown eyes flickered with fight and a type of anger that came when a man's freedom and natural-born rights were threatened. It was much like the expression in the eyes of a wild and spirited horse when someone attempts to corral it and it has no desire to be put in a stall, behind a fence, or any boundary.

"If anyone attempts to ride out to retrieve any Southern patrols," replied the leader, "know it would be pointless. Right now, my commander and his forces have your town surrounded."

He stepped to one side and extended a hand towards the still open door. "Please, see for yourselves."

Jacek and his councilmen walked onto the broad front porch and turned their eyes to the hills on the north edge of town. There standing as mere silhouettes in the early light were riders lined amongst the trees.

They could also see east and west and saw riders at both main entrances of Nokota.

More residents were outside now and watching things closely. A number had already had taken a look and then vanished out of sight. Knowing the people here, Jacek was aware they were going for weapons.

None of the security force was visible. They were in position and prepared to initiate defensive actions at a signal from Jacek.

"Is this supposed to scare us?" asked Jacek to the leader as he stepped beside him and the others.

The man smiled. "Before you get all excited, allow me to explain the purpose of my visit: I'm not here to tell you to hand over your weapons or food. We're not even here to take over your...charming town. I'm only here to make a proposal: give us any news you may learn of the Southern Forces movements, and we won't burn Nokota to the ground."

When Jacek eyed the leader, the man's smile broadened. "We know you're a major weapons supplier to them. So, the next time they pass through, or you learn where any of their squads are camped...let us know."

He slapped a hand on Jacek's shoulder and a menacing light gleamed to life in his eyes. "It'll be easy. Some of my commander's men will be staying here...to make sure you don't try anything foolish."

"That doesn't sound like much of a proposal," growled Jacek, not the least bit intimidated.

The leader chuckled and tightened his grip on the governor's shoulder.

"Now, I know you aren't afraid of what happens to yourself," he replied, lowering his voice. "But it is your job to look out for the people of this town. And if you're going to be difficult, we'll detain each member of your defense forces, and all your men and women who are fighting age...and kill each of them, one by one, slowly. Then we'll torch every last building and storehouse. Winter isn't close to being over, and it would be a very long-suffering few months until spring for any survivors."

He smiled tightly. "My commander transferred from one of Ambrose's units, and taught us a few things about persuasion and taking control."

I'm happy for you, thought Jacek, but didn't say it. Instead, he glanced at his councilmen.

They all wore defiant expressions, but they understood the weight of the situation. One by one, they dropped their heads, as if in submission.

"We'll do what you ask" replied Jacek to the leader, before adding much sarcasm, "oh, I mean...accept your proposal."

"Glad to hear it," answered the man. "No need to make a public announcement. Just let your smiths and innkeepers know to report anything to yourself or your councilmen."

The leader and his men turned, walked down the steps, and then swung onto their horses.

"When can we expect our...overseers to arrive?" asked Jacek coolly.

"They're already on site," replied the leader, flashing a sinister grin before turning his horse. "I'm sure I'll be hearing from you soon, governor."

Without another word, the dozen cantered towards the east entrance of town. The horsemen on the hills around Nokota had already vanished from sight.

"So," said the eldest of the councilmen quietly, "this is what we've become? Traitors to forces we've been loyal allies to since the beginning of time?"

Jacek turned his back on the street, then put his hands on his hips and dropped his head a moment, to give the appearance of defeat.

In reality, his mind was attempting to piece together some kind of plan. However, he knew that it was likely he and the others were being watched. Thus, none of them could act like they were scheming.

"We'll have to slowly and carefully try and find out who the overseers are," he replied softly. "Obviously, they won't be dressed like soldiers. But we get enough foreign traffic through here, even in winter, that it's difficult to keep track of who's from where. We'll just have to be patient, and hope none of the Southern Forces come here anytime soon."

"And we can't just send out messengers," added another councilman, "doubtless anyone leaving will be followed."

"I know," answered Jacek, trying with effort to keep his rising anger in check. "We'll have to figure out another way to warn them...otherwise, we'll be sentencing our friends and allies to death."

Chapter 73

Pawns & Informants

Earth

It had been a week after Aiden's first visit with the warlord Nazim. As anticipated, the sum he would be paid to attack his smaller neighbor proved to be something he couldn't ignore. Essentially he was being paid to exact revenge and expand his own territory.

Another known tribal warlord by the name of Arzad readily agreed to play the part Aiden had asked of him.

Now both warlords were getting their troops together. If Aiden guessed correctly, the regions two and a half hours south of Kabul would get exciting in another few weeks.

The pawns would move concurrently. Because Arzad and Nazim were rivals themselves, there was almost total certainty neither would know the other had been paid by Aiden. If they ever did discover this truth, it wouldn't be until well after the fact.

When they moved, they'd, in turn, set other pieces on the board into motion, and so on and so forth as a chain reaction was initiated.

Also as suspected, the Agency had taken note that Channing and Aiden were in Kabul. Thus it wasn't the least bit surprising when a local Agency case officer sat down at their table in the hotel restaurant.

When it came to some meetings, it was best to conduct them in a public area and during a time when it'd be busy. Sneaking around at night to a secret rendezvous, especially in the Middle-East, had a high potential of you being seen by someone you didn't want to be seen by.

In cities and towns in the land of sand, there were eyes everywhere.

"Look who we have here," said the agent, leaning back, clasping his fingers, and setting his hands on his stomach, "Channing and his number-two man, in Kabul of all places."

"I was wondering when one of you would show up," replied Channing with a smile.

"Yes, what surprise it is running into you," replied the agent with a grin.

Channing chuckled at the joke.

"How are things, Bashir?" asked Aiden before taking a sip of coffee.

Bashir had the physical makeup of any other local Afghani male, with the exception of his more formal clothing. His real name was Benjamin Stykes, American born and bred, though no average US citizen would've accurately guessed that fact.

The only reason Aiden and Channing knew any of this was because Channing had contacts deep within the Agency in this region of the world. Also, Aiden had worked with Bashir, aka Benjamin, previously. Therefore, they were acquainted with one another.

"Can't complain," answered Bashir as he leveled his brown eyes on Channing. "My boss and I were curious about what brings you to Kabul. Last time you were here, a car bomb destroyed an entire business, one of our teams was compromised, and two of our informants suddenly decided to stop working for us."

"We had nothing to do with any of that," replied Aiden. "If you had even the slightest bit of evidence that we did, then you would've shoved a black bag over our heads and taken us to a black site a long time ago."

"Since you found us, which wasn't difficult," added Channing, "then you know we're here for the energy conference next month. We just came a little early for some...personal business. You know what we do."

"Mm," said Bashir, with suspicion on his face.

Channing waved him off. "It won't interfere with anything you're doing, and if it does, I know you'll let us know swiftly. Oh!"

He snapped his fingers and shot a glance at Aiden. "But there is something that might be of interest to you. While my assistant was out enjoying the scenery the other day, he overheard some news worth noting, in regards to several groups not on the Agency's payroll."

Aiden gave a little shrug and met his boss's gaze. "They probably already know about it."

His eyes shifted to Bashir. "No use telling them things they already know."

"True," nodded Bashir, unclasping his fingers and folding his arms across his chest. "But in this region of the world, it's better to be safe than sorry. What's this...interesting news?"

Channing chuckled. "You think we're just going to give you the information for free? I like you, Bashir, and I respect your work, but I don't like you *that* much. Besides, if I started giving away sensitive details for free, then other people would hear about it, think I'd gone soft, and then it'd be nothing but work and trouble all the time."

A little smile pulled at the corner of Bashir's mouth. "What do you want in return?"

"Nothing in the immediate future," replied Channing.

The smile broadened on Bashir's lips. "This is for a future investment, a favor somewhere down the line."

Now it was Channing's turn to smile.

"Alright," conceded Bashir as he straightened in his chair. "Let's have it."

Channing glanced at Aiden, who then spoke. "It seems relations between several alpha tribal warlords in the south and central provinces are heating up. They're allying

and mobilizing, but not against the Taliban. Against each other. Something to do about revenge for thievery or something rather. Anyway, it's shaping up to be a little civil war going into winter, and a bloody one at that."

"I don't think the Agency is going to be overly worried," answered Bashir, as a dark and cunning light danced in his eyes. "We've instigated coups, civil wars, and manipulated power grabs, remember?"

Both Channing and Aiden held the Agency and its operatives with great respect. They saw the ugliest things that war and espionage had to offer. They hunted the most ruthless people and occasionally worked beside the darkest and vilest human beings alive in order to bring them down.

They did the bloody and dirty work no one else wanted to even get near.

They were also master manipulators in this game of deceit, distrust and illusions.

All that to say, Aiden knew it was difficult to trick a case officer, especially an experienced one. They were always suspicious of everyone and had to be.

But that was why it helped to have evidence to back Aiden's claims. In a month or so, he'd have that—and maybe a dead CIA officer or two, knowing how Channing planned things.

That would definitely help Aiden's cause.

"Well, just a heads up," said Aiden with another shrug before leveling a gaze on Bashir again. "But it didn't sound like it was going to be a simple territorial dispute."

"My boss will be touched by your concern," said Bashir with a chuckle.

Aiden smiled. "You know how we work. We have assets and resources of our own in the region that we don't want shot to pieces."

"Well, we'll see what we can do to accommodate." Bashir flashed a grin. "You know we aim to please and reward our informants."

He then stood, gave a nod, "Gentlemen," and exited the restaurant.

Channing and Aiden ordered lunch, and once their food arrived they began to speak again.

"Think they'll go for it?" asked Aiden.

"Not without getting ears on Nazim's group and the others," answered Channing, "or without something happening that would support your claim. But we already knew that, hence the plans that are in motion. Just keep in mind that the real plan has nothing to do with warlords and their poppy fields. It's all just a diversion. I have more details on the real jobs that come after, but those can wait until after we eat."

The boss took a bite of the qabli pulao and declared, "Oh wow. I forgot how much I missed this. This kind of flavor can't be found in the US."

Chapter 74

Identity

Earth

"Alpha has secured the Jack."

"Watch it! He just ducked out of sight. Bravo's..."

Rapid weapons fire from various assault rifles echoed off the ridges.

"Where's that coming from? I can't see him!"

"Charlie, hold your position."

"Bravo's secured the King. Who has eyes on Charlie or the Ace?"

A round of "negatives" were replying when there came the report, "Ranger has eyes on the Ace. He has some friends covering for him...has Charlie pinned on lower ground. On site in ten seconds...just don't shoot me."

"Alpha sees Ranger. Two breaking away and coming in behind..."

Light on her feet, Jada ran across the ridge, keeping just below the crest so as not to be spotted by enemy gunmen. After several mountain sheep excursions on Aurora, the terrain here was a piece of cake to traverse.

Ahead, the target popped in and out of view. But it was the weapon's fire on the other side of the ridge to her right that required her more immediate attention.

Dropping to her stomach, Jada crested the ridge and peered down into the narrow ravine. The members of Charlie unit were pinned by four insurgents, directly below her.

Not for long.

She'd picked off the one nearest her when the two members from Alpha crawled beside her.

"We've got 'em," whispered one soldier, sighting through the scope of his rifle.

"More reinforcements are en route."

Jada pushed herself backwards out of view of the ravine, leapt to her feet, and then slung her rifle over her shoulder. Taking off into a sprint, she tracked after the original target.

"Base has eyes in the air," said a female voice in her ear. *"The Ace is fifty meters ahead of you, Ranger."*

At the report, Jada picked up the pace even more.

"Delta is approaching from the north. In the area in thirty."

At the next curve of the ridge, she slowed her pace and stalked around the bend. The target was skittering and sliding on the floor of another, rather narrow, ravine.

Not a good idea on his part, she thought. Then again, this was his home turf, so he knew the lay of the land like the back of his hand, and thus knew right where he was going.

Jada reported his new location while scanning the terrain and spotting another lower trail that followed the ravine floor.

The target reached a turn in the path and then paused and looked over his shoulder. He had a subtle feeling that he was being watched or followed, but all his eyes saw were rocks. Seconds ticked by and then he continued forward.

Jada stood from a boulder she'd crouched behind and made her way along the lower path.

"Delta is another one hundred meters ahead of the Ace, at a choke point..."

It was pure instinct that Jada threw herself against the rock wall on her right. Several bullets pitted the rock off her left shoulder.

"And be advised the Ace has more support in the area."

Jada rolled her eyes before scanning the ridge opposite her.

"Good to know," she replied. "Ace is still heading north."

Movement on the other ridge and above her grabbed her attention. An insurgent poked his head above a little rock, spotted her, and then ducked out of view. In typical fashion, he proceeded to stick his AK-47 over the rock and fire blindly.

The bullets missed by a good dozen feet, striking above her head.

Staying in motion, Jada locked onto the insurgent's rifle.

He stopped shooting, peeked out from his hiding spot...and collapsed.

That was about the time three friendly military types appeared above his position.

"You're late to the party," said Jada, spinning and running after the target again.

"Couldn't find anything to wear," was the response. *"Onward, Ranger. Foxtrot has your six."*

Rapid fire exploded from around the next bend in the ridge.

"Watch yourselves. Five more running interference for the Ace!"

Upon cautious inspection, Jada found this to be true. But Delta had the route to the north blocked, as well as the high ground. Foxtrot moved into position and took out three of the insurgents simultaneously, catching them looking the other way.

This wasn't lost on the target. Reacting instantly, he spun and sprinted into and up a dry, narrow riverbed.

"Ace is headed east," barked Jada.

There was only a four-foot gap between the ridge she was on and the one opposite her. She jumped it and began high-tailing it up the rocky hillside.

Twenty seconds later, as she noticed how quiet it had become, she heard the update, *"enemy interference removed."*

“Looks like you’re ahead of him now, Ranger. We have the top of the ridge covered. You’re clear.”

She maintained her pace another fifty meters before, *“The riverbed opens up there. We’ll be able to see the Ace when he reaches you.”*

That was Jada’s cue to stop and wait to ambush him. A large rock provided her good cover right on the edge of the riverbed, and she crouched and waited.

This type of ambush was her personal favorite, kind of like a one-man shock-and-awe.

She heard the target first, before seeing him seconds later.

“We’ll see if we can’t draw his attention for a second.”

He was nearly to Jada when someone back in the ravine shouted. He jerked around, half-turning his back to her position. That was when she jumped and landed smack on top of him.

He dropped to the ground but was still conscious enough to try and fight. Jada sidestepped his sorry excuse of a kick before striding forward and meleeing him with the buttstock of her rifle.

Hope I didn’t hit him too hard, she thought as she zip-tied his wrists and then rolled him onto his side.

Ah, well, she concluded, *he’s still breathing at any rate.*

It was only another thirty seconds until reinforcements arrived. The Agency operatives secured their weapons upon seeing Jada and that the situation was contained.

The military men, who’d arrived after the unexpected excitement unfolded, kept their rifles trained on her.

Jada could understand this behavior for the first second or two, because she was in disguise and dressed as a local male. Plus a scarf hid most of her face. But even after their Agency counterparts had secured their weapons, they kept their rifles on her.

“Point those someplace else,” she chided. “If I were an insurgent, I wouldn’t have zip-tied my boss, and I would’ve shot you all on sight.”

Realizing who she was, the soldiers immediately lowered their weapons.

“Thanks for letting me make the bag,” she joked to Ryan McCormick, who first introduced himself as “John.”

“Yeah, well, I heard you like that kind of stuff,” he replied with a smile as he stepped beside her.

Jada allowed herself a chuckle before rotating her shoulders and popping her neck. *What a morning.*

It wasn’t quite lunch when they returned from their excursion in the hills north of Feyzabad, Afghanistan. They’d tracked a group known to supply weapons to Pakistan’s Taliban all the way into northern Afghanistan. When they’d reached their destination and

dropped off their payload, they met with some very important people: two were middlemen in the Taliban and a third close to those in the upper ranks of al Qaeda.

It was unfortunate for them that they'd shown up on the Agency team's radar.

In intelligence and counterterrorism, it was the middlemen who were wanted. They had contact with the bosses, who kept themselves isolated, and the rest of the world. Documents, money, marching orders, all manner of details were given to the middlemen. As such, it made them the people to target to find the big bosses, or stop bombings or hijackings.

Even in the age of ever advancing technology, there was still nothing like human intelligence. While drone strikes were great for taking out bad guys—if one could be certain the target was the bad guy, and that he was truly dead afterwards.

But an abundance of good intelligence could be killed off by “gun slinging” it, as Jada called it.

Either way, she and the team had always planned on raiding the drop point once the suppliers reached it and unloaded the weapons. The farm the suppliers stopped at had long been suspected of housing Taliban operatives or holding their weapons until they were retrieved. Thus, there was no reservation about executing a strike against them.

Jada and company also quickly adapted and expanded the plan that included nabbing the three middlemen. The part of the world they were in truly was wild, with great spans of distance between settlements or cities. All that to say: when a target disappeared, they wouldn't be spotted again for months or years.

It was all about seizing the opportunity, if the time was right.

The team had given ISAF forces in Feyzabad a heads-up about the operation. Many had been stationed there awhile and were familiar with the terrain around the immediate area. So, they were on standby if things got dicey.

Long story short, somehow the middlemen had more backup than had been originally been reported to Ryan and the team. There was a chance they'd somehow caught onto the Agency presence and managed to sneak in more men under the cover of night. Or they had brought extra reinforcements with them when they traveled and had simply been missed.

The latter was unlikely. The team was Agency trained. They didn't miss obvious details.

They'd moved up their strike time by an hour and it had worked out. They breached the shacks on the edge of the city literally just as the middlemen were leaving.

Excitement ensued and a short chase into the hill country north side of Feyzabad. Thankfully, the team's ISAF brothers were quick to respond, probably because it had been awhile since they'd seen any action. They'd appeared a bit put-off when they were tasked merely as “backup.”

Jada understood. She'd have been miffed, too.

But it all turned out well, and the team had their men. Presently they were who knew where by now. Another Agency unit had been waiting and whisked away the three captives.

She didn't need an imagination to know what was going to happen to them. *But what do you expect when you choose a life of bloodshed and preying on innocent people?*

Now the Agency team debriefed in a small, empty building on the grounds of the airfield, which currently displayed ISAF forces.

"Well, McCormick," said Jada, leaning back in her chair and stretching her arms over her head, "it's been fun."

Ryan, who'd allowed himself to take on a scruffy appearance during their stay in Pakistan and Afghanistan, smiled.

"She makes it sound like she's going to jump on the next C-130 outta here," piped Alex, sitting across the card table from Jada. "Don't tell me you already have another job lined up, Serbin."

Jada grinned. "Nope, nothing on the docket...today, anyway."

"Oh good," replied Ryan, taking a seat to her left and setting a bottle of water in front of her, "because Myles was hoping you might stick around."

She looked at him with interest. "Why? You have another case to work? You know I don't like to just sit around..."

"Seriously, Jada," cut in Alex. "Don't you ever take a break or a vacation? I've never even seen you sleep. How many cups of coffee do you drink a day?"

"Um...maybe...one? And I do consider this a vacation: this is a desert-ish place, with hills to climb, exciting daily life. What more could you ask for?"

Alex rolled his eyes. "You can't be human..."

"You're just jealous that she picked up our group's trail three different times," countered Stella as she walked into the room and completed the original four-man team. "And she did it by hiking twenty hours a day, boots on the ground."

Jada raised her water bottle to her and smiled. "That's how I roll."

"Freak of nature," muttered Alex, but there was a teasing twinkle in his eyes.

Stella had been referring to the two weeks leading up to the strike. Pakistani military spooked the Agency's target group several times into Afghanistan, which wasn't a big deal in itself, but they'd lost them.

There was a lot of rugged and wild country to cover, and the tribal regions were treacherous. Even military forces avoided going into those areas.

Picking up their trail again was sometimes thanks to satellite imagery, drones, or good ol' legwork, tracking and putting "boots on the ground." Jada's boots, actually, but that's what she got paid for—and she loved it.

“Well, you’ll be stuck here until tomorrow,” said Ryan, “no scheduled transports leaving ‘til the morning.”

His blue eyes twinkled as he added, “Unless, of course, you want to hitch a ride tonight with that group of diplomats here on a sightseeing tour.”

Jada made a face. “I’d rather take a donkey...”

That made Alex laugh, and Stella allowed herself a chuckle. When Jada glanced at Ryan, he was already looking at her with mirth in his sparkling eyes.

Ryan and Jada had clicked right off following their initial cool meeting back in the US. Once the operation began, she was able to see more of his true character.

He was determined to successfully complete an assignment and would track any lead wherever it went. While he was generally easy-going, there were a few items that got him heated quickly.

One of them was someone trying to sneak food off his plate.

Another was in regards to the safety of his team. He wasn’t the top boss, which was Myles, currently in Kabul. But Ryan was the second-in-command and he took the task of protection to the utmost seriousness.

Therefore, there had been some friction between him and Jada after the first time she’d gone off by herself to pick up the trail of their target group. Ryan kept himself mostly in check, though he did bite her head off a little when she joined up with the team again.

Or he tried to. After having dealt with Namor, before he was Jada’s friend, no one intimidated her ever again.

Jada held her ground in typical blithe fashion, which only ticked off Ryan more. But he’d known from the beginning how she operated, so how could he really be that surprised? Besides, she basically didn’t exist and had no next of kin to worry about if she was killed.

So really, he was sitting pretty if the operation turned black.

After that singular incident, Ryan held his peace whenever Jada vanished. In all honesty, she was the only one on the team who could literally stay on her feet, in motion and actually coherent at twenty-hour stretches.

She and Ryan quickly came to a silent understanding. She wasn’t intentionally “spitting” in his face. She was simply doing what she knew how to do and in her own style of doing it.

Besides, no one could argue with the results.

“What’s the latest in-house news in sunny Afghanistan?” asked Ryan, before giving a massive yawn.

Stella, on her iPad which provided its own internet connection, skimmed the latest Agency updates for central and northern Afghanistan. Anything highly classified, of course, wasn't on there. The information given was more like "FYI's."

"It's pretty quiet," replied Stella. "It is winter, after all. The only potential activity was mentioned by some previous assets in Kabul. Something to do with a territorial spat between warlords."

"Ah," said Jada to herself, "battle of the poppy fields."

"Pretty much."

"Who were the assets?" asked Ryan.

Stella turned the iPad around so Ryan could see.

"Channing and Aiden," he said. "Figures. And what brings them to Kabul this time of year?"

"Supposedly the energy conference next month."

Alex blew through his lips. "Yeah, right. The boss and his second-in-command of a top-of-the-line mercenary group are in Afghanistan...for an energy conference? Who would actually believe that? And they're a month early."

"Mm," answered Stella, looking at him. "Myles and the team in Kabul thought as much. Channing said they weren't planning anything that would likely interfere with any Agency ops."

The three agents looked at one another and then chuckled.

"Uh, you mind if I get an invite to this conversation?" asked Jada.

Stella handed her the iPad as Ryan explained. "Channing heads a merc group, elite grade. Consists of exceptionally trained men from special fighting forces all across the globe. We're aware that a lot of their jobs are...hostile in nature. But..."

"That's why you use them, for information," finished Jada, as she reached pictures of Channing, Aiden and a few others in their group. "They have access and details on all kinds of interesting people. You probably utilize their services sometimes, too. You'd have deniability if things go south. You can say you don't know them. But the pay or whatever compensation is good enough that Channing believes the risk is worth it."

"Exactly."

Stella said something to Ryan, but Jada didn't catch it. She was suddenly very drawn to the various surveillance photos of Aiden. The most current ones were during the meeting with an Agency contact in Kabul.

Jada wasn't exactly sure why she was drawn to him, but she felt like she'd seen him before, or that she knew him. It was like déjà vu, and her gut was demanding she pay attention.

When she reached the fourth photo, she stopped. It was nearly a full-body shot of Aiden, and there, on his left wrist...was a braided leather band, identical to hers.

“Do we know where Aiden is presently?” asked Jada offhandedly, before digging out her notebook and a pencil from her backpack beside the chair.

“No,” replied Ryan, as she began doodling on a scrap piece of paper. “We don’t have any need to keep him under constant surveillance. Why?”

Jada didn’t know any of the jobs Channing or Aiden had executed. However, that pair being in Afghanistan at the same time warlords were becoming excited— and during a time of year when everyone hunkered down—was highly suspicious.

Or maybe I’m just groping in the dark, she thought, or is it “groping at straws?” Grasp at straws? Ah heck, I can never keep my idioms straight...

Jada was positive Aiden was the traveler working for Cassius in Aurora. It made sense. Cassius’s progress, or failure, would affect Channing’s plots or success of his deals.

She now had a face and she knew how to get confirmation of him back in Aurora. To say she was suddenly very excited would be like saying that Zohmar was “just a horse.”

She needed to head back to the other dimension. Now. Urgency she hadn’t felt in nearly a year grabbed her fiercely, and she resisted the impulse to spring to her feet.

I finally have the traveler!

Jada’s mind was still trying to grasp that fact and the significance of it. She’d been put on the case with Ryan so she could identify Aiden and pick up his trail. At last, something to go on after nine months.

“Just a hunch,” said Jada, answering Ryan’s question as she stood.

Taking the piece of paper she’d drawn on, Jada folded it and slid it into her back pocket. She then slung her backpack over her shoulder before heading for the door.

“Hey, where you going?” asked Ryan.

She stopped at the door and glanced at him. “To find food. I’m starving.”

Ryan said something in response, but Jada never heard it as the door closed behind her.

Chapter 75

Deals

Aurora

It had been winter when Jada had left Aurora, and it was winter when she returned. Another storm had passed recently, and the air was exceptionally sharp and the light breeze biting to her face.

Augh! she thought, shrugging her shoulders up towards her ears, *temperature shock!*

Fortunately, she arrived in clothing basically suited for the weather conditions, save a heavy down jacket.

That was another item worth mentioning: when she'd returned to Earth's dimension, it had been spring and she found herself in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

Now, as she stood on a little balcony of a two-story cabin, she wore various layers of garb typical in Aurora.

Surveying the forest, Jada couldn't help but smile. It was like she'd returned home after a long journey. Truly, this dimension was more home to her than the other. Somehow, it seemed more real.

Right, she thought, *now to figure out where I am, so I can go hunting around for Aiden or his last known whereabouts.*

She turned to go inside the cabin when she heard a voice below say, "Glad I caught you at home for once."

Glancing over the balcony railing, Jada saw a middle-aged man looking up at her. It took her a moment to place his face and then identify him as one of Gilead's group.

Caught me at home, she thought. *So...this cabin is...mine. Huh.*

"What's Gilead want this time?" she asked.

He smiled. "One of his informants reported some news that he thought you might find extremely interesting. In exchange for this...tip, he asks that you go to Bourdin and pick something up from the innkeeper there."

"That's vague," she quipped. "What am I picking up? Besides drunkards?"

The man laughed. "Just a piece of paper. That's all. Gilead will meet you at our settlement, where he'll give you the information."

Jada sighed. "So I'm playing errand runner, is that it? Do I even get a hint over what this so-called interesting information is about?"

"Weapons supplies for the Southern Forces."

"Fine. I'll do it."

"Gilead will be glad to hear it," grinned the man as he began slowly backing into the trees. "Oh and he said the sooner you retrieve that paper the better because there's a limited amount of time that the tip will be good for."

He turned to leave but paused when a thought came to him. "You know, Gilead was honestly disappointed that he wasn't able to find you for the past few jobs he had lined up. He was beginning to think you were intentionally avoiding him."

Jada blinked at him, and the man just chuckled while he went on his way. As she watched him disappear into the trees, she wondered exactly how much time had actually passed during her absence.

Perhaps there was a legitimate reason why it felt like she'd been gone for awhile.

Turning sharply, she walked inside the cabin and was instantly greeted by a warm burst of air.

She now founded herself in a tall loft, which appeared to serve as an office. A desk with papers strewn about it was to her left, with a number of lanterns around it. A floor-to-ceiling bookcase sat against the far wall, near a rocking chair, footstool and a pair of end tables with candles on them.

Windows on every wall gave her a near three-hundred and sixty-degree view of the surrounding trees and hills. To the northwest, some familiar looking mountains towered high into the partly cloudy sky.

Down a short, broad hall whose right side was open to the living room, was a bedroom. It was large, with a vaulted ceiling and had its own bathroom. Jada guessed it was the master. Windows, and even skylights allowed for plentiful light.

Upon investigating the closet, she found clothes that looked like they were her size...and her armor and weapons.

Hello, beautiful, she thought, unable to keep from grinning, *it feels like Christmas*.

It really was her house. She had one in Aurora just like she had one back in the other realm.

The errand to run for Gilead pressed on her mind, but she wanted to finish a quick investigation of the house.

Stepping out of the room and to the railing of the loft, Jada looked down into an open living room. A hearth, with a fire crackling and popping happily in it, sat on the far side of the room, the west end.

Jogging down the stairs to the main floor, Jada saw the kitchen was on her right, on the north end of the house. Beside it was a mudroom and a side door, and a little bathroom sat beside that.

On her left, at the rear of the living room was another door, which led into a guest bedroom. The far right corner of the living room was built outwards slightly, bayed, and looked like some kind of sitting room with a smaller bookcase. It made sense because windows let in light from the east, south, and west.

The front door was on the south wall, opposite the kitchen.

Knowing herself, Jada probably had a secret stash of weapons somewhere or multiple stashes. Just like she believed there was no such thing as too many guns, there was also no such thing as too many swords, knives, or tomahawks.

But she'd finish poking around later.

Spinning, Jada ran back upstairs to her bedroom. Hastily, she slid on her armor, the chest piece and protective pieces that shielded her lower arms. After strapping on her knives, one per thigh, she secured her belt, with her sword and tomahawk on it.

When she finished five minutes later and slid on her overcoat, she was smiling again. *Just like the good, ol' days.*

After tossing some provisions into a backpack, Jada headed out the mudroom door. Thanks to the mountains, she had a good idea of where she was. But if she was going to reach Bourdin and then Gilead's settlement before summer came, she needed a mount.

After pulling on a hat to keep her ears from freezing, she began trekking west and called for Zohmar. When she received no response on the whispering breeze, she whistled.

Because this was only her second time returning to Aurora, she was still figuring out how things worked. She couldn't be certain if Zohmar would be directed to the area she'd arrive in *before* she actually showed up, or not.

However, she quickly understood that every time she'd landed in exactly the right place at the right time. Like when she and Blake had come back after the waterfall incident, and she found herself on the edge of the enemy camp.

No longer did she think of it as being "in the wrong place at the right time," or that it was a curse. How could she? Now she saw and understood it as it really was: a gift.

This time, she'd shown up at home just before Gilead's messenger had arrived.

After ten minutes of hiking, Jada resigned to the fact Zohmar wasn't nearby. *Maybe he's just mad at me for being gone for...who knows how long.*

She also wondered what all had happened with Halden and Ambrose, and what Michael and the others were up to. She hadn't realized until that moment how much she'd missed seeing them, her friends and fellow warriors.

But still, it felt so good just to be home.

The morning was wearing on when Jada reached the feet of the mountains, heavy laden with snow. The chickadees and "little finchy birds," as she called them, were out and bouncing about the bare branches of the birches.

She stopped when she came upon a clearing with a broad, but shallow pond in the center of it. It was frozen over, save for some random holes where deer or wild horses had pawed through the ice to get a drink.

The only recent tracks in the shin-deep snow, however, were deer. Any signs of horse were older.

Yet, she'd had the sense all morning that she was being watched, or followed. She continued towards the thicker trees a few strides before stopping and turning suddenly.

Just as I thought.

There he stood, Zohmar. He'd been following her for some time, to make sure it was really his rider and warrior, and not an imposter.

He snorted and lifted his head at her quick movement, but didn't bolt.

Jada's heart leapt into her throat when she saw him, her friend and partner-in-crime. He looked like he'd continued growing over the seasons, and his lighter winter coat made him appear almost white.

Some might've thought it was stupid, but tears of joy burned her eyes as Jada took in her horse. It felt like they'd been apart for an eternity.

However, she kept herself composed and planted her hands on her hips.

"Well, what took you so long?" she asked crossly.

Zohmar studied her with that intelligent gaze for a long breath before his eye softened, and he lowered his head and whickered.

Jada had forgotten how much she'd missed that sound. She couldn't keep from smiling any longer and if she'd grinned any harder, her face would've split.

"Get over here already," she laughed.

Zohmar snorted again and lifted into a jog towards her. Tossing his head into the air, he sounded a deep whinny that reverberated through the forest and seemed to shake the very trees.

Indeed, Zohmar had been waiting anxiously for his rider's return. The day she'd traversed back to the other dimension, he'd tracked her to the clearing, which was where her trail suddenly ended. He was puzzled until a finch, which had seen what happened, told him she'd vanished right where she'd stood.

She'd gone, left him. Yet he understood she would, that coming and going was what she was made to do. He saw her become what Balo had seen when he'd first laid eyes on her: a shining and terrible warrior, born to roam.

Still, his warrior had left him and for the first few weeks of her absence, Zohmar raged across the South and central lands. Every horse and rider were made for one another, and with Jada gone, the smoky stallion felt loss and a void in himself, much as how a human would feel when their best friend moves halfway around the world.

But he carried on the work he and Jada had done in previous months. He sought out and trampled squads of the enemy. Other times he tracked units of Southern Forces and followed them into ambushes.

Still, there were many nights when he raced along the mountains in the moonlight, remembering the countless nights he and his rider had done so together. And he knew she'd come back.

It was also as Jada had guessed. A week prior to her return to Aurora, Zohmar had been on the edge of the trees that bordered the Eastern lands, overlooking Kolanthel. Then his Creator whispered to him on the evening breeze that he ought to return to the familiar mountains he and Jada had once roamed.

It wasn't yesterday he'd come across her cabin and knew it was hers, though he'd never seen or smelt it before. Then that morning she'd returned, and Zohmar, famous in battle, felt fire and fight rekindle anew in his wild and restless spirit.

His warrior had come back, or more accurately, He had returned her to him. Now it was time to cause some mayhem.

Sliding to a stop before her, Zohmar arched his neck and pressed his forehead against hers.

"I missed you, buddy," she said, running her hands down either side of his muscular neck.

Zohmar whickered quietly in response before she stepped to his shoulder and buried her face into his mane. There was still no better smell than that of horse.

"So, what've you been up to?" she asked, untangling a few small knots in his mane. "Chasing mares?"

Zohmar flicked his ears back and grunted.

Jada raised her eyebrows. "No? Well, then, you been causing trouble for the bad guys?"

He blew through his lips and tossed his head.

She laughed and gave him a pat on the neck. "That's my boy."

As she grabbed a handful of mane, Zohmar arched his neck and pawed the ground. Life and light danced brightly in his eyes, and it was plain to see he was ready for the next assignment.

Jada swung onto his back.

"To Bourdin," she said, as he collected himself. "We have a little errand there."

Zohmar snorted and launched into a gallop. To Jada, it was like she was riding him for the first time all over again, and she was amazed at the speed with which he carried them.

They raced up the mountains and cut through the lower passes to reach the other side. Even though the snow was deeper, it didn't prove a problem for Zohmar, and they'd covered much ground by the time the sun drifted into the western sky.

Near the borders of Bourdin, which wasn't far from Highland, Jada stopped Zohmar and dismounted.

"Okay, you wait here. I won't be long."

After sliding off her backpack, she removed her belt and buckled her sword and tomahawk on it.

"If anyone tries to take my stuff," she said in her final orders to Zohmar, "kick 'em." Zohmar snorted and nodded his head.

Jada trekked through the snow until she found the main road into Bourdin. It was one of those times when she was especially grateful for her water-resistant, eight-inch boots because the road was entirely mud.

Come breakup in spring, she thought, this is going to be fun.

She walked into town and made for the inn, near the center of the settlement. No one seemed to take notice of her and walked or rode by without casting a second glance.

There didn't seem to be anything sinister nearby and no shadow loomed over the place, not like Asgard. It appeared darkness had not spread as far as Bourdin yet, and Cassius's forces had kept their distance in the North.

That was encouraging.

Jada reached the inn and stepped inside through the side entrance, which opened right into the bar area. The bar and nearby tables were veiled in smoke, and a fair number of patrons were already seated and chattering amongst themselves.

She plopped herself down on one of the empty stools.

"Whiskey," she said to the bartender, "and a piece of whatever bread you have that's still warm."

The man behind the bar poured Jada a shot before ducking into the kitchen.

She tossed back the shot as he reappeared and set a large, brown roll onto a napkin in front of her.

Tearing off a piece, she shoved it into her mouth. Out the corner of her eye, Jada watched the bartender step over to a man who'd come in front entrance. They spoke briefly before the bartender nodded and then shouted to someone in the kitchen.

A young man popped out of the kitchen and the bartender gave him instructions. The lad nodded before stepping around the end of the bar and into a side room a moment. When he returned, he had a key in hand and started off for the stairs, near the rear of the room.

The man, appearing rather travel-worn, followed.

This confirmed what Gilead's messenger had told Jada: the man behind the bar was both the bartender and the innkeeper.

She took another bite of bread, dug some bills from her pocket, and slapped them on the bar.

"Leavin' so soon?" asked a man, sitting one seat over from Jada as she slid off the stool. "Ya know, a fine thing like you should settle for a jar or two while foosterin' an' havin' a chinwag wi' me."

Jada managed not to roll her eyes or sigh audibly. This was one of the many reasons she didn't spend a lot of time in bars: the company was rarely up-standing, polite, decent, or chivalrous.

Still chewing on a bite of bread, Jada looked at him and raised her eyebrows in a less-than-impressed expression.

He was nearly middle-aged and not exactly bad to look at. But he was a shady character and obviously not really interested in being her friend.

By the type of accent he carried she knew he was from around these parts. She was just grateful he wasn't from the eastern regions, because the old country folk there could be near impossible to understand. Not that this man had anything to say that she was interested in, but still.

The translation to his comment and question ran something like "a beautiful person like you should have a few pints while wasting time and having a chat with me."

I'd much rather belt your face and get on with my life, thought Jada.

"Only here to have a kip," she replied, subconsciously falling into the accent that Merida and the others had claimed she'd picked up splendidly.

Typically, Jada rarely heard it in her own voice, and hearing the man's just now had been the first time in a long while since she'd heard such an accent. As a result, it brought hers out even stronger, which was a common enough thing.

Translation to Jada's response: *I'm only here for a short rest, or siesta.*

According to Merida, who could lay her accent on thick when she became agitated, the accent among the Western and Eastern Villages was considered more midland, though there was some subtle northern influence.

"I don't hang wi' chancers, like, an' I don' get bolloxed," Jada continued, adding some attitude for good measure.

Translation: *I don't mix with shady or dodgy people, and I don't get drunk.*

"Mary Hick," muttered the man with both distaste and disappointment. "Mary Hick" was a generic name for an old-fashioned female.

He raised his mug to his mouth but paused before drinking. "Well, like then, why are you here?"

"Mind your business," snapped Jada, "or I'll belt you in your bloody cakehole."

She turned her attention to the bartender/innkeeper, who'd returned to his place behind the bar.

"I'm here for a kip," she continued, "but I'm also playin' courier for a friend."

"So you're the errand runner this time," mused the bartender, with a heavy accent that said he wasn't originally from this area.

"Aye," she replied, "but not by choice, ya know. He has somethin' I badly want, but...you know how he is. If you want somethin' from 'im, you're gonna have to pay."

"Aye," nodded the bartender. "That be true."

He took another glass, poured it behind the bar, set it onto a new napkin, and slid it towards Jada. Her quick eye noticed the piece of paper under the napkin. The barman was good. She'd never seen him remove it from a pocket, drawer, or shelf.

"Oh," he said, as she took the shot, "tell 'im I haven't forgotten that he owes me for last month. He'll know what I mean."

Jada raised her glass to her lips but paused. "Doesn't sound much like our friend."

Then she gave a tilt of her head. "Goin' back on payments is bad business. I'll be back later, and if he hasn't paid you, I can track 'im and get it for you."

She threw back the shot and set it down on the bar, before looking at the man at the bar who'd spoken to her. "I'm good at huntin' people who've crossed me..."

She looked back at the barman. "And if you give me a share, I'll do the same for you."

Jada and the bartender shared another looked before he said, "Come back in a month and we'll see where things lie."

Jada tossed some more bills on the bar for the second shot and then walked out of the side entrance.

Once she returned to Zohmar in the woods, she removed the piece of paper the barmen had put under the napkin. She'd taken it when she'd looked at the stranger, the moment she'd initiated eye contact with him to hold his attention.

Written on the piece of paper were three dates and rough times. Only Gilead would know what they were for.

Returning it to a pocket, Jada jumped onto Zohmar. They turned east-southeast as she eyed the darkening sky. The heavens had cleared and it would be cold tonight.

By the time they reached the general area of Gilead's settlement, night had fallen upon the South. But the stars were shining magnificently in the clear air and lit the way for horse and rider.

At last, Jada spotted a small camp, about which were a number of brightly burning fires. Around the one in the center of the camp sat half a dozen men.

When they heard the approach of a rider, one particularly tall, lanky individual stood.

"Ah, good to you see you at last," smiled Gilead, "and glad to see you came so quickly."

Zohmar halted a dozen feet from him and the others, and Jada removed the paper from her pocket. Unfolding it, she held it up against the firelight, so Gilead could see the writing on it. He was still far enough away, though, so that he couldn't actually read what was written.

"Now it's your turn," said Jada to him. "What's this...interesting bit of information?"

Gilead worked his jaw back and forth as he considered things. Jada knew he was likely making her wait an extra three seconds just for the sake of being dramatic.

“There’s a group of scouts from Halden’s military forces,” he finally replied, “they stop at the inn in Hildegard on their days off. They’ll be there two days from now...they like to drink and often volunteer very interesting information.”

Gilead’s eyes gleamed in the firelight. “And I know you make good use of...interesting information.”

“Mm,” answered Jada and extended the piece of paper to him.

Gilead walked over and cautiously took it. After skimming the details written on it, he nodded with satisfaction. Then he dug something from a coat pocket and tossed it to Jada.

It was a little cloth bag and whatever was inside tinkled when she caught it. Judging by the feel, it contained coins.

A trace smile pulled at his mouth when she cocked an eyebrow at him.

“For making the trip so quickly,” he said, in response to her expression.

“That reminds me...”

Jada tossed him one coin and then pocketed the rest of the money. Then she dug out another folded piece of paper from her back pocket.

“Have you seen this man before?” she asked, unfolding the paper and showing Gilead a sketch.

It was the one she’d drawn of Aiden while back in Afghanistan.

Gilead glanced at the coin Jada had given him, then up to her before his smile grew into a grin. He recognized she’d given it to him as a sort of payment for his answer to her question.

He studied the sketch closely, before waving his men over. After they looked at it, they shook their heads.

“Haven’t seen him,” replied Gilead. “Who is he?”

“Someone I’m very keen on finding,” answered Jada, refolding the paper and returning it to her pocket.

She bent her gaze down on Gilead. “He won’t be too difficult to recognize...he’s a traveler.”

Gilead’s eyebrows rose and he regarded her with keen curiosity. “You’re...hunting one of your own?”

“Let’s just say,” said Jada, before pausing a moment to calculate her words, “he’s a threat to us all, thieves, suppliers, and up-standing citizens alike.”

That made Gilead laugh. “Well, when you put it like that, we’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with you,” she said with feigned sincerity.

Zohmar turned and started walking away.

“Oh and by the way,” added Jada, looking over her shoulder as Zohmar stopped and half-turned. “The innkeeper told me to tell you that he hasn’t forgotten you still own him for last month.”

Gilead gave no sign that he knew what she was talking about.

“Either way,” she finished, throwing him a devious grin, “if you don’t pay...I volunteered to track you down for him.”

Gilead remained silent, and Zohmar turned and lifted into a jog, carrying them into the darkness.

Chapter 76

Siblings

Since Jada had two days before she needed to go to Hildegard, she returned to her house. It was strange because even though she’d never been there until her initial arrival, the place still felt like home.

Just like her house in Earth’s dimension, the one in Aurora also appeared like she’d been living in it for some time.

It solved the issue over where Jada was going to live once she’d returned to Aurora. One of the primary reasons she was grateful for her own place was because she wouldn’t have to worry about endangering anyone. If she was with Jordan and Merida, she’d be concerned for their safety every time she left.

Plus, she enjoyed having an entire “spread” to herself.

After some exploring of the house, Jada found three separate, hidden weapons caches. She was impressed at how many weapons there were in each one.

The next two nights she only managed three hours of sleep, and when the time came to ride to Hildegard, she was more than ready.

She found Zohmar’s tack in a discreetly hidden shack built into the hill beside the house. It also contained a number of axes and other tools.

After everything was in place and she’d grabbed a bow, and a second sword, she mounted and swung Zohmar east.

They made good time and arrived at Hildegard at the approach of evening. The only real business in the town itself was the inn, a large, two-story building. All other structures remotely close were houses on farmland. But the inn was smack in the middle of various crossroads in the area and was the place where local famers and travelers frequented.

Jada secured a room for the night, more than paid for by Gilead's tip for her prompt errand-running. It was doubtful she'd actually spend the night, but she wanted an inconspicuous place where she could watch traffic on the road for awhile.

For some time, she stood in the dark at one of the windows of the room and took note of those coming and going.

Night had officially set in when a group of men on horseback approached. As they drew nearer the building, the light from the hanging lanterns revealed their armor and uniform garb.

Hello, she thought, and welcome back to Hildegard, gentlemen.

Even after the soldiers had arrived and disappeared inside, Jada remained upstairs for another hour. When she heard the noise level beginning to increase, she figured everyone had gone deep into their mugs of ale by that point.

As was the plan. She wanted to be able to slip in and out without anyone being able to remember her accurately.

After tying her hair back, Jada pulled the hood of her long overcoat over her head. The coat itself reached almost to her knees and concealed her knives. Her sword, tomahawk, bow and arrows would remain in the room.

She'd debated leaving them with Zohmar but decided she wanted them closer at hand, just in case.

Clothes worn and stained with mud, Jada appeared like any other traveler as she trudged down the stairs and took a seat at a table in the corner. No one seemed to notice her, though a few shared a nod of greeting.

Jada forewent the alcohol, not that she was a regular drinker anyway, and opted for dinner instead.

Indeed, Gilead had been correct when he'd said that the scouts enjoyed drink. They sat at the bar with their backs to her and already had a pint or two by the time she'd shown up.

Thankfully, Jada didn't have to wait long before she heard some interesting news, and she had to admit, she enjoyed the entertainment as she ate. They also held the rest of the company's attention and kept any curious patrons away from her.

She and the others were regaled with a few comical stories of the soldiers' troop movements before the really good stuff began to come out.

"Ohy," said one soldier, words running together a bit. "I don't know why we're still out here, wanderin' 'round in the cold and snow. These people further west are more stubborn and don't scare easy. As if we're going to convince them to ally with our forces. The last place that actually, eh...fell for our threats was Ardenna, way back east."

“Right,” agreed his friend, “and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say the commander was tryin’ to get us killed. We’re gettin’ close to warriors towns...and I hear the mounted patrols are everywhere out ‘ere...”

“The commander knows there’s more of a chance we’ll get run down,” nodded a third, completing the second soldier’s thought.

“Aye!” said the second and a bit too loudly.

The first soldier belched and then leaned towards his companion to his right.

“And do you really think Nokota is goin’ to inform on the Southern Forces for us?” he asked in a slurred question. “Actually tattle their plans and locations to us?”

The soldiers to his left and right shook their heads.

“No way,” replied the one on the left with an emphatic shake of his head. “They’re too...too...what’s the word? Stu, sne...uh...”

“Smart?” asked the first soldier.

“Too something,” nodded the second soldier. “Anyway, they’ve probably already managed to warn the Southern Forces we’re threatening to level their town if they don’t work for us.”

“Well,” declared the third soldier, as he resolutely slammed his fist on the bar, “I say we just hang around here a few extra days and then head back east, towards the troops. No way I’m going further into the West...”

He shook his head. “Not getting’ trampled by no filthy horsemen, tanks.”

He ended his statement with an impressive belch.

For another few minutes, they continued their discourse about their commander’s secret plan to have their group killed. As they did, they were kind enough to give away the rough location of their regiment, or at least where they’d been last.

While they were talking about these things, Jada studied the other patrons around the room. Most of them looked displeased as they regarded the soldiers, and a few slipped outside in short order.

One young couple, near the fire to Jada’s right, had been casting glances at her almost the entire time she’d been there. Finally, she turned her head and looked at them, though her low-hanging hood prevented them from seeing her face.

They shot glances from her to the soldiers and then back to her. By their searching expressions, it was like they were asking if she was there to help.

Clearly, they weren’t in league with Halden’s forces or his plans. Like any other local inhabitant, they were more than ready for them all to go away and leave them be.

Jada turned her gaze back to the soldiers, who were now discussing matters of food rations. She then raised her cup of water to the military men, who’d been so kind as to provide her sensitive information, and then drained the cup.

After tossing a few bills onto the table, she stood and stalked silently from the room. When she passed by the young couple, they exchanged a glance, eyes now twinkling. The woman's eyes flitted up to Jada for not even a breath and she fought to keep from smiling.

Jada caught and recognized the look on the woman's face and in her eyes: it was fight and determination, mixed with hope.

It was encouraging to see the people weren't afraid or easily intimidated. From what Jada had heard, not many would readily submit to the forces of Halden and Ambrose.

For the present, though, Jada needed to find the nearest outpost utilized by the resistance forces and report what she'd just overheard. They couldn't trust Ardena, and Nokota was being coerced into submission. Plus, there was an entire enemy regiment not too far from Hildegard.

Jada retrieved her gear from her room and slipped out a side door. After ducking through a thin stand of trees, she called softly for Zohmar. He appeared like a ghost out of the night, and she jumped into the saddle.

They headed in a southerly direction, and Jada whistled quietly for a winged messenger.

"Come on," she muttered as Zohmar lifted into a jog. "Where's a falcon when I need one?"

A shriek that sounded like it came from some kind of bird made Jada and Zohmar start. The sound was then proceeded by the exclamation, "Is it really you, Jada!?"

A small round blur shot through the treetops, landed on the crest of Zohmar's neck, and looked up at Jada with large, round eyes.

"It is you! You're really here!" said Phoenix the owl with total elation. "For a second I thought I was only imaging it!"

"How are you, Phoenix?" asked Jada in an excited whisper, mindful of the possibility there might be more enemy soldiers nearby.

The owl, who hadn't grown during her absence, beamed up at her as he hopped up and down.

"Where have you been?" he asked, seeming not to have heard her question. "We've all missed you!"

Unable to contain himself any longer, Phoenix suddenly hopped forward and wrapped his wings around Jada in a hug.

She fought hard to keep from busting up laughing because he'd reached a new level of cuteness.

"I asked you a question first, Phoenix," she said.

He returned to his position on Zohmar's neck and ruffled himself. "Oh, right. I'm, well, staying busy and all. As far as how things in the South have been...they're good and bad. It would take much time to fill you in."

"How long have I been gone? What's the date?"

Phoenix looked at her a moment and his features softened as he replied, "You've been gone nearly fifteen months now. It's April the third."

Fifteen months, thought Jada with some sullenness, *that explains it. A lot must have happened indeed.*

Straightening, she asked, "Where's the nearest outpost used by our forces? I've just overheard some urgent news."

Phoenix gestured southwest with his wing. Since the night was clear and the stars and moon were out, Jada could see where he was pointing.

"There's a post ten miles in that direction."

Zohmar whickered and pawed the ground.

"Thank you, and it's good to see you again, Phoenix," said Jada with a warm smile. "Every time you've come to my call, and you've been of greater help than you realize."

He shrugged his little shoulders in a bashful expression, and Jada fought to keep from laughing again.

"Do you think you'll be here for awhile?" he asked after a moment, "Before you have to go back again?"

Jada didn't answer immediately and merely studied his hopeful gaze as he searched her face.

"Maybe," she replied at length, "I think so. There are some things I need to get done. I expect I'll be going back and forth more frequently now, at least...frequently for me. But how much time passes between dimensions is a funny thing and can't be guessed. I may only go back to my realm for five minutes, before coming back here only to find that a year has gone by. Do you...understand?"

Phoenix nodded sullenly, and his little round face fell.

"But come!" she said, and Phoenix straightened. "There's much to be done at the present. Zohmar and I will ride with all haste to the post where...hopefully we won't be shot on-sight."

"And I," replied Phoenix, "will spread the word that you're back!"

"Could you...make sure you stop by and see Jordan and Merida? Tell them 'hello' for me?"

"Jada," answered Phoenix, "I would still do anything for you."

He then took flight and called over his shoulder. "I'll tell them and all the others! They need to know what hope is rekindled!"

Jada tilted her head back, closed her eyes and sighed. "People expect way too much from me, Zohmar."

Her horse heaved a grunt and swished his tail.

She blew through her lips as he picked up to a canter. "Oh yeah, thanks. No pressure."

Zohmar shook his mane and quickened his pace.

Through the forest they galloped, their way lit by the star and moonlight reflecting brightly off the snow.

In no time, the outpost came into view through the trees and at the top of a little rise. It wasn't anything more than a house with a barn attached by a covered walkway. All was dark inside, but judging by the tracks in the snow and mud, traffic came and went regularly.

Zohmar eased to a walk as they drew nearer. They were still thirty feet from the house before a sharp shout came from close to the house. Several riders charged from behind the structure and a number of archers appeared in the second-story windows, arrows set on their bowstrings.

"Easy," said Jada, "no need to get excited."

"State your business," demanded one of the riders harshly.

"I was just about to get to that," replied Jada, sending him a displeased look before glancing at the others. "I rode from Hildegard, where I overheard some news that proves important to the Southern resistance forces."

The rider who'd spoken eyed her suspiciously. "And why should we believe anything you have to say? What's it to you that we hold back Halden's military?"

The distaste on Jada's face didn't leave.

"Well, first," she answered with some sharpness of her own, "I work for the intelligence network out of the Southern Fortress and report to Commander Erez, of the Western Village..."

"Wait, who is it?" came a muffled voice from inside the house.

"I know that voice," added another.

Jada recognized those voices, and her heart jumped into her throat as she leapt from the saddle. For a moment, a spear of fear ran through her. What if they were mad at her for leaving, or for being gone for so long?

They appeared on the porch of the house and then marched down the steps and straight towards her.

Jada remained where she was, unable to discern anything in their stern faces, other than mild disapproval. Beside her, Zohmar whickered quietly.

They stopped a foot away and leveled even gazes on her. Still, she was unable to read them.

“You’re late reporting in,” said Akin sharply.

“You know that’s unacceptable in the military,” added Namor, matching his brother’s tone. “So you’d better have a darn good reason.”

Jada instantly caught onto their joke, and her fear fled.

They remained looking at each other for a long moment before the corners of their mouths began tugging upwards. Jada fought to keep a straight face but failed after another couple seconds.

The three burst out laughing and it took them a minute to control themselves.

“You look...older, Jada,” grinned Namor as they shook hands and slapped one another on the shoulder.

“And you, Namor,” replied Jada with a smile, “haven’t grown any taller.”

He snorted as she turned to Akin.

She and Akin shook hands before he gently placed both hands on the side of her face and kissed her forehead.

There’s no need to become excited. The gesture was a common way that siblings and family members greet each other after spending time apart. After everything that had transpired between the family of Erez and Jada, they’d unofficially adopted her as one of their own.

As they stepped away from one another, Akin looked Jada up and down. “Namor was right. You seem older...though you don’t really...look it.”

He sent a look to his little brother, who just shrugged.

Jada chuckled. “Well in the eleven months I was here, I was gone six years in the other dimension. That probably explains it.”

She straightened. “Anyway! I come bearing some vital information.”

Namor blew through his lips. “Is there ever a time when you don’t? We couldn’t imagine you returning to us any other way!”

They went indoors and Jada told them what she’d overheard about Ardenna, Nokota, and the enemy troop. Several falcons were on-site, and they flew away speedily to spread the word to other posts and to the Southern Fortress.

Akin and Namor caught Jada up on what had transpired since she’d traversed dimensions. Halden and Ambrose had quickly gone downhill and taken full control of their cities and closest outlying towns. Last summer everyone had been kept busy as they seemed to constantly be repelling attacks. The military forces of the two cities were slowly creeping south and west, but for the time being they were mostly held at bay.

Jada felt a touch guilty that she hadn’t been here to help in the effort to counter the attacks.

As far as anyone knew, Christopher was still at Halden’s side.

Rumor was Thalia had returned to Ambrose at Kolanthel and hadn't ventured outside again. Jada knew two things about her, the first she'd already learned, and the second was told to her by Akin and Namor.

First, Thalia had some kind of uncanny influence over men. But she wasn't seeking love or any twisted form of it; she was strictly a master manipulator, who got what she wanted and then left.

Second, she was well-learned in the art of warfare and acquiring and maintaining control. The towns that fell under Ambrose's forces weren't able to pose the smallest threat. Once a settlement fell, there was no hope of wiggling out from his grasp.

As for the next item of business, Jada pulled out the sketch of Aiden and showed it to the brothers. "Have you ever seen him before?"

They shook their heads, and she showed the drawing to the warriors in the room.

"Who is he?" asked Akin.

"The traveler working for Cassius's forces," she replied darkly.

Namor blinked at her. "You mean you actually found him?"

"Aye. He's connected to a plot back in the other dimension. His name is Aiden, though I don't know if that's the name he's using here."

Akin ran his hand through his hair. "Who knows how many of our plans and movements he's overheard, or even been told. He's a traveler and I doubt anyone would think a traveler would work for the dark king. Every single one who's arrived has been on our side, so we're naturally trusting of them."

That'll change shortly, thought Jada in her ever optimistic way.

"We need to circulate this sketch," said Namor firmly. "Are you certain this Aiden character is reporting to Cassius?"

"Ninety-nine percent," she replied. "He's a bad guy in the other dimension, too."

Jada's eyes narrowed. "And my next order of business will be to get final confirmation, and also pick up his trail, where he was last. I might be able to get an idea of where he might reappear if he comes back."

"How exactly are you going to find that out?" asked Akin. "The only way to do that would be to...talk to dark forces who might've crossed paths with him."

He sent Jada a look, but she waved him off.

"That's assuming we didn't mow them all down during that push to break Cassius's line in the central lands," she said.

"You ought to have at least one person go with you, as backup," commented Namor with a tone.

"Oh, come on," she replied. "I have Zohmar. Besides, I've had a real close look at dark soldiers, and they aren't anything I can't handle."

Akin studied her. "You never told anyone about what happened during your capture, did you?"

"Nope, not much to tell, anyway," answered Jada lightly, before changing the subject. "Now, do you want some copies of this sketch? If so, we need to get on with it so I can head out."

Namor huffed a laugh. "Jada, always on the move."

He gave her a slap on the shoulder before calling for some pieces of parchment. Several copies of Aiden's sketch were made, and while that was being done, Jada inquired about the rest of the gang from the Western Village and Chugach.

Everyone was still breathing, and a number had been placed in a patrol squad together. They were led by none other than Michael, of course.

That detail brought a smile to Jada's face. *Hmm, maybe I ought to make time to scope out his hometown, to see the attitudes of the people, identify their current illegitimate ruler...and find out just where they stand on this whole matter with Ambrose...*

She knew Michael would sit enthroned one day, and she hoped she'd be honored by getting to help make that happen.

Once copies of Aiden's sketch were made, Jada took one with the original, folded them both, and put them in a pocket.

"If I learn anything else along the way," she said, once they were outside again, "I'll send word."

She and Namor shook hands again.

"I hope you'll be allowed to stick around for awhile," he answered. "It felt like you were gone for decades."

"It was much too long for my liking," she nodded in agreement.

Then to her surprise, Namor placed a hand on the side of her face before bowing his head forward and resting his forehead against hers.

"Return to us quickly," he said quietly, "so that we may fight beside one another again."

"I'll come with all the speed Zohmar can muster," she answered.

Akin used the same gesture he had when they'd greeted one another. But instead of kissing her forehead, he leaned over and whispered, "Be careful out there, sister, for none of us can even bear the thought of losing you."

Jada's throat tightened. It was the first time any of Namor's family had actually addressed her as a sibling.

Putting a hand on his wrist, Jada squeezed it gently.

"I'll watch myself, brother," she replied quietly, before stepping away and turning to Zohmar.

Swinging up, she turned him back the way they'd come.

“Oh and by the way, Namor,” she said, “with all the hunting I did last time I was here...I’m pretty sure I passed your gath count.”

Jada glanced back over her shoulder at him. “Or we can just start over at zero, if you like.”

Namor grinned. “Zero it is.”

“Alright, game on,” she answered. “I look forward to seeing you cry when you aren’t able to catch up with me this time.”

Jada heard Akin burst out laughing as she nudged Zohmar. He leapt into a canter through the forest, their way still lit by the stars.

“Okay, buddy,” she said as the cool air slid by them, “time to settle into your pace. We’ve got a long trip ahead of us.”

Zohmar whickered and glanced back at Jada, as if to say, “is that so?”

Then he lengthened his stride and galloped onward with incredible speed northwest towards the mountains.

The night passed over horse and rider, and the trees blurred by as the moon set, and the eastern sky at last lightened with the approach of dawn. Still Zohmar galloped on tirelessly, and they cut through the lower passes of the mountains, heading ever north and west.

They would not stop and they would not sleep. Neither of them was tired, for they were on the hunt for dark forces, to interrogate them about a traveler named Aiden.

Chapter 77

Interrogator

Jada and Zohmar traveled almost nonstop for five straight days. They “island hopped,” so to speak, and stopped at various towns along their route northward. They only paused long enough to show Aiden’s picture to the locals and ask if anyone had seen him.

They’d been to five towns and a handful of settlements, and no one had recalled seeing Aiden. Jada was the first traveler they’d seen for years, period.

She gave no reason as to why she was searching for him. It didn’t seem necessary, or prudent, to openly admit there was a traveler, one of her “kind,” who was working for Cassius.

All she told people was that she was looking for him, and if they did see him, to please message the nearest Southern Forces outpost or patrol.

Along with the towns, Jada and Zohmar crossed several nomadic bands. For the most part, they were a relaxed lot, cavalier, and no one gave them any trouble. But none had seen Aiden either.

Zohmar came upon another group on the afternoon of the fifth day, and Jada knew right away it was a rougher unit. They struck her as being more alike Gilead's group: grim and suspicious.

They gave a start and drew their weapons when they saw horse and rider approaching out of the trees.

"There's nothing to worry about," assured Jada, when Zohmar stopped a dozen feet from them. "Besides, if I were going to attack you, you never would've heard or seen me coming."

"What do you want?" asked a tall and broad man, obviously the group leader.

"Just to ask you a question," she replied, "then I'll be on my way."

Moving slowly so as not to be prematurely shot by a lad who'd set an arrow on his bowstring, she removed one of the sketches from her pocket.

"Have you seen this man before?" asked Jada, unfolding the paper and holding it up.

The group ventured a little closer for a better look. Watching their faces closely, she saw the glance the leader sent to the woman on his left. Then he slid his gaze to Jada.

"What's it to you if we have?"

"He's a traitor who has something I want," she answered.

It was true. He had the details about what kind of plot he was in the middle of, back in Earth's dimension.

The man considered this a moment and shared another look with the woman.

"And what do we get out of it, if we tell you where we might've seen him?" he asked, when he returned his attention to Jada.

She sighed inwardly.

"Well, how do I know what you have to say is true?" she countered with a question of her own. "How do I know you aren't making up whatever it is you tell me?"

Jada fished out the little cloth bag of coins. "I'll give you the two weeks wages of an average laboring man, in exchange for your so-called information."

Her gaze hardened as she hit him with a fierce glare. "But know what I'm very good at tracking, and if I find that what you say is false...I'll strike so hard and fast you'll never know what hit you."

Any smugness left the man's face and he nodded.

Jada tossed him several coins, one week's worth of wages.

"We saw the man you're looking for," replied the leader. "We were headed into a settlement just a few hours north of Highland and spotted some glimpses of him in the

woods. At first, it looked like he was talking to himself, but as we passed I saw he was speaking to a big, brown wolf. He mentioned the name of some commander or something rather. Then the wolf turned and ran northwest. There were also some gremlins in the trees, and they flew away in different directions right after the wolf left. When the man glanced over his shoulder at us, we pretended like we hadn't seen or heard him and walked right on into town."

"When was this?"

The man thought a moment. "I'd say back in late November, just as the weather was finally turning cold."

"Last question, then I'll go. Where's the nearest squad of dark soldiers?"

The group looked at Jada like she'd just said something absurd.

Finally, the leader blinked and shot a look over his shoulder at the lad. "Where'd you last see 'em?"

"There was a squad several hours north of here," he replied, voice telling Jada he was still quite young. He hadn't even reached puberty yet.

He glanced at Jada for but a moment, before dropping his gaze. "But that was this morning."

Jada gave the leader the rest of his payment and pocketed what was left.

"You're the scout and chief archer of the group," she said to the kid.

He nodded, managing to hold her gaze a few seconds longer.

"Aye, he's sharp-eyed and eared," beamed the leader with quick pride, "moves quieter than a deer through the woods, too."

"If you ever think about putting your skills to use, and getting paid for it," she Jada to the lad, "you ought to visit the Southern Fortress or one of the warrior towns."

"What? Are you a recruiter now?" quipped the leader, and his face became stern. "Either way, we're not sending him off to fight in any war."

Jada's gaze flicked to the lad for a second, and she saw he was looking at her with interest.

"You're already in the middle of one," she replied with a little smile as she returned her attention to the man, "and have been for some time. However, I'm not interested in sending him to fight on the frontlines, no one is. There aren't really any frontlines at the present, anyway. But I find it important that people know how to defend themselves against wolves, enemies that prey on free folk minding their own business."

Jada now looked squarely at the boy. "One thing I know for certain is that you can hide only for a while, but sooner or later the bad guys will find you. Eventually, you'll face them, and you'll either be killed straight off, be forced into submission, or you'll fight. And if you choose to fight, you still may die, but you will do so with honor because you were doing your part to defend your family and friends."

Then she shrugged and returned to her blithe demeanor. “No one can hide forever, and pretending you’ll never run into any trouble...isn’t a good tactic. The forces of Halden and Ambrose are creeping South and West, and Cassius’s forces are just being held at bay in the North.”

Another smile tugged at Jada’s mouth as she regarded the lad. “Besides, everyone must decide for themselves one day what they’re going to do with their lives.”

Zohmar turned and started for the trees.

Jada thanked the group for their help and shot one more, quick glance at the lad.

His expression was thoughtful as he looked at his bow. Then he met her look for a breath, and she caught the trace smile on his face and bright twinkle in his eyes.

I look forward to seeing you amongst the ranks of the best archers of the Southern Forces one day, she wanted to say to him.

Instead, she signaled Zohmar faster.

They zigzagged for some time as they continued northwest, and the afternoon was wearing on when they finally found some fresh tracks. They were human and they traveled in two rows, so it was difficult to be positive of the number in the group. Could be six, could be thirty, and whoever they were, they were traveling straight towards the West.

A touch of uneasiness washed over Jada, as memories from the last time she’d tracked dark soldiers surfaced in her mind.

She was unsure why she was still dealing with this. She wasn’t consciously afraid of them, but perhaps it was just more due to the bitter taste that had been left in her mouth following the close encounter. She didn’t hate them, but she didn’t like them at all, either.

Zohmar and Jada followed the trail at an easy pace for roughly an hour. As the light began to wane, she saw the first glimpses of the owners of the tracks. It was a squad of dark soldiers, and there were only seven of them.

Piece of cake, she thought.

The entire time they’d searched for their targets, Jada had ticked through a number of options about how she was going to approach the dark soldiers. When she’d finally spotted them, a solid idea came to mind.

Now it was just a matter of execution, which might be tricky. If it was a simple ambush, it wouldn’t have been complicated. She’d attacked larger squads of kyros on previous occasions.

But for her plan, Jada needed at least some of the dark soldiers alive, partly so she could speak with them. She wanted more information on Aiden, or at the very least, confirm he’d been working for Cassius’s forces.

A person might have purposes for speaking to evil wolves other than to send news of enemy troop movements. Aiden could be working his own angle and flying solo.

The other potentially tricky part was that there was likely still a bounty on her head. She'd survived ambushes and assassination attempts, and since Cassius was in fact evil, no way would he just forget about her. That was especially true after all the gallivanting and troublemaking leading up to the routing of his forces in the central regions.

As Jada saw with her parents and fellow spies: evil was extremely vengeful and it *will* hunt you down. Whether or not it succeeded in killing its target was another matter, but regardless, it would search tirelessly.

For all she knew, the dark soldiers would kill her on the spot the instant she showed herself. Yet...that was assuming they knew what the lone, female traveler actually looked like.

In regards to the thought of ambushing and killing a group of dark soldiers, or using them as a means to an end—Jada still had no reservations.

She was aware the six years of absence, even though that'd taken place in Earth's dimension, had had a calming effect on the vengeful side of herself. While she felt no hesitation about what she'd have to do, she wasn't filled with a deep desire to see these men die or to shed their blood. Not like when she'd found the bodies of her parents.

No, there was simply cool resolution about what had to be done.

As Jada and Zohmar continued to follow the squad, it was plain to see they were on edge about being in enemy territory. They were already wary, constantly scanning the trees and sensitive to any noise, save for the crunching of snow beneath their boots.

They didn't stop until dusk and then began to make camp, such as it was. Jada didn't move then, though, because she was still piecing together the tactical side of her plan. Plus, she wanted to listen for a bit, to see what information she might hear, and find out who the commander was.

The lot didn't become very conversant until after they'd eaten dinner.

"I don't like it," said one soldier. "We haven't seen any sign of Southern troops."

"I know," agreed the second, holding a cup of some steaming drink, "but it could be that most of them are back North, right against our main forces."

"Even then," spoke a third, "we only see them when they ambush us. They know how to disappear and remain hidden. I've heard several stories where our squads have walked right into a unit of them without knowing it...until it was too late, of course."

A fourth soldier spit to the side. "Filthy vermin. But they'll get what's coming to them."

The others looked at him.

"So, Cassius actually has a plan?" quipped one with sarcasm. "Oh good, because for a moment there I thought we were just going to be on an endless scouting assignment, 'til we died of old age."

“Careful,” warned the soldier. “Cassius always has a plan, several plans. Even as we speak, there are a number in motion already.”

That had been the primary reason why Jada hadn’t moved then: she wanted to know who the commander of the little band was. He was the one she wanted, and her assumption was confirmed as she studied him a moment longer. He was slightly taller than the others and the darkness around him was thicker.

From where she was positioned, she could see his face, and she watched as an eerie light flickered in his dark eyes.

“And let’s not forget about the two counselors, or...rulers, now I guess they are. Cassius has a plan for them.”

“But they don’t work under or for him,” commented another soldier. “They have their own separate forces.”

That earned a rather haughty laugh from one of the others. “Ha, but their petty military is nothing compared to the ranks of Cassius, nothing compared to us.”

“Truly,” nodded the commander, as a smile twisted onto his face, “they know very little about the power that comes from working with darkness and are just now beginning to learn about it. Save for Ambrose and Halden themselves, the paltry soldiers know nothing of real power.”

The unit chuckled and the sound of it sent a chill through Jada. She had to remind herself these were dark soldiers she was dealing with, not some run-of-the-mill fighting man.

She may not have feared them, but she still had to tread carefully.

Darkness was a powerful foe and very cunning. It could not be easily scoffed at and should never be underestimated. Thus, Jada had a certain respect for an enemy that was deep in evil.

Jada listened a little longer, and when it didn’t appear that they were going to share anymore interesting tidbits, she eased Zohmar away. While she now had a rough plan of execution laid out in her brain, another thought had just struck her.

Turning Zohmar north, she asked him for more speed once they were away from the enemy camp. Then she whistled quietly, hoping there was a falcon or something friendly nearby.

She was feeling herself grow impatient half an hour later when a winged shadow dropped through the trees and in front of Zohmar. In the last light of dusk, she could make out that it was a stellar.

“I would’ve shown myself sooner,” said the creature quietly, “but I wanted to make sure it was really you, Jada.”

She could never quite get over how quickly word traveled in Aurora. Phoenix had done his job well and swiftly in informing the others she was back. Doubtless Akin and Namor had also spread the word.

“No worries,” replied Jada. “I just wanted to know if there were any large regiments of dark soldiers nearby.”

The stellar tilted his head. “They’ve taken over a settlement just west of here. Southern Forces have been watching them for some time, and sending spies to follow any who leave.”

Perfect.

“Excellent,” said Jada. “There’s about to be some excitement a few miles south of here, and I don’t want anyone on our side to become alarmed. Don’t be surprised if a patrol is sent from that settlement.”

“Another famous Jada plan?” asked the stellar. It was now too dark to see his face, but she heard the smile in his voice.

Jada snorted. “Famous’ is a serious stretch. Anyway, if you’d let the forces watching the town know what’s going on, I’d appreciate it.”

“I will do as you ask. It’s good that you’re back, by the way.”

The stellar took flight, and Jada turned Zohmar back south. They didn’t hurry to the small camp, and she was content to let night fully set in around the dark soldiers.

Upon returning to the campsite, Jada found all seven still around the fire and discussing various matters. After dismounting, she whispered a command to Zohmar, and he glided away into the night.

A minute later, a noise drew the attention of the soldiers. They stopped talking and exchanged a few glances before gazing out into the darkness.

Jada moved then, while they were looking the opposite direction. Coming from behind a nearby tree, she stepped between two soldiers sitting across from their commander. While doing so, she took a cup of some hot beverage from the soldier on her right and plopped down on the log.

“Evening, gentlemen,” said Jada, before taking a sip from the cup.

She made a face at the taste and handed it back to the soldier. “Oh, wow. That’s awful stuff. No wonder you’re all so grouchy all the time.”

The seven didn’t reach for their weapons, though a few did give a start in surprise before regarding her with distaste.

“What?” she asked, as she handed the cup back to the soldier. “No ‘how ya doing’ or even an insult?”

She settled her gaze across the fire and on the commander. “Don’t tell me you’re going soft.”

The commander studied Jada a moment, and the darkness in his expression and about him was recognizable and familiar. But she wasn't nervous and her earlier uneasiness was long gone.

"Hm," he replied as a trace sneer formed on his lips, "I'm not sure what a few common soldiers in the dark king's army can do for a...lone wanderer."

She smiled at the sarcasm in his voice. "That's more like it."

"Aye," said the soldier to the commander's left as he eyed her up and down. "A...very fair wanderer is more like it."

Jada rolled her eyes. *Typical.*

"Don't underestimate yourself," she continued, in response to the commander. "Actually, all I want is a bit of information, details which are common among Cassius's military. I don't want to know his dark secrets or your troop movements, and I doubt a little band of meandering soldiers would really know anything sensitive. Anyway, you won't get in trouble for divulging since you're merely stating the obvious."

"You make it sound so simple," replied the commander, with that darkly taunting and mischievous twinkle still in his eyes.

"It is," said Jada, with feigned cheeriness. "So, I just need to know, first, if you're going to answer my questions...or if I'll have to resort to more drastic measures?"

The group laughed at that.

"Right," said the soldier on the commander's right, "you and who else? Your invisible friends?"

Now Jada chuckled. "I have enough reinforcements to mop up this miserable lot. But you're not the smart one, are you? If I wanted you dead...then you'd be dead already. Now, I really only need the commander, because he for sure knows what I want to know also. We could've just ambushed you, killed the rest of you and left your boss alive. I was just in a generous mood...did I make a mistake?"

"You'd kill my men...for a piece of information?" asked the commander, expression growing sterner.

"Uh...yeah," she answered, before adding with a scolding tone, "don't tell me you wouldn't do the same. You know how war between good and evil works."

"And if we give you what you want," continued the commander, "then, what? You'll just kill us?"

"Actually, I'd be perfectly alright with leaving you as you are. And as an added bonus, I'll even give you a cover story, as it's called, to explain this encounter to your other companions. I would truly love for them to hear about this meeting. You'll understand why in a moment."

The commander considered Jada's words for a spell and then asked, "What kind of information are you after?"

Jada took out the copy of the sketch of Aiden and unfolded it for them to see. "I'm looking for this man. Do you recognize him?"

When it came to interrogating someone, you didn't want to ask leading questions. If the suspect is sharp, they can figure out what you want them to say, even if it's a lie. As a general rule, if you want real information or confirmation, you asked open-ended, neutral questions.

"Yea," answered the commander, "goes by Aiden. That's the only name he gave."

The soldier who considered Jada a "fair wanderer" huffed with disdain, "Good for nothing snitch of a traveler. He hasn't reported in for months!"

That earned him an elbow in the ribs and a sharp look from his superior.

As Jada refolded the sketch, she fought to keep from smiling. "So you'll confirm that Aiden does work for Cassius's forces?"

The commander snorted. "Yes, although 'work' is too strong a word. He's supposed to provide intel on the movements of the Southern Forces. But, as you now know, he hasn't given us anything in quite awhile."

"Then there's no reason for you to protect him. He clearly hasn't proven his worth. Where was he last seen?"

"Last I heard, he reported to a troop just north of Cedar Point."

Curiosity settled over the commander's expression as he studied Jada again.

"What's all this to you?" he asked. "How'd you find out about him? It's not like you'll be able to really hunt him. He's a traveler. All he has to do is go to the other dimension and stay there..."

Jada had kept the hood of her overcoat low over her head thus far, so her face stayed mostly in shadow. Now she reached up and pulled back the hood.

"First," she replied, "it means a lot to me simply because of the fact that Aiden is a spy who's divulging sensitive information about my friends. Second, I found out about him by way of a plot in the other dimension. And I'd like to stop him as quickly as possible. He needs Cassius to succeed here, so his boss's plot can succeed there, or vice versa. I can't allow any of that."

When Jada had tossed back her hood, the first reaction from the commander and his men was mild surprise. Initially, she'd thought perhaps they might've somehow recognized her face.

But that wasn't the case, thankfully. She didn't want *her* face known by the enemy across the entire realm. She'd like to stick to only being known by the fact she was a traveler, and a mysterious, lone female wanderer.

"You're older than you look and sound," said the commander. "You're a traveler, too, aren't you?"

Pulling back the sleeve on her left arm, Jada held it up to reveal the wristband. "Guilty as charged. And I am the one who is hunting your snitch, Aiden."

Dark amusement crossed the commander's face as he smiled. "A traveler hunting a traveler...not much loyalty among your kind is there?"

"If a dark soldier defected, you'd hunt him down and kill him," replied Jada. "It's the same thing with travelers. When a sheepdog betrays the sheep and sides with the wolves, he loses the loyalty of his fellow sheepdogs and becomes one of the enemy."

"Is that what you plan on doing to Aiden once you find him? Killing him?" asked the commander, and the darkness in him stirred at the thought of bloodshed.

"I need him alive, unfortunately," she replied, before pretending to try and hide a smile. "Unfortunately for him. He has information I want, so it'll be torture first...and then death."

"Ruthless," said one of the other soldiers with admiration and a shake of his head.

"War, even life itself, is cruel and ruthless," answered Jada blithely.

"True indeed," agreed the commander.

Resting his elbows on his thighs, the commander leaned forward. "Although, personally I think your...kind are more trouble than your worth."

Jada mirrored his posture, so they were gazing at each other right over the fire. "And if I actually cared about what you thought...then I might be offended."

They had a brief stare down before the corners of his lips tugged upward.

Straightening, Jada refocused the conversation. "Now, who is Aiden supposed to report to?"

"No one specific," said the commander. "He just finds the nearest unit whenever he learns something of significance and reports in."

"And that would be...? I'm interested in several of your nearest posts."

A cool glare set itself on the commander's face. "I thought you said—"

She interrupted him with a *tisk* of her tongue. "I'm only interested so I have an idea as to where Aiden might run to next time he shows up."

She cocked her head to one side and studied the commander. "I actually want your fellow dark soldiers to remain at those outposts, stay right where they are. They'll give me a place to look for Aiden. I don't want them wiped off the map, and therefore, I won't divulge their locations."

The commander's expression furrowed as the soldier to Jada's left asked, "You're playing both sides?"

"Mm, not quite," she replied, "and it's not for any personal gain. What Aiden is involved in is a big-time affair and very serious. This is simply one of those situations that requires manipulation of various pieces to achieve a necessary outcome."

That returned the smile to the commander's face. "It's a pity we aren't on the same side."

I've heard that before, thought Jada.

"My superiors, or even Cassius, would love the way your mind works," he continued, and her stomach cinched up just a little.

She gave a tight smile. "Well, sorry. I'm a bit overbooked, and my loyalty isn't for sale...unlike my traveling counterpart. Which makes me wonder: what was the person who agreed to let Aiden inform for Cassius thinking? You'd seriously trust someone who sold their allegiance just to postpone facing death? Really?"

"You're...not afraid of death?" asked the soldier to her right.

"No," replied Jada. "Are you?"

He gave no answer, and she returned her attention to the commander.

"Come, my final question. I'm ready to go eat my own dinner."

This time, however, Jada didn't receive an immediate answer.

Really, she thought, *you can't cooperate one more time?*

The initial surprise and uneasiness of Jada's sudden appearance not five minutes ago had faded. Judging by the commander's body language, and that of the others, he was convinced she wasn't an immediate threat, and as such, had relaxed.

All of that meant he'd press his luck a little, and Jada's earlier threat, by refusing to answer the question.

Either way, he was testing the waters.

Oh come on, she thought, before tilting her head. "Are you going to make things difficult right at the very end? That really would be a nuisance. I just got cleaned up from the last mess I made, and I'd rather not do such a thing twice in one day."

Jada gave a long sigh and slowly raised her hand, as if preparing to give a signal. "Now I'm going to have to go back to my original plan..."

"Hold on a moment," said the commander.

"You have three seconds before I get on with it."

He glanced at his men, who were now sitting straight and tense, in expectation of some kind of carnage.

"Fine," conceded the commander, though he now looked at Jada with distaste. "Our regiment was thirty miles north of Cedar Point. There's a post at Breckenridge and another forty miles straight west of here."

"There," said Jada, lowering her hand. "Now was that so difficult? So glad I get to leave you all in peace, or...in one piece."

She chuckled at her own joke, but the others didn't find it funny.

“And, as I promised,” she continued, “I’ll provide you with a cover story, since I also mentioned I’d like word to spread that someone’s on the hunt for Aiden...and that trouble *will* come to anyone who tries to shield him.”

She enthusiastically slapped her hands onto her knees. “Okay, it’s simple. When the patrol that’s headed this way shows up, just tell them that a group of mercenaries, one of which is a rogue traveler, is looking for Aiden. He owes them money or something, and they take payment of debt very seriously. The only reason you were allowed to live was because, as you know, mercenaries work for no one but themselves. They answer to no one and couldn’t care less about Cassius or the Southern Forces. Besides, they can’t have the dark king’s entire army out for blood, and killing you would’ve been pointless because they only wanted information on the whereabouts of Aiden anyway.”

Jada shrugged and stood. “Or not. Just a thought.”

She watched with some amusement as the commander processed her words. A few seconds passed before his eyes flicked to her. “And why would a patrol be headed this way?”

“Well, see, there’s a group of your friends stationed a few miles from here,” she replied, “and they may or may not...be drawn by the screams.”

Chaos ensued then. Well, it was chaos to the dark soldiers, but not for Jada.

While she simultaneously threw her elbows into the faces of the two soldiers on either side of her, Zohmar charged in. He incapacitated three soldiers for her, while she drew one of her knives.

The commander and his one conscious soldier jumped to their feet but were already too late in moving.

The soldier found a knife in his shoulder. While he dealt with that, Jada ducked under the commander’s blade. His next swing was delivered with great speed, but she anticipated it. Pivoting sideways, she latched onto the wrist with the sword and kicked him in the side of the knee.

Something popped and his leg buckled against his will. She wrenched the blade from the commander’s grasp but had to return her attention to the soldier before she was able to do anything else.

Knife still in his shoulder, he’d drawn his own blade and now took an unsteady step towards Jada.

With one powerful backhanded swipe, she glanced the blade aside.

That was when Zohmar reappeared. He came from Jada’s right, leapt the log that the soldier and commander had been sitting on, and practically flattened him in passing.

“Zohmar,” she growled before mule-kicking the commander, still behind her.

Because he was on one knee, her boot met his face and he slammed to the ground.

“I wanted at least two of them awake,” she said to Zohmar, as her horse stood amongst the unconscious soldiers.

But Zohmar didn't appear sorry for his rough treatment of the group and blew through his lips.

Fortunately, the commander was still somewhat conscious.

“We answered your questions,” he growled as she stepped beside him. “What...was all thi—”

“Bruises and bleeding will sell your cover story better,” explained Jada as she gestured to Zohmar, and he walked over to her. “As if your comrades would believe a bunch of rough mercenaries honestly didn't lay a finger on you? Come on, you can play the hero and say you fought them off defending your men or something. Like I care.”

She grabbed her bow, secured to the side of the saddle, and an arrow from the quiver, tethered on the other side.

“Well, commander, I was hoping one of your other men would still be awake for this, but they're not,” she continued, setting an arrow on the string and pulling back.

“It's nothing personal.”

Jada released the arrow and it plunged deep into the commander's thigh. He couldn't stifle his scream of pain and it echoed far in the still night.

Straddling him, she sank to one knee on his chest, to keep him pinned.

“Really, I'm doing you a favor in all this,” she said evenly and with a quiet voice.

The commander, sweating from his pain, glared at her with defiance and venomous hatred.

“Because if word gets out to your superiors, about what really happened here, that you let a lone, female traveler ambush and successfully interrogate you...you're a dead man.”

Jada shook her head a little. “I'm such a softie.”

Then she punched him and it was lights-out for the commander.

After securing her bow and quiver, and shaking out her hand, Jada swung onto Zohmar. He jumped into a canter and carried them into the night.

She'd wanted some of the soldiers alive, partly so she could speak with them.

But the other reason was so they'd spread the word that Aiden was being hunted. There was a bounty on his head, too. The story she'd given the dark band would allow them to give some details over their attack and allow them to live.

Either way, if Aiden returned in the near future, it was likely he'd learn that someone was searching for him, that being Jada.

But that was perfectly alright. She wanted him to know she was onto him, for the psychological effect. She wanted him to know that the people of this realm had been alerted to him. Hopefully, that'd send him running to the nearest dark regiment, which

would be north. There would still be a considerable quadrant to search, but it was narrowed down some. It beat wandering aimlessly across the entire realm.

There was also the hope that Aiden would wind up spending so much time running and hiding that he wouldn't be able to do his part in whatever plot he was mixed up in.

If Jada asked nicely, maybe some warriors in the spy network would watch the enemy outposts the commander and his friends had told her about. That way, when Aiden returned and he learned someone was after him, he might go to one of those locations and seek safety.

Of course, that led to the possibility that the soldiers at the posts would just shoot Aiden on sight. They might not want anything to do with the trouble he was involved in.

Then stopping the plot in Earth's dimension would come to a sudden dead end, pun intended.

Once Zohmar and Jada were a distance south, she whistled for a winged messenger. To her relief, one appeared within seconds and kept pace with horse and rider.

She gave him the copy of the original Aiden sketch and told him to fly to the nearest outpost. More copies needed to be made of the drawing and distributed quickly, because this was the face of Aiden, the traveler working for Cassius. Everyone needed to keep an eye out for him, and know not to tell him anything about...anything.

The falcon flew away with great speed and disappeared into the night sky.

All in all, Jada was quite pleased with her success of the night. Knowing how quickly word spread around this realm, in a matter of two weeks there was no place Aiden could go where his face wouldn't be known.

It was in that moment that another idea came to her. If she did the same thing in Earth's dimension, as she'd done in Aurora, then that would really make things interesting for Aiden and his boss.

As Jada's dad had told her, what happened in Aurora affected what happened in Earth's dimension.

Events in the plan to catch and stop Aiden were falling into place quickly.

In addition to simply frustrating their scheme, if things began going wrong for them, that guaranteed Aiden would return to Aurora sooner rather than later. Jada figured that if she could spook him in both dimensions, she might be able to pick up a fresh trail and then the chase was on.

Absolutely perfect, she thought, unable to keep from smiling. *I love it when a plan comes together.*

Chapter 78

Spooks

Earth

When Jada returned to Earth's dimension, she found herself standing in a dark, narrow alleyway. Turning in a circle didn't help her identify where she was, and she nearly stumbled over her backpack.

At the far end of the alley and across the street she spotted part of a business sign. It was written in Urdu, so she guessed she was in Pakistan. She was also dressed in local female garb and had a scarf over her face.

After digging through her backpack, Jada found her cell phone and checked the date and time. She'd only been gone three days.

The sky above was dark, but gradually growing lighter and there was a sharp chill in the morning air.

Her mission in this dimension was two-fold: first, she wanted to spook Aiden's assets and informants. She knew there were three he primarily used in this region, compliments of the information she'd skimmed about him and Channing on Stella's iPad. She also had last-known locations on them.

Of course, Aiden had additional people he used, but chatting with three would give Jada more than enough to do. Besides, word would spread quickly to the others that Aiden and Channing were being watched by a dark and menacing intelligence agency.

Her second objective was to find out where Aiden was staying in Kabul. She wished she could just grab him somehow, but there was little chance of that, at least at the present.

He was highly trained and had the capability to traverse dimensions. There was no knowing if he would be there or not. There was also the fact that he was a bad guy and wouldn't willingly volunteer information just because she asked nicely.

Then again, Jada's version of "nicely" involved a two-by-four and jumper cables. Still, knowing where Aiden was residing was a vital piece of data.

Right then, she thought, slipping on her backpack so it was in front of her. It looked slightly odd under her garments, but it would hopefully keep local riffraff away.

The first locals traveling to work on foot appeared in the streets, followed by a vehicle or bicycle or two.

Jada wandered around for a few minutes before figuring out she was in Jalalabad. At this discovery, she nonchalantly found someplace to get off the street. This wasn't one

of those cities a person visited for a relaxing vacation. Like many other places in the Middle-East and Central Asia, it could be extremely volatile.

For the time being, there was still a considerable US Army presence at the Jalalabad Airfield. But with troop withdrawals from Afghanistan next door, who knew if forces in Pakistan would be leaving, too?

Jada climbed onto the roof of an apartment building and then pulled out her cell phone again. As hoped, numbers for various Agency posts in Pakistan were still under the "Contacts" list.

It was "funny" Jada had landed in Jalalabad because one of Aiden's assets had been in the city last time anyone had checked. Now, before tracking him down, she wanted to confirm he was still there.

Jada called the post, whose name under the contact's list was "Chinese Takeout," and was relieved to find out that the asset was still in Jalalabad. After listening to where he'd last been spotted, she asked the operative if he knew anything about Myles' unit.

They hadn't returned to the US yet and were actually in Kabul, where Aiden's other two assets were currently living.

Funny how that works out, thought Jada as she hung up.

Now it was time to hunt.

Jada returned to street level and began meandering towards the last known location of Saman, the asset. Now that it was lighter, she was able to see that she still had some paint on her hands and wrists to dark them, even though the sleeves of her "bed sheet," as she called it, reached past them. She probably still had makeup on to darken her face and neck, just in case.

Situations such as these were the only times Jada wore makeup. In that part of the world, she couldn't very well be wandering around with her white face. She hoped she still had colored contacts in, too. Along with pale skin, nothing gave a Westerner away faster than light colored hair or blue eyes.

Saman wasn't at the business where he'd last been seen, so Jada started for his home. He wasn't there either, so she settled in a hiding place and kept watch.

It was a long morning of waiting, something Jada typically wasn't very good at, and she was glad when she finally spotted him.

It was just after noon and Saman was returning home.

Leaving her hiding spot, Jada started up the sidewalk, moving the same direction he was, but slower.

"If I were you," she muttered quietly in Dari, when she heard him come up behind, "I'd keep my distance from Aiden and his renegade friends."

Saman's stride faltered for a breath, before he continued walking, keeping a stride behind Jada.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” he answered under his breath.

In that region of the world, men and women, who are unrelated or unmarried, who have contact in public was frowned upon with great severity. Offending couples were sometimes beaten—or worse.

Jada sighed at Saman’s response. The fact that he hadn’t just walked right by her told her that he knew what she was talking about.

“Don’t play games,” she said. “We’re investigating Aiden and watching him closely. We know you work for him sometimes. Anyone who has contact with him will be targeted. So, if you want to remain here and not be taken to a black site...I’d keep my distance from him. He’ll be bringing trouble upon himself soon.”

A shout from up the road grabbed Jada’s attention. Adrenaline surged through her and for a moment she thought maybe they were about to be in trouble. The last thing she wanted was to draw the attention of the “holy police.”

Glancing up the road, she saw her initial fear was misplaced. Around a dirt square stood a large crowd, and in the middle were two mangy dogs having a go at each other.

Oh good, she thought, as she broke away from Saman and started down another street, just a dogfight. I really didn’t feel like being stoned today.

Business thus concluded, it was time to arrange transport to Kabul. Jada touched base with the agent she’d called earlier. Through him, she met up with an operative based out of Kabul, who was presently in Jalalabad on business.

It was perfect, and that evening they headed to Afghanistan. When they arrived, they went to an abandoned building which served as an outpost.

Inside, Jada found several new faces she hadn’t yet met, and Ryan McCormick and company.

They all blinked at her a few times before Ryan asked, “What are you doing here? And where’d you run off to in Feyzabad?”

Jada waved off his second question. “Something came up, and I’m here working on some hunches.”

She looked at the others. “I figured you all would be stateside by now.”

“Myles wanted us to stick around for a bit,” replied Alex, “to keep an eye on the warlord activity.”

“Ah, testing what’s-his-faces claims about looming territorial conflict between the warlords?”

“Aiden,” nodded Ryan. “And yes. Just a little precaution.”

Curiosity crossed his face. “So...are you here on another job or...?”

Looking at the invisible watch on her wrist, Jada said, “Oh, look at the time. I’d better get going. Please don’t lock up. I’ll be back later and would rather not get shot breaking into the post.”

Ryan's suspicion deepened, and Alex shook his head.

Stella, on the other hand, tried to keep from smiling. "Happy hunting."

Jada gave them a little salute before turning and stepping outside.

The nightlight in Kabul was quite lively since they were still between bombings.

The asset Jada wanted to chat with was named Yasir. Because she didn't know any of his regular habits, she didn't bother trying to search for him in the city. That'd be pointless and she'd never find him.

She did, however, know where he lived, compliments of the agent who'd driven here from Jalalabad. His marital status had remained unchanged since she'd last met with him, which was a plus. He was still single, though he was seeing someone.

But all that to say: she could sit and wait for him in his small house with little anxiety over being prematurely discovered.

The hour was growing late when Yasir walked into his house, shut the door, and flicked on the living room light. He gave a start when he saw Jada sitting at the kitchen table.

Because of the cooler weather, she got away with wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt under her overcoat, and black cargo pants. Her hiking clothes and weapons were in her backpack, which was located back at the Agency post. She did have a scarf, but it was presently around her neck.

Brown contacts in place, her hair was black because she'd dyed it just before traveling to this part of the world.

"Evening, Yasir," she said in plain English, which she knew he spoke well.

Yasir's dark brown eyes shifted around the house before returning to her. "What is it you want? I don't know anything about the plans of the local insurgents."

"That's not why I'm here," replied Jada, before removing a crumpled picture from a pocket and setting it on the table. "I want you to know that we're watching this man closely. He and the people he works with are in serious trouble. If you don't want to be taken from your bed in the middle of the night, you'll stay away from him."

At the last statement, Yasir's eyes widened a little and he swallowed. "I've helped you people in the past..."

"None of that matters, Yasir," she answered as she stood.

Jada returned the photo of Aiden to her pocket and then took a step towards him. "I hope you're not going to be difficult. I'd hate for something to happen to...what's her name? Atifa, is it?"

She gave a little smile. "It'd be a pity if rumor reached her family that she'd dishonored them..."

Yasir's jaw muscles flexed as both anger and fear flashed across his face.

Jada's smile remained in place. "This is very simple. I'm actually asking you to do nothing, so there's no need to get all excited. I did you a favor, really, stopping by and letting you know we were going after Aiden and his boss."

Wrapping her scarf around her head, she walked to the door. "Have a good evening, Yasir, and hopefully we won't be seeing each other again soon."

Jada then promptly headed to the location where she knew the third asset would be. In contrast to Yasir and Saman, he was a fun character, cavalier who didn't really try to hide his business, which involved running guns.

She'd come into contact with him twice, both under the same alias. Now, as she walked towards his favorite hangout spot on the edge of the city, she wracked her brain to remember on what terms they'd parted company last.

If Jada's memory served her correctly, they'd left on friendly conditions. That was usually a good idea with someone you'd like to deal with again in the future.

She found him as she'd expected: at the little restaurant he owned, kicking back after-hours with some of his gun-running friends.

Jada forewent the front door since it was locked promptly at closing time, and entered the alley. Just before going in the side door, she removed her colored contacts and flicked them onto the ground.

She'd had blue eyes during their previous dealings.

When she entered the restaurant, he spread his arms wide and laughed. "Ameera! Ye salem, I was wondering when you'd return to me."

"Na'eem, my friend," smiled Jada. "How are you?"

As mentioned earlier, men and women mixing in public was taboo. However, as also mentioned, Na'eem was lax, easy going, and didn't much care about certain things.

Story was that the Taliban didn't threaten him for his disregard for Islamic law, because he occasionally supplied a good number of weapons for their cause. For this reason, they tolerated him and his rule-breaking.

Judging by the glow in Na'eem's face and the light in his eye, he'd been well into his special brew of tea, as he called it.

It wasn't merely rumor that he had secret stashes of liquor, which was outlawed in Afghanistan. After hours, he and his employees or business partners broke out their shot glasses, like they had that night.

Na'eem offered Jada a seat across from him at his table.

"What can I do for my favorite spy-for-hire?" he asked with a smile that made his eyes dance.

Jada returned it. "I'm looking for a man..."

Na'eem raised his eyebrows and gestured to the half dozen people about him.

"Well, there are plenty to choose from here," he laughed.

She chuckled as she removed Aiden's photo from her pocket.

"I'm after only one," she replied with a playful tilt of her head. "And one who isn't nearly as courteous as you, Na'eem."

At this, he placed his hand over his heart.

Jada set the image on the table and slid it towards him.

"You've worked with him before," she said, and all joking disappeared from her tone.

"I know him as Aiden," she continued, as Na'eem studied the picture. "I've been hired to hunt him down...and I'm not the only one. Rumor has it the CIA, DEA and even MI6 are after him and his boss."

Jada eyed Na'eem. "Lately, they've gotten into a nasty habit of going back on their deals. They do it when a third party comes along and offers them more money. Then they cut out their original partner for the higher bidder."

A smile pulled at her lips. "Anyway, I was hired to take out Aiden, the chief operator. Since you've done business with him, I thought explanation would be necessary. I was already in the area and thought I'd drop in and give you a heads-up, as we say. A lot of people are coming after Aiden."

Na'eem's eyes still danced as he held her gaze. "I am grateful for this, though I wonder why you really came here."

"Come, Na'eem," she replied. "I don't want anything to happen to you. Our last two dealings proved very profitable, yes? I don't want you to get into trouble on behalf of this two-headed dog."

Jada leaned back in her chair and raised her hands a little, palms up. "Besides, what would Afghanistan do without you?"

Na'eem laughed long and loud before wagging a finger at her. "These are two of many things I like about Ameera: One, her humor. Two, she's good to people who are good to her, and looks out for them, yes?"

"You know I take care of my friends," she answered coyly.

That was true on a personal level between them. During the events surrounding their first contact, Jada had saved his backside from getting shot.

Naturally, this helped build high rapport with him, so it had worked out well.

"Anyway," said Jada, after putting away the photo and standing up. "I just wanted to let you know it'd be best to stay away from Aiden...and to keep out of my way."

She flashed Na'eem a grin. "I'd be sad forever if I was the cause of your death. But...you know how the world works."

"See," laughed Na'eem, "she is ruthless, but even when she threatens, she does so with a smile. Yet I am not angered. How can I be?"

He raised his shot glass. "I understand, ye habibti," he replied to Jada, half in English, half in Arabic.

Jada gave him one more smile and tilt of her head. "Na'eem."

"Ameera," he replied with a smile of his own and a nod.

Chapter 79

Hitch

Nearly two weeks had passed since Aiden and Channing were approached by Bashir, an Agency officer. Things had been going according to plan and the Agency hadn't appeared to be overly interested in them or their activities, not that they were doing anything worth noting.

Unfortunately, a small hitch occurred.

"A team of four additional Agency officers arrived Tuesday of last week," said Channing, as he and Aiden moseyed through the crowded streets.

"Do you know what for?" asked Aiden.

Channing gave a shake of his head. "Last I heard from my contact it had something to do with increased chatter over the poppy fields."

"So, the diversion was going as planned," replied Aiden, "but maybe a little too well? Until Nazim and Arzad make their moves, that means more eyes to look at us. When did you last hear from your contact?"

"It's been three days, and he was supposed to give me an update yesterday about the extra team."

Aiden shot his boss a look.

Channing gave a nod as he continued. "And that foreign ops unit I wanted to utilize is under heavy surveillance. So I can't risk contacting them, not yet, if at all."

Aiden checked the time on his phone. "I'm supposed to meet with some assets shortly. I'll see if there aren't any up for the large scale task you had in mind for the foreign team."

"Call me when you're finished."

Aiden and Channing went their separate ways, and Aiden called the first man he was scheduled to meet with some time that afternoon. Strangely, though, the man said something had "come up" and wouldn't be able to make the meeting that day or any other day.

Four others were either unavailable, already in the "middle of something," or just flat out told him they weren't interested. Aiden was positive the last time he'd concluded previous business with each of them that they'd parted on good terms.

Growing suspicious, Aiden tracked down the last person on his list in person, whom Jada, aka Ameera, had met with a little over a week ago.

Na'eem eyed him with the deepest suspicion and literally kept considerable space between himself and Aiden.

"We were told to keep our distance from you," Na'eem said coolly. "We don't want anything to do with you or your director. We don't want any of the trouble you are bringing."

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Aiden, truly puzzled. "Who warned you against working against us? I can assure you they're lying."

Anger rippled across Na'eem's face, and the two men with him *tisked* with their tongues.

"We are finished here," said Na'eem, and he and his two companions turned and walked away.

It wasn't panic that filled Aiden, but intense confusion—and a sudden realization that something was very, very wrong. All his local assets avoiding him or turning him down, in addition to Channing's contacts not getting back to him with important details was an extremely bad sign.

Turning in the direction of the hotel, Aiden called Channing and gave him a brief summary of the past few hours.

"It's no coincidence that not even my military contacts have returned my calls," replied Channing. *"And that's on top of everything else. I don't like how all of these roadblocks have just come up."*

"Something's changed in the other dimension," concluded Aiden.

"Call me when you get back," said Channing, and there was no missing the sinister tone in his voice.

A chill tickled down Aiden's spine as he ended the call.

Channing recognized that every plot faced problems and setbacks, and as such, he had to be flexible. That said, this kind of trouble threatened the entire plan.

He didn't take such threats well.

He also didn't believe in turning tail when things became rocky. Quite the opposite. As plans threatened to fail, he fought and strove that much harder.

He expected the same effort from those on his payroll.

Besides, if current and future clients thought he always played it safe, he'd never attract any of the bigger sharks.

Aiden was now feeling a little less sure about his job security.

He glanced about his surroundings subtly, before ducking into a narrow alleyway. No one ever saw him come out again.

Chapter 80

Famous

Aurora

Aiden found himself standing in the forest in the middle of a blizzard. The evergreens bent beneath the gales, which threw a flurry of snow down upon the land.

He turned in a slow circle in an attempt to get his bearings. It was dawn, and the forest was growing lighter, which allowed him to spot a structure.

Walking through the knee-deep snow, Aiden hunched his shoulders against the next gust that momentarily hid the building from sight. When he reached it, he saw it was on the edge of a town. As he quickly studied the layout, he recognized he was in...a town he couldn't remember the name of. But it was just a short hop southeast of Dartmoor and hadn't pledged allegiance to Cassius or his forces.

At least, not since the last time Aiden had been here.

A few people were out braving the storm and those who passed near him behaved in the oddest way. They glanced at him twice before slowly sidling away from him. Even after they'd gone past they shot looks over their shoulders.

This...isn't good, thought Aiden as he continued up the main road. He reached the inn in short time and shoved open the door. When he entered the warm and dimly lit room, all conversation ceased.

The half-dozen patrons or so looked at him before two stood and left. The others eyed him darkly and began whispering to one other.

"What's going on?" asked Aiden to the bartender as he slid onto a stool at the bar. "Everyone's been staring at me like I'm a walking plague."

The bartender gave a little smirk. "You must've just returned from the other dimension."

Aiden eyed him. How could the man have known he was a traveler? His coat sleeve hid the band on his wrist...

A man sitting one stool over chuckled before looking at Aiden with a taunting expression on his face. "You've become famous in Aurora, Aiden."

More alarms went off in the back of Aiden's mind at the use of his name.

The man chuckled again and gave an upward nod at the bartender. "Show 'em, Eduard."

Eduard reached under the counter then slapped a sketch onto the bar and slid in front of Aiden.

He studied it and...this was definitely a sketch of him, no doubt about it.

A number of questions raced through his mind all at once. Who knew about him? How could they have known? Did they know what he was involved in, or that he was supposed to be informing to Cassius's forces? Did they somehow know about Channing? If so, then that meant...

"Someone's been lookin' for you," continued the man at the bar, and a smile pulled at his mouth, "a lone, female traveler. We don't know details really, only that she's on the hunt for you. That can't be a good thing, but we don't care much about traveler business...so long as they aren't trying to interfere with our business or kill us."

A threatening gleam flickered to life in the man's eyes, and Aiden stood and left the inn right then and there.

Oh this is bad, very bad.

Turning, he started hastily towards the stable.

This was bad for him, but well-played on the female traveler's part. He assumed she knew he was up to some scheme with Channing back in the other dimension. She had connections and resources that allowed her to obtain photos of him. How she'd linked him in both dimensions, he had no idea.

Thus, she was also aware he was working for Cassius, though she hadn't apparently made that common knowledge among the locals. But they wouldn't trust him, and might even report him to any Southern Forces outpost or patrol.

There likely wasn't any city or town he could run to where his face wouldn't be known.

As Aiden had already acknowledged: well-played. He would've done the exact same thing, but she'd beaten him to it. This was the same female traveler he'd heard about all summer, he was certain. That distinct possibility heightened his uneasiness.

Like him, she was driven by impossible determination and had an endless source of energy. Once she had an assignment or was on a scent, no way would she stop until her goal had been reached, or her target captured. She was tenacious, likely more than the stories he'd heard let on.

Aiden reached the small stable and bought the one horse that was for sale. He then rode out into the storm and headed for Dartmoor.

Far as he knew, it was still run by soldiers of Cassius's army. Yet, as he rode along, a thought occurred to him that they might become wary of him also.

Aiden didn't know how much time had passed since the last time he was in Aurora, and he hadn't exactly been doing much informing.

But he had to start somewhere and find a spot where he'd have time to process everything and consider a plan of action. He knew Channing well enough to be certain that he'd better figure out a way to remedy the situation before returning to Earth's dimension.

Otherwise, Channing would exact severe punishment somehow, without actually killing Aiden. He still needed him alive, though that didn't mean he couldn't make things...unpleasant for his chief operator.

Curse you a thousand times over, thought Aiden to the female traveler who'd blown his cover.

The ride to Dartmoor was a short and cold one. He knew the town was still held by Cassius's forces by the dark and heavy presence over the place.

No one was out in the snow, and he halted his horse in a shelter beside the meeting hall, a building slightly larger than the rest of the structures. When he walked into the hall and shut the door, conversation around the room stopped.

"Well, well, well," proclaimed a commander, sitting with his back to the fire and his boots up on the table in front of him, "look who finally decided to show up. Our informant has returned at last."

A few of the soldiers huffed with disdain and regarded Aiden with disapproval.

"Did you finally come bringing some useful information that you promised a year ago," continued the commander, eyes darkling, "or have you come to seek refuge the female traveler who's after you?"

A year? Wait, they know about her, too, thought Aiden. *But how? If she or any enemy warrior had shown themselves to Cassius's military to tell them they were after him, they would've been shot on sight.*

"Seeing as how I returned barely an hour ago," answered Aiden sharply, "I haven't had time to gather any intel."

"And you won't be able even if you wanted to," added another soldier near the fire. By his size and stature, he too was a commander.

"You're pretty useless to us now that your cover's blown," he continued.

"Does that mean we can kill him?" asked a soldier from another table.

"He's not worth the effort," laughed the first commander, "and he might still come in handy."

"Aye," agreed the second commander, "give him a few days to prove his worth. But I don't think we should outright protect or shield him. Leave him to his own and let him earn his protection."

That earned nods of approval from the others.

"How about having him help our forces convince towns to turn away Southern warriors," suggested the first commander. "Halden had a good idea in secretly coercing allegiance from towns sympathetic to the cause of resistance forces. But up here, they've proven stubborn and won't turn over anything, even under threat of death."

That piqued Aiden's interest. Resistance to work for him and provide intelligence was the problem he'd faced back in Earth's dimension. Here in Aurora he'd just been told the cause for the problems: forces resisting both the fallen counselors and Cassius, who were still operating independently of each other.

The first commander blew through his lips. "Shoot, even making him fight in our own ranks would add a little value to him."

His dark eyes took in Aiden. "But that might be asking too much from a man not trained for battle."

"He'd probably wet himself upon seeing the first enemy horseman coming at him," jabbed another soldier.

That earned a good round of laughter, and Aiden felt his blood pressure rise to new, unhealthy levels.

"Once the storm has moved out," said the first commander, still chuckling, "we'll message our superiors and see if they have any specific trick they wish you to perform."

"How about just fall on his sword and get it over with," suggested one soldier snidely. "Good for nothin' traveler. I think your entire lot is more trouble than your worth."

He spit on the floor before returning his contemptuous gaze to Aiden.

At his comment, Aiden raised his eyebrows. "Why would I fall on my sword, when I'd much rather just kill you with it?"

The soldier jumped to his feet and strode towards Aiden. A fierce light was kindled in his eyes, but Aiden wasn't the least bit intimidated.

The soldier was strides from Aiden when he slid off his coat and threw it right at him. Using it as a distraction, and to momentarily cut off direct line of sight, Aiden stepped forward and into his swing.

His fist caught the soldier squarely in the jaw and sent him reeling. But Aiden didn't stay on him, knowing full well he'd likely drawn a weapon.

He was right. Aiden jerked backwards and a knife just missed his stomach. Ducking a sharp jab, he then grabbed the knife hand. He proceeded to kick the soldier in the knee, before pivoting into him, throwing him over his shoulder, and slamming him to the floor.

The soldier gave a powerful twist to break free. Aiden knew the kick to the leg was coming, but he opted instead to get a hold of the back of his rival's armor.

Aiden's leg gave, and he used his downward momentum to slam into the soldier's back to return him to the floor. He had his own knife in hand now and had it set against the soldier's neck when one of the commanders broke in.

"Enough. This is a small unit and we need every fighting man alive. But I think our little pet has shown he isn't a total loss. He fights smart and thinks on his feet."

Aiden pushed himself off the soldier and stood. Returning the knife to its place at his thigh, he snatched up his coat from the floor, all the while glaring at his rival.

The second commander was chuckling to himself as the soldier picked himself up and returned Aiden's glare.

"Yes, that's enough games for one night. Everyone keep your hands to yourself now. We should receive fresh marching orders within the next few days...and we can't afford to have any bones broken or throats cut."

"This has to be one the last outposts you hold this far south," said Aiden, sliding his coat back on, "you think you'll be ordered back North for now?"

"Maybe," nodded the first commander, before one corner of his mouth pulled upwards in a smile. "But perhaps our superiors, or even Cassius himself, will have some special assignment for you, since you're so well-known now, Aiden, famous traveler of Aurora."

Chapter 81

Found Wanting

In the North, the sky was clear above the perpetual haze that lay over the land of desolation. Bitter winter was reluctant to allow spring to arrive, and the night was particularly glacial.

But Cassius wasn't concerned about the temperature, for the dark king, astride his tall horse, was on the hunt.

Because both man and equine lived in constant dusk and darkness, they could see well in it. As such, this allowed them to move swiftly and sure-footedly through the night, and across the rocky hills and jagged ridges that lined the center of the southern border.

Their breaths came out in ghostly grey streams and hung suspended in the still air while they galloped on. The thick dust and ash that covered the ground muted the black horse's footfalls, and his dull coat didn't give away their position by catching any gleam of faint light.

His horse eased to a walk and finally a standstill when the hill began to gradually decline to meet a narrow meadow. He shifted anxiously, consumed with wrath that came within himself and from his master.

Both Cassius and his horse turned their attention southward, to the section of the border wedged between two mountain ranges. They knew something was approaching not because they heard it, but because they sensed it.

The horse pawed the dusty ground and danced sideways in rising anticipation.

After a minute, half a dozen shadows, running light and swift, shot out of the black and towering spruce trees.

Cassius's horse sprang into action and charged down the rise, drifting right as their quarry continued to draw nearer. The freezing air moving over them hurt Cassius's face and stung his horse's nose, but it was an afterthought. As he set the first arrow onto the string, any conscious thought of the cold faded from his mind.

The shadows, a herd of deer, didn't see or hear them in the thick darkness, despite the quiet of the night.

Horse and rider were running nearly even with them when the first deer fell, followed a breath later by a second, then a third and a fourth.

The remaining eight bolted west, away from Cassius. A large pack of wolves, that had chased the deer across the border, kept them from returning south.

Snorting with the thrill of a chase, the black horse gathered himself and then launched into a dead sprint after the deer. Like any other dark mount, his swiftness could not be surpassed, and if he so chose, he could quiet his footfalls and pass over the ground with the silence of a shadow.

As he was doing now.

The roaring wind was more biting than ever, but neither noticed it. Horse and hunter were completely focused on their quarry as they bore down upon them.

Four more deer fell beneath black arrows. The others spooked south, but the wolves were there and waiting. A pair skirted several wolves only to run right into the powerful jaws of another kind of canine, smaller and shorter than the large, sleek wolves.

One deer looked like it might escape. Giving a mighty leap with its spring-like legs, it vaulted over a pair of wolves. It cleared them easily, but an arrow found its mark, plunging behind the front left leg, and through a lung and the heart.

The deer collapsed in a heap of legs.

The final deer spun about and found itself encircled by the enemy. But when it sensed and then saw a horse and rider approaching, it stopped and looked at them.

The deer remained where it was as the horse came to a stop a dozen feet from it. Prey and rider gazed at one another for a long moment before the deer lay down on the ground, in clear acceptance of its fate.

It wasn't because the deer was surrounded by so many wolves that it had given up. No, it was because of the rider on the black horse. It sensed and understood that it could not escape. There was no hope at all.

That was true. In all the years of Cassius's life, no prey or target had ever escaped from his grasp, nor had a single one been able to outwit or outrun him.

If the dark king chose to hunt you, there was no hope of misleading him or of him giving up.

Cassius set one more arrow on the string and shot and killed the final deer.

Though the wolves were always ready to eat, they didn't touch the six bodies on the ground after they'd been killed. They did, however, create a perimeter around the large kill area and paced anxiously.

Laughs from the smaller and slower canines echoed over the dead plain. These were, in fact, hyenas, which were used primarily for patrol along the border of the dead land.

Cassius regarded them with distaste and disapproval, yet acknowledged they served a purpose. So he let them be...except when they forgot their place and feasted on one of his kills.

Such as the pair that had begun doing just so on one of the deer.

The wolves raised their hackles and growled in warning. But they didn't need to act further because two arrows killed the pair of hyenas, and those remaining sprinted to the perimeter of wolves.

By then, half a dozen other riders arrived. They'd just finished dressing four more deer and now they made quick work of draining and quartering the others. The night was only going to become colder as the hour of dawn drew closer.

Blackness was still heavy around the company as they raced back towards the city. The hyenas and wolves stayed in the kill zone and were now free to clean up the remains of the kills.

The kyros and chimera encampments outside the city were visible only by the numerous small fires they had burning. Inside the gates, however, was almost completely dark, save for a faint glow from one or two houses.

While the company would oversee further preparation and distribution of the meat, Cassius made for the main lobby of the villa.

He was just cresting the stairs and could feel the warmth from the fire in the hearth when Merek stepped beside him. "Still no update from Asgarod."

Like Cassius himself, his officials didn't sleep much. This was, in part, because of near-constant hunger. But presently it was because the evil that had been growing over the winter months was now becoming restless.

Part of that feeling was created by their own restlessness, as Cassius and his human soldiers served as half of the evil forces in the North.

The other half was Levian and his legions. The demon prince had remained busy through the fall and winter, sending scouts, doing surveillance on enemy posts and troop movements, and stationing his own warriors at hidden posts across the realm in preparation for the coming spring and summer campaign.

Contrary to what some thought, evil never rested. It may appear to do so, especially in the still and dark winter months. But evil loved the darkness of the winter and was refreshed by it.

But evil would never sleep and always it was moving and scheming. It would continue to do so, until it was finally cast down and destroyed forever.

Shrugging off his heavy overcoat, Cassius tossed it onto one of the nearby tables and then stepped in front of the fireplace.

Irritation and anger stabbed through him as he glared into the fire. Cassius had obviously fully recovered from his little bout of illness. As expected, it wasn't because the people of the realm had ceased their praying to the God of Eliadar. He'd simply become desensitized to the effects of the prayers.

That said, with the return of his strength Cassius himself was edgy. He knew the next phase of the plan was approaching, a step that would unleash darkness over the South and East.

Evil never accepted defeat. After a loss, it merely fell silent as it regrouped, planned, and moved various pieces into position in preparation for the next strike.

The restlessness of darkness only compounded that which Cassius felt in himself. He was longing to spill the blood of his enemies, and do so with his own hand instead of relying on others to do it.

The air tingled as an oppressive darkness filled the room and informed Cassius that Levian had just joined the little meeting.

"You know," grumbled the demon prince as Cassius turned to face him, "your deceiver has been taking his time lately, both in moving Halden along and in sending reports. He's, how you say? Been found wanting?"

"I'm well aware of that," replied Cassius. "But Christopher's a deceiver. He manipulates people for a living. Perhaps he thinks there isn't much we can do to him from a distance, and as such, he's become complacent...a little too comfortable."

"Halden is ready for the final push," came a report from another demon as he dropped through the high ceiling and into the room.

He was nearly as large as Levian, and between the two of them, with their wings spread, filled the length of the lobby.

"More and more gremlins arrive at Asgarod, along with more of our forces," continued the demonic commander. "Obviously we cannot assail the remaining believers, but we can move about the city. Once Halden aligns with us, we'll have free reign over a much larger territory in the South."

"And Ambrose has been more than ready for the next phase," added Cassius, before chuckling wickedly to himself. "He never stood a chance from the beginning."

"Can't you just send Thalia to Asgarod to finish the matter?" asked Merek.

"No," replied Cassius. "She's too unpredictable. Would probably find it more amusing to have Christopher kill himself than convincing Halden to take a deeper plunge into darkness. Besides, removing Christopher and adding a new player would take even more time to get Halden where we want him. Taking out Christopher might make the counselor suspicious, regardless of the...affect Thalia has over men."

The dark king met Levian's gaze. "Still, let's pay Christopher a visit and remind him that he can be reached anywhere at any time. Remind him the order of things."

Levian grinned and darkness danced in his eyes. "I know just the one who should pay him a visit."

He looked at his commander. "Find Aegan and send him to Christopher. Have him remind our little deceiver that time is running out, or...his time is running out. If he's not going to do his job, then he will be replaced."

"Also remind him that I haven't forgotten he has yet to kill the female traveler," added Cassius darkly.

Levian wrinkled his nose in disgust at the mention of the wretch. "My scouts report she returned from the other dimension. Word has spread through the entire South, and resistance forces are now putting forth a double effort to keep the forces of Halden and Ambrose back."

"Speaking of travelers..."

Merek never got to finish his statement when a gremlin shot into the room. He made a beeline for the hearth and plopped onto the floor in front of the warm fire.

After standing there shivering a few seconds, he turned and gave Cassius a salute.

"Pardon me, my lord," he said with chattering teeth, "I bring a message from Dartmoor. The traveler Aiden has finally come back from the other realm."

The commander in Dartmoor had told Aiden they'd wait until the storm moved out to message his superiors. But he'd lied and never intended to wait.

After Aiden had gone to one of the houses for the night, the commander and his counterpart agreed to send a report both to their ranking officer and to Cassius right away.

Gremlins didn't like the snow, and typically returned to the black land for winter, or found some safe, secluded place in the South. But there had been a few snoozing comfortably in the rafters of the meeting hall and the commanders put them to work.

Cassius frowned. "Aiden, right. A lot of help he's been, and a lot of help he will be now that everyone knows his face. That was thanks to the female traveler, also."

That stupid girl, thought Cassius, jaw muscles flexing. A fresh surge of anger at Christopher's failure to kill her at the beginning coursed through him.

They both ought to be killed.

But then another thought occurred to Cassius, several actually, as his shrewd mind began working angles—as if there was never a time when it wasn't.

Finally, he lifted his dark gray eyes to Levian.

"Continue with the plan for Christopher," he said. "As for Aiden...have two of your warriors bring him here. It'll be much quicker. I wish to meet with the traveler face to face."

Levian snorted. "That won't be a problem, but does Aiden even believe in angels or demons? It might break his mind."

Cassius shrugged as a smile played at his lips. "If that's the case...then we'll just kill him."

Chapter 82

Warmer

Earth

Thanks to the resources Jada had access to, she knew which hotel Aiden and Channing were staying at, and their room numbers.

Upon calling the front desk, she learned Aiden wasn't in at the moment.

Sure he isn't, she thought, *unless...he went back to Aurora. Hmm.*

At any rate, she wanted to see the hotel and better familiarize herself with the immediate area.

Jada had done laundry the day after she'd returned, so the one pair of jeans from her pack no longer looked like a crumpled piece of paper. Her three shirts were also no longer wrinkled and covered in dust.

Her appearance was Western enough as she entered the hotel. She had a cover-story in mind, just in case anyone asked, though she wasn't too worried about it. If she

went about her business like she knew what she was doing, and she had every right to be doing it, no one should bother her.

Ryan and company had headed out before dawn. Therefore, she was free to go about her business unquestioned. Ryan's suspicions of her, however, hadn't lessened in the three days Jada had been back. In fact, they had deepened.

Intelligence reports had come in yesterday, snippets of conversations among a network of informants and assets. They were all warning each other to keep away from Aiden and Channing and to avoid doing business with them.

When Ryan had eyed Jada, she'd merely shrugged and replied with an airy, "Maybe they're just getting smart is all, realizing trouble when they see it."

The look that then proceeded to cross Ryan's face told her he didn't believe her—and knew she didn't believe her own answer.

Oh well, she'd thought, it's not my problem.

Although she knew it could become one, if Ryan began pressing the matter of her strange comings and goings, and other various activities.

It was mid-morning when Jada arrived at the hotel. No one seemed especially out of place as she moseyed across the lobby and made for the elevators.

Fresh set of brown colored contacts in place, her blue eyes were again hidden. She'd also managed to find some more black hair dye to recolor her hair.

While making her way to Aiden's room, Jada had to keep in mind that the rest of his team might not be far away. Technically, there wasn't any record of them in Afghanistan.

But that didn't mean squat.

It was also possible one or two had taken up residence in Aiden's room *if* he'd gone back to Aurora.

So many unknown variables to try to account for, she thought.

When the elevator door opened on the third floor, Jada smiled inwardly. As hoped, in the hall were several carts from the cleaning crews.

After inquiring about Aiden, she'd called back to ask when she might expect the cleaning service to come. Her young son thought it would be fun to jump on the bed with orange juice.

Hence, that explained why she'd arrived at the hotel when she did.

Walking briskly down the hall, Jada put on a rather flustered demeanor. When she reached the door to Aiden's room, she felt around her pockets for the keycard. Unable to find it, she drew a sharp breath and searched again.

Now completely exasperated, she walked back down the hall to the nearest cart.

"Excuse me," she said to one of the women cleaning the room.

She was cleaning the bathroom and straightened and turned when Jada spoke.

Laying on a German accent, she continued. "I lock myself out of my room. You let me in, please?"

The woman appeared to have been up all night and waved at Jada with her hands in a gesture that said, "yes, yes."

Returning to Aiden's room, the woman opened it with her master keycard.

Jada didn't even have time to say 'thank you' before she returned to the room she'd been cleaning.

It would've been extremely interesting if Aiden had been in his room. Or one of his teammates. But no one was home, though someone was staying there.

After quickly poking around a backpack and small, black duffel, Jada learned two of Aiden's team were indeed sharing the room. She knew who they were because she recognized the names on the gear from the info she'd skimmed back in Feyzabad.

Aside from that, though, nothing else useful was to be found. Obviously, they wouldn't leave anything lying around that revealed their boss's evil plan. Only total idiots would do that.

Jada hadn't searched ten minutes when she stopped and considered her next move.

Wouldn't it be interesting, she thought as an idea struck.

Stopping at the desk, she scribbled a note on the notepad. Since it was one of the hotels which regularly received international clients, there were also envelopes in the desk.

Jada had just shoved the note inside one and tucked the flap into it when voices in the hall snapped her to attention. Whoever they were had stopped right outside the door and paused a moment.

Now this will undoubtedly be interesting, she thought.

She didn't panic, and there wasn't a single flash of fear or even anxiety. This was merely another challenge, and a sort of game to see if she could talk her way out of this serious dilemma.

Jada was all for brute force, as history showed. But getting into a fight or causing a scene would draw far too much attention.

She'd just sat herself comfortably in a chair when the lock of the door clicked. It swung open and in walked two individuals she knew to be Vadim and Kirill.

They blinked at her as the door shut behind them, before exchanging a look with one another.

"Uh...can we help you?" asked Vadim, the brown-haired, blue-eyed eastern European.

"Unlikely," replied Jada flatly, with a trace of a Russian accent.

“I was hoping to find your boss, Aiden, here,” she continued, studying one man and then the other.

Their expressions furrowed.

“Aiden...wait, who are you?” asked Kirill, a dark-haired and dark-eyed person of Serbian origin.

“Someone who would like much to speak with Aiden. He is difficult to track down.”

“And why would you like to speak with him?” asked Vadim.

Now it was Jada’s turn to eye them with suspicion. “That is information you don’t need to know. But I will say I was hired by Channing to keep an eye on Aiden. I was told he’s acting strangely, and Channing use me before, trust me...as much as one person can trust another in our business.”

“You know Channing?” asked Kirill, with some astonishment.

It was likely he’d never seen the big boss, who delegated orders through Aiden, the little boss. Channing recognized that the fewer people who saw him or truly knew him, the better.

Jada considered the question a moment before responding. “‘Know’ is too strong of word. We did deals in...earlier days.”

That earned her a sharp look from Kirill. “Earlier days? You don’t look that old.”

“And you don’t look like much for brains,” she replied.

Kirill’s jaw muscles flexed at the insult.

Jada shrugged. “Anyway, I was hired to ensure Aiden wasn’t planning to...what is word? Eh, double-cross? Betray Channing or his team. Aiden has always been lone wolf, yes? He is boss, but not really friend with anyone, no?”

Vadim and Kirill finally relaxed some, because Jada knew more about Aiden than what she could’ve from simply typing his name into Google. She also wasn’t asking about the plot they were involved in, not that they’d know.

They were just the tools, not the mastermind.

As Jada spoke, she caught a flicker of doubt ripple across Kirill’s face, and it wasn’t directed at her.

“I guess you could say that,” answered Kirill. “He’s very smart and has been the leader for some years. We still don’t know much about him.”

“He seems to disappear often,” she mused. “Difficult to, eh, keep track of.”

That statement was a complete guess, but also a round-about way of bringing the conversation back to what Jada originally wanted to know.

Both men considered her words before Vadim spoke. “Yes, he come and go without saying anything.”

“Sometimes he’s gone long time,” volunteered Kirill. “He disappeared for almost a month one time, and in the middle of a...job.”

Beautiful, thought Jada, before tilting her head. “Last time I saw him was maybe three weeks ago?”

“Last we saw him was one week,” said Vadim. “We meet him here, and then he vanished.”

Jada’s gaze narrowed.

“Hmm,” she muttered, as if to herself, “highly suspect...”

Pretending to catch herself, she straightened and got to her feet.

“Well, next time you see Aiden,” she said, offering the envelope to Vadim, “give him this, please. Sometimes it keeps people in line when they know someone is watching or looking for them.”

Jada passed between them and was at the door when Kirill half-turned and asked, “You will be watching still?”

For the first time since their meeting, Jada smiled as she opened the door. “You know Channing. There is always someone watching.”

Stoic demeanor returning, she left the room and made for the elevator. Once she was inside and the doors closed, she laughed quietly to herself over the event that had just transpired.

Wow, that was...weird.

Her trip to the hotel had gone far better than she’d planned or could’ve hoped. As far as Jada now knew, Aiden was in Aurora. Plus, she’d left him a little note that would hopefully shake him up even more.

On top of it all, she may have succeeded in stirring up some doubt within his very own team. It was one thing to spook assets, but this was much closer to home.

Of course, any doubt likely would be put to rest once they reported her visit to Channing, which they would. They had no reason not to.

Jada’s gut was telling her, too, that it was only a matter of time before there was some kind of retaliation, serious backlash to all these little annoyances she was instigating.

She was aware she had to be extremely careful now. She was back to being amongst the ranks of the enemy, only in another dimension. She’d been getting closer and closer until she’d interacted directly with them.

If she wasn’t wary, she was going to wind up captured again.

Along with having a horse flip over on top of you, Jada would suggest avoiding being taken captive by your enemy at all costs.

But her mind was now thoroughly focused on Aurora, and she knew now was a perfect time for a visit back home.

The trail that led to Aiden had started off cold. Upon Jada's first arrival in Afghanistan, it had warmed when she'd identified him. Now, after having spoken with his team members, she was getting even warmer, closer, to her target.

Chapter 83

Long Reach

Aurora

His sleep was restless that night, but not because the enemy was countering the darkness. It was due to some deeper evil which was drawing nearer. In his dream, it was a veil of black, like a line of shadow that covers the land when a cloud passes in front the sun.

And before the veil came a heavy weight, an oppressiveness...and great fear.

The dreamer may have been in league with darkness, but what he felt came from some higher rank of evil that struck terror in him.

The line of black drew closer and the weight heavier until he could barely stand beneath it. He watched with rising fear as the blackness continued to approach, and when it finally passed over him, he gave a cry of alarm and fell to the ground.

Christopher, deceiver and manipulator of high rulers and counselors, awoke with a gasp. Breathing hard, he sat up and blinked against the sheer darkness of his room.

As the seconds ticked passed, he became aware that the fear from the dream had not faded. It remained with him, and that told him...there was someone or something here.

Christopher gave a second violent start when he spotted a shadow on the far side of the large room. It was a shadow blacker than the dark and gazed at him with mocking yellow-green eyes.

"Wh...what do you want?" asked Christopher, when he finally found his voice.

"I am Commander Aegan," answered the shadow, as it pushed itself off the doorway to the balcony and slowly approached.

Aegan. The name struck a deep chord of fear in Christopher's mind and a chill washed over his skull. In the ancient tongue, the name meant "monster." He was familiar with a number of generals and commanders under Levian, and though Aegan was only commander status, he bore one of the most sinister reputations.

"I take my orders from the prince, Levian, who works beside Cassius, dark king of the North," continued the demonic commander. "And I bring several reminders from them to you."

A large, black silhouette of Aegan's outstretched wings blotted out the hazy light from the stars in the windows to Christopher's left. When he walked closer, the suffocating weight on his chest grew heavier and pressure pushed down on his head and shoulders.

Though Aegan stopped a dozen strides from the bed, he was still towering and menacing.

If Christopher hadn't been overtaken with horror and shock, he would've fallen out of bed and groveled on the floor.

"First," growled Aegan, "Halden is ready for the next plunge. We're all waiting on you and him, so hurry up."

Although he couldn't see the demon's face, there was no missing the snarl from him, or the flash of anger in his eyes.

"Has Christopher, the deceiver, gotten so caught up in his games that his mind has become muddled, too? Has he forgotten that my companions also fill this city, like the petty human soldiers in Halden's military? Has he forgotten that we're here? And that it's by our power and cunning that the counselor and his wolf are in a position of authority, and that their forces have expanded as far as they have? Remember the order of things, little worm: you don't control me or Levian, or any of the forces of darkness, which you truly know nothing about."

Aegan took another long stride towards Christopher and he jerked back against the headboard of the bed.

"Second: Cassius hasn't forgotten the fact that you still have yet to kill the lone female traveler. The longer she is alive, the more problems she will continue to create for us."

"Bu...but she has the ability to traverse dimensions now," said Christopher weakly, "how am I—"

It wasn't any word from Aegan that caused Christopher to cut off his question. It was the sudden and intense sense of hatred and rage that came from the shadowed commander.

"It was your task," snarled Aegan, "figure it out. If you'd done the job correctly the first time, you wouldn't be dealing with it now. The dark king is loathe to kill and replace you, but Levian and I...not so much."

The demon drew closer yet, until he was right over Christopher. "You can be replaced, remember that. Time is running out, or as Levian put it: *your* time is running out. Complacency is a dangerous thing for someone in your position, Christopher. Complete the jobs appointed to you, or the last thing you'll remember is having a knife driven through your back...and not by your girlfriend, Thalia."

Razor sharp claws grabbed Christopher's face in an iron grasp as Aegan leaned towards him. "Do your job and you'll reclaim good standing with us. And keep in mind: our reach is long, little wolf, and there's no place where you can go where we can't find you."

Chapter 84

Worth & Enslavement

Chaos disturbed the usually still hour before dawn, and the sounds of a skirmish were carried away by the chill spring breeze that was already stirring.

The attackers struck the town of Fria, a moderately-sized village two days march east of Dartmoor. Unlike some of its neighbors, Fria was a friendly settlement that welcomed travelers. In the wake of the push south by Cassius's forces, they'd naturally created a small fighting force. But they stood little chance against the invaders.

Dark armored and grim-faced, the attackers were none other than the company from Dartmoor. Led by a pair of commanders, the unit had been divided into two rough groups so as to more or less surround Fria.

The first group struck from the south end and east side, to prevent any citizens from riding out to seek aid. Because the dark company consisted of foot soldiers and no horsemen, the primary tactic was stealth and surprise.

The small band of Fria warriors was prepared. A falcon had reported to them the previous evening that soldiers of Cassius's army were heading their way.

As the first group of enemy soldiers crossed the town's borders, arrows fell among them. Many of the soldiers immediately made for cover. But those who stopped and turned were picked off by archers positioned on the rooftops of houses and businesses.

The soldiers retaliated quickly, and some held their ground behind cover and returned fire. Others began kicking in doors of houses and other buildings.

Once they were inside, they made for the upper levels and situated themselves in rooms that gave them a view of the enemy archers. Still more went to the rooftops, to set up perches and remove resistance fighters.

Civilians not wielding a weapon or putting up a fight were left to hide and cower.

Aiden was in the unit that had moved in from the southern end. He'd suspected something was wrong as they approached, and when they entered Fria, he'd been proven correct.

Presently, he broke cover from behind a store and sprinted across the road for the next building.

Maneuvering was easier said than done because the same storm that had visited Dartmoor three days ago had also done some sightseeing over Fria. The main roads were mostly bare dirt or mud, though there were still drifts against the sides of houses and buildings. The deepest snow was in the shadowed alleyways or paths between structures.

Aiden wasn't halfway across the street when an arrow just missed his neck.

Pivoting slightly, he drew an arrow, set it on his borrowed bow, and immediately returned fire.

The arrow shot across the adjacent street, and the enemy archer ducked out of sight as it sank into a short retaining wall of the roof.

Setting another arrow, Aiden paused when he reached the other side of the road. The instant the enemy archer began to reappear over the wall, Aiden released the arrow.

It found its mark, and the archer collapsed.

Like Jada, Aiden had taken up archery and other types of combat in Aurora quite naturally. Add to it he had years of training in Earth's dimension, and he proved to be a lethal warrior.

This realization quickly earned him some respect amongst his dark soldier counterparts during training exercises in Dartmoor.

Securing his bow, Aiden drew the short sword from its scabbard, strapped across his back beneath the quiver of arrows. He also took up his knife.

Several dark soldiers were with him as he approached a side door leading into a store. He signaled to the soldiers, and they positioned themselves on either side of the door. Keeping to one side, Aiden then strode forward, delivered a powerful kick that swung the door open...then dodged out of the path of several arrows as they shot through the doorway.

The moment the arrows passed, a pair of dark soldiers answered the shots. One had a crossbow and stepped sideways to one knee. The second, with an arrow set on the bowstring, stepped behind his kneeling companion.

"Two down," reported one of the soldiers as he and his companion ducked out of the doorway. "Two left."

What I wouldn't give for my M16, thought Aiden, as he peered cautiously inside the house.

Unfortunately, the only weapon that had ever traversed with him was a knife, if he had one on him to begin with. Firearms were automatically prevented from arriving with a traveler to Aurora. He knew this because he'd attempted to bring his semi-automatic 9mm once.

Hey, you couldn't blame a guy for trying.

The door opened into a small dining room off the kitchen. No enemy was in view, and he quickly and quietly stalked inside.

Aiden had the knife at the ready, and when he neared the doorway on the far side of the kitchen, one of the enemy fighters stepped into full view. He had an arrow at the ready, but Aiden was quicker with his throw.

The knife landed in the archer's shoulder. The force of the impact sent him stumbling backwards and as he did, he accidentally released the arrow.

It zipped over Aiden and stuck into the doorway header.

In anticipation of a strike, Aiden ducked as he passed through the doorway and into the kitchen. The move proved wise as a blade cut through the air where his head had been not a breath earlier.

He turned towards the enemy as he straightened, with his right arm up to block the second strike. As his rival swiped at him, he latched onto his rival's elbow and ran his sword between the gap of his armor and into the side of his ribcage.

With a sharp yank, Aiden removed the blade and deflected the swing from the enemy who still had a knife embedded in his shoulder.

Aiden went with the movement of his strike and pivoted into his right cross. It sent his opponent reeling. He slammed into a wall before Aiden landed a wound on his upper arm.

With a quick and decisive movement, Aiden kicked the man in the back of the leg, making his knee give. He then proceeded to slam the butt of his sword hilt into the man's temple, rendering him unconscious.

"We've detained four more warriors in a back bedroom," reported a dark soldier, who'd come up behind Aiden.

"Keep them secure here until we've taken the town," said Aiden, as he yanked his knife from the unconscious warrior's shoulder. "Then you'll receive word about where to move them."

Another small group of soldiers arrived at the house. They were still delegating who was to stay and guard the prisoners as Aiden exited out the back door.

The sound of fighting was still noticeable in the immediate area, and as Aiden stalked through town he saw small pockets of fighting. These he bypassed because he was hunting for the leader of the resistance fighters, the unofficial commander.

A minute later, as Aiden pressed northward, the sound of the fighting quieted. There were still a fair number of enemy warriors about, he knew and sensed it. There was no way they'd send their entire group to engage their attackers. Instead, they'd have squads hang back, either until their companions on the front lines needed backup, or the invaders moved deeper into town.

Aiden was also aware he was by himself, with no reinforcements. But that didn't bother him. He was accustomed to being right in the midst of enemy ranks by his lonesome.

A cool wind whipped around the side of a storehouse he was walking along, bringing him the scent of wood smoke. Eyes always scanning his surroundings, Aiden's gut was telling him someone was—

The next two events occurred simultaneously. An archer in a second story window straight across the street shot at him. While this was transpiring, a rear door of the storehouse swung open. It shielded Aiden from the arrow and left him free to deal with the warrior that was in the process of ambushing him.

He turned in time to bring his blade around and block a fierce downward strike. The swords locked. Before it could turn into a test of strength, Aiden kicked the warrior's knee while throwing his own weight sideways. This disengaged the swords and set Aiden up for the second warrior, who was nearly to them.

The warrior tackled him. They hit the storehouse door, swinging in the gusts of wind, and slammed against the side of the building. A well-placed kick by the warrior made one of Aiden's legs buckle. But on his way to the ground, he grabbed his enemy and dragged him down with him.

Ugly, close-quarter combat was Aiden's forte, especially when the fight went to the ground.

In the half second they were falling, Aiden twisted and threw his elbow into the man's head. The rotation of the movement put him mostly on top when they hit the dirt.

With a powerful move, he slammed a knee into the warrior's back. This kept him pinned for a moment, while he wrapped an arm around his neck. He then pulled the man's upper body off the ground a little, to ensure loss of blood and oxygen flow to the brain.

Aiden then remembered the archer across the road and the fact he was out in the open. He decided it'd be quicker to snap the warrior's neck.

He'd just completed the task and thrown himself sideways when an arrow barely missed his shoulder. Springing to his feet, Aiden half-turned and made for the storehouse door behind him.

By then, the archer had already set another arrow and fired. The arrow whistled through the air but was thrown off course by a gust of wind.

Aiden didn't have time to blink as a third arrow came from another archer. It was pure reflex that he pivoted sideways when he did. The arrow passed his arm and glanced off the wall of the storehouse.

When he turned, he saw a pair of enemy warriors coming towards him.

The adrenaline was already flowing, and now a surge of anger burned through him. He didn't have time for this, and he was tired of being shot at by stupid archers.

Fortunately, Aiden had reached the storehouse door and he stepped behind it. Not a breath later, an arrow grazed the edge of it, sending tiny splinters of wood into the air.

As Aiden backed into the storehouse, he wielded a sword in his left hand and took up his knife with his right. Then, with a twirl and a swing, he met the blade of the first warrior.

The aisles of the storehouse may have restricted movement, but it ensured that only one opponent could assail him at a time. That is, until any others ran around the far end of the row to come from behind. He knew there had to be more warriors in the storehouse and sounds of a fight would draw them in.

Aiden gave himself a full thirty seconds before that occurred. Until then, he focused on his enemy and settled into the rhythm of the fight.

The blades rang each time they met, and during the harshest strikes, sparks flickered in the dimness of the large room.

The warrior was fast, but Aiden was faster, and his rival was strong, but Aiden the traveler was stronger.

He'd nearly overpowered the first warrior by the time his companion ran around behind him.

One more powerful strike threw the first enemy off balance and let Aiden turn to meet the new threat.

A harsh swipe sent the second warrior staggering. Aiden turned and deflected the first's counterstrike before killing him with one more decisive strike.

As anticipated, more enemy warriors entered the rear of the storehouse.

Aiden was unconcerned. His skill and power were unmatched by these meager foes. Never before had he fought so effortlessly, or felt so confident in his ability to take on the enemy.

As they neared the far door, the room opened up, so they could advance from three different directions. But not even that mattered. Not worried in the least, Aiden turned all the enemies' blades back and fell their wielders in turn.

And it wasn't just confidence and surety that was with Aiden. A fire was burning in him, a heat he'd never experienced before, and it grew as the fight wore on. He'd never felt it like this during any of his assignments back in Earth's dimension.

Aiden was consumed with the heat of battle, but not from a righteous fire or zeal. He was, after all, on the side of the enemy, on the side of darkness. Back home he killed anyone he was paid to, men, women and children, and all without remorse or guilt.

No, this dark and intoxicating power came from slaying the good and innocent, from spilling clean blood.

Of the eight that fought against Aiden, six were killed and the last two were wounded. They were the smart ones and surrendered, tossing away their weapons.

They then slumped against the wall and smeared in blood from their various wounds.

"Where is your commander?" asked Aiden, still filled with hot wrath as he stood glaring down at them. "Where is your leader and where is he posted?"

When he received no answer, Aiden dug the heel of his boot on one of the warrior's kneecaps and applied some of his weight.

"Tell me now," seethed Aiden as the man winced at the pain in his leg, "or I will make your death so painful and drawn out, you'll wish you'd never been born. And then I'll kill your friend in the same manner."

"House two streets north," replied the second warrior, though his eyes, filled with fear, were on his companion. "Brick foundation...flaking white shutters."

Aiden grabbed both warriors and yanked them harshly to their feet. He then pushed them forward, through the door that led into the front of the storehouse. They crossed the room before he shoved one warrior out the door and kicked the second.

They stumbled and fell into the street, where Aiden knocked both unconscious and hogtied them with their own belts.

It was at this time that shouts came from the north and west edges of town. Moments later, the ringing of swords and sound of fighting was carried to him by the wind, which was now rather brisk.

The second unit of dark soldiers, which had been situated at the north end of Fria, had finally made their move. The idea was for the initial ambush by the first squad to draw the attention of the enemy forces. Once things were well underway, the second group was to move.

Aiden broke into a run. Speed was needed now, to find the commander's post while they were scrambling to deal with this second unit of attackers.

Use the distraction of the chaos to his advantage.

The wind tore at him, biting his face and hands. But the cold only awakened his senses and he seemed more aware of them. The smell of snow and dirt, the crunching of his boots through the snow, and the stinging of the tiny ice crystals cast up from the berms by the gales.

He shot out of an alley and across the next road. Out the corner of his left eye, he saw a small group of battling warriors. His money was on the dark soldiers.

Just before he passed into the next side street, he heard a shout off his right shoulder. He guessed he'd been spotted by one of the enemy.

But as he passed out of their sight two strides later, it didn't matter much.

The snow that had fallen during the storm must have been wet because it was mostly packed and hard. This allowed Aiden to run over the top of it and maintain his momentum.

Ahead he spotted the rear corner of a house with a brick foundation. When he neared the end of the alley, he saw one of its windows with shutters closed over it. They'd been painted white at one time, but most of it had flaked off due to weathering.

Pausing at the end of the alley, Aiden glanced up and down the road. At the west edge of town, to his left, he spotted a couple flickers of movement. They were his fellow dark soldiers, beginning to clear the area and press in towards the center of Fria.

He caught the attention of several and then signaled to the house in front of him. After a brief discussion amongst themselves, a few dark soldiers lifted into a jog towards him.

Now Aiden had backup en route.

He studied the building that supposedly served as the base of operations for the enemy commander. All second story windows were visible and didn't have shutters covering them. On the ground floor, only the one at the rear had the shutters pulled. The others were clear, though not presently open.

After checking the road again, Aiden stalked into the street as he took up his bow and set an arrow.

When he reached the first un-shuttered window, he cautiously peered through it. The glass was dirty, but not enough that kept him from spotting two warriors before ducking out of view.

Wonder if this will work, he thought as he drifted back into the street a few paces. He then pulled the string back and sidestepped until he was in line with the window.

He aimed at the vague shape of a warrior and released the arrow. It punched through the glass and drew a startled shout from inside the house.

Aiden immediately drew and fired a second arrow before sprinting to the rear of the house. *That ought to keep them busy for a second.*

On his initial approach, he'd noted the back door. He ran for it now and skidded around the corner. He set yet another arrow on the string but didn't need to kick open the door.

An enemy warrior opened it for him and instantly took an arrow to the chest. He wasn't one of the fortunate few wearing armor and it was an instant kill-shot.

His body was still falling when Aiden shot a second warrior in the thigh. He fell sideways into the wall before down to the floor. As Aiden strode past, he kicked him in the head.

Ahead in the living room stood three warriors in front of a fourth, whom Aiden surmised was the commander.

The group of four split up as Aiden shot another arrow, but that was alright with him. It gave him time to toss his bow aside and remove the mostly empty quiver.

He listened intently to the sound of footsteps running upstairs and muffled voices. His target had chosen to go to the next level, as opposed to flee the premises. Perhaps he thought the house was already surrounded.

At this point, several of the dark soldiers, who'd been on approach, arrived at last. He signaled to them and they nodded.

Aiden sprinted forward, one soldier on his right, another right on their heels. As he passed through the broad doorway, he ducked left into another hall. The soldier off his right shoulder deflected the swing from one of the two enemy warriors, leaving Aiden free to pursue the commander and his friend.

But when he was passing through the kitchen, he stopped as another idea came to mind. Not minding the sounds of the fight in the living room, Aiden quickly searched through the cupboards and found what he was searching for: some cloth rags, matches and a bottle of liquor.

He didn't have grenades, but a Molotov cocktail was the next best thing.

Aiden found the stairs and quietly ascended them. The top was open to a hall with three doorways on the right.

Just before reaching the last few steps, he lit tail of cloth, sticking out the bottle top.

He reached the landing and strode down the hall, not bothering to attempt to quiet his footfalls. He wanted the remaining enemy fighters in the house to know he was coming, for the psychological effect.

Aiden forewent the first room, which was empty anyway. He walked straight by the second door, and a pair of arrows just missed his leg and back.

Shouts of warning came from the room as he made for the final doorway. He paused just long enough to hurl the bottle onto the floor and feet from the group of five men.

One or two gave cries of surprise as the bottle broke and flames flared up before them.

Aiden made his move a second later. He strode into the room, filling quickly with smoke as a rug and the dried wood floor began to smolder.

Two of the warriors had jerked backwards and were in the far corner. The other three, including the commander, were prepared for the assault.

Or so they thought.

Aiden deflected the strike from the first warrior and landed a punch that sent him reeling. Ducking under the commander's swing, he used counter-momentum to kick the man up and into the diaphragm, which staggered him backwards.

Aiden straightened in time to pivot and avoid the jab from the third enemy warrior.

He and the three commenced in an awkward sort of dance for the next twenty seconds, as the room continued to fill with smoke—and fire.

The rug was now truly ablaze and was consumed quicker than the other two warriors could try and stomp it out. It was dragged to the far corner of the room as the clashing of swords rang loudly in the small room.

Boots on the steps and in the hall, followed by muffled voices in the next room, told Aiden his companions had arrived upstairs.

As for Aiden himself, he was backed almost right against a window. But that was part of his plan, as had been the fire.

Fire and smoking out enemies had proved useful on previous occasions in Earth's dimension. Why wouldn't it work here?

In giving a particularly powerful counterstrike, he completely shattered the window just behind his left shoulder.

It gave the smoke somewhere to go and pulled it towards himself and his three rivals, who were now becoming disoriented and light-headed.

Aiden landed a strike in the side of the warrior to his right. He locked blades with the commander before kicking the knee of the warrior to his left.

He then muscled his way around so the commander had his back to the window. From this position, Aiden could feel the heat of growing fire and catch the flickering of flames out the corner of his eye.

When he heard footsteps running out of the rooms and back down the stairs, he guessed it was time that he and his target made their exit.

Aiden shoved the blades to the side and kned the commander in the stomach. This weakened him...and allowed for Aiden to tackle him out of the broken window.

The awning over the front porch slowed their descent somewhat to the street, but Aiden still made sure the commander landed under him, to cushion the fall.

The impact knocked the wind out of the commander, and Aiden relieved him of the sword and two knives he had on him.

Since the situation was under control now, Aiden took a moment to catch his breath and assess things.

Soldiers had groups of enemy fighters detained from the command post and neighboring structures. Most of them were injured in some way or another with open wounds, scrapes and bruises.

As for the civilians, many of them half-hid in doorways and watched the activity.

Or more accurately, they watched Aiden and the commander, who still lay in the mud at his feet. Their expressions confirmed he was a leader, someone they cared about.

Excellent.

"Well, he is good for something after all."

Aiden looked up to see one of the two commanders of the Dartmoor company approaching. His gait was easy and demeanor relaxed, though the blade of his sword was stained red with the blood of his adversaries.

"Figured you might want the leader of resistance forces alive, Commander Silas," replied Aiden. "For leverage."

Silas's eyes danced with dark laughter. "Seems you and I are on the same page."

He studied Aiden a moment longer, before looking around at his men. "Get them lined up on the road."

Word spread through town and soon all enemy warriors were pushed and shoved into rows. Coats and other top layers were removed from them, as well as armor that a few wore. Then they were left standing and shivering in pants and short-sleeved shirts as the icy wind whipped down the street.

As for the enemy leader, he was pulled to his feet, removed of his armor and then situated in front of the three rows of his followers.

"I saw we just kill 'em all," piped a soldier who was approaching with the second commander, Oron.

"If you want to make a point and ensure the residents cooperate, then you won't do that," countered Aiden sharply and to his own surprise.

Something about the events of that morning, about the intense heat of battle that had been on him, how consuming it had been, had made an impact. For reasons he himself didn't understand, he felt camaraderie with the dark soldiers and he desired for their plans to succeed.

Previously in Earth's dimension, his teammates were just companions, tools, a means to achieving an end. And the job was just an assignment to be carried out with success to ensure he got paid.

But somehow it was different here. Aiden felt like he was truly part of something bigger.

Though he was countering a comrade, he was doing it so their forces would receive the most benefit. Normally, he wouldn't have cared and would have agreed it would be easier to just kill everyone, civilians included, and burn Fria to the ground.

However, keeping the people alive could prove quite useful.

On top of it all, Aiden somehow needed to turn things in Channing's favor. Hopefully, having a success here would result in success in the other dimension.

While Aiden was considering all of this, the two commanders watched him. When he broke from his thoughts and glanced at them, he saw traces of a smile pulling at their mouths.

Silas glanced at the three nearest soldiers and then nodded at the enemy leader. "There's no reason why he should stand there comfortably."

That brought wicked smiles to the three soldiers and one threw his elbow squarely into the enemy commander's diaphragm.

Silas then gave a little tilt of his head and he, Oron, Aiden and two others walked a short distance from the enemy combatants.

"State your case, traveler," said Silas to Aiden, as the sounds of a severe beating came from behind them.

"We'll want the warriors alive, but separated and detained as leverage," replied Aiden evenly. "Use them to ensure the residents cooperate. Halden and Ambrose have entire towns working for them, and I'd say it's a strategy we should use ourselves. This is especially true in a town remotely close to the South, where we've been routed. We'll want to maintain footholds here. So, enslave the civilians, keep them busy with mundane tasks. But don't come down too hard on them, or you'll only invite unrest."

He gave a shrug. "And if they do try and start something, kill one or two of the warriors, those they look up to the most."

Aiden glanced at the soldier who'd suggested they kill the enemy fighters. "If all else fails, we can just kill everyone. But threats of death don't always work to persuade people to cooperate, or it only works for awhile before the fear fades."

His eyes flicked to Silas and then Oron. "But if you want to kill anyone right away, kill the leader of the warriors. Cut off the head of the resistance, so to speak. It'll strike a dose of fear into everyone and leave the fighters without a commander."

Genuine smiles appeared the faces of Silas and Oron and their dark eyes gleamed.

"I think he's finally coming around," said Silas.

"Aye," agreed Oron, "settling in and getting with the program."

"There's nothing like it, is there?" asked Silas to Aiden darkly. "The fire of battle as you bring ruin on your enemies?"

Aiden met the commander's gaze but said nothing in response.

"I appreciate his reasoning," said Oron to Silas, "he fights and thinks like a seasoned warrior. I'd say he's a leader in his realm...and I'd also say he's proven his worth, in a single outing no less."

"Indeed," agreed Silas. "Alright, let's go with the traveler's plan. We'll send word to the North that we'll require additional forces to rotate in to relieve those who are stationed here."

He looked at Aiden. "As for the immediate future, how about you do the honors?"

Needing no further prompting, Aiden spun and strode back towards the enemy leader and his three guards. He gave an upward nod, and the man was pulled up to his knees.

Drawing the sword with a sharp movement, Aiden then punched the blade through the leader's chest.

That drew a visible reaction from a number of warriors and from the residents behind them as his body slumped to the road. Some jerked as if startled and a few of the civilians gasped.

Aiden couldn't remember the last time killing someone had been so satisfying. After a few kills, the exhilaration and high of it wore off, and it became like any other meager task.

He knelt and cleaned the blade on the deceased commander's shirt. After, he straightened...and froze.

A darkness fell over Fria and not because it was dusk. It wasn't even noon yet, so the sun wasn't setting.

No, this was a different kind of darkness and one that brought a chill that had nothing to do with the wind. It was dark as in...evil.

Also, everyone had fallen silent, and the civilians quickly disappeared indoors. The rows of warriors subconsciously gathered closer together as fear fell over them.

The soldiers and Silas and Oron didn't appear afraid, though their eyebrows went up a little. They were also looking at Aiden, or directly past him.

A chill ran down Aiden's spine as the town darkened still and a weight pressed down upon him. An ache like he'd never felt before gnawed at his head and an accompanying pressure pushed against his forehead. This wasn't a headache brought on by exhaustion, stress or hunger. It was caused by some outside source.

And whatever it was...was right behind him.

Something grabbed hold of his shoulders with a grip like iron. Sharp nails, or claws, dug into him, straight through his coat like he wasn't wearing one.

While he was held in place, another something latched onto his lower left arm, yanked the sleeve of his coat back, and removed the band from his wrist.

"Can't have you disappearing on us, little traveler," laughed a deep and gruff voice that struck Aiden with fear he'd never known.

His mind had become too foggy, the headache so intense that he couldn't even think of what to do when he'd been grabbed. Even now he was extremely dizzy and could feel the ground trying to lean on him.

But Aiden finally uprooted his boots from the muddy snow and slowly turned. When he saw what was standing, or more accurately, towering, behind him, he backpedaled a half dozen steps. His mind went numb as he stared wide-eyed at the two menacing, winged creatures with glinting yellow-green eyes.

These weren't gath or kyros. Oh no, these were beings Aiden hadn't ever taken much time to consider, or decide if he even believed they existed. Sure, Aiden recognized he was one of the "bad guys," but the thought of evil and forces of darkness hadn't ever crossed his mind.

Until now.

Standing before him was a pair of demons, demons which knew of him. That wasn't a comforting fact.

One of the demons laughed. "The boss was right again: he doesn't believe in us, or didn't until a second ago."

The second laughed too. "Little fool, but he knows now."

"There's someone who wants to see you," said the first brute to Aiden.

The demons could barely contain their mirth when they saw the look of horror that formed on Aiden's face.

"Don't worry too much," replied the second, "you're not going to the Pit yet. It's just someone wishes to have a little face-to-face chat with you. And we're the quickest way to get you to them."

Aiden instinctively stepped backwards, but in two long strides, the large demon was to him. The proximity of the brute made the weight on Aiden's shoulders too heavy for him to stand beneath.

As his legs gave, darkness, whether from unconsciousness or from the demon itself, consumed him and he remembered nothing else.

Chapter 85

Face-to-Face Meetings

Aiden awoke slowly and feeling groggy, like he'd been drugged. But the more consciousness returned to him, the more he became aware of several things.

First, the ground he was lying on was hard and cold.

Second, his head felt like it was in a vice.

Third, he wasn't alone wherever he was. Not only could he hear muffled voices, but a heavy presence was upon him. It was worse than when the demons had arrived in Fria and much more suffocating.

Fourth, it was dark. But that was just because his eyes were still closed.

As his brain continued to awaken, the voices grew sharper and clearer. At last, and with a monumental effort, Aiden opened his eyes.

He found himself lying on the stone floor of a vast room. Several tables and benches were positioned near a large fireplace, in which a fire was crackling. Lanterns hanging from tall pillars and the walls dimly lit various halls and a staircase at the rear.

But Aiden's immediate attention was drawn to those at a table near the fire.

First was a massive winged being, well muscled and with eyes that regarded him with such hatred that it couldn't be described with words. Several other, slightly smaller demons stood nearby, but they didn't come close to rivaling *him*. A dark power and air of authority surrounded the large shadow that told Aiden he was some kind of high-ranking officer.

But of just as much interest was the man leaning against a table with his arms crossed. He was tall, lean but strong, and didn't seem smaller than the high-ranking demon in the shadows off to Aiden's right.

With this man was also a great air of might and authority. He was a ruler, without question, but a dark leader at that. An evil that had nothing to do with the demons surrounded and emanated from the man himself. His expression was eerily sinister and his dark gray eyes spoke of unsurpassed intelligence and cunning.

Is that...him? The dark king, wondered Aiden, before remembering that he was still sprawled on the floor.

With a stifled groan, he pushed himself to his knees and held a hand to his aching head. That's when he became aware of something on his upper lip. Touching his hand to it, it came away red. He didn't remember getting punched in the face, but maybe he had been dropped on it upon arriving here.

"I told you he might not handle the trip well," grumbled a winged shadow behind Aiden's right shoulder.

It was one of two demons who'd retrieved him from Fria.

"These humans tend to be weak creatures," he continued with disdain.

"Yet he's here and in one piece," countered another demon, "and with his wits about him still, it seems."

Aiden was growing accustomed to the oppressive weight in the chamber, and he managed to get himself to his feet. He threw a glare at the demon before looking back at the man, who hadn't stopped studying him.

"So, what do you want?" he asked, with some sharpness. He was tired and the pounding headache was an annoyance.

A kick to the back of his leg dropped him to a knee before a sharp smack in the head with something hard put him forward on his hands.

"Mind who you're speaking to," growled someone behind Aiden. "You're addressing Cassius, king of the North."

The blow to the head hadn't helped the pounding any, and for a long moment Aiden's vision blurred again. After a few breaths, it cleared and he threw a look of distaste over his shoulder.

Standing over him was another tall man, though not as tall as Cassius. His very presence commanded authority and he wore light armor, so Aiden gathered he was a

military man, very likely a general. He was tall with a gaunt and harsh face, and slate colored eyes that were cold, as one who has seen many seasons of war and death.

Aiden pushed himself to his feet again and looked at Cassius, who hadn't moved and still had yet to speak.

"What can a lowly traveler do for the king of the North?" he asked.

Cassius smiled a little at the sarcasm in Aiden's voice, and he raised a hand to the general to leave him be.

"That is the question, isn't it?" replied Cassius with a question of his own.

The very depth and richness of his voice, and the authority in it, brought Aiden more to attention. He recognized a true authority figure when he saw and heard one.

Cassius pushed himself off the table and meandered towards Aiden. "I debated over whether or not to just have you killed, but you're a traveler. Not only that, but you're one who supposedly pledged to aid my cause and my military forces. Besides, your kind are mysterious with your comings and goings, and I merely wanted to satisfy my own curiosity."

He stopped half a dozen paces from Aiden and again studied him.

Aiden felt extremely uneasy under those keen eyes, significantly more so than when Channing looked at him. He realized then that the evil in the dark king was discerning and weighing him, and that was thoroughly unsettling.

"I understand our dimensions are tied together," continued Cassius after a moment, "but this I've known for a long time. I should say more specifically that whatever plan you're involved in, in your dimension, is tied to my own success or failure here."

The dark king gave a tight smile, though his expression was cold. "I hardly care about your plot on the other side, though a traveler can be of great value. From what I heard, you have quite the hand in combat."

"Aye," nodded one of the demons, "commanders Silas and Oron attested to it, as well as a number of their soldiers."

The smile remained on Cassius's face, but a fierce light flickered in his eyes. "Glad to see you're finally coming around after all these months."

He then drew a breath and a somewhat smug expression settled on his face. "As I said, I hardly care about what happens to your plan on the other side. However, I'd be a fool not to utilize your skills and unique ability to retrieve information."

Cassius lifted his chin a little and a real smile tugged at his lips. "I'd be willing to allow you to move freely about this dimension. Well, at least I wouldn't order any of my men to shoot you on sight. You can move about safely within my military forces, in exchange for a few things."

Normally, Aiden would talk, shoot, bluff, or con his way out of a dicey situation. Yet he knew it would be futile here, aside from the obvious fact he had no weapons.

He was in the presence of the most evil beings in this dimension. He was on their home turf, in their very headquarters. They themselves were masters of trickery, deception, and manipulation, and would detect the smallest trace of a lie in him.

He felt foolish for even thinking he could outwit them. He perceived himself as a rookie in a group of veterans.

"What's your price?" asked Aiden finally, and he mentally kicked himself at how weak his voice was.

Cassius smiled in a way that told him he'd read his thoughts and knew his mind.

And Aiden felt completely helpless, at the dark king's mercy. All pride, dignity, and confidence were gone, stripped away and he was now reduced to a pitiful being of a man.

He'd heard Cassius was the greatest huntsmen that ever lived, and he wondered at that moment if this was what his prey felt like. There was no use fighting or resisting; he might as well as accept his fate.

Cassius's smile broadened, darkness glinted in his eyes, and a chill ran down Aiden's spine.

"Last time you made an agreement," replied Cassius, turning and beginning to pace casually, "you didn't do a very good job at holding up your end of the deal."

"I'm a traveler, sir," answered Aiden, "I can't account for how much time passes when I come and go. Plus, as you know, I have work in my realm, too, and a boss to answer to."

Again, Aiden was surprised at himself and how he'd automatically shaped up before the dark king. It was like he was back in his early military days: Cassius was the commanding officer, and he was a lowly grunt.

Cassius paused and sent Aiden a look over his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll do your best to work everything out."

He resumed pacing. "First, continue, or more accurately, begin your task as a spy. I realize your face is known throughout the entire realm now, but who knows where you'll land the next time you return? Second, I'm keenly interested in effective interrogation methods from your realm. Third, I want you to find that wretched female traveler and kill her. I've already tasked another with doing it, but he's failed thus far. Besides..."

Cassius stopped again and tilted his head a little, gaze thoughtful. "Since she's a traveler, I don't doubt she's causing trouble for you in your dimension. She seems to have a knack for that, and we'll both be glad to be rid of her."

"That's a long list."

The words had barely left Aiden's mouth when Cassius was on him. The dark king moved such speed and struck with such force that Aiden never had a chance to think about bracing or defending himself.

He found himself slammed onto the stone floor with the wind knocked clean out of him. Aiden was specifically aware of the first strike, a devastating right hook to the face. After that, he only felt the pain.

And it wasn't like anything he'd ever experienced. Every strike, whether it be a punch to the head or a kick to the ribs, was exceedingly sharp, like a stab with a knife, only amplified tenfold. The pain itself radiated from the point of impact and shot outwards like a shock of electricity.

To add to it, what felt like claws dug into his back, neck and shoulders, razor-sharp talons that were ripping him to shreds.

It might've only lasted a few seconds or hours, but it seemed like an eternity to Aiden before the torment ended. He laid somewhat on his side, hitching careful breaths in between coughing and spitting up red.

Cassius towered over Aiden and glared down at him in great wrath. With his back to the light of the fire, his features were mostly dark, except for an eerie and vicious gleam in his eyes.

"You are in absolutely no position to negotiate terms or to be smart with me," seethed Cassius.

All poise and smugness were gone from the dark king's features and demeanor. The speed of the change, like the flip of a switch, startled Aiden exceedingly. Yet he sensed he was only seeing a glimpse of the true terrible and sinister nature of Cassius.

The king crouched down in front of Aiden, and even though he did so, he still seemed quite tall. Aiden wondered if his mind was playing a trick on him, but Cassius appeared to be taller than when he'd first seen him and significantly more menacing.

Perhaps it had something to do with the darkness around him, which had grown thicker and heavier. It pressed down upon Aiden with such force he could barely keep his head lifted. The headache awakened with new vigor and a wave of nausea washed over him.

"Tell me," said Cassius as he grabbed a handful of Aiden's hair and jerked his head back, "am I making a mistake in wasting my time with you? You don't want any protection? From enemy forces or that traveler who has put a bounty on your head? How would all of this go over with your boss, anyway?"

He shoved Aiden's head down before punching him in the temple, nearly rendering him unconscious.

"So you'd just...up and kill me?" grunted Aiden, pushing himself up a little.

Cassius grinned wickedly. "Oh no. I'd just wound you so severely you had to go back to your realm. I hear this female traveler is gifted at tracking, and maybe if you're lucky, she won't be waiting for you. It's difficult to run anywhere with broken legs and hemorrhaging organs."

He cocked his head to the side, as another idea came.

"Or we could just drop you on the lap of Southern Forces," chuckled Cassius darkly, "that would be interesting."

Contemplation formed on his face as he stood. "Although...I could just keep you here, in my dungeons. Then my men would have someone to practice their own interrogation techniques on."

With every sentence Cassius spoke, every idea pertaining to the traveler's fate, fear and desperation grew in Aiden. He'd always been someone who kept himself composed, and he was normally even-keel.

But there was something about being in the presence of this evil man and his associates, and about the sincerity of his words that struck terror in Aiden. He understood that if Cassius threatened, or promised, to do something, he did it swiftly.

Aiden's very being was afraid of Cassius and at the prospect of torture and ultimately death. In the back of his mind, he knew what awaited him on the other side. The pain and torment in this life would be a joy to face compared to what was coming in the next.

The weight of that reality made his soul shudder and sent a chill through him.

Cassius had barely finished speaking when, in an act of fierce desperation, Aiden grabbed the king's leg, the way a beggar or offender pleading for mercy might.

"No!" he cried, clutching at the ankle of Cassius's boot.

Cassius met Aiden's gaze as the wretched man looked up at him. When he saw the evident fear on his pale face and deep in his eyes, satisfaction flickered across the dark king's face. "*You are mine,*" his expression read, "*and you are wholly at my mercy.*"

Aiden was, and he acknowledged it completely. Never before had he been in this situation or condition.

"You wish to be employed under me then?" asked Cassius, with that deep voice that held great authority.

Aiden dropped his head and nodded.

"And you accept any order I give you, not just the ones I proposed?"

Again Aiden nodded.

"Understand that the terms of this pact are binding," said Cassius, "thus, if you fail to hold up your end, or you attempt to break our agreement, death will come on you swiftly. The evil that is will hold you to it. There'll be no talking your way out of the consequences, should you try to get out of the pact. Do you say it shall be so?"

"It shall be so," replied Aiden, head still bowed.

Cassius drew a knife from his thigh and cut his right hand. Then he dropped the knife in front of Aiden.

Darkness and a great weight were still on him, but Aiden managed to sit up somewhat. Picking up the knife, he too drew a red line across his right hand.

Lifting his gaze, he saw Cassius had his right hand, dripping with red, extended to him.

It took every last ounce of effort he had, but Aiden managed to push himself to one knee, which was really right where Cassius wanted him: on his knees and in submission.

Then Aiden clasped the dark king's hand.

The thick air in the chamber seemed to shift and the oppressive weight lifted from Aiden. As he raised his head, he noticed the room seemed lighter now, also.

No, not lighter, but he could see better in the darkness. Because he was now aligned with it, he could see in it, as the soldiers and other vile creatures could.

Aiden wouldn't know it until the next time he looked in a mirror, but his eyes had also changed color in the wake of this pact. Once hazel-blue, they were now a rich and dark bluish-grey.

"Aiden now officially works for us," said Cassius over his shoulder to the others.

"As such," he continued, as he returned his gaze to Aiden, "he has our protection, as long as he stays true to us and our cause."

With the weight on his shoulders gone, Aiden stood. Even now that he was on his feet, he still had to look up to meet Cassius's gray eyes.

"And remember," said Cassius to him quietly, but thickly, "you can't fool me, boy. I know you want to be here in this dimension, now even more than your own realm. Silas and Oron hadn't needed inform me of the change they saw in you, and how naturally you settled in amongst the other soldiers during the attack on Fria. I clearly read it in you the moment I saw you, and I can read you clearly now. I've been alive for many ages of man and both my gifts and my...affiliations give me the ability to read people like an open book, even deceivers and con men. The deceivers I placed in the courts of the high counselors, as great and cunning as they are, are like a lake of clear water that I can see through completely."

The darkness Aiden had seen in Cassius earlier stirred in him again.

"I plainly see that you're finally beginning to understand a few things. Though you were not born in this realm, you sense that you belong here. Aurora is more real than your dimension. You know what I mean by that. This is because the veil between good and evil, where the true fight is, is thinner. Your eyes are truly seeing and your mind understanding. You're waking up and are at last realizing there is much more going on than you originally believed. You are part of something bigger, a grand scheme...if you choose to be, to participate and play your role. The soul itself recognizes all of this and

that's why your spirit stirs like it does when you're in this dimension: you're closer to the real action, and you better and clearer understand your purpose."

Aiden was amazed at how well Cassius could describe the change he'd been feeling in himself, describe it perfectly when Aiden couldn't even begin to think of how to put it into words.

Cassius smiled wily. "Like I said, kid, I've been alive much longer than you, and I've been waging war for many, many years. I've seen and done it all."

Doesn't he ever get bored, thought Aiden, still in newfound wonder, *how come he doesn't...how does he manage to keep...planning and fighting?*

"My hatred drives me," replied Cassius, as if knowing his question, and a venomous expression hardened and darkened his face.

"And my desire for revenge can't be put into words. Evil never sleeps or rests, and it's what feeds and keeps me going."

Half-turning, Cassius held out his hand to one of the tables behind him. A man Aiden hadn't noticed before picked something up from a table, and walked over and handed it to Cassius.

It was Aiden's wristband.

"If you're wondering why I can't just put this on one of my men and have them traverse," said Cassius, "it's because it isn't that simple. A person must first be chosen to travel between realms."

Suspicion crossed Cassius's face, and Aiden felt his stomach tighten, in anticipation of another sudden assault and beating.

"That only makes me wonder why you, not one of the 'good guys,' was permitted to travel to begin with," finished Cassius. "Until you, that had never happened before."

His suspicion deepened and disdain changed his face, though the scorn wasn't directed at Aiden. Then it passed, and the confident and somewhat smug demeanor returned to the dark king.

"You'll recall one of your immediate orders is to kill the female traveler, and I'd say that should be your top priority. The wretch and her friends have caused a lot of problems, for me, and for you. She's the one who blew your cover, discovered your identity, and shared it with the entire realm."

Aiden scowled over that ordeal. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think this was about to become a duel of the travelers. Whoever kills who first gives their side a great advantage."

"You perceive well," nodded Cassius. "She's obviously hunting you, probably to learn what you're involved in, in your dimension. It's time to play her own game against her. Track her down. You're the only one who can follow her to the other realm."

Cool resolve settled over Aiden as his mind, sharper than ever, began piecing together plans of action.

"So glad you could meet with me, traveler," said Cassius, with a devious smile as he handed the wristband to Aiden. "I always prefer face-to-face meetings."

Chapter 86

News

Jada and Zohmar had been hot on the trail of a friendly patrol unit the past two days.

When she'd returned to Aurora three days prior, she'd landed just outside of Highland. It took half a day for her horse to find her, and during that time she'd heard rumor of a large squad of Halden's forces that were seen two days march east of Chugach.

There was no question about what she was going to do.

After Zohmar found Jada they raced to her house, where his tack had miraculously returned. Then the charge eastward was on.

A five-minute stopover in the Eastern Village allowed her to learn of the patrol unit. They were set to meet a considerable mounted force from further south to counter Halden's men.

With a snort and a leap, Zohmar settled into his pace, which had yet to be equaled by any other horse, save perhaps by Johar, Michael's mount.

The land swept by them, growing warmer at the approach of spring. Large swaths of bare ground, with shoots of green grass already poking up, rivaled the patches of leftover snow.

As the ridges softened, the budding trees began to thin and fall away, hills rolled out before horse and rider.

The wind was still crisp and sharp, and farther north the mountains remained burdened under a great mound of snow. The storm, which had just passed upon her arrival at Highland, had left behind a considerable amount of white powder on the upper peaks.

Day was officially upon them when the first, faint sounds of a skirmish came to their ears. Half a mile later, Zohmar slackened his pace as they crested a hill, and then stopped in the deep shadows of some young elms.

Beyond a thin line of trees was the scene of the main fight. Southern Forces had confronted a considerable unit of Halden's military and were presently holding them at bay.

Both sides were scattered to the north and south of a flat stretch of ground and had taken up positions behind trees and natural ditches.

The morning breeze had stirred itself up into a decent wind, with gusts sweeping through the greening treetops. Clusters of clouds, generated by the mountains behind horse and rider to the northwest, streamed by overhead swiftly. This created varying and shifting shadows in the thin forest.

Jada was assessing where everyone was when a small shadow out the corner of her right eye drew her attention. Zohmar was already gazing that way when she glanced that direction herself.

Her heart beat a little faster as adrenaline tingled through her. Because the wind was in their favor, the mounted patrol approached in total silence from the south.

Alright, here we go, she thought.

Jada guessed they'd split into two groups, with the second unit already on the other side of the makeshift battlefield. They'd cut in from opposite directions on the enemy lines to disrupt them.

The group that was on Jada's side of the fight stopped forty feet from her.

But she made no noise. She and Zohmar were hidden from their view, and she could only see a fellow horseman through a small gap between two trees.

Nor did she signal her horse to prepare for a charge. Jada didn't want to mess up their initial run. Every rider had his or her course, and she didn't want to get in the way.

Zohmar understood this and remained standing quietly, though he was gazing keenly at the fight.

A minute passed and then without a sound, the horsemen signaled their mounts. They jumped straight into a canter and, within mere strides, were moving at a fast clip through the trees.

The mounted patrol swept upon the enemy soldiers. Some of the riders cut down those on the frontlines, while others raced into the trees and removed immediate support fighters.

Jada's guess was proven correct in that the mounted unit had split. The second group appeared, galloping towards her and Zohmar, still standing in shadow atop the hill.

A few riders raced by them and glanced over their shoulders.

But now Jada and Zohmar were moving. This would be the first time Zohmar, mighty and famous in battle, and she had gone into a fight with one another since her return from Earth's dimension.

Raw power churned from his muscles as he cantered northeastward, towards the rear of the enemy line. He was perfectly balanced and collected, neck arched, chin tucked, and he snorted lightly in growing excitement with every stride. The sound of muted thunder went before him as his hooves drummed the earth.

Jada took up her bow and drew an arrow, and that's when the familiar heat of battle burned to life in her.

Zohmar sensed it and gave a low whicker as he lengthened his stride.

Clouds passed in front of the sun and the forest darkened briefly. They came upon the rear guard of Halden's unit with such silence that they didn't see horse and rider until they were half a dozen strides away. That was when the clouds trailed away a few moments and sunlight blazed into the wood. Zohmar's coat shimmered as he raced into the light with his ears pinned in sudden wrath.

The two nearest soldiers, one an archer, the other wielding a crossbow, turned as they stood.

Everything fell into place then, after the release of Jada's first arrow. The fire of fight steadily grew as she relaxed and settled into the battle. It was as if she'd never left, for none of her skills had diminished and she was wholly confident in her abilities.

No arrow missed its mark, and it felt as if some unseen hand was guiding her and everyone one of her arrows. As it had always seemed.

Zohmar and Jada cut through the rear of the line and drove the rest of the enemy forces forward, to the main fight. Afterwards, they kept to the edges and stopped any enemy who attempted to escape.

Initially, those who had tried to run opted for death. But they were no match for the riders, or for Zohmar.

While horse and rider were both in their element, they'd also never before been so close. Zohmar was exceptionally keen and responsive to how Jada shifted her weight. A majority of the time all she had to do was think about where she wanted him to go and he responded immediately.

As ironic as it seemed, their time apart had strengthened their bond tenfold.

They were cantering westward when two more enemy soldiers tried to slip away—but after Jada and Zohmar had already passed their position.

She sensed what he was going to do a breath before he did it, so when he slid on his haunches and performed a beautiful rollback, she wasn't unseated.

One soldier was an archer and already had an arrow set on the string as horse and rider made for him.

With a mere movement of her head, Jada avoided the arrow as it whistled through the air. She answered not a second later with her own arrow and the soldier collapsed.

By then, they were to the second soldier, sword in hand. But, with a powerful thrust of his hindquarters, Zohmar lunged forward and fell him beneath his deadly hooves.

"What took you so long!?" called a rider atop a handsome dark bay as they drifted beside Jada and Zohmar.

It was none other than her former instructor, Connor, of the Western Village.

Jada grinned as they cantered beside each other. "I wanted you to be able to have some fun first, before I spoiled the party."

Connor laughed as they passed the edge of a large clearing, where most of the fighting now was. It seemed to be quieting and, to Jada's surprise, many of the enemy was surrendering.

She then remembered Halden's men weren't dark soldiers. At least, not yet anyway.

"A pair of Halden's men have broken away and are heading east!" came a report from overhead.

A stellar glided above Jada and Connor before shooting eastward towards more open hill country.

Connor and Jada didn't even have to look at one another to know what the other was thinking. Their horses turned east and picked up the pace as they raced after the stellar, who kept just above the treetops.

The pair of fleeing horsemen came into view in short order. The smattering of trees along the hills thinned still more, and as the ground leveled off Zohmar and Connor's horse lengthened their strides.

The enemy horses were fast, but the mounts of Connor and Jada proved the swifter. They bore down on the pair and there was no hope of escape for them.

Connor took the rider on the left and eased his horse to the flank of the soldier's charge. Then the dark bay swung his head and bashed the hindquarters of his equine counterpart.

It was definitely safer than clipping heels and proved to be just as effective.

The soldier's horse stumbled sideways, nearly slamming into his companion, and then fell to the ground. The soldier was thrown from the saddle and did not spring lightly to his feet.

Zohmar and Jada flew by them, still on the tail of the second soldier and his horse.

As Zohmar pulled even with the other horse, Jada threw her elbow into the side of the soldier's head. He wasn't offering resistance, nor was he a dark horseman, so there wasn't any need to outright kill him, though that would've been quicker and easier.

Either way, when Jada's elbow met his temple, his head snapped to the side and he fell right out of the saddle.

Zohmar sounded a deep whinny and the other horse quickly halted and lowered its head in submission.

A galloping horse, with or without rider returning to its home camp was typically a cause for concern. The attacking Southern Forces couldn't have any enemy escaping and

returning to Asgarod. The less communication Halden's forces had with their headquarters, the better.

When Connor and Jada returned to the clearing, with their prisoners in tow, they found the scene in order. Nearly thirty soldiers had surrendered and would be taken either to the Southern Fortress or an outpost large enough to hold them. This would be done by the regular foot regiment and their dozen riders.

The mounted patrol was free to accompany them, unless they had other assignments. The patrol hung back, and it was the first time Connor and Jada were able to properly greet each other.

Once dismounted, they shook hands and slapped one another on the shoulder.

"Bless the Almighty that He brought you back!" grinned Connor.

"So good to see you," grinned Jada. "It's felt like an eternity."

"Aye, it's been too long since you returned home," agreed Connor, and the sincerity of his words warmed her heart.

To his eyes, Jada seemed to have grown a bit taller and, not to mention, more beautiful. A greater air of authority and confidence surrounded her, and one who didn't know her would've thought she was a young queen—young but old at the same time, wise from many seasons of wandering and war. Her gaze was keener than any Connor had seen, and he immediately felt exposed and that her eyes were looking right into his heart and soul, discerning him and his thoughts.

But there was also a bright and fierce light in her eyes that Connor recognized and respected. He'd seen it during her initial training and he saw it now: the wolfhound was indeed on the hunt.

The sentinel has been trained, he thought, and has been deployed for duty.

"We were jealous when we heard Akin and Namor had seen you," piped Ida, step light and quick as she joined Connor and Jada.

After giving Jada a hug, she stepped away and looked her over, her clear eyes dancing. "You seem older, though you don't look it."

Jada gave a wary smile. "That's what I keep hearing. I think it comes from traversing dimensions. But believe me when I tell you, I always look forward to returning to Aurora and feel more at home here than in the other realm."

"That's because you were truly made for this dimension," came a reply behind her, "as we all saw from the first day we met you."

Gabriel stepped to Jada's other side. They shook hands and then, to her mild surprise, the elf hugged her and slapped her on the back.

When he took a step back, there was more wisdom in his eyes than the last time they'd parted ways. Gabriel's gaze was keener and deeper. If Jada wasn't mistaken, there

was also a knowing expression on his face and in his twinkling eyes, the same kind of expression she'd often seen on Merida's face.

Strangely enough, Jada felt a stronger bond between them, though she didn't know why. It was a unique sense of camaraderie, in spite of the fact they'd been apart for over a year.

There was also a sense that they'd go on great adventures together, that they'd need one another in the future.

Jada sent Gabriel a suspicious look, at which he smiled and gave her another slap on the shoulder.

"Tav, and especially Michael, are going to have a fit that we got to see you before them," said Connor.

Ida chuckled and her eyes danced even brighter. "They're away at the Southern Fortress, on some kind of errand."

They proceeded to give Jada an update of all that had happened since she'd seen Akin and Namor. But she confessed that she only listened half-heartedly. She was merely content to just stand by and watch them all talk and banter with one another.

Jada was beyond grateful that she'd gotten to meet up with them again. Yet as she continued to watch and listen, a shadow crept over her.

She was tasked with coming and going at unknown hours. While these people were her friends, she wondered at what point they'd become fed up with her, get mad or something rather at her disappearing and reappearing tricks.

Jada also realized just how much she missed being with them. She wanted to stay beside her companions, those she now considered her family, for the rest of her days.

But she was charged with other things. That was when she understood this was part of the price a traveler had to pay: missing their friends and family.

Of course, Jada could choose to stay and not traverse, but she'd be disobeying her orders. It'd be selfish, and who knew what kind of disaster would result if she did stay.

All of this weighed on her more heavily than she would've expected.

Gabriel noticed her somberness and stepped a little closer.

"You're still learning what it means and what it's like to be traveler," he said quietly, though he kept his eyes on the others. "Your task is extraordinary, yet it also comes with many costly burdens."

Jada merely looked at him, wondering how he could know since he wasn't a traveler himself. Not that she doubted him. No, she was surprised at his knowledge and wisdom on the subject.

That knowing smile returned to his face. "We have many adventures ahead of us, Jada, that we'll face together. Be assured that even though some might abandon you...I won't be one of them."

Jada clasped the elf's shoulder. "There aren't words to express my appreciation for you, and Ida, my friends who have taught me so much...and are still teaching me."

Gabriel returned her gesture before Jada glanced across the group at Ida. She was smiling at them both fondly, as if she'd heard or sensed the exchange between Gabriel and Jada.

"There you are!"

We all looked up in time to see Phoenix drop out of the sky and land in the middle of the rough circle.

"I've been searching for you the past three days," he panted, both from the journey and his excitement. "A unit of dark soldiers took over Fria almost a week ago, and the traveler you've been hunting was with them!"

Connor watched the fiercely intense light flicker back to life in Jada's eyes as she locked her gaze onto Phoenix. "Are you sure?"

The owl nodded. "Our spies who were nearby confirmed it. They said he was very skilled in battle and knows a few things about manipulating people and securing their cooperation."

Phoenix hopped up and down as he reached the best part of his report. "And two winged shadows arrived in Fria and took him. Our spies couldn't follow, but they were headed northward."

"Winged shadows?" asked Jada with narrowing gaze.

Phoenix's eyes went wide as he again nodded. "Winged shadows, warriors under the demon prince Levian. They removed the traveler's wristband and then took him North."

Silence.

"I'd assume they took them to Cassius," mused Connor.

"Mm," replied Jada, eyes on the ground as her brain analyzed the news. "Yes, I couldn't see why a commander or general in Cassius's military would use such methods to have him taken to their post. He wasn't exactly on the best terms with them to begin with...and I can't think why any demon commander would have any use for Aiden..."

She put her hands on her hips. "I'm telling you, whatever Cassius has planned for Halden and Ambrose, Aiden is involved in it too, somehow. Not to mention what he's mixed up in here is also tied to the other dimension..."

Drawing a sharp, exasperated breath, Jada scratched an itch on the back of her neck.

"If he wasn't," she muttered to herself, forgetting there were others present, "then he wouldn't have been allowed to come, or been brought to my attention..."

When Jada finally lifted her gaze, she saw the others looking at her. None were puzzled, however, and instead studied her with great interest and some amusement.

"You're leaving, then?" guessed Connor, unable to completely hide his disappointment.

Jada felt the same way, especially since she'd just gotten there.

She managed a half-smile. "But I'll return...you can't get rid of me easily. I'm like a rash that keeps coming back."

In spite of his effort to maintain his brooding demeanor, Connor smiled.

Jada was about to turn but paused. "Oh and...tell Reagan 'hi' for me the next time you see her, will you please?"

She gave a wave of her hand. "And, of course, to Michael and Tav and...well...everyone."

Connor chuckled. "Will do. See you soon, traveler."

Jada touched her index and middle fingers to her forehead in a salute. As she started up the hill, Zohmar followed and blew through his lips.

She started down the other side and everything faded to white.

Chapter 87

Diversion

Earth

It was a little after noon in Kabul when Aiden strode into one of the hotel conference rooms.

"Nice work," said Channing, sitting in front of a laptop at the far end of the table. "I take it things went well in the other dimension. I received news this morning that the Agency and everyone else is totally focused on the warlord activity to our south."

Aiden stopped behind the chair to Channing's right but didn't sit. "So the territorial dispute has started, then?"

Channing gave a nod.

"Mm," replied Aiden, "Yeah, I made some new friends and helped them a little with their plans."

That was when Channing gave Aiden a second glance. There was something markedly different about him, but Channing couldn't put his finger on it. Had his second-in-command grown? No, he couldn't possibly have, but he seemed to have a more formidable air about himself. There also seemed to be a shadow in his expression, on his face. His eyes, too, held a cunning light danced all the brighter.

Speaking of his eyes...

"I thought your eyes were blue," said Channing, face slightly furrowed.

Aiden just looked at him curiously, and Channing waved him off.

"Anyway," he continued, "with more focus on our warlord friends, that foreign ops group is no longer under scrutiny. You're to meet with the commander after next prayers. I gave him just enough information to let him know just how big of a move it is, to see if he'd still take the job. He and his team are all in."

Channing threw a smile. "That might have something to do with what they're being paid."

"The details you want me to give them haven't changed?" asked Aiden as he finally took a seat.

"Nothing's changed in that arena," answered Channing, before distaste flickered across his face. "But we may have a slight...problem."

He removed an envelope from the folder beside the laptop and slid to over to Aiden.

"Kirill and Vadim sent this to me two weeks ago, not days after you'd left," explained Channing and there was an edge on his voice. "I'll tell you what they told me, but I want you to read it first."

Aiden sent an uncertain look at his boss, before picking up the envelope and opening it. In it was a note, which read: *Nice digs. Can't quite find anything like it on Aurora, can you?*

All thought processes stopped as Aiden, in great surprise and a touch of fear, stared at the note.

Channing proceeded to give Kirill and Vadim's account of what had happened, about a young woman who'd been waiting for them in what had been Aiden's hotel room. She'd convinced them she'd been hired by Channing to keep an eye on Aiden. Obviously, they'd believed her, because they let her walk right out of the room.

There hadn't been any reason for them not to give the note to Channing, or report her visit. But by the words in the note, she'd actually counted on that. She knew they'd report the encounter to Channing, who'd read the note and then proceed to give it to Aiden.

And she'd missed him by mere days.

Aiden couldn't sit any longer. He pushed himself to his feet and paced a few steps, running his hand over his mouth.

"She didn't just blow your cover in the other dimension for the fun of it," said Channing. "She did it because she's actively hunting you. And she got pretty darn close."

Just like Cassius said, thought Aiden.

Icy fear continued to tighten its grip on his stomach. But Aiden set his jaw and anger at this fear burned to life in him. No. He wasn't afraid of some young woman. He was an elite soldier, for crying out loud, and had skills unmatched by most others.

He was also in the service of Cassius now, and that mere knowledge supplied him with more confidence.

She was just as much a threat as she was a hunter. There was no way in high heaven Aiden would let her screw up Channing or Cassius's plans.

People liked movies or stories where good ultimately overcame evil. But that wouldn't be the case this time. Evil and sinister plots and forces would prevail, and those trying to stop them would fail and run themselves into the ground in an attempt to simply try and keep up.

The female traveler had clearly showcased her skills, ability to utilize resources, and to hunt. So Aiden had better answer and quickly before she caused more damage.

Truly, whoever stopped the other would gain great advantage for whichever side they were on.

Besides, Aiden always liked a challenge, one with high stakes and higher risk. It was exceedingly more enjoyable when he started off at a disadvantage because it was that much more of a thrill, a sweeter victory, when he beat the odds.

Alright, little traveler, he thought to her, *game on.*

Aiden also realized he had a lot to do, and that it was going to be a long day or week, or...however long it took to identify, locate and eliminate the threat.

Bring it.

He turned to Channing. "I'll deal with her, but we will still need to stay on schedule with our plans, so there's less chance she'll mess things up."

Approval flashed across the boss's face. He was pleased to see his associate so determined to ensure the success of their plans, as well as to remove this threat to them.

Channing glanced at his watch. "You'd better head out."

He removed a piece of paper from his folder and handed it to Aiden. "The address for your new...lodgings. It's the upper floor of the center building on a market street. Pretty basic accommodations, but obviously we need you difficult to locate. Not even the team knows where it is. I also figured you'd be coming and going and wouldn't be spending much time in the place. Your gear is already there."

Aiden snatched up the paper with an address and rough map scribbled on it.

"I'll be in touch after the meeting," he said as he turned and strode for the door, his face set with determination.

Even though he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a good night's sleep, Aiden wasn't tired. The urgent tasks before him recharged him, as if he'd just returned from a month-long vacation.

It was time to move the plan for more carnage along, and after that...the hunt was on.

Ω

Though the sky was clear and the sun was still well above the western horizon, the temperature was cool.

Checking herself over, Jada saw she was in local male garb, with the exception of her tactical scarf, which hid her face. She hoped she had her colored contacts in place.

Per usual, her backpack was at her feet, and she snatched it up before stepping out of the alleyway and starting down the crowded street.

While casually studying her surroundings, Jada recognized the lone hill and surrounding mountains. From them, she was able to confirm she was back in Kabul.

A few streets to her left, she identified the top of the hotel Aiden had been staying.

When she'd received the news from Phoenix that her traveling rival had been taken North several days ago, her gut told her he'd come back here afterwards. She knew she'd missed him at the hotel by days, and that he'd disappeared to the other dimension. But in Aurora terms, there was no being sure how much time had passed there by the time she'd gone back herself. What had Aiden been up to during his most recent visit, and what would the dark king have in mind for him, assuming that's who he was taken to see?

Jada had just missed him by days again. Unless he was being held captive by Cassius, she assumed he'd returned to Earth's dimension.

She was turning all of this over in her mind when she was nearly run over by a local on a bicycle. Jada threw up her arms in exasperation as the cyclist scrambled to rebalance himself and continue on his way.

Tisking with her tongue, she gave a wag of her head. Jada was about to start forward again when she lifted her gaze...

Well, look who we have here, she thought, continuing down the street.

It was none other than her nemesis, Aiden. She watched him cross the road, and then turn and walk in the direction she was headed.

Jada followed after him, aware this was the very first time she'd actually seen him in person. Until that moment, she'd only seen pictures and heard news of him while she'd been getting closer and closer.

Now she could run up and punch him if she wanted.

But Jada kept in mind that Aiden was highly trained, a dangerous rival. Every member of his team was also lethal.

For now, she was content merely to tail Aiden, and that's what she did for the next half hour. He led her, at an easy and relaxed pace, through the streets of the city.

She still needed to know what kind of plot his boss was planning, and she wouldn't know anything if she captured Aiden presently. She was his enemy and he wouldn't volunteer any information. Plus, Jada didn't exactly have a winning personality, so there was little chance she would get on his good side.

That thought was nearly laughable.

Thus, Aiden would have to show Jada what he was involved in, or who he was working with. He'd also have to tell her bits and pieces, without knowing it.

All of this had to be done by Jada being stealthy, by watching and listening. Although Jada had the indescribable desire to take a crowbar and beat the information out of him. But he couldn't lead her to key players of the plan if his legs were broken.

The afternoon was wearing on when Aiden eased his speed on approach to a marketplace. There were still enough people mingling about, which allowed her to edge closer.

Aiden moseyed through the booths that held various spices, and linens and pottery. The fruits and vegetables were sparser due to the fact that it was winter. A few more minutes passed before he stopped amongst a few tables of fruit.

Jada scanned the immediate area and right away her eyes locked on a rather large and rough looking character. He didn't stand out by his clothing, because it was plain enough, though not what the locals wore. By his facial structure, color of his eyes and hair, he appeared perhaps Russian or Armenian, or from one of those countries.

He had a relaxed and confident way about him, though he held a devious gleam in his dark eyes.

A warning reminder popped into Jada's brain that suggested the unknown man might have some friends nearby, to keep an eye on things.

She'd have to be extremely careful, but no way was she going to let this scare and prevent her from getting nearer.

Aiden and the unknown man began talking with each other, though it wasn't immediately obvious. They stood feet from one another as they investigated the fruit before them.

Jada was two rows over, taking her time walking between spice vendors. Before getting any closer, she nonchalantly took a picture of them with her phone.

She then texted it to Ryan with the message: "Know you're busy. But do you recognize him?"

Now she moved in until only one vendor and mere feet separated her, Aiden, and the mystery person.

"Your boss said we'd be aiming at some Yankees," the unknown man was saying when she was finally within earshot.

His English was pretty good. Although, Jada never thought she'd hear an eastern European refer to Americans as "Yankees." Typically, it was just "Americans" and spoken with scorn.

The aspiration of some of his words, and how some of the sounds were at the back of the throat, told Jada southeast Europe. No way was this guy from the west.

"We need it to look like local insurgents are behind it," replied Aiden, and the richness of his voice caught Jada's ear.

"We will need much surveillance and planning to do this," replied the Russian. "But it won't go well if we don't know when or where they patrol..."

"Leave that to me," interrupted Aiden. "We can get you that information and their movements. You just worry about getting the right...tools so you can frame a group. Remember, we want it big enough to draw attention, but not so big that drones whip out the entire countryside, or the entire military base empties out and goes on a man-hunt."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

"There will also need to be a lot of chatter first," continued Aiden, "to get US intelligence excited before the strike occurs. That will make things more difficult for you, because they may already be on alert."

"It is not problem," sighed the man.

"We still have a deal, then?"

"Deal."

"I'll be in touch," replied Aiden, before walking away.

What I wouldn't give for another pair of eyes, thought Jada.

She wanted terribly to follow Aiden, to find out where he was staying now. Only an idiot, or overly confident moron, would go back to the hotel. He'd have a new place to stay, to avoid detection or capture by that other traveler who was tracking him.

But she recognized it was significantly more important at the present to follow the European. She wanted to at least see where he was staying. That was a basic, but vital piece of information.

While Jada didn't know the full plan behind Aiden's deal, she'd gathered there was a plot to strike Americans, a US military patrol or something. It seemed the purpose of this was to further divert the attention of various intelligent agencies, to keep them completely blinded to what Channing was truly planning.

And what better way to do that, besides instigating territorial rivalry between warlords, than to kill American soldiers, she thought as she glowered to herself.

The very thought set her blood on fire, and she set her jaw. *We'll see about that.*

With reluctance, Jada turned and started after the European. Fortunately, he was easy to keep an eye on, even from a distance because of his size.

It was a good thing mid-afternoon prayers had recently occurred. Although she'd followed Aiden a solid half an hour, she still had two hours before evening prayers.

It was one of those important details to note because streets emptied and businesses closed for the duration of prayers. It made it a bit more difficult to sneak around when you'd lost your crowd-cover.

One thing Jada had learned quickly in the Middle-East was: there were eyes everywhere. Even when you didn't see anyone, there was a high chance you were still being watched.

Her large European friend kept up a legitimate pace for twenty minutes before entering a dilapidated apartment building. Jada didn't immediately follow, because that would've been way too obvious.

Instead, standing in a shadowed alley across the street, Jada scanned the numerous balconies of the building. On the second floor and on the side facing west, she spotted two non-locals. They were standing at the questionable railing on the balcony and appeared to be lookouts.

Not a minute later, something drew their attention from inside the room. Turning, the pair disappeared through a door and vanished from sight.

Second floor, west side and room at the very end, southwest corner, she noted to herself.

Jada found a hiding place where she could keep an eye on the building while deciding what to do. She'd hoped the rest of the unnamed man's team would've met him outside somewhere, so she could get a better idea of their numbers.

Ideally, they'd take her to whoever they were going to buy their weapons from, or to a local insurgent operative they'd enlist for the plan.

But that would've been much too easy.

Jada was ticking through options when her phone buzzed at her. Ryan had finally answered her text.

"That's Andro, Armenian origin. Boss of merc group that operates mainly in Africa and southeastern Europe. We were watching them until warlord activity started."

This was immediately followed by: *"What's he doing talking to Aiden? And what are you doing back in Kabul? Where have you been? Myles was miffed you disappeared again."*

"Are you and the team coming back to Kabul sometime soon?" she replied.

"You didn't answer any of my questions, and we won't be back in the city probably for another week or two."

Jada sighed. While she was big on self-reliance and liked to do things herself, she also admitted having a team to work with made certain tasks easier.

She hadn't been able to shadow Aiden back to his residence. She also couldn't sit on the apartment building and keep tabs of the comings and goings of Andro's team.

Plus, if they split up, she couldn't follow all of them to wherever. She had to be selective because she couldn't be in a hundred places at once.

After studying the apartment building again, Jada texted Ryan back. Of course, it would've been quicker to call, but she didn't want to give away what or who she was by her voice to anyone nearby.

"Aiden hired Andro and his team to target a US patrol unit or something. But Andro is going to either use a local insurgent group or frame one for the hit."

There was a minute of silence before, "*How do you know? Where'd you get your intel?*"

"Overheard it myself."

Movement at the side door the apartment complex lifted her gaze. Andro and five others exited the building and started leisurely down the road.

To follow or not to follow? That was the question.

There was no way of knowing if they were going to go search for a local insurgent or weapons dealer to hire. For all she knew, they were headed out for a late lunch.

After a few seconds, Jada made up her mind.

"I'll get more info and get back to you," she texted.

"*Watch yourself and don't do anything stupid. You don't have backup.*"

Jada rolled her eyes and then checked the location of the team. They'd grown smaller as they moved down the street, and she wondered how many had been left behind to guard the room.

Guess I'll find out when I get there.

Jada weaved her way through the crowd and across the road. Once to the building, she double-checked the time. She had just shy of two hours before next prayers.

Yet she'd operate on the assumption that the team would return before that event, so she had to be sure she didn't linger.

Warm, stuffy air greeted her as she stepped through the door and into the apartment building. As Jada walked down the hall in search for the stairs, she caught the scent of various meals being prepared. The walls were thin and she heard noise from televisions, and a few raised voices in the heat of argument.

She found the door to the stairs, cracked it open, and listened. When she didn't hear anyone, she began her ascent and reached the second level without any drama.

Stepping into the hall, Jada used the windows at either end to gather her directional bearings. She turned right, noting how quieter it was on that floor.

The thought crossed her mind that Andro might've rented out the entire level. He'd have to have some serious funds to do that, though.

She reached the end of the passage and stopped at the door on the left. After glancing out the window and spotting the alleyway she'd hid in, Jada confirmed this was the room she wanted.

Slinging her backpack to the floor, Jada rummaged through the front pockets. She'd debated whether or not to stash it somewhere, before setting out on this little adventure. But she wanted it on hand in the event she had to make hasty escape somewhere.

Plus, it had necessary items such as...a basic lock-picking set. She'd discovered it in her pack during her first excursion in Kabul. Bobby-pins came in quite handy, but why mess with those when you have the right tools to begin with?

Jada pressed her ear against the door and listened for a minute. When she didn't hear anything, she picked the lock and slowly opened the door.

Adrenaline tingled through her as she cautiously crept through the apartment and checked the two rooms. But no one was home.

Perfect.

Jada relocked the front door and started her investigation.

Judging by the backpacks and various gear about the place, this confirmed at least a few members of Andro's team were staying here. Obviously, she didn't find any legitimate passports or ids lying around, or a folder labeled "Aiden's evil plan."

She did find some fake passports, of which she took picture of with her phone.

After her initial "skim" of the premises, she began a more thorough search. The backpacks and duffels yielded what she'd expected to find: clothes, toiletries and some pocket knives or switchblades, basic weaponry.

But this was supposed to be a mercenary group. Doubtless, they'd take weapons with them whenever they went out on the town, but she wondered if they'd keep a stash somewhere in the apartment.

The clock was ticking and thirty minutes later, Jada was beginning to feel herself become frustrated. She hadn't found anything yet. Because she believed in never underestimating her opponent, she gave this team the benefit of the doubt that they were highly trained.

That said, they weren't spies. She doubted they had the extra-sneaky training that gave them ideas of the ultimate hiding places that no one would find or think to look. So, where would they keep sensitive information that they couldn't keep on themselves at all times?

Jada stood in the living room, hands on her hips. *It has to be so obvious it's ridiculous.*

There was the possibility they kept everything off-site, but nearby. That would complicate matters.

Her gaze fell on the worn couch, and then the outlet beside it. She crossed the room, took a knee in front of the outlet, and pulled out her pocket knife. She removed the screw that held the cover in place and popped it off. Sticking her hand through the small gap, she felt around a second...and her fingers touched paper.

Hello.

Jada removed a folded envelope and hastily explored its contents. Most of the papers were surveillance photos of people she didn't know. Some had names scribbled beside the individual, written in Armenian.

On the back of the photos were dates and times.

The group had been keeping tabs on people they deemed important, and discovering the routines of their targets. Everyone in the photos was in plain clothes, and one or two appeared to be locals.

But there was no time to sit and ponder all the possibilities of who they were and why they were important to Andro. That was immaterial to Jada anyway.

She replaced the envelope and the outlet cover.

Things seemed to fall into place then because two minutes later she found more documents concealed in one of the kitchen cupboards. All of the photos were of locals, and this time she recognized two of them as not-so-friendly neighborhood insurgents.

Jada hit pay-dirt in the oven five minutes after that. The bottom plate wasn't secured very well and it lifted away...revealing some rather high-tech surveillance equipment.

Her final and greatest discovery happened in the bathroom.

Everything under the sink appeared normal enough, until she lightly tapped on the wall in the rear of the cupboard. There was just enough room where the pipe ran into the wall to get a grip with her fingers. With a little tug, the rear of the cupboard flipped down, and there were two beautiful assault rifles and a pair of handguns, all with extra magazines.

It was highly likely there were more stashes in the apartment, but Jada didn't have time to look. She'd just replaced the panel and closed the cupboard when she heard muffled voices.

She walked towards the living room and paused at the end of the hall, the door to her right.

The voices were louder now and seconds later she heard the sound of a key being fitted into a lock.

Uh oh.

Jada crossed to the door of the balcony and opened it just enough to step through. Two stories was a lot higher than it looked from the ground. Fortunately, the streets were narrow and the building across the alley was single-story.

Hoping there wasn't anything especially fragile in her pack, Jada tossed it to the roof of the next structure. Then, she climbed onto the railing and not-so-gracefully threw herself off of it.

The landing wasn't pretty either, but rolling when she hit the roof prevented her from spraining or breaking anything.

Jada snatched up her pack and ran out of sight of Andro's balcony windows.

She had to find a place to hide during prayers a short time later, but that allowed her to catch her breath and review what she'd discovered.

While Andro and his team were merely part of the distraction and not players in Channing's main plot, they were still important. And the photos and equipment she'd found in the apartment told her several things.

First, they truly did have training and skills to do surveillance without being caught.

Second, they had resources. The fake ids had to appear legitimate enough to get them wherever they needed.

Third, they were well-connected. Their equipment was expensive and state-of-the-art. Not something you simply bought on Amazon. That would leave a trail, and you'd have FBI, DEA, and CIA on you faster than you could say "black site."

Business must've been good for Andro and his men. They were successful enough to maintain a steady stream of jobs to pay for their gear, surveillance, and weapons.

All of that to say they could definitely pull off a strike like Aiden proposed, without hiring locals. Plus, said strike would have to be done quickly, and that detail made Jada's stomach tighten as urgency awoke in her.

Oh man, she thought, as she emerged from hiding and mingled in the heavy, after-work crowds filling the streets.

No way could she cover all her bases. Andro would need to be thwarted somehow, while at the same time someone poked into what Channing was really planning.

Jada knew Aiden and his team would be covering surveillance of the military base and obtaining information on schedules. Once they had those, they'd be supplied to Andro.

Simultaneously, Andro would be getting his supplies together. When he had patrol details, he could pick the best spot, day, and time for a strike.

And then came death and carnage.

Chapter 88

Foreboding

That night, Jada secured a run-down room above a carpet store. She'd never much cared about how fancy a place was. If it had a roof and walls, that was great. Running water, especially hot water, was an absolute luxury bonus.

She allowed herself to indulge in a ten-minute shower before texting Ryan. She sent him the photos she'd taken and filled him in on what she'd learned.

Before enjoying ten minutes of bliss, Jada had also touched base with a local Agency officer. While she waited for Ryan's response, she read her other friend's reply.

Only he and two others were presently at the Kabul post. Everyone was either further south tracking weapons shipments or surveilling local insurgent operatives.

In summary: they were short on man-power.

Jada kindly asked that he let her know if any Armenians contacted local insurgents. She offered to repay the favor with a shwarma or something.

She was mulling over her options when her phone buzzed. Caller id said the incoming call was from "Local Takeout."

"Yello."

"*You've had a busy afternoon,*" said Ryan.

"Mm, and how are things on the poppy croplands?"

"*Mildly exciting.*"

Jada pushed herself off the mattress on the floor and walked to one of the windows. "Have you been able to get any face-to-face time with the warlords yet?"

"*No, it's still too hot. It really has turned into a bit of a civil war. The Taliban has been pretty quiet, though it wouldn't surprise us if they tried to infiltrate the warring tribes.*"

"Seize the opportunity. Kind of like Syria."

"*Right, that's our primary concern right now. Anyway. You're still bent on finding out what Channing and Aiden are up to, I see.*"

Ryan didn't sound as interested as Jada had hoped he'd be. Of course, spending one's days in a hot-zone in early spring in Afghanistan wasn't exactly relaxing.

"We, I, whoever, still has no idea the real game Channing is planning," she answered, gazing out over the city, its lights beginning to twinkle in the falling dusk. "All we know is the attack will happen quickly, and it will be a diversion. US troops will be specifically targeted. Our soldiers are going to die, McCormick."

"*Then we can hand over what we know to military intelligence,*" replied Ryan. "We can't watch out for everyone."

Jada scowled. "What about Channing? Doesn't it matter what he's involved in? Whatever it is, it has to be big if he's going to such lengths to distract intelligence and law enforcement agencies."

Ryan gave a loud sigh. "*As his plan develops, it'll become more apparent what he's up to.*"

"Of course," she said lightly, "because waiting until the very last minute to stop a sinister plot always works out so well."

"Jada..."

"Ryan. Look, I know there's always a bad guy somewhere plotting bloodshed, but we know Channing specifically is up to something. Why not follow him, do surveillance, the whole spy thing, you know? We have a bad guy in our sights. Why not take advantage of the opportunity?"

"Ja—"

"And if whatever he's planning goes down and the damage is catastrophic," she continued, "the Agency likely isn't going to want to have any ties with him. Especially if, you know, American citizens are targeted in any way."

Ryan sighed again. "*You might be blowing this way out of proportion. We could use another set of eyes and ears down here. How about you pop in for a visit and we can talk about this more? See what Myles has to say about it?*"

Jada could feel her patient streak coming to an end, and with effort she laid on a blithe tone. "Sorry, I have a more pressing case to work. Lots of footwork to do, bad guys to track."

"*You can't do everything yourself,*" said Ryan quietly.

"I know," she replied evenly. "But I still have to do what I can. Doing nothing isn't an option on this. I know gut instincts aren't evidence, but I always listen to my gut, and this thing with Channing...my gut's telling me I'd better pay attention."

"*Maybe things will quiet down quicker than we think and we'll be able to return to the city,*" encouraged Ryan, though by the tone in his voice Jada knew he doubted his own words. "*I'm sorry we can't—*"

"It's fine," she answered airily. "Don't worry about it. See you around the schoolyard, McCormick."

Jada ended the call before she lost her composure and gave him a piece of her mind. She knew it wasn't his fault. He was on a case, and the world didn't revolve around whatever problem she thought was important.

Still, the sense of urgency was growing by the minute. She had to get moving because there was so much to do. With each passing day, Channing was drawing nearer to executing his plan, whatever it was.

But first thing was first. She called her Agency friend, who went by Johnson, in Kabul.

“How do I get clearance to enter the military base?” she asked him. “I have sensitive information for their intelligence division.”

“*Funny you should ask about that,*” replied Johnson with a smile in his voice. “*I’m headed to the base tomorrow. I’ll get you on the ‘guest list’ so there won’t be any problems. Everyone’s a bit on-edge with the excitement down south.*”

“We’ll be spending quality time together,” she continued. “I’d be so grateful if I could see what you have on a man you all *were* watching before the warlords decided to shoot each other.”

“*Who’s the guy?*”

“*Channing...*”

“*The merc boss. Yeah, we were pretty curious to see him and his underling pop up in Kabul.*”

“*Yeah, him...so...*”

“*Girl,*” said Johnson, laughter now in his voice, “*you’re going to owe me a lot of shawarmas.*”

It was a long, uneventful night filled with a lot of pacing. Jada managed an hour of restless sleep, but only because her eyes were tired. Her mind and body weren’t. Just the reverse: they were growing more unsettled.

That told Jada that things were about to get exciting.

It was like on Aurora, the month of tracking and tearing all over the place leading up to her capture. She wasn’t tired and the need to hunt and work kept her going.

Additionally, Ryan’s lack of concern over the plot to strike US troops irritated Jada. She didn’t expect him to drop what he was doing and rush to Kabul to lend a hand. She just...wasn’t sure. She didn’t understand why he didn’t seem to care.

Didn’t it matter to anyone that there was a high chance their soldiers would be killed in a fast-approaching strike? Perhaps Jada was misperceiving, but everyone seemed complacent.

But in Aurora, everyone would’ve jumped into action and taken every preventative measure to ensure the safety of warriors and civilians. It had never mattered how frequently a threat was issued, or a warning was received.

It was exhausting work, but at least when Jada finally collapsed, she did so knowing she’d done everything she could to protect her family and friends.

If US soldiers died in Andro’s strike, what would it be for? Nothing. They wouldn’t fall while protecting the home front or while hunting evil men. Instead, they’d perish as mere pawns in a mastermind’s game, and that burned her gut.

A lot could be accomplished with only a few hours of sleep a night. By the time came to rendezvous with Johnson, Jada had organized rough plans and prioritized her “to-do” list. That helped calm her minutely.

The morning was cold, but the crispness in the air was refreshing.

Johnson and Jada were allowed entrance onto the military base. He’d apparently been there before because he knew exactly where he was going.

His business was in the same building Jada was headed, and just down the hall. He briefly introduced her to an intelligence officer and then walked briskly down the passage.

Jada knew by the two bars on his uniform that he was a captain, and a commissioned officer, as just mentioned. He hadn’t entered the Army via the enlisted route.

He was a few inches taller than her, with a lean build, and an average military buzz-cut kept his dark brown hair in order.

“I understand you come bearing gifts,” said Captain Troas. “Though the job market within the intelligence community must not be that bad if they can hire people to hand deliver documents when an e-mail would do.”

He said it good-naturedly and with a smile that made his dark brown eyes dance.

“It’s a fitness initiative, actually,” replied Jada. “Case officers are gaining too much weight from long hours of surveillance.”

At that, he belted out a laugh and offered her a chair.

“No offense, captain,” she said, “but if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather stand.”

“You a nervous type?” he asked, with a twinkle still in his eyes.

“Only when I’m on a hot scent,” answered Jada, “or when I come across something important.”

“Which is why you’re here. What’ve you got?”

Jada knew that it honestly wasn’t much. She showed him the pictures she’d taken of Andro, told him what the Agency knew about him, and what she had learned yesterday.

“I know it’s the wild west out here,” she said, after finishing the brief, “and you’re at high risk every day. But this is a specific threat and the time is closing fast on when the strike will be executed.”

“You can’t give us some kind of timeframe?” asked the captain, expression furrowed with concentration as he looked over the meager documents.

Jada frowned. “No, not yet. Hopefully we’ll hear or see something soon that will give us more to work with.”

“Well, if we knew the place, date and time of each strike or the location of every IED, then it’d be too easy,” answered Captain Troas with a faint smile.

“It’s not much to go on,” she said, “but it’s a matter of life and death, and I just wanted to give you a heads-up. We’re short on manpower, and as much as I hate it, I can’t patrol the city and surrounding area all by my lonesome.”

At this, the captain tilted his head and looked at her with curiosity.

“You can’t protect everyone,” he commented quietly.

“Who’s this?” boomed a voice in the doorway behind them. “A new recruit?”

“No, sorry Major Stonewall,” replied the captain with a grin as he and Jada turned. “She’s too smart for that.”

Before them was a giant of a man with twinkling hazel eyes and beautiful skin the color of chocolate.

Stonewall, thought Jada, seriously? He could pass as the Great Wall. I didn’t think humans came this large!

“This is a friend from the local community,” nodded the captain to Jada. “Brought in some hot details on an impending strike on our troops.”

The great man’s expression darkened. “The source credible?”

“Heard the conversation myself, sir,” replied Jada, meeting his gaze head on, “and it wasn’t between two locals at a hookah bar, either.”

The twinkle returned to his eyes. “And how’d you manage to get that close, without drawing attention to your Western self?”

“Major,” said Jada with a slow smile, “the art of blending is an invaluable tool, both for intelligence gathering and surviving.”

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. “You ever thought about a career in the military?”

“Oh, I’m too old and set in my ways to start a new career,” she answered.

“Well, if you change your mind, the Army has first dibs on you. I’d better not hear you joined up with someone else first.”

“Yes, Major,” she said with a nod and suppressed grin. “Well, you’re busy, so I’ll stop bothering you.”

The captain scribbled down contact information on a strip of paper and handed it to Jada.

“Appreciate you dropping by,” he said, taking up the folder in his left hand and extending the other. “We’ll have eyes and ears on this.”

Jada slapped her hand into his. “And if I learn anything know, I’ll let you know.”

Johnson intercepted her in the hallway, and together they made for their exit.

As they crossed the grounds of the base, and Jada studied the soldiers going about their tasks, a sense of heavy foreboding rested on her. She was positive that if Andro wasn’t somehow stopped, military men and women were going to die.

She found it a worse thing to see an approaching threat that she could do little to stop, over having disaster come upon herself suddenly. It was the worst when it was her friends or fellow warriors who were the targets. And yet, all she could do was stand by and watch, because there was only a minute chance of being able to intervene or rescue them.

As the captain had said, “you can’t protect everyone.”

But Jada would do everything in her power to do so, and her determination pushed back the dread rising in her.

Next stop was the Agency post at which Johnson was stationed.

The rest of Jada’s day was spent pouring over whatever documents there were on Channing and his group. She truly believed in the phrase “know thy enemy.” Getting an idea of their personality, what type of deals they made, if they were risk takers or played things safe, and how they worked with other people allowed a person to know their rival. From there, he or she could reasonably predict future moves by the target.

Or, in this case, obtain an idea of just how big of a plan they’re piecing together.

One might think sifting through files on a target would be exceedingly boring.

However, if a time limit was attached, it could be quite the opposite. Then it became just as thrilling or suspenseful as a literal foot chase. It was merely a different kind of suspense. Time was of the essence and with each passing second, the bad guy was inching closer to executing their scheme.

Reviewing documents of a target was like hunting in a way. The hunter is searching for tracks, hints of the plan, or who the quarry is working or dealing with.

All of that to say, it was late afternoon when Jada again became aware of the concept of time.

Since the return to the military base, she’d sat on the floor of a cramped bedroom with a laptop sitting on a chair. She skimmed page after page of data on Channing, the details of his legitimate businesses and the doings of his mercenary group.

Whenever she found something that piqued her interest, she scribbled down the point in her notebook. This was then taped to the rear wall.

It was her method of analyzing and digesting lots of data, and this event occurred countless times throughout the duration of the day.

Sometimes she spotted a pattern or a contact Channing used regularly. Boxes were eventually drawn around blocks of information, some connected with seemingly random arrows.

And with each new piece of information, Jada would stand in front of the wall and add it into what she already knew.

The collage looked a bit abstract, but there really was madness in the method.

Or is it “method in the madness,” she wondered at one point, *meh.*

Jada stood for the sake of taking a break but wound up standing in front of the wall and pondering.

Within the first twenty minutes of research, Jada recognized that Channing was a shark. He had an abundance of contacts and resources on the six inhabited continents. Obviously, he was sharp, shrewd, and adaptable. He seemed to be able to read people well and knew, for example, if a bribe would work to pay off a customs official, or if more coercive tactics were needed.

Jada considered him a shark because Channing was one of the big bosses in the “underworld.” World-class clients hired him because of his success, and all underlings and competitors feared him.

He was cutthroat, but not enough to where he scared away clients. Yet he was nonsense and harsh enough that anyone doing business with him banished any thought of double-crossing him the moment the idea entered their minds.

If you shorthanded Channing, or double-crossed him, there was no place in the world where you could hide. He’d find you, and sooner rather than later.

“Food’s here,” came Johnson’s voice behind her.

Jada had been deep in thought when the announcement was made and she started from her musings.

“Food?” she asked, turning and blinking at him. Her stomach made its own inquiry by growling loudly.

Jada couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten, and as she followed Johnson out of the room, the scent of lamb and various vegetables greeted her.

Her stomach rumbled again.

Joining Johnson and Jada was another case officer stationed at the post. William was the name he gave her, though it was unlikely his real one.

At the end of five minutes, Jada had inhaled her entire plate of food, at which her stomach gurgled happily.

“How are things in the south?” she asked after tossing her paper plate in the trash.

“First day of quiet,” replied William, in between bites of lamb. “And the tribes have actually withdrawn from each other a little.”

“How many tribes were overrun?”

“Three, but it was only a matter of time before they were challenged. Two of them hold, or held, small but fertile quadrants of land. They’re in control of their larger rivals now.”

“Any sight of Taliban operatives?” asked Johnson.

William shook his head. “Nope.”

Jada thanked them for dinner and excused herself as they began talking about matters that weren’t any of her business.

Returning to the bedroom, Jada sat on the floor and began checking out the latest emails sent to and from Channing.

Only a moron would've left a trail that led to their criminal activity. She recognized a few of the recipients from earlier research but, as expected, everything was cryptic.

However, most of his recent and semi-regular correspondence had been with some upper-class arms dealers. That wasn't surprising. Channing's legitimate business in energy was a cover for the money he made moving weapons and drugs. It also, naturally, explained the payments for "hostile takeovers" and "exterminations" for various clients.

The phrase "eliminate the competition" was taken literally in Channing's mercenary organization.

After getting nowhere half an hour later, Jada stood with a sigh. Crossing her arms, she stood in front of the wall covered with notes and contemplated some kind of plausible plan of action.

Thus far there had been no new news of Andro contacting a local insurgent to help in the strike on US troops. It was likely Andro and his team would do it themselves. The fewer people involved in the strike the better, because it meant fewer people could be made to talk if captured.

Knowing this strike was going to be occurring quickly maintained a high sense of urgency.

Somehow Channing and Aiden were going to retrieve schedules for patrol and troop movements. They had to have inside contacts for that.

Jada had been aware of that distinct possibility before going to the base that morning. Ultimately, she decided it better to literally "alert the troops" of an impending attack, as opposed to keeping the information to herself to prevent it from being detected by spies within the military ranks.

She ran a hand down her face. She knew where Channing was staying, but that wasn't of much help. He wouldn't be scared by her and she didn't have any leverage to use against him, to get him to stop his plans, or reveal them to her.

Yes, he and his group had been under suspicion for a number of mass murders, primarily Africa. But there was no solid evidence. Dozens of countries knew of him, and various intelligence and foreign law enforcements were interested in ways to pin him with something.

As mentioned earlier, the Agency had used his group's services before, and they didn't presently care about him.

Jada also couldn't return to the hotel again without risk of detection. She'd already made her play and at least two of Aiden's teammates knew her face.

Maybe I should return to Aurora and check out what's happening there, she thought. In all of this, Halden and Ambrose, and Cassius's plan for them, was occurring in tandem with Channing's plot.

But Jada didn't sense any need to return yet. On the other hand, she was at a loss of what to do here, until some new piece of information was discovered. Or one of the targets, Channing, Aiden or Andro, made another move.

I hate waiting.

Out of her backpack, Jada dug her final piece of chocolate and, stepping back in front of her wall of notes, resigned herself to the fact that it was going to be a long night.

Chapter 89

First Contact

While Jada was digging through information on Channing, Aiden was using his and his boss's connections to try and identify the lone female traveler who was hunting him.

His gut instinct was to start with contacts in the intelligence community. She'd known which room at which hotel he'd been staying in, and that meant she had resources.

This was on top of the fact she was a skilled tracker and hunter on Aurora. The interaction between Kirill and Vadim confirmed she was fearless, adaptable, and could think on her feet.

Hence, field intelligence, and she'd probably been assigned to a group stationed locally in Kabul.

After hours of hunting leads and some coercion of contacts, he learned several new Agency transfers had arrived to the city a few weeks ago. There were two males and one female. The woman and one man weren't officially with the Agency. They were freelance, independent assets.

None of them had photos readily available, but their names were. He skipped over the names of the two men and went to the woman.

Jada Serbin.

Aiden allowed himself a smile. *The female traveler has a name now.*

Of course, a picture to go with the name would've been a cherry on top of a small cake. It also would've been too simple.

Until a week ago, she'd been attached to a group supervised by T. Myles. The team was currently down south keeping a close eye on the warlord action.

As for Jada, who knew where she was?

By the tightness in Aiden's gut, he sensed she was still in the city. She was close.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much in the way of personal history for Jada. Seven years ago she'd vanished off the face of the earth, only to reappear again a year ago. She'd left no trace or trail of where she'd been during that long absence.

Aiden knew where she'd been, since he was a traveler. He knew during those missing years in Earth's dimension that she'd spent a year in Aurora, training and causing general mayhem.

Leaning back in his chair in one of the hotel conference rooms, Aiden wondered how hot of a scent she was on. Did she know the warlords' civil war was only a distraction? What was the likelihood she knew about Andro, his team, and their assignment?

She couldn't, thought Aiden, there's no way.

Knowing he wouldn't learn anything else useful, he shut down the laptop he'd been working on. After returning it to Channing's room, Aiden made for the hotel exit.

As he stood in the elevator, he wondered how he was ever going to get a visual on Jada. When it came to hunting someone, what was a name without a face? It was one of those "minor" details.

Dusk was on approach when Aiden left the hotel. Before allowing himself to think any further on the Jada matter, he pulled out his phone to deal with other business first.

After ringing four times, a rough voice answered. "*What?*"

That was Andro, without a doubt.

"Just checking to see if you received anything in the mail today," said Aiden, starting on a leisurely course towards his apartment.

"The messenger dropped off envelope this morning."

"Very well. That's all you should need to do your part," replied Aiden. "Scheduled dates and times for patrols for the next two weeks."

"Yes, yes it is very good."

"I'll be in touch again, to see if you need anything else. Otherwise...I'll wait to hear about your progress on the news."

Ω

Jada had grown tired of the bedroom and needed to stretch her legs.

She also needed to find more chocolate.

So she left the apartment and meandered through the streets. She wasn't sure where she was going, and she let her feet take her wherever they wanted. She knew she

ought to be paying attention, but often she did her best thinking when her legs were moving. For some reason, it enabled her brain to better attack a problem.

For some time, she operated mostly on autopilot and wasn't fully aware of where she was going. While stepping out of an alleyway, some time after getting lost in thought, she ran into someone.

They muttered apologies to each other in Dari and each continued on their own way. She walked two more steps, stopped, and then casually looked over her shoulder.

The person she'd run into had done the same as she, and their eyes met and locked. Clearly, Jada was in disguise, so he couldn't have outright known who she was, or if she was even female.

But you know your nemesis when you see them, disguise or no.

A chill ran down Jada's spine and adrenaline tingled through her.

Hello, Aiden.

In the second they looked at one another, Jada noted a particular darkness in his eyes and expression. She didn't know why she hadn't seen it before. If her memory served her right, his eyes had been a hazel-bluish color. Now they were darker and held a sinister light.

It was also evident that he wasn't afraid.

Excellent, thought Jada, it will make things much more interesting.

They were feet from each other and decided on a course of action simultaneously. Jada had heard great minds think alike, and apparently that applied to both good and bad.

Aiden and Jada pivoted and jabbed. They blocked one another's strikes and then kicked each other in the hip.

They staggered away and into some bystanders who'd stopped to stare at them.

Jada felt a hand on her shoulder and instantly retaliated, not knowing if it was to help her regain her balance or restrain her. Gripping a couple of the fingers on her, she wrenched them at an odd angle.

That ensured her released and Jada bolted forward, strides behind Aiden as he took off.

There were times when situations required you be conspicuous. In other instances, it didn't matter or you just didn't care.

This was one of those times.

People stared as Aiden and Jada sprinted up the road. As she avoided a collision with a bike, she wondered why Aiden hadn't continued the fight. If he killed her, he'd have a much easier time helping his masters' evil schemes succeed.

It crossed her mind, while skidding around a building and into an alleyway, that Aiden had more pressing business he wanted to see through first. He was committed to his boss's plan and whatever he was doing for Cassius.

It was one of those "run to live to cause more trouble and bloodshed another day" strategies. He also didn't want to run the risk of being injured and thus be put out of commission.

And it pushed Jada's legs faster. *Come here*, she thought as she slowly gained ground.

She was gaining still as they shot out of the alley and across another street. The city was thinning out quickly at the approach of evening prayers. Thus, vehicle traffic was able to move around easier.

Aiden just missed getting clipped by a car.

Jada barely cleared the hood but had to hit the brakes when she landed, due to another car heading the opposite direction.

She not-so-gracefully bumped off it and then broke back into a dead sprint. When she saw how much ground she now had to make up, she set her jaw.

The evening air was cool, and with each lungful Jada drew in, she forced her body faster.

Aiden cut down a narrow street. She slid around the corner in time to see him duck through a random side door of a building. Jada reached the doorway and heard some shouts from inside, followed by a brief commotion.

Not pausing, Jada ran inside and through what was some kind of storeroom, at the rear of a business. Half a dozen men, young and middle-aged, were seated on crates as one held a bottle of clear liquid.

Jada guessed that it wasn't flavored water.

She was able to catch a glimpse of Aiden as he weaved through a couple random storage racks. He crashed through a door that opened to a staircase, which led to the roof.

Across the roof they ran and then jumped to the top of the next building. All the while, Jada was aware of how quiet the streets below were becoming.

The next building was two stories, and Aiden didn't show any signs of slowing. When he reached the edge of the roof, he launched himself off and grabbed the railing of a balcony on the next building.

If he thought a little jump was going to turn Jada back, then he had another thing coming.

Jada hit the edge of the building going full-board and grabbed hold of a balcony beside the one Aiden had landed on. If she'd just been a little closer before the leap, she could've grabbed hold of him. But he was already pulling himself up onto the roof, compliments of some cables.

A fresh burst of adrenaline gave Jada some extra speed. Last thing she wanted was for Aiden to get to the roof with enough time to lay in wait and then kick her off.

Standing on the railing, Jada grabbed the makeshift awning over the balcony and then pulled herself onto the roof. She wasn't a half second behind Aiden.

The buildings in this section of the city were made up of some legitimate structures, in addition to shacks and add-ons. Some were back to back, or connected in odd shapes and at various heights.

All that to say, it made for an exciting chase. Jada hadn't had this much action since the excursion outside Fezyabad.

When was that, she wondered, Last week? Three weeks ago? Oh well.

Jada had given up trying to keep track of time.

She took off after Aiden as he leapt down a small flight of steps and then sprinted across several random buildings.

He'd just traversed to another roof when the call to prayer began, eerie in the stillness of the city. Another answered, and another and another, until the falling darkness was filled with a chorus of melancholy voices.

The end of the line looked like it was finally coming up for Aiden. But Jada wasn't expecting this to be over just like that.

Aiden was a soldier, a warrior. He kept himself in shape, that was clear enough, and no way would he go down without a fight.

The drop off was fast approaching, and still Jada didn't slow. It dawned on her what he was going to do when he was strides from the edge.

Dang it.

Jada didn't have enough rooftop to catch up to him, and he leapt from the edge...and then vanished, as quick as she could blink.

The bugger, she thought as she too ran to the end of the roof and jumped.

Chapter 90

Little Test of Skill

Aurora

"Did you hear that?"

"No. What?"

A breath of silence before, "Huh, must've just been my imagination..."

Because Aiden had traversed first, he arrived back in Aurora first. He found himself standing in a room, mostly empty and with a door that was halfway closed.

His instincts were screaming at him to remain silent and tread carefully. From this, he guessed he was behind enemy lines, and that the two men in the next room were enemy warriors.

Stepping quietly, Aiden inched forward until he could see out the door. It looked straight down a hall to the front door of the house. Visible at a table were two warriors definitely not soldiers in Cassius's army.

The front door swung open and a third warrior stood in the doorway. "We're about ready to move out..."

Some raised voices behind the soldier brought the other two to their feet, and the third turned to see what was going on.

"Don't point that arrow at me," said a female voice sharply. "If I were one of the bad guys, you'd have never seen my face, because I'da killed you already."

A chill shocked through Aiden, though he couldn't tell if it was from fear or anticipation. *Could it seriously be...*

The soldier in the doorway stepped aside and that was the first time he saw her, the female traveler who'd been hunting him: Jada.

Even though she wore layers for the cool spring weather, he could tell she was lean. Since she'd kept pace with him while rooftop jumping in Kabul, he also knew she was fit.

She had a fair and fine-featured face, with a sharp jawline, though the cheek was a touch sunken. Her long, dark hair was down, but some of it was braided back to keep it out of her exceptionally sharp turquoise eyes.

Like so many others, Aiden thought of Jada as a very fine creature. If they'd been on the same side, he would've liked to get to have gotten to know her better.

Fair she was indeed...even though she was also wet and splattered with mud.

Expression furrowed, Jada's gaze was intense as she glanced around at the warriors.

"Have you seen any strangers pass by recently?" she asked with a clear, demanding voice. "Someone traveling alone?"

"Sorry, no," replied one of the warriors. "We haven't seen anyone besides the men in the unit day before yesterday. We're pretty secluded out here and we would've noticed anyone passing through the area."

She exhaled sharply in agitation, before looking up and searching through the trees.

"You have a messenger nearby?" she asked.

"He left not an hour ago," answered the warrior.

"Who are you looking for, anyway?" asked another.

"Aiden."

"Wait...you mean *the* Aiden? The traveler who's wanted across the entire realm south of Cassius's territory?"

"Yes," she sighed, "that one. I just missed him in the other dimension."

The warriors exchanged several glances before, "Hold on, you're her, aren't you? Jada, the female traveler people talk about?"

She drew another breath, probably to keep her agitation in check, and then replied, "Guilty."

Aiden could only blink and was hardly able to believe it. That was her, Jada, not thirty feet from him.

How had he managed to land here of all places and identify her?

The instant he asked the question, he was supplied the answer. Jada was one of the "good guys," and he'd heard rumors she had a knack for overhearing sensitive information. Half of that came because of where she landed whenever she returned from the other dimension. The other half was likely because she was skilled in stealth and had connections, so she knew where to find interesting details.

This seemed to apply to Aiden, too. Now that he was officially in the service of Cassius, the dark powers that be aided him in his cause and had placed him in a favorable spot.

The God of Eliadar may have had a hand in where Jada landed. It seemed the hand of Evil also had some power and could determine where Aiden, one of its agents, wound up upon traversing.

"What happened to you?" one of the warriors was asking and gesturing to Jada.

"Landed in a creek," she answered. "Well, I'm off then."

"Where? Back to the other dimension already?"

"No, I'm off to track Aiden," she replied sternly as a fire flickered in her eyes. "He's here and I'm going to find him."

There was something about the conviction in her tone and the expression on her face that made Aiden a touch uneasy. She truly was a hunter and fiercely determined. If she had to walk the entire length of Aurora to pick up his trail, she would.

Even though she was his nemesis, Aiden had some respect for her.

Jada took a breath to say something else, but stopped. Her gaze narrowed, as if she'd just had a thought or perhaps heard something. Then she lifted her eyes...and looked straight at Aiden.

Just as Aiden had sensed he'd landed in hostile territory, or as dark soldiers could tell when an enemy was close, so Jada had probably sensed there was someone nearby who didn't belong.

That was all moot at the present, though, and Aiden spun and made his exit out one of the room's windows.

Ω

The little cuss was eavesdropping, thought Jada, as she sprinted around the house. That thought was then followed by, *and now he's seen my face. Dang it!*

"Careful!" she called in warning to the warriors as they sprang into action.

Jada drew one of her knives and half-crouched as she reached the corner. She saw the movement on the crest of the rise twenty feet away before reflexively pivoting sideways.

An arrow just clipped her arm.

Retaliation was swift, and she threw the knife at Aiden, who'd taken out a warrior and picked up a bow and quiver. He ducked awkwardly and the blade grazed the top of his shoulder.

Aiden dodged an arrow from one of the other warriors and then dropped out of sight.

"Here!"

Jada caught a bow and quiver tossed from the nearest warrior. Slinging on the quiver, she retrieved her knife before picking up into a run and drawing an arrow.

One whistled by her head as she passed down the rise. Her bow sang in response and her shot just scraped past her target's side.

It was an insane sixty seconds, with Aiden and Jada exchanging fire almost simultaneously as they continued to sprint through the forest.

In her defense, Jada had the more difficult task, because she needed Aiden alive for questioning.

He, on the other hand, simply needed to kill her.

Every one of their shots was a near-miss and a few were closer than that. The closest scrapes occurred on their final arrows.

Aiden's actually cut Jada along the cheek and nicked her ear.

Hers caught him across the leg and made him stumble.

Tossing her empty quiver aside, Jada continued running straight for him.

Aiden, not a dozen strides away, righted himself and strode forward. His shadowed expression was resolute and unafraid as fight gleamed in his dark eyes.

Oh yeah, he's definitely in league with Cassius, thought Jada.

Heat and adrenaline surged through her veins at the thrill of this dangerous challenger. At last, they'd get to test each other's skill.

In the final feet between them, Jada leapt atop a patch of ice and slid the rest of the distance.

Holding their bows length-wise, they executed the same opening move by pivoting one end at each other's faces. It was interesting and slightly unnerving that they mirrored one another and for the next dozen moves.

Aiden finally muscled them off the ice and back onto bare ground. With a powerful shove, he disengaged them before making a lightning quick jab with the bow.

Jada pivoted to avoid it and smacked him in the face with one end of her bow. Leaning sideways, she missed his counter swing but did catch a boot to the stomach.

She swiped as she let herself fall.

The two bows cracked loudly as Aiden blocked her strike.

Hitting the ground, Jada went with the momentum and twisted to her feet. A jab with the bow from Aiden barely missed her neck while she was still crouched.

She countered with a quick jab of her own and the sharp point of the bow rammed upward into his diaphragm.

That drew a snarl of pain and anger from Aiden. Jerking back, he delivered a decisive backhanded swing with the bow, as if he'd been wielding a sword.

Jada ducked and swung for his legs.

Aiden jumped to clear her bow.

They were then both able to square up and look each other over for a moment. Aiden was fired up and the darkness in and about him was raging. His eyes gleamed with fierce and murderous light, and he glared at Jada with vehement hatred.

It really was a pity, though. Because even in the darkness, Jada thought his features were ruggedly handsome.

What a waste.

As for Aiden, he truly hated what he saw in Jada. Fearless and even more determined to stop him she was, and consumed with fire and fight. But it was more than that. There was an exceptionally fierce gleam in her eyes that'd he'd only seen in a few other people in his life. They'd been elite warriors, whose sole purpose was to search for and destroy the enemy. They were the dangerous types who could sneak into enemy territory and ghost an entire army.

And they didn't lose any sleep over it.

Jada threw Aiden's glare right back at him and met his gaze.

"It's okay if you're afraid," she goaded. "You can still surrender if you want."

Aiden's jaw muscles flexed, and he struck with such speed Jada was nearly caught off-guard.

Nearly.

She deflected the strike from the right and the follow-up from the left. The third swing she blocked and then shoved the bows over their heads to close the space between them.

Before Jada could introduce her knee to his stomach, Aiden twisted himself, and her, sideways so they were side by side.

Both threw their elbows at one another's heads but failed to make contact. Jada always tried to turn every move in a fight to her advantage, or at least seize an opportunity. That's what she did next.

Pivoting at the hips, Jada turned back into Aiden and kned him in the stomach. It was unfortunate for him that he wasn't wearing any armor. But she didn't feel bad for him.

He did, however, succeed in elbowing Jada in the face.

She ducked as he struck with the bow. She'd lost track of hers when they'd gotten tangled. But that was alright.

Jada dodged the next jab and then, at the third swing, latched onto the bow near both ends.

They kicked each other and sent one another staggering. Somewhere in all of that, the bow broke, which was what Jada had been hoping to do.

Now it was just mano-a-mano.

Aiden advanced swiftly, and he and Jada danced through the trees as a cool breeze sent last fall's leaves swirling around them.

She admitted Aiden was one of the quickest opponents she had yet to fight. She purposefully hadn't drawn either knife yet, because there was a fair chance he'd get a hold of it. She wanted to wait until she gained more control of the situation.

The two rivals again mirrored moves, as they had at the beginning of the duel. Except this time, they did land strikes on each other.

Jada counted four or five solid swings or jabs by each of them. But she only felt the first two, which were brutal.

Yet with every blow her enemy landed, the hotter the fire burned in her. It had never been so fierce before. Jada guessed it had to do with the fact they were engaged in true hand-to-hand combat, the rawest form of fighting.

In all other conflicts on Aurora, Jada had been wielding some kind of weapon, a sword or tomahawk. Not this time.

She didn't notice the later jabs and was finally able to think three moves ahead of Aiden to pause the onslaught. Instead of jabbing, Jada wholly took a body shot to set herself up to deliver a feral right.

It sent Aiden reeling and nearly to the ground...while Jada drew both of her knives, one per fist.

She could feel the blood running from her nose and from a gash on her cheek. Yet, she remained undaunted and was more fired up than ever.

Fists up, knives at the ready, she bounced lightly on the balls of her feet. *Come on, she thought to Aiden, let's go, let's go!*

Jada had her target right where she wanted him. She hadn't continued to advance on him, because she knew he still had plenty left in the tank. She'd wear him down a little more, before moving in to secure him.

Aiden, meanwhile, was just picking himself up and regarded Jada with the utmost disgust. *Impossible*, he thought, *she can't possibly be human.*

It was in that moment that she saw the smallest expression of uncertainty flicker across his face.

Jada took a step forward as something punched through her side with such force it dropped her sideways to a knee. She couldn't stifle the fierce cry that wretched itself from her lungs. Part of it was from pain, the other part was rage.

In her peripheral, she was aware of large somethings approaching from the left. But, one hand on the arrow shaft, her glare remained fixed on Aiden.

An arrow passed over her and one of the advancing enemy dropped.

Aiden was already turning away as she forced herself to her feet and threw the knife she still had in her hand. It nailed him in the back of the shoulder.

Another arrow flew by Jada...and into the skull of a large hyena. A small pack was sweeping in, with a handful of dark soldiers.

Gritting her teeth, she snapped the arrow shaft, and then knelt down and picked up the other knife, which she'd dropped.

Adrenaline and fury dulled the sharpest of the pain and permitted her to stay on her feet.

Dodging behind a birch, Jada avoided the jaws of another hyena and then drove her blade through its muzzle.

A friendly arrow killed the brute and a breath later several horsemen galloped in.

That divided the small attack squad's attention, and Jada sprinted for the nearest dark soldier, who never saw her approach. Because he was focused on the immediate chaos, she was able to sneak up on him.

Jada picked up his sword in time to step and swing to meet the blade of one of his companion's. Locking the swords, Jada pushed them over their heads with a grunt of pain. Then, kicking him in the leg, he dropped to a knee, where the fight was finished a second later.

She was able to avoid the incoming hyena, but it clipped her and threw her off balance. Pivoting at the hips to square herself up again, Jada swiped it across the face with her knife when it snapped at her.

When it took a step back and shook its head, she advanced. A strike to its neck kept it backing before she sidestepped and drove the sword through its chest.

A fresh volt of pain shot up Jada's entire side and through her stomach. She fell back to one knee a moment.

But she only allowed herself to pant a few seconds before grinding her teeth and getting back to her feet. Jada staggered over to the rise where Aiden had disappeared and gave a sharp whistle. She hoped Zohmar was nearby because she could use a lift.

Come on, she thought, hand on her wounded side as she bent over the ground and searched for tracks, *where'd you go?*

She hadn't gone a dozen steps when darkness tried to encroach on the corners of her vision. She shook her head in defiance. *No, suck it up. It doesn't hurt that bad.*

Another dozen steps later, Jada found a few vague but fresh boot prints heading west-northwest.

Gotcha.

Picking up to an awkward jog, she followed the tracks as quickly as she could. Not all of the attack squad had been killed, and a few soldiers had retreated. Aiden's tracks merged in with theirs and the patrol squad that had pursued them.

After another quarter mile of zigzagging, Jada saw signs that the patrol had caught up to the slowest fleeing enemies. One dark soldier was on the ground with arrows sticking out of him. Several black arrows were set deep into the birch, but there weren't any implications friendly warriors had been injured.

On the north side of the main tracks, Jada picked up a familiar boot print in the mud. Also noted were a few drops of blood on some leaves.

The tracks turned more north and she followed. But the going was difficult, not because of the terrain, but because her body wasn't cooperating. Her lungs were working hard for not going that fast and the cool breeze made her aware of how heavily she was sweating.

Setting her jaw against her own weakness, Jada pushed her legs faster. Upon cresting the next rise, she saw flickers of movement ahead on the left. The sound of a small skirmish and galloping hooves were brought by the breeze.

Finally, her legs seemed to get with the program. Racing down the hill, she sprinted up the next knoll and continued along its crest.

You have to be close, she thought to Aiden, as she searched through the shadowed trees ahead.

That was when a black arrow nearly took Jada's head off. Cutting right, she ran down the steep knoll and leapt a narrow creek bed. The impact of the landing promptly dropped her to her knees, and a wave of pain and nausea washed over her.

"Get up," she growled as she pushed herself up. "You can take more."

Up the next rise and along the hilltop Jada ran, or more so gimped. That was when she saw a blur of movement fifty feet ahead. Whoever it was, was by themselves.

A fresh surge of adrenaline added speed to her stride and she took off.

Another pair of black arrows whistled by, but she didn't take much notice.

At the next drip of the hill, Jada didn't bother running all the way down. Instead, she gathered her strength and jumped to the next rise. Her legs threatened to give again, but her gaze was now locked on the person ahead and she was able to press onward.

He was closer and moving awkwardly, with a hand grasping his left shoulder.

Jada was just thinking there was still hope of catching him when something with sharp little talons latched onto her back. Stumbling to one knee with a snarl, she reached around, grabbed hold of the gremlin and threw him against the tree.

She saw another on approach in her peripheral and drew her knife. He never had a chance to do anything.

A black arrow nearly hit its mark in Jada's chest, and would have, if she hadn't fallen sideways against a tree.

She spotted the archer off to her left, but he didn't get to try again because a rider swept in and disposed of him.

Getting one foot under herself took a monumental effort, but Jada did it. Gazing ahead, there was no sign of Aiden now. However, taking his place was a large shadow with a bow.

A kyros. Of course.

Not every one of Cassius's squads had returned to the North, been killed, or driven out. But this unit had taken a great risk in coming to assist Aiden. Although, since he was working under the dark king, he'd secured protection.

He snarled, but something behind Jada drew his attention. Nose wrinkling in disgust, his dark eyes flicked to her once more, before he turned and vanished into the deeper shadows of the forest.

A number of horsemen cantered past her position in pursuit.

Hand on the tree for support, Jada managed to stand.

Zohmar, she thought, *where are you when I need you?*

"There you are. Where in the world do you think you're going?"

Jada looked over to see Connor jump from his horse and stride over.

"Sit down before you fall down."

She held up her hand. "Have you seen Zohmar? I need to get after Aiden. Now. He can't be far."

The look on Connor's face was mixed with incredulity and grave concern. "You've been shot, for crying out loud. You aren't fit to go anywhere."

Jada hadn't realized she'd again slouched against a tree. Calling upon her deep-seeded stubbornness, she pushed herself off it and straightened.

“You don’t understand,” she countered, not bothering to try and keep the sharpness from her tone. “I have to catch him before he reaches enemy territory or decides to traverse back to the other dimension.”

Jada hitched a grunt as another wave of pain and nausea hit. Connor put a hand on her shoulder to keep her steady.

“No, he’ll probably find a real weapon and come back looking for her,” he answered sternly. “He saw you get wounded. Don’t you think he might take advantage of that?”

In a harsh gesture, Jada swiped Connor’s arm away. “All the more reason to go after him now.”

She was riled from the fight with Aiden, and infuriated that she’d had him. Adding fuel to the fire now was a sense of terrible urgency. This could’ve ended today, or within the next few days. But that vital opportunity had been stolen.

“This is the South’s domain,” answered Connor, unyielding. “He won’t get far. The second patrol that came with us has continued pursuit.”

Jada took hold of the piece of arrow shaft still sticking out of her side and, before Connor could stop her, gave a firm twist and pull.

The pain nearly took her then, but she managed to stay on her feet.

“What the blazes?” exclaimed Connor. “Jada, you’re going to kill yourself!”

He reached for her, but she swatted his hand away and gave him a shove back. Jada knew this was somewhat out of character, rude and a touch out of control. Yet there was no time to be nice and cordial.

“What’s going on over here?”

Jada froze at the sound of that voice. Half-turning, she and Connor watched Michael stride up to them.

She was certain that her friend had grown over the past year, or filled out more. Also, the air of authority and command that surrounded him was thicker than ever before.

“She’s wounded and wants to go chasing after Aiden,” replied Connor, exasperated.

“Aye, and?” she asked. “Please, let me borrow a horse. There’s no time to be standing and gawking at each other.”

“There’s already a patrol following,” answered Michael with that trademark of irritating calmness.

When Jada opened her mouth to speak, he added, “With instructions to take him alive.”

A moment of silence fell between them and when it passed, some of the tension eased.

“Oh, and she pulled an arrow out of her own side,” said Connor, with some heat.

Michael's eyebrows drew together as he looked Jada over. Her coat somewhat hid the wound, plus she had her hand on it, so it hadn't been blatantly obvious when he'd first joined them.

Reaching over, Michael gently took her hand and removed it from her side so he could see the injury.

It wasn't pretty. A thick, dark red mass soaked her shirt and down the side of her pants. It looked similar to the gash Namor had inflicted when they'd first crossed blades. Only uglier.

The arrowhead had torn her up while she was running and frolicking through the trees. *Maybe I should've yanked it out sooner*, she thought.

Jada shot a look at Michael's face, but couldn't get a read on his thoughts.

This was the first time he'd seen her in fifteen months, and he thought her fairer and more beautiful than ever before. During her absence, he'd held in his mind that Jada was a light, a star, or fiercely beautiful heavenly being that was to be kept close, treasured and protected.

When he'd seen her for the first time minutes ago, this idea was confirmed and strengthened.

And when he'd seen her wound, the sharpest stab of panic and fear he'd ever felt had pierced him. This precious creature had been wounded.

But before Michael's panic could grow, a still small, voice whispered, *she'll be alright. You know one meager arrow isn't nearly enough to seriously wound her. Take her with you to the Western Village*

It was the voice the One who'd guided him these past months, who gave him insight on enemy plans, instruction for his unit's own attack strategy, and had enabled him to lead the group safely through many confrontations.

Peace came with the words, and the panic faded. He was still mildly concerned, and anger was slowly being kindled in him, anger at the one who'd done this.

"Prepare the unit to ride out," said Michael to Connor, who nodded and walked swiftly away.

"It's a funny thing that we were already headed for the Western Village," continued Michael, as he placed Jada's hand back on her side.

"Now sit."

She complied without argument and leaned against the tree.

Michael whistled and his horse, Johar, jogged up the rise to them. When the fine horse saw Jada, he perked his ears forward and whickered a greeting.

At least someone's glad to see me, she thought.

Michael removed some medical supplies from a hidden pocket in Johar's saddle and took a knee beside Jada.

She reached to take the bag from him, but he gave a sharp “mm,” and she shrank back.

Michael himself did a quick “pack and wrap” job on her side. Really, the wound wasn’t that horrific and was *almost* just a bad graze.

It took two minutes tops, and neither of them said anything. Michael’s expression remained a bit dark, and once or twice a trace of a glare appeared on it.

“Stay here,” he said when he was finished. “You’ll ride with me. The company should be ready shortly.”

Michael then stood, returned the supply bag to the saddle, and walked down the rise.

Johar looked after him, but when he wasn’t beckoned to follow, he remained beside Jada.

Closing her eyes a moment, she dropped her face in a hand.

What a mess, she thought. If what Connor said was true about Aiden coming after me, then I’ll be putting Jordan and Merida at risk. That’ll be the first place he checks.

An ache had begun to pound in her forehead, and she pressed her palm against it. *And why did I have to be such a jerk to Connor? There’s no excuse for that.*

Jada wondered if she’d ticked off Michael in addition to all of this. She’d never seen him remotely cross before, not even when they were fighting beside each other in battle.

He’s commanding warriors now. Probably just a lot on his mind.

But this definitely wasn’t what Jada had had in mind for their first meeting in a year. It wasn’t exactly uplifting.

I never even asked him how he was doing. No, “hey, Michael, I always knew you’d lead men one day,” or, “Oh, so how much longer ‘til you reclaim your rightful throne?”

Jada closed her eyes again and gave a shake of her head over her self-centeredness. After a moment, she drew a careful breath and tried to shape up.

Don’t let him see you like this. He has plenty enough to worry about. Last thing he needs is a commoner like you turning into a pansy. Suck it up. You don’t want him thinking you’re weak, because that’d ruin the whole perfect, kick-butt view he has of you.

Jada recognized she was still insecure about some things. Or perhaps, it’d be more accurate to say: insecure when it came to what people she highly respected thought of her.

Well done, Jada. You suck.

Johar’s nostrils quivered in a silent nicker. When he touched his nose to her face, she gave his forehead a quick rub. When she stopped, he lowered his head and practically put it in her lap, asking for more.

At that, Jada couldn’t help but smile.

The riders assembled near the bottom of the rise, and when Michael started towards Jada and Johar, she pushed herself up. Actually, she had help from Johar. He put his head under her arm, so she could wrap an arm around his neck and then carefully lifted her to her feet.

Standing beside him, she realized she'd forgotten how big of a horse he was.

Before she could even think about how she was going to get on with a gaping hole in her side, Jada heard Michael sigh...before he picked her up and set her in the saddle.

Then he swung up behind Jada and turned Johar northeast. The company set off at an easy pace through the forest, and they had time to catch up a little.

Aside from Connor and Michael, Tav was present, as was Gael, Eric, and Anna. There were a handful of others whom Jada was introduced to for the first time.

After the initial "meet and greet," quiet conversation among the warriors picked up as the trek continued.

"I wasn't upset with or disappointed in you," said Michael quietly. "I could never be. You just...scared me is all. When we first arrived, I thought we'd gotten there too late. Then there's the fact you had an arrow in your side."

Jada winced a little. "I need to apologize to Connor. I was a bit sharp with him."

"You do know you're the only person he's actually scared of," said Michael, and she heard the smile in his voice.

Jada huffed a careful laugh. "Right, I don't think a walking toothpick is much of a threat."

Then it came, a deep chuckle that rumbled in Michael's chest, and the sound of it lightened her heart.

"And don't worry about Aiden. Our patrols are sharp-eyed and eared, and are excellent trackers. They won't easily overlook him."

Michael was one of those people who had a soothing affect on others, no matter how intense or chaotic the situation. It was one of the countless moments where she was grateful for him. In the short time they'd seen each other again, already Jada's racing thoughts had calmed. The tension, too, had eased from her muscles.

Although that might have had something to do with blood loss.

Whatever, she thought. *It's just a scratch.*

"So, how are you, Michael?" asked Jada. "Feels like it's been an eternity since I last saw you."

"I'm well," he replied as Johar floated down a rise and up the other side. "We've been able to drive Halden and Ambrose's forces back even further. Yet it seems...I'm not sure, it's like we're waiting for something, some kind of disaster. Or perhaps after driving against Cassius's troops, we were just expecting more of a challenge."

The clouds broke a little and a few stray streaks of weak sunlight danced through the trees.

“However,” he continued, “now that you’re here, well...I’m even better. We all wish you could stay in Aurora permanently. But we also know what you’ve been tasked for.”

Michael’s words warmed Jada’s heart, but for only a second before a shadow fell over it. Not for the first time she wondered when her friends would become fed up with her. She came and went at random intervals. Here one day, gone the next.

But Jada would just have to burn that bridge when she came to it.

Or is it, ‘jump off that bridge? No, I think it’s ‘cross that bridge.’ Something like that.

Yet, she was realizing that she’d better enjoy every moment she had here, with her friends. Who knew how long she’d be gone next time she traversed back to Earth’s dimension?

She wanted to admit to Michael she wished that she could remain in Aurora, too. But she didn’t want to seem like she was getting all mushy.

They crossed some rougher terrain and the jarring sent pings of pain through her side. Jada did her best not to show any sign and subtly reached across her stomach to press her hand against the wound.

In spite her efforts, this didn’t go unnoticed by Michael, and he wrapped an arm around her waist to help keep her still.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “It won’t be far before the trail smooths out.”

“You know,” said Jada, ignoring the next stab of pain. “I’m having flashbacks of our flight from Asgard.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” he laughed. “And you returning to Jordan and Merida’s scrapped and scratched has a somewhat familiar tune to it.”

“Aye,” she grinned despite her discomfort. “Just like the good ol’ days!”