

“Parallel, Book One, Part III: Transform”

By: Kenya Gaede, 2016

Prologue

Excerpt from a journal entry by Jada Serbin:

I never asked to be important. I was completely satisfied with my roles of “warrior,” “lone traveler,” and “dragon slayer.” If anything, I’d prayed that I could do such things all the days of my life, and I thanked the Almighty for my obscurity and solitary existence.

So I had a difficult time believing... No, I had a difficult time accepting what I was becoming and the tasks He had been training me to complete. My new role was far above what I’d ever thought I’d be called to be. Beyond what I’d ever imagined.

It was all much too lofty for my taste, yet I still chose to accept this role and willingly allowed Him to instruct me. Any who know me know that I abhor self-praise, haughtiness, placing oneself over others, anything relatively close to those things. I also detest and am repulsed by receiving attention from a lot of people.

No, I embraced this role first, out of obedience. Second...it was just to be that much closer to Him. As it is with someone you love dearly and deeply. You desire to know them more and just to spend time in their presence.

So it was, and is, with the One who brought me to Aurora for the very first time. His greatness and His might, His sovereignty and very being is so amazing that we can barely grasp who He is in His fullness.

I wanted to be near Him and to deeper understand His mind and heart. I was not disappointed. In fact, I was overwhelmed at times by the things He revealed and by the very essence and power of His nature.

And the more I focused on Him, the more I understood that His purpose for me, for my role, was so that He could ultimately reveal His own glory and display who He is.

No one is worthy of such a lofty role, yet He still chooses to interact with His people and to work with them.

I mean, who was, who am, I? Just a lowly servant who committed her life to living rightly and in light, as He desired and commanded. Yet many, including myself, got to see and understand that such right living truly doesn’t go unrewarded.

But the higher He lifted me, the humbler and feebler I felt. Who am I? A weak and lost wandering creature, that’s what. And yet He sent me on vital tasks that brought about the gathering of ancient nations. He gave me dreams about what would happen in the days

ahead. I saw shining riders emerge from foamy seas. I saw chariots and horsemen clothed in fire. I saw mysterious and deep things, secrets of the realm.

And I stood before Him and saw things as they truly are through spiritual eyes.

At the memory of all these things, I can only hide my face in my hands. I was not worthy to be in His presence, let alone to look upon Him.

Yet He did all these things for me, and I was allowed to see Him in His terrible but magnificent glory.

But the battle for the mastery is not the end. The end will not come until Evil itself is bound and destroyed forever because Evil never sleeps.

Until then there is still more for me to learn and do. I know and believe there is. There's always more.

PART III: Transform

Chapter 123

A New Face & a New Name

Summer was in full-swing in the South. Everything was again lush and green, and the wildflowers were out en masse. All things seemed determined to grow and flourish in spite of the spreading shadow looming on the northern horizon.

The very first thing Jada did was take in a deep breath of the fresh, clean air. *Beautiful*, she thought, as she took in the fluttering oak leaves above her, and the carpet of green grass in the vast clearings outside the stand of trees. *It never gets old.*

Judging by the landscape, Jada guessed perhaps only a week had passed while she and Abner had spoken.

She watched with enjoyment as the bumble and honeybees buzzed about the nearby flowers and clover. She could picture spotted fawns learning the way of their forest homes and perhaps still getting used to their own awkward legs. She imagined the spring foals had now become more daring and challenged one another to races over the plains or up dangerous mountainsides. The wolf pups would also be exploring more and learning from the adults how to howl.

Eye catching a glimpse of something purple beside her boot, Jada knelt down and found that it was a tiny flower, much smaller than its other companions.

A late riser, eh, she thought, gently tracing the silk leaves with a finger.

Standing, her gaze turned towards the north, where a veil of dark gray hung over the horizon. Her heart sank a little and she sighed, before returning her gaze to the flower one moment longer.

Better enjoy the moments of peace and beauty while it lasts, she mused as somberness and a touch of foreboding draped over her spirit. She sensed the realm was going to become much darker before growing lighter again...if it actually did. Who knew if they'd come out of this darkness? Or had the end come and shadow would encompass this world until He vanquished it forever?

But there would be more time for sober contemplation later.

Jada straightened and looked about her, in an attempt to get a better idea of where she was. Judging by the area, the types of trees and the large stretches of open, subtle hilly land, she surmised she was far south.

Probably as far as Asgarod, she nodded, *perhaps a touch farther.*

Reminding herself there truly was little time to waste now, she gave a sharp whistle. No response came, save the merry chirping of the birds.

Jada whistled again and then shouted for Zohmar.

Where are you, you big lug?

Gaze going to the trees, she spotted a robin. "You haven't seen a silver-blue horse around here have you?"

The robin shrugged its wings. "No, sorry, traveler."

"How about an owl by the name of Phoenix?"

Again the robin shrugged. It was about to add something further but suddenly stiffened. Hastily it turned and fluttered higher up into the ash tree.

All the birds fell silent and not even the air moved.

Jada felt the ground beneath her feet begin to tremble as the sound of heavy hooves drumming the earth reached her ears. A large horse was approaching, and when chills washed over her, she gathered it was a creature of might and some authority in this area. And one likely with a dark and fierce temper.

Jada heard and felt the horse stop a short distance behind her and then exhale sharply. As she slowly turned, the animal pawed the ground and snorted.

Nope, she thought as her eyes beheld the creature before her, *that's definitely not Zohmar.*

He wasn't broad, but he was tall and had good substance to him. Though he was long in the face and in limb, he was still evenly and powerfully built. Dark blue roan in color, his entire face, from forehead to nose, was black and matched the color of his eyes, which glinted with a dangerous light. His thin black mane he tossed about an alarmingly strong neck and shoulders, and his black tail he switched about his stripped upper hind legs. There wasn't a single, bright white hair on his body.

On top of it all, he was a stallion and held the superior air of one. He owned the sky and the stars. All were beneath him, especially humans.

Jada knew that she needed to get going, but no way was she about to risk a premature move that would get her killed. She was keenly aware of the expression in this stallion's eye, the wild gleam that emerged when a fiery spirit had been kindled.

Being trampled was not how I imagined going out, she thought. This definitely can't be the threat the phoenix messenger mentioned to Michael and the others. Zohmar, where in the world are you?

Eyes narrowing, the blue roan lifted and turned his head a little, so as to get a better look at her. His fine ears flicked backwards a moment, and then forward as he took a few unsure steps towards the girl.

You are the one they call Adrana.

Jada's eyes went wide when she heard the deep and somewhat gravelly voice inside her mind. *A telepathic horse, thought Jada to herself. This is the most awesome thing ever. Unless, of course, I have multiple personalities and that was the voice of one of my other sides.*

The stallion stood before her and waited with expectation.

Looking directly at him, and having no idea how this worked, Jada attempted to reply, *Adrana? I'm sorry, I don't know that name. I go by Jada.*

At this, the dangerous light left his eyes, and the big horse visibly calmed.

You are both names. 'Adrana' is what the people, especially in the South, have been calling you. It's a name they have taken up. Do you know its meaning?

When Jada blinked at him, the horse gave a shake of his head. *Forgive me, of course you wouldn't. It is a word older than the ancient language and was spoken by Him ere the moon set for the first time in this realm. It means "the wandering light," and refers to the lone stars that shoot across the night skies sometimes: visible and burning brightly for but a brief moment, and then gone again for an unknown length of time. Long have these first words been forgotten, but with the stirring of great light and darkness, He has also brought back to life the words He first spoke when He made this place. He is stirring them in the minds of His people, hence your name "Adrana," the wandering light, as you are both a wanderer and a light.*

Extending a foreleg, the stallion dipped his head respectfully. *Forgive me for startling you, but I must be careful. I've crossed enemies hidden behind fair appearances, and I've met friends who were rogueish to the eye. I am Draug, overseer and protector of this corner of the South and the West.*

Draug, considered Jada briefly to herself. She'd hate to have to try to spell it. Dra-ow-g, she repeated.

Strange as the name might seem, Jada actually knew that one.

The dark light, she thought, and the horse gave a nod of his regal head.

She was just now grasping the fact that she was having a telepathic conversation with a horse. Not just a horse. None in this realm, or in Earth's, were "just" horses. Still, he was significantly more than an equine.

As she took in Draug, she noticed the majestic air that surrounded him. When she gazed deeper into his dark eyes, she saw that he was as old as time. He was old, very old, as ancient as the stars. Great wisdom was in his eyes, and his gaze was of one who had seen everything under the sun. He had seen the birth of new life and death. He had seen the mountains when they were still young and green, and he had seen them age and grow older, taller, and colder. He'd walked beneath the newly burning stars and seen night fall upon the realm for the first time. He'd seen countless winters and springs. He'd seen many battles, as the subtle scars that covered his body spoke to, and he'd seen seasons of peace, which kept the fire of his spirit burning hot. Before Cassius had come, he was. Before the realm was corrupted by darkness and was torn by its first war and battle, and saw the first blood spilt – he was.

The stand of trees they were amongst faded, along with everything else, and Jada saw how Draug had come to be.

There, on a green space before a stand of new trees stood Him, the One who'd created time and created the realm. She couldn't clearly see certain features of His, especially His face, because they were kept from her sight, and He was standing a distance away from her. He was also clothed in white and almost too magnificent to look at.

Left palm up, He placed His right hand on top of it. Light glowed and shone between His fingers as a mighty gust of wind came up and swirled around Him. As He drew His hands apart and spread out His arms at waist-height, light grew in the space between His hands.

Then, the wind increased and the hazy light seemed to writhe and take the shape of one horse, and then another. There they stood beside each other, a white horse and a light gray. The two horses turned their heads and touched noses, before five new horses miraculously filled the space between them: a crimson, a black, a palomino, a dark blue roan, and a dapple grey.

All five horses fixed their gazes intently on their Creator, who still stood before them. Jada couldn't hear the words, but He seemed to give instructions to each horse separately, and then point in various directions across the realm.

The first two horses created turned and stood on either side of their Master.

The dapple grey turned and galloped north, as the first rays of the sun spilled over the soft and gentle land. The palomino galloped east, towards the rising sun. The crimson horse sprinted southeast.

As these three moved off, full of life and splendor, the winds of the realm stirred and raced along each steed. Then, to Jada's further amazement, more horses miraculously appeared, as if born upon the wind itself, and galloped alongside each of the three original horses. Sweet and beautiful whinnies rose up, the first songs sung to the newborn world.

However, things went differently for the black and roan horses.

At His beckoning, the black horse stepped forward to Him. He then turned and faced West into the forest. After explaining His wishes, He placed a hand on the horse's forehead and then shoulder, before extending His arm to the trees.

The black horse, full of fierceness, nodded his head, pinned his ears, snorted, rocked back on his haunches, and then launched himself forward. Quickly he disappeared into the deep shadows of the forest.

The blue roan looked after his dark companion as a silent whicker made his nostrils quiver. Now that the distractions, the other horses, were gone, Jada finally recognized that the roan was Draug.

So he really was here at the beginning, she thought.

When He turned and looked at the final horse, the roan lowered his head in submission. But He made a gentle movement with His hand, and the horse raised his head again. He touched the roan on the forehead, as He had the black horse, and then pointed to the sky almost directly overhead. It was still inky and dark near the point directly above them, and far to the southwest.

He spoke to Draug, and the horse nodded his understanding. After final instructions were given, the blue roan with a dark face took a few strides away from his Master. He gazed up at the dark void for a breath, then pawed the ground, gathered himself, and took a mighty leap.

He left nothing more than a dark streak that arced up into the sky. The only trace of where he was, was marked by a subtle trail of stardust.

That was when Jada noticed that the inkiness was shifting and drifting farther southwest. The darkness of night was leaving, stars burned brightly briefly, and then the morning light was finally able to advance.

Faster now the darkness went, and seemingly on its heels, relentless, was the dark streak trailing stardust. In a matter of seconds, the darkness and the trail were gone and light wholly flooded the realm.

Jada turned away from the vision and looked at Draug, standing before her in the trees. *You're the dark light...the light that chased the night away, so the stars would be revealed and the sun could burn her path across the sky.*

Draug's nostrils quivered and a pleased expression settled on his face. *I am also one of the two who continues to drive back dark and evil things that lurk deep in the South, and*

come out of the Ancient Wood in the West. Dark and dangerous things, Adrana, fell beasts and creatures that the people of this realm have long forgotten about. I, and those with me, patrol these borders to keep others safe. That is our task, as is the task of my brother, the black horse sent into the West.

Jada glanced over her shoulder, but the vision was no more. Only trees stood behind her now. *But...you were there in the beginning. You were with Him. He sent you, and your brother, to dark places and to run at the heel of darkness. How...how can you tolerate being so far from Him?*

The blue roan whickered kindly and with affection. *He made me to rejoice in the morning light, but to love even more the night. I fulfill my purpose and my task, and He is near. He is always near to His creations. I am reminded of Him every time the first slivers of sunlight dance on the leaves or glint on the snow. And I am reminded of Him every time I see the first shadow of dusk or the first star appear in the night sky. Unlike many, whose memories fade over time, even the sweetest ones, mine do not. Every memory is bright and real in my mind. I can still vividly recall the gentleness and love, and yet unimaginable power, in His touch. To me, the passage of a century is but a blink of an eye. One day, I will be reunited with my brother and my sisters. One day, we will be reunited with Him, and may we present ourselves before Him and know no shame, for we completed our task to the best of our abilities.*

Jada was speechless, both in the wonder and beauty of his words, his speech and how he spoke. Ancient and timeless. Though he hunted and fell dark things, he himself was untainted by evil. He was not tempted or weakened by it. He just was.

A deep whicker, or perhaps it was a rumble of laughter, sounded in Draug's chest at Jada's starry expression.

Come now, little wandering light, you have places to be, said the roan, *I know not where your charge is, which is why I am here. I know you must quickly find Michael, great commander of men.*

Draug gave a shake of his head and toss of his mane as he danced sideways a few steps.

Jada's brain told her something had suddenly changed with the horse, and it took her a few seconds to realize what it was. She couldn't keep her jaw from dropping. Draug wasn't just a timeless horse, born of the very first two horses created: he was a unicorn. The horn was visible now, black, about two feet long and curving slightly backwards.

Draug whinnied with what couldn't have been mistaken as dark laughter. *There is no hide too tough, no armor too thick that I cannot pierce, and there is no foe that I cannot slay.*

The dangerous light was rekindled in his eyes as he presented his back to Jada and popped up in a half rear.

Quickly, he said with much excitement in his voice. The commander is close, but there is also an enemy nearby. I will not speak of it. I know it is one that you and the other humans must deal with, so I have not done away with it.

With only minor difficulty, Jada climbed onto Draug.

With a shake of his head and toss of his forelock, she watched the horn on his forehead shimmer slightly and then fade from sight.

Draug leapt forward without warning, but there was no need to worry. Jada had the sense of acceleration but wasn't thrown off balance. She barely felt the change from standing still to galloping all out through the trees.

While time seemed to slow when she rode Zohmar, it seemed to completely cease to be when atop Draug. The trees blurred by and suddenly they were flying across a large open meadow. The wind wasn't deafening, as was expected, and the air seemed to flow around them rather than right against them.

They crossed the clearing in the blink of an eye and Draug ducked into another thin line of dim trees.

I have been waiting for this day, said Draug to her, as eight more horses appeared and flanked either side of their position. It is of such great importance. Do you know why, Adrana?

The line of trees passed away and they charged out onto a great plain beneath a clear and deep blue sky.

To Jada, all of this was surreal, and she was utterly caught up in the moment. It felt like a dream, but it wasn't.

I'm sorry, I don't, she answered.

It is a key sign of the times, replied Draug, before lifting his head and giving voice to the most beautiful, and loudest, whinny she'd ever heard from a horse.

It shook the very air. Not only that, but the subtlest ripple went out over the ground before them and raced ahead. When it reached the trees in the distance, a number of shrieks came from them and then several groups of trees swayed madly, as if something large had disturbed them. A handful of shadows, only faint vapor to Jada's eyes, shot out of the trees and then fled southwest with all haste.

Draug tossed his mane and whinnied again, tone assertive and demanding.

In the forest, growing larger, one or two more shadows shrieked and fled after their companions.

The eight horses, four on either side of the road, opened their strides even more and moved ahead in a staggered line, creating a "V" with Draug at the point in the rear.

From your arrival to this point now, with you astride me, continued Draug to Jada, many things, deep things, have been set into motion that only those graced with the deepest insight can understand. Things only the wisest with the broadest vision can see. The pillars

of time are now crumbling, and the hourglass is shaking. Understand: the arrival of you, the fair traveler, marked the beginning of the final chapters of this realm's existence. Darkness is rising and stronger than it's ever been. Light is fighting hard to keep up. The last battle is not yet come, but its time is finally cresting the horizon.

Jada's mind reeled at all of this information, and she was still attempting to fully grasp just what and who exactly Draug was. Finally, her head cleared enough for her to ask, *not to doubt you, but how can you be certain of all of this?*

One of the last things He told me, before I leapt into the sky and chased away the night, answered Draug, voice quieter as he remembered, was that at the start of the final chapters, the wandering light, the traveling star, would ride upon the back of the dark light, who would clear the way and send the night flying before them...so that the star could shine brighter still and remain unhindered.

Jada felt smaller than she had in a long time. As she'd told Abner the wolverine, she didn't ask to be important. She didn't want to be.

She lifted her eyes to the clear heavens, *Father God, I'm not anyone...*

You're wrong, Jada, answered Draug evenly. Everyone has their task. Everyone's role is vital and they must play it. You have your task before you, and you've been selected for your part. You're important and greatly valued. Just as it's wrong to claim to be something you're not, or take something that isn't yours, so it's just as faulty to deny what you are. And you have not given yourself any of your titles. They were bestowed upon you, so they are not vain.

Jada drew a breath and returned her gaze to the trees, which they had almost reached.

Know this one last thing, little wanderer: that you are about to be fully lifted into your role, fulfilling the purpose of why you were made and why you were brought here. There is great and powerful light in you, as with all those who belong to the One Who made the stars. But you will be lifted above many, and you were made to be unique because you've been chosen for solitary and dangerous work. By your hand, legions will be put to flight. You sense the change already taking place, and I don't only sense it. I see it. The seasons have shifted, and you are finally, after all the tests and hardships, coming into your own.

Draug shook his head, and the black horn glinted and reappeared. He snorted lightly with excitement and powered onward towards the forest.

Jada could feel the immeasurable power surging through the roan's muscles, and could feel him becoming hot with excitement, anger, and fight. Full of zeal he was, this magnificent creature who had stood before Him at the beginning of time.

Together, Adrana, the wandering light, said Draug, with rising fervor in his tone, you and I will run fast upon the heels of evil and break the spell of one who once cursed my forests...but who will no longer curse anyone after today.

Chapter 124

A Deceiver's End

Michael and his company were on foot and walking beside their horses. It was always pleasant to stretch the legs after having done considerable riding for several days in a row.

It was growing into another warm afternoon and the unit was moving along comfortably enough. No one was particularly on edge, and there wasn't any reason to be. They had yet to come across the "foe" that the white phoenix had warned about just over a week ago.

So, nearly everyone had relaxed, having figured that if something bad were going to happen, it would've happened already. Besides, they were deep in the territory of the Southern Forces. What dangerous enemy could possibly venture into these woods?

Everyone but Michael and Gabriel had relaxed, that is. It took conscious effort to remind themselves to stay on guard. They wouldn't allow themselves to completely be at ease until they were within the walls of the Southern Fortress.

Mid-afternoon arrived, the day was clear, the sun warm, and a pleasant breeze was brushing through the trees. The smell of moss, clover, and earth were all intermingled on the moving air currents.

Thus it was easy to understand why many in the company became a bit drowsy. It wasn't like them to normally be this way, even on such a fine day. They didn't notice it in themselves or each other, except Michael and Gabriel, who exchanged glances frequently when their companions began yawning.

However, while the only two coherent individuals recognized this unusual behavior, neither knew the true cause for it.

Since taking her leave from Ambrose some time ago, Thalia, one of the two greatest deceivers, had passed into the borders of the Southern Forces. It had been a walk in the park and none spotted her. It had only been a few hours before she'd first heard reports of this Michael, son of David. A great commander of man he was, a mighty leader whom the people and warriors loved. He was also an invaluable asset to the fighting forces of all peoples resisting Cassius, Halden, and Ambrose.

Always on the lookout for wicked pleasures, Thalia thought it would be fun to pay Michael and his friends a visit. *What a terrible loss it would be if he wound up dead*, she'd thought, *or worse...if he just abandoned his commission and went wandering off with one of the enemy.*

She'd loved the latter thought. It would crush every single pitiful soul who'd once adored Michael and held him in such high regard. Besides, no man had ever been able to

resist her, and once Thalia led Michael astray and sullied his reputation...then she'd kill him.

By word of blackbirds in the area, Thalia learned where Michael and company were, where they were headed, and which route they were taking.

So, when they crested the next gentle rise in the trail and turned a broad corner, Thalia, great deceiver and slayer of man, was waiting.

Instantly the company halted the moment they saw her, but no one made any defensive or aggressive move.

Beside the path Thalia sat atop a round boulder, situated beside a little pool of clear, shallow water. The tiny stream that fed and flowed out of it bubbled noisily, and blue and brown dragonflies flitted about the brook.

A full minute of silence went by as everyone took in the woman sitting upon the boulder. She looked totally at ease, arms braced behind her on the rock as she leaned back slightly and sat with her legs crossed.

And she was beautiful beyond describing. No other creature could come close to comparing to this woman before them. She was tall, but not too tall, slender but not a stick figure, and she had a lovely shapeliness about her. Dark was her hair, almost mulberry in color, and it reached her waist and shone brightly in the sun's light.

But it was her gaze, the expression in her eyes, that trumped everything else.

To Ida and the women, the light was taunting, challenging, and belittling. The air about this woman said that she was superior to all other women and female elves. She was loftier, higher, far more beautiful, and men would always prefer her over them.

To the men, they saw daring and dark playfulness in her eyes. She knew she was a creature of unsurpassed beauty, she knew she was tempting, and she was obviously available. She was confident, and in that confidence, they knew she knew that she could have any man she desired. They could not deny her anything, no matter what. She might very well be the death of them, but they didn't care.

Deep and inhuman jealousy burned suddenly hot through Cora and Reagan towards this unknown woman.

But the fact that such dangerous emotions hit so fast and strong was what actually broke Cora from her daze. Once the initial wave passed she came to herself, though she didn't move or make a sound. She knew immediately what she was dealing with, what kind of enemy. For the present, though, it was best to not let on that she knew. It was better, and safer, to wait and see what any of the men do.

No offense, guys, she thought as she stole a sidelong glance at Connor and the others, but I don't hold out much hope for you. Let's just hope you don't kill me if I have to act.

Poor, young, and innocent Reagan was long gone, wholly taken by the spell and lost in her mind with dark thoughts filled with wrath.

Ida, though, knew exactly who and what this woman was and what she was doing. She felt no jealousy, only completely repulsed. She and Cora swapped a momentary glance and recognized that one another had their wits about them.

Gabriel, also, wasn't smitten by those big eyes or perfectly shaped lips. But he couldn't act, not right now. Like Ida and Cora, he'd have to wait.

But for the men, it was a different story. Namor and Connor had been totally taken by surprise at the appearance of Thalia and were thoroughly under her spell.

As for Michael, a fierce battle was raging within him. Thalia was directing most of the potency of the spell at him, and he knew it. He knew who she was, knew what she did and what she'd done. He wondered how many she'd killed, how many she'd lured to their deaths, and not strictly in the physical sense.

"I've been looking for you, Michael," spoke Thalia with a voice smooth as honey. "I heard you'd be passing this way, so I thought I'd wait."

Michael did not reply, though out the corner of his eye he saw the venomous glares sent by Connor and Namor.

She tilted her head to one side and the smooth, white skin of her exposed neck glowed in the sun. All the while she continued to eye him with that alluring and captivating gaze.

When Michael still didn't respond, Thalia pushed herself to her feet and slowly, gracefully approached him.

"I have been in the presence of those who have been called 'kings,'" she said, "but none of them compare to you, Michael, son of high rulers."

She stopped when she was mere steps in front of Michael, and eyed him up and down in a way that made his throat go suddenly dry.

"They had no air of dignity or authority," she continued, quieter now as she stepped closer still. "But you...you're very being is filled with it, and are one who ought to sit as high ruler over a great city."

Thalia was right in front of Michael now. She glanced him over a second time before giving a little smile and finally meeting his eyes.

Michael's heart was thundering madly in his chest, and for a moment he thought it might jump out of his chest. But the pounding matched the throbbing headache that was assaulting his entire skull.

In the first breath that he'd seen Thalia, he'd wanted her. But it passed as quickly as a breeze. He was repulsed by her, though part of him was still madly attracted to her.

These two sides were raging against each other in a way Michael had never come close to feeling before, and likely never would again.

“That is a future that awaits you, perhaps,” said Thalia at length, before gently placing a hand on the side of Michael’s face. “But right now you are weary with much travel and fighting, Michael, great commander of men. Why not come away with me for awhile and take some rest? The others will understand.”

She lifted herself up a little using her toes and brushed her mouth against his. “Come away with me.”

With war within Michael had reached the point where he had to act. If he didn’t do something now, he’d either be driven mad by desire or driven to uncontrollable rage.

When Thalia took a step away to gaze at him...Michael latched onto her neck with his hand. The strength in the grasp nearly crushed her windpipe. As she looked up at him, while trying to pry his hand away, she saw her spell had failed for the first time. Never before had this happened, that her target failed to gaze upon her with wild desire or a willingness to do whatever she asked.

No, the expression of Michael was dark and displeased. The lines on his face were hard and his mouth was drawn into a line. But it was his eyes that made her afraid: they were burning with a righteous zeal, a fire for swift and violent justice.

It was as if she’d been a deer, over-confident in its swiftness, and had teased what had appeared to be a sick and slow wolf by dancing about in front of it.

But the wolf had been neither sick nor slow, and it had latched onto her with ravenous rage and inconsolable fury.

The instant Michael’s crushing grip went around Thalia’s neck, Connor and Namor sprang into action. They made for Michael, and would’ve drawn their weapons if Cora, Ida, and Gabriel hadn’t acted also.

Ida and Gabriel tackled Namor to the ground and had him pinned in a heartbeat.

As for Cora and Connor, her grabbing and spinning him was enough to get his incensed attention. He drew his knife and his sword and stood ready for battle...before turning back sharply for Michael, who had not lessened his grip on Thalia.

Cora, with her own blade drawn, jumped after Connor.

He sensed her behind him and stopped and half-turned as he flicked the knife at her.

Expecting this, Cora dodged the knife and then deflected his swing with her sword. He apparently forgot all about Michael and Thalia then, and focused all his frenzied emotions on his teammate.

While that little duel was on-going, Michael looked Thalia over as rising disgust formed on his face.

“You sicken me,” said Michael, almost growling the words. “And don’t think that you almost had me. Not even close, little liar and deceiver who has led so many men to their deaths. I’m made of something higher than that.”

His jaw muscles flexed and his nostrils flared as a fresh wave of rage surged through him. He leaned a little closer, so he could half-whisper, half-snarl in Thalia's ear, "Besides...you're not worth it. Not by a long shot. There's only one worth falling for...and that's my future wife."

In spite of the fact she could barely breathe, and had been on the edge of unconsciousness for the past thirty seconds, Thalia couldn't resist trying to get in a quip. She'd failed, so she might as well as try and get something out of this.

She coughed and wheezed out a sneering laugh. "Oh, so your...traveling...si...sidekick...isn't worth anything either?"

Michael's grip retightened to a dangerous level and Thalia was only able to manage a weak gasp. "Jada is beyond worth," he growled. "Her value cannot be measured."

His expression softened a little and his gaze dropped a moment. "And no man could come close to being worthy or good enough for her."

Then, drawing a sharp breath, he refocused. "But you...you made yourself worthless and worthy of nothing more than to wallow in the mud and mire. That is the life you chose...and you've wasted it by luring men into your pit. But no longer..."

In the meantime, Cora and Connor were still having a dance. On a normal day, they were evenly matched in blade combat. But fortunately today he was fighting mad, not smart.

After dodging out of the way of a few more jabs with the knife, and another sloppy swing with the sword, Cora seized the opportunity and throttled him smartly in the jaw.

Connor dropped the knife and the sword, and then dropped dazed to his butt in the dirt.

Cora was about to jump him, and maybe give him another swing or two in the face, when a powerful whinny punched through the stillness that had settled over the area. It was followed immediately by a gust of wind that roared in fierce from the West. It bent the trees in half and threw up dust, leaves, and grit.

A second gale hit immediately after, carrying yet another whinny, terrible and filled with authority. The gust hit the group with such force it was almost as if it were more a shockwave than a mere burst of air.

The coming of the sudden tempest cleared the air instantly of the effects of the spell and everyone emerged from their stupor, if they hadn't already. Everyone looked over to see Thalia staggering away from Michael.

The gale had broken the tunnel vision of his fury and his grip had weakened enough for her to break away. She'd also stabbed him with a knife she kept at her thigh.

The wind was blowing, and everyone was still getting their bearings when an arrow whistled from somewhere behind the group and nailed Thalia in the chest.

Galloping hooves came down upon them not a blink later. Out of the air itself the horse, a tall and magnificent creature, seemed to come. He slid to a stop behind the group and, full of fiery wrath, pinned his ears and tossed his head.

The rider, with bow in hand, leapt lightly from the stallion and passed with swift grace through the gap between Cora and Gabriel.

Thalia, still looking with disbelief at the arrow sticking out of her, staggered backwards another step.

“Thalia.”

Stopping a dozen feet from the deceiver, the rider stood tall and like one who held great authority.

“Thalia,” spoke the rider again in a cold and strong voice.

This time the deceiver raised her stunned gaze.

Lifting a hand, the rider continued firmly, “Your reign of deception is finished, and the crown of death that you have proudly worn for so many years has now been cast down. Your spell is broken.”

Another mighty gust of wind tore through the trees. Following after was a blinding flash of light and loud, hollow crack, almost like thunder.

As the light faded and the gale quieted, the company saw Thalia’s body cast upon the ground, thirty feet away like it had been thrown. There was no movement or sign of life from her.

That was when the unit finally grasped who the rider was: it was Jada. She seemed to have grown taller, and she was filled with a power and authority they had yet to see from her.

Turning sharply, the wandering traveler fixed her gaze on Michael. While looking him over, she spotted a red mark on his side between the armor. Her expression stern, she crossed quickly to him.

The others were still gawking at her. How was this the same Jada who’d left them two weeks ago? Yes, she’d had strength and confidence about her before, but now she had more of it. Her very being was filled with power...and light.

Even Gabriel had to blink a few times to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. Her hands seemed to be clear and they were still filled with light.

Like the others, Michael was still attempting to comprehend what he’d just seen Jada do, and how different she was now.

“Don’t worry,” she said when she stopped beside him and placed her right hand on his side. “It’s only a scratch.”

Before he knew what was happening, healing warmth spread from her hand, into the wound and about his side. When she removed her hand, it was stained with no blood, and the gash was completely healed, save for a subtle scar.

Michael, and all the others, only continued to stare at Jada. She was the same as he remembered, but there was more to her. There was no trace of fear, doubt, or uncertainty in her eyes. Instead, she was sure, steady, and confident.

Yes, he thought as he and Jada held one another's gazes. It's as if her very essence has changed. Her gaze always looked deep, but now it looks deeper. No, no...it looks through me, and sees far beyond the things of this current realm.

As Michael's mind slowly worked on this, he was finally graced with insight. He nodded a little. Before, Jada was a fair and priceless creature, a terrible warrior and hunter. But it seemed like that time had passed for her. She was higher than that now. Michael sensed that she held a much more dangerous power that made a sword look like child's play. Yes, it was dangerous and fierce, but it was good, though it wasn't safe. She'd transformed from Jada the warrior and wholly into a wanderer of light, here one day and gone the next, bringing hope to her friends and fear to the enemy. In her own way, she also was a counselor to them all, and held an air of unsurpassed wisdom and understanding.

Adrana, the word was whispered into Michael's mind.

As they continued to hold one another's gazes, Jada's continued to see right into his heart and soul.

Michael smiled. She was definitely beyond anyone's worth now, if there had ever been any doubt.

He'd known it, too, that she had to be some being of light forced to come down from her place in the heavens. Forced to tread in darkness and amongst mankind. And she was still the most beautiful and fairest thing he'd ever seen.

Jada was no longer old or young to Michael's eyes, or anyone's. She was timeless. At long last, Jada finally spoke.

"Sorry, Michael," she said with a slow smile, "but Thalia was nowhere near good enough for you."

Michael grinned and chuckled, and then that chuckle grew into a laugh. He wanted to hug Jada, but now he was afraid to, more hesitant to get too close to her. Well, he was only a little afraid, and it was mostly out of increased respect that he kept his distance.

The others cautiously stepped closer, sensing the same thing Michael did.

Wow, thought the commander of men, everything has just changed. Everything has changed. We must've just come to a pivotal shift in the time of the war.

Jada sensed, almost heard, Michael's thought. She was a touch surprised but mostly found it interesting.

Is it because I met you, she asked Draug, and you first began speaking to me in thoughts?

Yes, replied the stallion. *While you were extremely keen in reading people's words and expressions before, now you'll be able to better see what's truly on their minds.*

Jada gave a single nod in response to Michael's thought. "This season of conflict is nearing an end. Cassius draws nearer and will also use the forces of his puppets', Halden and Ambrose."

She looked at the others. "Time is short and things will unravel quickly now..."

While she was still speaking, the urgency and idea to ride to Sirion came to her. Yes, she had that task before her yet, and the time to do it had come.

"The commander and his unit should continue on to the Southern Fortress," continued Jada. "And quickly. There are generals there anxiously waiting your arrival."

Her eyes went to Cora. "The time has come for you to ride with me, for a while."

She glanced back at Michael. "There is something I need her help with, and I will need her beside me in short order. But she at least will return in due time."

Michael nodded firmly. "My warrior is yours."

As if I could tell you 'no,' he finished in a thought to himself. You could probably punch me just by looking at me or something.

The corner of Jada's mouth tried hard to pull upward. Draug didn't attempt to hide his mirth. He whinnied outright with laughter.

"We must hurry," said Jada. "Time is against us."

Her gaze flitted over Namor, Connor, and Reagan. All three of them appeared to have returned to normal and seemed a bit embarrassed by their earlier behavior with Thalia.

Turning, Jada whistled, and this time a familiar whinnied answered.

A minute later, Zohmar galloped up to the group as they were mounting their own horses. However, when he looked at his rider, he slid hard to a stop a dozen feet from her. He gazed unblinkingly at her for a long breath of time, during which the others saw light being reflected in his dark eyes, as if he were looking at something shining brightly.

Then the silvery blue stallion whickered softly and lowered his head respectfully.

Jada just smiled warmly as she extended a hand and spoke to her horse in a language unknown to anyone there, save Draug.

At hearing that timeless language, the one He'd spoken in the beginning, the blue roan unicorn closed his eyes and savored the sound of the speech.

Zohmar walked to Jada and stood beside her, before dipping his head to Draug.

The timeless horse returned the gesture.

Thank you, thought Jada to Draug as she faced him directly, *for everything. This truly has been an eventful day, a day of change...and fulfillment, I guess.*

Draug's nostrils quivered in a silent nicker. *It has been a day of days, little wandering light, and I can't wait for the days that are to come...*

The stallion looked Jada over for a moment, before settling his deep and far-seeing gaze upon her again. *My old friend, Balo, told me what he saw when he first gazed upon you. He saw first a strong and great warrior. Yet as he looked deeper, he saw that warrior become something so much more: a being filled with light that no sword or spear could prevail against. First you were a warrior in shining light. But now, now you are filled with burning fire. Like all travelers, there is a timeless feeling about you, just like what you sense about me. We are timeless, called for a special and unique purpose. Until our final task is complete, no enemy will succeed against us. Then, in the end...*

Draug smiled and his gaze grew distant as if remembering some old memory. *Some taste death, whether by sword, illness, or the passage of time. But there are a few...like you and me...who will not taste it. We pay a heavy price for it, almost too heavy. All the grief we must suffer, all the pain we both face and witness, and the torment of watching dear friends pass...it's almost too much, too heavy a burden to bear, that we should live on, while everyone else passes into peace. While everyone else passes away and is taken by death, you and I will see the realm live out its last days, and then...we'll just pass out of thought and time, and find ourselves suddenly walking beside Him once again.*

Jada knew of how dark and difficult the days ahead would be. Her vision following the final duel with Aiden was always looming in her mind, and she wondered again just how many of her friends she'd have to watch die. Just how accurate was that vision? She supposed she'd find out soon.

Will I see you again, my friend, she asked Draug.

The blue roan lifted his head and whinnied again with laughter. A bright light was rekindled in his eyes as he pranced away a few steps. *We are timeless, Adrana. We will see one another again, maybe in the near future, and if not there...then when this realm sees its final day...and we find ourselves walking beside each other in the star fields.*

Somehow you lighten my heart and give me hope, smiled Jada. *I'll see you around, he who runs on the heels of the night and evil things that stalk in the dark.*

With a snort, Draug pinned his ears and launched himself westward into the trees...with a flicker or two of stardust trailing behind him.

Jada smiled as she turned to Zohmar and patted his strong neck.

"Wait, but...why aren't you coming with us?" asked Reagan, both greatly concerned and disappointed. "You...you just got here."

After swinging up onto her horse, Jada looked at the girl. Reagan had matured into a beautiful young woman, but at heart she was still an innocent child.

"My task was only to find Michael and his company, and deal with an enemy," answered Jada evenly, but with as much gentleness as she could manage. "I have other pressing matters to see to, while you and the others have your assignments."

“Will we see you again soon?” asked Reagan with hope in her voice and on her expression.

“I can never say for sure, but...I think it would be sooner rather than later, with everything that is going to happen in such a short amount of time.”

“That, uh...I don’t mean to sound, um...but that was...a bit cryptic,” commented Connor tentatively.

Jada considered him and noted how differently he regarded her now. It was the same with the others. They were a bit tense, as if unsure how to address or speak to her.

“I’m just speaking my mind out loud,” answered Jada with a little smile. “You’ll understand shortly.”

She looked to Cora, mounted on Raven. “Ready?”

Cora gave a nod. “Yes, uh...um...I feel like I should say something like ‘ma’am,’ but that doesn’t seem fitting for you.”

“I’m having the same problem,” agreed Connor.

Jada smiled weakly. “You can discuss it while you ride to the Southern Fortress.”

She turned Zohmar east, but paused to look at Michael, who was already looking at her. She then glanced at Gabriel, whose eyes were also on her. She wondered if elves were telepathic...

Look after Michael for me, my friend, she thought to him.

It’ll be my top priority, was Gabriel’s answer. *Ride swiftly, Adrana. The wandering light will be needed in many places in the coming days of darkness.*

Human and elf shared a long look and then smiled.

They were all about to head their separate directions when Namor, with not little distaste, asked, “What about Thalia’s body?”

Jada cast an eye at it where it lay.

“Leave it,” she said firmly. “She had no honor in life and she will not be given any in death. Leave her for the carrion fowl.”

Chapter 125

Challenging

They galloped eastward all that afternoon and straight through the night.

When they first started off, Cora was somewhat worried about their fast pace. She knew Raven was fast and had considerable stamina. But Zohmar had yet to be matched in speed, and Cora knew that her mare wouldn’t be able to keep up for long.

However, when they reached the edge of the great plains that stretched about the city of Asgarod, tall and dark in the far distance, Jada halted.

She’d asked permission to pet Raven, and of course, Cora consented.

Gently Jada had stroked the tall black mare's forehead and face, before running her hands down her silky neck. The moment her hand had touched the horse, the mare's eyes closed in total bliss.

While there was no light or glow in Jada's hands anymore, Raven still felt great heat surging from them. It was an intense heat, but healing. It ran through her entire body, and the mare felt new strength in her legs, strength that she'd never before felt.

All the time Jada stroked the mare and rubbed her forehead, she murmured to the horse in that unknown language. Whatever it was, it made Zohmar's withers twitch and shiver as he lowered his head a little and closed his eyes.

Jada hadn't known until that time what to do, and she didn't know how she knew what to do. It was a new innate knowledge, like the languages she'd been able to speak upon returning to Earth's dimension, languages she'd known without picking up a single textbook or taking a single language course.

This only went on for a minute before Jada had straightened, and Raven opened her eyes. Looking at Cora, Jada smiled faintly. "You need not worry about Raven. She's faster than either of you know."

Then Jada had spoken to Zohmar, "Come now, my friend. Take us to the city of the false king. His time of rebellion is coming to an end."

Cora's face brightened and her eyes went wide. She knew where they were going, why they were going there, and for whom they were going.

Jada's smile had grown before she signaled Zohmar and the silvery-blue horse leapt into a gallop. Raven jumped after him and kept pace.

They maintained their speed through the night and Cora was amazed at how fast they were flying. The land blurred by as it fell under the shadow of dusk, and before she knew it, the moon was high above them. Even though it was bright in the clear air, the stars too were burning splendidly. They lit the way for the riders, and all the land was bathed in a cold blue tone.

As they rode beneath the twinkling sky, Jada had lifted her eyes to it and smiled. Never again would she be able to see such a night and not be able to think of Draug or his words to her.

May they stay with me clearly, she'd prayed, that I may recall them in times of dire need of hope.

Now they galloped onward still as the clear dawn arrived, gray over the horizon at first and then growing steadily to a yellow glow. At last the top of the sun peeked over the far hills and greeted the land with morning. Blinding and warm, it bathed horses and riders in pale gold.

Lifting his head with ears forward, Zohmar sounded a whinny of greeting and tidings to the land, for morning had come. His coat shimmered and glistened in the pure light, and it seemed as if the sun was reflecting off him in shafts of white.

And save for catching glimpses of her flowing hair, Cora had thought for several moments that Jada had been consumed by the piercing light of the sun. In a way she had. The light struck and seemed to fill her, until she was hardly more than a burning white figure herself. For a long breath, she was too bright and brilliant to look at, and Cora had to shield her eyes.

Then, as the first wave of the sun's light passed, the brilliance faded and they were again two horses and two riders.

Cora had little time to wonder this, however, because both Zohmar and Raven had been filled with new life at the sun's arrival. The stallion snorted and shook his mane.

In turn, the black mare tossed her head before pinning her ears and arching her neck.

Zohmar mirrored her posture, and put back his ears and arched his powerful neck. Then simultaneously, stallion and mare lengthened their strides even more and took off towards the green hills rising up in the distance.

They'd come farther during the night than Cora had initially thought, not that she could really be certain how far they'd galloped. She'd noted Kolanthel when they'd passed by its domain, but that had been early in the evening, and she'd only ever been fifty miles east of that city. Beyond that, she was out of her reckoning as to where she was.

They reached those hills an hour later, but the horses did not slacken their speed. Onward they galloped amongst the hills rich and green, almost emerald in color.

It wasn't until nearly two hours after noon that Zohmar and Raven eased their pace. At this time, they began crossing numerous, but shallow little streams that flowed out of a beautiful forest to their south, off to their right.

It wasn't dark and ominous like the woods of the West. Instead, it was made of trees lovely in shape and color. It was an inviting place, a place where one could find peace.

And it was an ancient place. The Western Wood was old, but this place seemed beyond time. It was like the blue roan unicorn stallion...and like Jada.

The first to greet them while still out of the city was a band of one dozen horses. They spotted the newcomers a distance off and cantered over to greet them. They didn't block their path but cantered alongside them a short distance.

A happy chorus of greetings went back and forth between the dozen and Zohmar and Raven.

Cora was stunned at the magnificence of every horse. They were of remarkably similar build as Michael's horse and carried the same dignified and royal air about themselves as he did.

After about a minute, the herd boss wheeled back the way they'd come and took off, with the eleven others thundering behind him.

More whinnies greeted them from the edge of the forest, and it was another five miles before Jada and Cora saw the first humans. A pair of them, armored in light armor and armed with bows and swords, stood beside two horses. All four watched the two riders with great interest.

Jada raised a hand as she and Cora rode by, and greeted them in their native tongue.

Surprise appeared on the faces of the two people and their horses perked up before all four exchanged glances.

"How do you know their language?" asked Cora as they rounded the broad, gentle bend of the forest.

Jada looked at her with a smile. "You know...I really have no idea."

Then the two young women grinned at each other.

The forest bent further back towards tall, snowcapped mountains, but the riders continued straight over the hills. That was when they finally saw it: the city.

It was just like in Jada's dream. The "castle," as it were, and the immediate buildings sat atop a ridge. The line of mountains stood at its back and rugged arms melted into green hills north and eastward. To the west was the forest they'd been galloping beside.

Small farms peppered the land on the east and west sides of the main city.

"Welcome, Cora, to Sirion," said Jada.

"You've been here before?" asked Cora with surprise.

"Only in my dreams," replied Jada quietly.

To Cora's mild surprise they didn't go right to the main gate. Instead, Zohmar veered east and directed them towards a farm not a quarter mile from the city.

"I don't want to barge in," explained Jada as Zohmar slowed his speed on approach to the entrance to the farm.

"You want to confirm that the people are ready to kick out the current ruler and for the return of the rightful heirs to the throne," surmised Cora.

Jada nodded. "A crowd will mass quickly enough here. Many people have seen us and many more spotted us while we were far off. Word is spreading already."

Zohmar and Raven slowed to a walk and passed along the lane leading to a large barn.

Mares with their spring foals had been grazing in spacious paddocks on either side of the driveway. When they'd spotted the approach of the two horses, they'd all rushed to the fence. Now they pranced and snorted, escorting and trying to excite the visiting steeds.

Raven and Zohmar behaved themselves, and only arched their necks and danced on their toes a bit, even when mares and foals turned tail and darted across their pastures.

The owners and workers of the farm emerged from the barn and watched these two unexpected visitors draw nearer.

"I also don't want to let on right off why we're here," murmured Jada to Cora. "Follow my lead for now."

Cora, with a twinkle in her eyes, nodded. She couldn't believe that the time she and Jada had spoken about, and only mentioned briefly, was here. They'd come to Michael's city and were scoping it out. She knew deep down that "taking the pulse" of the people wasn't all they'd be doing today. No, she was certain that on this day an illegitimate ruler would be kicked off his unlawfully acquired throne.

"Good morning," called Jada in a friendly tone.

"Good morning," replied a tall man as he and a handful of others walked a bit closer. "May we help you? Are you looking for someone?"

"I'm searching for a young warrior who hails from Sirion," answered Jada, "a great warrior and commander of men. He is of high blood, from a line of rulers of this country. I'd heard it rumored that he had returned to his homeland for a while and I came to speak with him."

As predicted, nearby neighbors, and those who'd first spotted Jada and Cora were approaching down the lane. Some were on foot, others horseback.

At Jada's words, the man and his companions exchanged glances mixed with surprise and confusion.

"You're looking for Michael, son of David," he answered.

Jada nodded. "I am."

The man blew through his lips and scratched the back of his head. "We have not seen Michael for a very long time, nor David, not since the coup of Boethos."

Now it was Jada's turn to act surprised. "Oh..."

Her eyes flitted over the growing number of people. "I'd heard the throne had been reclaimed by the rightful heir."

"Unfortunately, no," answered one of the other men as he hung his head. "That hasn't happened yet."

"But you've been waiting a long time for it, yes?" asked Jada, almost suspiciously.

The man gave her a pained look that read something like, 'you have no idea.'

“It has felt like many ages of our time that we’ve been under that tyrant,” answered a young woman with long strawberry blonde hair. Though she was fair, she was strong, very strong both in will and body. As far as Jada had seen, everyone here was because they were all of high warrior blood.

“We’ve suffered long under Boethos,” she continued with rising anger that made her deep blue eyes snap. “He does as he wishes and rules only to ensure his own profit and pleasure. Not even his advisors can stand him. But who are we to dethrone him?”

Everyone was nodding, and several murmurs rippled through those gathered.

“Then you desire to have this dictator removed and the rightful ruler reclaim his throne?” asked Jada.

But now her tone had changed. There was a smile in her voice and subtly on her lips, and she raised her eyebrows as if knowing she was asking a leading question.

That was the moment they caught onto why she and her friend were here, and why she’d asked the questions that she had. A number of people gave a cry of laughter, and sudden hope and joy sprang up in their hearts.

The farm owner opened his mouth to answer but paused as the sound of galloping hooves came to their ears.

Zohmar and Raven shifted sideways away from one another and half-turned so their riders could see who was coming.

Three young men were flying towards them. When they entered the lane, Jada saw the lead horse was the blood bay leader of the horses that’d greeted them earlier.

The riders halted their mounts a dozen feet from the two visitors. Jada recognized the leader to be the rather outspoken young warrior from her recent dream about Sirion. Wild hope mixed with high suspicion was in his eyes as he took in Jada and Cora.

He opened his mouth to speak, but one of the crowd said, “They’re here about Michael!”

“They’ve come to do something about Boethos!” added another excitedly.

The young man raised his eyebrows in interest. But before saying anything, he instead chose to take a good look at these two riders, to size them up before addressing them.

Cora his gaze fell on first, and he noted she’d taken up a slightly defensive posture, with her hand subtly resting on the hilt of her sword. And she was glaring a little, her expression hard as a warning light flickered in her beautiful green eyes.

When his attention turned to Jada, his mouth became dry. There was something, some power that his spirit right away recognized about her. The last time he’d met any with eyes that had looked as deep as hers, he’d been at the deathbed of Sirion’s high counselor. He’d been his dear friend and mentor, and he had yet to meet another wiser.

Until now. Her gaze looked farther still and was like one whose memory went back to the beginning of time. But Jada didn't appear old.

No, he thought, as he slowly took in everything about her, no. She's also a traveler...wait, is she That traveler? The wandering warrior who can track any foe? Well...she is much more than that. There's deep power there...a fell and terrible power, I think. But it is good...and thank the Almighty for that! What a time we must be in, to have such visitors as these.

"So," said the young warrior at length, "you're here to see the throne of Michael, son of David, son of Malachi restored, are you?"

His tone held the suspicion that he felt. Yet Jada had discerned right away that this man, and everyone here, deeply desired to see such a thing take place. Their loyalty was fierce and deep, and their hearts belonged to the rightful rulers of Sirion.

Still, Jada knew he had to be careful, especially if he was an official in the city. For all he knew, she was here to lure him into a trap and then report him to Boethos.

A new and bright light glinted to life in Jada's eyes as she bent a hard gaze upon him. "You know well why I'm here, Conall, son of Jedrek," she replied sternly, his name coming to her just as she'd begun speaking.

Conall stiffened both in sudden fear at the look she was giving him and at the fact she knew his name, even though he had yet to give it.

To his credit, he cleared his throat and pressed onward, not quite ready to agree to an uprising or whatever idea this unknown visitor had. He'd never resented any other ruler like he did Boethos, but he wasn't keen on a bloody rebellion for the purpose of removing him.

"And may I ask who gives you...you the authority to come...here and do all the things that these people say you're going to do?" he asked, after gathering every last ounce of courage he could find. "And you have yet to give your name. A foreigner who comes to do such things may only be here to stir up mischief."

It took all of Cora's self-control not to smack him with the blunt side of her sword. Hot wrath rose up inside her, both in great annoyance and the unexplainable need to defend her friend's honor and motives. Well, she didn't, or more accurately couldn't, consider Jada as her friend anymore. She was above anything like that.

My dear friend is now my captain, she thought with a nod of resolution.

She then focused back on the situation at hand.

"Why you," exclaimed Cora to Conall, her face hard with incredulity, "you have quite the cheek to address a stranger like that, especially when you know full well who and what she is. And you know exactly why she's here, but you've let your fear get the better of you. That's why you're trying to catch her in a trap of your own making."

Cora looked around at the others. "You know the reason why we're here is true. You know the time is right and the hour has come. I can see that you know..."

Her eyes slid back to Conall, "And if someone like me can see these things plainly...then my captain can see that and so much more with just a glance."

Her expression hardened again. "How can you not know a traveler when you see one?! And not just any traveler, but the one who rides at the right hand of Michael himself!"

I knew there was a reason why I brought Cora with me, thought Jada.

That sent another round of murmurs, louder this time, through the crowd that was still growing in size.

"You're the traveler, the wandering warrior!" called out someone.

"The hunter who can track and slay any foe!" added another.

"Which young Conall perceived the moment he saw my companion and me," replied Jada sharply, eyes on Conall.

The tension in the atmosphere rose until it was nearly intolerable...and then Jada laughed gently. The tension evaporated, and all relaxed.

"You were rightly named, Conall," smiled Jada. "You are a strong wolf, and unfortunately you've had to use your strong nature and skills for a ruler like Boethos for so many years. And I cannot blame you for your caution or suspicion, especially in times like these."

It was Conall's turn to draw a deep breath of relief.

"You perceived me well, but allow me to more properly introduce myself. While there are apparently many names that others call me, they are too lofty for my taste. I go only by Jada if I have any say in it."

Jada's smile threatened to return as she continued, "And my companion, who you've already taken such a liking to, is Cora, an exceptionally skilled warrior in Michael's company."

Cora flushed at Conall and at the compliment.

Conall pretended not to notice that Cora was blushing, though the corners of his mouth tried to pull upwards.

"And I am Conall, as you know," he replied, "and I...unofficially welcome you to Sirion."

"It's an honor, Conall," said Jada, pressing on, "and forgive me that I cannot engage further with pleasantries. I must get right down to matters because time is important."

She let her gaze drift back over the now rather sizeable mass about them. "I am here on behalf of David and Michael, whom we all love dearly. I know you've long wanted them to return. You abhor the treason done against them, and I know that you've been grinding your teeth as you are forced to tolerate an illegitimate ruler."

The faint smile returned to her lips. "You've done rightly by the Almighty and by the high king of the North. An illegitimate ruler removed by the same means he took power only creates another illegitimate lordship. It would not have been the right choice, you all knew it, but at last you're long-suffering is about to be rewarded."

"But how?" asked a tall and broad warrior, sitting atop a chestnut horse beside Conall's. "In order for a false ruler to be removed and replaced with a true one, only someone with the right authority may do this."

"You're correct," nodded Jada. "Michael, and his father David are of the legitimate bloodline, those who have the right to rule this city and govern this land. As you can understand, David cannot come, for it would just be himself he brings. Michael, as you have likely heard, is commanding men, and even now is headed to the Southern Fortress. Both desire to return here and both desire to take up their rightful places. But both would rather remain cast down than to come and risk there being great turmoil, uprising and bloodshed. While they are great warriors and wise men, they desire peace over war...which makes them wiser still..."

Her sentence trailed off a second before she broke from her thought. "But allowing them to remain as they are, unrightfully dethroned, is wrong, and it will not be tolerated any longer. The time has come for the rightful rulers to return, and for the forces of this city to muster and gather for battle. The dark king is coming, you can now see the shadow in the north even from here. The forces of the South are struggling and will not be able to hold against Cassius, and Halden and Ambrose. We are already in dire need of your help, and your brothers and sisters in arms wish for your aid...though I dare say they've given up hope that you will come. Rarely does any ride from this land now, which I know is because your current dictator has restricted nearly all your movements..."

Angry mummings and nods went through the crowd.

"But...do...forgive me, wanderer, but respectfully...do you have the authority to remove Boethos from power?" asked a young female warrior standing near Conall's horse.

There was no indignation or challenge in her tone, not in the slightest. Instead, she was looking at Jada, drilling her with deep blue eyes and with a fierce hope in her expression.

Jada met the woman's gaze. "I have the authority, and I was sent to go before Michael, to clear the way for his return."

A wave of excited whispers swept through the crowd.

"So...are we going now?" asked Conall's friend.

"We go now and to deal with this snake who stole the rightful king's place," answered Jada firmly.

Needing to hear no more, Conall turned and spoke to several of his companions on horseback. Immediately, they turned their charges and bolted headlong down the lane, along the road, and towards the city.

Simultaneously, a large number of the people on foot followed after the riders.

Zohmar turned and started down the lane with Raven on his right. Conall's blood bay fell into stride on the left.

That was when a gust of wind, biting and cold, blew down out of the mountains. Jada looked over her shoulder at the clouds forming, hiding the peaks, and spreading a chill over the city and surrounding hills.

So, Boethos will be a stubborn one, thought Jada to herself, returning her attention forward as she signaled Zohmar for a canter. *Let him try to be. I'd like to see it.*

When they neared the broad gateway into the city, Jada spied people again on foot and on horseback filling the main road that led straight to the king's hall.

"I take it...riding through your streets is permitted," said Jada to Conall.

He grinned. "Any city that doesn't allow horses inside its walls has something wrong with it."

Jada smiled. "True indeed."

As expected, a throng followed after the group of riders once they entered the already open gates. Word had spread like wildfire about the two visitors and why they'd come.

When they drew near the hall, situated at the rear of the city and right against a sheer cliff of a mountain ridge, Jada noted how Conall had become tense again.

"Don't be afraid," murmured Jada to him. "There will be no need for great violence or action from the masses. What is about to happen will only involve two players at the least and a handful at the most."

Conall was a touch incredulous, finding her statement difficult to believe. But he gave a nod and settled.

"There is only one truly loyal to Boethos," he whispered as the horses halted before the long stairs leading to the pillared porch of the enormous hall.

"He's a small, dark goblin and will be lurking by the throne. He has two temperaments: haughty and provocative, or quiet and scheming."

"Thank you," said Jada. "That's good to know"

As Jada slid from her horse, she exchanged a glance with Cora. Her beautiful, black-haired friend looked at her with an expression of utter confidence.

The time that everyone, every person, every creature, even the land itself had been waiting for, was finally here. The fight might be ugly, dark, and fierce, but good would have victory at last.

When she set foot on the first step, Jada glanced up at the high pillars, ceiling, and header above the tall doors of the hall, all intricately carved out of marble and hard stone.

I have no idea what to say...

Even as the prayer ran through her mind, peace fell over her. She knew and believed that this would be like when she'd confronted Halden in that final appeal. The right words would come right when they were needed.

Even more peace flooded her until she was filled with it. There was no sliver of doubt or fear. As Draug had reminded her: He was always near to His creation, and He was here now. So, there was no need to fear or fret.

Up the stairs Jada and Cora walked, with Conall and two others in front of them. Right before passing through the large and magnificent entryway into the hall, another cool gust of wind rammed into them.

The hall was vast, high, and open. Two rows of tall, rectangular windows, one above the other, ran the entire length of the left wall. Skylights were also positioned in the great vaulted ceiling to allow for the most abundant light even on cloudy days.

A tiny, glinting light in the corner of Jada's left eye drew her attention. Out beyond the hills, the sunlight gleamed and danced off a great body of water.

The sea, she thought. It placed her in awe for some unknown reason. Perhaps because it reminded her of the dream about Sirion and all that was going to happen in the short days ahead. She knew what was going to emerge from those waters...

But now it was time to put forth all attention to the matter at hand.

Jada's gaze went to the end of the hall and rested on the man sitting in a rather relaxed manner on the throne, which was atop a short dais. It took great effort on her part to maintain an even expression and not wrinkle her nose at the sight of the figure that had absolutely no right to sit where he was.

To use a word she'd first heard from Merida, this Boethos was a "smarmy" character. He wasn't tall or lanky, and he was of rather strong build. But his face and the expression on it awoke the need in her to go take a shower.

His wavy, shoulder length black hair was oily, as if being the boss meant he no longer had to care about hygiene. His nose was narrow but bent in the middle, and Cora sarcastically wondered why anyone would ever want to put a fist into that face. A wishy-washy complexion gave a somewhat ill impression of the wearer, and his thin lips were subtly twisted into a perpetual soft sneer. Pale hazel-green eyes looked out at all with mockery.

Charming, thought Jada.

Remembering Conall's words, she quickly searched for this ruler's one loyalist and right away found him, half-hiding she thought, behind the right side of the throne.

Goblin was about right. The man was short, swathy, and clothed in heavy, dark clothes. Hunched at the shoulders, he kept his head halfway down in a constant demeanor of submission. The only reason Jada knew what color his eyes were was because they flicked up to her for not even a second. They were dark brown and full of scheming.

As for Boethos, he'd known that two visitors were here. He saw them when they'd ridden across the hills and disappeared to wherever it was. He'd then guessed that something was brewing when some associates of Conall, that outspoken mongrel, galloped into the city. He didn't need to hear whatever news they'd brought with them to sense that it had stirred the people. He could feel it in the air.

It dawned on him then, that the day he'd been dreading had arrived.

Now Conall himself and two companions walked towards him, their expressions stern. Boethos had yet to get a clear look of the two people behind them, though he'd seen that they were women when they'd first entered the hall. But as they walked, they kept themselves mostly shielded behind the three young men. Or "hidden," which was how Boethos thought of it.

A number of attendants, officials, warriors, and other more lowly folk cautiously entered the hall. They didn't fill it and left ample space in the center of the hall, as if they expected some kind of fight to occur. No, the "overflow" crowded at the entrance or stood outside the open windows and looked in.

Boethos paid no heed to them and kept his attention on Conall and the two unknown people.

They're probably poor and destitute beggars or something, he huffed to himself, and have come to plead for food or something trivial like that.

Another possibility dawned on him. *Or maybe they're messengers from the Southern Fortress or wherever, come to ask for help in their pitiful little fight against Cassius. Pha! More like tell me that I need to send aid. As if any outsider has the right to instruct me on how to run my kingdom...*

"Two visitors from the South wish to speak with you, sir," said Conall sharply. He resented Boethos like he'd resented no other, but although he wouldn't stage a coup, he still refused to address him as "my lord," or "my king." That went way too far...and it made Conall nauseous just thinking about it.

Conall and his two companions stepped aside, and when Boethos finally had a clear view of the two women...all of his fear fled. They were pathetic creatures to him, standing there with hands clasped in front of them, and with heads and gazes turned downward.

They said nothing and kept their eyes fixed on the floor.

Boethos could stand it no longer and finally blurted out indignantly, “Well? What’ve you come here for? I don’t have all day.”

He paused and looked smugly at the nearest attendants. “Well, actually I do have all day.”

He chortled at his own stupid joke and then looked back at the visitors. “Out with it!” he demanded boisterously. “Are you dumb as well as poor?”

While Beothos rambled off a few more insults, whispering doubts nibbled at Jada’s ears. *What are you doing here? Who do you think you are? What gives you the authority to come here and challenge Boethos? Do you really believe you can unseat him?*

But Jada just smiled to herself. *Nice try, but you should only use those taunts on someone you know is weak minded...*

She raised her head just enough to drill the goblin loyalist with a glare. She’d known the thoughts were from him. She’d pegged him as one who dappled it witchcraft the second she saw him. A chill had washed over her and a piercing pain knifed through her forehead. He had an eerie way about him, but he was no significant threat. He was just a little taunter who only gained victory whenever someone didn’t call his bluffs. But dappling in black magic was how he’d perceived who she was and why she was here, even though Boethos had instantly written off her and Cora.

When her eyes fell on him, the goblin drew a sharp breath and went rigid with fear. *Oh no*, he thought as an alarm sounded in his head, *oh no, oh no!*

I’d run while I still could if I were you, you little beast, thought Jada to him.

Upon hearing that thought all color left his face.

Jada tuned her ear back to Boethos just as he was saying, “What are you playing at, Conall? Is this another game to irritate me? Bringing stupid mutes into my hall to try my patience with you?”

“It’s clear to see why you have so many friends, Boethos,” said Jada finally as she raised her head and settled her gaze on the man. “You’re far too kind to strangers.”

Then the fear that had been so quick to flee came screaming back and seized him. Why hadn’t Lado warned him? That was when he noticed his hunchy sidekick had been clutching his arm and he simply hadn’t noticed.

Jada hadn’t needed to say a single word for Beothos to know why she was truly here. There was great challenge in her eyes and rising disgust in her expression.

He’d lulled himself into false security and now he was over-reactive and panicky. He sprang to his feet, eyes wild with both fear and disdain.

“Where are you going in such a hurry, Beothos?” asked Jada firmly, as she extended her arm to the throne. “Sit back down. Why in such a rush to leave the seat that you so clearly enjoy lounging in?”

Against his will, his legs weakened and he half-sat, half-fell back onto the throne. Sweat made his forehead gleam and was already staining the shirt he wore under his robe. He breathed hard as he grasped the arms of the chair. His heart was hammering no longer in just fear, but rising terror. But he was obstinate, and being angry at his fear helped him fight it and hold his ground.

“What...who,” he seethed in between pulling in deep breaths of air. “Who are you? Why are you here, anyway? What would a little...waif have to say to a king?”

Fuming and sweating, his gaze darted to the people closest to him. “I want her thrown out! Get her out of here!”

No one made any movement, other than to fold their arms or raise an eyebrow in defiance.

“Throw her out. Now!”

“If you were indeed the legitimate ruler, then perhaps someone might listen to you,” replied Jada as she squared her shoulders and took a stance of one thoroughly confident with their business and authority.

Boethos glared venom at her and looked like he was about to breathe fire.

But Jada definitely wasn't intimidated or scared of him. An old, familiar fire was simmering to life inside her soul and growing hotter.

“You know why I'm here,” she said sternly, “so don't bother to try and play the fool. I'm here on behalf of David and his son, Michael, the rightful rulers of Sirion, whose forefathers you led a rebellion against, whose blood you spilled! Blood that was pure and royal, two concepts that you know nothing about, Beothos. You're no more than a little man who speaks loudly that he has done nothing wrong, but cowers when finally caught in his wrongdoing.”

Jada looked him up and down, her expression now marked with disgust. “You spilled innocent blood and stole the throne of those who had been chosen by the high king himself.”

Her eyes flickered with the wrath and fire steadily rising inside her. “And you have the audacity to sit there boldly and proudly gloat over what you've done? How is there any honor or dignity in stealing lordship? How can you stomach to look at yourself after slaughtering the lives that you have?”

She gave a little shake of her head and a look of warning crossed her face. “Know that innocent blood, whether a child's or a king's, does not lie silently on the ground. It cries out against the wrong done and calls for justice...and those cries do not fall on deaf ears.”

Half-turning, Jada gestured to those in the hall. “And let's not forget about the outcry of the people. To appease the greedy desire of one small group, you removed the king that the people loved, stole the throne, and placed yourself on high. Not only did

you take power illegitimately, but you also oppressed those whom a leader is supposed to be safeguarding and protecting. You've harassed, you've belittled, you've tested them nearly to the point of madness, and you've taken nearly all their money and the resources that they've produced so that they couldn't afford to leave if they'd wanted. You knew they were upright in heart and that they'd never try to overthrow you, and in return you walked all over them and abused them."

That earned a lot of remarks of agreement and comments of affirmation. No one knew how Jada had known all of what she'd just said, but it had been entirely true. Save for David, Michael, and the high king himself, truly she was the only other one with the right to come and confront Boethos.

"A false king and a horrible example of a true one," jabbed Jada. "You may think you'd gotten away with all you've done, but you haven't. Today is a testament to that."

This time shouts rose up from the people behind her.

All while Jada spoke, Boethos sat there fidgeting, fuming, and sweating. His pulse was pounding madly in his head and he wanted nothing more than to kill the woman before him. But for some reason, he found himself unable to speak, let alone interrupt her. Every accusation, every statement against him, hit him like a punch to the stomach. He felt sickened from his anger, his fear, and something else he couldn't put his finger on.

At last, though, it was as if he'd been released by some spell of silence and he could speak.

Sweat was literally running down his face as Boethos, still grasping the arms of the throne, leaned forward. "You...you're one to talk about illegitimate and false...who gave you the right to come here and challenge me? What authority do *you* have, little witch?"

Jada's eyes flashed, her jaw muscles flexed, and she drew in a sharp breath through her nose.

"I am no witch," she bellowed, the richness and fullness of her voice echoing through the hall.

It had grown quite dark inside because of the brewing storm and thickening clouds. A cool rush of air whipped in through the windows and made the flames of the torches on the pillars snap and writhe.

The hall became darker still and a rumble came from deep within the mountain itself.

But as a moment passed, the area before the throne, where Jada and Cora stood, began to lighten slowly, subtly, coming from an unknown source.

"I am not witch or conjurer or sorceress," said Jada again, raising her left hand and pointing at Boethos. "Take care not to utter such foolish things again, lest they be the last words that you speak."

Taking another breath, she repositioned herself and stood as one braced for battle.

“You asked by what right, what authority I come here,” she continued, and the light about her grew still. “I was given the authority that I have from the same One who *allows* you to still be sitting where you are right now. The same One who has *allowed* you to rule for so many lives of men...”

Boethos eyes went wide. He pushed himself back only to discover he was still on the throne and couldn't go anywhere. He knew what Jada had said was entirely true. He recognized and knew the authority that she had was legitimate, and that she'd caught him.

And he knew that he could not ignore her or throw her out. He was now subject to this strange wanderer who had come to afar to unseat him. Whatever she bid him do, he would have to do.

Tense silence settled over the hall, and the people looked on and held their breath. There was Boethos, cowering on the throne, and there was the wanderer standing boldly before him and surrounded with light.

No, she wasn't surrounded by light. The light was coming from her.

The realization of this steadily dawned on more and more people, and they exchanged wide-eyed glances. But glances only. No one dared utter a word yet.

When Jada bent her gaze upon Boethos even more, he cried out and slid off the throne and down to the floor in front of it. He raised his arms, as if expecting some kind of harsh blow.

“Wh...what do you want from me?” he asked in a pleading question.

Now whispers danced around the hall. Most had obviously expected there to be a duel between the incumbent and the challenger, a test of strength and steel, blade-on-blade, an epic duel that left the defeated bleeding and cowering at the feet of the winner.

Yet as they considered all they'd seen, they were aware this was much more intense. It was a suspenseful duel in another way. It was indeed a test of steel, not of weapons, but of wills.

Boethos was a stubborn man who had long flaunted his superiority and knowledge that none in the city would challenge him. Nor could anyone rightfully, save David or Michael.

Thus, Boethos would never have shown any fear or sliver of doubt when confronted by someone who had no genuine authority to threaten or remove him. There he was, though, cowering before a wanderer who'd come from afar on behalf of Michael.

No, not just on behalf of Michael. At the heart of it, this emissary was here on business of the high king's. Whenever she'd mentioned him, the mind of Boethos was filled with glimpses of him, the high king from where he sat on the great white throne in his city. Yes, the high king knew what was transpiring here, even this very moment. He knew...because he'd sent this wanderer to do his bidding.

Boethos could not ignore or challenge that.

“I want you to leave,” answered Jada sharply as she continued to drill him with a relentless glare. “As much as it would amuse me to have you detained here so you could pass the crown to the rightful king...you are not worthy to even be in the same room as David and Michael. You’ve brought such shame so as to make yourself unworthy to take one step inside this land’s borders. So, you will be escorted to the edge of this country and tossed out. Where you go after that is none of my concern.”

Boethos, trembling now and unable to make eye contact with her, nodded his agreement.

“Now,” said Jada in a somewhat gentler, but still commanding tone, “remove the crown and *gently* place it on the seat of the throne.”

Boethos complied and with madly shaking hands. As for getting to his feet, it was clear he was going to need a hand.

Jada was about to suggest this, and several nearby warriors were prepared to act on it, when two events happened at the same time.

First, a dagger shot through the air and right for Jada. It would’ve gone over her shoulder at any rate, but she grabbed it by the blade in mid-air.

As soon as the dagger was airborne, an arrow answered it and plunged into the chest of the sender, none other than the goblin of a man.

Keeping hold of the dagger, Jada clenched her fist around it, and the metal crushed like paper. As she crumpled it with her hand, everything, the blade and the hilt, dissolved to dust and she let it fall to the floor.

Then, raising her eyebrows a little, Jada looked over at Cora, who’d long been ready with her bow. The muscles in her face were tight and her cheeks were flushed with sudden defensive anger.

While four strong warriors strode over and hauled Boethos to his feet, Jada slapped a hand onto her friend’s shoulder.

Cora, with set jaw, looked over at her captain and gave a decisive nod.

Jada smiled and took a breath, suddenly aware at how tired she felt. *What a whirlwind the past two days have been*, she thought.

Clouds still overshadowed the city and the hills, and it was misting now outside, but any foreboding was gone. This was a refreshing and cleansing mist and wind now, to begin washing away the stains and memories of the past years.

Already excited chatter and general merriment was buzzing in and outside of the hall. It was obvious that there would be abundant celebration this evening and attendants left quickly to prepare supper.

How much more celebration there will be when Michael actually returns to the throne, thought Jada, smiling warmly at the thought as she watched people rush about the hall.

Supper was prepared quicker than Jada and Cora had anticipated, and soon the dining hall was filled.

Because Cora knew Jada well, she made it a point to Conall that the wanderer wouldn't want to be placed in any seat of honor. While it was just and due, it would make her extremely uncomfortable. She'd likely make it a point to slip out quietly sooner rather than later.

Again, Jada was abundantly grateful for her companion.

So, much to Jada's relief, she and Cora were seated in the middle of a row of many tables. It was also clear that supper wasn't just about celebration, but business, also.

With them were half a dozen people from the line of advisors who'd stood before the true kings of Sirion. Jada discerned right from the beginning that they were true, honorable, knowledgeable in their specific areas, and wise.

She was glad Conall had taken the liberty to introduce them, otherwise she would've had to wander through the city searching for the right people to care of Sirion's affairs until Michael came.

It was obvious within the first minute of brief conversation with them that Jada would need to do very little. *Thank the Almighty for that*, she thought. *I'm a warrior, not a city organizer.*

As she listened to them, and regarded how high and noble each individual was, Jada again felt very small. These people came from royal blood and of lofty lineage. In seeing herself as lowly, and in comparing herself to the company she was presently keeping, she felt like a mixed-blooded mutt mingling with those whose breeding came from elite heritage. She was a scruffy wild horse in the midst of sleek-coated thoroughbreds.

Even Cora seemed like she'd finally arrived where she belonged. She fit in perfectly with the others, and if Jada hadn't known her, she would've thought Cora had been bred and born here in Sirion.

It was as if Jada was seeing her friend as she truly was: tall, noble, a queen in the making and one who was exceedingly fair and gracious. Few could compare to her. And as Cora, face glowing from the torches lighting the hall, conversed with the group, her eyes shone in a way that Jada had never seen. It was like her friend was meeting with new old friends, those she hadn't met previously, but belonged and got along with straight off.

Perhaps you will settle here, my friend, thought Jada, smiling in seeing her friend at home and among friends.

Her gaze went to Conall, who frequently looked at Cora. More than once their eyes met for a breath before they both shared a smile.

The conversation was beginning to drift back from business to other social issues, and Jada began to feel like the outcast. She was thinking of a way to slip away and search for a bed when Conall asked her, "So do you find that these individuals would serve as worthy stewards and caretakers of the affairs of Sirion until Michael or David arrives?"

Jada smiled weakly. "You know your own affairs better than I, and I have no say in how your arrange matters. But to answer your question: I'd say 'yes,' everyone here has been wisely chosen for the tasks appointed them."

Her smile widened a little as she looked about the group. "I'd say that the king isn't the only one who is going to be restored. You all come from various lines of advisors and are wise in your turn. It is pleasing to see that you too will be set again in your rightful places."

The group of men and women grinned at one another and their eyes shone bright as they regarded Jada.

Why does everyone have to look at me like that, she thought, resisting the urge to slouch and make herself smaller. She was grateful when her brain supplied her with something to say to bring this conversation to a close.

"Michael will be here soon enough, but I cannot guess when David will return."

"Either way, the city and this land are free and safe at last," nodded Conall.

"We'll ensure that our military forces are gathered and in order by the time Michael comes," added Brodan, a strong man and a former general of the military.

Jada, feeling wearier by the minute, nodded. "He'll have nothing to worry about, I'm certain."

"If there's no other urgent business, I'll take our two visitors to their rooms so they can rest," interjected Lyra, a tall and beautiful warrior with wavy blonde hair and green eyes.

Perfect timing, thought Jada, and she cast a grateful look at the woman, who smiled in response.

After exchanging "good nights," Cora and Jada followed Lyra out of the dining hall and along one of the many corridors.

They were crossing a lobby entrance that led to the housing section of the citadel when an attendant rushed up to Lyra and spoke quietly with her a moment.

That was when two people, at the far end of a hall to Jada's right, drew her attention. They held one another's gazes for a long breath. There was something oddly familiar about them, though she knew they'd never met. It was the expression in the eyes...like those who have been much in their lives, though they didn't appear old at all.

Are they travelers, thought Jada as she stared. She'd obviously been aware that there were others, but she had yet to cross another other than Blake.

And there are two right there!

The man and woman, with knowing expressions on their faces, smiled faintly and each gave a nod before slipping out of sight. Apparently, they and Jada would meet up later, when she wasn't about to collapse.

Right, and straight onto the next task, thought Jada, as she and Cora followed Lyra down a corridor.

Chapter 126

Tribes & Travelers

Jada had difficulty keeping her dreams straight. Try as she might, for some time she couldn't latch onto one single scene or event. Though she quickly figured out that the theme was water.

Deep water, and dark. Night surrounded her as lightning lashed out over the writhing waters that she was attempting to tread in. Swells rose well above her head before dipping swiftly and passing beneath her.

Normally she didn't have problems floating or staying above the water, but for some reason, she could barely keep her head above the surface. A wave crested and broke off her right shoulder and then barreled her over and put her under.

It was next to impossible to see much in the murky deep, but she did spot several things floating just under the water. When the next flashes of lightning lit the sky, it allowed her to better see what the objects were: bodies.

She didn't need to get any closer to know that they were the bodies of her friends. Cora and Connor were there, as was Reagan, Namor, and Akin. Or it was more appropriate to say they weren't there. They were just corpses, shot in the back with black arrows and then consumed by the sea.

With some effort, Jada managed to get her head above the water again. When she surfaced, she saw a burning town near the water. Its inhabitants ran screaming from the shadows that rode on swift wings out of the darkness.

A single glowing light to her left caught her attention. When she blinked, she found she was no longer in the water, but near the front steps of the king's hall in Sirion. The hall itself, and much of the city was on fire.

Michael was there, wounded as he sat leaning against the steps and glaring up at a terrible and fell general, who regarded him with disdain.

No words were exchanged, no quips or taunts. Instead, the general simply swung his sword and slew the prince of the city.

Jada felt like she'd been stabbed in the gut, but before anything else could happen, the land sped away beneath her. Next thing she knew, she was standing in the street of a village and looking at a dark squad that consisted of men and some kind of evil creatures, spawns of kyros maybe or, more likely, demons from the ranks of Levian himself.

The leader was an ugly brute with a black-bladed scimitar and a black bow and quiver of arrows. A yellow-green crescent glinted in his eyes as he and the others kicked in doors of houses and searched through the entire area. It was plain that they were looking for something or someone.

The scene changed to several different locations, but the group remained the same. Finally, the dreamer was enlightened more in regards as to what this party was looking for.

They stood in a very familiar village and several homes were ablaze. The others had been ransacked.

The demon leader of the unit grabbed hold of one of the village's warriors, talons wrapping around the man's neck.

"Where is she?" growled the brute.

The warrior glared with pained defiance and gave no reply.

"Where is she?" asked the winged shadow in a snarl. "Where is the wandering traveler?"

When he received no answer, he growled and was about to run the man through the chest when an arrow plunged into the beast's shoulder.

"Run, child," said a voice both dear and familiar.

Merida appeared, with bow and arrow in hand, as she put herself between Jada and the enemy squad.

"We're fine," she assured while stringing another arrow and sending it to another target. "We can hold our own, but you need to run, child! Run!"

Jada reluctantly began backing up as more warriors joined Merida's side. The enemy squad wasn't just any squad, she realized. It was a hunting party. Someone had put out new kill orders for her.

She was still backing when a black arrow landed in her left shoulder. While Jada was stumbling, the brute leapt right for her with sword at the ready. That was when an arrow plunged through the back of his neck, and he collapsed at her feet.

She tripped, felt herself begin to fall, and closed her eyes. But she never hit the ground.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was high above the realm, near the central territories if she had to guess. Far to the north, she saw a glint of white: the high king's domain.

As she watched, a thin black line began to outline the horizon, the mountains, and an area immediately around the north kingdom.

Her attention was directed southward, and a black line again began outlining what appeared to be territories. One after another, segments of land were drawn out.

If she counted correctly, there were twelve territories total.

“You’re treading in very deep waters now, little warrior...”

Turning, Jada saw a white phoenix with deep golden eyes. He was sitting atop a large boulder, and they were on some cliffs that stood right at the edge of the ocean.

“Dark times and great peril are before you, and the others,” he continued. “The hardest part of the race is here, the final effort, the last push to the finish. Darkness waits for any opportunity to devour your friends. As things are this moment, if you fail, they all will fall.”

Excellent, thought Jada, so no pressure, then.

“You know the tasks that are still ahead of you. They are difficult but don’t be dismayed. As the timeless blue roan steed said: He is always near His creations. How much closer He is to those He sends into darkness and danger! Be careful as you go along. There is a hunting party searching for you, both in this realm and the other.”

A boom of thunder came from the gray clouds above them. The phoenix glanced of his shoulder a moment and then looked back at her with concern in his eyes. “You must hurry and get moving now!”

Spreading his great wings, he fluttered them right at her face, and Jada fell backwards...and right into deep, stormy waters again.

“It’s time to wake up, Jada,” said the voice of Eliadar.

“Wake up.”

Jada opened her eyes and found she was still in her room in the king’s citadel. Sliding out of bed, she walked soundlessly to the door and peeked out into the corridor alight with torches. Judging by the sheer darkness outside the windows, she guessed it was still early. Or really late, however one looked at it.

She surmised she’d managed a few hours of sleep, but she felt rested regardless. After quickly putting on her armor, she stepped into the hall...and nearly jumped out of her skin.

The man and woman she’d seen in the king’s hall were standing at another entrance on her left. It served as the main lobby for the housing sector of the citadel.

The woman beckoned to her with a wave.

Glancing around out of habit, Jada quietly walked down the corridor to the lobby.

“We couldn’t sleep much either,” whispered the woman, standing a head taller than Jada.

“We must speak with you briefly, before you leave,” quietly added the man, head and shoulders above her.

Really, why is everyone so much taller than I am, thought Jada.

She gave a nod in acknowledgment at their words, and all three made their down the corridor to the king’s hall. When they reached it, they saw it was vacant though still lit by torches and lamps.

They stopped at a small table against the window-lined wall. Outside, Jada saw and smelt that the air was still stormy, and thick with mist from the clouds and salt from the sea.

The first traces of light marked the edge of the horizon and were just touching the clouds. The sea was churning and she could almost hear the waves thundering onto the shore.

“I’m Josiah,” said the man, before gesturing to the woman, “and this is Lauren. As you likely gathered last night, we are travelers like you. We don’t work together, but both of our separate paths were directed here, so they would cross with yours.”

“Please forgive our brevity on some matters,” continued Lauren, “and how we jump to different subjects, but it seems time is almost always of the essence. Were you visited with any dreams last night?”

Jada nodded.

“Did any of them involve segments of land being outlined with a black line?” asked Josiah.

Again, Jada nodded.

Josiah and Lauren exchanged a glance, and then Lauren explained, “The twelve lands that were outlined represent twelve tribes. Each original leader was appointed by the high king and given territory. From these twelve lands riches, materials, and an abundance of resources flowed. Some excelled in crafts and fine oils, others in science and mechanics, five were known for their advanced warcraft, and still from two the wisest counselors and judges came. The twelve were the pinnacle of all other lands and cities, and no others could compare.”

A shadow fell over her face. “Standing united, none could withstand them. But with the treason of Cassius, evil spread and reached even the twelve. Always so cunning and deceiving, darkness corrupted the hearts of the twelve, and one by one, they fell away. They became divided and quarreled over petty things. In recent years, the beckoning of the high king has returned some of their hearts to light. But others are ashamed of their past conduct and refuse to reunite. The lone holdouts, those who choose to be stubborn and deaf to reason and to the call of the high king, are the five tribes of war.”

“Of course,” muttered Jada, and then thought, *with the five that excel in warfare out of the picture, Cassius would face one less significant threat.*

Josiah nodded, as if reading her thought. “Exactly. We need the five to reunite with the others, and ultimately, for the twelve to stand together again. The twelve chosen by the high king, standing in unity, can turn back even the most relentless foes.”

Jada nodded as her mind pieced things together. “The twelve united under one banner again...and in addition to the forces riding from Sirion, with Michael at the head...”

“Cassius would get much more than he bargained for,” finished Josiah with a subtle smile.

“But that leaves a lot of work to be done,” commented Jada.

Her eyes went from Josiah to Lauren and then back to Josiah. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it exactly, and I don’t know any of these tribes or why anyone would want to listen to me.”

“We’ll ride to three of the five,” answered Josiah. “We’ll stir them to action. The other two will be up to you and your friend.”

Jada was about to ask another question, but when she saw Josiah and Lauren trying not to smile, she stopped.

“As to the names of the twelve tribes themselves,” said Lauren, with a twinkle in her eyes, “you’re already familiar with them.”

When Jada merely blinked, she continued, “They coincide with the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Jada gaped.

“And you’re actually in the borders of one of the tribes right now,” grinned Josiah. “This is the territory of Benjamin.”

The ravenous wolf, thought Jada, still trying to wrap her head around this new bit of information.

“Look here,” he continued as he pointed to a map of the realm. “Lauren and I will ride to the lands of Reuben, Gad, and Dan. You’ll need to rally Levi and Simeon. Send them to the Ruins of Iyasu. They’ll know where it is. From there, they’ll coordinate their movements with the Southern Fortress and with Michael.”

One more thing on the to-do list, thought Jada, and she was becoming aware of a rising need to return to Earth’s dimension. There was so much to do and her stomach tightened with tension.

She drew a breath and ran a hand over her face. *I also had no idea that I was going into a career of public speaking.*

She looked up at the two travelers. “But...what am I supposed to say? Why are they going to listen to me?”

“Well, for one, you’re a traveler,” answered Josiah, “and an infamous warrior. You’re going to warrior tribes, and tales of you and your deeds have gone throughout the entire realm. So, you’ll naturally have high standing with them in that arena.”

“Second,” added Lauren, with that twinkle still in her eyes, “this is a rallying cry. You’re not dethroning a leader. You’re mustering troops.”

“Besides, if there is even a single person with any sense left, they’ll recognize who has really sent you,” mused Josiah thoughtfully. “Lauren and I were both messaged by Eliadar to find you and appoint this task to you.”

“And please keep in mind that *every* tribe must come,” said Lauren in all seriousness. “Every tribe must unite. If even one does not, the shield will crack and splinter at the first strike of the enemy. The eleven will not be strong enough, even with Sirion’s forces, to hold against the lines of Cassius and the evil that is with him. And it’s not just the numbers of the twelve. When they are united together, and their hearts are with the high king, the living God of them all goes before them in battle, and He is One Cassius cannot withstand.”

Jada’s stomach cinched into a knot at the weight of this understanding and at the gravity of the situation.

“I understand,” nodded Jada. “I’ll see to it that the tribes of Levi and Simeon show up.”

Yup, absolutely no pressure, she thought to herself again, no pressure at all. If you screw up, darkness will just encompass the whole South and East. That’s all. No biggie.

As if knowing her thought, Lauren chuckled.

“Come outside,” said Josiah with a smile.

They stepped out of the doors and walked to the corner of the pillared porch. They were greeted instantly by a burst of wind that whipped around the buildings. Now that the sun was officially on approach, and the sky was growing lighter, they could better see the sea.

It was churning indeed. Massive swells heaved up and down, and the pounding of the surf on the shores, somewhere below their sightline, could be heard.

No one spoke for some time, and instead they listened to the muffled roaring of the sea, and the restless wind moaning about the buildings.

Michael, what a home you have, thought Jada. She wondered what all he would do if he survived the war. Would he settle, take a wife, and continue his royal line? Or would other tasks be laid before him? Perhaps both, and often he would leave the fortress of his home, and his queen, and travel far on the numerous affairs of men.

But it was all just the cycle of the passage of time. Kings and queens were born, grew up, did valiant deeds, got married, had children of their own, and then...just passed away.

More often Jada was wondering why, what the point of it all was, and her mind turned over the things in the book of Ecclesiastes. There is nothing new under the sun, and toil and chasing the wind was vanity.

What do these things, what deeds, small and great, really matter when compared to eternity, she wondered as her eyes took in the stormy sea.

It was a rhetorical question, and one she knew a rough answer to. But still, it was just one of those questions...

"This is how we were created to be, you know," said Lauren's voice quietly, breaking Jada from her thoughts.

When Jada looked up at her, she saw that the tall and beautiful traveler had her eyes closed and her face lifted into the wind. It tugged at strands of dirty blonde hair that had fallen out of her braid.

"Travelers were made to be like this," she said again, before taking a deep breath and looking down at Jada with clear, pale blue eyes. "We're made to be as restless as the wind, always on the move and never settling or slowing for long. Others are made to be solid and immovable, like the mountains, but we are appointed for a different life."

She smiled a sad sort of smile. "Josiah and I have been travelers for a very long time, and we have good and faithful friends in both realms. Yet it didn't take me long to realize that the only ones who can truly understand the nature and...essence of a traveler...is another traveler."

"It can sometimes be a lonely life," said Josiah quietly, his gaze lost in some thought or memory, "though some travelers do find one another and marry, which is a rare and beautiful thing..."

Like my parents did, considered Jada, and the thought of them made her heart ache.

"But in most cases," continued Josiah, voice stronger now, as he held Jada's gaze with captivating green eyes, "to be a traveler, is to be alone. We spend all our days toiling and striving to perform near-impossible tasks, putting our lives in danger so that many may be kept safe...and rarely does another single person know about it. Rarely do they know us, even our names. We watch the passage of time, as if we're standing outside of it. We see friends come and go, we see them marry, raise families, and pass into eternity. Then we watch their children, and children's children, follow the same course..."

"All the cycle of the passing of time," murmured Jada, letting her gaze drift back to the water.

"We are the few tasked with these things," he said, drawing her eyes back to him, "and while we live solitary lives, the One who made us gives us a few close friends to help us carry our burdens when they become too heavy."

He smiled the same sad smile Lauren had, but it still somehow brightened his entire face and made his eyes sparkle.

“He looks after His sheep and sends them help, sometimes in ways they don’t expect...other times He comes Himself, not to aid or rescue, but to bring comfort and take our hand in His, so that we know we’re not alone in the darkness and pain of our trials.”

Jada’s spirit stirred at everything they’d said, and love and gratitude towards these two welled up in her heart.

Truly, this was an ordained meeting, she thought, looking from Josiah and Lauren. They did seem like they were outside of time, for they were much older than she, older than Merida, yet they were untouched by signs of age. Far their gazes went and told her they’d seen many, if not everything, under the sun. There was nothing that could surprise them now.

And I got to meet them...what an honor.

“Come now,” said Lauren, “daybreak is nearly here and we must not take much more time. We will teach you a song, ‘The Traveler’s Song,’ it is called, and is put in the minds of travelers only. Not only is it a way for us to identify one another, but also...it somehow brings hope and comfort when the road is lonely.”

“This is the other task He gave us to tell you when we met here,” added Josiah. “While there were other reasons aside from telling you about the tribes and giving you this song, these two things were the primary reasons. It isn’t long, and we need only sing it once for it to be burned into your heart.”

Then they sang, in perfect harmony, to the tune of a dirge, slow, eerie, and melancholy. Yet it did lift Jada’s spirit. It was sung in the timeless tongue and ran something like this:

*I traveled far, far and wide,
from the mountains to the sea,
across deserts vast and hillsides green.
I traveled far, far and wide,
to lands forgotten,
and paths untrodden,
through the wilderness I went,
though my days remained unspent.
Made to roam, I wandered far,
for He made me restless, unable to sleep,
and all things under the moon and sun I must see.
And in my mouth He put a song,
a tune for the few made wandering,*

*a tune that when paths crossing,
a fellow traveler, recognizing,
and this is what we sing,
 ‘Our Maker is stronger,
 and there is no other.
 None can compare, and One that none can defeat,
 and before Him all fall to their knees,
 for none can match His sovereignty.’
He took me across the span of the earth and its seas,
He displayed His creations and works,
so that I could not deny His majesty.
For I saw with my eyes that when He speaks,
Lightning splits the skies and thunder shakes the heavens.
His greatness and His might are beyond describing,
and I wonder why He’d reveal His secrets to a lowly traveler, wandering,
yet He made me to travel far, far and wide,
until the day I stray out of thought and time.”*

Immediately afterwards no one said anything, and their gazes, though fixed upon the sea, were seeing various things deep in their own minds.

All the while they’d been singing, Jada’s vision had been filled with images of what Josiah and Lauren had been singing about, the mountains and deserts, the lightning splitting the heavens. It applied not only to the realm of Aurora, but to Earth’s as well.

Jada was able to mentally recite the entire song after that one hearing, just as Josiah had said. *Beautiful. Perfect.*

She was still lost in her own mind when someone gently took her right hand. It was Lauren, now smiling down at her. Josiah took Jada’s other hand, and said, “You’re being equipped with every last thing you’ll need for the final sprint of this race, little wanderer.”

“Run hard,” continued Lauren, “and don’t despair, even when you’re surrounded wholly by darkness. Laugh at the storm and remember that one little light can turn back legions.”

“It is time now for us to each go our separate ways,” sighed Josiah, releasing Jada’s left hand and extending his right one to hers. “It has been an honor to meet you.”

“And a blessing,” added Lauren, after Jada shook Josiah’s hand and turned to shake hers.

“The honor was all mine,” smiled Jada sadly as she looked at them both. “Will...will we ever see each other again?”

“Who can say!” laughed Lauren. “Maybe we will, and maybe it won’t be in Aurora.” She winked at Jada. “There’s more than just one evil plot to stop in Earth’s realm. We each have our tasks before us and, though seemingly separate from each other, are indeed connected by more subtle threads.”

Jada grinned. “Wow. I have a ways to go if I’m ever going to be able to speak in riddles like you.”

That made Lauren and Josiah both laugh.

“Farewell, little wandering light,” said Lauren. “May our paths cross again sooner rather than later. Elohim be with you.”

The eastern horizon over the water had been growing steadily lighter at the approaching sun. Finally, as Lauren spoke the final words of parting, there was a flash as the sun’s light broke over the sea and bathed the land not in pale gold this time, but deep crimson.

Jada had closed her eyes against the sudden burst of light, and when she opened them again...she found that she was standing all alone, looking out over the ever-churning sea.

Chapter 127 Tipping Point

Earth

Bern, Switzerland

While Jada was making progress in Aurora, Ryan and the team were also making headway on Channing and Aiden. When they’d received her note, and her exit was confirmed by other living and breathing people, Ryan wasn’t as irritated as he might’ve been.

As usual, the others shrugged it off. Ryan remained quiet for a brief while and then forced his brain to focus on his team and the case. This was partly by his own will, and partly on orders from Myles. Naturally, he’d agreed with Jada that it was vital he redirect his brilliant mind to the two evil men.

Besides, Jada had completed her set objective of capturing Aiden and she’d handed him over to the Agency. Thus, her role was basically finished, so there was no need to further worry about her.

The team had been in Bern the past three days, keeping their eyes glued on the boss man and his second-in-command. They had assistance from local operatives, and that rounded out their total number of operators and analysts on-site to: eight.

While Myles was slowly warming his superiors up to the fact that Channing was a major threat, he still wasn’t able to get more of the Agency management on-board. It was

understandable because he didn't have a lot of solid evidence against him, which upper management understood to an extent. The especially dangerous types were smart and didn't leave much of a paper trail. Any trail they did leave was either nearly impossible to find or it was meant to throw law enforcement off the real path.

Aiden hadn't been of much help and had only dead dropped two separate pieces of information on napkins while he was out. A third was just a name written in chalk on the wall of a men's bathroom in a restaurant. The note on the napkin was just a shorthand message that basically said he was still trying to get hold of some kind of sensitive information. The name provided was a little more helpful and they currently had eyes on a known Somali warlord.

But it had barely been three days, so Myles and Ryan weren't getting too suspicious. Yet. That would change quickly if Aiden didn't start delivering the goods he'd promised.

I'll put your body in the ground, Ryan had thought at the mere idea of Aiden betraying the team. He hadn't liked the man from the moment he set eyes on him. Ryan had pegged him as exceedingly underhanded, extremely cutthroat, and exceptionally skilled at escaping. He also didn't like the way he looked at Jada.

But all of that was two days ago. The tone quickly changed on the morning of the third day. It all began with the analyst Myles put on the company in India that had recently lost its head of security.

"I want to know everything you can get on the security firm that lands the bid for the head of security replacement job," Myles had said to the two analysts. "I want everything on the firm and every last detail on their financials, resources, and all the organizations they're affiliated with."

In regards to the security firm, analysts ran across some interesting, and very well hidden, bank accounts. These financials were linked to a number of powerful, and also equally interesting, organizations that were located all across the globe.

In short: the search on the security firm set off a domino effect.

"Check this out!" exclaimed Ryan excitedly as he burst into the living room of the house they were set up in. In his hand were several papers that he'd either just printed or pulled from the fax.

"What?" gasped Stella, surprised by her boss's abrupt entry.

Ryan started and then stuttered to a stop a few times, unsure where to begin. Finally, he shoved the papers at Alex, who was closest.

"It's all connected!" declared Ryan. "All the groups, everything and everyone! This is what we've been waiting for. It's actually way above and beyond what we've wanted to go after Channing with everything we have."

The more Alex read, the faster he read it and wider his eyes became. When he finished, he muttered an explicative and handed the papers to Stella.

Ryan began pacing the living room and speaking, half to himself and half to his team.

“The firm that landed the contract for the security job at the India energy company is connected, whether financially or by CEOs, to both an infrastructure group and a small, but international banking group. Those two groups not only have links to each other, but to oil and gas organizations, medical companies, military research, and other energy groups.”

He stopped and looked from Alex and then to Stella, who were still skimming the information. “Now each of those companies, and the people within them, both fund and cater to some very powerful figureheads all across the globe. We have politicians, government officials, people who hold real influence...”

“But these aren’t just any influential people,” interjected Stella as she finished reading and looked up, concern etched on her face. “All of these people funnel their attention, efforts, and resources towards some dangerous and radical ideas, like a one-world government, population control, a new world order, total government control of key resources...”

“Things that conspiracy theorists usually talk about,” said Alex, before giving a shake of his head and pointing at the report in Stella’s hand, “except these people are doing it. It must’ve taken decades for these people to seek out others like themselves, establish trust, gather resources...”

“And you need all of that variety of resources and heads of knowledge to build bases,” added Ryan, “to lay the foundation, establish, grow, and protect.”

“They’re building their own empire,” said Stella in a half-whisper.

“They’ve gotten a very good start,” muttered Alex. “We’re just now finding hard evidence about this?”

Ryan slowly nodded. “Talk about self-control and unsurpassed patience. The people involved in this have spent their entire lives working to build this network, or they’re next-generation kids following in their parents’ footsteps...”

He let his sentence trail off and he and his two companions fell into deep and dark thoughts. On one hand, Ryan wasn’t certain what the Agency’s jurisdiction was on this kind of scheme or if upper management cared –or really believed in such a thing as one world government.

But so far, Myles was on-board. At any rate, they also wanted Channing and Aiden for the deaths of Agency operatives in Damascus, for village massacres across Africa, and for their hand in chaos all across Europe, Asia, and the Middle-East. So, they’d start with

pinning them for those items, and then work their way up to the one-world government instigators.

Ryan could tick off several reasons why he'd be concerned about a single, global government. Such types of schemes were concerned with control of resources, population management, and ensuring that the general public followed the established rules and didn't rebel on a large scale.

But who would make up the governing body, who would make the rules, decide who was "in" and who wasn't? If you played the company "yes man," you'd likely be alright, which was fine...until your bosses began heavily oppressing the general population, targeted specific groups for eradication or didn't get food. Who labored and who lived in luxury? Who was allowed to continue living and who died?

Images came to Ryan's mind of concentration and labor camps, of a heavy-handed ruling body that mightily oppressed the people. It would be like Stalin's Great Terror, only for years on end, not a "mere" year of hell on earth, and it would cover the face of the planet. Famine, plague, starvation, mothers murdering their children, people resorting to cannibalism just to survive. It had happened before in real life, so it wasn't far-fetched to say that it would happen again.

Ryan was pulled from his thoughts when his two teammates shook themselves from theirs. A lingering uneasiness couldn't be missed in their expressions or their eyes.

With some effort, Ryan managed to get his brain back onto what they'd been discussing. "Uh, anyway...what you've read was just from one company. Myles told me that there's easily hundreds and hundreds of different businesses all connected. It makes it easier to look back on the assignments Channing hired out his crew for and understand why they were tasked for those missions. Who knows how many other mercenary groups have been hired out to eliminate competition, or whatever else, be the striking arm of the organizations that people like Channing work for."

"But Channing's crew is one of the best there is," stated Stella. "So we have an 'in' on a group that's higher up the intelligence chain than most others would be."

"And even our analysts nearly missed this information," added Ryan. "They didn't catch anything until they double checked the intel."

"If Jada hadn't put us on Aiden's trail," said Alex, "we'd be in the dark about all of this."

Ryan gave a nod, though he was reluctant to verbally admit it.

"Thing is," he said, "Channing likely has contacts within every United States government department. Homeland, NSA, even the Agency..."

Thank God Myles has been careful with who he's talked to about this, thought Ryan.

“We need to continue to be extremely cautious,” agreed Alex, having guessed Ryan’s thought. “We need Channing and we can’t risk spooking him if he does have ears within the Agency and he’s warned about our team.”

“He’ll be outta here like a bat out of...”Stella paused and finished with a shrug, “well, you know. And then it’ll be forever before we find him again.”

“Yes, Channing could provide us with some very interesting information,” mused Ryan, rubbing his chin.

After standing in silence for about a minute, he snapped out of whatever thought he’d been lost in. “Right. Myles is discreetly contacting some local assets for the snatch of Channing and Aiden. I also just touched base with the team shadowing Channing and got his current location. We need to get ready to move out. This will go down fast.”

Ω

“Here are the latest satellite images and extended forecast for the hit location,” said Channing, dropping some papers onto the table covered with maps and other satellite imagery.

“Thanks...I’m still trying to work out the best logistics for this assignment,” replied Aiden, leaning back in his chair and with a large book of updated topographic maps in his lap.

With a sigh, he leaned forward and placed the map book on the table. The metal chair groaned beneath him when he shifted his weight, and the table swayed a bit. Just like the vacant apartment building, the table, chair, and few other pieces of furniture were old and tired.

Because both Channing and Aiden were smart, evil masterminds, they believed in never working and sleeping in the same location. In other words, they didn’t put all their eggs in one basket. This way, if one location was raided, authorities wouldn’t have the criminals and the evidence together.

It gave the offenders leverage for striking a deal.

“I mean, I can’t really move forward until the transport crew has set a date,” continued Aiden. “And we’re going to have to somehow have small, portable refrigerator units either with us or nearby so we can move the virals quickly.”

The entire time Aiden spoke, he subtly tapped at the corner of the page he was open to. Channing noticed and glanced down. His eyes quickly skimmed over the scribbled note on the edge of the page.

“Agency shadowing us,” it read. “Approached last night. Want me to feed them info. Had fake charges. Said I’d help them. Should ghost the suckers ASAP.”

“I’ll press my local assets a little more for a date and time,” answered Channing, not missing a beat as he picked up a pencil and outlined a section on one of the maps. “I

forgot that you're a bit out of your reckoning in this area. Last I checked there was a little town here that actually had electricity. It's sketchy, but should provide you with what you need until the removal team retrieves the shipment from you. You'll just need to get the containers there..."

As he outlined the area he was speaking of, he jotted down some words. Aiden leaned forward, pretending to get a better look at the area Channing was referring to. The words Channing had written were: *Not surprised. Thought I felt a draft. Contacts inside embassy working assets.*

"In that case," said Aiden, getting to his feet and gathering up the maps and various papers. "I'm going for coffee."

Channing's phone rang then. "Good morning...yes, I see...so the shipment is en route then...and you've assembled the extraction team? Perfect. I'll be in touch."

It was during that short conversation that a wave of uneasiness and nausea washed over Aiden suddenly. When the hair on the back of his neck rose, he thought, *something very bad and very chaotic is about to happen.*

When Channing ended the call and fixed his steely gaze on his second-in-command, Aiden knew his gut was right.

Without saying a word, Aiden put the loose papers into the map book and stuck them halfway out. He then removed a lighter, something he always kept on himself and lit the edges of the papers and the book on fire. He then set the book on the table.

While he was doing that, Channing walked to an old locker, opened the door, removed a false side, and retrieved two handguns and two extra magazines.

He handed one sidearm and one magazine to Aiden, and then the two men made for the exit.

The possibility of hasty departures was one of the reasons why Aiden always jotted notes on the edges of papers: they only took a second to destroy, and that extra second could mean the difference between capture and freedom, or in extreme cases, life and death.

Channing and Aiden jogged down an exterior flight of steps that hugged the building, and with each passing second both men could feel their muscles tightening and readying for action.

"Apparently there's an Agency team one road up from our house," said Channing as they made it to the sidewalk.

"They already have a strike team?" asked Aiden, his expression hard set.

"Yes," replied Channing, turning right at the next street. "They were just rounding up their troops, such as they are."

He threw Aiden a devious smile even as anger lit his eyes. "Fortunately, I assembled a security team for our own crew before I even arrived to Switzerland. They're

heading to intercept the Agency unit as we speak. Hopefully, they'll have the full element of surprise and it'll be a massacre."

"One can only hope," growled Aiden, giving every appearance he was just as irritated as his boss. In reality, he was slightly unnerved by this news of an Agency strike team.

If they were assembling to detain Channing, and maybe himself, then that told Aiden that they'd just found some hard evidence against his boss and team. Whatever it was, was vital enough to stir them to swift action. They weren't going to let Channing remain in the open and lead them to however many other evil masterminds.

That also meant they no longer needed Aiden in the position he'd been coerced into.

As they walked along, Aiden's mind quickly ticked through options. Things had progressed faster than he'd anticipated. He'd hoped that he and Channing would work together to mislead the Agency, to throw them completely off any scent of what they were really scheming. He'd also hoped, shortly after that, he'd be able to kill Channing and stage the scene.

Aiden swore to himself.

I could still do it, he thought, I could just shoot him right here and now. But I still don't know where he's hiding the thumb-drive with all the good stuff. Curse it all! If I kill Channing now, without the data, I make myself a target for who knows how many groups he's working with. No, I wouldn't have any leverage or value if I do it here and now.

Finally, he settled on a decision. *No, right now I have to ensure that Channing escapes, so he can live to plot the deaths of thousands another day. That's top priority right now.*

A silver sedan pulled to the curb ahead of them and the driver looked at Channing, but made no sign or signal.

The boss man appeared to have been expecting this and quickened his pace towards the vehicle.

"The rest of the team are on their own," muttered Channing as he reached the car. "We'll receive a report from the intercept team shortly. If there are any Agency operators alive to come after us, or they arrived too late to effectively take them out...then we'll just have to lure them into the open."

As he and Aiden dropped into the vehicle, both were very aware of the sense that they were being watched. Agency officers most likely, or some local assets they'd enlisted.

We'll see just how good they can dance, thought Channing as the car pulled quickly away from the curb, drove down the street, and pulled onto one of the main roads.

The Agency strike team descended upon the target house like lions surrounding an unsuspecting zebra.

According to the final update, two members of Aiden's crew were inside the house. The big boss and his second-in-command were at a different location and were the second team's prizes to bag.

All doors were used to gain entrance into the house, as well as windows in two different rooms upstairs. Their targets might've been highly trained, but so was the team, and they moved with lethal speed and silence.

The first target was walking into the kitchen when the unknown men in black body armor and face masks confronted him. The unfortunate Kirill saw one intruder around the corner into the kitchen. But he didn't even have time to process what he was seeing as another came behind and hit him in the head with butt of his rifle. Kirill was still dropping to the floor when a black bag was pulled over his head.

The rest of the house was then searched quickly and methodically, but the second suspect wasn't on location. There were a few signs that the second bedroom had once been used. But there weren't another pair of boots lying around anywhere, another backpack or duffel.

No secret rooms or doors could be found, and schematics of the house confirmed no such things had been built in.

But at least they'd secured one man, and the strike team hoped the second unit would do better than they had.

Ω

They were now on foot and walking into one of the busiest areas of the city. Aiden had caught sight of one, maybe two, possible enemy operatives. But because they were good, they appeared only as a flicker of shadow out the corner of his eye. He couldn't be positive if he'd seen them or not.

During the car ride, Channing contacted one of his local assets who had "just so happened" been activated by the Agency and tasked with following him. Things were now in motion to throw off said Agency team that was following him. But before that could happen, they needed to slip away and out of sight for at least a minute. Then the man who was really Channing's asset could report a false sighting of the two targets.

As they passed through a crowded square, Channing felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

Aiden subtly glanced off his right shoulder and saw a glimpse of another shadow. He immediately felt his muscles tighten, and a low-burning anger simmered to life at the thought of a challenge by these inferior people.

I'll rip them apart, thought Aiden, just becoming aware at how long it had been since he'd inflicted any violence on anyone. The last person he distinctly remembered killing was...oh right, Vadim, the traitorous dog.

The want, the need, to shed blood reawakened and began to snarl. Today seemed like just as good a day as any to kill someone, even if it was in the middle of a crowd of witnesses. The enemy operatives might've proved worthy opponents a few months ago, but ever since Aiden's pact with Cassius and all the fighting he'd done in Aurora, none in this dimension had come close to posing a threat.

He was armed, but that was cheating. Hand-to-hand combat was much more satisfying. At least one operative had to have a syringe of sedative, so that would be an additional accessory.

A chill ran down Aiden's spine and his muscles tightened in anticipation for action. *Hurry up already*, he thought when he spotted a suspicious individual forty feet in front of him. He knew that the Agency personnel wouldn't execute swift action until they were an arm's length away from their targets, so as to draw as little attention and chaos as possible. Sprinting from all directions while only on the edge of the square would make the masses unpredictable and possibly panicky.

That was aside from the fact there was something fulfilling about successfully sneaking up on a target and pouncing.

Another chill tingled through Aiden as he kept his gaze fixed on the still-suspicious person now only thirty feet ahead of him.

The Agency case officers were closing the net...and he actually wished they'd hurry up a little.

Ω

Channing and Aiden weren't being paranoid, because Ryan and the second team had them surrounded and were closing in.

He'd just received the update from the strike team at the house. They had one target, but the second appeared to have left, taking essential belongings with him. The individual in their custody would be taken to the agreed upon detainment location, where they'd wait for further instructions.

Ryan and the others, strategically placed, were close enough now to clearly see Channing and Aiden. Unlike with a number of masterminds and terrorists when he finally saw Channing in person, he wasn't disappointed this time.

Channing was tall with good span across the shoulders, but not too broad, and he had a solid build, but not heavy or too thick. His jaw was somewhere between sharp and round, and his nose had a slight rise in the middle, giving his face a more distinguished expression. But those eyes, those blue eyes attested to the high intelligence and unsurpassed cunning of the mind behind them. Right now, though, his gaze was steely and calculating as he continuously surveyed the moving mass of people about him.

He had a confident and quiet way of moving. Not quiet as in shy or timid, but quiet in like the way that a shark passes through the deep, or a tiger through the jungle. It was a dangerous, stealthy way in which the man moved, and that told Ryan that he was very capable of handling himself in a fight and that he was ready for action that very moment.

When the team was within twenty feet of Channing and Aiden, the two men stopped. They must've considered splitting up and putting more distance between one another. However, they'd likely known that they stood a better chance in a confrontation if they stayed together.

Fifteen feet away and closing. Ryan was about to signal to the others to pick up the pace now when Channing half-turned and looked straight at him.

There was nothing else for it but to hold that cold and ruthless gaze.

It was in that second that local law enforcement vehicles came screeching onto the scene with sirens wailing. They surrounded the square and officers leapt from their vehicles.

Shoot, thought Ryan, *someone called the local cavalry.*

When one of the officers locked onto Ryan and started for him, he swore. *Someone called the cavalry on us.*

That was when a vacant building was suddenly half-demolished in a deafening explosion. The entire front blew out and rained down glass, bricks, and concrete onto the sidewalk and street below. Black smoke billowed into the gray sky and countless little flames licked at the exposed walls and ceilings.

By the time local law enforcement gathered themselves, the people they'd been called about in the square had vanished. For all they knew they were connected to the explosion they'd just witnessed, but right now they had more immediate matters to tend to than chasing phantoms.

The explosion had been a perfect distraction for Ryan and the team, and they'd ducked out of the square in the confusion. Now they'd split up. Some had jumped into vehicles while others, like himself, were running on foot.

But they weren't running from the scene of the explosion. They were in pursuit of Channing and Aiden.

“Someone tell me that they have eyes on the targets,” huffed Ryan, with Stella beside him as he ran down a side street. Ryan had seen them bolt across the north end of the square, but had lost sight of them after that.

There was silence for a solid thirty seconds before a report came through his earpiece. *“I’ve got ‘em! Half a block east of the square...bridge crossing the river!”*

“Here!” said Stella, ducking between a row of narrow houses.

It took fifteen agonizing seconds to escape the clutches of the houses and find the outer perimeter, a broad sidewalk lining the river. The bridge was up ahead, but no one was on it or the far side.

“I’m at the bridge. Did anyone see where they went?”

A string of “negatives” answered him.

Hands on his hips, Ryan turned in a circle and fumed. After ensuring he had composure enough to speak somewhat professionally, he said, “Everyone back to base, now. We need some major tech support to watch for when and where they pop up next.”

He’d learn after everyone rendezvoused that no one present had reported the sighting of the targets at the bridge. One asset said that was the first place he ran to, but he never saw anyone, save one or two civilians. He hadn’t countered the sighting report because he’d already begun moseying northward along the river and supposed they could’ve passed behind him.

Channing had an “in” on our team, thought Ryan, scratching the back of his head, most likely it was one of the local assets. We thought he was one of ours when really he was working for Channing.

One of the local case officers, who’d been directly in Aiden’s path, had had a close scrape with the man. Being well trained, the officer hadn’t taken his eyes off the target when the local police arrived. However, he’d been looking in the direction of the explosion when it occurred, which momentarily blinded him. Apparently, he’d taken a fist or elbow to the face, because the next thing he remembered he was being hauled to his feet by a companion as they stumbled away from the square.

“Talk about violence of action,” said the officer as he finished wiping blood from his newly broken nose.

As for the missing Channing team member, Ryan guessed he had something to do with the police being called and the demolishment of that building. *So there’s still three in action, he mused, and that third member strikes me as being even more silent and stealthy than Channing and Aiden.*

Stepping aside, Ryan spoke with Stella and Alex, both clearly displeased at the turnout of the day’s events.

“Myles already has people watching for any signs of Channing and Aiden,” he said quietly, “any aliases they use. We’re also watching for activity on any of their known bank

accounts. They left in a hurry and will be vulnerable until they reach a safe destination and are able to gather themselves.”

“We’re leaving their accounts unfrozen so we’ll better be able to get an idea of their location,” guessed Alex.

Ryan nodded. “Freezing their accounts might make it more difficult for them to move around, even though they will have stashes of currency on themselves or in a go-bag. But we don’t want to tipoff Channing’s clients or partners that we’re onto him, and them. We want to keep them oblivious to exactly how much we know and how much we have access to.”

Stella heaved an exasperated sigh and rubbed the side of her face. “I kind of wish Jada was here. Or that she’d shown up at one of those infamous opportune moments, like she usually does.”

Alex shook his head. “She might have other important cases going on in other parts of the world, but we could sure use her here.”

Ryan said nothing one way or another, because he’d given up trying to decide what to think of Jada. He wished she’d shown up, like Stella had said. But at the same time, when Jada showed up, that meant something exciting was about to happen.

“In the meantime,” said Ryan after a beat, “we have one of Channing’s team...”

A shadow fell over his face as an eerie gleam came to life in his eyes and he finished with, “And we may be able to get something useful from him.”

Chapter 128

Farewell & Reinforcements

Aurora

While Cassius had made true his word in showing mercy to no village, he directed the depth of his inhuman hate towards the Western Village and its neighbors.

When the dark king and his squad were finally able to find their way around the chasm that had opened during the ambush, they rode into the Western Village like a tempest. Dusk fell in seconds as darkness shrouded the town and mist completely enveloped it.

But as seconds ticked by, no warriors emerged. No one sounded the alarm, no cry was raised.

The Western Village appeared to be completely deserted. If the ambush on the dark king had succeeded in anything, it had been that it gave the warriors of the town an extra half day to pack up and flee. They’d innately known their town was one that the dark king would want to burn to the ground.

So that's what the dark squad did. In five minutes, every structure in the immediate area was being consumed with flames.

All the while the dark king watched, sitting atop his horse and toiling with angered thought over his disappointment at not being able to kill any of this town's warriors.

No, he thought, every one of its warriors will fall, whether we catch up to them on our way to the plains or on the battlefield itself.

His men were regrouping on the main road when three large wolves emerged from the nearby trees. They'd been under Grimm's command but had been separated from the main squad some time ago.

The alpha informed Cassius that the town's people had cleared out three days earlier and headed south.

"Stay here for another couple days," said the dark king, "in case anyone tries to come back. If they do, tear them apart. If no one shows themselves, make for the Southern plains. You will be of use there."

Turning eastward, Cassius led the squad towards the Eastern Village and Chugach. He suspected that they'd find those places desolate also. It didn't matter. He'd keep stored up his hatred towards them and unleash it on the battlefield.

Until then, every house, barn, and building would burn.

The inhabitants of these pitiful settlements, thought Cassius darkly, have said their last farewell, for they will have nothing to return to in the end.

Ω

While the dark king was playing with fire to the northwest, the cities of Asgarod and Kolanthel were buzzing with activity.

For some time the two cities had been coordinating with one another. Proof of that was their ability to send reinforcements to Cassius's troops venturing through the mountains. Spies had caught sight of the one thousand sent to delay the dark forces and quickly reported to Halden and Ambrose.

They'd suspected such tactics might be utilized, and they'd already selected swift warriors that would go to the aid of their much darker companions. Their foresight and preparation had proved successful, and now the five hundred that had been sent out were traveling with the Northern troops all the way to the plains.

But the rulers of the cities did not only communicate for the sake of mustering military forces. They counseled one another and provided insight to strengthen each other's weaknesses.

Halden's incredible knowledge of foresight into enemy movements, and of his ability to ensure the flow of revenue and resources, was of vital value to Ambrose.

Ambrose, in turn, instructed Halden in ordering and keeping order of soldiers, and in war strategy for crushing any outside resistance.

However, no major offense had come from either city. There had only been small skirmishes whenever Halden or Ambrose sent out squads to deal with village uprisings or to test roving units of Southern warriors.

But they had not ventured into the forests, and no forces of the South had launched an assault on the dark cities. Both of these things would've proven to be suicide.

The fellowship of Asgarod and Kolanthel did not go unrewarded. In the midst of the assault on the troops in the mountains, the dark king had bent his dark will and thought upon the sister cities. Not in a negatively consequential way, however. He'd sensed the two strengthening each other and allying with one another instead of quarreling, which so often happened.

The ground beneath the heart of the cities had trembled and shaken. Darkness thickened and settled over their walls. There had been mild surprise and some uncertainty as soldiers left the quaking buildings and entered the streets.

But Greyon and Volker had known what was happening and hadn't been alarmed. Instead, they'd smiled at their respective fallen counselors and said, "Prepare to take on reinforcements of your own, courtesy of the dark king and Prince Levian."

The ground near the center of the cities fell away, taking with it any nearby buildings. A black pit of considerable size had remained and from its depths came the scent of sulfur and death. And then the reinforcements emerged.

First came the ranks of kyros, striding up the somewhat sloped mouth of the pit. In rows of two they came, and streamed out for several minutes and stood in line along the nearest streets.

After them came the riders, three hundred per city. Those watching the spectacle heard the terrible snorting of the steeds, before they pranced out of the pit with their terrible riders astride them.

Asgarod and Kolanthel were the dark king's strongholds of evil, his bases in enemy territory. That was the only reason how such a thing had been able to happen, and how such dark warriors had been able to appear.

Unbeknownst to Cassius, however, this movement of unity by evil had come, in part, to the successful assassination in Earth's Pakistan by Aiden's team. It had also been spurred on by the escape of Aiden and his boss. Channing remained alive and free to slaughter innocent lives for another day.

Still, the two cities were paramount to Cassius and his success. Even more basic than that, they were vital to him being able to ride outside the borders of the Dead Land.

They were his key strengths, but also his weaknesses.

But how could any pose a threat to such dark and powerful cities? Surely they were indestructible now, built upon evil and strengthened by it.

Yet such things, no matter how strong they appeared, could be weakened and brought down—if one knew the right way of going about it.

However, for the present, Asgarod and Kolanthe were very strong and appeared to be unbreakable. Also, in counseling one another, they'd made obsolete their weaknesses, so that all there was now was strength.

Chapter 129 Deadly Snares

Earth

Pula, Croatia

Everyone was on edge, both exhausted and wired, compliments to toxic amounts of caffeine.

Ryan might've only had eight Agency case officers on the ground in Bern, not counting local assets. Up at the Zurich hub, however, Myles had had two analysts watching cameras around the areas in which Channing and Aiden had been moving in real time.

They'd lost them for a short time following the explosion but picked them up again a few blocks east of the little square. They'd climbed into a cab, of which one of the analysts hacked the GPS and then watched the vehicle travel in real time.

They'd arrived at a train station, secured tickets, and then boarded a train bound for Zurich. They'd made it just in time, and the train pulled away from the station thirty minutes later. Once in Zurich, they paid for tickets for passage to Venice, Italy.

There was time before the train left to get two case officers on the train, so they'd have eyes on the men and make sure they didn't make any unscheduled departures.

Upon arrival to Venice, the men disembarked and then went their separate ways. Instead of splitting up and each case officer following one man each, they stayed on Channing, the big boss.

They lost him twice amongst the crowds and labyrinth of waterways and buildings but picked up him again a short time afterwards. The third time, though, they were unable to again pick up his trail. Also, the sketchy number of cameras in the area didn't pick up anything.

No one had seen Aiden.

However, one of the locally stationed officers had been at one of the docks. As soon as it was known that two high priority targets were going to Venice, all local operators and analysts were informed.

So he did a subtle double-take when he saw a man matching Channing's description greet one of the local sailors. They chatted briefly, money exchanged hands, and then Channing, with only a duffel, climbed aboard the modestly sized vessel.

The case officer didn't overhear where they were going. But he was familiar with that particular sailor and knew he frequented areas along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, especially ports and docks along Croatia, Albania, and Greece. He wisely tended to avoid the relatively short strip of Serbia which touched the sea.

Aiden never showed up at the dock. In a turn of events, though, an old alias of his used in his budding mercenary years popped up on a flight into Zagreb, Croatia. He was spotted at the airport both by cameras and a case officer, and then shadowed all the way down to Pula, a seafront city on the tip of the Istrian Peninsula.

From there, he secured a room at a hotel, meandered down towards the water, and took up residence in a chair at an outdoor restaurant.

When it appeared that he'd finally settled, and while he was killing time doing normal human things, Ryan and his team high-tailed it down to Pula.

Myles had assured that there were able-bodied officers closer than he and his unit.

But Ryan was adamant that they personally be able to get another crack at bagging their two targets. Besides, they'd been doing all the legwork. They'd started this operation, and they were going to finish it.

Needless to say, Ryan and company didn't get the one-on-one time they'd originally wanted with Kirill. But it turned out to be okay. They hadn't needed his knowledge anyway, because it was doubtful he'd known where Channing would've fled. At any rate, Kirill wasn't going anywhere fast, so there'd be plenty of "getting acquainted" time later.

Channing had arrived at the harbor the following evening. When the two men met, they appeared to be exceptionally wary, but not paranoid. They grabbed a bite to eat and then returned to the hotel where Aiden had spent the previous night.

While they'd watched the pair eat dinner and chat, and they walked back to the hotel, Ryan's brain was running a hundred miles an hour. The entire time the Agency had been following, losing, picking up the trail of, and shadowing the two men, he wondered if it was all somehow a ruse. No, not a ruse. A trap of some kind. The primary cause for such a suspicion was the fact that Aiden had used a previous alias, even though it was old.

If he had truly been desperate to escape the reach and sight of the Agency, surely he had a new, unused id on himself. Or he could've secured passage another way.

It was the same with Channing. Why go to a familiar face? In the event of flight, capture, or death, new and unfamiliar was best because it kept the fugitive on-guard.

No, it wasn't as if they'd secured first class tickets with their real names or well-known aliases, thought Ryan, eyeing the hotel, illuminated beautifully by exterior lights. Everything had been subtle and smooth.

But maybe too subtle, thought Ryan, before shaking his head. *No, maybe I'm the one being paranoid now.*

Yet he couldn't shake a bad feeling in his gut. Channing was a cunning master, and Aiden was ruthless. They'd both eluded capture by numerous government organizations for many years. They wouldn't just slip up now...

"They're leaving out the south exit of the hotel," reported one of the officers who'd followed Aiden all the way from Zagreb.

"I see 'em," said Stella, positioned closer than Ryan or Alex. *"They're heading east up one of the roads, looks like towards the ruins."*

"Okay, Bravo, keep behind them," said Ryan, getting into motion. *"Charlie, close your distance a little. Team One, stay on them from the north. We'll take 'em when they're farther from the city, but I don't want them to reach the ruins."*

Ryan joined Stella and together they cautiously followed their two targets.

A quarter mile from "town", the road cut sharply to the right and lazily leveled out. Low trees and large boulders, remnants of walls long destroyed, obscured the pair's line of sight.

"Team One," whispered Ryan as he and Stella quickened their pace, "what's—"

"We have eyes. The road switches back to the left...now we've lost 'em. Standby..."

Picking up a jog, Ryan and Stella rounded the first turn, and Ryan felt his stomach cinching tighter and tighter.

"Team One has regained visual contact..."

Adrenaline tingled through Ryan, but not because of excitement. It was rising dread, and his gut was screaming at him that something was horribly wrong. But Pula and the outskirts had been cleared just before sundown, and the UAV they'd launched hadn't picked up any unusual heat signatures that suggested an army was lying in wait for them.

You're just being paranoid from lack of sleep and too much caffeine. No, we're not turning back, he thought with dogged determination, *not after coming all this way.*

Even as this resolution passed through his mind, he also had the idea of removing his night vision—

Rapid fire rained down upon them from all directions and the stillness of the night was shattered.

Unsure of where the closest gunfire was coming from, Ryan and Stella threw themselves against the steep side of an embankment on their left. He pulled the night

vision goggles around his neck so he was no longer blinded by the muzzle flashes of the enemy rifles.

“You okay?” he asked, weapon drawn as he searched the trees ahead of them.

“I’m fine,” panted Stella. “It’s just a scratch.”

Two riflemen straight ahead opened fire.

Ryan and Stella sprinted across the road and ducked behind a large mound of rocks. They hadn’t even settled when Stella, with night vision specs still in place, fired off three shots at the top of the embankment they’d just left.

A pair of enemy fighters were half-crouched there. They might’ve been wearing body armor, but that didn’t save them from headshots. One of Stella’s three rounds found its mark, and the rifleman on the right collapsed.

As soon as Stella had begun firing, Ryan had joined her, and the remaining enemy combatant ducked back and out of sight.

“Team One, do you copy?” asked Ryan as Stella squeezed off a few more shots around the boulder.

No response came to Ryan, except the sound of rapid gunfire somewhere further up into the hills.

“We need to move!” shouted Stella.

“We’ll head for Charlie’s location!” replied Ryan as Stella swapped out magazines. “Ready?”

“Ready!”

They broke cover and sprinted back across the road. With the help of the impressive amounts of adrenaline pumping through their bodies, they leapt atop the five-foot embankment like it was a curb, and took off westward across the rugged hillside.

Random bursts of gunfire flickered in the night and somewhere on the other side of the nearest rise. Rapid fire answered.

That was where Team One was, but currently Ryan was more concerned with Alex, aka Charlie.

He swore at his decision to send him solo. They were stretched thin on manpower, so he’d made Alex the lone man. Sure, reinforcements were coming in from Austria this very moment, but Ryan and the others weren’t going to wait six more hours. Who knew where Channing and Aiden would slip off to? Pula was their “regroup” location, and he didn’t want to give that pair the slightest opportunity to form a successful escape plan – and then execute it.

In the back of his mind, he was also aware of that third team member, that one who’d escaped in Switzerland. Ryan had little doubt that he was in the area. Considering the fact that they had yet to find a face or a name for him, he assumed that meant this individual was quite possibly more dangerous in fight scenarios. Ryan personified him as

the perfect lone assassin, swift and violent, but never seen. A black wolf that moved silently and unseen through fog and the debt of night.

But now the only thing that was in the forefront of Ryan's mind was Alex.

Pop, pop, pop! Pop!

Bullets whizzed by him and Stella, and they bent forward. The ground dropped steeper than it had appeared, and they slid into some kind of old crater. As they scrambled up the incline, backsliding a little in the softer ground, Ryan shot a glance behind them...and then threw himself onto his back. He opened fire on three combatants coming up stealthily behind, and covered Stella until she reached the top of the rise and laid down cover fire.

A bullet grazed Ryan's arm, another the top of his shoulder, and one more clipped his thigh. The enemy's accuracy was improving.

Risking being made easier targets for a few seconds, they sprinted up the short rise to the left and then barreled down the other side.

They hit the bottom, and Stella tripped and pitched forward. For a breath, Ryan was afraid that she'd been killed.

But that wasn't the case. As she returned to her feet, she glanced behind her to see what she'd tripped over.

It wasn't a "what." It was "who." Their teammate Alex lay unmoving on his stomach. They couldn't see perfectly with night vision, but they could make out the small pool of blood beneath his body.

Hot wrath, sorrow, and desperation consumed Ryan. It had been a long time since he'd lost a friend in the field, and the feelings it brought, and their depth, were beyond words.

But he was still in the middle of a fight for his life, and he had other teammates to look out for.

Stella, who'd taken her fallen companion's gun and extra magazine, had sprung back into motion, drifting sideways along the rise. Without his knowing it, Ryan had been moving with her while his brain finished processing the fact that Alex was dead.

The three combatants who'd been behind them reappeared and Stella dropped one of them with a single shot. Ryan had worked with her long enough to know that when she was being chased or shot at, her fear was replaced with anger. It wasn't a wild rage, but steady somehow, and cold.

Ryan had the sense that someone was approaching from the south, further down the hillside. He just couldn't see them, even with the night vision. Plus there was an air current now, moving straight up the hill and bringing a fine mix of dust and sea to his nose.

Movement in his peripheral made him spin and aim at the top of the rise. His brain informed him it was an enemy that was cautiously cresting the incline. He put two rounds into the gunman: the first was nonlethal to the body armor over his chest, but the second shot pegged him in the throat.

The gunman had a buddy, and Ryan drilled him with three shots to the chest. It didn't kill him, but he knew it hurt and likely left him breathless. The gunman staggered out of sight.

Stella picked off a second combatant of her own just as Ryan returned his attention southward. That was when he saw just a glimpse of a shadow that didn't belong. He fired off a shot just before he took one to the shoulder.

High amounts of adrenaline might've been coursing through him, but it felt like his shoulder had suddenly burst into flames. He fell to one knee, and it was his stubbornness that kept him from collapsing or passing out. It was also the need to defend his teammate.

Switching the gun to his left hand, Ryan aimed at the still-advancing shadow and pulled off several more rounds.

The shadow ducked behind some thick, bushy trees.

Ryan's vision blurred a moment and he shook his head.

Stella suddenly grabbed his good arm, put it across her shoulders, and helped him get back to his feet. They then awkwardly sprinted for a heap of large stones, and Ryan noticed how badly Stella was now limping.

They reached it in the midst of a hail of bullets, and Ryan collapsed against one of the stones. Warm stickiness had soaked into his shirt and also covered much of his right arm, which had pain pinging down it.

Shaking off unconsciousness, Ryan carefully peeked around the stone, spotted movement, and fired off a few more rounds.

The effort stole much of Ryan's remaining strength and all he could do immediately afterwards was lean against the stone and gasp in pain.

Fresh bursts of rapid-fire showered their position, and Stella dropped down beside Ryan. Bits of rock and dust peppered them, and it seemed to the two case officers that an army really had been lying in wait.

With bits of debris falling about them, and the sound of weapons fire popping against the night, all Ryan could think was, *Jada, where are you?*

Chapter 130

Levi

Aurora

The morning was restless when they passed into the territory of the tribe of Levi. A warm wind made the ancient oaks sway and creak, and mimicked the sound of rushing water as the gusts passed through the old pines.

While Jada had been relying primarily on Zohmar to guide them, they easily found a broad dirt path that led deeper southward into the forest.

They raced through the wood, Zohmar and Raven, and their riders spoke very little. Not a word had passed between them since yesterday afternoon when they were in the general area of the Southern Fortress. Jada had asked Cora if she'd wanted to rejoin Michael and the others, even though she'd expressed her need for her companion the morning they left Sirion.

Cora shook her head and answered with a decisive, "For now, I go where you go."

That was all that needed to be said. They'd ridden through the night and stopped only for a few hours of sleep in the deepest watches. They'd then risen just before dawn and had been riding hard ever since.

Cora didn't bother Jada with small talk or feel the need to discuss the lighter things they did when times were merrier. She saw that stress was ever mounting in her captain, and it was plain to see that numerous and heavy things weighed on her mind.

They'd ridden for nearly an hour through the area when they saw the first signs of life. Or life that had used to be in this area.

Every so often they came across a statue atop a square pedestal, one on each side of the road. Most were badly weathered and a few had collapsed into a heap of stone.

But the theme was easy to decode. Every statue still standing was that of a soldier adorned in armor and prepared for battle. With each new statue the riders passed, they noted that the statue soldier was holding a different weapon. First there was a sword, and then spear, then a crossbow, followed by an axe, and so forth.

Soon, some of soldiers were mounted on horses, tall, big boned, and strong.

Occasionally, where two statues stood, stone ruins of desolate houses sprawled about on both sides of the road. Once or twice the riders spotted a large barn, or what was left of it.

Between the statues and buildings that had once been, Jada and Cora guessed they were in the right territory. Levi was, after all, one of the warrior tribes.

Another half an hour later, Zohmar and Raven slowed their speed to an easy canter.

When Zohmar whickered and gave a subtle shake of his head, Jada knew they were being followed or had been spotted. It wasn't just because her horse had signaled to her, but her gut told her also.

Around a bend and up a rise the pair cantered. The sound of rushing water suddenly greeted their ears when they reached the top of the incline and halted a moment.

A narrow, but deep stream swept swiftly through the forest before darting south and disappearing around a sharp corner.

Jada surveyed the woods, eyes sweeping along the barren floor covered only in pine needles and last fall's oak and maple leaves. One or two saplings were attempting to grow, but were being hampered by their more mature counterparts.

Across the stream and atop the next rise two more statues stood. The soldiers stood tall, with swords in their right hands and pointed slightly behind them. In their left hands they each held a curved knife, which they held across their bodies at the ready and with tips directed backwards.

The message was clear. For a breath, neither horse nor rider moved.

A warm gust of wind rolled through the area, making leaves swirl and dance about the horses and along the road in front of them.

Zohmar snorted and pawed the ground. Raven flicked her ears back and tossed her head.

Aside from the movement of the horses, no birds could be heard, or any sound from any animal. It seemed as if all wildlife had fled or was in hiding, and waiting to see what would happen.

It was always risky entering the borders of a known warrior territory, especially one that had withdrawn from most of the world. Who knew what kind of a mindset they were in... or if they even still existed?

Oh dear, thought Jada, that would be interesting and difficult to explain. 'Sorry, Michael, but only eleven tribes exist, so...we should all just accept the fact that we're going to die right now. It was lovely knowing you.'

Jada looked at Cora, who drew a breath, squared her shoulders, and gave a nod.

Again a word didn't pass between them, and with a thought Jada sent Zohmar cantering on. Down the little rise they went, across the bridge, up the incline...and then passed between the statues of warning.

The wind raced up behind them as the horses stretched themselves out a little more and ate up the ground. Trees swaying and creaking, the gray sky seemed to darken a shade.

As they passed mile after mile, the stream seemed to approach and retreat. It would draw near to the road, before quickly darting away farther into the forest, before again drawing closer. It made Jada think of a snake curious about a new creature but exercising extreme caution about staying too close for too long.

They'd been cantering for another twenty minutes when a horn sounded in the distance. Several rises later, the hills suddenly fled, the ground leveled, and the trees cleared.

Zohmar and Raven stopped at the edge of the large clearing, which stood very near a large waterfall. It was fed, of course, by the stream Jada and Cora had been indirectly following. Now, reaching the end of its course, it cast itself off the edge of a cliff and thundered down noisily to a deep pool.

Solidly constructed stone houses, barns, and workshops were built close to the cliff's edge as it staggered farther south and straight off to the east. Numerous buildings were also spread out deeper into the forest.

Jada's eyes quickly spotted all the paddocks and fences that cut this way and that. Right against those paddock fences horses were gathered. They looked like the ones depicted in the statues: tall, but big boned, evenly built, and well muscled. Their faces were straight, but covered with considerable flesh. Coat colors were all in dark tones and various shades of grey and brown. A number were true blacks.

Sturdy beasts of war, thought Jada.

Each creature gazed at them with large eyes filled with curiosity and great interest.

As for human signs of life, that was in plenty. There were a great number of people mending fences, in the middle of hammering swords, or horseshoes, practicing in combat, and many other things besides.

Height aside, everyone that Jada could see was built like their steeds: even and very strong. The men looked like they could uproot a mature oak with their bare hands and carry it on their shoulder like it was nothing. The women weren't as masculine, but they still had the appearance of being able to labor all day beside their men and be no worse for wear.

With the exception of one or two especially dark-haired people, the main group had sandy or ginger colored hair. Eye color was spread across a range of greens and blues.

They'd clearly known the two riders were coming and no one was startled by their appearance, though they naturally stopped what they were doing to stare.

"Well," said a man standing at a table outside a blacksmith's shop. "It's been awhile since I've seen anyone ride from the Southern Fortress."

He finished wiping his hands with a rag and tossed it on the table before casually walking towards them.

"Though I can tell by your armor that you hail from someplace farther north," he continued, pointing at Cora, "closer to the mountains."

"You're correct," replied Cora with a nod, "though I'd expect nothing less from someone who was born of iron, steel, and weapons of war."

Jada smiled inwardly, *very smooth, Cora. Maybe I'll hire you to speak for me.*

The man smiled and a riotous, but somehow dark, laughter danced in his eyes and on his expression.

And that's more of what I expected, thought Jada.

If her memory of the twelve sons of Jacob, and his final prophetic blessings on them, served her correctly, Levi and Simeon used their swords as weapons of violence. Their anger was fierce and their wrath cruel. So, Jada expected to see some sign of this in the people, if not only the leaders, of this territory.

Now she had, and the simmering fire in his green eyes didn't die away again.

His gaze went to Jada and he eyed her up and down. He didn't do this in a degrading way, but in a manner that said he was trying to figure out just who or what she was.

"I don't know what to make of you," he said at last and folding his arms. "I'm familiar with all the peoples from here to the Northern kingdom, save perhaps, the rogues of the West. Normally that means when I'm looking at someone who doesn't belong anywhere that says they're a traveler."

He gave a shake of his head. "You are a traveler, but there's something else I can't put my finger on."

His expression hardened. "And the last time I laid eyes on someone like you, trouble came at his heels."

Jada had been watching the others in her peripheral and had noticed them moving around. When the man had spoken his last bit, she saw hands go subtly to sword hilts, spears, and bows. The tension in the air rose instantly and continued to mount. She could feel the steely gazes of the many eyes now fixed on her, as if she were an arch nemesis that had called them all out.

"She reminds me of Eremias, dad," said a young girl as she skipped up to the man and was totally oblivious to the fact that her friends were a breath away from skewering the two visitors.

The girl took her dad's hand and ducked under his arm, so she could lean against him.

"Is that who you're talking about?" she asked, gaze moving from Jada to her dad.

"I thought you didn't like him," said a boy, just a little older than the girl. He appeared on the other side of the man.

"Yeah, you called him a lot of bad names," agreed the girl.

"Well, he did make things difficult for your elders," said a woman with long hair the color of honey. She appeared and stood to the right of the man and on the other side of the girl. Her right hand went to her hip, and her keen hazel-blue eyes studied the rider on the horse whose coat shimmered from silver to gray.

Jada defeated the urge to sigh and roll her eyes. *I'm not interested in your husband.*

“Aye, stirring up trouble amongst our settlements,” voiced a man somewhere in the crowd.

“And getting us involved in fights that weren’t any of our business,” added another.

“It’s not our fault that our brother tribes got themselves into trouble,” threw in a third. “It wasn’t our job to waste our time and energy, or spill our blood to bail them out!”

“Yeah! We have more than enough to worry about!”

From additional outbursts, Jada was able to piece together what had happened. Eremias, a wandering traveler, had been sent to stir the tribe of Levi and send them to the aid of one of their fellow tribes. Assailants were en route to slaughter this tribe, and Levi was one of those selected to go to the rescue. Granted, Levi might’ve had their own pressing matters, but at the heart of it, family was family. When one of the Twelve chosen was in trouble, it was the duty of the others to help.

However, it was plain that interests of the tribes had turned inward, as was all too common among man.

In the meantime, the noise of the throng had continued to rise, and every other person was throwing out their two cents about historical events involving Eremias.

Jada sighed inwardly. *This is what happens when warrior-types spend too much time away from the battlefield or don’t have enough fights to occupy their time...and restless energy.*

The random shouting continued until someone spouted, “Good riddance to this wanderer, I say! And good riddance to Eremias. I’m glad he’s gone, the meddling wizard.”

“He was no wizard,” snapped the wife of the tribe leader.

All sound died and the people quieted.

She appeared displeased and her eye lingered on Jada a moment, before continuing in a firm voice, “Eremias was no wizard or one who dappled in any dark art.”

Her mouth drew into a line a moment as she drew a breath and then hesitantly finished with, “he was a prophet, and one who held favor of the high king.”

Oh, thought Jada, well that would be where our similarities end. I don’t fall into the “prophet” category, only the “annoying wanderer who stirs up trouble” class.

Yet the woman’s admittance to the truth spoke volumes about her. She might be harsh, but she was also fair and reasonable. She wouldn’t deny something that was true.

Harsh, perhaps cruel, but also fair, thought Jada. I wouldn’t expect anything less from someone who comes from a line of fierce warriors.

While all of this was on-going, Cora wondered why Jada had yet to speak. Glancing at her captain again, she saw that her face was still stoic, giving no clue to what she was thinking. No, it simply looked like Jada was waiting for something.

Mostly silence remained over the crowd, and the leader's wife returned her eyes to Jada. Taking a breath, she said, again with some reluctance, "And perhaps our visitor would like to speak for herself about who she is and why she's here."

Finally, thought Jada. She'd sensed with this lot and this situation it would be best to wait until she was directly addressed. Any preemptive speaking or comments, innocent or not, only had the potential to stir things up and tilt the situation downhill.

"I'm neither Eremias nor a prophet," answered Jada evenly, "just a traveler who was appointed a task. The sooner we get down the business, the sooner I will leave."

"Alright then, traveler," said the boss man with somewhat of a sneer, "why are you here?"

Jada turned her head a little and her gaze narrowed slightly. "I think you mean to ask: what took me so long to get here?"

The man straightened, as if he'd just been insulted or challenged, but Jada continued before he could speak. "Isolated as you are, you've heard the news of the spreading darkness. Even from the South now you can see the shadow coming from the North. The dark king, Cassius, has left his boundaries with the prince Levian and is drawing nearer. None have been able to stop him or pose even the smallest threat."

She lifted her eyes to the others and carefully studied them. "That is why the Twelve Tribes are being called together in this dark hour."

Murmurs rippled amongst the people.

"The high king has sent messengers to rally the Tribes and send them to meet at Iyasu...and they must gather already with the intent to be unified."

"If we were really so vital to the cause," scoffed a man near to the leader's right shoulder, "then the high king would've come and appealed to us himself."

Before any outbursts could ensue, whether in agreement or dissent, Jada's gaze locked onto the man. "So, the pot would now tell the potter how to work, and mold and shape?" she asked lightly, though her tone betrayed the incredulity and anger stirring within her.

How dare anyone even talk about Eliadar that way!

Edgy silence.

"Your forefathers were chosen by the high king himself," she continued, somewhat crossly now, "and he gave them territory that suited the skills and passions they were created with."

She looked back at the leader. "Once you were a feared people, and when you were united with your brother tribes, no enemy, no matter how big or strong, could stand against you. But you've known the high king longer than I, so tell me: when has he ever truly abandoned his people? When has he once turned his back on them? On you?"

Jada gave a shake of her head and a sigh. "But what can I say that will truly persuade you? What can I tell you that you don't already know? You've seen the shadow coming from the North and heard the news of war. You know that if you don't join the other Tribes, join the fight, then it won't be long before the shadow reaches you here. So I'm asking you, as a lone, feeble soldier to a tribe of infamous warriors: please, join your fellow Tribes at the ancient meeting ground at Iyasu."

A long silence followed. There was no murmuring or whispers amongst the crowd this time, and all fell into quiet considering.

Another warm gust of wind pushed through the trees and kicked up several little whirlwinds of leaves. They went dancing about the broad clearing, and around Zohmar and Raven, but the horses remained unmoved.

Finally, several horses in the paddock to the left whickered, and one or two gently bobbed their heads. Stepping forward, they lightly pressed against the fence and gazed keenly at the humans.

A big black mare nickered at Zohmar, who snorted and nodded in response.

The horses are ready for battle at any rate, thought Jada, as she cast a look over the sturdy beasts.

The black mare that had spoken to Zohmar met Jada's gaze and tossed her large head and whinnied. The other horses whinnied also and shifted anxiously for a few seconds before settling down again.

At length, the leader answered Jada, "I have to say that I'm a touch impressed. Everyone else has appealed to our skill in battle...and taste for swift violence, and inconsolable rage on the battlefield against our foes."

The tension that had hung over Jada, Cora, and the crowd evaporated, and everyone breathed easier.

"Well, I figured doing such a thing," replied Jada with a faint smile, "telling you something you already knew, would've just insulted your intelligence...and your honor."

The man smiled for the first time and it made the light in his eyes twinkle brighter.

"So, we're going to battle, then, Abiel?" asked the lead man's wife.

Abiel, thought Jada, father of strength. How appropriate.

"Yes, Eda," replied Abiel firmly and with a growing fire in his expression. "We are going to battle."

A strong warrior standing nearby raised the spear he was holding into the air and shouted, "To war!"

"To war!" shouted the crowd in unison while raising swords, spears, and bows over their heads.

Abiel half-turned to the throng and said, "Prepare to ride out immediately! We make for Iyasu. Pack light, for our strength is in speed."

Almost as soon as the crowd began to disperse, a clear horn rang through the forest. A span of seconds passed before another horn answered in the distance, and then another, and another.

This tribe was obviously larger than Jada had initially anticipated –and it gladdened her heart and brought relief. She knew battles and wars weren't won by numbers only, but they definitely helped.

At the sound of the horns, the horses neighed and shook their manes. They pawed the earth and snorted.

Jada knew that soon all this region would be filled with the low thundering of galloping hooves. She knew that she and Cora couldn't wait that long, but the thought of the sight and sound of riders and armored horses riding out sent a chill through her.

“Abiel...”

The man looked back at Jada.

“May the shield of the living God go before you and your people.”

“Will we see you on the battlefield, wandering messenger?” he asked.

“I cannot say,” answered Jada. “We must first ride to Simeon before anything else happens.”

At this, Abiel's eyebrows rose slightly.

“A word of advice for you then,” he said. “The tribe of Simeon is very hot and zealous. They're a wild lot and can be unruly. Expect a challenge from Harahn, the leader, or from one of his commanders.”

A wry little smile pulled at his mouth. “Of our two brother tribes...Levi has been the more reasonable.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

As Zohmar turned, she gave a wave of ‘goodbye,’ and then her horse jumped into a canter, heading back the way they'd come.

“If that old map of the Tribes was remotely accurate, it'll be a good ride to Simeon,” said Cora as Raven pulled even with Zohmar.

“It will,” nodded Jada. “But if our horses can get us all the way from the Southern Fortress to Sirion in a day and a half, then we'll arrive at Simeon by dawn's light tomorrow.”

Jada then wondered if she really wanted to bring Cora with her to Simeon. Did she need to? She definitely didn't want to put her friend in the middle of a den of lions...

“I'm not afraid,” said Cora, breaking into Jada's thoughts. “My place is still by your side. Where you go, I will go.”

When Jada looked over at her friend, she saw the set determination on her face and peaceful resolution in her overall expression.

Jada laughed out of the gratitude and joy that filled her. Dealing with Levi had been tense and climatic, though not in the traditional sense of the words. Her gut told her that when it came to Simeon, however, there would undoubtedly be a skirmish.

It would be too easy if both tribes agreed to unit without offering any resistance at all, mused Jada.

If there was to be a fight, Jada was glad to have Cora.

“Then to Simeon we both go,” grinned Jada, slapping her friend on the shoulder.

Then she leaned forward and spoke softly to Zohmar. “Run, my friend, and show us just how swift you really are.”

The mighty horse, gray in the shadows of the woods, snorted once and then quickened his pace, reaching with his strong legs and eating up the ground with great strides.

Then Zohmar, with Raven at his heels, disappeared down the trail and headed northward.

Chapter 131

When Dark Gates Open

The noonday was dark at Asgarod, not that the sun’s light had been able to pierce the shadow veil since Halden’s fall.

No outsider, neither scout nor enemy soldier, had seen what kind of forces and fiends gathered within those dark walls. None had ever been passing by when the gates opened, and none had seen any visitors entering or exiting. Then again, no one in their right mind wanted to venture near the city.

In a matter of weeks following Halden’s fall, the pasture lands around the city died. The grass, timothy, and alfalfa fields, along with all fruit trees and vegetable gardens, withered and died. What was once green was now brown and dead.

Livestock seized by the city military were now housed in low-roofed barns off-shooting from the northeast side of Asgarod. Tall, thick perimeter walls were built around the barns and were well-guarded, so as to prevent any thieves, out or inside the city, from retaking what had been taken from them.

Long had scouts and warriors of the Southern Forces been wondering when an assault would come forth from those dark gates. Then, not a week ago, a hawk had risked a closer look and flown over Asgarod.

At dusk on a particularly foggy and misty day, he used the low clouds as cover and flew overhead. His keen eyes saw numerous soldiers moving quickly about, as if all were busy on some errand. The streets were filled with them and with other fell beasts, like kyros. Winged shadows were just as common as the humans, and they fluttered about the

buildings, passing in and out of the walls. The greatest of their number, however, were in the citadel of Halden.

Every soldier and kyros bore a single, slate-colored wolf print on the chest of their armor. It was the sign of Halden and the demon general, Greyon, who partnered with the former counselor.

When the hawk was halfway over the city, soldiers streamed out of the various buildings and headed towards the citadel. It seemed to him that they'd all been summoned and were going to a meeting.

The last thing noteworthy that he saw was on the northeast side of Asgarod. Down within the barnyards were a number of black dogs, stationed there to defend the perimeter. The hawk had seen a few with human squads in the city, but here he was able to get a better look at them.

They were of medium size and evenly built. Their black coats were sleek and shiny, attesting to the fact that they were well looked after. The pair that the hawk passed over had been roughhousing. Snarling at one another, they reared up on their hind legs and snapped at each other's necks to reveal for a second their large, gleaming teeth.

The hawk didn't risk a second pass. Gremlins were fluttering all over the city, and there had been several instances when the hawk had thought he'd been spotted.

After he reported his observations to patrol squads, as well as to the Southern Fortress, all began anticipating an assault.

Yet that afternoon, on the very day Jada and Cora were riding away from the tribe of Levi, none had expected that those dark gates would open. In five to seven more days, perhaps, when plans were further developed. But not that day. The minds of the generals in the Fortress were on many other things, one of them being another delay assault on Cassius's troops in the mountains.

But under the weak noon sun, the ranks of Asgarod marched out onto the plain. From the main gate, and from two of the other five that had been built, the forces came.

Leading the way was a garrison of riders skilled in mounted warfare. All their horses were black, or dark gray or brown. They were lightly armored and keen for battle.

The three hundred of Cassius's personal cavalry that had arrived earlier were not sent out. They were to be held in reserve for the real battle, and Halden and Greyon were not going to willingly reveal them to their enemy.

Behind the horsemen walked many squads of men and kyros. Each was specifically trained with the sword, bow, or spear.

On either side of the men walked more cavalry units.

Walking with and amongst the ranks of horses and men were the black dogs with their sleek coats gleaming over rippling muscles. A bright light glinted in their dark brown eyes and they were on the eager lookout for any enemy near or far.

A handful of gremlins flew ahead of them to scout out the road, as the forces of Asgard marched onward towards the Southern Fortress.

Ω

A stellar and two falcons screamed over the Southern Fortress and sounded the alarm. While the falcons broke away, the stellar made for the heart of the fortress. He was relieved to see two generals and several commanders just leaving the council hall.

“Generals!” called the stellar, dropping to the ground in front of them. “Forces from Asgard are marching this way!”

“How many,” asked one of the generals, none other than Ezra from the Western Village. “And how far away are they?”

“Two thousand,” answered the stellar, still panting from his hasty flight, “horsemen, foot soldiers, and kyros. They’re maybe ninety miles northeast as a horse runs.”

Brief discussion amongst the generals and commanders followed. After a rough plan was formed, the call to arms was sounded.

Sufficient forces were needed to repel the approaching enemy, but the generals didn’t want to reveal their full numbers yet. So, it was agreed upon that seven hundred of the more skilled horsemen would be dispersed to meet Halden’s forces head on, including a fair number of stellars for air support.

Of those ordered to muster was Michael’s company, which was presently rather small, and included: Connor, Reagan, Namor, and Gabriel.

But they would merge with units led separately by Uri, Zev, and Akin. They had well proven themselves as commanders and were obviously following in the footsteps of their parents.

As for Namor, the youngest of the four, he was itching to lead his own squad –and it was whispered that it wouldn’t be much longer before that desire would become reality. Though still a bit hot-blooded, he’d thrived and grown much under the command of Michael, who the young man saw as a warrior of high honor.

Ida and a number of other elves were in the infirmary. It seemed that the evil of Cassius had reached far enough South to have an ill-effect on the fair elven kind. The elders who had seen potent darkness in previous times weren’t alarmed or surprised, though to see their kin weakened was disheartening.

The majority of those ill would grow used to the nearness and power of this evil and would recover. But it wasn’t unheard of that the fairest did die as a result of the proximity of great evil. When they did, they took with them some of the purest light from the world, for in being the fairest they had also been the kindest, warmest, and often of

the more wise of the realm. When any elf died, instead of merely fading from time at the end of their days, it was said that a bright star went out in the heavens and no longer blessed the realm with its light.

It was truly a deeply sad and grievous thing.

But at least for the elves ill within the Southern Fortress it seemed all would recover in time.

When the call to arms was given, Gabriel reluctantly left Ida's side, where he'd been ever since she fell ill shortly upon arriving.

The three other units rode under Michael's banner –which didn't technically exist yet. But when Reagan slid her fiery sorrel mount to a stop beside Johar, she held her hand out, palm up to Michael.

In it was a wooden object, round and flat-ish, like a large coin. On it was carved a sword, pointing downward, with a mountain behind it. Behind the sword, and in front of the mountain, rays like from the rising sun were shooting outwards.

But when Michael glanced over it a second time, he saw that immediately behind the sword was a throne, hidden in the outline of the weapon and the mountains. And it was from out of the throne that the light came.

"It'll be put on a banner when we get back," declared Reagan proudly.

Michael smiled as he took the object. When he looked at it once more, and took in the mountains and the throne, his yearning for Sirion awoke fiercely. His heart and very being longed to return to the land and city of his heritage.

Soon, whispered a thought in the back of his mind, and hope sprang up inside him.

Michael slid the object into a hidden pocket in his armor.

"Thank you, little sister," he said to her, for that was what he'd been calling Reagan for some time.

Reagan beamed at him before he nudged Johar and led his company towards one of the northern gates. There they fell in with the rest of the seven hundred and were given final updates. The only new development was, "and be aware that the advancing forces have attack dogs."

"Good," chimed one of the dozen stellars accompanying the riders. "They'll make decent target practice."

The northeast gate was then opened and horns sounded. The horses snorted and pawed the ground. A few reared and whinnied, no longer able to contain themselves.

Then the seven hundred galloped out of the Southern Fortress and into the forest. They would not slacken their pace until they were nearly to Halden's forces. Speed was key so that they'd meet the enemy while they were still far away.

They moved as one and thundered through the woods like a swift flowing river. Any village or settlement they past, its inhabitants held up a hand or a weapon, if they were holding one, in symbol of strength and honor.

The miles flew past, but the horses did not tire. Quite the reverse: they grew hotter and galloped faster, snorting as they ate up the ground with great strides.

They were on an errand that could not wait, and they had been given a task that could not fail. They were fierce and loyal, and they were made for battle, for they had been born and bred in the mountains east of the Western Village. They would trample their foes and defend their riders to the death –for that was the duty, calling, and highest honor of a horse of the South.

Chapter 132 Pained Delays

They caught clear sight of the enemy ranks after three hours of hard riding.

The forces of Asgarod were still out on the plain and had wisely kept out of the forest, which was truly the element of the Southern warriors.

But even as the company halted in the treeline, it appeared that the cavalry in the front of the foot soldiers were picking up their pace and drawing away.

It had already been decided which units were making the initial charge and which lines they were running. They broke away, moved into position, and then charged out of the trees. Five stellars accompanied them.

In the meantime, the remainder of the riders strung their bows. The wind was on their side and the enemy riders were within range. Their comrades were still riding towards their foes when the archers loosed their first arrows.

Because the sun was now on the western side of the sky, and the arrows were coming from a southwesterly direction, the enemy riders didn't see the shafts until they were falling among them.

While this was on-going, the first regiments reached Halden's riders. A second line of horsemen also broke out of the trees and directed their charge further down the lines of foot soldiers.

As for Michael's company, they were one of the last squads to ride out. No words passed between anyone as they watched the initial unfolding of the battle. Each had seen enough skirmishes to be considered reasonably seasoned. There were no new soldiers here, none that needed calming or last-minute coaching.

The units that had executed the opening charges were thoroughly engaged with enemy. Some directed their attention to the Asgarod horsemen, while others punched through the lines of foot soldiers. Those on foot might've successfully speared a few of the

horses, but the horsemen were excellent archers. The horses themselves knew how to shove spears aside with their heads or step sideways just so and gallop past.

For the most part, the first moves had been clean on behalf of the Southern Forces. No one had been picked off by enemy bowmen, though the closest scrape came when an arrow sank into the protective leather covering one of the horse's shoulders. It didn't drive deeply into the flesh, but it was enough to cause the animal to stumble a few steps. When it righted itself, the rider yanked it out and saw that there red was smudged on the arrowhead.

That was all that was needed to ignite the fire within the Southern riders, already hot with fight. Blood had been drawn from the faithful steed of a fellow rider. There would be heck to pay.

Following the passes by the horsemen, the Asgarod warriors were somewhat able to regroup, stay together, and hold their ground. Their fellow riders did what they were supposed to and kept the Southern horsemen away and preoccupied while archers attempted to line up shots.

As for the dogs, for the moment the most they were to the enemy was a nuisance as they chased and bit at the legs of the horses. However, the equines had no tolerance for that sort of thing, and well-timed and placed kicks kept the canines from doing much damage.

Also, the stellars were playing their part well. Swooping down, they took out any dog that was close by, or dive-bombed the soldiers and kyros as they tried to shoot the horsemen. Occasionally, a stellar would momentarily find himself free long enough to perform an aerial assault on an enemy rider.

The plain was filled with the typical chaos of battle, and the Asgarod forces were thoroughly drawn into the immediate Southern Forces swirling about them.

That was when Michael and his company finally made their move. They burst out of the trees and approached from the east, behind the enemy squads in the rear.

Arrows from the bows of a dozen warriors, including Gabriel, Reagan, Connor, and Uri, picked off soldiers and kyros while they were busy looking the other way.

The unit fanned out, some drifting northward and others south, so they could more or less converge on the enemy ranks from different directions.

Gabriel, along with two elven companions, were the only ones who didn't put up their bows as their horses drove down upon the Asgarod soldiers. The horsemen plowed over the enemy and crisscrossed paths with one another, missing each other by a foot at the most.

Upon breaking out of the enemy squad, riders charged after Michael, Namor, Zev and a few others, and they broke away from the heavier fighting.

But Reagan, who'd taken it upon herself to watch after Michael in Jada's absence, kept close to him, so she could take out any threat from the ground while he dealt with the rider.

Her sorrel mare snorted and perked her ears towards a nearby soldier wielding a spear. His gaze was locked onto Michael as the commander's horse swung around so his rider could take a swipe at the enemy horseman.

The spearman's eyes then went to Johar, and Reagan knew that killing either the horse or rider would be acceptable.

But he never had the chance. A well-aimed arrow from Reagan landed in his neck and he collapsed.

She'd hardly released the arrow when her horse jumped sideways and an answering arrow whizzed past her shoulder. Snorting, the horse half-reared as a second arrow passed between the rider and her mount's neck.

Reagan already had another arrow set on the string as her horse swung around to help her get a line on the archer. She'd spotted him in her peripheral as she took out the spearman, but Michael's safety had taken precedent.

Now as she turned she saw that even as she pulled the bowstring back, the enemy archer was drawing his. That was when she also saw that there was a second archer, standing a dozen feet from his companion. He too had an arrow aimed at her.

An arrow whistled through the air and dropped the archer to Reagan's left.

Gabriel galloped by, and the instant that he was clear, Reagan shot the second archer.

The battle raged on, and the sun continued to sink towards the treetops to the West.

It seemed that the Southern horsemen were winnowing away at the Asgarod ranks for an eternity before they finally began to see results. There were notably fewer enemy soldiers standing, and the kyros had not been keen in fighting in the afternoon sunlight. All of the cavalymen had fallen. Indeed, they'd been the primary targets of the Southern riders because they posed the greatest threat.

But this mastery was coming at a price. While many soldiers of Halden lay strewn across the plain, here and there were fallen horses and riders of the South. A fair number of the living were wounded, also.

It seemed that the forces of Halden were not mere mindless pawns or untrained volunteers. They were trained, skilled, and fought with a purpose.

Every live lost on the side of the South made the fire burn fiercer in their fellow warriors still alive. In a fight like this they rarely showed mercy, it was true. But in light of the deaths of brothers and sisters-in-arms, those still fighting were on the cold and merciless warpath.

Things seemed to be winding down when twilight fell upon the plain, but not because the sun had dipped below the horizon. It was due to the low-lying clouds that had been drifting in from the northwest.

Now they stretched across the sky and sent hazy mist swirling down the plain and forest.

One of the few remaining dogs was currently harassing Johar. Its black coat was slick with blood, and it snarled and snapped at the horse's legs.

Johar, clearly displeased, snorted and leapt out of the way of those deadly jaws, while seizing any opportunities to kick or trample the mutt.

With the speed of a lightning strike, the horse kicked at the dog. But the canine had positioned himself well so he was able to duck the kick and leap right at the horse's foreleg.

He might've latched onto that leg, if an arrow from Michael hadn't punched through the top of its skull.

Without warning, Johar lunged forward as another dog came from the opposite direction. Ears pinned, the horse squealed with rage as he and the dog commenced in chaotic dance.

"Michael!"

Michael glanced over to see Reagan with an arrow set on the string.

He guessed her thought, as did Johar, and the horse bounded forward and sprinted into a gallop straight west.

The dog scrambled after them in pursuit, but only made it half a dozen strides before Reagan's arrow found its neck.

Michael eased Johar as Reagan and Gabriel pulled up beside him. The remainder of the fighting was a short distance away and it was becoming clearer by the second that the Southern Forces would have victory.

Lifting his eyes to the darkening sky, Gabriel considered the mist and the warm gusts of wind tearing over the plain. Something wasn't sitting right here, something was wrong...

That was when a flicker of moving shadows near the woods to the West drew their attention. A small group of enemy soldiers was trying to make a break for it.

Simultaneously, Connor and Namor thundered past the trio on their horses, in clear pursuit of those attempting to escape the battle.

Michael, Gabriel, and Reagan turned their horses after them as Uri, Zev, and a handful of other riders joined them.

Together the group galloped after their two companions and passed into the trees.

The forest was writhing in the gusts, and the pines and oaks creaked as they bent and swayed. Leaves and twigs were yanked from their places and thrown into the faces of the riders and fleeing men.

It was darker in the wood, and both horses and riders tensed, as if expecting an ambush. Dirt and last year's foliage swirled about the legs of the horses as they galloped onward, following after their two comrades.

They passed around an immense boulder and finally spotted Namor and Connor, mere shadows in the fast-falling darkness. They'd caught up to the fleeing soldiers and were making short work of them.

But as Michael and the others approached, their horses checked their speed just a little, and Johar shook his head and snorted.

The gazes of the riders searched through the forest almost frantically. They knew to listen to their steeds, especially in situations like this. Even as the seconds ticked past, the trees continued to thrash about, and the warm wind pushed against horse and rider, the stomachs of the warriors slowly tightened.

All of this was passing through their minds when out of the darkness to the north *they* came: tall horses, dark as the night. On them sat riders, dressed in all black and wielding weapons that barely reflected any light.

One of the horses near Zev whinnied and stumbled to the ground as a black arrow found its mark. The rider was thrown harshly to the ground. More black arrows came and the riders had to rely on their horses to see the deadly weapons to avoid them.

When Michael turned his eyes to Namor and Connor, he saw them already trading strikes with the enemy riders. As Johar closed the distance between himself and his two comrades, Michael also became aware of black forms galloping past them.

This was no small attack squad. This was a larger regiment...and they'd come from the ranks of Cassius himself. The heavy fear and dread trying to grip him was proof of that.

Michael knew then that a small squad would deal with himself and his unit, while the remainder of the regiment continued to the battlefield to assail the Southern horsemen.

As the darkness of the wood encompassed Michael and the others, and as black riders attacked them from all directions, he knew it was now quite likely that none of them would survive the night.

They'd galloped through the morning and into the afternoon. While the morning had been clear, by the time they stopped near the Southern Fortress haze weakened the sun's light.

The wind also had been rising steadily, gusting warm from the southwest. The atmosphere was unsettled and a sense of foreboding was steadily increasing with the wind.

Because of this, Jada and Cora only stopped long enough for a short breather, and then they were riding again. As they were traveling west of the Southern Fortress, and because the wind was blowing from that direction, they didn't hear the horns call from within those walls announcing that riders were moving out to meet an enemy.

Zohmar and Raven had, of course, but at the time their immediate task was more pressing than trampling enemy soldiers in battle. Nor was there a strong sense of danger.

However, when the clouds came and blocked out the sun, and as darkness and mist fell, Jada and Cora felt their horses become uneasy. They were riding now in the trees and just about even with the plains of Asgarod, on which a battle was wrapping up.

Complete darkness was nearly upon them when Zohmar and Raven slowed steadily but quickly. They turned eastward, towards the plains.

Jada gently checked Zohmar, and he halted, though he continued to stare into the east.

A gust of wind rolled by and after the initial rustling of leaves and creaking of tree trunks quieted, they heard the sound of horses whinnying and swords ringing in the distance.

At the same time, Jada and Cora felt heavy dread settle in their stomachs. Something very evil was here.

Fiends from the ranks of Cassius, no doubt, thought Jada, setting her jaw.

Without a word or signal, Zohmar and Raven bolted forward towards the plains. A few agonizing minutes later, they burst out of the trees to see what they had feared: all of the horses and riders were shadows in the darkness, but the enemy was blacker still.

Casting a quick glance up at the sky, Jada glowered at the misty clouds. She then took up her bow, set an arrow, and gave a command to Zohmar.

The stallion, a shadow in the darkness, gathered himself and powered forward. He flew around the edge of the skirmish, and Jada released half a dozen arrows in rapid succession. In spite of the dark, each arrow found its mark in chests and legs of the black horses, or in the necks of their fell riders.

This started a ripple of mild confusion through both the remaining Southern horsemen and the riders of Cassius.

With rising fire and wrath, Jada loosed one more arrow and sent a black horse toppling to the unforgiving ground.

Zohmar opened his stride and continued galloping around the outskirts of the fight. When Jada drew her shorter blade, he tucked his chin and whickered deeply. Reaching out of the ground, he closed the distance between himself and the next enemy, and the earth itself seemed to tremble beneath his hooves.

The black horses sensed that some kind of menace was fast approaching, but it was hidden from them. They clearly saw the figures of the enemy warriors and their horses, but they couldn't see the immediate threat. One or two of them thought they saw something, something that flickered silver before fading to gray, the shade that filled the night.

In the final seconds, the riders of Cassius also sensed a lethal threat. They looked about for a moment and caught a glimpse of it, but it was too late.

There was a bright flicker, like moonlight glinting off a sword as it was drawn, and then darkness again...

The deadly blows came a breath later. The first rider didn't feel anything before falling from his horse.

The sword of the unknown assailant rang when it fell the second rider, though it never met the enemy's blade.

The third horseman in the immediate group was standing a little apart from his two companions. After his second friend fell, he saw again a glint of light on the unknown attacker's sword.

"This is not your land!" shouted the sword's wielder.

It was as if the veil that surrounded himself and his fellow dark riders had been working against him, keeping him from seeing the menace. But finally it was pulled away.

It was a woman and her outline seemed clear cut now in the eyes of the dark rider. He saw her plainly and all in shades of grays and silver. As she glared at him, he saw plainly that there was no fear in her, and he sensed that she was filled with light and great authority. Lastly, his eye went to the sword in her right hand and saw that its edge glinted in a pale blue hue.

All this the rider took in, in a matter of seconds, and when he blinked out of his stare, he found that his mind had gone wholly blank. He could think of nothing to do as this rider galloped towards him on a mighty horse whose coat now shimmered from gray to silver.

The black horse he was sitting upon whinnied with fright and reared. Still the rider could think of nothing to do. All he was capable of was watching this threat drive down upon them. He noticed that the closer they came, the lighter, the more silver and white, horse and rider seemed to become.

As this silver pair fell upon the dark horse and rider, a blinding flash of light filled the rider's vision...and then there was nothing after that. Both the dark horse and rider fell to the ground.

Zohmar was moving swiftly towards the next enemy horse when a low and familiar whinny, filled with power, echoed over the plain.

Zohmar shook his mane and whinnied an answer.

A cool and refreshing breeze swept in from the north and tore apart the mist and low clouds. The low moon and bright stars were now able to fill the land below with their light. All became visible now, and the warriors of the South were better able to counter the dark assailants.

At the same time, galloping shadows raced out of the forest to the West with impossible speed. The leader sounded a bellowing call again and any remaining shadows seemed to flee.

The dark horses screamed in terror as Draug and a dozen other of his kind galloped in. They might have been dark to the eyes of the humans, but to the black horses they were forms of near-blinding light that were terrible and painful to look at.

Even the female warrior on the silver steed seemed whiter now as they darted and danced amongst the enemy and cut them down one after the other.

"This is not your land," growled Jada again when she locked blades with a dark rider who'd managed to defend himself. For at least one swing, anyway.

His deflecting strike was weak and Jada disarmed him with a second swing. She then latched onto his shoulder and at her touch, pain radiated through his collarbone, neck, and arm.

"This territory does not belong to you," she said sharply, and the light he sensed she was filled with showed itself until it was nearly blinding. But her eyes, pale turquoise, were clear to see, and the depth of that gaze spoke of great knowledge, deep knowledge of things unknown by most. And it pierced his soul and mulled about his black and putrid heart.

This could not be the same traveler who'd first arrived two years ago. Naturally tales of her deeds were told throughout the realm. But in those stories she'd been heralded as a skilled tracker and a lethal hunter only.

Yet the person he was looking at was far beyond a hunter, skilled or simple. No, this was now someone, a being, that had been granted deep sight and given terrible power –but for the light, and not darkness, as with Cassius. The dark rider had yet to meet such a person of light...and seeing all of what became of someone deep in light scared him.

Maybe it was the way the light saw through all defenses. It saw his heart, mind, and soul. It was true that the darkness Cassius had sold himself to could also see such

things, and it understandably awoke great fear in anyone, dark soldier or Southern warrior.

However, at the heart of the matter, it came down to condemning the soul itself upon death. The dark rider understood in that instant that the light in this woman was of the One, the only One, who could condemn the soul to torment and fire.

Truly, He was the One who ought to have been feared all along. The only One to be feared.

In that moment, the rider was much more afraid of Jada than of the dark king.

“You have no power here,” said Jada firmly, before running the sword through his ribcage. “And you never will.”

“Adrana!”

Unclear if she’d heard correctly, or if someone was calling to another person, Jada glanced around the battlefield.

“Jada!”

Ah, I had misheard, she thought as her eyes fell upon a rider galloping for her. The idea of answering to a name other than the one given to her by her parents seemed odd.

“Bless the Almighty you are here!” breathed Uri, bringing his horse to a halt. “And that you brought...reinforcements. But we need to hurry! Michael, Zev, and several others rode after some enemy soldiers in the woods, and not minutes later the riders came! I haven’t seen or heard from any of them!”

A fresh burst of adrenaline, brought from sudden dread, tingled through Jada.

Zohmar swung around and leapt after Uri’s horse. Jada called for Cora, but her friend was already behind her.

Cora had kept close to her captain, much like Reagan had for Michael. If any wanted to kill Jada, they’d have to get through her first.

The moon and starlight aided them in finding their companions, even when they rode through the forest. The wind was still blustery at times, but seemed to finally be settling.

It wasn’t half a mile later when Zev, Jada, and Cora found Michael and his company. They slowed their horses as they approached a small clearing, where two or three small fires were going.

Michael saw the riders approaching, but said nothing.

Jada felt her throat tighten. Michael was smeared with blood, though he didn’t appear to be much hurt. It wasn’t his appearance that caused Jada’s dread to deepen: it was the expression on his face and the look in his eyes.

She leapt from Zohmar’s back when he stopped and she warily eyed the bodies that she could see in the light of the fire. Most were dark riders and their black horses.

Quickly she walked to Michael, and when she reached his side, she saw that he was crouched beside two people. The first of the two was Namor, badly wounded and clearly in pain.

The other was Connor, who looked far worse, half-dead already. When Jada saw the two arrows sticking out of his chest, her knees gave and she dropped beside him.

Reagan knelt at Connor's other side, her head bent as she grasped his hand.

Jada looked over her mortally injured friend in panicked horror.

"A bit late...to the party," muttered Connor to her and the corners of his mouth tried to pull upwards.

"My friend," said Jada, gently laying a hand on his bloodied shoulder. "I...maybe...I don't know, maybe I can take you back to the other dimension, get you to a—"

"No," grunted Connor, grabbing her arm. Pain seized him and for a moment all he could do was pull in a few sharp, uneven breaths.

"No," he repeated through a clenched jaw, "too late. Besides I...born here, and...will die here."

He coughed painfully and grunted before shaking his head and again saying, "Too late."

He closed his eyes a few seconds and then managed to open them again.

"It's okay," he said to Reagan, squeezing her hand, and she bent nearly double so she only had to lift his hand a little ways, in order to press it against her face.

"Don't...don't be too sad...too long," continued Connor to her. "And don't...don't be bitter...or angry..."

Jada winced, not at his words, but at the sound of his breathing. He wheezed with every breath and she could hear the fluid building in his lungs.

Stop talking, you idiot, she thought angrily, you're making your pain worse.

"I don't want to fight without you beside me," whispered Reagan to Connor. "I don't know what I'll do without you."

Even though it hurt, Connor coughed out a laugh. "What...you talking about? You're going to...going to go on to be one of the...greatest warriors ever. And then whe...when the war is over...you'll rule you...your own kingdom or something, remember? Remember, your...your land would be somewhere...deep in the forest...where all your friends are..."

"Unicorns and butterflies," they finished together, smiling.

Another wave of pain gripped Connor and for a minute he said nothing more.

Jada could barely stand to watch, and a few times her gaze strayed over to Namor, looking feverish...like Akin had when he'd been badly injured.

Suddenly Connor tightened his grip on Jada's arm again, redrawing her attention. "It was su...such an honor getting to meet...and train with you, Jada..."

A smile pulled at his mouth again, “the wandering star.”

Jada drew a steady breath as tears burned her eyes. “No, my friend...the honor was all mine.”

Taking in several sharp breaths, a fire briefly rekindled in Connor’s eyes, “Now...save my brother...save Namor. Still time...for him.”

Though he was still in pain, his eyes began to grow heavy. “Commander,” he grunted to Michael, but had to stop. He wished to say more, but the rapidly spreading weakness in his body made him unable.

They held one another’s gazes for a long moment, before tears glistened in Michael’s eyes. “Rest now, my brother,” he said to Connor, “and be at peace.”

They all knew when Connor passed not even a minute later. They’d all seen death on the battlefield, witnessed it, and they could all feel it when it took a life.

Jada set her jaw against the rush of grief that wanted to flood her, and she turned to Namor, even as Akin walked up and stood beside his other brothers.

“This looks familiar,” he mumbled when he eyed his little brother.

They all recalled that she’d found a tree of healing before, but it was so far away. She’d never make it there and back again in time.

Hot tears ran down her face without her approval, but her expression was set like stone as she tried to think of a solution.

That was when Gabriel appeared out of the darkness, “I know where another tree of healing is, and it’s closer than the one near the Western Village. It’s east-northeast of here.”

Jada jumped to her feet. *East, northeast...that’s near Simeon’s territory. What are the odds of that...*

She was quite aware, as she stepped to Zohmar, that it was very likely she’d have to send the healing leaves back here with Gabriel while she rode straight to Simeon. She didn’t like the thought of that. In fact, she hadn’t liked that she’d been delayed by coming here to the battle. Now she’d be delayed again in her errand to Simeon, which in turn delayed her return to Earth’s realm.

Delays, delays, delays, thought Jada angrily as she swung onto Zohmar. She recognized that she was already in the ‘anger’ phase of grief. She also knew she was using that anger, along with the frustration at the overall situation, and directing it towards the immediate task at hand.

Heaven help whatever beast guards this tree of healing.

No one spoke a word, for various reasons, and especially not to Jada. They saw the rising wrath etching itself on her face and glinting in her eyes.

Gabriel, astride his horse, waited for Jada on the edge of the firelight. She looked about for Cora, but saw that her friend, with silent tears running down her face, was

already at her side. While Jada saw the grief in her eyes, what was more prominent was the anger.

I retract my previous thought, thought Jada as she, Cora, and Gabriel picked up a canter towards the plains. Don't help the beast...just give it the intelligence to stay out of our way. That would be better.

Just as they broke out of the trees, Jada saw Draug and his warriors standing in line off to her right.

Jada gave a slight dip of her head in passing. *Thank you, my friend. We would not have had victory without you and your warriors.*

The Almighty goes before and with you, replied Draug, and is with all your fellow warriors. He clears the path in front and shields you from behind. He strengthens your hand in battle. It's vital to remember in the days ahead, little wandering star, that one small light, even when surrounded by darkness, can still put legions to flight.

I will remember.

As the plain, silvery blue in the moonlight, opened up before them, the riders turned a little more to the north, towards the hills.

No one spoke, for each was lost in their own thoughts of grief, loss, and what might await at this tree of healing.

What a day this turned out to be, thought Jada with a sigh, it started out bright and with cheer, and then ended with pain and delays.