

“Parallel, Book II: Beyond Strength & Sorrow

Chapters 1 - 14”

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Dedication

To the pure, innocent, and altruistic souls. You suffer perhaps more than most others. Nothing cuts you deeper quicker than when someone accuses you of selfish or greedy motives, even though these don't exist in you. Try to remember that the One who made your soul is the only One who truly sees your motives –and His sight and opinion of you is what matters the most. Those who falsely accuse you really ought to be pitied if they can't even imagine that another human has pure motives. In some cases, they really are showing a reflection of themselves and their attitude has very little to do with you.

To my rare, fellow personality types. To those who are regularly and wildly misunderstood, even by closest friends and family members. Every individual is created to be unique and can serve either a good or bad purpose. While perhaps the more common types of people make the world and society “go around,” the rarer ones serve an even more specific purpose. Because of your oddity, you don't function like the mainstream and are easily marked for ridicule. Yet the fringe and creative thinkers were created to help bring about advancements and discoveries to humanity (which would hopefully reflect the original Creator). However, as ones gifted with “abnormal” abilities, it is your responsibility to use those gifts and powers properly. Still, you suffer greatly and in many ways. Why is it that you make efforts to understand others unlike you –yet rarely does anyone else attempt to return the favor? Remember, we as humans tend to ridicule things and people we don't easily understand. Do not hide who you are or think that you should try to be “normal” like everyone else. Trust me when I say that doing this can lead to severe consequences and an extremely unhappy existence.

Finally, to those simply looking for a good adventure: I hope that this story draws you into a completely different world. This novel is very near and dear to my heart, which I do have, contrary to the belief of some. I hope that it inspires and speaks to you deeply.

Prologue

Old Journal Entry by Jada Serbin:

I cursed the day I stepped onto the Great Sands and ground my teeth in knowing that there was no better route. It does not matter which path a person takes. On their initial journey to the North, all are put to an ultimate test.

Even though much time has passed since I came out of that dark trial, I still shudder when I recall it. What a black time, by far the blackest that I had ever faced. All previous hardships and losses were made nothing in comparison to the desert. They were a joy, light matters, and even the death of my parents became a common suffering of life when set against the hell of the Sands.

I cannot describe or emphasize enough the depth of my anguish and pain. I cannot put into words the experience of having your mind unhinged, spirit torn to pieces, and your very soul smothered and shattered. I cannot express with speech the utter torment and misery one passes through as their entire beings are emptied.

I say that I have passed through hell and I believe that I did. I suffered grievous wounds. I had no food or water. I did not have shelter against the scorching heat of the day and terrible cold of the night.

I should have died as I went weeks without any of these things. In fact, I did die. No being of flesh and blood can survive such conditions and torment. I died. I passed through Death's door, and yet it seemed that my heart continued beating and my lungs breathing. I was dead but stumbling through hell.

And I had no relief, and no one came to the rescue. In the back of my mind, as I approached the Sands and began walking through it, I had naively believed that if I were ever in true danger, someone would save me. If all else failed, He would come.

But He did not. Every time I woke up from passing out, I found myself where I had collapsed.

I wept bitterly and cried out in my physical and mental agony.

He did not answer.

My mind turned to Michael, my beloved friend whom I didn't love romantically but as one who completed me. I thought of my other friends and of previous, easier times. Such things, however, only worsened my suffering and further embittered me. So, I put them all from my mind and shut them out.

As I began crawling because I had no more strength to stand and stumble, I recalled an event mentioned by the Apostle Paul when he and his companions had been tested beyond their bounds, beyond what they could handle. I was reminded then that nowhere in Scripture does it say that God will never give you more than you can handle. That is a lie we tell ourselves to give us false hope and assurance...but we ultimately set ourselves up for greater devastation.

I know because of what that shattered false hope did to me in a place where I needed real truth the most, even if that truth had been discouraging.

I can also say with surety that there is nothing much worse than the death of all hope. I have been there, and I have walked in the awful place.

While I dragged myself through the never-ending sand, I wondered if this was actually some kind of punishment. What if what I had thought would be a test was actually chastisement?

I wondered repeatedly what I had done to deserve such a punishment. Had I sinned so badly so as to earn passage through a living hell? Was this for all the blood that I had spilled in recent years? I had only ever shed the blood of the enemy, of those who sought to slay innocent lives.

I had trusted Him in times of heavy loss and when facing legions of the enemy. And this was what I received for it?

How did it come to this? How did I, a once shining warrior of light, untouchable and undefeatable, who'd had a hand in turning back the dark king, come to meet such a horrific end?

I wondered with despair just how long this rod of chastisement would remain. Near the end but before I'd entirely broken mentally, all that I could think over and over was, "Dear God in heaven, please, I don't understand. If I've sinned against You, then I'm sorry...what did I do? Why are You silent? What did I do? Please, please..."

In the end, all I desired was to understand.

There are times when we do eventually understand why something happened. Other times we do not. There is no guarantee that we will.

However, in this instance and on the other side of the black trial, the Maker of all things graced me with understanding. It wasn't in the form of a face-to-face, verbal exchange. It came as clear thought and deep innate insight and wisdom.

What I faced, the work done while passing through it, and the final outcome was something so magnificent and wonderful that no man or elf blessed with the greatest imagination could have fathomed it, even in the deepest moment of inspiration.

All things were put into perfect perspective. Against the hell of the Sands and the gloriousness after it, what was all of life's former trials? What was losing a home? What was not getting a promotion? To perhaps be crass, what was losing a loved one? These were common hardships and events.

I can tell you that there is pain and an aching heart—and then there's pain beyond describing, relentless waves of hopelessness that keep you down, and a madness that grabs your mind, slowly breaking it. There is a place of such internal agony where you loathe your very existence with all that is in you. There is a place where you wail your hatred for your own life.

That black place cannot be remotely compared with anything else.

There is also an irony that is so cruel and incredulous that you can do nothing but laugh at it. I did this when I was “rescued” from the Sands. I laughed because of whom, of what my “rescuer” was. From pitch black darkness to mere darkness I went. But the chains and dark hole I spent much time in was still a huge relief. They were infinitely better than being in the desert.

Still, who would ever think that an enemy would be the one to pull you from a God-allowed trial? That level of irony is at such a level of hilarity that it’s beyond laughter.

Dungeons were far better than the Sands. In the desert, I was stuck in a hell with no end in sight, with no breath of fresh air, and not even the smallest glimmer of hope. That hell and hopelessness was my life. Eventually, memories of light, of good days, and of normalcy were driven from me. I forgot what it was like to have a normal life, and I longed for it though I couldn’t recall it.

Everyone has grand notions that they will never break under pressure or torment. But that is self-deception. Everyone has a threshold. When it’s passed, they break. Everyone. No one is exempt.

A very few have drunk from the same cup that I did, and therefore only those select few can truly understand the wretchedness of that hell and the conclusions I have formed from being in such a place.

There are those He holds dear and blesses by keeping them from terrible trials and let’s only the “common” hardships come to pass. Thus, it’s difficult for these dear and blessed ones to understand those like me. Just as those who have never seen the blackness of war and death can’t truly comprehend and understand unless they themselves experience it—so it is with trials that lead you to experience hell.

That is why I say that only a few can understand. Only those who have languished mentally and physically in a hopeless, torturous hell that took them far beyond their ability to withstand the trial and had their minds completely shattered –only they can understand the depth of despair and hopelessness and the loathing of their existence.

Yet indeed, here is one of the many truths I learned: the longer and more terrible the trials, the better. The deeper you go, the longer the torment and the more horrific it is...the

more phenomenal and supernatural the transformation on the other side. No one can fathom the great and glorious things He reveals, or the depth of wisdom and knowledge He can share.

The more that you are broken and emptied, the more of Himself He pours and weaves into you. It is a deeply difficult and wondrous matter to describe. It's not that I was restored, that a few bandages were applied and the old wounds healed. The old was not repaired and remained old. In deep and supernatural wonders that I will never fully understand, the old was made entirely new. I think this is what happens when one walks through Death and beyond, but is then sent back to perform new tasks. You return changed in all ways, and the way that you were previously is a mere distant dream of a memory.

I've been under the rod of chastisement. I've been in the Refiner's fire, and I came out understanding great and marvelous mysteries. He molded and bestowed upon me wisdom that no man had ever known and knowledge of the deepest things and the secret places that none could imagine.

When you pass through a fatal trial as I have, and when you return from eternal places in the state that I did, you and He are infinitely closer. You better understand that, while He is always the head, you're partners.

All of these things are why I say, "What is loss? What is the greatest disappointment? What is the most grievous wound? What is the most atrocious pain, and even what were the horrific Sands?" In the end, all of these things, no matter how wretched and painful, become distant, ancient memories in dreams. They are ultimately made to be nothing in that eternal place.

All I have left to say is: in the days of blackness, when there's no end in sight, you must trudge or crawl onwards. You must keep moving, no matter how slowly. There will be nothing that can console you, bring you hope or any joy in times like that. It's entirely up to you to choose to keep fighting because there will be no one to help or hold your hand.

But I can truly say that if you choose to persevere...it's beyond more than worth it.

Chapter 1

The Cup of Demons

The dark band traversed the steep, hilly terrain with little difficulty. Regardless of the landscape, be it the narrow passages that wound about endless ridges or climbing their short cliffs, they moved easily and in silence. As a cool dusk greeted the land, they continued their trek without slowing their pace.

Their ancient kind was known for marching for days at a time without stopping for food or rest. Thus, the fact that they gave every impression they were prepared to walk night wasn't odd.

That particular evening, however, gave them a specific reason for marching on: they were tracking potential prey.

An hour ago, their hunting dogs had indicated that they'd picked up a promising scent. The two lead trackers went out in front, while the rest of the pack remained around the group of humans. They'd been in this rough formation since then.

The full inky darkness of a clear, but moonless night was resting upon the labyrinth of hills when the humans saw a twinkling light in the distance. They didn't need to be any closer to know that it came from a small campfire. By the light cast from it, they saw a single mature tree near it. The fire and the tree were situated on the western edge of the labyrinth, at the feet of the great mountains that cut through the middle of the realm.

Fifteen minutes later, the band crested the ridge and spotted a lone figure sitting by the fire with its back to them. There was no way to identify who it was because he or she was wrapped in a large cloak with a deep hood pulled forward.

They watched the figure for several minutes and then looked at one another. Even though it was dark, they could still see exceptionally well in it. They shared a glance and came to a silent agreement that this stranger wasn't an immediate threat. In fact, they seemed rather drawn to it for some reason.

The leader signaled to the others and, in total silence, they approached the figure. Although they honestly didn't expect a fight, they drew their weapons and sent the dogs to encircle the little camp.

The cloaked figure, with its back still to them, spoke when they were a dozen feet from him. "Nice evening for a walk, don't you think?"

Something in the voice gave the band pause and stirred awake something deep within them. They exchanged another look before the figure continued, "Why not come and have a seat by the fire?"

He extended an arm to a large log opposite him and across the fire. "Humor an old man with some company, just for a while and long enough for a drink."

Almost without their own bidding, the group complied immediately with the man's request. They put up their weapons and seated themselves. As they did, they again noticed how their spirits were being moved and in a way that made the darkest side of their already cruel nature burn to life.

They recognized at that moment that this man was a friend in a sense that his heart and spirit was like theirs: dark, violence-driven and self-seeking with a crude streak thrown in for good measure.

"I have to say," said the man, as he picked up a clay jar and poured some dark liquid into the cup in his other hand, "I'm surprised to see a band of orthros, of all people, wandering the hill labyrinth. I've not seen any of your kind for a very long age."

The group's expressions hardened, and a dangerous light flickered in their eyes. With a steely gaze, the leader locked onto the man, leaned forward a little, and replied, "That's because during the second civil war of the middle lands we were marked for total annihilation."

His voice was rough and harsh. There was a touch of gravel in it, but the overall sound was hollow. Rough and hollow, like the country that they were in currently.

"We were hunted by the allies of the North," he continued, the wild light in his eyes growing brighter, "by those loyal to the ruler of the white city. We were deemed too

ruthless and vile to be allowed to continue to live, so we were hunted like animals. Our settlements were burned, our livestock butchered, and all of our people cut down.”

Leaning farther forward, he finished with a seething, “It was decided that we were unworthy of living.”

With eerie suddenness, the wild gleam in his eyes went out and he straightened. “But I think you knew all of that already.”

“I did,” replied the stranger, after taking a sip from the cup, “and I think it’s terrible what happened. No one has that authority. Who did the king think he was? God?”

He lifted his head a little, so the firelight caught his eyes. “Tell me, though, and correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t one of the reasons you were killed off was because you were gifted in the dark arts?”

The leader’s gaze narrowed slightly. “We were, and those of us who live on still practice. What’s it to you?”

The stranger raised his free hand. “Oh no, I appreciate exploring different paths to achieving power. I respect it.”

A cool air current rushed through the camp. When it passed over the fire, it swirled about the flames. The group watched as the fire turned into shades of dark blue and gray. After a few seconds, the stranger snapped his fingers and the dark colors seeped down into the coals and the fire returned to its normal colors.

In the abrupt return of light, the group caught the briefest outlines of two large winged shadows with glinting eyes standing behind the cloaked man.

It’s likely that the king was afraid you’d obtain power that rivaled his, so he eliminated the threat.

The group members sat a little straighter when they all heard the man’s thought in their heads. But they weren’t taken aback. Instead, this coupled with the winged shadows told them that he was an ally, whoever he was.

“Perhaps,” said the leader with a raised eyebrow and faint smile, “we found a path, a very mighty path to power, though it’s not for the faint of heart. We know that we must

give a portion of ourselves to the spirits, but...the benefits are more than worth it, or so we've found."

"How else do you move like shadows, you and your hunting dogs," nodded the stranger.

"Truly. Now I know this wasn't a chance meeting, priest. What do you want with the likes of us, a few orthros warriors?"

"I have a proposition for you," answered the man, pulling back the hood of his cloak.

Every man in the group straightened again. In the first breath that the stranger's face was revealed, they had visions of demon officers, high commanders, and princes flash before their eyes. One or two of these winged beings were known by the members of the group.

And the man they were beholding was Ambrose, the fallen counselor and ex-ruler of Kolanthel, the now broken city of the East. Although they didn't know him personally, they recognized that he was one of great authority of dark unseen beings. The band themselves were low ranking practitioners; he, on the other hand, was steeped in the purest form of dark magic and sorcery. This meant that he was their superior and more or less subject to his orders.

Still, he'd said "proposition," giving them at least the illusion of a choice.

No, thought the leader as he studied Ambrose's face and darkling eyes, we truly have an option not to accept whatever offer he has in mind.

"The task I would like to propose provides you with the opportunity for many things," continued Ambrose, "for revenge of past wrongs, and for gaining favor and status amongst my associates –and the one I work for. The members of your remnant are few, but they can be made great once again, and swiftly."

"On one hand I say the offer sounds good," replied the leader, "but on the other, I say: it sounds too good to be true."

"The task will not be nearly as easy as it may first appear," answered Ambrose. He extended his hand to the fire. The flames diminished a little, but a glowing light rose

above it. In this light and rippling heat, a miniature image of Jada appeared, with Blake and Gabriel on either side.

“I’m uncertain how much you keep up on recent events,” said Ambrose, before gesturing to Jada, “but this little traveler caused much trouble for the dark king Cassius in his most recent defeat in the great battle of the South.”

When the leader’s eyebrows rose, Ambrose added, “She rode in leading chariots and horsemen of fire, and by the great light that was within her, she turned back the black tide of Cassius’s forces.”

The smile returned to the leader’s face. “We always love a challenge.”

“Excellent,” nodded Ambrose, who then pointed to Jada’s two companions. “These two must also die. The man is a master of stealth and sabotage, and he has great skill in battle. As for the elf...he’s an elf. Not much more needs to be said, other than this particular one has been given much insight into the mystery of travelers from the other dimension. He also knows much about the darkness we ally with and as such, must die as well.”

The mere mention of death stirred the group’s terrible nature and desires until it was a raging inferno of burning darkness. It was Ambrose and his allotted power that was causing this churning, not that they would’ve cared if they’d known. It had been a long time since they’d shed the blood of another human and the mere opportunity made their heads buzz.

It had also never taken much to stir up those of the race of orthros. They were dark in nature and appearance. In fact, they were so tall and lean, and their demeanors were so brooding, that they could very well have been mistaken for some of Cassius’s dark soldiers.

But the line of this people was much older. Their lineage was in existence when Cassius had been a young boy. They were a bloody, violent, and rebellious lot. If not for the independent streak, they would’ve made the perfect allies for the first rulers of darkness. However, they were unreliable in that they didn’t always kill only enemy targets; there had been many an occasion when orthros squads had gone berserk and

butchered everyone around them, both the forces they were supposed to be allied with and the enemy.

In short, they lived and breathed combat in the most corrupt and violent way imaginable. If there was one particular kind of revel in killing for pleasure, it was the orthros.

After glancing at his men, the leader looked at Ambrose. “We’ll accept your offer.”
“Very well,” answered Ambrose.

He poured a little more drink from the jar into the cup. After taking another sip, he extended it to the leader. “Have a drink to celebrate, and then we’ll perform the rite to seal the death of our enemies.”

Accepting the cup, the leader took a drink and then asked, “You’re accompanying us?”

“Yes,” replied Ambrose as the cup was passed around to the others, “I believe we’ll need everyone for this task. Besides...never let it be said that I don’t get my own hands dirty.”

Once everyone had taken a drink, Ambrose took the cup, and threw it and the remaining contents into the fire. When it struck the fire, there came a great *whompf!* The flames instantly turned from red and orange to deep blue and gray again. The fire itself grew, writhing and pulling upwards until it was the height of a man.

They all then stood in a circle about the dark flames and the ritual began. The liquid that had been from the cup which they’d all drunk from had, in fact, contained the blood of a rather unfortunate goat. There had been no time to find a young, innocent human victim to kill for this occasion, so the animal had been the substitute. Also, the demon general and his commander companion had spoken their own incantations over the blood, putting into it whatever vile illusion they had in their power to use.

The drink offering of blood combined with the blood pact of the cutting of the hand put the orthros wholly under the control of Ambrose and his winged associates.

As the ritual progressed and they lifted up their voices in agreement for the death of the three victims, a darkness that had nothing to do with the night settled over the

entire region. It manifested as a heavy, suffocating weight, and a visible dark veil hovered above the fire and the men.

Great dread came with it. The surrounding hills and mountain ridges became completely still, save for the clouds which appeared and hastily hid the higher peaks from the awful event taking place far below.

The large tree close to the fire shifted and swayed as if being buffeted by a great gale. Its leaves instantly browned and fell from every branch. By the time the tree settled and became quiet again, it was bare and leaning away from the group.

At the height of the incantation, there came a flash of dark blue from the fire. It streaked upwards, and when it hit the veil, there was another flash followed by a loud crack. A faint blue shaft of light continued upwards into the sky, where it hit the clouds formed by the mountains. Dozens of arcs of lightning danced through the clouds and a hollow peal of thunder echoed over the land.

The order had gone out and the men could sense the frenzied stirring of the unseen all around them. While a majority of the forces under the demon prince Levian remained in the Dead Land, there were still many outposts throughout the realm.

In the wake of the war for the South, lands beyond the plains of battle had begun to fade and die at a fast pace. The life that had once been in portions of forests and mountains had slowly slipped away before going out altogether. But the evil that had assailed it had been potent, too potent. It had left wounds that would never fully heal and stole away the remaining life from earth and tree.

Thus, because no one wanted to live in the newly forming wasteland areas, this left Levian's underlings able to take up residence without being easily spotted or harassed by their angelic foes.

This explained why there were demons already in the area to take control of the humans. The hunting dogs also they took possession of, and man and beast together formed a lethal hunting force.

Ambrose already had a rough idea as to where Jada and company were, and he directed the unit in that direction. Pulling the hood of his cloak over his head, he used his

gift of concealment and hid from physical eyes. He started off after the team of assassins and then glanced up at the sky, covered in a blanket of dark blue clouds visible even in the night.

Now we will test and see just how much protection You're providing for Your favored wandering traveler, he thought, or not. Like Your human king, You've shown that You have a habit of abandoning Your servants, even the most faithful. I think this will be proven correct once again, and I believe that we'll find Your latest pawn has been left up to her own devices.

Chapter 2

Assassins!

His short sleep was filled with one long, terrible dream. It began with him standing on a hill and watching night fall over the land. Soon after, a darkness began to stir, a darkness that took the shape of a pitch-black shadow. It appeared around the northeastern edge of the mountains and then settled over the edge of the labyrinth of hills. From the area over which it hovered, there was a flash, and winged shadows suddenly took flight and headed straight east. Other shadows moved quickly over the ground and followed their airborne companions.

A howling of wolves rose from the dark as the air in the night began to grow restless and to seethe.

He looked eastward, ahead of the winged shadows, and spotted a lone figure standing atop one of the short, sheer hills. He blinked and found himself standing beside this person. It was Jada.

When he turned his attention back to the west, the shadows moving over the ground came abruptly closer. Whatever they were, they were human enough, though not entirely. An unsettling blackness was in their eyes and they moved much faster than should be possible for mere mortal men. Murder was plain in their expressions and they each wielded a deadly weapon.

Black jackal-like dogs ran around and ahead of the human assassins. In their black eyes was a wild glint. They snarled with malice as they flung themselves over the ground, so eager to catch their prey.

When he looked back towards Jada, he saw that he was standing close to her again. He shot a look at the hastily advancing shadows, before back to Jada and just in time to see her take three black arrows: two to the chest and one to the base of her throat.

Blake shot awake with a fierce cry and sat up. He looked around quickly and spotted Jada's dark sleeping form a dozen feet from him.

Taking a few steady breaths, he scanned the immediate area and took note of the ground fog. It had formed within the past three hours, after Gabriel had taken over watch duty and he'd fallen asleep.

Blake glanced at the top of the short cliff before him as Gabriel, nothing more than a black shape against the overcast dawn sky, appeared. Blake started and a burst of adrenaline rushed through him before he recognized his companion.

"We need to move and quickly!" said the elf as he lightly made his way down to the labyrinth floor.

As they hastily began throwing tack on their horses, Blake shot another look at Jada. She appeared to have just now woken, sitting up and yawning as Zohmar nudged her shoulder.

How did she not bolt awake when I did, he wondered curiously. As far as he'd known, and from what he'd seen during their trek so far, she was an extremely light sleeper. The night breeze shifting a blade of grass a mile away was enough to send her leaping to her feet before she was fully awake.

"What's going on?" she asked as she stood and began tacking Zohmar.

"Something is coming," replied Gabriel in a whisper, "something dark."

Jada redoubled her pace, and the three were ready in short order.

As she swung up onto Zohmar, she wondered herself why she hadn't sensed anything. In the past, she'd always been extremely sensitive to dark and sinister

movements or plots. Last night, however, she'd slept soundly and even now she didn't sense anything amiss.

It caused her to worry, especially when she saw that the horses were on edge. As the minutes ticked by, though, and their mounts picked up to a quick jog, Jada finally felt her muscles tightening and the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

She loosened her sword in its sheath and then studied the terrain. She'd only been to this area once before, that being when she'd traversed here and first met the winged horses of the mountains. At that time, she'd found the steep, moss-covered ridges and little waterfalls and icicles to be enchanting.

That was before this present trek when she and her friends had to navigate the area. It wasn't called a labyrinth without reason. They'd spent the past five days working their way through this rather lonely and forlorn place. The only living things they'd seen thus far were a few sparrows. Some tracks of other beasts occasionally disturbed the ground, but they were old. As far as sounds, apart from the hooves of their horses they heard the trickle of a waterfall, rustle of a random strand of grass, and the mournful howl of the wind as it passed amongst the labyrinth.

A lonely and forlorn place, indeed.

Blake had said the other option besides the labyrinth was the ice tunnels through the mountains, which he and Gabriel advised against. It was a much more treacherous place, and the tunnels created a maze far more confusing than the passages of the hills. It was easy to become lost in there, and to do so would definitely spell greater disaster than if one lost his way in the labyrinth. At least in the hills, a person could climb up the little cliffs, see the land beyond, and regather their directional bearings. Not so in the tunnels, and there were additional dangers, such as strange, wild creatures.

As they passed through a large gap between two hills, Jada glanced at the mountains off her left shoulder. Although they didn't intend to travel through them, the company kept close to the range. The mountains were the only viable contingency plan should something go wrong in the hills.

She wondered for a moment where the winged horses were. Where were Rune and his dark, handsome son? Where were the dragons, and which one had won the fight that had started on the Southern plains during the battle with Cassius?

A falling stone and Zohmar tensing brought Jada's attention fully back to the situation at hand. She glanced back at Gabriel and saw that he was keenly studying the hilltops on their left.

As they approached an intersection between several sheer hills, the three horses slowed without being asked. The fog had thickened rather quickly and now it was difficult to see the ground, a mix of sand and stones. A chill air current had also begun moving and pulled the fog upwards in wispy strands.

Zohmar, chin tucked, flicked his ears back with distaste and shook his head as they entered the intersection.

As Jada took up her bow and drew an arrow, she shot a glimpse at Blake. His blade was already drawn, and he was scanning the hilltops ahead and to their right.

"We're surrounded," whispered Gabriel.

Why the blazes can't I get a stronger sense of who's after us and where they are, she wondered with rising irritation. *Maybe I slept a little too deeply last night...*

That thought was just passing through her mind when a sharp headache knifed through her forehead. Grimacing, she growled in pain and tried to clear it with a shake of her head.

In the next split second, Jada was aware that Blake and Gabriel were moving and multiple attackers were appearing. As the worst of the headache eased, she became aware that Zohmar was carrying her farther down a passage.

Jada twisted around in the saddle to check on her two companions. She saw Blake and then a black jackal creature leaping from one of the hills attack him.

Just before Zohmar ducked around a corner, Jada's arrow found its mark and the jackal dropped to the ground.

Zohmar picked up to a canter and raced along the corridor. Heaving a loud snort, he pinned his ears and tossed his forelock. But he didn't need to tell his rider that they were being flanked by the enemy on both sides.

Jada clearly saw the two tall men sprinting along the ridge tops. Judging by the wild and malicious gleam in their dark eyes, she guessed that they weren't interested in sitting down and having a pleasant breakfast together.

For a moment, she thought they were dark soldiers of Cassius, but there was something markedly different about them. They seemed larger, taller and thicker, though not too overly broad.

At least I can still discern that much, she thought. Good job.

To test their skill and agility, Jada shot an arrow at the man to her left. With a slight movement of his torso, the arrow passed by harmlessly.

Naturally, she thought.

When Zohmar grunted, Jada pivoted back to the right and saw the second man pulling back a shiny black arrow. She drew, set, pulled, and released in one fluid movement. The two arrows shot through the air, met in mid-flight and broke one another.

And at least I can still shoot, she considered gratefully.

Zohmar cut left around the next passage as another arrow passed behind Jada's back. He slid around the corner, sending rocks and sand flying everywhere before he bolted to full speed again.

He dodged left when one more arrow came at Jada, followed by another and another. They clacked harmlessly against the cliff walls. However, when he had to dance out of the way of a knife and an arrow aimed directly at him, that crossed the line.

"Enough of this," growled Jada and put up her bow. She was never a fan of running away from someone trying to kill her. That said, attempted murder of her horse was a different insult entirely.

Jada dropped her stirrups and then brought her legs up and crouched in the saddle. Quickly scanning the top edges of the hills on both sides of the passage, she searched for promising handholds.

The end of the line was approaching quickly, where the current passage teed into another. Arrows were still flying, each passing dangerously close, and Jada had yet to spot something to grab. A black jackal appearing at the end of the passage forced her, at last, to bail.

“Get ‘em!” she shouted to Zohmar as she leaped from the saddle and grabbed the edge of the hill to the left. She jumped not a moment too soon. The very breath that her boots left the saddle, Zohmar launched into the air and then landed right on the jackal.

Jada swung herself onto the hilltop, where she was then forced to roll sideways to avoid another arrow. Twisting at her hips, she pivoted her boots beneath her. As she stood, she drew the sword at her hip and the one from the scabbard across her back, under her quiver.

Another arrow whistled through the air and her shorter blade rang as it deflected the shot. Gaze locked on the nearer of two assailants, Jada strode forward to meet him. Out the corner of her right eye, she saw that one of her companions was battling a tall rival of his own on another hilltop. Her instincts told her it was Gabriel, and she was fully confident that her friend would have the situation resolved quickly.

When Jada and the first assassin were within striking distance, the assassin jabbed his blade forward with surprising speed.

Jada pivoted sideways to miss it and then deflected the strike with equal speed. She followed it with a swipe from her second blade, which the enemy blocked with a knife in his other hand.

The next few swings were much like the opening moves and every strike was at lightning speed. Sometimes the rivals would dodge out of the way, while other blows they deflected.

During this awkward dance, Jada quickly recognized that she was outrageously outmatched in regard to power. While it definitely wasn't unusual because of her slight

build, she'd yet to experience these kinds of abusive swings from an opponent. Even when she'd dueled with the darkest commanders of Cassius, she'd never felt such violent shafts of pain shock up her arms, not like she did with this rival.

Being up close and personal to this foe also confirmed her initial observation about these enemies: they were tall, very tall, standing almost two torsos above her. She wondered if they were descendants of giants by their large and lean frames.

In addition to their size, they had a dark and seething air about them, though the shadow wasn't outwardly visible. They were lovers of violence and slaughter. Killing any and all would do.

They're more like reapers, thought Jada, ducking as a sword whooshed over her head, *sans the scythe and the cloak. That's just fantastic.*

She jabbed with the sword in her left hand.

The tall man deflected it with a swipe of his knife before simultaneously slashing his blade across and upward at Jada's stomach. She jumped back and, with a fast flick of her shorter blade, sliced her enemy on the inside of his arm.

With unexpected speed, the man landed a powerful kick in her stomach and she flew backward a dozen feet before hitting the ground and rolling. In an effort to pretend like she didn't have the wind knocked out of her, Jada jumped quickly to her feet and advanced.

The tall man was almost to her already and they each struck simultaneously. There was great power in both of their swings and when the blades met, they rang loudly. Over her rival's shoulder, she saw another tall, dark man moving quickly towards them to join the fight.

In an attempt to keep her current rival between herself and the second enemy, she employed the combined tactic of "half-hearted jabs" and "dodging out of the way to avoid the enemy blade." This allowed her to be particularly light on her feet and to maneuver in a way that forced her enemy to block his approaching companion.

But the tall man quickly caught on to this tactic. Hastily, he sheathed his knife, gripped the sword hilt with both hands, and then unleashed a series of brutal downward swings.

Jada needed both of her blades to block his strikes and each one nearly put her on her knees. As he executed his onslaught, he was able to maneuver her sideways, so she was an easier target for his companion.

In his final swing, the tall man put all the strength he had.

Jada crossed her swords to create an “X” and blocked her enemy’s blade. The power in the strike put her halfway to her knees, which then buckled under the brute’s weight.

The tall man leaned against her and it took everything she had to hold him at bay. This was when Jada saw that the second enemy had a bow, on which he set one of those shiny black arrows.

Oh you, she growled.

Setting her jaw, Jada gathered what strength she had left and, using her legs, managed get back to her feet. This momentum also enabled her to shove her enemy’s blade away and push him back a step. A quick backhanded swing kept him preoccupied before Jada ran past him and towards his friend.

The breath before he released his arrow, Jada lunged into the air, pivoted at the hips, and twisted horizontally over the ground. The archer loosed the bowstring and the arrow zipped underneath her.

Jada’s maneuver had been not only to avoid being shot but also to quickly close the distance between herself and this second enemy. She knew that fighting both of them at the same time had been inevitable, but she wanted to engage them on her own terms.

When her boots touched the ground, she pivoted with the momentum to gain torque for her first swing.

The bowman, caught slightly unprepared, stepped and leaned back to miss her first swing. Because he had no other choice, he used his bow to block her follow-up strike with her second blade. When the sword met it, the bow cracked and broke.

Clearly not appreciating this, the bowman threw a left hook.

Jada managed to get her head somewhat turned, but the blow still found its mark. She'd been punched before and this strike wasn't a direct hit. However, as when blocking a sword swing from one of these tall opponents sent pain up her arms, so the punch sent a terrible ache radiating through her jaw and down her neck.

Jada danced backwards on her toes and shook her head to clear the pain. She then twirled her right sword, raised it...and spun to swipe at her first enemy with her other blade. This swing he deflected, but her downward strike with her raised blade sent him off balance.

This gave the second assassin time to draw his blade and get himself squared and ready.

As the fast-paced duel and dance continued, Jada thought, *this is one way to start the morning, and I haven't even had breakfast yet...talk about bad etiquette.*

†

Blake was still down in the passages, the floors of which were now completely hidden by fog. It wasn't his decision to still be down here, but it seemed that the jackals had taken a liking to him.

Their three horses were now riderless and tearing about the hill passageways taking care of their canine opponents as best they could. That helped Blake somewhat. Still, he desperately wanted to know what was happening with Gabriel and Jada. Apart from when it had been her turn to scout ahead, she'd never been out of Blake's sight. Whenever she had gone scouting, his heart had been in his throat until she'd returned.

His dream just before waking didn't help his rising anxiety and his gut was presently telling him that Jada would need some assistance soon. But he couldn't provide it until he dealt with the jackals currently pursuing him.

He skidded around a corner with a jackal right behind him. Sprinting forward, Blake leaped atop a little shelf jutting from a hill to his left. The instant he landed and grabbed a handhold, he stabbed his blade back sharply. The sword passed through the chest of the animal that had jumped after Blake.

He was able to climb up the short cliff with one free hand and he easily reached the top. It proved a good thing that he still had the sword drawn. When his head appeared above the edge, a jackal lunged straight for his face.

Blake was less than impressed. He was forced to let go of the ledge and fall backward. But as he did, he whipped the blade around and killed the jackal.

His landing wasn't as harsh as he thought it'd be, though he was slightly winded. He got one foot under himself and then threw himself sideways as another jackal leapt for him.

The creature missed and skidded across the rocks as it flung its back end around. It snarled and snapped its jaws in irritation, flashing its gleaming white teeth.

Blake, now on his feet, glared at the black creature, challenging it as he met its murderous gaze.

The jackal lurched forward and began trying to bite Blake's legs. This quickly became annoying because it was able to duck or dodge out of the way of his sword. After thirty seconds of awkward dancing on Blake's part, he was able to cut the jackal across the mouth.

It jumped aside with a growl and then managed to duck under his next strike. Taking advantage of the sudden opening, it made a jump at Blake. But this proved to be its undoing.

Blake grabbed it by the throat and, with supernatural strength, threw the rabid beast against the sheer wall of the nearest hill. The impact killed the jackal instantly.

He turned around and listened for a moment. He was relieved to hear the ringing of multiple swords, which told him that at least one of his friends was still alive.

Blake took a step forward and then stopped. Two jackals, one from either direction, jogged quickly into his passage. Anger rolled through him, both at another delay and at the audacity that these creatures had to cross him.

He definitely wasn't an egotistical man. Instead, this line of thought came from the status of man over animals: man had been placed above them and to have dominion. So, what were these mutts to him? He was also a skilled and elite fighter, and he didn't have

time to mess with little creatures that wanted to tear his throat out. There were larger, more serious foes to slay.

Blake's face set hard and he glared from one jackal to the other.

Both creatures had the idea to charge him at the same time, so they did. They bolted forward and covered the distance with long, swift strides. When they were near their target, they both threw themselves at him.

Blake simply ducked and dodged forward. The two jackals passed over him and collided, dazing one another. All Blake had to do was turn, give one giant swing, and slay them both.

He turned to one of the sheer hillsides and was just reaching for a handhold when he dropped into a crouch. A sword glanced off the rocks above his head. Blake pivoted on the balls of his feet and shoved his blade up as he stood.

The orthros warrior turned just so and the sword's edge lightly slid over his arm. He retaliated instantly by kicking Blake down the passage. But he rolled right to his feet and leveled a severe and determined gaze on his dark enemy.

Not the least bit intimidated by the tall man, Blake gave his blade a twirl to remove some of the jackal blood from it and then advanced boldly.

Upon seeing the expression in Blake's eyes and on his face, the orthros warrior actually smiled a little. As he walked to meet Blake, he was delighted to have found an opponent that would offer some sort of challenge before being killed.

†

As Jada guessed, it was Gabriel who was fighting with an orthros opponent on a nearby hilltop. As he and the tall warrior fought, he was impressed himself by the sheer power in the man. There was an ancient darkness in him, an old evil. Gabriel knew this particular kind only filled those humans who came from a long lineage of occult members. The moment evil had been let into the world, they willingly became corrupted by it and served and worshiped it to gain power of their own.

While Gabriel was a being of light, and he was sensitive to the movements of darkness, he wasn't the least bit overwhelmed by that which was in the orthros warrior.

With ease, he turned back his enemy's blade and stole the power from his strikes. The orthros quickly became frustrated with his elven rival and put forth every ounce of malice and anger he had into his swings.

This was exactly what Gabriel wanted, for his enemy to spend all of his energy. When he glanced over at Jada and saw that she was being forced into an awkward position, he knew he'd need to wrap things up quickly.

The tall man delivered a mighty overhead strike.

With a single-handed backswing, Gabriel glanced it aside before slashing his blade across the man's chest.

The orthros growled in pain and delivered a quick stab from the right.

Gabriel took a step back to miss it and then hooked his arm around his opponent's while it was still extended. This locked the man's arm in place and left him unable to block Gabriel's stab with the knife.

The blade went deep into the tall man's side, but before the elf could land a second blow, he latched onto his wrist.

They both wrestled themselves out of each other's grasp and it was the orthros who struck first. But it was a weak effort and Gabriel deflected it before cutting him across the shoulder. After blocking the next swing, he gashed the man across the thigh, making him stagger.

The orthros tried to lash out with another strike but found himself unable to do so. He hadn't the energy. He knew it wasn't because of the few meager scratches he'd received at the hands of his enemy.

The light that was in and around the elf had kept his enemy off balance. Whenever their blades had met, Gabriel seemed to steal significant amounts of strength and energy from the orthros. This dark man had never met an opponent who'd been able to do this and it was completely ironic.

In all other instances, it was the darkness in the man that had drowned the light and life from his enemies, all of them, whomever they may have been. But today that had all changed and he knew his time was finally coming to an end.

And Gabriel was certainly wielding the power and authority that he had been given. Elves had many gifts. One of the many that he had was the knowledge and ability to steal away an enemy's darkness and bring it to nothing. In a way, it was stealing their dark advantage, making void the power they'd been given, and reminding them just how mortal and weak they really were.

A decisive swing of the sword wounded the orthros badly down the shoulder and arm. As he bent over and stumbled, Gabriel landed an identical wound on the opposite arm, and then turned and delivered the kill strike with his knife.

The moment this happened, and the body fell to the ground, a faint shadow rose from the orthros. It hung above Gabriel for a moment before being caught on a gust of wind and carried away.

There wasn't too much time to dwell on this, because Gabriel looked at Jada again and saw that she was in a rather awkward situation. She was down on one knee with one orthros in front of her and the other just to her right. All three of them had their blades tangled and locked.

Dropping his sword and knife, Gabriel took up his bow and drew a pair of arrows. In one fluid motion, he set them, aimed, and released...

†

Jada was just wondering how she could turn this unfavorable situation around when two arrows plunged into the assassin to her right. One sank into the base of his shoulder and the other his ribcage.

Roaring with pain and sudden anger, he stumbled sideways and down to the ground.

Jada used the momentary distraction to shove the other assassin's blade away and push herself to her feet. With a twist of her torso, she delivered a deep wound across the man's chest with her right blade. She spun with the momentum generated by the swing and as she turned, she deflected a counter swing. As she completed the turn, she then delivered the kill strike to the assassin on the ground.

She ducked sideways to avoid a stab to her neck and then straightened and advanced against the other assassin. Now with only him to focus on again, Jada was finally able to take control.

But even as she settled into the fight and landed several blows, she finally noticed that the old, familiar fire of battle was still missing. Sometimes it had stirred before a fight had even begun and other times it took a while, but it had always kindled.

Until today, that is, until this fight. She felt nothing, not even a spark or flicker of heat. She was just...fighting. In its absence, she was now keenly aware of every twinge of tiredness in her muscles and of the great toll that fighting took on the body.

First I fail to sense danger and now there's no fire, she thought as she deflected a strike from her opponent and then delivered a powerful counterstrike that knocked him off kilter.

What's going on with me, she wondered as her expression furrowed with both confusion and irritation.

Her split-second lapse in concentration cost her a gash on the arm. Jada reacted instantly and, in a sudden burst of anger at herself, she unleashed a series of consecutive strikes. There was new power in them and she had the assassin backing. His arms tremored with each blow and he finally understood what Ambrose had meant about not underestimating her.

The young woman had already proven that she was fearless and wouldn't be intimidated. He'd known, too, that she was determined and would not be easily defeated. It also went without mentioning that she was skilled in combat and possessed strength that exceeded what it should for someone of her lean size.

However, Ambrose had said that she was a traveler and all travelers had a particular timeless expression in their eyes, and their gazes saw deep into a person.

While the orthros did catch fleeting glimpses of this in Jada, these senses had been veiled within her. A change was befalling the woman and judging by the flickers of confusion on her face, she noticed them, too, but didn't understand.

In two final, mighty swings, Jada had the assassin down on one knee. Their swords were locked between them again, only this time she was the one pressing down and forcing him to lean back.

In spite of the fact that he was likely about to die, the orthros sneered a smile.

“I must’ve missed the joke,” said Jada as she pressed against him. “What’s so funny?”

“I was just wondering, ‘where’s the fire?’” replied the assassin, chuckling even as weakness made his arms and legs tremor.

She scowled and considered how he could’ve sensed such a thing, how he could’ve known.

“It’s in the eyes,” said the assassin, sensing her question. He was leaning back uncomfortably far now and managed to shift himself a little to hold his ground another couple seconds.

“I’ve never seen a traveler whose power has been muted before,” he continued with his deep, rocky voice. “You must’ve done something terrible in order for your God to take back the power He’d once given you.”

Then he laughed...until Jada abruptly straightened, pulled her crossed swords away from one another, and ensured that he’d never laugh or say anything ever again.

As the assassin’s body fell, the ground lurched and many of the hilltops cracked. Some crumbled and collapsed on themselves. The fog was thick and high now, swirling upwards in an icy wind and cutting off Jada’s line-of-sight from the other hilltops.

Jada wondered where Gabriel and Blake were when *he* appeared out of the fog. He was taller than the others, and darker, like some large stone statue that had come to life. In one hand he wielded a sword and in the other an axe.

He has to be the leader, she thought as she squared herself up and stood braced for battle.

She was right and his name was Shimron. He was his band’s leader not only because of his size, but because he was the most powerful practitioner. He held the greatest power and authority and wielded the greatest fear.

Jada had already known that he and his underlings were aligned with darkness. Thus, she wasn't surprised when she felt a gnawing ache in her head and weight on her shoulders.

Get off, she grumbled as she marched forward to meet Shimron.

Upon the very first meeting of their blades, there came a great flash, followed by a rumble of thunder. The wind rose quickly as the fight unfolded and the fog thickened and darkened. Low mist also settled over the immediate area, giving Jada the illusion that they were fighting on an island high in the clouds.

Fighting a giant, thought Jada as she dodged the axe and then deflected a strike from Shimron, *glad I can check that item off my bucket list.*

The advantage of battling an opponent so large was that she was quicker and able to land a number of strikes across his legs.

That was where the advantage ended. Shimron's power was crippling and every swing from the sword made Jada stagger. She did the best she could to dodge the strikes, but she was warier about blocking a blow from the axe than one from the sword. It wasn't long, however, until she wasn't able to avoid such a thing.

After blocking another bone-shattering strike, Shimron delivered a quick backward swing with the axe.

Jada avoided being cut in half, but impact sent her backwards through the air. She'd only just landed when Shimron was on her. She rolled sideways and the axe just missed her and sank into the ground. As he raised his blade, she ran her shorter sword through his calf.

He grimaced and swung his sword straight down.

Jada held the sword in her left hand straight across her body and then braced the broadside with her right. When Shimron's blade struck hers, the force sent her sliding between his legs and behind him.

Before he could turn, Jada stabbed him in the lower back and then in the back of the knee.

This caused him to stumble and almost go down to one knee. It also gave Jada time to safely leap to her feet.

She sensed the waves of enmity rolling off Shimron as he stood and turned to face her. The gnawing headache tried to return, and weight settled again on her shoulders. This time, though, self-doubt appeared and tried to work its way into her mind. It had been stirred by the words of the now deceased orthros warrior.

But she disregarded it as her large rival approached and swung.

The duel commenced in much the same fashion it had started. The two moved about the broad hilltop as the chilling wind continued to dance around them and pull the wall of fog higher. Occasionally, the opponents noticed flickers of light somewhere behind the gray wall, and they heard rumbles of thunder and felt the ground tremble.

A few minutes into the fight, neither of them was making headway against the other until the ground shook again and the cracks in the hills widened.

Shimron and Jada staggered away from each other a few paces as sections of ground beneath both of their feet broke and fell away. They scrambled backwards until the ground was again solid. Both then glanced into the gaps in the hilltop and saw that below them was a dark chasm.

The two rivals glanced at each other and attempted to discern if this had been the doing of the other. Neither could tell, so they closed the distance and resumed their fight. However, now the duel had an increased level of peril. At any given step, the ground would break and fall away into darkness. The earth seemed just as eager to devour Shimron as it was Jada.

And who said life isn't fair, she thought, dodging a harsh swing from Shimron.

Jada could feel her body growing tired at a quicker rate now. Whether it was caused by the fight only or if Shimron's darkness played a role in it she didn't know.

Blocking his next swing sent her down sideways to one knee, and it was in that moment she was keenly aware of the possibility that she was going to die shortly.

You know...this isn't exactly how I imagined going out.

As Shimron swung his axe around, Jada drove her blade into the side of his uninjured knee.

The big man howled in frustration and pain as he followed through with his swing.

Jada had just pushed herself up and braced her swords when the stroke fell. She dodged the axe head, which came unnervingly close to hers, and managed to stop it from cutting into her shoulder. The force and angle of the impact buckled her knees and took her feet clean out from under her.

She slammed against the ground and it took everything she had to keep the axe at bay. Thinking fast, she delivered a two-booted kick to one of Shimron's injured knees. This weakened him and pivoted Jada sideways, away from the axe. She followed this up with a hasty kick to the shin, which kept Shimron preoccupied long enough for her to return to her feet.

His annoyance was plainly evident on his face and his retaliation was quick. With a backhanded swing, he glanced Jada's blade aside and then gave her a mighty kick. It sent her sailing through the air and the farthest she'd gone that morning. Her return to the ground was unforgiving and she slid for a distance over the damp ground. But having the wind knocked out of her again was the least of her worries.

Jada saw that she was sliding and tumbling towards a rather sizeable gap in the hilltop.

Why does this always happen to me?

She was able to use the heels of her boots to slow herself. She had almost come to a stop when the ground under her gave way. Twisting around, Jada was able to grab hold of some moss and keep her torso above the ledge while her legs dangled over cold nothingness.

Glancing up at Shimron, she saw that he hadn't advanced. This was mostly because of the numerous cracks had opened as she'd slid over the hilltop. He didn't want to be too quick to rush over suspicious ground.

When a sudden flurry of flashes in the fog to their right caught his attention, Jada figured she had an extra second to finish catching her breath.

Right, okay, she thought as she hauled herself onto firm ground. I'm done with flying lessons for today.

Jada had just stood and retrieved her weapons when two things happened.

First, a pair of Shimron's men leaped through the fog and joined his side. Both were archers and had arrows set upon the bowstring.

Gabriel and Blake appeared then from the right. The elf lifted his hand and there was a great flash. When the air cleared, one of the two archers was killed and Shimron was reeling in temporary blindness.

Blake, face set like stone, strode forward, effortlessly glanced aside a strike from the second archer and grabbed his fist when he attempted a punch. There was such strength in Blake's grasp that it broke bones not only in the archer's fingers but also his arm. With a cry of pain and defiance, the archer assassin was forced to his knees, where Blake killed him.

Jada had been impressed with Gabriel, and she was equally so with Blake. It was definitely a relief and a reward to have such companions in a fight.

The three approached Shimron with confidence, each certain they'd defeat their foe. They were a dozen feet from him when the earth gave one last, giant heave. The ground broke all around the four, and cracks of collapsing earth racing from one end to the other sent everyone running in different directions.

Jada was pursued by one of the gaps. Sheathing her blades, she sprinted for the nearest edge and jumped onto another hilltop. But when she landed, it crumbled and fell away beneath her.

Blake and Gabriel, still running and jumping for their lives, had looked in Jada's direction just as she'd landed on another hill. They'd also watched in horror as the ground gave way under her feet and she fell out of sight.

They didn't have time to process this before the earth beneath their own boots suddenly gave way all at once and they too fell into darkness.

Chapter 3

Old Friends, come to Kill

To Jada's surprise and relief, she didn't fall into a black abyss. Instead, she landed harmlessly in a passage of the labyrinth.

She stood and then almost fell down again. The ground was now coated with ice. As Jada tried to find another hill to climb or double back to her friends, she had quite a time slipping and sliding.

She finally spotted a promising hill and carefully made her way to it. A breath of icy air came from behind her and brushed against her neck.

The assassin was right, whispered a voice in her ear, you've lost your fire and your skill.

Jada froze as a chill raced through her.

What did you do? The old Jada would've slain all her foes with ease. Maybe...you've been abandoned in your weakness.

Doubt and despair from an outside source tried to consume her. They flooded her whole being as a terrible wretchedness pounded down against her like a drum. It took her breath away and bent her nearly double.

But she didn't go to her knees. This was by far the most powerful she'd ever felt these things, stronger even in the wake of her parents' deaths. However, this didn't come from within herself and it did make a difference, all the difference, actually.

It also gave Jada a hint about what kind of enemy was standing behind her. Whoever it was, was deep in darkness and had amazing power to bend his will upon his victim. While she'd never been under the shadow of Cassius, she'd wager whoever was near her was close to his level of evil power and authority.

"Save your lies," replied Jada fiercely. "I know better than to trust feelings."

Instantly, most of the weight fell from her shoulders and severe doubt lessened. She turned to face the deceiver, and when her eyes beheld Ambrose, she wasn't surprised.

Instead, she was mildly disappointed. Plainly, she'd known he was fallen and aligned with the same darkness as Cassius. However, she hadn't seen him just prior to his turning as she had Halden. Thus, while she'd known that Ambrose had betrayed his appointed duties, she hadn't understood what it had fully meant, precisely how it had corrupted him, or how it had physically changed him.

Ambrose was taller than she'd remembered, but just as broad across the shoulder. His short gray hair had actually darkened instead of lightening, and his cruel expression was set like granite. In his eyes was an edgy glint that told of his great lust for power.

"You've fallen a long way in a short time, counselor," said Jada, minding the ice as she walked towards him.

When she was about a dozen feet from Ambrose, she drew her elven blade and leveled it at him. "Although, since we destroyed your city, you're obviously not as powerful as you think. You might want to check with your demon cohorts about that...little pawn."

No trace of doubt remained in Jada now. The fire hadn't returned, not even a spark, but she was wholly at ease and confident.

Ambrose lunged forward in a burst of rage and struck with a long, jagged dagger he held in his hand.

Jada deflected it and the two blades rang with a low resonating hum. The impact sent her off balance on the ice and she wasn't able to counterstrike the following couple blows. The successive strikes forced her to scuffle and slide backwards, while Ambrose didn't have any problems at all. He walked over the ground as if it were completely dry.

With every stab he delivered, the wild light in his eyes shone brighter as his terrible wrath kindled.

At last, Jada was able to find some footing and she executed a quick one-two strike. The first glanced the dagger to the side, and the second made Ambrose take a step back. She whipped her blade around in an arc, but before she could bring it down something resisted her strongly. It was as if an invisible hand had grabbed her wrist firmly and was preventing her from completing the swing.

After a second, she became aware that what felt like ice was wrapping around her wrist, before moving up into her hand. When Jada looked up, she watched as a dark bluish-purple bruise appeared, taking on the prints of fingers and a hand.

“You’re a foolish girl,” thundered Ambrose with his powerful voice. “You really think you could challenge the likes of me?”

He stood towering over her like the image of an ancient and terrible ruler, tall and strong with malice glinting in his shadowed face.

“Things have changed, girl,” he continued, raising the dagger, “you’re not as powerful as you were just a few months ago.”

Ambrose was in the process of bringing down the weapon when Jada kicked him in the knee and then the stomach. She didn’t know if it was a response to her continued resistance or her movement, but her arm was released.

Ambrose slashed with the dagger right as she fell sideways, and the blade missed her head by an inch. Both were in odd positions and Jada moved first. She made a wide backhanded swipe with her sword, which caused Ambrose to take a big step back. She then pushed off the rock wall she’d fallen against and rolled across the ice and out of immediate reach.

Or so she’d thought. She’d just gotten to her feet when something struck her in the side and sent her sliding. She bent double at the awful pain but managed to lift her head.

Ambrose was striding towards her with his left hand extended. As she continued to watch, his palm seemed to fill with an icy light.

It was just dawning on her what she was seeing and what was probably about to happen when Ambrose spoke again, “You’re a very...foolish...little girl.”

The faint glow in his palm went dark and the ice disappeared...seconds before an orb of bitter air appeared feet in front of her.

Reacting out of pure instinct, Jada raised her sword just in time. The orb smashed against the blade and shattered into hundreds of little ice shards. The impact also sent her sliding backwards another dozen feet and reawakened pain in her wrist and side.

That shouldn't be possible, thought Jada, coming to a stop in an intersection of passageways. She'd seen brilliant flashes and strikes of light come from the likes of mighty elves. But for some reason, she'd never thought it was possible for a human to perform such a supernatural feat.

"That's nothing," said Ambrose with a wicked smile. "I'm just in the mood to toy with you a little before we kill you."

Jada's brain had just registered the fact he'd said "we" when she noticed a shadow in her peripheral. Farther down the passage to her right, she looked and saw a dark figure walking through the fog.

I need better footing, she thought, before turning, scurrying to a short cliff and pulling herself up hastily. Jada was relieved to see that the footing was indeed better and that there wasn't any ice on the hilltops.

There was plenty of fog, though. She found herself on another island in foggy clouds and the wind was terribly cold as it howled over the hills.

Jada had just taken up her other sword when a familiar whistling caught her ear. She turned, spotted the black arrow, and deflected it with her sword. She meant to deflect it, anyway, but it shattered instead. The black shards threw themselves at her, and wherever they made contact with her skin, they embedded themselves. She took a few pieces to the left side of her face and several struck her right arm.

The wounds burned like fire and she brushed at her face and arm. The shards fell away and dissolved to ash, but the marks they left behind were evident.

The next arrow came from a different direction, and instead of trying to deflect it, Jada sidestepped it. But when it hit the ground, it shattered and the shards flew upwards, biting her legs.

She gave a cry of pain and anger as she backed away while at the same time trying to remain aware of her surroundings.

"Enough games!" she shouted furiously into the wind. "Show yourselves!"

Careful what you wish for, boomed the voice of Ambrose in her mind. It came a breath before the full weight of the attack. A shaft of horrific pain pierced through her

temples and sent her reeling, causing her to drop her weapons so she could grab her head.

Self-doubt returned full force and infinitely heavier than earlier. It came with oppressive weight and something else, some other invisible power. Together these things pushed her to her knees as the pain in her body was reawakened.

Dear God, she gasped. She tried to push back against the assault but found she was entirely unable.

The pain forced her forward onto her hands and she dropped her head. Indescribable pain and intense aching filled her entire body. It stole her breath away and held it hostage. All that she could manage through the constricted pressure in her lungs were small, short intakes.

Jada knew all about warfare by now, both physical and spiritual. She'd been in the clutches of a dark commander, walked through the black veil that surrounded the dark king, and gazed upon Prince Levian.

But what she was so unfortunate as to experience now was something she'd never imagined a human could bear. This intense attack was on an entirely new plane. For what seemed like an eternity, all that there was, was darkness and agony. The pain wasn't on a physical level. It was just as much on the spiritual and a matter of the spirit and soul.

All that Jada saw before her eyes and mind was utter darkness, and every second in that wretched place was like the passing of an age. In that horrible blackness, she felt her very spirit slowly being quelled, and her soul being struck and stabbed by the hand of Evil itself.

Every ounce of her whole being was in agony. Light was being shattered and destroyed, and what replaced it was something more terrible than anything anyone could conceive. The old scars that marred her soul and spirit were ignited, and horrendous fire and pain tore through soul, spirit, and flesh.

Average men could describe pain on the physical and emotional levels. However, when it came to inner pain of spirit and soul, only a select few could even understand. Very few had genuinely experienced torture of the spirit and fatal wounds to the soul.

Jada was one of those few now, regardless of how long or short a time she remained in that darkness. Time is a tricky thing in such a realm. Although only minutes may have gone by in the physical as Halden and Ambrose held their victim in their merciless grasp, to Jada's soul, years of slow pain and decay had already passed.

Jada understood that there was a place where a person experienced such pain that it left them unable to move or even think.

The return of your mortality and the full understanding of what that means can be such a cruel thing, mocked Ambrose as he walked out of the fog to her left.

His thought in her mind pulled Jada out of that black place and slowly brought her back to herself. This only made her aware again of the physical pain still clutching her body. She thought that her head would split. She was drenched in sweat, and intermittent tremors seized her muscles. If she could have seen herself, she would have been struck by her own pale and haggard complexion, looking as if death had just brushed by her.

You really are weak and pitiable, continued Ambrose. *It must be such a tragic turn of events for you. At one time, you were immune to the most potent effects of attacks by the unseen. Now...you aren't. And that's apart from the fact that you no longer have that once infamous fire for battle and skill with a blade.*

"You're just like all the other weak souls you once fought to rescue and save," added a familiar voice on her right.

With the greatest effort, Jada lifted her head and saw Halden appear, Halden a wise being she'd once respected and revered. Now, with a jagged dagger in his hand, her former friend had come to kill her.

"Your God granted you special gifts for a time," continued Halden, "but like always, when He's finished using someone, He took it all back and then left you to your own. He's recalled the gifts, the fire...and the protection, young Miss Jada."

"It all means that you're a mere mortal again," said Ambrose, glancing at the dagger in his hand.

“I know that the truth can be a cruel and bitter thing,” added Halden as he and his associate continued to approach, “but at least you won’t have to suffer from the pain of it for very long.”

†

As for Blake and Gabriel, it turned out that they didn’t fall far either. When the earth beneath them collapsed, they knew they’d fallen, but never remembered hitting the ground.

Getting to their feet, they looked around and saw that they’d landed on the edge of a broad crater. Thick fog was still everywhere, but in the center of the crater was a sizeable dark shadow.

Blake edged closer and, as the fog cleared a little, discovered the shadow was actually a large hole. It dropped straight down to an unknown, black depth.

An uneasy feeling washed over him then and he spun sharply as he drew his blade. Eyes scanning the area, he spotted the faint shadow of Gabriel. He had his bow strung and aimed at something to Blake’s left.

Blake wanted to run and to try to find Jada. His gut was now screaming at him that she was in terrible danger. But there was a nearer threat that needed to be dealt with first.

I sense it too, thought Gabriel to Blake, who caught this elf’s words, *we will finish here quickly and then find her.*

The sound of rocks being moved under a heavy weight made every muscle in Blake’s body tighten for action. Something was approaching, and seconds later a large shadowed veil rolled towards them. It was intended to surround the man and elf to disorientate and blind them, but it didn’t work.

Gabriel released the arrow and as it passed through the veil, it completely disrupted the shadow. The darkness rolled itself up and was then caught up on the moving air current.

Simultaneously, Gabriel’s shot had found its mark and a roar of pain answered. He strode forward then, out of the thickest wall of fog. Shimron. He plainly had not fared well upon the descent from the collapsed hilltop. He was covered with black scrapes and

gouges. Blood ran from the various wounds inflicted by Jada on his legs, especially his calf and knees. His left arm appeared to be dislocated because it now hung at an odd angle.

He'd lost his axe somewhere, but still had his sword and the desire to finish what he'd started.

It would prove to be a short fight.

Blake sprang towards him as Gabriel loosed another arrow.

Shimron deflected it with his blade, but this left him unable to defend himself against the strike from Blake. He cut Shimron across the side of the thigh and then along the lower back as he passed behind the large orthros.

Keeping his attention on the elf, now approaching, Shimron flicked his sword behind him to swat at Blake. Gabriel shot another arrow, but this time Shimron grabbed it by the shaft when it was an arm's length from his face.

To keep their enemy's attention while Gabriel put up his bow, Blake lunged forward and stabbed his blade through Shimron's left leg. The sword passed clean through the side of his thigh and out the other side.

An awful bellow came from Shimron as he dropped to one knee. With unexpected speed, he swung his dislocated arm at Blake. His hand missed him by inches as he leaped sideways into a crouch.

Gabriel was almost to Shimron now, but the being was currently more irritated with Blake. With a growl, he pushed himself back to his feet and swung his blade.

Although Shimron was weakened, Blake was still impressed by the raw power in the harsh strike. Holding his blade like a bat, he deflected the first swing and then locked swords with the big brute on the second blow.

Before Shimron could try to overpower Blake, he was forced to turn to Gabriel. His first swing was high, and the elf ducked it. The second was low and he lightly jumped over the blade. Before Shimron could attempt a third swing, Gabriel executed a lightning fast flick of his knife and drove it through his hand.

The big orthros howled with pain and anger but didn't drop the weapon. With another surprising burst of speed, he spun to Blake, using the twisting motion to put on speed in his swing.

But to Shimron's surprise, Blake met the blade with a mighty swing of his own. The swords rang clear, white sparks danced to the ground, and Shimron was thrown wildly off balance. He stumbled sideways for a few awkward strides before going down to a knee.

The fight ended quickly after that. While Shimron was wounded and weakened physically, he still possessed considerable power of darkness in and about himself. But that didn't matter either. No matter how much dark power he wielded against these two foes, it never affected them in the slightest. They didn't even seem to notice.

The elf, a race of which all orthros hated, was filled with the purest light. Though perhaps not visible to the average man, because Shimron was deep into darkness, he saw it plainly with his eyes.

The light also glowed from the elf's weapons, and streaks of white flashed from the sword and knife whenever Shimron's blade made contact.

The man's power, however, was veiled. Occasionally, a small shaft of light glinted through a gap in his garments, but overall his power and light were cloaked. Instead, it was most visible in his eyes, which were impossibly clear and blue. His was plainly the gaze of a traveler, of one who'd seen much in the history of his existence, and one who saw things far ahead that no one else did. He had great physical strength, but the spiritual side of him was stronger still. All in all, he was an honest man with a will as immovable as the mountains, and with determination Shimron had only seen in a rare few.

With an effortless swing, Gabriel swiped Shimron's blade aside and then drove his knife into the orthros' chest.

Simultaneously, Blake rammed his sword into Shimron's ribcage. As the big man began to collapse, he kicked him, and he fell into the black hole.

Almost as soon as the body disappeared, the earth quaked mildly. A rumbling sounded from it and then the gap closed on itself.

Blake and Gabriel shot a glance at one another as they sheathed their weapons.

This place gets stranger every day, thought Blake to Gabriel.

They then turned and sprinted westward into the fog. They had no idea where their horses were, but they didn't want to call or whistle to them. There was no knowing just how many assassins or jackals were prowling about still.

So, man and elf ran on, making for a particularly tall, sheer hill, whose top was completely hidden in a veil of fog and clouds.

†

They stood over Jada, enjoying watching her slowly suffocate in the torment they were unleashing upon her. Revenge really was a beautiful thing, both sorcerers thought. In fact, they found that the more trouble an enemy had caused them and their plans, the more satisfying taking vengeance was.

I better understand why you were so inclined towards revenge in your younger days here, laughed Halden to Jada.

The sweating had lessened but the cold wind buffeting Jada made her shiver. She was still on her hands and knees with her head down, and the increasing pressure against her shoulders was threatening to take her completely to the ground. It wasn't necessarily that she didn't have the energy to move; it was that she couldn't push back against whatever force was holding her.

If she tried to move at all, the ache which had seized her body worsened. Every once in a while, when it amused the sorcerers, they sent a violent volt of electricity through her.

Jada's ability to breathe normally was still limited and gradually worsening. It felt like something was slowly squeezing the oxygen from her lungs and pressing steadily against her ribcage.

And she could do nothing to resist. It was the first time Jada could remember...that she wanted to die. This desire was markedly different from the death she had wished for in the wake of her parents' murders, when she'd pursued the enemy squad.

This time the want was solely because of the unbearable pain inflicted upon herself. For one instant, Jada wished Halden and Ambrose would put an end to her misery and kill her.

That wish and thought had already passed through her mind and was being replaced by her well-known stubbornness when a shock of electricity surged through her. Halden and Ambrose had sensed her desire. The very thought of their victim begging them to kill her amused them, so they gave her another large dose of pain instead.

Visions of torture filled Jada's mind, and for a moment she was back in that black place of loathing. She was unable to think. All there was, was suffering.

When the worst of it passed, Jada's legs gave and she dropped to her elbows. She became aware of a tightening grip on her shoulders. That unseen thing still had a hold of her, ensuring she couldn't retaliate.

"As much as we'd love to draw this out," said Ambrose, stepping closer and down to one knee beside Jada, "we have other business to see to."

With a flick of the dagger, he drew a fine red line across her face. The instant he saw the blood, an idea wholly seized him, and he stiffened. He remained still for a moment as he stared with an eerie fixation at the cut.

"If only we had the time," he said quietly, as if to himself, "if only...if only we were nearer our altar."

A wild light burned to life in Halden's eyes. Now that was an idea. Who knew what things would be unbound and unleashed if they sacrificed someone like Jada? She was a traveler and was favored or had been by both Eliadar and his God. She was a being filled with light and was of high status. So, if they sacrificed her...

The possibilities of what would result for Cassius, evil, and darkness were endless. Ancient and hidden gates would open and evil things so unfathomably evil would issue from them.

But the two sorcerers were far from their concealed residence and their altar. They didn't have the time to drag their victim there.

Halden and Ambrose came to these conclusions simultaneously and shared a disappointed scowl.

Muttering to himself, Ambrose stood and kicked Jada onto her back. Once there, the invisible hands gripped her arms and legs, and one went around her throat.

“Despair in that your two friends couldn’t save you,” spoke Halden coldly as he stepped to her other side and looked down at her. “They are strong in their own right, but not even the light of the elf can break the darkness that Ambrose and I have together.”

Jada’s fuzzy brain tried to work out his meaning, but it was having difficulty. A being like Gabriel had great power, and she knew that Blake could equal it. Certainly, the pair of them, perhaps three if Jada could somehow break the grip that had her, could at least turn back Halden and Ambrose.

They had yet to face a foe that they couldn’t defeat together. Why would this be any different? In spite of the fact that the realm was dying, the end was drawing near, and darkness would eventually have complete reign – light still had to win out in situations like the one she was currently in, right?

Sensing her thoughts, the two sorcerers laughed heartily with deep voices.

“You...you’ve been spoiled by your previous victories,” chuckled Halden, barely able to contain his dark mirth, “and it’s just another display of the cruelty of your God. He gave you those victories knowing full-well you’d deceive yourself into thinking you’d always win, that there’d always be a way out, or that someone would always come to the rescue.”

He lowered his head a moment as another fit of silent laughter seized him. After he regained some control of himself, he continued. “Well, welcome to the reality of the darkest and ugliest truths about warfare. Understand that like so many others, you lived a mostly protected life, a life in the sun until now. The loss of your parents was just a normal, common trial of that easy life. But here in the black heart of the battlefield, in the presence and territory of darkness, in the cruelty and grimness of the deepest warfare...there is pain that you’ve never known, and pain that doesn’t end. There is brutal

defeat and terrible loss. All of these things are on such a level that very few of your kind ever walk in it and experience it.”

“Here in disputed territory, the rules of engagement are much different than when you’re fighting in friendly regions,” added Ambrose. “Both in contested and enemy land, you better understand the importance of the rank of your enemy. As you no doubt discovered with the assassins, battling a commander was more difficult than fighting with a dark soldier in the safe lands around the Western Village.”

He smiled as he glanced at Halden, “And the benefits of two or more gathering in agreement work for both the light and the dark.”

“Do you see it all coming together now, little waif?” asked Halden. “All of what we’ve shared with you explains why a believer like yourself can’t simply...repel us now. Here in unclaimed territory, we are better able to wield our power, and you are less protected and more sensitive to it. In other words...you’re fair game.”

Ambrose shook his head as he and Halden took a knee beside Jada. “You were lifted high above it all in the battle for the South and shielded with great power. But now He has dropped you. He has recalled all the power and protection. That’s why there’s no fire kindled within, no heat and zeal of battle. He has taken it back, so now...it’s just your weak and mortal self.”

All of what they’d said threatened to extinguish Jada’s spirit then and there, and crush her battered soul. It all made sense, everything that they’d said about warfare and the absence of the old fire. Then again, they knew they couldn’t ensnare her through feelings, so they’d used practical sense and arguments.

She knew this, but still, it was overwhelmingly difficult not to accept it and give up.

Despair returned and doubt followed right behind it. However, on this occasion, it wasn’t self-doubt. It was doubt in the living God, the One she’d been trying to faithfully follow since childhood.

The doubt came on strong, but the instant that it did, in one last effort of resistance...hot rage of the determined traveler burned through her. The stubborn rebel

and free spirit thrashed awake with malice of her own, malice at those threatening her life and at whatever invisible being that had her physically restrained.

All despair fled in fear as a dangerous light gleamed to life in her eyes, the kind of light that glinted in the eyes of an injured, cornered wild animal. The wild horse ensnared in the barbed wire and caught by ropes of cruel handlers was about to make its final, mad attempt to break free, even if that meant killing the handlers and herself.

Jada drew a forceful, albeit painful, breath. She didn't understand entirely what was happening to herself, didn't understand the changes. All she knew in that second was that she had been ordered by the high king to meet him at the gates of his city.

And that's where she was going, no matter what.

So, get out of my way, growled the fiery spirit within her as it burst into a consuming inferno.

Halden and Ambrose, obviously confident that they had all day to slay their victim by all of the talking they'd done, set the dagger points against Jada's wrists. But the very instant that Jada made the decision to resist, the ground beneath them all fell away...

Chapter 4

Escape Route

After dropping a considerable distance, Jada landed in a passage with an *oof!*

Having been released from the oppressive spell, both the haze over her mind and weakness in her body passed quickly. Her traumatized lungs still hurt but with each breath of cold air, her strength returned.

She pushed back the initial memories of the horrific event she'd just been through and forced herself to focus. The time to analyze past matters would come later.

Jada realized then that she was seated in a tunnel covered with ice. Behind her, she felt and heard the sound of cracking stones and rumbling boulders.

A particularly loud boom shook the tunnel and sent cracks up the walls. The lurching ground also caused Jada to begin sliding. The angle of the floor steepened somewhat, and the tunnel began to cut and turn. Jada went sliding up the sides of the walls as her momentum increased.

Following a few gentle turns, the tunnel veered left and spit her out into a passage. Her two swords clanked onto the ground beside her.

As Jada pushed herself stiffly to her feet, she glanced over her shoulder to watch the tunnel exit collapse on itself.

Well, that's a new one, she thought, scooping up her swords and sheathing them.

She glanced about to get her bearings and saw that the mountain ridges were very near. Only a few sheer hills and passages were between her and them.

Jada then wondered where Blake and Gabriel were, and a rumbling in the earth made her turn back. The passage she was looking down ran straight for a considerable distance until it was intersected by a hill. The earth trembled beneath her feet and she watched as that very hill crumbled. A line of destruction continued to approach, as the short, sheer cliffs on either side of the passage began to cast themselves to the ground. It kicked up great clouds of dust and flying rocks.

“Right,” said Jada.

She turned back to the mountains and a wave of dizziness washed over her. Jada stumbled sideways...and then took a giant leap backward as a dagger just missed her neck.

Ambrose was there and advancing towards her with murder in his eyes. How he'd come to reach her so quickly she didn't know. However, judging by the tricks he performed just minutes ago, she wouldn't be surprised if he could project himself from one place to another.

Jada skittered backward and drew her shorter blade.

Ambrose pressed closer and reached for her with his free hand. Her vision blurred a second and dizziness tried to settle over her mind. When she saw a shadow come from his hand and spread its wings towards her, wild anger and desperation filled her.

“No!” she snarled, swatting the shadow with her blade and then turning and sprinting down the passage that curved gently left.

Like a bird freed from a net she flew, and she would fly or die before ever falling into the hands of the awful captors she’d just escaped.

The ruin of the hills she’d seen in the passage pursued her, and Jada was very aware of the quaking of the earth and the rumbling behind her. A crossroads she reached forced her to slow. The passage she was in went either left or right, but these two options split into two additional routes. None of them continued straight toward the mountain ridges that were so close.

A large heap of earth and rocks slammed into the ground behind her and flung rocks and debris past her head.

Taking the right-most route, Jada jumped back into a run...and then threw herself against the wall.

Halden had been waiting just around the curve and the moment she appeared, he struck. She avoided the brunt of the swipe, but the blade still cut her across her left shoulder.

Jada’s brain was just informing her that the wound was burning like fire when she struck the sheer wall of the ridge. Her brain was then given other things to process when the wall didn’t stop her but gave way. She went tumbling through it and into a parallel passage with a cluster of rocks and a cloud of dust.

A portion of the hill on either side of the hole simply blew away by Halden’s bidding and he walked through easily.

Jada tripped to her feet and staggered sideways as he advanced upon her. He stabbed downward with the dagger and she deflected it with a backhanded swipe of her sword. The blades rang loudly and white sparks danced into the air.

Jada could feel a familiar and much-dreaded darkness trying to take hold of her again. She backed up quicker, but Halden stayed with her.

They exchanged a few strikes, each one sending out sparks as the ground continued to grumble and shake. Finally, and with incredible speed, Halden grabbed onto

her wrist of the hand holding her sword. Cold pain tore down Jada's arm. She was pushed down to one knee with her back against the passage wall.

She managed to pivot her sword so it was across her body right as Halden stabbed with the dagger. The side of his hand was stopped by the broadside of her sword and the dagger just missed her left shoulder. The air around them tingled. Jada could feel her mind being taken to that black place of torment and death when the wall behind her gave way.

Jada fell back into another passage and Halden staggered over her. Before he could do anything, she twisted and landed a double-booted kick to his chest. He stumbled back and she jumped to her feet.

It looked like he was on the verge of drawing his dark power and conjuring something horrid until a deep boom came from the earth beneath them. The ground between them began to fall in on itself. As Jada spun and ran, she heard Halden give a cry of outrage.

As she ran, the collapsing ground continued to chase her and the sheer hills on either side of her began to follow suit.

Searching the path ahead, she saw that she finally had a straight shot to the mountain ridges, which created a rough cliff on the edge of these odd hills.

The ground a dozen feet ahead of her collapsed, leaving a ten-foot gap. There was nothing else for it and Jada pushed her legs faster. At the edge of the gap, she jumped with all her might and just cleared it. She stumbled a few steps when she landed but righted herself and ran onward.

She'd only gone another forty feet when another, much larger hole opened in the ground. Immediately after this happened, a chunk of hill to her left collapsed at the edge of the hole's mouth, creating an arm of rock.

As Jada skirted up the arm and along the hilltop, the gap continued to grow and ran parallel to her for a distance. The opposite ridge also began to shift and come apart.

She took in this unnerving sight and then noticed a passage on the far side of the gap. In it were an orthros assassin and a black jackal. They both snarled in disgust that she'd been saved from running right into their hands.

Just before she ran out of sight, Jada watched as their passage began to collapse on them and they were forced to turn and run for their own lives.

This was when the hill under her feet shifted and seemed to wobble a little. Chunks began to fall away into the passage on the right and she was forced to begin leaping from one falling stone to another.

The end of the hill she was running along was nearing an end. When she neared it, its edge slid down into the intersection of passages.

Jada almost fell off but managed to keep her balance. She ran down the arm and as she did so, the hill directly in front of her crumbled. At the same time, another chunk of ground fell away in front of the arm she was running on.

This is so weird! she thought. She jumped and scrambled as rocks under her feet began to give way again, but when she reached the top of the next hill the ground became solid. Jada glanced back at the ruined intersection and caught a glimpse of Halden, another assassin, and two more jackals.

She could feel her legs beginning to tire and she urged them on. Her abused lungs were struggling and, in between random bouts of coughing, her breaths came out in ragged gasps.

Jada ran across the hilltop and saw there was only one more gap between her and the mountain ridge. She figured that she'd have a decent height advantage and would be able to land on a shelf on a ridge.

She was in the final strides to the hill's edge when it dropped a foot and began to crumble. She stutter-stepped onto some larger pieces and then gathered her strength and launched herself.

Jada did have enough height and speed to land on a shelf, but not as gracefully as she'd envisioned. Her legs buckled when she landed, and her momentum slammed her against the cliff wall before she slumped to the shelf.

“Ow,” she groaned and coughed as she got to her feet.

A black arrow sank into a rock inches from her nose.

Jada glared down at the passage and spotted an assassin archer. Growling with disgust and frustration, she turned and began hastily climbing the cliff. Between the arrows and the occasional rocks that broke under her hands or feet, she had sufficient adrenaline to give her the strength to climb.

She was near the top and reaching for another handhold when another arrow passed between her ring and middle fingers.

Jerk, she thought, glancing over her shoulder and downward.

She saw the archer drawing back another arrow. Before he could release it, the ground opened up right beneath his feet and he fell out of view. Multiple cracks ran from the edges of the hole. One large one, in particular, began to crawl and pop up the cliff.

Oh, come on. Jada grabbed the arrow that was between her fingers and used it to pull herself upwards to the next handhold.

The crack was now unnervingly close and it sent sheets of rock sliding down into the passage. This provided her with enough incentive to reach the top sooner rather than later.

Jada climbed onto the top of the cliff and then glanced at something off to her left. It was a black jackal. But before anything could transpire, a stellar appeared out of nowhere, struck the jackal and sent it falling to its death.

She ducked as several more stellars whooshed over her head and shot over the rumbling hill labyrinth. This turned her so that she could see two more assassins and several more jackals at a farther distance on the ridge top.

They spotted her and advanced swiftly. They didn't get far before a pair of stellars dropped in to give them something to think about.

Jada wasn't given any time to watch. The ridge under her feet trembled and the crack appeared over the edge close to her feet.

“This is getting old,” she said with distaste as she turned, scanned the terrain above her, and picked out the path of least resistance.

Once or twice Jada thought it was safe for her to slow. But each time, the mountainside gave a loud pop and a section fell away or another crevice appeared.

She made good time to the next little plateau, and when she paused to catch her breath, she noticed an arched entryway of dark blue. It was an ice tunnel.

Jada considered the words of Gabriel and Blake about the tunnels and then checked the landscape below her. She saw one or two stellars blur by, followed by a faint yelping of jackals. She also spotted another squad of assassins.

Surely, she could now gather herself and join the little fight. Two things, however, happened then that prevented her from doing this.

First, another, much closer unit of assassins appeared around a large boulder.

Second, the ground between Jada's little plateau and then dropped, creating a sheer cliff between them.

"Seriously?" asked Jada in frustration.

A tumbling rock nearly hit her in the head then. Spinning around and looking farther up the sheer face of the mountain, she noticed...the beginnings of a rockslide.

Shoot.

There was nothing else for it and Jada sprinted the final distance to the ice tunnel. She ran into it a short way and then paused to check behind her. The mountain began shaking violently and moments later a mound of massive rocks blocked the entrance to the ice tunnel.

It also made the ceiling of the tunnel itself begin to collapse.

Jada backpedaled a few steps, before turning and running down the passage. It turned out to be a short tunnel, curving gently to the left before leading out onto a sizeable shelf.

Jada slid onto the shelf as the tunnel collapsed completely, expelling a burst of air and dust. Eerie silence and quiet fell over the steep arms of the mountains all around her.

As she stood and stared at the tunnel debris, she allowed herself a moment to finally catch her breath. She wheezed a few painful coughs and became aware of a particular tiredness pulling at her body and soul.

Jada considered all that had happened that morning. She thought about the collapsing hills and gaping holes. As for the pursuing cracks that had chased her up the mountain, it was plain that was to prevent her from fighting those who were hunting her. For some reason, she wasn't supposed to be involved.

Ambrose and Halden had had her in their grasp and what a terrible experience it had been. The horror of that place of darkness and torment of the spirit and soul washed over Jada at the memory.

That deadly exhaustion again washed over her soul and pulled at her worn spirit. A wave of sickness rolled through her, and she involuntarily shuddered and swayed a little.

Why couldn't she shake this? As a matter of fact, why hadn't she been permitted to help fight on the ridge?

Am I no longer strong or skilled enough, she thought to Him. Is what Halden and Ambrose said true about my gifts being taken away?

She searched the partly cloudy skies. *Did I do something wrong?*

The only answer that came was a chill breeze.

More nausea seized her, nausea and great weakness. On their heels was that hellish darkness, that horrible power that would take her back to that black agony.

Jada didn't realize that at the approach of these things and of the memories of being in Evil's grasp, she'd shut her eyes tight. Her shoulders hunched and she bent forward a little, partly in dread and partly in rising sickness.

This was how Blake found her when he emerged from another tunnel. The sight of her fear and trembling illness stopped him dead in his tracks. His own fear, mad fear, crashed through him when he saw the shadow of Death over her and that very particular shade of pale in her face.

Uprooting his boots, he rushed forward and cried, "Jada!"

The shout surprised her out of perilous memories and she literally looked like she'd been shocked.

As she initially turned her gaze on Blake, he slowed cautiously. The wildest gleam of fear and desperate rage he'd ever seen in human or animal burned in Jada's eyes. It was

the look of a badly abused captive who had escaped from the captor, the look that warned and promised he would kill any and all who even threatened to return him to his cage and the hand of abuse.

After a breath, the fire extinguished and was replaced with a tired expression. Though her cheeks had flushed in her sudden surprise and anger, a pale tint remained to her face. It would remain there for the rest of their journey together. No matter how much Blake would try to tell himself that it was gone, that touch of death was always present.

What terrible horror did she suffer, Blake wondered with grave concern.

“Are...you going to be alright?” he asked, searching her face and then looking over the rest of her.

She had black cuts on the left side of her face, burn holes in the sleeves of her coat, and the sides of her pants. She was covered with a layer of dirt and it was smudged across her face.

Jada didn’t answer immediately and only met his gaze. Her expression was haunting, and a chill ran down his spine. Some great evil had been upon her, he saw it in the back of her eyes where the near memory lingered. Then, like the mad fear, the memory faded also as she pushed it back.

At length, Jada replied with, “I will be.”

Her voice was thin and strained. Seeing concern flash across Blake’s face, she closed her eyes, took a careful breath, opened her eyes again and smiled faintly.

“I am fine,” she continued, voice stronger. She made it a point to keep hidden from him the hand bruises on her wrists and the cuts Halden and Ambrose had made with their daggers.

Any remaining weakness passed entirely, and Jada’s typical blithe demeanor slowly returned. Before Blake could press her about her condition, she asked, “Are you alright?”

Like hers, Blake’s face was streaked with dirt and displayed a few minor cuts. He gave a small shrug, “Just a few cuts. I’m fine. Gabriel and I got separated when everything started collapsing. I don’t know where our horses are, either.”

Jada took a breath of fresh mountain air and let it out. “Well...we’d better get a move on then. We don’t have any food or water on us.”

Doubt about their predicament flickered over Blake’s expression.

She gave him a slap on the arm. “I’m positive you can find our way out of here, and if not, well...I am a woman, which means I have an innate sense of direction.”

In spite of his numerous worries, Blake snorted a laugh.

As they started along the broad shelf, Jada said, “I don’t know about you...but that was just a little too much excitement for first thing in the morning.”

Chapter 5

Moral Dilemmas

Blake and Jada spent the next few hours walking the ice tunnels. There was no way to navigate the exterior mountainsides. They were sheer, sometimes flat and smooth, while in other areas they created thick rows of rough crevices. So, the two travelers were forced to do the thing neither had wanted to do at the beginning: challenge the tunnel maze.

The initial going wasn’t too difficult, confusing, or disheartening. With Blake leading, they kept to the tunnels that were lightest, which told them that particular passage was near to the outside.

More than once their route took them back outdoors where they beheld amazing spectacles. Twice they saw countless little waterfalls converging from different crevices before thundering down to a narrow, deep pool. Once they arrived at a ceilingless chamber with walls made entirely of large columns of thick ice.

However, always hovering in the back of their minds was the fact that they had no food or water, and it was going to become exceptionally cold come dusk. The only clothing they had was that which was on their backs, and they had no means with which to make a fire. It wouldn’t do any good to panic and neither really fretted. Both were relatively certain that a way would be found.

To keep their minds off these presently minor concerns, the two shared what had happened once they'd been separated in the labyrinth.

Jada listened attentively to Blake's tale and silently wished she'd been there to see him and Gabriel battle the leader of a race called orthros. She asked him if he knew much about them. He was knowledgeable about some of their history and none of it was pleasant.

When Blake asked Jada about her adventure, she gave a brief summary, skimping on details about the near-death encounter with Halden and Ambrose. But she made up for it when recounting the mad dash for the mountains.

None of this was lost on Blake and he studied her out the corner of his eye a few moments after she'd ended her story. Doubtless, the encounter with the sorcerers had been the cause of her great fear and illness. Even though she brushed over the details, her face grew a shade paler and memory of some terrible place flickered in her eyes.

However, Blake understood Jada well enough to know that pressing her would only push her farther away, and then she'd never say anything. At any rate, perhaps the memory was still too fresh and talking about it would only make matters worse.

So, Blake let the matter go. "I'd been wondering where Ambrose and Halden had been whisked away to. I'd doubted that they'd been killed in the destruction of their cities."

"Mmm," answered Jada, looking up at the pale blue arched ceiling of the tunnel, "I thought they might've had a secret stronghold to go to...but I had the sense this morning that they were just roaming, more or less."

She took a breath and then continued softly, as if to herself, "And this is contested land, anyway. They can come and go easily enough without risk of being spotted or attacked."

Although Ambrose and Halden were now deceivers and habitual lying wasn't out of the question, Jada had considered and discerned that some of what they'd said to her had been true. Obviously, they'd been sure that they were going to kill her, so they'd engaged in a classic villain behavior: gloating and sharing some of their great wisdom.

Feeling Blake's gaze on her, she shot him a quick look. "They...just said some things, is all, some of which were actually true."

But just how much, she wondered.

It took all of Blake's self-control not to ask her to expound when he saw the shadow fall over her face again. Before he could debate with himself a problem suddenly demanded the attention of them both.

They entered an expansive ice chamber with arches everywhere and several passageways running from it. There were also some higher up the walls as paths crisscrossed. None of the options continued in the direction they'd been walking. Every tunnel was darker, too, telling them that they ran deeper into the mountains.

They both stood looking about a minute before both simultaneously prayed, *Um, a little help, please?*

No inspiration came.

They split up and investigated the chamber and entrances to each tunnel. They checked for scrapes or wear in the ice, something that indicated foot traffic. There wasn't a single scratch or any other sign, not even an odd or familiar scent on the air currents.

Blake and Jada met again before the tunnels and considered them.

"Well," said Jada, "guess we better pick one and get a move on."

Blake, with worry now on his face, nodded.

"You want me to pick this time?" she asked. "That way you can blame me when we're freezing to death?"

Blake gave her the look that he reserved specifically for her, but he was smiling faintly. "If you're volunteering...I haven't the vaguest idea of where to go."

"Okay."

Jada chose the passage that ran gently to the right and off they went.

From that point, they walked for another two hours. They stopped when they reached a small chamber with a clear, little waterfall falling through its center. By their growling stomachs, they guessed it must be around lunchtime.

They had to settle for icy water.

In the span of the next ten minutes, they came across two more large chambers with multiple passageways. Like the first chamber, there was no hint of traffic, animal or human. Thus, they had to guess.

To make matters more intense, they both began to have the sense that they were being followed or tracked.

Twenty minutes following that, they entered a third chamber and stopped. Instead of studying the tunnel entrances, they casually turned so that they were standing back to back and rested their hands on their sword hilts.

“There’ll be no need for those,” echoed a voice all around the chamber. “I’m here to help, not eat.”

Looking up, they spotted the speaker sitting on an ice bridge that spanned nearly the entire breadth of the room.

Jada’s eyes narrowed slightly. He looked familiar. Then again, she’d only ever met one black panther.

“Yes, it’s me,” replied the panther in response to Jada’s expression. “Raj. We met shortly before the incident with the winged horses and dragons.”

He gave an upward nod. “I would come closer, Miss Traveler, but your companion is looking at me like I’m one of the jackals that paid you a visit this morning.”

Jada glanced at Blake, who looked at her with an expression asking if they could trust Raj.

She proved that she was feeling entirely like her old self. In response to his nonverbal question, she put on an Earth gangster impression. She gave him a light tap on the arm with the back of her hand, followed by an upward nod. “He’s cool’, man.”

Her carefree attitude in the face of legitimate danger had always irked Blake a bit, which was why she did it. He rolled his eyes in response and then folded his arms.

“Wonderful,” said Raj. He jumped from the ice bridge and casually approached in the least threatening way possible.

“You said you were here to help,” said Blake curtly. Jada could shrug off the threat all she wanted, but that didn’t mean that he was going to do the same.

Raj stopped a dozen feet from them and sat. “I did, and I have a proposition for you. I have a little problem I’d like your help in remedying. If you do that, then I’ll show you the way out of these tunnels.”

He flicked the end of his tail before wrapping it around his paws. “And before you launch into questions like, ‘how can we trust you to hold up your end of the deal or won’t abandon us in the middle of the maze,’ bla bla...know that I’m a panther of my word.”

He placed a paw over his heart for emphasis. “I’m in the...supply and demand business, and if I wasn’t a keeper of my word...I’d have been killed a long time ago. Besides...”

He flashed his sharp, white teeth with a grin. “I could’ve just killed you already or never approached you in the first place.”

Just as I’d thought from the very start, thought Jada. He’s like Gilead, only with better hygiene and easier on the eyes. Raj is a ‘businessman’ and supplier. He’ll help as long as it benefits him.

“You make it sound so easy,” said Jada with some light sarcasm. “What exactly is this problem you want help with?”

“I have an enemy,” answered Raj, “a human who has made it a sport to hunt me personally. He makes living here in my rightful home difficult.”

A light gleamed in his green eyes. “He also killed my brother, not for fur or food, but solely for fun. My brother had done nothing to the man and didn’t even go into the village. But he was killed and left where he fell. So, remove this man, Raqqa, and his second-in-command of the village will take over and cease mindless hunting. You do this and I’ll show you the way out.”

Upon hearing the details of this proposal, all Jada could do was raise her eyebrows. Blake’s expression mirrored hers.

“You want me to kill a man who has done me no harm, doesn’t make a living torturing or butchering innocent people, and isn’t in league with Cassius?” she asked, before crossing her arms. “The price for your help almost seems a little too high. What we need and what you want doesn’t quite balance one another.”

“Oh, but they do,” countered Raj. “If you don’t do this, you don’t receive my help. If you don’t receive my help, you’ll both be dead within forty-eight hours. The odds of you finding your way out on your own are astronomical.”

Blake shifted his weight back to one hip. “And you can’t do this yourself because...”

“The risk is too great for me,” replied Raj. “As much as it pains me to admit, Raqqa is an exceptional tracker and hunter. I can’t just go sneaking into the village. That’ll be a task much easier for you than for me.”

Jada said nothing else because there were no words. In her previous season as a hunter, she’d tracked and killed squads of chimera. She’d even ambushed squads of dark soldiers. However, both had been blatantly evil, trespassing, or were en route to slaughter innocent victims.

But to kill a man for the reasons Raj had given? Killing animals solely for pleasure and leaving the fur and meat, or torturing them was obviously wrong. Did it then justify killing Raqqa, the so-called hunter who only killed creatures for fun? Could her conscience clear her of that?

Then again, a clear conscience was moot if she froze or starved to death.

But on the other hand, what was surviving if she was guilt-ridden and haunted because she couldn’t cope?

“I see you need some time to consider my offer,” said Raj, after several minutes of silence passed.

Unsheathing a single white claw, he began drawing in the ice. “This is how you get to the settlement where Raqqa lives. It’s quite simple from here. I can also tell you that the only way in and out is by the tunnels. Forget trying to climb your way out.”

Raj stood. “Oh, and Raqqa will be the loudest person in the village. Average height, broad, dark brown hair, brown eyes, pitted face, and a big scar along the entire left side of his head. He claims he got it hunting, but everyone knows he got it in a bar fight”

He turned to go but paused for one final word. “And don’t bother trying to find me once you make up your mind. I’ll know.”

The panther then went on his way and disappeared from sight.

This is impossible, thought Jada.

For some minutes, she wracked her brain trying to think of a way out of this that didn't involve killing Raqqa. Nothing came to mind, not a single spark of inspiration.

When Jada finally looked at Blake, she saw that his expression was furrowed. Left arm across his stomach, his right elbow sat on it as his hand covered his mouth. He was in deep contemplation. When he finally stirred from his thoughts and met her gaze, she saw he'd come to a conclusion unrelated to Raj's offer.

"It's started," he said, lowering his arms and facing her. "The trials have begun...first the ambush this morning and now the moral dilemma. It makes more sense now."

When Jada just blinked at him, he clarified. "When a traveler begins the Northward journey, these tests, these events are automatically set into motion."

His face softened as he searched her face. "I faced many during my trek. The entire trip is a series of tests to challenge you, to see exactly what you're made of...and your trials have begun. That means I can't make any decisions for you. It's all up to you."

The full weight of his words and their predicament settled on her shoulders.

"So, no pressure," answered Jada, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Just...remember that the trials are going to test you at your core," he said gently. "They aren't always going to be fair and there will be times when no choice seems good. In those instances, it's a matter of trusting that the One who has called you northward will work it all out in a perfect way that you can't see."

Jada took a deep breath and blew through her lips. Without saying another word, she walked to Raj's map on the floor and studied it.

If it wasn't for the cold, she would've said, "We'll try for one more day to find our own way out." But they couldn't risk getting helplessly lost in the heart of a mountain. Also, their bodies would've already burned significant amounts of energy, and then they may be too tired to fulfill Raj's offer if they'd really wanted.

Jada shook her head and scowled.

The faint howling of the wind through a distant passage was the only response.

Blake shot Jada numerous glances as she stood in silence and stared at the floor. He understood very well her predicament. He'd faced a similar one during his journey. He still didn't like this quandary at all. It wasn't necessarily the task Raj had appointed –it was because it was Jada who had to face the test itself.

At last, Jada looked at Blake, someone who'd already proven that he was a trustworthy companion.

If I were to perish alone in these tunnels, that'd be one thing, she thought, but a delayed decision or to reject Raj's offer would also mean Blake's death. I won't have that on my hands. If we are killed trying to fulfill Raj's wish, at least we'd be actively trying and not languishing pointlessly in the mountains.

"We'll go to the settlement," said Jada firmly. "We'll need to get there before dark, regardless of what we end up doing. It'll be no use getting caught in the tunnels come dusk."

Blake gave a decisive nod. "To the village."

Chapter 6

Raqqa

The clear sky was darkening when they reached the small village. The moment Blake and Jada laid eyes on it, they immediately understood Raj's words about not being able to climb out. The settlement was on a plateau nestled tightly against sheer mountain ridges that completely encircled it.

Hmm, okay, thought Jada, as she and Blake took a knee behind a large boulder.

The town consisted of one giant cluster of small buildings, most of which were houses. A handful of slightly larger structures were in the center of it all and were likely a business or two, and a tavern.

As the pair studied the layout, they watched as dozens of windows began to glow with light from candles, and the scent of wood smoke filled the still air.

It also wasn't long before laughter began to drift to their ears. The workday was done and now people were kicking back at the tavern with food and quite likely a beer.

Almost from the moment they arrived at the village and took in all different variables before them, Jada committed to final action.

"If we...I, am going to do this," said Jada quickly, "it'll be easiest to wait and strike once Raqqa is on his way home or arrives there, hopefully somewhat drunk. I wouldn't be surprised if he's as rough as Raj made out."

She wished that she had a tactical scarf to hide her face, but at least she had the hood of her coat. Once she was inside the village, then perhaps she'd be able to find something.

Jada glanced up at the mostly dark sky. "I'll wait a little longer and then sneak in to do some recon and pinpoint his location. From there, it'll be a matter of finding a place to hide and wait, assuming he's at the bar or whatever it is."

"I'll hang back and watch out for you from a distance," said Blake. "If I need to run interference, I will. But I'd also be on the lookout for..."

Before he could finish his sentence, several dogs barked from somewhere in the village. It wasn't the bark of a generic canine, but the sort of "howly" sound of wolves talking to each other. It made sense, really, that people of the high mountains would have wolves or wolf-hybrids as guards and hunting companions.

And considering I'm here to kill one of their people, they're not going to be especially friendly to me, sighed Jada. One thing she'd learned quickly upon her initial arrival to Aurora was that animals here were exceptionally good at reading the intentions of humans.

Jada waited for another half hour before slipping from the shadows and making her way into the settlement on a well-used trail. In seconds, she reached the outlying structures and found the main "road," as it were. It was nearly a straight shot to the businesses less than one hundred meters ahead.

Most of the activity was either at the tavern ahead or in the squatty houses on either side of the road. Because winter had already arrived in the upper passes, the

residents who didn't have inclinations for loud evening socialization remained in the warm quiet of their homes. That worked to Jada's advantage in that there was a less risk of running into someone unexpectedly.

It also meant that the only primary concern she had to keep in mind were the wolves.

Jada stayed near the right side of the snow-covered road and was constantly aware of hiding places. This attentiveness paid off. Several times a wolf or two appeared from an alley and she had to quickly duck into the black shadows of a house or crates. It was during this first instance where she became aware of the bonus of that cold night: the total stillness reduced the risk of the wolves instantly catching her scent.

Also, while she was sneaking around behind a couple houses, another advantage of night dawned on her: the darkness would hide her footprints as she snuck through areas where people didn't normally walk.

I still can't believe that I'm doing this, thought Jada, creeping down a narrow alley towards the main road, *and I still can't believe that I'm going to do it*.

She stopped at the end of the lane and crouched to scan the area. *Don't over-think it...just...focus on what you need to do, and do it*.

Cautiously, Jada peered around the corner to the right. The tavern was no more than a hundred feet away now and it was definitely the after-work meeting place. Considerable noise, laughter mostly and a few raised voices, came from the well-lit structure.

Within the span of two minutes, she heard one rather gruff voice rise over the rest of the throng. She guessed that it was her target, Raqqa.

As the minutes ticked by, and her hands and feet began to grow cold, Jada prayed that she wouldn't have to wait too long. She wasn't concerned about herself. It was the fact that Blake was out here in the bitter cold, too. On a clear, quiet night like this, the temperature would continue to plummet.

Jada had been crouched in the dark alley for thirty minutes when a pair of wolves popped out from between two houses across the road and two houses to her right. They

studied their surroundings a moment before one of them looked at the lane where Jada was hiding.

It stared for a moment, took a few steps forward, stopped, lifted its head, and then stared some more. A long breath passed before it then lowered its head shoulder-height.

Someone exiting the tavern gave a loud, happy exclamation. The two wolves looked at the speaker and their body language instantly changed to submissive: ears back, body slightly hunched, tails lowered, but wagging.

A man came into Jada's view and he gave the two wolves a good pat on the shoulder before continuing down the road. At some quiet word or signal, the pair leaped after him as he walked down the road.

Jada drew in a long, silent breath and then carefully let it out.

A minute later, at least two more people left the tavern. The pair of drunken bar buddies, one slightly less inebriated than the other, staggered into Jada's line-of-sight. The one under the heavier influence had his arm draped across his drinking companion's shoulder.

They were having a loud but indistinct conversation, which became heated when they were almost directly in front of her. The man who'd required walking assistance slid his arm from his friend's shoulder and gave him a push.

In the glowing light from the tavern, Jada clearly identified her target. Apart from the fact that he matched Raj's physical description perfectly, the man was also much louder than the other, and not to mention bigger.

Raqqa's companion pushed him back. He retaliated instantly by throwing a feral right. His big fist smashed into the other man's head, the force and momentum sending him crashing into some stacked crates. He didn't get back up.

Raqqa had a good laugh at that. But as he was doing this, Jada watched as a cloaked figure stepped out of the alley behind Raqqa and shoved a short-bladed sword through the left side of his back.

The assassin disappeared back into the shadows just as a group exited the tavern. At first, they thought that Raqqa had too much to drink, which wasn't uncommon. When

they drew closer and saw the growing pool of blood around his body, their assumption was proved wrong.

Jada was already sprinting back towards the ice tunnel when shouts echoed over the settlement. Human and wolf voices answered. Seconds later, someone near Jada hollered. As she glanced over her shoulder, she saw someone pointing her direction. The moment she heard a single wolf sound the “hunt” cry, she knew that she was in trouble.

As she darted behind the last few houses, arrows began to fall around her. She could only guess that living in the mountains had honed not only their senses but also their hunting skills. It likely explained how they were able to see her sprinting in and out of the shadows, and also line up some exceptionally close shots.

Jada slid around a corner of a house and heard a light snarl close behind her. The sound of an arrow came out of the darkness from her left, before it was followed by a yelp of pain.

Thank you, Blake, she thought.

Jada pushed her legs faster as she neared the last house between her and the tunnel. The only cover after that would be two big snow-covered rocks.

When she broke cover, she ran half-turned so she could keep an eye out for incoming arrows. One she was able to duck, and the next struck the first boulder as she raced behind it.

Just before Jada passed the second rock, she saw a sizeable group of people running after her.

Naturally, she thought.

Jada was forty feet from the tunnel when she heard Blake shout. She instinctively dove to the ground. Two arrows were on approach at the same time. One of these Blake shot with an arrow of his own. The second landed in the snow a foot from Jada’s shoulder.

A third appeared but an arrow from opposite Blake’s position intercepted it. Gabriel appeared by Jada’s side a second later and together they sprinted into the tunnel.

“How did you...nevermind. Tell me later,” said Jada to her friend.

Blake slid in from another passage and fell in line beside them.

When they reached a small chamber, they paused to listen and heard the sound of close pursuit. They picked another random passage leading from the room and sprinted down it.

The following two minutes involved running through random passages, across various chambers, and into more tunnels. They'd just crossed yet another large room and entered a passage when Gabriel stopped, turned, and fired an arrow.

It blurred across the room and sank into the forehead of a wolf just as it appeared around the far corner.

As they ran and slid along the tunnel, Jada wondered how Gabriel could see well enough to shoot. She then realized that she could see well, too. This was followed by the awareness that moon and starlight were making many of the tunnels glow, which allowed the three to see rather well. Every now and again, a cluster of tunnels were pitch black as they ran away deep into the rocky heart of the mountains. Overall, though, there were still plenty of illuminated passageways to choose.

I'm glad it's a clear night, thought Jada, right before coming to an abrupt halt.

A wolf slid out of a tunnel ahead of them, and the three made a hasty escape down a passage to their right.

Barks began echoing all around them, followed by a shout or two from the human pursuers.

Another wolf cut off their path and forced them to make another detour. A second later, a third appeared almost directly behind them and Blake killed it with a swipe of his knife.

They entered a small chamber and had to stop when they heard voices coming from two other tunnels. The three were being hemmed in.

"This way!" hissed a voice to their left.

Turning, they saw two green points of eye shine at the entrance of a dark tunnel.

"Hurry!" whispered Raj, before his black form turned and moved down the passage.

With no other immediately viable options, the three ran after him. The tunnel was a short one and they could see that the end led into a spacious chamber glowing with light.

Raj didn't slow as he passed into it and darted to a tunnel at the far right side of the chamber. Above them crisscrossed many ice bridges. A pair of wolves ran along one.

One fell under an arrow from Jada. A breath later, the second took one to the chest when it was in mid-jump to the chamber floor.

Now Raj cut and weaved through a maze of passageways, some of which were extremely dark. All the while barks, howls, and shouts danced through the tunnels, making it difficult to be certain of just how close the pursuers were.

After a minute of weaving, Raj led them to another large, but dimly lit chamber. He sprinted across its span and then leaped to a path that began fifteen feet up on the wall.

Blake ran ahead of the three, then slid to a knee and interlaced his fingers when he reached the base of the wall. He gave Gabriel a "boost" when he reached the wall and jumped, and the elf sprang lightly on top of the wall. Because of her light weight, he nearly launched Jada up and over Gabriel's head.

The pair quickly slid onto their stomachs and hung over the edge of the path as Blake ran and jumped. He probably could've made it on his own because he was so tall, but Gabriel and Jada grabbed hold of the back of his coat and pulled him up anyway.

They ducked into a black tunnel when the first wolf entered the chamber. As they carefully made their way down the passage, the noise of pursuit quickly died away. Soon, the only sound was the faint treading of their boots.

The three followed Raj for what seemed like an eternity even though they only made two more turns. Following the second one, the tunnel began to climb steeply and there were moments when they had to keep one another from slipping backwards.

About halfway up the ascent, Jada noticed just how hard she was breathing, as were the others. They had the elevation to thank for it.

And I thought I had decent cardio, she thought.

The climb came to an end a short time later. The tunnel straightened and led them out onto the top of a mountain ridge bathed in moonlight. The side of the ridge was steep but navigable. Once they were below the line of snow and ice, the going would be even easier.

“I wouldn’t slow until I was a good distance from here, just in case,” said Raj, sitting on a rock shelf above them.

“Uh, thanks...for your help,” replied Jada.

She and the panther shared a long look. Had he thought that she’d actually been the one to kill Raqqa? Or did he know that it hadn’t been her and he’d decided to help them all anyway?

Either way, Jada didn’t think it prudent to ask.

“I look forward to doing business with you again, traveler,” said Raj, who stood and disappeared into a crevice.

Jada and Blake swapped a glance, before looking at Gabriel, who had only half an idea about what had just happened.

Chapter 7

Old Memories & New Resolve

The half-moon and star-packed sky lit well their way as they skittered down the mountain. Moving to lower elevations and staying in motion warmed them up after being chilled in the ice tunnels.

Because danger was still in the minds of them all, even Gabriel’s, they maintained a decent pace and didn’t speak. Blake and Jada could trust their instincts well enough. But if Gabriel was on-edge, then they’d unquestionably trust his senses and follow his lead.

Of course, due to the events of the past twenty-four hours, and in addition to Blake’s words, Jada was feeling less than confident in her abilities, period.

It's like I've devolved back to being an untrained newbie on Aurora, she thought as she jogged along. No...I know that I have skills. It's just that they've been...muted, is all. Or that's how it seems.

Yet, stronger than Jada's faltering confidence was a new concern for her friends. If she could no longer pull her weight or even sense danger, then she was putting them at greater risk.

They should just leave me now, she mused, as the ridge flattened slightly before dropping steeply into the trees. They should go before anything terrible happens and they're killed trying to help me.

Jada had never played damsel in distress and detested the very idea. That hadn't lessened in the slightest since her time in Aurora. It had actually strengthened and understandably so. Her appointed tasks had included helping unite divided clans of warriors, turning back the black shadow of a dark and evil king, and leading magnificent beings of fire into battle. She'd become accustomed and completely comfortable in working alone and in dangerous territory. She'd had unwavering confidence in these situations and settings because she knew and believed that He'd graced her with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle anything.

Now, however, she was less certain about everything. To an extent, her gifts and talents had indeed been veiled and a certain level of protection was withdrawn –and that's what caused her to worry for her friends.

Jada still abhorred the thought of having the blood of her friends on her hands. *And anyway, Blake said just before we left Sirion that there were some things I'd have to face alone.*

She'd already decided not to voice any of her concerns or thoughts because she knew how the conversation would go. She'd suggest that Blake and Gabriel go on to their own business and leave her to continue northward. Blake would probably then say something about now not being the right time to leave. Gabriel would likely agree.

Jada knew that she couldn't get away with trying to give them the slip. Both of them were excellent trackers and their horses would just follow Zohmar's scent...if they ever found their horses again.

All of these things kept her preoccupied as they carefully trekked down the steep descent and neared the forest.

Blake and Gabriel, meanwhile, could easily sense the troubled thoughts of Jada and the burden that was on her. Because they knew her, they could guess what she was wrestling with in that brain of hers. Never was she worried about her own wellbeing; it was for her friends.

That fact wasn't what was interesting to either of them. It was the fact that they could so easily read Jada. Normally, it was much more difficult to tell because she had an unsurpassed ability to internalize and then put on a front that said nothing was bothering her. If anyone had wanted to guess what was on her mind in previous days, they could make a hundred guesses and still be dead wrong.

However, it seemed her ability to hide her thoughts and concerns had been removed, like many other things.

Neither of them thought lesser of Jada. They felt sorry for her because they sensed how much she was fretting about it all.

Minutes later, they passed into the trees and instantly breathed a little easier. They now had concealment and they'd made it there without being chased.

After another mile, the terrain leveled out somewhat and the land became gentler. When they reached a clear, swift stream, they finally stopped. They all took a quick drink, during which time Jada prayed, *"please don't let any of us get beaver fever."*

Following that, they walked at an easier pace. Jada was now able to finally ask Gabriel where he'd been during the "great division" and how he'd found her and Blake in the mountains.

It short, Gabriel had had to run back southwards for a distance, before hilltop-running his way to the mountains. Once there, he'd actually found a narrow path that led high up the pass. Dusk was falling when the trail ended abruptly against a sheer cliff. At

the back corner, though, was a drop into an ice tunnel. It put him near the village, and he was able to use his ears to follow the sounds of the settlement.

“And now here we are,” said Gabriel with a smile in his voice. “Although, I myself am curious about the panther and what you two were doing in the village in the first place.”

Blake gave a brief account of their run-in with Raj and his proposition. When it reached the part where they arrived at the village, Jada took over.

“I wouldn’t doubt that the assassin appeared to ultimately save you from having to kill Raqqa yourself,” said Gabriel, after Jada had finished.

“Exactly,” agreed Blake. “You’d legitimately made up your mind and were sincerely committed to what you had to do.”

“That thought crossed my mind,” answered Jada, who knew full well that He’d intervened yet again, just as He had during the mad run through the collapsing hills.

Gabriel was also keenly interested to hear about Jada’s encounter with Halden and Ambrose. But he knew that in her present mindset and mood she’d dodge the issue.

He glanced at Blake, whom he could see well enough in the pale moonlight passing through the treetops.

I want to ask her, thought the elf to his human companion, but I know she won’t tell me, or perhaps anyone else, about what Halden and Ambrose said. Or...she won’t reveal everything.

Blake gave a subtle nod. *You’re right. She was extremely vague on the details when I’d asked. I’ll tell you what she told me later but...I will tell you now that when I first found her in the mountains, she looked like death. She was remembering something terrible and I’m certain it was about her encounter with Halden and Ambrose.*

The three walked on in silence for some time, listening to the faint sound of the night air moving through the leaves.

At long length, Gabriel stopped atop a gentle rise. He listened a moment while peering into the shadows of the woods. Then he whistled softly.

A snort answered, followed by the sound of hooves treading lightly over the ground. Elroch, Gabriel's horse, Dan, and Zohmar all appeared. They were filthy, covered with dust and crusty sweat. But they were well and appeared ready to gallop until dawn.

They'd be disappointed. The people settled for a drink and quick snack from their packs and then settled for a few hours of sleep.

†

Jada took the final watch before dawn and stood in a thicket atop a knoll behind where the others were sleeping. The knoll faced east and every time after studying the surrounding forest, her gaze returned to the horizon.

She asked not for understanding or insight about what was happening to her, but peace and comfort. She knew now what was going on and why, thanks to the insight of the sorcerers and Blake.

No, she just wanted peace and some sense of security, something solid. The old confidence was gone, along with the fire. The old strength and power had been taken back.

A mere mortal, she thought, recalling the words of Ambrose.

Jada thought of the sweet and still vivid memory of when she'd been fatally wounded and He'd called her spirit to Him. She was in His overwhelming and powerful presence—and she saw herself as she was meant to be. She'd seen the spiritual side and was then sent back to fulfill tasks appointed according to His will.

But now, those spiritual gifts and all things related therein were also muted. In light of that, her mere flesh-and-blood self was much more predominant –and all the weaknesses and dull senses that came with it.

The spirit had been quieted and the flesh amplified.

Jada lowered her head. She'd become accustomed to that power and fire, not so that she could build herself up, but because it meant that He was there with her. She'd become used to the old purpose of traveling throughout the realm, thwarting enemy plans, rallying troops, falling enemy strongholds, and galloping into battle with her friends.

How just a few months had changed everything. Jada wished with all her heart that things could be the way they used to be.

She was just now understanding what this northward journey would mean. She hadn't thought it would necessarily be easy, but the things she'd already faced weren't what she'd expected. She'd anticipated, perhaps, an epic battle or two with terrible beasts during which she and her friends would lay complete ruin to them to seize victory.

Instead, there were struggles.

What instinct that Jada still had told her that's what she'd be facing the entire way, apart from the words of Blake.

An ugly uphill battle all the way, she thought. Plainly, my purpose has changed with the season. Before it was charging into battle, now...to face tests and trials.

Jada took a deep breath and closed her eyes. *God give me strength.*

Zohmar, who'd been standing behind her with his head over her shoulder, whickered gently. None of his powers of perception, discernment, and understanding had been diminished. He knew what was befalling his dear, fellow warrior.

He didn't just know it. He saw it. As Balo has seen what Jada would become when he first saw her, as Zohmar did later, so he now saw her as she was presently.

Just before the Battle of the South, she'd been a being of shining light and with a spirit that burned with white and red fire. But now a cloak had been placed around her and the flames were hidden. The light and power hadn't been taken but placed deep within her, to await the time when they'd be unveiled and rekindled.

Blake and Gabriel didn't think any less of Jada due to these changes, and neither did Zohmar. In fact, it stirred his fierce protectiveness of her. It redoubled his determination to watch out for her and trample any suspicious character that came remotely close.

You don't need to worry, he thought to her as he touched his nose to her face, I'll look out for you, for that's my purpose for the time being: to protect the daughter of kings while she journeys to the North.

Jada looked at Zohmar and he again whickered quietly. She gave a sort of sad smile. She couldn't even speak to him with her thoughts like she had just months earlier. That ability too was gone.

But Zohmar could understand still and he was certain that those abilities would one day be restored. The silence between them would not last forever.

He snorted, smooshed his nose against her cheek, and began licking her face the way a dog might.

Jada slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle her burst of laughter. She then pushed his nose away and rubbed his forehead.

"Right," she said quietly, "enough moping. There's a sunrise to watch."

The eastern sky had been lightening the past ten minutes and now the foggy clouds hugging the horizon began to glow. As the minutes passed, sky and fog burned brighter until the sun peeked its head up and threw its light over the land.

It brought to Jada another memory from when she was with Him. He'd extended a hand towards the horizon and commanded the sun to rise. "*Come now and rise,*" He'd thundered, "*and follow your path across the sky.*"

She smiled at the memory before straightening up and marching down the knoll towards her sleeping companions. She found some cranberries to throw at Blake as she walked by his sleeping form.

"Rise and shine, cupcake," she said, "it's going to be a warm day and I want to get an early start."

Zohmar, following behind her, looked at Blake, and nodded his head and swished his tail.

Blake just blinked at woman and horse before looking over at Gabriel, who was trying not to chuckle. Dan, standing nearby, whinnied with laughter but looked away when his human glanced his direction.

"Horses," muttered Blake as he pushed himself to his feet.

The horses received a quick scrubbing with the brushes from their riders' meager packs. After that, they were tacked quickly. They could already tell that Jada's words

about it being a warm day were true. Even though it was early morning and they were in the forest, the air seemed stagnant.

In no time, the riders swung up and headed northeast towards the rugged lower hills and ridges of the mountains.

Chapter 8

Pursuit to the River

By lunch, the three had reached the end of the heavier forested terrain. Pausing in the shadow at the edge of the dense treeline, they gazed northeast.

To their immediate left, the mountains continued straight north for a fair distance. Although they'd lessened in height, they remained sheer and rugged. The smoother gray stone had been left in the farther heights and was now replaced with coarse brown rock. They did not encourage anyone or anything to attempt to climb their faces.

Before them, the steeper rises softened to large, but gentle and lazy rolling hillocks. Random patches of trees stood here and there as all faded into a distant haze. A pale blue and cloudless late summer sky stretched over their heads and didn't boast a single cloud.

After studying the landscape for a minute, Jada suddenly realized what was odd: it was completely still and quiet. As far as she could see, there was no movement from a single living thing, nor did she hear any sound. No breeze disturbed the short grass or trees, and no birds sang.

Jada turned her gaze to the treetops. They were actually moving in an air current, but they did so soundlessly.

Odd, she thought, before finally looking at Gabriel. "You see anything?"

The elf's sharp eyes gazed far north and east. He was silent a moment longer before saying, "There's no movement at all. The land is completely silent, but...it's not quiet as in peaceful. It's the kind of quiet that comes when a menacing threat is nearby and the land is silent out of fear."

Jada looked again to the hazy sky and then northward. While she had a vague sense of danger, it wasn't strong to her. Granted, when she gazed across the land, it gave her an eerie feeling, but it didn't seem particularly ominous.

When she glanced at Blake, it was easy to read the concern in his eyes and expression.

Even the horses were anxious, though not in a restless sort of way. Like the land before them, they were silent. But their muscles were tight, their ears constantly twitching, and there was anxiety in their eyes.

Jada sighed inwardly in silent frustration. She wished that the mental haze would lift, and she could think and perceive clearly again.

Glancing at the others, she saw that Blake was already looking at her. Gabriel still had his gaze directed northward and didn't seem in any hurry to make a decision about when and where to go.

Jada took a quiet breath. Just like in the ice caves and with Raqqa, the decision about what to do was up to her. This was her journey, and as such, all of the decisions had to be made by the journey taker.

That didn't mean she couldn't delegate, though.

She loosened up on the reins a little and gently squeezed Zohmar's sides with her calves. *I trust you to find the safest route*, she thought, even though she was unsure if he could hear her or not.

Even if he couldn't hear her, Zohmar seemed to understand. He picked up a brisk trot out of the trees and into the open. It quickly became apparent that he was choosing the path Jada would have herself, which was a relief to her. It was encouraging to know that she hadn't lost her gut instincts.

Zohmar didn't take them directly through the random clusters of trees when they neared them. Because shade was sparse, there was a good possibility that something unknown and lethal dwelled there. But he didn't wander too far from the stands, either, in the event someone spotted something on the open hills and they needed quick cover.

After easing into the first two miles, Zohmar picked up the pace to a steady canter. Neither he nor the other horses liked this land that they were passing through and their riders clearly noticed. Their gaits were stiff, bodies tense in apprehension of sudden danger springing at them.

And with each passing mile, as they traveled deeper into this silently foreboding land, they all had the sense that danger was drawing nearer. Yet, it wasn't a threat from the hill country only.

There's another menace at a distance, thought Gabriel to Blake, although it's farther, it's a more serious threat.

I agree, replied Blake. Halden and Ambrose, if I had to make a reasonable guess, or some rogue force in a neighboring territory.

Gabriel scanned the sky and then the sheer cliff walls that were now a distance to their left. He saw nothing but was still positive that they were being watched.

†

Man and elf were both correct. They were being watched and it was by Halden and Ambrose. The trio was being tracked by various creatures under a spell of the sorcerers. Sometimes they reported back directly to the pair. In other instances, the fallen counselors used their dark power to see through the eyes of their scouts and controlled their minds and wills.

Now Halden and Ambrose stood in a narrow and deeply shadowed passage that cut through the cliffs. Overlooking the gentle, sparse hill country, their keen eyes could just see the three riding northeast.

Although the sorcerers held great power, as they'd already displayed, the hill country was too open for an ambush. Neither did they have horses or any other beast that could overtake the three equines, especially Zohmar.

That didn't mean they had no effective options. They were, after all, sorcerers. They were also familiar with this country and knew full well the dangers that they had at their disposal.

Sharing only a glance, Ambrose and Halden knew they were thinking the same thing.

Ambrose stepped to the edge of the passage. Closing his eyes, he bent his dark will upon the land and nature that was before him. Sporadic puffs of warm wind whipped about him before turning into a gentle, but steady whirlwind. On this current, he uttered quiet words of violence and madness. When he'd finished, the wind left him immediately and raced eastward.

While Ambrose was doing this, Halden climbed to a higher, more exposed shelf. Turning his eyes skyward, he searched the hazy heavens. Not a minute later, several crows appeared. One glided down to him while the others perched on higher rocks.

Speaking in an unknown tongue, Halden relayed his wishes to the black bird that sat in front of him. The bird tilted its head as it listened and then cawed once when the tall sorcerer was finished. It then hastily took flight and called to his companions.

With great speed, the group took to the air and disappeared from sight.

†

The afternoon was growing late and rather warm. What was strange, though, was that although the air was hot, they didn't sweat much. The atmosphere wasn't muggy; it was just stuffy.

The minds of all three riders turned to where they might bed down at night...if they even wanted to stop. It was probably best if they simply kept moving. They had yet to see any wildlife whatsoever here, but it was reasonable to assume that it just meant animals here were nocturnal.

Their attention was recalled as they stopped atop a rise close to a large cluster of trees. A wind rose from the west and quickly built until it was a mighty gale. It tore through the sparsely growing prairie grass and ripped through of the junipers.

The horses shook their heads and shifted anxiously.

The riders quickly searched their surroundings: the sky, hills, and stand of trees.

As they did, the great wind went farther, spreading over the hill country. On it were the whispers of the sorcerer. It carried his orders, his will, his very thought to the creatures he sought.

When the wind and its utterances reached their ears, they stirred to life with quickly rising anger, a sudden unquenchable thirst for blood and violence, and the uncontrollable desire to put to death three specific beings.

The gale also brought with it the clear scent of the horses and their riders, the targets of the wild beasts.

Snapping and snarling at each other, the pack of creatures jumped to their paws and raced towards their prey.

The wild beasts weren't the only ones who'd heard Ambrose's whispers. Zohmar heard and understood them, too. Without warning, he halted, looked west with ears perked forward, and listened. The dark words were translated for him by his Maker and he understood who was sending this dark wind and why.

With surprising abruptness, Zohmar snorted and half-reared. Swinging around, he informed the other two horses of what rode on this strange wind.

Dan's ears went back as he tucked his chin to his chest and backed a few steps. Swishing his tail, he shook his head and clacked his teeth.

Gabriel's sleek gray, Elroch, meaning "the evening star", whickered to his rider.

Blake and Gabriel clearly understood the gist of what their horses were telling them. As muted as Jada's gifts may have been, she knew that something rather unfortunate was advancing or about to happen.

"Perhaps now is the time to risk some cover," said Jada, gaze north towards the river in the far distance. Something was rising off the water, smoke or fog she didn't know. But it was plain that the mood of this mysterious land was quickly changing.

Blake and Gabriel offered no objection and neither did the horses. They turned towards the broad stand of junipers and jogged towards them.

The wind died abruptly as the riders passed into the weak shadow of the trees...and the horses balked.

Zohmar launched himself sideways, all four hooves off the ground and legs tucked. His hindquarters just missed the trunk of a large juniper. On his way back down, he kicked with a hind leg and socked what looked like a particularly large jackal in the head.

Zohmar, Dan, and Elroch took flight northwest out of the trees. The ambushers followed.

“Jackal” was an appropriate enough name because they looked like jackals, only larger. But they didn’t have the black “saddle” on their backs. Instead, their entire coats matched that of this country: varying shades of gold and brown, with some greys. Their otherwise dark eyes glinted green or gold and all bore a particularly wild and murderous expression in those gazes.

More dogs, thought Jada, this land couldn’t produce a fiend that’s more imaginative?

And the hunters kept after the horses tirelessly. Even as the hills disappeared and smoothed out several miles later, the jackals hadn’t lost any ground.

Yet it occurred to Jada, as she loosened the sword attached to her saddle, and the one sheathed across her back under the quiver, that the jackals also hadn’t made an effort to close the distance.

That meant...

Zohmar tapped the brakes and then lunged to the right as a jackal appeared out of the grass in front of them. Several more made a jump for Dan and Elroch, who dodged out of the way.

Jackals seemed to form out of the ground itself, and Jada was wondering at this as Zohmar danced out of the way of another...and then stumbled badly. The earth under his hooves had suddenly collapsed almost to his knees.

Jada swiped a jackal on the right across the mouth with her short sword as Zohmar snorted and stumbled out of the hole. The ground crumbled under him for a short distance before he found firmer ground and leaped into a canter.

Shooting a quick look around for the others, she spotted Gabriel just as the ground collapsed beneath his horse’s hooves. Ears pinned, Elroch snorted and shook his head as he clamored out of the hole.

Movement in her peripheral redrew Jada's attention. Zohmar maneuvered expertly, sliding just to the side as the jackal jumped and his rider jabbed with her blade. It rammed into its open jaws, through the roof of its mouth, and out the top of the creature's skull.

Just as expertly, Jada kept her seat as Zohmar gathered himself on his hind legs, sprang up and onto another jackal, and then cow-kicked a third. He wheeled around and trampled over the top of it as he carefully made his way towards Elroch.

It was then Jada saw a pair of jackals poke their heads out of the hole that the gray horse has fallen into. It was also the time when Zohmar broke through the ground again and nearly received a nose-full of grass and dirt.

Our horses are going to break their legs, thought Jada with irritation as Zohmar worked his way out of the hole. He struggled for fifteen feet before his hooves finally found good ground again.

Aware of several more approaching jackals, Jada sheathed her sword and took up her bow. As Zohmar continued to stumble about and Jada further considered this unfavorable ground and the jackals she'd seen in the hole, her eyes found Blake and Dan.

Having seen how dangerous the ground was, horse and rider were attempting to move about as little as possible. Their tactic was to stay in one relatively small piece of real estate. It worked during the opening minutes of the ambush, though Dan and Blake knew they wouldn't be able to keep to this technique forever.

They were proven correct as Jada's gaze found them. When she watched what happened next, her heart wedged itself into her throat.

Dan kicked a jackal behind him while Blake struck down one to the left. Dan then jumped sideways to avoid a jaw of razor-sharp teeth. When his hooves hit the ground, it gave slightly, sinking around him a few inches. Both he and his rider saw the jackal about to make a leap for them, and Dan gathered himself on his hind legs to prepare to rear...

The ground buckled right as the jackal jumped. As Dan half sank, half-fell, the jackal clipped Blake, sending him from the saddle. Or it would have, had Blake not been partially pinned.

The jackal was right there but there wasn't cause for further worry. Blake's knife sank into its chest.

It didn't drop, as hoped.

But Dan, the brave tawny buckskin, was legitimately angry. Ears pinned, he snorted sharply and shifted his weight as he whipped his head around. He grabbed a mouthful of fur, latching onto the jackal's neck, and threw the creature right onto one of its companions, which had been quickly approaching.

He was aware of yet another jackal stalking to the left, and he knew throwing the one would leave his neck and throat open. But the safety of his rider trumped all.

No need to worry, though. An arrow plunged into the skull of the approaching jackal and the animal crumpled.

Without warning, Dan squealed in sudden surprise and thrashed about to get himself up. Blake resituated himself in the saddle on the way up before his horse bolted forward and kicked out a few times. It wouldn't be until a few minutes later that Blake would understand his horse's sudden excitement.

Glancing left, Blake saw that Jada and Zohmar were only thirty feet away. The pair was moving haphazardly towards them, trying to deal with the growing number of jackals while being cautious of footing.

Farther ahead to the right were Gabriel and Elroch. Even the agile elvish horse was still having difficulty with honeycombed earth breaking under his fine hooves.

Jumping forward, Dan avoided a leaping jackal and then skittered to the side to miss the snapping jaws of another. A line of jackals seemed to pop out of the ground in front of them and Dan hit the brakes.

Blake was still sizing up the situation when a jackal on the right charged towards them and leapt. In a strange turn of events, another jackal tackled his jumping companion in mid-air and they tumbled across the ground right in front of Dan.

Snorting with irritation, Dan danced sideways and cut through the line of jackals momentarily distracted by what had just happened. One on the far left took notice of horse and rider and took off after them, before being taken down by another jackal.

However, as Blake and Dan made their little escape, Blake glanced back. More and more of the jackals were fighting, but it wasn't against other jackals. What they were focused on, and what had tackled the two, weren't jackals at all. They were some kind of wild cat.

Roughly the same size as the jackals, their bodies were sleek. Coats also came in the same shade as their canine counterparts, except they had subtle stripping.

An angry whinny grabbed Blake's attention and he looked over to see Elroch with a wild cat at his heels. That was before Gabriel loosed an arrow at close range and killed the pursuer.

In the meantime, Jada was still wondering where all these animals were coming from. The golden prairie grass barely reached the horses' knees, but it was sparse and wasn't sufficient for concealing moderately sized creatures.

The answer came seconds later. She and Zohmar were on course to meet with Blake and Dan when Zohmar launched himself into the air and forward. He kicked out with his hind legs, instantly killing the cat that was lunging at them. When he landed, he came down somewhat awkwardly, front legs on a subtle rise before his hooves broke ground.

Something in Jada's peripheral made her look once, and then twice. Finally, she understood why the ground was so inconsistent. From the angle she was at, she saw that the earth looked like a planted field, with long rows of earth subtly raised. Between the rows was lower ground.

As Zohmar turned and carefully tested out this low ground, Jada's suspicion that the risen rows were actually more like burrows was confirmed. In passing, she watched the side of a mound move. A second later, a jackal pushed his head out of the burrow and hastily clawed its way out and gave chase.

In response to Jada's command, Zohmar jumped two mounds to the right, so that they were only one row over from Blake and Dan. The pair had also just made the same discovery as Jada and Zohmar.

As the four turned north, they searched for Gabriel and Elroch. They were already cantering northward. It was plain their best option was to head towards the river.

Without having to be told, all three horses picked up the pace and headed in that direction. It was a chaotic scene all around them. They passed by jackals and wild cats fighting with one another. Others gave chase, while still more broke out of the burrows and swatted or snapped at the horses' legs.

They hadn't gone far when the riders had the thought that this still might be some kind of trap. What if they were being driven to the river?

A great pop, followed by a low boom in the earth, echoed over the area.

Blake glanced back. Starting from where the first horse broke through the ground, the earth opened in great cracks and raced outwards and towards the riders. Random sections of the burrows collapsed and in other areas, large gaps opened wide. These wider gaps sent out trailers speeding towards the riders.

The horses redoubled their speed and sprinted towards the river, now growing larger as they closed the distance to it.

They had to accept that being pushed to the river was, in fact, a trap, one they could do nothing about now. Turning back to fight their way through jackals and wild cats was one thing, but what was chasing them now was far more dangerous and impossible to defeat.

A mile from the river, some of the cracks reached the riders. The earth popped as it broke and threw dirt clods up at them. The smaller trailers were right at the heels of the horses and only after they lengthened their strides even more did they pull away from this deadly threat.

The river, deep and blue, opened up before them. It was great indeed, at least one hundred meters across.

Neither jackals and wild cats nor the earth seemed interested in letting the riders stop at the abrupt grassy banks. These forces kept after the trio, who galloped on towards the water.

They were fifty meters from it when the three watched one of the eeriest spectacles they'd ever seen unfold before them. A massive flock of crows dropped in from the sky and dove straight into the river. The instant they hit the water, clouds of black, moving like watercolors, spread just beneath the surface.

There was no time to consider what evil thing was about to transpire or appear. Creatures and nature driven by evil will were snapping at their heels and would not relent.

With no better option, the riders left their horses unchecked and they leapt into the dark blue water.

Chapter 9

An Ancient Beast Disturbed

The water was cold and if not for their present situation, it might've been considered as "refreshing." To their relief, the current wasn't overpowering, and the riders slid from the saddles and swam beside their horses.

Casting a glance over her shoulder, Jada checked to see what had become of the pursuing cracks. For an instant, she imagined that when they reached the river's edge, they became bottomless, black holes. Then the pitless whirlpool would suck the water with the horses and their riders into it. Death by drowning in a demonic, watery black hole was not how Jada thought that she'd go out, either.

Sheesh, Jada, she thought to herself when she saw that the cracks stopped at the water's edge, when did you become so imaginative?

But then her mind turned to the very real spectacle she'd witnessed with the crows moments before she and her companions had bounded into the river. There was still a genuine threat or some kind of menace that was lurking nearby or already en route to them.

As she swam with Zohmar, she looked down into the water. Below was only murky blackness. Immediately, she felt her entire body tense as she imagined some unseen beast

snatching her by the ankle with a tentacle before dragging her down to the crushing deep. Back in Earth's dimension, she'd always hated swimming in a lake where she couldn't see the bottom. It wasn't a full-blown phobia, but it wasn't something she enjoyed either.

Forcing herself to focus, Jada returned her gaze to the opposite bank, still a good distance ahead of them. She shot a look at Blake and Dan, to her right, and then Gabriel and Elroch, to Blake's right. None seemed injured.

Maybe we'll make it before whatever creature that's been summoned reaches us. This thought had just passed through Jada's mind when she felt a burst of cold water sweep past her. Whatever it was had moved against the current.

Thinking perhaps that her imagination really was getting the better of her, Jada looked at Zohmar. His eyes had widened slightly, and he'd lifted his head higher out of the water as his ears twitched.

When another torrent of cold water moved around them, Zohmar flicked his ears back and whinnied to his equine companions.

Dan, with ears pinned, gave an angry neigh in response.

Elroch squealed with rage, tossed his head, and lurched forward with such force that the entire upper half of his body came out of the water.

Now having an exceptionally strong sense that something quite bad was about to happen, Jada reached over to the other side of the saddle and drew her elven blade from its sheath.

It came then.

Appearing with the sound of a great thundering waterfall and rising high over them was a river dragon. Its scales were midnight blue in color with a metallic sheen and those on its underside were a lighter shade. It was of similar appearance to the dragons in the central mountains, except this one's horns were curved backwards more severely, and it had spikes with webbing between them that jutted from just behind his jawline.

Opening its mouth, the water dragon sounded a deafening call heard for many miles and one which disturbed the river's surface. Jada noticed quite suddenly that the

river itself was becoming tumultuous. Waves began to rise and toss themselves this way and that, as if they were caught in a stormy lake instead of a river.

The sky also clouded over, and a chill fell over this mysterious land. Shaking his head, the dragon raised his head and bellowed to the darkening heavens.

A second later, it began to rain.

It was in that moment, with a riotous river throwing itself at the horses and riders, that Jada realized it was the dragon commanding these waters, as well as the skies above it.

Gazing up at him in the fading light, she took in his mostly silhouetted giant figure. From this angle, the horns on his head looked to be like a crown or helm.

He's the lord of the river, she thought.

Then the water dragon turned his burnt orange eyes down upon her. Their stark contrast was inhuman and eerie against his black outline, and Jada felt cold fear shock through her.

She was brought out of her fear by a wave crashing on top of her head and then the feeling of something pulling on the shoulder of her shirt. Head reappearing above the surface, Jada saw that it was Zohmar who had latched onto her shirt and was pulling her faster towards the far bank.

“Ohie!” she shouted, tossing water and strands of hair out of her face. Sheathing the sword, she climbed back into the saddle and took up her bow. Chancing a quick glance around as she drew an arrow, she tried and failed to find her two companions.

Jada wasn't worried about them, though. It would take more than a little rain and an angry water dragon to stop them.

She lined up a shot on the dragon's face, a good one hundred feet above her, and saw that his attention had been drawn to something closer to him. Who or whatever it was made the creature wrinkle its nose and bare its greenish, slime-stained teeth.

Jada's line of sight was clear for just a breath and she saw that Elroch and Gabriel were the nearest to the dragon, close to his hindquarters. Knowing Gabriel, he'd already landed half a dozen arrows into the beast's flank.

I need to stand in the saddle, thought Jada to her mount, can you hold me?

She heard no response, but a sharp nod and insulted snort from Zohmar supplied her the answer.

Standing in the saddle, she lined up her shot again and released an arrow. It struck the dragon in the side of its face and recalled his attention to Jada.

“Hey, you!” she shouted at the lord of the river. “Slime face!”

He bared his teeth at her.

“Come on!” she yelled.

To Zohmar, it was as if the ancient Jada, the warrior, had momentarily resurfaced. He sensed her total lack of fear, and the need to fight, to slay the evil beast that had had the audacity to cross her path. He saw her spirit then, for only a breath, but he saw it clear as day.

It didn't burn white, as when she had been Jada the prophetess. Neither was it burning with fierce fire. But it was a spark, a flicker of a flame, and a red hue. It was the start of that great fire of Jada the wolfhound, the hunter of the most fell creatures, and the terrible, ruthless, and cold queen of war on the battlefield.

And then the vision was gone.

Before Zohmar could do anything, Jada secured the bow and threw herself forward, diving into the water and swimming straight for the dragon.

Zohmar squealed in both alarm and anger. He tried to swim after her, but the riotous water and shifting currents prevented him from making up any ground. It seemed as if the water, under the will of the water dragon, wished to prevent him from helping his rider.

Grunting in irritation, he continued forward, to position himself more or less in front of the beast.

Meanwhile, Dan and Blake's course were taking them straight toward the center of the dragon's side. Apparently, the beast could easily make its body float, because the head, neck, and upper half of its body were at or above the river's surface.

No matter. Neither Blake nor Dan was afraid of this creature, and Blake had in mind to cut the beast from nose to tail.

However, the dragon sensed the man's desire and intentions and caused the river to react accordingly. The waves became wilder around them, rising higher above them or breaking directly onto the pair. The water also began pulling itself upward from beside or beneath horse and rider. They found themselves thrown around by the river and Blake was nearly tossed from the saddle.

Dan, with ears flat against his head, sounded a low whinny of distaste after an especially large wave had broken directly onto his head.

Tossing water and locks of dark brown hair out of his face, Blake grunted his agreement. Like his horse, he'd quickly grown tired of being swamped and snorting water out of his nose.

He resituated himself in the saddle, extended his right arm, and spoke a word of command in the ancient tongue. There followed a quick flash of light and then a shockwave that shot outwards towards the dragon.

Immediately, waves ceased to crash on top of them and the upward torrents from below stopped. The river still tumbled and thundered about them, but no wave came within ten feet of them in any direction. The way before them had calmed.

Simultaneously, Gabriel and Elroch were dealing with their own problems. They were approaching near where Gabriel guessed was the hindquarters or tail of the dragon. He couldn't see them under the dark water, so he could only estimate.

And he and his horse were proven correct moments later.

The water dragon both saw and sensed the elf and his horse drawing close. Regardless of the wild water, the elven horse swam as if the river was a flat lake. So, the dragon used a new tactic.

Jada was swimming towards the water beast and Blake had just calmed the waters for his horse when the dragon whipped his tail. It came from directly below the elf and his horse and launched them dozens of feet into the air. They flew high over the dragon's back and into the river on the other side of it.

Elroch emerged snorting water out his nose and shaking his head. He then pinned his ears and directed a deep whinny of umbrage at the dragon.

I agree, replied Gabriel, treading water beside his mount. He alighted into the saddle and then the gray horse turned and swam upstream, making for the front of the dragon.

As for Jada, she had nearly reached the water dragon when it returned its attention to her. Her line of sight to her target had frequently been obscured, but she'd caught enough glimpses to know whether or not she was heading in the right direction.

The next time she saw any part of the beast, it was of scales gleaming from water. Then she craned her neck upwards in time to see those eerie orange eyes slide to her.

Oh, hi, she thought a breath before the beast reacted.

From the bottom of the river, it brought its left clawed hand. It breached the water's surface just enough to grab at Jada.

Jada was taken down into the river even as she drew one of the elven daggers at her thigh. She slashed the blade into the webbing between the clawed fingers and then instantly shoved her free hand into the gap made by the dagger.

The beast snarled in pain. He pulled his left hand up towards himself and out of the water.

Jada lost her grip when the dragon's hand reached the surface, but she didn't much care so long as she could gulp in a few breaths of air.

But the air didn't remain long in her lungs. As soon as the beast saw that Jada was dislodged and on the surface, he dropped his hand below the water and then brought it up quickly. He backhanded her, the sharp razor-like protrusions along the back of his hand catching her in the ribs before sending her flying through the air. She sailed over his back much like Elroch and Gabriel had done and hit the water on his other side.

Turning his head and neck to glance at her, he gave Jada a "good riddance" snarl. This motion caused his body to twist around somewhat, and the motion caused a great disturbance in the water around him. His neck and upper body dropped below the surface, creating a powerful downward vortex of water.

The moment that the dragon did this so happened to be the moment when Blake and Dan had just reached his side. They were pulled under the water in an instant. Horse and rider were more unamused than afraid, but the movement ended up working in their favor. They found themselves on the other side of the beast, and Dan collected himself and gave a mighty leap towards the river's surface.

Either they weren't as far under the water as initially thought or by some supernatural influence, Dan launched himself entirely out of the water and a good twenty feet away from the beast.

He also landed a mere thirty feet from Jada. Knowing Blake's thought, Dan sawm towards her. She seemed to be having some difficulty treading water or swimming. That was due to the fact she now had some bruised ribs to contend with and they were throbbing from being backhanded.

Blake reached over and grabbed hold of her when they were close enough. As he did, Dan felt the water move and whickered.

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the dragon already looking at them. The lord of the river met the defiant gaze of the man and then lunged at the three with his great jaws gaping wide.

Without warning, a mighty gale tore down the river, shredding mist from its surface. On this gust rode the most piercing, shrill squeal that the dragon had ever heard. He also felt the loyalty of the river change. Though its surface remained choppy, the sizeable waves ceased to be, and a roll of thunder grumbled in the dark grey sky looming close to his horn-crowned head.

Whipping his head around, the lord of the river beheld the issuer of the challenge. Actually, it was *issuers*, for there were three before him.

The river on either side and directly in front of them had fallen and rolled itself away so that they were standing on what appeared an outcropping of foaming water.

One challenger was Zohmar. Grey coat dark in the gloom, it made the icy crescent in his eyes gleam brighter. One of the greatest horses ever made to grace Aurora stood before the great beast of the river like he knew it. With his great head lifted, his

expression was one of a ruler looking with distaste at one of his subjects who continually made a blunder of things.

The sleek grey elven horse Elroch stood a dozen feet to Zohmar's left. Unlike his muscular equine brother, Elroch's lean frame glimmered brightly from an undying light that burned within him. His dark brown, mahogany-flecked eyes and entire demeanor regarded the dragon with the same wisdom, quiet confidence, and surety that his elf counterparts gazed with upon beasts and beings.

Gabriel sat straight atop Elroch and was locked onto the beast with a gaze of aversion and also a supremacy, a certainty that should a duel commence, he and his allies would have victory.

Confidence, fearlessness, and defiance emanated from them, and the beast bared his teeth in his hatred. He was also miffed over the fact that where he now stood, the water only reached his belly. As the outcropping had formed beneath the three, the river had been pushed to either side and stood darkly against either wall. A dark blue waterfall fell at the rear of the water outcropping upon which the challengers stood. This section of river was eighty feet deep and there the lord of the river stood not even chest deep in it.

It went without further saying that he felt particularly exposed and vulnerable, something he hadn't felt in many years of his long memory. He hated feeling these things, which deepened his contempt for the three even more.

Who do you think you are, that you dare challenge the lord of the river, growled a deep, hollow voice in the heads of elf, humans, and horses. *Would you really risk death for the life of one little worthless traveler?*

Dan and Blake stood on a moderately sized rock sandbar that sat even with the water dragon's back. Jada sat beside Dan. Her ribs were still burning, and she was just now starting to get her air back.

All three found themselves on the "sandbar" when the waters had begun to shift. While there was a forty-foot literal wall of water standing to their right, there was the narrowest opening in it, allowing them to see the actual riverbank.

She can sense neither danger nor trap now, continued the dragon, a twinkle of mockery glinting in his eyes. The once great prophet and mighty servant of the God of Eliadar is gone now. What once was is no more and all the blessings have been taken back.

The water roared on and thunder boomed in the expanse over the river.

Defenseless, sneered the dragon, lowering his head a little as he taunted the two horses and elf. Powerless. Helpless. Without the gifts and talents that made her special, and that which she does possess is average. She's mediocre at best...

He turned his head so that he could look at Jada with spiteful orange eyes. After gazing at her pitiable soaked form sitting near Dan's hooves he huffed in revulsion. *She needs her friends and even her horse to rescue her now when she once turned back legions of dark enemies to save her companions.*

With a low growl in his throat, he returned his attention to the three on the outcropping. *She is nothing, just a burden now, like one of the helpless, weak peasants that has to be escorted to the king. The most common of commoners...and the most helpless. Useless...*

His final words boomed in Jada's mind. It was as if he'd known the doubts that had been gnawing at her almost since the start of this trek. Every day, and countless times throughout the day, sometimes hour to hour or minute to minute, she wrestled to fight back such thoughts. They were relentless. Even when she did manage to push them back for a while, they were always present in the back of her mind like a nagging droning.

They made her very chest ache, although she'd done well thus far to hide her internal struggle and torment from Blake and Gabriel. Or so she had hoped.

The dragon's words beat down upon her as she sat there and nearly choked as the weight of his words and jabs reawakened the doubt. False or not, wrong or not, the words were not without effect. They bore now a steadily increasing weight that tried to crush her already bruised soul.

Dan's ears went back at the beast's ridiculous statements and he shook his head sharply. He knew the words were false because he saw Jada as she truly was, as Zohmar and Elroch saw her.

Neither gift nor talent or blessing had been taken from her. They were merely hidden for a time and for reasons only the Creator knew.

The great horse could also both sense and see the awakened doubt that wrapped like a shadowed blanket around her shoulders.

The tawny buckskin whickered to Jada, nudged her with his nose, and then snorted and gave one more sharp jerk of his head.

Blake, standing behind and just off Jada's right shoulder, stole a look at her. It was difficult to really see her face from where she was positioned, though he doubted he'd be able to read her expression. Even under great distress, she was stoic.

He didn't need to see her face, though, to observe the effect of the dragon's words upon her. It was all micro movements, but he caught them clear as day.

Repeatedly, Blake saw her straighten just a little, square her shoulders just a touch as if she was resolved to resist and push back the doubt. Seconds later, though, Jada's shoulders slowly rolled and dropped forward, and she hunched under the weight of the doubt and struggle.

His heart went out to her, the woman who was dearest and closest to his soul. He knew the beast was absolutely wrong. He'd been drawn to her long before she was Jada the warrior, hunter, or prophetess. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd known that she was special just by the way she was, by her character and personality. And deep within her soul and spirit had been a light and power that ran hotter and deeper than it did in most. It came from the One that lived in her and had known her from before she had even been formed.

Thus, it was impossible for such things to be taken away. Once such a pure and fiery Spirit resided in someone, it never left and could not be taken back.

Riding on the heels of this empathy was a familiar fierce defensive wrath towards the dragon of the river.

How dare we be the ones to challenge him, thought Blake as his expression hardened. *How dare **he** say such things about a favored servant? He ought to have his lying tongue cut out.*

Additional questions then slowly surfaced in his mind. How did this dragon know that Jada's power had been veiled? Did he see or sense it? Did he have such abilities or perceptions? Was it somehow a rumor spreading amongst creatures throughout the land?

Or...

As the last possibility formed, Blake was instantly certain that it was the true case. He wasn't sure how, but it was simply one of those traveler gut instincts.

Or did he learn this development from Halden and Ambrose?

In this sudden light, the pursuit across the plain, the crows diving into the river, and the consequential appearance of this present foe made an abundance of sense.

Halden and Ambrose, growled Blake in his mind. They should be hanged for their treason and their attempted murder.

Another, louder roll of thunder broke him from his angry musings.

We need to get ready to move, whatever happens, he thought to Dan. Are you able to carry us both, my friend?

Dan nodded his head in response.

Moving slowly and subtly the moment the dragon looked back at Gabriel and company, Blake stepped over to Jada and extended a hand down to help her up.

Understanding, Jada took it and grimaced at the aches in her body as Blake pulled her to her feet as carefully as possible.

"We do not recognize anything that you have spoken against our companion," replied Gabriel. His voice was somehow amplified and heard clearly by many creatures for miles around.

By the great power that was in it, indeed in his being, the voice of the flowing waters around and before them quieted. The stormy heavens overhead also came to silence. Any and all beings, whether good or evil creation, that heard his voice attended to it. The realm itself seemed to quiet and pay heed to his words and will.

"You have lies woven on your tongue and deceit interlaced in your speech," continued Gabriel, blue eyes brightening from the growing fire within him. "You speak as

one who makes false declarations solely to tear down or stir up for your own amusement. You take pleasure in the destruction and torment of others.”

The truth of Gabriel’s words burned Jada’s chest like fire, rekindling her spirit and beating back the doubt. For the briefest second, she had a vision of a dragon made of fire snapping and chasing away the shadowed wraith-like creature that had settled about herself.

Then her eyes took in Gabriel himself again. She’d always heard about the power of the elves and of the blessing of witnessing them as they were in their true form and glory.

Even over that distance, Jada could see him...sort of. With every word he spoke, the elf himself shone brighter, for light came both from within and around himself as if light from some unseen realm were about him. He was shining white and even Elroch shimmered with light like his entire being was made of it.

The water dragon’s expression narrowed as he leveled a glare upon the elf.

“Indeed,” said Gabriel sharply and with finality, “you speak as the sorcerers, the two fallen counselors who now wield the powers and forces of dark magic...you speak as Halden and Ambrose...the very ones who counseled you in what to say to tear down and destroy the soul that is still a threat to them...though they lie and say she is a worthless and weak creature now.”

The dragon’s dark blue tongue flicked the air like a snake, and he took a breath to retort.

Before he could though, Gabriel cut him off and his voice was filled with even greater power and now anger. “If the servant truly was as they claim, then they would not be ambushing and hunting her. So do not bother to say any more on this matter, for all you will do is weave more lies about our friend, with whom we have the greatest honor of traveling alongside.”

The dragon snarled as he leveled his head with the three. “If you continue with her, you will face darkness and torment like you have yet to meet. You will beg for death before the end and it will come even as you witness her own destruction.”

“No more lies!” shouted Gabriel in sudden wrath as he drew his elven sword and leveled it at the dragon.

Sharp pain, like a thousand stinging nettles, assaulted the water dragon’s mouth and snout. Expression contorting in pain, he scratched at his face, and even as he did, he still growled out in rage and hatred, “What would the king want with a useless little waif anyway!?”

Straightening at the neck, he threw his head towards the sky and unleashed a terrible roar. He then looked down at the three and, with saliva dripping from his jaws, he bellowed, “We’ll see just how special and favored the wretch is! If you are saved from my grasp, then perhaps your own words may be proven true!”

The river lord straightened to his full height and bent his will full upon the waters. Over all the years in this mighty stream, he’d always been its master. Even when he had been young, it yielded readily to his will. Every now and then, over the years someone would come to challenge his authority over these waters, or he’d sense a being somewhere along the banks testing his own power over the river.

All challengers and “trespassers” were defeated, killed or sent running for their lives. Ever since the events of the great betrayal in the North, he’d had dominion over this river, which he knew by heart from traveling up and down it for more than an age. He knew every bend and fall. He had his favorite resting and “vacation” spots.

And for always he had known the river’s mood and mind.

Therefore, it was mildly surprising to him when the waters had yielded to the purpose of the three challengers. He was surprised and increasingly irritated when its loyalty now seemed undecided...or, perhaps, even to be changing.

As the dragon straightened, he drew in a deep breath, as if gathering his power.

A deep rumbling and droning answered from within the river. The waters again became riotous and filled with violence.

But for the first time in his existence as ruler of these waters, the dragon felt the river resist him strongly. Some other powerful force was rivaling his.

Water and earth began to shake and the storm above writhed with billowing clouds. A great torrent of wind also arose, pulling upward towards the sky. Seconds passed and the quaking continued to worsen. A great noise arose to accompany the mighty shifting of the earth, a terrifying sound of increasing violence.

Warring forces were pressing and tearing at the river and surrounding plains. Both continued to tremble a minute longer until neither could withstand the effects of the opposing powers any longer.

The ground cracked along the riverbed and up both banks before racing out over the plains. On the southern side, the new cracks met with those which had chased the travelers. These new cracks collided with the old with loud pops and snarls. Huge pieces of rocks and earth were thrown into the air as the cracks continued on, and where they met with other ones, the ground fell away to create great gaps that fell down into the blackness of unknown depths.

While this was on-going, the wind continued to increase, howling, almost roaring in its rising anger and restlessness. It tore at the waters with an indescribable vengeance until it was pulling large swaths of mist upwards towards the clouds. It gave the appearance of hazy veils that separated the river from the rest of the outside world.

As for Dan, Blake, and Jada, the entire time that Gabriel and the dragon had been speaking, they'd been on the move, making for the gap in the water wall. However, the going was rather slow.

It wasn't the weight of carrying two humans that slowed Dan. It was the terribly shaking ground. Plus, the rocks were wet and completely covered with slime in some areas.

After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the gap in the water. When they passed through it, Jada craned her neck upwards. It was an eerie feeling, passing between two walls of dark water, feeling their air move and hearing them thunder. Knowing that they were being held in place by an unseen force made it even more unnerving.

Between the water wall and the mostly sheer wall of the riverbank was a fifty-foot gap and a makeshift path that led gradually upwards.

But the dragon had been aware of all the three's movements the entire time and he'd been watching the trio in his peripheral. As he and the challengers before him pressed against each other with unseen force, and when the horse and riders passed through the water gap, he dug in and shifted some of his focus to them.

Dan reached the path, such as it was and had only taken three uneasy steps up it when the ground heaved with sudden violence. Unable to stop or redirect himself, he was thrown full force against the wall.

Fortunately, neither Blake nor Jada had their legs crushed. Their shoulders took the brunt of the impact and they managed to shift enough so that their heads didn't make contact with the rocks.

The already shaking ground lurched again and this time another large crack appeared in the belly of the riverbed and popped its way quickly towards them. They were only aware of its existence when it passed under the water wall and then ran in front of them and up the rocks. It threw splinters and shards of sharp rock at them from the left. Large pieces of the rock cliff wall were also dislodged at the crack's passing and rained down towards the three.

Dan whinnied and shook his head, half-rearing in his effort to try to backpedal.

All the while, Jada was very conscious of the wall of water to their left. Its height remained the same, but a few times she saw the tall waters shift or ripple as if trying to move.

Yeeeah, drowning still isn't how I imagined going out, she thought.

Rocks were falling towards them when two mighty torrents of river broke from the grasp of Gabriel, Elroch, and Zohmar. Stemming from the waterfall that fell from behind the outcropping, the torrents came to life the instant they hit the riverbed. They threw themselves with great anger about the water walls and then crossed paths right before passing along either side of the dragon. They flared up behind him like two vast wings before dropping towards Dan, Blake, and Jada, behind the forty-foot vertical wall of standing water.

They couldn't see the birth of the two torrents because their sight was blocked by the wall. But they heard a rolling boom and then seconds later, saw the two arms punch through the wall. This also triggered a collapse of the water wall, as if breaking it free from whatever had been holding it there.

All that filled their vision now were falling rocks and a mass of angry water.

Dan's ears went back and his nostrils flared red. Bracing himself as if for battle, he sounded an infuriated neigh of challenge and pawed the ground.

When their painful destruction was nearly upon them, Blake stretched out his left arm and spoke a command with such a powerful voice that it echoed off the rock wall and collapsing wall of water.

There was a flash of light, followed by the tinkling sound of a thousand pieces of glass.

Jada watched as the rocks and water struck an invisible shield a good fifty feet above and around them. Water and rock were reduced to dust and mist, which was then carried away by a gale issued from Gabriel.

The remnants of the water wall churned thirty feet behind and ahead of them. The roiling waters were to their left and the cliff wall to their right. But the river would come no closer for the present. It struck the unseen shield and then tossed itself away, creating a continuous breaking wave that thundered back on itself.

As Dan moved forward, the water was pushed ahead of them and was allowed to fill the area behind them.

Furious beyond describing, the dragon turned more fully upon the three even as Dan began making his way up the path. His summons had been to destroy the traveler called Jada. The death of anyone with her was an added bonus but she was the primary target.

As the great beast turned, Gabriel, Elroch, and Zohmar, at last, displayed their power.

Gabriel gazed about the waters. He then spoke in his own tongue and reached towards their enemy.

The river came fully alive now. Multiple arms, like ropes, rose up and wrapped around the dragon. With great force, they pulled him back, one after the other, some around his neck, others around his legs and body, while one or two smashed him in the face.

The beast let loose a terrible bellow and he threw his head from side to side to shake off the attack. He then whipped his tail about and roared at the river.

The torrents that had been ropes fell in on themselves and the other waters smashed against the cliff walls. Some impacted with such force that they caused the riverbanks to collapse.

Dan was halfway to the top of the riverbank as the dragon whipped himself back around towards them. He cared not for the elf or silver horse. To him, all this chaos, undoing, and annoyance was Jada's fault. Why couldn't she just die like a normal, weak human?

A powerful gust commanded by Gabriel came rolling across the plains to their north. It hit the river lord full force and knocked him back. After the initial strike, he felt a firm pressure against his neck, as if the wind had an invisible hand pushing against him.

The dragon growled and slashed his tail, this time aiming at the outcropping. But when his tail made contact with ever-churning waters, a fierce shock like electricity shot up his tail and into his body.

A grumble of thunder overhead answered.

He bent all his will now upon the waters, gathering and expending what power and authority he had left. He directed it at the challengers, thinking now that if he could remove them, then the target would be much easier to assail.

Gales tore up mist from the outcropping, but that on which the three challengers stood remained solid. The waterfall was now throwing itself down into the riverbed, which was slowly filling with water again.

The dragon lunged straight for the outcropping. A blinding flash filled both sky and river, while simultaneously the unseen hand of the wind threw the beast against the

wall of the opposite riverbank. His mass slammed into it and more pieces of bank dropped into the rising waters.

When the light faded, the dragon snarled, taken aback. Standing tall just behind Zohmar was more or less an outline of a giant winged horse with a horn jutting from its forehead. The outline was either of mist or electricity or maybe a bit of both, the beast couldn't tell. Electricity arced whenever the being flapped its wings and a great wind roared in response. The horn on its head burned bright, bright as if with the light of stars or lightning.

Zohmar pawed the ground, then shook his great head and whinnied loudly.

The horse-being mimicked him. When it pawed the river, a peal of deafening thunder slammed against the sky. When it shook its head and whinnied, its clear call caused water and earth to tremble.

And then it took one step forward, stomping the ground as it put a bright hoof down. There came a crackle in response, before a hollow clap of thunder as several large bolts of electricity shot from the churning out-cropping and snapped the dragon squarely in the chest and neck. Then the being stood still and poised with chin tucked and the tip of the horn pointed at the enemy.

When the dragon looked back at the horse and riders, now just cresting the riverbank, he saw the vaguest outline of a great man with a wild thick head of hair and a long beard. His hand was outstretched, as if to prevent the dragon from advancing beyond his reach.

This was the owner of the invisible hand that had caught him by the neck.

Unable to destroy the three challengers or the one he'd been tasked with killing, the water dragon unleashed a great call to the sky. With sudden speed, he lurched towards the three on the outcropping.

The horse-being squealed in rage and lunged forward. Two brilliant flashes lit the river and plains from ground to sky. The greater of the two were from the horse-being and the lesser from Elroch, ever shining brightly.

The dragon was thrown backward into the river, which was now almost back to normal level. He was just becoming aware of the pain radiating through his body when the ruler of the wind took him by the throat and shoved him under the water.

While below the surface, he saw more flashes and sparks coming his way.

The beast shrieked and thrashed about, making great waves and causing them to spill over the banks. At last, he righted himself and swam farther away. When he reached the first bend in the river, he lifted his head out of the water and growled again to the three. The outcropping they'd once been standing on was now nothing more than a small island of foamy water and light that sparkled just beneath the river's surface.

Still, the winged unicorn remained, as did the man. Both remained watching him.

The lord of the river hated them all but soon his hate was chased away by sudden fear. He'd just been defeated and in a dramatic display. Would the river now obey him? Would it continue to heed him or now that he'd shown weakness would it ignore him and no longer hold him with such high regard and respect?

Then another greater fear assailed him. It was one thing to lose some standing with the running waters and those that lived in and around it...but it was another entirely to have all remaining strength and status taken from him. What would Halden and Ambrose do when they learned of his failure? Would they somehow steal away the power that he had left? Would they diminish him completely to an old, shriveled barely living sack of bones? To be brought low so drastically after having lived an entire life of dominance would be a fate worse than death.

With these things running through his mind, the once great ruler of the river swam downstream with all haste, as far away from the victors and the sorcerers as quickly as possible.

Jada slid down from Dan as Zohmar and Elroch, with Gabriel aboard, walked across the river's surface to the riverbank. She was unable to keep from smiling as she watched the winged unicorn-being make his exit. Still standing in the midst of the river, he reared up. As he did so, he was caught up in his own mist and what Jada now saw was

stardust. Now that she studied him again, or what was visible, she saw it wasn't really electricity that flickered in him, it was stars, stardust, and constellations.

His light and starry essence were caught on the wind as he leapt for the clouds overhead. He was nothing more than a great comet when he reached them, and when he did, they instantly began rolling back.

Jada then remembered their other ally and looked up. The barely visibly man still loomed over them. He gazed after the water dragon a brief moment longer and then seemed no longer concerned. Glancing down, it seemed that it looked over Jada, Blake, and Dan. Then straightening, he squared his shoulders and reached his left arm southwards.

The mightiest gust yet ripped over the plain and pummeled them. Jada was pushed forward a step or two as she hunched her shoulders.

And then the gale and its master were gone. A light breeze followed after them.

The two horses and elf stepped onto dry ground as Jada returned her attention to them. Before she inquired about this water trick and why they hadn't simply galloped right over the river's surface, the answer came to her.

The river had been under the command of the river lord. It wouldn't have heeded the power of the elf or the horses.

Jada blew through her lips and waved the whole matter off. Zohmar stopped in front of her and she rubbed his forehead. *I always knew you were special and had a great power of your own, she thought to him, but I had no idea just how great.*

Zohmar sneezed, showering her with water.

Jada merely looked at him with a disappointed expression. "Thanks for that."

Zohmar nodded his welcome.

Rolling her eyes, Jada rechecked the saddle. "You know...that really was kind of anticlimactic."

After she mounted, rather stiffly, she looked at Blake and Gabriel who were already looking at her.

“Hey, I’m just saying,” she explained as Blake’s expression slowly turned into one of helplessness, “wouldn’t it have been cool to check ‘slay water dragon’ off your to-do list?”

Chapter 10

A Fun Excursion

The three continued northward but slowly at first. They wanted to wait a short time for any injury of the horses to show themselves.

While they moseyed along, the riders inspected what gear had remained secured to their saddles. Each immediately noticed that the main item missing was the food. A few small pouches holding some tools and herbs were also gone, having been swept down river.

Jada scanned the land before them, a mix of gentle hills peppered with steep thickets. There was no evident sign of a town or settlement on the horizon.

“I’ve never been in this part of Aurora,” said Jada, breaking the silence following their missing food discovery. “Exactly how far is it to the next town?”

“Marbella,” answered Gabriel, “three days from here, but that’s if we ride hard.”

At the news, Jada’s stomach growled loudly. *Oh, hush*, she thought to it, *you’ll be fine. At least we still have water pouches. You’ll be okay on a liquid-only diet for a few days.*

The elf chuckled. “There’s no need to live off water until we replenish supplies. There’s tale that somewhere in this land is fruit that can sustain a traveler for some time.”

“But the rumors also speak of creatures that protect the fruit,” added Blake quickly.

“Oh...so it’s like another tree of healing adventure,” surmised Jada. Her tone was almost hopeful, to her own surprise. *Well, I am all for epic activities*, she thought in the old Jada, warrior-way of thinking.

Gabriel laughed both at her spoken words and her thought, which he caught without her knowing. “I can’t say for certain. But better to take a risk and gain food than to travel on an empty stomach for three to four days.”

Jada blew through her lips. “Not that that’s anything to an elf. I bet you could go a month without eating and only then begin to feel a twinge of hunger.”

This time it was Elroch who whinnied with laughter.

She again turned her eyes to the landscape that stretched before them. Her gaze then turned to the sky, noting the patchy clouds that were just thinking about glowing gold in the late afternoon sun.

Jada looked west. Darkness would come quickly to them because the setting sun would soon be behind the mountaintops. Those ridges and hills, though they were traveling slightly away from them, were still tall and harsh in appearance. There was something about them that she didn’t like.

Normally, Jada loved the mountains, but she’d never been this far north on their eastern side. Until the start of this trek, she’d never traveled beyond those mossy-covered island ridges. She’d been on the northern face of those mountains, where she’d watched great dragons battle for dominance and met winged horses that danced with the fire breathers. She’d been to the west and northwest of those peaks, both to spy and to slay enemy squads.

Jada knew well that mountains had minds and wills of their own. And they were moody. They could shield a good man from the enemy or throw both good and evil down their sides in sleet, ice, and rock.

If there was one thing that Jada had always been able to do, extra powers hidden or not, it was sense the mood of mountains. The ones that she was looking at now had changed. Before they may have been wild and unpredictable, but now they were different, in a mood she’d never seen upon them. As her gaze lingered on those eastern walls, she sensed that they’d never actually been in this mood.

Something had happened which caused them to change. Perhaps it was the overall shift that had come over Aurora following the battle for the South, and then the dark king’s retreat. The realm had been deeply scarred and the evil that had come down from the North had covered much territory. It had tainted many forests, plains, and rivers.

They'd never be the same. This fact combined with the fierceness of the battle had caused some of the light of this realm to fade or flee.

Jada remembered just before the start of this journey as she'd looked over the land and sensed that it was slowly dying or fading, in spite of the victory. The realm was longing for restoration.

This was evident northward as well. But Jada had the sense that something specific had caused the mountains or at least that section to brood and be in a foul mood. Perhaps there were still dark things lingering this far south...

Gabriel had been following Jada's line of thought, catching glimpses of them. When she reached the last one, he said, "I think it likely that the mountain's mood has changed perhaps because two sorcerers wander hidden amongst them."

Jada gave a slow nod. It would make sense. Halden and Ambrose tried to kill her in the ambush in the hills. Based on this desire, there was a great chance that they'd try again.

Maybe they just did, she thought.

The pursuit by the jackals across the plain came to mind and then the creepy scene with the crows diving into the river...

"It's how the river dragon knew about you and your current condition," said Blake to her.

Jada scowled. *Jerks. They really don't want to be friends anymore.*

"Apart from whatever guards this fruit we'll be looking for, are there any other creatures that we need to watch out for?" asked Jada. "Or...anything that can be influenced far away by two irritated sorcerers?"

"It's difficult to say," replied Gabriel. "It has been a time since I've traveled in this land."

Jada took a breath. "It's so quiet here..."

It was true. The land itself was quiet but not like the region on the south side of the river. It wasn't silent as if it was in fear of some menace or waiting for some catastrophe to strike. It was still, quiet, almost as if it was old and tired.

“Yes,” answered Gabriel quietly. “This land is weary. There used to be a people who inhabited it a long time ago, in the beginning. But they were killed and driven away by darker things that came when evil first touched the land here. Back in the earliest days. There’s barely a memory of them in the earth now.”

During Jada and Gabriel’s quiet discussion, and Jada’s musings, Blake studied her. He was greatly relieved and glad to see the reawakening of some of her senses. To his eyes, it was as if small gleams of light were bursting to life inside her, like the birth of baby stars in the great wide universe. It was something small reemerging, but it was something.

It filled his heart with hope and gladness.

Maybe she won’t be completely muted when she crosses the desert and beyond, he thought, maybe He will restore to her some of her gifts or at the very least, her natural born skills.

“And I want to kick myself.”

Jada’s voice broke Blake from his thoughts and he tuned back into the conversation.

“I wonder if anyone knows if anyone else is actively tracking Halden and Ambrose,” she continued. “I know I never thought about it until now.”

“I doubt anyone really has,” added Blake. “In the wake of victory, there was the burying of the fallen to tend to, and the crowning of a king. The average man, upon conclusion of a war and long hard conflict, isn’t going to instantly think about tracking dangerous foes the morning after a war has ended.”

“Indeed,” agreed Gabriel. “Why hunt and challenge two sorcerers? There has been no immediate need, although that may change in due time...”

As he said this, the elf shot a quick look over to Blake before returning his eyes forward. Blake knew that look, knew it very well. It seemed like that he would be tasked with work soon regarding the two former counselors.

“It isn’t wise to go looking for trouble or war,” continued Gabriel, without missing a beat.

“Especially when your opponents are incredibly powerful and have great authority both in the seen and unseen,” finished Blake, not giving anything away to Jada.

The last thing Blake or Gabriel wanted was for Jada to get it into her head that hunting the two sorcerers would be something she should help do. Once she set something in her mind to do, there was no getting it out.

“There is a time for war and a time for peace,” said Gabriel, before a little smile tugged at his mouth and he shrugged. “Or...at least, a time to enjoy peace...however short-lived it may be.”

Jada checked the position of the sun and then straightened up in the saddle. “So, are we going to try to find some food now or not? If we’re going to be fighting our way to dinner, I’d rather do it while we still have light.”

“Come now, Jada,” teased Gabriel, eyes twinkling with laughter. “Where’s your sense of fun and adventure?”

Jada sent him a look of distaste before signaling to Zohmar and leaving the other two behind her.



The sun was making for the mountains to the west when Jada, Gabriel, and Blake cantered towards another thicket. These thickets had turned out to be more like miniature ridges than simple wooded hills. They rose sharply and had multiple arms reaching in every direction. Heavy trees covered them and shrouded the forest floor in deep shadow.

Dusk was threatening when the three halted before the dense wood of the fourth thicket. The evening was promising to be stiller than the day and already the intermittent afternoon breeze quieted.

“I know,” said Blake, when he caught Jada glancing back at the mountains behind which the sun was rapidly vanishing.

“We should split up this time,” suggested Jada. “We can cover more ground quicker and I’m not sure if any of us will want to search another thicket in the darkness.”

The group had become increasingly aware of their rising hunger. The activity of riding hard from pursuit across the plain and the little swim they'd taken had dramatically improved their appetites. At least it had for Blake and Jada. They weren't certain about their elven companion.

Since no one sensed an immediate threat, they agreed to split up but remain within a reasonable distance of one another. They had yet to come across a dangerous beast or being in the thickets or see any sign of one. Thus, it was within reason to think that it would be safe to continue searching for food even after dark. However, that thought still went against something in Jada's mind. Or perhaps it was just a hyperactive imagination subtly suggesting there were nasty beasties waiting to grab her ankles.

Or it just could've been plain, old laziness and the desire to call it an early night.

Man, I'm gettin' too old for this, thought Jada as she swung down from Zohmar.

Their horses stayed just inside the trees, each facing a different direction. None appeared alarmed or nervous; they were simply standing and watching with typical vigilance.

Blake broke off to the left and disappeared quickly from sight. Gabriel veered right and Jada continued more or less straight.

The light was poor and until her eyes better adjusted, her other senses filled her in on what was around her in the heavy wood. Beneath her the ground was firm and she heard the muted sound of last fall's decayed leaves under her boots. Apart from seeing them upon approach, her nose told her this stand of trees consisted of pine. Also judging by smell it had been some time since it had rained heavily; the earth was dry here. Her ears informed her that, whenever a gentle current shifted leaves overhead, oaks kept their pine brethren company.

Jada moved as quickly as safety permitted in the diminishing light. She noticed that as she passed deeper into the thicket, the earth began to change. The ground softened and the smell of moss and dirt came to her nose, telling her that moisture was coming from somewhere relatively close.

She'd just become aware of this change when the toe of her boot tipped a rock and she tripped forward into an oak. The way became uneven and as Jada's eyes finally adjusted, she was aware of a rise ahead that cut directly in front of her.

At the bottom of the rise, Jada paused to listen and look about her. There was only darkness the way she'd just come, though atop the rise it seemed lighter. Up there, the trees opened somewhat and she saw a twinkle of a star or planet. Save for the random shift of an oak leaf, the thicket remained completely silent.

Jada commenced the climb. The mossy ground made the ascent difficult and the rise was steeper than initially thought. Finally, she reached the top and paused. The scene before her was unexpectedly beautiful. The steep hill continued to rise a short distance and curve gently to her left before leveling out. An arm also ran to her right and sloped downward.

Below her was a small clearing lit by the stars. It was covered with a thick layer of bluegrass. It was so lush and full that it reminded her of the grass that covered the hills and plateaus near the Western Village.

Ground fog was beginning to form and laid itself in thin streams over the clearing and about the broad trees bordering it. This was the first such thing she'd seen in a thicket and her gut told her there just might be some fruit nearby.

Jada looked into the trees to her left and felt chills run through her. It was pitch black in contrast to the light of the clearing.

Don't start, she told her imagination.

Quietly, Jada continued up the hill.

Fog began to form in the trees to her left and slither out and around her legs. Its touch was cold, like an icy breath compared to the relatively mild evening.

Despite this eerie development, Jada didn't sense any menace or danger. Then again, her danger-sensing abilities definitely weren't what they used to be. She rolled her eyes upon reminding herself of that painful reality.

Jada stopped again when the hill flattened and glanced down into the clearing. She froze. She'd just had the strong sense that something had passed swiftly behind her. Something cold, a shadow or something rather.

Still, she didn't sense danger...and she quickly became irritated.

Subtly touching the hilt of the knife at her right thigh, Jada nonchalantly looked about herself again. There was no sign or trace of anything and the only imprints and disturbances on the ground were from her own boots.

She continued forward and made it to the next gathering of trees. A small arm of the hill ran sharply down to her right, creating the far side of the clearing now over her right shoulder.

Again, there was no hint that anything had recently passed through this area.

Jada walked back into the shadow of the forest. Mindful of the pitch-black form of the trees against the opaque darkness of the thicket, she felt the ground going gently downward.

Something cold burst by her and she reflexively lurched sideways. Either her foot caught a rock or something else reached up and snagged her. Regardless, she pitched to the right and tumbled down a steep incline. After a few good rolls, she came to an abrupt stop on flat ground.

I need to work on sticking my landings, she thought as she pushed herself up.

In the awkward darkness, she made out that she'd landed in another clearing. A section of the ridge curved in a horseshoe around her and multiple narrow black arms stretched down towards her. Covering the ground around her feet and those arms were numerous winding vines and creepers randomly sprouting large leaves.

Squinting a bit and taking a few steps forward, Jada managed to make out some smallish, round objects wedged amongst the coarse cracks of the arms. She was glad about this food discovery for all of one second before a burst of chill air swept by her.

She went instantly cold and an icy fear tried to settle around her. It wasn't her own fear, though. It didn't come from inside her. Instead, it seemed like it was sent by some external force. Something was wielding it and trying to instill it in her.

Jada wrapped her hand around the knife hilt at her thigh. Cautiously scanning the near pitch-black surroundings, she took several steps backward and slowly turned, and froze.

Standing before her was a massive shadow, wholly black. Great wings stretched out to either side of the being and the only visible thing was its glinting yellow-green eyes.

It took Jada's brain a full ten seconds to find the memory that told her she'd seen this large demon once before, and briefly. Another second later, her brain supplied her with the name: Levian. This was the demon prince who worked beside Cassius, dark king of the North.

Unsurpassed power and authority were in and about him, and by the glint in those eerie eyes she knew he'd come here to complete some unfinished business.

But how...

The question was running through her mind when she had a mental image of something rushing up behind her.

Jada spun with knife drawn...and saw nothing. Pulling in a breath of more agitation than fear, she turned back around to face the demon prince...and literally started.

"Sheesh, Gabriel," scowled Jada quietly.

Glancing her over, Gabriel gathered she'd just seen an especially dangerous threat, but it had gone.

"Your mind playing tricks on you?" asked Gabriel in a whisper.

"Maybe," answered Jada before stepping to one side and pointing at the fruit. "Do you see those or is it just me?"

Because his elven eyes could see better in low light, Gabriel quickly spotted the fruit. He nodded in response to Jada's question...and then everything went dark. It was as if a blanket had been cast against the moon and stars to block out their light.

In front of them and close to the first crack that held fruit, they became aware of a tall, pale grayish creature. When they continued to look at it, they understood that it

wasn't gray itself; that was the color of its cloak. Whatever it was, was almost transparent in nature and it hovered nearly a foot above the ground.

So, the guardians are like...ghosty...looking...things.

The moment Jada had this thought, an impressive weight pushed down upon their heads and shoulders, and their minds became fuzzy.

Jada still had enough of her brain together to sheath the knife and draw the sword from the scabbard strapped across her back.

Gabriel had his bow in hand in an instant and an arrow set. But he was aiming at something to Jada's left. When she glanced that direction, she saw that Levian had reappeared.

He's back, thought Jada.

"You know this creature?" breathed Gabriel, a fierce light in his eyes.

"Levian," she answered and shook her head to try to clear some of the mental haze. "The demon prince that works with Cassius."

Gabriel's expression furrowed. To his eyes, he was gazing upon a Kildran. A being not seen in Aurora but still living in other dimensions, it was known by the elves as a world-ender. In appearance, it was a cross between a wraith and dark angel.

Tall and broad across the shoulder, it was clothed in many black rags that were always moving in some unseen current. Great black-feathered wings stretched out to either side of it. On its head sat a great crown-like helm, black and glinting like polished obsidian with two horns that curved forward.

In one hand it held a long, black-bladed sword, edge gleaming like the helm. With its other hand, the Kildran wielded its awful power. The terror in this being wasn't in some kind of destruction with which it laid waste to a land. It was in its power to utterly destroy, to obliterate anything and everything.

Hence the title "world-ender." Like a black hole, it pulled everything, light and all things created into the darkness of its being. All things were laid waste, trees, rivers, mountains, cities, creatures, and the heavens. Everything that was touched by its thought

or gaze was killed, decayed, and remembered no more. This even included the hearts and foundations of planets and worlds, as known by the elves who traversed many realms.

This kind of destruction explained why the elves mildly feared the world-enders. Elves loved all light, that of the beautiful sun and of the glorious moon and stars. It was the fading or complete dying of this light that grieved elves on the deepest level. When a Kildran was finished with a realm, there was no flicker of light left, not even a memory. There was only cold, black nothingness, a void that had once been filled with light and beauty.

It was as Gabriel watched this Kildran approach, destroying and pulling the trees and even ground towards itself, that he understood what was really happening. He was seeing something that an elf would legitimately fear. Jada was seeing something that she feared most at that moment in time.

It's feeding off our fears, he thought to her.

Illusion, boomed the word in Jada's mind right after she heard Gabriel. Realization cut sharply through her head like a spear. The ghost-like creatures guarding the fruit were able to sense what each intruder feared and then used a great power of illusion to project that fear in front of them.

It was acutely interesting to Jada in that second that Halden or Ambrose wasn't being projected. The place that she had been sent while in their grasp had been terrible far beyond describing.

Then again, she considered, *that is the place where Levian comes from and truly resides. It's possible that he could somehow take me there physically and do things far worse than two human sorcerers ever could.*

Jada next discovered that the ghosts could mess with a person's perception of depth and proximity. She swatted at the projection of Levian a dozen feet away, partially to try to shake the pressure on her head and partially just for the sake of striking at him.

It turned out that he wasn't twenty feet away. He'd been advancing and was almost to her when she struck. The blade in his hand met hers with a loud metallic ring and startled her because she wasn't expecting it.

Jada leaped back with sword at the ready. She then dodged quickly right before darting back to the left. Her sudden, sharp movements allowed her to confirm something she'd seen during her initial reflexive leap. Moving quickly and abruptly caused the projection of Levian to blur for a split second, revealing what was behind the disguise: just an irritating ghost being.

Levian snarled, lunged, and jabbed.

Jada deflected and returned the favor.

Levian mimicked her deflective move but wasn't expecting the quick backhanded swipe. He jerked backwards but Jada had no more time to engage with him.

Sensing a close threat from behind, she spun and ducked as a blade whooshed over her head. A second Levian was there, just as large and ugly as his twin.

Pivoting at the hips, she avoided another jab from the first Levian, blocked and locked blades with the second, and then kicked the first in the stomach. Or would have, if he'd been real. His projection was nearly two feet in front of the one creating the projection and her boot went through air.

Not anticipating this, she was pushed off balance by the Levian she'd locked blades with and fell into the first projection.

And yet the weapons of the projections are real, she thought. This place just gets weirder and weirder.

Jada delivered a lightning-fast swipe behind her. This forced the ghost to back up several feet with a shriek of distaste.

She then forced her sword and her opponent's harshly to one side. Unleashing a flurry of strikes, she drove the second Levian back. After the sixth or seventh swing, he finally stopped her onslaught by locking swords. He then gave a mighty push and rushed her.

Before Jada could blink, she was enveloped in a thick cloud of black vapor. It was disorientating and her head spun. It filled her lungs and started to choke her.

There was nothing else for it. She swiped randomly with her blade in an attempt to deflect any strike. Eyes watering, she began coughing uncontrollably. It only took a second for her to come to the decision to run and get out of this suffocating vapor.

Picking a direction at random, Jada lurched forward. She broke through the cloud, but her eyes still burned and watered. She was coughing so hard she was almost dry heaving to clear the toxin from her lungs.

All around her was darkness but she continued to stumble forward. Her blind swiping with her sword paid off and she weakly deflected a strike from whatever or whoever was behind her.

The ground became mossy again and when she hit the softer, uneven surface, she tripped. That saved her from what would've been an ugly wound. When she pitched forward, she felt a cold blade graze across her back and scrape her arm. Her other shoulder then slammed into a tree and she was knocked off-kilter. That was the moment blackness enveloped her again and terrible claws grabbed her, one hand on her shoulder, the other by the belt. Jada felt herself go weightless a moment as she was plucked off the ground like she weighed nothing. She was also weightless again for a few seconds as she was thrown.

Instinctively, her arms went up to protect her head and she tucked in her knees. The precautions were useless. She hit the ground on her side, and it knocked the wind out of her. At this point, she was certain that her ribcage and lungs wished that they belonged to someone else after all the abuse they'd been taking the past few days.

When Jada finally got some of her wind back, she sat up on her knees. Gazing up she saw the tops of trees and above them, a dark sky dotted with stars. Of more immediate concern were the five Levians standing around the hole she'd been thrown into. The hole smelled heavily of earth and a hint of decay.

Fingers digging into the moist, black soil she touched something with her right hand. Pulling it up, she could see just enough to recognize that it was a bone. This was a death pit.

Blake was having an uneventful search when he felt the stillness of the thicket shift. Though no wind passed through the trees, the temperature dropped abruptly, as if winter had just been brought by a frigid north wind.

As it did, fear nearly froze his heart. When a strong wave of dizziness whirled by him, his heart resumed not with beating, but mad pounding. Old memories from his journey to the North ignited in his mind, memories from his trek through the forest. Illusion there had been powerful but the foes he'd faced here even more so. That place had been altogether wretched and horrible.

The experiences had left their permanent scars on him. To the end of his days, a little chill would wash over him whenever something triggered a memory from that forest.

It was because of that experience that Blake now feared wildly for Jada. He had no idea what kind of creatures guarded or patrolled these thickets, but his gut was telling him they were no less lethal than facing a dragon.

With heart thundering in his chest and a cold sweat of fear breaking out across his forehead, Blake turned back the way he'd come and ran. All the time he prayed and pleaded for Jada, and that if he couldn't reach her first that Gabriel would be there.

†

"Do not hope that help will come to you, little human," said a low, gravelly voice from one of the beings above Jada in the pit. "I know plenty of your type, you who shine with the light of the God of Eliadar."

"You're so full of self-deceit," spoke another. "You tell yourselves that you will never be tested beyond your strength."

"And that help will always come," added a third. "But it's just self-reassuring lies to comfort yourselves. Better a soft lie than a hard truth, isn't that right?"

Funny, she thought, they sound like Halden and Ambrose.

"Your God was not there when thousands of soldiers died in the war or when innocent lives were lost in the villages when the darkness came from the North," said the

fifth. “He does not rescue all who call on Him and He does grant fiery trials beyond the strength and courage of His people. When it is your time, it is your time.”

“Which is why you are here now,” spoke the first voice, and Jada realized that there were no more Levians. The illusion was gone, and the casters of the projections were plain to see.

“Your time has come, and you were brought to us...”

“Save it,” growled Jada, cutting off any further words. As each of the creatures spoke, the heavier the weight had become on her mind and shoulders. However, her agitation rose sharply, resulting in a pounding headache. She’d never liked being trapped, toyed with, outsmarted or overpowered. Basically, she hated defeat.

The war raged between the powerful illusion and whatever spell was trying to settle on her. Yet her white-hot spirit rekindled and raged. Jada had known from the very beginning never to listen to the words of an enemy. The heart of it was lies, and though their words may be laced with truth to appear more appealing or acceptable, in the end, they were bitter and false.

What was true was that people were tested beyond their strength and ability to handle the worst situations. In order to learn reliance and deeper trust, in order to be stronger sometimes required that the greatest characters be broken completely –so that they could be rebuilt ten times stronger than before.

Deep in her soul, Jada knew that this was what this trek northward would do to her. However, it wasn’t to begin now. This was just a little...side excursion to expose her to a new, powerful kind of enemy so she’d recognize it the next time.

That was the lie portion of their speech: that her time to die was now.

“I don’t expect to be rescued,” she snarled in rising anger. “And I don’t expect help.”

Slowly, she turned her exceptionally wrathful gaze onto the ghost that was above and behind her left shoulder. “I’ve looked after myself since I was a child.”

Standing suddenly, Jada drew, turned, and threw the knife from her right thigh with her left hand. Simultaneously, she drew and flicked the knife on her opposite leg with her right hand.

The two knives were just finding their targets when she dug the toe of her boot into the dirt and flicked her sword up to her hand. Her hand grabbed the hilt as her knives found their marks. The two made direct hits to the chest, which were followed by two terrible screams and brilliant flashes of light.

The momentary light allowed Jada to see about her in the pit. A large tree root was in front of her and she sprinted to it, jumped, grabbed, and hastily climbed.

The three remaining ghosts were still in dismay, half at the demise of their two companions and half at the unexpected blinding light.

One stood directly in front of where Jada emerged from the pit. She burned hot with the same fire she'd felt in her decision to make a final resistance while in the sorcerers' final grasp. This time, however, she was able to act on it.

She grabbed hold of the creature's cloak in an iron grip and yanked it back down into the pit with her.

It vanished into the hole with a shriek, which was followed seconds later by a burst of light.

The moment Jada reappeared at the edge of the pit, one of two struck at her. She had her wits about her and latched on with her free hand, the other still clutching her sword hilt.

The creature pulled her out of the pit, and they crash-landed onto the ground a dozen feet from it. When they stopped, the ghostly being found itself pinned by a very incensed young woman. Her blade lay across its throat with her weight behind it. The only thing holding her at bay was its grip on the blade with one of its claw-like hands.

Jada was a seething creature of wild burning fire, the light of which glinted in her eyes. And she unleashed a guttural scream right into the face of her enemy. There was no fear in her anymore, which was why neither the ghost under her nor any other in this wood could project anything. There was only human fury.

The scream was the venting of anger at being assaulted yet again, being insulted by the use of such weak mental tactics by these opponents, and frustration over having all her gifts veiled. And there was also the fact that she had to resort to being escorted on this northward trek, which blatantly insinuated that she was weak and incapable of making this trip by herself.

Jada was aware of the fifth ghost to her left in her peripheral, but she didn't have to worry about him. An arrow pierced his chest with a flash, and he collapsed into a grey vapor with a screech.

At the same time, the ghost Jada had pinned brought its free fist towards her. She saw the glint of a blade and pushed herself up. They struggled briefly and the ghost managed to wriggle about, get a foot free, and kick her.

The kick launched her a dozen feet. But Jada pivoted herself around before she even touched the ground. She landed in a low crouch and with a fierce gaze locked on her target.

Instantly, she saw a black veil try to engulf her and felt heavy illusion trying to rest on her again. She already knew the tricks, though, and doing so enabled her to repel the attacks without much thought. She was also aware of something warm running down her upper arm, but she disregarded it.

In getting off the ground and attempting to attack her mentally, and by standing instead of fleeing, this opponent was telling Jada that it wanted a fight.

She wanted one too, and she was only so happy to give it one. Besides, she was tired of being perceived or perhaps perceiving herself as weak.

A thought in the back of her mind told her that Gabriel had fired that arrow but that he may also be in a bit of a bind.

Don't worry, she thought as she took a few slow steps forward, like a cat stalking a bird, I'll make this quick.

Then with a sudden burst of speed, she broke into a dead sprint toward her opponent...

Sensing that Jada had been in some need, Gabriel had broken away from the illusion of the Kildran and ran after her. All while he ran, he could hear his foe behind him, closing the distance. Whenever he chanced a glance behind him, though, he saw that the enemy had disappeared. Yet, he could still hear and sense its nearness.

It wasn't long before he came upon the scene of Jada pinning a ghost while another lined up a shot with its bow and arrow. Gabriel had loosed his arrow before the enemy could and dispatched one more creature.

A breath after Gabriel had fired that arrow, he was shrouded in a great black haze. It confused his senses and seemed to push and shove him, like the darkness was a bully harassing its victim.

After a few chaotic seconds, Gabriel, with eyes closed, took a slow breath and gathered himself. The pure light that is in all elves welled up inside him until it was nearly uncontainable. He put up an arm as if to shield himself and there came a flash.

When he opened his eyes, he found that he was in the middle of a swirling torrent of grey and black. The illusion was so powerful that, to his eyes, the forest was completely gone.

But it made sense. The "ghost" that he was facing was the chieftain of such illusionary creatures in that region. Thus, his powers were greater than those of his subordinates.

Stepping out of the vortex around him appeared multiple world-enders, all crowned with glinting helms, all armed with gleaming swords, and the power in their left hand to bring all things to nothing.

Quicker than a blink, Gabriel set an arrow to the string and fired at the beast directly in front of him. It hit its mark and the target vanished into a cloud of mist that was caught on the wind.

He set a second arrow and fired another, and then another. Every arrow flew true and hit its target, and just like the first, all targets disappeared into vapor. He wasn't hitting the real enemy. They were just illusions, distractions from the singular threat.

Terrible weight and disorientating pressure pushed down on Gabriel. The chieftain was using all his power and directing it on him. He knew all about elves and he despised them with such a deep enmity that it went beyond words. He was a master of illusion and trickery, and greed drove him. Elves, with all of their repulsive light, broke his illusions and illuminated what he really was. Humans weren't too bad because they could generally be tricked with ease. Elves, however, he had a special hatred for reserved in his heart.

Gabriel took a few staggering steps beneath the weight pressing down on him. Closing his eyes again, he drew several deep breaths and then thought in the native tongue of these ghost-like creatures.

I know what you really are, he thought to the chieftain. You should know that your tricks won't work.

The weight fell away, not because the leader had relented but because Gabriel repelled it.

He opened his eyes and saw that the vortex of wind had died, and he was again in the forest. Before him stood the chieftain. On either side were two of his companions and he sensed one more behind him. He identified the leader by how much taller he stood over his underlings –and he was still projecting as a world-ender, or trying to. One moment he was that terrible beast and then the next he was in his true form.

The two ghost beings to Gabriel's left and right each held a bow and he watched in his peripheral as each set an arrow.

The chieftain drew a long, narrow-bladed curved knife from the sheath at his side. The edge of the weapon glinted cold and white.

Gabriel moved then. He drew and threw one of his daggers before any of his enemies could blink. As it flew straight for the chieftain, the elf unveiled his own power. White light burst forth from him and about him, and he appeared almost like some being of heaven revealed in all its wondrous glory.

The chieftain, being the strongest, was able to deflect the dagger in spite of the burning light. Simultaneously, Gabriel spun and threw his other dagger at the creature

behind him. He and his two companions had been momentarily taken aback by the light and were thus defenseless.

The second dagger found its mark in the chest of the creature and it fell into a pile of grey vapor.

Gabriel was in the process of turning back around when he saw a sword sailing like a spear through the air from his right. It passed through the back and out the chest of the creature to his right before piercing his one to the left and sinking into a nearby tree.

The chieftain was on Gabriel in an instant. Gabriel drew his elven blade and blocked the leader's. The blades met with a flash and hollow ring.

In the opening strikes, it was plain that the chief was far outmatched by Gabriel, glowing with light. So, when their blades met for the sixth time, he intentionally locked them.

The stare down was short-lived as the leader spit black mist into Gabriel's face. It was repelled in a blinding flash, but it was that burst of light that the chieftain used to escape.

Jada ran onto the scene then and retrieved her sword from the tree. Giving her a once over as she joined his side, Gabriel noted the dirt smeared on her face and hands, as well as the fierce, wild light in her eyes. It had been some time since he'd seen that particular gleam.

"Blake missed out on all the fun," said Jada, wiping her face on her sleeve and then nodding to the rear of the clearing with the crevices and fruit. "Let's get dinner."

They walked through the clearing and to the fruit. They came in clusters like tomatoes and were the size of a pear and color of a grapefruit.

Jada and Gabriel each picked a vine, on which was a cluster of three or four individual fruits. Jada was reaching for another cluster when she felt Gabriel gently nudge her. Glancing at him, she saw that he was looking at something on the ridge above them.

Following his gaze, she saw that standing over them was at least a dozen ghostly creatures.

Both stared a moment longer before Jada said, “I think this is a ‘grab and go’ kind of meal.”

“I’m in complete agreement,” answered Gabriel.

Taking what fruit they had, the pair turned and ran in the direction they’d originally come. The trees thickened and the darkness was almost complete, so they made it a point to stay right on each other’s heels.

Behind them, a wind stirred up and they saw fog forming around them. They ran as quickly as they dared, but when they felt the ground hardening, they knew that they were nearing the outer perimeter.

That’s when they began to catch glimpses of Levian, kildrans, and ghosts through the narrow breaks in the trees.

They cut right around an impassable stand of trees. Four Levians suddenly appeared in front of them and they darted left through a slight gap between two oaks. Five large world-enders appeared over their shoulders and they wove through a group of pines.

A total darkness was pursuing them, trying to snare them with long, wispy black fingers. They could both sense it, almost feel it on the back of their necks.

Through another narrow gap they darted, and the forest suddenly opened up before them. The pair shifted their course more to the right, passed around a pair of massive oaks, and ran right into Blake.

Jada and Blake both jumped and pulled in a sharp breath. Gabriel caught his breath and quietly let it out.

Blake then looked from one to the other of them. By their scuffed state, especially Jada’s, he surmised that his fear had been well-founded. However, Gabriel had been there to assist in...whatever dicey situation they’d found themselves in and they’d made it out alive. Most of his fear faded then as relief flooded him.

A few seconds passed before he asked, “So...what’d I miss?”

Jada and Gabriel merely looked at him for a long breath, and then to each other. They considered the adventure they'd just had, then Blake's question...and started chuckling and then laughing.

"Let's get our horses and be on our way," smiled Gabriel. "We'll fill you in then."

Chapter 11

Future Dreads

The trio rode far that night before they were weary enough for sleep. The excitement surrounding the finding of food was coupled with the rejuvenating qualities of the fruit itself. Each of them ate half of a fruit and found their stomachs full and bodies reenergized. It didn't equal the fruit from a tree of healing, but the effects were definitely beneficial.

The bright stars and half-moon were playing hide-and-seek amongst the patchy clouds when the three finally stopped. They chose a small, airy stand of trees atop a gentle rise as the place to bed down for the night. None of them sensed a near or immediate danger and neither were the horses on edge.

Because Gabriel and Jada had expended the most energy during their adventures, Blake volunteered to take the first watch. But Gabriel was still the most awake and energetic of the three, so he took the first shift.

Elves, thought Blake with a shake of his head.

Jada didn't say a word in protest to this arrangement. Before Blake had even untacked Dan, Jada had stripped Zohmar of his gear and tossed herself onto the ground. She was breathing deeply in minutes.

As Blake lay on his back in the grass, his body reminded him how worn out he really was. For a short while, he gazed up at the sky, watching the stars disappear behind cloud cover and then reappear again. It wasn't long before sleep took him as well.

It would not be a restful or pleasant sleep. Instead, it was restless and full of dark dreams.

He dreamed of a storm gathering over the eastern edge of the mountains. The dark clouds pressed close to the peaks and spread themselves slowly east and north, casting the land into shadow. Below, he heard the howling of the hounds of the ancient hunting men and the barking of wild jackals on the plains.

Halden and Ambrose appeared before him. They were clad in dark clothes and darkness. He was uncertain about where they were. The only thing he could clearly see was the pair and the ground beneath them covered in short, dead grass. Everything else around the sorcerers was dim gray nothingness.

Both of them spoke in turn into the void. Moments later, sometimes appearing alone, other times in packs, all manner of creatures appeared. Jackals, wild dogs, hyenas, wolves, wild cats, serpents, scorpions, bears and many others answered the evil call.

All were given orders, and a projection of Jada appeared before them. Every creature snarled and bared their teeth at her. Each then turned and charged back out into the void and vanished from sight.

Next came several different races of men. Each spoke with Halden or Ambrose and then executed a blood pact, cutting their palms and shaking hands. Then the men, too, disappeared.

A chill ran through Blake. Halden and Ambrose had just gained allegiance from all manner of creatures and men. A bounty had just been placed on Jada's head, and bounty hunters, too many to count, would now be seeking her.

As he continued to watch, the two sorcerers turned and looked at him. Everything went dark. He heard sounds before he was able to see anything again, and he heard clinking like chains and the crackling of a fire.

Slowly, a glowing light allowed him to see and the scene that unfolded before his eyes made his heart pound. Fear and rage filled him.

Before him in a dark stone chamber were Halden and Ambrose. In a large stone hearth was a blacksmith's fire, in which were glowing coals and various iron tools. A large table with more items stood nearby.

And chained to the floor by her wrists was Jada. She sat hunkered over and leaning to one side. It was clear that she had been there for a time. Her clothes were worn and frayed. From what he could see of her condition, she was thin, emaciated, and probably starving.

Her long hair was down in a tangled mess. It hid most of her face from him but when she turned her head just so, he caught a glimpse of her eyes. The expression in them froze his heart. Though it was clear she'd been tortured, it wasn't pain or suffering in her gaze.

It was vacancy. He'd seen that expression before, following the murders of her parents. She'd withdrawn deep into herself as a result of her suffering. Physically, she was in the chamber but mentally she was far away.

Never before had Blake seen such a distant look. He didn't know if someone ever went that deep into themselves whether they'd be able to come out again.

Then Halden drew a glowing brand from the coals and stepped towards her.

Jada didn't move or even flinch.

Before Blake could do anything, everything blurred together. Seconds later, as everything came back into focus, he saw Jada standing on the edge of the Great Sands. Gabriel stood on the peripheral of the picture and Blake saw himself standing beside Jada.

As he watched, though, he turned and walked away from the woman for whom he cared so much. She stood confidently and readily as she looked out over the desert, the course she was committed to taking.

When Blake saw himself again, he was nowhere near Jada. He was far off in a narrow, mountainous valley. And he was on the hunt. Blake saw how he was bent low over the ground, looking for tracks. After a brief moment, he apparently found what he was searching for and broke into a run.

The scene sped northward, following the trail, until it came upon the ones leaving it: Halden and Ambrose.

That was why Gabriel looked at me when he hinted something about someone being put on the trail and tracking them, he thought.

Blake didn't want it to be him. This would be an exceptionally agonizing task. He'd be ordered away to other business and forced to leave Jada. It didn't matter if he left Aurora or remained in it, he would still have to be parted from her.

It dawned on him then in this dream that he had yet to be called back to Earth. Ever since the war for the South, Earth's dimension had never entered his mind until that moment. No summons to return to his birthplace had been sent to him. It seemed, at least for now, that being a traveler had been removed from his job description.

Either way, Blake would have to leave Jada soon to fulfill other business. He was already familiar with the sorrow that he knew would fill his heart, make his chest ache, and chase away any hunger or appetite. Every day as he pursued his quarry, his heart would love and live for the hunt, but it would also long to be with the one he loved. Being in the same land but unable to actually be beside her was nearly intolerable.

As Blake's mind turned to Jada, he saw the far image of her again standing on the border of the Great Sands. There truly wasn't any better choice. None was better than the other when it came to that initial trek northward, that first journey to see the high king.

And although some of her senses and skills seemed to have returned, they would not save her in the desert. Not by a long shot.

As Jada stood there still gazing into the desert, all of the creatures and the men that had made a pact with Halden and Ambrose converged from either side of and behind her.

Yet when Blake looked deeper into that vast desert, he sensed even greater danger and a menacing threat. He'd be unable to do anything to help or save her. He'd have to leave her alone and unprotected. He'd have to abandon Jada.

This great internal agony and fear ate at him, and Blake flailed awake. It was still night about him, though the moon had set.

Taking a few quiet breaths, he looked around for Gabriel. He saw the form of the elf exactly where he'd been when Blake had fallen asleep.

He pushed himself to his feet and silently walked to his friend.

"Are you alright?" whispered Gabriel. "I sensed darkness moving in your sleep."

Blake shook his head. “It was just a dream. I’ll go ahead and take over now. Get some rest.”

Gabriel said no word of argument or debate and he slipped away quietly.

Blake kept watch for the remainder of the night. The entire time, until the eastern horizon began to lighten and the stars to fade, he wrestled with the turmoil of the dream in his mind.

Sometimes dreams brought hope or peace. But other times they brought the opposite. Blake’s had definitely been less than encouraging. As he stood amongst the trees, he wished with everything he was that he and Jada could have normal lives. Then again, even with normal lives in a normal place, there would still be the struggle, toil, and turmoil of life itself. And would she even want to be with him? She had remained emotionally distant from him ever since that evening in the Western Village long ago, when he’d broken her trust. Words could be just as damaging as physical harm and he’d said all of the wrong things.

But to him, a life without Jada, that rare, precious star of heaven, wasn’t a life worth living. It was a life without purpose, light or blessing.

Finally, as he did from time to time when he considered the cycle of toil, joy, and grief of life, Blake wished that he’d never met Jada. Perhaps it would’ve all been better if he’d never known someone like her, never been made aware that a person like her existed. Then, maybe, his heart would not ache within him.

Near the end of the watch, as that east horizon began to pale with the approach of dawn, Blake’s thoughts returned to pleas and prayers for the protection of Jada, that beautiful wandering star.

Chapter 12

Marbella

It was the fourth day out from the river. The spattering of random thicketed hills slowly faded away to flat country dotted sparsely with large, lone-standing trees. By late morning, the town of Marbella suddenly appeared before them.

It was a rather long settlement, meaning that structures were built in one long line east to west. Those in the center were single story, while those on either end were two levels. A few random, freestanding buildings were placed around a fountain that marked the square. On the very ends of the line of small establishments, more buildings ran north to south, so that everything together made a “U” shape. From the edge of these north-south buildings ran a makeshift perimeter wall that created a large square. The walls themselves were more for décor and to identify a border than to keep out enemies.

Marbella had once been a major trade hub. In early days, peoples traveling from the west, east, south, and occasionally the north, would pass through the town. All matter of materials and goods were once abundant. Now in those late days, it was a rest area for weary travelers.

Zohmar felt Jada tense as she took in the town, and stopped. She wasn't gazing at the buildings. She was taking in the lofty sand dunes, towering even from a great distance.

She'd been so focused on surviving the events of the most recent days that arriving at the Great Sands hadn't been in the forefront of her mind. Now that she was beholding them, it seemed like this part of the trek had arrived abruptly.

As it often is when one arrives at the door of a great feat or adventure. It all seems like it has happened or come too quickly, even with ample time to prepare.

A weight settled on Jada's shoulders, a knot tightened in her stomach, and her heart began to pound.

Those dunes are much larger than I imagined they'd be, she thought to herself.

Dan, who'd stopped a few steps ahead of Zohmar, whickered softly to her.

Breaking from her thoughts, Jada looked at the beautiful tawny buckskin and saw him looking back at her.

It'll be okay, she thought to him as she straightened.

Dan's nostrils quivered in a silent nicker of response.

In short order, the three rode through the two stacked stone pillars that marked the entrance to the town. Blake had apparently been here before because he and Dan led them to the two-story structures to the left of the square. They stopped and dismounted in a fenced enclosure with several water troughs.

When Jada's eyes adjusted to the shadows of the building, she saw stall through a broad breezeway. Through another breezeway further to the left, she spotted some fenced-in runs behind the stalls.

A lean, weather-worn man with a stiff gait and half-bent back appeared out of the main breezeway.

"I'll go see about getting us some rooms," said Gabriel quietly to Jada as Blake approached the man. The elf spoke a word to his horse and then walked off briskly. Elroch remained standing beside Zohmar and cocked a hind leg.

In short order, the horses and tack had been taken care of, and two rooms had been secured, Blake and Gabriel in one and Jada in the other. They were on the second story of buildings to the right, opposite those over the stalls.

Since there was still plenty of daylight left, the three ate at the inn. Under the firm suggestion of both Blake and Gabriel, they then began compiling an essential list of items Jada would need to take on her journey across the desert. "Essential" was the keyword because she'd need to have as little weight to carry or pull as possible. Plainly, most of that weight would be from her water supply. There was also some fruit leftover from the adventure a few nights ago.

Taking Zohmar was out of the question. It was at least a three-week trek at the absolute minimum from one side of the desert to the other. Because no one crossed over the Great Sands regularly, there were no camels or animals of that nature at hand that could travel great distances without needing water.

Naturally, thought Jada, not that she'd really expected it to be that simple. She'd long accepted the fact that she'd have to make this trip on her own two feet.

Due to the fact that she'd have so much water weight, it was agreed that she should pull her supplies on a small sled of some kind. It would be tiring but less so than if she lugged it all on her shoulders and back.

They were able to find something to suit their needs by evening. They scrounged around the stable first for scrap wood before Gabriel disappeared on some other trail. He returned rather triumphantly a short time later. He'd investigated one of the merchant/carpentry shops and found a small sled-like shaped piece of wood. It was of ash-colored, smooth, lightweight, and strong. He hadn't needed to say that it was of old elven make. It was obvious by its appearance, Gabriel's smile and twinkling eyes.

By the time they went to bed on that first night, most of Jada's supplies had been gathered and arranged on the sled. The more perishable food items she'd purchase just prior to setting out.

That first night they all slept soundly. The native population of Marbella was relatively small. Given the fact that only a few additional lone or paired travelers were currently visiting, there wasn't much occasion for festivities late into the night.

The only sound that Jada heard as she drifted to sleep was the sound of a solitary, distant cricket. As a bright and clear dawn broke, a lone chirping bird on the walkway railing outside her door greeted her upon waking.

Getting up, she walked to the window by the door and peeked through the curtain. The nearest sand dunes seemed to have moved closer during the night and they appeared even larger than yesterday.

Jada let out a quiet breath and turned for the bathroom.

The theme of silence seemed to carry throughout that day and the next. Jada sensed that it wasn't a peaceful quiet but rather a tired silence. Like more and more areas of this realm, this place was worn out, perhaps even dying.

Quiet suited her and the others just fine, and during the first three days of their stay in Marbella, Blake, Gabriel, and Jada rarely saw one another. It was only for dinner when they naturally gathered for a quiet meal.

This was satisfactory with Jada. With an inevitable doom looming before her, she wasn't in a particularly social mood. She wanted, she needed, to be left with her thoughts and prayers. The one sense that seemed to grow within her with each passing day, even hour, was that of rising doubt. It was something she'd rarely struggled with, not even when she was riding to war against Cassius. In that time and place, there hadn't been the slightest trace of it.

Now, however, this next hurdle seemed different. Maybe it was because Jada knew she didn't have the gifts that she'd had in that most recent season of life. Also, the nearness, the dear closeness with the One she'd once had seemed to be no longer. There was only silence from Him. No word had come from the North, no messages, no phoenix messengers burning with white fire.

Silence from Him answered all prayers and thoughts.

Jada sensed too that her two companions had weighty things on their minds, that they had issues and actions of their own to consider. They'd reached the point of the road where they must part eventually, each to his own business.

For Blake, the nightmare he'd had days ago about Halden and Ambrose, and the enemy surrounding this very town weighed on his mind. With every passing day, it grew heavier and his fear for Jada and these things grew.

Gabriel, the one most difficult to read, also had some silent concerns. Though he'd never willingly show it, he was concerned for Jada. He had an extremely powerful sense that her trial northward would be through a fire hotter and fiercer than most had experienced in their journeys. It wasn't that he thought she wasn't strong enough. It was that he simply hated to even think about fair and good things suffering great torment and pain.

The encounter with the illusion of the world-ender in the thicket lingered with him, also. He wasn't afraid that one would traverse to this dimension and devour everything light. Instead, it seemed to the elf that it was a symbol of what was happening to Aurora. The illusion brought to him thoughts of the end of Aurora as it had been

known since its creation. Time was coming to a close, the end of the realm was approaching...and it saddened him.

In the minds and hearts of Gabriel and Blake, a prominent sense planted itself in them: the longer they stayed in Marbella, the higher the risk of detection by an ally of the sorcerers.

It would not be much longer before some enemy came to this place...or some spy saw them and reported their location to some deadly menace.

† † †

They raced through the darkness of the thicker cloud cover to the southeast of Marbella. Shifting night wind currents kept any potential trackers off their scent as they ran to their master. When they passed through the thick forest east of the town, the leaves overhead moved noisily in the wind, branches clacked, and great trees groaned.

The forest soon gave way to rocky rises nearer the feet of the mountains. In no time, they were darting about labyrinths of stone and rock as softer dirt and moss were left behind in the woods. High above their heads and shrouded in black cloud were the treacherous mountain peaks. Lightning flickered about their perpetual snow laden tops and low rumbles of thunder answered.

It was shortly after midnight when they reached their destination, after some time of passing through random passages and pathless ridges. The wind was rising with the storm, and though no rain was falling yet, their thick coats were pulled towards the churning clouds in strong updrafts. Lightning flashed brighter now and with more frequency as its unseen brother boomed in loud response.

The pair stopped atop a large rock shelf and before what appeared to be a narrow cave entrance.

One of the two large and scraggly black dogs barked several times and then quieted again.

In the next brilliant flash of lightning, a door, not a cave entrance, opened. Out stepped an average sized, lean, and weathered man. He was clothed in many ragged cloaks that were tossed about by the feral wind. Only the faintest light from his dwelling

in the rock illuminated him before the visitors. His green eyes glinted, not from the light from his home because it was to his back. Instead, it was kindled from some menacing light within.

“They’re at the town Marbella,” growled one of the dogs. “They arrived three days ago, a man, woman, and an elf. We went there today while patrolling our perimeter and to catch up on news. A serpent in the stable told us of the arrivals and overheard some of their speech.”

“We lingered in the shadows of the forest that borders the eastern side of the town,” continued the other mongrel. “We saw them for ourselves and they are the ones we were told to watch for.”

“Very good,” said the man with a gravelly voice.

The weak light behind the man was momentarily blocked out as two shadows emerged and stood on either side of him.

He stepped forward so he was in front of both dogs and then placed his hands on their heads. He spoke a few quiet words in some ancient tongue and instantly a terrible torrent of wind roared up the ridge and swirled around them.

The two black dogs suddenly melted away into dozens of black birds, which were caught on the mighty updraft. They flew away with all haste deeper into the mountains.

One of the shadows, a demon scout, slugged his companion in the shoulder and grinned. “Finally. And I know someone else who would love to learn where the waif is.”

The other demon cackled and unfurled his wings.

The man, a sorcerer in his own right, turned back for his dwelling in the rocks, unbothered by the demons.

The birds made for Halden and Ambrose, to inform them of their target’s location.

As for the demons, they headed for the dwelling of another foe, of one far in the North, in a land of desolation.

Chapter 13

Foes, Dangerous from a Distance

The black birds reached Halden and Ambrose in the deepest watches of the night. They'd taken up temporary residence in a small stone outpost long abandoned and wedged between two steep ridges deep in the mountains.

While they'd known that the three travelers would continue to push northward, they had been hidden not only from their sight but from numerous spies throughout the land.

"But they couldn't hide forever," said Ambrose to Halden after one of the birds, perched on the table, had given the report.

Halden, in a tall-backed chair, remained silent for a moment in considering. "She will try to cross the desert...her male companion will have warned her about the treacheries of the forest."

Light from a fire in the nearby hearth gleamed in Ambrose's eyes. "That gives us many opportunities to do what we've been unable to thus far."

Halden didn't seem as certain as his associate. "Maybe...the Great Sands are expansive and moody like the mountains. She may also have peripheral protection. No one may aid someone making their maiden journey to the North, but that doesn't mean there won't be a sort of perimeter protecting her and preventing anyone else like us from interfering."

"In that case, we need to move quickly," nodded Ambrose.

"Yes," agreed Halden before turning his attention to the black bird still on the table. "Divide your group. Send them north and east of the mountains. Search for marauders and mercenaries, men and creatures with which we've made pacts. Do it quickly and send them to Marbella. We must seize this opportunity and strike with speed. We will delay things as much as we can from here..."

Without further delay, the black bird took flight and shot through one of the windows kept open despite the storm. He called to the rest of the flock and they hastily executed their orders.

Without sharing another word between each other, Halden and Ambrose stood. Through a back passage of the small room, they went, and it wound its way through narrow halls of cold stone. After a short time, they emerged outside on a broad stone plateau that faced north. In the middle was a tall, slight altar. But in that early hour, they did not need to use it, not that time.

They stood near the edge of the plateau as the storm above raged about them. Yet its wrath did not touch them. The angry wind whipped above and before them and threw bits of grit and pebbles. But nothing came near the two sorcerers. An unseen shield seemed to protect them from the storm's wrath.

Closing their eyes, they each recalled words of ancient incantations and spells. Again, without needing to speak, both of their minds aligned and seemed to enter into a single track. And down they went as one, mind and spirit, into deep wells of darkness.

Overhead, lightning flashed, and thunder rolled deep in the earth. Yet there then arose another sound, deep and droning in the air about the plateau.

In finding the incantations that they wanted, Halden and Ambrose let themselves immerse in them and the intoxicating darkness about them. The more they became as such, the louder and stronger the droning was until small stones were vibrating against the ground.

And then all of the noise, save the droning, faded completely. The storm churned on, but they didn't hear the thunder or the howling wind. There was only the powerful darkness that they'd lost themselves in, darkness and the desire for revenge as their thoughts focused on the town of Marbella.

Four of the six demon commanders watching from rock ledges around the plateau shared a look and a nod. Opening their great black wings, they took flight. The sorcerers could hold their own by the authority and power that Evil had given them. It was time for some of Levian's underlings to do their work and gather some forces of their own.



An unusual lethargy and heavy slumber settled over Marbella that early morning. Beasts and humans fell into a long, deep sleep where their dreams were either unmemorable or dark and mysterious.

Even Gabriel fell under this spell, though he knew what it was even in his sleep. Yet, he couldn't will himself to wake up, not without a fight.

And it was a long-running struggle. He was on a battlefield overshadowed with the veil of dusk and no matter how many foes he slew, there were always more. Relentless, enemy after enemy he cut down, for days it seemed to him. At last, when the last foe was killed, there appeared abruptly on the battlefield the lord of the world-enders.

The battle with this great enemy went on for many more days or so he perceived in his dream. Finally, when he was gaining the advantage, Gabriel, knowing this was all still a dream, wanted to see who was behind this nightmare. It was more than a nightmare, he knew. Normally, he could will himself awake if he so desired. However, his inability to do so told him that there was some powerful, external source preventing him from doing this. He knew it had to be some deep darkness to hold him under like it was.

So, Gabriel displayed his full light and glory and took hold of the world-ender. He gazed into those terrible eyes and was taken in a rush over the forests and to the central mountains. In those mountains and in a random cleft stood Halden and Ambrose.

With a gasp and lurch, Gabriel sprang awake. After quickly gathering his bearings, he looked across the room to Blake. The young man was clearly in the throes of some nightmare, also. He was drenched in sweat, his jaw was set tight, and every muscle in his body was rigid.

Blake was indeed having a nightmare of his own. He stood in the Marbella square and Jada was positioned behind him. Enemies of all kinds came from everywhere. Chimera and the ancient hunting men of the hills charged from the west and south. The hunting dogs and jackals came from the east.

No matter how quickly he shot arrows or ran his sword through these foes, he was only just able to keep up and prevent them from reaching Jada.

Soon, groups of people he didn't know about appeared with blades in hand. Blake was turning them back when the ground near his boots seemed to come alive. Snakes appeared, the most venomous within Aurora and Earth.

Panic rising to incalculable levels, Blake lurched back and with a broad swing, cut the heads off seven snakes. He was then forced to turn and deflect the blade from an orthros chieftain.

He was finishing that short duel and aware that the serpents were approaching Jada when a rain of black arrows fell from the sky.

Blake gave a cry of dismay but before he could make a move for Jada, another orthros knocked him to the ground. Seconds passed by painfully slow as he dispatched his current enemy. Twisting around, he looked at Jada.

She was now sitting on her knees with arrows having pierced her left shoulder, right side of her chest, and stomach. Her beautiful turquoise eyes were slowly fading to gray and her face was pale. Yet without wearing any expression, she stared dead ahead and pointed at something on the southern horizon.

When Blake looked in the direction she was pointing, he saw black clouds and darkness to the south. And the darkness was approaching quickly. Under the shadow of the storm strode units of forces allied with darkness. Leading them were Halden and Ambrose, both with murder in their darkling eyes.

While this had been ongoing in Blake's sleep, Gabriel had tried to wake him. Conventional methods quickly proved to be ineffective.

This is powerful magic, he thought to himself as he took a step away from Blake's bed, Halden and Ambrose have only grown in the dark arts instead of diminishing in the wake of their defeat.

The full seriousness of their threat weighed on the elf. If they were able to produce such strong results from that great a distance...

Gabriel turned his thoughts from the dark possibilities and returned his attention to his friend and then closed his eyes. Knowing who was conjuring this spell and what

kind it was made countering it significantly easier than if he hadn't known either of these things.

His lips moved in silent prayer as he lifted his hands, out at his side and about waist height with palms upturned. Almost immediately, faint light began to glow from his hands.

A tremor ran through the earth and made the buildings tremble briefly as light challenged the darkness. The light in his hands grew and a second, stronger tremor raced outwards from Marbella.

At last, Gabriel brought his hands together abruptly. A blinding flash of light lit the room and sent its brilliant shafts out of the window. Simultaneously, thunder rolled through the ground, starting under the town and moving southward.

The heavy, groggy presence that had been over the room was suddenly gone and the air cleared.

Blake was also quite awake. He was up and standing next to his bed with dagger in hand.

They looked at one another for a long breath before Blake said, "We need to get moving."

"Many enemies are converging on this town even now," nodded Gabriel.

They both grabbed their meager things and stormed out of the room. It was late morning already judging by the sun. Though the sky was clear, the wind was up and whipping about the trees that created a border to the west.

A stellar unknown to either of them suddenly dropped below the roofline and made both man and elf jump. The creature was short of breath and worried.

"There are a great number of dark enemies not far from here," panted the stellar. "They are coming from the direction of the forest and from the south. They are swift and evil desire drives them. I heard word from Zohmar that you were here, and I was just leaving to patrol southwards when I saw the darkness."

He stopped to finally catch his breath a second before blurting out, “You must leave now and choose your courses quickly! Jada must fly for all she is worth! I do not know orders for the either of you, but Jada must run now if she’s to escape untraced!”

“I’ll get the horses,” said Gabriel, turning left for the stairs and breaking into a run.

Even as Blake took a step towards Jada’s door, he knew in his heart what he had to do. He’d known at the dawn of the second day here at Marbella that the time to depart had come. The longer he’d waited, the stronger that sense had become.

He’d known that he’d have to let go but couldn’t. Now, however, he had no choice. He could not go with Jada into the desert. That was not his task or his calling. If he tried to go, he knew with total certainty that he would perish.

His heart ached terribly like it never had as he reached Jada’s door. He knocked first and when he didn’t hear any response within a few seconds, he barged in.

Jada didn’t explode awake like she normally would have. Instead, she remained where she was in bed, dead to the world.

“Jada, we have to leave now,” he said hurriedly as he rushed about and grabbed what little she had.

When she didn’t respond, Blake stopped and looked at her again. She didn’t as much as twitch and there was no catch in her breathing.

Growing nervous now for other reasons, he cautiously stepped over to her bed but not too close. He cleared his throat and spoke louder this time. “Jada, we...let’s go.”

Again, nothing.

A fresh burst of panic caused sweat to prickle across Blake’s forehead. She was under the same spell that he had been. But he wasn’t Gabriel. He didn’t have amazing, supernatural powers and he ashamedly knew little about spiritual warfare.

Out of desperation, Blake gently took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Jada, please wake up,” he said, quieter this time. Memories from the tree of healing in the mountains, when she’d been on Death’s doorstep flooded his mind and he felt his throat tighten.

He thought he saw her move just a little and her breathing change slightly. He gently squeezed her hand again, but she made no more movement.

Desperate for her to wake up and knowing full well that time was of the essence, Blake brushed the hair out of her face. As he gazed down at her, he also realized in that moment that this could very well be the last time that he saw her or got to be near her.

For a breath, time stood still. For a moment, the advancing enemies didn't matter nor did his next assignment. What were those things, what was work if it meant being separated from someone he loved and would love until he breathed his last breath?

His heart was breaking even as he looked at her and took in her beauty. Tears burned in his eyes and a lump formed in his throat.

This may be the last time we see each other, he thought and then made an effort to push back the tears. Who knew if she'd make it across the desert? What if it turned out to be some place of solace and nearness for her, nearness to the One who had sent her from heaven down to the world of men? And what if, having sent her, He would then recall her to Himself, her errands completed?

Blake did not know how long it would be before he'd be allowed to see her again. Perhaps it wouldn't be until they were both in that place outside of Time, in that place beyond pain and suffering.

He also thought about his dreams and her torment and suffering in the desert. He thought that his heart would burst in his chest.

Leaning down, Blake brought his lips close to her ear and whispered, "It's time to wake up, Jada, who I hold so dear."

Then he gently kissed her forehead.

There was a hitch in Jada's breath and as Blake straightened, he watched her eyes flutter open. The first thing she did was slap a hand onto her head.

"Oh, headache," she muttered, "what a great way to start the..."

Jada cut herself off. She noticed Blake was gently holding her other hand in his and she saw the great emotions of pain and agony in his eyes, which were glistening.

Her heart immediately began to beat faster. Her expression furrowed and she opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but Blake backed away and said, “We need to leave. Right now.”

Without another word, he disappeared out the door and shut it behind himself.

Jada jumped into her armor and gathered her weapons, just now realizing how late in the day it must already be. When she stepped out of the room, she was greeted with a burst of hot wind and a shrill whinny.

She clamored down the stairs and was about to make for the stables when Zohmar, on the desert side of the buildings, caught her attention. He wasn’t saddled or bridled, as he was to be released to freedom again since he wasn’t going with her from this point.

Blake and Gabriel appeared on horseback with Blake pulling the sled by a rope to the side of Dan.

Jada took a step towards them when a tremor rippled through the ground. A handful of the native folk had emerged from their own groggy sleep and were now running around, shouting to one another.

She shot a look over her shoulder to the south...and saw a dark line of clouds with shadows below them. Many foes were approaching swiftly and were nearly here already.

Jada turned and ran towards her friends. As the sparse, rocky ground melted into sand, a fresh and fierce gust buffeted her.

Zohmar stepped to meet her first. He pinned his ears and shook his mane, telling her what he thought of this whole abrupt turn of events.

Take care of yourself, my dear friend, she thought to him as she rubbed his forehead. *I am forever grateful that you were brought to me and that I had the honor to sit on your back.*

Zohmar blew through his nose and dipped his head. *The honor, daughter of kings, wandering light and star of heaven, was mine. No matter what, you must make it to the other side of this desert. You must...and if not, then I will wander always, every night wherever the starry skies are, that I may catch a glimpse of you shooting across the heavens.*

Jada threw another look to the south. Through the broad archway of the buildings, she could almost see outlines of the nearing enemies.

This desert is designed to test you in all ways, she heard Gabriel think to her as Elroch stopped before her. *One hour, one minute at a time, my dear friend. Keep moving, no matter what. Keep moving.*

Blake extended the rope of the sled to her and Jada stepped over and took it. They shared a look as the terrible wind whistled around them. She now had the same understanding that Blake had had minutes prior. This may be the last time they saw one another for a long time, perhaps until they both reached the end of this present life and crossed into the next.

Now Jada understood the expression in his eyes when she'd first awakened. Her own heart ached, yet she wasn't exactly certain for what reasons.

A squeal from Zohmar recalled them to the present. Jada watched as her faithful mount and companion in battle charged southward and through the archway towards the enemy ranks.

"We'll hold them off or try to lead some away!" shouted Gabriel over the wind.

Without hesitation, Elroch jumped into a dead sprint after his equine companion.

Blake looked after him a moment as Dan shifted beneath him. He then looked at Jada and leaned towards her. He gazed into those beautiful eyes and felt tears try to well up again in his own.

He dropped his head a breath and then placed a hand on the side of her face.

"You have to make it through," he said, searching her face. "Please."

He then pulled her in close and kissed her forehead again. *If you don't, then I will be in agony forever, I will live in hell on earth until the day I die.*

Then he straightened and Dan danced sideways away from her. Jada looked after Blake with a sadness in her eyes.

The wind increased still more and began to blow sheets of sand. Waves of it passed between her and Blake until she could barely see him.

The sound of a raised voice somewhere behind the blowing wall of sand to her back snapped her to attention. Shaking back her own tears, Jada wrapped one of her scarves around her nose and mouth. Then with resolution, she took hold of the rope and started quickly northward, making her way into the vast desert until she was hidden from sight by the blowing sand.

† † †

Jada vanished from view the moment the first enemy pursuers reached the entrance to the town. An insane silvery-blue stallion, Zohmar, made several angry passes at them and trampled a number of foes into the ground. Also, an elven warrior unleashed his power and skill and destroyed many others.

A man upon a tawny horse galloped through in what turned out to be the three defenders' final pass. His horse leaped the eastern wall of Marbella and as he moved swiftly west through the square and in front of the next group of enemies, the rider swung his sword back and around, and then struck the ground.

A flash of light and trembling of the earth resulted as a large sinkhole opened up and ran southwards a short distance, devouring many of the enemy.

A powerful gust of wind followed after him, kicking up a large cloud of dust and grit. This prevented the remaining assailants from seeing the path the two riders took as they disappeared into the forest to the west.

In the woods, there had been a handful of approaching enemies, but by the time Blake, Dan, Gabriel, and Elroch reached them, Zohmar had already killed them.

With the treetops writhing madly in the relentless gales, Blake and Gabriel turned their horses southwest, towards the mountains. But Blake looked back at Zohmar, silver coat now a shady grey. Horse and human looked at one another before the stallion whickered. He would run north and do his best to keep track and pace with Jada, his human, his warrior.

Blake wished that he could say something like “look after her” to the great horse, but even he wouldn't be able to do this, not this time. Jada must be left to her own now.

With a toss of his head and swish of his tail, Zohmar pivoted around to the north and took off into a gallop.

Gabriel and Blake signaled their horses and they picked up a good pace as they made for their next assignment, which involved two rather powerful and dangerous sorcerers.

As for the remaining assailants of Marbella, they passed around either side of the sinkhole without issue. They also met no resistance from the native inhabitants because they'd gone into hiding.

However, they found that they couldn't pursue their quarry. At the edge of the town, where the rocky ground met the sand, a mighty wall of sand rose up before them, pulled and driven by a scorching desert wind. This wall disappeared into the forest to the west and as far as the eye could see to the east.

As they were considering this, the ground beneath their feet began to crack and fall away. Another large chasm opened in front of them, causing them to scramble back to the line of buildings.

Plainly, this was all happening by the hand of the God of Eliadar. They surmised that even if they waited for the sand to finally settle, any trace of Jada would be long gone, erased by the wind. Judging by the rumors they'd heard of her, she could move swiftly and tirelessly, even if she was only traveling on her own two feet.

"The Sands have her in its grasp now," said a tall orthros hunter. "She is at its mercy...though I dare say that she'll come to realize before long that it would've been better to face us than that wasteland of sand and torment."

Chapter 14

The Great Sands

Jada's gaze remained fixed on the great sand dunes towering in front of her as she marched steadily towards them, pulling the sled behind her. In the rush to escape the assailants, Jada hadn't had time to grab the last-minute food supplies. That left her with

some fruit, bread, and a few pieces of dry, salted meat. Most of the weight that she was pulling was from the water supply.

Jada's thoughts to herself before finding the fruit to eat came back to her as she mentally recalculated the food and water rations that she had with her.

You're not going to starve to death, she told herself, you'll be fine with eating once a day or maybe two small snacks if that can be managed.

She recalled the early days when she'd been a tracker and hunter. During that time, she rarely ate much at all. Her mind had been so focused on the task at hand, and determination and urgency had been her body's fuel.

It was a decent walk to the first dune and when Jada reached it, she paused to look behind her. There was no sign of Marbella unless it was the small, long shadow that she could just see through the haze.

The wind and blowing sand that had sprung up just outside town had kept up for a solid half mile. Beyond that, the tempest quieted, and Jada could pull the scarf down from around her nose and mouth. She'd felt the earthquake also, and guessed that something had resulted from it which had prevented the attackers from pursuing her.

She looked west. The forest that had been so close to Marbella's border now ran sharply away westward from the edge of the sands. A dark line marked the border of trees for a short distance before fading away altogether, chased away by pale gold sand.

Jada had initially considered keeping close to the forest, in order to have some kind of directional bearing. However, there was no guarantee that the trees would keep to a north-south line. Drifting in a diagonal line would mean more distance to cover. But seeing just how quickly the forest had drawn back confirmed her choice not to use it as a marker.

To the east was nothing but sand and a haze on the far horizon.

Taking a breath, Jada continued forward and passed through a gap created by the arms of dunes on her left and right.

Climbing up the soft faces will take more energy than passing around them, she thought to herself. I sure hope that they will eventually face different directions so I can just walk up the ends and follow the spines...

Walking around would take more time but going straight up and over meant more exertion. She was already sweating, though it was barely mid-morning.

Jada passed to the rear of the first dunes and found that the next row was standing in the same manner as the first: in tall, long barriers of opposition against her.

This is going to be a long couple of weeks, she thought to herself as she veered towards the left of the sand dune in front of her.

It was near noon when Jada climbed to the top of the nearest dune to check her tracks and scope out the land ahead. It took her nearly ten minutes to reach the top. It didn't seem to matter which route she chose to ascend. The sand was soft and deep and with every step, she sank almost to her knees.

Pulling a sled full of water jugs didn't help matters because it pulled against her.

At last, Jada reached the crest. She was sweating but taking off the tan scarf and any other clothes was out of the question while the sun was out full force. She was panting lightly now due to the climb, though she'd been doing her best to keep her mouth closed to avoid losing water faster.

As she caught her breath, she looked all around again. Dunes ran east and west, as far as she could see. Everywhere was vacant and without a single tree, shrub, or rock.

To the south, the direction she'd come, she saw that thus far she'd managed to keep herself more or less straight. They were difficult to see, but she was just able to make out her tracks. Since she didn't have trees to walk towards, she'd use her footprints to keep herself as straight as possible.

The landscape northward wasn't encouraging in the slightest. The sand dunes grew larger until they ran up abruptly against towering giants that were literally mountains. These taller formations were darker in color, browner, and if Jada wasn't imagining, she saw snow on the heights.

Her heart sank. This desert would not be like the ones with which she was most familiar back in Earth's dimension. The sands she knew were scorching during the day and hot at night.

So, it's going to be like Colorado, she thought to herself as she took a few small sips of water. *Hot during the day...cold at night. But maybe the severe temperature swings won't start until I'm a little closer to the mountains.*

That first night she learned just how cold it got in this desert place and her little hope of mild nighttime temperatures was dashed. Judging by the bite in the air, involuntary tightening of her muscles and the fact that she could clearly see her breath, she guessed that it was quite literally almost freezing.

Jada had trekked on through a red sunset that bathed the sand in a crimson hue and into the darkness where temperatures plummeted. Stars overhead twinkled brighter now that the moon was a waning crescent.

Fog began to form around the feet of the dunes, and she pushed onward. Finally, she stopped around what she guessed was eight or nine o'clock. Three-quarters of the way up a dune, she halted. After pushing sand up against the edges of the sled to ensure it didn't run away, she wandered about the dune, to investigate if one patch was warmer than the other.

At least the wind isn't up tonight, she thought.

When she didn't find an especially warm spot, she returned to the sled and then glanced down at the fog, now thick where it lay at the base of the dunes. Just to confirm a theory, she walked down towards it and the cold increased.

It was one of those little things that seemed obvious, but she had to double-check. Aurora was a strange place and didn't follow the same rules and laws as those on Earth.

Like streams of water flowing uphill, she thought. It would've been unfortunate if she hadn't checked the fog and it had turned out to be warmer than higher up the dune.

Oh well.

Going back to the sled, Jada shifted some things around, and sat in it. She then pulled out a piece of fruit and tore off a small piece of bread from what was left of the loaf. This was followed by water.

As she bedded down for a few hours of sleep, she checked the clothes layers that she had removed once the sun had been low enough. They were still a touch damp with sweat, so she laid them over herself before pulling the light and heavy coats over herself.

Jada's short sleep that first night, and every night after that while in the desert was filled with dark, restless dreams. Evil beasts were lurking everywhere, sniffing in the night, wandering here and there as if they were trying to track or find her. Their forms weren't easy to make out, but she was able to identify them as some kind of wild dog, wolf maybe.

As she watched in the paralysis of her dream, one large beast with glinting eyes zigzagged its way closer towards her. It then seemed that it picked up a definite trail and approached faster on a straighter line. When it was within twenty feet from her, it slowed to a stop, sniffed a few times, and then looked right at her. Its eye shine glowed green one moment and then as it moved its head, it turned red. With a snarl, it bared its teeth, white in the moonlight, sounded a sharp bark, and then charged straight for her.

The danger from the dream, coupled with the sensing of movement near her in the waking world, Jada flailed awake with a snarl of her own. Her mind was still returning to reality as she heard a noise like that of a creature moving swiftly through the sand.

Sword in hand, Jada leaped out of the sled and searched the night. She neither saw anything nor heard –

Before her brain could tell her that there were no significant sounds, a near shriek echoed off the dunes. Or was it a cry or call from some night creature, like an owl or other bird? Whatever it was, it sent a chill shooting down Jada's spine and she remained rooted where she stood, eyes wide, ears straining.

The noise came again, from the dune across from her and to the right. This time, it sounded like a mid-pitch bark abruptly cut off, and the dog-like shadows of her dream filled her mind.

Movement below her drew Jada's attention and she blinked at what she saw. The fog was writhing and moving as if something or multiple somethings were swimming in it. She thought she spotted a few tails breach out of the fog and the answer came to her: eels.

Pairs of green eye shine began to appear in the fog and then, one by one as each creature locked onto her, the shine turned from green to red.

Jada wrinkled her nose in distaste and in offense over this attempt to intimidate her. Even as she gave her sword a twirl, she became aware of a slinking shadow on that opposite dune. She sent a darting glance to it and returned her attention to the eels, now plainer to see.

One of the creatures opened its mouth and hissed at her. A dark greenish-yellow glow appeared deep in its throat as if preparing to spew something at her.

Jada stood braced and ready for battle...and then jumped backwards. The ground all around her feet was moving, covered with scorpions. They weren't the big black ones but the smaller, more venomous light-colored ones.

Another screech, different from the ones she'd heard previously, snapped her gaze skywards. There, black against the stars were large, circling vultures.

A sting in her lower leg demanded her attention but she didn't need to look to know that one of those scorpions had gotten too close. The stinging sensation turned to fire and raced up her entire leg.

Snarling, Jada dug the heel of her boot into the creature which had stung her. Then swinging her sword, she cut through a handful of others near her. With a puzzled glare, she watched as they evaporated into greenish-gray vapor.

The eel with gaping jaws expelled a glob of thick mucus that landed on the front of Jada's left shoulder and splattered across her arm. Immediately, it began burning like acid.

Jada growled in anger and took another step back even as the dog shadow to the right charged with glinting crimson eyes, and the vulture shapes overhead swooped down for her.

Arm and shoulder now burning like her leg, that defiant Jada fury roared to life within her. Taking a step forward, she swung once more at the nearest scorpions and turned them to vapor.

Several more eels were spewing toxic venom at her and the first massive vulture was nearly to her on her left. Simultaneously, the dog shadow to her right jumped at her with claws and jaws ready.

Jada lurched with a yelp...and sat up. She had still been dreaming.

A dream within a dream, she thought as she stood unsteadily and looked about herself. *I think I saw that in a movie once.*

That was when she noticed that she was shivering. The layers that she'd had over herself had been kicked off and were now laying outside and all about the foot of the sled. She'd also begun sweating sometime during her sleep and now it was starting to freeze to her.

Jada grabbed one of the scrap rags from the sled and wiped herself down before grabbing the other clothes and layering up again. She pulled on the light coat and studied the sky. The moon was set to disappear, and the night was utterly dark with no trace of light yet paling the eastern horizon.

She grumbled as she readied the sled. It had to be around three in the morning, and she felt like she hadn't slept at all. In fact, she felt like she really had been fighting off beasts.

Jada reached down to grab the rope when a stinging pinged through her right calf. Pulling up her pant leg, she could just make a dark spot on her leg in the pale starlight. Come to think of it, her left shoulder and arm were sore, too.

The significance and danger of this development struck a chord deep in her mind and soul. She thought of the adventure when she, Blake, and Gabriel battled the winged beasts in the mountains to reach a tree of healing. It brought to her mind that, though her body had remained with them when she'd been near-fatally wounded, another part of her had been taken to a place far away in a different dimension. If that was possible, then it was conceivable that she really had confronted strange creatures that were in another

realm. Or, perhaps, what happened in her sleep did leave lingering physical effects on her in reality. No tracks or signs of anything were to be seen around the sled and yet...

Jada shook herself from her thoughts and started down the sand dune. This was an extremely unnatural turn of events.

Then again, she thought, this whole adventure since reaching the hill labyrinth has been unnatural.

This journey northward was meant to test the sojourner in aspects beyond the physical. It was a trial, an assessment to pinpoint loyalty, faithfulness, and determination. It would put the traveler on the brink of mental and emotional stability...if not push them over it.

Jada took a deep breath and sighed. She wondered where Blake and Gabriel were. Already she wished that she was with them or anywhere but in this desert.

She paused when she reached the fog, still thick at the bottom of the dunes. Without entertaining the thought that something might be lurking there, she strode through it and started around the side of the next dune without incident.

That second day, Jada walked until sunrise, when the sun blazed into the pale blue sky. She shed the extra clothing layers, nibbled on some bread and fruit, and took a few sips of water.

She would continue until a little after noon, and then she'd rest during the heat of the day. As she trudged along, slow but steady, the bite or sting on her calf sent out a ping with every step.

Upon quick examination in the rising sunlight, Jada hadn't seen a stinger or anything lodged in the dark red and swollen mark. That was of some relief unless a stinger had worked its way deeper inside her leg.

Oh, sheesh, wonderful thought, Jada, she said to herself with a roll of her eyes.

That afternoon when Jada did stop, her rest was not pleasant. She was tired, more mentally than physically, but the moment that she laid down in the shade of the propped up sled...her brain kicked into high gear. And whenever she did close her eyes, she saw visions of more dog shadows and other creatures she hadn't yet dreamed of.

So, it's going to be like that, huh, she thought, opening her eyes and looking up at the sky. High above, she saw tiny black silhouettes circling. They didn't need to be closer in order for her to know that they were vultures.

Once the sun was lowering itself into the west, Jada returned to her feet and continued. At least she had the dune mountains to use as an additional bearing and she kept the tallest point directly in front of her.

She walked until almost ten o'clock that night. Her sleep that followed was similar to the first night: restless and filled with attacks by odd or shadowed creatures. When she awoke early again, she found that she had several new marks on her legs and arms that she couldn't have self-inflicted.

During that third day, which seemed warmer than the first two, the wind began to stir and increase. It blew hot off the desert and made the sand to start slithering.

The furnace is kicking on, she thought.

Throughout the day, the wind gained strength until it was a steady gale buffeting her from the west. It was apt to point out when any part of her skin became exposed to the blowing sand. Jada managed to keep herself mostly protected but whenever some sliver of skin was accidentally exposed to assault, the bite of the granules was immediate.

The stinging also seemed to reawaken the random marks on her body. If Jada wasn't mistaken, the sting on her calf burned worse than it had yesterday, and the soreness in her left shoulder and arm was more severe. She pushed back the rush of panic that washed over her and swallowed back the dread of the possibility that the pain of every sting and bite would only increase with every passing day that she was out here. If this journey were to take three or even four full weeks, what state, then, would she be in at that point? Would she be able to survive at all?

It wouldn't be long, however, that she would learn the number and severity of any wounds would not determine her survival in these strange and vast sands.

On day four, Jada noticed that she'd begun drifting west. Whenever she'd stop for a rest and to check her position, she saw with rising irritation that her tracks went lazily

towards the left. No matter how many times she reset herself, she always saw later that she had, in fact, drifted westward again.

The tallest mountain, too, that she'd kept in front of her seemed to be moving farther to her right.

By the time she stopped for her early afternoon rest, Jada was downright angry that she couldn't keep herself on a straighter course. She grumbled and huffed as she sheltered herself as much as possible from the blowing sand.

As usual, when she found herself unable to sleep, she studied the mountains. There was something different about them today, she thought, but her mind, growing fuzzy from the lack of sleep, couldn't tell her what it was for some time.

Finally, it dawned on Jada that they seemed to be much closer. They rose and filled the horizon directly in front of her.

She then recalled that she'd had the thought of shifting in a more westward direction to go around the tallest stretch of mountains. She knew she would still have to face a cold trek once she reached higher elevations, but she wanted to avoid being snowed on if possible.

Right, because freezing rain is definitely better, she thought to herself as she began rummaging for some bread.

Jada's thoughts wandered in random directions and after a minute, she stopped what she was doing because she couldn't remember what she was doing.

What was I looking for again?

She searched her brain in an attempt to remember. That's when she saw the bread packaging.

Jada whistled at herself and gave a subtle shake of her head as she removed a piece of bread. She was aware of what poor sleep and deprivation did to the mind and body. Already her thoughts were rambling and scattered, and she forgot quickly what she'd just been thinking.

So soon. It's happening so soon, she thought with another bout of rising dread. If she was already mentally exhausted, how was she going to make it? If she was unable to get some real rest, it wouldn't be long before she began hallucinating.

One of those intermittent moments of clarity visited her then, as she sat looking out over the sand dunes. The reason behind the dread and even the fear was doubt. From this, all of the fear, panic, and anxiety were stemming. Doubt was at the core of it, doubt that she wouldn't make it.

Quite aware of her own mortality in this life, Jada was conscious that failure and death were distinct and real possibilities. She wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid of failing to fulfill her orders from the king, afraid of failing her assignment.

All these thoughts raced through Jada's mind and she finally had to make a focused effort to take a few steady breaths.

Easy now, don't get yourself worked up.

All the nervous energy that had been stirred up awoke a strong desire to get up and keep marching now, regardless of the blazing sun, which was as hot as ever in spite of the blowing sand.

No, you have to pace yourself. No panicking. You have to pace if you're going to have half a chance of making it through this place.

A vision then, of the king's city flashed through her mind. Its grand archways of the gate glowed in the sun, as did the entire city backed against impenetrable mountains. Lush, green hills rolled gently away from the city's feet and sitting to its east were turquoise waters stretching as far as the eye could see.

That's when she saw him, Eliadar. He stood just inside the grand archway looking at her.

Jada came back to the present, very aware that her heart was racing, and her muscles were tense. She did not know if that vision had meant to inspire or torment because she felt stronger than ever the impulse to get up and get moving.

She placed a hand over her eyes for a moment and then gently rubbed her forehead, which was beginning to ache.

No rash decisions, she told herself, folding her arms across her chest and closing her eyes. *Just try to rest.*

From that point on, Jada's dreams and slowly fading mind alternated between battling black beasts and Eliadar's city. It took a concerted effort from Jada not to be pulled in by either of these and not to completely despair, though a weight had settled over her heart and soul.

And yet this was only the beginning of what was in store in the Great Sands.