

## **“Parallel, Book Two: Beyond Strength & Sorrow”**

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## **Dedication**

To those:

- † lost in the forest of Life's confusion
- † stumbling through the seemingly endless darkness
- † drowning in Life's never-ending chaos and frustration
- † dragging themselves forward through their most trying circumstance and feeling like they're about to spend the last of their strength
- † who cannot drag themselves any further and can now only sit in hopelessness
- † who are shattered to their very core
- † with bloody knuckles and a very essence pierced and crippled by Life and your fellow humans
- † pleading to the heavens for understanding and help to only receive silence in response

To those accepting the darkness in all its soul-rotting power and the journey through it. To those accepting the pain in its season and its indescribable horribleness because pain means you're still alive, and to embrace Life in its fullness is to accept even the long spans of impenetrable blackness.

And to those taking on the most difficult and terrifying task of all: looking into the darkest areas of your being to seek out your most putrid qualities to accept them, seize them, and battle them every day. Such a war requires the trademarks of genuine strength: brutal honesty, humility, and perseverance beyond measure. And I can tell you with unwavering surety that such a war is best fought with the Lamb of Heaven beside you. What better warrior and counselor to have beside you than the One who conquered Death and is the only one with the power to destroy the body and the soul—or to save it.

This story is for you.

## **Prologue**

### Old Journal Entry by Jada Serbin:

*I cursed the day that I stepped onto the Great Sands. I 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, your 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 the 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 yet 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, though 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 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, and 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.*

*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 who, of what my “rescuer” was. From pitch black darkness to mere darkness I went. But the chains and the dark hole I spent time in were 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. 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 allows only the "common" hardships come to pass. Thus, it's difficult for these 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 in a sense.*

*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 all night wasn't unusual.

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 had 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 had maintained this rough formation ever since.

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 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 then looked at one another. Even though it was dark, they saw 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 drawn to it.

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 moving, moving in a way that made the darkest side of their already cruel nature burn to life.

They recognized then that this man was a friend and that his heart and spirit were 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 surrounding them.

"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 living, 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 life.”

With eerie suddenness, the wild gleam in his eyes went out and he straightened. “But I think you knew all 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 would 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 event, coupled with the winged shadows, confirmed that he was an ally.

“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, visions of demon officers, high commanders, and princes flashed before their eyes. One or two of these winged beings were known by the members of the group.

And the man they beheld 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 over 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 had 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 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 with 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. 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.”

The mere mention of bringing 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 caused this churning, not that they would have cared if they had 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 the race of orthros. They were dark in nature and appearance. 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 have made the perfect allies for the first rulers of darkness. However, they were unreliable in that they didn’t always kill enemy targets only. 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 who reveled 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."

After accepting the cup, the leader took a drink and then asked, "You're accompanying us?"

"Yes," replied Ambrose as the cup was passed 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 landed in the blaze, 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 they had all drank had been the blood from 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 to enhance the effect of the ritualistic agreement.

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 that 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 that streaked upwards. When it hit the hanging 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 lightning arcs danced through the clouds, and a hollow peal of thunder echoed over the land.

The kill order had gone out, and the men sensed 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 rapidly fade and die. 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. They also took possession of the hunting dogs, and man and beast together formed a lethal hunting force.

Ambrose already had a rough idea about 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 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 then settled over the edge of the labyrinth of hills. There came a flash from the area over which it hovered, and winged shadows suddenly took flight and headed straight east. Other shadows passed quickly over the ground and followed their airborne companions.*

*A howling of wolves rose from the dark, and the air in the night began shifting restlessly.*

*He looked eastward, ahead of the winged shadows, and spotted a lone figure standing atop one of the short, steep 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 filled their eyes, and they moved much faster than should be possible for mere mortal men. Murder was plainly in their expressions, and they each wielded a deadly weapon.*

*Black jackal-like dogs ran around and ahead of the human assassins. A wild light glinted in their black eyes. They snarled with malice as they flung themselves over the ground in eagerness to catch their prey.*

*When he looked towards Jada, he found himself standing close to her again. He shot a look at the hastily advancing shadows once more. He turned his attention to Jada 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. He looked about and spotted Jada's 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 and after Gabriel had taken over watch duty.

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 quickly!” said the elf as he made his way lightly down to the labyrinth floor.

As they hastily began throwing tack on their horses, Blake shot another look at Jada. She was just 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 knew, and from what he had 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 why she hadn’t sensed anything. In the past, she had always been extremely sensitive to dark and sinister movements or plots. Last night, however, she slept soundly, and even now she sensed nothing amiss.

It caused her to worry, especially when she saw that the horses were on edge. As the minutes ticked by, 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 studied the terrain. She had only been to this area once before, when she traversed here and first met the winged horses of the mountains. At that time, she 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 had spent the past five days

working their way through this lonely and forlorn place. The only living things they had seen thus far were a few sparrows. Some tracks of other beasts occasionally disturbed the ground, but these were old. As far as sounds, apart from the hooves of their horses, they heard the trickle of a waterfall, the rustle of a random strand of grass, and the mournful howl of the wind as it passed through the labyrinth.

A lonely and forlorn place, indeed.

Blake had said the other option besides the labyrinth was the ice tunnels through the mountains. He and Gabriel advised against that path. 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 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, which hid 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 pulled Jada's attention fully back to the situation at hand. She glanced back at Gabriel and saw him intently studying the hilltops.

As they approached an intersection between several sheer hills, the three horses slowed without being asked. The fog had thickened 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 don’t I have a stronger sense about 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 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 a black jackal creature leaping from one of the hills to attack Blake.

Jada’s arrow found its mark, and the jackal dropped to the ground a stride before Zohmar disappeared around a bend.

He 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.

Jada 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.

*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 smooth movement. The two arrows shot through the air, met in mid-flight, and broke each other.

*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 before bolting 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, the attempted murder of her horse was a different crime entirely.

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

The end of the line was approaching quickly when 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 to jump.

"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 landed heavily on the jackal.

Jada swung herself onto the hilltop where she was 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 and 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 of 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 then deflected the strike with equal speed. She followed it with a swipe from her second blade that the enemy blocked with a knife in his other hand.

The following swings were much like the opening moves, and every strike was executed at lightning speed. Sometimes, the rivals dodged out of the way. Other times, they deflected.

During this awkward dance, Jada recognized that she was outrageously outmatched in regard to power. While this wasn't unusual because of her slight build, she had yet to experience these kinds of abusive swings from an opponent. Even when she had dueled with the darkest commanders of Cassius, she never felt such violent shafts of pain shock up her arms.

Being up close and personal with 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.

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 please them just fine.

*They're more like reapers,* thought Jada, ducking as a sword that 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. 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 at the same moment. There was great power in both of their swings, and when the blades met, they sang 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 light on her feet and 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 his sword hilt with both hands, and 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.

The tall man put all the strength he had into his final swing.

Jada crossed her swords to create an "X" and blocked her enemy's blade. The power of the strike made her knees buckle.

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 to 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 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.

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 had 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 backward 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. She had never been out of Blake's sight, except when it had been her turn to scout ahead. Whenever she was gone scouting, his heart had been in his throat until she returned.

His dream just before waking didn't help his rising anxiety, and his gut presently told 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 him.

He climbed up the short cliff with one free hand and 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 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 would 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 and challenged 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 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 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 threw themselves at him.

Blake ducked and dodged forward. The two jackals passed over him and collided, dazing each other. 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 advanced boldly.

Upon seeing the expression in Blake's eyes and on his face, the orthros warrior 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 at 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.

He turned back his enemy's blade with ease 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 at Jada and saw that she was being forced into an awkward position, he knew he needed to end this fight 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 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 received at the hands of his enemy.

The light that was in and around the elf had kept his enemy unsteady. Whenever their blades met, Gabriel seemed to steal significant amounts of strength and energy from the orthros. This dark man had never met an opponent 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, whoever they may have been. But today that had all changed, and he knew his time was finally coming to an end.

Gabriel was certainly wielding the power and authority he had been given. Elves had many gifts. One of these 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 their power void, 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 a gust of wind caught and carried away.

There wasn't too much time to dwell on this. Gabriel looked at Jada again and saw that she was in a rather awkward position. 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 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 into 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 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. 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 noticed that the old, familiar fire of battle was still missing. Sometimes, it had stirred before a fight had even begun while during 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 simply 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 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 reversing. 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 size.

However, Ambrose had said that she was a traveler. 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.

Although 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 have sensed such a thing, how he could have known.

"It's in the eyes," said the assassin, sensing her question. He was leaning back uncomfortably far now but managed to shift himself a little to hold his ground for another few 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 for your God to take back the power He had once given you."

Then he laughed—until Jada abruptly straightened, pulled her crossed swords away from each other, and ensured he would 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 must be the leader*, she thought as she squared herself 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 mentally 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 several strikes across his legs.

The advantage ended there. Shimron's power was crippling, and every swing from the sword made Jada stagger. She did her best 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 the impact sent her backward through the air. She had only just landed when Shimron was upon her. She rolled sideways, and the axe 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 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 faced 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. This doubt had first been stirred by the words of the now deceased orthros warrior.

She disregarded it as her large rival approached and swung.

The duel commenced in much the same fashion as 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.

Neither of them made 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 the ground beneath both of their feet broke and fell away. They scrambled backward until the ground was again solid. They both glanced into the gaps in the hilltop and saw a dark chasm below.

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.

But 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 felt 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 with a hasty kick to the shin, which kept Shimron preoccupied long enough for her to return to her feet.

His annoyance was 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 had 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 grabbed hold of some moss and kept 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 numerous cracks had opened as she 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 drew 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 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 from the right. The elf lifted his hand and there came 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 in 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. Having such companions in a fight was a relief and a reward.

The three approached Shimron with confidence, each certain they would 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.

One of the gaps pursued Jada. 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, running and jumping for their lives, looked in Jada's direction as she landed on another hill. They next 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 collapsed 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 again. Ice coated the ground. As Jada tried to find another hill to climb or a way to 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 wrap around 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.

She refused to go to her knees. This was the most powerful she had ever felt these feelings, stronger even in the wake of her parents' deaths. However, this didn't come from within herself. That made a difference, all the difference.

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 had never been under the shadow of Cassius, she wagered that 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 the severe doubt lessened. She turned to face the deceiver, and when her eyes beheld Ambrose, she wasn't surprised.

Instead, she was mildly disappointed. She knew he had 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 knew 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 remembered but just as broad across the shoulder. His short gray hair had darkened instead of lightened, 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 was unable to counterstrike the following blows. The successive strikes forced her to scuffle and slide backward 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.

She became aware of what felt like ice wrapping around her wrist first before up into her hand. When Jada looked up, she watched as a dark bluish-purple bruise appeared in the shape 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 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 had fallen against and rolled across the ice and out of immediate reach.

Or so she thought. She scuttled to her feet before 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 filled 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 back 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 had seen brilliant flashes and strikes of light come from the likes of mighty elves. But for some reason, she never thought it possible that a human could 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."

Another shadow stepped into her peripheral. She looked down the passage to her right 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 find that the footing was better up here and no ice covered the hilltop.

Plenty of fog remained, 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 and deflected the black arrow 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 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 had 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 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, 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 pale and haggard complexion, looking as if death had just brushed against 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 had 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, they didn’t fall far, either. When the earth beneath them collapsed, they knew they had fallen but never remembered hitting the ground.

Getting to their feet, they looked around and saw that they had landed on the edge of a broad crater. Thick fog remained, 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, and he spun sharply as he drew his blade. Eyes sweeping 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 find Jada. His gut was now screaming 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 heard 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. 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 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 had 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 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 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 askew. 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.

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

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 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 had seen much in the history of his existence. He was also 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 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.

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 each other as they sheathed their weapons.

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

They 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 more assassins or jackals prowled about.

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. In fact, the sorcerers 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 that had seized her body intensified. 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 worsened. It felt like something was slowly squeezing her ribcage.

The worst part was her powerlessness 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 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, her 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 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 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 Eliadar and by 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 terrifying would issue forth from them.

But the two sorcerers were far from their concealed residence and their altar. They also 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? Of course, the realm was dying, the end was drawing near, and darkness would eventually have complete reign. Still, light 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 would 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 they said threatened to extinguish Jada’s spirit then and there and crush her battered soul. It all made sense, everything they said about warfare and the absence of the old fire. Then again, they knew they couldn’t ensnare her through feelings, so they 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. The instant that it did, the hot rage of the determined traveler burned through her in one last effort of resistance. 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...