

“Parallel, Book One, Part One: Genesis”

By: Kenya Gaede

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Dedication

This is for those going through a time of darkness and struggle, who have been broken and have yet to begin healing. While it doesn't help in the very moments of devastation, when your life lay in ruin around you, know that you're not alone. You aren't the only person going through or struggling with what you are. There are others who share camaraderie with you in your pain. You just haven't met them yet.

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

I write this not with invalidating placation or with airy words that often come from someone who shares my faith. I write from many years of life's grueling experiences. My knuckles have been bloodied in brawls with my demons. My heart has been devastated many times. My very soul has been repeatedly pierced. I have fallen beneath the shadow of human villains. I struggle with the absolute darkness of my mind. I have inquired and pleaded for understanding in many dark nights and received only silence in response.

Yet, I still attest to the faithfulness and goodness of my Friend in heaven. I can only do this because I truly believe that He is real.

When my body broke, He was there. When my mind splintered and my soul shattered, He was there. When I utterly hate my lack of understanding and my feebleness, when I strike against Him with bloodied fists and demand answers—He remains. He grants me peace and wisdom. When I have exhausted myself from fighting against Him, He still catches me. He soothes my exhausted and tattered soul. He shows me consistent friendship when I would have abandoned myself long ago. He repeatedly saves me from myself. He never changes and is the constant star that guides my life.

He is very real, and He will help. All you have to do is ask. He is mighty to save, and He is the one friend who will not leave you. You're not alone.

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

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

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

- Excerpt from Chapter 11 of *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis

Author's Note

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

There was no debate about keeping the beginning once I wrote it. I left it unaltered in the sole belief that there are many other people who have experienced a similar event and can relate (to the family drama—not the being transported to another dimension part). Yet, believe me when I say there is no malicious or vengeful intent behind it.

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

Please note the main character is a young adult and will mature gradually throughout the story. This doesn't happen overnight. Also, don't fall into the assumption that simply because a character thinks or does something that I agree or support them. As in any other story I write, the characters must make mistakes and have struggles. Otherwise, they're unrelatable.

If you're an adult who has passed through many seasons and you think that reading a book with a young adult as a main character will be irrelevant to you—I suggest otherwise. Why read this as an adult, even as one wiser and older? First, because things that happen in our youth affect and shape us as adults—especially unresolved or traumatic things. These alter our thoughts, perceptions, and worldview.

Second, I believe that it's far too easy to forget what it's like being young. We too easily forget what it's like experiencing those early seasons and situations. When we forget, we run the risk of losing empathy and sympathy with younger generations and with our own peers. When we lose those, we disconnect and shut others out. We become rigid and harsh.

On a random note: there is a city in this story called Asgarod. I did not simply take "Asgard" from Norse mythology and twist it a little. It never crossed my mind. I settled on Asgarod after hours of research and thinking. Truly, the pains of an author are many and great (drama intended).

You won't see every character, animal, or beast in the opening chapters. They are introduced little by little as the story unfolds.

This book is published in three parts due to the length of its content. Part I is about exploring the other dimension, character development, and setting up the plot there.

Part II shifts from character development and focuses more on the plot of the antagonists in both realms and seeing how the worlds affect each other.

Part III is the final climax.

On a final note, you'll notice I use directional bearings (north, south, etc.) and that sometimes these are capitalized. There's a difference between upper case and lower case in the story. The capitalized words (for example, the North) refer to an actual geographical area, such as the region where the dark king and high king live. Lowercase spellings refer to a general direction.

I had a great time writing this story. As always, I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Prologue

Excerpt from an old journal entry by Jada Serbin:

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

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

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

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

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

How I prayed to God that I wished I hadn't had to live with my relatives after the disappearance. I knew I could've survived on my own. I knew the way of the woods and mountains, and growing up on a ranch gave me a work ethic and broad range of skills.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a short time, my silence was due to fear of opening my mouth in front of my relatives. I was afraid my words would be twisted and used against me in some way, stored away to be brought up and manipulated during an ambush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

It Begins

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

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

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

Maybe anyone else would have been excited and more than ready for a break. She wasn't. Until that day, Jada hadn't realized how much of an escape school had been for her. She had preferred coping as an outcast during the week over the freedom of weekends. Why? Because weekends and holidays meant she had to be home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One day years ago, they had started talking and became instant friends. Though she would never tell him, Zander was the one who kept her sane in light of her torment, and he kept her from completely withdrawing into herself.

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

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

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

"Will do," replied Jada to Zander.

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

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

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

The day was unsettled by a late spring storm brewing in the mountains. They sat off her left shoulder to the west and ran parallel to the road for miles. Snow had yet to melt from the highest peaks, and the forested ridges below were carpeted with spruce and aspen. The trees stood erect along many vast fields that had been cleared by farmers.

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

The clouds were roiling in shades of dark grays and blues, and the atmosphere felt heavy.

It was during weather like this when she often wondered if something sinister was brewing, like darkness was moving or there was about to be some clash between Good and Evil. Jada knew that sometimes it was merely the result of her hyperactive imagination.

Other times, like in that instance, she had a sense of foreboding as if something bad was about to happen. She wouldn't have to wait much longer to understand that the rising dread tightening her stomach wasn't the result of her creative mind.

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

She finally wrestled the screen door open and then the main door. The wind sucked it shut with a loud *bang* before she had a chance to stop it.

"Jada..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While Jada didn't intentionally eavesdrop on peoples' discussions, she did have a knack for accidentally overhearing things. She called it "being in the wrong place at the right time." More often than not, she thought it was a curse. She thought it again as she started down the stairs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you decided on a college or university, yet?” asked her aunt.

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

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

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

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

Jada ignored the rest of the lecture that she received countless times in a given week.

This was also another one of those details she had learned while staying with her tormentors: in the eyes of some relatives, until a person acquired a four-year degree, they were worthless and unintelligent. While Jada acknowledged people with a degree sometimes earned more than those who didn't, that didn't mean they were worth any less or more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Excuse me?” she asked, managing to keep her tone neutral.

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

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

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

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

That was when Jada understood what was really happening.

Oh, she thought as she felt her throat tighten. This is one of those 'attack my character' occasions.

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

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

The most important reason of all was she wanted to grow closer to the one true God. Thus, Jada's intentions, the way she lived, and the way she conducted herself came from pure motives. Deceit and masking her intentions or motives never crossed her mind. What someone saw of or heard from her was "what you got."

Thus, when someone jabbed at her and told her she couldn't possibly want to keep living as she was, or accused her of faking her right conduct, it cut her straight to the heart. It was the best way to land a devastating strike that left her instantly crippled.

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

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

This is a nightmare come to life, thought Jada.

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

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

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

She was right and not misperceiving. She had never had many friends. Such situations allowed those like her long stretches of alone time to think about people and life. Although loneliness was the price, wisdom and insight were commonly reaped as the reward, even in youth. Now as a late teen, she could accurately discern a person's intentions and what was behind their words.

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

Why do I matter? Why do they resent me so much?

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

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

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

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

Jada just stared. Am I actually hearing this?

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

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

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

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

Appetite completely gone, she put away the bread and peanut butter. Her tormentors continued speaking to her, but she finally managed to tune them out.

Jada returned to her room and carefully shut the door. Then she paced about the room and tried to compose herself.

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

But both angry and wounded, the tears came anyway.

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

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

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

After throwing on a change of clothes, Jada grabbed her heavy-duty pocketknife, jumped into her good hiking boots, and put on her coat. She quietly slid open one of the windows, stepped onto the roof, and shut the window.

The main floor on that side of the house was her aunt and uncle's room, and they usually kept the blinds shut. Therefore, no one would see her.

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

Last summer, she begun stashing things in a hideout in the woods. Her good backpack and other essential gear were there. She had also thought out several possible plans for seeking work and lodging.

Presently, though, it was all about escaping.

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

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

A mile out, Jada reached her gear stash, well-hidden in a small rock alcove. She grabbed her backpack and started along a stony path that would take her to her secondary stash. That one held her heavy duty gear, mainly axes, extra rope, and camping equipment, all things that she had bought with *her* hard-earned cash. Her dad's hunting rifle was also there with an abundance of ammo.

Halfway there, Jada stopped on a rocky flat near treeline as heavy mist began falling from the clouds. She wasn't out of shape by any means, but she had to stop. Never before had she been in such emotional anguish that she felt physical pain.

She collapsed to her knees and doubled over, hitching several breaths. Her chest ached from pain that was beyond words, and the wounds inflicted were now beyond bringing more tears.

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

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

There, meandering towards her, came a large black bear.

Though not nearly as big as his brown counterparts, she would rather deal with one of them than this guy. A brownie that charged might be bluffing. But if a black bear attacked, good luck.

Why can't I just be left alone?

Jada flicked the knife blade open with her thumb and slowly began backing away. There weren't any nearby trees; the terrain was sheer rock on both sides of the broad path.

She watched the bear in her peripheral and thought maybe he would check out her backpack first.

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

The bear wasn't interested in the gear. He continued straight for Jada, lowered his head, and quickened his pace.

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

Close behind came the sound of claws scrambling over rock and huffing breath growing louder.

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

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

Above, the bear huffed and snorted in disgust. It began weaving back and forth, attempting to find a way to get to her.

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

Bear and rocks slid right for Jada.

She sprinted across the short shelf and launched herself for a large rock jutting out from the ridge.

She didn't jump soon enough. Rocks brushed past her, and the bear caught her in the legs. It turned her, and she slammed her side against the rock she had jumped for. She started to slide and grappled along the rock before her right hand found a handhold.

For only a second. The rock broke beneath her fingers, and she slid over the edge. Then Jada closed her eyes as she fell...

Ω Ω Ω

It took some seconds to realize that she hadn't hit the ground or any trees. The daylight was also brighter.

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

She remained frozen as panic-induced sweat broke out on her forehead. *I really have lost my mind.*

Before she could think anything else, a black arrow shot out of the trees and sank into the ground beside her.

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

Arrows whistled past, and Jada sprinted down and along a shallow creek. Behind her came the sound of heavy footfalls and the thumping of horses' hooves.

More shouts, answered occasionally by an unearthly bellow.

Of all the places my insane brain could bring me, why here in the middle of danger, she wondered as she stumbled on the uneven rocks. Or maybe this is just a dream.

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

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

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

Still in a confused and slightly unsteady state, her foot caught a rock. She tripped and fell backward into the stream.

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

Jada was still sitting in ankle-deep water when soldiers came swiftly on foot and horseback. At this moment, she became fully aware of the coldness of the water, and it pulled her from her initial shock.

She raised her right hand from the stream and watched the clear water run from her palm. Something about the vividness of her surroundings and the coherent string of events in the past minute made her realize, *This...isn't a dream. How is that possible?*

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

Akin¹, leader of the band, thought her a rather pitiful sight from where he was atop his stately bay horse.

There she sat, a willow wisp of a young woman. Although she was of lean muscle type, he thought her a bit too thin. The first thought that came to mind was that she had been neglected for some time, especially by the trace hollowness in her cheek.

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

¹ *Akin is pronounced like A-kin or eh-kin.*

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

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

A distinct sharpness marked his tone. He couldn't very well pick and choose which strangers he would be nice to. Consistency and impartiality were important. Besides, he couldn't have his companions think he was soft or so drawn to this unknown person. He would never hear the end of it. As such, he had to keep up appearances.

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

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

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

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

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

Jada shivered. The water in the creek was exceptionally cold. Her head was also beginning to ache as well as her ribs from slamming into that rock on the ridge.

That's when she and Akin noticed his bay horse looking at her keenly. It was strange. She had never sensed such intelligence in an equine before. It was as if he was looking right into her.

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

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

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

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

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

That's when a big black and yellow butterfly appeared. It fluttered about in front of her a moment before gently landing on her bound hands. It rested there a couple of seconds, opening

and closing its wings. Then, taking flight again, it performed one more circle overhead before floating gracefully away.

The sorrel whickered.

Another bay horse, on Jada's other side, answered.

She darted a look from one horse to the other, both of which stared at her.

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

A sharp snort came from Akin's horse. Pinning its ears, it bared its teeth at the soldier who had pushed her.

The soldier backed away.

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

Jada had spent nearly her entire life around horses, so she spoke horse. At the moment, though, she was too disoriented to begin figuring out what was happening.

What she didn't know was that the horse was responding to Akin. In this realm, they were exceptionally sensitive to their rider's demeanor, mood, and mindset. When the soldier shoved Jada, Akin's horse had sensed his rider's sudden wrath at the gesture towards the stranger. It then reacted accordingly.

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

Now completely dejected and cold, she was too shy and withdrawn to meet his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jada involuntarily shrank back under that astute gaze.

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

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

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

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

Merida stepped to Jada's side.

There stood a tall and strong man, someone Jada instantly recognized as an authority figure. One other, slightly younger man stood beside him.

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are you from?"

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

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

“I’m sorry? The what?”

“We’ve had some strange people coming and going lately,” he said. “And strange things have been happening.”

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

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

Oh wow, thought Jada. Thanks for that.

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

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

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

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

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

He also saw just how deep her torment and brokenness ran.

Here she was, a young woman who had been flying from some great terror and who had been dropped into a strange world she had never known. A fair and innocent child blessed with wisdom beyond her years—or cursed with it, depending on how one looked at it.

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

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

“I can see that,” replied Jordan, rubbing his stubbly chin thoughtfully. Any aggression was long gone and replaced with sympathy.

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

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

In her shocked and dazed state, Jada didn't understand that it was an announcement. A new traveler had arrived and news of her coming would quickly spread. In mere days, word would cross the forests of the South, into the wilds of the West, hills of the East, and across countless leagues to the high king of the North.

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

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

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

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

The soldier and his companions glanced at Jada for a long moment.

Any hostility towards her on behalf of the others had been replaced with curiosity, except for Akin. He maintained a highly suspicious expression and said nothing as he turned his bay steed.

The others followed.

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

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

They walked a short distance up the broad, dirt path to the house Merida had come from. It sat at the end of the main road and atop a draw. The front and rear of it faced east and west to catch the sunrise and sunset, though dusk had cast everything into cool shadow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now, are you hungry?"

Jada shook her head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She had also forgotten how much she missed her mom.

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

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

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

“Merida?”

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

But in that second, she understood: it was as if she was grieving over the loss of someone dear. She guessed that was what happened when someone has been so badly wounded by people they loved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Genesis

Chickadees sang happily outside, and sunlight made the curtains on the east side of the room glow.

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

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

The relentless personal attacks had created an increasing burden on Jada's shoulders and distressed her soul beyond words. But that weight had been lifted, and her soul calmed. She hadn't realized the depths of her agony until that moment, with all the turmoil finally lifted. She felt like her soul could breathe for the first time in years.

After making the bed, she changed into the clothes Merida had lent her. The pants fit like jeans but were made of a comfortable, somewhat loose-fitting material. As for the shirt, it was like any other plain shirt. Oddly enough, they fit her perfectly, and she wondered if Merida had had kids at one time.

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

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

Both froze like deer in headlights. Jordan had a stack of firewood balanced on one arm and held an axe in his other hand.

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

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

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

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

“Jada,” she replied as she hesitantly shook it.

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

“Glad to see my husband has remembered his manners,” said a familiar voice behind Jada.

“I always mind my manners,” replied Jordan, smile tugging at his mouth as Merida stepped beside Jada. She raised her eyebrows at her husband, as if to ask “is that so?” though there was no missing the sparkle in her own eyes as she regarded him.

Husband and wife held each other’s gazes a moment before both broke into grins.

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

“I apologize about yesterday,” continued Jordan, looking at Jada. “That was the closest an attack squad has come to the Western Village in some time. It made everyone a bit edgy.”

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

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

She walked with elegance into the kitchen and removed a plate of food from a stone oven. She set it on the little counter and slid it toward Jada.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jada blushed.

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

She apologized for him, but her eyes were laughing.

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

She stepped into the bathroom and washed her hands. When she glanced into the mirror over the sink, she pulled in a sharp breath. Her eyes were no longer green. They were a deep turquoise.

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

"What's wrong?" asked Merida, alarmed as she appeared in the doorway.

"My eyes," blurted Jada. "They used to be green."

That knowing smile returned to Merida's face. "I will explain everything during our ride."

"Ride?" asked Jada, perking up.

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

Needless to say, Jada inhaled her breakfast then hopped into her hiking boots.

Not the best for riding, she assessed, but it's what I've got right now.

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

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

Jada stumbled once or twice as she looked around with wide eyes. She was amazed at the vividness of the colors, the greens in the grass, the leaves of the trees, and even the browns of the bark on the pines. One would think she had never used her eyes before and was seeing everything for the first time.

The air was clear and sharp, shocking the lungs. A cool breeze brought earthy scents, and above the treetops stretched an impossibly blue sky.

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

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

Jada looked at her. Merida and Jordan hadn't been surprised to see her and hadn't thought her clothing weird. Not that it differed much from theirs, though. It simply seemed they knew she wasn't from here and that was normal.

"Yes."

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

Genesis, thought Jada, before asking, “And people like me just showing up isn’t...unusual?”

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

“Oh, thank God,” breathed Jada. She wouldn’t have to worry about them thinking her an alien.

Merida laughed, and the breeze caught the fair sound and carried it away.

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

That was one of the first things Jada had noticed: the guest bathroom had running water. It wasn’t exactly hot. Still, a flushing toilet and water in the sink was never something she had taken for granted. She had also found an extra toothbrush in the cupboard under the sink.

“Aye, they did,” answered Merida. “We already had a basic knowledge about many things, but they taught us much more. We’ve learned skills in the fields of medicine, science, and mechanics. You’ll find that most people here have a basic knowledge of these things.”

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

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

A whinny answered, followed by the sound of cantering hooves. Moments later, they appeared out of the trees, a pair of horses, one fiery sorrel and one faded gray.

They stopped a few strides from Merida and Jada and snorted.

“This is Astor²,” said Merida, pointing to the red horse first. “And Balo³, two of our horses. They are faithful and loyal creatures, and as you’ve already seen, they have keen insight and understanding.”

Astor bobbed his head.

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

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

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

² In this story, Astor is pronounced like as-tore, with emphasis on the “or” sound.

³ Balo is pronounced like bah-low.

Merida smiled. "You've been in my dreams a lot lately. But more about that later. Come!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ahead, a massive pine lay across the trail, but their mounts neither slowed nor faltered in stride. Instead, they pricked up their ears and charged straight for it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds charming," she muttered. "Gath squads? Is that what I landed in the middle of?"

"Yes," answered Merida and gazed into the distance. "Gilead is nothing compared to the real threat. Residing to the far northwest, in a diseased land of desolation, is the dark king known as Cassius⁴. From his borders come all things vile, though he himself isn't permitted to go beyond the edges of his territory. That doesn't stop him or his demonic general from sending out raiding parties to harass and attack towns."

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

"Gath? Like...Goliath of Gath? The Philistine?"

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

Astor whickered, and Merida stroked his mane.

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

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

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

⁴ The name Cassius in this story is pronounced like Cassy-us, not Cash-us.

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

A trace smile appeared on Merida's mouth. "You believe in the reality of spiritual warfare and the workings of angels and demons. From what I know of your realm, you rarely see either, though believers like you understand to an extent what goes on in the unseen. You don't see it, but you see the effects of the warring Good and Evil. Sometimes, you're even the target of a direct attack."

She gave an upward nod of her head towards the North, and Jada followed her gaze to the far horizon. "Here we see evil in solid form and are directly involved in the fight. The conflict is very tangible. That's why your eyes are a different color here: you're really using them and seeing things as they truly are. The veil between what is seen and unseen is thinner."

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

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

"Our king," said Merida fondly. "The high ruler of all."

For some reason, the mere mention of him sent a thrill of excitement through Jada's soul and made her heart pound. It didn't make any sense because all she knew about him was that he was the high king. Yet, there was something in the title or about him that her spirit immediately recognized. It longed to go see him. That desire gave her a clue as to who he might be.

"When the time is right," continued Merida, "you will see him."

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

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

As she had matured in her faith and relationship with the living God, she learned He only revealed segments of His plans like pieces of a puzzle.

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

She could also tell that Jada was extremely intelligent judging by her expression as she pondered Merida's words. Or, perhaps, describing her as attentive and extremely curious about everything around her would be more accurate.

Yet, something more filled her. There was a certain light and life about Jada that surrounded those who belonged to the High One enthroned in Heaven. She was rooted firmly in her faith and would not be easily shaken by any attack or plot by the enemy. This was key and would prove vital in the days ahead.

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

Without her bidding, a scene bloomed in Merida's mind. The dull, tattered rags covering Jada melted away to reveal a confident warrior, strong and armed with weapons of the realm. Each of the following scenes played over the span of several seconds before changing.

She saw what Jada was and would become. She saw the kindness and compassion that formed the foundation of the girl's being. She saw her wield her weapons skillfully and laugh in the faces of the cruelest enemies.

The final scene flooded Merida with warmth and peace. Jada walked along a path in a pale gray surrounding. As she walked, bright sunlight shone on her briefly before the light was choked out by a howling black tempest. Wind and rain lashed at her mercilessly for a moment, then the sun returned. Regardless of the weather of life, she stayed on the path, and in sun or storm, she kept her arm outstretched, as if reaching for someone or something.

A hand then gently took Jada's. She watched as the girl and a man, who shone like the sun itself, walked through a wood. They spoke until the wood and the man faded, and she returned to walking alone on the path.

She understood. Jada knew the One Merida had known for many years. Jada consistently sought His companionship in both the peaceful seasons and the hardships of life. She would become a mighty little soldier who would inspire many others to fight in the looming war. However, she would turn even more enemy back with her blade and bow.

And she, Merida, had been given charge over this abused young woman.

Very well, thought the woman. *May I be successful in this task.*

An "mmm" from Merida broke Jada from her thoughts. She looked at the noble warrior astride the red horse and saw her far-seeing gaze studying her. Jada quickly lowered her eyes to Balo's mane.

"Poor, faithful soul," murmured Merida quietly before finally answering Jada's question, "I don't know. Maybe he will, maybe he won't. Most likely, as you train and spend more time here, you'll discover why you were brought to this dimension. In the immediate future, I will take you to Halden, one of the two wisest counselors our world has ever known. He resides in a city southeast of here, where he advises the people. Perhaps he will be graced with insight about you."

Silence again fell over the conversation as Jada's mind slid into the chasm of contemplation. She wondered what she was doing here and what her purpose was. This all felt like a dream, not that she wanted to leave and go back home, not in the slightest.

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

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

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

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

Merida again studied Jada but out of the corner of her eye this time. Another clearer vision came to her.

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

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

The further she had run and the more she was harassed, the more transparent Jada had become. Now, as she sat doubled over, she was easier to see through. She had been beaten down until she was hollow, a wisp of mist that threatened to blow away in the wind and simply disappear completely.

When Jada glanced at Merida again, she saw the woman's face soften with sadness.

"You've been tormented for a long time by people you trusted," she said quietly, returning her eyes to the horizon.

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

That's a quick way to wear out your welcome, ran a thought through her mind. *Don't go attention-seeking, either, or be overdramatic. That will make them tired of you even faster.*

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

"No," said Merida gently, placing a hand on her arm to get her attention. Her expression hardened as she looked through Jada.

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

Fear jumped up Jada's throat and made her heart start hammering. "How did you—"

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

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

Jada's chest tightened. For reasons she didn't know, the thought of being known or perceived by another person was terrifying.

"You know about my parents?" she asked, voice becoming strained. "Do you know where they are and if they're alright?"

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone in recent history had lashed out viciously, belittled, and torn her down to the point where she truly believed she was worthless and couldn't do anything right. Her initial aspirations and desires were meaningless and wrong, so she might as well forget them. She would never amount to anything. Jada feared the harsh words Merida would speak before throwing her out.

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

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

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

"Poor child," said Merida quietly. "But it's okay. One thing at a time. I will show you that you can trust me and my husband."

Then she smiled, and the genuine warmth of the expression put Jada's fear to flight. "Jordan's already quite taken with you, though he'll never say it. You know how men are..."

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

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

Merida chuckled and rubbed the grey's forehead.

Astor snorted and swished his tail.

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s your sign,” whispered Merida, still smiling. “How Elohim encourages you and reminds you He’s with you.”

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

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

Balo snorted suddenly, spun a one-eighty, and reared as a black arrow missed him and Jada by inches. Fortunately, she had a sense of balance, was expecting an explosion of movement, and wasn’t unseated.

Balo’s front hooves hadn’t yet returned to the ground when he launched into a gallop like a racehorse out of the starting gate. When they reached the forest, they heard Astor thundering up behind them.

The trees blurred by as Balo and Jada flew between them.

Astor, ears pinned, and Merida pulled even with them and twenty feet to the left.

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

Jada captured glimpses of it through the trees. It looked like some kind of winged cat. Whatever it was equaled the size of a young lioness and was covered with short, rich golden fur.

Jada didn’t have time to study it further. Balo dropped down the ridge and swept around to the south and into the sunlight. He cleared a shallow stream in a single bound, charged up a shallow rise, and then down the other, much steeper side.

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

Ahead, the ground leveled out for six strides then dropped abruptly.

“Oh, uh...”

“Keep going, Jada!” called Merida, somewhere behind them.

I’m going to die, thought Jada before looking behind her again.

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

Balo maintained his speed. When they reached the edge of the drop-off, several black arrows whistled past. The grey horse collected his hindquarters and gave such a leap that Jada

wondered if he was a descendent of Pegasus. The ground dropped away, and she understood why he had put such effort into his jump.

Lying in wait were three more gath.

This is going to hurt, thought Jada as Balo prepared for landing. The touchdown wasn't as punishing as she had anticipated but was worthy of the thought, *Ow*.

He cut sharply left as more arrows sank into the trees behind him and his rider.

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

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

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

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

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

Man, they're ugly.

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

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

When she was little, she had followed her dad around the woods with a small hatchet. As she grew older, she graduated to a double-headed axe and learned to wield it expertly.

Tomahawk can't be too different, she thought.

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

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

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

They swept around the bend in the hill and spotted another rider.

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

Below, riders raced in and out of the trees, galloping past one another or drawing the attention of an enemy so a comrade could line up a shot. It was like a well-choreographed, fast-paced dance. Loosing their arrows with great skill, not a single horseman missed his target.

The gath squad diminished quickly, and the survivors spread out and ran in different directions. All except the commander, a huge, ugly brute. He ducked and dodged several arrows as a rider atop a blood bay galloped towards him.

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

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

The gath commander brought his left arm around to swing with the tomahawk first, but an arrow sank into his side before he completed the move. The force spun and dropped him to a knee as the horseman fell upon him. With a single swing of his sword, the rider struck and killed the commander.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jada searched the forest ahead and spotted several dark running forms.

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

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

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

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

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

The creature bared its yellow teeth at them.

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

As she did so, Balo slid on his haunches and swung sideways, using his own body to help her gain torque for the throw.

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

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

"Not bad," he said in passing and with a teasing tone, "for a girl."

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

She had enjoyed charging into the fray and galloping alone atop the ridge. That feeling was gone now in the presence of another person. She was highly untrusting and saw people generally as rivals. Thus, her defensive mood remained extremely high.

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

There was no aggression on his face at all, and his eyes danced. He was like a puppy excited to play with the new arrival who had come from a neglected home and wasn't interested in anything.

Jada, however, didn't have to give a single word in response. Balo sensed his rider's tension and mood and took it upon himself to answer for her.

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

When Balo had first gazed upon the small human now sitting on his back, he hadn't seen her as frail. He saw her as a shining little warrior who already bore scars from previous abuse and torment.

While she was understandably a little afraid and unsettled by her new surroundings, there was something unique about her. In the furthest depths of her created being, the grey horse saw that she was a loner type, a maverick.

She also loved horses and understood them. That was good enough for Balo. His loyalty to Jada was immediately sealed, to the death, if need be.

Pinning his ears, Balo half-reared and sounded a warning squeal. He then lifted his head and took a couple of aggressive steps toward the young man and his horse.

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

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

Jada wished she could disappear as the others looked from her to the fallen gath nearby.

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

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

Jada looked around for the one who had spoken. It sounded like it had come from overhead.

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

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

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

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

In the meantime, Jada was trying to grasp the fact that the creature was speaking.

He glanced at her with gold eyes then did a double-take.

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

Jada's mouth went dry again as anxiety coiled around her.

Balo whickered quietly and craned his neck around to touch his nose to her boot in a show of encouragement.

“Allow me to introduce Icarus,” said Merida to Jada, “captain of the stellars, as we call them. We’ve been friends and allies since the beginning of time.”

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

“Careful, captain,” smiled Merida.

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

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

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

Nearly a minute passed before Jada cleared her throat and tried to shift backward.

Stifled chuckles went around the group.

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

Icarus kept up his unblinking stare for a few more awkward seconds before looking at Merida.

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

Merida lifted her eyebrows over being given an order.

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

The stellar stopped and looked over his shoulder. “There’s something about this one or...perhaps...her arrival signifies an important change on the horizon. Either way, the king himself asked me to watch out for someone like her.”

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

Many eyes returned to her, and her slouch deepened.

She wanted Balo to back up a few steps. Unfortunately for her, he stubbornly refused and switched his tail instead.

More chuckles.

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

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

"Do...do you have any idea about why I'm here?"

Icarus regarded her with those beautiful eyes then nodded at the gath she had slain. "My guess is that it has something to do with that. We need all the warriors we can find."

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

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

"No, but I'm—"

With one burst from his wings, Icarus shot into the air. His two companions followed and, in the blink of an eye, they disappeared through the treetops.

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

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

"No, only some," she replied, "but even if they can't, you will find you can easily read a creature's intentions. Just as our horses are extremely perceptive, you and I can immediately tell whether an animal is friend or foe. Not all creatures are on the side of our king. Some work for or are under the influence of Cassius."

The pair rode along silently for a moment and watched the branches of the pines above sway in the breeze.

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

What's next, she thought. Elves?

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

Merida laughed heartily, and the sound made Jada smile. "In time, you'll acquire those skills, too, if you *want* to train. Nearly every day our young warriors are doing something, archery, tracking, hunting. The four towns in this region including the Western Village are considered 'warrior towns,' meaning our expertise is in combat, both on foot and mounted. We're also known

for our horses, and armed forces from across the entire realm come to buy young steeds. Anyway, I don't doubt you would pick up combat training quickly. You have a natural hand for it, I think."

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

"Battle is tiring until you're conditioned for it," remarked Merida as they found a real path and made their way down it. "You're probably ready for lunch and a nap."

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

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

Jada's brain broke. "What?"

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

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

"And I know you'll pick up regular chores just by watching Jordan and me. But...no one's saying you have to do anything. Like I said, give yourself time to heal a little and give me a chance to prove to you that you can trust me. I hope you'll soon see I don't help other people because I expect compensation. I believe those who do need to reevaluate their motives and reset their priorities."

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

"You speak truly, Jada."

The sound of hooves approached from behind. To Jada's dismay, the young man on the dark horse pulled up beside her.

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

"Jada," she replied, gripping his hand.

"Strong, calloused hands," he observed, before looking over at Merida with his playful expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Needing no urging from his rider, Balo jumped after his companion, and they raced back home.

Chapter 3

A Spot of Trouble

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

Steeling herself, she opened her eyes...and breathed a sigh of relief. She was still in Merida's spare bedroom. She did, however, wonder if she could ever go back to the other realm. Was she stuck here forever? She wasn't too worried.

Sitting up, Jada saw the edges of the curtains holding the faintest glow around them.

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

Flinging her legs over the bedside, she quietly walked to the window and swept back the curtain. The weak natural light allowed her to identify Connor and a girl beside him.

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

After blinking a few times, she unlocked and slid open the window.

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

“Oh, uh...sure,” replied Jada hesitantly.

“Great. Hurry up, then.”

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

She sent Jada a big smile before disappearing after Connor.

Anxiety over meeting a group of strangers settled in her stomach. She could barely keep her hands from shaking as she changed.

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

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

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

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

Connor, the girl, and two others were waiting when Jada slipped out the front door. They had various weapons such as swords, bows and quivers of arrows, knives, and tomahawks.

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

Thank goodness for that. Children terrified her.

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

The group spoke briefly about the latest news reported by the night patrols. Units of warriors rotated on night watch and roamed the territory’s borders. Recently, they began reporting an increased presence of gath, chimera, and dark soldiers. They had also discovered numerous, recently-deserted enemy camps.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They soon left the path and dropped down the back side of the ridge. The others spread out and flanked Connor's position. Jada hung back half a dozen strides and observed how they moved with both speed and incredible stealth through the trees and brush. She hoped those were skills she would eventually acquire.

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

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

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

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

"You sound like a drunken bear crashing through the woods, Namor⁵," said Connor, who had an arrow set on his bowstring.

"And I hope you've brushed up on your archery skills since our last meeting," came a fair and clear response before another group of young adults emerged from the trees. "Otherwise, you stringing a bow isn't much of a threat."

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

What's more, everyone besides her had a legitimate weapon. She only had a pocketknife.

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

Well, technically five in Connor's group including Jada. But she doubted that she would be much help in a fight.

⁵ *Namor is pronounced like Nay-more or Neigh-more.*

"And I wonder how the likes of you don't freeze during winter, Gabriel," quipped Connor, "since you can't swing an axe, let alone hold one properly."

As the two leaders stood glaring at each other, Jada realized that Gabriel was an elf. He stood taller and leaner than Connor. Skin fair and clean, his eyes were hazel-green and bright with life. His blond hair was kept short, unlike what Jada had always seen in the movies back home.

Okay, so yesterday, she thought, when I thought 'what's next? Elves?' I'd only meant that as a sort of joke.

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

Upon studying those accompanying Gabriel, she counted two more elves. The remaining pair were of men.

The young man farthest from Jada held her attention. He was taller than Gabriel and strong, though not in a beefy sense. He stood wider across the shoulder and in the chest compared to his elven companion. His hair was such a dark brown it looked almost black, and he kept it short and out of his eyes, which were the color of the sea.

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

Somehow, there was something markedly different about him. She guessed he was about twenty. He seemed older than that, though it didn't show itself physically. Perhaps it had to do with the depth of the expression in his eyes, like one who has seen many things in his young life.

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

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

Then they laughed.

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

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

"You too, huh?"

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

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

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

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

The elf looked back to Jada. “Blake is from your realm. Moved here about ten years ago.”

He extended his hand. “I’m Gabriel.”

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

Namor lived in the Western Village, but he had stayed overnight in another town.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jada had pegged Namor as an arrogant brute from the second she saw him. She knew the sort because she had been bullied at school in her earlier years.

For some reason, she wasn’t intimidated this time. Like the need and desire to charge after the fleeing gath yesterday, she couldn’t explain what she was feeling now or why. Or perhaps, more accurately, she couldn’t explain what she *wasn’t* feeling, and that was fear.

Jada scowled as she met Namor’s gaze. “Maybe I will.”

That drew a visible reaction. He unfolded his arms and straightened to his full height, which was unimpressive. He then walked towards Jada as his muscles hardened, and a temper gleamed in his eyes.

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

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

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

Connor prepared to intervene. Jada was still quite new, and therefore, protection was merited. He also couldn't have a potential warrior injured straight away.

Namor had always been a bit of a brute until people showed they could handle themselves or they pushed back hard enough to the point he respected them.

Connor stopped when Gabriel raised his hand a little, and he saw the faint smile on the elf's face. Connor had known Gabriel for years. Like many of his kind, Gabriel proved he held profound insight.

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

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

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

While people in this realm were generally keen and had great discernment, travelers possessed this gift tenfold because of their purpose.

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

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

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

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

His own thought surprised him even as he subtly rested his hand on the hilt of the knife at his thigh.

Jada, meanwhile, noted Blake move closer behind Namor and saw him rest his hand on a knife. She had once heard that chivalry wasn't dead; it was just on life support. Yet, with Namor towering over her, that wasn't encouraging.

Whatever, she thought, as stubborn defiance awoke inside her. I can take care of myself.

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

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

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

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

Connor wheezed a laugh and had to turn away.

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

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

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

"Oh yeah, we haven't been to the river lately," piped Reagan, the girl who had been with Connor at Jada's window.

She was cute and three years younger than Jada. She sported brown hair, freckles, and hazel-brown eyes that looked upon life with the joy that comes from innocence.

She was already taken with Jada, a tall, slender, and gorgeous fighter-type. Reagan already saw the warrior Jada would become, and the traveler was already a queen in her eyes. No, higher than a queen, if there was such a thing.

Everyone turned, jumped the stream, and jogged up the far hillside. Jada brought up the rear again.

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

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

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

It felt good to Jada to run through the woods. She felt at home and was sure-footed, naturally mindful of rocks and tree roots hidden by moss or brush. The cool morning air was a bonus and kept them from sweating.

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

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

Connor, however, was prepared.

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

Other skirmishes started simultaneously, though Jada stayed on the edge of the action. She wanted to play and join in the fun but didn't have a real weapon. Plus, she was afraid of making a complete idiot out of herself.

Something touched her arm, and she jumped.

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

Jada followed her through the trees and toward another smaller clearing. Again, she was amazed at the silence with which Ida moved.

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

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

"Yeah, I follow."

They reached the clearing and stopped. Wooden targets stood at various distances and were littered with holes and divots. The ends of arrows stuck out of the grass.

In a fluid movement, Ida drew an arrow from the quiver across her back. She had barely set it on the string and drawn back before releasing it. The arrow found its mark dead center in the target.

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

"Uh, already?" asked Jada.

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

Feeling rather self-conscious, Jada took the arrow and set it on the string. Drawing back required more effort than it looked. Fortunately, all those hours of doing chores and tossing hay bales and feed bags paid off.

After taking several steady breaths, she took one more, exhaled halfway, and held it. Then she gently released the arrow.

It departed somewhat lethargically from the string, somehow managed to clip the very top of the target, and pirouetted to the right in a rather amusing fashion.

Jada lowered the bow with a shoulder slouch and reported, "That's...not how I pictured that happening."

Ida snorted and waved off the remark. "Where was your point of focus?"

"Arrow tip."

"Try focusing on the target. That can help your body naturally align itself. And draw farther back. Your release is perfect, though: quiet and gentle."

Fifteen minutes later, Jada's arrows began consistently landing near the target's center.

When she finally lowered the bow again, Ida nodded. "Excellent. You're someone naturally skilled with working with their hands. Now, note how much time it took for the arrow to reach the target from this distance and with how far back you drew. The time between the release and the arrow reaching the target isn't always instantaneous. Longer bows will reach you farther targets though at a slower speed. Shorter bows are good for shorter distances and can pierce a semi-close target with incredible speed due to the increased string tension."

"I understand," answered Jada, trying not to feel discouraged. She could only imagine how much practice she needed with various types of bows before being able to intuitively shoot at different distances.

Like many perfectionists, she automatically forgot to take a moment and be proud of her initial accomplishment. She also didn't believe Ida's compliment. Her brain reflexively dumped those sorts of things into the mental trash bin.

And I can't even imagine how long it will take me to learn to shoot from a horse, she thought.

Ida regarded Jada silently for a moment. She knew there was one group of people who would beam at the compliments of others. The second group of people, into which Jada fit, could not. This mental or emotional block didn't stem from the belief that the compliment-giver was lying. Their minds were unable to believe it, period. This made them more difficult to encourage. Adjusting beliefs about themselves couldn't come from outside supporters. It had to come wholly from internal shifts and changes in what they believed about themselves.

Although Ida was insightful, she didn't have the same level as Merida. However, she did know that Jada had a lot of mental work ahead of her before achieving a healthy amount of self-confidence.

"Again," instructed Ida. "But draw faster this time."

Jada practiced reaching over her shoulder and drawing a few times before committing to an actual shot. To her mild surprise, the arrows hit the target. The more shots she took, the tighter her grouping became.

"Now start moving your shots to farther targets. And mind that your left arm stays rotated down so the string doesn't catch the inside of it."

Jada did as told and took farther shots until she knew the effective range for that particular bow. Without realizing it, she had completely forgotten about her anxiety over being watched. Her focus on the singular task at hand pushed away everything else.

She eyed a target in the shadows beyond the edge of the clearing and strung another arrow. She guessed how much to adjust for the rate of drop and released. The arrow sank into the edge of the bullseye.

"Very good," said Gabriel, who had come silently up behind. "But move around the course next time."

Jada helped Ida retrieve salvageable arrows. After refilling the quiver, she scanned the course and mentally plotted a path.

Jada refocused on the task ahead of her and shifted any anxiety about Gabriel's presence to the back of her mind. Each target represented an enemy warrior. If she didn't kill him first, he would kill her or those with her.

Jada and her parents had done much traveling. They had made friends with many people in a variety of professions including the military and federal government. At one point of another, these individuals had said, "When you wake up every morning, you have to decide if you're going to do what it takes to do your job, to protect your team and family, and to stop evil men from shedding innocent blood."

Jada believed the same rule applied here. War and conflict were ugly. It was supposed to be so people generally avoided it when possible. Yet, when war inevitably came, the rule truly was kill or be killed. Even if a person chose to flee, sooner or later, they would cross a bad guy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um...no," she answered.

"I told her that she's one of those people who is naturally skilled with their hands," commented Ida.

Gabriel nodded. "I agree."

He grinned at Jada. "Now you just need to shoot a few thousand more arrows, and you'll be ready for a real battle."

A shadow moved out of the corner of Jada's eye, and she turned. No one was there, but she sensed a third person had been watching.

By his smile, Gabriel knew who it had been.

The trio returned to the main clearing, and the entire group stopped to chat.

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

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

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

After discreetly studying Gael for a few minutes, Jada could tell she liked Blake. It was obvious. She looked at him with great endearment and admiration, and her eyes danced whenever she regarded him. Of course, there was the minor fact that Blake was particularly good-looking, at least to most red-blooded females.

Jada sighed. *Figures.*

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

Gael finally noticed and followed Blake's gaze.

Jada shrank back and looked away. She could almost feel the jealousy and vengeance rolling off Gael.

She wasn't imagining, either. Gael did like Blake. A lot. She had for some time. She hadn't said anything to him, though, because she was gauging his feelings towards her.

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

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

She didn't like emotional drama—or trauma.

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

“So, you have some skill with a bow but how about a blade?”

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

He had been the one watching the archery lesson from the shadows. What he saw had filled him with spite and a touch of panic.

Jada hadn't been a natural archer right from the start. However, she was someone who learned hands-on skills quickly. After an hour, she looked like she had been born with a bow and arrow in hand. The more she shot, the more confident and relaxed she became. This, in turn, further improved her accuracy.

He had also discovered she was a physical threat. He had noticed the muscles in her arms flex, and she had kept up easily with the group while on the way here.

She might have been lean, but Namor was no fool. There was strength and speed in lean working muscle. It also possessed unmatched stamina and power.

“Someone lend her a sword.”

“Hold on a second,” snapped Blake, protective fire igniting inside him as he strode towards Namor and Jada. “She has no training whatsoever in this sort of combat.”

“Well, she picked up archery quickly,” replied Namor snidely. “If she's such a skilled and gifted traveler, swordplay shouldn't be a problem.”

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

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

Okay, she thought. I wish I could disappear.

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

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

Fog and mist already shrouded the upper ridges, and a cooler wind current moved across the hillside.

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

Uh oh, she thought.

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

She looked back and saw Ida with another arrow set on the string. Gabriel and Gael also had their bows in hand.

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

"Dassous⁶," growled Namor.

When Jada glanced at Connor, he explained. "Dassous means 'spy' in the ancient language."

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

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

Black feathers covered its body, and its head was the head of a bat. The grotesqueness of the face rivaled that of a gath. Its wings were leathery, and it had a thin, long tail like a rat.

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

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

"The wolves have crossed the river," said Gabriel, concern in his voice as he scanned the forest.

"They don't normally cross until winter when they're hungry," said Ida to Jada.

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

Jada had no idea what he meant by that or why he was looking at her when he said it. The intense curiosity with which he gazed at her was even more puzzling.

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

Before she could say anything, Turin released an arrow in the direction of the shadow. It vanished into the fog where it drew a loud snarl. The wolf was closer than any of them had thought.

⁶ *Dassous is pronounced like dah-sues or -dah-soos.*

Without saying a word to one another, they spun and sprinted along the ridgeline. The branches of the pines were too high up for any of them to grab, so they couldn't climb. Besides, the wolves could wait them out.

The moist air, now driven by a breeze, clung to them. Connor and Gabriel were in the lead, followed by Gael. Ida positioned herself so that Jada had her on the right and the steep drop of the ridge on the left.

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

A shout came from Namor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two kept Turin, Namor, and Blake preoccupied. Another kept Gabriel, Desmond, Reagon, and Connor busy, and Ida and Gael fought the last.

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

The blade sank deep into the right side of its chest but didn't kill it. The impact of the sword knocked the wolf off-balance and, with an enraged snarl, the beast threw itself at him.

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

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

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

As for Turin and Blake, the moment the second wolf broke from cover, they split up to divide its attention.

Blake moved closer, and the wolf turned to him.

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

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

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

Jada became aware that she was staring at him again.

Am I developing some kind of problem, she wondered.

She also felt completely useless standing there. She had no weapon other than her knife. It would barely leave a scratch on one of these beasts and would probably only make them angrier. But what was she supposed to do? Throw rocks? Frighten them with rude expressions?

As for Gael and Ida, they had gone native on their foe. Gael had, anyway. They had already inflicted several deep wounds upon the wolf when Jada glanced their way.

Mist and blood matted its thick tan coat. Ida goaded it to draw its full attention while Gael snuck around behind. It was a colossal beast, the largest of the four.

The wolf lunged at Ida.

She swiped it across the nose with her dagger then dodged lightly out of the way.

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

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

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

Namor sprinted by Jada and towards his two companions. For just a second, she saw his face. Fierce determination had hardened his gaze, and a fire-like light gleamed in his eyes. He may have been a jerk, but there was something about seeing him in action that brought new respect from her.

Another pair of wolves broke cover from the right as even more shadows approached

Okay, thought Jada. We're all going to die.

Turin leapt in the path of one beast as an arrow from Reagan sank into the skull of another.

That's when Blake appeared beside Jada. Gaze intense, he looked her over quickly to ensure she was uninjured. Then he held out a tomahawk.

"Here," he said, panting lightly, not from the exertion of the fight but from the adrenaline.

"I hear you're skilled with one of these," he continued, with a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Jada's face grew warm, and when she took the weapon, their hands accidentally touched. Her stomach proceeded to cinch into a knot.

Cut it out, she chided herself. She purposefully glanced back at Turin to break her gaze from Blake's stormy eyes.

The elf, with Reagan beside him, stood braced for battle before three wolves.

Before Jada could do anything, movement in her peripheral drew her attention. When her gaze flitted back to Blake, she knew something was amiss.

He drew a breath and straightened as his eyes fell on something behind her.

Jada shoved him out of the way before turning sharply. Her knife was already drawn, and she had moved it to her left hand before taking the tomahawk from Blake.

As she turned, she swiped with the knife, catching a gremlin in the chest, and then brought the tomahawk around and killed a second.

The creature she had struck with the knife was still alive and flopped along the ground, trying to escape.

Without a second thought, Jada strode to it and gave one final swing of the tomahawk.

All thought processes stopped as she stood over the dead creature with its black blood dripping from her weapon.

What am I doing? I feel like some kind of medieval warrior.

“Heads up!”

Jada spun to see more wolves advance onto the scene and isolate her companions into two groups. Blake, assuming she could handle herself against a pair of tiny assailants, had already rejoined the others.

Between the two groups strode a big, black wolf. He turned his head and regarded Jada with pale-yellow eyes, eerie against the dark contrast of his coat. He sized her up and sounded a kind of snarl-woof.

More wolves turned toward her.

With nothing else for it, Jada spun and ran down the steep ridge. The trees began to grow closer together the further she went, and the sound of the river became louder. The fog was clearing closer to the water instead of thickening, which didn't make sense.

Then again, she thought as she cut between the trees, neither does talking animals, flying bird-bat things, or being chased by wolves on steroids.

Behind her, she heard the steady huffing breaths of her pursuer, drawing nearer.

Correction: *pursuers*.

As Jada cut left and down a steeper path, she glimpsed shadows on her left and right. The wolves were flanking her and would close the net anytime.

Yup, she thought as she jumped a fallen birch tree. I'm definitely going to die.

She clearly heard the river now and occasionally saw it over the treetops below the rise.

Ahead, the ground dropped away, but she couldn't see how far. There was no time for hesitation because the gray wolf to her right veered sharply towards her.

Pushing her legs faster, Jada charged for the edge of the drop-off and leapt with everything she had.

It didn't turn out to be a sheer cliff. The ground was only at an incredibly steep angle. It was also rocky and didn't suggest a pleasant landing.

But, as when Balo had put extra effort into his jump yesterday, it had been a good thing Jada jumped as hard as she did. A gray wolf waited below like he had known his companions would herd her there.

She overshot him and didn't jump into waiting jaws. When her boots hit the ground, she dropped and tumbled...and tumbled some more until the ground leveled a little.

Using her momentum, Jada rolled backward and into a crouch. One wolf was nearly to her. In a sheer, desperate act for survival, she swung the tomahawk back, around, and up sharply.

The blade caught the wolf in the throat, stopping his momentum and throwing his head back. His body dropped to the ground and did not move.

There wasn't time to consider this accomplishment because the others were strides from her.

Upon her uncomfortable descent, Jada had noted the thick line of alders beyond the narrow clearing. Now, she spun and ducked into them.

Trying to bushwhack through alders was an extremely difficult ordeal. They grew tall and tightly together. However, Jada wasn't trying to clear a path, and she slipped through them with only minor difficulty.

Behind her, she heard angry snarls from the wolves and the sound of large beasts thrashing madly about.

The alder stand was only thirty feet thick, and Jada emerged from the other side in short order. While the alders slowed her pursuers, staying inside the stand wasn't a permanent option. The wolves would eventually wiggle their way through and get to her.

A narrow, grassy plateau topped the steep bank of the river, which was wider than she thought it would be. It also looked deep and cold.

Jada jumped back as a large black blur whipped past. The black alpha male had made quick time and gone around the alders.

He skidded to a stop and swung around. He had just begun advancing before jerking to a halt as the sound of a horn cut over the noise of the river.

The wolf wrinkled his nose and growled.

"Jada!"

She searched for the owner of that familiar voice and found him standing atop the ledge she had jumped from. Blake.

Great, she thought. He probably thinks I'm totally helpless and am no good for anything besides getting into trouble that I can't get myself out of.

Jada had always held the idea of "damsel in distress" with great disdain. If she got herself into trouble, she would get herself out. She wasn't a raging feminist, but she also wasn't some useless woman who didn't know how to take care of herself. She preferred to do things herself, thank you.

Blake's shout made the black wolf turn its head.

Seizing the opportunity, Jada stepped forward and swung with all her strength.

The blade of the tomahawk struck the wolf and left a deep, ugly wound from its neck to the left side of its face.

It unleashed the fiercest snarl of rage she had ever heard from an animal.

Jada backpedaled out of biting distance then turned and sprinted away from the other members of the pack.

When she felt hot breath on the back of her neck, she swiped behind her. She hit air, and the wolf on her heels growled with distaste.

The stretch of bank Jada was running along became narrower. When it wound around a curve, she saw the end of the line was approaching. A sheer rock cliff stood fifty feet high and jutted into the river on the left.

While on approach, Jada quickly noted potential handholds.

A second wolf appeared to her right.

An arrow sank into its back, and it stumbled and fell.

She was nearly to the cliff but needed to do something about the wolf on her heels.

Adopting Namor's strategy, Jada slowed a little before leaping, twisting, and swinging. The tomahawk sank into the side of the beast's head. She released the handle, leaving the blade embedded in the wolf's skull.

Jada hit the ground, rolled to her feet, sprinted for the cliff, and jumped and grabbed a narrow ledge. Thanks to a fresh burst of adrenaline from the thought of having a wolf latch onto her leg, she quickly found a foothold and pushed herself higher.

It was an agonizing ten seconds before Jada was out of reach of the wolves. And out of handholds.

The rock face was smooth like shale. It crumbled like it, too. Her footholds gave way, and she was left hanging by her fingers.

Below, the wolves snarled in their frustration. Several jumped for her, but she was a foot too high for them.

Okay, if I can hold out until reinforcements arrive...

The rock under her right hand began to flake.

Nevermind.

Jada heard the sound of galloping hooves. However, the riders would first have to go around the line of alders and then confront the wolf pack.

While attempting to think of a plan, something out of the corner of her eye stole her attention.

Blake again. The moment he had found a break in the attack, he sprinted after Jada. He knew his companions could take care of themselves. Urgency had given him added speed, and he broke out of the trees and followed the ridge until it ran into the cliff face Jada hung from.

Light on his feet, he carefully moved from one narrow ledge to another until he reached a shelf fifteen feet above and to Jada's right.

Another ledge sat almost directly above her. However, there was a sizeable gap between it and the one Blake currently stood on. He would have to make the jump and risk the shelf giving way when he landed. That would drop them both in the jaws of the wolves, which didn't seem too concerned about the approaching riders.

Jada was glad Blake hadn't felt the need to say anything stupid like, "Hang on."

Right, she thought, as if I would willingly let go because I want to get eaten alive by a pack of wolves. Or fall and break my legs...and then get eaten.

Expression one of the utmost intensity and concentration, Blake eyed the shelf above Jada and any others close by as he tried to figure out a plan.

Meanwhile, the rock under Jada's right hand finally fell away, leaving her hanging by four fingers. She groped for another hold and the toe of her boot found one a few inches to the left.

Blake watched with a knot in his stomach and his heart in his throat as Jada carefully maneuvered along the cliff until she again had temporary hand and footholds.

The girl's got guts, he thought. There was no fear on her face, not a single trace of it. She was simply dealing with the situation like she would any other problem. No panic or terror. He admired her even more.

Unfortunately, Jada had moved ten feet away from Blake. She was also on a section of cliff that began to curve. Glancing down, she saw she was roughly between the bank and the river.

All at once, her footholds crumbled, as did one of her handholds. The seconds ticked by, and Jada felt the rock under her left hand beginning to give.

It would come down to the wolves or the river. The choice was simple.

As for Blake, he chose to risk the jump to the low shelf. There was no more time, and his concern wasn't for himself. He was committed to saving Jada, by any means necessary, even if it meant his own death.

At that moment, Blake was surprised at how quickly and deeply he had given his loyalty to a stranger. That had never happened before, either. No more time remained to consider it further, though. He would think about it later. If he survived.

When Jada saw Blake preparing to make the jump, she shook her head.

No, no, no.

“Don’t!” she called. “It’s not worth it.”

Blake scowled and looked as if she had insulted him.

Just as the rock beneath her hand crumbled, Jada tucked her legs underneath her and pushed off. She flipped back and away from the cliff and out over the river.

This is going to be cold.

She hit the water boots-first, and yes, it was definitely nippy. She had experience fording rivers with strong currents and wasn’t especially worried.

Jada let herself float on her back as the river took her through a broad gully with steep cliffs on either side. A short distance ahead, she saw that the cliffs ended abruptly and were replaced with decent banks.

No problem, she thought as she began swimming across the current.

Unfortunately, she incorrectly assumed she had plenty of bank and that it would stretch for a long distance. It did not.

When Jada looked downstream again, she saw the river disappear over a waterfall.

Oh, come on. You can’t make this stuff up.

The cliffs ended, and narrow, rocky banks ran along either side of the river.

She was a good thirty feet from the bank, and the river picked up speed on its approach to the drop-off. But it was also getting shallower.

Forty feet from the edge, Jada’s boots scaped bottom once then twice. She managed to make solid contact with the bottom, slow her speed a little, and push herself closer to the bank.

She was maybe a dozen feet from it when the bottom fell away again. The drop was coming up fast, and she thought, *well, this is going to suck.*

Since Jada couldn’t be in two dimensions at once, she assumed that if she died here, she was gone in both Aurora and Earth.

As she was taken towards the drop, she noted a slight lip of rock that rose just out of the water on the edge. Grabbing it would be a last-ditch effort to avoid an unpleasant end.

That’s when Blake sprinted out of the trees and along the bank, keeping even with Jada.

She, meanwhile, was unsure about exactly what he was going to do. She was about to run out of river and he out of ground.

Feet from the drop-off, the river became drastically shallower.

Turning sideways, Jada made herself as least resistant as possible to the current and drove her boots hard against the bottom. She slowed but couldn't stop. The top of the rock was slimy, and she grappled for a handhold as the water took her over the lip. Her hands found nothing to hold onto, and she went over the edge.

She would have felt stupid if the drop turned out to be a small waterfall. Then again, it also would have been a relief.

Well, it wasn't a short drop. It was a massive waterfall, hundreds of feet high before it thundered down to a deep pool hidden somewhere below the mist.

As Jada went over the edge, she glanced up and spotted Blake. She watched in puzzlement and horror as he reached the edge of the bank, flung himself off it, and drove straight for her.

By Jada's guess, she had fallen about a hundred feet when Blake had nearly reached her. The air was beginning to grow hazy from the mist generated by the tumultuous river as it met the bottom of the falls.

After another thirty feet, everything faded to a misty blanket of gray, and she lost sight of Blake.

It was strange. Some people might have panicked after going over a waterfall or thought about all the things they wanted to do before dying. Perhaps, they would have considered their life's regrets.

Jada wouldn't know. She had never spoken with someone who had gone over a really big waterfall. She was, however, trying to figure out what the heck Blake thought he was doing or what he was going to do when he caught up to her.

Seconds later, a hand latched onto her arm before the rest of Blake emerged from the mist.

"I gotcha!"

Jada clamped her other hand onto his shoulder. Before she could ask what his brilliant plan was, her vision blurred and everything went white.