

THE  
BRILLIANCE  
OF STARS

*A Jack and Ivy Novel*

THOMAS NELSON

*Since 1798*

J'NELL CIESIELSKI



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# • EUROPE 1917 •



# GLOSSARY

## Russian Words and Phrases

*Chem ty zanimayesh'sya?:* What do you do?

*Prosti menya, gospoda:* Forgive me, gentlemen

*chyort:* damn

*da:* yes

*damy:* ladies

*damy i gospoda:* ladies and gentlemen

*devushka:* little girl

*dobro pozhalovat:* welcome friends

*druk:* friend

*glupyy:* foolish

*kokoshnik:* traditional headdress worn by women

*kotyonok:* kitten

*krasotka:* gorgeous, beauty

*kroshka:* little crumb

*kubanka:* hat

*mamushka:* mother

*mem:* ma'am

## GLOSSARY

*moy*: my

*muzyka*: music

*nyet*: no

*papakha*: furry hat

*pazhalsta*: please

*pozhaluysta*: you are welcome

*prekrasnaya*: beautiful (female)

*printsessa*: princess

*privyet*: informal hi, hello

*rubakha*: tunic style shirt

*rusскиye*: Russians

*sarafan*: women's traditional folk dress

*schwalbennest*: Swallow's Nest

*ser*: sir

*shuba*: fur coat

*sovnya*: a traditional Russian weapon with a single-edged blade  
mounted on the end of a long pole

*spasibo*: thank you

*stoy*: stop

*troika*: sleigh

*tsar*: emperor of Russia

*tsarevitch*: the tsar's heir

*ubiytsa*: killer

*upyr* (*female, upir*): vampire; a creature present in Russian and Slavic  
folklore

*ushanka*: traditional Russian fur hat

*yazychnik*: heathens to the Church

*zamechatel'nyy*: wonderful

*zdrastvuyte*: hello (more formal greeting)

*zhenshchina*: woman

## Other Foreign Words

*willkommen* – welcome (German)

*isten hozott* – welcome (Hungarian)

*vanillekipferl* – vanilla crescent cookie (German)

*shatz* – darling (German)



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# PROLOGUE

DOBRYZOV CASTLE, RUSSIA  
JANUARY 1917

SHE KISSED JACK HARD ON THE MOUTH, THEN AIMED HER BERETTA OVER his shoulder and fired a round of shots down the medieval corridor of Dobryzov Castle. The men in black toppled, bright crimson blossoming across their chests, staining the embroidered red dragon like fire heaving from its venomous jaws.

Jack tossed aside his spent gun with its silencer and flipped aside the edge of his stolen evening jacket to pull out his pistol. He cut quite the dashing figure in all his deadly finery. “Under ordinary circumstances I would never object, but is this the appropriate time for romance, love?”

They dove around a corner as terrified party guests stampeded through the corridor, crushing one another in their haste to flee the chaos.

“A horde of guards is intent on killing us. What time could be more appropriate?”

Jack peered around the corner. “Twelve guards, actually.” He took aim and fired. *Bam! Bam!* “Make that ten.”

“Apologies I wasn’t specific enough.” Hiking up the hem of her

*sarafan*—also stolen, sadly—Ivy pulled a fresh clip of bullets from her garter and slid it into her gun. Blood trickled into her palm from the knife cut on her arm. She wiped it on her skirt and transferred the gun to her clean hand. “Are you certain you got both?”

“Are you doubting my skills?” His side-eye was more accusation than question.

“No, but if we’re going to die, I’d like to know we took down as many of them as we could. I’d rather not have failure written on my tombstone.”

“People in our line of work don’t get tombstones. We get a tarp weighed down with stones at the bottom of a river.” He fired another round. The sound of bodies thumping on the stone floor followed. More guards came running with a fresh hail of bullets.

Ivy ducked as bits of ancient stone pinged off her *kokoshnik*. Probably the only time she would get to wear a crown, even if it was fake, and it had to be when someone was shooting at her. “If you’re trying to sour the moment of spontaneous romance, you’ve succeeded.”

“I’ll make it up to you later, love. Go!” Racing along the wall, they pushed through a side door and down a steep set of stairs, landing in the kitchen.

Dozens of eyes lifted from chopping vegetables and stirring pots to stare at the intruders. Had they not heard the mayhem erupting upstairs? Darting around the long worktable and enormous black stove, Ivy shoved through the back door with Jack on her heels.

*Bam!*

A bullet struck the doorframe inches from her face. A guard rushed across the service courtyard and raised his rifle with a bayonet gleaming beneath its long muzzle and aimed straight at her.

Ivy raised her pistol and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. She squeezed again. Nothing. Why did these things always jam at the worst possible moment? Whipping off her gold sequined *kokoshnik*,

she flung it like a discus. It struck the guard square in the face. He stumbled. Rushing forward, she grabbed his rifle and whacked it against his head. He crumpled.

Jack grabbed her hand and pulled her across the square as guards spilled from the kitchen door. Jutting cobblestones wobbled beneath their feet as they raced around the corner to the front courtyard where noblemen and dignitaries in black-tie formal wear and ladies dripping in jewels flooded down Dobryzov Castle's ancient steps. Screams of panic bounced off the stone walls as they pushed and trampled each other in desperation. Smoke billowed from the doors behind them.

Like ants abandoning their disturbed mound, armed guards swarmed the stairs. The bright red flash of a dragon encircling a crown was emblazoned on their chests, the only color against the backdrop of choking smoke.

"There they are!" One of the guards shoved through the crowd of terrified nobility. His comrades quickly formed a spearhead behind him, cutting through the throng of bodies with rifles raised to fire.

Ivy clung to Jack's hand. This was not going according to plan. Then again, what did? Her gun was still jammed and she was out of crowns to throw. Before she could rip off a shoe to chuck, an automobile horn blasted through the discord.

*Aoogah! Aoogah!*

People leaped out of the way as the Gräfin and Stift Double Phaeton skidded to a stop next to Ivy and Jack. The driver rolled down his window and leaned out with a devil-take-all grin on his boyish face. "Need a lift?"

Ivy scrambled into the back seat. "Philip, I could kiss you."

Jack flung himself in next to her and slammed the door. "So could I."

Philip jerked the auto into motion, blasting the horn as people jumped out of the way. "I'd rather neither of you did if it's all the same."



The back window shattered. Jack threw himself on top of Ivy as shards of glass sprayed over their heads. Another bullet whizzed by, this one cracking off the side mirror. Levering up on one elbow, Jack pointed his pistol out the broken back window and fired. Ivy didn't have to look to know he'd hit his target.

"Where is the other auto?" Ivy eyed the hole in the back of the seat where the first bullet had lodged into a tuft of cotton. Directly behind Philip.

"Already gone with the others tucked safe inside." Philip didn't slow as they sped under the iron-spiked gate and spiraled down the drive that wound itself around the lone mountain. "You two took your time getting out."

"So sorry to keep you waiting." Jack grimaced as he touched a bleeding spot on his forehead where a piece of glass had grazed him.

After tying a torn strip of her gown around her bleeding arm, Ivy sat up and moved closer. "Here. Let me look at that—"

*Crack!* The front windshield crackled from flying bullets.

Philip jerked the wheel. "Keep your heads down! We've got company."

Ivy peeked over the back seat. A black auto loaded with three enemy guards roared behind them. "Where's the trigger to set off the dynamite in the autos?"

Philip tossed it to her as he careened down the winding drive of the mountain. "Don't press it until I tell you to."

"If I don't do it now, they'll be joining us for tea in the back seat."

"We're not out of range. Wait for it . . . Wait . . . Now!"

Ivy pressed the button.

An explosion shattered the earth behind them. She turned back to see the ground cave in a mighty roar, swallowing the tailing auto whole. Heat blasted her face as flames consumed the gray sky.

Dobryzov Castle, crumbling crown of the mountain, sat ringed in fire.

Jack curled his hand over hers. "I adore the way your eyes light up in the midst of danger."

Smiling, she laced her fingers through his as they watched the world burn behind them.

"Are you sure you killed him?" she asked as they left the mountain and raced toward the rendezvous point.

Jack lifted their joined hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Right in the eye. And if the bullet didn't take him, the fire will. Straight to the pit he crawled from."

"Good."

She would look back on that day a hundred times, a thousand times and wonder what might have happened if it had all gone differently. A thousand times she would throw her head back and scream defiance to the night sky that this wasn't how it was supposed to be. Yet the Fates would gather in their malevolent cluster of stars and clutch her by the throat as they laughed, "This is how it is."

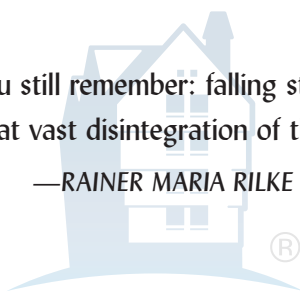
A hundred times she would run her hands over the battles stitched across her skin. A tally of every war waged against those Fates. A thousand times, again and again she would defy them to change that one moment Death was summoned to their aid.

In time she would learn: Death answers no summons but its own.

# PART I

Do you still remember: falling stars, . . .  
beneath that vast disintegration of their brilliance

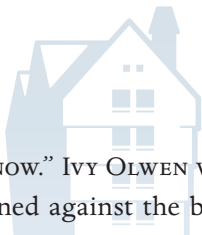
—RAINER MARIA RILKE



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# ONE

WASHINGTON, DC  
APRIL 1914



I THINK WE'RE SAFE FOR NOW." IVY OLWEN WIPED DROPS OF RAIN FROM her slouchy hat and leaned against the brick wall of an old warehouse to catch her breath. The stone's cold wetness seeped through the patched jacket that hung loosely on her sixteen-year-old frame. Though she secretly pined for a more well-rounded figure, remaining shapeless while surviving on the streets had its benefits. "We'll rest here a bit. Wait for the sun to come up."

Philip wheezed next to her and stuck his neck out like a scrawny goose. One year her junior, he had also escaped the build of an emerging adult. "We never shoulda come here. What's so bad about where we were?"

"It's the slums. We sleep beside mold and make friends with rats. No one bats an eye if two more street urchins like us turn up dead in the gutter. Here on this side of town, we got a chance to change that. Didn't you see those lovely horse-drawn carriages and park benches when we crossed Pennsylvania Avenue? Not one bum sleeping on them."

"I was too busy bailing water out of my shoes." He held up a foot and water trickled from a hole in the heel of his shoe.

Pushing a lock of cropped hair from her eyes, Ivy peered around the corner to see if the copper had followed them. Canal Street stretched through the gray drizzle like a wide river shimmering under the splashing raindrops. Not a soul to be seen in the predawn light, including their pursuer. Second-guessing herself wasn't a habit, but she should've waited for a sunny day to start hawking their papers in a new territory.

Runts, castoffs, orphans, and newsies were common enough in the eastern part of the city, but the western half kept its streets clean and respectable, which was precisely why she had chosen it as her and Philip's new turf. Rich people needed newspapers, too, and she intended to fill her coin bag with their shiny bits of silver.

Unfortunately, the policeman they ran into didn't agree with her. He wanted to keep his beat clean of scamps, but they'd managed to slip from his grasp and disappear into the shadows.

Philip sneezed and hunkered his bony shoulders farther into his coat until nothing but his grimy ears stuck above the frayed collar. His sandy-colored curls hung limp, which only enlarged the agitation in his eyes. "People pay just as much for the paper on the Hill as they do here in Georgetown."

"But the Hill people don't tip like folks here." She jiggled the small bag of coins tied around her waist for emphasis. It clinked with the heavenly promise of food for a few days—maybe a week if they stretched it. Her stomach pulled at the thought of being full. "Once we have enough, we'll move over to Millionaires' Row and live in high style. I bet they tip for newspapers in solid gold."

"Why didn't we go to Millionaires' Row then, instead of coming here in the rain to get run over by a train?" He pointed to the Old Dominion Railway trundling a few yards away.

"Looking like this?" Ivy pointed at the threadbare lapels of her

oversize jacket. “We’d be carted off straightaway and put in a work-house. We need to look respectable first and that takes money. Money we’ll get in this part of town.”

The first thing she would purchase for them was a hot meal and a warm bed, both sensations nearly scrubbed from memory. Then a change of clothes that didn’t crawl with lice and wasn’t covered in patches. A lady’s set of clothes. She tugged at the shorn hair curling behind her ear. Perhaps a few ribbons for when it was safe to grow it out. No need to disguise herself as a boy once they had money.

A shadow fell over them. The copper. “There you are, you little beggars. Don’t you know you should’ve stayed on your side of town?”

Ivy puffed up to her full size, which wasn’t much, and glared despite the policeman being twice her size. “We have a right to be here same as anyone.”

The cop towered over them, seemingly swollen in size with his greatcoat and wide hat dripping with rain. He grabbed the bundle of newspapers she had carefully wrapped in an old fisherman’s coat to keep them dry and flung them into a nearby puddle.

“No!” Ivy shot forward to save her livelihood, but the policeman blocked her.

The dirty water gobbled across the pages, bleeding the black ink into smears.

“It’s a waste of time and resources teaching the riffraff to read. You don’t need letter learning to do the jobs you’re best suited for—like mucking out the streets.”

“We’re trying to earn an honest wage and you’ve ruined it.”

Fury flashed across the man’s face. “You need a lesson in manners!” He shoved her backward into a puddle of runoff sludge. The bag of coins spilled its treasure across the slick ground. Grinning, he reached a gloved hand toward the shiny coins. “Lookee what we got here.”

"Those are ours!" Philip charged forward with skinny arms swinging.

The policeman swatted him away with his baton. "You got something else to say, thieving runt? Assaulting an officer is consider a felony." Pocketing the coins, he drew a whistle from his uniform pocket and blew. *Tweet! Tweet!* "We'll see what the judge has to say. A stint in the workhouse will set you straight."

Ivy grabbed Philip's arm. "Run!"

Forgetting the papers and coins, Ivy and Philip bolted, blurring past warehouses and train boxes as the Potomac River stretched black and glistening to their right in the pearly gray light. The policeman's boots smacked against the wet pavement behind them.

Rounding a tavern, they ducked behind a pile of crates as their pursuer ran by. When his footfalls and whistle faded, they doubled back the way they'd come and paused beside the Aqueduct Bridge that stretched across the great river to Virginia.

"Policemen are much faster on this side of town," Ivy gasped, trying to catch her breath as the rain thinned to a silver mist.

"The rotter. We're not here to steal nothing, and now we've gone and lost what coin we did have."

"We'll find another way to make it." But how she didn't know. Two months of scrimping and saving, paper hawking, standing on street corners in the pouring rain, being chased away when an older newsie decided to make their territory his—all lost. The hunger in her belly knotted to fear. They would manage. Just as they had at the orphanage where they'd met, only to be kicked out a few short years later. Living on the streets these past six years had taught them how to survive, and above all, they were survivors. Each other was all they had.

Ivy peered over the side of the bridge. Old stone steps led to the base of the structure. Beneath the archway was a dry enough spot to

plan their next move. "Let's go under here and get out of the rain. We'll rest while the sun decides if it's going to show today."

She began navigating the slippery stairs from the top of the bridge's abutment to the path wandering beside the river and toward shelter, then stopped at the bottom. Voices echoed from ahead. "Someone's already here."

"Most likely a drifter or two trying to keep dry, same as us."

"No, I don't think so." Ivy's pulse kicked up as her ears strained to make out the words. "It's not English."

Philip rolled his eyes. "If you haven't noticed by now, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Irish, Italians, and all other kinds of immigrants are in this city hoping to find a better life than the one they left behind. Come on, maybe they'll have a few matzah balls they can spare."

The words switched to English, though the voice was heavily accented. "No one saw you leave?"

"No one. I'm here alone." An American.

"How do we believe the word of a man willing to betray his own people?"

"Guess that's the risk you have to take."

Before she could stop him, Philip shot into a tangle of bushes and dandelion weeds growing near the mouth of the arch.

Ivy dove in after him. "Are you mad? This is dangerous. We have to leave. Now." She grabbed his arm.

He shrugged her off. "And miss the most exciting thing we've ever heard? Leave if you want. I'm staying." He grinned, knowing she would never leave him. Tar and feather the josser.

Dangerous as it was, she couldn't deny her own curiosity was piqued. Like standing on a roof in the middle of a thunderstorm waiting to see how close the lightning would strike without getting zapped. She peeled back one of the branches and peered through the leaves. Two men stood under the arched tunnel. A smattering of light from streetlamps near both entryways trickled into the gloom.



"What information can you offer me?" the man with the accent demanded.

"Anything you need. Names of Congressmen disgruntled by what laws are put into legislation. Representatives looking for a leadership that will listen to their concerns instead of hushing them. Lobbyists sympathetic to Russian dealings." The American dropped his voice, but not enough to be muffled against the echoing bricks. "There are many here who long to see the dictatorship of the Romanovs fall, and more than a few are willing to fund a revolution if your people should one day rise against their injustices."

"Russia has been a slave too long. Her people starving and beaten while the tsar and his ilk swill themselves on caviar and palaces. Russia's power belongs in the hands of new leadership. With a leader who will bring great change, not only to our country but to the world. For those who are worthy. To achieve this, I am scouring the earth for those brave enough to join our ranks, those who will remain silent yet vigilant until the time comes to rise up. The worthy have been found in Russia, Europe, and Asia. Now I come to the shores of America and ask if she will rouse from her star-spangled slumber when the hour strikes." With a hand that stood out stark white against the surrounding gloom, the foreigner reached out and grasped the American's shoulder. "Are you ready for the next step, *druk?*"

"I am ready, as I know others are."

"*Zamechatel'nyy*, for the next step is not enough. Ever onward we seek."

"Don't you know it's rude to eavesdrop?" a strange male voice whispered over Ivy's shoulder.

She screamed. A hand clamped over her mouth. She bit down hard on a finger.

"Ow!"

Philip flew at the man with fists pummeling. "Let go!"

The attacker dropped his hand from Ivy's mouth to block Philip's punches. Fast as a blink, he grabbed Philip's wrists and pinned him facedown on the ground. Ivy scrambled to her feet and launched herself on the man's back, locking her arm around his throat and squeezing tight.

"Get off!" He wheezed for air as the muscles in his neck constricted.

Voices shouted from the tunnel.

"You said you came alone!" The foreign man sounded panicked at the commotion.

"Those are your men!" the American yelled.

"Nyet! You lie to trap me."

*Bam!* A gunshot. Pounding feet reverberated from the tunnel as one of the men fled in the opposite direction.

The man beneath Ivy rolled, throwing her off his back, and jumped to his feet in one swift motion. A gun flashed at his belt. He planted a boot on Philip's thin chest, then grabbed Ivy and locked his arm around her.

"Eavesdroppers *and* scrappers. Here I thought it was going to be an easy morning." The attacker's heavy breath blew across the top of Ivy's head. Immobilized with her back against his chest, she couldn't make out his features.

"Let us go." Ivy twisted against his hold, but it was a vise grip trapping her arms at her sides.

"Not until we determine what the two of you are about."

Philip wheezed from where he lay prostrate under the man's boot. "N-none of your b-business."

"I'm making it my business. Tell me the truth now or things will go a lot worse for you, that I promise." His tone was easy as a summer breeze, but the open threat rang like steel.

Philip wheezed again as he dug his fingers into the boot's leather sole.

Arms pinned, Ivy did what little damage she could by beating her fists into the attacker's thighs. "Let him up. You're hurting him."

"He should've thought of that before he took a swing at me. I'm likely to have a blinker come morning."

"Serves you right." She kicked, but he shifted and her foot struck air.

"I wasn't the one prying where I wasn't welcome."

A figure stormed from the tunnel and materialized into a man of towering height, red hair, and a black scowl. Blood ran down his arm from a hole in his jacket. "What are these urchins doing here?"

"I don't know, sir. They won't stop assaulting me long enough to find out." Ivy beat her fist again. Her attacker didn't shift fast enough and earned a punch on the leg. His fingers dug into her shoulder, numbing her arm. "Particularly this one."

"Bloody got me shot. Russians?" He spat the accusation as if it were as admirable as the muck beneath his boot.

Ivy didn't take kindly to the implication. Nor the loss of feeling in her arm. "We're not Russian."

The redheaded man yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and wound it around his bleeding upper arm. "Then who sent you?"

"No one. We sell newspapers."

"Newspapers. Anything for a headline." Disgust rolled down his long nose and jackknifed from his sneering lip. With his uninjured arm, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a gun. "Take them to the river."

Ice flooded Ivy's veins, the spikes of fear chilling her all over. She'd seen guns before, had witnessed numerous acts of violence from drunken brawls to roving gangs with broken beer bottles, brass knuckles, and knives. The streets provided a tough education with a live-or-die creed, but never had she found herself within point-blank range of a muzzle. Mist softly collected around the black barrel,

blurring its cold edges. The hand holding it didn't shake once. A fact not in the least bit reassuring.

"Sir, they're only boys." Was that a clip of concern from her attacker as he removed his boot from Philip's chest?

The redheaded man didn't flinch, not so much as a shudder of his finger over the trigger. "Gutter rats who would sell their souls to the highest bidder for a scrap of food. In this case, a story about Russian spies. No witnesses, you know that."

"Washington will want to see them."

The redheaded man hesitated, but his eyes were unrelenting. He was merely calculating the cold facts stacked one against another. His frigid assessment was cut short when a third man jogged through the tunnel to meet them.

Panting, he bent over and grasped his knees. "Couldn't catch him. Turned the corner at Water Street and disappeared into the mist." His gaze flicked to Ivy and Philip before shifting to the gun in the other man's hand. The black mustache perfectly curled over his lip twitched. "What's all this?"

"Spies."

Desperation clawed through the ice freezing Ivy's muscles. "We're not spies, and if you let us go, we swear never to breath a word of this."

"That much I will guarantee." Training the gun a second longer on her, the redheaded man sighed as his eyes sharpened to decision. He shoved the weapon back in his jacket. "Take them to Washington. He can shoot them when he's done."

## TWO

JUMPED BY TWO KIDS. BRUISED RIBS. A FAILED MISSION. THIS WAS NOT how Jack Vale had anticipated his day going.

The assignment was straightforward. Make contact with the Russian, allow him to think Jefferson was there to turn traitor and join the zealot's cause of anarchy, then root out the true leader and snuff him out. Simple. Tasks any Talon agent could do in his sleep.

Jack held back a grunt of pain as he shifted position against the broken bookcase. He wouldn't be getting sleep anytime soon. Not until this little interrogation was finished. If it were up to him, they would've sent the kids scurrying with an earful of threats never to say a word about what they'd seen under the bridge. No need to pull out his trusty Colt M1911, more affectionately known as Undertaker, to finish them off. He knew the look of terror and hunger scratched across their dirty faces, and pity overcame any need to silence them. He'd worn that look himself not so long ago when he'd prowled the streets like a stray dog.

The kids now sat in the middle of this drafty attic at Talon headquarters tied to chairs with hoods over their heads. It wasn't how he would have handled the unusual situation, but then again, Talon had its secrets to keep and two homeless little mice could prove as much a downfall as Russian spies.

The smaller boy's erratic breathing ticked the passing minutes. "What are they going to do with us?" His voice creaked in the still air.

The taller boy, the fearless one who had bit Jack and then tried to choke him, twisted against the ropes binding his scrawny wrists. The skin was rubbed raw. "I don't know."

Jack slid his gaze to Washington, Talon's leader, who sat silently in a chair opposite the hostages. The man was bald with a pointed nose and, despite his average build, had a presence that filled the silent spaces of the chamber with authority. Dressed in crisp white and gray, he was cut into angles with no rounding to soften his person.

Washington gave an infinitesimal shake of his bare head. The kids thought they were alone, and he wanted to keep it that way. For now.

"What kind of men stow black hoods in the back of an auto?" the smaller one continued.

"The same kind who keep guns in their pockets and have no qualms about kidnapping people, obviously." Harshness sharpened the edge of the other one's tone.

"Do you think that redheaded man will make us target practice for this Washington? I read about men like them—what meets in back alleys and carries guns."

"Since the orphanage didn't teach us to read past our first learners, forgive me if I doubt your sudden interest in stories, much less their depiction of criminals."

Interest glimmered in Washington's sharp eyes. One of his favorite tactics was simply to sit and listen in obscurity while questions were answered and information offered without him needing to say a word. It was certainly proving successful in this case.

"Wasn't our fault they decided to swap secrets under the same bridge we needed for shelter." The smaller boy snorted with indignation. Muffled by the hood, he sounded more like a snuffling baby pig. "Do you think they're going to kill us?"

Washington crossed his legs. "Oh, I don't think that will be necessary."

The boys jumped, tottering in their chairs. The taller one found the nerve to speak first. "Wh-who are you? What do you want with us?"

"The more important matter is who you are. Oh, for the sake of civility, can we not remove these hoods? Get them off. Hop to it."

Jack stepped forward and ripped the hoods from their heads then moved back behind them. His role was to remain unseen until needed. Another effective tool for interrogation because the hostage would never know where he came from or when.

Their heads twisted around as they took in the dusty chamber. They couldn't see much with their shoulders lashed to the chairs. Uneven shelves nailed to unadorned walls. Warped floorboards gray with age. A ceiling that gave way to rafters stained from dripping water.

Jack saw the moment their worst fear settled in. No obvious way out.

"Tea?" Washington indicated the silver tea set with three cups and a plate of cookies on a squat table before them—completely at odds with the squalid surroundings. "Allow me to pour."

Acting as if nothing were amiss in this hostage situation, he poured a generous amount of the fragrant brew for the boys before filling his own cup and adding a generous splash of milk to each. He stirred his with a silver spoon and took a polite sip.

"Ah. We might start with names. I'm Washington."

The older one's hands twisted against his ropes. "The one who wants to shoot us."

Washington's dark eyebrows, thick in defiance against the scarcity up top, lifted a fraction but without the slightest hint of surprise. "Am I? Well, we'll return to that prompting momentarily. Might I ask who you are?"

The younger one jerked forward, straining against his bindings as his earlier fear disappeared beneath a thunder of bravado. Another trick Jack knew from the streets. Knowing how to bluff had served him well as a Talon agent. “Ask all you want, but we ain’t giving you nothing.”

“Robust spirit, as you said, Jack.” Washington’s sharp gaze cut over the children’s shoulders. “You’ve already met, but allow me to make proper introductions. This is Agent Jack Vale.”

Jack’s cue to move from the shadows. The kids’ eyes snapped to him. Blinding gray light pouring in from the tall window at the far end of the attic washed their faces in ash.

“Yes, sir. That one jumped first, quick as can be.” His gaze moved from the smaller one with keen brown eyes and settled on the gutsy one. Gray-green eyes stared back at him in defiance. “This one here nearly choked me to death.”

“Did he indeed.” Washington regarded them with a statement rather than a question. Admiration glimmered in his eyes. “I’ve tried a number of times to get my hands around Jack’s throat, but he’s too slippery for me. How ever did you manage it?”

“He attacked us first.”

Jack smothered a grin. He was starting to like this kid’s spirit. He stepped over to the wall and leaned against it as if all the time in the world were resting on his side. “Quietly subduing an ambush is not the same as attacking. If I recall correctly, you were the first to strike when you bit my finger.”

“You shouldn’t have snuck up behind us.”

“You and your brother shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

“We’re not siblings, not by blood anyway. How were we to know it was a gathering place for criminals? All we wanted was a place to stay dry until the rain passed.”

The defiance slipped from the boy’s glare and in its place crawled



the underbelly of fear from someone forced to take shelter where he could. Someone who didn't have a warm house to go to or warm food to fill his belly. It was someone Jack used to be before Talon took him in. They'd taken his hardships and rough edges and refined them to a knife's tip with purpose. He worked every day to prove he was worthy of their efforts.

The boy threw his plea to Washington who sat silently calculating the entire exchange. "Please believe us. We had no intentions beyond the inconvenience of the weather. We'll go on our way and not say a word."

Footsteps sounded on stairs and a few seconds later Jefferson stepped up through the hole in the floor that served as the entry and exit for the attic space. His scowl had grown in fierceness since the bridge, which was understandable considering the swatch of bandages padding his left shoulder. He prowled around to stand in front of the hostages.

"Shoot them now and be done with it. They heard too much."

The boys gasped in unison.

Washington's fingers hovered over the cookie plate. "Not every problem is solved with a bullet, Jefferson." He selected a cookie and took a bite before placing the remaining piece on the cup's saucer.

"The deal was nearly done! Now I've got a hole in my arm because of these slum interlopers."

Jefferson looked to Jack for agreement, but Jack merely crossed his arms and shifted uncomfortably from his position against the cracked wall. He'd learned long ago not to interfere on the rare occasion when his instructors locked horns. Jefferson might be his mentor, but Washington was too clever for anyone to run circles around him.

"It was a clean shot. Nothing you haven't experienced before. As for the Russian, we'll catch him soon enough like all the rest." After popping the remaining piece of cookie into his mouth, Washington chewed and swallowed before lifting the cup to his lips. His sharpened

gaze cut over the rim to the hostages. “Neither of you backed down from a fight. You’ve managed to keep cool heads since being held in this less-than-pleasant place, and you’ve both been searching for an escape route since the moment the hoods were taken from your heads. All actions to your credit. With a little work, you might prove competent.”

So Washington recognized their potential, but for Jack it went deeper than appreciation. A strange kinship like looking back through a portal of time and seeing himself. What he once was and what he might become.

“Competent in what?” The older boy may have had a defiant spirit, but this younger one carried a crate ton of pluck beyond what his scrawny appearance suggested.

Washington sipped his tea as if he hadn’t just trumpeted the utmost note of temptation to a young boy. He set his cup on its saucer. “You might as well know that you have not stumbled upon a nest of criminals or traitors but rather an elite agency.”

“Sir!” Jefferson’s face flared red. “I must protest—”

Washington waved him away. “Your protest is noted. As I was saying, we are an elite, independent agency sworn to—”

“Sir! These beggars have no right to—”

“Jefferson.”

“—understand the graveness of the situation into which they’ve heedlessly thrown themselves. Furthermore—”

“Jefferson.”

“Please, sir. Allow me to finish.”

“Jefferson, you’re bleeding.”

“What?” Jefferson’s attention dropped to the blood splotching his bandage. “Oh. Excuse me.” Muttering about secrets and danger and guns, he retreated through the hole in the floor to the stairs below. The floorboards vibrated until his stomps slowly faded away.

“Bit of a dramatist, Jefferson is, but he’s a brilliant fencer and

the only man I know who can render a man unconscious using only his thumb. You have not touched your tea. Oh, yes." Washington motioned to Jack. "Untie them."

Jack took the knife from his belt and made quick work of the ropes. The taller boy sprang from his chair and glared back at him. Jack merely saluted him with his blade before sheathing it once more and settling back against the wall. Loose and unthreatening was the best way to calm a skittery cat. The boy backed slowly away then quickly skirted around Washington and made for the window.

His expression, hopeful for escape, was immediately dashed when he looked out the glass. Jack knew the dizzying view well enough. They were four stories up in a tower with the Potomac River flowing several blocks away. To the east was the hub of Dupont Circle, upon which carriages and autos rounded before turning off one of the many spokes, including the one stretching far below the window. The ritziest neighborhood in the city, but still a prison of no escape.

"As I was saying"—Washington reclined in his chair without the least concern of his two charges making a break for it—"the agency upon which you have thrust yourselves is a beacon of light poised to roust out the bitter darkness seeping through the earth's cracks. Yet for our work to find success, our light must be cloaked in shadow."

The younger boy, who had only moved to sit warily on the edge of his chair, scratched at a dirty spot on his neck. "Are you the police?"

"While police forces are essential to keeping civilization on the straight and narrow path as provided by the law, we walk an alternative path. A narrow path intended for good but not necessarily a straight one. There. Is your curiosity piqued?"

Jack's attention shifted to the boy by the window, and he caught his gaze in the glass. Two cautious eyes in a pale rain-washed face with something else about the boy that Jack couldn't quite put his finger on. Jack probed beyond the drops of mist collecting on the grimy pane as he sought to slip into the privacy of a detachment the

boy was determined to keep. There was a savage fragility in the boy, like that of an animal torn from its den and thrown into a cage for observation, begging to be set free.

Clutching the edges of his frayed lapels, the boy broke the connection and turned around to Washington as the latter finished another sip of tea. "What will you do with us now?"

"That depends on your choice. There are only two ways out of this room. One through that window there. A straight drop four stories to hard concrete. Jack can oblige you if you're nervous about taking the first step. The other is through that door." With perfect calm, Washington nodded to the hole in the floor behind the chairs.

Interest undoubtedly piqued, the boy in the chair swiveled around to gape at the hole. "Where does it lead?"

"Perhaps to the firing squad. Or a dragon's lair. Or perhaps just downstairs to a grand old building with burning fireplaces, unlike this drafty attic." Washington drained his teacup before placing it on the saucer, then stood, walked over to the hole, and descended the stairs. He waved a hand over his shining head. "Come find out."

A silent argument of twitching eyebrows and head shakes erupted between the boys and ended in six seconds flat when the smaller boy threw up his hands in exasperation and sprinted after Washington.

"Not so eager to join him?" Jack shoved his hands deep in his pockets.

The taller boy didn't move. His stare turned assessing. The sharpness of it was only softened by an unusually thick fringe of lashes. "Will you throw me out the window if I don't?"

"You're safe on that account. The latch is broken. I haven't been able to toss anyone out in months." Hiding his grin, Jack shrugged off the wall and started for the stairs.

"How do I know this isn't some sort of a trap?"

"You don't, but if we were going to kill you, you'd be six feet

under by now, not standing at a window learning our exact location. Learn to trust a little.”

“I’ve been given little opportunity for that.”

He paused on the steps and looked back. The defiant tilt of the boy’s chin was thrust out to meet the world as it came to him, harsh and snapping, but vulnerability lurked in the corners of his eyes. He had known trust once, but it had been snatched from him like a well-loved dog suddenly shoved out into the cold and made to fend for itself. No one deserved to be abandoned like that, to have trust stripped away so that they could no longer accept goodness in the world when they stumbled upon it. Jack had been condemned to such callousness once, but he wouldn’t allow another to succumb to it. Not if there was something he could do about it.

“Then trust *me*.”

Appearing as nervous as a rabbit fearing a trap about to spring, the boy followed Jack down the rickety stairs to a deserted corridor flanked by closed doors with unpolished knobs. A single gas lamp flickered from a peg on the cracked wall. Washington’s gleaming bald head disappeared around a far corner. The smaller boy hovered at the corner, waiting for his friend and Jack to catch up.

“How long have you been trying to work this side of town?” Jack asked as they rounded the corner to another hallway. The names Adams, Hancock, Jefferson, Madison, and Rutledge were written on stained cards and pinned to each door in a row of them.

The boy swatted at a low-hanging cobweb. “Do we stand out that much?”

“Around here, yes. I know every newsie on the west side. Best way to get information.”

Somewhere between being accused as a spy and having his hands untied, the smaller boy with the keen eyes regained his nerve and attempted to keep stride with Jack.

"We mostly work the Hill, but *someone* doesn't think it's good enough anymore." He shot a look over his shoulder to his friend.

His friend snorted. "I don't want to sleep on a cold floor under a leaky roof and keep scrounging for food every day. Life has to be better than that."

"Not for the likes of us. We have to fight for every inch if we hope to see tomorrow." Midsentence, the smaller boy had forgotten his friend and turned his interest back on Jack. "I've never seen anybody move like you did at the bridge. Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

Jack shrugged as they descended to another floor. This corridor was adorned with paintings of severe Talon men in wigs from over a century ago. The scent of lemon beeswax lingered around the gilded frames.

"I've picked up a few tricks out of necessity." Not to mention the hours spent training every day with the other agents.

"Can you teach me? I've never seen someone throw a punch like that. Not even at the wharf."

"Sure, kid. We all need to know how to stay a few steps ahead."

"My name's Philip."

"Just Philip?"

Philip shrugged. "The orphanage never gave me a last name to go with it. That's"—his friend jabbed him in the shoulder—"Ive. That Jefferson would've killed us for sure if you hadn't spoken up. Don't you think he would've killed us if Jack hadn't come to the rescue, uh, Ive?"

Ive nodded reluctantly. "He might have. We are grateful."

"Despite what you witnessed earlier, Jefferson's a good man," Jack said. "They all are."

"Who exactly are 'they'?"

Jack stopped and turned to look back at Ive. Hands still in his pockets, his mouth curved at the corners. "People who had something different in mind for me. Maybe for you too."

The corridor opened to a wide landing with a grand staircase leading down to a great hall with reddish wood walls that glowed like warm cherries on a brazier. Everything gleamed, from the gaping fireplaces at either end to the golden chandeliers dripping with candles. A king could live here with no desire to step beyond the wonders of his own rooms. High on one wall was a black flag with a golden bird whose massive wings were outstretched and claws sprawled open for a kill. Terrifyingly majestic.

"An eagle. The symbol of our great nation." Washington's voice boomed from where he stood in the center of the magnificent hall. "Do you know how close we came to having a turkey instead? If a few of our founding fathers were allowed their choice. Or a dove for that matter. Absurd."

Ive shrank into his oversize coat as if trying to disappear. "No, sir. I didn't know."

"Hmm." Washington assessed him thoroughly with his sharp brown eyes. At last, his gaze cut back to the flag. "Majestic creature, the eagle. Strong, defiant, powerful. Protectors. Can you call a turkey majestic, what with that flabby thing wobbling all about?" He flapped his hand under his chin.

Ive's shoulders lowered from their hunched embarrassment. "No, sir. I can't."

"Indeed not." The man's eyes cut to Philip then back to Ive. "I see they didn't opt for the window."

Jack offered a nonchalant shrug. "Guess that proves they're daring."

"'Daring,' you say. Daring to leave the political riches of the Hill to descend on this part of town. Has selling newspapers drawn your boredom, and now you seek a new thrill of fulfillment? Stealing brooches from old ladies? Silver-capped canes from unsuspecting gentlemen? Pennies from the fountain?"

"No, sir!" Ive flared with indignation. "We're not thieves. We

were trying to earn a few coins selling newspapers in a new neighborhood. That's all."

Washington didn't relent. He used his imposing presence to bear down on the boy like one of those newfangled trollies running on electricity. "Where are these newspapers?"

"Trampled in a puddle."

"Ah, I see. A lack of evidence. Not to mention a fool's hope in selling papers on a soggy morning. Are you a fool?"

"No, sir."

"A liar then."

"I do not lie."

Washington bent to the boy's eye level, his unflinching stare probing him, searching for cracks. He seemed to find none. "Good." Straightening, he cupped a hand to his mouth and bellowed. "Dolly!"

Philip jumped behind Jack who merely stood there grinning, content with his place in this overwhelming room. After a few more bellows, loud enough to bring down the rafters, a tall angular woman with graying black hair marched around the corner.

"That's quite enough of that! There is no call for shrieking like an uncouth backwoodsman, Washington." Dressed in a gown of dusty purple that ruffled at her throat and hem, the woman squared herself directly in front of Ive and Philip. "New visitors, I see. Quite the impression you're making." She speared a look at Washington, who feigned interest in the ceiling. "A hot meal is what the two of you need."

On cue, the boys' stomachs rumbled. When had they last eaten a full meal? By the looks of them, not recently.

Ive's eyes cut to the main door and the outside world mere steps away. The hopeful flash of escape he'd had at the attic window returned as he placed a hand on Philip's shoulder. Long tapered fingers with delicate bones. That uncertainty that Jack couldn't quite figure out niggled once more at the back of his mind.



"That's very kind of you—" Ive said.

"Upstairs, I gave you two choices," Washington said. "The window or the door. I give you two more choices now. The door to dreariness where you'll dodge puddle after puddle with no newspapers to sell and become drenched to the bone after you find an abandoned doorway to shelter in. Or a hot meal and a safe place to lay your heads for the night where you may wake on the morrow to find a new world waiting for you. One beyond the ordinary." His gaze cut through Ive's forming protests and daggered her greatest fear. "Upon my word of honor, you will be unharmed no matter which you choose."

Ive opened his mouth with another slew of reservations but was cut short by loud rumblings from his belly.

"You'll catch your deaths of cold if you walk all those blocks back to the Hill in soggy clothes," Jack said to ease the war of uncertainty and survival battling across Ive's face. For added measure he threw in, "Trust me."

Ive glanced at Philip's pleading face and conceded defeat with a nod.

"Excellent choice. It's the one I would have made. All right, Dolly. Hot food, a bath, dry clothes, and a warm bed for the night for these boys." Tucking his hands behind his back, Washington spun on his heel and walked away. "If they steal anything, make sure it's the silver. I detest the set we have."

Dolly looked between Ive and Philip, her thin lips pursed in consideration. "Right. A warm bath and dry clothes first before they wrinkle themselves into colds. Jack, you take that one"—she pushed Philip toward him before taking Ive's arm—"and I'll see to this one."

Jack glanced back as Dolly propelled Ive in the opposite direction. Ive was having none of it, and the sudden realization of what now seemed so obvious—what he had been trying to put his finger on—hit Jack full force.

Laughing out loud, he turned and guided Philip to the men's wing.