

Angel of War

The Nephilim Chronicles:Book 2

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Waterbury. A city where basketball is everything. With that said, there is no love in the game. It's a place where people don't want to see you do well or give you the credit you deserve. There are so many great players who come from this strong basketball community, but the love isn't there. No one wants to see anyone do well. I'm different. I know that there are many great players who come from our city and I want to see them all do well. I would love for everyone to get a scholarship! I want everyone to make it to the pros! I want everyone to be able to come to a pickup game and just have fun competing against the best from our city without arguing or fighting!! Just enjoying the opportunity to compete against the best and improve on a different aspect of their game each and every time. Though, the love just isn't there. If our basketball community was united and supportive as a whole, I think it would be scary to see how much talent wouldn't get wasted. Though, that me against the world attitude and spirit is so toxic. Most people are their own worst enemies. Well, when we make the choice to love one another and want to see all of us make it. Sky's the limit! Something is going to have to change though! –Waterbury Resident.

New Haven, CT. In this city (that I'm glad to call home) is one of the most prestigious universities in the world and yet it's ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in the U.S. On one side of the city you can find million dollar houses and the home of one our U.S. congresswomen, and a few blocks away you find yourself in the heart of gang territory where too many of our youth have lost their lives to gun violence. Wanna hear some good music? You can check out Toads Place on York Street. Want some amazing food? Check out Little Italy on Wooster Street. Pretty much whatever you're into, whether good or bad you can find in this city. If I had to summarize my city in one sentence I would say that New Haven, CT is most simply put a dichotomy between the rich and the poor, culture, exposure and the lack thereof. – New Haven Resident.

Waterbury is a place where time stands still. Nothing changes, no one evolves. People have very little, but they are

generous. It keeps you grounded yet at the same time, you want more for yourself. – Former Waterbury Resident.

New Haven is a wonderful place that has so many shadows. Shadows that are treasures and shadows that are painful. Every time New Haven is in the news it's always about the negative: such as who shot who, what drugs are being sold, and gang activity. But no one really recognizes how in the past ten years high school graduation rates have more than doubled, projects that kids do in the community, how many have come from poverty, lost so many things and had so much success in life. Another hidden treasure is the great programs such as LEAP. Originally it received great press but over the years most of CT has forgotten that it is still there.

I love my city because it has so much beauty to it, but I hate that it's so poverty stricken, it gets so much bad press, and there are limited resources. Yale University has taken over so much but has given back so little to those in need. Instead taxes are sky high and they make it nearly impossible to get a job in any of their facilities. All New Haven needs is more resources and guidance then it would be a perfect place in my eyes. – New Haven Resident.

Waterbury: home of the nicest rude people you'll ever meet.
–Former Waterbury Resident.

“And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven.” – Revelation 12: 7-8

“The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.” –Genesis 6:4

Chapter 1

Samuel Johnson was a beast. As a McDonald's High School All-American, he averaged 36 points, 6 assists, and 5 rebounds per game during his senior season for Stratford High School. Standing 6'2" tall and weighing 170 lbs., Samuel did not look very athletic until you watched him dominate the game, and his most shocking attribute was his strength. Despite often being the thinnest guy on the court, he was usually the strongest and the most explosive player; so much so that people would leave work early just to watch him dunk during the pre-game warm-ups. During the game, Samuel would use his strength and his 40 inch vertical leap to catch his opponents off-guard with thundering dunks through the lane. He especially had a taste for dunking on opponents larger than him and would make it a point to target anyone 6'5" or taller. Of course, Samuel's athletic marvels were no surprise to his family. He inherited his deceptive strength from his father. However, Samuel was even stronger because he also had the state's smartest personal trainer; his sister, Achilla Johnson.

Moving away to Loomis Chaffee did not prevent Achilla from helping Samuel with his training. She emailed his meals and workouts and scolded him by text if he didn't follow her regimen; sometimes threatening to "come down there and force feed" him a healthy diet. With Achilla's knowledge of nutrition and fitness, Samuel grew stronger, faster, and more explosive while gaining minimal weight. As a result, every crowd that watched Samuel play would gasp whenever he rattled the hoop with a dunk. He soon gained a reputation as the strongest dunker in the SWC conference.

During one game against Jonathan Law High School in Milford, Samuel drove down the middle of the lane with only a dirty blonde, 6'5", 260 lbs. center standing in his path. Samuel knew him well. He was an all-state lineman who broke the kneecap of Stratford High School's quarterback with a dirty play. So Samuel decided that a little payback was in order. He

tomahawked the ball through his outstretched hand and broke the rim and the poles behind the backboard with a dunk that boomed like a car crash. Luckily, it was near the end of the fourth quarter and Stratford High School had a commanding lead. When the referees ended the game, the Red Devils won. Samuel stood by the bench with his chin raised as he watched the lineman walk off the court with a broken wrist. It served him right

Samuel owed Achilla a debt of gratitude for her constant training and advice. So the day before her graduation ceremony, he took Achilla to a diner in Hartford; just the two of them. He was a junior at the time, and he had just started driving himself to his new job at the Champs in the Trumbull Mall. He used his newfound money to cover Achilla's four plates of salad. Samuel ordered a burger and fries, and much to his amazement, Achilla didn't chastise him. Considering that their last meeting with their parents ended in an argument over their father's career path(Samuel still thought his father should run for Mayor of Stratford), Samuel figured that she wanted to go easy on him. Why not to make it up to her by treating for lunch?

After not seeing her in person for over two years(she said sports and extra-curriculars required her to stay on campus), Samuel noticed a change in Achilla. She always looked old for her age, and spoke with even more maturity, but as he sat across from her at this white table piled with bowls of green lettuce and plump red tomatoes, he almost felt like he was hanging out with one of his teachers. Achilla spoke with perfect grammar; only occasionally switching to colloquialisms in a way that made Samuel feel like she was dumbing herself down for him. Her jet black hair fell straight down her back, lying against her maroon t-shirt like an ironed towel. Her green eyes were more intense, something that Samuel didn't think was possible, and though she looked at Samuel when they spoke, she had a tendency to look around the room for half a second before taking a bite of her food. Samuel noticed an elderly couple staring at her from behind, but Achilla raised her hand to keep his attention.

"Don't mind them," Achilla said.

"Why would two random people just stare at you like that?" Samuel asked.

“Ten.”

“Huh?”

“Ten people stared at me when I walked in,” Achilla said before taking a bite of her salad and dabbing her mouth with a napkin. “The two you’re noticing haven’t stopped or bothered to hide it. The other eight are eating their food and pretending not to notice we’re here.”

“Ok, care to answer the why part?” Samuel chuckled.

“You’re so unassuming,” Achilla said with a smile as she shook her head. “You really do admire me, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” Samuel said. “Because of you, people say I’m going to be the best player in the state next season. Maybe even New England.”

“Samuel,” Achilla laughed. “That’s why they’re staring. We look nothing alike, so I’m assuming they think I’m your girlfriend.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Achilla said with a head nod. “You’re the star here, not me.”

“I guess,” Samuel replied with a shrug. “All I do is play ball. You’re the Marine.”

Achilla covered her mouth as she let out a short giggle; the kind that hadn’t changed since they were kids playing basketball in their driveway on long summer afternoons or bundling up in front of the television watching cartoons when Connecticut’s brutal blizzards gave them a snow day. Samuel remembered that laugh during snowball fights outside when Achilla would belt Samuel with two snowballs at once by throwing them over the roof of their house. To this day, Samuel had no clue how she managed to aim so well without actually seeing him, but it always felt like a bird dropped dead and crashed onto his winter hat. Achilla laughed harder when Samuel threw snowballs back because she was impossible to hit even with her back turned. That laughter used to frustrate Samuel, but now it made him curious. It was a laugh that just didn’t seem to fit Achilla’s demeanor. She always held a straight faced expression until she suddenly laughed at the slightest joke or mishap. It was certainly not a trait that she inherited from the Johnson family. They were

always smiling and talking. Samuel's parents' laughter was never a sneak attack like Achilla's.

"I'm actually glad that I have to explain this," Achilla said with a smile. "It means you're humble. Just so you know, you'll notice more of this later."

"More of what?" Samuel asked.

"Fame," said Achilla before biting into her food. "Your level of talent makes you a household name pretty quickly. Just watch."

Achilla's undying faith in Samuel was a Johnson family trait, and it was well placed. During his senior season, Samuel watched Achilla's words come true. Soon Division 1 programs across the country sought after him. Scouts flooded the stands whenever Samuel played, and he received letters from Kentucky, Duke, and Kansas to name a few. UConn didn't send him any letters, but that wasn't surprising. The fact that Vin Baker played for the University of Hartford proved that UConn tended to overlook the talent in its own state. Still, their refusal to acknowledge Samuel's accolades frustrated many Stratford residents. He made the front page of the Hartford Courant twice, and one of those articles scolded Coach Calhoun for not scouting a player who led his division in scoring two years in a row. Samuel always smiled and waved it off, but his blood boiled. He swore to himself that he would pick a school that had to play UConn at some point, just so he could drop buckets on them and stare down their bench.

Despite UConn's snub, Samuel's fame continued to rise. When restaurant owners in Stratford recognized Samuel, he ate for free. Teachers, counselors, nurses, police officers, you name it; they all pulled over their cars and thanked Samuel for his game last night and asked him if he would do it again next time. The answer was always yes. Samuel answered head nods, salutes, and waves from random people when he walked through the Trumbull Mall with his team wearing his letter jacket. Everywhere he went, someone knew his name.

Samuel was also the object of many crushes. Girls at school bumped him in the hallway and "accidentally" leaned into his chest before apologizing, caressing his chest again, and giggling

as they speed-walked to class. Girls at away games waited outside of his locker room and grabbed his butt as they slipped their phone numbers into his pockets. On the off chance that he had time for a date, other girls would literally show up and interfere until he demanded that they leave him alone, or his date gave up and walked away; sometimes both. Some girls pestered him every day until he blocked their phone numbers and Facebook profiles.

Even when the Johnsons moved to a wealthier section of Stratford, some of the girls found his home and came over unannounced. The Johnson property had a cement walkway that led to a driveway with enough space for Samuel to shoot around on his brand-new regulation hoop, a three car garage, and a spacious front and back yard with some woods on the edge of the property line; and Samuel found a high school girl hiding in every corner. They insisted on coming in and meeting his parents if they were there. If they weren't, they insisted on coming in and getting it on before they came home. The girls who met Samuel's parents rattled off a resume of their achievements to prove themselves worthy of their trust. The ones who didn't used every kind of seduction method that they most likely learned from their older sisters.

One day, Samuel looked up from a curly-haired brunette lying on the living room couch, and found his father Brendan, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed over his navy blue suit. Samuel removed his hands from her belt and raised them like he was under arrest. Brendan averted his eyes as the girl rushed to cover herself with the green sweater she left on the off-white carpet. Samuel's heart pumped out of his chest as he scrambled to think of an excuse while she rolled off of the couch and ducked her head like she was evading enemy fire. She was the fifth girl to visit this couch, but the first one his father had actually met. Samuel breathed a short sigh of relief that his mother was still at parent-teacher conferences. She always stayed later than the other teachers for those kinds of things.

"I know, son," Brendan said with a raised hand as the brunette ran past him to the door. "I also know she's not the only one. Not for a kid like you."

“Am I in trouble?” Samuel asked.

“For what?” Brendan chuckled.

“Mom would be pretty upset.”

“I’m not your mother,” Brendan replied as he stepped into the living room. “And your mother doesn’t know what it’s like to be a high school boy with girls knocking down his door.”

“So now what?” Samuel asked with a frown.

“So this stays between us,” Brendan sighed as he patted his shoulder. “This isn’t a moment for punishment, but I do have some advice. Be careful, son. You might be having fun, but some of these girls take this thing real serious.”

“Didn’t seem serious,” Samuel quipped. “I met her three days ago, and she popped up here looking to smash.”

“She found your address in three days?” Brendan asked with a cocked eyebrow. “Son, we need to help you with following your gut because that sounds plenty serious to me.”

“Ok.”

“First, don’t do that anymore,” Brendan said with a thumb toward the door. “Girls who pop up at your house out of nowhere are not the ones you screw with. Be honest. Were the girls who kept calling until you blocked their numbers the same ones pulling that kind of crap?”

“Well...yeah,” said Samuel as he scratched his head.

“Ok then,” Brendan replied. “And don’t be like me. I used to fool around with everything that moved until I screwed somebody’s girlfriend over on the West End and almost got shot. Learn something about them first.”

“Got it.”

“And use protection,” Brendan said with a wave of his hand as he turned his back. “No diseases. No babies.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” Brendan called as Samuel readjusted the pillows on the couch.

“Yes?” Samuel answered with raised eyebrows.

“Be real careful about parties or alcohol,” Brendan said. “It’s rape if she’s drunk. It’s wrong and against the law. Period. I didn’t raise you to take advantage of women like that punk, Stanley.”

“Right,” Samuel replied as he remembered the night Achilla came home crying and hugging their parents after Stanley attempted to rape her. Fortunately, Achilla was not a normal fourteen-year-old girl. After a few days, Achilla transformed from being afraid for her safety to worrying if the damage she had done to her attacker would land her in prison. Thanks to Brendan, it didn’t, and Stanley’s football career never recovered. Last Samuel heard, he applied to the University of Chicago; probably with the sole purpose of avoiding Achilla. Samuel hoped he lived the rest of his days in fear.

“I won’t be like him,” Samuel said with a hard stare. “He disgusts me.”

“And if she lies about *anything*, don’t do it,” Brendan continued. “Anything. Understand? I don’t care what it is. It could be the time she got up this morning. Just get up and walk out. I don’t care if she’s ready for whatever. If you catch her in a lie, any lie, leave.”

“Why?” Samuel asked. “It’s not like she’s my girlfriend, right? I don’t have to trust her if that’s all we’re doing.”

Brendan stared at Samuel until he looked away. He then stepped back into the foyer and pointed at the couch. Samuel sat down and Brendan lounged on the other end as he unbuckled his silver and black-faced watch. He had a habit of doing that when he came home. Samuel wondered if the watch was too heavy for his wrist.

“Son,” Brendan sighed. “As a man, and especially as a black man, you need to understand what I just said to you.”

“Why?”

“Because you have no idea what a dishonest woman could do to you,” Brendan said. “All it takes is one lie and enough evidence to convince a judge, and your hoop dreams are over. I know this from experience, son. I don’t want you to end up like some of my clients.”

“I understand,” Samuel replied with a head nod. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good,” Brendan said with a slight smile. “I hope you find someone good, Samuel. Someone who’s on your side like your

mother's always on mine. And I hope you find her a lot sooner than I did."

"Is this about *her*?" Samuel asked. They both knew he was referring to Ailina Harris; the Bridgeport Cop turned freak of nature who attacked them four years ago. Samuel hadn't seen her since, but her glowing green eyes still haunted him in his sleep on occasion. He was convinced that if Achilla didn't step in when she did, they would all be dead, but watching them fight made his jaw drop. Stanley got off easy compared to Ailina, but the fact that she could get up and walk away after such a pounding frightened everyone in the Johnson house. Achilla kept her at bay, but she didn't disable her, and if she couldn't, none of them could. If she ever came back without Achilla around, they were done for unless God Himself intervened. So sometimes, saying her name was too frightening. *Her* was enough.

"Yes," Brendan said. "The only good thing about *her* is the fact that we have Achilla in our family now. But she's not the only manipulator in the world. They start early, son. Just be careful. That's all I want."

"Got it, Dad."

"All I want is for you two to be happy and successful," Brendan replied. "I want that more than all the high profile cases and money in the world."

"Thanks," Samuel replied with a smile. "I won't disappoint."

Per his father's advice, Samuel slowed down. He no longer took unannounced visits, and if he liked a girl, he would take her on a date first before they did anything. His mother Sam became a gate keeper for the girls he dated. She made it a point to find out everything she could about every girl who came Samuel's way, and they often didn't measure up. The Johnson house protected its son at all costs. Diseases, babies, and even unsavory rumors were to be preempted by screening every girl who crossed paths with him until word spread around Stratford High School that the turnover rate for being Samuel's girlfriend was very high. Samuel didn't mind. He needed more time to work on his post game anyway. That was the next addition to his repertoire, and until he mastered the Dream Shake, the girls could wait for a while.

On a mild, March Saturday afternoon, Samuel decided to practice those post moves. He threw on a gray t-shirt and black basketball shorts that hung past his knees and followed his usual warm-up routine of twenty shots per spot before making thirty free-throws. Then he would practice hook shots and pump-fakes. Before he finished his first set, a lollipop blue Mercedes Benz pulled into the driveway. Samuel sighed and tossed the ball between his hands. It was Trish O'Brien and the last person he wanted to see today.

Trish was a red-haired, freckle-faced girl from his psychology class who was pretty popular at Stratford High as the captain of the tennis team and the soccer team. Though both teams were not particularly good (they tanked after Achilla graduated), Trish's individual accolades and her 4.0 GPA were enough to garner attention from Ivy League and other D1 level programs. The fact that she was the offspring of two Yale alumni didn't hurt either. Trish's father was a doctor, and her mother was a physician assistant. She came from money and she often thought it could buy her anything, including Samuel. The last time they spoke, she insisted on giving him her phone number and offered to buy his lunch at school. Samuel took her phone number but refused the food three times until she walked away in a huff. Now, like many others, she found out where he lived and decided to drop by for a visit.

Samuel made another jump-shot and jogged to pick up the ball as Trish parked just far enough to avoid any loose rebounds. He shook his head as Trish stepped out and sauntered toward him wearing a white blouse, black knee-length skirt, and shiny black Mary Janes from a French designer whose name Samuel couldn't pronounce; not that he particularly cared to learn it. Though he noticed her pale but defined calves accentuated by her high-heeled shoes, that wasn't her most alluring attribute. It was the fact that her blue eyes always met his before she spoke. Trish always approached him with the sort of confidence that baffled Samuel considering how often he rejected her advances. He might have found her attractive if she wasn't, well, Trish.

"Hi, Samuel," Trish said with her chin raised. "How are you?"

“What’s up, Trish?” Samuel asked before turning and shooting another jumper.

“I just thought I’d ask why you didn’t call me last night,” Trish asked with her arms crossed as Samuel dribbled through his legs. “I was waiting for your call, you know.”

“I was busy,” Samuel replied with a shrug.

“I offered to take you shopping,” Trish said. “All you had to do was tell me when you were free to go, and I would’ve bought you a new pair of sneakers. You’ll need that for off-season training, right? I noticed a great pair that would’ve been perfect. You would’ve been pleased.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Samuel chuckled as he dribbled his ball behind his back. “I mean, to be honest, it’s a little weird of you to just offer to buy me stuff out of nowhere.”

“I don’t think it’s weird at all,” Trish replied. “It’s a nice gesture.”

“Yeah,” said Samuel as he low dribbled the basketball with his finger-tips. “I don’t need you to be that nice. I mean, I didn’t ask for it.”

“Well, I think you need someone like me,” Trish said as she paced the driveway with her chin in the air. “Someone who can do those kinds of things for you without you having to ask.”

“And by that you mean regardless of whether I say no?” Samuel muttered.

“Ok, I’m persistent,” replied Trish with a shrug and a pearly white smile. “So sue me. There’s nothing wrong with showing how much you like someone, right?”

“Maybe,” Samuel said before throwing up a sky hook that bounced off the backboard and through the net. “But I don’t see how that involves you taking me shopping for shoes you picked. I mean, it’s not required. You’re not even my girlfriend.”

“That could change,” Trish replied with a grin. “And it comes with a lot of benefits.”

“Haven’t had much trouble getting those benefits on my own,” Samuel chuckled.

“Not all of them,” Trish said while she pointed at her car. “My Dad treats my boyfriends really well. My ex got season tickets to the Knicks.”

“Didn’t he give you those tickets back after he broke up with you?”

“He was very stupid,” Trish snapped before taking a deep breath and wiping a strand of her hair. “You’re not stupid. You should have them instead. You deserve them.”

“That’s cool, but I’m not a Knicks fan,” Samuel laughed. “Not that I don’t appreciate re-gifting.”

“You know what I mean,” Trish said with a roll of her eyes. “It can be any team you want. Maybe the Celtics?”

“I’m actually a Lakers fan.”

“Oh, well I’m sure we can figure out when they’re in town-”

“Trish, I can’t focus on a relationship right now,” Samuel sighed as he dribbled the ball through his legs and whipped out a crossover before finger-rolling the ball into the hoop. “I’ve got too much going on. Didn’t we talk about this already?”

“I’d like to talk about it again,” Trish said with a soft voice, but a not so friendly stare. “When is your birthday, Samuel?”

“None of your business if you’re trying to buy me something-”

“Samuel!” Sam called as she walked out of their house wearing her typical sky blue t-shirt and jeans. She stood with her hands on her hips as she stared back and forth at Samuel and Trish. With his skyrocketing success in the courtroom, Brendan now spent the majority of his time at the office, even on the weekends. Thus, Sam was in charge of most of the day-to-day tasks around the house. This made her gatekeeping role especially easy.

“Samuel, does your friend need something to drink?” Sam asked.

That was their code phrase for *is she welcome?*

“Nope,” Samuel said as Trish frowned at him.

“All right, well I need you in here to change these light bulbs,” Sam said as she turned her back to walk in the house. That was Samuel’s escape route. He waved at Trish and jogged into the house, leaving her standing in the driveway. When

Samuel came inside, he and his mother laughed as they watched Trish drive away. Another one bites the dust.

“Hey, I don’t know, Samuel,” Sam said with a nudge of her elbow as they walked into the kitchen with brown marble countertops and an island. “You could’ve at least gotten some season tickets out of it.”

“No way, Mom,” Samuel replied. “She’ll never leave me alone then.”

“So have you decided on a school yet?” Sam asked.

“No,” Samuel groaned.

“Cutting it close there, Samuel,” Sam replied with a cocked eyebrow. “You need to make a decision so we can help you prepare.”

“I know,” Samuel said. “I’ll decide. Soon.”

“Good,” said Sam. “Just know that we’ll support you with any school you choose. We’re all in this together.”

Samuel hated to admit it, but he was frightened of college basketball. The opportunity to compete against top level basketball players excited him, but the big stage seemed so overwhelming. It wasn’t that Samuel had a problem with people. He was the Senior Class President, captain of the debate team, and a regular volunteer at church. Still, the big stage brought so much pressure that it kept Samuel up at night. His insomnia got worse before the state championship game at Mohegan Sun. Stratford High was scheduled to play against Crosby; a public school in Waterbury with a starting line-up of D1 prospects. Samuel played against them before in AAU tournaments and leagues around Bridgeport, Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, Boston, and New York City. He knew he could take them, but he still couldn’t sleep.

He called Achilla at around two in the morning and she picked up after four rings. Since she decided to enlist in the Marines, an odd choice to everyone who had never seen her fight before, she was deployed in Iraq. Still, she told Samuel that he could literally call her any time. Her answer made Samuel regret accepting her invitation.

“What is it, Samuel?” Achilla snapped. “I’m busy.”

“At two a.m.?” Samuel asked. “What do they have you do in the Marines? Shouldn’t you be asleep? I mean I was expecting to leave a voicemail-”

“It’s not two a.m. over here, Samuel.”

“Oh, so were you at work or something-”

“God, what do you think I was doing?” Achilla hissed while Samuel heard shuffling in the background. “I had a guy over, and now he’s leaving. You know I always pick up when you call.”

“Oh, sorry-”

“Don’t sweat it,” Achilla sighed. “I told you to call me at any time. I shouldn’t get mad at you when you actually do it. You’re nervous about your game. I can hear it in your voice.”

“I’ll be all right,” Samuel muttered as he lay down in bed.

“Just remember how great you are,” Achilla said. “Know that, and nobody can take you. You have it. You’ve worked too hard not to.”

“What about you?” Samuel asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well aren’t you nervous?” Samuel asked. “You’ve been deployed.”

“If you think the Marines are a challenge for me, you’re bugging,” Achilla chuckled. “I’m just here because they’ll let me fight.”

“Do they know about you?” Samuel asked. He noticed a long time ago that Achilla liked to keep her abilities under wraps; especially her super strength. He wondered how well she could hide something like that while serving in the armed forces. If her smirkish with Ailina proved anything, it was that emergencies tended to draw out her true nature. A warzone would provide plenty of opportunities for Achilla to become a hero and overnight sensation; the exact opposite of what Achilla wanted.

“No, and I’d like to keep it that way,” Achilla replied with a rushed tone. “I have to go.”

“Night, Sis.”

“Hey wait, quick question,” Achilla said. “While you’re awake. Has that girl Trish come around lately?”

“Yeah, but-”

“Stay away from her,” Achilla said with a curt tone. “She sounds like Ailina.”

Achilla was the only Johnson who had zero problems uttering Ailina’s name, but she always spat it out like a mouthful of spoiled milk.

“Achilla,” Samuel groaned and wiped his face before turning on his side. “She’s pretty aggressive, and maybe a little shallow, but I wouldn’t compare her to *her*. Come on, don’t exaggerate.”

“She might be a little less extreme,” Achilla said. “But I know the mentality when I hear it. Come on, she’s always trying to buy you stuff. She keeps saying you need her. She thinks she’s better than you, Samuel, and she’s trying to make you dependent on her so she can use you and drop you. Didn’t you say there was a cute girl in your Trig class?”

“Yeah, she’s straight,” Samuel replied with a shrug. “I guess she’s kind of nice.”

“Nice is good,” Achilla said. “I like nice. Talk to the nice one.”

“I think it’s my choice, Achilla.”

“Yes it is,” Achilla replied with a smile that Samuel could hear through the receiver. “Ok, I’m going for real now. You’re going to destroy them tomorrow. Remember that and get some sleep.”

The rest of Samuel’s day was a blur until the opening tip. As he watched the two centers at half-court stand on both sides of the referee, Samuel’s hands trembled. His knees shook at the sound of the crowd of parents and teachers screaming and cheering on their teams. His teeth chattered at the silence of the scouts in the crowd who were too busy analyzing his game to be exuberant. He closed his eyes and imagined his sister deployed in the Marines. She was always so strong. She risked her life for her family, and now for her country. How could he be afraid of a basketball game; a game that he was so good at that college scouts called his home at least twice a week?

Samuel opened his eyes just as the ball flew in his direction. He caught the ball and looked down court. Two defenders had crossed half-court, and they were both big men who stood 6’8”

apiece. Samuel saw an opening to attack that he knew nobody else on this court could see. He jogged for a couple steps to lull the other team to sleep and then exhaled as he sprinted forward. One guard caught up from behind at an angle and reached for the ball.

Big mistake. Samuel and Brendan practiced this scenario in their driveway for years, and it was an easy two dribble set-up. Samuel pounded the ball through his legs, let his defender skid to a stop and recover, and then whipped out a crossover that sent him stumbling face-first. Samuel left the hapless guard in his wake to the tune of a buzzing audience and beelined down court. That was a move that Brendan taught Samuel as a boy, and it was an old classic.

The Killer Crossover: Courtesy of Tim Hardaway.

The two big men scrambled to cut Samuel off, but they were too late. Once Samuel stepped past the three point line, nobody could stop him from getting to the hoop. Samuel picked up the ball and drove in with his elbows out, jabbing an opponent's chest before dunking the ball with a thunderous clank. The crowd gasped, and his team jumped from the bench to its feet as Samuel jogged back on defense. As the opposing guard dribbled the ball up, Samuel stared at his teammates and nodded his head. When they nodded back, Samuel hiked up his shorts and smacked the floor with both hands as he prepared for Crosby's retaliation. That dunk was all Samuel needed. This game was his.

Stratford High School won the state championship with an undefeated record. Samuel was the MVP of the entire tournament, and he scored 40 points in the championship game; mostly through dunks and layups. Samuel's teammates carried him toward the locker room, but he commanded to be let down. He then grabbed their coach, and they carried him instead. After he showered and changed into a gray hoody and jeans in the locker room, a reporter for News Channel 12 approached him for an interview.

"Rich Feinstein reporting live," he said as he shoved a microphone in Samuel's face. "Samuel, you scored 40 points on

15 of 25 from the field and sank 10 straight free-throws. How did you do it?"

"Well first I want to thank God," Samuel said. "And then I want to thank my family for supporting me. Without them, none of this is possible. To answer your question, I mean, I just went out there and played and took what the defense gave me. You know, Crosby played excellent defense and pushed me off the perimeter, so I took it to the hoop and showed that I could handle the physical play."

"Samuel, you have recruiters from all over the country knocking down your door," Feinstein said. "Have you made a decision yet?"

"Not yet," Samuel replied. "When I do, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Samuel," Feinstein said. "You have a great future, and good luck to you."

"Thanks," Samuel said as he walked away toward his parents on the other end of the court. His father wore a black hoody with jeans and black and white adidas; his typical basketball game attire. His mother came straight from school and wore a tan blouse with green slacks with green shoes. No matter how much older they looked, no matter how much Samuel had grown, his parents were always the same. Samuel hugged them both and Brendan rubbed his head.

"Great game, son," Brendan said. "Great game!"

"You were wonderful out there," Sam said.

"Thanks," Samuel said. "You guys can thank Achilla for that. She worked me so hard."

"And it paid off," Brendan replied.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Sam said with a frown. "And here I was worried that her standards would be too high."

"That's the thing," Samuel chuckled. "She always tailored everything to me. It was perfect."

"Sounds like Achilla to me," Brendan said. "Look, we're going to head home. You go party with your team."

"Just call us and let us know where you are," Sam said. "Have fun!"

Samuel did just that. He drove his blue Honda civic down to the South End of Stratford where Brian, the senior point guard, was throwing a party. Samuel didn't drink (Achilla and his parents would kill him if he did), but the rest of the team guzzled beer the entire night. As Samuel sat on a red couch with a bottle of water in his hand, he spotted Trish sauntering across the room wearing a burgundy and black plaid shirt and khaki shorts that hugged her porcelain thighs. She sat next to him and crossed her legs so that her sandaled foot tapped his knee, and she played with her hair as she smiled at him. Samuel sighed and leaned back. Normally, he would avoid her, but tonight was a celebration. Seeming to have read his mind, Trish leaned over and kissed Samuel on the mouth. She then grabbed his hand and led him an empty bedroom in the back of the house.

After they finished, Samuel lay in a bed with black bed sheets and looked at the red-haired girl next to him. She slept on her side with her hair over her face and her arm across Samuel's chest. This was the same girl who just the other day, Samuel thought was too crazy to meet his mother. Now he was lying in bed with her wondering how he can get away. Samuel stared at the ceiling as a tinge of guilt gathered in his throat. This girl, no matter how rich and snooty she might have been, was still another person. She at least deserved his honesty. Samuel nudged her awake and she grinned and scratched his chest.

"Hey," Trish said as she bit her lip.

"Hey," Samuel replied. "Look, I don't want to lead you on. I know you wanted a relationship, but I can't give you that. I'm sorry I waited until after sex to--"

"No biggie," Trish said as she stretched her arms and legs under the bed sheets.

"What?"

"Look, I only offered to be your girlfriend because everyone kept telling me how much of a good boy you were," Trish said. "That and your mom's like super protective. This was really all I wanted, and I didn't think you would do it without a date first. Everyone says that all guys care about is sex, but that's not true. Guys like you have to feel all special first, and I get

that. My ex was the same way, but you're way hotter. You know, I have to admit this was definitely worth the effort--"

"Wait," Samuel replied with a frown. "So you don't actually like me?"

"I like your body," Trish said with a smile as she caressed his chest. "But you're not exactly the guy I would *date* date. Think about it. What's your plan? Have you even picked your school yet?"

"No," Samuel said.

"I'm going to Yale," Trish replied. "And I'm going to major in pre-med. After that, I'm going to Johns Hopkins for med school so I can become a neurosurgeon. Are you going to play basketball your whole life? Let me tell you, the NBA isn't exactly the easiest or most sustainable job to land. It's a good dream and all, but that's usually all it is."

Samuel frowned. As much as he enjoyed basketball, and intended to use it to pay for his education, he hadn't thought about going pro. He dreamt about wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase to his next trial while answering reporters and guiding his client to his car; just like his father. He wanted people to depend on him like they did Brendan, calling him in the middle of the night to save them from unfair prosecution. He wanted to be the reason the wrongfully accused never lost their freedom, not under his watch anyway. Samuel always wanted to be a defense attorney. He watched the NBA on television, but he never imagined himself playing in it.

"I'm going to be a lawyer like my dad," Samuel said. "Better than my dad."

"Oh right, you're Brendan Johnson's kid," Trish said with a head nod. "I guess that stands for something. I hear your father's a real bleeding heart though. He turns down clients who can offer him more money so he can *help those who need it*. I guess it's worked out for you, but he's not exactly the manliest guy around--"

Samuel shoved Trish's arm away and turned his back on her to grab his pants.

“You’re mad at me?” Trish laughed as she sat up. “Come on, five minutes ago you were about to give me the ‘it’s just sex’ speech. If guys can do it, why can’t I?”

“You think I care about that?” Samuel snapped.

“Then what’s the problem, Samuel?” Trish asked. “Jesus, boys are so sensitive nowadays.”

“*Nobody* talks shit about my father in front of me,” Samuel growled as he pointed his finger in Trish’s face. “If you were a dude, we’d be banging out right now.”

“Oh bullshit, like you’ve ever had to fight someone,” Trish replied with a sneer as she pushed his hand away and covered herself with the sheets as she reached for her shirt. “You always had your butch sister protecting you. Everyone knows that.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Samuel snapped as he pulled up his jeans and threw his t-shirt over his head. “And for your information, my father’s a great man. He’s been my hero my whole life.”

“Well if he’s your example, I’m glad we did this now,” said Trish as she buttoned her shirt and pointed at her breasts. “Later on I won’t have time to waste all this on some mediocre lawyer, and besides, I have a reputation to uphold. If anyone finds out about us, I can just tell them I was young and dumb or something, or that I had a thing for black guys in high school.”

“What?” asked Samuel with a curled lip. “Man, how do you sleep at night thinking like-”

“I sleep just fine,” Trish cut Sam off with fire in her eyes. “And you’d better wake up! Girls don’t like guys with no future, and I don’t think you have one. You probably won’t make it pro, and you can forget being a lawyer who makes any money. I hate to break it to you, sweetie, but outside of some good bone, you’re pretty pathetic.”

“Shut the hell up!” Samuel fired back.

“Aw, did I upset you?” Trish replied with a sideways grin. “Is the big strong ball player going to cry like a little bitch? Well newsflash, your cock’s probably all you’re good for, and every girl knows it.

“Man, everybody’s not like you, Trish, everybody-”

“Yes, they are,” Trish snorted. “They’re just too nice to tell you. I’ve heard about the girls you hooked up with. I know their boyfriends too. They’re the ones who get to meet the parents and go to prom because they’re actually worth something. You are literally a fun ride with like zero relationship potential.”

“No,” muttered Samuel as he shook his head. “No, you’re wrong. Watch me. I’ll change lives just like my dad did; more than he did. And when I do, you’ll regret everything you just said.”

“Oh, God another bleeding heart!” groaned Trish as she covered her face with her hands and shook her head. “I am *so* glad we used a condom. You’re such a loser!”

“To hell with you, Trish,” Samuel said as he walked out the door. “I bet this is why your last boyfriend dumped you!”

“No *to hell with you*, asshole!” Trish snarled at his back. “You and your loser for a father!”

Samuel rushed out of the party without saying goodbye to his teammates and hopped into his car. As tears welled up in his eyes, Samuel pounded his steering wheel. Why was he crying over her? How could her words cut so deep? Samuel wiped his eyes and started his car. Trish didn’t know anything. She didn’t know about the night he stood up to Ailina and was ready to die for his family. All she knew was that he was an athlete, and that was all she ever bothered to see. He was nothing more than a tool to her. What about the rest of those girls? Was he just an object to them too? Did they just *have a thing for black guys in high school?*

Samuel shook his head as he pulled out of the driveway and drove slow down the street. No, Trish was lying. Maybe some people thought like her, but not all and certainly not most. The more Samuel thought about it, the more he realized just how different from everyone else Trish was. The other girls who came to his house to hook up were up front about it, but Trish pretended to want a relationship just to have his body. When that didn’t work, she waited until his defenses were down and used a different angle. This was about more than sex. Samuel was sure that Trish enjoyed manipulating him as much as she enjoyed the sex itself, and the moment he showed a sliver of dignity she went

out of her way to cut him down. He told himself that he would never speak to Trish ever again; but not just out of anger. Samuel had a gut feeling that she was exactly the kind of woman who sent his father's clients to prison. Speaking to her was no longer an option, not unless he wanted to throw his life away.

Samuel was halfway home when blue and red lights flashed behind him. So he rolled his eyes and pulled over. As his father had taught him, he cracked his window and placed both hands on the steering wheel. He closed his eyes and rehearsed the polite tone he would use when he requested to go home. Brendan had a knack for foiling corrupt police officers in court, and he always taught Samuel to never give a cop an excuse to mistreat him. As a black male, he had to be extra vigilant, and if anything funny happened, he should tell Brendan everything down to the minute detail. Samuel took a deep breath and calmed his nerves for the oncoming conversation.

He frowned when he noticed a statuesque female figure with back-length hair approaching in his rearview mirror, but he couldn't make out who she was with the lights flashing behind her. Still, her height and gait made his heart race. When the officer approached next to his car, she shined a flashlight in his face and beckoned with her hand for him to lower the window. Samuel maintained a straight face as he pressed the button and watched the glass descend. The flashlight shined so bright that he had to force himself to look forward. Once the window lowered, the officer leaned in, and he could smell the mint gum in her breath. Samuel's heart pumped even harder. Brendan told him that the police weren't supposed to do that. Already, this cop's conduct was suspicious, and Samuel planned on telling his father. What he heard next made his heart jump out of his chest.

"Why hello there, Samuel," said an all too familiar female voice that sounded like a cat purring with a slight Boston accent. "My you've grown."

Samuel's head snapped to his left and he saw Ailina's green eyes staring back at him inches away from his face. He tried to jump to the other side of the car, but his seatbelt held him in place. He unbuckled and reached for the passenger side door. Ailina grabbed his hoody and slammed him back into his seat,

and he grabbed her forearm to break free. It was like prying open the jaws of a crocodile. Ailina giggled at his struggle as she waved the flashlight in his face before dropping it inside the car.

“Brendan taught you well,” Ailina said as she stiff-armed Samuel against his seat. “Had the officer I killed pulled you over instead of me, you might be home free by now.”

“Look, just leave me alone-”

“Aww, now he’s scared,” Ailina cooed with a pout on her face. “What happened to the boldness I saw a few years ago? I liked that.”

“Get the fuck off of me!” Samuel growled. “Did you like that?”

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Ailina replied as she pushed Samuel to the other side of the car, slamming his head against the corner of the passenger’s side window. Ailina then reached through the window and unlocked the door before sitting in the driver’s seat. Samuel reached for his keys, but she snatched his wrist and shook the car when she pinned him back. He then opened the passenger side door and dove for the street. Ailina grabbed his hood and yanked him back in before he touched the ground. Samuel gasped at first, but then he roared and kicked at her face. Ailina grabbed his leg and flipped him upside down until his face was under the glove compartment. While the blood rushed to his head, Samuel’s mind scrambled to think of another way to escape.

“If you have half a brain, you’re probably wondering why I’ve bothered to keep you alive,” Ailina said as she started the car. “Two reasons. First, I find your boldness irresistible. Second, we need to talk.”

Suddenly Trish didn’t seem so bad, but Achilla would’ve been much better. If he could get a hold of her, it might not save his life, but at least he’ll be avenged. Samuel dug his cell phone out of his pocket. He groaned when Ailina grabbed his wrist and snatched the phone away.

“You won’t be calling Achilla,” Ailina said. “Not yet. And you’ll find out soon enough why that is. Don’t worry. I’m good on my word. I won’t kill you or your family.”

“I don’t believe a word of that,” Samuel replied.

“If I wanted to kill you, Brendan, or Samantha, you’d all be dead,” Ailina snapped. “And that’s a huge problem that I want to talk to you about.”

Ailina pulled into the Quality Inn, a nondescript hotel that Samuel always passed by but never stayed in. She reserved a room and nearly dragged Samuel to the elevator. Once they reached the third floor, she swiped her card key and then pulled Samuel inside. He grunted when Ailina tossed him onto a bed with a red comforter over white sheets. Before he could sit up, she pinned him down by his shoulders and straddled him. He grunted and struggled with her until her green eyes glared at him and held him in place.

“Look,” Samuel said as his eyes refused to look away from Ailina’s gaze. “I’m not-”

“Oh, you will,” Ailina said with a grin as she unbuckled his belt and ripped it off of his jeans. “It’s too late now. I paid for this room. We’re doing this.”

“No!”

“I’ve been waiting for you to mature, Samuel,” Ailina breathed with dilated pupils the size of quarters. “You’ve grown strong enough for me, and I’m ready. The time for us is now, Samuel! No more waiting!”

“Help, somebody-!” Samuel screamed until Ailina clamped her hand over his mouth and shushed him.

“You scared, baby?” Ailina cooed into his ear before releasing his mouth. “You’re a man now. This is what you’re supposed to do. Now we can do this the easy way, or the hard way. Your call.”

“No!” Samuel growled as he sat up, only to get slammed down by Ailina’s forearm to his chest.

“Not an option, Samuel,” Ailina said with a sing-song tone. “But I love that you tried. You’re a good challenge, Samuel, and that really turns me on. There’s no turning back now! You’ve really got my motor running! This is so exhilarating! Aren’t you excited?”

“No!” Samuel snarled as he pushed against Ailina’s arm. “I’m not doing-”

Ailina interrupted Samuel with a kiss on the lips. She used lots of tongue and a bite to his lower lip at the tail end, but something about it was different. It was the most potent kiss Samuel had ever experienced, and he squirmed like a child forced to drink his first shot of whiskey. Ailina slammed him against the bed and held his throat. As she glared at him with glowing green eyes, Samuel found himself unable to look away or even move.

“I don’t care if you want to or not,” Ailina said with a low voice. “We’re doing this. The more you resist, the more it’ll hurt, or did you forget what I did to your half-sister?”

Samuel didn’t forget. He remembered watching Achilla fly into a tree. He remembered Ailina snapping her leg like a twig. He remembered the potholes in the driveway from their altercation. Samuel knew he stood no chance against Ailina in a fight.

So like a trapped rat, he relaxed and lay flat on the bed. He then looked away from Ailina as she pulled his shirt over his head and scratched his chest before pulling off his boxers with her teeth. The next forty-five minutes were nothing like anything Samuel had experienced with any high school girl. Sex with Ailina was like a drug; the kind that’s injected into you without consent. He found himself paralyzed to the bed for the rest of the night as Ailina had her way with him. By the time she was done, Samuel couldn’t tell if he was asleep or awake anymore.

He just lay there. Numb.

The following morning, Samuel woke up from his deepest sleep in months. He wiped his eyes and looked around the still, quiet room as he tried to piece together what happened last night. Did he actually have sex with Ailina, or was that just a weird dream? If it was a weird dream, why was he in the hotel room? Samuel realized that he still couldn’t feel his feet. When he looked down at his legs, he saw Ailina at the foot of the bed pulling down a black t-shirt. When she bent over to tie her shoes, Samuel noticed the upper crack of her toned rear peeking out from her dark blue jeans. Samuel pulled himself upright with his arms, dragging his feet as far away from Ailina as possible.

“Relax,” Ailina chuckled with a wave of her hand without turning around. “You’re in no danger. I just thought I’d let you sleep. My men always need a lot of rest after their first time with me; though I usually don’t use a hotel room. They’re pretty impersonal, but our circumstances left me no other choice.”

My men? Impersonal? He did have sex with Ailina! Samuel held his head in his hands as he put the pieces together.

“I just had sex with a woman who tried to kill my parents!” Samuel groaned with a catch in his voice. “Aww, dammit!”

“You couldn’t help yourself,” Ailina said as she rose to her feet and stretched her arms before scratching under her left breast. “The females of my kind have higher levels of testosterone than any regular man. I’m not exactly in my best years, but I was more than enough for you. Seduction’s kind of my specialty.”

“You threatened to kill me!” Samuel replied.

“You would’ve done it anyway,” Ailina sighed with a shrug of her shoulders. “Brendan was the only man to avoid me of his own free will, and that was because I tried to crush him with a sink. Fear always trumps arousal, unfortunately.”

“Why would you do that?” Samuel asked. “A sink? Are you crazy?”

“I was pregnant,” Ailina said with her head low. “Hormones. Also stronger with my kind; stronger than I had anticipated. I won’t be repeating that mistake. I’ll be ready this time.”

“Your kind?” Samuel asked. “So what, you’re not human?”

“No, I’m human,” Ailina replied. “Just more advanced. Think of me as-”

“Wonder Woman?” Samuel blurted. “That’s what Achilla said.”

“I find it irritating when you cut me off,” Ailina said with a snarl that turned into a grin as she stroked her hair. “Keep doing it.”

“No thanks.”

“Why not?” Ailina asked with a pout. “Did I wear you out already?”

“So what did you want to talk about?” Samuel asked as he struggled to get the feeling back into his toes. He might as well keep her talking before he could make a dash for it.

“Oh right,” Ailina said before pacing the room with her hands behind her back. “I did bring you here for that reason too. Your sister isn’t in the best situation right now.”

“It’s the Marines,” Samuel replied. “She knows it’s dangerous.”

“You’re all so stupid,” Ailina spat with a roll of her eyes. “She’s not in the Marines. She’s an agent for the CIA. Since I refused to join, they grabbed her instead, the slick bastards.”

“Achilla joined the CIA?” Samuel asked. “She’s...a spy?”

“Yep,” Ailina replied. “Since she was sixteen. Though I doubt you could seriously count her high school years.”

“She left the house at sixteen.”

“Now you’re piecing things together,” Ailina said with her arms wide. “Don’t be mad at her for not telling you. That kind of comes with the job. In exchange for her silence and participation, they promised to protect you from me.”

“How do you know?” Samuel asked as his feet tingled awake.

“For a police chief, Greg Price is really oblivious to phonetapping” Ailina chuckled. “It didn’t take me long to figure out what happened before those agents cut me out. Good question, but I think you missed the most important part of what I just told you.”

“What’s that?”

“The CIA promised to protect you from me,” Ailina said with a pointed finger. “And here I was preparing myself for an all out brawl to get you, and nothing came. Not only was I able to get close to you, I was able to have you all to myself. I won’t, but I could kill you right now, and not a single agent has come within a hundred yards of this conspicuous hotel with *your car* in the parking lot.”

“How would you know that?” Samuel asked. “They could be waiting outside right now.”

“Really good hearing,” Ailina said as she tugged her earlobe. “I can literally hear a whole conversation about two football fields away; further if it’s quiet out. I’m sure you noticed that with Achilla, right? You seem more observant than your parents.”

Samuel remembered moments when Achilla would address him long before he was anywhere near her line of sight. It took him a while to figure out that she could hear him from far away. As she got older, she started letting him tap her shoulder before speaking. Samuel always had a feeling that she could still hear him coming, but he hadn’t pieced it together. Now those snowball fights made a lot more sense. He took a deep breath and crossed his arms. Ailina was telling the truth.

“When you’re following someone,” Ailina continued. “It helps to hear them from a further distance than they can hear you, but the reverse is a huge disadvantage, and that’s why the CIA and the Feds have yet to catch me. Of course, they haven’t really tried to kill me yet. That’s probably a factor.”

Samuel nodded his head as he looked for exits. Ailina seemed to read his mind as she stood between him and the door. She then covered her mouth and let out a slight giggle that made Samuel’s legs shake. Something about the way she laughed always did that. It sounded just like Achilla’s laughter, only without any real happiness to it.

“By the way,” Ailina said as she bit her lip with a pitiful smile. “I heard what that girl said to you, and I thought she was a bit harsh. You usually can’t say things like that unless you’re as good as I am. A man has to actually be your slave before you talk to him like one.”

Samuel’s jaw dropped as he lowered his head and clenched the bed sheets between his fingers.

“She’ll learn that eventually just like I did,” Ailina sighed. “But by now she’s lost you altogether, right? You feel disrespected, and without any excuse to come back, you won’t. She got what she wanted, but she has a long way to go before she can turn a man into a repeat returner. She has potential though. I kind of want to take her under my wing and show her the ropes, you know?”

“So you got past the agents,” Samuel snapped while Achilla’s warning about Trish ran laps in his brain. “So what?”

“Got past them?” Ailina replied with a sideways grin. “I’m good, but I’m not that good. If they were actually trying I would’ve killed a few before they all shot me to death. There were no agents to infiltrate. The CIA reneged.”

“Achilla’s being used,” Samuel said as he stared down at his bed sheets. “And they’re probably keeping her busy so she won’t notice.”

“That was a brilliant hypothesis,” Ailina replied with a smile as she clapped her hands. “How did you figure that out so quick?”

“It’s just a bait and switch, Ailina,” Samuel said. “You should really stop assuming you’re the only smart person in the room.”

“Be that as it may, Achilla needs to know,” Ailina said with her hands on her hips. “But she can’t know that you know she’s in the CIA because that could come back to hurt her and your family. Tell her about this rendezvous we just had. That’ll be enough to tip her off.”

“Why should I do anything you say?” Samuel asked.

“Oh, I love that you asked that question,” Ailina replied with a slight shudder. “Please, argue some more-”

“Seriously, why not just ask the CIA-”

“And...you just turned me off,” Ailina replied with a shaking head. “They’re an organization that hires agents to lie and manipulate people for the sake of their country. What makes you think they’ll tell you the truth?”

“They don’t have to,” Samuel said. “If I let them know-”

“I know where you’re going and forget it,” Ailina said. “Nobody will notify your sister of a thing. They’ll just cover their tracks. Or worse, they’ll take Achilla further away and bog her down with assignments until she forgets about her family altogether.”

“Achilla wouldn’t forget about us,” Samuel said with a frown.

“You’d be surprised at what effective brainwashing can do,” Ailina replied as she walked to the door. “Get dressed, go home, call her.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I won’t kill you,” Ailina said over her shoulder. “But your father works in criminal defense, and sometimes he gets a little too close to some shady characters. No agents means no protection until it’s too late.”

“Why would you care about that?” Samuel asked. “You tried to kill him yourself.”

“I already told you that if I wanted you all dead, you would be,” Ailina replied with a cutting glare. “You know, I had fun last night, but your father was a much better listener. She didn’t have to say it, but Trish might be right. You’re hot, but you seriously lack boyfriend skills.”

“I lack...what?”

“Goodbye, Samuel.”

Ailina shut the door and Samuel sat in bed with his arms crossed. He had no reason to believe that anything Ailina said was true. For all he knew, Achilla was in Iraq. She was learning Farsi, and even shared some phrases over the phone. Samuel rolled his legs out of bed and stood on his tingling feet and wobbly knees. He then stumbled and sat on the bed before reaching down and grabbing his clothes. He shook his head after he checked the clock on the nightstand. It was nine in the morning and he never called home. His parents were going to kill him long before any CIA agent could step in.

After Samuel pulled into the driveway at home, he hadn’t stepped two feet away from his car when his mother stormed out of the house in a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants. Brendan trailed behind wearing a button down shirt and jeans. Samuel lowered his head as he thought of an explanation. Judging from the last time he told his parents about Ailina, telling them about last night was a big no-no. Sam stood in front of Samuel with her hands on her hips as she glared at him with dark brown eyes like his own. After seeing Ailina last night, brown eyes were a refreshing sight.

“Mom, I-”

“Where were you?” Sam snapped as she smacked Samuel across the face so hard that his cheek burned.

“That’s enough, Sam,” Brendan said as he held her back by her arms.

“No,” Sam snapped as she ripped her arms free before pointing at her son. “He needs to explain where he’s been.”

“That I actually agree with,” Brendan said as he stared Samuel down with his arms crossed. “Samuel, why were you gone all night?”

“I..um...”

“Spit it out, son,” Brendan said. “You don’t want me to hit you next.”

“I stayed out all night with the team,” Samuel muttered. “We got carried away.”

“You smell like that body spray these girls are wearing,” Sam said with her arms crossed. “You were messing around with one of those little fast girls, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” Samuel said. “What do you want me to say, Mom?”

“I knew it,” Sam said to Brendan. “I knew all this attention would get to his head. Those girls are relentless, Brendan. I know how they can be. If we’re not careful, he’ll get trapped. They’re not like when I grew up. They are *treacherous!*”

“Did you use protection, son?” Brendan asked as he raised his hand at Sam.

“Of course,” Samuel said with a frown. Then he remembered his night with Ailina. He was pretty sure that there was no condom then. Did she do that on purpose? Samuel’s heart sunk through his ribcage at the thought of impregnating the woman who tried to kill his family. He shook his head and focused on his parents. Right now, they were his main concern.

“Well at least there’s that,” Sam sighed before pointing a finger at Samuel’s chest. “Was it *your* protection? Please tell me you didn’t take hers.”

“Yeah, Mom,” Samuel replied. “It was mine.”

“Ok,” Sam said as she nodded her head at Brendan. “He listened to you at least.”

“He has to listen to both of us, Sam,” Brendan replied before turning to Samuel. “You’re grounded for a month.”

“Huh?” Samuel blurted and stepped back. “Just because I had sex?”

“Because you stayed out all night without telling us where you were,” Sam replied. “You know why that’s not safe; especially for us.”

“There’s always the possibility that *she* might return,” Brendan said. “And Achilla’s overseas.”

Samuel’s parents didn’t know how right they were. Not only did Ailina return, but she forced herself on him. He wasn’t sure if what they did was consensual or not. He certainly didn’t hate it, but he didn’t want it either. Still, the look in Ailina’s eyes and her raw strength compelled him to stay put. What was he supposed to do? Say no to the same woman he watched survive a head on car collision and then throw his sister fifty feet *through a tree*? Yeah, he had sex with an older woman, something a lot high school boys would be happy about, but the thought that he didn’t have it willingly made his eyes water.

The more Samuel thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea to explain to his parents what really happened that night. He would love to tell them everything, but they were so busy controlling everything he did. He couldn’t go here. He couldn’t go there. He couldn’t date this girl or that girl; even if he liked *that* girl or perhaps wanted to see both. Every decision that affected him was decided by them. Samuel felt teenage rebellion rising up in his throat like vomit. It left his mouth just the same.

“I’m eighteen now,” Samuel said. “You can’t ground me anymore. I’m a legal adult.”

“Oh, is that right?” Brendan chuckled as he stepped forward. “Whose house do you live in?”

“Yours.”

“Do you pay rent?” Brendan asked.

“No, but-”

“Who pays for your car?” Brendan demanded with a hard stare.

“You do-”

“And who buys groceries and feeds you?” Sam chimed in.

“You,” Samuel said with his head low and his fists clenched as that same rebellion made his heart pump through his chest.

“Then you’re grounded like your father said,” Sam replied. “We need to work on this attitude of yours, Samuel. You’re getting a little too bougie for my liking.”

“Can I have my cell phone?” Samuel asked with a slight snarl.

“Yes,” Brendan said. “We’ll need it to communicate.”

“Good,” Samuel said as he pulled out his phone and started dialing. He waited until the person on the other end picked up.

“Who are you calling?” Sam asked with a scowl. “We’re not done speaking to you.”

“Hi, Mr. Washington?” Samuel said. “Good morning, it’s Samuel Johnson from Stratford, Connecticut. I’ve decided to commit to Duke ...Oh no, thank *you*. Bye.”

“What was that about?” Brendan asked as Samuel hung up the phone.

“Grounded for a month?” Samuel asked. “You got it. But I have a free ride to Duke and I know one of those *fast girls* who’s going there too. I can ride with her in case you take my car away.”

“Son, you don’t play for a basketball program to get back at your parents,” Brendan said as he rubbed his hand against his forehead. “You have to put more thought into it than that.”

“If I get good grades at Duke, I can go to their law school,” Samuel replied. “Or anywhere else I want. If I become a criminal defense lawyer like you, it might not help me much to work in the same state. God knows I’m not working under you.”

“Samuel, can we discuss this?” Sam asked. “UConn’s a great program.”

“UConn didn’t even scout me, Mom,” Samuel replied.

“We can send them a tape,” Sam snapped.

“Why would I do that?” Samuel chuckled. “None of these other schools needed me to send them anything. If I don’t have to come to them, why should I have to send anything to a program that’s just in our back yard and wouldn’t bother to drive

a couple hours to see me play? Let them scout guys from New York or Cali or, I don't know, everywhere else, and if I ever play them, I'll bust their asses!"

"Samuel!" Sam gasped.

"Ok, excuse my language, but you know I'm right," Samuel replied before looking at Brendan. "Come on, Dad. How did you feel when Fairfield scouted you more than UConn when you were the best player in the state? Well they're doing the same thing to me, but I'll be able to play against them and pay them back for it. Dad, I know you would've killed for the chance to do the same thing!"

Brendan's eyes flickered with the competitive fire that Samuel could recognize in any current or former ballplayer; the fire that wanted to prove wrong anyone who doubted him. Samuel had that same fire and he looked back, hoping to speak his language and appeal to the heart of a winner. Brendan closed his eyes and sighed as he covered his face; the sign of a lawyer's unwilling submission to a good argument. Samuel suppressed his grin. It worked. Sam whirled on Brendan with a wide-eyed expression.

"Brendan!"

"He makes a good point," Brendan replied.

"Brendan. Johnson," Sam growled. "He can't go all the way to North Carolina."

"Honey, it's his decision," Brendan said. "We've got to let him make it."

"I don't believe this," Sam replied. "We never do this! We never make *executive decisions* about our children."

"It's not up to us," Brendan said with a hard stare. "He has to choose his own school, Sam, and he did."

"Mom, isn't this what you wanted?" Samuel asked. "Come on, you've been riding me about not choosing a school. Well, I chose one, and you said you'd support any school I chose."

"You did tell him that," Brendan muttered until Sam glared at him.

“All the way to North Carolina?” Sam demanded at Samuel with her hands on her hips before lowering her head. “Are you sure?”

“My mind’s made up,” Samuel said as he walked past his parents to the house. “But while I’m under your roof, I’ll respect your rules. I’m grounded for a month. If you excuse me, I have an All-American game to prepare for.”

“Brendan, say something!” Sam said to Brendan as Samuel closed the door behind him. He strolled up their spiral staircase to his bedroom with a blue carpet and wall paper. As he threw himself onto his bed’s blue comforter, he stared at the ceiling. There was another reason he applied to Duke. Should Ailina ever come looking for him, she’ll never have to harm his parents in the process. Samuel pulled out his cell phone and scrolled down to Achilla’s number. If he told her about last night, she would go ballistic. Samuel recalled the last time Achilla fought Ailina. The look in her eyes was inhuman. Samuel wondered what would have happened if Achilla won that fight. Would she have been able to control herself and stop? The thought of trying to calm down a bloodthirsty Achilla made Samuel put his cell phone away as his parents knocked on his bedroom door. They would try to persuade him to stay in Connecticut, but he had no intention on budging. He pulled out his cell phone again to tell his teammates the good news.

The following Monday at school, Samuel received high-fives through the hallway from all of the guys. Most of the girls smiled at him and touched his arms. Samuel spotted Trish. She fluttered her eyes as she approached him from across the hallway. When she tried to hug Samuel, he walked past her with the grace and agility of a boxer slipping a knockout punch.

As the students in the hallway pointed and laughed at Trish, Samuel approached the one girl in the hallway who wasn’t gushing all over him. She had tan skin and black shoulder length hair and wore crisp, white, sneakers that matched her blue and white duke t-shirt and blue jeans. Lauren was her name, and they shared AP Calculus together. Samuel leaned against the lockers as she fiddled with her lock. When she looked up, she adjusted

her black-rimmed glasses that magnified the thin, hazel eyes under them.

“Lauren, what’s up?”

“Ugh, if you want me to do your homework for you, forget it,” Lauren snapped. “You’re like the fourth ball player to-”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Samuel said with a wave of his hand. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but we’re going to the same school next fall.”

“Really?” Lauren said with a smile before coughing and straightening her face. “I mean, good. Duke’s a good school. You made the right choice.”

“Why don’t we grab something to eat and talk about it?” Samuel asked.

“You’ll have to meet my parents first,” Lauren replied.

“No date,” Samuel chuckled. “Not yet. I’m grounded. I was thinking just meeting during lunch. I’ll pick you up at class.”

“Um...ok,” Lauren said as she stroked her hair. “What about Trish?”

“Done with her,” Samuel said. “She’s not my type.”

“Good,” Lauren replied with her chin raised. “I always thought she was racist. It’s like she just flaunts her privilege for everyone to see, and she’s not even that smart-”

“Let’s not talk about her anymore,” Samuel said as Lauren closed her locker and they walked down the hall. “So have you decided your major?”

“Education,” Lauren giggled as she stroked her hair some more. “You?”

“Criminal justice,” Samuel said as he spread his arms wide. “I’ll be the best attorney the world has ever seen. Watch me.”

Chapter 2

Achilla Johnson was not a Marine. She was not on a ship travelling to Iraq or at any sort of base, and for the record, she wasn't learning Farsi. She was already fluent, and that wasn't all that Achilla learned over the past four years. On top of mastering six martial arts in high school, she was also proficient in Silat, Systema, 52 Blocks, and Capoeira. If it involved fighting, Achilla studied it, mastered what was useful, and then practiced it. With her beyond genius intellect, it didn't take her long to develop a style all her own; a mixture of brutal and efficient speed and strength. Achilla had no doubt in her mind that she was the most capable fighter in the country and possibly the world. Though she hadn't seen her since their last fight, Achilla also believed that she was twice as skilled as Ailina in hand-to-hand combat. She anticipated meeting her again, and it was her goal to take Ailina down in five blows or less.

Fighting was not Achilla's only skill. She learned how to survive in the toughest conditions; hiking through fire stripped forests, submerged under frozen ponds and lakes, stranded in the mountains during a summer heat wave. She could hunt for her own food, prepare it, and dispose of any evidence of her presence. She could trail a wolf pack unnoticed. She could also defend her kill from any scavengers; including wolves, bears, and mountain lions. Achilla was as adept outside of civilization as she was inside of it, where she learned to hide in alleys and on rooftops to trail her training targets. On occasion, she would swoop down and save them from danger, but for the most part Achilla cut her surveillance teeth by stalking unsuspecting civilians in the Hartford inner city without them noticing.

Much like her mind, Achilla's body never stopped developing. She now stood six feet tall, and her jet black hair flowed down her back unless she tied it in a bun. Her body held toned muscles that hid under her dark skin like serpents coiled under muddy soil, and her feats of strength included pulling tractor trailers, sparring with wild bears(until she learned to

control herself well enough for humans again), and kicking down trees large enough to shake the ground when they landed. She could catch a car driving at fifty miles per hour. She could jump and land five stories. Even from a handstand she could propel herself as high as fifteen feet. Every day, Achilla surprised herself with her own athleticism. Training Samuel was easy compared to challenging herself.

Samuel, like most of the world, had only seen a fraction of Achilla's abilities. As much as she would have loved to show him, she couldn't. Everything about her had to be secret; her strength, her intelligence, even her whereabouts. When she showed her face in public, she had to pull the ultimate dumb act with everyone except her CIA counterparts. Since it was impossible to pull this off with her family, they had to believe that she was in Iraq fighting in a war fueled by disappearing weapons of mass destruction in a land rich with oil reserves.

Achilla hadn't even left the state of Connecticut. The pictures she sent, the letters she wrote, and the phone calls she dialed were all a ruse doctored by the United States government to keep her family safe and ignorant. Achilla Johnson was a CIA Agent. At least that was what she told herself for the past four years. It was better than listening to her inner impatient twenty-year-old who constantly nagged at her that all she got was grunt work and training exercises.

She ignored that nagging voice as she stared out of the window of a studio apartment in Downtown Hartford watching a drug transaction across the street. Any other person would need binoculars, but she watched with her naked eyes as a heavyset black male with back-length dreadlocks walked into a one bedroom apartment. He wore a black t-shirt with a skull and crossbones on the front. Achilla still couldn't believe those shirts, pirate shirts as she called them, were in style. There were few things she found less sexy in a man than a reminder that he might have scurvy and frequently spent his weekends at Davy Jones' Locker. She shook her head as she watched him shove his hands into the pockets of his baggy black jeans.

The man Achilla identified as the owner of the home, a tall, thin, bald Hispanic wearing a pink button down shirt and dark

blue jeans, walked into the main area from the kitchen to the right and extended his hand. Though she hated pink on men, at least this guy avoided the pirate shirt. He wasn't overwhelmingly sexy but doable if she hadn't had any in a while. Achilla's thoughts snapped back to the task at hand when the black male pulled out a gallon-sized ziplock bag full of white powder from under his t-shirt, and handed it to the owner. Achilla smirked as she rose to her feet. They made the drop. Now all she had to do was trail the black male's car, interrogate him, and find the supplier.

Achilla had reason to believe that the supplier was connected to a Chinese diplomat. That kind of intel could give the U.S. a lot of leverage in future negotiations. The first step of her mission was a success. Now all she had to do was get downstairs in time to-

Achilla's ears twitched when she heard three men of average height and weight approaching her location. She leapt across the apartment and leaned against the wall next to the door. The entire studio had bare white walls with black furniture. Achilla wore a white t-shirt with black sweatpants and black sneakers. There was no way she could hide from her intruders. She had to fight them. That was what she told herself as she grinned from ear-to-ear at the thought of trying out some new combinations.

As expected, they busted the door wide open. The second Achilla saw a gun protruding past the doorway, she grabbed the shooter's wrist, pulled him toward her and struck his elbow with the heel of her hand, snapping his arm with a pop. As he screamed, she shoved him into his partner and lunged for the third guy behind them, diving low and upper-cutting his groin before rising up and punching his face. He flew across the hall and landed on the floor with a slump as Achilla turned and kicked one of the original two in the temple. She grabbed the first shooter's head by his blonde hair and was about to knee his face when she heard the click of a gun behind her. Achilla sighed and raised her hands.

"You got me," Achilla said. "But you never said you'd be involved."

"Expect the unexpected," the man behind her said. "Want to explain how you heard them coming but not me?"

“I was too focused on the fight,” Achilla said as she rolled her eyes. “And not focused enough on the escape.”

“Too focused is right,” the guy from across the hall grunted. “Jesus, Achilla, you crushed my balls, and I’m wearing a cup.”

“Sorry, I tried to go easy,” Achilla said with a shrug and a weak smile. “I guess I got caught up in the moment.”

“You tried to kill me!”

“No, I didn’t,” Achilla sighed. “If I wanted to kill you I would’ve hit your groin *a lot* harder than that, or I would’ve reached into your chest and pulled out your heart, or finger-jabbed your jugular vein, or elbowed your solar plexus-”

“We specifically said no contact,” the first shooter said as he rose to his feet and pointed at his arm. “That means you don’t break my arm. I’m not doing any more of these training exercises with you if you expect me to be your punching bag. That’s not what I signed up for.”

“You pointed a gun at me,” Achilla shot back. “What did you expect? And by the way, we did not discuss firearms before we started this, so I guess we’re even, buddy.”

“It’s not even loaded!” the first shooter growled as he pointed at the pistol on the floor.

“How the hell should I know that?” Achilla replied.

“You tell me,” the first shooter said. “You’re the freak!”

“Call me that again,” Achilla snarled, “and I will break your other arm, I swear to God!”

“Both of you shut up,” said the man standing behind Achilla as he grabbed her shoulder. “Achilla, you should know by now that nobody here plans on shooting you, but that’s beside the point. The fact of the matter is you should be long gone by now, and you’re still here. You made a mistake. Own up to it.”

Achilla closed her eyes and hung her head.

“Yeah that’s true,” Achilla groaned. “I messed up. Mr. Jones, can I put my hands down now?”

“It’s Agent Jones, for the umpteenth time,” Agent Jones snapped. “And yes.”

Achilla dropped her hands to her sides and leaned over to help up the man she kicked in the head just a few moments ago.

She studied his motionless body and checked his pulse. He was alive, but he wasn't going anywhere for a while. Achilla leaned him against the wall in the apartment until the first shooter came to his side and gave her a curt wave with his hand; the kind you give a child you know is about to break something if you don't step in and stop her. Achilla pouted before she stepped back into the hallway and faced a black male with cul-de-sac hair wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, and black boots. Achilla shook her head at herself as she stared at his clunky, black, steel toed boots. She knew she should have heard him coming. Achilla pinched herself in the thigh. She had to get better at this. Her supervisor, Agent Freeman Jones, was a strict teacher, and Achilla hated to lose.

"Your destructive force is obvious," Agent Jones said with his arms crossed. "But your assignment was to get in and out unnoticed by the general public; even if your enemy finds you. How can you do that if you throw a man across the hall?"

"She punched me across the hall," the man said from the hallway floor. "I wish she threw me. God, I think she cracked my cheekbone too."

"You waste a lot of time, Johnson," Agent Jones continued over his groaning. "Someone with your strength and speed should be able to escape something like this in seconds. I, the fourth and unexpected person, wouldn't have been able to arrive in time. We don't need you to be an exhibitionist. We need you to be efficient. This isn't a kung fu movie."

"Understood," Achilla said as she forced herself to look Agent Jones in the eye.

"All right," Agent Jones replied before he turned his back and walked down the hall. "I need to show you something. Let's go."

"What about them?" Achilla asked as she pointed at her victims. "It's my fault they're injured."

"They knew what they were getting into when they volunteered," Agent Jones said. "That's why they got paid overtime, and that's why there's a medical station on standby outside."

Achilla walked out with Agent Jones as the medical staff walked in. She also watched as the black male with dreads and the Hispanic male in the pink t-shirt stood across the street and placed their fingers on their ear pieces. When they both saw Achilla walking out, they walked past her into the building. The black male with dreads gave Achilla a knowing look as he walked by. Like most agents in her division, he most likely heard about her. Like most of the black agents, he always nodded at her like they were part of a secret club within the CIA. Achilla knew that head nod well. It was the *good to see another one of us* look, and it made Achilla smile.

As she stepped into Agent Jones' tan 1990 Honda Accord that he used to blend in with urban areas like Hartford, Achilla smirked at the carpet seating. Though he could probably afford something fancier, it would only stick out in neighborhoods where people worked three jobs and still needed government assistance to survive. Hartford was indicative of most of Connecticut's major cities with a gap between rich and poor that was hard to fathom unless you saw it for yourself. Looking like you belong on the rich side of town could draw unnecessary attention. That was what Agent Jones reminded Achilla over and over before she went on one of her training exercises. No matter where you are, learn the culture and find a way to go unnoticed. If only he knew how difficult that was for someone like her, with or without a beat-up Honda.

While they drove past a few high rises and brick buildings, Achilla leaned her head on her hand and stared out the window. Up until now, the CIA had only given her measly assignments; most of which helped them watch her. While she attended Loomis Chaffee, they made her bug her teachers' classrooms and the principal's office and taught her how to hack into the school's network. She also spied on a student whom they believed could blow her cover by dating him. Now that she graduated with high honors, they were putting her through all sorts of simulations to test her abilities. Even her diner visit with Samuel was a brief exercise to determine how her brother's newly acquired fame would affect her ability to hide her identity.

So far, the CIA approved. Sometimes Achilla felt like they were just keeping her occupied until Ailina reappeared.

And just where was Ailina? Achilla hadn't seen her biological mother in years; not that she missed her. It was just odd that someone so hell bent on killing the Johnsons wouldn't come back to finish the job. Achilla regularly asked Agent Jones if he had heard of any changes in Ailina's behavior, or if she had come near her family. The answer was always the same. *If she did, somebody would notify him, and then he would notify her.* As cool as her job was, Achilla really hated the secrecy of it; especially when it applied to her own desire for more information.

Agent Jones pulled into a parking garage and parked on the first floor. He then stepped out of the car and walked away without waiting. Achilla speed walked to keep up as he used his key to open an elevator door. The elevator descended to a basement level with a door that opened from behind. Achilla shook her head. She was a CIA agent for four years now, and she still couldn't believe how they hid in plain sight. Achilla followed Agent Jones down a hallway with white walls and steel doors with eye-level windows.

"Is this a nuthouse or something?" Achilla asked. "Or is it a jail for rogue agents?"

"Neither," Agent Jones said as he turned to the last room on the left and opened the door. "This is a research center."

"Yet I didn't have to show ID or get scanned with some weird gadget?" Achilla asked.

"Like most people, you watch too many movies," Agent Jones replied as they walked into a dark room with a dim light over a table and two chairs. Agent Jones beckoned for Achilla to sit down and she followed suit. He then sat across from her with his hands folded. Achilla leaned back and crossed her arms.

"I'm too old for kid lectures," Achilla said.

"Good because I'm not giving one," Agent Jones replied. "It's time I shared some information about you. As you know, you're not like the rest of us. Your body is a remarkable specimen."

“Now I feel like you’re hitting on me,” Achilla replied with a grin. “Keep it coming.”

“Your juvenile humor aside,” Agent Jones sighed. “Your mind and body are advanced on levels that we cannot quantify. Your mother tested your I.Q. at 200. I estimate that it’s much higher. So far I’ve seen you push or pull objects that Olympic weightlifters couldn’t budge. Add your advanced martial arts training, and you’re quite dangerous. I won’t lie to you, the CIA recruited you to make sure you’re on the side of the United States.”

“I gathered that much,” Achilla said with a nod of her head. “But why all the busy work? What are you hiding?”

Agent Jones frowned.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Achilla said with a smirk. “Come on, I know busy work when I see it. Someone else with my qualifications would be in Afghanistan by now, but you’re holding me here in *Connecticut*. Like anything substantial actually happens here that concerns national security.”

“Ailina concerns national security,” Agent Jones replied. “And she’s a much greater potential threat than Bin Laden.”

“Then send me looking for her,” Achilla demanded. “Come on, what are we waiting for?”

“I get your assignments from higher up,” Agent Jones said with a shrug. “That’s all. To be honest, I wish I knew more. I would’ve sent you out a long time ago.”

“Dodging my question and flattering me,” Achilla said. “Not bad.”

“Anyway, I was assigned to you because I’ve been monitoring Ailina for the past twenty years,” Agent Jones said. “From a distance of course. A few agents who got too close ended up dead.”

“That tends to happen,” Achilla replied with a shrug. “You should send female agents. She doesn’t try to kill women unless they’re raising me to be a decent person. Ask my mother. Oh wait, *I’m* a female agent! You could send *me*. What a coincidence.”

“Yes, Ailina’s ruthless,” Agent Jones said. “But believe it or not, brute strength is not her calling card. Her strengths are

investigation and manipulation, and we can't engage her without a foolproof plan and a little patience on your part. I have reason to suspect that her intelligence is even greater than yours, but at your peak you will be twice as strong. You're one of the brutes of your kind."

Achilla flexed her bicep and tightened her abs at that thought. Achilla knew her strength was abnormal. However, she wouldn't have guessed that she was predestined to be stronger than Ailina; especially after the supreme butt-kicking she took from her the last time they fought. Just a few more years in the CIA, and Achilla may be able to protect her family on her own. She kissed her bicep and smiled as Agent Jones stared at her as if she were wasting his time.

"I don't like the word brute," Achilla said with grin. "How about warrior?"

"You're physically advancing at a faster rate than she did," Agent Jones continued as if she never spoke. "I would estimate that even right now, you two are equal in raw power."

"You haven't told me anything that Ailina hasn't," Achilla said. "Can I go home now?"

"Ailina never gave you a name for your kind," Agent Jones replied as he stood up and walked away from the table. "We've given you the acronym N.E.P.H.; newly evolved posthumanoids. We prefer to call you *nephilim*. It's more poetic."

"Even the CIA reads the Bible," Achilla chuckled. "Good thing I can't tell Mom or she'll make me go to church again."

"I've studied both you and Ailina and found lots of similarities," Agent Jones said with a deep breath as if to power through Achilla's side comments. "You have heightened senses and physical capabilities. You're also aggressive breeders."

"Ok, stop," Achilla said with her hand raised. "Please don't talk about me like I'm some endangered species of frog. I like guys just like anyone else. It really isn't any more complicated than that."

"The correct animal related innuendo would be a rabbit--"

"Whatever, just don't talk about me like I'm anything less than a human being," Achilla snapped. "And besides, you haven't

shown me anything outside of what I've already learned; except that you see me as a *rabbit* apparently."

"How about this?" Agent Jones asked as he walked across the room and flipped a switch. The lights in the room illuminated the white walls and a large interrogation window. On the other side of the window was an even larger room with a twenty foot tall tank full of blue liquid on the other side. Inside that liquid floated a large white male with black, shaggy hair. Achilla placed him at 6'5" and 230 lbs. with about 4 percent body fat.

"Who's he?" Achilla asked with a frown.

"Your grandfather," Agent Jones said. "Meet Ares Harris; our first known, present-day *nephilim*."

Achilla gazed at this man with the same nose and facial structure as her, but with much lighter, Mediterranean skin. Unlike Achilla and Ailina, who could hide their strength until they needed to use it, Ares looked every bit as strong as she could only imagine he was. His neck muscles looked like shoulder pads and his biceps were as large as Achilla's head. Even his abs looked like ropes wrapped around his midsection. Achilla frowned at Agent Jones when she noticed two small scars on his forehead.

"What happened to his head?" Achilla asked. "I'd like to meet whoever managed to land a hit on someone like him."

"You already have," Agent Jones replied. "That's a gunshot wound from Gregory Price."

"That's right, he did mention that," Achilla said. "Price shot the guy before he got a car thrown at him. I'm impressed."

"It was a domestic violence call," Agent Jones said.

"Rosa, your grandmother, called the police on Ares. Of course it was too late by the time Greg got there. He literally tore her in half right in front of Ailina."

Achilla crossed her arms to keep her composure. Not long ago, Ailina tried the same thing to her parents. Was that why she wanted to kill Brendan and Sam so badly? Did watching her mother die mold her into who she is now? In a rare moment of empathy, Achilla actually felt sorry for Ailina. It didn't last long.

“It’s not the kind of scene any officer wants to walk into,” Agent Jones continued. “Once Greg got there, he tried to piece together the crime while keeping the little girl away from the bloody mess that used to be her mother. Ailina was only eleven at the time.”

“That’s...horrible,” Achilla said with a shudder. “Where was Ares during all of this?”

“Waiting across the street,” Agent Jones said. “When Greg was just about to leave the scene, he appeared carrying Rosa’s upper body in his arms. He then killed nine officers with his bare hands before picking up Greg’s squad car to crush him with it. Greg shot him in the head, and the car landed on Greg’s legs. It took him years of physical and psychological therapy to recover. In return for his silence, we paid for everything. We also pulled strings to make sure he moved up in the ranks.”

“Bridgeport’s youngest police chief,” Achilla said. “Now it makes sense. He thinks he owes you something, and in return you use him to monitor Ailina and me.”

“That’s a very cynical way of looking at it.”

“Yeah, you haven’t denied it though,” Achilla quipped. “What happened to Ailina?”

“She moved into a foster home in Boston not far from where she lived as a small child,” Agent Jones replied. “Greg took extra care to visit her and make sure she was turning out ok. She had a destructive temper, but she functioned well until she returned to Bridgeport and joined the police academy. After that, she met your father.”

“Where?” Achilla asked. “My father never told me where they met.”

“Mr. P’s in Stratford,” Agent Jones sighed. “It’s a bar-”

“I know what it is,” Achilla snapped. “I lived in Stratford remember?”

“Your father was always a good man,” Agent Jones said with a hard stare. Achilla could tell that she was testing his patience, and it made her laugh inside; served him right for calling her a rabbit. “But like any pure defense attorney in the making he saw the good in people even when it wasn’t there. As you know, Ailina’s a textbook a sociopath. She pegged Brendan for a

provider the second she laid eyes on him, but there was no love there. Like all of the other men in her life, he was a possession, nothing more. To this day, I don't understand why she kept him alive."

"What do you mean?" Achilla asked. "My father didn't do anything wrong."

"But she could've killed him, and she never hesitates," Agent Jones replied. "She never does anything by accident. She didn't keep him alive for an emotional reason. It's impossible."

"Maybe she wanted me to experience what she did," Achilla said. "She tried to kill my parents in front of me. With the story you just told me, it makes sense."

"But again, why didn't she go through with it?" Agent Jones asked. "I'm not advocating your parents' deaths, but she had to have a reason."

"My brother," Achilla said. "She said that he was so bold that it would take the fun out of killing him. She said she wanted to be his *friend*. Creepy considering he was like fourteen."

"I see," Agent Jones said as he crossed his arms and paced the room. "Ailina never keeps a man in good health unless she plans on using him. Your brother may be a new target. I'll pass the word along--"

"Price said the same thing," Achilla replied. "Target for what?"

"Breeding," Agent Jones said. "There's a reason you like guys so much. It advances your next generation at a rapid rate, and you're living proof that mixing a *nephilim* with a human being bears positive results. Ailina's too smart to miss that."

"No," Achilla snarled. "She can't have Samuel."

"Like I said, I'll talk to the proper people," Agent Jones replied. "Your brother's life isn't in danger yet, but if he resists her--"

"I'll kill her myself!" Achilla barked. "My brother isn't her toy."

"We don't want you near her yet," Agent Jones said. "Not without a plan."

“We agreed that you would protect my family,” Achilla said with a sideways glance. “If I find out she comes anywhere near him, the plan’s over. Just keep that in mind.”

Agent Jones stared at Achilla and she glared right back. Agent Jones took a deep breath and looked at Ares.

“Ares only had one child as far as we know,” Agent Jones said. “Nobody else like you and Ailina has popped up anywhere in the country. Still, our experiments have found that a male *nephilim* can mate until he’s well past two hundred years old. We don’t know how long the females remain fertile.”

“Again with the animal talk?” Achilla growled. “When will you accept that I’m human just like you?”

“What I’m trying to tell you is that you’re more than human,” Agent Jones snapped. “You’re a superior model; one that we have to study to protect ourselves. You knew coming into this that we recruited you as an answer to Ailina. It wouldn’t be right to use you for that purpose without telling everything I know. You wanted more information. Here it is. Whether you like it is up to you, Achilla.”

Achilla rose from her seat and paced the room as she watched Ares float in the tank. Even while he floated like a dead goldfish with a tube of oxygen floating into his nose, Achilla could feel his masculine energy. It was strong from this safe distance, but she knew it would be suffocating if they were in the same room. Her heart stirred at the very thought of having to face him as an opponent. How could she turn down such a glorious victory?

“What if Ares woke up?” Achilla asked as she suppressed her grin and faced Agent Jones. “How do you kill him?”

“You’re considering killing your grandfather?” Agent Jones asked. “He’s one of three people just like you—”

“I am *not* like him,” Achilla retorted. “You don’t see me tearing innocent people in half and throwing cars, do you? How can you say that to me? I thought you knew me better than that.”

Agent Jones hung his head before setting his hands on his hips.

“Fine,” Agent Jones sighed. “For that I apologize.”

Achilla wanted to stay mad at him, but she struggled to suppress her smile. After knowing him for four years, Achilla never saw Agent Jones apologize to anyone but her. That thought made her stroke a strand of her hair before refocusing on the task at hand.

“Besides, any man who abuses and kills his wife before rampaging against the police is a danger to everyone,” Achilla continued. “A danger that only I can handle, right? So how do I kill him?”

“Like you said, *nephilim* are still human,” Agent Jones replied. “Your bodies have the same weak spots as anyone else’s. You just have to have the strength and speed to strike them. Aside from that, another gunshot to the head should do it.”

“Sounds right,” Achilla said as she walked toward the door. “Unless you have anything else to tell me, I’m grabbing dinner. You’re welcome to join me.”

“I keep business and pleasure separate, Achilla,” Agent Jones replied.

“Wasn’t exactly looking for *pleasure*,” Achilla chuckled as she opened the door. “But if you’re not coming, more steak for me. Later.”

Achilla found her way to Trumbull Kitchen, a restaurant on Trumbull Street in Hartford that served a mean grilled angus filet mignon. Achilla always ordered one on the government’s dime. After that, she took the bus to her apartment building. As she looked outside the window, she watched the dark gray clouds roll in and sighed. Another storm was rolling through.

July in Connecticut was always tumultuous, but it followed a pattern. There was a heatwave for about a week, and then a storm would hit with thunder that set off the car alarms on Achilla’s block; a noise made doubly annoying to someone with her advanced hearing. Judging from the black clouds with a faint purple lining, this one might have thunder of that caliber. When the bus dropped her off in front of her brick apartment building, Achilla yawned and stretched her arms. Of course, that was her way of pretending to be distracted as she listened for any trails. So far, nobody followed her; or at least they kept their distance. Achilla shrugged her shoulders and walked inside.

When she entered her one bedroom apartment on the twentieth floor with black and cream decor, Achilla checked for any listening devices. The more she worked with the CIA, the less she trusted their willingness to respect her privacy. She was their secret weapon, and they couldn't afford to lose sight of her. Still, Achilla needed her space, and her apartment was her sanctuary. The CIA would just have to wait until she checked into work the next morning like they would for any other agent. After searching every crevice of her apartment and finding nothing, Achilla kicked off her sneakers and strolled to the bathroom for a shower. Despite the old wives tail that showering during a storm was dangerous, Achilla was in no mood to wait. She needed to let off some steam, and going out was the perfect way to do it. If she got struck by lightning before that, well then it was just her time.

After her shower, Achilla threw on a red dress that she bought a few months ago for an undercover training exercise. She hooked up with her partner that night (the night Samuel called), and ever since then this dress was her secret weapon in the Hartford night scene. No man could resist it. Achilla threw on a pair of black, red bottom heels and walked out of her building to the sounds of people laughing as they strolled down the sidewalk. The pavement carried the scent of fresh rain as she strolled to the bar down the street knowing that CIA agents were most likely watching her. They knew her range of hearing and would stay out of it; spying her with binoculars and radar sensors if need be. When she found a fun guy, Achilla would give them something to report.

She gave the bouncer her ID(fake, of course), and walked inside as the big screen televisions that lined the wall behind the polished wood bar showed a baseball game. Achilla scanned the room for prospects until she found wide-backed, brown-skinned male in a teal button down shirt drinking a beer as he leaned against the bar and watched the game. Achilla sauntered across the room, ignoring the stares from the other men. She stood next to her new beau and poked his shoulder with her index finger; taking extra care to be soft about it. The last time she poked too hard, the guy thought she was another man picking a fight and

took a swing. The next morning, she had to explain to Agent Jones why she still belonged in the CIA after breaking a civilian's jaw. When her new beau turned and faced her without any animosity, Achilla breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

"Hey," Achilla said as she stood with her hands on her hips.

"Hello," the man said as he looked Achilla up and down before beckoning for the bartender.

"No," Achilla chuckled as she stepped closer, grabbed his wrist, and set his hand on the bar. "I don't want a drink. I want you to stay focused on me. What's your name?"

"Dhiraj," the man replied as he stood up and leaned on the counter with his elbow. "Yours?"

"You can call me Sikta," Achilla said as she caressed Dhiraj's hand with her thumb.

"So if you don't want a drink, I guess you want to talk a little?" Dhiraj asked.

"Not really," Achilla replied as she intertwined their fingers and squeezed her palm against his with one hand and pointed at the dance floor with another. "We're going to have a date. Right now."

"Wait a minute-"

"Hear me out," Achilla interrupted Dhiraj with a finger on his lips. "And if you have any questions beyond what I'm going to say, ask me after I'm done."

Dhiraj nodded his head.

"Good," Achilla said as a grin grew on her lips and she pointed with her free hand at the dance floor. "You're going to dance with me. After I've had a sufficiently good time, I'll take you back to my place."

Dhiraj nodded his head again.

"Now," Achilla said as she removed her finger. "Any questions?"

"Not anymore."

"Good," Achilla replied with a head nod as she led him toward the dance floor. "Oh, I love this song. Date starts now!"

When they reached the dance floor, Ray Jay's "Sexy Can I" blasted throughout the bar and Achilla smirked and pulled Dhiraj close by his belt. Dhiraj held her arms and she grabbed his face,

leaning in close for a kiss before turning away at the last minute and backing into him; grinding between his legs. Achilla then craned her neck and kissed him on the lips. She spent the next three songs dancing with Dhiraj until their evening actually felt like a date; the kind of date Dahntay would've taken her on. She wondered how Dahntay was doing for a split second before the third song ended. She then shook him out of her head, grabbed Dhiraj's hand, and led him out the door. It was time for some aggressive breeding.

The next morning, Achilla yawned and stretched under her black bed sheets before looking over at Dhiraj. She could tell by the dark window behind his head that it was exactly four in the morning. Like most of the men she slept with, Achilla was up long before him. She pouted before sliding her legs out of bed, leaving Dhiraj asleep on the other side.

If Achilla's father knew she was having one-night stands, he would blow his lid, and Achilla wondered why she did it. Sam would probably burst into tears, and Achilla knew it wouldn't be because their daughter was sleeping around. It would be the way she picked up men, screwed them, and cast them aside just like Ailina. The thought of resembling a Harris in any way made Achilla scowl at herself as she stepped into handstand. She then lifted one arm and split her legs before lifting them straight up and performing a set of one-handed handstand pushups. After hitting two hundred, she switched arms. When she finished her upper body morning workout, she hopped into the shower and threw on a pair of gray basketball shorts and a white t-shirt. She then tied her hair into a ponytail as she grabbed a bottle of water out of her refrigerator and stood in her living room watching her view of the city.

Much like Bridgeport, Hartford was a city divided. Even from her apartment window, Achilla could determine the wealthy areas from the poor. She could see robberies in progress and rival gangs fighting in the street. Other times, she watched socialites drive their Aston Vanquishes to high class restaurants. Sometimes Achilla just wanted to change things. She wanted to give the homeless man the Aston and throw the socialite on a street corner just to see how they would handle it. That thought

left her head when she heard Dhiraj shift in bed in her room. He would probably wake up in another ten minutes or so. Achilla strolled into the kitchen and grabbed a carton of eggs from her fridge. The only positive to waking up earlier than her partners was watching the looks on their faces when they ate her special scrambled eggs with a side of turkey bacon.

Achilla ignored the steps she heard in the hallway. By now the serious clubbers were coming home so they could sleep all day, but she frowned when the steps arrived at her door and knocked. The only people who knew her address were the CIA, and they usually didn't make house calls. Achilla opened a drawer next to her black oven, lifted the tray, and pulled out a hunting knife before tip-toeing to the door. When she looked in the peephole, Agent Jones stood in the hallway wearing a button down and jeans with a black blazer. His head was completely bald and shined under the hallway lights. Achilla giggled and opened the door wide, setting her knife on the kitchen counter.

"Aren't we fresh today," Achilla said with her eyebrows raised. "Did you have a breakfast date, or are you taking me on one?"

"No date," Agent Jones replied. "But you'll like the gift I've brought you. I have a new assignment. A real one."

"Yes!" Achilla hissed as she pumped her first. "Now we're talking. Let me get rid of my guest, and we can get started."

"I can come back at a better time--"

"Nope," Achilla said with a wave of her hand as she turned and walked in. "I've been waiting for this."

"Don't you think it'll be awkward?" Agent Jones asked.

"No, this'll be easy," Achilla said. "But I need you to step into the hall."

Agent Jones stepped away from the doorway. Achilla smiled and nodded her head before speed-walking into the bedroom. She pulled her hair out of the ponytail and mussed it around her shoulders. She then found Dhiraj's clothes and kicked them into a pile in front of the bed. When Achilla was ready, she stood in front of the man in her bed and cleared her throat before she began.

“Hey, get up,” Achilla said in a hurried voice as she shook him awake. “My boyfriend’s coming up the stairs! Get up! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

“Boy...friend?” Dhiraj asked as he opened his eyes. “You never mentioned-”

“I didn’t think he’d be home so early!” Achilla replied as she paced the room. “He didn’t tell me he got out today!”

“Got out?”

“Prison!” Achilla snapped. “Look, I’m wrong, but there’s no reason for you to get hurt because of me! You need to go!”

“But wait-”

“Now!” Achilla said as she pulled him out of bed, shoved his clothes in his chest, and shoved him out of the room. He struggled to put his shirt on as she pushed him toward the door. By the time he reached the hallway, he ran on his own in his boxers. Achilla looked both ways and noticed Agent Jones was gone. She frowned at first and lowered her head when she heard movement in her living room.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Achilla said before closing her door and turning around. “What if he saw you?”

“After that line?” Agent Jones chuckled as he strolled into the kitchen behind her. “Not a chance. If you told me that, all I would see was the door. I wonder if your mother would’ve approved of that little story.”

“I do a lot of things she wouldn’t approve of,” Achilla sighed as she opened her refrigerator. “For example, lying to my family about joining the Marines.”

“Fair enough,” Agent Jones replied with a raised hand. “I’ll back off.”

“What’s the assignment?” Achilla asked as she sat at the table with a bottle of water. “Where am I going?”

“It’s in State-”

“Seriously?”

“Hold on,” Agent Jones said. “We’ll be sending you to New Haven. We need information from a man named Roberto Gabrielli. His friends call him Blue Eyes.”

“Criminal defense attorney?” Achilla asked before taking a swig of water.

“You know who he is?”

“Yeah,” Achilla said. “He was a classmate of my dad’s. They never speak, and anything my dad had to say about him was negative; immoral, money hungry, doesn’t care about his clients, stuff like that.”

“Well Brendan’s right,” Agent Jones said. “But he missed an important detail. We have reason to believe that Blue Eyes is involved in an international sex-trafficking ring shipping girls from all over the U.S. to Brazil. He’s a United States contact, and if you look at his file, you’ll notice that the majority of his clients as of late have been accused of sex trafficking under-aged girls. We think his clients are also his coworkers.”

Achilla’s free hand clenched into a fist as she remembered her night with Stanley. Before she turned into a vicious *nephilim* capable of killing Stanley if she felt like it, she remembered being a scared girl who wanted nothing more than to call her father. Achilla took care of Stanley on her own, but she knew she was unique. Stanley probably had plenty of victims before her and after; all of whom were every bit as vulnerable. Right about now Blue Eyes sounded no different than him. Achilla kept her eyes trained on Agent Jones as she fought the urge to ask for his address so she could find him and give him a much deserved corporal punishment.

“There’s no telling how lucrative this business is,” Agent Jones said. “There’s also no telling how far they’ll go to keep it a secret. You could be killed. My higher ups aren’t happy about this assignment, but I pushed for it.”

“Why would you do that?” Achilla asked.

“We brought you in to stop Ailina,” Agent Jones said. “This guy might be just as dangerous to your father as she is. How could you handle her if you can’t handle him?”

“That’s fair,” Achilla said with a shrug.

“You’re going to be a real estate agent from Los Angeles looking to get her feet wet with a sale,” Agent Jones said.

“Specifically the home of one of Blue Eyes’ clients, Mayor Berger. From there, you’ll have to find a way to get close to him. How good is your L.A. accent?”

“Hella proficient,” Achilla replied with a grin.

“Achilla, I grew up in L.A.,” Agent Jones replied. “Please don’t use the words ‘hella’ and ‘proficient’ in the same sentence.”

“Got it,” Achilla said. “Anything else I should know?”

“If you can, sneak in and out with no casualties,” Agent Jones said. “If you can’t, we doubt anybody will actually miss Blue Eyes all that much. He’s the descendant of New Haven mobsters and apparently wants to keep up the tradition. After years of working the kind of criminal defense that police officers hate, no one’s going to lead a serious manhunt for him if they suspect he’s dead.”

“You’re telling me to kill him if need be?” Achilla asked.

“Only if need be,” Agent Jones replied. “I’m also telling you to make it quick and clean.”

“I don’t think the higher ups would approve of that,” Achilla said with a frown.

“Then they won’t know,” said Agent Jones. “Anything goes bad, I’m your superior anyway. I’ll take the fall.”

“Understood,” Achilla said. “When do we start?”

“*You* start in three days,” Agent Jones said as he rose from the table. “Good luck.”

“Wait,” Achilla blurted as he made his way toward the door.

Agent Jones looked at Achilla and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, um, do you want some scrambled eggs and turkey bacon for the road?” Achilla asked with a smile as she pointed at the carton of eggs next to the stove. “It’s my specialty, and I was going to make it anyway.”

“For your guest, correct?” Agent Jones replied. “The guy you just kicked out?”

“Well, yeah,” Achilla replied. “But he’s gone now. No reason why you can’t have some, right?”

“No thanks, Achilla,” Agent Jones said before reaching for the door knob. “Contact me when you’ve gathered enough intel to meet Blue Eyes. I know you’ll do well.”

Achilla swallowed hard as Agent Jones left her apartment. Why couldn’t that man relax and have some food for once? Why did he always have to be so *professional* all the time? Whatever.

Achilla would just have to eat his share too. If he changed his mind, he was just too damn late. After wolfing down ten eggs and twelve slices of turkey bacon, Achilla tried to wash her plate but snapped it in half by accident. She sighed and shook her head as she threw it out and ambled around her kitchen.

This was it. Achilla had her first serious assignment. She took a deep breath and leaned against her kitchen counter as she recounted her own qualifications: trained in nine martial arts, surgical with handguns and sniper rifles, fluent in five languages and conversant in six. At twenty years old, Achilla was more ready for espionage and combat than anyone ten years her senior. But as her heart beat out of her chest, Achilla didn't feel ready. She had never killed a man before despite coming close as a teenager. She had no doubt in her mind that she would be able to take a life, but would she be able to stop? Or will she get one step closer to becoming as sick as Ailina? Achilla walked into her bedroom and opened her night stand drawer. Inside was her .22 caliber Glock pistol equipped with a silencer and six cartridges. She took another deep breath as she loaded her gun.

Preparation begins now.