

# CHAPTER

# 1

ST. ELDON'S ACADEMY  
MOROCCO, AFRICA

**S**creams!  
Shots!

And Sasha had seen the two bloody bodies of the security guards outside in the paddock when she'd released the horses a few minutes ago.

Her heart was beating hard as she ran back into the stable and down the long aisle toward the back stall. She dived into the shadowy dimness and pressed back against the wood, trying to catch her breath.

The *screaming*. She closed her eyes as terror and bewilderment washed over her. They must be hurting those girls, or they wouldn't be screaming like that.

What else could she do to help? Sasha thought frantically. She'd tried to call the police but there was no signal. She'd even tried to reach Alisa on her satellite phone, hoping that even if a tower was down the satellite might somehow be working. Nothing. The attack had come out of nowhere and the school seemed to be entirely cut off.

And there was no telling when those men who had killed the security guards would decide to come into the stable.

Sasha crouched lower in the back stall where Thor had been quartered before she'd released him. A weapon. She should find some kind of weapon . . .

"Sasha?" Paul Boujois, the school's head trainer, was ducking into the shadows of the stall beside her. His face was pale, and his voice was shaking. "I'd hoped you'd managed to get away yourself when you released the horses. It might be too late now."

"I had to make sure the horses were heading toward the hills away from the all the gunfire. I'm responsible for them. But I need a weapon, Mr. Boujois. Do you have a weapon?"

He shook his head. "And what are you going to do with a weapon? We're better off giving up as soon as they start pouring into this stable. They might let us live."

"They killed the security guards. And those girls are still screaming outside." She swallowed. "They're all my friends and classmates. They might be killing them, too."

He flinched. "I know."

Then why wasn't he doing something, she thought in frustration. She'd been working for the past four years as a volunteer at the school's riding stable, and she respected Boujois's expertise with the horses. She even liked him most of the time. But it was clear she was not going get any help from him in this situation. He was even more afraid than she was, and his solution was for her to bury her head and hide?

"I need a weapon," she repeated, looking desperately around the stall. She saw a horseshoe in the far corner, grabbed it, and tore off her neck scarf. She twisted the horseshoe into the scarf, forming a make-shift sling. "Who are they? Do you know why they're doing this?"

He shook his head. "I saw three trucks with machine guns mounted on them. The men are all wearing military camouflage fatigues. I'd guess it's a raid on the school by some military guerrilla group who've heard there are fat pickings to be had here at St. Eldon's with all you rich girls as students."

“Ransom? Then maybe they’re not killing them. Maybe there’s some way we can save them.”

More shots. Someone was yelling outside the stable.

“Sasha. Let it go. Don’t fight them.” Boujois’s hands were shaking as he grabbed her shoulders. “You’ve done all you can. You’ve got to live through this.”

“You said she ran in here?” Cursing. A man’s strident voice as he strode into the stable and started down the aisle. “Find her, you asshole. If she got away, I’ll cut your throat, Baldwin.”

“I swear I caught a glimpse of her. She’s here somewhere.”

Run for the stable door. Take their attention away from this stall and give the trainer a chance. If Boujois was right about the ransom, she might be safe, but there was no way he would be.

She *ran*.

She heard a shout as she dived past the two men walking toward her down the aisle. A tall, fair-haired man reached wildly out to grab her arm, but she swung her scarf at his head and heard him grunt with pain as the horseshoe struck his temple.

Just a few more feet and she’d reach the stable door—

*Pain.*

She stumbled to her knees as the butt of the other man’s gun crashed against her temple. Then his hand was tangled painfully in her hair as he jerked her head up so that he could look into her eyes. Through the dizziness, she was only aware of brown, close-cut hair, dark skin, and savage anger. “You’re the one who released those horses?” he hissed. “Do you know how long it’s going to take my men to round them up and put them in horse trailers?”

“Too long,” she said hoarsely. “The police will be here by then and they’ll be safe. You won’t be able to hurt them.”

“The police won’t be here for more than an hour. I’ll be long gone by then.” He gave her a brutal backhand blow to her cheek. “I’ve taken down the cell tower.”

“I’ve found someone else, Masenak.” The fair-haired man she’d

struck with the horseshoe was dragging Boujois out of the stall. “He’s wearing those same fancy English boots you wear sometimes. It’s probably that horse trainer you told me to look for. What do you want me to do with him?” Then he forgot about Boujois as he saw Sasha. “Can I have that bitch in my tent tonight?” His glare was venomous. “She needs to learn a few lessons from me before you give her to someone else.”

“We’ll talk about it later. She may be of use,” Masenak said absently as he looked down at Sasha. “We wouldn’t want to damage such a pretty little girl if she can help us get those horses back.” He let go of her hair, and his hand touched the nameplate on Sasha’s suede jacket. “I believe I’ve heard a few stories about you, Sasha Lawrence.” He turned to Boujois. “Is she really as good at training horses as the rumors have it?”

“She’s very good.”

“Better than good? What I’ve heard is she’s something of a horse whisperer. She can coax a horse to do almost anything for her?”

“I wouldn’t say that good. She’s only a student volunteer.” Sasha could tell he was searching desperately for what to say that would be safest for her. “I’ve always found her . . . efficient.”

“Let’s see how efficient.” He jerked Sasha to her feet. His face was suddenly only inches from her own, his eyes glittering. “I’ve no intention of hurting those horses. They all have excellent pedigrees. Which means they have enormous value for me. But there are dozens of young girls like you being put on those trucks out there who have very little value for me in comparison. So you will go with my friend Baldwin into the hills and you’ll capture every one of those horses you freed and place them into the horse trailers I brought. You’ll do it quickly and accurately because I will start killing those girls after the next thirty minutes. There were twelve horses. If you miss retrieving even one of those thoroughbreds, one of those sweet friends of yours will die because you weren’t efficient enough. Do you understand?”

He meant it. His lips were pulled back in a feral grimace, and she could see that he was enjoying every nuance of the terror she was feeling. “I might not be able to get all the horses back right away. I deliberately spooked them.”

“Then you’d best be better than Boujois was telling me. Because I don’t take excuses.” He looked at his watch. “Your thirty minutes starts now. Get her up in those hills, Baldwin.” He pushed Sasha toward the door. “You’d better hope the police don’t show up too soon or the carnage might have to start early. I’m looking forward to seeing you later, Sasha.”

“Don’t do this.” She was running toward the door in panic. “I’ll do whatever you say. Just don’t kill them. Give me time to get those horses back.”

“I’ll think about it.” Masenak chuckled. “But you should look on this as a challenge to prove your worth in case I decide not to be generous.” He paused. “On second thought, I really think you should be punished for causing me this much trouble.”

*Kaboom.*

She stopped. She whirled to see Paul Boujois falling to the floor, his head blown off. Sickness. Shock. Horror.

“I do hope he was a good friend,” Masenak said softly. “Punishment should always be as thorough as possible.” He turned away. “Better hurry, Sasha. The clock is ticking.”

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## ZAWAR PALACE MOROCCO

The dogs were barking!

Alisa Flynn froze on the top of the wall as the howls of the Doberman guard dogs broke the silence.

Shit!

This wasn't supposed to happen. She'd planned it all down to the last detail, even to keeping those dogs silent for the time she'd needed to break into the palace and reach Gabe Korgan's study. She'd been told that the dogs had to be given just the right amount of sedation so that they'd be quiet but not appear to be sluggish or drugged. She couldn't believe she'd screwed up that dosage.

The dogs had stopped barking. Their handlers had probably gone to check on them and found nothing suspicious. She might be okay.

Or she might not.

No sign of the sentries who usually patrolled the veranda area of the palace grounds at this time of night. But then they weren't due to make their rounds for another fifteen minutes. She'd *counted* on that fifteen minutes to get in and out of Korgan's study and back over the wall. But now she was sitting here trying to decide if that damn barking would cause those sentries to change their schedule.

And she couldn't hesitate much longer or that brief window would disappear. Go for it? Or cancel and try again tomorrow night? She knew what she should do, what she'd been taught to do.

But that twenty-four hours could make a difference, and she didn't know if she could live with that difference.

So screw it, she thought recklessly. Go for it anyway. Trust that all the preparations she'd made would hold and luck would be with her. That study was just off the veranda and she could be in and out in less than ten minutes. She was already lowering herself from the wall to the courtyard, her eyes on the veranda. After that, rely on the fact that she was very fast and could make it back here before the sentries reached the courtyard...

She *ran*.

No sign of any guards yet.

The veranda was right ahead, the study dark. She'd waited for two hours after those lights had gone out before she'd climbed over the garden wall.

She ran up the veranda steps to the French doors and waved the

RFID chip over the security panel's illuminated face. The screen changed from blue to green.

So far, so good.

She keyed in a six-digit pass code, and after a pause that seemed like an eternity, the door unlocked. She pulled it open. No alarms, no blinking lights.

She was in.

She moved to the side of the door and disarmed the interior alarm with another swipe of the RFID chip.

She drew a deep breath and waited, listening.

No sound.

Then she moved toward the desk where she'd seen Korgan working for the past three nights. She was right on schedule. Just another two minutes and she'd have it . . .

"Enough," Korgan said impatiently from across the room. "Lights, Vogel."

Lights illuminated the room.

Alisa whirled to the easy chair where Gabe Korgan had been sitting in darkness.

She recognized him at once. Why not? Those silver-blue eyes and intense features were familiar to most people in the world these days. And at the moment the bastard's eyes were lit with interest, and he was smiling with satisfaction.

*Busted!* she thought, disgusted. Why shouldn't he be smiling?

And the man he'd called Vogel was crossing the room toward her with a gun in his hand and a grim expression on his face. "Don't move," he said crisply. "Reach for a weapon and I'll put you down."

She was trying to smother her frustration and gather herself together. She might be able to get out of this, she just had to figure out how. She immediately lifted her hands. "I have no intention of resisting you, Vogel," she said quietly. "I wouldn't be that stupid. I've done my research and I realize how good you are and how loyal you are to Korgan. And I don't have a weapon. Not that I don't carry

one on occasion, but I didn't come here to shoot anyone, and I didn't want Korgan to think I did. Search me."

"I will." His hands were already running over her quickly and thoroughly. He stepped back. "Clean, Korgan. Do you want me to call the local police or do you want to question her yourself?"

"Let's not be in a hurry." Korgan's gaze was searching Alisa's face. "So you didn't want to shoot me, just rob me?" he asked mockingly. "How kind. Who the hell are you? And may I ask what you were after, and how you were able to get past my alarms? You were incredibly fast when you were disabling them. You shouldn't have been able to do that at all, much less with that degree of speed."

"I had a little help." She looked him in the eye. "But that wouldn't have done me any good if you'd had the new XV-17 alarms installed here at this palace instead of the older XV-10. That comes very close to being totally foolproof. The V-10 has been around long enough to be studied and breached if the technician is clever enough. I'm a very good technician."

"Evidently." His lips tightened. "But that doesn't mean I like the idea of you using my own work against me." He paused. "You would have needed an RFID chip to get past these panels. Did you steal one from one of my staff?"

"No, I didn't need to. I cloned yours."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now, how the hell did you manage to do that?"

"When you went to the airport the other day. I played the part of a maintenance worker in a lumpy, unflattering jumpsuit. I'm sure you didn't even notice me."

"I didn't. Lumpy... I assume to hide an RFID reader?"

She nodded. "It's very effective within six feet or so. I know it's on your key ring, but you should really find a way to sheathe that thing. It's a scary world out there."

"Tell me about it. And how do you know about the XV-17? It's still in beta testing. Are you into corporate espionage?"

“No, I don’t give a damn about your alarm systems right now. It’s you I’m interested in.”

“One of my favorite subjects.”

She stepped toward him. “No, it’s not. You try to keep everything about yourself out of the spotlight. But it’s pretty futile. Everyone knows you’re one of the greatest minds of this or any other age. An innovative genius who comes up with a miracle or two every couple years. Your upcoming subspace passenger jets are on the verge of revolutionizing the travel industry. Straight up into the upper stratosphere, then down to almost any place in the world. New York to Tokyo in sixty minutes.”

He shrugged. “It’s looking closer to seventy.”

“We’ll suffer through it. You won your Nobel prize with your fleet of solar-powered drones that plant, water, and fertilize crops, maybe solving the world hunger problem.”

“A fun side project.”

“Uh-huh. Like your virtual reality glasses that started as a toy but are now the industry standard for teleconferencing. Hearing aids that bring people back from almost total deafness. Self-driving cars that communicate with each other, reducing accidents to almost zero. Electro-stimulus techniques on the human nervous system that could someday wipe out Alzheimer’s.”

“I’ve had an enormous amount of help with that last one.”

“Barely a day goes by that I don’t see some article that compares you to da Vinci, Edison, or Einstein. I bet that really annoys you. Your design aesthetic is second to none. You designed your mountain-view headquarters in Colorado with the same care and creativity you bring to every one of your projects. And I saw your art exhibition in San Francisco. Breathtaking stuff. More side projects?”

“Just another creative outlet.”

“As if you needed one. But you can see I know enough about you to go after one of your other projects if I was a corporate spy. I’m sure your really important inventions are patented before they’re

off your drawing board. You probably came up with the XV alarms when you were bored and needed something to amuse yourself.”

“Close.” He was silent, studying her. “Very perceptive. But I’m not sure I like you being that perceptive about me. It indicates you’ve been studying me, and that means you may have come up with answers that might prove uncomfortable for me.”

“Police?” Vogel asked again. “She’s smart and she almost got to you. You need to get rid of her.”

“Not yet. She hasn’t even told us her name.” Korgan smiled and turned to Alisa. “Vogel is always eager to protect me from people who might prove to be detrimental to my health. He’s particularly wary of very smart, beautiful women because they have more weapons than most. We’ve run across a good many scam artists in our time. Are you a scam artist?”

“No. I’m Alisa Flynn, and I’m a special operative with the CIA. I’m very honest for the most part. I was only trying to rob you of information, and I had no intention of using that information against you.” She shrugged. “Though I can see why you might be skeptical. You’re probably not at all trusting. You were a billionaire before you were twenty-five. Now that you’re in your late thirties, you must be close to Bill Gates territory.”

“No, but I have hope for next year when I have two new operating systems coming out. One must always strive to improve.” He leaned back in his chair. “And information can often be the most valuable commodity of all. I value it far more than I do anything else in this palace. I resent having it stolen.” He repeated, “Alisa Flynn . . . CIA. What do we know about her, Vogel?”

Vogel was already pulling up information on his phone. “Agent with the CIA. Recruited in Caracas when she was only thirteen. Very high IQ. Well respected by her superiors. Has qualified in auxiliary training in a number of fields. No family. Travels extensively. No permanent residence.”

“Just the kind of operator the CIA would choose to send here to

steal information from me,” Korgan said dryly. “What does the CIA want from me, Alisa Flynn? Why did they send you?”

Lie? Or go for it? Either way it could be dangerous for her. But she’d already made the decision which path she’d take if she was forced to change directions. “They didn’t send me. They didn’t know about this break-in.”

He gazed at her skeptically.

“I’m telling you the truth. I don’t have a choice. Everything I’m going to say to you from now on will be the truth.” She added in exasperation, “This wouldn’t have had to happen if I could have gotten to you a few weeks ago to talk to you. I thought perhaps we could help each other. But everyone around you was on high alert, and I couldn’t get past that gold wall that people like Vogel have built around you. So I decided I’d just try to do it on my own.”

“Do what on your own?”

She paused and then said, “Stop Jorge Masenak.”

He didn’t change expression, but she’d thought she’d seen a flicker in his eyes in that first instant. She’d definitely noticed the sudden tension in Vogel’s demeanor. “Masenak?” Korgan said slowly. “Was that name supposed to arouse a response?”

“Yes, and it did.” She shrugged. “I thought I’d just cut to the chase and let you know that what I’m after has nothing to do with that empire you’ve built, and everything to do with getting rid of that son of a bitch as quickly as possible.” She stared him in the eye. “He’s an annoyance to you. I don’t know why yet. I’ve been trying to find out. I thought if I could find out what you want, then I could offer you a trade. But all I’ve been able to learn is that for some reason, Masenak is getting in your way. I’m guessing you’re looking for a way to remove him from your path and make sure he doesn’t bother you again.” She added bluntly, “Or maybe you just want him dead.” She leaned toward him, her voice suddenly urgent. “Either way, you’ve been blocked from touching the bastard, just as I have. But we could help each other. I could make it happen.”

“My, my, are you offering to kill him for me?” His eyes were narrowed on her face. “A CIA operative turned rogue? So much for your sterling reputation with your superiors. Not exactly plausible. If you went rogue, you’d lose everything you’ve worked for in your career. You’d be on the run yourself. Would it be worth it to you?”

“Masenak is a monster,” she said flatly. “Yes, I would kill him if I had to. Yes, it would be worth it. It would be better than watching what Masenak will do if we stand and do nothing. And it’s true, if you make that call, I would lose everything. Everyone in the agency is under orders to stay away from Masenak until the present tinder-box of a situation is resolved.” She paused. “I’m not going to wait. Do what you like. But you might consider how valuable I could be in any plot you’re weaving.”

His brows rose. “Plot?”

“Don’t play games. Shall I lay it out for you? Jorge Masenak is one of the most powerful and ruthless mercenaries in Africa. He’s a thief, rapist, and killer. Compared with him, ISIS appears positively angelic. But he has the people in the Szarnar Jungle terrified, and a few of the desert tribes have also started to throw him their support. Partly because of Masenak’s threats of reprisal, partly because he’s bribing the chiefs with women.” Her lips twisted bitterly. “Or should I say girls? He’s using some of the young girls he kidnapped from St. Eldon’s Academy outside Morocco six weeks ago. The chiefs like the idea of young, healthy girls they can screw now and might be able to ransom to their parents later.” She added, “But that means Masenak’s influence is growing, and it might be harder for you to get what you need from him if you don’t move quickly. He’s getting stronger all the time—when he raided that girls’ school, he kidnapped fifty-nine girls, most of whom were daughters of wealthy businessmen and influential diplomats. All of them were between the ages of ten and seventeen. Since then every time a move has been made against Masenak, the bastard has chosen one of the girls and filmed her

being raped or tortured.” She was trying to keep her voice steady. “If the girl was considered by him to be unimportant, he showed her being beheaded. An excellent way to keep both government forces and parents in line, don’t you think?”

He nodded. “In keeping with the son of a bitch you called him. I can see why there was a news blackout since the raid. The CIA would be under pressure to keep from getting the blame for causing Masenak to torture or kill even more girls.”

“But you knew about it, didn’t you?” she asked fiercely. “You had to know about it.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked warily.

“Because you’d make certain you knew everything that was happening with Masenak. He was on your radar. You had a meeting with CIA director Joseph Lakewood only a week before that attack on the school and offered to finance manpower and weapons to take out Masenak’s forces in that Szarnar area as soon as possible. The director was considering it when Masenak launched his attack on St. Eldon’s Academy. That blew your deal with him out of the water.”

“Did it?” His expression was suddenly wary. “Now, how would you be privy to information about a meeting that I was assured was top secret? I wonder what other classified data you might have decided to appropriate.”

“Whatever I had to have,” she said steadily. “I have friends in high as well as low places. I was searching for any way to stop Masenak and then I found you. You have all the power and influence money brings. Naturally, I decided to zero in and see if I could tap it.” His expression hadn’t changed, and she couldn’t decide if she was making any impression on him. “I couldn’t let it go on, no matter what the director said.” Her voice was suddenly passionate. “Look, I don’t care what you’re planning on doing to Masenak. It can’t be worse than what Masenak is doing to those students. That’s all that matters to me. I need to get them away from him. You help me, and I’ll get you Masenak.”

“It’s an interesting offer. I admit Lakewood’s freezing of any action in the Szarnar Jungle has slowed down progress. And just how do you intend to help me get Masenak?” He leaned forward. “Do you know where his camp is located in that jungle?”

“No, but I have sources who can help me find it. Give me another day or two and I promise I’ll have him for you.”

“Really? He’s slippery as an eel; no one has been able to capture him for the last eight years. He’ll go on the run the instant he believes he’s cornered.”

“I have contacts in the Szarnar Jungle who can help me, and also a limited number in the desert country. Besides, I can track him myself. You’ve probably never seen a better tracker than I am. Check on me. I promise I’ll find him. After that, it’s up to you.”

He leaned back again. “And all you want in return is for me to free those girls without getting them killed?” he asked mockingly. “While more than likely dodging your fellow CIA friends who did *not* turn rogue, as you have. And throw in the possibility of causing an international uproar if even one of those students is hurt during the escape. Such a small thing . . .”

“Don’t be sarcastic. I know how hard it’s going to be. That’s why I was trying to work around you. But you *want* Masenak. It could be worth it to you. And I’m telling you the truth. Do what I ask, and I’ll hand Masenak over to you.”

He was silent a moment, gazing at her face. “You might be telling the truth. You’re certainly sincere about saving those students. It’s difficult to fake emotion like that.”

“They were *innocent*. It should never have happened. He’s hurting them. It’s got to stop.”

“It will stop,” he said quietly. “I’ll get Masenak. I’ll find a way to bring him down whether or not I have your help. I’ve already started. I believe I’ll be able to bribe my way into finding the location of his camp.”

“But probably not soon enough,” she said through set teeth. “Not

for those girls. Some of them are mere children.” She started to reach into her jacket. “Don’t shoot me. I’m only reaching for my phone.” She rapidly pulled up a photo and held it out to show them. It was a class photo with rows of dozens of young schoolgirls in plaid skirts and white blouses with matching knee socks. “Look at them. They don’t deserve this. You don’t know what they’re going through.”

“No, but I can imagine.” He added speculatively, “But I believe you do know. This is very personal for you.” He tilted his head. “And I admit I’m intrigued by the possibility of using your sources. You managed to get into my study, disable my alarms, and now I find out you know about my meeting with your director. I doubt if you’d have been sent by him to contact me even if he’d had a change of heart about accepting my generous ‘donation.’ Which means I’m back to rogue agent again. Just what were you after when you broke in tonight?”

She hesitated. He wasn’t going to like this. But it would be worse if she lied when she’d told him she wasn’t going to. “Why do you think I’m here? I knew you weren’t going to give up even though the director shut you out and tied your hands. You came back here, positioned yourself near Masenak’s army in the Szarnar Jungle, and started to work on getting what you wanted from Masenak on your own. For you, that would almost certainly mean bribing Masenak’s men. That’s what you’ve been working on since you flew here from Washington.” She paused. Oh, well, go for it. “I planted a bug in the computer on your desk when I broke in here a few days ago. I wanted to retrieve and monitor any messages you’d received from anyone you were paying to give you information about Masenak.”

Vogel was swearing softly. “This is the *second* time? She’s dangerous, Korgan. She tells a good story, but it could all be bullshit. We should make sure her superiors know what she’s been up to and let them deal with it.”

“But then they’d find out what *I’ve* been up to.” He was smiling with amusement. “I’d really prefer that they don’t until I’m ready to

use them at some point.” His smile faded. “You managed to hack my computer in spite of all the firewalls I set up? That’s disturbing.”

“It was very difficult,” she said quickly. “And I’m exceptionally well trained.”

“I’m not finding that comforting. Nothing is foolproof, but I thought I’d developed a security that came close.” He shrugged. “Oh, well, back to the drawing board. Now, you said that you’d tried to contact me before but were prevented by my wall of gold.” He grimaced. “A term I dislike very much, by the way. What would you have told me if you’d managed to reach me?”

“That I have much better sources than you do in Masenak’s territory. That you need to take me with you and let me help you.” She added fiercely, “And the rest is just what I’ve already told you. I could give you anything you wanted, if you let me help those girls get away from that asshole. Tell me what it is, and I’ll do it.”

“But I’m afraid that would be a mistake. What’s to stop you from getting overenthusiastic and bringing Masenak down on me before I managed to get my hands on him?”

“Because I’m a professional and wouldn’t do that. Yes, I’m going to want this very badly, but I wouldn’t do it until I was sure I could pull it off. I’d hope that we could come to an agreement. You’re a ruthless man and you’d crush me like a bug if I made a deal with you and then violated it.”

“Perhaps not like a bug. The comparison offends me when I look at you. As I said, you’re very beautiful.” His smile vanished, and she was instantly aware how much steel was beneath that smooth facade. “But you would definitely know that I was displeased.”

“You wouldn’t be displeased, not if you help me get what I want.”

He was silent again. “I’ll think about it.” He glanced at Vogel’s frowning face. “Yes, I know you believe I should be more careful. You always do. And I agree that her sudden appearance here is coincidental at best and suspicious at worst. But if it’s a scam, she’s certainly been well prepared for it.” He was suddenly smiling

recklessly. "Let's see how well prepared..." He was striding to his desk and opening a drawer. The next moment he had spread out a large map on the desk. He motioned for her to come and stand beside him. "Show me what you know about the Szarnar Jungle and Jorge Masenak."

She frowned. "What are you asking?"

"I want to know both your point of view and the depth of your knowledge of Masenak and the area. You've made a lot of claims and promises. I can't tell what you're basing it on."

"Whatever." She shrugged. "The man first, I guess. Though he's more of a monster. Masenak was born and raised in Lisbon, Portugal. He was the son of a local crime boss who headed the gambling syndicates in Spain as well as Portugal. His mother was a prostitute who disappeared from the picture after a few years, and Jorge was taken care of by servants and his father. He traveled from racetrack to racetrack with his father, who trained him to become the arrogant son of a bitch he is today. He liked the gambling, particularly the winning, and he was on his way to following in his father's footsteps. But he and his father didn't get along all that well and he wanted more power than he could get as the head of a syndicate. He ran away when he was twelve after stealing enough money to start the life he wanted. He surfaced a few years later in Morocco as a mercenary when he was putting together his first guerrilla army to start trying to form his own kingdom. You know what he's been doing for the last twenty-five years. Blood and gore and murder." She met his eyes. "That's all I know. Very general knowledge because I wasn't interested in him until he committed that atrocity at St. Eldon's. I've been too busy trying to find him to dig any deeper. I'd rather catch him and stop him in his tracks than find out how he got that way. That's not my priority." She tilted her head. "But I bet you know more than I just told you?"

"Perhaps. Though you did well for skimming the surface. You hit the highlights. Go on."

Alisa looked down at the map. She pointed at the large green expanse of jungle. “Masenak uses the Szarnar as an escape route after his army raids surrounding villages and cities. The entire area is known as the Szarnar Jungle, but a good portion of it is rain forest. He’s always found it particularly useful because the foliage is so thick and impenetrable that even the most sophisticated drones aren’t able to detect anything below the tree canopies. There are no real villages present there, because Masenak’s soldiers have either killed or run out the natives.” She pointed to several spots on the map. “But there are still isolated individual bands hiding out in these areas who refused to leave their homes.”

“And became part of the network of ‘sources’ who supply you with information?” Korgan asked softly.

“Perhaps,” she said warily.

“And, if you did locate Masenak, would it be possible to lure him into a trap using those very stubborn villagers?”

“No, he’s too smart and well protected. It would just mean those innocent villagers would be butchered, and any sources I might have would vanish.”

“Pity.” He nodded again at the map. “Go on.”

She pointed to an extreme area to the south. “That’s the northern border of the nation of Maldara. Masenak used to raid over there, too, but after their bloody civil war he found it healthier to confine his raids to north of the jungle. Morocco, Marrakech, Tangier . . .” She pointed to a mountain range. “The Atlas Mountains. He raids villages more in the foothills of that area than any of the others.”

“Why?” Korgan asked.

“I think you must know. It’s convenient. Everyone says he has a fancy castle up there in the mountains where he hides out when it gets too hot for him down here.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t know for sure.” She gazed challengingly at him. “Do you?”

“I’d heard a few rumors that he has a magnificent place in the mountains where he stables his prize horses. Everyone knows he’s fanatic about racing.” He smiled faintly. “But you’re the one who’s supposed to be answering questions. You don’t have any valuable contacts or informed sources in that area?”

“No, but I could find them quickly if I had to.” She grimaced. “After all, it’s not rocket science.” She gestured to the map. “Am I done? Did you get what you wanted from me?”

“For the time being. At least you didn’t promise something you didn’t think you could deliver about a trap for Masenak. It’s something to consider.” He looked over his shoulder as Vogel grunted in the background. “Consider,” he repeated to him. “She can’t hurt me at the moment. I can hurt her just by making a telephone call. I’m curious if this ingenious and totally bizarre proposition she’s offered me could have any substance. If it does, I have a hunch that she might prove just the element we need. Find her a room and I’ll talk to her in the morning.”

Vogel muttered a curse. “Those damn hunches. They’re always getting in your way.”

“Only sometimes. But at times they tend to clear the way of obstacles.”

Alisa took a deep breath and then let it out. It had been a tremendous gamble, and she still wasn’t sure she’d won. “Am I a prisoner?”

“I don’t think so,” Korgan said. “*Prison* is such an unpleasant word. But that bedroom will be guarded until we do a little more research about you. Tomorrow we’ll decide how to handle each other to best advantage.” He smiled. “Though you’ve already decided how to handle me. Just barge right in and hope for the best?”

“I did my research, too,” she said coolly. “But in the end, I knew you’d respond best to honesty and your own judgment about my character. You believe in yourself or you wouldn’t have become as successful as you are.”

His lips were suddenly twitching. “So my belief in you shows how intelligent I am?”

She smiled. “Exactly. Together with the fact that you had the foresight to ignore that I’d tried to steal that information from you. You usually know how to cut your losses and turn them into victories.” She turned to follow Vogel from the room. Then she whirled back to Korgan. “You were expecting me tonight. I was able to get in the study with no problem the last time. How did you know? Was it the dogs? They only barked that one time and it didn’t alert the sentries. I thought it would be safe. Did I make a mistake?”

He tilted his head. “Would it bother you?”

“Yes, I can’t make mistakes.”

“You’re very hard on yourself.” He added quietly, “No mistake. It wasn’t the dogs. There’s no way that you could have known about the new experimental drone I was testing by augmenting the house security yesterday. It’s the most sensitive one I’ve ever produced, and it reported a brief glimpse of you on the property. Vogel followed up. Satisfied?”

“No. A mistake is a mistake. But you’re right, I didn’t know about the new drone. It’s hard to keep up with everything you’re doing in those mega labs of yours.”

“That fills me with immense relief,” he said dryly. “I’m glad there’s something you don’t know about me.”

“I’m sure there’s much more. I didn’t have much time to research when I chose you as a target.” She turned back toward the stairs. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome. Though I can’t say I like you referring to me as a target.”

“I’d think you’d want me to call a spade a spade. It’s not as if I meant you harm. Good night, Korgan.” He didn’t answer, and when she looked back, she saw that he was already punching a number on his phone. She had another sudden thought. “Korgan.”

He looked up at her.

“If you really want to know who I am, you should phone Special Operative Daniel Zabron. No one knows me better than he does. Mention my name. Then I promise he’ll answer questions without you having to worry that it will be repeated to anyone else in the CIA. After your discussion with the director, it might be awkward for you to arouse additional curiosity.”

He nodded. “I appreciate your concern. However, I’m not certain I should trust information from someone who’s obviously your cohort. And you’re not the only one who has sources.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. I just wanted to save us both time.” She turned and started after Vogel.

“And our sources are very good,” Vogel murmured as he led her upstairs. “He’ll know everything there is to know about you by morning. Though he should have really let me check you out before he let you stay here.”

“I know that would have made you feel better,” she said quietly. “I realize how loyal you are to him. You’ve been with him for years, and it’s clear you also like him. But I’m no threat, Vogel. I admire loyalty, and there’s a chance I can use Korgan. I know how lucky I’d be if I could pull it off. It would be stupid of me to run the risk of ruining that opportunity.” She grimaced. “Though I’m sure you don’t believe a word I’m saying, and you’ll be on guard to make sure I don’t creep into his room and cut his throat.”

“Yes, I will,” he said coolly. “It’s not that Korgan isn’t aware how many nuts there are out there that would target him if they got a chance. But he’s been a risk taker since the moment I met him, when we both served in the army. The recruiters took one look at his IQ and wanted to put him in the computer division or OCS, but he decided he wanted to go for special services. I don’t know if it’s curiosity or that he’s such a genius he just gets bored.” He paused. “If you’re as well prepared as Korgan suggested, then you might have dug deep and found out that info about him. But don’t think you can use it just because Korgan sometimes appears

so easygoing. He can be tough and cynical as hell. You'd regret crossing him."

Vogel was piling on warnings she could have done without, she thought impatiently. But he was important to Korgan and so he was important to her. At least, respect the effort he was making. "I'd know that just by looking at him. And I was telling the truth about not doing research as deep as I should have done about him. But I assure you that I haven't underestimated him . . . or you."

"That's good. He earned all those billions because he's one of the smartest men on the planet. But it's too much money for most people, and they can't absorb it without resentment." His glance meeting her own was icy cold. "So I make sure that resentment doesn't get in his way. You said you want to use him? Everyone wants something from him, he's used to it. But no one is going to hurt him to get it."

"Warning taken and accepted," she said. "I told him what I wanted, and I won't ask anything else."

He was silent for a moment. "No offense. I hope you're telling the truth and you're who you say you are. But you're CIA and that means you're trained to be lethal if it suits you. Korgan knows as well as I do that no matter what you claim to want from him, he'd always be a great bonus prize to use as ransom. I thought you should know that I won't allow that to happen." He stopped at the second door down the hall and threw it open. "Here it is. I guess it's comfortable, but I don't like palaces myself. Neither does Korgan. It was the only place in the area available on short notice where I could arrange the degree of security he needs." He added sourly, "Not that it did much good stopping you until we brought in that drone."

"It will be fine." She glanced around the luxurious suite. "Good night, Vogel."

"Good night." He closed the door, and she heard the lock click. Clearly Vogel was following up on those warnings by trying to make sure that she couldn't leave until Korgan permitted it.

Except that Alisa would have no more trouble with that lock than she'd had with the veranda doors. Less. She'd had to study the XV-10 alarms, but these bedroom locks were standard issue. Vogel probably guessed that and would make sure either he or another guard would be on hand to try to prevent an escape.

It didn't matter, she thought impatiently. She had no intention of trying to escape tonight. She'd think about that tomorrow if she couldn't get what she wanted from Gabe Korgan. And that result was still definitely questionable. He was just as much an enigma as she'd learned from her research on him. It wasn't often she couldn't read an adversary, but she hadn't been able to pierce that cool mockery she'd encountered in Korgan. It had caught her a little off balance. She needed to think, to go over his expressions and what he had said tonight, so that she'd be ready when she had to face him again.

But first she had something else to do before she tried to prepare herself for the next bout with Korgan. She reached into her pocket for her phone. The next moment she was swiftly dialing the number.

Margaret Douglas answered on the first ring. "What the hell happened?" she asked tensely. "You should have called me almost an hour ago."

"I was a little occupied. I was busted. I screwed up. Korgan was expecting me. I'm lucky to have been able to phone you at all. Since he didn't take my phone, you can bet that it was deliberate and he's having this call monitored. So change out your burner phone after you hang up, Margaret."

"Screw the phone. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I told you that I wasn't worried about Korgan doing me any physical damage. Not that he wouldn't be capable of extreme punishment if he became angry, but it would involve completely destroying the rest of my life, not taking it." She added bitterly, "It's Masenak who's into torture."

"You still shouldn't have taken the risk. You don't screw up. You were just in too much of a hurry. You should have waited."

“No, I shouldn’t. We’re running out of time. Yes, I knew there was a risk, but even if I didn’t get the info, I figured I’d only be faced with switching the plan to a confrontation with Korgan. Either way I’d be moving forward. That’s better than standing still. Now all I have to do is convince Korgan I can give him whatever he wants if he goes along with me.” She paused. “Is everything all right there?”

“Better than with you. No deaths. But I don’t know how long I can keep control.”

“You’ll manage. Let me know if there’s a change.” She hoped desperately Margaret was telling the truth. “I have to hang up now. If they let me keep my phone, I’ll be in touch. If not, I’ll still find a way to get to you. Be careful, Margaret.”

“You be careful,” she said dryly. “You tend to think you’re made of Kevlar. You’re flesh and blood, Alisa, and I don’t want to be left alone to face this nightmare.” She cut the connection.

Alisa’s hand was shaking as she stuffed her phone in her pocket and dropped down on the bench beside the bed. She didn’t feel in the least like Kevlar at the moment, she thought wearily. She was vulnerable and worried and just trying to hold everything together until she found her way to get those students away from Masenak.

Lord, she hated this sudden feeling of weakness and uncertainty. She’d had occasional bouts of weakness as a child during the bad times, but it was rare that she experienced it these days. She couldn’t permit it to attack her now. It was intolerable, and she mustn’t accept it. Force it away. Get rid of it.

She curled up on the bed and closed her eyes. Do as Zabron had taught her when he’d first made her his student.

Relax.

Breathe deep.

Let everything go.

Think about who she was, what she could do.

Not what could be taken from her.

Now identify the source of the fear and weakness.

Masenak?

Visualize.

Concentrate.

No, it wasn't that bastard Masenak.

It was Gabe Korgan. Lean, strong features, dark hair with a touch of gray at the temples. She could see him standing beside that map, his gaze narrowed on her face. Power. Intensity. That super intelligence that she'd always found more exciting than mere good looks. Those glittering gray-blue eyes seeming to read her every thought. It was the first time she'd seen him up close and personal, and he'd shaken her.

Of course he had. He was the most important person in her life right now. She'd known he'd be a challenge if it came down to a confrontation. So think about him, ignore the fact that she had respect and admiration for his genius, realize that he was only a dangerous man that she had to use to get what she needed.

She concentrated, going over the way he spoke, the way he moved, the way he'd watched her every move while he'd questioned her.

Extremely dangerous.

Now ignore the danger, forget him and think only of what made facing him or any threat worthwhile . . .

Think of the child who had been so furious with her on that day five years ago . . .

*Naples, Italy*

*"Who are you? The little girl's huge brown eyes were glaring fiercely down at Alisa as she rode her white Arabian horse across the circus ring toward her. "You've been here for every performance for the past two weeks. Why?"*

*Alisa stiffened at the antagonism in the child's tone. "Perhaps I'm just admiring your performance, Catriona. You and your horses are wonderful together. You're as fantastic as that Catriona the Great poster out front says you are. I've never seen some of the tricks you did with Zeus here." She smiled at her. "And you're only ten years old? It's amazing." But the child was still glaring suspiciously at Alisa, so she asked gently, "Why do you think I've kept coming here?"*

*"I've seen how you watch me," she said jerkily. "You're probably one of those welfare people who want to take me away from here and put me in an orphanage. Do you think I haven't had that happen before?" She slipped off the horse's back. "Or maybe you think I don't take good care of the horses and want to take them away from me. Well, I won't let you do that, either. Mind your own business. I get along fine."*

*"I'm sure you do," Alisa said quietly. "You remind me of myself at your age, and I always wanted to control my own life. I promise I have no intention of whisking you to an orphanage or stealing those beautiful horses from you." She met her eyes. "And I didn't know quite why I came here two weeks ago, but I believe I'm beginning to get a clue every time I come back and watch you. I thought it was about you, but I'm wondering if it's really about both of us." She smiled. "Because I've been just as nosy and interfering as you thought and found out the owners of this circus don't treat you as well as they could. But it never seems to bother you as long as those horses are kept happy and healthy." She shook her head. "Yet for some reason, I found that it did bother me. Because those wonderful horses could be in even better shape, and so could you . . . if you'd let me help you." She leaned forward, her eyes fixed intently on the girl's face. So much distrust, so much wariness. It was like looking in a mirror of the child she had been herself. "Suppose I promise to buy those four horses for you and give you a comfortable place to stay and work that would allow you to do whatever you wish to do?"*

*She frowned. "Why would you want to do that? No one does something for nothing."*

*"You're right, so maybe I do want something from you. You'll have plenty of time to find out and so will I. Because from now on I'm going to be here for every performance that I can manage to get away from my job." She made a face. "That won't be as many as I'd like because I'm certainly not rich, and I might have to work even harder to save up enough money to buy those horses for you. But I'll be here as much as I can, and maybe after every show we'll talk and learn what's possible for the two of us, Catriona."*

*She shrugged. "I think you're a crazy woman." She jumped back on the horse and turned him toward the tent exit. "Just know I'll be keeping my eye*

*on you. If you're lying to me about that orphanage, I'll know it. I'll go away and you'll never find me." She got to her feet and balanced on the horse's back with effortless grace. In that blue tutu she looked like the ballerina on a jewelry box. "And I don't need help from you or anyone else."*

*"Certainly not on the back of a horse," Alisa said ruefully, touching her forehead in mock obeisance. "Truly the Great Catriona."*

*"Yes, I am." She glanced back over her shoulder and said grudgingly, "But since you say you're going to be around for a while, you might as well get one thing straight. Catriona isn't my name. Alonzo Zeppo, the owner of the circus, changed it because he thought Catriona the Great looked better on the posters." She lifted her chin, her smile both proud and defiant, as she stared at Alisa. "My name is Sasha Nalano . . ."*

Alisa could remember that smile as well as everything else about Sasha that day. The grace, the strength, the wariness, as she strove desperately to keep everyone at bay, to keep Alisa at bay . . .

And that memory of Sasha was giving Alisa the reason she needed to ignore everything else around her as unimportant. Just as she had known it would, as it always did.

Then her lids flicked open and she was swinging her legs to the floor. The next instant she was on her feet and heading for the door she assumed led to the bathroom. She would take a quick shower, and after she finished she would spend more time thinking about Korgan. There must be something she could offer him to ensure that he would give her what she had to have from him . . .