



CHAPTER 10

Whether it's just good fortune or not, our passage through the Strait of Gibraltar has gone unharmed and has unsuspectingly left this group of passengers with some hope. But I'm not sure that I've garnered any favor that makes this small moment of peace sustainable. Though it's clear to many on board that my alliance and good faith has been somewhat polluted, I carry on with an agenda nonetheless.

I've been ridiculed at times for convincing these people to leave America for a better place to live. The nation had been taken over by the Russian government under extreme hostility. How can these people believe that things would have been better if they had stayed?

Jacob may have led the Southern Resistance, but it is I who started this revolution from the beginning. A nationwide rebellion had risen and I did everything I could to keep these people from being enslaved. These same people who embraced and honored me in their camp reside with harsh judgment now. Very few understand my choices while others bicker among themselves of my *undoing* and the uncertainties that lie ahead. Until we reach a safe haven, I'm afraid I'll be a source of continuous resentment.

Where there's bitterness, there's often conflict, and with a struggle to resolve differences comes something more dangerous than just petty umbrage: genuine hatred. I fear it will overshadow this withering fellowship with deadly consequences.

For the last few days, I've left Allison and Luke under the care of Juliana for reasons I'm almost ashamed to admit. I've spent most of my time with Jacob, holding on to a desperation

that this may somehow be the last peaceful moments we may ever share together.

Though the calm Mediterranean Sea has secured a swift reprieve the past few days, it soon evaporates as tensions brew the closer we reach the port of Alexandria. The winds suddenly change as the clouds darken above us. An unsettling eastern breeze, spawned from a devil's night howls cool and lonely with a familiar stench. As a blanket of fog slowly rolls in, the sight of the port almost disappears, but I don't have to see what lies beyond the mist to know that it's the smell of death.

As if on cue, the metal decking below my feet vibrates with the pulse of a bee's wings. People emerge from their containers with curiosity. The roar of the ship's engines, churning in reverse beneath the black waters, slows our advance to the docks. When the rolling engines finally stop, silence dominates our arrival as our ship drifts with an eerie crawl into the abandoned shipyard.

With my guns drawn, I stand cautiously at the bow of the ship with Jacob by my side and wait for the unexpected. But as always in this unpredictable world, the unexpected has become the expected. Because everyone just assumed we would be met by severe opposition, we are instead greeted with no more hostility than that of sewer rats scurrying along the docks. There's nothing left here but a hollow discovery.

We enter deeper into the port where the shroud of dusty mist lifts from our ship and rises behind us. The small light emitting from the red of the moon sends a shiver down my spine. Upon a clearing ahead where our ship is to dock, an unforgiving image is revealed. It's one of our cargo ships that survived the voyage only to later suffer an unwelcoming of hostile militia. The ship stands abandoned by the docks, and several of its slaughtered passengers are lying on the deck to rot.

My heart quickly sinks. While the clouds cast shadows over the port, the large cityscape that lies just beyond the docks cast another mystery. Every building tall and small stands quietly in the dark like a silhouette of jagged shapes. Not one light piercing through any of the thousands of windows shine down on the town. What has caused a widespread blackout could only come from inhospitable adversaries drawing closer to control the region we are attempting to cross through. While this passage may be a death sentence, there's no other way around it now. We must press on, but with a cautious spring in our step.

The ship finally takes rest against the steel-girdled dock. Everyone stands around, murmuring with uncertainty. I take Jacob's hand and lead him to my container where Allison and Luke lie bundled up beneath a pile of blankets. Juliana and Nadia stand guard outside.

"Where's Niki?" I ask.

"She's with the children in the hull," Harold chimes in. Harold saved Jacob's life when our ship was under attack. He sacrificed his own life to save another during a relentless firefight near the bow of the ship, but it was more than just a sacrifice—it was the truest form of love. He was willing to leave behind Niki, his one true love, to save another from the grips of a cruel death. I have the utmost gratitude for his bravery, and we have developed a mutual trust.

"How are we going to do this?" Nadia wearily asks.

"Arena, we need to get these people off the ship as soon as possible," Ananiah interrupts as he approaches.

"I agree, but we don't know what's out there lurking in the dark."

"And we don't know what's going to come lurking on here either when those clouds begin to break," Father Joseph joins in.

"You saw what happened to the other ships. I'm responsible for these people now, and I wish no more suffering on anyone if I can help it," I argue.

"We'll be no more safer on here than we will be out there," Ananiah says.

"They're right, you know. It's a risk we may have to take. Like you said, from here on out, everything we do is a risk no matter what," affirms Jacob.

"Okay," I say with unsettling ambiguity, "but I want a scouting party at least a hundred yards in front of us. I'm not taking any chances. We have no means of communication, so you're going to have to use your better judgment."

"How?" asks Harold.

"Well, if you hear gunfire, I'm pretty damn sure you don't want to be standing around. I'll take point. Jacob and Ananiah will come with me, and the rest of you will fall back with the others." Father Joseph looks concerned. "Don't worry about me, Father. You're going to have enough to deal with."

"How do you figure?"

"You'll have to try to wrangle two thousand people from straying. That would be enough to keep me on edge," I say, and he smiles. "If anything should happen to me—"

"I trust you," Father Joseph interrupts. Whether it's just for his personal comfort or for my own, he keeps me briefly withdrawn from the grim reality that I might die out there. I'm not willing to accept defeat, but even I know my boundaries.

"I'll come with you," says Harold.

"No, you stay back." I pause for a brief moment. "Niki needs you."

"But I—"

"No!" I bark, and Harold flinches. "That's an order," I say more softly. The surprise on his face gradually dissolves and he nods in agreement. This private moment between

Harold and I assures me of two things: I know he will give his life for mine if the time should ever come, and I should never be surprised by his bravery ever again.

While the others leave to prepare the group's massive exit, Nadia waits waiting for me to say something, but all I can muster is a strained smile. I reach out and offer her my hand of friendship.

"What do you need from me?" she asks kindly.

"Though I'd rather have you by my side, I really need for you to help Juliana and Niki with the children."

"I understand," she simply answers.

"And especially stay close to Allison and Luke. I trust you, and I know you will guard them with your life." Her face brightens before she walks away. I'm forever grateful that she rescued me after Matthew's death.

I'm not sure what fortunes should come to us to leave this ship, but I'm just crazy enough not to care anymore. Only death itself will keep me from reaching my brother in Cairo. I look gravely down the darkened streets and realize just how slim our chances have become. I grab Jacob's hand and lean my head into his shoulder.

"You ready for this?" he asks softly.

"I wish not to wake up anymore and wonder."

I stay still for a moment as I hold on to the security of Jacob beside me and watch the crowd of people on board rustle with their belongings. Ananiah hovers over the railing, searching through the binoculars toward the city. I'm not sure what kind of expectations I have of him from this point on, but I suspect I should dig a little deeper to find out.

"Jacob," I say casually, "go grab Kale and three other men, and make sure they're armed."

"Is that enough?"

"For now."

I'm suddenly intrigued by the mystery surrounding Ananiah. With Jacob's absence to gather the other men, I

strategically leave myself alone with Ananiah to collect the truth behind his promise to lead us through this unsightly region unharmed.

“So what’s your plan?” I curiously prod.

He holds steady as his eyes undress our perimeter with bewilderment. “I just don’t get it. Why would the entire city be covered in darkness?”

“Curfew?”

“Unlikely.”

“I’m assuming you still have a plan though,” I say.

Ananiah turns to be. “Alexandria has always been a point of interest to the Israeli government. Though Egypt’s political ties with Russia has been somewhat of a deterrent lately, it’s always been a region of mutual respect within the walls of diplomacy for its neighboring cities. Israel may be the target of rebellion, but political affairs aside, she still has a few unsuspected alliances outside her border.”

“Well, I hope your coalitions extend further than Cairo, because I’m not getting a warm, fuzzy feeling here.”

“Alexandria has never posed a threat to our agenda, but I’m feeling less eager to suspect something has changed.”

“Why?”

“Over the course of the last five years, we’ve stationed many militia here to protect the city in exchange for safe passage and trade, but with recent turmoil brewing from an international pact with the Russian and Chinese governments, our means for survival may have diminished.”

“Well, I’m not giving up here, and we certainly can’t go back now.”

“I have no means too, but this changes everything.” Ananiah sighs.

“Surely, they haven’t all left.”

“I’m not too worried that my men have gone into hiding.”

“Then what do you fear?”

“What’s out in that darkness that made them flee.”

A chill trickles down my spine. “So what are we to tell the others?”

“Nothing,” he snaps.

“You mean lie?”

“I mean to tell them what they need to hear.” Ananiah looks and me fiercely.

I agree with him to some extent. I know the truth can sometimes be better served in silence, but I am responsible for these people’s lives, which changes the game.

“If you tell them anymore than that, this group is sure to break,” he continues.

“I understand, I just—”

Ananiah’s eyes soften. “I’m not trying to break trust here, Arena. Believe me, it’s the last thing you need from me, but there needs to be a semblance of hope if you truly intend to keep this fellowship alive.”

Right then Jacob, Kale, and three large men from the engine room walk over, fully armed, bringing our brief but undisclosed conversation to an end. I recognize one of the men as Scarface, an appropriate nickname for a man who bears a gouging scar that stretches from one side of his cheek across to the lower part of his jawline. He seems to accept the name as a badge of honor.

Kale introduces the other two men: Caspar and Francisco. Caspar is an arrogant, little British shit; his uncouth behavior and lack of gallantly courting skills did very little to woo me when we first met. The only thing memorable in that short-filled exchange was my knee meeting his nuts, and by his scowling eyes, it’s the only thing he remembers as well. But I’m not looking for gentlemen to protect our perimeter, I want soldiers.

Francisco is a well-cut man who looks like he’s seen military action in his days, but I’m not too sure he’s ready to relive any of it.

Jacob's eyes briefly move over mine with an insecurity hidden in them. "Everything okay here?" Jacob asks, looking at me rather unsure.

"Fine, just trying to forge a plan," I say with my eyes piercing Ananiah's. I'm sure it's painfully obvious that nothing is okay by the expression on my face, but I'm disinclined to disclose anything to Jacob in front of the others.

Jacob holds my arm. "What's going on . . . and the truth this time," he whispers.

"Your inquiring tone is not with her but with me," Ananiah answers.

"Okay, so spill it," Jacob scoffs.

"The Israeli government has been keeping secret tabs on Egypt's political movement for quite some time now, but more importantly it has given the nation a reason to renew a coalition. And that coalition can only exist if there is a mutual deterrent."

"Russia?" Kale suggests.

"With the global economic collapse under severe duress, Russia and China have made it clear who is in control now. Although China refuses to claim second to the global helm, it knows Russia is the stronghold to keep the nations under an economic decree. Even America has relinquished its power to China's rule."

"So how does that help us here?" asks Jacob.

"Sometimes sleeping with the enemy is all you have. A top-secret Israeli militia has been stationed here for the past three years as a warranted means of protection for the Egyptian government," Ananiah continues.

"How do you know this?" asks Scarface.

"Because I'm the one who initiated this negotiation with our enemy. I'm not exactly fond of the idea of siding with Egypt, but it was necessary. Being Israel's militant leader doesn't define my loyalty in this war, but sometimes

there are undesirable decisions attached with it, and I was forced to make one."

"A trusted ally on enemy soil?" Kale sneers.

"Loyalty is what you make it without knowing the outcome. Before all of this chaos, Egypt served as a vital point in major trade for the Israeli government, notwithstanding from the harsh opposition of neighboring territories of course, but still a place growing with a mutual agenda and a supporting alliance."

"And now?" Kale asks.

"That alliance has come under siege."

"If you know you can't beat someone, you do the only thing logical to survive," I add.

"What's that?" Caspar asks in a slightly mocking tone. I glare at him.

"Join them," answers Jacob.

"Hell, maybe that's not a bad idea for us," Caspar says, chuckling.

I expect fear to draw these men back to our group, but that is a crippling response to this fellowship I just won't allow. I angrily draw my knife toward his nuts. Caspar's eyes grow wide as he cowardly shuffles behind Kale.

"I risked my life for these people while my brother rots in a prison. I'm not going to see it be exploited because you would rather cower behind the enemy," I sneer.

"Arena, stop it!" Kale shouts.

"Arena, don't, he meant no harm," Jacob calmly adds. I quickly put my knife away.

Caspar's eyes bulge and he trembles a few paces back. "Jesus, I'm sorry. You know, you might want to keep a chain on her," he says to Jacob. If not for Jacob and Ananiah holding me back, I would have reunited my knee with his crotch. "And this is who we want leading us?" Caspar nervously spews.

"Fine, you want me to leave?" I snap.

"I want to survive."

"Then I suggest you shut your damn trap."

"Look, I'm just a little uneasy about the whole thing, okay? I'm not suggesting we surrender." He takes on a softer tone, and for a quick moment I almost feel bad to have frightened him.

"Good, because I don't expect us to surrender," I say defiantly. The fear on his face is expected, but it will pale in comparison to anyone else on this ship when they discover the true danger that lies ahead. We don't need any more fear to infiltrate this group than it already has.

"Arena is right—this isn't a time to back down now. There's a small chance my men are still here," says Ananiah.

"And if they aren't?" Kale asks.

Ananiah sighs. "You want the brutally honest version?" he asks, and we all nod. "We will not survive this journey."

"You're telling me we're going to die here?" Kale exclaims.

"Shh . . . let's keep this quiet and civil," Ananiah says.

"So what's your plan then?" asks Jacob.

"If my men did flee, then yes, it's certainly a cause for concern, but seeing that there is nothing here but a darkened city, I suspect we'll find someone out there who knows."

Caspar boldly steps forward. "And that's your plan? To walk blindly in these empty streets for an answer? Hell, we'd be safer in the middle of the ocean."

"You'd be dead," I angrily assert.

"And we're just going to walk right in there uninvited?"

I look at him with a peculiar bode of confidence and simply say, "Yeah."

"Oh, okay, since you put it that way." Caspar rolls his eyes.

"Can we assume Egypt is still on our side?" asks Kale.

"For years the belly of this nation has secretly stood by Israel's response to Russia's global insurgence, but now I'm afraid Egypt serves as one of the Ten," Ananiah responds.

"One of the Ten?" I ask.

"Before your president was pouring out his cruelty, America was creating something much deadlier than just class wars. Two years ago, when the United States was forced to remove its global-power status to the likes of Russian adversaries and excessive Chinese levies, President Kriel vowed to settle his economic differences with the rest of the world. With the help of America's political allies and negotiating prowess, he and Russian leadership set up a global conference, which later became known as 'the Ten.' During that expanse, ten nations came together for a private summit held in Switzerland to discuss an international peace treaty, but it became more than that. A one-world government was introduced and it captured everyone by surprise. It was an election of power over commerce, and Gennadi Gorshkov, Russia's leader, had no intentions of leaving that summit without the support he needed."

Listening to Ananiah explain Gorshkov's cruel intentions sends a rare tingle up my spine.

"Those who removed their state to conform withdrew their trust and became expendable. Any radical party outside the Ten restricting their loyalty to this regime, being largely clandestine, will remain in fear until they are dead," Ananiah states.

"I'm assuming Israel wasn't a representative party at that assembly," Scarface says.

"No, but Egypt was. That's why we sent an allied delegate instead to get this information. You see, the only ruse in this political war is to determine whom to trust. And since Israel is the impeding factor to Russia's abrasive ideals, then no one is trustworthy."

“So why not negotiate then? I mean, if your nation is truly a visible target in this war, wouldn’t it be logical to take the path of least resistance?” Francisco asks.

“Israel isn’t in the business to reciprocate with nations under animosity. Russia is the one out for blood in this movement and it has taken a league of nations in secrecy to fight against it. I assure you, Israel will not fall to it. She would assume to be dead rather than be a slave under the rule of a one-world government.”

“And what of this Ten? Assuming we do reach Jerusalem, what kind of hostility is expected now?” I ask.

“Ten delegates interceded into this pact, but only seven nations came together in agreement to form this new order, though I suspect that the three nations that remain—Egypt, the Republic of Germany, and what’s left of the United States—will eventually grow loyal to Russia’s offer. Either way, war is inevitable. Israel has always and will always be under severe hostility from the rest of the world. The Ten will not make any difference now.”

“So if these nations are being threatened to unite for some world economic diplomacy, what kind of international relationship could Russia be trying to build without creating some kind global upheaval?” Kale asks.

“Gorshkov stands between a nation to reign and a worldwide genocide, but it’s not a relationship he’s trying to build.”

“Then what is it?” Scarface asks.

There’s a slight pause and the air feels heavy, as I answer for Ananiah. “An army.”