

Two

Angel sat at a small table inside the Sixty-first Street Starbucks on Galveston Island studiously avoiding eye contact with the elderly couple on her right while her stomach growled at the fragrant scent of cinnamon rolls and fresh scones.

The old woman's face had drawn up in a mask of disapproval, her nose crinkled like she smelled an open landfill instead of the heady aroma of freshly ground coffee beans and pastries. She shot a barrage of narrow-eyed glares Angel's way while her husband's gaze was altogether different. The old man looked at Angel like she was a three-inch thick New York strip steak. She'd watched him swipe a strand of drool from quivering lips before his gnarled hand retreated beneath the table to do God knew what.

Once more she fought the urge to tug at her skirt. What was the point? It wasn't like pulling on it was going to make it one millimeter longer.

The old lady sniffed then turned her attention back to her *ensainada*. She took a bite and Angel's stomach growled so loudly the table of teenage surfers on the other side of the old farts heard it and snickered. Angel sighed. She'd wanted to order the yummy coiled sweet bread topped with powdered sugar with her coffee, but sadly could only scratch up enough coins to pay for the iced caffe Americano.

She didn't dare use her credit cards. The last thing she needed was a *Chernyy* headhunter showing up which would be the first thing to happen if she used her plastic. Anyway, she needed the caffeine more than the Danish so her empty stomach would just have to suck it up. Unhappy with the arrangement, her stomach complained again. Geez, where was her coffee? Angel glanced back at the barista, saw her cup was now third in line and sighed again. Who would have thought Starbucks would be this busy on a Sunday morning?

She crossed her legs and mentally rolled her eyes when she heard the old man slurp in a breath while the sour old lady hissed, "Shameless hussy."

Yeah. Well, she'd just have to suck it up, too. Angel peered out the wall of glass. The surf was as gray as the morning sky. It reflected her mood.

She was a legend in the assassins' community. Her reputation as lethal and invincible was almost universal. Why did she feel so helpless? Worse than that, she felt fragile, like she'd shatter into a zillion pieces at the slightest touch.

"Ahren?"

Starting, she looked around to see the young man at the counter. Her order was ready. She'd forgotten that she'd given him her true name. Tugging again at the disobedient skirt, she rose to her feet.

“Sweet Jesus on a donkey.” The old man’s voice was hoarse. With her peripheral vision, Angel watched his wife lean over and give his arm a smack.

“Oww... whaddidya do that for?”

“C’mon you old coot. We’re leaving.”

“Why? I haven’t finished my breakfast.”

“Oh, yes you have,” she snapped. Draping her purse over her shoulder, she marched him to the door, her gnarled hand gripping his wrist while he cast longing looks back at Angel.

After adding sweetener to the coffee, Angel returned to her seat, sipping contentedly as the strong brew hit her stomach and silenced its demands at least for a while. With the dual distractions of hunger and lecherous old men taken out of the equation, her thoughts returned like homing pigeons to what was really bothering her. DM.

Angel picked at the neon pink fingernail polish on her thumb, her coffee forgotten. Why... *why* had she left DM that way?

They’d made love—sex on the beach had been everything she dreamed it would be. So, why had she ditched him?

Come now, Ahren. Who do you think you’re fooling?

Damien—God! She’d actually called DM *Damien* when her orgasm flooded her. Damien was DM’s identical twin. His brother. His enemy. Had he noticed? Of course he’d noticed. She grimaced at the memory. DM had stiffened for that instant

before he'd lost himself inside her. She scratched off another line of polish, refusing to think about the sensuous dream that had taken her afterwards. Damien and her. Together in a shower. Their lovemaking had seemed so real.

"No. I won't think about that. It didn't happen. It will never happen. It was a dream... just a dream," she whispered, as if saying it aloud would make it true.

"They say if you talk to yourself you converse with a fool."

Angel's head snapped up, her breath catching in her chest. She knew that voice. "Gregor?" Unable to do anything but croak.

Gregor Utegaliyev, the Director of *Chernyy*, was a man in his middle years. His dark hair was close cropped and threaded with silver. Standing just at average height, his looks were misleading. His cheeks were ruddy and his lips had a natural tendency to curve up. He looked harmless. That was until you met his eyes. His eyes, shrouded by heavy, black brows, were coldly intelligent and dangerous.

Her eighteen months with *Chernyy* had shown her what Gregor was capable of. She'd watched him cut a man to pieces in front of the man's family then turn and give the victim's children a pat on the head and a couple rubles each before burning down their squalid home. The smell of burnt cabbage and sausage had stayed with her for days. "Life is hard," he'd explained after they'd returned to base and were enjoying a glass of vodka. "Better for them to learn that early." Cold, Russian pragmatism at its finest, that was Gregor.

Angel glanced wildly from him to where her handbag, with hand gun inside, rested just out of reach on a chair and cursed silently. It sat in easy reach to Gregor. As if driving that home, he unbuttoned his sport coat to reveal his rig.

With little to lose, she made a grab for the purse, but he easily stopped her clumsy attempts, his gun clenched in his fist. The barrel looked as big as a cannon and it was pointed at her head. Slowly, she shrugged and put her hands back on the table. With a quick glance around, Gregor sat down.

“You’re... here,” she said, stupidly stating the obvious. She’d expected a *Chernyy* hit team, but not the Director of *Chernyy*.

He dipped his chin once, a wry twist to his lips. “You could say I was in the neighborhood.”

Angel sat back in her chair. “You won’t shoot me in Starbucks. Not in front of all these witnesses.”

“Won’t I? I’ve made countless hits in places more crowded than this.”

She’d give him that. “But not here in the United States. There are cameras everywhere and people with cell phones to record your actions. It would cause an international incident.”

Gregor’s eyes narrowed for a moment then he sighed. With a shrug, he slipped his gun back into his rig and smiled broadly. His teeth, she noticed, were stained. As if in answer to that observation, he pulled a pack of Marlboro cigarettes from his jacket, stuck one in his mouth and lit it, ignoring the hostile

glares from neighboring diners. He inhaled deeply then blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. “Marlboro,” he said turning the cigarette sideways so she could see it.

She shrugged. What the hell did she care?

“It is the brand of cigarettes American cowboys smoke.”

“Great,” she said faintly. Okay, now that was weird.

Seeming satisfied with her response, Gregor again inhaled deeply, savoring the taste of the tobacco. Exhaling another plume of smoke, he focused on Angel. “Did you truly think I would not learn you’re a Guild plant?” He smiled when she stiffened.

She’d known he’d found her out. Hadn’t she survived the kill team at the Four Seasons Hotel? But the truth of the matter was she’d thought it was DM they’d been after. She was convinced that she was still flying under the radar—which just showed the depth of her own self-deception. Damn, she hated when she did that.

Taking a sip of tepid coffee, she said, “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice you’d joined with the Chinese to take me out?” She watched him dip his chin as though conceding a point in their verbal chess match.

“You survived the operation, so naturally I knew you and Morace would figure out the alliances.” The thick cloud of smoke he exhaled veiled his eyes.

Glancing about, Angel noted the blond giant, Nikita, who was always a jolly flirt, sitting next to the restrooms’ doors

while surly Dimitri, never her friend, sat at the table beside the exit and sent dark glances around the room. Looking through the window, she noted a charcoal gray SUV, Chernyy's vehicle of choice, across the street. A trill of fear danced up her spine. She was alone. Alone as in singular. There was no backup. There would be no backup. She had only herself, the gun she couldn't reach, and a couple clips she wouldn't be using. Trapped. Good and well trapped.

She heard wind chimes and frowned. Where was it coming from? The soft tinkling erupted again and she peered down at her cell phone, confounded. That was not her usual text tone. Tilting the phone up, Angel ran a thumb across the screen.

Chernyy is here

No shit, she thought, stealthily turning the phone to silent mode.

Come outside. We r w8ting

Using extreme care, she was just able to press ? and send. In an instant the reply came back and she nearly fainted in relief when she read the single word: *Natalya*

She blinked, realizing that Gregor was still speaking in a low, urgent tone. "... Damien must be sent a clear message."

Oh, that was rich. She burbled a laugh. Truth was she couldn't hold it back. The thought of sending the Crown Prince of the Guild a clear message was laughable. It was Damien who had put her in this untenable position with no explanations and certainly no apologies. Did these fools really think they could

lesson Damien? The term *damned if you do and damned if you don't* sprang to mind.

"Funny, Damien said the same about you."

Gregor's lips tightened for a tense moment. Finally, he leaned back and shrugged. "Ah, but I am here and where is Damien?" He made a show of looking about expectantly before turning back to her, his dark eyes alight with triumph. "No doubt he is sitting safe and snug in his ivory tower, yes?"

He was right, damn him. She knew that was exactly where Damien was. And double damn Damien for putting her here with no backup, no real resources and only one ally who she herself had abandoned. Glancing out the window again, she prayed DM would show up, that she hadn't made a clean getaway, and that somehow he'd followed her. After all, if Natalya was here it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility he'd be with her. But she could find no sign of him—or Natalya; just a young mother pushing a baby stroller, and an older couple sitting at the bus stand watching a teen sail past on a skateboard. There would be no rescue today.

Meeting Gregor's gaze, she thought she saw sympathy in his brown eyes but that was impossible, right? It had to be a glint of triumph. "Shall we?" he asked, nodding at the door.

Sighing, she reached for her handbag. Exhaustion kicked her hard between the eyes as she rose to her feet and left her feeling as colorless and worn as a faded pair of blue jeans. Angel trudged past tables where diners sipped their coffee and

took bites out of pastries while staring like zombies at their tablets and smartphones.

She walked to the door held open by Nikita, a disapproving purse to his lips, and passed through ignoring Dimitri's muttered threats. The gray SUV pulled across the street to a chorus of angry horns making the elderly couple look up and the young mother standing at the corner waiting for the light, turn and gawk. Gregor led the way, head down, moving with purpose toward the vehicle's open door.

She gave her head a shake, unable to believe this was happening. Not once did she envision her death would be so boringly ridiculous.

Nikita stepped closer to her, his gun flashing in her face, and she set her jaw, determined to take this opening. She made a grab for his weapon, but felt her arm go numb from a blow to her elbow. Angel threw a kick that sent Nikita stumbling into the SUV's open door and she slammed the door onto his legs and heard his muffled grunt. She heard the click of a round being chambered and ducked. A melee of rounds tore across the side of the SUV and caught Nikita, his legs jerking as the bullets ripped through him.

Not sure where the attack had come from, Angel swung around to see the young mother holding an assault rifle. Maybe it was her frown or perhaps her flashing sapphire eyes, but suddenly she looked familiar.

“Move!” Natalya shouted, jerking the barrel to the left. Angel’s head twisted in that direction and she watched the elderly couple take pot shots at the *Chernyy* driver and associate.

She flung her head around, searching wildly for Gregor, but he was nowhere to be found. He had ducked back inside the coffee shop. There were muffled screams and shouts coming from inside. They mingled with the distant sound of sirens and became too much.

“Come *on*, Ahren

She moved, stumbling, her legs numb. Another burst of bullets passed so close she could have touched them had she but lifted her hand. Unconsciously, she grabbed for her sword then remembered she’d left it in DM’s room above the Stone Toad.

“Ahren! Catch!”

Suddenly her blade sailed through the air. Reaching up, she snagged it and unsnapped the leather thong, sliding the blade from its sheath and into Dimitri’s gut, opening him from groin to sternum. The big man slowly crumpled to the sidewalk like fall leaves, silent and soft, his arms thrown wide. She frowned, her gaze focusing on the strange circle tattoo on Dimitri’s wrist. It looked familiar.

Squealing tires made her look up. A glossy black tricked-out, restored Camaro pulled up beside Natalya, its big V-8 engine growling.

“Come *on!*” the driver shouted, a handsome man with a sun streaked mane of hair floating over his wide shoulders.

Angel stood motionless, unable to believe what she was seeing. She blinked, but nothing changed. She squinted looking at the man. Was he? Yes, he was. The driver was the lead singer from the Stone Toad. What was his name? Ethan? Yeah, that was it. Ethan... Dusk or something there abouts. The thought fled her mind when he lifted a gun and rested the barrel on the glass of the half lowered window. Pointed at her?

“Move, Ahren!” Natalya shouted.