

The Red Order:

Part II of the Order of the Seers Trilogy

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~ Chapter Samples ~

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Chapter 1: The Defeated

The fact that Crane Le Dieu had barely escaped with his life less than ten hours ago did nothing to humble his demeanor as he stormed out of the steel-glass elevator, as bold and arrogant as always.

“You!” he shouted, pointing his short index finger at the middle-aged Asian woman who sat at the far end of a sea of cluttered work stations that made up the office level of the Guild’s lead Research Facility in Geneva.

“Did you hear what happened? How could you let this happen?” Crane continued as he cut across the open floor plan toward the target of his anger – the woman he was now leveling his deadly gaze upon.

But Ming Jhu was all but oblivious to Crane’s approach as she took another long draw from her cigarette and stared at the open email message on her laptop. As head of Research and Development for the Guild, it was bad form for her to just be sitting there, so indifferent to her superior, as the other scientists around her froze in terror at Crane’s presence. But she’d been like this for at least the last hour. Even with the Guild’s lockdown protocol which had them sequestered in their offices at 11 o’clock at night, Crane bursting into their facility yelling demands at her was nothing new. What felt refreshing was that, for the first time, she didn’t give a damn.

It would have been nice, she thought, to have had this objectivity twenty years ago, before she had bartered her life away while most of her other colleagues were being killed. In the early days of the International Science Team’s research on Seers, Eli Tanner, Gerard Morrow, Willem Knight, Neeva Patel, Hasaam Al Attar, and the other lead scientists had been such good mentors to her that she had considered them family, or so she thought before she watched herself choose self-preservation and advancement over them. By the time the Guild had asked for her allegiance, she knew Willem Knight and Gerard Morrow colleagues were dead because of their refusal to cooperate with the Guild’s new agenda to catalog and harness new Seers against their will. At the time, she was just another eager, twenty-nine year old junior researcher, but she had shown tremendous promise and the Guild made their interest in her known as soon as it was clear that most of the Seer Project’s lead scientists would need to be replaced. With the gift of hindsight and twenty-three years of experience behind her, Ming could almost laugh now at the fact that she had been naïve enough to be more flattered than frightened when Crane came to her apartment to recruit her as part of the new team for R&D. It was only later that she learned how much blind ambition and stupidity had in common.

But Ming’s hubris wasn’t the only thing that kept her with the Guild. Back then, she had just met Thea Case, was just learning what it meant to find the one person you would do anything for. In the years that followed, Thea had made most of the despicable things Ming had done bearable, if not quite

worth it. The irony of what Ming now knew made the rims of her weary eyes burn with the need to cry, but she refused to do that here. Instead, she squinted at her computer screen while flicking the ash from her unfiltered Dunhill on the floor, before taking another long deep drag. *And it's all for nothing now. It's all for nothing*, she thought as she exhaled the smoke from her cigarette and read the email in front of her for the 47th time.

M – Got your message and saw the news about the lockdown. Wish I could have told you this in person, but since I don't know when you'll be home I think it's better to get this out now. Just came from Dr. William's office. I've gone into stage four of my cancer. There's nothing left to do. I think it's time to start letting go.

Love,

Thea

"Do you hear me talking to you? Are you suddenly deaf? I know you've heard what happened in Chicago. Andreas and I were lucky to escape with our lives!" Though Crane was now standing directly behind Ming, his voice had not descended one octave from when he began screaming at her from across the room.

"Pity," he heard Ming say softly.

"Excuse me?" Crane sneered. He wasn't sure which part of what he said made her respond so inappropriately, but the insinuation of her indifference only made him angrier.

He reached for the back of her chair and spun her around with such force she would have made a complete 360 degree turn if she hadn't jammed the sharp left heel of her 3" boot into his foot to stop her momentum.

When she finally looked up to meet his gaze, she noted that he looked more surprised than in pain, as if he really thought that she had, for a moment, gone deaf.

Stupid fuck, she thought as she flicked her ash in his direction before taking another drag. Though she had heard about the events in Chicago, she got the news shortly after Thea's email and as a result, it fell into the same category as Crane's presence – nothing she cared about anymore. The calmness she felt now was in sharp contrast to her demeanor two hours ago when she'd first received Thea's email. Immediately after reading it, Ming had rushed out of the building to call her, seeking what little privacy she could attain within the Guild's secured and heavily guarded, three city block perimeter.

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"I'm coming home now," was the first thing out of Ming's mouth when Thea answered her cell phone.

"M, you can't," Thea replied as gently as she could.

"They can't stop me. Not this time," Ming said as the tears began to fall.

"Yes, they can, M. It's not safe and anyway, I'm not even home. It's ok. I'm ok with it," Thea paused for a moment to make sure her voice was steady before she added, "Everything dies M. Everything dies."

"I don't care," Ming sobbed. If she wasn't so stricken with grief, she would have been shocked to find herself crying in the middle of the street. Public displays of emotion were not her thing. "I need to see you. We don't have time. We don't have any more time."

"Sshh. Don't cry, baby. Don't cry. I love you, ok, that will never change. Just don't cry."

Ming let the sound of Thea's voice calm her, as it always did. "I want to see you," Ming said after her voice was back under control.

"I know, but you know how I am, I need some time to wrap my head around this. I just need a minute, ok? When you come home, we'll talk and figure it out."

Ming nodded her head even though Thea could not see her acquiesce. This was her Thea, always calm and quietly optimistic – even in death.

"Ok, but I'll try to slip away as soon as I can." Ming said softly. "I love you."

"As I love you, M. Be safe and don't worry, okay? When you come home, I'll make your favorite, chicken and dumplings."

Ming thought about protesting. Thea had been too weak to cook anything for months and she didn't want her to strain herself, but Ming also knew that cooking made Thea happy and her happiness had always been more important than anything else.

"Ok, just take it easy. You still have to be careful..."

"I will. I promise, M. Now, let me go. I'll talk to you soon."

After Thea hung up, Ming walked straight to the shoe shine stand on the first floor of her building and bought a pack of Dunhills. *Everything dies*, she thought as she lit up her first cigarette in 15 years.

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No one, including Crane, moved a muscle as she exhaled her smoke in disgust and finally responded to his question.

"I said, 'what a pity you escaped with your life'."

Watching the shock flash-freeze Crane's entire expression was the best present she'd received all year and Ming settled back in her chair to enjoy it, letting a satisfied smirk spread across her full, heart-shaped face.

Recovering slowly from Ming's brazenness, Crane could not help but smile as he saw the hate Ming had always tried to hide from him on full display. While he preferred fear, hate from those he considered to be truly powerless was also something he enjoyed, and his mood lightened at the thought of watching Ming attempt to spar with him. Clearing his throat, Crane rearranged his amusement into a stern expression.

"You failed," he began. "You should have known about their true potential. It was your job."

"Oooh," Ming responded as her eyes went wide with mock curiosity, "Now you want to know about potential. That's funny. I don't even know what you're talking about. We don't *do* science here," she explained calmly with a wave of her hand around the room. "We only do what you tell us. So what can I say? I guess we're all just as limited as your imagination."

Crane hadn't expected her to cut to the chase so quickly, turn the tables and blame him for what happened. His enjoyment was gone as quickly as it came and Ming knew it. She arched her brow in anticipation of his response as he narrowed his eyes.

"What the hell has gotten into you? You know better than to test me." Crane bent down toward her slightly and lowered his voice to a low hiss before adding, "I will have her ki-"

"Yeah, see that's the thing," Ming interrupted as she nodded her head. "I hear you. I really do."

Ming turned from him and put out her cigarette on the edge of her desk while keeping her heel firmly dug into what she believed was his big toe. *Why isn't this hurting him?* she wondered in passing as she turned back to Crane with a new cigarette dangling from her lips and a matchbook in her hand.

"Except, you're a little late – which is unusual for you, I'll admit," she began while looking down to light her cigarette. "This just hasn't been your week."

The corners of Crane's eyes trembled with the effort it took for him to refrain from reaching out and strangling her where she sat. Though she was focused on lighting up her new-old habit, Ming didn't

miss the twitching of his hands as he waited for her to finish. It made her proud to see him so out of control. It had been a long time since she'd had this much power over anything.

Nodding her understanding of his restraint, she continued. "You see, Thea *is* dying. I got the email two hours ago," she paused to fully exhale before adding, "So there literally is no one left for you to kill except me, and as you can see, I'm suddenly feeling up for a fight, so... how should I put this... fuck off."

Crane's laugh was loud in response, but there was no mirth in it. Despite herself, Ming fought to keep her back straight as the ice cold sound made its way down her spine. *There is nothing more he can take from me*, she reminded herself as she continued to smoke her cigarette with a slightly less than steady hand.

When his laughter finally died down, Crane returned his gaze to Ming and smiled at her, almost lovingly. "Ming," he cooed, "You're always so articulate. It's one of the things I like about you."

And in less time than it took for Ming to pull the cigarette she had just inhaled from her lips, Crane was over her like the pitch black cover of night as he grabbed the hand that held her cigarette. Though he was not a particularly large man, Ming was shocked that he still managed to block out all the light from the overhead flood lamps and ceiling-to-wall reflective windows that were meant to inspire greatness from the scientists that worked there. But Ming couldn't see any of her colleagues as they stood passively by, couldn't see anything beyond the charcoal of his herringbone suit as he pushed her chair against the edge of her desk while his face, smooth and pallid, hovered close enough for her to smell the 100 year-old scotch he'd consumed an hour ago.

"And I do like you, Ming, but not enough to keep you alive if you're not willing to cooperate," he said softly. The dulcet tones of his voice contrasted sharply with the vise of his hold on her left wrist and hand. Ming turned slightly toward her twisted fingers to see her cigarette drop red ash on the backside of his hand. He didn't flinch.

Even through the pain in her hand, her inquisitive mind could not shut down. *Something is wrong here*, she thought. Her heel was still buried in the fine leather of his left shoe and the flesh of his big toe and he had yet to react to it.

By the way he shifted the bones in her hands with his grip, she knew he wanted her to scream. But as frightened as she was, she knew she was stronger than the breaking of her wrist. Though her courage had waned, her resolve held firm. Not trusting her voice to remain steady through a verbal retort, Ming did the only thing she could as she forced her gaze upwards to meet Crane's and exhaled the smoke she'd been holding in her lungs, right out into his face.

If she could have predicted what would happen next, she would have tried to hold her breath forever. But by the time Crane leaned in closer, it was too late. She watched in growing horror as Crane's eyes fluttered closed just before he leaned into the smoke she'd exhaled, and breathed in as if savoring a lover's sweet caress. The intimacy of the gesture made her stomach spasm with revulsion. When Crane opened his eyes to meet hers, he was pleased to find the fear he'd been waiting for. He finally had her attention.

"I love the taste of something burning," he whispered, just before Andreas Menten interrupted them.

"Crane, step back, NOW! What are you doing?" Andreas demanded.

Though Crane kept his proximity, he did drop Ming's wrist, causing her cigarette to fall on the floor. Crane held Ming's terrified gaze as he answered Andreas' question.

"Dr. Jhu has refused to cooperate in our efforts to determine how we were so outmatched in Chicago. Isn't that right, Ming? Do I understand that you wish to test our resolve in this matter?"

The importance of her next words made each syllable quiver in her throat, as if they were afraid of their own power to condemn her. When she first heard Crane coming toward her, her only goal was defiance, but now she wondered how she could not have seen how swiftly the consequences of her actions would come. With Crane's intentions for her so clearly visible in the cruelty of his gaze, Ming doubted that she would even be allowed to go home. *Will I see Thea again? What will they tell her about my disappearance?* she wondered with a clarity and calm that surprised her. *She'll know*, Ming reassured herself. *No matter what story they tell her, she'll know I finally stood up to them.* Even with the fear twisting in her gut, she knew Thea would be proud of her, of the choice she was about to make, no matter what it cost them.

"No. I won't be a part of this anymore," Ming finally answered, still holding Crane's gaze.

With a broad smile slowly spreading across his face, Crane did not try to hide his exhilaration at Ming's response. *You have no idea all the ways I will make you regret those words*, he thought earnestly before pushing away from her and turning his gaze from Ming to Andreas.

"As you can see, Andreas, she's obviously hiding something and I was just telling her of my intentions to get the answers we need from her," Crane pronounced.

Andreas could sense where things were headed from the minute he stepped out of the elevator. Normally the office level of the research facility was always buzzing with scientists entering, rechecking, and setting up data charts for the constant testing that went on there. So when Andreas' entry onto the floor was met with complete silence, he knew something was off. With two dozen scientists on the

floor, each person seemed frozen in place with every head turned and facing what had become the center of attention - Crane hunched over Ming's body in a stance clearly intended to intimidate and subdue.

Andreas understood that Crane's accusation was meant to set off a specific chain of events - immediate imprisonment, followed by Crane's personal petition to conduct the interrogation. When Crane received the inevitable green light to proceed, he would have his opening to do what he wanted with her. *So single-minded*, Andreas thought with exasperation. Having just mapped out a plan for internal damage control from the incident in Chicago, Andreas suddenly had another use for Ming's unexpected insubordination.

"Perhaps," Andreas began as he closed the distance between himself and Crane, "but I believe we have a more pressing matter. Someone needs to be *held accountable* for the mistakes that have clearly been made in our efforts to advance Seer potential. In light of our recent failures, I think Dr. Jhu's lack of cooperation seems oddly timed and suspicious. Don't you, Crane?"

Crane caught up quickly to Andreas' train of thought. Though it wouldn't give him the personal satisfaction of seeing Ming bleed to death in front of him, she would serve a larger purpose that was almost as important as his own gratification.

"Yes, Andreas, I think you're right. It is very suspicious that her refusal should come at a time when we need answers the most. Perhaps she has been withholding information that could have saved the Guild from the terrible loss of life we saw today." Crane sighed heavily with feigned concern as he took his place beside Andreas.

"We can only hope she hasn't somehow been conspiring with the lost Seers to undermine the Guild," Andreas added, looking around the room to the other scientists. "If she was, it is hard to imagine that she would have been acting alone."

"This is such bullshit!" Ming shouted when she had recovered from Crane's threats enough to recognize that she was suddenly being framed for what happened in Chicago.

"Is it?" Andreas asked calmly before motioning to his assistant Christof to call security.

"You're just trying to save your own asses because you're the ones who fucked up. I've been trying to tell you for years that we should be looking to *help* the Seers rather than control them!" Ming barely finished her sentence before she was hoisted up out of her chair by two large men in grey fatigues.

“Let’s not make this uglier than it has to be. We’ll make a public statement of your pending investigation within the hour,” Andreas said to the small crowd of scientist who watched as Ming was quickly whisked away to the Guild’s private holding facility.

Andreas and Crane exchanged brief glances as they waited for the security guards to leave the floor. When Ming’s screams could no longer be heard, they both returned their attention to the group before them. Crane nodded for Andreas to continue with his plan to divert attention away from their own culpability.

“The investigation that I mentioned will naturally involve all of you, as you were Dr. Jhu’s closest colleagues. While I can’t imagine that she was working alone in her efforts to sabotage our mission, I sincerely hope for each of your sakes that that is somehow the case.” Andreas summoned his most sincere affect before continuing. “If any of you have information that you think would be helpful to our inquiry, it would serve you well to mention it now. There may not be another opportunity for leniency.”

The murmurs that erupted in the room after Andreas’ last words were deeply encouraging to him. As he assessed their innocent, worried faces, Andreas marveled at how some of the smartest minds in the world could be so easily led to deception. Though Andreas didn’t know Ming half as well as anybody else in the room, he was almost sure she had nothing to do with the events that took place in Chicago. She had always been too aware and too afraid of the Guild’s absolute power to try anything like that. Her colleagues, he mused, should have known this, but the mere suggestion that she could have been involved was enough to make them question each other. That’s why Andreas called for security. He knew that all you needed was a discrediting scene to make people begin to question things they would have sworn they knew for sure five minutes before and nothing looked worse than being escorted out of your office by security. *You may know every minute detail of the human brain, he thought with superiority, but I know politics, and politics trumps facts any day.*

“Of course,” Crane chimed in before the group could work itself into a frenzy, “we are also looking for ideas and people to help us rebuild what has clearly been a flawed endeavor on our part. You all heard what happened today in Chicago. Our need to defend the global peace and order that our work creates has never been greater. We need your allegiance, now more than ever.”

Crane and Andreas stood in the center of the group for several moments in silence before Ming’s third and most junior assistant, Dr. Mark Cleary, wiped his sweaty brow and spoke up.

“Uumm, I’m sure Ming would have told you this... I mean, if she hasn’t already, so I guess it’s no big deal, but she was working on a different version of the Luridium, one with less side effects.” As soon as Mark became aware of Crane’s singular attention on him, he began to hurriedly stammer his way through the rest of his explanation, regretting that he gave in to the need to speak up in the first place.

"I mean... this was about a year ago, just as a side project. It might not mean anything, I mean it was never tested on Seers... but I think, I mean, it might be a start."

"What is your name?" Crane asked quietly as he assessed the young man before him. He looked no more than Ming's age when he first approached her.

"Uumm, Mark Cleary, sir. Dr. Mark Cleary."

"Dr. Cleary, did you assist her in the development of this new drug? Do you have information on the process - enough information to replicate it?"

Every eye was on Mark as he prepared to answer Crane. Some of his colleagues looked relieved while others looked wary and frightened. But whether it was for him or for themselves, at twenty-nine, he wasn't old enough to know or understand and so he answered Crane's question honestly and sealed his fate.

"Yes, sir. I did assist Dr. Jhu in the development of the new drug, and I have all my notes."

Chapter 2: The Honeymoon is Over

Alessandra didn't know what was more upsetting – news coverage of the Guild's man-hunt to find them or the sight of her husband morphing from a carefree tourist to his old severe self as he checked and rechecked the windows in their two-story flat. She let out a long sigh, hugging her knees closer before finally deciding to let her legs hang over the edge of the bed.

"That won't help, you know," Alessandra said softly as she gestured toward the window latches. "I still can't see anything. Our future gets more obscure the longer we stay here."

"Neither will that," Liam replied, pointing towards the TV before heading back downstairs to recheck the backdoor. "You should stop watching that stuff. They don't know anything about us."

The sudden return to real life from their three month extended honeymoon had been jarring. With the exception of a brief visit by Lilli and Joel after Marcus' burial, Liam and Alessandra had spent their time together in blissful isolation. Their lazy days were spent on bike rides and picnics – just learning and enjoying each other. They hadn't even turned on the TV until three days ago, when Lilli called to tell them what Liam already knew – that they had lingered too long in San Gimignano.

'They have your general vicinity, though Katia was able to block them from getting your exact location. You have a couple days, but you need to leave soon,' Lilli had warned.

They were packed within an hour of Lilli's call with a private plane chartered to take them to London, but inclement weather had kept them grounded for the better part of two days, leaving them stuck and anxious in a small duplex in Florence.

"It's just hard..." Alessandra said absently as she stared at the screen. "We're terrorists in the world's eyes. We've gone from being pariahs to terrorists in less than four months."

"Not everyone believes that, Alessandra." Liam said as he stopped short of his destination to turn around and stand to the side of where she was seated at the foot of their bed. By the way the images from the TV took up all the light in her eyes, he could tell she had barely heard him.

The truth was he didn't know what to say to comfort her or himself. From the tension and stress that hung in the air between them, it was hard to believe that less than a week ago they had been chasing each other through the vineyard that was just behind the villa they had rented for the summer, drunk on wine and laughing without a care in the world. Those carefree feelings were nowhere to be found as Liam watched Alessandra's grip on the bed comforter tighten with every minute the news of the Guild's smear campaign against them continued.

“Hey, look at me,” Liam began as he grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. With only the light from the street lamps streaming in, he knelt down directly in front of her and gathered her hands in her lap. “Look at me.”

Alessandra closed her eyes briefly to try and rein in the panic that was slowly but surely taking over her mind. *You knew this would happen. We couldn't stay hidden forever*, she tried to reason.

“Alessandra, come on. Look at me,” Liam asked again. But she wasn't ready to see the fear in her own eyes mirrored back at her, so instead she leaned forward until her forehead rested on top of his.

“I'm scared,” she whispered. “I don't want this again. I'm not ready to lose who we are now to all of this.”

Her hands were rigid with the effort she was expending to keep them from shaking, but he still felt the tremor. In response, he gripped her hands tighter until he could feel the tension in her grip ease, just a little.

“Baby, it's just us. Look at me, please.”

He could see the outline of her shoulders fall and relax the minute their eyes met, just as he felt the tight coil of tension release in his own back.

“I don't know what's going to happen, but I know we're going to be okay – not because I can see it, but because I believe it,” he said, inching closer to her before he continued. “I need you to believe it too, Alessandra, because that's the only way we're going to make it through whatever comes next. We have to believe it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she sighed as she took a deep breath and wondered why she ever doubted that he would know the words to say to calm her down. “I believe it.”

They were allowed only a few moments of their renewed peace before they heard the snap from the latch on the living room window as it broke off and fell onto the parquet wood floor. Besides the twitching of Alessandra's finger as they both registered the sound, neither of them moved an inch as they heard three sets of feet hit the floor below them.

Should we try to run, Alessandra wondered as her eyes darted from Liam's to their bedroom window and back again. Liam shook his head at the implication in her gaze before rising slowly off the floor and pulling his gun from the backside of his jeans. The meaning of his actions was as clear to Alessandra as if he had spoken them. *We will face this now*, she thought as she took in the set of her husband's jaw. With one hand, Alessandra grabbed her small satchel off the bed which held their

passports and cash and slung it around her neck and shoulder quickly before rising to her feet. Liam squeezed her hand once more before letting it fall to her side. He motioned for her to get behind him as he began to inch his way towards their bedroom door.

Aside from the initial sound of their intruders, nothing could be heard from the living room. Liam guessed that they were listening for any indication of their location, just as he and Alessandra were. Though the building in which their duplex was situated was over five centuries old, the owners' renovations had been meticulous, down to the sturdy marble tile that didn't make a sound as Liam and Alessandra crept out of their bedroom towards the cavernous servant staircase that led directly to the kitchen.

Behind Liam, Alessandra worked hard to calm herself enough to access her sight. When her breath finally became even and deep, she immediately caught an image of one of their assailants feet hitting the bottom step of the molded staircase just as they reached the edge of the top landing. Alessandra grabbed Liam's shoulder to get his attention. When he was turned towards her, she held up one finger before pointing it in the direction of the staircase.

Nodding his head in understanding, Liam returned his gun to his jeans. If there was only one of them on the stairs, it would be safer to take him out as quietly as possible, Liam reasoned. His plan was to try to make it down the staircase unnoticed, giving them as many options for maneuvering and escape as possible.

They descended the steps slowly, until they were hidden from view behind the curve of the plaster as the steps winded down. They caught their first assailant easily as he rounded the corner to find Alessandra and Liam waiting for him. Before the hulking man who was just an inch shorter than Liam could recover from his surprise at their appearance, Liam used the leverage of his high ground position to grab him by the wrist in a lock position that immediately made him unable to fire the gun that was in his hand. Using the same momentum, Liam folded the assailant's body into his own, so that his back was pressed firmly into Liam's chest as Liam held him in a tight choke-hold position. Before the man could scream for help, Liam used his free hand to grip the man's jaw. With a powerful jerk of his jaw and neck in opposite directions, the assailant's body went limp in Liam's arms.

The altercation happened so fast Alessandra didn't even realize the man was dead until she saw Liam struggle to keep him upright as his lifeless body threatened to slip down the steps. But it only took a moment for Alessandra to catch up and begin helping Liam drag his body up to the top landing before they took his gun and headed back down the stairs. Once in the kitchen, they could hear the ascent of another pair of feet on the main staircase to their bedroom.

This is it, Liam thought as he replaced the assailant's gun with his own and motioned for Alessandra to get behind him.

"Shit. Anderson is down. They're not up here," the second man shouted from upstairs. As they both listened to his rapid descent down the back stairs, Liam wished for the millionth time that Alessandra would agree to carry a gun. Even though he had taught her some self-defense maneuvers, she refused to pick up any type of weapon. 'I know what these things can do,' she'd said once as she gently pushed the gun that Liam offered her away.

But now they were about to be cornered as the man coming down stairs blocked their path to the second floor while whomever was on the first floor would soon discover their location.

Liam counted in his head the bullets in his gun and the 9 mm standard issue he'd taken off the 1st assailant while looking for a place to take cover in the small kitchen. *The center island should buy us some time*, he thought as he inched closer to the kitchen's main entrance. With less than five feet to go before they were out of the kitchen, Liam heard the moment the second man's feet went from molded plaster to terra cotta tile.

Liam fired immediately, driving the 2nd man back into the stairwell while he and Alessandra took cover, just before the assailant began firing back.

"Henley, I'm trapped!" he yelled. "Get over here man, they're in the kitchen!"

"Yeah, I got 'em," Liam and Alessandra heard from a cool and confident voice that hovered just above them. "Nice and slow guys. Come on out."

When Liam and Alessandra looked above them they were met with another 9mm that stood arms length from a man with a large smirk stretched across his angular face.

"Come on out, Dean. They know we've got 'em," Henley continued.

Liam slowly pulled Alessandra and himself to a standing position so he could assess both of the men before him. He'd seen their type before – rugged, dirty, and slightly high from the thrill of the chase. Taking in their demeanor, he knew that these men weren't from the Guild. *Contract killers*, he surmised quickly as he raised his hands in surrender, keeping his gun high enough that someone would have to reach over to get it, which was exactly his plan.

"All right, hot shot, gun on the counter," Dean said as he looked Alessandra over. "Don't make this harder than it has to be."

When Liam didn't move, Henley let out a snort, before explaining. "Look if you weren't worth more to me alive, I'd have no problems killing you, so give me the fucking g—"

Henley was about two inches shorter than Liam at a full grown 6'2", so when he leaned over to swipe the gun from Liam's hand, he was left a little off center, which was all Liam needed. Liam grabbed Henley's hand by the wrist and brought his entire arm down against the granite island countertop – hard. Next, Liam brought the butt of his own gun down sharply onto the delicate ulna of Henley's forearm, shattering it on impact.

Henley screamed out in pain before crumpling to the floor. Liam barely had time to kick the gun out of Henley's reach before shifting his attention back to Alessandra. But by that time, Dean had already emerged from the stairwell to grab Alessandra. With Alessandra's body facing forward and held against Dean's chest like a human shield, Liam couldn't get a clean shot of the man who was now pointing a gun at him.

"Put your gun down, or I'll kill her."

Liam took a deep breath as he kept his eyes on Alessandra and tried to think clearly through the rage of having anyone put his wife in danger. As she held his gaze, he was proud to see that she looked strangely calm as this man held her captive. By the way Dean was holding her, Liam could tell that Dean didn't have a lot of experience fighting women. *Your grip needs to be even more precise*, Liam thought as he watched all the subtle hints in Alessandra's movements that let him know she was preparing to break Dean's hold. *Women have a way of wiggling out of things*, Liam thought as he remembered the faint sparring scar under his left nipple that he'd earned from a female black belt who taught him this lesson the hard way.

Liam kept the relief from his eyes as he placed his gun on the counter and stepped to the side, just out of Dean's direct line of fire. As soon as he shifted to the side, Alessandra understood that Liam knew exactly what she had planned. Now all she needed to do was wait for Dean to make the mistake of assuming that because they were both unarmed, they were not dangerous. The moment Alessandra felt Dean's muscles relax, she made her move. She groaned loudly, as if she was in pain, before bending down to let the weight of her body fall forward into Dean's arms around her waist. When she felt his torso extend with hers to compensate for the shift in their center of gravity, Alessandra raised up swiftly, swinging her head back and connecting squarely with Dean's face. His grip on her opened immediately as his hands flew up to catch the blood rushing from his broken nose. Once out of his grip, Alessandra swung around and grabbed him by the left side of his torso so that he would not be able to use his gun as she kned him in the groin three times. By the time she released his shirt, he was breathless as he fell to the ground, grasping for air.

Liam couldn't control his smile as he stooped down and took the gun from Dean's hands without the slightest resistance. While Alessandra had been teaching Dean a valuable lesson in underestimating woman, Liam made sure Henley was unarmed and incapacitated.

"Nice," Liam said proudly to a slightly stunned Alessandra before knocking Dean out with a blow to the temple. "Come on, we need to go."

Alessandra could only nod her head as she took one last look at the man who had become her victim before grabbing Liam's hand to go.

They made it as far as the foyer before three more men burst through the front door. No one moved an inch as they faced each other down - three gun barrels to Liam's two and Alessandra at his side, ready to strike.

The bald man directly facing Liam, named Jackson, spoke first. "You're outnumbered. Unless you want to die, I suggest you put down your gun."

"That's what the other three thought, too" Liam sneered in response, as he tried to find a distraction that would allow him to even the score. "Now they're in pieces all over the place," he lied.

Liam used Jackson's momentary glance toward the kitchen to shift the balance in their favor.

"Get down!" he shouted at Alessandra as he used his right hand to grab Jackson's wrist and swing him around, so that when Jackson fired reflexively, he ended up killing one of his partners. But before Liam could swing him around again to take aim at the third man who was now trying to grab Alessandra, the right side of Liam's face was hit hard by the blunt force of Jackson's smooth head. Both men fell back then, losing their guns on impact with the floor as Liam lost his footing. With both hands now available, Liam used his position underneath them to maintain his chokehold around Jackson's neck.

"Get out of here," Liam yelled to Alessandra as he struggled with Jackson. But Alessandra had no plans to leave without everything she came with as she evaded her pursuer's desperate attempts to catch her alive. As she ran through the living room toward the kitchen where Henley and Dean's passed out bodies lay lifeless on the floor, Alessandra threw everything she could down and in her path to slow his progress. She was in the kitchen when she heard Liam cry out in pain. Without a thought, she ran toward the foyer with only the sound of his screams in her head. Her vision was immediate as she saw the knife that pierced through his skin slice clean and vertical through the muscle in his upper thigh. A half a second before she reached him, she could see the tip of the blade reach and scrape his bone.

The look of pain on Liam's face as he gritted his teeth in anger and agony while refusing to relinquish his grip on Jackson's neck was something she knew she would never forget. Alessandra felt

the very air around her come to a standstill as she sensed the current of her visioning energy bubble up and through her body in a rush. She could feel it like never before in the tips of her hands and feet as she let go of her fear completely to make room for the one thing she was suddenly sure she could do. Save him.

“Stop,” Alessandra said as she turned to her attacker and held up her hand. She could feel the power of her energy creating a form and a mass that would do her will – anything she thought or said. The man chasing her halted abruptly as if frozen upright and in place. Her senses were suddenly infinitely acute and attuned to everything in her environment so that she could hear the rushing of blood from Liam’s wound and the absence of sound as her assailant’s lungs and heart refused to pump.

Don’t kill him, she heard Lilli say in her thoughts. Help Liam.

Understanding that he was not the one who she most needed to subdue, Alessandra took another moment to order the man who had been pursuing her to “Be still”, then turned before she could see his lungs expand with air as his body fell paralyzed to the ground. Facing Liam, Alessandra focused on Jackson’s blind attempts to inflict further harm on her husband as the hand that held his 5” hunting knife stabbed wildly at the ground, trying to reconnect with Liam’s leg.

You will not hurt him again. Before she’d completed the thought, the fingers around Jackson’s knife handle were crushed beyond what could ever be repaired. The scream that escaped his throat could be heard three apartment buildings down.

“Get off him,” she hissed. Jackson’s body was immediately pulled from Liam’s grasp and hurled out the door, landing on the hood of the black SUV that he had driven to their home by the sheer force of Alessandra’s determination to have this man as far away from Liam as possible.

Alessandra could hear Liam’s heart beat too fast as he struggled to manage the terrible pain in his leg. But even his wound could not distract him from what he’d just witnessed.

Lifting himself gingerly to his elbows, his eyes tracked his wife’s procession in awe as she knelt down beside him.

“What was that?” he huffed in amazement through quick shallow breathes.

“Shhh. I don’t know. Lie still. I think I can heal this.”

As soon as she said the words Liam could feel his pain subside as a strange twisting-tingling sensation began emanating from the wound just before Alessandra placed her hands at each side of the opening.

“What are you doing?” Liam asked breathlessly as he felt the deep gash on his leg begin to close. Where her hand touched his leg, he could feel energy, like adrenaline, coursing into him like he’d felt only once before, with Lilli.

“Giving you my energy, my ability to heal,” she finally answered as she released her hands and wiped away the blood from the top of his thigh to reveal the sun kissed color it had been this morning, without a scar to even reference the events of the last half hour.

“How...how did you know? When did you learn to do that?”

“I don’t know,” Alessandra replied with tears of relief in her eyes. “I heard you scream and I just... reacted.”

The cool night air gusting in through the open door broke through the wonder of the moment to remind them of just how exposed they were in their current location – to the Guild and the local police.

“Thank you,” Liam said, cupping her face in his hands as he wiped the tears from her cheeks. “But..”

“I know,” Alessandra said as she leaned in for a kiss before rising from the floor with Liam. “We need to get on that plane. Now.”