

Segment AIA:

It was not a night for a crisis. The still night air, sultry and warm this time of year, was a mantle heavy on the land, nearby mountains withholding any of the coastal winds that would have otherwise bathed the area. The sun still had some time yet to rise, and the sounds of nature, muted this close to civilization, were stilled by the unbroken darkness. Kassad leaned slightly against a towering oak, thoughts idle. The impression on his back was strangely ridged through his worn, plain brown coat – the tree was pock-marked from human axes yet thriving regardless. Some days, men from the local town would come by and give it a frustrated glance, but never more. Occasionally, someone would try to bring it down, but all the will and steel of half-dozen generations had failed, and it seemed that that would continue. As well it should, Kassad thought. It would be a shame to see such a grand testament to the resilience of life fall at the hands of humanity.

Crossing his legs, arms relaxed at his side, Kassad felt an urge to whistle, to sing, a wordless tune, light and cheerful. He knew and accepted that this could well be a mistake, a trap, but even from the very beginning it could have always been a trap, and the years had worn away at his caution. He had come here alone, and his belt was plain, without a loop for a sword or other weapon. He thought he heard a rustling in the scattered bushes behind him, and he re-crossed his legs the other way, shrugging slightly, twisting his shoulders one way, then the other. Good. The knives he had brought were still in place. Time had not completely washed his caution away, after all. They were excellent knives, he knew from experience. He shrugged again, this time in slight irritation. He had not arranged for this discussion intending to wait for long. Another thirty minutes, he decided. Patience was always a good skill to have, but this wasn't his only destination tonight, or his only chance to die.

Just as he decided the meeting a failure, the veil of silence departed; heavy footsteps, crackling on the leaves, came in its stead. The sound stopped some distance away, too far away to see. Kassad smiled, slightly, keeping his eyes open. He could identify many of his associates by how they carried themselves, how they moved. It was not a mark that could be changed easily, or disguised. He spoke first, as always. "I hope that there have not been any problems, my friend." Even as he spoke, he unclenched his right fist, shaking his sleeve just so, a knife moving into his hand, blade pointing up his arm, almost undetectable. It was mostly out of habit, but the man had kept him waiting, after all.

"No changes, Kassad," the man replied in a voice like a granite fist. Perhaps he had noticed the knife, but this was his usual tone, and Kassad didn't mind it. "You did not follow protocol." Even in the darkness, Kassad detected a brief flutter of movement, and he knew the man had armed himself as well, and paid it equally no heed. Precautions were never enough, and he had broken the rules, admittedly. Well, not without reason.

Walking slowly and silently on the hard-packed earth, avoiding twigs and leaves almost by instinct, he spread his arms wide as if in apology, and his left hand held a knife, too. They could always be put back, if things went well. “We both know this was a guideline meant to be broken, made to be broken. All that matters is the time and place, and I think you agree that now is the time. You see that the situation meets the requirements the framers stated, yes?”

“An end to delays would be very greatly appreciated,” the other man replied, voice still as hard as good steel stock.

Kassad was close enough to see him clearly, now. Close-cropped dark blond hair appeared black in the shadows, and deep-set eyes were hidden completely. He wore a plain coat and cloak for the occasion, the former of the same weave as his own, with slots for four blades in the sleeves and back. The cloak held as many, and the other man didn’t mind the heat, outlander as he was. It was too early to gauge expression, and his friend was skilled at hiding it even under considerable duress, but Kassad sensed the hostility easily, anger and wariness mixed in as well. “Tell me then, why didn’t you bring this before the Council yourself, when it was still possible to act on it before our enemies interfered?” Kassad’s voice hadn’t changed, but he felt the other man stiffen. So it was a little bit of provocation. No harm done.

“I tell you, Kassad, the five of them would not listen to me. I say it again: none, not even, no, especially your father. He almost would have had me put in chains despite the Panel of Limitations.” Again, no changes in expression or tone. His friend could choose to call himself a veteran, and he was respected even among them. “Udai showed signs of believing me, but I could not convince her without you there, without the evidence placed before her. It seems that in your family, my reputation precedes me.” There was the barest hint of accusation there, and Kassad thought it genuine. No wonder his friend was irritated.

He still had to confirm it, though. Maybe something else would develop. “As a traitor, or as an alleged god of iconoclasts?” Now that was a barb that not even the best-trained could ignore. Without hesitation, the best-trained did not disappoint him.

“As your friend, Kassad,” the man retorted, and then he settled down to business. “Now, where *have* you been?” he asked, clasping his right forearm. *So he doesn’t think me a threat*, Kassad thought, *and he’s making it obvious*. “All lines of information disappeared, and you did not respond to any of your contact indicators. The man the Inquisitors had observing you said you vanished without a trace. The Council of Five itself said it had not heard from you since you left the capitol, nearly two months ago.” A pause, and he continued in a much less patient tone. “Your last message to me, from the border, arrived a week later. You made yourself completely untraceable for the rest of that time, and now you show up here, as if this were some routine exchange of information.”

Kassad shrugged, and the blades returned to their holding places. It seemed this wouldn't require another death, after all. "I thought I needed to work on my tradecraft and practice my stealth. It wouldn't do for me to lose my touch. Those were your first lessons to me, after all." No response. "As to what I was doing, I had business to take care of, a matter that a subordinate bungled." Kassad shook his head, and his dark braid swung carelessly about his shoulders. "You received news of the vote on the trade deal with Visangani?" he asked, as if he held almost no interest in it. *Time to get things started*, he thought. It would be good exercise.

Surprise registered, a small amount and tightly controlled but evident nonetheless. "That catastrophe? You engineered that, Kassad?" When the younger man made no reply, he continued, "That will anger the Council if it's linked to you. Even though the sight of a successful Aesyrrian diplomatic initiative would irk them no end, it would have nonetheless expedited many of our projects." He exhaled deeply. "Besides, a level of stability would be appreciated, now of all times."

"The coward's vision," Kassad snapped irritably, all good humor gone from his voice in an instant, laughing inside. Striding up to the man, letting the underbrush crackle, he looked him in the eye. This close, they were much clearer, wintry flints that rarely changed and never blinked. Interesting, what a few months as a prisoner of the Lyrians could do to someone.

"True, but you cannot suggest that –" He doubted still, to Kassad's disappointment. It was not like his friend to maintain optimistic delusions, however much others seemed to delight in them. Discouraging, indeed. Well, best to relieve him of that nonsense.

"The fireworks were ready to begin, had I not extended the wicks," he interrupted, idly twirling a knife through his fingers, across and back, and then back up his sleeve. "And I doubt that either you or the Council would have enjoyed them."

"That cannot be so," the man stated, refusing to accept the obvious. "The Seekers cannot be ready to move yet, not this quickly. Even their so-called Fists of Heaven would need more time to secure the proper authorization and mobilize the material required." If he reacted at all to the display, he did not comment. Kassad could see that he had replaced his own knives, too, the handles making the tiniest imprint on the fabric.

Good. He could still push. "You must remember that we are not prepared, either. A rushed operation in a buffer state could have led to an escalation, a massacre. Instead, I pushed back the referendum at least a month." And he had bled to see it so. It had been worth it, of course. "Even if you've accomplished nothing while I was gone, as it seems is so, then that will give us enough time to do whatever is necessary. If the tower collapses, at least the civilians will be out of the way." His voice had calmed again. Now it was the silken sheen of a quenching blade. "Do you disagree?"

His old friend ignored the warning, much to Kassad's displeasure. "This is lunacy! You bypassed the entire chain of command for this, man." The younger man glanced at him quizzically, and he continued. "I know you disdain the proper avenues when it comes to speed and necessity, but this is going too far. If you succeed, you will be pardoned, certainly, but you have no way of guaranteeing that. If the coming weeks do not go your way in even the smallest detail, the Assembly will riot to have your throat, and the Council will let them, however much influence your father provides, that is if he doesn't lead the Council in demanding your death himself!" His words weren't rushed, but almost slower, more distinct in emphasis.

Kassad had to agree that it was true, weak as the argument was. However, truth, he had learned, was easily blighted by ignorance. You could not accept what you did not understand, and his friend, as intelligent and skilled as he was, simply did not comprehend the scope and magnitude of the situation. Very deliberately not sighing, he readied himself. The younger man was going to do what he hated most – explain.

"By the time that this is over, the Assembly will be the ones stepping lightly around *me*. It's long past time to change the balance of power and reform our executive priorities. You know the laws could use re-interpretation." An understatement to say the least, to the man who had been just shy of starting a revolt. It might have succeeded, for that matter. "My father will be quite satisfied with these actions, and Udai..." He paused, considering. "Well, if my beloved sister wishes to persist in this nonsense of saving me from my 'mistakes', then at the very least she will learn to respect me as whom I am."

He knew his old friend trusted him, as he rightly should, and as he had always. It was only a matter of time, now. "You walk a narrow road, then," he replied blandly, conceding the point and showing some courtesy. It would have to do for now.

Kassad spoke ardently. "It will widen as more see the truth, as the people inevitably will. You will join me, Rajad. I cannot, as you say, have any guarantee of success. Unless you help me." Best not to leave it to a question. Best not to mention that his assistance wouldn't guarantee success either.

The older man wasted no time in his answer. "Let's get to work."

* * *

Sonya was awoken by the soft, insistent tapping at the door. Struggling to pull away the thin summer sheets that had still somehow managed to trap her during the night, she half stepped, half rolled out of the small bed and twisted the shades open. To her surprise, the sun had barely appeared, a crimson sliver lodged in the rolling, wooded hills to the east. Stifling a deep yawn and an equally strong urge to ignore whoever was at the door and go back to sleep, she wiped her hand across bleary eyes and kicked ineffectually at the table

where her texts lay strewn from the night before. Aside from a hollow *whomp* and a dull pain in her foot, the action solved nothing. She hadn't changed either, just collapsed into bed, asleep even as she fell.

Muttering under her breath about visiting hours and security, she glanced through the small, plain washroom that linked the paired dormitories and discovered with mild, sleep-studded surprise that Adela had already left. Thinking that it was best not to glance at the stand-mirror, she broke the surface of the water in the washbasin before splashing a bit on her face, throwing off the last vestiges of tiredness. For now, at least. She decided firmly to get rid of whoever was at the door as quickly as possible and get on with more pressing priorities. Like sleep. She fought back at another yawn, barely succeeding.

The tapping had continued, and had seemed to grow more insistent, and Sonya wondered idly who it was. Any of the university officials that wanted a word with her would have dragged her out of bed and slammed her against a wall repeatedly as a courtesy, while everyone else was either asleep, or ascribed to the very limited visiting hours of the University. Whoever it was, she doubted that it would be happy news. There hadn't been much of that recently. Adjusting the shoulder of her dress a bit before accepting that it was meaningless, she sighed and paced over to the door before yanking it open, only wishing that the hinges opened outward instead of in. The nerve indeed, to be waking her up at this hour.

In the doorway stood a man in his middle years, of medium height and build with neatly combed sandy hair and dark eyes, tinged with weariness but alert and guarded nonetheless. Later in the day, he could be described as intimidating, but at the moment he seemed more in need of rest than she did. In his shirtsleeves due to the heat, he had a well-woven dark blue coat draped on his left shoulder, and in his right hand, he held two letters, one on thick, starched paper, the other in a narrow, sheer roll. He smiled when the door opened, though his proud eyes remained tight as he glanced into the room. Of course, it could have been a grimace, too.

Immediately, maintaining her distance, Sonya demanded in as sharp a tone she could manage, "Who are you and why are you knocking on my door at this unholy hour?"

He bowed smoothly, as if that had been the most formal and polite greeting she knew. "I represent your grandfather and Shaler Kastora. You are returning to Tyrorra, Lady Irehne. As for the early hour... The sun rose half an hour past, and most of your fellow Tyrorrean classmates had departed an hour before then. Myself, I found no place to change horses, and I was thus delayed. It is of no importance."

"What? Leaving? Now?" She moved to lean against the doorway, and it wasn't just the fatigue. She noticed that the man subconsciously stepped to the side as she did. Perhaps he wasn't as tired as he looked.

“You do know the elections are almost upon us. There have been complications. Your presence as granddaughter to the High Lord of Kastora is required in case of any... more drastic problems.” He stiffened, turning his head and scanning the corridor with his eyes. They narrowed further, if that was possible, hardening into flints.

“My education here is not complete for another two years! What does Grandfather want me back there for? It isn’t fair for him to drag me back before I receive my commendation.” After all, she knew quite well that he had sent her here mainly to get her away from him for as long as reasonably possible, and she was perfectly happy with that, as well. As much as she had come to despise the school, as much as she had dreamed about being able to leave, it had never quite been in this way. Not to go back, at least.

“The purpose of this institution is to educate the children of nobility to follow in their stead,” the man stated calmly, as if she didn’t know what she was there for! “I’ve spoken to several of your teachers as a matter of course, and most of them believe that you’ve... learned as much as you will, here. Your history instructor, she in particular seemed rather emphatic on the matter. I trust that you don’t disagree, yes?” She shot him a scornful look, but he disregarded it and continued. “Practical experience is the key to leadership, not just scholarly knowledge.” He glanced at her meaningfully, and then into the room again, observing the chaos as one would a war zone, debris and casualties scattered on broken and bloody ground.

“Yes, but, why do I need to come home, now?” She asked again, closing her eyes. If only this person would disappear when she opened them...

His voice cut more sharply this time, and he frowned. “I explained this earlier. Do you wish me to repeat what I have already said?” His impatience was growing with every word, and hers gained with it. Who did this servant think he was?

“No, but an answer would be nice,” she snapped.

“What is your question?”

“Who are you? What’s your name?”

“Lady Ithrene, this is not the time for social pleasantries. We will be on our way, and, I must warn you, my orders are quite clear. I am to return you to Shaler Kastora, even if you resist. I was told,” he paused wryly, “to use ‘as much as force as necessary’ to persuade you. I believe that answers your questions.”

“But –“

He shook his head and handed her the thicker paper unceremoniously. “This is a letter from the Board of Instruction acknowledging your rushed graduation and granting you an honorary commendation if desired. This,” he gestured to the message roll, “is the latest news from Tyrorrea.” He paused at her silence. “Would you like to know why you are returning to your homeland? This will answer your questions, but I do not think they will

be answers that will satisfy you, my Lady.” A brief, considering pause, and he sounded somewhat wry. “I would almost guarantee not.”

Snatching at the message, which the man – she still didn’t know his name! – held on to a moment before handing it to her, Sonya unrolled the paper and read in silence. Almost immediately, she gave it back, watched him return it carefully to its container. “Economics? Politics? It said something about a planned trade deal falling apart at the last minute. What does this have to do with me? It’s not my fault, you know.” She wished she hadn’t said that. It was too early to be up and thinking.

“The answer to that question, my Lady, is best left to those more qualified to handle the situation than you. Since you seem determined to stay, I see no need to pass that information to you. The choice is yours. Consider it, if you will, an incentive for cooperating.” That faint tinge of amusement remained, despite the man’s clear annoyance. Very unsettling.

Part of her wanted to tell him to go away. Most of her wished she could just slam the door shut and ignore him. This had nothing to do with her. However, a small shard of curiosity worked its way through her tired and disoriented mind, and she heard herself say, despite all her intentions, “Fine, I’ll go, on one additional condition.”

“And what would that be, my Lady?” He regarded her warily, yet still with an eye watching the corridor. He looked like he was looking for someone to kill, and he looked like he was looking forward to it.

“I want you to tell me what your name is.” Sonya clapped a hand to her forehead. Had she really said that? A small part of her wanted to apologize. Too early in the day, she told herself consolingly. This wasn’t her fault, of course.

“How many times must I tell you, we have no time to waste. If you do not cease these childish games immediately, I will do as I am ordered and haul you back to Tyrorreia in a sack.”

Well, so much for remorse. “Your orders don’t say that! And you can’t do that to me, whatever your name is. We have some principles here, you know. You’d have a riot, and you wouldn’t live to tell my grandfather you failed.”

His expression twitched, then returned to its silent, constant study. “You’re no longer in a position to delay our departure. This is your last chance.” He crossed his arms at his chest and glared expectantly down at her.

It was all so frustrating! “Fine, fine, fine, fine, fine!” A door opened on the other side of the hall, a head peered out, met the man’s eyes, and immediately ducked back in. The door slammed shut, and Sonya could hear the locks clicking shut. Maybe she should have gone quietly. Maybe she should have followed Kathya’s example when she still had had the chance.

“Excellent,” the man replied, almost smiling, paying no mind to her outburst at all. He shrugged his coat back on and strode through the doorway. “I will help you gather what you will require. I have two horses waiting in the north stables.” He glanced back at her, eyes questioning. “You can ride, yes?”

“Of course! What are you doing, anyways, just barging in here like that?” she demanded, stalking after him as he scanned the room, as if for enemies that could have climbed in through the windows or something.

“It will be best to supply ourselves as best we can before we leave. If you have anything practical in this mess, there may come a time when it has a use.” He strode to the table and began clearing off the flotsam. Books and pens rattled onto the floor as he retrieved a map from his coat pocket and unfolded it, laying it out on the table, weighting it with a few ink jars. In a louder voice, he continued, “If you have any knives or other items with sharp edges, put them in this pack, along with any rope, metal, coins, and needles you have.” He pulled her chair over, tossed a dress that had been draped on the back onto the bed, and began studying the map, measuring distances and shaking his head. “We’ll be traveling light, and I know of a shortcut through the mountains; you’ll only need two changes of clothes. Something durable and warm will be fine.” He swept his hands across the desk, frowned, then withdrew a pen and ink from his coat, and began taking notes on the map, single letter abbreviations in a strange script that made no sense to her at all. “We leave as soon as we can – you’ve wasted enough time already.”

As she turned to start gathering her things, ignoring that last remark, she shook her head and muttered under her breath. So, no time at all for farewells, and off to a land she disdained and a home she detested, with a complete stranger who seemed completely at ease with insulting her, a noble and heir to a Shaler, an ancient and honored house. Certainly not how she planned on spending the day.

“One final thing,” she heard, and cringed. What would it be, now? “My name is Aidan. Aidan Jhorandal. Do not forget it, for I will not repeat it again.”