



DESTINY OF A BULLET

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Volgorod, Kos Volozk, Khador, 607 AR

He had once hidden in a pile of garbage for three days in order to kill a man. That job had been completed during a summer in Imer. It had been miserably hot, and insects had feasted on him continuously. Stinking of filth, badly dehydrated, sunburned, and sick, he had still made the two-hundred-yard shot on demand the instant his target had shown his head. One round. Nice and clean.

That job had been preferable to this one. For two days and two nights now he had hidden, watching the blank white of a high mountain pass. He was chilled to the bone but couldn't light a fire for risk of being seen. It must have been because of the unrelenting cold that he found himself thinking wistfully about the desert. The northern woods of Khador had never been intended for man. Fools lived here simply because they were too stupid to leave and too stubborn to die.

He had come all this way to put a bullet into a particular one of those stubborn fools.

Some folks called him a mercenary, others a hired gun. Most would argue he was nothing more than an assassin. Regardless of

their opinion of how he earned his coin, everyone knew Kell Bailoch was the finest rifleman in western Immoren. Give him a clean shot and the gods themselves couldn't save you.

The hard part was the waiting. The sniper let his mind wander.



He had spotted them coming long before they saw him. Picking his potential employer out from the crowd had been easy. The hooded woman walked between two men in long cloaks. The common folk were deferential and moved quickly out of the woman's path. The two men were trained killers, and they couldn't help but act like it, with wary eyes constantly shifting as they scanned the busy market. Their predatory nature made them stand out among the shoppers.

Kell Bailoch preferred to blend in. It made his job easier. He kept his wide-brimmed hat low over his eyes and covered the lower half of his face with a scarf, masking his Cygnaran features.

He stepped from the shadows and followed the three discreetly for a time. The gently falling snow barely stifled the merchants' enthusiasm as they loudly hawked their wares. Fall in northern Khador was like winter in any other kingdom. Once he was certain this wasn't an elaborate trap and they were isolated from potential eavesdroppers, Bailoch walked up behind the kayazy's guards and waited to be noticed.

It didn't take long. The first bodyguard turned, his hand inside his cloak and surely resting on a long dagger. The second moved immediately in front of the woman. They were quick, but he noted that neither looked toward the rooftops. *Sloppy.*

"What do you want?" the first guard demanded.

"I wish to speak with Mistress Padorin about a job," Bailoch answered. His Khadoran was unaccented, as bland as his appearance. "I was informed she's looking for me."

The woman turned, giving him a glimpse of pale skin and blue eyes inside the hood. She was rather young for the leader of a ruthless trade organization. “You are the one I was told about?” she asked.

Bailoch tipped his hat. The survivors of Talon Company could always be counted on for referrals.

“You’re shorter than I expected.” She appraised him. “Are you as good as they say?”

“Are you as rich as they say?”

She nodded.

“Then I’m good enough.”

