

The Assassin of Dune
By Michaela Spoonamore

This isn't what my mother would have wanted for my twin brother, Floyd, and I, but it was the path we had chosen for ourselves ten years ago when she died. I had trained for this from dawn to dusk every day, perfecting my skills with a dagger, sending one opponent after another sprawling into the dust. But this time... it was real. I sat, crouched, on a tin rooftop in the sandy, arid city of Dune with my brother at my side, scanning the crowded streets below for our target. Though the heat of the midsummer sun beat down like a relentless wave, making me feel as though I were being roasted alive in my black jeans and T-shirt, I sat still as a statue. If we were detected now, it would all be over. The government already suspected that a clan of assassins was at work in the area, but I wasn't planning on confirming their suspicions. I glanced at my brother, taking in his tense posture. He knew as well as I did that this was a job that had to be done.

"Faye, you take the southern border of Dune and see if you can find him," Floyd said, his voice flat. "I'll take the eastern boundary and meet up with you when I'm finished."

I nodded stiffly, my heart fluttering uncertainly inside my chest like a trapped bird.

My brother rose to his feet and expertly made his way towards the edge of the roof, his black boots silent on the rickety metal. He hesitated and turned back to me, his gaze softening.

"Hey, I just want to say...I'm proud of you."

He paused, looking more uncertain than he had in months. "Just...don't forget your training and you'll be ok. Got it?"

I stared at him for a long moment, his nervous demeanor sending my already queasy stomach rolling. Without waiting for a response, he spun and disappeared over the edge into the alley below. Sighing, I turned to gaze out over the noisy city, my vision clouding with guilt. If everything went as planned, by the time the sun sank below the horizon that very night I would have the blood of an innocent kid on my hands. I swallowed hard, the dagger at my side feeling heavier by the minute.

I pulled the blade from its sheath and held it up before me, the conflicted hazel eyes of my fifteen-year-old-self staring back at me in the metal's reflection. This is who I was now and there was no changing that. Reluctantly, I slipped the dagger back into its resting place at my hip and stood. If I didn't leave now, I was gonna lose my nerve altogether and abandon the mission. And seeing as this was the first one I had ever been entrusted with, that would be a dire mistake on my part. With that thought fresh in my mind, I turned and followed the path my brother had taken across the roof just seconds before. I slowed as I reached the edge and peered into the deserted alley below, scanning the shadows for any sign of movement. Seeing nothing, I leapt nimbly down from the rooftop and hit the dirt road beneath me with a muffled thud.

I rose and stole through the shadows, becoming one with my surroundings until they were as much a part of me as my own body. When at the entrance of the alley, I stopped. Every drop of blood in my veins was screaming, begging for me to stop. To turn back. But I didn't. I couldn't. I stepped out of the safety of the alley and into the crowded streets of Dune. Immediately, I was swept up by the throngs and tossed into the writhing river of bodies. The sour stench of sweat, soot, and unwashed clothes hit me like a toxic cloud, making me gag. Despite the nausea rising in the back of my throat, I shoved my way forward through the crowds, determined to complete the difficult task that had been set before me. As I reached the turn that would lead me to the southern boundary, I paused, frowned, and then pulled out a crumpled

scrap of paper from my back pocket. Even though I had already memorized my target's description, I skimmed the information written on the paper one last time:

Name: Oliver Decker

Age: 16

Description: Light brown hair, blue eyes, a snake-shaped scar on his left forearm.

I gazed at the paper for a long moment before shoving it back into my pocket, my hands shaking.

Find the boy. Take him out. Complete the mission. It sounded so simple, yet I knew it was going to be harder than that. For one, I had my conscience to wrestle with. I scanned the faces of the passersby for my target, trying to ignore the sick feeling in my gut. My gaze raked over the crowds, once, twice, and then I saw him. Across the street a tall figure with light brown hair pushed his way through the throngs, heading towards the southern border. I hesitated, glancing from the boy to back the way I had come. I could always just slip away and say I never found him. But no, the leader of the clan could always sniff out a lie faster than a mutt after meet scraps. I didn't have a choice.

Silently, I crossed the street and began trailing the boy, careful not to lose him among the crowds. To be honest, it wasn't that hard. His light hair stood out painfully among the sea of dark heads. I felt a pang of sympathy for the kid, knowing that everything he had ever known and loved was about to be snatched away from him in a way he never would have expected. Suddenly, someone shoved past me, causing me to stumble. I flailed my arms for a heart-stopping moment in a battle to regain my balance but failed. With a gasp, I fell off the curb and into the middle of the street. I hit the ground with a thud and slammed the back of my head against the hard-packed dirt, the impact sending a bolt of white-hot pain searing through my skull. Groaning softly, I closed my eyes and let myself go limp, every beat of my heart splitting my head like a mallet. Suddenly, a scream ripped through the air, snapping me back into the present. Jolting upright, I gasped and looked around wildly. I froze, watching as a huge black pickup truck hurtled down the road twenty feet away...coming straight at me. All I could do was sit there like an idiot and watch helplessly as my fate was sealed before my very eyes. Not many people get to stare death in the face like that. In a way, it was a relief to know how it was all going to go down in the end. I closed my eyes and waited, submitting myself to the impact I knew was to come. But it didn't. Or at least not in the way I expected. Instead of the front of the truck slamming into me, I felt something wrap around my waist and yank me to the side, pulling me out of the way of the vehicle. I landed in the dust at the edge of the street, a blast of air hitting my back as the truck sped past. Shocked, I slowly sat up and stared after it, watching it careen around the bend at the end of the street and disappear.

"You ok?"

I turned at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, my hand immediately going to the hilt of my dagger. The boy I'd been following lay sprawled in the dirt, his chest heaving as he fought for breath. I stared at him for a moment, my expression frozen in a mixture of shock and confusion.

Seeing the look on my face, the boy laughed softly, his clear blue gaze meeting mine.

"Sorry, I know that you're probably a bit shaken," he said, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Near death experiences can do that sometimes."

"Wait," I said slowly, my eyes widening, "you pulled me out of the way of that truck?"

The boy's face turned red, and he glanced away, smiling sheepishly.

"Any person with a shred of decency would have done the same," he said softly, getting to his feet and brushing the dust from his pants. He hesitated, then offered me his hand.

I stared at the snake shaped scar on his forearm, still trying to understand what had just happened. Oliver must have seen me fall and turned back to help me. Deep down I wished he hadn't. It just made everything worse. Swallowing hard, I reached up and grasped his hand, letting him help me to my feet.

"Thanks." I muttered.

What am I supposed to do? Matters had just become way more complex than I had ever intended. Before, the only thing riding on the success of my mission had been a better future for my brother and me. Now, if I were to fail, the security of the whole clan would be at risk. This boy had seen my face up close. If Oliver became suspicious, he could describe me to the authorities, who could track me back to the clan. I glanced at Oliver, my mind groping for another solution to my situation other than the one I knew to be the most obvious. But I came up blank. I grimaced and looked away, unable to meet his gaze a moment longer.

"Can we..." I swallowed hard. "Can we maybe go somewhere a little less crowded? I feel like my head is going to split."

"Of course," Oliver said without hesitation.

I numbly turned and followed Oliver towards a nearby side street, my vision swaying. I stopped and slumped to the ground, leaning my back against one of the sandstone walls as I tried to figure out exactly how I was going to do what I knew I had to do. Inside, my heart was breaking. How could I be expected to kill the boy who had just saved my life only moments ago? I squeezed my eyes shut and gritted my teeth, desperately trying to hold back the torrent of emotions inside of me. My training had taught me not to feel, only obey. And what would happen to Floyd if I abandoned the mission? Beside me, I heard Oliver's footsteps slow to a stop.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, the concern in his tone hurting me more than any pain a blade could ever inflict.

I couldn't bear to answer him.

"You know," said Oliver softly, sitting down beside me, "my mother always tells me that you can't run from your problems. You can only face them." He looked up, studying me. "I don't know you. I don't know where you came from, or even your name. But I do know something's wrong. I can see it in your eyes."

He fell silent, his intense eyes searching mine. I found my gaze instinctively drawn to them like magnets.

"If only you knew," I whispered, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"Then tell me," Oliver said gently. I looked away, tears clouding my vision.

"Oh, Oliver...you don't understand." I turned back to him, my gaze pleading. "I'm supposed to...I'm supposed to kill you."

He didn't jerk away from me like I had expected him to. He just gazed solemnly at me, studying my face as if it were a page in a book. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm my racing heart, knowing that these next few seconds—this decision—would change the course of my life forever.

Finally, I looked up, a fire that I had never felt before burning in my chest. I stood; my gaze hardened with determination. "Run."