

HUNTED

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Seated behind the prosecutor's table and flanked by two large men dressed in government-issue blue suits, dark sunglasses and wearing stern expressions, Sarah shivered as she watched the devil standing before the judge.

“Jacob Strict, having been found guilty of conspiracy against the United States government in the Philadelphia Federal Building bombing and the deaths resulting from therein, you are hereby sentenced to be put to death on the date and time to be set by this court.”

The judge's gavel hammered against the wooden bench frame. Despite her resolve to remain calm, Sarah jumped, her breath catching in her throat.

The judge's words echoed for a moment in the silence of the crowded courtroom.

Then shouts of victory erupted from the victims' families. Strict's “family” moaned and wailed. She felt neither jubilation nor remorse. Seeing that Strict received judgment for his crimes had driven her for months. Nothing else mattered.

The prosecutors shook hands and slapped each other on the back. Reporters scribbled frantically in their notebooks or spoke softly into tape recorders. The rail-thin, white-haired man standing at the defendant's table didn't move a muscle—not even an eyelash. He stared ahead with deadly calm as if waiting for the perfect moment to strike—a consummate performer to the last.

Grasping the coat sleeves of the oversized navy blue suit the Marshal's assistant had given her to wear for the hearings, she closed her eyes. The tumult in the courtroom pounded in her ears and she shrank into the chair, praying she'd be swallowed up by it. Plain by most people's standards and rarely noticed in a crowd, she prayed that for once she could blend into the furniture. Only this time she knew her wish wouldn't be granted. No matter how little he'd shown it to his audience, the defendant's entire attention was focused on her.

She'd done the unthinkable. She'd defied the Almighty Prophet—dared to expose the monster to the light. There would be hell to pay.

The judge's gavel banged and banged. Shouted commands to come to order or have the courtroom cleared slowly registered with the crowd. People regained their self-restraint. Women dried their eyes. Men took their seats.

A cold chill settled in her bones. Fine tremors caused her hands and knees to shake. She dug her fingers into the nylon serge of her borrowed suit.

Once again the judge focused his attention on the silent man before him. “Mr. Strict, do you have anything you wish to say before this court, Sir?”

Tense silence filled the assemblage. Women gripped their husbands’ arms tight. Some spectators waited to hear their prophet speak his last free words. Reporters’ pens paused.

For her, time slowed to an eon. She sucked in air, every muscle in her body tensed for flight. *Words can’t hurt me, words can’t hurt me.* She silently repeated the mantra she’d practiced for years in her head. She just wished her body believed them as much as her mind wanted it to.

The Marshals moved a fraction of an inch closer, reminding her they were there to protect her. Slowly, she exhaled, sat straighter and lifted her head.

Jacob Strict, the Grand Prophet of the People’s Militia Movement, inhaled deeply. Only five feet eight inches tall, he appeared to double his height with the breath he took—a trick she’d watched him practice in front of the mirror for years. Slowly, he scanned the faces on the jury, his throng of supporters, and then the faces of his victims’ families.

Finally, his gaze locked on hers. His eyes narrowed. He’d lived by one simple code for as long as they’d known each other. An eye for an eye—total retribution, no matter how large or how small the infringement.

She returned his stare without flinching. She’d be damned if she’d let him see her fear. From the moment she’d walked into the police station, half-starved and nearly frozen to death, she’d known her testimony would seal her own death sentence.

After a moment that seemed like an eternity, he spoke. “The chains of this illegal government cannot hold me. Soon I will be free. Then nowhere on this earth will provide safe haven for the traitor among us.”