

The Shadow Chronicles

book 1

The traitors mask

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Prologue

I WAS BORN A TRAITOR.

I STAYED A TRAITOR.

TO THE CROWN.

OF COURSE, HE WAS A REALLY TERRIBLE EMPEROR.

I HAVE BECOME AN ASSASSIN TO KILL HIM.

PLEASE, READ ON.

Wearing a mask is fun. I have a mask. I don't have an alter ego though... Not like Spider-man... I mean, no one knows my birth name, my mother would never tell me what my name was, so I *did* fashion myself a new name, but meh... Our (assassin) clothing is subtly different to the average, however nothing like the modern contemporary interpretation, which, if am to add my opinion on the matter, is pathetic as well as completely illogical... so, I don't have an alter ego... But I lived more than five hundred years before your current modern world. They say a traitor never *really* dies.

I

A father and son

a very long time ago

My mother wasn't a great friend to the Emperor or anything, but she *was* his advisor, and he listened to her. He was a fair and just Emperor and though he had the reputation of ruling his kingdom with an iron fist, he was merciful. It was said that his wife, the Empress Kira, was the kindest who ever lived, with the heart of a dove and a round face that shone with her tenderness.

Despite how well matched they'd seemed, it was still a diplomatic marriage, with the purpose to bring about an accord.

Kira had been a young princess from the north, from the other side of the mountains. She hated the lack of freedom the monarchs, hated the guards that followed her, even to get a drink. She'd heard tell of princesses over the seas who could not fight, were not allowed to wield, or learn how to wield, any kind of weapon, at least she could become a warrior. More than anything, she hated that she could never have more one sired heir at any one time, hated that she could only have a second child if the first died, hated that she had no control over her child's life. She died in childbirth.

The young prince, however, was nothing at all like his parents and not in a good way. A thousand years ago this was called bad luck, and the child; a bad egg. Now, thanks to the modern-day sciency stuff, this is called bad luck, and the child; a bad egg. He had a thirst for war and a craving for battle, throwing absolutely the worst tantrums imaginable when he couldn't go.

On those rare occasions when his father would take him to the battles, the young prince would watch the raging fight, planning and assessing, watching over the lands he would one day conquer.

Prince Shenkei *really* loved his parents, like *go to the end of the earth*, loved them. They didn't spoil him, and he didn't, not once, feel neglected, but he still had a ~~yearning~~, no, an obsession to prove himself worthy. Though this can usually be expected of a ruler's child, whom is more inclined to prove himself to his parents, the young Shenkei was another matter altogether. A wise man once said: "It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, you will always want something you do not have, you will always have challenges, you will always have pain. It is not until you come to understand and accept this, that you shall be able to silence those voices."

They say it easier to forgive someone for being wrong than for being right. Emperors don't like to be wrong. Nor do their sons. My mother told the Emperor not to trust the strange man. His son told him otherwise. That's what my mother said, telling me three nights before the execution, despite

the town crier, Shenkei, and court exclaiming otherwise. See Shenkei had been saved by a cloaked man on a hunting trip. An arrow had been fired at the prince and the cloaked figure had pulled the prince from his horse. One of the soldiers claimed he'd seen the cloaked man shoot the arrow in the first place, however he became a laughing stock of the whole town. The Emperor was assassinated by the Black Assassin. The prince later had my mother executed for betraying his father.

He placed a decorative mask on her face, which he hung from the city's gate. He called it the traitors mask. It was the most beautiful mask, beautiful in a deadly way, like an ocean with a hidden current. Inter woven colours of silk and satin to represent the extreme and destructive sides of the four seasons. Bitter cold that annihilates crops and animals, sweltering heat that burns crops and workers. Autumnal floods that drown crops and people and spring born bugs that wipe out crops and contaminate water supplies. Not really the kind of thing you'd expect from a fourteen-year-old.

I was there, at his coronation, I watched his coronation, I left a clear message. I'd sworn to kill the Emperor as soon as soon as I could, and of course, once I knew how. I've trained ever since. That's why they call me the Shadow Traitor. I've shadowed his life like an eagle over its prey. I am Kage, the Shadow Traitor. I am the forgotten assassin.

Five years later

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Targets and priorities

5 years later

Now, but for you, then

I stare at the target, thirty metres away, and the one next to it, only ten. I glance briefly at the forest behind it and shiver, though not from imminent winter temperature. All the trees are very ancient, the forest is too thick for any young ones to grow. Their branches twist and intertwine, making the forest virtually impassable. There are all sorts of eerie stories about it, some people even call the trees *elders*. I tear my eyes from the forest and adjust my focus to the other assassins in the training field, all so focused, each deadly to their skill.

I refocus on the first target, and raise my bow, ignoring the slash on my arm from earlier as I pull back my three black arrows, one between each finger, aligning the middle shaft with the bullseye. I release and before any of the arrows hit the target I spin around, pulling out my knife, take a moment to aim and throw it at the second target. I relax my guard.

Straining my eyes to see if I hit bullseye on either target, I feel two fingers on my back, right in-between my shoulder blades. My only thoughts are those of frustration.

“Never let your guard down, even in training, you hear me, never,” is the snarl I am delighted with, “have I taught you nothing? The second I’m not looking you drop your guard, but trust me, I’m not the one you need your guard up for.” I twist around and see Alaric, one of the senior students (senior mind, not older, I mean he can’t be older than 26), his face is twisted into a bleak expression. He is, has been in charge of mine and Oliver’s training for as long as I can remember, he makes us do things over and over, although I suppose it’s as much our Master as him.

“Yes Al-”

“Now, slow down your spin, take a second longer to aim, and,” he continues gruffly, ignoring my butts, “you can speed it up later. Now go and collect you weapons, when you hit both targets, with all three arrows and the knife extending from either the second most inner ring or the inner ring, ten times, then we’ll move on.”

“What will we be working on next?” I ask, curious.

“Your patience,” is the irritating answer I get, and I can’t tell if he is joking or not. His face definitely doesn’t give it away. I make to get my weapons but Alaric grabs my arm, gesturing for me

to use my other arrows and blades first. I glare at the arrows and blade protruding from the targets, only one arrow hit bullseye. I sigh inwardly, I am going to be here for a *really* long time.

Again, and again, I re-notch my arrow and steady my knife, until I feel a cold hand on my shoulder and grimace at Oliver.

“Having trouble?” He snorts, his thick accent filled with barely contained laughter.

“Arse.”

“No need to be hostile, cool down- *ow*.” I punch him, hard.

“Wassat for?” he replies, the hurt on his face, non-existent.

“Your language is terrible.”

He glares at me, refraining from irritating annoying me further. A voice from almost directly behind me alerts me that Michael’s unwanted company is joining us.

“Hey, I hear neither of you can hit a target.” I stare at Michel, another one of the students, who is what you would call a bully, only he is worse than a bully, he is a bully who’s better than me, which makes him impossible.

“Why don’t you show us how it’s done then, if you’re so good?” I challenge, regretting it the second the words tumble from my mouth. Anger and annoyance fill my insides as Michael glances at me, a menacing grin, twisting his features. He holds out his hand for my bow, arrows, and knife. I reluctantly hand over my stuff, frustrated as he prepares himself.

Alaric walks over, “let’s see if you can do any better than Cruella da Ville here, Michael.” And sure enough, as Michael takes his turn, Oliver nudges him, throwing him off balance. His arrows miss the target by about two metres to the right, and the knife falls short.

“Apparently not then, practice harder,” snaps Alaric shortly.

“But Sir,” snarls Michael through his teeth, “I’d say I’m squarely better than Oliver, and I don’t cheat for my scores.”

“Assassins are trained to cheat,” comments Oliver.

“Only those who aren’t good enough win without cheating,” he replies smugly.

“Shut up,” growls Oliver going pink.

I eye the debate in growing interest, as Michael smirks, “I thought you were the deliverer, I didn’t realise you were the punch line to a bad joke. Did your hourglass run out?” I roll my eyes, it would be fun to see Michael bite. Cruel, I guess, but fun.

“At least he hasn’t made as many mistakes, how long ago did the love in your hourglass run out? When you betrayed-”

I am cut off by Alaric’s ferocious warning snarl, “Kage.”

“Perhaps it was when he let the axe fall on his begging mother’s neck.” Oliver lets out a choking sound as Michael braces his hand around his neck, going a sickly pale before green.

“Michael, that is enough,” snaps Alaric, a fiery light in his eyes, “you must have self-control.”

Michael turns to me, “a shadow of my past haunts me every day, today you solidified it for the first time in a long while, I will not forget this.”

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Forbidden Places

Few days later

Forbidden sector

As I walk down the cobbled stone path, I slide my dagger into the sheath by my side, but not before its reflection catches my eye, momentarily blinding me. I look around and take in my surroundings, the perfectly concentric circles of paved stones in the centre of the “garden” (or what was once a garden), the rock hard and slightly cracked earth and the stone ruin.

I try to imagine what this place might have once looked like, flowering cherry blossoms, spongy, soft moss, and perhaps a water fountain.

Knowing I'm not supposed to be here, I scan the area for somewhere to duck behind if someone else decides to visit. I can only imagine the look on my Master's face if he found me breaking his rules yet again.

My Master? He is known as the Black Assassin, but some of the senior assassins just call him Isaac. I sigh, I have trained and trained, but it seems that the more I train, the less sure I become of what I believe is right and what I want to do.

I absent minded rub my aching head. Vengeance, revenge, it all seems so childish, but still, I can't do nothing. I sigh, a long, drawn-out gasp of anguish, I feel so lost, but I know what I have to do.

Slipping into an old day dream, a daydream where I've grown up like a normal kid, with two parents instead of none. Ahh, now you're probably wondering; who the hell *is*, or for all I know, *was* my father?

IV

Legends

First and foremost, I don't even know what to write in this chapter. I suppose should start with something like, 'I don't know who my father is or was'. Man, this whole chapter is supposed to be about my father, but I'm sure I'll find some shit to fill it with. I never met him, and my mother never really talked about him.

Actually, she never really talked about anything. My father was a... well I don't *know* what he was, I don't *know* what he looked like but I did form a slight image in my mind, torn clothes, and choppy, jet black hair, a slim build, and bright blue eyes. But of course, I know that this is not what he actually looked like. What happened to my father?

Trust me, I've been wondering the same thing for the past fifteen years, I started doubting when I was four and asking a few weeks later. Every time I asked my mother, she just smiled distantly and poked me in the chest before replying, "you already know." Honestly, I don't know whether to hate my father or not. Can I hate someone I never met? Someone, who for all I know, could be dead, my mother never exactly made it clear by what she meant by, "he left to what called, for what called was always there, he could never return." Oh, and before you ask, I have no idea what that is supposed to mean, I don't know what most of what my mum said was supposed to mean.



I am pulled from my day dream by the smell of smoke. Cautiously I slip around the ruin. Scouring it up and down, until I find a climbable face. I take a deep breath, I know this is a terrible idea, but my common sense died along time ago. I curl my hand around a stone, climbing carefully up, one foot at a time. I stop, pushing myself hard against the wall and wishing more than ever that I could wipe the blood from my torn fingers.

I turn and look down as chunk of stone falls to the ground, immediately regretting it, I don't particularly like heights as it is. It's a pretty fatal height, but if I didn't die, just broke my leg say, there still wouldn't be much of a place for me in this world for a long time, few hundred years. Heaving myself onto the top of the ruin I hiss as the jagged rocks slice through my clothing, grazing the skin beneath. Pushing up onto my feet, I look down across the valley of the fallen.

It is a forbidden place. And before you ask "why is it called the valley of the fallen, and why is it forbidden?" I don't know.

When I'd ask Alaric, he'd say: "I'll ask you to imagine what I am about to describe. Cherry blossoms, of all colours, from the blood red to the palest pink, from white to peach and the petals all across the ground, making it appear as a carpet.

"Until you reach the river, where the ground is covered by a gentle moss, and willows sway, ever so slightly, their branches dipping in the crystal-clear water. The river bed, lined with smooth stones, and silver fish, and in the trees, there are folk; spirits of the dead."

Our legends state that the forest is one of the seven places on our earth that connects to a different realm. The seven passages were created long ago, when the earth was still woven with magic. Magic has been gone for generations now, it started leaving when human kind separated the earth and created war and suffering. *Not that our legends can be relied on*, is the first thought that comes to my mind, bitterly, but I push it down, further than it was before.

V

Death and relief are just synonyms

Atop the forbidden ruin

I unsling the bow from my back and raise an arrow at a bird, a little finch. I don't really care what kind of bird it is though, only that it has no true defence, the weak ones always die. I take careful aim and let the shaft fly and can neither describe nor explain the sense of triumph that I feel at the sight of the bird falling to the ground, its feathers, now stained red. You probably think that I am cruel, but the truth is that the little finch probably wouldn't have survived this winter anyway, I just offered it a faster, more painless death.

I unstring my bow, strapping it to my back, my feet finding the ledge. In a matter of minutes, I'm only three feet from the bottom, but as I go to move my foot down a sharp pain pierces my thigh. I glance down to see blood trickling down my leg from where a triangular blade is lodged deeply into it. My last thoughts are those of pure anger that someone dared touch my twin blades, before I pass out, falling the remaining way.

I fight for consciousness, not really sure if I'd rather be unconscious, before I realise, I'm no longer at the ruin; I'm in the forest. My leg is numb and I'm vaguely aware of a throbbing in the back of my head. I reach my hand up to rub the ache only to find it wet and cold, I pull my hand away, sticky with blood. The sight of it makes me feel dizzy, I...

VI

Nightmares

I bite back a scream, in front of me is... is a something. Flesh hanging from its mouth, its smell, like burning flesh and its skin, like something cross between a baby bird's and an angler fish. Trying to scramble backwards, unable to move, I stare in fascinated horror as the thing slowly changes shape and form, becoming the young Emperor, slowly, ever so slowly, coming closer, not walking, not running, just... coming.

His features are twisted into an endless snarl. Blood coats the twin swords he holds, blood is splattered across his face, but my sight is averted to his sword, where the blood and steel reflects the faces of those he's slaughtered, still screaming, my mother, along with countless others I knew. As I watch, a hole appears where his heart should be, but no blood gushes, not a hint of red, only black. The back slowly grows and grows, swallowing first the prince, then the world and everything else.

I didn't realise I was asleep until I woke up.

I woke up screaming.

VII

Pain

I wake up in god knows where. Every other day, if I'd woken up screaming, I would have been severely humiliated, the fact that I'm not, is depressing in a weird way. Which is bad. I must have hit my head really hard to feel so unwell.

I don't think I could have sunk any further into the mattress if I tried.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” Is the voice that snaps me from my comfortable position to five feet in the air.

“What a pleasant way to say good morning,” I say sleepily.

“Good morning? Good morning?! Good morning to you. It's a terrible morning! You know what it's not even morning!” shrieks another voice from the other side of my bed. I twist around to see voice belongs to.

“What?”

“Do you know what it's like to have a big ass assassin show up at your door carrying a little ass assassin, who has blood running from its forehead? And on top of that, having the larger assassin, shove a knife at your throat and threaten to heal the little assassin or else!?”

“N-no, I don't, and might I ask who you are? Don't refer to me as 'it' and don't comment on my height.” I manage to stutter, my dry mouth making my words feel thick and heavy in my throat.

“Ohh I'm so sorry, I am at you service your most royal and magnificent majesty.” He scoffs, his mockery both cheap and common.

I raise one eyebrow, “I'm pretty sure that's mutinous.”

The healer bristles, more unfriendly with every second, “your pathetic, lemme guess, you're that person that follows ever rule, never gets in trouble?”

I open my mouth but am cut off by Alaric's snort of laughter, “you kiddin me? She can't see a rule or boundary without breaking it!”

The healer rolls his eyes

I bare my teeth at him,

I raise my line of sight to my mentor, “why am I here?”

“You already know” he replies, and I'm glad to hear the wince in his voice. I move my gaze to the healer, who is standing in the corner, I snarl at him, but feel a strong hand on my chest, forcing me back down onto the pillows.

VIII

Lone wolf

I sit up in my bed, the sheets are soaked, and I'm covered from head to toe in sweat. I try to steady my breathing, I had the same dream again, or similar at least. I hear an owl outside, its, hoot a gentle eco in the still night and I, well I already told you was naïve, decided to go for a walk. I get changed, slip my knives into my belt and string my bow before slinging it across my back.

I open the door and gasp as the cool breeze whisks away my breath. Feeling it blow into my face making my hair, short as it is slash across my face. I watch as my breath as it puffs away from mouth, a gentle silver cloud.

My gaze falls to the owl in the crooked tree, it's eyes wide and alert, almost glowing in the moonlight its skill uncanny. I bow my head, even in the assassin's realm we respect many of the animal kingdom even if we are, well, picky. I follow the owl, as if following will somehow find me what I'm looking for. I know, I need to stop searching, but I can't, ever since was little I felt like I was missing something, some part of me. Every time I feel closer, even when it feels close, I know it is still worlds away, whatever "it" is.

My thoughts flit back to the owl, my eyes a fraction of a second behind. Some of our older legends say that the animals came from another realm, but when magic disappeared, many were left trapped here.



I stop, standing dead still as the owl, just about to swoop on a plump rodent, fly's off and somehow, I don't think it was because of me. My suspicions are confirmed when eye see a lone wolf, white with age. Her silver coat is split by thousands of pearly scars, a particularly nasty one across her snout. I raise my bow, an arrow already knocked in place, aimed directly at her neck. She snarls,

baring her teeth at me, her shocking blue eyes meeting mine. Bowing her head, she turns, stalking back through the snow-covered forest.

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

I wrap myself in blankets before closing my eyes, thinking about my uncontrollability.

♠♠♠♠♠♠♠♠

My eyes meet her bright blue ones through the white darkness, and, in my dream state I study her, trying to figure out just how old she is. *Older than you could ever imagine*, a voice echoes through my head, feminine yet rough and ancient. I stare at the wolf in front of me, even in dream state confused. *You are not who you think you are my shadow, do not believe what others have told you.* I stare, transfixed, as she folds inwards, vanishing in a puff of silver smoke.

IX

More pain

“Hello sleepyhead, our dearest mentor is almost here to kill you” is the voice I am delighted with, I groan and roll over, giving my back to the boy on my right.

“Go to hell.”

“Been there, devil didn’t like me, spat me back out.”

Ugh.

“I hate you.”

“Your love for me is accepted with gratitude, however declined.”

“Haha, I’m not sure how possible that is.”

“It’s more than possible, and if not, you’re not alone, you’ll be happy one day. Look at Isaac, he’s never had a lover.”

“I don’t want a lover.”

He shrugs, “I never said you did, but what of friends, parents, we love them in a different way.”

I laugh icily, “but I don’t have any parents, I have one friend who’s infuriatingly annoying.”

“I still can’t believe you disobeyed Alaric’s rules *again*.” he says adding an unnecessary amount stress on again. “I also can’t believe Michael took your favourite twin blades!”

I whip my blade to his throat, “don’t mention my twin blades again.”

He takes a step back, holding his hands up, a gesture of peace. He sighs, shaking his head, “our dearest mentor has arrived, “I’ll leave you two to it.” I snarl at his retreating body, then slowly sit up and mentally prepare myself for my mentor.



“As you so unsubtly fail to keep yourself from harm, Isaac has decided to you give you the next mission.” I run the words over and over in my head, trying not to shudder. I’ve done missions before, but... but nothing like this, all the deaths before, I believed in them, this one... I don’t know, only that he’s is a traitor to the crown. So am I. Also, I used to know him.

X

Gravestones

I creep silently around the cabins, careful not to attract attention or look suspicious. Cautiously slipping inside the ruin, my eyes catch on the rows of stone slates, about one foot between each slate and tree feet between each row. I study the stone slates, they all have words on them. I crouch down close to one to read what is written on it.

“Kahan Millann aged 24, assassin, knives:

‘When death has come, for he *will* come.’”

I read aloud, and in my confusion, tilt my head, each slate, a name engraved on it, as well as a profession and a quote about death, is grey marble, which is, very expensive. I adjust my eyes until they rest on another slate of marble, and once again read aloud:

"Atelia, aged 14, assassin, trainee:

'time is endless, death follows life, but what follows death?'"

I stumble backwards.

I am in a grave yard.

I turn around and slam into something, hard.

"Ohh!"

"Kage, the Shadow Traitor, age 23

'One is only lost until found, death is only the last to find the lost.'"

But I've never said that and I'm quite alive and definitely not twenty-three.

"A-hem" coughs someone behind me. I stifle a scream and raise my light to see who it is.

Ohh dear.

"Sneaking around in the dark in forbidden places, are we? Whatever next," and even in the dark I can see the grin that stretches across Alaric's face. "You look like you've seen a bloody ghost, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"No, no you're not."

I snarl at him

“You would be a very terrible diplomat,” he says, though the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Why are you here?” I ask, not even trying to hide my frustration.

“I might ask you the same thing,” he says raising one eyebrow. I open my mouth to reply but am quickly cut off.

“Shush, someone’s coming” he whispers, his voice sharp. Alaric melts into the shadows, and I silently slip into the shadows beneath the eaves.

XI

Ill-fated timing

I press myself firmly into the overhang of the eaves, trying to keep my stomach from flipping as I become vaguely aware of something crawling along my body. It is too dark to see who the newcomer is but their footsteps are confident and cocky, their shoes making a clicking sound that only shoes of the nobility make. I flatten myself further into sharp stones, shivering as blood trickles down from my knees, forehead and stomach. But it doesn’t feel warm as it slowly trickles down my skin, it feels cold, freezing even. I don’t dare move though not yet, not while I can’t see what’s under the bridge.

We hear, or I assume that Alaric hears what I hear too, a second pair of footsteps. not as cocky as the first, nor as careless, almost... cautious?! I close my eyes and purse my lips, trying ineffectively to prevent my blood from trickling into my mouth. Nearly gagging as the metallic taste fills my mouth, numbing my tongue. Resisting the urge to spit it out I try my best to prevent the gagging sounds from escaping. A third pair of barely audible footsteps join the other two, carefully paced, silent and with an air of both stealth and arrogance, more like the tread of an animal than

human. The third comer is greeted with low voices before all three sets of footsteps eco then fade, as the trio enters the ruin.

I slip down from my position, cringing as the stones tear at my cuts,

“We need to go.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out,” he replies, his tone making it clear that I am lucky that he hasn’t yet skewered me.

“You make it sound like I am a genius,”

“I said you don’t need to be genius to figure that one out, in other words, your interpretation was the opposite of my meaning, also we can’t go straight back, you need to wash or someone might see you,” his matter-of-fact tone enough to make me snarl.

“I’ll just say that I fell out of bed I reply,” my careless and slightly angry manner, too careless for Alaric’s ego.

Even in the dark I can see the sceptical expression that twists his face, “fine, we’ll be at the hall tomorrow, don’t be a minute past six.” I pout. Which is returned with a not-so-subtle look of disapproval.

XII

A game of cards

Kage’s cabin

I hop out of the bath and wrap a towel around my body, grimacing as its hard bristles irritate my scratches. I dry myself and get dressed in record time before remembering that it’s Friday, and get undressed and re-dressed, making sure that I cover all my scratches. I glance at the clock on the wall.

I open the large oak entrance doors to the hall and stop in surprise as I see there is no one else here. I glance round the room, confused until I see the clock on the wall. I sit down on a pillow, straighten my back and contemplate what to do while I wait. Catching my eye from about the middle of the room is a large chest, my eyes leaving it, I glance back up at the clock, I have ten minutes before people start arriving, which is not long, but I hate waiting. I stand up and walk back to the door, open it, and leave the hall. I climb one of the large cherry blossoms, balancing precariously on a branch, completely obscured from below, waiting for others to arrive.

I grab a handful of cherry blossoms, sucking on them one by one, sighing as they fill my mouth with flavour. Out of the corner of my eye I see Alaric arrive, a surprise, it's usually Elizabeth. I wait an estimated five minutes, but nobody else comes so I scramble down the tree and stumble into the hall, my eyes flashing once again to the large chest, curious as to what today's intellectual challenge will be.

Isaac sits meditating in the corner of the room his eyes closed. Alaric stands at the front of the hall, and I wander over curiously.

"I said six, not quarter past."

I open my mouth to retort but realize the clock says it is indeed quarter past.

"I was waiting to see others come."

He ignores me, instead gesturing to the four, large tables, one on either side of him and one in front of each of those. His hands adjust and point at the station to his right, where upon is a game of chess of ebon and ivory.

"Chess, a game of leadership, sacrifice and improvisation." He arranges his hands again, so they're pointed at the station in front, "dice, where you must prove your skill in cheating, even where it is near impossible to cheat." Repositioning his hands and twisting his body to the left he says, "poison riddles, a game of intellect, quick thinking, common sense, and the capability to neither underestimate nor overestimate your opponent." The movement in his hands is barely noticeable,

though his hands are now pointing south-easterly, toward the final station, where a game of cards lie, the artwork on them of the highest order, or so Isaac boasts.

“Where is everybody else?”

“They’re competing.”

“What” I squeak, “why are we here?”

“In a way, you’re grounded.”

My mouth falls open, “but-”

“Don’t say you don’t deserve it.”



“Check,” I say smugly placing Alaric’s rook on the table.

“Check mate,” he replies just before his hands sweeps down and snatches my king from the board. “Deception,” he whispers, picking up a different piece with each word, “improvisation, I want you to cheat. Again.” We play, again and again, and it takes that many times until I get his king, I only bow my head.



It’s not until long after sun down that Alaric and I reach the last station. As I said, he is a cruel mentor, so I am starving as he has not allowed me to eat lunch nor dinner, I am simply grateful I thought to have breakfast before. I glance around the room, my eyes coming to rest where Isaac still sits who sits in the corner of the room, where he has sat for the whole of today, sometimes meditating, sometimes silently watching.

Sitting down on a cushion and crossing my legs, I glance at the cards on the table, then at Alaric, and groan, “must we play cards?”

“Yes,” is the ever stoic, yet tired reply.

“But-”

“Do you *have* to argue with *everything!*” He snaps, I finally did it I made him snap, honestly, I’m surprised it took so long. I sit there quietly and bow my head, trying to deal with the guilt that

hits me in waves, overwhelming my senses. I want to say sorry, but I know it'll make no difference, as Alaric shuffles the cards and hands me my share.



Placing my cards on the table I cautiously look up, but Alaric isn't looking at me, so, still without looking at me he leaves his seat and says, "come."

I carefully stand up, glancing at Isaac, who nods, then Alaric, then the doors. I bite my lip, closing my eyes for just a few moments before forcing them open, forcing my tiredness down, and stepping, even if slightly wobblingly, towards the towering oak doors. I glance back, but Isaac has gone, I groan and turn back around but can't see Alaric anywhere, instead in front of me stands Isaac.

XIII

Another cemetery

"Wait, isn't this..."

"Perhaps?"

"Why here of all places?"

A gentle laugh, "why, *not* here of all places?"

"But-"

"But why not."

I open my mouth but quickly close it again.

He snickers

"Now I am indefinitely confused," I grumble, tired.

"Haha, confusion slows you down."

Despite knowing it is a fake, my first reaction is my hands flying to my throat, where my hands claw and the “harmless” garotte entwined around it. They claw at it for a minute, before I regain control of my instincts and twist around to grab my Master.

“Still haven’t mastered your instincts then, I see.”

“It’s a little hard,” I snarl through closed teeth.

A blank answer consisting fully of “try harder.”

I glower, glad of the dark veil of night that prevents Isaac from noticing. Stopping, he holds out his hand in front of me, a notion for me to stop too.

“Wait a second, we’ve frightened them.”

My eyes widen as all around little mushrooms start to glow, faint at first, then stronger, a toxic blue. He raises his lantern and staring I take a step back as the beams fall across a decorated plaque, surrounded by blooming flowers.

“Isn’t this where-”

“Of course,”

“Why is he here on your land, he- I thought he was buried by the royals?”

“My dear, he was murdered by the royals.”

“But-”

“But you should know better than anyone, *stories can’t be trusted*, you cannot believe what you hear, t’would be hypocritical, for you at least,”

“Bu-but why-”

“Why is this where he is buried, or why did I bring you here?”

“The latter, why would you bring me here of all-” a small cough, “I mean, why here, why here after what happened here?”

“Multiple reasons.”

I groan, I can’t be bothered to ask for a translation. He leans against an old twisted oak tree, its branches nearly impossible to singularly identify.

“In a few days, you will kill a man, bury all evidence of what happened, and create a cover story to who killed him why he is dead etc. I, for one will *not* be cleaning up your mess again, Kage, I sincerely hope, you have learnt your lessons in the past, and so shall not leave any, ahh, *loose ends.*”

“Of, course sir.”

“Good, you will find a list of things Alaric wants you to buy while you’re at the black markets on your bed.”

“Thank you, sir,”

He raises one eyebrow sceptically but says nothing. I turn to go, knowing our little chat is over.

“Ohh, and Kage,” I twist back around, “I suggest you stop looking for a new family before you lose the one you’ve found. I expect you to begone ere tomorrow dawn.”

♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣♣

Stumbling into my room I groan and begin tidying, gathering up my carved objects and folding my knife. I fold up my pyjamas and put them on my pillow, before sitting down on my bedclothes and glancing around, I start to realize the ridiculous amount of tidying there is to do, no-way can I be bothered. Yawning, I glance up at the painting on my wall, a mother holding the hand of a young child. There are so many things I love about it, from the fear in the mother’s eyes, to the expression on the child’s face, an unplaceable expression of so many emotions. More than anything I love the slightly blurred features of the mother making it impossible to tell what she truly looks like.

My eyes flit to the signature on the bottom of the painting, Amy Sathorn made that painting for my sixteenth birthday, but I feel like I’ve had it for so much longer. I pick up the box below the painting, a small rosewood box, the intricately carved letters on the lid spell out two words: Amy Sathorn. I try to swallow back the tear that rolls down my face, slightly sticky and irritating, it lands on the box, sitting there, a perfect bauble. I never cry. It solves nothing. Alaric is almost convinced

that I have a heart of ice. Haha, well I guess even the cruel can cry, I reason, *everyone* mourned her death.

XIV

The black markets of Sarhavia

The black markets of Sarhavia are located in the eastern wastelands, in the citadel of an old, long abandoned palace, with a large harbour on the eastern side. The citadel is divided into multiple sections, each one component of the entire market. As I walk through the market, I rub the place where my blade, hidden beneath my tunic, irritates my skin, I glance around but try not to look too cautious, you just can't in a black market. Taking in everything I see, I think about possible ways to assassinate my victim, I don't want to be seen or suspected and I didn't bring my disguise components due to travel distance.

'A fire?' Asks a small voice in my head, considering the possible options.

'Too large, it would be too uncontrollable, unpredictable,' replies another voice, ruling out many options.

'Frame someone?'

'No, no too many things could go wrong, and we'd be involved then, no, that would not do.'

'What if we, say, paid, then threatened someone to upturn a stall or steal something or frame someone?' asks another voice, sounding almost... careless.

'We'd still be involved,' stated the second voice.

'Not if we disguised ourself,' replied the third.

'you've got a point,' considered the first speaker, *'I vote that.'*

'Fine, we'll do that,' snapped the second voice, clearly irritated.

'But-'

“Shut up, okay, just shut the hell up!” I yell, almost smiling as no-one turns to give me a strange look, as if this happens every day. Usually people take one look at me and cross to the other side of the road, the black market is... refreshing. I laugh.

I slip around to one of the darker parts of the gold and gems market, where it will be easier to find a thief, even though it's a black market, the rules are ferociously upheld, you'd be crazy to break them, luckily for us, me, the rules contain nothing of wounding maiming or killing, and the stall holders couldn't care less about what we do to each other unless you disrupt their “peace.”

These are their laws:

The black market of Sarhavia:

- i. Theft is punishable by death (method of death depends on the theft)*
- ii. Accidental Damage to sellable goods results in high fines, and a warning*
- iii. Purposeful damage to sellable goods results in banishment and fines, or execution*
- iv. Any form of injury done to a salesman is punishable by banishment and fine, or death, depending on the extent*

of the injury/ies

- v. The murder or injury of another non-seller is not punished unless it disturbs a stall or its salesman*
- vi. You may not leave the market without at least one something from the market, and its receipt*
- vii. You may not enter the slave market with weapons*
- viii. You may not enter the gems, gold, etc. market with weapons*
- ix. You may not continue to haggle after the stallholder has told you to leave their stall*
- x. Bribery is illegal, the punishment for its death by noose*



Glaring at the piece of paper between my hands I try to read Alaric's awful scrawl:

- ☞ *Concentrated inorganic acids- Hydriodic, Hydrofluoric, phosphoric, sulphurous, sulfuric*
- ☞ *Poison- anything really dangerous & hemlock & nightshade-belladonna & aconite*
- ☞ *Antiseptics- nightshade-belladonna & anything else that sounds really good*
- ☞ *Drugs- the ones we use for medical purposes only!*
- ☞ *Spices- anything that looks good*
- ☞ *Concentrated alcohol- ethanol*
- ☞ *Anodyne- atropa belladonna*

I groan at the length of the list, even though everything on the list comes in tiny bottles most of them are illegal, making them both expensive and hard to find. Groaning I start looking for a place that might sustain.



Climbing the stairs of one of the four battlement towers, I stop at the third landing, open the window, and sit on the windowsill, carefully searching the market below, for alleyways, dark corners, store rooms and a likely place to find and corner a thief, thefts being common in the textile component of the market as fabric can be sold at ridiculous prices. I marvel at the view. It's a lot better I had perceived, and I had expected it would be good enough, but it is so much better than that. It doesn't take me too long to find a small, lightly guarded corner, with a stallholder that looked rather irritable. I smile to myself, remembering my best friend when I was ten.



I squeal with delight as I duck behind a dark alley, grinning at the boy running by my side. We duck down a darker passage, slip through a tight gap between two slum houses and crouch behind a pile of crates. Luca flashes a grin at me, which I return with a grin of my own.

“You got it?” He asks breathlessly.

“Well duh,” I reply and relief floods his face. I pull the hunk of bread from a fold in my tunic and rip it into two pieces, handing him one of the two to halves. By the time we eat the bread, it’s black with the soot and dirt of our hands. Luca wipes his face with his sleeve, removing very little of the dirt and soot that coat every inch of his face.

“My turn” he says smiling wolfishly as he pulls out two apples, and hands one to me, and I scrub at with the corner of my cloak, but only succeed in making the apple grubbier, so I give up on trying to clean it. I offer it back to him, knowing that he needs it more than I do.

“Take it,” I whisper, ignoring the frown on his face, “trust me, you need it more than I do, food is harder for you.”

He shakes his head, “perhaps, but that apple is yours nonetheless.” I close my ten-year-old eyelids as the juice fills my mouth. all too soon both apples are gone, but he sighs, a breath of happiness. Half a loaf of bread and an apple in twice as much as he usually has, for him, it’s a feast.

XV

Souvenirs and gold

It didn’t take too long to find a thief that could be bribed with little, though the bargain was still steeper than I would have liked. I run it over with him again when he questions, asking for more details than makes a difference.

“You do realise this man, Hiro, is one of the most powerful men in the market?”

“Okay.”

“That doesn’t bother you.”

“Not really.”

“Fine. Whatever. Your funeral.”

I flash a grin at him, “I’m counting a funeral, just not mine.”

“And at what point do I get paid,” he asks sceptically.

“When you bring him.”

“I ain’t trusting an assassin.”

“Why should I trust a thief? Besides, if you don’t come back with him, I’ll find you,” I grin, wrapping my garotte around my finger.

He sighs questioningly, “do I have a choice?”

I pretend to consider his question for a moment, “nope.” He rolls his amber eyes, looking at me as if I am an immature child.

I wait in the dark alleyway, straining my eyes to check each barb on my garotte, hoping it’s sharp enough. I *do* need a new one. Pulling out my whetstone, I begin to flick the sharp of my blade down it, my ears a little sensitive to the shriek of the sharpening blade, reminding me of the executioner sharpening his axe. Hearing raised voices, I duck behind a store cupboard on the side of a wall, about mid alley, slipping another blade into my hand in case there is more than one man. I prefer not to choke people, as being really scrawny I find it quite physically demanding. I slip behind Hiro as he corners the thief, and he stops still when he hears me, not daring to turn around with my blade scratching the back of his neck. He opens his mouth as if to scream for help but I persuade him not to. I lean closer and tilt my head until my mouth sits next to his ear, my garotte in front of his neck.

“I need you to answer some questions for me.”

“Why shouldn’t just scream?”

“The difference is you scream and die or answer and survive.”

“Haha, how do I know you won’t kill me anyway?”

“You don’t.”

“Fine, what are these questions?”

“Who is Emperor Shenkei’s current advisor?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because that was my mother’s job before she was executed.”

“Kage?”

“Long time no-see general. Congratulations on actually remembering my name.”

A choking noise escapes his mouth, “still seeking revenge on your traitorous mother’s death then?”

My snarl is guttural, “that’s a little rich coming from you don’t you think?”

His laugh is cruel, “his name is Gabriel, you’d remember him I suppose.”

My breath catches, “Shenkei’s tutor?”

“The very same”

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

“None of us were.” He opens his mouth, just a little wider to yell. I hiss in his ear.

“Scream, and I’ll kill you and everybody that comes, stay quiet and it’ll be quick.”

“What?”

I swiftly entwine my garotte around his neck as he exhales, wincing as the barbs ~~mangle~~ mutilate the flesh of his throat. But he’s dead in seconds, as his blood seeps around him coating the paving stones in a wash of red.

Crouching down, I scour Hiro’s body for two souvenirs, proof that his is dead, one’ll sit in a stone chest that takes two men to open and shut, with three locks, and writing engraved across the lid, sacred stuff. The other will be buried beneath a small gravestone, a remembrance, a small we can do, a good for each life we take. I settle for the set of keys that hang from his belt and his seal, though while I’m at it, I grab his pouch of money, take his all his rings and arm bands and all his papers.

“Y-you know,” the thief stutters, the fear evident in his voice, “y-you can keep that money, I’ll just be on my way.”

My head snaps up. Truth be told, I’d forgotten all about the thief, he could have just slipped past me and I probably wouldn’t have paid any attention. Now however...

I sigh and turn to face him, I open my mouth to say sorry but the look of terror on his face reminds me all too much of the look that had been on Luca’s face the night that he died. The night a lot of slum children had died. There were four drunk men. Well, soldiers. They thought little of the slum children, their status being higher than the slums. I remember the cries of the children, I remember the fire, I remember screaming at the Emperor’s foot soldiers, “please do something, you cannot let them burn!”

I remember the head of guard looking at me and sighing, “I am sorry my child, but they are the slums, there is nothing we can do.” I remember running, harder than I had ever run before, I knew my mother was in the throne room in an important debate, but I didn’t care. Ducking around the guards I burst into the throne room before any of them could stop me. I got down on my knees in front of the Emperor, but the words that left my mouth were little more than gibberish.

“Pleasesiretheslumsareonfiretheyarekillingtheyoungchildrenthey’vekilledmybestfriend!”

My mother surged forward and placed a hand on my shoulder, bending down she spoke softly into my ear.

“My child, there is nothing we can do.”

That night, I dreamt of the screaming.

“Help me bury the body,” I whisper my voice sounding a little hoarse. The thief looks at me in terror and I sigh. “Please,” I prompt, trying to sound friendly.

“W-we could always lock it the storehouse then burn it,” he suggests, though it sounds more like a question, “no-one will suspect much, store cupboards burn all the time.”

Cocking my head at him I consider it, it does make sense.

XVI

I am too angry to say goodbye

The main hall

Isaac raises one eyebrow, his face completely poker, though I suspect he's more than sceptical at my proposal. I meet his eyes, nervously at first but stubborn, persisting with what I want.

"I think it will be a new addition sir, something we haven't seen here before," I plead, with no plan of backing down now.

"Kage... I'm not sure you understand the... complications," he replies carefully, "does he even want this life? We are mercenaries and there are few of us, which leaves us with little competition and frankly, I'd prefer if it stayed that way." I glare at him. His impressions of what counts as *few* and *little* competition clearly differ from mine.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I snap angrily.

I stare in mixed horror as Isaac stands, the look on his face making it clear that I have stepped over the line.

"No, that is my decision and it is final! He may not join us."

"So, what now? You're just going to let him go? He knows our location; don't you think he will tell the Emperor and get a reward? You know the Emperor wants us dead!"

"The Emperor does not want us all dead, he just wants a few of us, all under his command. As for the boy? He is your problem, you will be responsible for... disposing of him." I groan, this isn't even the last thing I wanted to happen, I didn't want it to happen at all.

I glance at Isaac, "what about my other request?"

"No way. Absolutely not. You may not go."

"Please-"

"There is no question about it, my answer remains no."

“But-”

“NO!!!” He roars, the sound bouncing off the walls in an endless echo. His voice softens as I take a step back, “I know you want to kill him in style, with the whole world watching if you can, but this is not the way you are going to do it. A masquerade? Really? Can you even begin to imagine the amount of people? Much less the guard? You would need to forge an invite and I’m sorry, but you would need to go as a girl, as a dress would obscure weapons more easily, you wouldn’t be able to go for your usual androgynous tunics.”

I snarl protectively, “and what about a mask?”

“Against my point.”

I open my mouth but quickly close it again, not entirely sure what to say or where to start.

“Masquerades in this kingdom thrown *with* the Emperor attending happen what? Every ten years?”

“Great! You can kill Emperor Shenkei after what ten years more training? Perfect!”

“No,” I groan, my hands over my face, “not perfect.”

“Kage, I thought you were going to wait until he had a sired heir? Besides be logical, your only nineteen, wait until your older, ten years-”

“Ten years?! I’ll be nearly as old as you!”

“-Give or take. You’ll be a better age for deciding the future of this kingdom. I’ve told you not to exaggerate too, last time I asked you thought I was fifty.”

“But I *am* ready!” I exclaim, ignoring his last comment.

“And what if this fails, Kage? I know that aside from revenge all you want is a better life, but not just for you but the people of this kingdom. and don’t even try to deny, the slums. But what if the death of this Emperor bought about a darker age, an age of civil and outer conflicts. Remember, as many allies as this kingdom has it has enemies, and once the line of our current Emperor is dead, our kingdom will have twice as many as current enemies, our accord will fall, as will our kingdom.”

“Anything will be better than our current... monarch!”

“Kage, your mother was Emperor Shenkei’s personal advisor, you of all people should know what an impact they have on the monarch.”

“Yeah, not enough,” I reply bitterly, trying not to think of all the times my mother couldn’t make a difference.

“Kage, Emperor Shenkei was a fourteen-year-old prince when he lost his father, he was no older than you, when you lost your mother, the Emperor has had it no easier than you.”

“So?”

“He never met his mother, you never met father, you both lost your other parent at fourteen. I think your being a little hypocritical.”

“At least there were a thousand courtiers at the palace who would have been more than willing to raise the boy.”

“Not because they loved him though, not like a mother loves her son.”

“I don’t care how much a mother loves her son” I hiss, stifling in anger.

“What if he is not the man you think he is?”

“Are you saying he is a good Emperor and I *shouldn’t* kill him?” My voice both incredulous and scathing, showing my barely contained fury.

“Kage, don’t jump to conclusions, all I am saying is, he has signed treaties, thanks to him we have more allies than we could have possibly hoped for. For a nineteen-year-old he’s done a lot. Do you truly believe that another monarch will be any better? At that, he might be worse, and he almost definitely won’t be better. The slums are the slums, no matter where you go, no matter who rules, there are always suffering slums, our populations are too large for there not to be suffering.”

“Why?” I whisper, “why did you bring me back here? Why did you lie? Why did you raise me to kill him? Why did you stop me from driving that knife into my heart? At least then I could have had a nice peaceful afterlife rather than eternal damnation!”

I’m at the door by my last sentence spiting it out with as much force as I can, though it remains slightly covered by my confusion. I pull at the door my hand gripping the bar hard enough to

for my nerves to spasm under the pressure. I slip out, trying to sort through every emotion, every stab of anger, sadness, frustration.

After changing into some fresh clothes, I stuff two daggers, a few Chinese stars, a couple of throwing knives and my poisons and acids within my tunic, slipping one thin blade into each of my two boots.

'That was very childish you know, so is this,' comes an irrationally mature voice. I strap my quiver to my back and sling my bow across my shoulders, eyeing my petite short sword. *'Do not ignore me, who do you think you are supremo?'* I fasten it to my side after checking its blade, drawing it lightly across ball of my thumb, drawing blood. Snatching up a piece of paper and my pencil, I quickly scribble down a few words before folding it and stuffing it into a small leather pouch that is clipped to my belt. I hear the voice grumble, something about disrespect, but I don't catch what.

The soft padding beneath my shoes makes no noise as I slink towards one of the uninhabited lodges. Well, it's usually empty, but the thief from the market is staying there. I had the choice to either kill him or bring him here, if he wanted to become an assassin that is, to be trapped with an impending future of: H.E.L.L. Turns out he wasn't religious, apparently most thieves aren't, so he took the second option, but Isaac was against it so...

I try the door but it's unsurprisingly locked, so, I slip through the window, which he has conveniently left open. In his defence, it is a small window, so I doubt he thought to worry. I slip in and consider my options, I can ~~sever his femoral or carotid arteries~~, pierce his heart, ~~break his neck~~, or slip some poison into his drink. Crossing out two of my options due to the pain they would cause, (though I've heard tell that your leg goes numb if your femoral artery is slit but I won't trust what I've heard, not again). I weigh up which one would be faster and more painless. I go with the poison.

Slipping quietly and cloaked in darkness towards his bedside table, and cannot help but notice the dagger, though sheathed, that is clutched carefully in his hand. If he wakes up while my back is to him; I'm a goner. I slip a fast reacting drug into his water and add a slower reacting poison which

will shut of his circulatory and respiratory system. I pull out the note I wrote earlier as I creep out of the bedroom, searching for a place to put it. Settling with the bench, I place it carefully in said place and slip back out onto the cobbled path.

XVII

The Emperor

I glance up darkly at the ominous sign that swings creakily in the bitter wind, trying in vain to cover my face from the driving rain that slashes across me, stinging. When I opened the door, it groaned lightly, but now, as I let it go, it screeches before slamming loudly into its frame. Shuddering, I yank at my cowl, covering my face almost completely in the flickering light as I head towards the counter. As I wait for the innkeeper, I carefully keep still while my eyes flit around the room, examining each table. I stop, my eyes resting on a man in the furthest corner, wrapped in thick furs, his long hair pulled back loosely with a piece of string. I snap my attention back to the counter where a burly man glowers at me fiercely, studying my face and cloak.

“Get out,” he snarls threateningly, “we don’t wan’ yer kind here.”

I slip a gold coin from my pouch and slide it across the counter, giving the bartender a questioning look.

“I’ll have single room.”

“I tol’ ye ter get out. Now.”

“And I told you I want a room. Now,” I hiss menacingly.

“If ye don’ get out now...”

I carefully slot three blades in-between the fingers on my right hand. The innkeeper just stares at me like I’m completely insane, though there is a little fear also reflected in his eyes.

There is little wrong with this tavern, the food and drink however are definitely two of the things that come under the ‘little wrong’ part. I glower distastefully at the food, prodding its burnt outer and undercooked inner, despising it-. I almost laugh at myself. I have always been a little picky, though I always had the manners to eat all sorts in the slums, apparently that has gone out the window. I raise the dirty glass of ale to my lips, letting the alcoholic liquid slide down my throat. I look up suddenly through the glass that is still raised, as the door shrieks piercingly before slamming back into place. In its wake stand three sodden soldiers, covered in filth and a little blood, each one looking exhausted. I assume they are back from the northern wars; small battles that rage almost constantly in a haul for more land.

I curse under my breath. Most lower-class innkeepers don’t allow soldiers into their taverns, they often end up in the middle of any problems or fights. Soldiers aren’t allowed to physically harm or injure anyone who hasn’t broken the law, *generally*, they see no reason not to comply, however, if they’re drunk... Being an assassin is breaking the law in itself, whether by choice or otherwise. It is fully within the law for them to kill me immediately upon recognition – as an assassin that is. My eyes jump to the innkeeper, flashing over him, analysing his every move while sliding my blades into my hands. Scolding myself for not thinking of this possibility and appearing both less threatening and more common, pretending I was something I was not.

Trying my best not to pull a face, I force down the last of the dried-out bread with a gulp of wine, glad that I have already finished the rest of my meal. I drop a gold coin into the remaining wine and wait for the minstrel to start his next ballad, when others will be distracted. I slip around the corners of the large room and try to tread as lightly as possible on the old stairs but succeed in stifling only a few.

Carefully inching the door open, I scan the room with my eyes searching for the other occupier, perusing who they are. My eyes fall on a sleeping figure, curled up into a ball, blue lipped and shivering, covered in nothing but a thin sheet. The girl is clearly young though her hair, long and auburn, covers most of her pale face. she shockingly reminds me of Emperor Shenkei’s grandfather’s

illegitimate heir who he had hidden for eight years before she had been discovered and given a public execution. I notice another three beds, each made to perfection, a small notice of welcome on each. I laugh darkly, as angry as I am, I can't help but find the situation a little ironic. I carefully take the woollen blanket from my bed, gently laying it across the girl, before taking one of the soldiers many blankets for my own.

I roll over, trying to use the blanket to soften the near constant poking of all my weapons, having not removed them. My breath catches as I hear the floorboards creak, I lie still, pretending to be asleep.

“Why bother pretending to be asleep when you're not?”

I open my eyes and sit up, “where your other two friends?” Our eyes make contact, and his widen slightly with surprise and shock.

“I don't believe I have seen you in five years Kyhyria.” My eyes widen, the name resurfacing an old memory, I try to shut it out but it is too late, I am already submerged in my past. Past I didn't want to remember.



“I'm so sorry, here let me help you.” I glare up at the young prince, leaning down to help me pick up the apples, who knocked me over.

“I don't want or need your help,” I reply shortly.

“do you know who I am? He asks softly, nearly threatening.

“I know who you are,” I retort, “and I don't care.” Something in his face changes, from menace to pity, neither expression suiting him.

“I'm sorry there is nothing my father could do,” he said, truly sounding sincere, “I'm not sure you understand the lack of power and freedom he has as Emperor.” I search his shockingly blue eyes for any sense of dishonesty.

I take his offered hand and he hauls me to my feet, smiling at me as he does so, “friends Kyhyria?”

“That’s okay, because I have been waiting- wait what!!!”

“You are my twin, Kyhyria.”

“You will die in hell.”

“Says the assassin.”

“You’re a tyrant and liar.”

“You were adopted.”

“Okay, now I am intrigued. I don’t believe you but I would like to know what your story is.”

“The person that I overheard calling you Kyhyria was my father... and your mother. Your birth name was Kyhyria.”

“Okay, so why are you trying to convince me that you are my twin?”

“Because it’s the truth, and you should hold nothing against me for executing Diana.” The blade that just left my hand narrowly misses Shenkei’s face.

“A. you are lying, she was my birth mother, and b. even if she wasn’t, she cared for me like a daughter. So *yes*, I am still going to kill you, and you will still burn in hell.”

“I’m gonna burn in hell for executing a traitor?”

“My mother wasn’t the traitor,” I snarl, my blades once again raised.

“My soldiers will be back in a minute.”

“They are not your possessions, they are human,” I growl, “Why should I care if they come?”

“Haha. Three against one? Not exactly a fair fight!”

“Hmmm, your right,” I agree, “you don’t stand a chance.”

I flick my blades lighting fast to drive forward, only to find my hands held where it is by an iron grip, a grip I’d know anywhere.

“Kage, he is telling the entire truth, it was your mother who hired me.”

I whip around to face him, “what is your problem? I don’t suppose you could have told me this when I was younger rather than filling my head with all your shit! Did you need a weapon just in

case Shenkei ended up a crap Emperor, or perhaps you wanted me hollower than I already was so I would just do everything you said instead being a difficult little brat?"

"Kage," Isaac says warningly, reaching out his hand as if to lay it on my shoulder, or perhaps to touch where my heart should be. "Enough."

"You are not my father, okay," I snarl, though inside me, I feel something snap, "so stop treating me like you are, because you are not my father, I... I just don't have one of those."

He snaps back his hand as if it has been burnt, his whole-body jerks back, as if he has been stung, and in that moment, I forget all sense of guilt, I let my anger from the past years pour out of me. At last my voice breaks, I recede, "you are not my father" I growl quietly, before turning and walking away.

"Kage." I stop at the door but do not turn around, "if you leave now, we will have no choice but kill you."

"If that is so," I prompt, my back still to them, "then so be it."

XVIII

One End is just a new Beginning

"Are you leaving?" Questions the bartender, his voice laced with hope.

"Nope," I reply stubbornly, my eyes glinting with menace, "I am going to stay in your wine cellar until the soldiers leave, then I will go." His groan is of such disappointment that I almost feel sorry for him, "cheer up, it's not the end of the world."

"You know, I almost think that it might."



'Okay,' comes a rather excited voice, as from the rafters I watch the Emperor and his soldiers leave, *'that's my cue, that's our cue! We can finally leave this stinking trash pit.'* I drop down, landing lightly on my feet, turning to the bartender.

"Thank you, for your... hospitality?"

"You have caused me so much trouble, I don't suppose you could hand a tip?" He questions casually, rubbing his thumb and forefinger.

"You didn't have to let me in."

"You realise as I have done this for you, they, will have me hanged!!!" He growls in anger, ignoring my sarcastic comment.

"You never know they might execute you, or I guess they could drown you."

"That is my point!!!" He screams, shaking in anger, his eyes flames.

"Then way didn't you say that," I asked, feigning confusion.

"You little-" He takes a breath and tries again, "look, I've done something for you, isn't there nothing you can do to ensure my safety?"

"What if I paid and arranged for you to another land one where you are guaranteed safety? From these people at least." I gesture around us with my hands, "they won't be able to find you or chase you or hunt you. Deal?"

"Almost. What is this land called and where is it?" I lean closer to him, a wicked grin playing across my face.

"Oh. I'm sure you've heard of it, it's generally referred to, or called, the land of the dead. And as for where it is," I continue, a careless edge to my tongue, "well, everywhere yet nowhere. Ha, but I see you already know this, I'm not surprised 'tis a safe haven.

"Perhaps, one day we will meet again, but more likely, we will be the dead of different realms altogether, of course, I may never make to any realm at all, but rather be forever banished to the gap between worlds, never quite anywhere, an eternal hell, or so they call it." He stares at me in horror as, grabbing his right shoulder, I callously driving my dead sharp dagger into his breast

angling slightly to the left aiming closer to the heart for a faster death. Gagging on blood, he falls to his knees, and his blood explodes from his mouth and the freshly gaping hole just below his heart. I remove my blade as the blood seeps into a pool, staining my bare feet crimson.