

WILL WIGHT



THE ELDER EMPIRE : FIRST SHADOW

OF SHADOW & SEA

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Of Shadow and Sea

The Elder Empire - First Shadow

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To NegaMom, who always supports my parallel self in Earth-1.

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Cover Art by Patrick Foster and Melanie DeCarvahlo

Welcome, Reader.

Right now, you're reading the first book in the Elder Empire series.

But it's not the *only* first book.

Of Shadow and Sea was written in parallel to *Of Sea and Shadow*, which takes place at the same time from a different perspective.

You can begin with either book, and you will find that they tell a complete story. Upon finishing *Of Shadow and Sea*, you will be fully prepared for its sequel: *Of Darkness and Dawn*.

But I wrote these books together, and their stories intertwine in a way that I think you'll enjoy. I invite you, when you're through with this book, to check out *Of Sea and Shadow*.

Until then...

Welcome to the Elder Empire.

CHAPTER ONE

Fifteen years ago

When they had to kill a grown man, the children worked in pairs.

The Bait, usually a girl, would lure the target in by faking some sort of crisis and begging for help.

When the target isolated himself, the Knife would drive their blade home.

By mutual agreement, Mari was always the Bait. She had long, curly hair and big eyes that looked like she was always ready to cry. Sometimes adults would stop her on the street and ask her what was wrong, even when she wasn't trying to lure anybody.

Shera was the Knife.

The two of them dressed poor, but not too poor. They couldn't look like homeless beggars, or the target would never stop. Maxwell had provided a faded dress and cheap blue ribbon for Mari, and a boy's pants, shirt, and cap for Shera. No shoes.

Some of Maxwell's older children complained about how they hated waiting; the long, boring stretch of hours between the time you set up your ambush and the time the target wandered through. Sometimes the target would *never* show, and you wasted your whole afternoon.

Not Shera. This was her favorite part.

As Mari sat on one side of the street with her chin in her hands, waiting for the target to pass by, Shera leaned against the wall of an alley, eating chunks of meat from a stolen skewer. The noise of the Capital blurred into a soothing lullaby, and she found herself drifting off as she watched the people pass her alleyway: a tourist couple carrying their luggage; a shirtless Izyrian hunter with a musket over one shoulder and a rabbit in his hand; an alchemist with her mask hanging down around her neck, biting her lip and scribbling on a clipboard.

Shera could watch the crowds all day. You saw all kinds of people in the Empire's Capital.

The familiar sights and the droning music of the city lulled her to sleep, tugging her eyelids down. She curled up against the alley wall, hugging the skewer to prevent its one remaining piece of meat from falling to the ground.

She so rarely got the chance for a nap. And now they could be here for hours...

Shera opened her eyes again at the sound of Mari's voice. "Please, I don't know what's wrong with her," the girl choked out, through her sniffles. "She's fallen asleep and won't wake up!"

Why can't she let it go? Last time, Mari had brought the target around the corner and found Shera fast asleep, knife still clutched in her hand. That had required some fast talking—and some fast work with a blade.

The sun had all but set while Shera napped, leaving her blanketed in the shadows of the alley. Perfect. The target wouldn't be suspicious when he failed to see her.

Shera rolled up to a crouch, hiding behind a crate of empty bottles. She tore the last piece of meat—now cold—from the skewer and tossed the empty stick away. Still chewing, she pulled the knife from the back of her pants.

"I am no physician, girl," Kamba Nomen said, his voice shrill and precise. "I can promise nothing

for your sister.”

Maxwell made sure that his gang of children knew their targets better than they knew their own reflections. Before Shera could see Kamba, she knew him: a short, dark-skinned man with a limp, walking with the aid of a cane. He was a Reader, but not the sort who cleansed battlefields of lingering resentment and invested scythes so that they cut wheat more efficiently.

“He’s a different breed of Elder-spawned filth,” Maxwell had assured them. *“He lays curses for hire, and as the whim strikes him. A woman sold him a bad piece of fruit, and within the day her cart collapsed. Sent her to the physicians with two broken legs and a cut neck. Last week, a neighbor of his burned up in an unexplained fire. The Empire has no use for this man, children. He deserves his fate.”*

The silver-capped tip of Kamba’s cane appeared around the edge of Shera’s crate, and she tensed her grip on the knife. He wasn’t supposed to see her before she struck. She was going to have to fight

Ice grew in her heart, cold spreading inside her like frost on a winter field. If she had to fight Kamba, so what? Either he would die, or she would. Her hand steadied on the knife, and her body loosened.

But Mari hastily ran up and grabbed Kamba’s other hand, directing him to the other wall of the alley.

“Not there! Over here.”

Kamba leaned over, looking into the shadows where Shera and Mari had placed another bundle of clothes. In the darkness of the alley, it should look enough like a little girl crouched under a blanket.

The Reader nudged the bundle with his cane. “This doesn’t look like—” he began, but he never got to finish the sentence.

The Bait had done her job. Now it was time for the Knife.

Shera leaped, kicking off the nearby crate and latching onto Kamba’s back like a monkey.

Maxwell had warned them about the dangers of confronting a Reader. *“His jacket might be invested. It could turn your knife, so don’t risk it.”* Shera didn’t. She stabbed him in the throat, where his jacket couldn’t cover. Blood sprayed onto the alley wall and trickled over her fingers.

She dropped back to the ground as Kamba staggered around, flailing his arms. One of his spasms jerked his cane back, catching Mari on the shin.

Mari muffled a shout and fell backwards as Kamba finally quieted, twitching and bleeding on the alley stones. Shera quickly dragged him behind the crate—no one on the street would look twice at a suspicious stain on an alley wall, but even the Capital’s indifferent citizens might come investigate a body in a rich man’s jacket and pants.

Then she walked over and knelt, examining Mari’s leg. “Is it cracked, do you think?”

“It hurts,” Mari said, real tears welling up in her eyes. “And he almost found out. If you had taken one more second...” She shuddered. “I’m still shaking. Aren’t you?”

Shera wiped her knife off on the dead man’s coat and stuck it back down the waistband of her pants. “Shaking? It’s not cold.”

Mari sniffled, wiping tears from her eyes. “Not from the *cold*. Weren’t you scared?”

“Of what?”

Shera glanced around the alley, in case she’d missed the sight of an Imperial Guard or some monstrous Elderspawn. Something to be scared of. Surely Mari couldn’t have meant she was frightened of Kamba. The man had walked into an alley, and they’d stabbed him. Where was the threat?

Through her tears, Mari let out a long-suffering sigh. “Sometimes I want to be more like you. Other times, I think you’d get yourself killed in a week without me to take care of you.”

This spoken by a girl who might have been ten years old. Shera wasn’t sure about her own age, but she knew Mari couldn’t be that much older. But for some reason, the other girl liked to think of

herself as the mother.

~~Shera looped an arm around Mari's shoulder, helping her to her feet. "Who's taking care of who? Together, the pair made their way back to Maxwell's safe house, leaving a corpse behind them.~~

~~~

The safe house for Maxwell and his brood of adopted children rested underneath an *actual* house, residence across from Gladstone Imperial Park that his family had owned for generations. The two stories above street level were furnished the way a single man living alone might keep them: dishes piled up on the table; a whiskey cabinet perpetually open; only two chairs in the sitting room.

But if you pushed the piano aside and rolled up a cheap Vandenyman rug, you found a trap door.

The three floors beneath formed the home where Shera and the others spent most of their time. Now that Mari and Shera had arrived, with Shera helping Mari down the ladder, they found the safe house in a state of panic.

A girl ran up to Shera, hauling a pillowcase stuffed with odds and ends. "There you are! Maxwell says he won't leave without you."

Shera exchanged confused glances with Mari. "Where is he going?"

The girl almost dropped her pillowcase in her excitement. "You haven't heard? Oh, that's right, you've been away. Well, Benji and Keina didn't report in at sunset. When Maxwell went to look for them, he found them *missing*. So he checked the traps in the upstairs house, and they've all been disarmed!"

Shera still felt like she was looking at a puzzle with half the pieces gone. "So...Benji disarmed the traps and ran away?"

A few children ran every few months. Sometimes Maxwell brought them back and dealt with them himself, as examples. Other times, he came back empty-handed. He called the losses, "acceptable costs of doing business."

"You don't get it?" the girl said. "We're under attack! Somebody found us! They might be here right now!"

She seemed more excited than terrified, hurrying down the hall with her pillowcase over her shoulder.

This time, Shera didn't need to look at Mari's face to know what she was thinking. They hurried downstairs together, Shera helping the hobbling Mari along.

As they shuffled down the hall, Shera heard a clatter and glanced back over her shoulder. There was no one else in the hallway. Only a fallen pillowcase, spilling its treasures all over the ground.

Of the girl, there was no sign.

The safe house was simple, and simply decorated. White walls, bare stone floor, and functional rooms with the bare minimum of cheap wooden furniture. The children slept in beds packed one against the other, sharing straw-stuffed pillows and scratchy woolen blankets.

Shera considered it the most comfortable home she'd ever had. With her real mother, she'd be lucky to have a single blanket in a filthy alley.

The pair hurried through the safe house, passing a steady stream of boys and girls bustling around and clutching their meager belongings. After Mari asked directions three times, they finally found their way to Maxwell: waiting for them in the discipline room.

The discipline room was lined with metal cages, where Maxwell's unruly students found themselves locked for days at a time.

He'd given up using that punishment on Shera after the first time, when she'd simply curled into a ball and slept from sunrise to sunrise.

Maxwell himself stood at the far end of the room, his sleeves rolled up, carrying a cage away from the brick wall. When he heard them enter, he staggered a few steps to the right, dropping the cage in

clatter of iron.

Some students saw Maxwell as their father and called him such, but he never insisted. Personally, Shera had never seen him as family at all.

He always wore black pants and a black shirt, with a white rose tucked into his shirt pocket above the heart. Some of the older girls giggled about how handsome he looked, with his curly brown hair down to his shoulders and his compact, muscular figure. Again, Shera found it difficult to think of him in that way.

He was just Maxwell.

When he turned and saw Shera, he gave a relieved sigh. "Shera. At last. I was worried that they would...never mind. Did you see anyone in the upstairs house?"

Mari moved away from Shera's support, stepping gingerly on her good leg, and answered. "We saw no evidence of any intruders, Maxwell."

"Of course you didn't see anyone. They're too good for that." He rubbed his hands together, invigorated, but his face still looked drawn and tight. It was the same look he wore in the first day or two after a child ran away and he couldn't bring them back.

He raised his boot and kicked another cage out of the way, and Shera finally saw what he was doing. A low metal grate rested in the middle of the wall, leading into a dark tunnel.

Maxwell nodded to the tunnel. "The other children are trying other means of escape, but this is where we'll be going. Rebel soldiers used this to move from base to base in the Kings' War."

"Should we gather anything from the house, sir?" Mari asked.

He didn't look at her. "Shera, what have I taught you about weapons?"

"A warrior is never unarmed," she said.

Maxwell gave her a proud smile. "Good girl. The others know where to rendezvous, but I didn't want to risk you getting lost. Come on, now."

Mari hesitantly raised her hand, as though asking for permission to speak. "What about—"

"Yes, yes, both of you. Into the tunnel, quickly. If they're who I think they are, we don't have much time."

Shera grabbed Mari by the shoulder again and began helping her toward the tunnel, but Maxwell held a hand out. His eyes sharpened. "What happened to Mari's leg?"

He directed the question at Shera, but she waited for Mari to answer. "I...the target hit me with his cane, Maxwell. It isn't bad."

Their leader shook his head. "Mari. There's too much at stake this time, girl. The Empire is sick, and we are the cure. But if these *hirelings* have their way, we'll never get to spread our good work."

He turned from Mari, picking up a crowbar to pry away at the grate. "Ordinarily I'd wait for you to recover, but we don't have time for that now. You'll slow us down."

Shera had completed the assassination of Kamba Nomen without a single instant of fear, but now a worm of doubt and uncertainty crawled its way into her heart. Instinctively, she stepped between Mari and Maxwell.

"Shera," Maxwell said, without turning around. "When do we kill?"

"When the target has earned his fate. When the target serves no useful function."

He gestured in Mari's direction with his crowbar. "Today, Mari serves no useful function. Quite the opposite. Finish your work."

Mari turned to Shera, eyes wide, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. "Shera..."

Shera looked between Mari and Maxwell. In the back of her waistband, the knife felt freezing cold.

She didn't want to kill Mari. *Why not? Because she's my friend? That doesn't matter. If she's useless, she's useless.*

But Mari was the one to shake Shera awake when she overslept. Mari made fun of Shera for being

lazy. Mari told her when she should be afraid, even if Shera didn't feel it.

"~~She does serve a useful function,~~" Shera said. Mari stared at her, hopeful.

Maxwell turned fully around, gripping his crowbar like a sword. "Then what is it?"

"I can't...I don't have the words for it. But I have a use for her."

Their leader blew out a breath, running his empty hand through his hair. "Children. I sometimes forget that they're children." Gently, he placed the crowbar on top of a nearby cage.

Then he pulled out a pistol and shot Mari in the chest.

Gun smoke filled the tiny room, the shot echoing like a collapsed wall. Shera couldn't take her eyes from Mari, who staggered backwards in her red-stained dress, clutching at a nearby cage for support. She finally collapsed, her mouth working for a few more seconds before she stopped trying to suck in a breath that wouldn't come.

Maxwell tossed his pistol aside. "What have I taught you about mercy, Shera?"

*There is no such thing as mercy. There is only hesitation.*

But this time, she didn't say it. She remained silent, thinking about Mari.

Her friend was dead. Shera confronted death every day, but she rarely thought about it. Death wasn't personal...except, this time, it was. It hurt like a knife to the chest, and she couldn't quite understand why.

And with the pain, her thoughts grew cold.

Maxwell had grabbed his crowbar again and resumed his work on the grate, prying it away from the brick wall. "No one else has learned my lessons better than you have, Shera. The Consultants think they have the best, but they won't be able to compete with you."

Shera stood behind Maxwell, her knife in her hand, thinking of Mari.

She cocked her head, aware of something she had never thought of before. Maxwell engineered the deaths of dozens, perhaps hundreds of people. He *deserved his fate*. And as for his 'useful function'..

"I have no use for you," she said.

He was starting to turn around when she drew her knife across his calves. He fell to his knees, screaming, and she plunged her knife into his back. Five times, to be safe.

The other children soon arrived, drawn by the sound of the gunshot. From the doorway, they each saw Maxwell, facedown in a pool of his own blood, as well as Mari's body slumped against a cage.

Some of them cried. Others screamed, and still others remained silent. A few looked as though they'd finally been released from prison.

But when they saw Shera, sitting on top of a cage with a bloody knife, none of them entered the room.

~~~

Kerian stood in the hallway of Maxwell's safe house, watching her fellow Consultants work. Or rather, watching the *results* of their work.

It was rare, even for her, to catch a Consultant in action.

A twelve-year-old boy raised a shaking pistol with both hands, pointing the barrel at Kerian—the only target in sight. She didn't bother moving.

A black shape passed across the boy and he was gone, pistol and all. A nine-year-old girl, who happened to be turning the corner at that exact moment, gasped and dropped a bundle of clothing. Before she could run off, a pair of black-clad arms reached down from the ceiling and pulled her up through the trap door.

Idly, Kerian fiddled with the leather satchel that hung from her shoulder. She had prepared for any number of contingencies, and thus far none of them had materialized. She couldn't help the boredom. Gardener missions were many things, but they were rarely boring; even if you had to lie perfectly still under a flowing river for six hours, breathing through a reed, assassinations had a thrill all their own.

She was the only Gardener on this mission, for which she was glad. Certain instincts could be hard to suppress, and they wanted these children back alive. The clients had specified as much, for understandable reasons.

The clients were the parents of these missing children. And they had finally offered such an obscene sum of money that the Consultant's Guild could not turn them away.

As glad as she was that she didn't have to rein in a team of Gardeners, she could never get used to working with Shepherds and Masons. The Masons weren't suited for *real* stealth work: they relied on their disguises to see them through, and they couldn't see that disguises served them nothing. A Mason hustled into view now, dressed as an old lady in an apron, chasing a girl down the hallway.

It doesn't matter if you look harmless. If you're a stranger, these children will run. It seemed, sometimes, that Masons left common sense on the island with their Consultant blacks.

Shepherds were a little better; at least they wore black. They were so *skittish*. Kerian had personally witnessed a Shepherd running from an eight-year-old boy with an undersized saber. Shepherds had been trained for so many years to minimize risk that they didn't recognize a harmless target when they saw one.

These children, on the other hand, had been raised like Gardeners. Or as close as Maxwell could come to it, having never seen the Garden himself.

Kerian strolled down the hall, searching through her satchel with one hand as she walked. *An extra pair of knives...useless. Climbing gear...unnecessary. An invested hammer in case we have to break through a wall...well, that one might come in handy.*

She still hoped someone would attack her. A mission didn't feel right without the risk of danger.

When she heard the pistol-shot ring out through the safe house, Kerian's spirits soared. Here, at last, something was happening.

She made her way downstairs, catching snatches of the reports from Shepherds who had—*of course*—already checked out the noise and returned.

“...Maxwell dead.”

“...shot one of the girls. Don't know...”

“...looked like he was trying to escape.”

A crowd of children clustered around the door to the room full of cages. They were facing the same way, so it was easy for Kerian to slip around them unnoticed and into the room herself.

The scene inside looked like the aftermath of a sloppy Gardener's botched mission.

Cages had been hauled away from one wall, revealing a metal grate that was halfway peeled away from the brick. The tunnel beyond it was Maxwell's “secret” escape route, an underground road dating back to the Kings' War. Five Consultants waited in hiding at the other end, prepared to take Maxwell when he emerged.

But he hadn't made it that far. Maxwell lay facedown as though drowning in blood, five or six stab wounds in the back of his shirt. His killer had been shorter—they'd slashed him across the legs to bring him down so they could reach. One of his children, then, had turned on their master.

Perhaps this girl over here, the curly-haired one with the bullet in her chest. Tears had worn tracks down her cheeks and she still had a blue ribbon in her hair.

Not her, then. She'd died surprised and unarmed.

Kerian glanced around the room before she spotted the killer: a girl, probably less than ten years old, with her black hair spilling out of a cheap cap. She was curled up on a cage, a bloody knife still gripped in her hand.

Asleep.

The Gardener snapped her fingers twice and two Shepherds appeared, black-clad and black-masked, bowing their heads and awaiting her order.

“Finish collecting the rest of the children,” she ordered. “Then bring them to the chapter house for the clients.”

She nodded to the sleeping killer. “I’ll bring this one myself.”

CHAPTER TWO

'Intent' is what we call the power of focused will that all humans possess. If you use an object, you invest that object with your Intent. This, in turn, makes your tool more effective.

We have recognized these effects since ancient times, but only now are we learning to turn these principles to our own ends.

I believe the military applications are obvious.

-From an ancient research journal in the Magister's Guild
(Excerpt stored in the Consultant's Guild archives)

Fifteen years later, Shera was having trouble staying awake.

She sat in a padded chair behind a broad desk, forehead pressed against the paperwork she was supposed to be organizing. The room around her was well-appointed and comfortable; a chapter house of the Consultants had to be at least as inviting as this one. Paintings hung on the wall, plants on the windowsill, and the clients' chairs in front of the desk were even more comfortable than Shera's own

If only they had a client.

This was the northern chapter house, one of three in the Imperial Capital. Even in a city the size of the Capital, not many people could afford the services of the Consultants, and they were usually rich enough to arrange a meeting beforehand. These days, the chapter house's flow of clients had effectively dried up.

Which meant paperwork. Lots and lots of paperwork.

The Shepherds' observations and Masons' reports would usually go straight to the Miners back in their catacombs, but some of the information was time-sensitive. It was up to the staff of the chapter house to sort through the piles of miscellaneous facts and decide exactly what they needed to keep and what needed to be sent back home.

The quicklamps on the wall glowed a steady orange—the alchemical fluid shone with the color of torchlight, or the blaze of sunset. It created an intimate, comfortable atmosphere for clients.

A little too comfortable for Shera. Her head rested on the paper, and her eyes slowly drifted shut. Maybe this time she'd be able to catch a few minutes of sleep before...

Her partner jabbed her in the ribs with what felt like a knife. Shera jerked awake, one of the sheets of paper sticking to her forehead and coming up with her.

Ayana's voice was a rough whisper, like paper over stone. "Control yourself. You should be able to lie motionless for a day and a night without losing focus."

Shera's partner was at least twenty years older than Shera herself, and she looked like an unquiet spirit from a five-bit horror novel. Her pale hair hung in strings like a torn burial shroud, her skin as pale as if it had never seen the sun. And that wasn't the worst of it.

She poked Shera's side again, with her six-inch iron fingernails. They were all-natural, gifts from parents who had not been entirely human.

And a plague on Shera's nap time.

Shera peeled the paper away from her forehead, slapping it back down on the stack in front of her. “Can we have this conversation after I wake up? It’s too early for this.”

Ayana looked pointedly at the gilded clock ticking away at the corner of the desk. “It’s noon.”

“Then we should at least wait until six.”

Her partner jabbed her again, in the leg this time, but Shera didn’t flinch away. That would only invite further punishment. Ayana sighed, drumming her metal nails on the surface of the desk.

“I beg you, take this more seriously. Yala will only relent if we prove ourselves indispensable. We have to be patient.”

Shera propped her head in her hands. “*Yala* would execute me this second if she wasn’t so afraid of the Regents. You’ve got a chance, though. Tell her you’re sick of me, you’ll listen to her commands from now on, and then kill somebody she doesn’t like. She’ll come around.”

Ayana remained silent, still drumming her nails on the wood. Shera started to worry.

“...please don’t actually do that.”

“I didn’t say I would.”

“You looked like you were considering it, though.”

“I consider many things.”

Was she serious, or was she saying this to make Shera sweat? “Don’t leave me alone here. I shudder to think who they’d send to replace you.”

Ayana clenched her fist, which looked like she’d gripped a handful of knives. “Neither of us should be here. In a time like this, she’s wasting not one, but *two* Gardeners? Inexcusable. I don’t know why Kerian lets her live.”

Kerian lets her live because Kerian doesn’t see murder as the solution to every problem. It was an unexpected attitude in an assassin, but Shera had learned to accept it.

“Well, don’t go too far,” Shera said. “I don’t mind being wasted. I’ve gotten more sleep in the last year than in the rest of my life combined.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“My problem is that I can’t *enjoy* it. There’s always something to do, and that’s bad enough, but it’s not even enjoyable. It’s like raking leaves for a living.”

Ayana scraped her iron fingernails together in a horrible cacophony that made Shera wince. “What I’m gathering from this discussion is that you’d like to live the rest of your life on a paid vacation.”

Shera considered for a moment. “I’ve never heard it out loud before, but yes, that sums—”

The ring of a bell cut her off as an old man pushed open the door.

Shera’s hands worked without conscious input, gathering up all the papers and shoving them under the desk. Ayana did the same, and in the blink of an eye the evidence of their morning’s work was hidden from the client’s view. Ayana kept her hands in her lap, smiling pleasantly. The expression made her look like a grinning skull.

Quickly swiping off the smudge of ink she was sure the papers had left on her forehead, Shera adopted the same expression.

“Welcome to the Consultant’s Guild,” Shera said pleasantly. By mutual agreement, they had decided that Shera was supposed to talk for both of them. Ayana’s voice could be...off-putting. “How may we help you today?”

Their visitor was an older gentleman, perhaps in his early seventies, who had clearly seen better fortunes. His bowler hat was faded, his brown suit patched. He leaned on a chipped cane as he limped in—not as a pretense, but a prop to cope with a genuine injury.

He hobbled in with the mournful aspect of a man attending his own execution.

Straightening his back as much as he could, the man spoke. “My name is Ulrich Fletcher. Please, need your help.”

His voice trembled with desperation, as though he were asking for nothing less than his own personal salvation. That was unusual. Usually, the people who could afford Guild services were several thousand goldmarks distant from the poorhouse. For them, ‘desperation’ was just a word.

“Of course, Mister Fletcher,” Shera said with a smile. “Please, have a seat.” Beside her, Ayana covertly rifled through a drawer full of files marked ‘F.’

With great effort, Fletcher levered himself into one of the padded chairs in front of the desk. “Ahem. Well, where to begin? I was once a man of great means and influence, you see. Eleven years ago, my business was destroyed by...”

He droned on, describing his personal history in unnecessary detail. Shera felt her smile slipping. She never had been suited for the false cheer that working in a chapter house required, but Ayana’s smile sent small children running, and her voice could make a Champion shiver with fear. Next to her, Shera seemed as welcoming as a grandmother.

“...though I was compensated for this loss by the Emperor himself, may his soul fly free, it was still too late for my original fortunes. What was I to do? I could barely see a light in that deep darkness, and I’m afraid to say...”

Not only was Shera’s smile gone, but her eyelids had begun to slide shut. She wondered if the old man would stop talking when she started snoring, or if he would keep going.

Ayana slipped her a file, careful to keep her sharp iron fingernails hidden from Fletcher.

On the outside of the file, in Ayana’s wide handwriting, were the words ‘*Ulrich Fletcher.*’

Not even pretending to pay attention to Fletcher’s story any longer, Shera studied the file. They kept information on any potential clients they were likely to encounter in each chapter house, which included essentially any citizen in the Capital with enough cash to hire them. These files had to be pruned, trimmed, and modified on a daily basis, which led to her waves of paperwork.

‘*Former warden of Candle Bay Imperial Prison,*’ the file said. ‘*Recent owner of an alchemical workshop at 1328 Regent Way. Kanatalia investigated him for the manufacture of illicit substances, but the investigation ended on uncertain terms.*’

The old man wiped a tear from his eye, his story not slowed in the slightest, and Shera scanned the file for any other relevant information. Her eyes locked onto ‘*Estimated total worth: five hundred silvermarks. The workshop is valued separately at approximately six thousand silvermarks.*’

Five hundred silvermarks? Shera had never settled on a contract for less than that. Ulrich Fletcher was becoming less interesting by the second.

“...so I invested everything in my workshop. If I can’t get it back, I won’t be able to feed my family.”

Shera trawled through her mind for the bits of information that had trickled through. “So you say a gang of criminals has taken over your workshop? That seems like a job for the police. Or perhaps the Imperial Guard, since you have Alchemist’s Guild contracts.”

Fletcher’s breathing grew a little rougher, and he looked anywhere except in Shera’s eyes. “Ah, you see, that’s the point. I’ve had some rough dealings in the past...anyway, you can’t trust Capital police. What separates them from the street gangs? Uniforms and pistols, that’s what I’ve always said. And I could never bother the Imperial Guard with this, their time is far too valuable—”

Shera cut him off before he could launch into another story. “I get it, Mister Fletcher. What are you making in there? Anthem? Drake dust? Undersong?”

Fletcher shifted in his chair as though he sat on a bed of hot coals, and Ayana elbowed her in the ribs. This wasn’t the time to let him squirm.

“If you’re cooking up something illegal, Fletcher, you can tell us. We don’t care.”

“It’s very difficult to turn a profit with the classic solutions and formulas, you see, and even flash potions have a surprisingly low profit margin...”

He trailed off, but Shera took it as an admission of guilt. “You’re manufacturing recreational alchemy, and you need us to clear out the workshop before everything gets stolen. Great. We can certainly be of service to you, Mister Fletcher, but first there is the issue of remuneration.”

“Remuneration,” Ayana whispered.

“Payment,” Shera said.

Fletcher pulled a stuffed envelope out of his coat. When Shera took it, he let his fingers linger until the very last instant, as though he were a Soulbound and the paper contained his Vessel.

Shera pulled the gray banknotes out and flipped through them, counting in seconds.

Five hundred silvermarks. According to his file, that was the value of everything he owned outside of the workshop. He must be truly desperate.

“That’s everything I could beg, borrow, or steal,” he said weakly. “Without the workshop, I’ll be living on the streets in a week. Please, I’ve given you all I have.”

Shera handed the envelope to Ayana and gave the man a friendlier smile. “That was a good decision.”

As long as the payment exceeded a certain minimum amount, it was up to the chapter house staff whether they accepted small-scale, limited-term contracts or not.

And in this case, Shera had nothing better to do.

Fletcher slumped in his chair, visibly deflating. “Thank you. What information do you need from me? I have blueprints, floor plans, inventories...”

He started to pull further papers out from his coat, but Shera stopped him with a raised hand. “That won’t be necessary. We have all the information we need.”

One of their Masons was employed in his workshop, so their file on Fletcher already contained everything he was likely to provide.

“Go home and rest,” Ayana murmured. “We will contact you when your workshop is cleared. Reassured: your problem is already solved.”

Fletcher looked askance at Ayana, obviously disturbed by her hoarse whisper. But he didn’t say anything about it, merely offering another word of thanks and departing to the ring of a bell.

As soon as he was out of sight, Shera hopped up and pulled her shears—a pair of bronze blades, still sheathed—out from under the desk. She would need to get her blacks from the back room, and she’d have to consult the file to see if she needed any climbing gear.

Ayana stopped her with a bladed hand on her arm. “We have four Shepherds on standby, and two Masons associated with this gang. I’ll assemble a team.”

Shera waved her off, walking toward the back room and calling out, “No need. Order a cleanup team for the workshop.”

Iron fingernails drummed against the desk again, and Shera could hear it from the next room. “That won’t impress Yala,” Ayana said. “I think this is exactly what she wanted to avoid.”

“Then she should give me more time off,” Shera responded. “Or a more interesting job.”

~~~

The alchemical workshop on Regent Way was unexpectedly boring. Shera had seen alchemist’s lairs disguised as castles, made entirely of invested glass, and filling pyramids half-buried in the earth. This one was just...a warehouse. One identical building nestled among its brothers.

She’d climbed up on the roof of a neighboring building and slept until dark, which already made the mission worth her time. She would have taken the assignment for no more reward than these hours of sleep.

At the sound of a shout far below, she instantly woke and rolled onto her belly. Down by the workshop entrance, two men were pushing a third down onto the street.

She pulled a collapsible telescope out of her pouch for a closer look. The men certainly looked like

they had dressed to intimidate rather than to impress: they wore rumpled suits with buttons undone, jackets that looked as though they'd been intentionally frayed, and far more jewelry than the situation deserved.

On closer inspection, one of the men had strangely colored eyes. She stared through the telescope until she'd confirmed her suspicion—the veins in the sclera of his eye had turned solid blue. A long-time Anthem user, then, and he wouldn't have long to live at this rate.

His partner scratched surreptitiously at the skin on his arm, and it looked like the skin rippled out of the way, as though trying to avoid his fingernails. Either he was an Imperial Guard who was kicked out for failing a graft, or else he'd taken one too many potions. His limbs twitched and jerked, and he rolled his shoulder as though the joint pained him.

*Anthem user, potion abuser, she noted. Must be the right place.*

The man on the ground tried to scramble away on his hands and knees, but Anthem User grabbed his heel and pulled him back. Potion Abuser walked up to the side, kicking him in the ribs.

Holding up an arm as though to ward off his attackers, the man on the ground said something in a pleading tone. Begging for his life, no doubt. There was a certain memorable cadence to people who were begging for mercy in times of certain death.

Potion Abuser hauled the victim to his feet as Anthem User pulled out a pair of knives. He tossed one to their prey, keeping one in his hand.

Victim missed the knife, which clattered to his feet, earning him a punch in the kidney from Potion Abuser. Thus encouraged, Victim bent over and scooped the knife up, holding it awkwardly in his right hand.

Anthem User tossed his own blade from hand to hand, spinning it around his wrist and walking it across the back of his fingers. Showing off, no doubt, but it made Shera roll her eyes. He had earned death for that display alone.

Anthem User stepped in closer, slashing Victim across the upper arm. Victim staggered and tried to retaliate, but he dropped his knife again. Potion Abuser took the opportunity to kick him in the forehead as he tried to recover it.

Growing bored, Shera considered her options. While they were playing around outside, they had left the workshop door open. She had planned to move from roof to roof and then lower herself down through one of the high windows, but if she tried that now, those three outside would likely get away. There was the possibility, in that case, that they would return to trouble her client after she'd left.

*The client is Emperor.*

She wouldn't allow that to happen. So she either had to wait until they returned to the workshop, or take care of them now.

Victim was bleeding from half a dozen cuts, and Anthem User was laughing hard enough that Shera heard him clearly. He had taken Victim's knife back, and was waving a blade in each hand, weaving a complex pattern of steel in the air before him.

That settled it. She couldn't risk the chance that Anthem User would escape, spreading his defective knife-fighting technique to an unsuspecting world.

Her rope waited for her, lying camouflaged against the wall, and she slid down to the street without a sound.

~~~

Tombstone had chosen his own name when he was fifteen, because he'd thought a tough denizen of the streets should have a name to match. Now, as he knelt in front of Wellin and bled from a dozen wounds, he wondered if he'd chosen his name *too* well.

Wellin widened his blue-stained eyes and grinned, flashing his knives so quick that they blurred into a mesh of steel. That was a technique of a master knife-fighter, Tombstone was sure. He could

never hope to match that skill.

“What now, Tombstone? Hm? Never let go of your weapon, I told you that. I told you.”

Behind Tombstone, Fisher laughed. “Hey! Hey. Where do you put a tombstone, huh? *In a graveyard!*”

Wellin flicked his eyes up to Fisher and back down, as though he didn't get it.

A few seconds ago, Tombstone had been filled with such terror that he thought the fear alone would stop his heart. He'd wet himself, for which the other two men had mocked him mercilessly, and he'd emptied his stomach onto the stones.

Now, he felt...hollow. Maybe it was the blood loss, he didn't know. But instead of being terrified, he simply wished they would stop toying with him and get on with it.

Wellin kept hurling insults about his lack of respect, his *betrayal*, but that didn't make much sense. Tombstone had simply sold a couple of the potions on the side. Where was the harm in that? Wellin and Fisher were using up the stock themselves, and nobody cared. But Tombstone decides to make a silvermark or two by moving the stock on the street, and suddenly it's a death sentence.

He steeled himself, trying to look death in the eye, as his father taught him. So he was looking straight at Wellin as the man's face tightened in confusion.

“Hey, what happened to...” Wellin trailed off, then threw his head back. “*Fisher!* Get back here you, you...Elder-spawned...trash. Thing.” Wellin's insults trailed off into rambles.

Tombstone tried to turn and look behind him without taking his eyes off Wellin's knives. It was true: the presence at his back known as Fisher was gone. Probably off to water some alley somewhere.

A spark lit inside his heart. This could be his chance for *escape*.

He started scrambling away, pushing against the road with his feet, pulling himself along with the tips of his fingers. Wellin laughed.

Tombstone looked back in time to see the man throw a knife at his back. It struck him square between the shoulder blades with enough force to send him sprawling on the street.

The knife clattered down to land in front of Tombstone. *That's good news*, he thought dimly; it meant the blade hadn't pierced his flesh. It must have hit him hilt-first.

Unfortunately, Wellin had already caught up and retrieved his weapon.

His boots, scuffed and black, moved up into Tombstone's vision.

“Can't go anywhere my knives can't reach you, Tombstone,” Wellin said from above.

It seemed that was true.

Then the boots turned away, in the opposite direction of the warehouse. “Private business, get gone.” Confusion entered Wellin's voice. “Hey, what're you wearing? You...you're not Blackwatch, are you?”

Tombstone propped his head up with his chin against the cobblestones. There was someone in the shadows.

After a moment, the outline resolved itself into a slender figure, crouching in the darkness. Could be a woman, though Tombstone couldn't see enough detail to be sure. Black hair fell down around her face, and a black cloth covered her mouth. The rest of her body was sheathed in solid black, though irregular spots on her silhouette showed places where she'd strapped on weapons or equipment.

She said nothing, but she stepped forward into the dim starlight. With one hand, she reached behind her back, grasping a hilt.

Slowly, she withdrew a bronze knife.

The spark of hope in Tombstone's heart flared back to life. Rescue! Someone had come to rescue him!

He couldn't think who would have bothered to come save him, especially since he didn't know he was in trouble until a few minutes ago, but he wasn't picky. He scooted out of the way so he wouldn't

get caught up in the fight.

And so he might be able to escape once the battle began.

Wellin grinned as soon as he saw the woman's knife, brandishing his own blades and waving them in a shining web. "Oooohhhh? You want a knife lesson, do you? Well, step up, I'm game."

Tombstone noticed a detail he hadn't considered before: there was a second sheath on her back, with a hilt sticking out from her left side. She had a second blade. Why not draw it?

She stepped forward, and Wellin advanced, and then *something* happened. Tombstone couldn't say what.

Wellin's knife flew out of his hand, ringing like a bell against the cobblestones. He didn't look like he had any better idea what had happened than Tombstone did.

The woman waited, still calm and half-bent, as though she meant to rush forward at any second. Her knife remained absolutely still.

Widening his blue-stained eyes, Wellin took a half-step back. "What...what did you..."

The woman in black straightened, walking casually closer to Wellin. He slashed desperately with his one remaining blade, trying to ward her off.

The second knife clattered against the street, coming to rest next to the first. Tombstone still couldn't tell how it had gotten there.

When the woman reached Wellin, she lifted her foot and stomped Wellin's knee in. From the side. Didn't look like she put any special force in it, or that she was in a particular hurry, but the joint sounded like crunching bone as it crumbled.

Wellin opened his mouth for a scream, but she jabbed him in the side of the neck with something in her hand. A syringe? A needle? He couldn't see. Was this an *alchemist* who had come to get revenge for the workshop?

Tombstone's spark of hope flickered, and he began to push himself farther away, closer to the shadows underneath the nearest building. His only chance was to stay out of sight.

The woman pushed Wellin roughly to the cobblestones as he choked and coughed, trying to get out a scream.

She leaned down beside him, whispering in his ear. Tombstone was close enough that he could hear each word clearly.

"This is *my* workshop. If I ever catch you within a city block, I will enter your home through the window. You know, the one that creaks? The one with a crack in the corner? *That* window. I'll slip in and no one will hear me. While you sleep, I'll put a knife between your ribs. You'll never make a sound. No one will wake. They will find your body the next morning, soaked in your own blood."

Wellin whimpered, and Tombstone understood the impulse. He pressed himself against the far wall, his terror having returned in full force.

She walked over, picked up Wellin's knives, and then returned to crouching in front of him. She held the blades so he could see them.

"Also, if I ever see you pick these up again, I'll make you eat them."

She drove one of the knives down at the ground, and for a second Tombstone thought she had buried it to the hilt in Wellin's throat. But the man was still breathing, still staring wide-eyed at nothing, still struggling to scream.

The woman had wedged the knife in between two cobblestones, where the edge would be pressed against Wellin's neck.

She shoved the other knife down on the other side, pinning Wellin's throat between two blades. Then she stood up and walked away, closer to the workshop.

Tombstone couldn't believe his luck. His wounds burned as though his entire body had been dipped in fire, and his blood was leaking out more every second, but the woman had completely overlooked

him. He was free!

~~Without turning around, she threw a hand back at him, and something stung him in the shoulder. Perhaps a wasp.~~

He moved his hand up to find the tip of a needle buried in his flesh, the outer edge sheathed in a small wooden handle. Rather than a needle, it might have been better to call it an oversized pin.

Tombstone pulled it out and let it fall to the ground. All things considered, it wasn't too bad. Didn't hurt much worse than a pinprick, and she was still leaving him alone.

He noticed the poison only seconds later, when he realized he couldn't move his arm.

It spread like ice through his veins, locking up all his muscles. He lay on the stones seconds later, rigid as a board, forced to watch the woman in black walk up to the glowing rectangle of the workshop entrance.

He didn't know who she was. He didn't know what she wanted. But in his heart, he fervently swore to the Unknown God of the Luminian Order: *If I live through tonight, I'm never coming back here again.*

Someone called out from the inside of the workshop. "Hey, Fisher! Why is it so quiet?"

The woman walked through the workshop's open door. There were a few shouts.

A second later, the lights went out.

Even through his paralysis, Tombstone shuddered.

CHAPTER THREE

Fifteen years ago

GLADSTONE KIDNAPPER FOUND DEAD

During the early hours of yesterday morning, Rudeus Maxwell (previously known in this publication as the Gladstone Kidnapper) was found dead in his home, not two miles from the very same Gladstone Park in which he committed his fiendish crimes. Members of the public are no doubt fully acquainted with the infamous Kidnapper, who abducted some five dozen children from Gladstone Park and the surrounding areas over the course of his six-year career.

Professional investigators, Imperial troops, and the best Readers in the Empire failed to uncover any trace of the Kidnapper prior to yesterday's events, previously leading some to speculate that the "Gladstone Kidnapper" may have never existed at all. This theory has now been proven decidedly false, as Maxwell's corpse was discovered in the same house as many of the missing children.

The public should note that it was not an officer of the peace who discovered Maxwell's crimes, nor a judge who executed him. At an hour before dawn, members of the Consultant's Guild arrived at 75 Hanberry Street to investigate the suspicion of their clients. When they arrived on the premises, they found Maxwell's body still warm. It is presumed by Imperial investigators that the Kidnapper was dispatched by one of his own victims.

All the evidence needed to posthumously convict Rudeus Maxwell was found in his home, including the surviving handful of kidnapped children.

Forty-eight boys and girls were rescued by Capital police, and are currently residing in the local chapter house of the Consultant's Guild. If you believe your child may have been taken by the Kidnapper, please proceed to that location with all haste.

The name of the child who turned on his captor still has not been released.

Tapping her pen, Kerian regarded the child across the desk. The girl's feet didn't quite reach the floor.

"How old are you?" Kerian asked.

The girl leaned forward, eyeing the plate on Kerian's desk. Remnants of dinner still rested there—half-eaten pork sandwich and a handful of fried almonds, bought from a street vendor. Kerian had the meal brought to her while she worked, but she'd been too busy to finish.

Kerian handed over the food, and the girl snatched it away, sinking her teeth into the sandwich before she'd settled the plate on her lap. She closed her eyes, savoring the flavor.

"Mmmm. This is *real* pork. I can tell."

"How long has it been since you've eaten?" Kerian asked. She wouldn't put it past the Gladstone Kidnapper to have starved his victims.

Still chewing, the girl twisted her face in thought. "Lunch? No, wait; I stole some dates from the cart outside. About two hours ago."

"Oh."

The girl tore into the sandwich like a ravenous wolf, and Kerian elected to stick with her professional questions. “How old are you?”

The girl shrugged. “Not ten yet, I don’t think. The ten-year-olds got special treatment.”

Kerian put a question mark in her ledger next to ‘Age.’

“How long have you been with Mr. Maxwell?”

The pork sandwich had vanished, so the girl held up a single salted almond to the light, examining it with one eye shut like a jeweler holding a diamond. “A long time,” she said.

Kerian wrote another question mark next to ‘Length of Confinement.’

“Now, what’s your name?”

The girl popped another almond into her mouth. “Maxwell called me Shera.”

Kerian froze with her pen a half-inch from the ledger. That sounded suspiciously like an Am’haranai name.

Based on what the Shepherds observed and the Miners dug up, Rudeus Maxwell was a nobody. A malcontent who aspired to rebellion. He’d served in the Imperial army for almost ten years, but retired before the South Sea Revolution to inherit his family’s remaining fortune.

Judging from a handful of Maxwell’s letters the Consultants intercepted, some drunken talk with Mason in a nearby bar, and the testimony of Maxwell’s former squad members, it was good that he’d left the service when he had. He would have been more likely to join the Revolution than stay with the army.

That would not have ended well for him. The Emperor had signed the release—Baldezar Kern, Head of the Champion’s Guild, was taking the field. The South Sea Revolutionary Army would be little more than splinters and twisted iron by the end of the month.

But it seems there’s no escaping fate. Dead here, dead on a distant battlefield—Maxwell would never have made it into next week, no matter his choices.

Kerian made a note in the margins of her ledger: *Have someone Read his belongings.* She needed to know if he was imitating the Gardeners out of coincidence, obsession, or some secret knowledge.

If Rudeus Maxwell had been connected to the Consultants, then the Guild would have to answer some uncomfortable questions. As the Guild Representative for this chapter house, it would be up to Kerian to answer those questions.

“No family name?” Kerian asked, returning to her inquiries.

Shera shook her head.

Only Consultants, born on the Gray Island, had no family name. Kerian took a closer look at the girl. Black eyes, black hair down to the shoulders, pale skin...she was the typical breed of the Capital streets. Most of the Aurelian Capital’s more dignified citizens had dark Heartlander skin, like Kerian herself, but the peasants came from a hundred mixed breeds.

Shera might have had an Izyrian ancestor, probably several from Erin, and maybe a dozen other mingled bloodlines. Without a full name, it would be hard to place her.

“Maxwell called you Shera,” Kerian said. “What did your mother call you?”

Shera had finished her almonds, and was now staring intently at the sandwich crumbs on her plate. “Not much.”

“Where is she now?” Kerian asked.

“Dead, probably,” the girl said casually, placing a crumb of bread on her tongue.

Her voice sent a chill tickling down Kerian’s spine. No one so young should be so cavalier about death. She even *spoke* like a Gardener. “Why do you say that?”

“Maxwell said that’s what happens to Anthem addicts.”

Whatever other lies the Gladstone Kidnapper may have told his victims, in this one case, he’d spoken the truth. If Shera’s mother had been addicted to Anthem before the abduction, she would

likely have died in two or three years. Shera could have been gone for as many as six.

“What about any other family? Do you remember anything?”

Shera reluctantly placed the empty plate back on the desk. “No brothers, no sisters. I may have had a father once, but I think he went away.”

She didn't seem concerned about her fate. Instead, she craned her neck to see over the desk as if she expected to find another pork sandwich lurking in the shadows.

Next to ‘*Family Status*,’ Kerian noted, ‘*likely deceased*.’

She hesitated before asking the next question. This was the important one, the reason why she had left Shera for last, after all the other children had been returned to their parents or to the care of the Empire.

“Do you know what happened to Mr. Maxwell?” Kerian asked.

All the other children had responded the same way to this question: they had shifted uneasily in their seat and pretended to know nothing. Some of them had glanced at Shera, but none had said a word.

Shera looked Kerian in the eyes as she answered. “I killed him,” she said.

Kerian tapped her pen against the ledger, next to the words ‘*Relevant Testimony*.’

“Why?” she asked.

“He shot a friend of mine,” Shera said. “We were only supposed to kill people who deserved it. I thought he deserved it.”

In her mind's eye, Kerian saw the dead girl with the bullet-wound and the blue ribbon. “How did you feel, once you killed him?”

Shera's eyebrows furrowed. “Hungry. I hadn't had dinner yet.”

Kerian rubbed the scar on her forehead, a nervous habit. She'd earned that scar when a client turned on her with his saber in lieu of payment, slicing her face straight down the middle from hairline to the tip of her jaw. She had overlooked his past as a professional duelist.

In other words, she'd earned the scar for being careless.

The Consultant placed her pen on the desk. “Shera. Do you have anywhere else you can go?”

“I'll find someplace. Do you have another sandwich?”

“No brothers or sisters? No relatives of any kind?”

The girl looked back at her, eyes flat and dead. “Why?”

Kerian tore the page out of her ledger, folding it in half, and then in half once more. The Council of Architects might not appreciate this, but Kerian herself would have a seat on the Council soon. And technically speaking, she already had the authority. Even if no one expected her to exercise it.

“Shera, I think you should come with me. I believe I can find you a place to stay.”

The girl tilted her head in curiosity. “Am I going to live with you?”

“Something like that,” Kerian said. She pulled a match from her desk, flicking it to life against the striker. She lifted the paper, letting the flame catch the folded corner and spread like spilled water. Kerian tossed the paper to the ground, watching as the only record of Shera's existence burned to ash.

“Tell me, have you ever been on a ship?”

~~~

Shera woke up lying on a nest of empty bags and coiled rope. A woman stood over her: brown skin, black hair in a hundred tiny braids, and a white scar passing down the center of her face.

*Kerian*, she remembered. The Consultant.

The slick wooden floor and the salty tang in the air reminded her that they were riding in the belly of a ship. On their way out of the Capital, the place she'd lived her entire life, and toward a place that Kerian called the Gray Island.

And none of that mattered quite so much as getting back to sleep.



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