



The Uncrucified

An **Exalted** fanfiction
by Angela R. Sasser

The Un-crucified

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Foreword

Let it be known in the chill of Resplendant Air of RY 765, I began this memoir a scant time after settling into the freshly built shack that would become the first guild hall of the Pristine Guild, the guild I built from the shattered hopes and dreams I had left in me. It would rise from stick and mud beginnings just as I have from the dusts of the South to a grand path that lies before me.

Already, those who would tear this place down and reclaim this city and its people have been beaten back. The strings of destiny knot here in this place full of the undeniable passion of the free and the awe-inspiring golden warriors that I somehow find myself numbered among.

May this document be proof that I, Kalara Vadras, daughter of Ahrun the Seeker, lived in this moment in Creation for a cause larger than myself. For any who may discover these words after my death, let them serve as a lens through the myopia of time and memory. This is my story and my cause. Let it be yours, if you have courage and understanding.

Entry I - A Cautionary Tale

It was told to me by the other slaves when I was old enough to understand that my parents had been lost to a great plague that had passed through the South, taking the rich and poor alike. I knew no more of them but smiling faces and distant lullabies.

And so it was that I grew up a child of random handlers, slaves who took the moments out of their full days to teach me how to avoid a beating or showed me the rare surrogate affection. I was also a child of labor, working long hours running to and from the market retrieving whatever needed retrieving, cleaning, sweeping, and crawling into dangerous spaces only a child could fit for machine repairs and mining operations. My lullabies became the murmured tales of Dream-Eaten¹, slaves who returned from the Fey lands soulless and hollow. Tales of their misfortune lulled me to required darkness with their moral. Be a good little slave, for that is how one survived.

¹ Dream-Eaten - The dream-eaten are mortals who have been sold to the Fey, who in this world devour the dreams of the living. Fey wish to destroy all Creation that encroaches on their chaos. Slaves are often sold to Fey for an easy profit, after which their soulless husks are returned, compliant shells of their former selves who are used for menial labor.

There were worse duties for slaves, like the dead-eyed 'dolls' I saw sometimes in the pleasure quarters or the wretched soot-covered chain gangs who worked the mines. I kept my head down and continued cleaning, sweeping, and crawling. I did whatever was asked of me in fear of the hazy definition of what 'worse than this' could mean.

It was on an unremarkable run to the marketplace for the usual errands that my love affair with flame pieces² began. I was trying to reach the grocer's booth when I found the way blocked by an unusual congestion in the market traffic. I managed to squeeze my way through the cheering crowd lined along the main street to catch my first glimpse of them - The Ashen Guard³.

They marched in formation down the street, their grey cloaks flowing in the warm wind, the hot sun glinting on their bayonets and pale, colorless armor. They had just returned from their latest victory against a raider's camp.

For those not of the South, it is said the Ashen Guard defended the city of Gem from a terrible siege undertaken in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption. Their elite regimen was tasked to ambush the raiders while the town rallied a defense. Inspired by the tactics of desert outlaws, they buried themselves in the ash, using breathing tubes and periscopes to stay hidden until their enemies were just within arm's reach. Then, they sprang, decimating their surprised enemies!

Oh, how my boundless child's imagination created stories about their adventures! I imagined myself riding full tilt atop a white horse in pale armor, ashen cloak flowing behind me, firing off that single impossible shot through the eye of a needle to fell my enemies. I was a ghost in the sands, a hero of the city!

Even then, those who owned me could not contain my imagination. Fate has come full circle. My guns defend Dinas Rhydd, this city of freed slaves. Despite my own reservations, I've found myself numbered among its heroes. How I would have smiled then if I knew what was to come to me as a grown woman. Instead, I only had my daydreams and cautionary tales to get me through those bitter nights.

Throughout my adolescence, I would be passed along from one master or another, some kind, some cruel. All owned me as they would a dog or a horse, no matter their intentions for good or ill. I daydreamed too much to be diligent and gambling problems in the city of Gem meant I was always being sold to cover debts or won in games of chance. However, it was one such master who acquired my contract in a game of cards when I was 16 who would, despite it all, do me a most unexpected favor.

² Firewands (aka. Flame Pieces) - Essentially medieval type barrel loading handguns which spout streams of fire after being loaded with firedust, this world's equivalent of gunpowder. They are a prized and expensive luxury in this world.

³ The Ashen Guard - A specialized mercenary core native to the city of Gem in the hot desert lands of the South. They are known for their famed skills with guns and strategy.

I was bought and sold without even a chance to bid farewell to my home town or my friends there. Attachments were always a dangerous thing to nurture in this life, for they could be stripped away, along with the rest of your identity, at the merest whim.

I became the property of Cynis⁴ Varia, a churlish man with a small amount of weight to his name (and his girth). A terrible gambling habit coupled with failed business ventures had resulted in his unofficial banishment to the city of Chariascuro.

For an Imperial from the Blessed Isle, I would learn that this was quite a disgraceful place for any noble, a fact Varia's wife, Sana, would remind me of constantly with her tantrums that often ended up unleashing upon myself or the other household slaves with the broadside of a light, but sharp, carved bone swatter she used to keep away the flies. We 'lovingly' called it 'her sharp tongue'.

Varia did not improve his gambling habit upon becoming an unlikely citizen of Gem. It was a day like any other day avoiding Sana and finding housework to do as far away from her as possible that I found myself pulled aside and ordered to begin learning numbers and letters from a tutor. My tutor was a thin, bespectacled man who seemed allergic to my presence with his constant sniffing and upturned nose at my person. His great intellect was wasted on a slave such as me, which he never ceased to remind me of when I answered incorrectly.

I was terrified at first. Why was I being forced to take on these extra duties? Was it a strange sort of punishment? Had I done something wrong? Learning how to read certainly seemed like a punishment, at first, but I couldn't deny the fact that a whole new world began to appear around me.

What once were cryptic symbols I had no time to ponder on became points of fascination as the cipher of literacy began to fall in place, piece by piece. Fate would have it that I was a quick study, so much so that I could swear having seen a small glimmer of approval of my progress in my tutor's face one day.

Soon my terror would peak, however, when master Varia came and fetched me himself, gathering us quickly into a palanquin to go I knew not where. Understanding began to creep in as he brusquely explained that we were going to a meeting. I was to be his hand servant while he played a game of chance. If the cards of his opponents were favorable numbers in a certain range, I would ask if he would like me to fetch his drink. If they weren't, I would scratch my nose.

His request was so surreal, I could do nothing but float through the night as if in a dream, daring not to mess up his instructions for fear of terrible punishment. Surprisingly, the numbers made sense and I quickly picked up on the rules of the game.

⁴ House Cynis - One of the Great Houses of the Scarlet Dynasty and the Blessed Isle. House Cynis has a deserved reputation for debauchery and perversion. Its power rests largely on its ability to provide slaves, drugs, and other vices to the Realm as well as the secrets it often learns through these activities.

My performance was so flawless, Varia's schemes with me as his gambling tool became more complicated as time went on. In a relatively short while, I was counting cards and creating elaborate signals to notify him by. I became his 'lucky charm', as he called it. I foolishly enjoyed the reprieve from my regular duties then, relishing the glimpse of uptown and its high class lifestyle and my usual prize of a good meal that didn't consist of table scraps. Varia even gifted me with a nicer set of clothes to attend the games at one point.

I should have known such joy was tenuous, for when Sana found out, she got the idea in her head that his outings with me went deeper than gambling, that I had somehow become a target of her husband's illicit affections.

To prove her claim false and that I was nothing more than a tool for his games of chance, Varia gave me eleven lashes with her 'sharp tongue', enough so that I passed out before the end. I still carry the scars like a lightning strike across my back to remind me to this day.

Shortly after, wounds barely healed, I was hastily hauled off to the slave market where yet another person would become the master of my destiny. That was the end of my tenure as Cynis Varia's 'Lucky Charm'.

Despite all of this, I still feel a strange form of gratitude to Varia. No matter the reasons, he opened up a world of knowledge to me I might never have known.

The next person to buy a part of my life would be like any other master, at first, but he would change me forever. We would change one another.

Entry II – The Delightful Heretic

I took my exile from Varia's household harder than I could have ever anticipated. I was like a man lost in the desert who had finally had a taste of water on his lips. The taste of being treated like a human being, even if I was being used by someone for their own gain, had been such a sweet taste. But now? I was chattel once more. Literacy had afforded me a position as a 'permanent resident employee' of my new master, Ahrun Vadras', for who was Cynis to resist bartering me away at a good price with his tutelage and training of my person as a selling point? I suppose I should have been thankful that I was not sold cheap to a far worse fate with his wife's ire to consider.

In this new, strange part of my life, I lived in a small room that doubled as storage for dusty curiosities and helped organize the rooms and offices of his large estate and business which I traveled back and forth to as commanded. The city of Nexus was an intricate nest of roads and markets that led into dark and secret nooks of slums and gambling houses. I missed the dry warmth of the South and hated this loud, hungry city full of dank catacombs and two-faced merchants.

Even more, my mind was consumed by what I had lost and the strangest sense of betrayal that still made my scarred back ache at night. I became so restless and bitter, I began not to care about consequences. So it was I started to sneak into master Vadras' study at night when the household slept. I would wait until the glow of candles disappeared from the shadow of his door, which was sometimes a challenge unto itself with as much as the man would work late. More often than naught, my willpower won out and I managed to stay awake longer than he could balance his books. The tomes in his study were the most forbidden pleasures to me. They beckoned me from the first day I set foot into the household and spied their gilded leatherette spines from the hall. Sadly, my limited vocabulary only granted me partial understanding of the more complex tomes, their colorful illustrations allowing me to glean just a bit more.

My favorite book that I returned to time and time again had an intricately embossed cover dyed jade green and adorned with dragons trimmed with gold powder. I loved the feel of the textured cover under my fingers and the painstakingly detailed illustrations within. I'd huddle with this precious tome under a chair keeping a single small candle nearby and hoping nobody would spy its light. This well-loved tome, as far as I could translate with my limited skills, told the story of The Thousand Thunderous Burning Cranes, a beautiful concubine turned warrior who raised an army against her unjust lords. Her adventures led her across snow-covered mountains where dragons coiled and cursed waterfalls where demons dwelled. My teenage imagination began to stir with purpose and ambition again. What if such a warrior came this city and wreaked havoc here? I would join her army as quick as that, facing demons with her at the fore!

As a sidenote, one day I will mention these adventures to our Commander Demiato⁵,

⁵ Cathak Demiato - A Player Character from our campaign, an accomplished Realm soldier who withdrew into self-exile after her Exaltation, taking a contingent of loyal soldiers with her. She manages the defense of the free city of Dinas Rhydd and works to atone for the atrocities committed in her past.

the Cathak bearing the mark of Dawn that leads the defense of our newborn city. Then perhaps she might understand just how her fearless intervention in preventing the reclamation of the slaves of Dinas Rhydd inspired me so. Just like a hero from a fairy tale, she brought us, and me, hope that we could change our fates. Her fearlessness is infectious, though she seems so unaware of the effect she has on those who would follow her into fire, a fact that makes me respect her even more.

However, one night whilst re-reading the adventures of The Thousand Thunderous Burning Cranes for quite possibly the 24th time, I heard the unexpected sound of boots in the hallway! I blew my candle out as quick as I could and huddled myself into the smallest ball I could under the chair, clutching the book to my chest.

It was master Vdras, muttering to himself with a candle in hand as he shuffled through papers, annoyed that he couldn't find what he was looking for.

My mind raced! If he saw me, I would be punished. I should hide! But then what if he noticed me anyways? Surely he would smell the smoke from my candle. I was certain he could sense the rebellious thoughts I had been thinking only minutes ago. Better to ask forgiveness! I panicked and did the only thing I could think of...

...I threw myself out from under the chair, diving into a deep bow of apology atop the 'stolen' book and shouting "Forgive me, master, I was only looking at it!"

I scared Ahrun so badly, he dropped his candle and jumped back with a high pitched shout of an unintelligible word. I stayed with my head planted into the book, kneeling, as he cleared his throat, recovering his glasses and shining the light over me, assessing the situation with what was no doubt the judgment of someone who would punish me with a thousand tiny cuts, a hundred withheld meals, or worse, for having stolen his property (even if I hadn't even made it out the door). Surely he would think I was stealing!

To understand my initial fear of Ahrun Vdras, you must know him. Back then, he looked an unassuming middle-aged man, lithe and well-kept with long white hair bound in a ponytail. The shine of his reading glasses always seemed to hide his intent. It was his unassuming nature that I always assumed hid darker things. His meticulousness also scared me, for nothing good had ever come of meticulous men in my past up to that point. They were always planning something else I would never expect.

"Child..." I heard his smooth, but annoyed voice intone. "...are you truly trying to steal...a book?"

"No, s-sir, master Vdras. I only meant to read it!" I shouted without thinking too much about my response, my forehead pressed to the book's cover. I could feel his eyes on my exposed back, no doubt pondering which fingers he should break for stealing.

"Hah...do you even know the one you're holding?" I could feel his smirk in the

darkness.

“The...um...” I actually didn’t know the title. There were words in it I hadn’t learned yet. “The Glorious Adventures of the Thousand Thunderous Burning Cranes!” I tried to answer as best I could with my own embellishments to fill in the gaps of knowledge. In my nervousness, I literally shouted the answer back at him.

There came silence and then a most unexpected sound. A laugh. “That should be *The Heretical Tales of The Thousand Thunderous Blazing Cranes*.” He corrected with ease. I finally looked up and slowly sat back on my haunches, staring at him, dazed and confused.

Vadras continued. “If you are to read in such a manner, especially from such a priceless tome, you shall do it during my afternoon studies. Do you understand?” I could only continue to stare and blink with my face a pale fearful, blank.

“No professor of the Luminous Academy, even a retired one, would ever deprive a hungry mind of a book. Even a ‘thief!’” Vadras, calm now, joking even, returned to shuffling through his papers and spoke next without even looking at me. “Now, return to your quarters.”

I obeyed without a single word or moment of hesitation, carefully placing the book back on his desk and keeping my body bent in an apologetic bow even after I was out of sight. I would barely be able to sleep, my wide eyes plastered on the ceiling as questions burned through my young overimaginative mind. Would he really not punish me for this? Even more, would he actually really and truly let me read in his study? It was unheard of!

True to his word, Vadras let me read in his study afterwards while he processed his day’s accountings. Soon enough, he couldn’t resist his own urge to help me with my readings, the night’s sessions turning into full on lessons when he had the time, though it never felt like kindness, but Vadras’ own inability to suffer ignorance or resist a retired teacher’s old habits. Back then, I swear he could feel my frustration as a silently struggled over words and, like any good teacher, he just could not abide that.

Thinking back on this first true impression of the man who would become my teacher and father, I can but smile at the ironies. Knowing what I know, I know the reason why the Thousand Thunderous Blazing Cranes was always limned in gold leaf with the curious symbol of the sun etched into her forehead. I know now the extreme peculiarity of the man who would become my father, a man who would deign to let a slave read and let her even dream for a minute through the stories in a book.

Not to mention the fact Ahrun Vadras was such a man who had heretical and very illegal books in his library. He was a rebel long before I ever convinced him to be so with my foolishness.

Entry III – The Unexpected Treasure

I couldn't have guessed at this stage in my life as a teen verging on adulthood exactly when Vadras' tolerance of my curiosity and taste for learning turned into affection. For sure, I made myself as useful as possible to him in hopes that he would never find a reason to banish me from the wonders of his study. While I had an appetite for books, it was mathematics that I took to like a bird to the air. This proficiency had only just begun to take root under Cynis' instruction, but under Vadras, it bloomed with voracity! I was his constant shadow in nearly all of his business dealings, checking measures and pointing out incorrect calculations in currency conversions, not all of which were made innocently. This aptitude seemed to please Vadras most of all.

I kept waiting for him to ask me to accompany him to other darker dealings, to venture with him into Nexus' underbelly and find a way to cheat his competitors. I was sure that he would, as Cynis had, find some way to use me in immoral ways for his own benefit, but to my surprise, he never did.

For all intents and purposes, despite my own doubts that I could ever think such of any master, Ahrun Vadras seemed a forthright and fair man who made his fortune from exploration, his unparalleled skills in cartography, and the sale of antique and rare curiosities which he procured on his expeditions. He was known throughout the Guild for his stern demeanor and the shrewd fairness of his dealings. As a Merchant Prince⁶, he managed several caravan rotations along with a few shops in the district that sold his refurbished antiques, maps, and other niche services.

I kept wanting to find reasons to hate him for the mere fact that my only other recourse was to accept life the way it was. I was a slave whose future was always what other people would make of it. I should hate him on principal, but I never could. His kindness, or at the very least, his fair treatment when compared to other masters, made me comfortable and complacent. I had a place in the world as his assistant, even if I slept in the storage rooms. There were other fates far worse than this. I adjusted well to the rhythm of business meetings, the exodus of his modest caravan, and quiet nights reading in his studies as he poured over his day's accountings, his glasses gleaming with concentration in the candlelight.

Expeditions were always an exciting time in the household. Vadras would be gone for weeks, sometimes months, at a time only to return with fanfare from the entire estate bearing crates of wondrous oddities he would spend the next few months studying and inventorying with my aid. He would never let me tinker with the strange curiosities he brought home, however, no matter how my curiosity and wide eyes burned over his shoulder. Sometimes he'd bring home broken tech from the ages past or old toys unearthed from gods know where so he could study and replicate the design.

⁶ Merchant Prince - The most successful and highly regarded Guildsmen of the Merchant branch of the Guild, Creation's largest mercantile organization.

Finally, my burning, silent, pleading curiosity became too much and Vadras decided to include me with a nonchalant, “Kalara, I suppose you should come along and manage the supplies. Haro is making a complete mess of it and I think he needs a vacation from the stress.” Unsurprising, considering Master Vadras was also known for having an insatiable curiosity of his own that often led him down the more dangerous paths most explorers usually shied away from. Hired help cycled through fairly often. Many couldn’t stomach the risks he liked to take.

Even knowing all this, I was elated at the opportunity! I spent day and night for a month making sure every supply we could ever want for was included, probably to an extraneous degree. Vadras seemed pleased and in a matter of days, we had set off on my very first expedition! Our humble inconspicuous caravan included myself, Vadras, a small escort of mercenaries, and a trusted excavation crew. The floodplain countryside of Nexus with its silent brooding statues of the Emissaries faded away into the rocky territories of Lookshy. I was finally able to enjoy these sights without being stuffed into a wagon of countless unfortunate souls. I rode at Vadras’ side, trusted and valued.

I wouldn’t know it at the time, but we weren’t exactly welcome legal company in the area. Vadras secured our passage along the roads with honeyed words and greased palms. I was too caught up in the excitement to be scared or to care overmuch. When we were camped one evening, I noticed the glint of the mother of pearl inlaid grip of a firewand tucked inside Vadras’ robe. He must have felt my curious stare because he smiled and drew the flame piece, holding it out where I could better view it in the firelight.

“It was a gift from Arbani Halan⁷ for a most fortuitous arrangement involving a dig in Gem.” Vadras continued smiling his subdued smile, delighted by my slack-jawed wonder as I gazed upon the most exquisite craftsmanship I had ever seen. “Would you like to see how it works?” I nodded, still dumbstruck by the seamless integration of swirling elegance with function. Another part of me wanted to ask Vadras about his adventures in my homeland, but I was too distracted by the offering of beautiful craftsmanship that symbolized something from a distant childhood daydream I had almost forgotten.

To my complete and utter surprise, he led me to the side and placed the piece in my hand. The grip was even more cool and exquisite than I could imagine! I wasn’t thinking about how much trust it must have taken for Vadras to put a firewand in a slave’s hand. I wasn’t thinking about anything remotely as radical as shooting my master and escaping. I wasn’t thinking about how this firewand and the firedust needed for its operation were worth more than my life. All I knew at that moment were the cold beautiful carvings and far off childhood dreams of the gunslinging Ashen ghosts.

Ever the teacher, Vadras merely continued to explain the procedure for packing the

⁷ Arbani Halan - An impressive craftsman and sharpshooter, head of House Arbani in Gem. He runs one of the few mortal organizations in Creation which has the knowledge to build superior firewands. They guard their secrets closely.

firedust in the barrel and the form and function of the hammer and ignition. He held my unsteady hands and guided them to aim at a stray rock stack that made for a perfect practice target. The loud pop and short burst of fire that emerged made me squeal with fright and excitement all at once! I could only stand there grinning with glee and staring at the stream of smoke trailing out from the barrel before Vadras removed the firewand from my dazed grip with an amused snort. "Well, I am at least glad to see enthusiasm for such 'inefficient' weapons!"

He laughed and rambled on for half the night about the advantages and disadvantages of the firewand versus the bow and arrow and how his theorized modifications might improve the design of the firewand if only the Arbani would let him in on their clan secrets.

I listened with rapt attention, my mind abuzz with the possibilities and remembered fantasies.

We reached the dig site within Vadras' projected timetable and things moved quickly. Camp was secured and his team of trained experts disappeared into a yawning opening in the side of a sheer cliff face grown over with vines. Strange luminescent flowers bloomed on vines that grew out from the opening, a hint of the wonders within. Unfortunately, because of my inexperience, I was doomed to sit outside staring fervently at the entrance wishing I could go in with them. I endured hours of staring with no sign of anything, eventually deciding I should make myself useful and water the horses and refill our canteens at the nearby river.

It was in the midst of returning from my ever so boring task that I heard the voices of the mercenaries echoing across the canyon. "Are you sure all of the charges are set?"

"I've got them around the entrance." His companion responded. "Vadras won't see it coming. That'll teach him to cross Vaator Lex!"

I didn't even think, my body moved on its own. I could hear Vadras and his crew coming back up to the entrance. Caught unawares, the traitorous mercenaries could only watch in surprise as I ran as fast as I could past the rocks they had chosen for cover and threw myself towards the entrance, waving my arms emphatically and shouting to Vadras to turn back before the entrance blew.

I saw Vadras' confused face as I appeared in his path just as the bomb blasts detonated behind us. A loud pop and a flash was all I could hear before I felt the concussive force throw my body forward into him, a hot rain of shrapnel hitting my back as the world went dark.

I awoke a day or so later, the lull of horse hooves and the caravan a small comfort for the wracking pain that kept me in a tight cocoon of immobility. No sooner than I had

come to than Vadras was there, talking gently and instructing me not to move. In his over-informative manner, he went through the list of injuries. A concussion, embedded shrapnel, internal bleeding. "You saved me, Kalara." He said at last. "You saved me from the brunt of it. Why did you do that?"

He seemed perplexed and I had no answer for him but hot, pain-induced tears and some unspoken emotion I was afraid to admit to. I owed him so much for something so little. To be able to dream again, to be able to feel like a person again, to be able to learn and grow. These were all gifts he had given me. Little gifts that most people took for granted.

Apparently while I was unconscious, Vadras had found a hidden passage from the ruins. All the while, he chose to take this scrap of a foolish slave along with him, despite the fact my limp body slowed them down and made it so his betrayers escaped without punishment.

Unfortunately, the simple fact of the matter was that I was going to die from my injuries and we were leagues away from any settlement that we could safely stop in. Somehow, Vadras still had hope. "Just hang on a little longer." He said with gentle encouragement. I felt his hand holding mine. "There's someone who can help." I couldn't respond and tell him how I felt, how grateful I was. To speak invited too much sensation.

And so Vadras spoke instead, soothing and distracting me from the minutes that dragged out to eternal hours where I didn't think I could hold on past the pain or the injuries that ate away at my body's ability to function. He spoke of the days when he was still a teacher at the Luminous Academy and his many adventures as a young, exuberant man. He spoke of his wife and child - a daughter I had never heard of until now.

She would have been my age, I learned, if they hadn't succumbed to the blue death that had taken them while on an expedition. He couldn't teach any more after that and instead buried himself in his business ventures. It wasn't till I snuck into his study and reminded him what it was like to show an eager young mind the wonders of discovery that a spark of passion had re-ignited in him again.

His steady voice and the ever-present grip of his hand kept me in this world until we made a stop far off the beaten path at a secluded hovel. There, a beautiful woman with amber eyes stopped the pain with a touch of her hands. I remember thinking it was a trick of the light that her fingers seemed to be glowing gold.

We would return home not entirely empty-handed. His prize from the excavation was a pair of pristine firewands the likes of which even Vadras had never seen before. They weren't at all like the wood and iron ones he possessed, as lovely as I thought they

were. Their frames were struck in orichalcum⁸ and chased with elegant script etchings and runes. Each gun's grip had a peculiar hollow in the bottom of it, as if they were beckoning to be filled with something equally wondrous.

Vadras would display these twin guns proudly over his mantle on a custom-made mount until the day I would take them down, the day I left Nexus. The day of his funeral and the day of my execution. But that is a story for another entry.

⁸ Orichalcum - A precious metal and magical material gold in color and purified by the Unconquered Sun's power. This metal is used in crafting materials for Solar Exalted and is highly prized.

Entry IV – Name Day

When I met the young men who would become my loyal bodyguards and ‘little brothers’, they were barely older than children. Arc and Night Locust⁹ appeared one day on my path through the countryside, two of many lost souls that gathered in our makeshift caravan seeking the thin thread of hope that was the road to the free city of Dinas Rhydd. I didn’t pay much attention to them, at first. They were another pair of unfortunates in an unending stream that never ceased to trickle from the Threshold.

It wasn’t until we were held up by highwaymen that I learned the truth. I had thought I could talk my way out of anything and tried to negotiate our passage with strong words. Everything started to fall apart when a member of the impatient thugs grabbed one of the girls by the arm and started dragging her away. Before I could even draw my weapon, Arc and Night struck like lightning from the shadows behind the ragtag band. They played off each other with ease, one of them diverting attention with a flashy rain of throwing daggers while the other struck stealthily from behind. Their antics proved lethal for more than a few of the thieves.

I watched them more carefully after that, observing their quiet conversations and marveling at the deadly skill of mere children. I learned later that they were what I suspected, child assassins sold into servitude in Nexus. They were useful tools for implanting unsuspecting children in the midst of their targets, for who would think twice about such an insignificant servant? I had been one of those invisible souls only a lifetime ago.

I remember their hollow smiles and the way they played with killing instruments as if they were toys. It made my blood run cold and sometimes it still does.

Knowing Night and Arc as I do now, I know what living as slaves did to them. To be sure, they are grown boys now. War made them so. But they grew with no affection, no hope, no delight in the simple things in the world around them. Not until they saw what freedom was truly like. In many ways, slave children are stillborn. Our bodies operate on survival instinct. We breathe. We eat. We sleep. We work. But our spirits do not grow. Our emotions remain small, shriveled, unborn. Meeting the boys made me remember just how lucky I was that someone who would be a father to me showed me what it was like to be loved, to be born as a human again.

⁹ Night Locust and Arc of Silence, Player Character & NPC, respectively.

Arc of Silence - The younger counterpart to the child assassin team of himself and Night Locust. Arc is an excitable teenage ninja with a flowing scarf who enjoys inspiring people.

Night Locust - The older counterpart to the child assassin team of himself and Arc of Silence. He's the more serious of the two, despite being a prankster in his own right. His final test as a slave-assassin was to kill his partner, Arc, but he couldn't bring himself to do so and, instead, Exalted as a Night Caste, killed his master, and escaped with Arc to freedom, where they later encountered Kalara on her path.

After my recovery from the injuries of that first fateful dig with Ahrun, things changed at the estate. I was given my own room instead of the dusty storeroom I had previously called my quarters. This new room felt too big and lonely, as if it would swallow me up with its emptiness. I was far too used to cramped spaces by that point.

Most perplexing of all, Vadras had informed me that he no longer had time to give me lessons personally, a fact that greatly saddened me. I was to begin lessons at the academy with other future initiates of the Guild. It was a waste, he had said, for my talents to be spent merely on ledgers and housekeeping.

The night before I was to begin my first day at the academy, Vadras came to my room and stood at my bedside, his hands clasped behind his back. I pretended like I wasn't crawling out of my own skin with nervousness. What was he thinking sending me to the academy? It was no place for someone like me, even if it was meant to better train me as a servant. But I kept all of these doubts tidily hidden under a 'I will do my best, master' when he asked how I was feeling about the notion.

And that's when Ahrun Vadras produced a tart with a candle on it from behind his back. Honey and hazelnut and pine nuts! It was my favorite pastry from the South. Confused, I merely took the plate in my hands and stared blankly back at Vadras.

"I wasn't sure of your age, so I figured today was as good as any." He steepled his fingers together and took a seat on the side of the bed.

I still only stared. When my confusion became evident, he seemed embarrassed, but quickly hid the fact with words.

"Why, happy name day, of course! Since I couldn't find the date in your papers, I figured today was as good a day as any." He pointed to the candle and made a motion. "Blow this out."

I followed the command without thinking, as I had been trained, and, to my surprise, found half a tart shoved into my mouth. I chewed, still confused, but pleasantly distracted by tastes that reminded me of familiar spaces.

"I don't understand, Master Vadras,...my name day?" I tried to eat daintily in front of him, but I failed miserably, getting crumbs everywhere and hastily trying to clean them up after.

"Yes, a birthday! Today, my girl, you will be called Vadras officially. I've already sent off the missives." He smiled, pleased with himself. "Kalara, I would like it if...that is to say...you are willing. I would like it if you became...my ward." He stumbled over his words, Vadras more nervous and ill composed as I had ever seen him.

I stopped chewing, stunned, crumbs still littering my face. He seemed to take my pause

as an answer in the negative and became vaguely flustered.

“I suppose I should have asked first. I’m sorry but I...oh!” Vadras had no time to finish when he found himself caught in a tight embrace. I had no words for this kindness. They weren’t in my vocabulary. I could only manage tears and quiet, feeble words.

“Please don’t wake up...”

The words made no sense to Vadras till it dawned on him that I was telling myself not to wake up from this blissful dream. The realization made him return the hug with unexpected tenderness.

“Oh, my girl, you gave me my life...what kind of businessman would I be if I did not return the favor?” I could feel his smile on my neck. “Now, eat the rest of the tart and clean up! You want to be alert for your first day.” He finally rose from my side, handed me the plate, and casually straightened the sheets and fluffed the pillow as a way to channel his own nervousness.

“Thank you,...master.” Stunned as I was, I could only mutter one of many trained responses of gratitude as Vadras turned to leave. At the word ‘master’, he stopped, though, and spoke without turning around.

“Maybe one day, when it feels right, you might call me ‘father’ instead...” He bowed his head and sighed to himself. I could see he wanted to turn back again, but he kept himself facing away. “Goodnight, Kalara.”

I ate the rest of my tart in silence and my dread for the next day fell away. If this was a dream, I was happy to stay asleep. For once, I would be the one in charge of where the dream led me.

It would take me about a year to stop calling Ahrun ‘Master Vadras’, and even then, I simply called him ‘Ahrun’. That changed one unexpected day, a day that would simultaneously be one of the most terrible and amazing days of my time in school that I can recall.

I had been summoned to the dean’s office after an incident with three of my classmates. They had cornered me one day, as they often had, to pick at my ‘dirty’ complexion, mock the Guild brand I hid under bracelets, and remind me that I never should for one moment believe that I belonged in the Guild’s prime academy for up and coming managers. I was offal to them, former property. I had no place in the same institution as them.

They made one mistake that day that was different from other days. They threw my books in a puddle and broke the handmade abacus that had been gifted to me by Ahrun.

Those pampered, prissy, overfed brats weren't prepared for the flurry of anger and lifetime of repressed rebellion that I unloaded on them that day!

Of course they used the opportunity to point out to the dean my unruliness and uncouth character. When I came into the office, Ahrun had already arrived and his dark, stone expression sucked out any self-righteous indignation I had prepared beforehand. I was dismissed almost as soon as I came in with the dean satisfied that I would 'receive proper education' at Vadras' hand.

We sat in complete silence during the palanquin ride. I began to open my mouth, but Vadras only motioned with a raised hand that I should stop right there. He continued to sit with crossed arms and an expression that gave away nothing. I realized soon after that we weren't going home. My heart began to race. Where were we going? Even after all of that time of living as his ward instead of his slave, I still feared discipline whenever I displeased him, moreso because I still feared, deep down, that he would one day be tired of me and decide it was easier to keep me as a slave.

Soon enough, we arrived at a nice house off the market district. To my surprise, one of my offending classmates, who was still nursing a black eye, opened the door. She was completely reduced to jabbering 'yes sir's at the sight of Vadras, who I sometimes forgot was one of the most powerful men in the district. Ahrun Vadras making a house call for anything other than business dealings, research, or a meet and greet was unheard of.

I sat and watched, bewildered in stunned silence, as Vadras spoke to my classmate's parents and in his usual courteous, but terse manner, informed them that if I was bothered or distracted from my studies again that they would find the price of jade and linen would triple for their enterprises. They would also find that their currency would no longer be accepted at several banks and establishments.

We made two other stops that night with similar speeches being given at the houses of my other offending classmates.

When we arrived home some time later, Ahrun simply called for dinner to be prepared, making sure that my favorite foods would be on the menu that night.

I could only throw my arms around him and cry with amazement. "You are the best dad!" I nearly choked him with gratitude.

"I know." He grinned his subdued little smile and continued on. Business as usual.

When I returned to my studies at the academy the next day, much to the dean's surprise, fearful murmurs followed me wherever I went. I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy that aura of fearsome mystique they were painting on me.

I was Kalara Vadras and that name meant something now. I returned to my studies, business as usual.

Entry V – The Last Night

Before our eyes, Dinas Rhydd has raised itself from mud and sticks to wood and brick, weathering armies and invasion like the oldest mountain stone. It grows as life will on the old bones of a great city that once toiled beneath our feet. My Pristine Guild weaves a golden thread through it, tying outpost to outpost, smithy to baker, heart to heart. Only now do I understand the power of this golden web. Like silk, it seems fragile, but holds strong the fabric of Creation.

I realize now how little I understood about this balance as a young woman, fresh from school and full of plans and ideals. I could only see a small part of the weave and attempt to pluck at it without any knowledge of how everything beyond my small vision changed when I did so.

Despite entering the academy with an unorthodox educational background, I graduated top of my class, even managing to gain the respect of a few of those poor jeering souls that had tormented me upon my first arrival. With my father's sponsorship, my membership to the Guild became a surety.

And then I learned the special kind of torment that was the droll, mindless monotony of working as a clerk in the Administrative branch. I tried to remind myself that every scribe and clerk had to pay their dues and earn their keep to become a Factor¹⁰ before our voices could truly be heard. Instead, the reality was a self-perpetuating system of seniority and complacency that kept the Administrators where they were and the young, eager clerks toiling away in shackles of paperwork and drudgery. I made friends in mutual agony at the branch, but I knew in my bones this life was not my place in the world.

Ahrun would be my savior again by allowing me to become the head of operations for his excavations and shops, expanding my reputation even further than the Administrative branch as a sharp-eyed manager with shrewdness that equaled my father's. If there was one thing I learned about the world then, it was that reputation meant nearly as much, if not more, than skill and financial backing.

For as much as my father trusted me, however, one fear kept me awake at night.

I had complete control over the approval and arrangements of his caravans. I would be responsible for every coming and going. I had every accounting in my ledger and knew exactly the formula of our profit versus projected loss, calculated risk, and profit margins for every product in our stores. However, when it came to hiring labor, I couldn't bring myself to pretend I was someone who hadn't walked those streets as a slave only a few years ago. I couldn't look away from the sluggish husks of the dream-eaten the whip legions offered up like day old trash when I went recruiting.

¹⁰ Guild Factor - The most influential members of the Guild whose investments drive the entire organization.

Would Ahrun really and truly allow our profit margins to suffer because I chose not to hire the cheap, easy labor? I hated myself for doubting, but I couldn't help but think that it was one thing to liberate a slave girl whom you had grown fond of and entirely another to risk your profits for faceless dregs you didn't even know.

The night I finally confronted him about my business plan involving the season's caravans, after many days of avoiding the conversation, I prepared my papers and defense of more expensive labor to an insanely tedious degree. Ahrun listened quietly, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, as he usually did, while I talked myself in circles about every defense for the reason why I chose to hire the laborers I did and how we could make up for the loss with several other tediously organized contingencies. Finally, I felt his hand on my shoulder, the depths of my discomfort dawning on him.

"Kalara..." He said simply. The sternness of the way he said my name made my words stick in my throat. I expected the worst to come next.

"...I asked you to become my head of operations because I trust your judgement. *Completely.*" He smiled that small, content smile until a fit of coughing took him and he had to go looking for a handkerchief. When he could finally speak again, his voice wavering a bit from the exertion of it, he said. "Besides, I'm getting older. You'll eventually take the entire thing over so I can spend my time completing the maps I've been meaning to work on all these years before I'm too senile and blind to finish them!"

As he always did, my father reassured me through his actions that his love for me wasn't false. My love for him only grew over the next few years as we worked together to re-tool his business. An untested philosophy led us down a new path together. Slaves, or those who had been sold as 'permanent employees' as I had to avoid morality laws in some of the anti-slavery territories, were converted to employees with wages. Many of the workers were happy to stay on, even when offered their freedom. Our profits waned only slightly, but stabilized as we moved our investments and streamlined certain processes. We did the unthinkable...and survived!

The rumors of Ahrun's senility and the gold-digging ex-slave woman whispering in his ear only spread, however. That didn't stop our business from being successful. Ahrun, after all, was considered a Merchant Prince long before I ever came into the picture, despite his eccentricities. It was only his wish to remain independent and unfettered that he had not pursued the position of Factor, despite being more than eligible and capable of it. Even with the controversial nature of his business restructuring, his grand innovations and incorruptibility drew the eye of the Guild Directorate¹¹. Rumors spread like wildfire that he was a prime nominee for their ranks.

I was ecstatic for him, even if my father seemed quiet and thoughtful on the matter. Those maps and retirement were waiting for him, after all, but I saw a grand opportunity!

¹¹ Guild Directorate - The Guild Directorate is a ruling body of the Guild formed by 9 members which oversee systems and standards of trade throughout the Threshold.

He was in a position where he could spread our newfound philosophy and business structure in a wider capacity.

“What would I have been without the freedom you gave me?” I had asked him. “Imagine how the world might change if you could only show them they don’t have to fear it!” I urged him on with the passion and free will he had gifted me, that he nurtured with unwavering faith and love in me.

Together, we drafted the business plans and documents that laid out the proposed structure of a Labor branch of the Guild. We compiled countless proposals on new cost-saving measures and practices for businesses willing to make the change. Together, we mapped the profit projections, fluctuations, and numbers based on our own first-hand experience.

Enclosed herein is an excerpt from the speech he was to give once elected into the Directorate and allowed the right to propose changes. I wrote it for him, my heart pouring onto the paper while my mind raced at the possibility of changing the world, even if I was only the speech writer.

“Colleagues, friends, merchants, craftsmen, we have all come together in this place, pioneers of the paths of Creation and with a sense of self-governance and innovation instilled in us by our great Founder, Brem Marst¹². It was he who first drew together the tangles of feuding merchants, families, and rebels into something grand that would connect Creation in a way it had never been connected before. We stood with the Rivers, as strong as ever and as resilient against the Scarlet Empress’ advances as a castrated monk!”

“But time weathers us, like this old man, growing soft in the midsection. We allow complacency and fear to keep us from acknowledging the problems in our long-lauded system. Even today, the people whisper of our hypocrisy, of how we aid the Fey by buying and selling the sad husks of our own people. The same Fey who would devour Creation and destroy us all! We turn a blind eye to legal loopholes that allow us to bind unfortunate souls into servitude just so we can pretend to have our pretty morals. The people distrust as at every turn...and we have earned their ire!”

“We say we abhor these deplorable practices and yet we turn a blind eye and count our coin. My esteemed colleagues, we should not be afraid of solutions. We have already changed the face of Creation! We can do so much more if we have no fear and believe in what we can achieve together as the most powerful mortal organization this world has ever seen!”

¹² Brem Marst - The original founder of the Guild who established its preliminary structure after the devastation of the Contagion throughout the land. His passion and savvy brought together countless disparate families and merchants to form an impressive network that would change the course of history.

“My solution is real and proven by the success of my endeavors. We can return to the wisdom of our founder. We can be pristine in all things, as it should be! My friends, the only obstacle is our own fear.”

To be sure, many would have been offended by some of these accusations, even if they were true. Thereafter would have followed hearings on these proposals. Countless hearings. Endless debates. But maybe, just maybe, a small change might occur. Then another and another. Like droplets of rain before a deluge.

If I had known the night before the vote would be the last night I would talk to my father, I might have said something different to him. I might have told him how much I loved him. How much I owed him. How much he changed me from a servant to someone who could forge her own future.

But as it happened, the last words we spoke, I nagged him about taking his medicine and reassured him that the meeting would go well as long as he remained the dry, sarcastic old man that I had come to love.

I was so naïve to ever believe that fear wasn't as powerful a force as love.

Entry VI - Innocence

Ahrun Vadras, my father, the eccentric merchant prince, known as the Fearless Seeker, was found dead in his own bed in the warmth of Fire Ascending¹³, the year RY 763. It was I who found him that fateful morning. I noticed he had slept in longer than usual, for he was a prompt and studious man, and I thought I'd relieve our servants of the responsibility of bringing him his morning tea and biscuits so I could tease him about his growing bad habits.

I cannot describe the horror of finding someone so dear simply...gone. He had been there smiling and laughing with me just the night before.

By the time I found him, death had already made his lips a shade of blue, a patch of foam congealed at the corner of his mouth, a curious detail that I was too distraught to notice then. The servants heard my startled yelling as I tried to wake him to no avail. I kept trying, even when they pulled me away and fetched help.

Doctors, associates, and priests came and went in the hustle of death preparations, but my world remained unearthly still, the voices around me falling away, ignored. I could only sit in the chair by his bed and stare at his cold body trying to convince myself he was only sleeping, but knowing that was only a childish wish. A gold embroidered black veil was placed over his face out of respect. The priests would come for him soon.

It was only the head priest's soothing, compassionate tone that brought me back to the world. "You are his daughter, his only family, yes?" Funny, nobody else had asked me up to that point. I nodded weakly in reply. He took my hand in his. I remember he was surprisingly gentle. I remember the prayer talismans hanging from his belt jingling with little bells. "A daughter should make the preparations. It will bring him peace and tranquility in his next life."

But I wasn't ready to let him go in this life. Not yet. Not yet. I clenched the priest's hand, hard. He didn't seem to mind. The priest let me stay like that for as long as I wanted. Until I finally could speak again. "Yes, I will make the preparations."

An organizational task would be a welcome distraction. I took comfort that I was his daughter, the child of Ahrun Vadras, even if we were tied by different bonds than blood. I would do what love dictated and see him on the path the way that any dutiful daughter would. The priests took him then. I could only stare, still frozen from grief, as they gently and respectfully bathed him with white cloth and wrapped him in white silk, then carried his silk-swaddled body away on a stretcher.

Over the next couple of days, with a hollow in my chest, I set about the task of planning my father's funeral. Notices were drafted and sent to his close friends and business

¹³ Fire Ascending - Summer in this world, a season associated with the element of fire and the Sun.

associates. I decided to buy the candles and votives needed for the service myself and ventured to the marketplace. I barely noticed the looks I was getting along the way. My mind was too set on the task of funeral preparations to care.

And then I saw it. On the marketplace community board printed in large font and stamped with the Guild's mark.

"Wanted alive for questioning and suspicion of murder. Kalara Vadras, daughter of Ahrun Vadras, the victim."

For the second time in just as few days, my heart skipped a beat in my chest. I finally noticed the stares and glares from passersby, from shopkeepers I had spoken to many times. I tore the paper from the board and very nearly thought to stomp my way to the magistrate's office and accuse them of posting gross misinformation, but common sense finally took over. Something was wrong, very wrong, and it wasn't a printing mistake.

I quickly hurried with my shawl pulled over my head to a friend's house. Melkar's face when he opened the door told me everything I needed to know. This was indeed very bad. He had the forethought to leave a bottle of wine on the table and sit me down to explain the situation.

"They're calling for your arrest. They're saying you poisoned him, Kalara."

The full extent of the horror and deceit of what had really happened to Ahrun was finally beginning to dawn on me. Who would do this? Why would they do this? Gods, I was so naïve then. For as many years as I endured the cruelty of mortals, Ahrun's love had blinded me, lulled me into feeling that because of what he did for me, anything was possible, that people and the world could change. How wrong I had been!

Together with my colleague, I devised a plan to escape the city, for as painful as it was to abandon the preparation of my father's funeral, I knew I couldn't stay. As naïve as I was back then, I understood that whatever was happening, the chances that I would have to explain myself were slim. The Guild could take me without a trial if they pleased and I knew what that meant. Melkar arranged a barge to meet me at sunset where I would be whisked away to a safehouse at his cousin's.

Everything seemed to be going to plan. I was able to quietly weave my way through town to the docks without incident where the barge awaited. The captain beckoned me on board with hushed tones and went ashore to make one final preparation. I started to let out the breath that I had been holding ever since I saw the announcement.

I saw the shadow that moved from within the blue sails too late to do anything about it. I caught only a brief glimpse of the Water Aspect¹⁴'s face before I felt a stabbing pain in my temple and fell into unconsciousness.

I awoke on the cold, dank floor of a prison cell, my hands and feet bound in cold iron shackles. It was an old, familiar sensation that sent chills up my spine, sending me ever so briefly back to a moment in my past where I had displeased a master. A voice I barely recognized greeted me from the shadows.

“Hello, Kalara. Did you sleep well?” I squinted, still trying to identify this vaguely familiar voice. My breath caught in my chest at the revelation once he stepped into the light in front of my cell. It was Factor Oroshu, a colleague of my father’s in the Merchant branch.

He was a tall, thin bearded man clothed in rich silks whom I had known from meetings I had attended with my father. As one of the Factors, he had a great deal of control over the flow of the district. I remember my father only dealt with him when he absolutely had to. The Factor was a deplorable businessman who was said to make a majority of his profits from illegal bandit raids conducted across the countryside, among other practices. It was rumored the only reason the Guild Warden¹⁵ hadn’t taken him to task was because of some deep, dark secret he held against him.

I remember how Oroshu would look at me during the meetings, especially when Ahrun would speak his piece about certain practices. His black eyes would always bore into me, as if I were responsible for Ahrun’s renewed interest and straightforwardness in Guild affairs, the devil slave-woman whispering in his ear with her infectious ideals. We had spoken only briefly, both times in which I could only respond with hollow acknowledgements because of his higher ranking. Both times, he let me know in subtle, biting ways that I wasn’t worthy to lick the dirt from his shoes. I could never have guessed at the true depths of the disdain he harbored for me.

Factor Oroshu sneered and turned to nod at the cloaked Water Aspect that had been standing a little farther off. I could only stare back and forth between them, confused. “That will be all. You’ve done well. She shouldn’t be a problem from here on out.” Oroshu waved the man off without so much as a glance his way.

I remember staring after the cloaked man, my eyes pleading and fearful. Before he turned to leave, my gaze locked with his and I heard him say. “It’s nothing personal...” As if that ‘apology’ would exempt him from whatever fate he was about to leave me to. With that, he simply left.

Nothing personal. I would never forget that sentiment or his cold, unfeeling stare.

¹⁴ Water Aspect - Terrestrial Exalted who are aligned with the element of water who lean towards covert specialties.

¹⁵ Guild Warden - Members of the Guild who are specially appointed to enforce internal Guild law.

Even still, my mind went around in circles trying to understand Oroshu. I pleaded with him. He couldn't truly be responsible for what I was barely beginning to understand. He couldn't be that close-minded against change! I voiced my disbelief at his short-sightedness, at his inability to understand how we could change things and still make a profit. I was in denial. I couldn't accept what my heart already knew.

My passionate outburst only made the Factor laugh. "Short-sighted?" He hissed. "It was you and your father's short-sightedness that made this unavoidable! You killed him, don't you see? You poisoned him in the night, you filthy little slave. He didn't deserve such an end! Ahrun was too stubborn to see reason, so we had to act."

Those words struck me silent as if they were a blow to the face, the realization of the plot finally starting to settle in. *They* had done this. Our very own organization, the organization we both loved and believed in. They had killed him. All of the little details I hadn't noticed earlier started to sting in my mind. The foam at the corner of his mouth. A faint sweet smell. The medicine....

Oroshu seemed gratified by my silence and left me there in the darkness. Tomorrow, he said, I would be punished for my sins against the Guild. I could only sit back on my haunches, the weight of the chains not nearly as heavy as the weight of the events that had just transpired. My father had died not only two days before, but it was my spirit that died that day, crushed under heel by my own naïveté and the machinations of fearful mortals.

Entry VII – Black Sun

The night before my execution was the longest night of my life, in a life filled a third of the way with long, fearful nights. At first, I sat in the dark, my spirit still hollowed out by all that had transpired. Hours passed and my mind began to race, pouring over every detail. Where did we go wrong? What should I have noticed earlier? How could I have stopped this?

Could my father have lived if I didn't convince him to fly in the face of the status quo?

He could have been working on his maps right now with none of this worry, while I, like a dutiful daughter, could have been running his business, the both of us prosperous and content as long as we turned a blind eye to the world. It had been my foolish goading all along that led to this.

That revelation was when the wall of grief hit me and the tears I had been holding back since I had first found Ahrun dead poured out. I shouted at the top of my lungs, kicking and tearing at the bare accommodations in my cage. I was innocent! Why wouldn't they listen? Surely someone would come and listen?

But nobody ever came that night, not even to tell me to be silent. I was left to boil in my anger and grief, no doubt another mental torture ordered by Oroshu, or perhaps a security measure to ensure nobody learned of the hasty mockery of justice they were planning for me.

When they came for me, I was too hoarse and fatigued to protest much as I was stripped and dressed in the white linen frock of the condemned. "Please, can I just talk to someone?" I remember asking one of the guards in a strained voice. They merely continued on with their duties, completely ignoring my futile pleas.

I moved in a surreal dream as they escorted me from the prison to a curtained black coach. The noon sun blinded me a short time later when we emerged from the carriage at the location they had chosen for my death. I could only stare in disbelief and move involuntarily forward as I was forced to walk down the path flanked by guards.

The screaming faces of a crowd gathered for the execution pressed in on me on all sides. Some of them were familiar, people I talked to every day. Some shouted in excitement or anger while others looked on in shocked fascination. 'Could she really have done it?' I'm sure they wondered. The fetid rain of rotten vegetables and garbage was a telling sign of their belief.

The slow, seemingly endless march ended at a makeshift platform prepared especially for me. Gazing over the scene and taking in the familiar crates and podiums, I finally realized where I was.

It was the square of the slave market.

At that moment, the square was eerily empty of traders and flesh to sell. No one ever called it a 'slave market', despite that being what it was. 'Permanent employees' were merely drafted and processed here. Unfortunate individuals would be forced into contracts and brought here where their lives were auctioned away. I remembered passing through here all those years ago, a teenager fresh from the wounds of betrayal.

That day, I saw the bodies of crucified criminals displayed proudly next to the docks, their twisted corpses still nailed to stained wooden crosses while their broken, misshapen legs dangled below them – an example for all to see, a hidden message to all slaves who ever thought of rebellion. I would join that gruesome puppet show as a powerful warning. This would be my fate. The realization made me shudder.

They must've paid a fortune to clear the square for the 'event'. Thinking back on it, I can almost admire their creative choice of execution grounds for me.

And there Oroshu stood, officiating the whole horrid scene from atop a podium on the makeshift dais and drinking in my shock with a barely masked smile of satisfaction.

"...Now, we bring this murderer of the much loved Ahrun Vadras, the Fearless Seeker, to justice!" At the sound of his voice, the crowd roared and the full horror began to unfold. The guards grasped me by each arm and yanked me forward towards the terrible construction of wood beams that had been prepared for me. All the while, I pleaded and begged for help from the crowd, my voice a frightened whimper. I found nothing but the same familiar, yet alien faces.

They hauled my body unceremoniously onto the wood, catching my errant hands and feet and holding them into place while the black-masked executioner secured them with rough ropes. They splayed my limbs like a dead bird's wings across the wood. I could barely breathe, the panic setting in when I noticed the long spike in the executioner's hand as he knelt by my side. He centered the sharp point of it over the juncture of my left palm.

"Kalara Vadras, do you confess to this heinous murder so that your soul may be cleansed for your next life? A merciful death awaits for those who repent!" Oroshu's sneering visage caught my panicked gaze. A hush settled over the crowd as all awaited my answer. I could feel the hatred from them, from Oroshu. I knew they wanted the satisfaction of my confession and I knew it meant a quicker death than what the cross offered.

"No..." I shook my head for emphasis, my chest heaving with anger. "No!" I said again, louder and more clearly. I chose the long death.

The first drive of the sledgehammer was enough to pierce the stake through my left hand, but not enough to mount it securely to the beam beneath me. It took a second and a third impact to make sure of that. The intense impact of metal against metal drowned out the screams that tore from me without my consent. I had meant to be

strong, to give them not an inch, but nothing, nothing could've prepared me for that sudden sharpness and the finality of my impending death.

"I implore you once more. Confess!" Oroshu shouted again, so self-assured in his plea for the mercy of my soul, but confounded by my stubborn resistance that thwarted the satisfaction of any confession. I only glared at him through the unwanted tears dragged out of me by the pain. The executioner leveled the next stake over my right hand. The sharp point lingered, poised for its inevitable target, awaiting the signal to fall.

I shook my head again, no. I had no more tears left. No. I would spend my last awful hours on earth satisfied in my final, tiny rebellion. I think I smiled then as the executioner drew his arm back to make the fateful strike...

But the strike never came. Caught between one breath and the next, the world grew still and quiet. I laid my head back against the rough wood, caught in utter defeat. My gaze turned towards the sky where the noon soon blinded me with its white hot glare. Past the executioner's masked face, past Oroshu's smirk, I looked into the blinding sun overhead and closed my eyes, ready to die.

And then in the next moment, I was standing in a vast expanse, the sliver of a sun peeking over the rise. The sunlight suddenly cut like a white blade across the horizon, as if a thousand sunrises happened at once. Strangely, it didn't hurt my eyes as I had expected it to. At the center of the sunrise, a mirror flashed, catching my eyes with brilliance. I spotted the silhouette of a man holding the mirror moving closer, the corona of the sun behind him. Or was it coming from him? He came closer and I saw the expanse of four arms cloaked in golden radiance. In each hand, he held a spear, a shield, a branch, and a horn.

I know they will say I am a liar, but even this ignorant slave knew his form from stories. I knew him from old, abandoned statues, all torn down and grown with ivy. He was called The Unconquered Sun¹⁶ once. As I live and breathe, I saw him that day on the cross.

He reached out his hand to me and I instinctively reached for him. A flurry of images raced through my mind and I felt his voice in my bones, in my very being.

"You have been chosen."

I saw a grand army, generals flagged by glorious standards, leaders facing one another, each with arms outstretched and clasped in a handshake of peace. I knew my destiny then. Radiance washed through me, cleansing all doubt and fear. Everything I ever was had led up to this moment of absolution.

¹⁶ The Unconquered Sun - Ruler of Heaven, leader of the rebellion against the Primordials, and all-powerful being.

When I opened my eyes again, yet another arm emerged from his chest within the mirror. This fifth arm ¹⁷held nothing, but I knew in my heart the invisible majesty of its purpose. I had no fear as I touched my fingers to this strange fifth hand. Golden essence glowed where our fingertips touched. A new purpose filled me, wrapped around me, poured into my heart. The mirror encircled me, its edges brimming with molten dark and light essence that stung the edges of my vision.

Sunlight blinded me once more and I found myself back in the world, the sight of a black sun trimmed by the pink corona of an eclipse filling my vision. The entire sky turned to night and pure silence fell over the entire square. Even the wind seemed to stop. I looked over at my left hand that had been so cruelly nailed to the cross. The stake pierced through it turned white hot and melted away in tiny rivers of molten metal. Nothing but a scar where the metal had been embedded remained after. Much to my astonishment, I felt no pain as the metal trickled away like water.

I should have been surprised when the executioner began to untie the ropes, but I wasn't. I stared at him, somehow content with his actions. He even helped me to my feet. I rose and surveyed the crowd with a calm, sweeping gaze, cradling my palm which had miraculously healed with only the vestigial blood from the closed wound dripping down my fingers.

The shadow of the eclipse fell over us all, bringing with it a preternatural tranquility to the slaver's square. Even Oroshu, in all his burning contempt, could only stand where he was, staring with his mouth agape. Even still, none moved against me. I don't think they could have even if they tried.

They knew this was right that I should live. Heaven would have it so.

The crowd parted before me as I made my way off the execution stand and stumbled through the dusty square in complete silence. I managed to stagger all the way home without a single soul stopping me. I must have been a peculiar sight as I shambled home through the city in my bloodstained frock and bare feet.

Once I was home, I packed clothing and supplies. From above the mantle, I retrieved my father's prized pistols. Somehow, it felt wrong to leave them behind. When I touched them, I felt something new pulse through me. They felt alive somehow. I knew then they weren't my father's and never had been. They were mine and mine alone.

Next, I took a knife and cut the red Southern tresses from my head and tossed them in the fireplace. I swore to myself as I watched the hair burn away into embers that I would not let my father's death be in vain. I was someone entirely new now. Father did always like the name Koh. It was his favorite character from a story about a gunslinging bandit king. Koh would be the perfect persona for this new life. He would be a mask I

¹⁷ The Fifth Arm - The fifth arm of the Unconquered Sun holds all other arms together to maintain his form. It also symbolizes the Eclipse Caste.

could wear to trick my enemies until the time was right. In this new life, this new passion that flowed in me, I found patience in my purpose and revenge.

The final item I took was my father's reading glasses, one last momento to keep him close to my heart. They would become a key part of the new identity I fashioned for myself as Koh. Even in disguise I could proclaim my relationship to him to myself as long as I wore them.

My only regret in leaving then was that I could not send my father off to his next life. I only hoped someone else had stepped up to perform such rites for him. I swore to my father, wherever he was, that I would return one day and reclaim what was ours. I would make sure all that he had built was not squandered. I would see his betrayers punished.

That day, I said goodbye to all that I knew and set forth on a journey whose destination I did not know. I would realize our dreams of a new world, a new Guild, pristine in all things. For the second time in my life, I learned to dream again and I was not afraid.

Entry VIII – The Uncrucified

It wasn't till my arrival in Dinas Rhydd long after my journey as Koh had begun that I would learn what the witnesses of that day had dubbed me - The Uncrucified. I loved the poetry of that. Whether I was murderer or not, those in the crowd that day knew my innocence and spread the whispers of my name across the city of Nexus and beyond like wildfire.

In my first days as Koh, I followed the rivers, venturing along the roads gathering slaves and runaways to me. I lived up to my bandit king namesake, making Guild caravans ours, with special attention to those shipments I knew were coming from my old friend Oroshu. The symbol of the Eclipse that I saw in my vision painted over the Guild's insignia became ours. The phoenix became our symbol, a portent of a greater future rising from the ashes of the Guild's failings.

In each hub city I passed through, I left the seed of a trading post, the first threads in the golden tapestry that would become the Pristine Guild. All roads eventually led to Dinas Rhydd, the free city. Planted in a barren terrain that would not yield where none would dare to settle, our city of slaves scratched out an existence. It might have ended there when the first armies sent by the Guild lay siege to the city or when the barbarian hordes threatened from the north, but it didn't.

The constant war awakened in me even more newfound strength I had never experienced before. Essence flows in my veins and in my being. I've become quicker than lightning and more deadly with firewands than father could have ever dreamed. He was right all this time. In the hands of a 'Righteous Devil'¹⁸, firewands have become for me more than mere tools, but a path to salvation. My heart knows the fire's path and my enemies are purified in its flames.

With the help of myself and my newfound companions, all who also bear the mark of the sun as I do, the city has outlasted where no other would. The fields have grown from the tears of a sorceress¹⁹. The wisdom and compassion of an exiled Realm soldier²⁰ have kept it safe. The inspiring words, and superior baking, of a warrior-monk²¹ have kept spirits high. The watchful eyes of the two guardian shadows²² at my side have kept

¹⁸ Righteous Devil (aka. Righteous Devil Style) - A martial arts style created by a Solar Exalted. This style specializes in the use of firewands in a martial art designed to punish the wicked with holy flames and exact terrible and swift justice on the Righteous Devil's enemies. However, few practitioners still exist, as most are vanquished by the mysterious founder of the style, who will hunt down and destroy any of his students who turn from the path of righteousness. Kalara inherited this style from her soul shard's previous owner.

¹⁹ Our Circle's Twilight Caste - Darimina Xesa - (Player Character), an eccentric sorceress who shares her library with those who seek knowledge.

²⁰ Our Circle's Dawn Caste - Cathak Demiato (Player Character), commander of the city guard and protector of Dinas Rhydd, she fights to restore her honor and make amends for her past as a Realm soldier.

²¹ Our Circle's Zenith Caste - Chaos Divide (Player Character), who despite his simplicity, is a warrior to be feared, especially by the Fey, and a vigorous baker of cookies which he offers to friends and foe alike.

²² Our Circle's Night Caste, Night Locust (Player Character) and his companion, Arc of Silence (NPC) - Child assassins who came to Dinas Rhydd seeking freedom and eventually found themselves employed as Kalara's bodyguards.

us safe in dire times. The divine craftsmanship of a master artisan²³ has restored it from ruins. Finally, my Pristine Guild has grown from a thread into a grand weave, bringing prosperity and stability within our walls. Our Circle is complete and with them at my side, I feel like we can accomplish anything.

I never would have believed in destiny had I not seen the things I have seen and done the things I have done. We discover new potential within ourselves every day. Gods have dined at our table and ancient wonders come to life, revitalizing the city with new marvels and bringing the populace grander days than we ever could have hoped for or imagined.

Some will say we are monsters, and I tell you now this is false. I have seen real monsters. They are the greedy who build their wealth atop the scarred backs of their fellow man. They are the fearful who would keep the world as it is through deception and murder. They are the blind who cannot accept what they do not understand.

Some will call us gods, but this is also false. A god chose us to change the world, but we are only the instruments of this change. You, the people, are the perpetuators of change. Your dreams will shape the future of Creation. Your children's children will be the drops of rain that turn into a deluge, each one inspired to be better and more enlightened than the last.

They will call us Anathema, but we are no demons, no mindless shells. I am possessed only by my own passion. I finally have the power to protect the good I've seen in this world, even though I was born into cruelty. Even before this path came to me, I have always had power, just as you do. As strong as I may become, I know that true power lies in the ability to abandon fear and to continue forwards, even when you have tasted defeat.

If you are reading this memoir, my time in the sun has passed. Do not let this be an end to it. Let courage assuage fear, let love despoil cruelty. Dare to dream of a different world the way you never thought you could envision it. Answer hatred with ruthless compassion.

I am Kalara Vdras. I am Koh the Silver-Tongued Devil. I am a slave, a bandit king, a businesswoman, a daughter, and now I am nothing but a story. Let my story become yours. Let the world be what you make of it.

²³ Our Circle's other Twilight Caste - Voice of the Orichalcum Forge (NPC) whose artistry is known far and wide and who has been a large part of repairing the city's ancient manses.

Credits

Written and narrated by Angela R. Sasser
Cover Illustration by Angela R. Sasser

For more about this story and its characters check out The Uncrucified online!

<http://theuncrucified.angelasasser.com>