

**REDEMPTION**

Kyle sat in the back of the Hover-Chariot with his eyes fixed on Dante. Light streaked in through the windows, whenever it could break past the trees. The distant solitude of the moonlight gleamed off Kyle's eyes. The feral intensity of Kyle's glare locked Dante into place. The methodic way Kyle sharpened his sword didn't hurt either. The Hover-Chariot's bench seating forced Dante to either look at Kyle or turn to the window.

Dante twitched and his hair stood on end, each time Kyle's sword ground against the sharpening stone. He could barely stand Kyle's gray eyes on him. Kyle stared unflinchingly until Dante gave in and looked out the window. Dante knew the battle-hardened muscles that danced beneath Kyle's chocolate brown skin. Dante found it hard to look at a face that was clearly made to smile, turned grim and dark by life. Even though Kyle was mostly hidden beneath his black cloak, his stone jaw and piercing eyes found a way to freeze Dante's soul. Kyle's simmering anger grated against Dante like the sword and sharpening stone.

"Thank you for coming, Kyle," Dante stammered when he could take no more.

"I told you not to contact me about the Trust," Kyle replied.

"You're the only person I could come to," Dante continued.

Dante's voice was deeper than his boyish looks suggested. Curly brown hair sat atop his sandy-brown skin. His thick mustache curled at the edges and matched a patchy beard. He filled out his dark clothes but was thinner than Kyle. Like Kyle, a thick cloak hung off Dante's shoulders and he hid beneath the deep hood. The glimmer in his dark eyes held mischief and something deeper.

"You can't come to me," Kyle said.

“Yet here you are,” Dante noticed.

“Don’t make me regret it,” Kyle said as he turned his blade over. With the same precise stroke, Kyle sharpened the opposite edge. “What do you want?”

“Your help, naturally,” Dante answered.

Dante tried to bite back the sarcasm, but it clung to every word. Kyle glared at him and Dante continued avoiding his gaze. Something about the way Kyle sat, the way he sharpened his sword, all of it felt predatory. Dante fidgeted in place, suddenly the inside of the Hover-Chariot felt too close. Kyle shifted to his right and redistributed his weight. For the first time, he turned his head slightly and watched Dante from the corner of his eye.

“I need your help, Kyle. I don’t know what else to do. This isn’t about the Trust, it’s about me and you,” Dante continued.

“I don’t owe you anything, Dante.”

“I know you don’t, but you were kind to me. You were kind to all of us,” Dante said.

“Why didn’t you get Reynard to help?” Kyle wondered.

“This isn’t Reynard’s area of expertise, it’s yours.”

“I was kind to you,” Kyle said as he turned back to Dante fully. “And you need a sword.”

“You already knew that, Kyle. Otherwise you wouldn’t be sharpening that blade,” Dante answered.

“Look at me Dante.”

Kyle stopped sharpening his sword and placed the sharpening stone on the bench. Dante gritted his teeth and slowly turned to face Kyle again. Kyle leaned forward and placed his sword on his lap. The stream of moonlight from the window caught the blade and turned it to pure light. Dante moved backwards as Kyle removed his hood and cracked his neck.

“Do I look like your retainer?” Kyle asked.

“No, Kyle, you don’t,” Dante mumbled.

“Do I look like I can be summoned?”

“No, Kyle, you don’t,” Dante repeated.

“Do I look like I want to see you or anyone else from the Trust, ever again?”

Kyle growled as he tightened his grip on his sword.

“No...”

“Then turn this chariot around and take me back to Avalon,” Kyle said.

“I can’t Kyle, I need you,” Dante pleaded. “There’s no one else to turn to.”

“And?”

“And you were kind to me, Kyle. Kind at a time when you had no reason to be.”

“That doesn’t mean I would do it again, Dante,” Kyle reminded him.

“I had to take that chance,” Dante replied.

“You led me to believe this had something to do with Balthazar or Malcolm.”

“I didn’t deceive you, Kyle,” Dante said.

Kyle picked up his sharpening stone again. He returned to meticulously preparing his blade for whatever was to come. Dante leaned forward and removed his hood. He rested his arms in his lap and clasped his hands.

“I’m finding that hard to believe,” Kyle sighed. “Malcolm is gone and Balthazar washed his hands of us.”

“Balthazar was the wise one,” Dante smiled.

“What am I?” Kyle wondered.

“You’re the man I need. The only man I can trust.”

Kyle held his horse’s bridle as he walked slowly along the road. A dusty wind blew across his boots at the edge of town. His cloak hung off his shoulders and his hood lay flat on his back. His swords were secured in the bedroll that was tucked away on the horse’s back. Kyle idly chewed a stick of black-root as he patted his horse’s head.

Sand crunched under Kyle’s feet as he walked along the unpaved main road. The lush grass that peeked between buildings was worn away on the well-trodden path. Wooden structures lined the street and a dry breeze blew past Kyle’s lips. Children played in the distance. Their voices cascaded through the small town. Their carefree sense of wonder was like music to Kyle’s ears.

In the distance Kyle watched three men exit a building with a woman in between them. She was slight of waist and fairly small in stature. Curly golden-brown hair bounced atop her head. Nicholas, a tall, sandy blonde male walked behind her with his palm at her back. He nudged her forward whenever her steps slowed. Two broad shouldered males, Garret and Adrian, shielded her as they stepped in unison.

As Kyle neared, she stopped briefly and locked eyes with him. There was such a desperate fire in her eyes that Kyle stopped in the middle of the road. The tall male pushed her forward and sneered at Kyle. The sun gleamed off the young woman's eyes. She stared at Kyle with unwavering focus. Something in her eyes pleaded with Kyle. Nicholas saw it too and broke off from the group.

Nicholas approached Kyle with the arrogant familiarity of a young Warrior. Nicholas absentmindedly tapped the hilt of his sword as he neared. He used a finger to adjust the glasses that slid down his nose.

"You should watch where you look, friend," Nicholas warned.

"I don't know what you mean," Kyle replied.

"Keep your eyes off of things that ain't yours," Nicholas said.

"I don't know what you're getting at, but I'm just passing through," Kyle softened his tone. "I'm not looking for trouble."

"Damn right you're not," Nicholas said as he turned away. "You better remember that."

Kyle watched as Nicholas walked back into the distance. Garret and Adrian waited atop horses for him, as did the young woman. The woman looked back at Kyle again, tearing through him with her gaze. Nicholas saw the look as he mounted his horse. He looked back and saw Kyle's stoic acknowledgment. Festering anger made Nicholas dismount and unsheathe his sword as he charged at Kyle. Kyle smacked his horse lightly on the back and it trotted a safe distance away before stopping. Kyle stood alone on the dust blown road.

"The Priestess is waiting, we don't have time for this," Garret reminded Nicholas.

“I’ll make time!” Nicholas yelled as his first slash rained down at Kyle.

Kyle dodged to the left with liquid speed and Nicholas’ blade sailed past his head in blind rage. Nicholas continued his unrelenting attack and Kyle answered by dodging, escaping and pivoting out of his way. Nicholas attacked with fury that made Kyle backpedal and watch as the sword passed a hair’s breadth in front of his face. On that dusty road, Kyle and Nicholas danced to the serenade of death like two old partners. Kyle’s grace matched Nicholas’ fury as they moved around each other.

Kyle planted his back foot and felt the stairs of an abandoned building behind him. Nicholas rushed forward with a mind to split Kyle from clavicle to abdomen. Kyle lunged, grabbed Nicholas’ sword arm and placed a hand on his chest. Kyle pushed Nicholas back and startled by the move, Nicholas lost traction for a split second. He moved towards Kyle again with a wild looping slash. Kyle back flipped as the sword sang just beneath him. Kyle landed on the top of the stairs and Nicholas landed there with him. Kyle pressed his forearm into Nicholas’ neck and as Nicholas drove his sword forward. The blade stopped when it punctured the wall behind Kyle. Kyle remained with his back against the wall and his forearm at Nicholas’ throat. Nicholas breathed down on Kyle with his sword lodged in the wall.

“Nicholas, that’s enough!” Adrian commanded.

“Yeah,” Nicholas’ halfhearted answer rang out across the road. He lingered there with Kyle, still locked in his eyes. “He’s had enough,” Nicholas growled as he pried his sword from the wall.

Nicholas kept his eyes on Kyle as he casually walked back to his horse. Garret handed Nicholas the reins before he mounted. Kyle searched for the young woman's eyes, but she turned from him. She placed on her hood and bowed her head.

Kyle stayed against the wall until Nicholas and the others until they trotted down the road and out of sight. He walked down the stairs slowly and noticed his piece of black root, trampled during the fight. Kyle retrieved his horse and tied it to the front of a nearby cottage. Kyle patted his horse's head again and rubbed under its chin. He threw his bedroll on his back and walked inside.

"Are you Thomas?" Kyle asked as he entered the cottage.

A gaunt older man awaited Kyle as he entered. The old man pretended to dry a glass as he looked out the window. His liver spotted skin hung off his bones. He stood at the counter near the entrance. Kyle dropped his bedroll on the counter and Thomas jumped a little.

"Thomas is the surname. How do you know?"

"It says it outside," Kyle said, as he fiddled with the leather straps of his bedroll.

"Who were they?"

"They're from the Order of the Broken Cross. And that's all you want to know about them, trust me," Thomas replied.

"Do they stay in town?" Kyle asked.

"Up the road a ways and to the west. You can't miss their church."

"Is that so?" Kyle said, as he opened his bedroll.



Thomas jumped in shock when Kyle's assortment of blades revealed themselves on his bedroll. Two thick leather belts held Kyle's long swords. The rest of his tools of war slept quietly in special designed pockets.

"What do you plan to do, mister?" Thomas wondered, as Kyle strapped on his sword belts.

"You have rooms available here?" Kyle asked as he sheathed throwing knives in his belt.

"Yes. Well sort of. I have one," Thomas stuttered. "No one's been up there in a while."

"Clean it up, put the rest of my things up there and feed my horse," Kyle said as he placed a billfold on the counter. Thomas' eyes brightened when he flipped through several hundred-mark notes. "Tell me when that runs out," Kyle said, indicating the mark notes.

"No problem mister," Thomas answered as he put the mark notes in his pocket. "You going to be here long?"

"Not if I don't have to," Kyle said as he walked towards the door.

"You're not about to do something foolish, are you? Mister? Mister?"

"I'm just going to have a little chat."

Nicholas poured drinks as he recounted his run in with Kyle. He barely got the words past his proud smile before he laughed. The young woman walked towards the

door and by him. He turned but barely acknowledged her presence. She walked with her head down and clutched an ornate necklace. She whispered to herself and stopped short when she reached the door.

Kyle walked past the large window and she watched him inch to the door. She clutched her necklace tighter and said a quiet prayer. She opened the door as Kyle walked up the steps. She watched him silently, just as she had done before. Her eyes held both wonder and sadness. They carried too much sadness for one so young but clung to just enough wonder to give her hope.

“What’s your name?” Kyle asked quietly.

“Save yourself, while you can. Turn around and walk away from this place,” the young woman answered.

“Who are you?” Kyle pressed.

“I fear with you, comes the darkness,” the young woman said.

“That’s no way to talk,” Kyle smiled as softly as he could.

“I thought I told you to watch where you look,” Nicholas said, as he stopped before he took a drink.

The young woman retreated from the door. She disappeared deeper into the house, as Nicholas came from behind the bar and Kyle remained in the doorway. Adrian and Garret came from behind the bar as well, but Nicholas stopped with a hand in the air. Kyle stepped into the foyer and he and Nicholas paced around each other. Kyle ended with his facing away from the bar, watching Nicholas as he stood near the door.

“I think we started off on the wrong foot,” Kyle said.

“I see you go heels now,” Nicholas noticed as he tapped the hilt of his sword.

“Matter of fact, I do.”

“I’m real scared,” Nicholas smirked.

“Your friends back there ruined our last conversation,” Kyle said with a nod to acknowledge Adrian and Garret.

“Conversation? I think it was more of a lesson. You in need of another?”  
Nicholas asked.

“Don’t you owe me one?” Kyle wondered as he stepped forward. “Come, pay your debts. On your word.”

Kyle stepped to within striking distance. He recoiled slightly with serpentine precision. His hand hovered over his sword and his icy glare looked through Nicholas. Nicholas turned to his side slightly and loosened his shoulders. One hand held his scabbard and the other grazed the hilt of his sword.

Nicholas’ eye twitched and he grabbed for his sword. Kyle’s blade scorched from his hip like living fire. It cut through the air and the meat of Nicholas’ stomach, before Nicholas fully grabbed his own blade. Kyle’s attacks melted into each other with liquid speed. He slashed Nicholas from his ribs to his clavicle and silently sheathed his sword, after he opened Nicholas neck from ear to ear.

Nicholas’s eyes rolled in his head and he reflexively clutched his own neck. Wet gasps escaped his throat as blood dripped down his fingers. Nicholas tried desperately to stem the tide of dark crimson running from his veins. Kyle kicked Nicholas and sent him back through the door. Kyle turned on his heels and his hands flashed from his sides. Two of his throwing knives lodged themselves in Garret’s chest. Adrian’s eyes rolled

into his head as Kyle's last throwing knife bore into his skull. He and Garret hit the floor in a mutual pool of blood before Nicholas hit the cold ground outside the door.

Kyle stood fully again with a hand on his sword. It slept in its sheath but Kyle's eyes scanned the rest of the Order. Frozen in shock, the Order remained where they were when Kyle first entered. Some held their hands up and other's just watched him with a strange mix of fear and rage. Kyle backed away slowly, with the same serpentine precision that just killed Nicholas.

"Tell your Priestess, that her men brought this on themselves," Kyle told them as he backed through the doorway.

"The Priestess won't take this lying down," one of the men replied.

"Then you better let her know this wasn't about her Order. This was personal."

"We didn't have these problems before the Order split," Dante explained as he took a liberal drink.

He and Kyle sat on stools at Thomas' counter. Thomas stood behind it and poured drinks for both. Dante busied himself with a pint of ale and Kyle sipped a glass of whiskey.

"The bulk of the Order broke off and created Shadow Company. The strongest Warriors remained with the Order, but they were never the same," Dante continued.

"Why did the Order split in the first place, greed?" Kyle asked.

"Ideology. Shadow Company doesn't think the Order will uphold their vow."

“Which is?” Kyle wondered with a drink.

“The Order of the Broken Cross is supposed to protect the Sunset Islands from the living darkness of the Obelisk,” Dante said.

“Fairy tales,” Kyle sighed.

“Like the Age of Myths?” Dante smirked.

“It’s not a fairy tale, mister,” Thomas interrupted.

“Aren’t they now?” Kyle asked.

“No sir. My grandfather told me of a time before. The same stories that his grandfather told him. King Theron brought the Sunset Islands to heel, just like the Mad King Pelerion did to Egypt. Dark were the days of King Theron’s rule. He stretched out his years through the suffering of his people. The rivers of blood only stopped flowing when his council betrayed and murdered him,” Thomas continued.

“We know the story old man,” Dante interrupted.

“I don’t. Let him finish,” Kyle interjected.

“The story goes that before his head died, he closed the Obelisk and foretold that only one of his blood could open it again. His council became the first members of the Order of the Broken Cross. They have protected the Sunset Islands for years unnumbered,” Thomas finished.

“Now Shadow Company doesn’t think they’ll do it anymore?” Kyle asked.

“That’s the going theory,” Dante said.

“Who’s the girl?” Kyle wondered.

“She’s my sister,” Dante confessed.

“Excuse me?” Incredulity laced Kyle’s words as he grabbed Dante by the shirt.

“I used to be part of the Order. I left before Shadow Company broke away. She’s my sister in the Order,” Dante stammered as he showed Kyle the brand of the Order of the Broken Cross.

“You stole me from my brother’s wedding because I thought your family was in danger. What are you playing at, Dante?” Kyle asked as the fury buried deep in his heart bubbled to the surface.

“I told you I needed you, Kyle.”

“I’m not your errand boy, Dante.”

“This isn’t an errand,” Dante stuttered, doing his best to stem the tide of Kyle’s anger. “I can’t do this on my own.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t at all.”

“Is that what Malcolm would say?” Dante asked with coldness to his words that froze Kyle.

“Malcolm has nothing to do with this,” Kyle said with a disaffected turn.

“He has everything to do with this, Kyle. You made him a promise. You said you would be there when I needed, if he couldn’t,” Dante reminded him.

“I know what I said, Dante,” Kyle fumed.

“Then you know I need you.”

“This is the first and last time you bring up Malcolm’s name. His debt is over when this is,” Kyle eyed Dante wearily.

“You have my word,” Dante agreed.

“I don’t need it. I don’t want it.”

“I just want to do what’s right for once, Kyle,” Dante explained.

“Who is she, really?” Kyle relented and let go of Dante’s shirt.

“Word is, she’s the last of King Theron’s blood,” Thomas hazarded a look around the room. “No one speaks of it, but we know it’s true.”

“Shadow Company?” Kyle asked.

“They want her dead. That’s why they broke away. End the blood line, end the threat of King Theron’s words,” Dante replied.

“They’re not wrong. How did she survive this long?” Kyle wondered.

“This Priestess isn’t a Warrior. She was a Scholar. She found Selah as a baby. Order of the Broken Cross or not, she wasn’t about to murder a child,” Dante explained.

“But Shadow Company doesn’t believe the Priestess will resist the temptation of power,” Kyle added.

“Exactly. The Order has assassinated every member of Theron’s line. Selah should be no different. When Shadow Company saw that the Priestess kept her alive, the Order fractured,” Dante continued.

“Now what?” Kyle asked. “What’s with the stalemate?”

“The Order has limited freedom here. But Shadow Company keeps them under a watchful eye. Selah is caught in the middle. She deserves better. She deserves a life,” Dante finished.

“Why doesn’t someone parlay with...” Kyle stopped short and cocked his head to the side. “Get down, both of you!”

Kyle jumped off his stool just as Thomas’ front door exploded off the hinges. Dante pulled his cloak down over his head and covered where he was. Thomas ducked

behind the bar with a yelp. A member of the Order charged behind the destroyed door and into the cottage.

“You picked the wrong town, stranger,” he said as he pointed his sword towards Kyle.

Kyle grabbed his stool by the legs and turned to the window on his left. The window shattered and another brother of the Order soared in behind the raining glass. Kyle stepped through the storm of glass and shattered the stool against the brother’s chest. The brother ricocheted off the stool and flew back to the window he came through. Kyle dropped the broken stool as the brother collapsed against the wall under the window.

Kyle turned and ducked behind the bar as the brother from the front door did the same. The brother’s sword peeked out and Kyle caught the glint of it, out the corner of his eye. He slithered to the top of the bar and knocked over the alcohol as he bolted towards the brother. The brother hazarded a glance up and gasped, wide eyed, as Kyle soared at him. Kyle leapt and hooked his leg around the back of the brother’s neck. Kyle’s momentum slammed them both to the ground. The fleshy sound echoed through the room as the brother’s face smashed into the floor and Kyle landed on top of his neck.

Kyle rolled off the brother with a growl. He snatched the brother’s sword from the ground and stalked towards the door. He turned the sword upside down and roared as he stabbed through the wall next to the door. Kyle turned back to Dante and Thomas, still breathing heavy.

“Do you think they saw me?” Dante asked as he stood slowly.



“What does it matter?” Kyle wondered as he pried the sword from the door and rested it on his shoulder.

“I just don’t want... I don’t want them coming after me like they’re coming after you,” Dante stuttered.

“They aren’t going after anyone,” Kyle replied as he threw the sword back down. “Thomas, board that window up. The door too.”

“It’s kind of late. I don’t know if I can...” Thomas stopped when Kyle turned with eyes like dark flames. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you,” Kyle ended, as a third brother slid from behind the wall next to the door and dropped into a pool of blood. “Looks like I’ll take care of the parlay myself.”

Kyle sat at the back of a table with Shadow Company’s sigil etched into its face. Across from him, Darius’ smile oozed from his lips. Two members of Shadow Company flanked him and watched as Kyle sharpened his sword. Kyle caught the dying sunlight on his blade and forced Darius to squint. Shadow Company’s hotel was old and rundown, but large enough to accommodate its members. The chipped paint and rotting wood of the hotel somehow complimented Darius’ crooked smile. The way Darius smiled made the hair on the back of Kyle’s neck stand up. His indifferent gaze and nonchalant sword upkeep hid his growing disquiet.

“Nicholas was the Order’s best guy, but you knew that, didn’t you?” Darius asked.

“I don’t know much about the Order,” Kyle answered.

“Well yeah, Nicholas was big time on this side of the world. That won’t go unanswered,” Darius continued.

Darius was a slightly older man. Thinning hair clung to his head and his cheeks were just a little too chubby. He was still in fighting shape, but his days of leading the battle were behind him. He wiped his brow and a chill traveled up Kyle’s spine. Something about the look in Darius’ eyes felt slimy. The air felt thick in Shadow Company’s Hotel, even thicker sitting across from Darius. Kyle rubbed his beard and measured Darius, before he answered.

“They tried last night. Didn’t go so well for them.”

“Interesting. How many does that add to your tab?” Darius wondered.

“Two won’t be a problem for a while. One won’t be a problem ever again.”

“Four in one day? Keep you here for a few weeks, we might not have to worry about the Order at all,” Darius smiled and then let out a bellowing laugh that the other Shadow Company members echoed.

“You’ve had the numbers, why not attack them already?” Kyle inquired.

“Yeah, we got the numbers, but they are good. Really good. Especially Acheron,” Darius confessed.

“Acheron? Who’s that?”

“Acheron is the best of the Order. Second in command to the Priestess,” Darius said.

“I thought you said Nicholas was the best the Order had,” Kyle replied.

“The best outside of Acheron. But Acheron travels a lot. Never really know when he’s coming or going. So the Priestess runs things with Nicholas at her side. Until you killed him of course,” Darius explained.

“He had it coming,” Kyle shrugged.

“You’ll get no disagreement from me or mine. I just changes things,” Darius smiled.

“How so?” Kyle wondered.

“Once Acheron comes back, things are going to get a lot less peaceful. You killed his men, he’s not going to take that lying down,” Darius continued.

“Maybe I’ll have a talk with him.”

“Acheron is a man of darkness and shadows. Can’t say he’s ever been beaten with a sword either. Can you say the same?” Darius asked.

“No, I cannot,” Kyle, confessed.

“Good thing you came to see me. Even Acheron won’t attack Shadow Company here.”

“I thought you said the Order was good,” Kyle remembered.

“They are indeed, but these numbers still count for something. I just won’t waste my brothers going after the Priestess on her own soil,” Darius replied.

“I thought this was about Selah?” Kyle wondered.

“It’s always been about the Priestess, regardless of what she tells people. That’s her stock and trade, manipulation. She knows how to weave a tale. Couldn’t tell the truth if her life depended on it,” Darius said with a venomous hiss.

“What’s the truth, Darius?” Kyle asked.

“That she wants to use that girl. The Priestess wants to reclaim the Obelisk as her seat of power. That’s why I left, why we all left,” Darius answered.

“That’s not what I heard,” Kyle informed him.

“Whatever you heard was a lie. Nothing but death comes from the Obelisk and the blood of King Theron. Shadow Company exists so the Sunset Islands never relive that,” Darius finished and looked deep into Kyle’s eyes.

“Noble cause. But nobility doesn’t pay the bills,” Kyle said.

“No, it does not...”

“What does?” Kyle wondered.

“We guarantee that certain shipments from the port, get where they’re supposed to,” Darius smirked.

“And that others don’t.”

“Something like that, Kyle,” Darius replied.

“That’s not so noble.”

“But it puts food on the table. And it keeps us in a position to watch the Order,” Darius explained.

“Okay, Darius,” Kyle said as he returned Darius’ steely glare. They sat in silence, until Darius looked away. “Shadow Company has my sword.”

“I’m sure this will be mutually beneficial,” Darius said, as he reached across the table and shook Kyle’s hand. “You get paid per shipping run. Success goes into your pocket, failure comes out of your hide.”

“You must say that to all your new recruits,” the evil in Kyle’s smile made Darius pause.

“I’ll have one of the Company set up a room for you,” Darius continued.

“I have my own arrangements.”

“We all stay here. Makes coordinating easier. Also means you don’t have to sleep with one eye open,” Darius chuckled.

“You might have a point, let me think about it,” Kyle replied.

“Fair enough. Welcome to Shadow Company,” Darius finished.

“Let’s hope you don’t regret saying that,” Kyle smiled and winked at Darius with a glint of malice in his eyes.

Sea spray caressed Kyle’s face, bringing a smile to his cheeks. The gentle crashing of waves behind him sounded like a sweet lullaby. Something about the coast felt like home. Gulls squawked overhead and merchants yelled from ship to ship. The salty air cleared his head and it wasn’t until Shadow Company loaded the last crate that he remembered where he was.

Shadow Company piled into the front and Kyle hopped onto the back of the transport. He pulled his hood up as the transport rumbled away from the port. Kyle’s eyes stayed on the port as it faded into the distance. The transport rumbled away from the port on Kyle’s fourth supply run. What Shadow Company considered precaution, he considered boring. Without Nicholas at the fore, the Order was largely silent. The shipping runs lined Kyle’s pockets, but did little more.

The steady shimmy of the transport put Kyle at ease. The solitude of the Sunset Islands and the boredom with Shadow Company was a welcome change. A falcon screeched overhead as it trailed behind Kyle and the transport. He realized how deep in the forest they were and how far he had let his mind wander. He scanned the forest as he shook the cobwebs from his head. Some feeling kept bringing him back to the falcon, high above.

Kyle saw something sparkle from the corner of his eye. He whipped his head in the direction, but the forest was silent. He banged on the back of the transport three times. That was the signal to stop, but either Shadow Company didn't hear, or they ignored him. Kyle raised his hand to bang again, when the transport skidded to a stop. Kyle rested his head against the back of the transport as Shadow Company poured out the front. He took a deep breath as they took defensive positions around the transport. Members of the Order surrounded them as Kyle leapt off the back of the transport and stood. He pulled off his hood and walked leisurely to join Shadow Company at the front of the transport.

"What is your business here?" Kyle asked, with casual indifference.

The Order of the Broken Cross surrounded the transport in a loose circle. The Priestess stood at the front, face to face with Kyle. The members of her order flanked her, with weapons drawn. The Priestess removed her hood to reveal dark curls that framed her face. She was older than Kyle, but still fighting age, her steel jaw left no doubt about that. Her darker than olive skin glistened in the midday sun. She lifted her arm and the falcon landed gingerly on her forearm.

“Lay down your weapons and take the long walk through the forest. We’ll take the shipment from here,” the Priestess replied.

“Who are you, to demand that?” Kyle asked.

“She is...” one of the Shadow Company members said.

“Quiet,” Kyle commanded the Shadow Company to silence.

“I would ask the same of you, stranger,” the Priestess added.

“My name is Kyle, I am from the land of the Great Realms,” Kyle bowed slightly as he spoke. “And you are?”

“I am Avan, of the Order of the Broken Cross, known to most as the Priestess,” she replied.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Priestess,” Kyle smiled.

“I wanted to look into the eyes of the man that murdered Nicholas, now I have,” the Priestess explained.

“He had it coming.”

“Perhaps he did,” the Priestess agreed, as she put her arms out to stop the Order from moving forward. “But that doesn’t matter now.”

“No, I don’t believe it does,” Kyle agreed.

“I repeat, lay down your weapons and take a walk. We’ll take the shipment from here.”

“And if we don’t, Acheron will make us wish we had?” Kyle wondered.

“Acheron isn’t around right now, and we don’t need the likes of him to get the drop on you,” the Priestess smiled, evilly.

“Fair enough,” Kyle laughed.

“You’ll meet Acheron in due time,” the Priestess said.

“I have no doubt,” Kyle replied.

“Are you going to do what I said, or is this going to get bloody?” The Priestess asked, as the Order of the Broken Cross moved forward.

“We’ll take the walk,” Kyle started and raised his hand to silence Shadow Company. “But we’ll be keeping our weapons.”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Kyle.”

“It most certainly is, Priestess. Unless you want this to get bloody.”

Kyle and the Priestess stared at each other for a long silent moment. His steel gray eyes trapped her chestnut brown gaze. Both Shadow Company and the Order shuffled anxiously around them. Kyle’s hand slowly trailed down to his scabbard. He slowly twisted and redistributed his weight to his right. Nervousness flashed across the Priestess’ eyes as his left hand touched the hilt of his sword.

“How do I know you won’t attack as soon as we take the transport?” The Priestess asked.

“You outnumber us and you outmaneuvered us. The transport is yours,” Kyle answered.

“That doesn’t answer my question, Kyle.”

“Where I’m from, Warriors don’t question each other’s word, unless given reason to,” Kyle said.

“You live in a place very different from the Sunset Islands,” the Priestess admitted. “But we’ll defer to your customs. A few steps back if you please.”



Shadow Company looked around nervously and Kyle gave a slight bow. He turned his back on the Priestess and walked out of the circle of the Order. Shadow Company stood shoulder to shoulder and slowly stepped away from the Order. When Kyle and Shadow Company were a distance away, the Priestess saluted Kyle. She and the Order piled into and on top of the transport. Kyle and Shadow Company watched as it rumbled into the distance, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. The Priestess stuck her head out of the side before the transport disappeared into the forest.

“A pleasure doing business with you, Kyle,” her voice caromed through the forest.

“What the hell do I pay you for?” Darius slammed his fist on the table and rose.

“Excuse me?” Kyle asked.

“I pay you to make sure the shipments get through. And all I have to show for it are empty hands. Do I look like a fool to you?” Darius continued. “My men say you just let the Order walk away with the transport.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Kyle asked, as he leaned forward.

“You know what I mean,” Darius stammered. “I have important clients. I took you on because you led me to believe you could guarantee security.”

“I did.”

“Then where is the damn shipment?” Darius wondered.

“If the Order hadn’t walked away with the shipment, we’d still be having this conversation,” Kyle started, through clenched teeth. “But you’d have less members of Shadow Company outside that door.”

“These aren’t the kind of people who let you fail,” Darius sighed as he stood.

Kyle shifted in his seat as Darius walked to his mini-bar in the corner. He poured a drink from a large decanter in the back. He slurped down the alcohol as waves of fear cascaded off of him. Kyle fiddled with his cross-guard and cold steel peeked from his scabbard. Darius’ hands trembled as he returned to the table with his glass.

“Who are they?” Kyle asked.

“It doesn’t matter now. We have to make amends,” Darius replied.

“No, we don’t.”

“You don’t know these people!” Darius spilled his drink as he rose again.

“Lower your voice,” Kyle growled. “You don’t want to scare the men outside. And you don’t want me to get the wrong idea.”

“You don’t understand, Kyle,” Darius ran his fingers through his thinning hair as he spoke. “Taking you on might have been a mistake.”

“No, taking me on gave you an out,” Kyle responded.

“How so?”

“The Order knew which shipment to hit. This one was more important than the rest. Without me, your men would have died out there today and you’d still be short a shipment,” Kyle explained.

“Go on,” Darius hazarded another large gulp.

“Your men are alive and I’ll get the shipment back tonight,” Kyle continued.

“How are you going to get the shipment back by yourself?” Darius wondered, with peeked interest.

“You’re going to tell me what you clients really want. Most of that stuff had to be smoke and mirrors. What were you really moving?” Kyle said.

“What makes you think it was smoke and mirrors?” Darius wondered.

“Okay, don’t tell me. But I’m the only thing standing between you and your amends,” Kyle smirked, as he stood to leave.

“Wait, Kyle. Wait!” Darius pleaded. “Sit back down. Let’s talk like gentlemen.”

“I’ll stand, but say what you need to,” Kyle said.

“The shipment contained two artifacts. The buyer is wealthy and dangerous. I don’t know what they look like but they are ancient Askani. Shouldn’t be hard to spot,” Darius smiled.

“Just two?”

“Just two, Kyle,” Darius replied.

“I’ll contact you tomorrow,” Kyle said as he headed to the door.

“What are you going to do?” Darius asked.

“Right now, I’m going to have a drink,” Kyle answered.

“I have plenty of alcohol here, my friend,” Darius said and motioned to his mini-bar.

“I like to drink alone,” Kyle finished, as he walked out of Darius’ office.

Kyle strolled into Thomas' cottage and dropped his cloak on a nearby stool. He massaged his head and took in a deep breath. The herbs Thomas burned to hide his love of pipe smoking wafted around the room. Kyle reached into his shirt pocket and put a piece of black-root in his mouth. A sweet smell danced across his nose and he cocked his head to the side.

The stairs above him creaked as Kyle placed his swords on the bar. He leaned over and grabbed a large glass. He poured his bourbon liberally, neglecting to add ice to his glass. The stairs creaked again and Thomas peeked his head around the corner.

"There's someone here to..." Thomas' voice trembled.

"To see me, I know," Kyle interrupted, as he turned toward the far wall.

Houman sat beneath the shadows in the corner. He crossed his legs and held a lace handkerchief below his nose. Kyle brought one of the stools closer and placed it in front of Houman. He held up his glass as he sat. Houman shook his head and pretended to swat dust off of his ornate tunic. Houman wiped the handkerchief across his brow and Kyle continued to chew his black root. The stairs creaked again and both Houman and Kyle watched Thomas disappear upstairs.

"My name is Houman Al-Jabari. I'm the Primus of Montehari," Houman stated.

"Land of the Black Sands? What brings you this far around the globe, Primus?" Kyle asked.

"It was time you and I talked."

"Is that a fact?" Kyle wondered.

“That’s a fact, Sir Kyle,” Houman started, as Kyle’s brow arched in mild surprise. “Yes, I know who you are. I’m surprised you didn’t blaze that sword when you realized I was here,” Houman motioned towards Kyle’s swords as he continued.

“I don’t need to go heels for a conversation, Primus,” Kyle smiled.

“Is that a fact?” Houman wondered.

“That’s a fact,” Kyle replied through his black root.

Houman stood as Kyle took a liberal sip of bourbon. Houman wiped his brow again and placed his handkerchief in his front pocket.

“You present an interesting problem for me, Kyle.”

“How is that?” Kyle asked.

“If you stay here, I run the risk of someone knowing about this little gem of mine. I can’t exactly make you leave, but I don’t want you staying either,” Houman confessed.

“Looks like you have quite the situation,” Kyle noticed.

“I have two groups here. One or the other usually gets me what I want. Since you showed up, that hasn’t been the case. I find that distressing, very distressing.”

“I can only imagine,” Kyle said as he rose and placed his glass on the bar.

“You and Shadow Company lost my shipment to the Order. But now the Order is afraid to sell to me. They think you’re going to attack,” Houman continued.

“What would give them a fool idea like that?” Kyle asked.

“Same thing crossed my mind,” Houman began as he turned his back to Kyle.

“Then I put myself in their shoes. It’s not a bad assumption to make.”

“It’s still an assumption,” Kyle replied as he leaned against the bar.

“It boils down to this,” Houman said, as he locked eyes with Kyle. “I have things I need. I used to be able to count on one of two groups getting those things to me. That’s no longer the case. Whether that’s truly your fault or not, remains to be seen.”

“Your point?” Kyle wondered.

“I want my shipment!”

“You want the Askani artifacts, you couldn’t care less about the shipment,” Kyle smiled.

“Should have known Darius would be stupid enough to tell you,” Houman sighed.

“He didn’t really have a choice.”

“What are you going to do with that information, Kyle?” Houman asked.

“Same thing I was going to do before,” Kyle said, as he took the black root from his mouth and used it to point at Houman. “I’m going to get you your artifact.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“That’s my concern. But it clears Shadow Company’s debt and puts the Order back on even footing. All’s well that ends well,” Kyle said, while dusting his hands.

“The fact remains, you’ve changed the dynamic. Change can’t be undone,” Houman answered.

“What do you mean, Primus?”

“I don’t need the Order, Shadow Company or this town. I used them because they were beneficial. You’ve changed that. The costs outweigh the benefits now,” Houman replied.

“I have nothing to do with your profit margins, Houman,” Kyle said.

“No, you don’t. And truth be told, this was always part of the plan. Your arrival merely hastened my actions,” Houman laughed.

“Which are?”

“I’m going to walk out of this dust-covered, hovel and get on a ship. That ship will take me to Montehari and in three weeks, I’ll return. I’ll return with a battalion of Medjai. Whoever gives me the Askani artifacts lives, every other Warrior dies,” Houman explained.

“That’s unnecessary, Houman. I told you, I’ll get your artifacts back,” Kyle reminded him.

“The Order, Shadow Company, both have outlived their usefulness. I don’t care which one survives. Hell, Kyle, I don’t care if you return the artifacts to me yourself. I’ll wipe out both groups and leave the place to you,” Houman answered with a smirk.

“I don’t want this town,” Kyle replied.

“Then you have three weeks to fix my problem. Or I’ll return and fix it my way,” Houman said, as he casually strolled toward the door.

“What if I don’t let you leave?” Kyle growled.

“You’re good, Kyle. But you’re not that good. Especially not with these so far away,” Houman said over his shoulder, as he stopped by the bar and patted Kyle’s swords. “Three weeks, Kyle. Alea iacta est,” Houman finished, as the door shut behind him.

“Indeed Houman, the die has been cast,” Kyle said as he poured his last drink.

Night fell on the Sunset Islands with a stillness that lulled the land to sleep. The moon rained light into the streets and stretched the shadows into monsters. A somber wind kicked up the dust around Kyle's legs as he stalked closer to the Order's compound. He melted from one shadow to the next, like a living phantom. Kyle realized that he killed Nicholas in one of the Order's auxiliary buildings as he approached the towering headquarters.

Uninitiated guards patrolled the walls and a single member of the Order stood sentry at the main entrance. Kyle watched the nonchalant way the guards secured the walls from the darkness and waiting until a new member of the Order relieved the door sentry. Kyle moved towards the compound like a living shadow, unseen in the deepening night.

Kyle divorced himself from the shadows and climbed the side of the compound. He snaked his way around the building, bounding from one place to another with serpentine precision. Kyle leapt to one of the high arched windows and the old stone buckled under his weight. He slid to the left and snatched the stone out of the sky before it cascaded to the ground below. He melted into the shadows and ascended the rest of the building, landing silently behind one of the uninitiated guards.

Kyle knelt when he felt a rush of wind at his back. He unclasped his cloak and spun on his heels. A flacon soared into the body of Kyle's cloak and he closed it around the bird, like a beast welcoming prey into its gullet. Kyle wrestled with the flacon as it struggled inside the cloak and Kyle moved further away from the guard. Safely tucked behind a pillar, Kyle reached into his pocket. He opened the cloak slightly and the flacon



peaked its brown and white speckled head out. Kyle raised his palm and the falcon watched him for a long moment, before it took the food offering from Kyle's palm.

Satisfied with his offering, Kyle lowered the cloak to the ground and slowly opened it. The falcon skittered out, and looked around the compound. Kyle stood over him and watched silently. The falcon spread its majestic wings and streaked into the sky without a sound. He circled over Kyle twice, who stood unmoved and then disappeared into the night.

Kyle continued into the compound, blending in and out of the shadows to avoid detections. He slithered behind another set of guards and put his back against the wall. He picked the lock on the basement door on his right and the metal creaked behind him as it closed.

Kyle tiptoed down the steps, hunched over as he went. The wood moaned with his weight and Kyle peered into the dusty basement cautiously. Shipment crates lined the floor as far as Kyle could see and a distant pounding rang in his ears. He concealed himself behind the crates as he made his way closer to the pounded that echoed through the basement. A light in the distance led him right to the sound and void in the meticulously organized crates.

Selah stood in the center of the crates, sweating profusely as her wrapped fists pounded against a wooden pillar in the center. She was all motion and fury. Her eyes burned with rage and pain. She struck the pillar over and over, fighting and unseen opponent. She dodged pretend blows and countered with strikes of her own. When her wrist bent back on itself, she continued despite the pain. She bit her lip, grimaced and wailed on the pillar harder.

“Keep your wrist straight or you’re going to break it,” Kyle said, startling her.

“How long have you been there?” Selah wondered as she stepped back.

She looked like a frightened rabbit, ready to bolt. A savage sort of joy rose inside Kyle. While he was indeed a hunter, Selah was not his prey. He approached her slowly with his hands visible. Instead of walking to her, he approached the pillar. He laid a hand on it and checked its sturdiness.

“Long enough to know you’ve never been trained,” Kyle smiled.

“They forbid me to train,” Selah answered and wiped her brow. “But what they don’t know...”

“Your secret is safe with me, Selah.”

“How do you know my name?” Selah wondered.

“I have a way of finding out whatever I need to know. It’s just something I do,” Kyle replied.

“Are you here to kill me?” Selah asked, the momentary fear disappeared from her voice.

“I’m here for Shadow Company,” Kyle started as he walked away from Selah.

“But we’ll leave it at that.”

Kyle searched around the nearby boxes. He lifted a few lids and moved a few others out of the way. As Kyle searched, he moved boxes to make the area around the pillar larger and Selah came closer. He silently scoured the room as Selah watched him in mild frustration.

Before long, she asked, “What are you looking for?”

“I just found it,” Kyle said as he picked a blanket up off the ground.

“Don’t touch that!” Selah demanded when Kyle reached for a second blanket nearby. “I’m not finished with that one.”

“Fair enough,” Kyle said with a wink. “How about this one? Can I take this one?” He asked as he picked a third blanket up.

“Yes, that one is fine,” Selah relented.

“First things first,” Kyle said as he approached the pillar. “You can’t train if you don’t have enough room to move.”

Selah looked around and in what she thought was Kyle’s mindless searching, he rearranged the crates so that she had an open space around the pillar.

“Come here,” he continued as he folded the blanket in half. “Hold this right here.”

Selah held the blanket against the pillar. Kyle wrapped the blanket tight around the pillar and secured it there. Then he repeated the process with the second blanket. Though it was a little low for him, Kyle wrapped the pillar at the perfect height for Selah.

“Second, you can’t train if you hurt yourself.”

“What’s third?” Selah asked as she patted the pillar.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Kyle smiled.

Selah fixed him with the look of a perturbed bunny. She must have found Kyle’s gruff laughter insulting, because she took a swing at him. He batted it away easily and held up a finger.

“Balance, technique and follow through.”

“Okay, what about them?” Selah asked.

“You need all three,” Kyle said as he dropped into a fighting stance next to her.

It took her a few moments to catch on, but Selah stood next to Kyle and mimicked his stance.

“Widen your feet just a little, it will help.”

“What else?” Selah inquired, trying her best to hide her smile.

“Throw your punches slowly at first. Until you know what you’re doing,” Kyle continued as he demonstrated each punch for her slowly. “Think of each strike as part of a tree. Build on them. Each punch has a number, count it out until it becomes second nature. Technique makes all the difference,” he explained, as he showed her kicks.

Selah copied Kyle’s moves slowly, shifting in place and teetering as she learned. Her eyes said she wanted to go faster, but Kyle kept the pace slow and steady. He went through the punches and kicks until he was satisfied that she could remember them. He adjusted her wrists when she bent them and helped her plant her back leg for power.

“What about the last thing?” Selah asked.

“Follow through,” Kyle said as he hit the pillar with an overhand left that thundered through the basement. “When you are ready, practice one single punch until you master it.”

“That seems like such a waste,” Selah replied as she continued her strike tree.

“The greatest Warrior of a generation said, ‘I do not fear the man that practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.’ I’m sure he’s smarter than both of us,” Kyle smiled.

“Maybe,” Selah huffed in agreement. “Why are you helping me?” Selah asked as she backed away from the pillar. Her eyes turned from wide-eyed excitement, to feral apprehension in a blink. “What do you want?”

“I already have what I came for,” Kyle replied. Selah raised an eyebrow in response. “I have access to what I came for, I should say.”

Selah slowly stepped away from Kyle.

“I’m here for Shadow Company, you know that. You also know the Order stole a shipment earlier.”

“Yeah, what of it?” Selah asked wearily.

“I saw your journals when I grabbed those blankets. The Order keeps you down here to catalogue what they take,” Kyle explained.

“Maybe...”

“You write a fine pen too. Leads me to believe you spend your days studying,” Kyle noticed.

“The library is the only place they leave me alone,” Selah agreed.

“So, when you catalogued their latest haul, you were the only one that realized it had Askani artifacts in it. The Order thinks they just ripped off Shadow Company,” Kyle smirked when recognition flashed in Selah’s eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Selah said hesitantly.

“Yes, you do,” Kyle replied as he walked over to the journals. “That’s why you didn’t want me touching this blanket earlier.”

“I just didn’t want you touching my stuff,” Selah protested.

“Or the Askani artifacts underneath it,” Kyle answered as he pulled the blanket back.

Selah rushed forward, then stopped short with her hand over her mouth.

Underneath the blanket were two small statues. Time and tide had washed away most of

the once vibrant color, but the ancient writing remained on the surface. One depicted the battle between a lion and a large bird. The eyes and the wings of the bird were made from sapphire. The lion's topaz eyes and mane stood out against the time worn statue. The second was a lone castle made of obsidian, being swallowed by ivory waves.

"Don't touch those! I need them!" Selah pleaded.

"So, you can sell them? Get yourself out of here?" Kyle asked as he covered the statues again.

"That's the plan, if you don't screw it up. You don't know what it's like here for me," Selah explained.

"You're right, I don't. But I know you can't sell them."

"Why not? That's all you're going to do," Selah replied.

"Because you don't have enough knowledge. You don't know anyone connected enough to give you a fair price. Sell them to some junk trader outside the village and they'll rip you off. You'll be lucky to leave with your life," Kyle told her.

"You'd rather I stay in prison here?" Selah asked.

"What does the Priestess do to you?" Kyle asked in a voice cold with rage.

"The Priestess treats me like her child. I love her more than you could imagine. But I'm still in prison. I can't leave. I can't figure things out on my own. I can't walk outside without guards," Selah complained as she turned her back. "And you want to take my only way out."

"These artifacts aren't your way out, I am," Kyle said as he placed an arm on her shoulder.

"I don't even know you, now you expect me to trust you?"

“Don’t trust me, hold me accountable. Keep practicing what I taught you. Keep studying, keep learning. If I don’t help you out of here, when the time is right, you’ll be ready to make me pay for it,” Kyle said.

“Or I could scream for the guards right now,” Selah reminded him.

“That would just get a lot of people killed and your artifacts broken. We don’t want that,” Kyle said.

“I don’t want to believe in the unspoken promise of a stranger,” Selah’s petulant anger bit through her words.

“I make you this promise,” Kyle started as he turned her to face him. “Within three weeks, I will have you free of this place and of the Sunset Islands if you chose. Your life will be your own, for now and forever.”

“How can you make such a promise?” Selah wondered.

“Because I was sent here to help you.”

“Huh?” Selah’s voice stammered, genuinely confused.

“It’s not important,” Kyle said as he looked around the room. “I’ve been here too long. Where does this door lead?” He asked, when he noticed a door opposite the one he came in.

“Into the main sanctuary,” Selah told him.

Kyle walked to the artifacts and bundled them in the remaining blanket. He turned to Selah and said, “After I leave, wait five minutes, open the outside basement door and scream for the guards.”

Selah fixed him with the quizzical bunny-look of hers and placed her hands on her hips.

“Won’t that get a lot of people killed?” She wondered.

“It gives you chance to clean this place up,” Kyle said as he hefted the artifacts onto his shoulder. “Trust me, I’ve got a plan,” he ended with a wink, as he walked to the basement’s main entrance.

“Don’t forget your promise,” Selah said sternly as Kyle opened the door. “And be careful stranger,” she whispered, as Kyle disappeared into the main sanctuary.

The Order’s inner sanctuary was just as cold as the wind-swept top of the building. The cold and gloomy interior glowed in pale blue light. Kyle ventured further into the building with his back to the wall. He leaned around the corner and the Priestess stood in the center of the hallway, with her hands on her hips. She looked down the hallways opposite Kyle. A hooded figure faced her, but they were partially obstructed from Kyle’s vision.

“What was I supposed to do? You were gone, again. Nicholas was dead. We needed to remind them who we are,” the Priestess fumed. “You would know that if you were here, Acheron.”

“You’re inviting them to attack us,” Acheron replied in a hoarse voice, hindered further by his cloak. “With Nicholas gone and me away, that’s the last thing you want.”

“True, but it’s necessary. They can’t think we’re weak.”

“There’s one way to prove we’re strong,” Acheron hinted.

“I told you before, I’ll never lay a hand on that child,” the Priestess screamed, causing Acheron to take a step back. “If that’s what you want, join Darius and Shadow Company. I’ll see you both dead and cold before I let any harm come to her.”



“Calm down, Avan. I didn’t mean any harm. I was just fooling,” Acheron’s tone softened.

“It’s not about Selah anymore. Maybe it is for you and me, but not for Darius. Not for the ones who left for Shadow Company. It’s about land, territory and coin.”

“I know the stakes, Avan. I’ve been doing this almost as long as you have,” Acheron reminded her.

“I have a plan that will change the balance of power. I’m going to make a deal with the Primus,” the Priestess smiled.

“How are you going to do that?”

“Darius is too scared to ask the Primus for help. We’re not. We deliver him this shipment and then guarantee future ones and we earn his trust. Then he’ll help us with Shadow Company,” the Priestess continued.

“Why would the Primus make a deal with us?” Acheron wondered.

“You’re going to convince him. You’re the only person I trust, Acheron.”

“Weren’t you just complaining about my time away?” Acheron asked.

“This is necessary. We can’t keep doing this with Shadow Company. Sooner or later Selah will get hurt. I promised her I’d never let that happen,” the Priestess explained.

“Okay, I’ll meet with the Primus, but if this doesn’t work, barring Selah’s involvement, we’re taking more aggressive measures,” Acheron agreed.

“This will work, it has to work...”

Selah’s soul-wrenching scream sliced through the Priestess’ words. Selah’s pained shriek echoed off the walls and reverberated through their bones. Avan and

Acheron froze in the hallway. Acheron tugged at Avan's arm and they disappeared down the hall opposite Kyle. Kyle melted into the shadows as members of the Order thundered through the sanctuary. He waited a moment as the footsteps died behind him. He stepped from the shadows, slung the blanket over his shoulder, looked back one last time and strolled out of the Order's front door.

Kyle casually laid the blanket on Shadow Company's table and poured himself a drink. The whiskey heated his throat and chest, as Darius scurried into the room. He closed the door quickly but Kyle saw Shadow Company lining the outside walls. Darius immediately focused on the blanket, but stopped when he realized Kyle was watching him. Kyle took another liberal drink as Darius stared at his mini-bar quizzically.

"I thought you liked to drink alone," Darius noticed.

"I do," Kyle said, with another drink. "I didn't know you'd be here so quickly."

"I couldn't wait, not with these on my table," Darius said, as he reached for the blanket.

"Funny thing that," Kyle began, as he pulled the blanket away from Darius. "I found out some pretty interesting things in the Order's compound."

"Like what?" Darius wondered.

"Like the Priestess doesn't want anything to happen to the girl. She didn't even mention the Obelisk," Kyle replied.

“That’s because that’s what she wants you to believe. I told you she was a master manipulator,” Darius said.

“She didn’t know I was there,” Kyle said, to a stunned Darius.

“That’s her game. She never turns it off. That’s why everyone believes her. But you weren’t there in the beginning, you don’t know what I know,” Darius explained.

“Then teach me Darius, tell me. Because I saw a woman willing to lay down her life for Selah,” Kyle growled.

“Selah? Pretty familiar, aren’t you?” Darius asked.

“That’s none of your concern. Tell me about Avan.”

“Avan had the chance to do what the Order was created for. She had everything, and she let it go,” Darius said. “She had a chance to end the line of King Theron. The Order waited that day for centuries.”

“She wouldn’t kill Selah,” Kyle reminded him.

“You weren’t with Avan in those days, she had no compunction about killing.”

“This is a little girl we are talking about. A baby,” Kyle said.

“One child, to wipe out a plague among the Sunset Islands. One child, so that other children might live,” Darius reasoned.

“You can’t weigh lives like numbers,” Kyle replied.

“But that’s just what we did, what we do. I killed more people with Avan than I care to remember. But it’s what I pledged myself to,” Darius continued.

“Yet you walked away from it so easily.”

“I walked away from Avan and her lies. It was the only thing to do. The only thing I could do. I wasn’t going to surrender that power to her,” Darius fumed

“Excuse me?” Kyle asked.

“Why else would she keep the girl alive? I told you, she wants the power for herself. That’ll never happen,” Darius declared.

“Perhaps she refused to kill an infant. There are many killers, but fewer still are truly monsters,” Kyle answered.

“You dream, Kyle. You live in a fantasy where the blood you shed can somehow cleanse you, if you’re noble enough. If you pretend to be noble enough. That world doesn’t exist,” Darius continued.

“Be careful,” Kyle warned.

“I wish I was there before her, before she laid eyes on that baby. But I always fought by her side,” Darius mused. “Had I been vanguard, this conversation would never have happened.”

“I’ve had my fill,” Kyle said as he stood and dashed his glass against the wall. “And I’ve heard enough from you,” he continued, as he hefted the artifacts on his shoulder and moved towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Darius’ panic bit through his words.

“Our business is done here.”

“You can’t leave, I need those artifacts. And I need your help,” Darius said.

“I’m not in the business of helping liars,” Kyle replied.

“What are you talking about? Everything I’ve told you is the god’s honest truth,” Darius answered.

“You’ve been lying to yourself for a long time,” Kyle said, as he reached for the doorknob.

“No one leaves the Company. Not while they’re breathing and not without their share of blood,” Darius explained and reached for the artifacts.

Kyle turned to Darius and his sword scorched from his scabbard. Darius’ own blade met Kyle’s in a war cry that echoed through the room. Shadow Company banged on the door outside and Kyle kept it closed with a foot at its base. Kyle and Darius stared at each other through the dance of their swords. Darius gritted his teeth and flexed his jaw, while Kyle looked back with a barely contained inferno in his eyes.

“I’m walking out of here and you won’t stop me,” Kyle growled.

“All of Shadow Company is outside. You can’t take us all,” Darius said.

“You’re right, but you’ll never see which one of your men cuts me down,” Kyle’s smirk had an evil edge to it.

“You’re a charlatan!”

“I’ve been called worse,” Kyle replied.

“I call you traitor. I call you my enemy. I call you a dead man. Drop the artifacts and I’ll let you live,” Darius said.

“Don’t let your pride and the men outside get you killed,” Kyle warned.

“There’s nowhere you can go. We will find you,” Darius said.

“I’m leaving Shadow Company, but I’m not going anywhere,” Kyle answered.

Darius blinked first and when he did, the grip on his sword softened. He let the blade slide against Kyle’s as he stepped back. Darius threw his sword on the Shadow Company table as Kyle sheathed his own. Kyle stepped away from the door and Shadow Company nearly fell over themselves, coming into the room. Kyle watched them and

cocked his head to the side as they stared back. The crowd parted slowly and Kyle walked through them in silence.

Darius stared at Kyle's back for a long time as he walked away. He poured himself a drink, sat at the table and pushed his sword to the ground. Shadow Company retreated from the room without a word, leaving Darius alone. The ice in his glass melted long before he moved a muscle. When he finally did, the scream that escaped his throat could hardly be described as human.

In the days that followed, Kyle took a room back at Thomas' and shadowed The Order whenever they left their compound. He made no secret of his movements, standing in broad daylight to trail them.

At first Avan watched him with casual indifference. That changed when her prized falcon leapt from her arm and landed on Kyle's shoulder. Her puzzlement grew the next day when Selah broke from her guards and slammed into Kyle with a bear hug. Avan measured Kyle's devilish grin and she approached slowly. Selah stayed by his side as the Order surrounded him. Kyle's eyes narrowed and he took a step away from Selah. A familiar tinge in his muscles brought a smile to his face. The falcon above screeched and Kyle and Avan both turned their attention skyward.

"His name is Aramis," Avan said, pointing to the falcon. "I think you two already met."

"Beautiful bird," Kyle responded.

“That he is, and loyal too. Only comes to me,” Avan said.

“Times change, don’t they?” Kyle smiled.

“That they do,” Avan started, as Aramis landed on Kyle’s shoulder again. “Am I missing something?” Avan wondered as she watched Aramis and Selah at Kyle’s side.

“An opportunity perhaps,” Kyle replied.

“I’m not in the habit of trusting anyone that kills my members.”

“I’m not in the habit of killing anyone that didn’t deserve it,” Kyle said.

“Fair enough. What’s your game, Kyle?” Avan wondered.

“No games. I’m here to protect the girl.”

“Shadow Company might have something to say about that,” Avan continued.

“It’s not their concern,” Kyle said.

“Darius would beg to differ. He bought your loyalty.”

“My loyalty was never for sale, only my sword. Your man Nicholas cost you that,” Kyle replied.

“He paid a steep price too. Now what?”

“I told you, I’m here to protect the girl,” Kyle answered.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” Avan hissed.

“I didn’t ask for your permission.”

“Is that a fact, Kyle?” Avan asked.

“That’s a fact,” Kyle responded.

Avan flared her cape out and placed her fists on her hips. Two hilts peeked from behind her fists, attached to her back. She cocked her head to the side and locked eyes

with Kyle. Kyle stepped back with his left and dug in with his right. He lowered his shoulders and contracted slightly.

“Both of you, stop it,” Selah commanded. She jumped in between Kyle and Avan with her arms up as Aramis shot into the air. “If you’re both here for me, what’s your problem?”

“You’re too young to understand,” Kyle looked down at Selah and pushed her arm away.

“No, I’m not!” Selah protested as she brought her arm back up. “If you need to protect me, then do it... together. That’s not hard to understand.”

Aramis circled the end of the street and let out an ear-piercing screech. Selah, Kyle and Avan turned to him and looked into the distance. A dust cloud blew across the street before Shadow Company rounded the corner, flanking Darius. One of the Company hurled rocks at Aramis, to no effect.

Avan stepped forward. She stood shoulder to shoulder with Kyle, as Selah stepped behind them both. Avan’s members of the order swarmed in and surrounded Selah. They all waited silently as Darius and Shadow Company approached.

“Beautiful day, wouldn’t you agree?” Darius asked as he stopped in front of the group.

“Tell your man to stop doing that,” Avan replied.

“Doing what?” Darius smiled evilly.

“He’s going to hurt Aramis. Tell him to stop!” Selah demanded, holding onto Avan’s leg.

“Hush child, the adults are talking,” Darius replied.



“Darius...” Avan said.

“Cameron,” Darius began with a wave of his hand. “Leave that creature alone. We don’t hunt birds. We hunt nuisances. And traitors.”

“What’s that mean, Darius?” Avan asked.

“You know very well what it means, Avan. You do too, Kyle,” Darius answered.

“Your words are bold, but your actions are that of a petulant child,” Avan said.

“I only see one child here. And not for long,” Darius replied.

“Careful,” Kyle said as he shifted his weight.

“Be patient, Kyle, your time is coming too. But it’s not today,” Darius ended as he turned away and Shadow Company walked into the distance.

“He’s a bold one,” Avan commented as Darius and Shadow Company rounded the corner again.

“Getting bolder by the day,” Kyle added.

“I can thank you for that,” Avan said.

“This was bound to happen. What are you going to do about it?” Kyle asked.

“That’s none of your concern. I don’t want your help. Steer clear of me, Aramis and Selah, if you know what’s good for you,” Avan finished, as she and the Order headed in the opposite direction.

“I’ll be seeing you.” Kyle smiled as Selah peeked back at him through her bodyguards. He stood there on the street alone in silence for a long minute. “I’ll be seeing all of you, very soon,” he whispered to himself.

Dante brushed passed Thomas and grabbed a large bottle from the top of the bar. Thomas opened his mouth to say something and even moved to stop Dante, but instead did nothing. Kyle sat on the opposite side of the bar in mild frustration. His sword belts sat on the bar next to him and he watched the empty glass in front of him. Thomas dropped ice into the glass and Dante hovered over it with the bottle. Before Dante could pour, Kyle covered the glass with his palm and waved Dante away.

“It’s not like you to turn down a drink,” Thomas commented.

“Now’s not the time for drink. I need to be focused,” Kyle replied.

“This place is getting more and more dangerous,” Dante added.

“You never seem to be around for any of it,” Kyle noticed.

“If I could’ve handled this myself, I would’ve. But I’ve never seen Darius confront Avan like that in broad daylight,” Dante said.

“He’s a wounded animal,” Kyle said, as he picked up his swords and walked to the chair at the back of the room. “He’s going to strike however he can.”

Thomas followed suit. He picked up a chair and a small table and sat them both in front of Kyle. He placed his drink and some fresh fruit on the table. He sat as Kyle picked up a piece of fruit and polished it on his shirt. Dante came over last, drinking straight from the bottle as he walked. He kicked a stool to Thomas’ side and sat as well.

“How is that going to help Selah?” Dante asked.

“I thought the artifacts would scare him off, but that didn’t work. So, I don’t know,” Kyle confessed.

“Since you got here, this town doesn’t seem big enough for Shadow Company and the Order,” Thomas said with a drink.

“It never was,” Kyle replied.

“You definitely brought it to light,” Dante added.

“You wanted me here, Dante,” Kyle hissed.

“I’m not complaining. I still need your help,” Dante continued.

“This isn’t about you anymore, Dante. It never was,” Kyle finished, as his blades peeked from inside their scabbards.

The pounding on the sanctuary door almost knocked Avan off her prayer bench. When she looked up, her Order flanked her with weapons drawn. Two guards stood on both sides of the door with their bows taut, when Avan and entered the main hallway. She nodded at the man to her left and he approached the door slowly. He stopped short when the pounding started again. The Order looked around wearily, but Avan stood in the center of the hall steadfast.

The guards opened the door slowly and Kyle spilled into the hall, barely carrying a bloodied member of the Order. Kyle struggled to hold the man up, while the rest of the Order stood in muted silence. Avan locked eyes with Kyle and moved forward slowly while the rest of the Order remained paralyzed.

“What did you do?” Avan asked, as he grasped the sword on her hip.

“I saved his life,” Kyle replied as he lowered the man to the ground, slowly.

“There are two more on the road here.”

“You killed them?” Avan asked.

“No, I saved them. All of them. But not for long, if the Order is going to stand around doing nothing,” Kyle answered.

“Move,” Avan demanded as she pushed Kyle out the way and she tried to stop the bleeding. “What happened?”

“What do you think?” Kyle said. “It was Darius.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Avan scoffed, applying pressure to the wounds. “They weren’t even on a shipping run. They were just getting supplies.”

“You said Darius was bold, he just proved you right,” Kyle said.

“This was your doing!” Avan’s rage burst from her.

“I wouldn’t have left them alive,” Kyle said as the Order closed in and he grabbed the hilt to his sword.

“Stop, wait,” the bloodied guard coughed weakly as he looked at Avan. “Kyle is telling the truth. Shadow Company ambushed us. They took off when they saw him.”

“Well, don’t waste time,” Avan commanded, waving the Order off. “Go help the men that were left. We don’t know if Darius will come back.”

Avan’s guard and the rest of the assembled Order rumbled out the main hallway. The door to the sanctuary barely clicked shut, before Kyle was at Avan’s side. She tended to her wounded member, but Kyle looked deep into her eyes. He stayed there until she was forced to look back. Even though she tried to hide her gaze from his, Kyle was relentless.

“Darius isn’t a fool. No one has seen Selah in days. He’s looking for her,” Kyle said.

“You don’t know that,” Avan replied.

“We BOTH know that.”

“No, we don’t,” Avan insisted.

“Why else attack your men?” Kyle asked.

“It’s what he does. He’s chaotic. Always has been,” Avan reasoned.

“Damn it, Avan. Stop being a fool. Where’d you hide her?”

“Help me get him into the sanctuary,” Avan said as she stood.

Kyle knelt next to the man and cradled him. The man’s pained groans let Kyle know that he could be gentler. Kyle followed behind Avan and laid the man one of the empty pews before he followed Avan to the front of the building. Avan turned to Kyle slowly with fire smoldering in her eyes.

“Selah is safe. And Darius will pay once Acheron returns,” Avan hissed.

“Acheron. Acheron. I keep hearing that name. But he’s a ghost. He won’t save Selah. And neither will you, not for long,” Kyle said.

“What are you implying?” Avan wondered.

“That Darius knows this country better than I do and it’s only a matter of time before he figures out where you’ve got her stashed away,” Kyle answered.

“What are you going to do?” Avan asked.

“With or without your help, I’m going to find her,” Kyle said.

“Why do you care so much?” Avan asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Kyle confessed as he turned away from Avan. “But I think I saw the same thing in her that you did. Selah is special.”

“That she is, Kyle,” Avan smiled.

“Tell me where she is. I’ll bring her back here and we can both protect her until we deal with Darius permanently,” Kyle said. “You can’t trust the roads right now.”

“How can I trust you, Kyle? Avan asked.

“All I care about is keeping her safe,” Kyle replied.

“Your word, you’ll bring her back here?”

“Yes, back here,” Kyle responded.

“Then, we wait until Acheron gets back and we handle Shadow Company,” Avan continued.

“If that’s what you want, that’s fine by me,” Kyle said with a wave of his hand.

“Do you have a horse?” Avan wondered.

“Saddled up outside,” Kyle answered.

“Meet me out back, Aramis knows the way. He’ll take you.”

“You trust her location to an animal?” Kyle asked.

“I trust Aramis more than anyone,” Avan confessed.

“That doesn’t scare you?”

“It didn’t,” Avan said with a deep sigh. “Not until this very moment.”

“Darius reached out to me, I know I can’t be the only one,” Nose said, as he looked around the room.

Nose, so named because of the prominent appendage, looked to Nathan, Christopher and Goose for approval. Nathan sat opposite Christopher and Goose sat

opposite Nose. No one answered, but they all heard what he said. Further, they all knew it was true. Darius had made similar overtures to all of them before they left town.

Something about the last couple weeks made Darius desperate, dangerous even. The stalemate they had come to know as normal was teetering. Nose was the only one to say it, but it had crossed all of their minds.

“This isn’t something we should even be discussing, Nose. We are part of the Order, we swore our loyalty to the Priestess,” Nathan reminded him.

“That’s before Darius said how much he was offering for the girl,” Christopher added, patting his sword.

All of their weapons were laid out on the table in front of them. The cottage was small but had enough room to move around. They sat in the common room and the stairs leading to the upper floor were on the left. The entrance was down the hall on the right and the kitchen was behind them. Goose shifted in his seat restlessly and Nose scanned the room again.

“This is a little girl we’re talking about,” Goose said, nervously.

“Darius wants the Priestess and some artifacts, the girl is just a bargaining chip,” Nose explained.

“So, you think,” Nathan replied.

“You’re willing to use a child like that?” Goose wondered.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing now? We’re sitting in God knows where until Avan says we can return home. Just so she can beat Darius,” Nose’s truth brought them all to silence.

“He’s not wrong,” Christopher said after a long pause.

“It’s not right,” Goose protested.

“No, it’s not, but neither is the situation. We should at least consider it,” Nose continued.

The entrance door creaked for what seemed like too long. All four members of the Order looked up, but Kyle was already standing at the head of the table, behind Nathan. The entrance door clicked closed and silence swallowed the room.

“Is the girl upstairs?” Kyle growled.

Kyle moved like living fire. His sword burst from its sheath and licked across Christopher’s neck, in the moment it took for him to blink. Kyle descended on the table and his cloak flapped behind him like dark wings. A back-kick ricocheted against Nathan’s skull and sent him to the ground. Kyle spun and his blade danced across Nose and Goose’s chests. Nose tried to summon the strength to grab his sword, but he only painted the table in more blood. He fell over, just as Kyle leapt from the table and plunged the length of his blade into Nathan’s sternum. Kyle roared as he wrenched the sword from Nathan’s chest. He watched Nathan choke on his own blood until his eyes rolled into his head.

Kyle wiped his sword down with his cloak as he moved towards the stairs. He eyed them cautiously before he ascended. He looked back one last time at the four guards as he headed upstairs.

There was a single closed room upstairs, the rest was open area. The dark wood was covered with dust. The rugs crunched beneath Kyle’s feet as he stalked forward. He opened the door on his right slowly and locked eyes with Selah. She sat on the edge of



the bed with her legs dangling off, looking at nothing in particular. When she saw Kyle, she leapt off the bed.

Kyle held open his arms and Selah landed two solid blows to his stomach before he shifted out of her way and blocked the rest. Selah's quizzical-bunny look held a deep well of anger, all focused on him. She swung again and Kyle grabbed her wrists and held her in place. She struggled but gave up quickly and looked up at him.

"I don't know whether to be proud or angry," Kyle smiled lazily.

"I heard them talking about making a deal with Darius. They were going to kill me. You were going to let them kill me. You promised you'd help me," Selah's words tumbled from her with a sob.

"And I'm here, now," Kyle reassured her.

"But what if you hadn't been. What if you hadn't showed up?" Selah asked.

"It doesn't matter, because I did. They won't harm anyone," Kyle replied with cold finality.

"What are we going to do now?" Selah wondered.

"Get you back to the Sanctuary where it's safe. I've got some unfinished business back in town."

Broken glass lined the floor and screeched across the wood as Kyle cautiously opened the door. He held his sword defensively in front of him and kept Selah behind him, with his opposite hand. Kyle kicked the door open and slid into Thomas' cottage.

Kyle used his leg to wedge the door open before he slid in. Cold wind blew through the broken windows that lined the wall. Glass crunched under foot as Kyle moved into the room slowly. Selah followed closely behind him, doing her best to control the fear that rose in her stomach. Kyle released her hand as his eyes acclimated to the awkward amber light that showered the cottage.

“Stay against the wall,” Kyle ordered, as he pointed to the back corner. Selah quickly retreated where he told her too and watched him in frightened anticipation. “Thomas! Dante!” Kyle called out as he walked forward.

Something rustled behind the bar and Kyle’s head snapped to attention. A bottle rolled off the bar slowly and shattered on the ground. Thomas yelped from behind the bar and slowly put his hands in the air. He stood and the amber light glistened off the fresh blood on his forehead. One of his eyes was swollen closed and he leaned to the side, moving gingerly with bruised ribs.

“Are you okay?” Kyle asked as he rushed to Thomas’ side. He led Thomas around the bar and to a chair at the back of the cottage. Selah came closer but kept a weary distance from the two. “Why didn’t you come out when I called?”

“Shadow Company did the same thing. I wasn’t sure if they were back,” Thomas said, with a wince.

“This was Shadow Company? Why?” Kyle asked.

“They were looking for something. Some artifacts, they said. They took them and that blanket you had,” Thomas answered.

“My way out,” Selah whispered.

“I’ll handle it,” Kyle reassured her.

“But they took them, you promised me, Kyle,” Selah’s tears drowned out her words.

“I keep my promises, Selah,” Kyle said as he held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Where was Dante?” Kyle asked as he turned back to Thomas.

“He disappeared early in the morning. I haven’t seen him since,” Thomas responded. “I wish he’d have been here...”

“Quiet!” Kyle hissed as he slid towards the door.

The door burst open just as Selah and Thomas hid behind the chair. Dante leapt through the door and right into Kyle’s grasp. Kyle’s vice-like grip dug into Dante’s collar and forced him to drop his sword. When Kyle slammed his back into the wall, Dante almost lost his breath. Kyle’s blazing gray eyes seared through Dante, pinned against the wall.

“Where were you?” Kyle roared.

“Looking for you,” Dante said as he struggled against Kyle’s grip.

“I told you where I was.”

“Look outside, Kyle,” Dante said as he shook off Kyle’s grip. “That’s not the sunset. That’s Shadow Company’s compound burning. Acheron came back. It didn’t take long for the whole town to know,” Dante explained as he walked to the bar.

“Shadow Company didn’t wait.”

“If they took the artifacts, why is their compound burning?” Kyle asked.

“The Order didn’t wait either. After Shadow Company ransacked this place, they raised a blanket as their banner. That’s all it took for the Priestess to go on a rampage,” Dante said.

“She thinks Shadow Company has Selah. They’ll slaughter each other,” Kyle realized as she looked back at Selah.

“Let them. For what they did to my town, they deserve it,” Thomas added, from behind the chair.

“Dante, look after Selah,” Kyle said, ignoring Thomas. “Keep her here until I get back,” Kyle continued as headed for the door. “I’ve got to stop Avan before it’s too late.”

“What about Acheron?” Dante called to Kyle as he trotted off.

“The man’s a phantom. I’ve never been scared of ghost stories.”

“Perhaps you should be,” Dante muttered to himself as Kyle disappeared into the night.

Amber light framed Avan’s face, as the flames climbed higher into the sky. Fire crawled over the Shadow Company’s compound as the Order formed loose ranks in front of the entrance. Avan stood at the center of the Order, the furious lines of her face painted by the inferno. Anger twisted her face into an almost unrecognizable mask, as she watched fire crawl over Shadow Company’s compound.

Shadow Company warriors fired arrows from the windows and tried to fight the fire from inside. Their ghostly silhouettes ran back and forth in pandemonium. The main entrance burst open and flames belched from its mouth. Members of shadows company

tumbled from the entrance and spewed from the windows. They caromed around like bees, running from the fire that latched to them and scarred their flesh.

Grim though the site was, Avan was no monster. Her archers' aim was true and her guards struck down anyone that came from the building. The soul wrenching screams that escaped the men still trapped inside were mercifully silenced when the Order's arrows found their mark.

Kyle came around the corner and skidded to a stop when he saw the Order standing outside of the blaze. Men were still jumping from the building to escape the flames and they were still being cut down equally as fast. Some of the Order enjoyed the slaughter, but Avan's posture said something else. Kyle wasn't certain what he saw when he looked at her, but it wasn't satisfaction.

"What are you doing?" Kyle yelled over the roar of the fire as he grabbed Avan by the shoulders.

"I'm keeping YOUR promise," Avan spit back as she shook off Kyle's grip. "Acheron came back this morning. I sent him to the safehouse. He returned, you didn't. What was I supposed to think?"

"That I was traveling with a child and it might take me longer on the back roads."

"You don't have her now. I'm going to force Darius to give her back," Avan protested.

"By killing everyone?" Kyle's rage bit through his words.

"Acheron said that everyone at the safehouse was dead and there was no sign of Selah. Darius raised her blanket to taunt me," Avan continued.

“Selah is safe at Thomas’. I told you I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. Everyone is dead at the safehouse because they made a deal with Darius. They were going to sell you out,” Kyle explained.

“Bullshit, Kyle!”

“Why would I lie to you? Stop this madness,” Kyle said as he watched the flames dance in the sky. “Darius has her blanket because he broke into Thomas’ cottage earlier. He’s playing you!”

“Then he got what he wanted, fire and death!” Avan screamed and the Order cheered.

“You’re a fool and so is Acheron,” Kyle growled.

“Be careful, to say his name, is to summon the man,” Avan warned.

“My Priestess, look,” one of the Order called from the back.

Darius held a thick rag over his mouth and waved his cape in the air. He coughed and choked as he struggled out of the entrance. He fell to his knees and gulped in the fresh air. He dry-heaved and tried to catch his breath. Two members of the Order went to his side and raised him off the ground. His charred clothes stuck to his skin and ash littered his body. Through his haze, he looked up at Avan.

“I never thought you had it in you,” Darius coughed with a weak smile.

“Where is Selah?” Avan demanded, grabbing Darius’ collar.

“I don’t know,” Darius wheezed.

“Where is she? Tell me!” Avan continued as he put her sword against Darius’ belly.

“I don’t know. Never have. I wanted the artifacts, not the girl,” Darius’ ironic smile stopped Avan cold.

Thomas appeared from the darkness screaming, “this is for what you did to my home!” As he plunged one of Kyle’s long forgotten throwing knives into Darius’ stomach.

Thomas kept screaming as he stabbed Darius over and over. Kyle, Avan and the Order watched in shock as blood poured over Thomas’ arm and the life faded from Darius’ eyes. The crazed fury that took over Thomas quickly faded as Darius dropped to the ground lifelessly. Thomas let go of the throwing knife and fell to his knees.

“Where’s Selah, Thomas?” Kyle asked as he grabbed the back of Thomas’ shirt.

“I left her with your friend,” Thomas answered with a bemused, faraway look. “I’ve never killed anyone before. I didn’t know there was so much blood. So much blood,” he rambled.

“Who’s your friend?” Avan asked, as she turned Kyle to face her.

“Don’t worry about it. Selah is safe,” Kyle answered.

“That’s not good enough. Not for me and damn sure not for Acheron,” Avan countered.

“I don’t serve Acheron, but I’ll be glad to finally meet him,” Kyle sneered.

“You don’t have to wait long,” Avan noticed, as she looked into the distance.

“Here he comes now. And it looks like he did what you couldn’t,” Avan continued when she saw Selah.

“That’s not Acheron. That’s... Oh shit...”

In all his life, Kyle wasn't certain that he'd ever been hit harder or faster. A wave of solid dark energy knocked him off his feet. His vision didn't return from a haze of black until his back hit the ground and the wind shot from his lungs. His chest throbbed and a high pitch rang in his ears. He struggled to turn over, but his limbs felt like they were on fire and he still gasped for air.

All of the Order, including Avan were similarly struggling to get to their feet. Their garbled voices bounced off of Kyle's ears. Scattered images appeared in between moments of blackness, moments that lasted too long. Whatever just attacked them had laid waste to the entire group, without so much as a sound.

Kyle stumbled to his feet and his hazy vision slid into focus. Dante stood at the far end of the street with Selah next to him. He held her hand gingerly and self-satisfied smile twisted his lips. His deep throaty laughter bounced off the roar of the flames at his side. Selah's dark and unmoving eyes stared into the distance. She stood next to Dante like a statue, while the charm at his neck emitted the same dark glow as her eyes.

"What are you doing, Dante?" Kyle asked as he drew his sword to steady himself.

"That's not my name," he replied, in a voice multiplied by the darkness around him.

"Acheron!" Avan yelled from Kyle's right.

"That's more like it," he said, as evil stretched his smile.

"Who are you?" Kyle asked.



“Does that really matter? I am power, and I am your death,” Acheron answered.

“I trusted you, Acheron,” Avan protested.

“That was your first mistake.”

Acheron thrust his hand forward and the shadows around him sprang to life. The phantom Acherons took on a form like his, only larger, bulkier. Selah’s hair blew in a non-existent wind and her eyes glowed brighter. The charm at Acheron’s neck crackled with power as it floated in front of him. Energy pulsed from Acheron’s hand to his dark creations. Dark purple energy leaked off their frames as they stalked closer to Kyle and Avan.

“Give Selah back!” Avan screamed, as she charged at Acheron.

Acheron clenched his fist and the jewel empowered phantoms wadded into battle. Purple energy rimmed weapons formed from the phantoms’ arms as Acheron moved his hands like a puppeteer behind them. Avan held back three of them. Her sword flashed left and right, but she backpedaled away from the phantoms’ superior numbers. One of the Order jumped to her aid and cut the head from one of the phantoms. The two non-corporeal forms shuttered and shook, before they formed two new energy filled phantoms. Avan and Shadow Company were forced back on their heels, fighting to survive against phantoms that multiplied with each deathblow.

Kyle sliced across the abdomen of the one of the shadows. Kyle’s sword sloshed through the shadow, finding little resistance in the body. The phantom sputtered and split and reformed as two renewed figures. Kyle ducked beneath a deathblow from the phantom on his right and plunged the length of his sword into the shadow’s chest. Kyle’s sword lodged there as the shadow stumbled backwards.

In the distance, Acheron's power faltered and he stumbled back as well. When he did, the rest of the phantoms followed suit. Kyle drove his sword deeper into the shadow's chest and took them both to the ground. The shadow struggled against Kyle's sword and convulsed as it melted back into the ground.

Acheron clutched his chest and the jewel that channeled Selah's power. He panted as he locked eyes with Kyle, whose vicious grin spread across his face. Kyle dodged another attack and struck another shadow in the heart. Acheron doubled over again, holding his heart as a cold sweat beaded on his brow.

"It's the heart, Avan. Aim for the heart!" Kyle roared as he waded into the fray with the multiplied phantoms.

### FIGHT SCENE

Kyle thrust his sword into the ground and staggered to his feet. A mess of shadow bodies littered the ground and Acheron panted to catch his breath. The jewel at his neck had lost its glow and lay idly on his chest. Selah still had a far-away look in her eyes, but power no longer emanated from her in waves. Acheron placed a hand on Selah's shoulder as he held his chest. His grimace deepened as he thrust his hand forward, but the shadows no longer answered his call.

Kyle looked around, most of the Order was either dead or injured. Avan held a shaking hand up from the ground. She reached for Selah with her last bit of strength. Avan's head slammed into the dirt as her body betrayed her. Sadness pooled in Kyle's eyes as he leaned on his sword and Selah collapsed at Acheron's feet. Kyle and Acheron locked eyes as rage burned through Kyle's veins.

Acheron bent over, still clutching his chest. He cradled Selah in his arms and lifted her nearly lifeless body off the ground. His thrust his hand forward again but the jewel and Selah remained silent.

“Run back across the ocean, Kyle. Return to Avalon. You’ve lost,” Acheron smiled as mist surrounded him.

“Take your hands-off Selah, or I’ll kill you,” Kyle struggled.

“It’s over, Kyle. There is no hope for you, no daylight. All that’s left are shadows and death. And I am the master of both,” Acheron laughed as the mist swallowed him and Selah.

Kyle didn’t know when he blacked out, but he awoke to Avan sitting over him. The musky scent of the sanctuary crawled into his nose. Aramis idly flapped his wings at Kyle’s side, as Avan wiped his forehead with a damp towel.