

“Untitled”

She opened her eyes. The dim light pointed at her appeared blindingly bright, after her long wait in the darkness.

“Are you ready?” asked a voice.

Elara didn’t hesitate. “I am ready.” She had been ready for years. Her whole life had been centered around her career. And now she could take her first task, to dictate whether she had the strength to continue. Or the weakness to fail. But she couldn’t stop. Fail, and be killed.

“Here.” The dim light was adjusted, and Elara could see a hologram of a middle-aged man. “Here is your target.”

She nodded briefly. “Suicide, or an accident?”

“It will be a mysterious disappearance. Dispose of the body in a way that cannot be discovered. Leave no evidence.”

“I won’t,” Elara responded quietly. She mentally ran through the ways she could accomplish this.

“He won’t be traveling alone,” her employer’s spokesperson warned.

“Bodyguards? Associates?”

“His family.”

Elara felt a small twinge of emotion in her gut. It was quickly quenched. Assassins did not feel. She had spent much of her training in teaching herself to suppress inconvenient things such as emotion. She had not felt the pain of a conscience in years.

“And?”

“Kill them too. They will not keep quiet.”

“I will.” Elara was once again cold and professional. “Not a word of the affair will get out.”

“Yes. You have your information. It is waiting at your place of residence.”

She wasn’t surprised. She didn’t know where she was, or exactly who her employer was. Just that she had been brought to this place, and she was being payed by most likely a government official. The fact that this man knew where she lived and how to get her the information she needed in a safe, secure way, seemed plainly obvious.

“I will do my job. Aris Xan will be dead by the time you ask.”

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When Elara arrived at her home, a file of papers was waiting, as expected. Primitive. It was only as she lifted them that Elara realized the cunning. One could not

hack into a simple Manilla folder. Once destroyed, paper could never be recovered. It was easier to eliminate this paper trail.

The assassin quickly skimmed her information. She stopped at a snapshot of her victim. A prominent figure in the Underground, the stress of his occupation showed. Yet though his face was finely lined from pain and stress, there were also smile lines. Lines by his eyes, left from much laughter. Creases, all of which indicated a depth of his personality.

Elara snapped the folder shut abruptly. She needed just enough information that she could use it. Identify the target. Eliminate his companions. Finish her job.

Just like she had trained for. Like she had been taught for years. As *he* had taught her.

No. Elara forced her thoughts away from the only semblance of family she had had. Her surrogate father. Killer of her family. But protector of her life. Who was now dead.

She knew her assignment would go better. She would be unharmed, and her victim would have vanished. He and his family would be gone without a trace, a few documents the only evidence that they had ever lived on Earth.

She would not fail. She would do as she had been taught.

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“Daddy, why are we walking?” piped up a small child hanging from his father’s hand. “We don’t ever walk places. Is this different?”

“No, sweetie. We’re just moving. We’re walking because this is an adventure,” Aris Xan’s voice was hushed. Despite his reassuring words, his gaze darted around every few seconds. He was perfectly aware of how much he was wanted. He exchanged a significant look with his wife, who was walking on his other side and carrying a young girl, barely more than a toddler.

“Why are we moving, Daddy?” asked the little boy after a moment of silence. “I like home. It’s nice.”

“We’re going to a new place,” said his mother. “It’ll be nice too. It will keep us safe. From the bad guys?”

Xan paused, clearly thinking on whether to tell his children the truth. “...Yes. From the bad guys. They won’t get us.”

Elara, observing all of this from her vantage point, almost laughed at the cruel irony of the situation. In running away, the rebel was simply putting his family in further danger and making it easier for all of them to be killed.

Yet he didn’t know. He walked onto the set stage. Everything was laid out.

“Target spotted?” spoke a voice in her ear.

Elara reached up to press an earpiece. “Yes,” she muttered. “I need to move closer. His wife and two children are with him.”

“Remember– make sure there is no trace left.”

Elara bit back a retort. The small family was traveling through a wasteland toward a pickup point. Elara could have used an explosion to kill her victims and the difference to the landscape wouldn't have been remarkable.

Yet her duty was to simply kill the man and his family. Then move on. Collect payment, forget the whole thing had ever happened, and wait for her next job.

The young woman crept forward silently, tuning out the continued chatter of her target's children. The children which were also her targets. Every piece of advice, every teaching from her father, rang through head. Her first mission. She had to succeed.

Elara passed the group, and found a convenient spot. One shot, and her main target was dead. The rest would be easy to get. She had him just about in the right place. A few more steps... And just as she was about to pull the trigger—

The boom and shake of an explosion threw her off. Debris flew everywhere, and the only thing Elara could do at that second was huddle behind the shelter she had been using to hide.

As the dust cleared, an upright figure could be seen, passing through the rubble, searching.

Elara straightened. Who could have—

"You!" she spat as her eyes widened, then narrowed, with recognition. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," replied a thin man easily. He spoke in an accented voice.

"Diros, you know exactly why I'm here. Leave. He sent you to make sure I did my job, didn't he?"

Diros snorted. "As if I'd just leave. Look, I'm here to keep an eye on you. You weren't doing it, so I did."

"I was about to."

"He was walking and talking. If a target is walking and talking, that generally means the assassin failed. Be glad I was here to back you up."

Before Elara could respond with something quite rude and probably unwise, the rubble stirred. Both assassins ran towards the spot.

Miraculously, the entire family was still alive. Bruised and bleeding, but alive.

Aris Xan stumbled to his feet. He shoved a youngster behind him and, though his stance was shaky, faced the people meant to be his killers.

Elara tensed, waiting for him to attack one of them, run, or plead for his life.

The man fell to his knees. "Kill me. But let my family go."

Elara stiffened.

Diros smiled cruelly. "The first part of that sounds good. The second half..." He shrugged, then gestured to Elara. "You may kill him."

Elara moved her hand to the hilt of a dagger. One move. It would be so easy. Yet—

“Elara! Don’t be like your father,” Diros warned. “Finish the job.”

Elara rounded on him. “He always finished his jobs! His last target was dead before he was.”

The assassin facing her snorted. “That’s not what I meant. He was unable to finish one. Too weak. You know he killed your family.”

Elara glared at Diros. “I know.”

“He failed to kill you.”

A sharp intake of breath.

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“Not my daughter! Please don’t kill Elara! Just kill me!” Her real father. Pleading. The man who had been a father to her from that point in her life on. Hesitant. A few moments later, as a body fell to the ground, the assassin crossed the room. Stooped, and picked up a baby.

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“Fine! I’ll do it!” Diros exclaimed.

Elara, brought back to the present, reached defensively for her dagger, but Diros had one of his own.

He drew back his arm.

With a flash of thought, Elara threw her body forward. She felt searing pain, and saw a hilt protruding from her sternum.

Everyone gaped in shock. Diros paused long enough for Elara to reach for her blade. A moment later, the assassin fell too.

Aris Xan knelt beside the young woman meant to be his killer.

“Why?” he asked brokenly.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Elara’s face. “All my life I was taught my duty. To take life. Like that was the right thing to do.”

“And?”

“And it’s not. I was blind. But my eyes have been opened.”