

Fair, by Sophie Houlden.

Chapter 1: It starts with a death.

The rain beat down heavily on the forest, shaking the trees violently. Though on a night as dark as this they were only visible at the edges of the mother's torchlight.

She looked down at her child, sheltered in her cloak, tired from the journey and feeling the mud was getting the better of her. The mother hoped this was the only hardship the child would have to face. She knew there were troubled times ahead for people like them, but like now she was going to do all she could to shelter her child from the storm.

A flash of lightning turned the night to day for the shortest of moments, the trees were nothing but an instance of movement, a single frame in their movie fight with the wind and rain.

But the mother was sharper than the lightning, she knew she saw something, but made sure she showed no signs of it though, if she was being hunted she didn't want her stalker to know that she was aware.

Another flash of lightning and she knew she was surrounded. This was a situation where she was outmatched, her only motive now was the survival of her child.

The mother stopped, moved her child as close as possible, and then put out the torch.

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The assassins probably didn't hear the child crying beside her mother's corpse as they approached, they likely didn't even know the mother had her child with her after she was hidden in the cloak. The circle of killers slowly crept towards the body, still fearful of it, if the death was just a trick, a warrior this strong could be the end of their careers... and their lives.

The child still partly covered by the cloak tried to get some kind of response from her mother, she saw the blood running down her arm, her face laying sideways in the mud, eyes wide open. Unblinking.

The girl could feel the puddle she was in was warm, she knew well enough what it meant, someone had taken her mother from her, she didn't know why, but more than anything she knew it was the most unfair thing in the world.

The girl stood up, attempting to wipe the tears from her eyes, but the rain pushed on her so strongly there's no way to know if she managed.

The assassins froze, it was clear to them now the child was with the mother, but it was not a part of the plan. One decides it's best to knock out the child but they never get the chance.

It seemed like daylight for another split-second. But it wasn't the lightning this time, when the light faded there was a circle of bodies surrounding that of the child's mother.

The child outcried the storm.

Chapter 2: Customers expect benefits.

Aella felt herself being shaken, drowsy, she opened her eyes to see a large, bald, bearded man in her face.

“Wake the hell up girl! I dont pay you to sleep on the job!”

Aella thought to herself “you barely pay me at all”.

he then shook her forcefully a second time,

“Ok... ok already! I'm up, fuck Ssa!”

“Dont give me any of that lip, serve the customers and then take the trash.”

Aella picked herself up from the sacks of potatoes she was using as a bed and straightened out her outfit, pulling her apron back into place. As she did this she noticed her mother's bracelet, the one thing she had to remember her by, was showing. She quickly covered it with her sleeve.

Who knows what the assholes who came to the bar would do if they saw something that looked that valuable, especially if they saw that one of the 26 glass beads that was embedded in it... glowed. Aella didn't want to risk losing the last connection she had with her mother.

Picking up a tray and a cloth Aella stepped out of the kitchen and into the bar to clear the tables. As usual, the bar was totally full. Aella heard that ever since the white event times have been hard for everyone. She looked at all the men drowning themselves in beer across the bar and thought them all cowards. If times are hard all they do is drink themselves stupid so they dont have to think about it.

“Hey tits! Our table needs some attention!”

this was her life ever since her mother died, cleaning up after rude drunken assholes who can barely make it to the toilet, and even when they do they make a godawful mess for her to clean up. And for what? So she could earn enough to stay alive and keep doing this?

“My name's Aella, asshole.” she took the (substantial number of) glasses from the table and wiped it down.

“no need to be rude kid, it was a friendly gesture!”

Aella looked at the mans face, she could see right past it like it was invisible and his thoughts were painted out all to clear, he was being too friendly for her liking.

“Whatever I dont like it. Dont talk to me like that.”

Aella cleared up the rest of the tables in the bar, received many similar interactions with the other customers and by the time she was done she was ready to put someones face inside out.

She dumped the glasses in the sink and grabbed the bags of trash.

“Make sure you put them in the skip at the end of the allyway this time, dont just dump them next to it” Ssa called at her from the other side of the kitchen.

“Hey that was because the skip was full! The garbage guys are too busy drinking in there to do their jobs!”

“Times are hard girl, and they need their cheer if they are to get back to work. And their cheer is paying for your room and food, dont forget it!”

stepping out the kitchen and into the alley Aella cursed Ssa, she saw how much money came into the bar and she knew how much the beer cost, he could lecture her all he wanted, she knew he was ripping her off something rotten.

“Well hello there tits, fancy seeing you here.”

It was the asshole from the bar, blocking the end of the alley, Aella knew the trash wasn't worth the trouble of going past some horny customer alone so she turned back. Only to find someone had been waiting behind the door, to stop her getting back to safety.

“now now girl, don't try and leave us just yet, you said some pretty mean things back there, you have a cruel mouth.”

Aella turned to face the gobby one walking toward her down the alley.

“I'm sure we can find better things to do with that pretty mouth of yours, much better thi—”

“if its raping me you're after I'm not going down without a fight”

before she knew it the man behind her had Aella in his grip, he held her arms over her and she dropped the trashbags to the ground.

“well that wasn't much of a fight was it girl? But you look much nicer in that pose, it shows off your figure.”

the first man reached towards her chest but hesitated.

“what is this now, looks like you have a very nice bracelet there,”

Aella saw red, her sleeve must have come down being held by the goon behind.

“I think pretty as you are its a bit too good for you. Lets take that before we start shall we...”

Aella tensed up, not in fear but in determination and said;

“Thats one wrong move too many dickheads.”

She pulled her hands down in front of her full strength, throwing the goon holding her over both Aella and the man in front.

The first man turned in shock to see his friend smash into the skip and be knocked out cold. As he turned around to face Aella her foot was already passing through where his head was and he was knocked against the wall with a bigger headache than he had ever had in his life.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing girl?”

Aella turned around to see Ssa fuming from the kitchen doorway.

“These assholes tried to rape me!”

“So what? My customers expect certain benefits and the cost of the beer covers that, you think I pay you so much just to walk around carrying stuff back and forth!?! when these guys come to you will damn well do what they want!”

“Screw you Ssa! This isnt what I signed up for, I quit!”

“Fine, theres plenty of women who would kill for the li9fe you are throwing away, I hope you enjoy the gutter bitch”

at that Ssa slammed the door.

Fuming, Aella picked up the trash and threw it at the kitchen door.
“ASSHOLE!”

Aella marched out the alley towards the street, she knew a place she could go to clear her head for now.

“you should have let them do it.”

Aella turned round to see a child with pigtails in a dress, carrying what seemed to be an unreasonably large backpack.

“Trust me girl, when you're a little older you'll take my side on this.”

“hey, I'm not a girl!”

“...you look like a girl”

“No, I look beautiful, I'm going to be the most beautiful person in the whole land when I'm older, and I'm not going to let the fact I'm a boy hold me back!”

“great, I'm almost mugged and raped, I lose my job and now I'm being pestered by some cross-dressing little brat.”

At that Aella turned away and started walking off along the street.

She heard the boy's footsteps behind her.

“what now?”

“well, its just that... they couldnt have taken it, your bracelet I mean”

“and you know that how?”

“well it says right here see,” the boy pulled a huge book out of his backpack and flicked through the pages, Aella stopped walking and looked at the book, it seemed to be almost half the size of the boy, and his backpack seemed to still be full.
'this kids stronger than he looks' thought Aella.

“Ah! Here it is see, items forged in the white event cannot be taken from their owner unless the owner dies.”

Aella looked at what the boy was pointing too and all the words seemed alien to her,

“what do you mean 'forged in the white event' this was my mother's bracelet.”

“Your mother's? Are you not Anemone?”

Aella hung her head.

“no... that was my mother”

“...I- I'm sorry, so you never knew anything about the bracelet? Did it not seem weird to you that it glows?”

“Hey! How did you know it did that? And more importantly, how did you know my mother? She must have died before you were out of nappies kid!”

“well, cant you tell I'm a scholar?”

“what?”

“I'd have thought the glasses gave it away... whatever, the thing is my dad knew your mum, they used to work together studying white event phenomena, so thats how I know about her. I actually came looking for her so I could study stuff like that in the real world, instead of just reading about it, its the right of all scholars to explore the world!”

“well like I said, my mum's dead now, sorry you wasted your trip kid”

at that Aella turned and carried on down the street.

“dont you want to know about her? About your bracelet? About why she died?”

Aella paused for a moment.

“you can follow me for a while if you want kid, its not safe round here for girls”

“I already told you I'm not a girl!”

“yeah, but you look like one and that makes it not safe for you.”

“...”

“come on.”

“hey, I still dont know your name!”

“I'm Aella.”

“nice to meetcha! I'm Claire.”

“Claire?”

“whats wrong with that? Its more beautiful than the one my parents gave me!”

“...”

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“what is this place?”

Claire asked, though Aella could only really see his head over the top of the long grass. With the sun setting soon she wouldnt be able to see even that much of him.

“this is the town's orchard, its supposed to be off-limits, but I used to help the picker out so he lets me come here as long as I keep quiet, and he looks the other way if a couple of Benapples go missing.”

“its huge! Its like as big as ten fields!”

“yeah, the benapples help to go into the beer, as well as most of the towns baking, apparently they only grow round here since the white event.”

The pair sat down at the edge of some woods, looking down the sloped orchard, over the town

and at the sunset falling behind the mountains on the horizon.

“This is kind of my spot, we'll be staying here tonight.”

“You dont have any other place to go?”

“That bar was where I slept before, but to be honest I think being homeless is better. What about you, why are you sleeping outside tonight?”

“I told you, I'm a scholar on my world stud-”

“save it kid, last scholar I saw on world study was three times your age, I know you arent supposed to leave the library till then.”

“...”

“runaway huh?”

“...yes.”

“... I'll get a fire started.”

Chapter 3: Doll.

The assassin never expected to become a prisoner, the boss told him this job should be the easiest, the weakest to take from. But this guy... he had seen the assassin coming a mile off, which took some doing, the assassin was exceptionally well trained.

Amrs tied to a beam in the ceiling, the assassin tried to shake himself free.

“I wouldnt bother trying if I were you,” the assassin heard someone say from behind him, and footsteps sounded as the unknown man walked in front of the assassin.

“you are tied with pure Qi there, theres no breaking that.”

the assassin was thinking a mile a minute, he was furious, this opponent was beyond belief, not only had he managed to trap him, but to tie someone up with nothing but Qi energy seemed impossible, either the boss set him up, or more likely, the boss had no idea the target was so advanced.

The assassin knew better than to ask what was going to happen, to speak a single word would give away something about his master. This was going to be an interrogation.

“I can see from your eyes you dont plan on talking, no doubt you'll die before saying a single word. I'd be impressed if the determination was your own, or you had a worthy cause, but clearly you dont...”

“Doll, if he isnt going to talk then what are we doing here?” another voice came from behind the assassin.

“He's not going to talk, but I am... since you have brought this world back to me its time for me to be honest with myself... and with you I guess.”

at that Doll started to tense up a little, the assassin could see the shadows cast by the dim basement light started to fall across Doll in a different way, he was... shape shifting?

Doll stretched a little, working out the kinks in her new body.

“God its good to be back to myself again, well, I say myself but this isnt the body I was born with, its just the most comfortable you know?”

before the assassin, where seconds ago stood a dirty, unshaven man, now stood a beautiful woman with hair almost down to her knees.

“wha...” a word escaped the lips of the assassin, this was too unexpected.

“ah, made you talk huh? Dont worry kid, I wont hold it against you. Like I said, I'm not after information from you, I want you to tell your boss about me, tell him he should have come himself, then I would never have stepped out of hiding, all he has accomplished today is awakened another contestant, and my goal is the same as his.”

at that Doll withdrew her Qi holding the assassin in place.

“also, tell him I dont think highly of getting others to do his dirty work, when I am ready I hope we become opponents and I shall take the points he cheated from the others who couldnt stop you assassins.”

The assassin quickly looked around, trying to assess his situation?

“I wont kill you stupid,” doll smiled “I need you to deliver the message”

at that the assassin took his opportunity and dashed out the door past Doll's friend.

“Are you sure its ok to let him go?”

“bah, I dont want to kill anyone I dont have to, especially as he isnt a match for me. If I win the contest, hopefully it will put an end to the killing.”

“So you are going now?”

“Things have been set in motion, the arena is calling louder than ever, and I can feel my bracelet's energy, it will start to pull soon.”

Doll looked at her bracelet, an ornate, expensive looking band with 26 glass beads embedded in it. One of them glowing.

Chapter 4: Encounter in the twilight.

“What do you mean my mother was a warrior! She never hurt anyone!”

Aella was almost shocked this kid had known her five minutes and was already badmouthing her mother.

“whoa there A! I'm not saying she was a barbarian or a soldier or anything, like it or not you're a warrior too—” Claire tried to explain himself

“I am not!”

“oh yeah, as far as I can tell you're the only 16 year old girl who totally caned two full grown men in a fight today.”

“that was! ... that was different, I was just defending–”

“exactly! Warriors aren't just people who get into fights for fun, you had a reason, you believed in what you were doing, and you decided to do it yourself.”

Aella looked at the boy, already used to his girlish appearance, took a deep breath and sat back down on the log by the fire. The sun had slid behind the horizon and its light only half-heartedly tried to light the surroundings, but it was clear the twilight would make way for night soon.

Aella gazed into the fire for some time,

“So, what is the deal with my mother's bracelet then?”

from nowhere some knives hit the trunk right by Aella, she quickly turned around, making sure to come between Claire and whoever was attacking.

“Who's out there!?”

a calm voice responded;

“Well I suck at sneak attacks anyway, to be honest I was hoping they would miss anyway, I'd prefer to face you with honour. Still though, it's strange you couldn't tell I was here... didn't you feel the pull?”

“the pull? What are you talking about?”

Claire was the one to answer Aella's question;

“the pull on your bracelet! It pulls in the direction of the nearest warrior who also has a bracelet like it! He's here to kill you!”

The owner of the voice dropped from the trees, he appeared to be a young man, no older than 18.

“well it's true I want to kill you, but only for a short while, I have a technique to bring you back to life if I'm quick enough, then I can take your glow and be on my way.”

“what do you mean take my glow! Why do you want to fight me?”

The boy tilted his head a little

“...you're serious aren't you, you have no idea what's going on.”

the boy walked over to the campfire, and sat down on the log, pulling his knives from it and putting them in pockets along his clothes. Aella made sure to stand between him and Claire.

“oh don't worry, I'm not about to fight someone who is as ignorant as you, it's just not honourable. I'll wait until you have learned enough, and I promise next time I'll give you warning first.”

Aella saw the boy was quite relaxed, and not defensive so she relaxed a little and sat down.

“who's the girl anyway?” the boy pointed.

“HIS name is Claire.” Aella responded.

“tomboy?”

“just boy.”

“whatever.”

the three sat around the fire in silence for about an hour, Aella didnt know what to say, Claire wasnt sure if she should carry on explaining stuff in the presence of someone who would sooner or later be an enemy, and the boy just seemed to not care about anything but relaxing by the fire.

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“OK what the hell is up with you asshole! You bust in trying to kill Aella and now you just hink you can hang with us!?!”

the boy looked up to see Claire standing over him.

“And whats with you Aella?! You're just sitting there not doing ANYTHING, the least you could do is try and learn what is going on, and take advantage and kill this idiot who's taking you too lightly!”

Claire looked back and forth between the two.

“ANYONE WOULD THINK YOU DONT WANT TO KILL EACH OTHER!”

claire stood gasping, waiting for their response.

“well, I dont want to kill him”

“I'm not in any rush to kill her either, why are you stressing out on such a pleasant night?”

Claire was clearly more pissed off that this guy was back chatting and kicked him as hard as he could.

“ow! And what was that for?”

“If you're going to hang around then at least tell us your name!”

“... do you normally ask people questions this way?”

Claire looked set to blow again, he seemed to the boy to be like a volcano that could explode as often as it wanted, each time more violent than the next, a real nuisance.

“My name's Timon, no need to get so stressed.”

“URGH!”

Claire sat back down in a huff, crossed his legs, folded his arms and looked intently into the fire, almost as if he was willing it to jump onto Timon.

Aella waited a little while for clair to calm down before asking;

“why would we want to kill each other?”

both Claire and Timon looked at her then back at the fire.

Timon answered first, "your bracelet, there are 26 in the world, each one belonging to a warrior, its the destiny of the warriors to kill each other to take the glow from all the bracelets and claim the white event legacy."

"whats the white event legacy?"

"no one knows for sure, but the rumour is it's the power to reshape the world as the surviving warrior sees fit."

"It's not just a rumour," Claire spoke for the first time since she was fuming, "The white event itself changed the world just enough to create these circumstances, it has the power to change the universe entirely. It is powered by sheer willpower, the determination of a warrior. Whichever warrior demonstrates their will is strongest by surviving, is the only one the white legacy will respect to obey."

"but... why should we kill each other for that?" Aella asked, not happy with the idea of having to kill, let alone fight against 25 warriors.

"Take a look around," Timon said, "does the world look like its ok right now? I for one think it could do with change, and I dont trust any of the other warriors to not just make themselves dictators over all existance."

Aella stared into the fire, no one else spoke that night, and the all fell asleep around the fire.

Chapter 5: Dawn punishment.

As the sun rises the light passes through the dojo doors as the assassin makes his way back to his master, but the light does not reach the steps to the basement where his master is waiting.

"What is it Seventeen? Why do you not have the bracelet?"

"Master, I apologise, this opponent was much stronger than I could manage, he sensed me coming and trapped me. Then... he became a she and..."

"shape-shifter eh? That means that she must have mastered controlling her Qi flow and used it to keep her power hidden from me... continue Seventeen."

"She... she gave me a message master, she told me that because you sent me she was coming out of hiding, and I dont understand it, but she said something about taking part in the contest. She thinks she will face you at some point, said--"

"that's enough Seventeen. All I need to know. However I sent you to collect the bracelet and you return empty handed, you have failed me Seventeen."

The assassin's master signaled to someone in the shadow.

"samurai, kill seventeen for me."

there was a flash of steel and seventeens head rolled along the floor, samurai standing on the other side of it.

"I want you to deal with this 'Doll' personally, I know it's not your style, but I want her to suffer before you kill her. It's unacceptable that she should challenge me."

"yes master."

The assassin's eyes clouded over as the samurai made his way out of the dojo to clean up the mess the assassin made.

His devotion to his master as a samurai would surely take him to victory over the assassin.

Chapter 6: The Journey Begins.

As dawn cast its friendly glow down on the three around the ashes of the fire, Claire was the first up, he stretched, walked over to Aella and shook her shoulder gently;

“Aella, time to get up.”

Clair then walked over to Timon, and kicked him in the leg.

“GET UP LAZY!”

“What the hell kid!?! whats the rush!?!”

“In case you didn't know, we cant afford to let our guard down, you're bracelets always pull towards the nearest warrior.”

“So?”

“Sooooo... they are pulling towards each other, there could be a warrior coming for you guys over the next hill and you wouldnt notice it!”

“...this is a good point.” Timon was suddenly very awake.

Aella yawned and stretched.

“I'm too tired for people to be attacking us, it wouldnt be fair.”

Timon turned to her;

“Sorry blondie, but not all the warriors are going to be as nice as I am, there arent really any rules to this thing.”

Timon held up his arm showing his bracelet, Aella suddenly felt her bracelet almost pull towards his.

“the bracelets... do they really want us to kill each other?”

“Of course not, they are just bracelets, they dont want... anything!” Claire finished picking up his bag. “It's the beads, they contain some of the essence of the white event... its like magnets, they pull towards each other, the essence is trying to recombine.”

Timon looked at claire.

“He's pretty smart, even I didn't know that.”

“Thats why I know where we have to go, Aella needs training, and no-one knows more about her abilities than my father. And as for YOU...” Claire looked darkly at Timon, “You have to look after us until Aella is in fighting condition. If any warriors appear, you fight them off understand?”

“geez, so bossy... whatever, I was going to do that anyway.”

Aella looked around as the others got ready to set off.

'So we are going to go see someone who knew my mother' she thought. 'perhaps going with these guys is for the best.'

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“Um, little crossdreser kid...”

“It's Claire asshole, I can remember your name, why cant you remember mine?”

“Well it is pretty confusing, you having a girls name, and dressing as a girl when you are a guy, besides my name isn't 'asshole'.”

“Fine, TIIIMOOON, and its only confusing to you because you are stupid.”

“could you guys maybe not fight so much? You're giving me a headache.” Aella was already weary, they had been walking for hours across fields, no signposts or paths.

“so... CLAIRE, just where are we going anyway?” Timon asked, probably just as weary as Aella.

“We're going to Koob of course, the capital of knowledge and wisdom? Where do you think a family of master scholars like mine would live?” Claire seemed to have lost no energy since this morning, even with her massive backpack. How she did it was a total mystery to both Aella and Timon.

After a few minutes Timon asked “Are you sure it's ok to go to Koob? Theres a lot of people there right? There could be warriors nearby.”

“It'll be fine, even if there are warriors, fighting is forbidden inside the city, we can use it as a refuge until Aella has mastered her abilities.”

“umm, about that...” Aella questioned, “exactly what abilities are you talking about? Like using swords and stuff?”

“I dont think so, from what I heard about Anemone her abilities were more energy based.”

“energy based?” Aella was even more confused.

“she could use spiritual energy, she willed stuff to happen and it did, stuff like... telekineses, levitation, heating stuff up from across the room... that kind of thing.”

“uhh, sure.” Aella was skeptical

“Dont dismiss what he says,” Timon could sense aella's tone, “I've seen a battle between someone who could summon fire and one who danced in a way she changed the air around her.”

Claire stopped and turned around.

“Wait, you've actually seen 2 of the 26 warriors battle!! how the hell did you get away? Did you kill them?”

“no way, I was just a kid, I ran away whilst they were fighting, it was scary stuff.”

“and the winner didnt come after you?”

“no, the bracelets have only recently started pulling.”

Claire thought about this for a second, and turned back continueing at his slightly too energetic pace.

Chapter 7: six years ago.

The snake of panicked people pushed through the town, the evacuation led by guards who were just as fearful themselves. The fire lit up the night sky and it seemed every building was on fire.

“Timon, cover that bracelet.”

“Sorry Grandfather.”

The 12 year old pulled his sleeve down past his wrist, he didn't know why he had to do it, but his grandfather always said it was important to keep it hidden.

“It's ok, lets just concentrate on getting out of the town with everyone safely ok?”

The old man looked down to his grandchild with a warm smile, looking up at his grandfather Timon couldnt help but be comforted, even when he could see the buildings on fire behind him.

There was a large explosion a few blocks away, and the fireball reached so high Timon thought it might burn the clouds.

“Come Timon, we must hurry now”

the old man ushered his grandson toward the evacuating crowd, but between the buildings Timon saw a man walking in a daze, towards the explosion.

“Sorry grandfather, but I think someone needs my help!”

at that Timon ran between the buildings just before the entrance to the passage was filled with burning rubble.

“TIMON!” the old man was suddenly very scared, “TIMON– J... JUST BE CAREFUL! STAY SAFE!”

Timon could barely hear the calls of his grandfather over the roaring of the flame, the whole town was on fire and it was screaming.

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Timon fallowed the man through the maze of fire, just catching his silhouette as he came around a corner until it went over a hill and into a massive crater, probably formed by the huge explosion from before.

Timon climbed to the top of the mound at the edge of the crater but stopped himself when he saw into it, the man he was following, his hands were on fire, and he was throwing fire onto

things as he went past, the man Timon chased after to save was the firestarter himself.

Timon decided it was best to leave, the firestarter was too big and clearly too dangerous a man to be around. But just as Timon turned away he heard a woman's voice call out to the fire starter.

“Ignis! I always said you were crazy, I'm sad to realise just how right I was.”

There was a woman standing across the crater from the firestarter.

“Oh you would know wouldn't you Cadence”.

“What happened Ignus, when did you become this way?”

“I wonder why you want to know, do you think all those years ago, it was me that did it?” Ignus ginned wickedly

“...well, did you?”

Cadence was clearly someone strong, but she was clearly close to tears.

“Well, I wish I could say I did, I always wanted to be in a battle for vengeance, but it was someone else. I'm not your sister's killer Cadence.”

Cadence sighed and looked at the floor.

“It doesn't change anything you know, you have still become a monster Ignus.”

“Of course I have, it was inevitable, and if you're the one to walk away from this encounter, sooner or later madness will take you too, it's our birthright Cadence! I just knew to give up resisting and enjoy it!”

“I'll never become you Ignus, power...” Cadence took a flute from its holster.

“...doesn't...” she changed her stance, readying herself for battle.

“...have to...” she pointed her flute at Ignus.

“...CORRUPT!”

the two warriors launched at each other, Ignus was like a ball of fire, shooting massive fireworks at Cadence constantly, she just seemed to dance with them, and rocks and rubble around the crater started to dance with her, as she swung her flute its tune seemed to command everything inside the crater.

The battle became furious, with fire and boulders flying far past the edges of the crater, Timon feared the two would kill each other and take the town with them, he fled in spite of the awe he felt at seeing their battle.

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on a hill overlooking the town, an old man stood watching the display caused by the battle die out with a massive clap and burst of light.

The old man looked down the hill to see a 12 year old boy climbing up to him.

“Grandfather...”

“I know Timon, its time for me to tell you some things.”

Chapter 8: The samurai and Doll.

Doll sat cross legged, leaning over the table on the hand, surveying the board.

“You cant beat me you know, I have faced warriors much stronger than you and won. You underestimated me today”

Doll moves her rook forward two squares.

“Check!”

Doll sits upright and smiles challengingly at the child across the table. The child looks down and after a minute thinking, they move their knight.

“Check...MATE!”

“NO WAY!” Doll feigned shock for the child “of all the opponents to defeat me, it was but a child, how humbling that you take my title. I shall never underestimate you again, for you are clearly a master.”

the child thanked doll for the game and went off to his mother who was calling him.

“It's very honorable to sacrafice your game like that to a child.”

Doll turned to face the samurai who was resting against one of the chess house's supporting poles.

“and pretty honourable of you to wait for your opponent to finish their battle before you challenge them.” Doll took a sip of her tea, it was getting cold.

“I am nothing if not a man of honour.”

“well, your own honour perhaps.”

“what other kind is there, we only have our own experience to guide us.”

“a shame, but true.” Doll agreed taking another sip of tea. “So you're a samurai eh? I thought you guys were extinct. I especially wouldn't expect a warrior of band to be a servant. What do you intent do do if you survive the contest, will you follow your masters will, or become a ronin?”

“I follow only my master, as such I shall not survive the contest myself.”

“...your master has a bracelet too huh, and that means the assassin I bumped into... he a friend of yours?”

“he is no one's friend now.”

Doll finished off her tea.

“It seems your master is less forgiving than I.”

The samurai looked away in contemplation, he knew his master was not a good man, but as a samurai, his honour lay in following his master's wishes regardless. He looked at doll as she got up from the table and took her cup back to the serving hatch and wandered, it would be a

shame for the world if he defeated her in battle, but it would be shame for him if he lost himself, and his own honour was the only one he had any right to consider, he would not hold back.

Doll walked back, "ok, I'm ready when you are, but I would rather we move someplace unpopulated, I believe we can trust each other enough to travel somewhere without attacking the other?"

"I believe so also."

Doll and the samurai left the chess house together and set off to a place where they would try and kill each other.

Chapter 9: Koob is a really long way away.

Claire fell over on his back; "UUUuuugh, guys, I'm tired, lets take a break."

"ITS BECAUSE YOU MADE US GO AT SUCH A FAST PACE IDIOT!"

"I'm going to kick you again when I get my energy back."

Chapter 10: The Samurai and Doll, part 2.

The daylight shone through the trees that covered the path, making gentle dancing shadows as the leaves rustled in the breeze, above them the sky was very blue, below them Doll and the Samurai walked the path.

"There is a clearing further along this path," Doll pointed, "I think it is a suitable place, though it will be a shame for us to stain it with blood."

"...do you know this area?"

"I grew up a few villages away, but I travelled a lot as a teen, I saw people living different lives and tried a few on for myself."

"lives?"

"yes, not just because I was shapeshifter, I wanted to find my place, find me... well maybe it was because I was a shapeshifter. I was looking for something to ground me."

"and did you find anything?"

"in a way... after you have seen life from so many perspectives, there isnt really any way to settle back into a single one, I think as I am now, I am sort of living as a 'best of' collection, I took the parts I thought would make me the best person I could be... so... what about you?"

"I have only ever been myself."

"well thats debatable, but still, have you never empathised with people? Tried to see life from another angle?"

"you are curious if I will defect from my master."

"I don't think you will, I'm more curious if you would be capable of it."

"Well if it answers your question, I do think about what other people are going through, and why they act as they do, but it is always in the context of my own ideas and values. But wherever my mind travels, my actions remain firmly tied to my honour."

The two walked on for a bit in silence.

Doll broke the silence, "And in the context of your own ideas and values, how do the actions of your master weigh up?"

"...you have a talent for knowing people and what questions to ask them."

"Well knowing people is kinda one of my talents after all" Doll smiled at the samurai.

"It is something I have thought of, and I imagine you know enough of my master simply from the interactions you have had with his subordinates."

"I see... I have to say I'm impressed, you tell me he's a dangerous, possibly evil man, capable of anything, but without saying a bad word about him. Whilst I don't agree with your loyalty, I can't fault it."

"It is a part of my honour after all."

"I have to say samurai, I never enjoy battle, but I am genuinely sad that we must fight each other."

"As am I, but we both must follow our roles."

Doll looked up at the light passing through the leaves, "I wonder..."

Chapter 11: Zephyr.

"I think you've drunk enough miste—"

the barman found a pistol quickly pointed at his forehead.

"I... I'll decide when I've had enough, and it's sure as hell isn't enough until I've downed as many bottles as people I killed today... you, you have a lot more pouring to do."

Zephyr holstered his gun and gave the barman his glass for a refill.

Chapter 12: The Samurai and Doll, part 3.

Doll and the samurai stood facing each other in the clearing, the sun shone bright but neither felt it, this was to be a battle they would both regret, regardless of the outcome. In the short time that they had known each other they had made a connection, perhaps the strongest connection possible. Regardless of their opinions of the other, they both respected each other more than any they had met before.

The leaves at this time of year were just starting to fall, and a couple blew between the silent warriors in the breeze as they waited.

They both savoured the breeze, the last thing that they would share together before the battle that would tear them apart.

"I think..." started Doll.

"I agree." the samurai nodded, "we should make it as quick as possible."

Doll looked at the floor, then into the samurai's eyes, he was already looking into hers.

The samurai dashed first, he was rapid, almost instantaneous, Doll was of course using her Qi to block it, she was exceptional, the only person who could have blocked such an attack, but as a Qi ability her will faltered, she didnt want to defend with all her heart.

The samurai's attack was not full strength either, Doll was cut acrossd her torso, but it was nothing that could kill her.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, facing opposite directions.

"We have both... dishonoured ourselves... and my final dishonour, is for yours redeemed." the samurai closed his eyes.

"thank you." said Doll, tears forming.

She made it quick, and the samurai didnt defend, he fell to the floor, with a smile on his face.

The glow in the samurai's bracelet faded, and it passed to a clear bead in Doll's.

The samurai had chosen a new master. And Doll had lost a love, at least until she was bested.

Chapter 13: A grave overlooking the sea.

There is a spot atop a cliff by the ocean, so high the gulls dont dare tresspass, where the grass is lush and a single stone juts from the ground, written on it;

"Here lies a warrior of unparraleled honour, who waits patiently for his love, who he died for, and is marching to meet him with the honour he displayed"

Chapter 14: An insult he wont stand for.

500 assassins stand before their master beneath the dojo, the master is clearly furious, that somone would kill his samurai and take the glow that was rightfully his called for a drastic response, twice now Doll had insulted him, and this time it was too far.

"I dont care if you have to die to do it, if any of you dont give it your all to kill her I will kill each of you in a manner such as your nightmares would fear... go."

in a split second the assassins vanished, and were dashing away from the dojo through the forest.

Chapter 15: Back with the trio.

“Are you still out of energy?” Timon asked.

“Well yeah, have you seen what I have to carry around?!” snapped Claire.

“I think we should stop here for the night, it's a bad idea to travel in the dark.” Aella said, looking across the fields.

“oh yeah and how do you know?” jeered Claire.

“I... I have experience... besides from here we can see all around, the moonlight should let us know of anyone coming.”

“well that makes sense to me,” said Timon “we'll take it in turns to be lookout. I don't think there are any warriors in the area, but it's best to be safe. I'll take first shift, you two get some rest while you can.”

“don't need to tell me twice.” Claire said relieved. Aella turned to see Claire had already pulled a sleeping bag out of his backpack and was climbing into it.

“just how much stuff do you carry around in that bag?”

“more than can fit, well... night!”.

Aella pushed down some grass to make do as a bed and Timon sat at the highest point of the hill they were on.

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some time later, Aella walked up the hill to Timon.

“we don't have to swap yet, there's plenty of time before I need any sleep.” Timon smiled at Aella.

“it's not that, I just can't sleep tonight.”

“oh,” Timon paused and looked towards the moon, “is it because of your past, or your present?”

“a little of both I guess.”

“What Claire said before, after you said we should stop here–”

“My mother... we... we were traveling at night and... she was...”

“It's ok, you don't have to say, I can understand. When I was five my parents died in a flood. I kind of envy them in a way now I think about it.”

“you want to be dead?”

“not really, but if I'm going to die, I'd rather not be killed in a fight.”

“...”

“...”

“Timon, will we really try and kill each other someday?”

“I honestly dont know, I'd rather not, you seem like an ok person, even if you are a little stupid.” Timon smiled wickedly at Aella. Aella shoved him playfully, “Heeey! You keep saying stuff like that and maybe I wont have any problems killing you.”

“I wouldnt worry about it, I think Claire will kill us both long before anyone else will.”

the two laughed for a minute, then looked out at the moon.

Chapter 16: The journey resumes.

The next day was like the one before it, clear and sunny, and the three set off throught the fields in the direction of Koob as they had done before (if at a slightly more reasonable pace).

“I've been thinking Claire” Aella started.

“Careful, dont hurt yourself.” Clair responded.

“whatever, I was thinking how you are really a runaway, and we are going back to your home...”

“so?”

“so, we are going to see your father, whats he going to say when you come back after doing one?”

“He'll probably try and ground me, but I dont care, I'm smart you know? I can break out of anywhere. When you are trained up we'll leave again.”

“really? You let him worry like that?”

“frankly it's not the running away punishment I'm afraid of...”

“why, what else did you do? Oh crap you didn't steal that big book did you?”

“NO!... well, yes, but thats not the problem. The problem is... is...”

“That your dad hasn't ever seen you so pretty?” Timon joined the conversation.

“...well, yeah...” Clair hung his head a little.

“Hes not going to be the type to have a problem with that is he? Isnt he a scholar too?” Aella asked.

“I dont know, I never let him know anything about me like... this, so I dont have any idea how he'll react.”

“I'm sure you're worrying about nothing Claire.” Timon patted Claire on the back. “hey, whats that there on the horizon?”

Aella tensed for a second, and looked to where Timon was pointing.

“That's Koob,” explained Claire, “The outer walls of the city are mirrors, the idea is that the contents of the libraries and wisdom in Koob were a reflection of the world itself. Its meant to

be symbolic.”

the three picked up the pace (just a little) now that their goal was in sight.

Chapter 17: Udo.

A long, long way from Koob, an old man sits at the centre of an almost otherworldly building, he watches the entrance which leads to a bridge so long its hard to make out the other side.

As the shadows grow longer in the arena the old man sees the bridge has been clear all day, and is thankful there are no warriors to challenge him today, the arena shan't claim another life until atleast tomorrow.

The old man begins to meditate as night draws in.

Chapter 18: Waiting.

Doll knew the samurai's master would not be pleased she had survived, and expected his retaliation. She climbed mount Brave, where she could be certain a battle of any scale was out of reach of civilians, even out of site depending on the weather, the peak of the mountain was usually shrouded in mist. It was also much colder because of the altitude, if there were more assassins coming after her, the temperature change would put them off, any distraction she could prepare for in advance would work in her favour.

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there was an abandoned dojo near the peak, Doll waited atop its roof. It creaked a little in the wind beneath her, this place was chosen as a place to train because it was so unforgiving, but it was too much for even the instructors. And so apart from the most determined of climbers, Doll was the first person to visit this place since shortly after it was built. But that would change soon.

She could sense their Qi, a few hundred souls, all with orders to kill her.

If it were not for her last fight this would be the hardest battle of Doll's life, but when you kill the person you love, even if it was their wish, nothing can ever be that difficult.

Doll waited, fearless.

Chapter 19: Cadence.

Aella, Timon and Claire continued their march towards Koob, night was starting to take hold but they didn't want to stop when their goal was so close.

“And what do we have here?” A woman's voice came from behind the three, they turned sharply to see a woman with a long fringe and a flute, she had a familiar bracelet on her right wrist.

“you're... the town that burnt down you and Ignus!” Timon recognised her immediately.

“Oh? You saw that did you boy? You were lucky to have done that and gotten away alive.”

“Where did you come from?” Aella asked nervously.

“really dear, that is not the most important question to you right now, you should be asking yourselves 'is this lady going to kill us?' I'm well aware you both have bracelets, and the short one also has something that could benefit me.” Cadence smiled at Claire, who took a step back.

“really children, I can see you don't want to dance with me yet, and I am only in the mood to dance with willing partners. I just saw you passing by and thought I'd introduce myself.”

“you aren't going to kill us?” Aella asked.

“I might, but not today.” Cadence smiled again, eyeing Aella. Aella looked at Cadence's bracelet,

“you have 3 beads lit up...”

“you know what that means don't you?” Cadence held up the bracelet so the three could see clearly. “for each of those I've killed a warrior, it's a long way to go to get all 26, but not a bad start.”

Cadence relaxed a bit.

“Well anyway, I have places to be and people to see, and you just aren't my priority now kids, ta-taa!”

At that cadence swung her flute quickly, it made a high pitched whistle as she vanished.

“she seemed much cooler the first time I met her” Timon said.

“I think we should hurry to Koob now” Aella didn't want any more encounters.

The three ran the rest of the way.

Chapter 20. Night attack.

Doll could feel them, they were surrounding her, she could feel the patterns of their planned attacks almost instinctively now, her attunement to the Qi of others had developed substantially in the past year.

At this moment she knew precisely how to counter their first wave, and how to cope with the assassins' reaction to her counter. She had planned the battle in her head up to the point where half the assassins were dead, but she ran out of time to plan the rest.

She could feel the assassins were about to make their move, she would just have to fight on instinct once she reached the end of her plan.