

SIDE STORY – LOVE AND DEATH
~300 YEARS AGO – ANATALIEN

Two forms writhed in pleasure, dancing in perfect pairing. As her pleasure reached a peak, Anatalien opened her mouth and screamed. Her wings opened wide and trembled as she rode her climax through.

She collapsed forward, on top of her lover, her wings lying limply on top of the bed. She took great care not to injure him with her horns as she turned her head and placed it on his chest—listening to his heart beating.

They stayed like that for a long while, basking in the afterglow of their coupling. Then, she spoke.

“That was amazing,” Anatalien sighed.

The only response she got from him was a gentle petting of her wings. She relaxed under his touch and kept her eyes closed, enjoying their closeness. She had never thought that she could ever feel this way. To love someone so much, and feel so safe in their arms. She placed her hands on his chest and pushed herself up, looking at him from above, her hair framing his face.

The room was illuminated by soft orange light from one small lantern above her bed, so most of it was shrouded in shadows. Still, she could clearly see his pale blue eyes and blond hair. She smiled down at him.

“I love you, Sig,” she told him.

He put his hand on his chest, over his heart, then raised and placed it over her heart. She leaned down and kissed him gently.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” Anatalien whispered. He responded by hugging her tight and kissing her neck. She was about to speak again, when something caught her attention. For a split second she thought that her **|Perfect Air Current Sense|** detected something, but then it was gone.

She raised herself up, and looked Sig in the eye. He frowned and she was just about to ask if he had felt something. Then she felt it again. Immediately she twisted and beat her wings, flying off the bed as several lances of bright red fire blasted through where she used to be, and burned the wall behind her bed.

She twisted in the air and looked around, seeing a dozen assassins preparing to attack her. She called on the wind with her **|Mine Are The Winds, And The Sky|** but before she could even turn the air in the room to her will one of the assassins activated a glowing device. Suddenly all the air inside the room stilled, and an assassin pointed his hand at her, gravity shifted and she slammed into the ground, falling on her wing and breaking it. Something came over her and all of her power was sealed, a silencing power.

She screamed in pain as they rushed at her, their weapons raised to kill her. And then she saw Sig step off the bed, and his lips moved.

“YOUR BONES ARE SHATTERED,” his voice boomed across the room, and Anatalien grimaced in pain as her bones trembled. Even when it wasn’t targeted at her, his words impacted everything.

The assassins froze for a second, and then they burst apart, every bone in their bodies spontaneously shattered to pieces and ripped them apart from the inside. Blood, bones, and gore splattered her room, painting every wall in the various colors of the assassins blood.

Then he was there, next to her, carefully helping her up. She hissed in pain as she leaned on him and stood up from her broken wing. He pulled out a potion out of his ring and helped her drink it. She grimaced as she downed it, but the pain started to lessen almost immediately. Then her powers came back, as whatever they had done to silence them ran its course.

“Damn it,” she said as she looked around, using the motion to hide the ache in her bones. Sig might be able to guide his words somewhat with focus, but it still hurt to hear him speak such command. She saw the state of her bedroom.

Not only was it covered in blood, but the two of them were as well. She heard footsteps and yells as her guards got into the room ready for a fight, but too late. Sig stood in front of her, shielding her from their gaze.

“Search the city. If there are more of them, I want them captured,” Anatalien ordered.

That snapped her people out of their horrified expressions at the state of her room. “As ordered, Master,” they said and walked out, they were unnecessary here, not now, when both she and Sig were on alert.

Once they were alone again, she turned her eyes to look at him. He had a complicated expression on his face, one that she had seen before. “We don’t know for sure,” she whispered.

His expression hardened, and then he stepped back, he raised his hands and started to move them in precise signs. “*Who else?*” He signed, his eyes boring into her own.

She turned her eyes away, and looked at the carnage. “It could be a hundred different people, I have enemies. There are others who can afford to hire assassins who are that powerful. Maybe they were here for you?” She shrugged.

His hand reached for her shoulder and pulled her around, making her face him. “*They came prepared for you. Formations, powers. None of them was lower than immortal, when they return, they will know that their tactic nearly worked. They will try again. You know that I am right,*” he signed when he was sure that she could see.

“It could be years before that happens. And I can have Eratemus search for their souls, kill them before they return. You don’t need to worry, she can’t kill me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “*You trust that book too much. It can all be a lie.*”

“We went over this before. I am certain that I will not die anytime soon.”

His hand cut the air in front of him, showing his disagreement. “*You cannot take the chance. You can’t ignore her any longer,*” he signed. “*For all you know, you are supposed to kill her.*”

“I... I can help her,” Anatalien whispered. “It is just the matter of proper balance. If she can reach the Evolved Realm it would lessen. I can share my inspiration with her, show—”

He shook his head resolutely and waved his hands, stopping her. “*She is insane, this is the third time. I know that you care for her, but this cannot continue. If you can’t do it, I will. It would only take me a word.*”

“Sigmund, no, you can’t,” Anatalien pleaded.

“*I will not allow her to keep doing this.*”

“We don’t have any hard proof,” Anatalien responded weakly.

“No more,” he signed, then he moved his hand over his heart scratching with two fingers. His sign for her name. *“Tali, you cannot help her. She doesn’t want you to help her. She thinks that you stole her birthright, as long as you have those wings on your back she will hate you.”*

Antalien closed her eyes. She didn’t agree with him, she knew that she could help her friend. She couldn’t abandon her, not after all that they had been through together. “I’m sorry, but I must try.”

His eyes flashed, she saw him struggle with himself, and then his lips trembled. Her eyes widened and she jumped forward, putting her hand over his mouth. “Don’t, you promised that you will never do that to me.”

She saw the pain in his eyes. He shook his head and took a step back. *“I will kill her,”* he signed.

“If you do, I’ll never forgive you.”

He turned around and kicked the chest next to her bed, breaking it apart. He looked around her bloodstained room, his body heaving in impotent rage. She walked over and placed a hand on his back. At her touch he deflated and his head dropped. She embraced him from behind, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Please, just let me try,” she whispered in his ear.

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~300 YEARS AGO — ZENKER

Zenker looked at the field around him, the ground that had burned with such intensity that even the dirt had melted, carving swirls of patterns all around the cliff. Ash and pieces of burnt trees were scattered all around. Craters and a piece of bone here and there, those that hadn’t been turned to ash from the fire. The sky was broken, cracks filled the air as if someone had punched glass. Now, darkness seeped through, like smoke, tendrils of black and violet danced in the air above them. An entire side of the mountain was cleaved off, as if someone had cleanly sheared it in half. The remains of the mountain’s side were beyond the cliff, burying the valley beneath in rock and dirt. It was a site of devastation and ruin.

Eratemus, in one of his well-preserved zombie bodies, a pale human with dead eyes, stood next to him, while Yirrel stood a few steps away looking at a piece of bone sticking out of the ground.

“This is insane,” Eratemus whispered.

Zenker agreed, but he didn't comment. He looked in front of them, where a man was kneeling next to the cliff's edge a few dozen paces away from them.

“You know what he will want to do,” Eratemus said.

Yirrel turned her head and Zenker saw that her expression was hard. “We can't let him.”

“Do you want to be the one to tell him that?” Eratemus asked. “I'm the one that can get away safely, the two of you are screwed.”

Yirrel grimaced, but then turned her eyes to the kneeling figure. “Are we sure that she is dead?”

Eratemus nodded his head. “I tried to track her soul, I got nothing. She's gone.”

“Fuck,” Yirrel cursed. “We should've done something.”

“You know why we don't,” Eratemus told her. “We cannot allow more wars, and if others see us taking her down, then they'll think that they can take down their enemies too. Before we know it, we will be buried in the dead, and fighting wars that we cannot afford.”

“We are supposed to prevent this from happening in the first place,” Yirrel accused.

“Anatalien forbid it,” Zenker sighed. “We shouldn't have listened. But... If she had succeeded... It was a risk worth taking.”

“And she is dead for it,” Yirrel added.

“Yes, but we can't do anything to change that now,” Zenker said. “We need to make sure that Sig doesn't do anything rash.”

“Rash?” Eratemus chuckled. “He is going to shatter the bitch's soul into a thousand pieces.”

“We can't let him do that,” Zenker said. “Even insane, the amount of damage that she can do is limited. There are others who are far more dangerous, and keeping the status quo between all of them is our job.”

“She killed one of our own,” Yirrel growled.

“We will need her. You know how hard it is to reach her level of power. We can’t afford to lose more,” Zenker told her.

“And what if she does this again?” Yirrel asked.

“You see the same thing that I see. An army died here,” Zenker gestured all around them. “She will not be able to do something like this again. And we will watch her, make sure that she is contained.”

“It is easier said than done,” Eratemus commented.

“Let Raela do it, she at least won’t trigger her insanity,” Zenker said.

“That still leaves us with a problem, Sig will not agree to any of this,” Yirrel said.

“We must convince him that it is for the greater good,” Zenker insisted.

“And what if he decides to speak?” Eratemus asked.

Zenker hesitated. “He wouldn’t do that.”

Eratemus raised an eyebrow. “He is grieving.”

Zenker closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Then we promise him his revenge.”

“You just said that we can’t let him do that,” Yirrel said.

“Not now, but once the domes fall, we can,” Zenker told them.

He saw understanding in their eyes. Eratemus nodded and turned his head in Sigmund’s direction. “That might work, if he is feeling generous.”

They walked over to the edge of the cliff and stopped just behind the grieving man.

“Sig,” Yirrel said.

After a few seconds, the man reacted. He stood up and turned around. Tears were flowing freely from his eyes, but Zenker could see the determination in them. He knew what Sig intended to do.

Even now, seeing him standing before him, Zenker was surprised at him. Sigmund was so much younger than them, barely five hundred, a child of the very few Third Iteration humans that stayed in the core when the rest were exiled. A man that had a hard life. But he was also a cautionary tale, an example of what price the last tier of power demanded from everyone who managed to claw their way to it.

In many ways, Zenker was thankful for him, now he knew that he had to be very careful in how he advanced his skills. He needed to make sure that

the drawbacks he would experience were not as severe as what Sigmund had to live with.

He couldn't even imagine what it would be like, to know that an errant word spoken casually could twist reality so much. The last tier of power, more than any other offered great power, but at a price.

Sig raised his hands and signed. *"She dies."*

Zenker glanced at the others, and when he saw that neither of them could bring themselves to speak, he stepped forward. "Sig, you know why we made our group, you know why we don't allow High Rankers to fight amongst themselves."

"Yet she killed Tali," Sigmund signed, his eyes boring into Zenkers. *"Are we not supposed to punish her for it?"*

"We made mistakes, this is true. If we kill her in retaliation, you know what will happen," Zenker said. "The truth is that we need her, and you know that."

"She is insane! She needs to be put down," Sig's hands moved quickly, his face contorting in anger.

"Half of them are insane, half of us are insane. We are keeping a delicate balance. It is either this, or we all die," Zenker pleaded with him.

"No, you can stand aside, but I will not. She will die, and if you try to get in my way I will..." his hands stopped, but his eyes finished the sentence.

Zenker felt everyone tense at that, and then Yirrel took a step forward and raised her hand.

"Sig," she started, but he shook his head.

"STOP."

Zenker froze, Eratemus and Yirrel did too. The blood in his veins stopped, the air in his lungs, his mind, everything ground to a halt under the command. And then, just as Zenker felt like he would break, it was gone. Yirrel stumbled, but caught herself. All three of them looked at him warily. Zenker hadn't really thought that he would speak in their presence.

"She took the thing that I valued most in this world from me. She burned her soul to nothing, there is no return for Tali, there is no afterlife. She will not get to live her life, not when Tali cannot. I will speak in her presence and reality itself will end her."

Zenker looked at him, seeing the pain in his eyes. He bowed his head, perhaps they were wrong, perhaps they shouldn't try to stop him. He opened his mouth to say his thoughts, but Eratemus spoke before he had the chance to.

"I understand," Eratemus told him, the pale eyes of his body boring into Sigmund's. "And I know that she deserves it, but we are not who we are because it is easy. You do not have the power to bend reality to your will with just a word because it is easy. We stand above, and it is our duty to make sure that we get through the last test."

Sigmund's expression darkened, and his lips trembled. Eratemus raised his hand. "No, let me finish, please."

Sigmund looked at Eratemus for a long moment, at the edge of speaking, but then Zenker saw him gather himself and glare at Eratemus.

Eratemus spoke. "If you will only put your trust in me, I promise you, she will die. And her death will be so much worse than anything that you can do to her. Let the domes fall, let the horrors and nightmares within come. And I will send her to the front lines, I will make sure that she dies a horrible death, but only after we have used her to hold back the horde. After she had spent her fire and bought us more time. And when she dies, I will capture her soul, and I will inflict on her an eternal torment. She will not just end, she will suffer for all time."

Sigmund's eyes bore into those of Eratemus, almost as if they were speaking with looks alone. And then, finally Sigmund deflated. He nodded his head and then signed. "*If you break your promise—*"

"You may do with me as you wish," Eratemus said.

Sigmund nodded again, then turned around and walked away.

The three of them remained, and watched his back as he moved beyond their sight.

"That could've gone very badly," Yirrel said. "I didn't think that he would've spoken out loud."

"He is grieving," Eratemus said, mirroring his former point. "Do not hold it against him."

"Perhaps it would've been easier that we just let him kill her," Zenker said.

“No,” Eratemus shook his head. “He is in pain and angry. If he had done it, he would’ve taken revenge, done it out of hate. He would’ve made an example, and everyone would know how powerful he is. People would’ve been afraid, and eventually someone would’ve been stupid enough to do the same thing that Awirren did with Tali, and tried to kill him. Do you really want to see him go on a rampage. To see him speak in a center of a city?”

Zenker shivered. “No, I would not. Are we sure that he won’t do anything?”

“I can call Yerala back and send her to him, they are good friends. Perhaps she can keep an eye on him,” Yirrel said.

“Do so, but I do not think that he will,” Eratemus said. “I have never known him to break his word.”

Zenker sighed and looked over the devastated territory around him. Having so much responsibility was weighing down on him. He really needed to take a vacation, go out and travel for a few hundred years.

Perhaps I just might do that.