



Story & Main Illustrations by: lordcloudx
Proofreading by: Chronoluminaire
Epilogue Concept & Art by: Judecca
Poems by: Yanagi

Prologue

Angels With Black Wings

By: Yanagi

here are the angels with black wings
feathers stained with crimson blood
is each and every painful sting
a crime in the eyes of GOD?

A past that was cast away
Memories crushed like sifted grain
A sin that will forever stay
echoes a haunting refrain

angels that have one belief
an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth
every stroke equals one's grief
and another's wound would be soothed

you take a life to save another
seeking to protect the weak
yet must you make someone suffer
to bring the justice that you seek?

thus you go on and on
your ebony wings stained with blood
cold eyes numb as weathered stone
are you a criminal in the eyes of God?

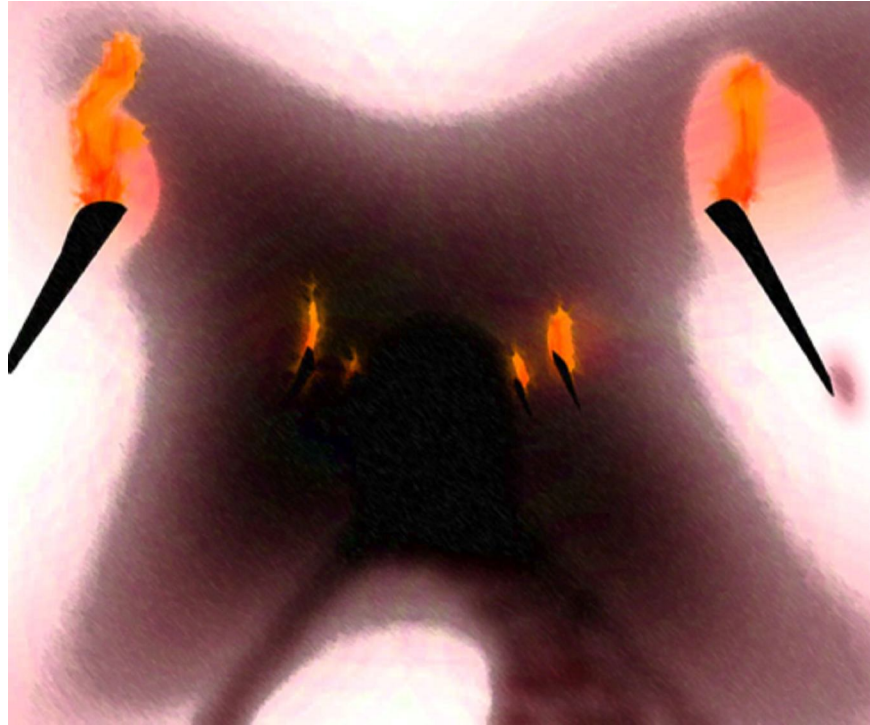
you're heaven's damnation, the devil's spawn
Angels with black wings you are
in this world you're all alone
and time would never heal your scars

yet who are we to decide
of what may be wrong or may be right,
I ask you would you take a life
to protect someone who cannot fight?

the paradox of justice turns
with no answers, with no proofs
it is up to us to discern
where lies the elusive truth

Chapter 1 Rygel

Stealthily we made our way inside the last stronghold of the Shadow Cross using the night as our cover. From the outside, the structure looked like an ordinary multi-level residence. Yet, as cliché as this might sound, when we entered the large building using our ninja grappling hooks to gain access through an open window on the second level, the evil genius of our common enemy Lord Silva truly manifested itself. We found ourselves inside a small room. A recently slept in mattress was laid flatly on the wooden floor. No other pieces of furniture could be found in this room. I assumed that this was an ordinary soldiers' quarters.



Dim lighting came from the low-hung torches that decorated the thin wooden walls.

We exited the sparsely decorated area cautiously. Outside the room, we found that the inner section of the building was a maze of twisting corridors and small passageways. The air was ripe with the stench of death from Silva's freshly slain warriors. Dim lighting came from the low-hung torches that decorated the thin wooden walls. Normally, we would have spent hours searching for Silva on every room and on every single floor of this strange building. This time however, it was almost as if he was beckoning us, challenging us to find him. It's kind of difficult to explain. It's a sixth sense that most fighters develop and learn to rely on after years of experience. Although in my case, it's more of a natural talent. I could feel Silva's aura - or at least I presumed it was his, since it felt incredibly strong, to the level of arrogance. His troops were crushed and our forces surrounded his headquarters. Our enemy was literally a caged animal, trapped in his own castle. Yet, this made him even more dangerous. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. Trying to clear my mind of these thoughts, I concentrated on focusing on Silva's ki.

"Careful Rygel, it's too quiet. These walls may have ears." My accomplice and sensei Kira whispered softly beside me.

The thought hadn't really crossed my mind. It's true though, that there was something foreboding about the silence here. Of course, one might expect this to be normal for the aftermath of an earth-shaking battle.

Kira's weapon, a large and deadly cross shuriken, dangled loosely from a leather strap tied to his back. Many people believe that this type of weapon is impractical in real combat, but... those people never knew Kira.

He joined our army about six years ago. When we found him, his clothes were torn and he was badly wounded, covered in blood and barely breathing... however, something struck me about his eyes. The anger and determination burning inside them were so intense that they could make an ordinary person think twice before approaching him. His appearance was just as intimidating. Long thick strands of jet-black hair with silver orbs as cold as ice. He had a stern, rugged face that went well with his muscular physique. I might have been attracted to him, if I were a woman that is.

I had him treated using our base's advanced medical facilities; he recovered quickly and swore allegiance to me afterwards. I learned all of my fighting skills from him, but even so... I know very little about him. He would only give me his first name, Kira. He doesn't like to talk about himself. However if he does choose to speak, his words are usually filled with long years of wisdom. He has a knack for finding the solution to almost any problem. And I'm not limiting it to just problems that we encounter during battle. He's often helped me to come to terms with my troubled past and my own little personal headaches. I was surprised to discover that he was actually not as cold as I thought him to be at first. Whenever I talk to him, he always seems to understand my problems and can come up with some pretty sensible and helpful advice for me. I never ask him about his past or anything related to that. I somehow feel that he's uncomfortable with the subject and I'm not really one to pry into others' personal lives.

As long as he's on our side, Kira is a formidable ally and I'm fine with that. I do respect his wisdom. The fighting techniques that he taught me were designed to kill or incapacitate an opponent quickly and efficiently; and that's not all I learned. He's also very knowledgeable on the magical arts and he taught me of the powers of Ki. It has many names such as Chi, Mana or Ether but they all refer to the same thing. Not all

people are born with this gift. Of course, I had this natural talent. With a little training, I was soon hurling fireballs and levitating small objects with ease. I am still not on Kira's level in my own opinion. That's why it's so hard for me to imagine what could have wounded him so badly when we found him. It couldn't have been a group of thugs or something like that; even I could easily beat up some cowardly crooks armed with second-rate knives.

"Psst...Rygel! Kira! over here," said a thin female voice.

Blending in almost perfectly with the shadows, I could make out the lithe figure of Risa just a few paces ahead of us. She was attractive in a cute sort of way. Her straight brown hair was tied up in a ponytail. She had a cute nose, and naturally red lips. Her eyes were a dark violet shade, which spoke more of innocence rather than of a heartless killer. She wore a loose rose-colored ninja suit, with a short skirt that displayed her athletic and rather appealing legs. She's also quite mysterious in many ways, which I don't care to discuss. Once she was an assassin whose sole mission and purpose for living was to kill me, since I was the so-called leader of the rebellion against Silva. I'm not really sure of her origins and she remembers nothing of her past beyond her ninja training, and our own adventures together afterwards. She gave me the fighting name that Silva himself had given her, "The Risen Angel." I called her Risa for short. From the outside, she seemed to be a happy and carefree individual. She never fails to lighten the mood, with her happy-go-lucky disposition. Yet, I knew that there was more to her than that. One time I found her staring blankly at her own reflection while sitting by the grass on the side of a lake illuminated by the starlit sky. I moved closer and I heard a faint snuffle. I realized that there were tears in her eyes. I imagine that I must have accidentally stepped over a twig, or maybe it was the rustling of the leaves, because she suddenly looked up and smiled to greet me, we talked about many things afterwards, mostly of our own dreams and hopes for ourselves and for this dying world. I find myself thinking more of her these days. Perhaps, it's... love? Yeah right; even if it was, where would I ever find the courage to tell her that?

We've been together for three years, we've had our differences in the past, but we're now comrades at arms and I trust these two with my life. No. Actually, we're more than that, we're friends and I know that we'll remain friends forever.

Up ahead, I saw three ascending staircases a short distance from each other, all of them leading in the same direction. At this point, we had no choice but to split up and take separate paths. I chose the path to the left, which was nearest to the comforting rays of moonlight from the rather bare glassless windows. Though I've been trained to embrace the darkness, there are times when it scares me. A deep empty darkness...threatening, consuming...it feels as if my lungs and brain are being smothered. Perhaps I'm claustrophobic, not that it matters. We exchanged nods and silently went on our separate paths deeper into Silva's fortress. Halfway up, I almost stumbled on the corpse of a soldier slain by a fatal wound to the heart with an arrow. His armor bore the black insignia of the Shadow Cross. I closed his still wide-open eyes. His expression was peaceful, the look of a person who had mercifully died even before he could experience the pain. I continued to climb the stairs and soon found myself on the next floor.

This level of the fortress was unlike the lower floor. It was a straight and narrow path blocked off by stone walls to the left and right. It wasn't littered with the dead bodies of Silva's warriors. No rooms either, just high windows on one side allowing enough light to pass through for me to see. The ceiling seemed to stretch beyond what my eyes could see. There were no abandoned weapons or traces of struggle. It looked like Silva still controlled this part of the mansion. I moved forward swiftly but silently. After a while, the path seemed to go on forever. The repeating pattern of the bare floor and windows were beginning to bother me. I felt my eyelids begin to drop slowly. There was something hypnotic about this place. I shook off the urge to sleep and put my senses on full alert, a basic rule for survival in any armed conflict. No sooner had I done this, when I felt a murderous urge dangerously close to me. Whatever it was, it was moving...fast and it was close. Too close! I stopped running and rolled to the left just in time to see a large metal sickle attached to a chain stab the floor that I was standing on. I looked up to find the source of the projectile just in time to see two more blades rushing toward me.

"Slow!"

I leapt back while my mind simultaneously took in the situation. I couldn't see them, but their malicious attacks were giving off too much ki. I could tell there were three of them and they were all armed with the same chained-weapons. They were somehow clinging

to the ceiling, the shadows there rendering them completely invisible to me. I smirked and reached into my survival kit inside my suit. I didn't need to see them to know where they were. I flung three shurikens toward the ceiling before I could land. I heard them connect with my victims just as their Kyoketsu-Shogi hit empty floor.

I turned and resumed tracking Silva's ki, hearing their lifeless bodies fall to the ground. It was foolish of me to allow them to get so close. I unsheathed my dagger. These guys were obviously small fries. I took a swipe at the seemingly empty wall to my left. The assassin hiding there screamed in agony as I destroyed both of his eyes. I buried my weapon deep into his head while turning my face in the opposite direction. The sound of metal slicing into human flesh sickens me. I never could find pleasure in killing, but it was necessary. I withdrew my weapon and kept moving forward shaking off his blood. Now that my senses were heightened I realized that this entire floor was filled with those shadow assassins, but I had no time to waste on them. I quickened my pace, now and then slashing or dodging any projectiles that got too close to me. I also dropped some caltrops behind me at random intervals to deter would-be pursuers. In the distance, I saw a bright light coming from a narrow doorway, I dropped off the last of my caltrops. Finally, Silva had to be at the other side.

I was tense in anticipation of the final encounter. As I closed the gap between myself and the doorway, I was ready to bolt past to the other side.

Suddenly, a cool gust of wind swept past me, I stopped dead in my tracks. My legs felt almost numb... paralyzed. Shivers ran down my spine. For a brief moment, I felt close to blacking out. I knew this feeling all too well. It's the same defensive mechanism that all animals resort to when confronted with danger. It was fear!

Finally, I summoned the courage to turn around. My neck felt drenched in a cold sweat. Tensely, I raised my dagger holding it in a backhand grip. My enemy was waiting only a few paces from where I stood. He was a tall man. I could see his face clearly illuminated by the pale moonlight that passed through the high glassless windows. His eyes were calm yet focused. They radiated with a faint greenish cat-like glow. A few thin strands of his shoulder length silver hair dangled in an arch before his eyes to augment his sharply

angled facial features. He was clad in black from the neck down and his loose clothing seemed a little large for his lean, muscular frame.

I stole a glance at his weapon, a finely crafted Japanese sword. It gleamed menacingly as it reflected the silver moonlight and I caught a glimpse of my frightened expression, eyes wide with terror on the length of his blade.

He stood lazily with one foot slightly bent forward, his posture befitting of a man with absolute confidence in his abilities. I, on the other hand, was struggling to contain my emotions. Beads of sweat ran down my forehead to wet my already damp eyebrows.

“I am Zefyr, The Wind Dragon. One of the six dragons of Shadow Cross.”

His voice was icy and dry. I wanted to respond. I wanted to shout out my own title. I was the ninja Rygel. I was the leader of this entire rebellion. But I bit my lips and remained silent. Yes, I knew he was skilled, perhaps even more than me. Dragon Class is the highest rank within Shadow Cross. It involves one of the most ruthless and rigorous training regimes this world has ever known, which usually results in death. That’s why only six people have achieved this rank. Silva was among them, as was this man, Zefyr, who I was about to face in combat. I knew that I would stammer and reveal my fear if I tried to speak.

Instead, I allowed my actions to speak for me. I rushed toward him, my dagger held back to conceal the direction of my strike. As I approached, he closed his eyes. I knew what he was doing. “Empty the mind and think of nothing but the battle ahead.” This is one of the principles of combat that Kira had taught me.

At the last moment, I stopped and sidestepped to the right. I swung my weapon with all my strength aiming for his neck. His eyes suddenly flung wide open and he smiled. A wicked and malicious smile.

CLANG!

He easily parried my attack with his slightly larger blade. I drew back and attacked again, this time from below.

TZING!

From above.

SWISH!

From various angles... but he parried them all effortlessly.

Finally, out of frustration, I stepped back and jumped as high as my legs would carry me, reaching a height of about seven feet before I twisted my body to roll sideward. As I neared my target, I thrust my weapon downwards using the momentum that I had built up to hit... nothing but air.

He rolled backwards to avoid my attack. I landed hard on my feet. I was too focused on attacking to cushion my landing, a mistake that would cost me dearly.

Now he had the initiative. Not wasting any time, Zefyr advanced on me and attacked with a series of swift, powerful horizontal slashes. I deflected them with counter-slashes of my own while taking a step back each time. I soon learned why he was known as the Wind Dragon. His speed and strength were inhuman; my arms were getting tired from parrying his blows. I had to use both hands to hold my dagger or it would have been knocked away.

SHKKK!

He cut deep into my right shoulder. I clutched my injury with my left hand, holding back a scream, while I used my other hand to hold my weapon. He gave me a kick to the midsection that sent me flying backwards several feet. Miraculously, I was still on my feet when I hit the ground.

I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, convincing me that more than a few of my ribs were broken. He didn't let up. He rushed towards me with his sword held to his left side pointing away from his body.

Not knowing what else to do, I held my hand out in front of me and opened my palm. I focused hard and released a relatively large blast of red energy from my palm. He answered with a ki blast of his own, effortlessly fired from his sword. Our energies clashed and dispersed in mid-air.

Zefyr whirled and thrust forward with a violent roundhouse slash. I blocked it with my dagger but it was so powerful that it forced me to crouch down. Our weapons were locked together. He held me in place and smiled at me wickedly. Sparks flew from our weapons as he continued to push forward, using his strength and larger body mass to keep me pinned down. It was then that I noticed something strange about his sword. The grip was a large and seemingly hollow v-shaped funnel that forced him to hold the blade in a diagonal position from his hand.

"Your hands are trembling warrior. What is it? Do you fear me?"

His words sounded so sincere, as if he was actually trying to help me. It's true, that I was afraid, but of what I wasn't totally sure. Perhaps I did fear him. I had no time to think about this however. The Wind Dragon of Shadow Cross broke away from our weapons embrace and reversed his grip. To my surprise, he aimed the back of his sword at my face.



“Your hands are trembling warrior. What is it? Do you fear me?”

BANG!

I did a reverse cartwheel escape just in time. I felt the hot slug come within an inch of my face.

“A gun! I knew there was something wrong with that weapon.” I remarked to myself in my thoughts.

When I looked again, I found the barrel of his gun staring at my face. But he didn’t fire, instead, he leapt back and beckoned me to come after him. He was mocking me!

I didn’t stand a chance against him in my current condition. I had to relax, calm down and rethink my strategy. He jumped back a few meters more to hide in the shadows. My shoulder hurt more than my pride would admit. Thankfully, the wound seemed superficial. I was a bundle of nerves, my head was throbbing but not as strongly as the frenetic beating of my heart. I closed my eyes and relaxed my body. I eased the tension from my tight grip on the dagger. I breathed in slowly taking time to distinguish the different scents of my surroundings. I could recognize my own sweat mixed with blood, which was now beginning to subside. I identified the familiar scent of the fabric of my own

clothing. I smelled the cool, crisp evening air, which was desecrated by the fresh scent of death from the assassins that I had previously murdered. I could still feel those shadow assassins hiding in the walls and ceilings. They were keeping back, presumably on orders from Zefyr.

“What’s taking you so long boy? If you’re not going to attack, then I’ll just end this right now.”

I could hear his footsteps. Slow at first, then faster and more frantic. I ignored him and continued to meditate. My breathing slowed down allowing me to enter a sleep-like state.

I allowed my mind to wander on its own, without guidance from my consciousness. I was taken back to the days of my training as a ninja. Back then, the physical training was rough and repetitive, consisting mostly of Kata exercises. I was trained to use almost any type of weapon. I learned to handle blades like the sai, wakizashi, and the handy katana, and projectile and mid-range weapons like the manriki-gusari, crossbow, and my favorite, the shuriken; as well as learning to recognize the unique sound that each one makes cutting through the air when fired or thrown. Guns were also a part of training. I learned not to rely on them but to recognize the distinct sound of a gun’s inner mechanisms before firing.

What distinguishes Ninjutsu from other forms of martial arts is its emphasis on stealth. Its main principle is to embrace the darkness and use the shadows to blend in with the surroundings. To exercise complete control over the body and conceal all traces of one’s presence, this is called Onshinjutsu.

However, I reached a point in my training where I realized that I had developed my skills to the maximum extent. I felt that I had nothing more to learn from Kira. I grew arrogant and would no longer follow the strict training regime that he had set for me. I used my newfound strength to show off to the fresh recruits of the rebellion’s army. I was invincible and no one, not even Kira, could stop me. Or so I thought, because I wasn’t prepared to face the consequences of my actions. It was a cold, starless night and I was sleeping soundly inside my large, rather luxurious room when he suddenly awakened me by forcing the thin sliding doors open causing them to slam against their own

restraints. I was quite annoyed and I threw my pillow at his face. He responded by slicing it into three separate pieces with his cross shuriken before it could touch him. I got up to my feet staring at him wide-eyed. He was carrying a large sack in his other hand, as he stood by my doorway, which led directly to the outside. There was something different about him. His eyes were narrow and cold, his lips stiff and expressionless. The wind continuously blew through his long raven locks, giving him the look of some vile messenger of death. He wasn't the Kira that I had known and trained with anymore. He threw the large sack, which he had been carrying at me. It landed near my feet and I found that it was filled with my ninja gear. Not wanting to cross him further, I hurriedly put on the black costume. Still he kept silent and only motioned his hand for me to follow him outside. I knew what was coming. He hadn't come for me in the middle of the night for a talk. I was being challenged to a duel.

And so, we fought... At first it seemed as if we were evenly matched. However, as the fight wore on, it became clear that Kira was controlling the flow of the battle. I could hit him, but I found myself falling deeper and deeper into his rhythm. Finally, I was taken down with blinding a succession of strikes.

I lay on the ground exhausted and beaten. I remained semi-conscious with my eyes closed. I lost... but I couldn't understand why. My skills were almost equal to Kira's. Yet, throughout the fight, I knew that I couldn't win.

Then, he spoke to me. It wasn't speaking in the literal sense. We communicated with words beyond words. His thoughts reached into my mind and somehow, I knew how to answer.

"Rygel, why do you think you lost?"

"I wish I knew sensei. Isn't it because your skills were superior?"

"Do you think so?"

"No...not really."

"That is correct. You have learned everything that you need to know from me. You are now nearing the completion of your training."

"Then...why?"

"You were afraid."

"I was? But it couldn't be. I was afraid of nothing. My mind was focused only on the battle."

"That is arrogance!"

"Then enlighten me, sensei."

I had meant that answer to mock him for thinking that he knew how I felt.

"Rygel, you were afraid of yourself. Your sakki warned you of my strength. Afraid to test yourself against a strong opponent, you hesitated to attack me from the start. You were afraid to try your best and still lose because it would hurt your selfish pride. You contented yourself with showing off your skills to those less than you are. In truth, you were only using them as a scapegoat to cover your own insecurities."

I was shocked. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but he was speaking the truth. At that moment, I was totally drained physically and emotionally. I was embarrassed but I also felt that a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I was defeated and there was no more reason to continue my arrogance.

"You are right...sensei."

"Yes, there is no shame in admitting and recognizing your own limitations. Even at your weakest, your life will never be without meaning. Congratulations, ninja. During your training you have passed through the elements of earth, wind, and water. Now you have completed the last stage of your training. You were bathed in the element of fire, it burned you and hurt you deeply, but you have emerged triumphant and stronger."

Continue to persevere and someday, you will reach the highest form of knowledge, Mikkyo, the void."

Looking back at those times, I realized that I was reborn with a new strength when my sensei informed me that I was a full fledged ninja. I regained my pride and was ready to lead the rebellion to victory. I remembered the fear that made me lose the fight back then. It was the same fear that I felt when I sensed Zefyr's strong ki.

"This is your fight now Rygel; let your fear propel you forward."

I opened my eyes and snapped back into reality just in time to see Zefyr's v-blade about to cut me in half. With inches to spare, I managed to get my dagger up to block it before he could inflict a fatal wound. As it were, he managed to dig his sword into my elbow before I defended. However, I was different now. Without hesitation, I struck his weapon away from me with the dagger. He hadn't expected that - his sword hand was forced upward leaving his body an open target.

Seizing the opportunity, I thrust my blade at him. He tried to shift his body to the side to evade, but it was too late. My weapon shone with a white glow of energy invoking the endless powers of the universe before engraving itself deep into his stomach. Blinding waves of ki exploded from my dagger and escaped his body before I took it out. It left no wound from where I stabbed him.

I stepped back and looked sadly at The Wind Dragon. He was still standing defiantly, his silver hair still beautiful, his eyes as radiant as ever, even though the mystic blade had devastated his entire body beyond healing.

"Don't look at me with eyes of pity, boy." He managed to crack a shaky yet sincere smile. "I was glad to have fought you, the wielder of the Silver Crescent, in the end." And it was over.

He collapsed gently on his back. It wasn't my ninja sakki, but something inside made me want to check him carefully before moving on. I noticed a tiny white speck sticking out of

his clothes where his vest met with the collar of his black suit. Sheathing my dagger, I carefully tried to extract the small object with my hands.

“Paper? No... it’s a picture. Of his family?”

It was a dark, faded, black and white photograph of a beautiful woman in a long dress, smiling happily while holding a small, energetic looking girl about 10 years of age in her arms. Upon closer inspection the little girl bore a striking resemblance to me. I examined Zefyr once again. His face was serene and peaceful, almost as if he were asleep. At that moment all the hatred that I had built up for him during the battle melted away. I could only remember how he hesitated to pull the trigger on the v-blade and kill me when he had the chance. I was speculating, but I truly believe that he saw his young daughter in me. He must have thought of me as the son he never had.

I tried to force back the tears that were beginning to flood my eyes, but I couldn't. They kept flowing uncontrollably, running down my cheeks and wetting even the thick fabric of my ninja suit. I pulled out my dagger, Silver Crescent and stared at it blankly. I wanted to thank it for saving my life and curse it at the same time for all the tragedies it had caused. I never wanted any of this from the start.

I looked back on my own life before I first laid my hands on Silver Crescent. I was born into this world of war. The terrain consists mostly of dry rock, but there is enough water from the large and numerous rivers running throughout its surface to sustain life. Due to the unusual landscape, technology developed rapidly while society did not. This planet is nameless. Once it may have been known by different names by those who lived in it, but those names have all been forgotten. All that remains now is the name of Shadow Cross, an international organization of assassins who openly control all aspects of life in this world. However, there are those who fight back. Nobody is sure of their numbers but it is rumored that their members are just as numerous as Shadow Cross. They have no official name, so people simply refer to them as “The Rebellion.”

Even as a child, I had already witnessed first-hand the numerous clashes between The Rebellion and Shadow Cross. The outside of the village where I lived in often became a bloody battleground for their military campaigns. Swords against guns, magic against

bullets, this was the scenario that confronted me. However, despite all this, I was always well-provided for. My father was a Shadow Cross captain. His job kept our family stable and secure. My mother was contented with taking care of the household and raising me. We lived in a well-equipped two-story house, provided by Shadow Cross. Life was easy if a member of the family became a soldier and with the endless war, there were always plenty of job openings. However, it was a different situation if you chose another profession. Job security was a myth if you weren't a soldier. Doctors, businessmen, teachers and other professionals were tolerated only because they were necessary for economic growth and development, but once they outlived their usefulness, the organization didn't think twice about relieving them of duty or simply disposing of them. This was the cold reality.

We were one of the privileged class, the elite. As such, I was considered an outcast by the less privileged children. I often watched them play from the window of my room on the 2nd floor. I envied them. Though their lives were in constant danger, though they didn't even have simple toys to entertain themselves with. How I wished to be one of them, to belong. But they hated me for being different, for having more than they had. Maybe if I had only persevered back then, they might have accepted me.

I didn't. I chose to be alone and entertain myself with the make-believe friends crafted from my childish imagination. I never spoke of my feelings with my parents. So life went on. They believed that I was growing up happy and contented, but that was only on the outside. They never knew of the psychological torment that I had to endure. A cold, empty loneliness that left a permanent scar in my heart.

My father died in battle when I was 10. His body was sent home to us, mutilated with various bullet wounds. My mother broke down crying, almost hysterical in her grief. I however, could shed no tears. I don't know why. His death did hurt me. I felt a sharp stabbing pain in my chest when I learned that he was gone. Still, I could shed no tears for my father.

After his death, I noticed a certain change in my mother. What I didn't understand was that she still loved me, perhaps more than ever. That could never change. However, she became paranoid and insecure. She feared that I wouldn't be able to adjust to our new

lifestyle. Now that my father was gone, he had left us much, but we had no source of income. She became suspicious of the people around us. She feared that society no longer respected us with my father's passing. Life became one large problem after another and I felt myself becoming her biggest problem. She became high-strung whenever we had to pay for something. She withdrew into her own world, believing that we had to scrimp and save every day just to survive, which I knew was far from the truth.

What hurt me the most was her lack of faith in me. She was overprotective, and didn't even trust me to help with the simplest household chores. It's true that I had never experienced hardship before, but I wasn't afraid of it either. My path in life was all set out for me. I would become a Shadow Cross Soldier, just like my father. My job would restore the people's respect for us, but most of all, earn me the luxuries to live a long and happy life. It sounded so enticing... but I just couldn't see myself walking down the straight and narrow path. Not when there was so much of the world I still wanted to see. Not when I still dreamed of finding great adventures and leaving behind the artificial worries of this poorly structured society.

Thus, I did the only thing that seemed logical to my young mind at that time. There was no place for me in that house anymore, so I ran away from home and swore never to return. For so many years that I lost count, I traveled from one village to another. I learned the ways of the world. I depended on the kindness of strangers for my survival, or if not, then I created some of my own by lifting what I needed from some unsuspecting merchant's store. I left my family in search of something, but I still could not find it.

One day I came upon a remote village guarded by huge valleys on each side. There was something different about the people there. They eyed me suspiciously, watching my every move. They were different from the people who had lost all will to live, in the other villages that I had visited. Suddenly, I heard someone shout out.

"To arms! Shadow Cross is attacking!"

I spun around and saw about a dozen men clad in heavy bulletproof armor bearing the insignia of Shadow Cross, slowly marching towards the village. Most of the villagers pulled out an assortment of weapons, while the rest fled for the safety of their homes.

Swords, guns, cannons, and even crossbows, each villager who stayed behind was equipped with a weapon. It wasn't long before the clash of swords and the sound of gunfire filled the entire village. Swords against guns, magic against bullets, it was exactly like the battles that I saw outside my village when I was little. I stared mesmerized at the fascinating and bloody display of military warfare.

"Hey, watch out!"

A middle-aged villager grabbed my shoulder and pulled me out of the way, just before a Shadow Cross soldier could slit my throat. The villager matched blades with the soldier, who was obviously superior in skill. The man was literally butchered to death. First the soldier hacked off a shoulder. The villager continued fighting even with one arm, then the soldier sliced into his leg, leaving him crippled.

"For the Rebellion!" the rebel shouted, before the soldier ran him through.

I realized that I was no longer a bystander in that battle. I was caught in the middle, and without a Shadow Cross uniform, I was just another rebel to them. If I was going to survive this, I needed to find a good hiding place. I escaped amidst the confusion and chose a relatively large concrete building located in the middle of the town. The door had been left open, so I ran inside quickly. The inside seemed to be some sort of cathedral. Intricate paintings depicting beautiful winged beings decorated the high dome shaped ceiling. An eerie multi-colored light filtered through the stained glass windows. I made my way further inside and saw something shining perched atop what seemed to be an altar. Suddenly, I heard alien footsteps echoing throughout the cathedral. I turned around and saw that a Shadow Cross Soldier had followed me inside. There was murder in his eyes. My heart racing, I ran without thinking up the steps leading toward the altar. I saw that the shining object I was admiring was actually a long dagger with a white, seemingly ivory handle. I grabbed it - it was heavy - I held it with both hands, feigning knowledge in the martial arts.

The soldier knew better. He smiled and cautiously inched forward. I yelled and swung my weapon at him; he deflected it, the force of his blow sending me sprawling backwards. I hurriedly got up to my feet, as he laughed and drew back his sword,

preparing to strike. I ducked at the last moment and managed to evade his thrust. Now his weapon was buried inside the stone altar. With all my strength I plunged my dagger into his stomach, his body offering almost no resistance to the finely crafted blade. He fell forward, instantly dead. Slowly I moved away from his corpse. It was the first time that I had killed a man, my hands were stained with his blood. I felt scared and guilty. I sat down on the altar's steps and contemplated what I had just done. Finally, when my nerves had settled down, I decided to go outside and check if the battle was over.

Just then, I noticed that my hand holding the dagger felt incredibly strong. I glanced at it and saw that the dagger was shining with a mysterious white glow. I made my way outside the cathedral. One of the villagers saw me clutching the dagger nervously and exclaimed.

"Look, the dagger shines! The crescent has chosen a wielder! We're saved!"

He was answered with the resounding cheers of his comrades. Somehow my presence had changed the tide of the battle. The morale of the rebels grew and soon the Shadow Cross retreated, leaving most of their companions dead. The shadow had been lifted from the town.

This was the first time that I held Silver Crescent. Since then, this mystic weapon, which was supposedly crafted by divine hands, has saved my life countless times, far more than I can remember. The rebels welcomed me with open arms. I accepted their offer to become the leader of the rebellion, even though I knew nothing about fighting at that time. At first I thought that I was fighting because I wanted to end this senseless war.

I know better now. My reasons were selfish. I became the leader of the rebellion because for one time in my life, I found acceptance. It made me feel wanted, needed, and important. I finally found a place where I could belong.

I dried my tears and placed the Silver Crescent back into its sheath. I checked my injuries. My shoulder had stopped bleeding but it still hurt. My chest was in pain and some of my ribs were probably broken. I took out a piece of cloth from my emergency kit

and bandaged my arm that Zefyr had cut. I was a bloody mess and continuing further would only serve to aggravate my injuries.

The danger was over for now. The shadow assassins were gone from their hiding places. With their leader defeated, there was no more reason to fight me. I gritted my teeth and advanced forward into the inviting light of the narrow doorway. The long years of war are finally coming to an end. The dawn of a new world is coming. A world where people can live free and chase their dreams.



Chapter 2

Risa

Reluctantly, I stepped away from him. Rygel... I was hesitant to leave his side. Yes, he could take care of himself, but that doesn't stop me from worrying. This led me to wonder why I act this way. Is this what it means to be human? Then at other times I think about how all this thinking is making my head hurt.

Human... yes... I can still recall it. Those days, I was a cold heartless killer, no, I was a machine programmed only to kill, and Silva christened me The Risen Angel. I didn't really understand the significance of this title. Perhaps it means that my strength is on par with these fabled beings. Or maybe, it's because my potential can reach as high as the angels wings could carry them. In other words, unlimited. Is that so huh? I must be so great then. Hahaha! Prepare yourself Silva, your angel of death is coming.

On a side note... Shadow Cross warriors are known by their rank. Viper class is the weakest, consisting of freshly trained recruits armed with automatic rifles. Python class warriors are only slightly better than Vipers. They are skilled with blades and can use them effectively against ranged weapons. Serpent class warriors are fairly rare, they are masters of stealth and melee combat and are trained to use any kind of weapon. Salamander class warriors are almost equal to the Dragons, but they lack the wisdom, experience, and discipline. Dragon class is the highest rank within Shadow Cross. So far, only Silva and five others have attained this level of mastery. Then of course, there's my rank, Angel class, a special rank reserved only for me.

When I first entered this world, I was already fully mature physically. I never went through the stages of infancy, childhood, or adolescence like other human beings. At times, I doubt if I am even truly human. When I first set my eyes on this world, I found myself inside a dark, empty place. It was cold and hard, but I found solace in the comforting rays of moonlight that passed through the barred windows of my birthplace. I already possessed knowledge that would take most people a lifetime of study to acquire.

This was where I first met Silva. He introduced himself as my master, the one person whom I should devote my loyalty to for eternity. I never really got to know Silva, although I lived with him inside one of his fortresses almost all my life. He was a man cloaked in mystery, both as a person and in appearance. He always wore a long black hood that concealed his face in the shadows. I wanted many times to endear myself to him taking him as my surrogate parent, but he evoked an aura of indifference that stopped me each time.

The days of my training lasted for no more than a week. Strangely enough, my body seemed to react automatically, almost like a reflex action whenever I was threatened.

They used ten to twenty pythons against me as sacrificial lambs for a single training session. At first, the pythons, unaware of who I was, stared at me lustfully. How they feasted on me with their eyes while they slowly advanced. I hated that, so I never regretted slowly beating the life out of every one of them. They tried to strike me down with their blades, but their movements were crude and slow. It was like a dance of death, and I was the star attraction. Though I was unarmed, I knew exactly where to strike my opponents based on the weaknesses that they presented with their own careless attacks. It didn't take long before they were all crushed before me. Soon, word of my exploits spread among the lower class pythons and vipers of the organization. They learned to fear me and respect my skills. It didn't exactly feel good, but it was better than before.



They tried to strike me down with their blades, but their movements were crude and slow.

It was like a dance of death, and I was the star attraction.

When Silva deemed that I was ready, he sent me to him. My only purpose for existence was to hunt down and eliminate the wielder of Silver Crescent, Rygel. When I had finally cornered him, he felt my presence and issued an open challenge. He was exactly as Shadow Cross intelligence described him. A man of scarlet hair, with deep red eyes. Brash and bold, yet bursting with an indefinable, quiet strength

We fought long and hard, my weapon of choice, the curve-bladed spear, bisento against the legendary blade of moonlight, Silver Crescent. We were evenly matched, but in the end, I won. I had him on the ground, fallen and weaponless.

Yet, just as I swung back my bisento to deliver the final blow, his eyes met mine. I stopped, there was a mesmerizing quality about them. They were flaming red, the color of fire, burning and unyielding, but it was the expression inside that caught my attention. I didn't know what to do, so I asked him.

"Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Why don't you kill me?" he answered.

"I will in due time," I said. "But... answer my question first." He had aroused my curiosity.

"Because I pity you."

"What?" I said in astonishment. "I don't understand you. I deserve no pity from one whose life is at my disposal."

"But you haven't won anything at all. Whoever sent you has won. Can't you even recognize that fact?"

His words enraged me. I hit his face and body multiple times with the wooden handle of my bisento, while holding back just enough to keep him from going unconscious or doing any permanent damage. Yet, he didn't even attempt to avoid or roll with my strikes. When I had finished, his eyes were a thin slit. I had beaten him near death, but I didn't kill him yet; I wanted to prolong his agony. I found the sense of power of having someone completely at my mercy quite gratifying.

Then, to my surprise, he turned to me and cracked a smile. "Yes, I do pity you. You're nothing more than a pawn in this little game, eh?"

He stood up effortlessly as though he was uninjured, shaking off the dust from his garments and completely ignoring me.

“Wait!” I commanded.

I thrust the bisento to within inches of his neck. He remained still, but I could tell he was unfazed. Something was holding me back, perhaps a part of me that still remembered how it was to be human. To cry, to laugh, and to have compassion. A part of me that still clung to the weakness called emotion.

“If you wanted to kill me...” He paused to meet my eyes again before continuing. “You should have done so earlier.”

Suddenly, I felt the touch of cold steel resting against the back of my neck. I looked back to see a tall, lean, raven-haired man holding onto the large and sharp shuriken that was resting on my neck. Rygel tricked me!

I sank down on my knees and laid down my weapon in resignation.

“End it now,” I commanded.

I felt the giant shuriken moving away from my neck. I closed my eyes preparing for the final blow. At least, I would die an honorable death, for whatever it's worth.

Then, something warm touched my shoulder. It was firm but gentle... I sensed that it was a human hand. I opened my eyes and saw that it was Rygel's, he moved closer to whisper in my ear.

“I know that you feel lost right now. It shows that you're still human despite what Shadow Cross may have done to you. Come with us.” Slowly, he moved away and offered me his hand

I stared at him in surprise, but saw no trace of hostility or bitterness on his face even after the way I treated him. For the first time in my life, I smiled. Not a calculated smile

meant to deceive, but a real smile, natural and unplanned. Something inside me, perhaps the person that I once was, told me that to refuse his offer would be the biggest mistake that I would ever make.

Slowly I took his hand. The moment our fingers met marked the beginning of the rest of my life. He had broken the unseen chains that bound me to my fate. My loyalty to Shadow Cross slowly melted away. I glanced behind me to see the raven-haired man offer his hand to me as Rygel did. Thus, I befriended Rygel and Kira, the two people who gave me a second chance at life and I knew that the bond we established that day would only grow deeper with time.

I was... different back then. So serious, so focused. It makes me laugh when I think about myself during those times.

As I awakened from my recollections of the past, I found that I was alone again. We chose to go on separate paths, though we knew that we were being ensnared. We were playing his game now. I might have known it would turn out like this. Silva's secretive and devious ways are not to be taken lightly, even if we obviously had the upper hand.

I moved further on, ascending the stairway with caution. Before long, I reached the next level. The passage was dark and expansive. It was a maze of tall pillars carved with symbols of various deities and walls decorated with framed oil paintings. I heard once that one of the top leaders of Shadow Cross was also a talented artist. Perhaps I had stumbled into his domain.

I stopped as I noticed some movement not too far ahead of me. Two vipers were patrolling the area watchfully, though they hadn't seen me yet. I decided to dispose of them quickly and readied my spear to kill. I paused for a while allowing my breathing to slow down almost to a halt. I could feel the heat and anxiety slowly exiting my body. This ritual preparation before killing comes almost naturally to me, though some may find it takes years to master. With the preparation complete, I hid in the darkness, eyeing my prey carefully and waiting for that perfect moment to strike. They patrolled in set intervals forming a large circle around the area just out of sight from where I was watching.

I saw my chance as they lined up not too far from each other in a perfect angle for me to get both of them in one swift strike. I ran quickly adjusting my footing to run diagonally along the wall as I picked up more speed to take better advantage of the shadows as I neared them.

One of them saw me too soon and aimed his rifle straight at me... I had nothing to fear of course.

"Hey what the... help!!!" he screamed, as I cut through his neck.

I landed in a crouched position right on target behind them. By this time, I had already severed both of their heads from their bodies. My weapon was now bathed in the deep dark crimson of human blood. The viper who saw me first had managed to get off a few quick bursts from his rifle, which I had easily evaded, before he collapsed. I was smiling inwardly, quite satisfied with what I had just done.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

"Bravo! A truly artistic display of murder at its finest."

A deep male voice spoke as its bearer emerged from behind one of the room's tall pillars. Not that I hadn't noticed his presence before, I just thought it wise to leave him alone. I assumed from his manner of speaking that he was the leader of this area.

He stepped into the light of the attractive chandelier that hung in the center of the room, allowing me to get a good look at his profile. A bit young for a Shadow Cross warrior, perhaps in his early twenties. He had thick well-groomed brown hair done in a style fitting of wealthy executives. What struck me as odd were his clothes. Instead of the usual combat attire, he was wearing a black tuxedo made from expensive-looking fabric.

His posture was also questionable. One hand in his pocket, with the other left free to gesture when he speaks. I would have been led to believe that he wasn't a threat if not for the feeling of malice I felt from my Sakki.

“But I would expect no less from the legendary Risen Angel.” He smiled mysteriously slowly placing his free hand behind him.

“Allow me to introduce myself.”

Suddenly, he flung a circular disc that left green trails of ki in its path right at my face. I parried it using the edge of my bisento, and it flew gracefully back into his hand. That’s when I realized that he was using a chakram. A ring shaped throwing weapon capable of dealing death in an instant in the hands of a skilled user. It works pretty much like Kira’s shuriken, useful for both ranged and melee attacks.

“I am Zan, the Fire Dragon of Shadow Cross.”

I’ll never understand these Shadow Cross titles. Why name themselves after the elements? It’s not like this guy’s about to breathe fire in front of me.

“You know it, fella.” I took an offensive pose with the bisento’s blade thrust in the direction of my opponent.

“Nothing personal then... but as you know, we never tolerate traitors in our clan.” Zan stared me down menacingly.

“Your move, Zan. But are you forgetting that we have this entire place surrounded?” I gave him a wink. Pressuring him to attack first.

Zan smirked haughtily and suddenly lunged forward with a high knee strike. He was pretty fast - the attack grazed my arm a little - thankfully, my thick ninja armor absorbed most of the impact.

“You’ll find that a single Dragon is worth a thousand warriors, little murderess.”

Zing! Crash!

He didn't let up, using his Chakram as a short-range melee weapon. I had no choice but to defend, parrying and taking a step back every now and then and dodging his more powerful swings. This was fine, I could read his moves, but I might still suffer a fatal hit if I couldn't find a way to fight back, and besides, my longer bisento was pretty useless at this range. Had to think of something...

"Yeah... whatever, Mr. Dragon Breath. Hey! Look behind you quick!" Well... it was the only workable plan I could think of at that moment. Actually... it might even work.

"Hahaha," he laughed cockily, "come now, did you really think I'd fall for that trick?"

He had a point though, bumbling villains like that only exist in kiddy stories of good vs. evil... still...

Smack!

"Ouch!?!..Wha?"

I got him in the stomach cleanly using my bisento's wooden handle. I can't believe this idiot actually fell for that.

"It seems your gloating gave me an opening Zan. It's my turn now."

Now that I managed to put some distance between us, I had to decide what to do. Hmm... should I just observe him and look for a weakness? No, it's better to attack him and force him to reveal his weak spot.

"Haiya!" I used a simple forward slash, which he sidestepped quite easily. The attack hit the floor.

He stepped on my Bisento's handle and dashed along its length with great agility, towards me. Fortunately, I expected him to do that. I used my right arm hitting him in the face with my elbow, while simultaneously withdrawing my weapon. He landed on his back momentarily dazed.

However, I was now at a disadvantageous position. He was a lot farther away from me, which would give him the chance to use the chakram's long-range capabilities. There wasn't much I could do except to watch and wait. Charging in would surely result in my being cut to pieces. The bisento isn't designed to parry a missile weapon in full momentum.

Before I could finish my thoughts, Zan sent the chakram flying towards me. I barely dodged it at the last possible moment. I used the bisento as a crutch to regain my balance and leapt towards him to close our distance. He stood his ground even as I approached him. Then suddenly he flashed a wide evil grin and waved the back of his hand at me. I rolled sideways just in time. I felt the chakram come dangerously close to chopping my head off from behind, before returning to its master. Somehow, it managed to inflict a light wound on my leg. Why do cute ninja girls like me always have to wear these short skirts anyway? It's not even slightly practical.

"Hmm... you're pretty good, Himika. You're the first one to survive that attack."

"Heh! You're not bad yourself. I guess I should be flattered...Wait! What did you call me?"

"Uhh.... no..nothing... Now let's continue shall we?"

"It was most certainly not nothing. You called me Himika didn't you?"

He bowed his head low, his eyes hidden in the shadows of his hair. He didn't answer. It seems that he was in no mood to chat anymore. I readied myself. This is where the true battle begins. I was still wondering in the back of my mind about what he called me. Who was he? What does he know about me?

I had no time to ponder this however. Without warning, he rushed at me with the chakram held back and concealed from my view. When he came to within a few feet from me, he launched his body into an aerial plunge, a graceful maneuver that would

precede a diagonal cross slash. I waited expectantly to parry the killer blow and catch him in a counter-attack, timing our movements in my mind.

A great warrior once said that it's foolish to play mind-games and attempt to predict your opponent's movements during the flow of the battle. I almost learned that lesson the hard way. Instead of using the diagonal slash that I expected, Zan thrust the chakram straight at me, aiming for the critical spot between my shoulder blades. Fortunately, I managed to raise my spear in defense. The thrust hit my weapon's blade with such force that it sent me flying sideways into the far end of the room.

Something wasn't right... my body felt numb. I instinctively clutched my shoulder. It was damp. Blood!

Astounding! Even though I thought I parried his attack successfully, he had sliced into my right shoulder so sharply that I didn't even feel any pain when the blade cut inside me. This man's fighting skills were almost equal to... no, he was better than Silva. So this was the Fire Dragon of Shadow Cross.

"Ugh!"

I fell to my knees in exhaustion. This was bad. I was losing blood too fast and my muscles were quickly beginning to feel numb. I estimated I had about 15 minutes left to fight before I passed out. I had to end this battle soon. Keeping my eyes focused on Zan, I saw him approaching me fast.

"Damn!"

At that moment, I was like a critically injured wolf, nearly defenseless even though I still had my fang, my bisento. I couldn't even direct my body to move away from him and buy me some time to counter-attack. I had no chance, I closed my eyes bracing myself for the killer blow.

"Pray be swift Zan."

And... nothing. Nothing but the comforting feeling of a gentle hand being pressed against my forehead.

“Zan? Wh...”

“Himika... my precious little sister. You’ve finally returned.”

“What?”

I couldn’t take in what I was hearing. Was Zan referring to me as his sister?

“I do not lie. Will you listen to my story?”

I examined his face, looking deep into his eyes, there was no trace of deception or malice inside them. Normally, I would have taken this as a chance to kill him, but I couldn’t. By coming within sword-range of me in such a defenseless stance, this man had placed his entire trust in me, the woman whom he believed to be his little sister, and after all that I’ve been through with Rygel and Kira, I couldn’t bring myself to betray that trust. I nodded in consent.

And Zan told me his story. About a young boy and a baby girl whose parents were killed out of pure bloodlust during a Shadow Cross raid on their village. The boy tried to escape from the burning remains of the village with his little sister. However, his efforts proved futile as the Shadow Cross soldiers swiftly thwarted his attempt and captured them. Neither of them were killed, but they were forcibly separated. Both were trained to become master assassins for Shadow Cross and subjected to extreme mental conditioning designed to rewrite their memories. Yet, although he did not let on, the boy retained his memories from his life before being involved with Shadow Cross. His strong feelings of wanting to protect and be reunited with his sister prevented any form of artificial mind control from completely dominating his consciousness. Now, it had come to this, a fight to the death between siblings, but Zan explained that he had always been waiting for this chance to come. Climbing the ranks within Shadow Cross, gathering power, so that one day, he might meet with the one called the Risen Angel, his sister Himika.

“But... how can I possibly believe your story?”

As soon as I asked this question, Zan smiled gently. He held a small ocarina to his lips and began to play. A gentle melody, almost like a lullaby began to resonate from the musical instrument. It was... beautiful.



He held a small ocarina to his lips and began to play. A gentle melody, almost like a lullaby began to resonate from the musical instrument. It was... beautiful.

I closed my eyes as I took in the music that... my big brother was playing. Fading memories slowly crept into my mind, forming images that I thought I had forgotten forever. Faint, wonderful memories of my mother's scent, my father's protective voice and my big brother's hand pressed gently against my forehead. Even though I never knew their names, I knew then that Zan truly was my brother.

I couldn't contain my emotions any longer. I leapt at Zan and embraced my brother tightly, as if even he was about to disappear from my sight at any moment. Zan stopped playing his ocarina and slowly placed his arms around me.

He whispered into my ear.

“Himika... I’m happy... even if it had to end this way.”

I pulled away from him slightly shocked at what he had said, but I felt reassured when I saw the gentleness in his expression.

“Brother? What do you mean?”

Zan fell on one knee. From this angle, I saw a sight that would have made any normal girl pass out. An innumerable amount of arrows were stuck to his back. It was a miracle that he was even able to do battle against me.

“Hehe... it seems that we underestimated your rebel army.”

I realized then that he was already severely injured even before we had fought.

“NO!”

I rushed to his side, but he held his hand out in front of me to make me stop.

“Listen... I don’t want you to remember me looking as pathetic as this. Himika, my dear sister, take my ocarina and always remember how we fought each other on this place. Remember all the lives that we had taken to get here, just for this one final tragic encounter,” he said weakly.

With that my brother breathed his last.

I breathed in deep, trying to contain my emotions. It was no use. The sadness that I felt within was overwhelming. Here lay my brother who had fought so hard just for one single chance to be reunited with me again. My brother who had died so violently by the hands of our own men. Just a little bit earlier, I saw him as my enemy, a useless pawn that I needed to eliminate, and in almost an instant, he had become the most important person to me. There was nothing more I could do for him. Being an assassin, I knew the reality of death more than anyone.

I picked up my weapon. Although my sadness was immeasurable, I was still an assassin. I had no more tears left to shed after taking the lives of so many in getting here. I had only a burning hatred for Shadow Cross and an overwhelming desire to protect the people who are important to me. I carefully pocketed Zan's ocarina, that he had been holding on to dear life just to reach this one single moment.

I felt the shadows of the past slowly being erased from my consciousness again. I was bleeding badly and my body was sore all over, but it didn't matter anymore. Even though my body was battered, I would continue to fight until this battle with Shadow Cross was over. Tragedies like this must never again be allowed to happen. I... no, we... finally have the power to change this world. Let this blood-soaked battlefield be the last.

Rygel, Kira, let's chase our dreams towards a world of hope.



Chapter 3 Kira

Two unseen roads stretched out before me.

“Which path do I choose?”

I asked myself as I stared at the hallways that split into four separate, possibly winding paths in front of me. But I didn't have to do that. Because the truth was that I had always known my way around this place, Shadow Cross headquarters.

Even the shadow ninja that would have normally attacked any strangers in the area stayed their blades as I passed by. It had been... perhaps 30 minutes or more since Rygel and Risa went on their separate paths. What those two didn't know was that no matter which path we chose, we'd all end up meeting each other in the central shrine eventually. That is, provided they don't manage to get themselves killed.

Which path do I choose? This question invaded my mind once again. Certainly I wasn't at a loss for directions this time. Rather, I questioned my intentions as I moved closer and closer to the room where Silva should be waiting.

Rygel and Risa... those kids and I have been through so much together. I can still remember our adventures quite vividly. In our travels to unite the rebellion against Shadow Cross, we once met the spirits of two lovers from the ancient kingdom of Parcia.

Hana, the Ice Princess whose lover disappeared on her wedding day. Her soul was possessed by a passion so strong that she continued to inhabit the Ice Cavern and wait for her lover on the very same spot she had left him, even after she died. We had no choice but to defeat her or die ourselves when she mistook Rygel for her dead lover.

I clearly remember Risa's regret when she asked, “Rygel, Kira, did we have to kill her? Did we do the right thing? Is it so wrong to love somebody and to want to be loved?”

And Rygel's response. “I... I didn't want to do it, but we had no choice. She wanted to continue loving him, but their physical bodies died a long time ago. It's not wrong to love someone, but it doesn't give you the right to take another person's life. If she has the right to love, then we also have the right to live.”

Who would have guessed that further along our journey, we would meet with the soul of Jamar, the slain hero and Hana's lover.

Jamar's tale precedes the legend of the Silver Crescent. He was a spy sent to gather information about the heir of the Silver Crescent by the Black Moon Empire, an enemy of the Fire Kingdom of Parcia where the divine weapon, Silver Crescent, had been passed down for generations. It was during his time in Parcia, disguised as a traveling minstrel, that he met Hana, an enchanting street dancer. They got to know each other, spent time together and fell in love. Yet, Jamar was a spy, and he had long overstayed his welcome in the Fire Kingdom by the time that Hana fell in love with him. He kept his identity a secret from his lover in order to prevent her being involved with his dangerous profession. Jamar was forced to leave Hana behind when he was ordered to report back by his superiors. He lied to her by telling her that he had a singing engagement on the night that he left, leaving his subordinate who masqueraded as his best friend to watch over Hana. They promised to meet again on Jamar's birthday.

Yet, this was the last time that the doomed lovers would meet. Little did Jamar know that their promise would later on drive Hana to become the Ice Princess. His superiors betrayed him. The information that he relayed to them was so vital that they couldn't afford to let anyone associated with Parcia know about it. Not even their own men. They wanted to assassinate Jamar right there, but he fought back with all his strength and managed to fight his way out of the empire. The memories he carried in his heart of his time in Parcia with Hana was the only thing that kept him going. Yet his efforts were futile; his body had already begun to succumb to the poisoned arrow which penetrated one of his legs in the struggle. He forced his body to continue on, even as the poison spread even more throughout his body with every move he made. If willpower alone could have taken him there, he would have crawled his way back to Parcia just to catch a glimpse of Hana again before he died. However, the poison had now entered his entire body and all his limbs had become numb. In the end, he only managed to crawl the last few inches into a secluded spot within the Spirit Forest where we would meet his undead soul a thousand years later.

He had been waiting for over a thousand years, hoping that Hana would someday come. We relayed Hana's story to him and he took it in quite calmly. Then, in a manner befitting the noblest of souls, he asked Rygel for one last honorable battle, to finally set his soul to rest. As a warrior, Rygel consented to his request.

And so they fought each other. It was clear from the very beginning that Rygel's skills were superior, but Jamar was not an opponent to be taken lightly. He used a large broadsword coupled with a light crossbow that gave him nearly infinite attacking range in one-on-one combat. For a short while, it was give or take, but finally, with a devastating swipe that knocked Jamar's broadsword from his hand, the wielder of the Silver Crescent triumphed. Jamar bowed low to acknowledge his defeat. He had fought valiantly until the very end.

As we watched the ghostly remains of the warrior named Jamar slowly dissolve from this world, I couldn't help but admire this person's strength of character.

As Rygel put it, "One stood by her love, and the other clung to his hope. May they meet each other again in a less tragic world."

I continued on, walking deeper into Silva's lair. The wooden floor felt thin, thus I was wary of any concealed traps. Dim lighting came from the small torches hung high above my head upon the narrow walls which were lined with what appeared to be handmade carvings forming a flame-like pattern.

Flames... they reminded me of another of my adventures with Rygel and Risa. The time we met with Phaedra, the Princess of Fire from the ancient kingdom of Parcia, and her lover, prince Lexor. We had wandered into the sealed sanctuary, an old cave near the very edge of the world. The petrified vines that protected its entrance could only be cut by the Silver Crescent. It was there that we saw a handsome youth clasping the hand of a stone statue in the shape of a lovely young girl. The youth was the one called Lexor.

He bowed before us, acknowledging Rygel, the chosen wielder of the Silver Crescent, and began to tell his tale. Lexor was the crown prince of the Black Moon Empire. He was groomed from birth to kill the Princess of Fire, the wielder of the Silver Crescent in that

time period. Phaedra and Lexor were supposed to be sworn enemies, yet by some twist of fate, they fell in love with each other.

However, before Lexor could finish his story, night had begun to descend upon us, consuming what little light filtered through the cave. We heard him speak the words, "It was a forbidden relationship, we both knew that it would never work out. But... we were so young back then. Now... we have been damned to this infernal existence."

Then we saw a small glowing orange orb floating directly in front of us. The orb's light gradually grew brighter until it illuminated the entire cavern. It came from the statue... or what was once a statue, because now it had become a living being of flesh and blood.

However, we would not hear Lexor's voice again, he had now turned to stone, in the same lifeless grey color as the girl who stood before us once was. All we could do was watch in awe. The girl bowed before us and introduced herself.

"Greetings visitors. I am Phaedra, once the bearer of the weapon you hold," she pointed at the silver dagger in Rygel's hand, "The Silver Crescent." She closed her eyes revealing her exquisitely long lashes and the quiet beauty of her face which was contrasted by her long, flowing, flaming red hair.



She closed her eyes revealing her exquisitely long lashes and the quiet beauty of her face which was contrasted by her long, flowing, flaming red hair.

“As the Princess of Fire, I fell in love with Prince Lexor, but as you already know, the Black Moon Empire and Parcia were enemies to each other. We were cursed never to touch each other again. We chase each other as night follows day, for as one of us turns to flesh and blood, the other will turn to stone.”

And she continued her story for quite a while, before finally asking Rygel to break their curse by traveling to the ruins of Parcia and severing their link with this world by destroying an object that could only be cut by the Silver Crescent.

Rygel agreed easily enough, touched by their tale as he predictably was. Phaedra gave us the directions to reach the ruins of Parcia. When we arrived, I was a bit reluctant to enter the place, since I could feel the presence of hundreds of restless souls still roaming the premises. These were probably the souls of the innocent who were slain in the tragic war that followed soon after the last heir of the Silver Crescent vanished from this world.

According to historical records, the fall of Parcia marked the end of a golden age of civilization for man. The Princess of Fire disappeared on her 16th birthday, along with the crown prince of the Black Moon Empire. A brief period of calm followed, and after

that, a fierce war broke out that severely impacted the world's population. The survivors from that bloody period created the civilization that we live in today.

There within the ruins of Parcia, we saw the object that Rygel had to destroy with the Silver Crescent, a wildflower of an unknown variety, the only living thing that grew within the ruins which smelled of death and decay. It felt somehow reminiscent of the Princess of Fire.

As Rygel cut through its bright red petals, all the way to its stem, small orbs of white light rose from the stone walls and the very ground on which we stood. We knew then that our task was done. I could only imagine that within the sealed sanctuary, a short distance from the ruins, the eternal lovers would finally be able to touch each other. Even though their physical bodies died more than a thousand years ago, the curse was finally lifted.

Thousands of lives were needlessly taken in the very place where we stood. At that time, I couldn't help thinking, were we leading this civilization down the same path as our ancestors?

I sighed as I reminisced about our adventures. We had been through so much together. Seen the hopeful bittersweet endings of so many stories. Now, ours was nearing the conclusion as well.

I pushed on, further into Silva's lair. I could now make out the outline of the stone doorway that was once a very familiar sight to me. As I neared the doorway, I saw someone waiting just beyond. He was there, waiting for me... my younger brother. Yet now, I felt like a stranger to this place. It was because... something within me had begun to change during my journey with the rebellion. In many ways, the Ice Princess, Jamar, The Princess of Fire, Prince Lxor, Risa, and Rygel were the catalysts of this change.

I looked straight at my brother. He held his hand out to me and as he did, a myriad of thoughts entered my mind. Thoughts of betrayal, jealousy, anger, happiness and

confusion, enough to drive any man to insanity. And as my own hand began to clasp his, one single thought remained. I asked myself once again, “Which path do I choose?”



Chapter 4 Silva

Ah! Those beautiful silver eyes. I could have drowned just by looking at them. My brother, Kira, at last we were together again. I had been waiting for so long for this moment. Kira was the older brother whom I had always looked up to.

From birth, we were nobles, since our parents were high-ranking members within the hierarchy of Shadow Cross. Mother died shortly after giving birth to me. At least that's what Kira told me. Our father, a serpent class warrior, raised us to become perfect killing machines from the moment we learned how to use our feet to walk, and our hands to grasp. Our training dummies? Live targets. Random people from territories within Shadow Cross jurisdiction, and at that time, that meant almost the entire world.

At night, our training would begin. Father would choose a target for us and it would be up to Kira and me to send another unfortunate soul to the afterlife using only a small dagger and the techniques of the ninja arts that he had pounded into our bodies so much that we knew them by memory.

Nobody within Shadow Cross territory ever questioned the disappearance of any person who was not a member of the organization, and thus we had plenty of targets to practice on. Certainly, to any normal person, the very thought of being forced to kill might be shocking, but this wasn't the case with us... or at least for me.

You see, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the killing. The feeling of human flesh being torn, violated by the cold steel edge of a sharp piece of metal held by my hand. It was strangely stimulating, instinctive, almost erotic. I know not whether my brother Kira ever felt the same way that I did. Kira was the epitome of cold-blooded killer, always wearing that same expressionless face, his silver orbs unblinking as he cuts through his victims with such grace and ease that not even our father could match. Kira was the person that I truly looked up to. His technique, his speed, his unshakeable aura of confidence: I was always trying to emulate these traits of his and make them my own.

However, our time together with father would prove to be short. It happened in a town called Westerine. I was already an accomplished killer at 12 years of age. It was supposed to be a routine assignment. We were to investigate some rumors of an anti-Shadow Cross uprising being organized in that town. Westerine was a highly developed town of extremes. From the outside, it looked to be an affluent place with its large towering residences and expensive hotels and shops which lined the sidewalks for as far as the eye could see. Yet, deeper within the city, hidden away in an underground network of old construction materials and thick slabs of broken concrete blocks, there was a place called "The Slums."

It was as if this place was made to be the receptacle of all the filth and grime from Westerine, so that only the beautiful face of the town would be shown to its visitors. The slums was nothing more than an intricate network of discarded material, ranging from

broken pieces of furniture, to moss-ridden cement walls and rusty steel poles and cyclone wires. The homes consisted of either half-built rooms with no ceiling, the backs of old cargo trucks complete with sawn-off makeshift windows and doors, or whatever materials the denizens of this disease-ridden area could scrounge up. All the houses, if you could call them that, were located high above the ground since the putrid smell of decaying garbage and human excrement made the flooded lower levels of the slums uninhabitable. The box-homes were connected to each other by thick, old worn-out power lines, making the entire place look literally like an urban jungle. Even the upper part resembled a rainforest canopy and allowed only very little light to pass through because of the maze of scrap metal and unused pipelines that made up the top of the slums.

We traced the origin of the rumors to this forsaken place. Our father predicted that the inhabitants might be hostile towards us since we bore the insignia of Shadow Cross on our clothes. However, no one would dare openly defy Shadow Cross. All members, even the lowly vipers, were authorized to penalize any form of disobedience with swift and immediate death. All eyes seemed to focus on our trio as we passed by. If the rumors were true, we had been dangerously trekking through enemy territory and inviting disaster.

Come nightfall, the urban jungle seemed to transform before our very eyes. It was a magnificent spectacle, as all the incandescent bulbs, from within the box-homes and hung on strategic locations on the top levels, lit up in harmony to welcome the night. The contrast of darkness and light was eerily stunning.

It was then that we heard it... or more specifically, felt it. With our trained senses, we felt the bloodlust and disgust in the air, which signaled that someone within the area was actively speaking out either against us, or against Shadow Cross. The feeling was similar to the sound of complete, deafening silence being broken by a shrill scream or something annoyingly similar. Silently, we followed the trail of miasma to its source. Even from a few kilometers off, my ears could already pick up traces of the rebellious talk taking place inside the large locked-up box-home that we were approaching.

“At dawn! We strike!”

“They’ll have guards at that encampment, but our archers can pick them off from a distance before they can signal for reinforcements.”

Clearly, this was indicative of subversive action and this was all the excuse we needed to kill all the interlocutors of that meeting. Father quickly sliced a rectangular hole atop the metal box creating a doorway for us to enter. Almost immediately, five sharp 10-inch long metal stakes flew from the hole with blinding speed. All three of us leapt out of the way with ease. Eleven or so men, their heads covered with t-shirts revealing only their eyes to effectively mask their faces, emerged from the large metal box and onto the roof. Each one of them held a sharp bladed weapon, a farmer’s machete sharpened to such extreme proportions that they were easily a match for short swords.

They had been expecting us, perhaps even leading us into their little trap. Kira signaled with his eyes to our left and right sides. Glinting in the darkness, I could make out the shape of ten to twenty projectile weapons, from crossbows to handguns, trained on us from sniping locations just a little above our heads obscured by concrete blocks on each side.

Father nodded silently, which was our signal to take out the archers. With a smirk, I let my body drop to the side of the metal box just long enough for me to push off on the side and propel myself with lightning speed towards the sniping location on the right side. Simultaneously, Kira had done the same and was taking care of the archers to the left.

A few metal bolts here and there flew in my direction which I either dodged or deflected without much difficulty. I gazed at the familiar look of fear in my victims’ eyes as I landed inside their concrete safe haven before hurling my collection of kunai knives from my belt in multiple directions. There was no struggle. All of them had been killed instantly, stabbed to death with pinpoint precision. From the snipers’ nest, I flashed my assassin’s dagger at Kira to indicate success, he signaled back to tell me everything was taken care of from his side as well.

Now there were only the footmen left. Father was taking his time, perhaps savoring the moment in anticipation of the massacre which was to follow. The swordsmen

approached him cautiously, then, perhaps out of excitement, one of them shouted something unintelligible from the top of his lungs and dashed out ahead of his comrades. He took a giant swing at our father, but his head had already been severed from his body even before he could finish his stroke. A shower of blood flew from his decapitated body as his companions looked on in shock. Father, who was now soaked with the man's blood, had killed him without even unsheathing his blade. Such was the terrifying power of a Shadow Cross Serpent.

Recovering from their momentary shock, the rebel swordsmen realized that their very lives were at stake unless they killed this man before he could get to them. They rushed forward to run him through with their swords, but the Serpent, who was many battle steps ahead of them, jumped high into the air. Before they could even look up, all the masked men fell to their knees, their heads decapitated in an instant.

To an onlooker, the act seemed almost magical, but we, his sons, knew the secret to the multiple killing quite well. He had used a fine steel garrote, which had already been set up in a triangular snare long before the swordsmen emerged from their hiding places. With his victims in place, all that he had to do was jump high enough with part of the steel wire in his hand to suddenly tighten it and cut through everything within the deadly triangle's range.

Kira and I jumped back on top of the now bloodied metal box.

"Hic...."

We heard some muffled voices from inside the box. Acting instantly, almost like a reflex action, Kira lit up a flare from his pouch, threw it into the hole and the three of us dropped in.

The inside of the box-home, which was now illuminated by the flare, looked like an ordinary household, though sparsely decorated. There was a dining table, chairs, a bed, and even a carpet, which covered the otherwise cold metal floor. Just in front of us, a woman was crouched on a corner of the room, trembling. She was with two scared kids, a girl and boy about ten years of age, who were right behind her.

The woman looked straight into my father's expressionless eyes. Then she smiled and was about to say something, but her throat was cut mercilessly before any voice could escape.

Even though I was used to killing people every day, there was something about this act that didn't agree with me.

The two kids predictably squealed in a mix of terror and sadness as the woman's lifeless body hit the floor. I looked to Kira. His eyes were closed but I could tell that he had uneasy feelings about this as well.



Even though I was used to killing people every day, there was something about this act that didn't agree with me.

Then, as if he hadn't done enough, Father approached the children with a bloodthirsty glint in his eye. This was madness! He'd even kill these innocent ones?

Perhaps, back then, I was the one who was mad. After all, what right did I have to show compassion to those two kids? Hadn't I willingly taken so many innocent lives myself? It would be hypocritical of me to try and stop my father in the name of this concept called "justice." But it wasn't like that at all. Looking into the eyes of those two petrified children,

something slightly stronger than pity welled up within me. I found myself in front of my father, my body shielding the children from the path of his blade.

“Get out of my way Silva.”

I didn’t budge.

“What’s this?” he said with an annoyed smile, “do you feel sorry for these two worthless runts?”

I looked down... at my bloodstained hands, taking a long pause before answering him.

“No... I know the same bloodlust that you feel. Your killer’s blood runs within my veins as well. But...” I looked into the children’s eyes once again. “If it can be avoided, I don’t want to make any more senseless killings.”

The forced smile melted away from my father’s face.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes... I am.”

“Then you are prepared to die!”

I never knew my father could move so fast that even with all the body memory I had incorporated into my system, I couldn’t budge an inch as his blade reached out for my throat.

I could do nothing but close my eyes and accept certain death. At that moment, I should have died; however, fate had other plans for me. What I saw next was the man I knew as my father coughing up blood, Kira’s sword sticking out of his stomach about 5 inches through from his back where he had been stabbed.

“Kira... you!” He squealed in anger even as his breathing now came in labored gasps.

“.....”

Kira closed his eyes and silently withdrew his blade from the dying man. He swung it down to shake the blood off, then, he turned to me. In a few more seconds, father took his final breath.

“Silva... why did you do that?”

“.....”

“You knew that he would try to kill you didn't you?”

“.....”

“Sigh...”

Then, I felt my brother's warmth against me. He was so close that I could hear his heartbeat. I gazed up at his profile; his eyes were half-closed as he embraced me. Something wet dripped down onto my shoulder. Tears? My invincible older brother was shedding tears for me?

“Don't ever do that again, you fool! You are all that I have left in this world. Don't you ever throw your life away so easily.”

And from there, I just stood still. Secure in the warmth of my brother's embrace. I wanted time to stand still for just that one single moment. My vision turned to our dead father, to the insignia of Shadow Cross sewn neatly on the shoulder of his uniform. That was when I asked.

“Tell me brother... what does the black cross stand for?”



“Tell me brother... what does the black cross stand for?”

We couldn't tell the organization that we had killed our own father, a superior officer. We dumped his body into the putrid, acidic mess that made up the lower section of the slums. The children that we rescued that day were taken into the custody of Shadow Cross and raised as warriors, just as we were. They would grow up to become my most trusted allies, my fellow dragons, Mika and Saichirou.

Kira and I swore two things that day. That we would never again draw the blood of the innocent and that we would support each other to usher in the beginning of a new era where the weak could be protected. We thought we had eradicated the rebellion that day, but little did we know that in that incident where we killed more than fifty men for being suspected of subversion, we would spark the flames of a bloody revolution.

Upon our return to Shadow Cross, Kira and I wasted no time in climbing the ranks of the organization. Even so, it would take us seven long years before we reached the coveted title of Shadow Cross Dragon. Mika and Saichirou were with us every step of the way. It was during these years that we learned of the existence of the rebellion that we thought we had eradicated. Numerous clashes between our two forces would leave both sides with many casualties and bring more grief to those left behind. Yet, I never once thought of the suffering that our battles brought upon the innocent. To me, everything was just a process, a necessary step towards completely dominating the organization.

Finally, after more years of fighting, we had clawed our way to the very top. The insignia of the strongest, the dark dragon, was presented before us brothers. Kira was the rightful owner of this title, but he chose to relinquish it to me.

“I was born to fight, not to lead. I now entrust the direction of our goals to you, my beloved younger brother.”

This was how I became known as Silva, the Dark Dragon, the leader of this generation of the Shadow Cross. Now I had the power, the means to realize our dreams of ushering in a new era. However, I didn't know even where to begin. The world was still at war, the rebellion was growing stronger each day, and with each skirmish, more lives would be lost.

My decision was this: I left Kira in charge of the organization and went on a journey to discover this world. To learn more about the villages, the cultures and the people of this world that we wished to protect.

My journey would span the globe for ten long years. Disguised as a peddler, I revisited the slums, and the very place where we had murdered our own father. I felt no regret as I looked down upon his murky watery grave, not even a hint of sadness for the man who raised us into this violent world of murder.

“Poor soul, not even his children would cherish the memories he left behind.”

I traveled the countryside to see what life was like among the farming villages. The people there were simple folk from a spectator's perspective. Farmers who were satisfied with bringing in just enough crop yield to sell to the city and support their families. Yet, even at this level, the seeds of jealousy and discord were apparent. The farmers would covet another's animal, or boast about the achievements of their children. The men would spend the evenings drinking cheap liquor while playing cards. Sometimes, this led to misunderstandings, fistfights and dead husbands by morning.

Things seemed different in the more affluent villages, but this was only on the outside. In places like Westerine, the rich ones would compete with each other to buy more pieces of land and make their houses outshine that of their neighbors. It was a never-ending game of keeping up with the current benchmark of what constituted a fine residence. However, as an old man I met on the road put it, "There is no place in this town for those who are too young or too weak to seek their own economic prosperity."

As I learned, most of the orphans I saw on my travels owed their fates to the numerous clashes between the rebellion and the Shadow Cross.

There were also the specialized places such as the library town of Jade and the amusement park town of Retro. Yet, even in a place like Retro, people only went there to momentarily escape from the pitiful situation of their everyday lives. The only ones taking an active part towards change were once again those in Shadow Cross and those of the rebellion.

In the center of Religion called Morrow Church, all that the people prayed for was a false sense of salvation brought about by memorizing the church's teachings while hoping for their own self-gain.

It was during the course of my travels that I realized this simple truth. That people are naturally good, yet they don't realize what is good for them. Thus, it would be up to the educated ones, the ones with the power to lead, to teach them their roles in life. I would return as leader of Shadow Cross with these convictions. In order to realize my ideals, I needed to first eradicate those who opposed me, in this case, the rebellion, and then unite the world under the rule of the Shadow Cross, but this time, by my laws.

I once asked my brother, "What does the black cross that we carry stand for?"

The meaning of the insignia has been lost long ago in the undocumented, unwritten history of Shadow Cross, but with my reign, it would take on a new meaning. The cross was the symbol of the person, the dark color was the people's sins. As the enlightened ones, we would bear this black cross of sin on our bodies, as we led the people to a peaceful age of enlightenment.

Thus, I returned from my journey, older, wiser, and in my belief, more capable to usher in this new era which we had always dreamed of. Yet, Kira did not fully agree with my ideas. He believed that this endless strife was the very reason for our existence as warriors. That we, the strong, must always be there to protect the weak from those who would oppress them and from themselves.

Perhaps I was being selfish. After all, Kira had not seen the world that I had traveled. Thus, I decided to be magnanimous and sent him on his own journey to infiltrate the ranks of the rebels and, in the process, see with his own eyes the things that I had experienced.

It was painful for me to part from my older brother and send him on such a dangerous mission so soon after we had been reunited, but I felt that he needed this time for himself as well. Within Shadow Cross, sitting at the very top of the organization's hierarchy, you had no clear view of what was going on in the world below. Now, it was time for him to open his eyes as I did.

During Kira's absence, I amused myself by raising a young orphaned girl who was subjected by my subordinates, without my knowledge, to a hypnotic process that caused her memories to be rewritten every five years. I gave this girl the title "the Risen Angel," and raised her as my own daughter. She was extremely talented, which was probably the reason why I sent her to attempt to kill the leader of the rebels. The wielder of Silver Crescent, the youth named Rygel.

Not only did she fail in the attempt, but somehow, Rygel managed to convince her to join their side. This might have already been a bad omen for me, but I chose to ignore this mild annoyance. After all, Kira had successfully managed to infiltrate the rebels and was now one of Rygel's most trusted men.

Now, by my side once again, Kira had also come to the end of his journey. His eyes had changed from the fierce look of determination that they had when he left to join the rebels that day. They were kinder now, and I could detect just a hint of confusion within them. Deep in my heart, I wondered if he had found the same answers that I had..

We were now deep within the final stronghold of Shadow Cross. Perhaps it was a slight miscalculation, perhaps I was too caught up in my philosophies, but before I even realized it, the rebellion had taken footholds on all our military encampments. At this point in time, we were completely surrounded. Kira, myself, and a few loyal Shadow Cross legions still within the stronghold, were the only remnants of the organization left. Of course, the leader of the rebellion still had no idea that one of his most trusted men was actually a spy, my brother Kira, the Holy Dragon of Shadow Cross.

But all that Kira could offer me at that moment was information, and one more sword to fight for our side. I knew myself that it was a lost cause, but... that didn't mean that I had to give up.

Mika "The leader of the rebels is here, sir," Mika, the child we rescued from certain death, who was now my trusted ally, said as she knelt before me.

Saichirou "He is accompanied by the one known as the Risen Angel," Mika's brother Saichirou, the other orphan, continued, while also kneeling down beside his sister.

I sighed.

"You may both rise, my trusted dragons."

"Sir!" they replied in unison as they stood up.

"Mika... Saichirou... from this day on, you are no longer dragons of Shadow Cross."

"What?" Mika exclaimed.

"Sir! Are we being demoted?" added Saichirou.

"No, no one is being demoted." I paused as I heard my enemies' footsteps coming ever closer to this room, "What I meant to say is that you are free. From this day on, you may

live your lives freely.... this final battle is mine alone... so if you please, leave this place right now while you still can.”

Saichirou bowed down before me and Mika followed.

“Sir” He said to me, “Mika and I owe our lives to you. If you would let us, it is our wish to serve you until the very end.”

“Is that so...” I stifled my emotions; if I allowed myself, I would have broken down into tears upon hearing his words. “And you Mika?”

“I would want nothing less sir. We will stand by you to the bitter end. If it is your wish that the Shadow Cross end here, then we will be here for you until that time comes.”

Tap!

Tap!

Tap!

The footsteps were coming closer now. I turned to my brother.

“Kira? Will you stand by me as well?”

Kira moved closer to me to whisper his answer into my ear.

“I see...” I was a bit shocked at first, but I quickly regained my composure. “So you have chosen your path dear brother... as have I.”

Crash!

The heavy metal doors burst open. Rygel was the first to enter, followed by the Risen Angel. Upon spotting me, the girl quickly readied her spear and assumed a fighting pose

in front of Rygel. Mika and Saichirou drew their weapons and positioned themselves in front of me to meet her challenge.

I turned my gaze towards Rygel. So young... he was a handsome youth, barely out of his teens, yet the fierce look on his face spoke of a battle-hardened veteran. In his right hand, he held the rebels' trump card, the magical blade of legend, Silver Crescent. Though it looked to be an ordinary dagger, I could feel an overwhelming amount of unknown strength screaming to be released from the tip of its blade.

I waved down Mika and Saichirou and they immediately obeyed.

"Risen Angel... no, you're called Risa now. Have no fear, my fight today is not with you."

She remained unmoving, but Rygel signaled her to step aside as well.

"Kira! Why are you with lord Silva?" Asked Rygel.

"A good question brother," I saw Rygel raise an eyebrow as I said this. "Perhaps it's time to make clear whose side you are on?"

Kira leaned back and hurled his cross shuriken violently into the wall, burying it in beyond retrieval.

"I have chosen my path, brother. Thank you for sending me on that journey. I have seen much as you said. I no longer wish for a world of eternal strife, but I'm afraid my vision for the future will always clash with yours. Though I cannot aid him in this fight, I have chosen to entrust the future to the wielder of Silver Crescent."

"There is your answer, Rygel. Now then, if your resolve is firm, I ask you as a warrior, come at me with all your strength. Let the fighting end here and now, with the outcome of this duel."

Then I felt my brother hug me from behind, holding me back as if he was afraid to let go.

"Must you really do this? I don't want to lose you my brother."

I gazed at Kira who was now in tears. If... there was any other way, I would gladly have chosen it, but...

"The sins that I bear on this black, bloodstained cross which I carry, are far too heavy for me to discard. Just as you have made your choice Kira, so have I made mine."

"Silva," Rygel spoke to me, "I misjudged you. You are not the incarnation of evil that I made you out to be."

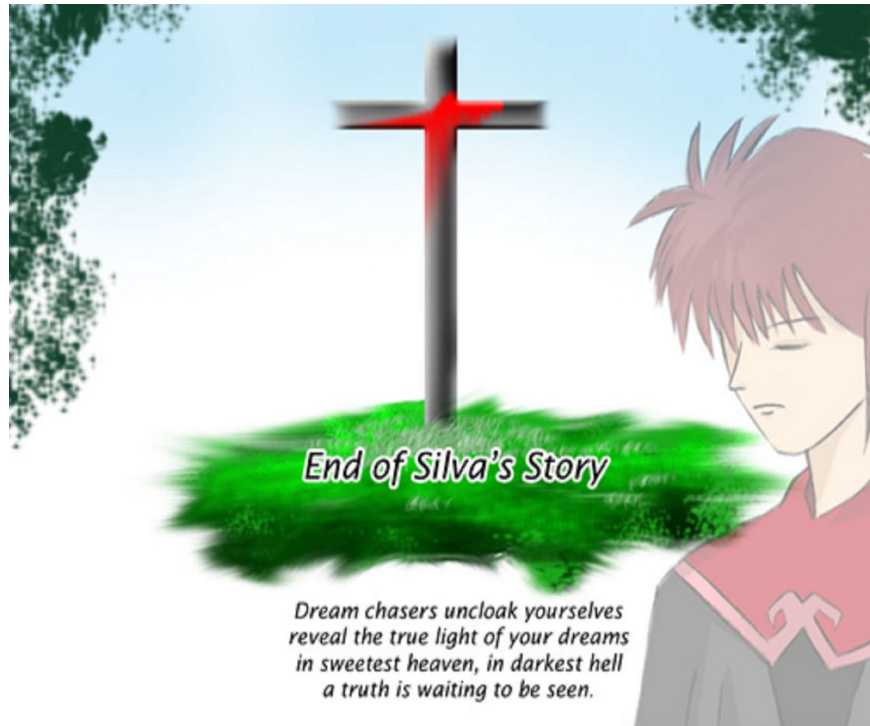
"Thank you." And as I said this, I rushed at him with all the strength that my body could muster.

.....

.....

.....

Though we walked down different paths, we can always go back to the memories that we found on our younger days, Kira. Never forget the person that I was, and the dreams that we once shared. Just as you have entrusted your hopes to the future, I chose to carry the burden of the dark cross to the very end. I love you always... my dear brother.



Epilogue

Kira

On the day of the final battle, these were the words I whispered into Silva's ear.

"If there was one thing I learned on my journey, it would be courage, brother... without courage, nothing can ever change. Even with all our superhuman skills, I never realized how much courage it took to choose one path over another. I have chosen to stay with Rygel, in that boy's eyes, I saw the dawn of the new era, that we have always been hoping for."

Certainly, it felt like I had betrayed my brother's trust, but Silva never directed a word of blame against me. Instead, he held his sword firmly and walked down his own path with the same courage that I believe I had found.

Although history would remember Silva as just another dictator who had met his demise by allowing his subjects to revolt against him, the people who were present during that last fateful encounter knew better.

Silva was a dreamer. He was my little brother, impulsive, kind, sad, and ever lonely. Shadow Cross died that day, but my brother's memories will live on within me. I will continue to fight as a member of the restoration group in this post-Shadow Cross era. This is the world that we have ushered in, and it is the world that I must protect.

My dear brother, you always asked me, "What does the cross we carry stand for?" Now, I finally have an answer. The endless battle to prove that the dream that we both believed in was not wrong. This is the black cross that I have chosen to carry.

Rygel

It would take several more months of fighting to weed out the remnants of the Shadow Cross. However, with their leader gone, the casualties in the battles that followed were minimal. Kira chose to stay with the rebels who immediately seized power upon the fall of Shadow Cross. By this time, I would no longer be their leader. Surprisingly, the Silver Crescent lost its divine aura a few days after my last battle with Silva.

To me, this was a sign from the heavens that my role in this story was over. Although my comrades within the rebellion asked me to stay on as the new world leader in the international governing body that they hoped to establish as soon as the fighting was over, I chose to refuse their offer. I was just a simple man, the child of a noble who lost his father during the bloody Shadow Cross period. A child who ran away from home, simply because he lacked the courage to speak out for himself. I could never be qualified to be a world leader.

It's true that Kira, Risa, and myself were the key players in bringing the Shadow Cross era to an end, but even back then, even while we still fought together, I had always been fighting just for myself. How many lives had I taken for my own selfish desires? I didn't know anymore, I had lost count long ago.

Silva made me see this. When I met him, I realized that there was not that much of a difference between us. He wished for change just as I did, and he was not afraid to take lives for this goal just like me. It was nothing more than a clash of principles that led fate to make us fight each other. I won in the end, but so what? I had been fighting for an abstract dream of a better world, but when it was finally within my reach, I didn't even know how to begin to grasp it.

The world does not need another dreamer like me. Thus do I go on this journey to explore the post-Shadow Cross era that we have brought forth. To confirm with my own eyes that what we did was not wrong. Perhaps I can be reunited with my mother on this voyage. If ever we meet, I want to tell her that I love her, and that I'm sorry for running away just when she needed me the most.

Risa

I have a name, Himika. This is what my brother called me. Even if it was just for the shortest time, I'm happy that I was able to feel the warmth of his loving arms around me. Finally, Shadow Cross is gone, and although not many will be able to feel it yet, this world is surely beginning to change.

This is the world that we dreamed of. This is the world that we risked our lives for. So why, Rygel? Why, Kira? Why can't we see it through to the end together? After the fall of Shadow Cross, we immediately went our separate ways, even though I never wished for it. It was as if all the adventures, all the memories that we shared together, amounted to nothing.

Even though Kira stayed with the rebellion, he wished to stay only as a warrior and nothing more. Rygel disappeared to travel alone. So where does that leave me?

Maybe I'm being selfish, but I truly believed that we would all stay happily together after all the fighting was over. Yet, there was no use complaining about it anymore. I should bravely travel my own path, just as my companions did.

Zan's ocarina, my brother's precious memento. It will be the starting point of my new adventure. To travel the world playing the melody that I heard from my brother on that fateful day. Perhaps in doing so, I might uncover more fragments of my lost memories.

Kira told me that my memories would last no more than five years before they were once again erased. I had been conscious for more than four years now. My time as Risa might be drawing to a close, but I can no longer look back. I just want to keep on living my life without regret... and... I will never ever forget these precious bittersweet memories of the person that I once was.

You know, Rygel. Even if you feel that you are not qualified, the world still needs a leader. Silva wasn't completely wrong. People are naturally good, but... even if they know what is good, they need a ruler to watch over them and give them direction. Although you said you were selfish, I know very well that you fought because of your great pity for the people's plight. Someday, I know you will return. And when that day comes, I and Kira will be by your side. So that whenever you are in doubt, you will always have friends to tell you when you are mistaken.

Dream Chasers

By: Yanagi

What you seek with jaded eyes
is cloaked in boundless mystery.
First unveil your heart's disguise
so your eyes may clearly see
the substance
that lies beneath the shadow of forgotten
dreams
in the darkness underneath, the truth is clearer

than it seems
Unmask the doubts deep within and cast all your fears aside.
To chase your dream is not a sin, your frailties
you must not hide.
Dream chasers uncloak yourselves
reveal the true light of your dreams
in sweetest heaven, in darkest hell
a truth is waiting to be seen.

THE END

Extra: After The Journey...

The following are colored illustrations drawn by Judecca for the epilogue of the Dream Chasers visual novel. The drawings also came with some speculations as to what happened to the characters after they went their separate ways, so I've decided to include them here.



Rygel spots an ominous figure atop a Shadow Cross monument

Silva has been killed and the Shadow Cross destroyed. Rygel has left the resistance and travels the land, visiting scattered cities and wondering if he's done the right thing, if his dream was better for the world than Silva's.

He arrives in a city at the outskirts of civilization and sees something odd: there is a large monument to Shadow Cross erected in the center of town. When was it built? Is it new? Does it date back to the Shadow Cross era? The scaffolding around it could suggest new construction or eminent destruction.

Looking down, Rygel notices a crowd has gathered. They are listening in rapt attention to a figure atop the scaffolding. Is this person a leader of some distant pocket of Shadow Cross attempting to regain power? Is he a member of the rebels who has just arrived in the city to spread the good news? Nothing is clear.



Risa finally begins to lose her memories

The rebellion has ended with Risa, Rygel, and Kira each going their separate ways. The emotional pain of what may be a final goodbye between close friends has been very hard on Risa, and being forced to kill her brother during the final battle still weighs heavily on her soul. Risa is a warrior, though, so she has buried these negative emotions deep in her psyche.

Soon, Risa starts to develop holes in her memory. Kira said she would lose her memory entirely; this is the beginning of that process. There are times when she can't remember who she is. Other times she remembers being in one place and then is startled to find she's wound up in a completely different place, as if her mind fell asleep and her legs walked of their own accord.

One day Risa wakes up in the midst of a thunderstorm. She's startled to find herself at the ruins of what was once a Shadow Cross fortress. Feeling a mix of fear, frustration, anger, and loneliness, the emotions she had worked so hard to bottle flood outward.

She wonders where she is and can only vaguely recall faces that seem important. Though she can't quite remember where the ocarina came from, she knows it has special meaning.

Risa stares into the sky while clutching her ocarina. She's been crying but she can't remember why, so she continues to stare blankly, hoping something will come to her.



Kira must once again make a pivotal decision

Several years have passed since Kira took control of the restoration group. He is firm in his vision for the future, but there are times when he pauses to reflect on the past. Memories of his brother Silva..memories of Rygel, Risa, and the others...even memories of his slain father parade across his mind's eye in moments of solitude, particularly when he visits what remains of his family estate.

There is a small, private sanctuary on this land. Kira visits from time to time when agonizing over great and terrible decisions. Shadow Cross has fallen, but its influence can still be felt across the world. The restoration group faces a tough political climate: some people are glad to be rid of Shadow Cross' oppressive regime, yet others long for the days of brutal structure and bleak solidarity. Kira has learned there is always resistance to change, and he fears becoming an organization like Shadow Cross in his pursuit of a new world order.

On this day Kira must make a pivotal decision that will shove the world in one, unalterable direction. He stands in his family sanctuary and meditates on what must be done, always cognizant of the past.

Author's Notes

Ah! It's finally finished! Fanfiction aside, Dream Chasers is the longest complete original fiction story that I have ever written. I began this project after inspiration struck me while playing Wild Arms 2nd Ignition for the Playstation. The concept of three unique characters with different backgrounds whose stories are interwoven by fate borrows heavily from that game. Of course, being the otaku that I am, Dream Chasers was also partly inspired by the Saga Frontier games and a plethora of other anime/video games.

Dream Chasers Versions

The first version of Dream Chasers with a complete story was actually an rpgmaker 2000 rpg based on chapter 1 of this story. I was halfway through writing chapter 2, Risa's story, when I suddenly realized that I had no idea how to connect the critical events that (according to my plot outline for the entire story) had to take place. So, I decided to take a break and write the side-story (and this was actually completed and turned into a visual novel first) which would form the background history of the world that I had created, "The Princess of Fire." Now while writing the Princess of Fire, I couldn't help noticing the very rpg-ish feel of the story. So I thought to myself, "Hey! Why not? I bet I can turn Dream Chasers into a pretty good rpg." Thus, I downloaded myself a copy of RPGmaker 2000 (which wasn't illegal at that time) and using "no custom battle engine", "no custom menu" and most importantly, "no custom character art/sprites," I managed to complete it and make a release within 7 days. Don't get me wrong though, I'm still quite proud of that rpg I made even if it contains almost every rpg cliché known to man. The story for the rpg version differs a lot from the original version because I took a lot of liberties to try and make the game light-hearted in feel like the Playstation version of the Lunar games.

The 2nd version of Dream Chasers is this story that you have just read. This is the story that I managed to complete after picking up from chapter 2 where I left it two years later. I have to thank Mikey from ATP projects for appointing me as the character artist for his children's story, Time's Tear. Somehow, working with him as an artist gave me the inspiration to complete the last few chapters of Dream Chasers.

Now for the 3rd version, it hasn't been released yet at the time this was written and it's the visual novel version which is basically the same story as this one expressed in another medium. Which of the two versions is better depends on the audience.

Connections To The Princess of Fire/Other Tidbits

Like I said before, The Princess of Fire, which has gained significant popularity on download.com and among the Original English Language Visual Novel Community, was actually a side-story written to complement Dream Chasers. Thus, it's natural to assume that the two stories are very closely related. Allow me to list some of the connections/tidbits from both stories in no particular order. (Whichever comes to my head first.)

- In the rpg version, Silva is pure evil from start to finish, yet in this story, there is intentionally no clear dividing line between good and evil. In fact, I can identify myself better with Silva's character more than any other character in Dream Chasers.
- Blood is a recurring element in my stories and artworks. Even my children's story, "Hikari's Ribbon" comes with graphic depictions of blood.
- Since I like rpg clichés so much, the Dream Chasers rpg includes among others: a hot springs (onsen) scene, a loli character (Momoka), a master who gets killed by the bad guy (Master Hiryou) , Two bad guys who repeatedly annoy the party, but will turn to your side later on if you let them. (Mika and Saichirou).
- If I were to make a fighting game tier list for the Dream Chasers/ Princess of Fire characters based on power levels. It would look like this: (from strongest to weakest)
 1. Jarel
 2. Phaedra
 3. Jamar
 4. Hana
 5. Lexor, Shin, Kira, Risa
 6. Silva
 7. Shadow Cross Dragons

8. Rygel

9. Anyone else I forgot to list.

- “Searching” is a theme that I like to reuse in almost all my stories. The “key” to the search is often in the form of a weak, fragile form such as a flower, a little girl etc.
- The Silver Crescent possesses different powers according to its wielder. Phaedra, with a strong affinity for fire, can slash her opponent with an added elemental fire effect from any point within her field of vision. Rygel, who was born at a time when humans could barely use magic, can only inflict instant-kill damage if he manages to injure his target with the Silver Crescent’s blade. Think of Tonberry from Final Fantasy.
- Silva uses an artificially reconstructed version of the silver crescent in the rpg with the same moves as Rygel but slightly more powerful. This is only revealed if you finish the parcia sidequest
- Hana and Jamar are bosses in the Dream Chasers rpg which is why Kira mentions them both.
- Westerine, Retro and Jade are all from the rpg.
- Kira lives or dies at the end of the story depending on the number of extra quests you finished.
- Although it uses some dialogue and to a certain extent, even the angst from the text version of the story, the rpg is a lot more light-hearted in feel.
- Mika and Saichirou can join your side (although not as party members)
- At the end of the princess of fire, the silver crescent was supposedly lost with Phaedra inside the sealed sanctuary but (I hinted at this in the Dream Chasers trailer) since Jarel survives, Phaedra entrusts the silver crescent to him, which is how it found its way into that church-like structure where Rygel found it.
- Risa was supposed to die according to my original plans.
- Kira was supposed to die too
- Rygel was supposed to be poisoned by Silva's blade giving him an indefinite number of years left to live
- Rpg cliché: The ancient evil returns every 1000 years on the dot. Shadow Cross appears 1000 years after the fall of civilization in The Princess of Fire.

- Rpg cliché: Reverse evolution: Parcia's technology was much more advanced than that of Shadow Cross. In the rpg, Parcian weapons are some of the strongest equipment you can obtain.

Moods

Contrary to my outward appearance, I am actually a person of many moods. In fact, most of the time, I display a blank stare because of the myriad of thoughts going through my head at any given moment. Of course, if one were to just look at me, you would probably see a boring guy of ambiguous age who apparently has the personality of a toaster. Needless to say, my moods often affect my style of writing and in some cases, the direction of the story. This is one of the reasons that Dream Chasers took me so long to write. When I began writing this story I felt sad... ahem... forlorn if you want to make it sound classy. Anyway, it was a happy kind of sad. (Yes, I know I'm contradicting myself) It was a state where I was feeling melancholic but fulfilled. That weird mood of mine lingered (and I tried to make it last) for about two weeks, which was the length of time I needed to complete chapter 1 and part of chapter 2. Unfortunately, after I decided to play Threads of Fate using princess Mint, all my feelings of melancholy evaporated into large hot clouds of lulz. After that, I desperately tried various media in order to regain that feeling that I lost and it wasn't very easy. Watching AIR and Kimi Ga Nozomu Eien gave me too much melancholy, as did reading Narcissu. Bleach was a no-brainer even with the suddenly emo Ichigo after the Seireitei arc. Gundam Seed Destiny was a bit too epic for me. Writing "Wings" made me want to commit suicide. Full Moon Wo Sagashite was too cute even if it was slightly sad. It wasn't until I saw the FFXIII: Crisis Core Trailer to the theme song "Why" (being the fanboy that I am) by Ayaka that I regained that same... um "emo" feeling that I needed to continue writing Dream Chasers.

Fragments Of Me

Once upon a lemmasoft discussion, I mentioned something like, "Whenever I write stories, I like to think of my characters as fragments of personality. Even a person who is completely opposite from me would still be written according to my view of how a person completely opposite from me would think/act." This cannot be anymore true than in Dream Chasers. I'm no psychologist, so I don't know if it's obvious to anyone else other than me, but there are intentional subtle similarities in all of the main characters. I'm very partial to this type of writing because I believe this is the ingredient that elevates the

characters beyond the pages of the story and into actual living, breathing human beings. After all, in a way, they really do exist within me.

The fact that Dream Chasers was written with each chapter being narrated by a different speaker was no random choice on my part. It was done intentionally so that the characters could not only shine in their own chapters, but also, to emphasize the fact that these four distinct individuals are actually fragments of a single persona. After all, in real-life we are often stuck with a single personality for any group of people that we have to deal with; and randomly changing it would make everyone think you've lost your senses. Thus, writing my stories in the persona of the people that I am/could have been is also a form of catharsis for me.

Cymark Ferdinand P. Mirasol (Cloud^/lordcloudx/dreamer)