

Evening Star

She was more of a legend than a girl, a story parents told their children, a whisper in the streets, a shadow on the wall making people jump. Her real naming had no meaning. She was the Evening Star, harbinger of death. She was the last beauty you would see, before being ushered into the endless night.

Evening Star was not cruel. She never brought more pain than she needed to. But she could not forget that it was her job to kill. That way the king wouldn't need to get his hands dirty. All his sins would be on her conscience.

Tonight, the target was a merchant. The story was that he owed money to the empire. The king had demanded the money, but the merchant had refused to give. More likely the merchant had said he disliked the king to the wrong person and now the king wanted him dead. Not that it mattered to Evening Star. This was her job; it was easier for her not to think about who she killed. That's why he would remain nameless. She would call him the man, the victim, the merchant, but never his name

The capital city was crowded, stone buildings pressed close together, connected and separated by cobblestone roads. From Evening Star's position on the flat top on one of those buildings she could see onto the sea and the moon above it, casting its milky light into the dark water and its blue hues all over the city. Evening Star could also see the target's house.

Evening Star jumped off the roof. Two stories were nothing with her training. Her black suit allowed her to move with flexibility and hide amongst the shadows. With her long dark hair, dark skin, and dark clothes she was able to blend into the night. Complete with a flowing black cape, for no reason other than flare, she was the embodiment of shadows. The girl of shadows and legends, myth and darkness.

She moved silently through the streets. There was no one out at this hour, but it paid to be cautious. The guards wouldn't hurt her, but a civilian might, or at least hinder her mission.

She got to the house. She took a deep breath in. She had tried to learn what she could about the merchant. He was born around here and had lived most of his life here to. He had been married once, but his wife had died. No living family members. That eased Evening

Star's conscience. No family would miss him, and she could even pretend that she was sending him to spend eternity with his wife. That was a pretty thought.

Evening Star crept up to the door. She was easily able to pick the lock and slip inside. The home was small, a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom, and, upstairs, the bedroom. That would be where the target was at this hour.

Evening Star ran up the stairs. Her training had taught her to be light as a cat and never make a sound. She paused outside the merchant's door. She reached for the short sword at her belt. The Crimson Blade, named by the same frightened people that had named her Evening Star, was named after all the crimson blood it shed.

Evening Star swung the door open. There the victim was lying peacefully in his bed. He was a deep sleeper. That would do him well. His life would not end in terror as some's did, but in the soft embrace of sleep.

Evening Star took out her sword. The moonlight filtering through the slight crack in the window caught on the blade, making the pristine steel shine for a minute. She walked closer until she was right upon him. She plunged the blade into his neck, twisting it before pulling it out.

She took a deep breath in and looked at the man lying on the bed. Blood was seeping through the wound on his neck. She felt sick to her stomach. She had gotten used to the thought of killing, had numbed herself, but every time she saw one of the bodies dead by her hands, blood seeping onto their skin from deep gashes or gushing out of stab wounds, she felt revulsion. At the king, but mostly at herself for not standing up to him.

She stepped out of the house, breathing in the crisp night air. She still had some time before the guards would "stumble" upon her, so she decided to take a walk. She was cold and terrible and tried to cut herself out from human emotions that would make her weak and regretful, and yet every time she looked up at the moon and stars she was filled with wonder and awe.

The breeze made Evening Star's cape flutter as she walked. She inhaled deeply. The scent of the sea overwhelmed her. With it, came back old memories of her old life. Her family was poor. She robbed a market to feed them, only she was caught. Had she not been young, and had the king not been impressed with her, she would have been killed. Instead she was

forced to work as the king's hidden assassin. She was seventeen, had four years under her belt, and had a lifetime to go. She only hoped that her family was safe.

"The Evening Star!" she heard someone scream. Reth, one of her favorite guards. He was high up enough that he knew her identity as the king's assassin. *Time to run*, she thought to herself. Then she broke off, her cape flapping behind her.

She rounded a corner and ran to an alley. She was intercepted by another group of guards. The king wouldn't capture her, but she would be forced to suffer a chase. She kept running, but turned her head back for a second. She had five guards on her. She turned a corner faster than them and slipped into an alley. She pressed her back flat against the wall, dissolving herself into the shadows. She watched as the guards ran past the alley's opening, away from her. She wouldn't be surprised if Reth knew which way she went, but kept running anyway. He knew that she would escape anyway, so why prolong the fight. After a few minutes she removed herself from the wall.

"Hey, Eve," A voice said. Evening Star spun around. One guard had followed her. She wasn't worried though. This was Calissa, her best and only friend.

"Hey, Calissa," Evening Star replied, returning her friend's smile. "It's good to see you."

"You too." Calissa's face lost her smile. "How are you?"

Evening Star looked down, not wanting to look Calissa in the eye. "I'm fine. I always am."

"Are you?"

"I don't have a choice to be anything else." Evening Star said shrugging.

"Eve, you have me. You can always talk to me," Calissa said. She walked closer to Evening Star and put her hand on her arm. Up close, she was a few inches shorter than Evening Star. Calissa looked down at the bloodied sword on Evening Star's belt and sucked in a breath. She brought her eyes back immediately to Evening Star's, but not before Evening Star had noticed.

"No, I can't," Evening Star said with a sad smile on her lips. "I can't tell you about all the things I've done."

"You can at least visit me. We can play games together, talk about nothing like we did when we were younger, and you were just a prodigy and I the younger sister of a king."

"We'll see, love," Evening Star said. "You have to get back with the others."

“They’ll be wondering where our Evening Star ran off to,” Calissa said with a teasing glint in her eyes.

“Honestly, this show of guards is really wearing on my nerves. Reth probably knows where I hid anyway. You did.”

“King Elric doesn’t want people to know you work for him. The more guards, the more desperate the search seems. The less likely it is that you work for the king. Keep up, Eve.”

Evening Star snorted. She waved goodbye to Calissa who ran out of the alley. Calissa who was so innocent. She may be a princess, training as a guard, skilled in battle, ready to protect her king, but she did not need to learn the life of an assassin.

Evening Star opened a grate in the street. The sewer system. Thankfully it was mostly just storm water, but it wasn’t pretty and Evening Star finds herself getting chills whenever she’s here. Unfortunately, it was the only way to the palace, unless she wanted to risk another pointless chase.

She arrived at the palace when the moon was just beginning to set. For her efforts, she was not treated like a criminal and was given her own suite in the palace. She slipped into her suite and shed herself of her clothes. She stepped into the shower before going to bed, washing herself of her sins and the merchant’s blood. She will see the king tomorrow to give him her report. In the meantime, she fell asleep and prayed to the gods that the merchant’s peaceful face would not become another tormentor in her dreams.

Evening Star awakened as sunlight was streaming through her windows. In the morning the cream-colored walls stood out. Someone had laid out breakfast for her. She dressed herself in pants and a tunic, clothes easy enough to put on without someone’s help unlike some of the other court dresses. Only some of the higher up guards and her maid knew her identity as Evening Star. To everyone else, she was the insane cousin of the king. Everyone was ordered to avoid her and avoid her they did. All except Princess Calissa.

Evening Star walked through the palace to the throne room where the king was waiting for her. She paused outside the throne room and nodded to the butler. He opened the door for her and announced her presence to the king. “The Lady is here, Your Majesty!” At night she was Evening Star, in the day she was the Lady. Without a name, it was easier for them to erase her identity and break her spirit.

She looked up at King Elric of Ushea. His throne was atop many stairs, making him seem grander than he was. In reality, he was not much taller than Evening Star herself. A lavish gold crown sat atop his dark brown hair, almost as black as hers. Though where her skin was dark, his was an olive tone.

The king nodded to the people in the room, mostly servants and a few courtiers, signaling them to leave. Reth, as one of Elric's high guards, stayed. He nodded to Evening Star and smiled. She smiled back, careful to make sure the king did not see the stolen glance of comradery.

When the door closed, Elric addressed her. "Evening Star, how was your night?" he asked. "Quite pleasant, Your Majesty. Everything went smoothly." The words rolled off her tongue easily. In another life, she would've made a fantastic actress.

"Wonderful," Elric said, laughing. It took everything in her to keep a passive face. He was laughing at a man's murder. She killed because she had to, but he killed for petty reasons and laughed about it. It was disgusting. Evening Star looked to Reth, who was also trying to remain stoic. The only reason Reth was a guard was because he loved Ushea. He hated the king as much as she did.

"I have another job for you," Elric said, when he had composed himself.

"Already, your majesty?" she asked, surprised. Usually she had days or weeks between jobs.

"Yes, Evening Star. It has come to my attention that someone in my own court has wronged me. Her name is Princess Calissa Hayyan."

Evening Star heard a clatter. Both Elric and she turned to see Reth, who dropped his sword. "Sorry, Your Majesty," Reth said, before resuming his position.

"What has Calissa Hayyan, your sister, done?" She asked, doing her best to keep her voice unwavering. Evening Star didn't know what game King Elric was playing, but did not want to risk it by giving away emotion.

Elric walked closer to where she stood. He was just inches from her when he answered, "Princess Calissa stole something that was mine. Now she will pay." He turned back around. "You are dismissed, Evening Star."

As soon as he said the word, Evening Star raced out of that throne room. She ran back to her room where she threw herself onto the bed. To kill Calissa would be to kill her only

friend. Elric believed that Calissa had stolen her from him. He was wrong. If Calissa had stolen her from him, she might've had the courage to stand up for herself, to run away. Yet, if she killed Calissa, she would be gone from him forever.

It was nightfall before she made up her mind.

The next day, Evening Star walked into the throne room as she had the day before. She was once again alone with the king and Reth.

"I did not see my sister this morning," Elric mused. "You killed her?"

"I did," Evening Star said.

Elric walked closer to her. "I am impressed, Evening Star. I did not think you could do it."

"You underestimate my loyalty to the crown," she said.

"I will not doubt it again," Elric replied. He walked closer towards Evening Star and pulled her into an embrace. Evening Star stiffened at his touch. He leaned his mouth closer to her ear and whispered. "Remember that you are mine. Do not doubt that I will have you punished again, should you ever turn away from me."

"Too late," she whispered. She moved past her revulsion and locked her left arm around his back, trapping him against her. She brought her right arm up between them, holding the Crimson Blade, aimed at Elric's stomach.

"What?" Elric looked at the blade between them. "I don't understand."

"You asked me to kill so many people in the past. I never batted an eye. I regret that. I will not kill my best friend. I told Calissa to stay in her room this morning. She was not the Hayyan I killed today. You will be, the monster who runs the kingdom with an iron grip, lashing out at even the slightest mistake. Calissa will live and she will be a far better ruler than you ever were." There was an edge to Evening Star's voice that she had not heard in a long time. Not since she first started killing.

"I'm so sorry. I did what I had to do to survive." Elric's voice wavered. It was a plea she recognized well. One filled with fear.

"You're wrong," Evening Star whispered back. She would feel no sympathy for this man. "I am doing what it takes to survive. You did nothing."

She pulled Elric closer to her. Then, Evening Star felt blood on her shirt. She gasped at the sensation of the warm, stickiness seeping through her clothes.

She stepped back and Elric fell to the floor. "My Evening Star," he said, gasping for breath. She watched as the life drained out of his face.

She looked over to Reth, whose jaw had dropped open. She had forgotten he was there. She smiled at him. "Tell them that the king is dead. Evening Star finally came for him." Evening Star paused for a minute. "And tell them long live the queen."

She walked to the balcony. "Where are you going?" Reth called after her.

"I don't know," was Evening Star's response, not turning her back. "I will find out when I get there."

"Calissa would let you stay, you know. She cares for you." Reth called.

"I know, but I need to start over. Get a new life, away from this. Give Queen Calissa my best." Evening Star stepped out onto the balcony. She raised herself up on to the balcony railing and jumped.

She was the Evening Star. She would find her way. She was the stuff of myths and legends. She could always live in the shadows.