

Tears of a Phoenix

We did not choose to live, but we refuse to die.

Von abgemeldet

Kapitel 1: The Newcomer

"And I'm telling you, it was *wrong* to let her in!"

"Come on, you're overreacting, Eugene!"

The two young men glared at each other, catching their breath, both determined not to give in. Eugene was the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

"I'm still the leader, Vergil, remember that," he said in a dangerously low voice. "This is *my* guild, and I do *not* want that bitch here!"

Vergil, as he was called, clenched his fists, his face clearly showing his growing anger. It was unusual for him to be mad at someone - but this... this was too much! His dark blue eyes were full of sorrow, a strange contrast to his usually rather boyish features and his messy, spiky black hair. He was breathing hard, frantically trying to find the right words.

"She just lost her sister yesterday," he muttered. His fists were shaking as he continued, "We were supposed to protect that girl!"

"Are you saying I should let her join because her sister was killed? Since when were we called 'Defenders of Pity'?" Eugene spat.

The other boy shook his head, annoyed at his friend's sarcasm. "You know what I mean, Eugene. Asaya was her last living relative. She could use a few friends."

"Friends my ass!"

Vergil just looked at him, completely speechless. Even though Eugene seemed to regret his words, both chose to remain silent. They never had an argument before, both being proud fighters and best friends who had helped each other to find their place in a world that only allowed the strongest to survive. There was a bitter truth to that all of them had to face after the corpse of their youngest and most innocent member had been found the morning before.

Why was Eugene trying so hard to ignore the pain he was feeling himself? Just why was he trying to put all the blame on the older sister that had arrived too late? Vergil tried to ask what was lying heavily on his heart, but he did not find the strength to open his mouth, the strength to voice what was eating him inside.

"Just to make something clear: I'm here to avenge my sister. I don't need your pity."

Both Vergil and Eugene turned their heads at the sound of the harsh female voice. A woman with short, striking red hair had entered the small meeting room of the guild house, a cold smile on her face that did not reach her eyes. Those eyes, reddish pools full of rage and pain, were the only indication for the emotions she was successfully preventing from breaking out. She was tall and slender, having an air of confidence around her, and stood at the door, unmoving, as Vergil and Eugene stared at her, both unable to say anything.

"How much have you heard of our conversation?" Eugene finally managed to ask.

"Enough," was the simple answer. Her voice was deadly calm when she added, "All I want is revenge. My apologies if I acted rude towards you yesterday, Eugene, but I don't care what you think about me. And I won't take back what I said." She took a deep breath. "I will, however, leave your guild at once."

With that, she suddenly turned around and walked out, leaving no time for any of the two young assassins to respond.

"It was her fault for calling me a coward," Eugene mumbled eventually after his friend had thrown an angry look at him.

"But she's right!" Vergil exploded. "All we did - all *you* did - was sitting here in safety while Asaya was getting killed on the streets! We took her in to protect her! Wasn't that what we had promised Kayis two years ago?"

"That doesn't give her the right to blame me for her sister's death!" Eugene countered, getting desperate. "Asaya left us all on her own, and..."

"That's not an excuse!" Vergil shouted and hit the wall with his fist. "I'm going after her - go ahead if you want to throw me out, I don't care anymore!"

He stormed out, leaving Eugene once again at a loss for words.

It was getting dark and very cold, but the only coldness she really felt was the one that was enveloping her heart. She looked into the clear water of the fountain and saw the hard features of a woman who seemed older and stronger than she actually was. Her red hair was messy, she noticed, but after years of living on the streets she had learned to not care about such things anymore. Was this cold face really hers?

Was this part of all the training, the desperate fights for survival she had been going through all her life? Did anyone know how easy this glass mask was to break?

Kayis threw a stone into the water, destroying the her face's reflection. She was already breaking.

"Hey..."

Surprised that she had not heard the footsteps, she saw into the boyish face of one of the few people whom she actually called a friend. The young woman managed to smile, but again, it could not hide the pain in her eyes.

"Kayis... He didn't mean it."

"I know."

Vergil sat down beside her on the edge of the fountain. A ghost of a smile appeared on his face, but Kayis saw that the sadness of his eyes was the same as hers.

After a moment of sitting in silence, she finally spoke up again, "It's not Eugene's fault, and I want you to know that I'm not blaming him for my sister's death at all. I was calling him a coward because that moron can't even face his own pain - and his responsibility. A member of his guild died... and he acts like nothing happened."

She was staring at the ground.

"You know very well that I've never been good with people. That's what years of being alone on the streets do to you. I only had my sister, and I never learned to get along with anyone but her. I... should have been here when she needed me the most."

Kayis smiled again, a sad smile, and stood up so he could only see her back - and not the tears that was forcing their way out of her eyes.

"She talked... a lot about you when she was with us", Vergil responded carefully. "I think she thought of you as the perfect sister. You did everything possible to take care of her, to ensure her safety... Please... don't blame yourself."

"I can't help it." Those words were spoken very quietly - so unusual coming from her...

This was the kind of situation he never knew what to do in. He had always thought of Kayis as a strong, if a bit cold young woman who had gone through numerous hardships, and yet... she was silently crying at this very moment. Vergil was well aware of that, even though the red-haired girl was quite good at hiding her emotions. She had always been. He was one of the few who actually knew how much she was really hurting inside.

"Believe me," he muttered, "if I had known she was supposed to meet you, I would have never let her go alone... And neither would Eugene - or any of the others."

Kayis turned around, looking directly into his sorrowful eyes. Slowly, she said, "I do know she left week ago without telling any of you where she was going. And I also know she had written in her note that she needed time to be alone. I talked to the clerics in the church today. They were the last to see her the day before yesterday. None of you were at fault, and I know that."

Vergil looked up in genuine surprise. How did she find out so fast?

Her voice got quiet again as she continued, "I think she had asked the clerics for some help in her training. Asaya had always thought she was weak, that she was a burden to me. I brought her to the church to give her the possibility of living a safe life as an acolyte, but she never stopped trying to prove that she could be strong as well... And all that time, she never understood that she, just by being herself, was already strong - and that she was *my* real strength as well. I could keep going on because of her."

"Did you..."

He was unable to finish the sentence, but she already knew what he was going to say.

"They did let me see her corpse. She... had a quick death, at least." Kayis looked into the distance, trying hard to control the emotions that were taking over her. "It wasn't a pretty sight, but now I know how she died, and where I'm going to look for the murderers. And I swear - I won't stop until I have tracked every single of them down and cut them into a thousand pieces!"

It was not the first time Vergil saw the determination and hatred flaming up in Kayis' eyes, but each time, it amazed and scared him anew. This was the Kayis that was able to kill without blinking even once, this was the dangerous, bloodthirsty thief that was only able to survive on the streets by being heartless and cruel ever since she was small...

And Vergil knew that despite blaming herself, despite being in pain, she would not hesitate to kill anything - *anyone* - standing in her way in order to find the ones who were responsible for her innocent sister's death.

"Kayis, you sound like you're leaving immediately," were the only words he came up with.

He heard her sigh.

"I have to," she replied, "Eugene is not going to help me, nor did I expect him to. I don't have any place to call home, Vergil. All that is left for me is to get my revenge."

"Will you at least tell me where you are going? I mean... An attractive woman like you should not go alone on such a dangerous trip," he attempted to joke.

The thief laughed, though it sounded a bit forced. "I'm sorry, Vergil, but tomboys like me will never fall for your sweet words. Your guild needs you more than I do."

He stood up, trying to find the right words to hold her back, but knowing very well that such words did not exist. All he could do was to watch her going away and to realize how cruel this world was for always taking away the most precious things in life.

It was Kayis' sister who had been killed the night before, but Vergil knew that he, too, would never be the same again.

Bright stars were decorating the sky, and most people had already locked their doors. The lights were out - it was probably just before midnight. As busy and bright Prontera was during the day, as wide the streets and as pretty the buildings were, they knew none of them would be safe anymore once the darkness had opened its wings.

But Vergil, just like any other trained assassin, welcomed the darkness. Slowly, he walked through the empty streets back to his guild, leaving the lonely fountain behind. He knew he did not have to fear any attacks, for he had mastered numerous skills the Association of Assassins had taught him. Warriors like him were not meant to kill people - they were skilled fighters whose main job was to get rid of the nasty creatures roaming all over the continent. And just like many other assassins, Vergil had been born into a poor family in the desert town Morroc, having no other choice than to sneak into well guarded places and to steal just enough to stay alive. The Association of Assassins was there to support skilled thieves like he had been, and in return, the members took on missions assigned by the Association.

Thinking of his own past, Vergil could understand perfectly well what Kayis had been through, and he finally seemed to realize why she had always refused to join the Association - she wanted to stay independent, to only think of her little sister, to give everything she had to her...

From what Kayis had told him, she had never known her parents, having been an orphan as long as she could remember. She had somehow managed to keep herself and her newborn sister alive when she was only five years old, stealing here and there and teaching herself how to fight with the simple knife she possessed. It was a miracle in itself. Until she met Vergil two years ago, she had known no other friends but her sister whose life she had trusted the clerics of Prontera Church with, knowing very well she would only put Asaya in danger if they stayed together.

For a long time, Vergil had wondered where Kayis' amazing strength came from, where she always found the will to keep going, to steal and to live a rough life on the streets... They only met occasionally when Kayis was visiting her sister in Prontera, and it had been Vergil's suggestion to invite Asaya into his guild. All those years, he had never realized it was that innocent little acolyte that Kayis was living and giving all her strength for, it was her sister that the thief fought and survived on the streets for the whole time.

Vergil was so lost in his thoughts that he did not notice he was already standing in front of the guild's entrance - until a girl suddenly opened the door, her face brightening up when she saw him. He was startled, but his face soon relaxed when he realized who it was.

"Melt! You guys are back!" the young assassin exclaimed, completely ignoring the angry looks Eugene was shooting at him from behind the girl.

"Where have you been, Vergil?" she asked, her voice as clear as a bell.

Vergil was relieved to see that his three guildmates were finally back from their daily mission in the culverts, for he did not know how to treat Eugene after the fight they had in the afternoon. Especially Melt, the only wizard in their guild, was a born diplomat, whereas Deathstrike and Blademaster - whose real names he did not even know - always sided with their elder brother Eugene.

"I just said goodbye to Kayis," he explained after a short moment of silence, "she is going to look for Asaya's murderers."

"Thought so," Blademaster, the youngest of the boys, muttered, "that's one tough woman."

"And what role do we play in it?" Deathstrike wanted to know, always eager to fight. "Don't tell me you left that chick alone? I mean, she kicks ass and all, but still..."

Vergil, who actually enjoyed fighting just as much as the three brothers, found himself unable to forget the deep sadness in Kayis' eyes, and once again regretted not having followed her - even though she would have refused his help. He looked to Eugene, very well realizing Kayis would have never left so quickly if it was not for his guild leader's words.

"Eugene was the one who made her leave in the first place," he finally muttered, voicing his thoughts and mentally preparing himself for the inevitable confrontation.

"That's because she was bitching at me!" Eugene snorted.

"She was being *honest*!" Vergil gave back.

"I smell another quarrel," Blademaster commented. "And a stupid one at that."

"I agree," Melt nodded, her long, blonde hair falling in waves over her shoulders as she moved closer to the two angry assassins, "you are both being childish for having an argument at a time like this! I, for one, think we should just all go after her and save the discussion for later. Kayis can be quite dangerous and also very careless when she's mad. She cannot be too far yet, so we might be able to prevent the worst from happening."

Even though Vergil and Eugene were still glaring daggers at each other, they both

knew the young girl was right, and neither of them dared to talk back to her.

"Sometimes, I wonder why you even put up with us, Melt," Vergil murmured eventually, "you could have joined one of those big, popular guilds, being the wealthy and talented girl you are." He winked at her. "Then again, I know you can't live without me."

Melt just laughed while Eugene had such a funny look on his face that his brothers could not help but grin as well.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine, Vergil, this is just a simple glowing spell, so I'll be able to hold it for a very long time," Melt assured her friend.

They had just left Prontera through the north gate and were now walking on a lonely, wide road, all the time relying on the light Melt had cast on her staff since it was too dark to see anything - even for assassins.

"Why are you so convinced she took the north gate?" Blademaster asked impatiently.

"I'm pretty sure she is going to Mount Mjolnir," was Vergil's reply. "It's just a feeling, though."

"A *feeling*?" Deathstrike scratched his head. "I hope you don't rely on your *feelings* when we get attacked around here, buddy... or you'll be meat."

Eugene grinned and Vergil shrugged, then did the same.

Melt smiled slightly when she turned her head and saw the boys walking next to each other peacefully, despite their goal being a dangerous one. She knew it would remain unspoken between the two assassins, but they had been through too many things together to forget they were a team, and, most importantly, friends. And as much as Melt liked to tease them about their sometimes rather childish behaviour, she knew they were all reliable.

The five continued to walk in silence, always looking around to make sure there were no nasty creatures waiting for them behind the bushes. It was a quiet night, time passed slowly without any incidents, but worries were clouding their minds, even though each of them had their own ways of handling them.

The news of Asaya's death had hit Melt very hard, and though she had preferred to stay with her guild and to perhaps meet Kayis, Eugene had insisted on her accompanying his brothers on their mission in the culverts - just to make them forget about the recent events, she guessed.

But we will never forget, Melt thought, for they all felt guilty for not being able to protect the acolyte.

Asaya had been one of the first to befriend her ever since her arrival in Prontera. It had helped Melt to push away the memories of her hometown, as there were too events she did not want to think back to. And Asaya had understood her, even though the wizard had never actually told her friend the whole truth. Now that it was too late, she wished she had.

She wondered if anyone knew about *her* pain.

"Melt! Hey, you're going the wrong way!" Eugene called out to her.

There were three roads ahead, and Melt had been just about to take the one on the left which led to her hometown Geffen. Was it a coincidence - or just the one place in her past she was unable to forget?

Melt blinked, a bit startled, and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I was lost in thoughts."

The boys turned around to look at her and shortly nodded at the young wizard to show that they understood - and that, maybe, they had similar feelings.

Eugene grumbled, "Just don't do that when we-"

"*Behind* you!" Melt screamt suddenly. Her light was glowing stronger, reacting to her fear.

Eugene, who was the furthest away from Melt, unconsciously knew he was the one being in immediate danger since the attacker - he could not see anything clearly - was coming from the path they were supposed to take, the path *he* was the closest at. The attack came as a surprise, too quickly for the assassins to react, for they were used to being the ones to sneak up on the enemy - not the other way around. Eugene did not even have time to turn around to see who was attacking him in the first place.

In fact, none of them really registered what was going on until they heard the sound of something being sliced up, followed by a bloody arm - was it an arm? - falling onto the ground directly in front of Eugene. Since the moment of Melt's warning scream, no more than two or three seconds could have passed. It happened all too quickly.

They could all only stare into the direction the sound was coming from. Judging from what they could hear, the creature was being pulled back, and its screams, reminding them of a pained animal, were a clear indication for the nearing victory of the stranger who had saved Eugene.

However, there was no time for the group to celebrate - the sudden sound of numerous footsteps made them realize immediately that the creature had not come alone.

"It would have been too good to be true," Eugene muttered under his breath as he took on the first of the monsters with his katars.

His eyes were used to the darkness, and with the soft light Melt's staff was providing, he could make out forms that reminded him of a spider - there were four arms and four legs - but also of a human being... and Eugene saw, as he quickly counted, about seven of them, one of which the human looking stranger was fighting with, though the person was too far away for him to recognize. Those were creatures he had never faced before, and for a moment, he was worried about whether they could win this fight.

Sweatdrops were forming on his forehead just when he barely managed to dodge an attack. But Eugene would not be taken by surprise anymore. This time, he was prepared! His face was contorted in anger.

The other three assassins did not hesitate for even a second to join in the fight as well, being young men who battled with passion, while Melt remained on her spot and did *her* part: magic.

She remembered the fear she had felt the first time she had to cast a spell on a monster that was clearly out to kill her - but at the same time, Melt remembered the way her friends were standing protectively in front of her and how they took care of the attacker until she had finished her casting.

Slowly, she moved her hands up, her staff floating in the air between her arms, still giving off the gentle light that now became stronger and stronger. A flaming red aura surrounded her, accompanied by mystic words whispered in a language that seemed older than the world of Rune-Midgard itself. She had taken those words with her when she left the academy and her hometown, and even though the memories still pained her every time she cast a spell, Melt thankfully felt the power of her magic flowing through her veins - so strongly that she instantly knew it was now time to set her spell free.

In a sudden movement, she opened her arms widely, the staff floating even higher while her aura seemed to explode. For a second, a strong light was blinding their eyes, then heavy, deadly bolts of fire crashed down on one of the dark creatures that was giving Blademaster trouble.

At the same time, Eugene, Vergil and Deathstrike had managed to strike down each of the remaining monsters with the help of the mysterious stranger - who was, however, neither mysterious nor a stranger anymore. After they had, in the heat of the battle, momentarily ignored the person who had saved Eugene from the fatal attack, it was now clear it had been no one but Kayis herself who had come to their rescue.

"I should've known it was you," Eugene groaned, faking annoyance, "now I owe you and I don't like it one bit."

"Don't talk rubbish." The female thief glared at him. "You guys were not supposed to

be here! I was going to lure them away from Prontera, but just as I was trying to get to the eastern road, they obviously spotted you, probably thinking you had more on the bones than I have." To everyone's surprise, she grinned. "Which is true."

"Are you saying I'm fat?" Eugene raised his eyebrows, but the look in his eyes told Kayis he was really just kidding, and they both relaxed. Then the young guild leader added weakly, "We were actually here to save *you*."

"Let's just pretend we did, seeing as I don't believe she could have taken on all of them by herself," Melt smiled and took a look at the dead creatures lying on the ground. "Now, what kind of things are *these*? I don't think I've seen them before."

Vergil got down on his knees and reached out for one of the ugly beings, the one Kayis had cut the arm of. The skin looked very thick and dark, and even though it did not look like a human being, the form of the head, the arms - there were three of them left - and the four thin legs reminded him more of a human than of an animal. Its body was rather round and very big, having obvious traits of a spider. It was ugly and creepy at the same time.

But apparently, it was also not quite as dead as they had thought, and as soon as Vergil moved closer, it grabbed the startled assassin's arms with its remaining hands. Its grip was surprisingly firm, and it would probably have successfully ripped off Vergil's arms if Deathstrike, who was standing right beside his friend, had not been faster to react, ramming the blades of his katars into the already heavily injured body of the monstrous being.

"Death... upon you all!" it suddenly hissed, then finally loosened its grip on Vergil and lay still.

The realization that the creature had finally died for real was not nearly as big as the shock of actually hearing the primitive being *speak*. It was not quite a human sound, having a very strange accent that would have been impossible to imitate, but the words were indeed those of human language. They stared blankly at the corpse, not knowing exactly if their feelings were those of utter amazement, fear - or pure horror.

"Impossible...!" Melt was the first to find her voice back. "Monsters cannot talk!"

Kayis had remained silent the whole time, but she could clearly hear Melt's voice tremble. She sighed. This was going to be hard on all of them.

"Dangerous times have come," the thief began quietly, "more dangerous than ever before, and these" - she pointed at the corpses - "are just the beginning. They are camping everywhere around the towns now, on every road, every path, waiting for the right moment to slaughter the innocent. You're wrong in thinking they're as primitive as the creatures you have faced so far. I would never dare to take on a group of them all by myself, and if they had caught up to me when I was alone just a while ago, you would have seen my corpse instead of theirs. Especially their group leaders are not to be underestimated."

"*Group leaders?* You mean like the one that almost ripped my arms off?" Vergil asked. He looked puzzled. "Why do you know so much about them?"

"I'm wondering, too," Melt cut in, "you seem to be familiar with those creatures. And you weren't surprised at all when that thing talked. Just what are they...?"

Kayis looked into the face of each of the five young warriors who were staring at her. "I'm sorry, but you shouldn't get involved in this. Take my words as a warning. I have wasted enough time here, it's time for me to go."

The thief was already turning around.

"Don't you dare to run away now!" Eugene shouted all of sudden, his face reflecting anger and something Kayis could not quite recognize when she turned around again to look at him.

She saw him taking a step forward in her direction, his voice firm and serious as he spoke, "Whom are you kidding? You think you can do everything by yourself and shut everyone else out. Weren't your words against me this morning just an excuse to go off on your own? Wasn't it more like your way of saying goodbye to us? You never expected me to actually help you. Do you think I didn't know that?"

Her eyes widened, but he did not give her time to cut in.

"Don't deny it, Kayis! I'm now offering you my guild's help - take it as a payback for saving me if you want, but if anything, *you* will be the coward here if you leave again."

His guildmates were completely dumbfounded at Eugene's unexpected speech. So he *had* thought about helping Kayis after all!

Vergil could not suppress a grin when he realized that Eugene had apparently hit Kayis' weak point. She was indeed not exactly the social type, and it was not entirely unlikely that she was just protecting herself by taking such a form of escape. No one could tell. It was so hard to look through her.

Well, maybe they would not find out the truth anytime soon, but what counted was the fact that Kayis did not snap at Eugene, but actually took a step towards him, her face giving nothing away.

"You," she said calmly, "are not as dumb as I thought."

"Excuse me?!"

None of them would ever forget Eugene's hilarious facial expression at that moment.

The wind was blowing strongly behind the church. It was dawn, the first rays of sunlight were breaking through the clouds. A strange glow seemed to surround the simple, grey tombstone, decorated by a few well chosen, freshly bought white lilies.

Kayis, Vergil, Melt, Eugene, Blademaster and Deathstrike were standing in front of Asaya's grave, praying silently for the kind soul that had left the mortal world.

"Little sister..."

Her eyes were fixed on the stone on which the simple word 'Pure' was engraved. Kayis knew there was no time to mourn, no time for regrets or self-pity. Her sister's murderers were not waiting.

Never would she cry again.

"I will do whatever it takes to avenge you. I promise," she declared with a steady voice.

"So will I," Vergil spoke firmly, "I swear I will find the ones responsible for the murder and give them what they deserve."

The others nodded in agreement, joining in an oath that did not require any more words. And it was not until they were on their way back to the guild house that Eugene chose to break the rather peaceful silence.

"Hey, Kayis," he said, "I hope you realize that you're now one of us, a 'Defender of Midgard'. Be proud of your title, newcomer."

At that, she simply grinned. And this time, it did reach her eyes.