



THE LAST MORTAL STRING

A Sorrow Resplendent Epilogue

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Tales from Sorrow Resplendent: City of the Free

All the lanterns but one burned low at the estate of Mutin Oroshu on a blustery night of Descending Fire. Few ran the streets of this particular quarter of Nexus which was kept clean and free of vagrants by Guild funding. Senior members enjoyed their own lavish district near the market streets where they could live in peace in their twilight years. The last light shone from the venerable Factor's study, where every night he checked his ledgers, tallying invoices from his establishments and absorbing the news of the realm in private contemplation. Though he had been forced into retirement after the Guild merger, Oroshu still kept his mind sharp and his business, legal and illegal, active.

This nightly routine had been just what they were counting on.

"Are you really going to go through with this?" Night Locust spoke softly, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall of the hallway, his half-closed eyes trained on his employer as the rest of his senses searched out any possible disturbances. His observance of the Factor's habits over the past few weeks was flawless as ever, Night certain there would be no interruptions. The Factor liked to be by himself while he was illegally altering his ledgers.

"I am..." came the simple reply from his companion.

Kalara glanced down the shadowed hallway towards the warm light that beckoned her to him, the Factor that had changed her life so completely. She thought she might rush in, make a dramatic scene, but that finality, the ease at which they could simply enter, put her on edge. Things had not been so easy once upon a time. She had paid deeply for such mistakes of arrogance the last time she had rushed in to confront him. It seemed at least that the gods were no longer interested in the affairs of a lowly retired merchant who no longer yielded power in the Guild.

But now? She had to trust her sources were right and that Night knew what he was doing. Careful reconnaissance had been conducted, the right household guards had been paid off, the sources that knew of her location were as few as the two beings including her who stood in the room at that moment. Her path to the Factor was clear.

Night Locust sighed heavily in the shadows, his form barely perceptible but for the shine of his red eyes and the hint of the deep red of his scarf in the dark. "You know, if you kill him, the war will start all over again. The peace will be over..and I'm not just talking about peace between the Guilds."

"I know..." She spoke, but her mind was lost somewhere between the past that had led them here and the future that lingered ahead in that office, a future she was still uncertain about.

She felt Night shrug in the dark. "But hey, what do I know? I'm just a dumb ninja."

At that, she turned to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Whatever happens, you've taught me all you could." She squeezed his shoulder, her voice caught somewhere between

determination and pleading as she searched his masked features. "I have to do this for peace. For myself."

"Whatever happens. I'm grateful that you tried." She managed a weak smile and stepped away from him, turning with new conviction to the light at the end of the hallway and taking the first step towards the future she hadn't decided yet.

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The night's missives did the retired Factor, Mutin Oroshu, no favors for his mood. Several cabals in the East had been restructured in favor of that demon woman's suggestions for expansion. He cursed their short-sightedness. Soon, the Guild would be nothing like its former self! The new Administration Branch she had spear-headed would cripple their profits and efficiency. All for the sake of the Guild Directorate's much lauded virtue! They would see how far they would fall when the next quarter came. Then, they would beg him to come out of this forced retirement to help them find their way once more. He was as certain of this as the sun's rising!

Lost in thought, his bony fingers stroking his white beard, he did not notice the flicker of candlelight as a figure slipped into his office, nor the preternatural quiet that covered the household. He did not notice her until her shadow fell over his desk.

"Hello, Mutin, it's been too long since we've been able to chat one on one." The sound of her voice raised the hairs on the back of his neck. The call for his house guard caught in his throat as she continued. "I would not call for your guards. I gave them the night off so we could speak more...intimately."

The devil woman leaned out from the shadows, placing her palms on his desk and looming over him with a dark gleam in her green eyes, her hair a mane of red that crowned her dark skin. He could swear he saw the glow of the golden fiend, but as soon as the glimmer came, it left. The purpose in those eyes drove him to sit back down, his knees weak from the fear that started to seep in. He knew this day would always come, even as the years wore on and his youth faded away. He thought perhaps she'd forgotten him, or simply enjoyed torturing him from afar with her frustrating deeds.

His hands trembled as he placed them on the desk in front of himself and dared to stare at the slave woman he'd tried to execute half a lifetime ago - Kalara Vadras. The same woman from that day stared back at him, unchanged by the time that had passed since then.

She stared at his trembling hands for a moment, her gaze moving up to search his quivering jaw. "Has it been so long?" She seemed surprised herself.

"Years do not change you, demon!" Oroshu dared to challenge her, even if he feared whatever weapon or magicks she was hiding that might end him. "State your purpose and begone!"

He flinched as she tilted her head to the side and pulled something from a satchel at her side. However, she drew no weapon, but instead, a parchment which she carefully unrolled, inch by inch, in front of him. She took a small step back, her eyes boring into him again, her voice piercing him from the shadows.

“Read it.”

His failing eyes flicked from her to the document and back again, confused. Yet still she waited and the command hung heavy on him until he finally retrieved his reading spectacles and moved his hand along the smooth paper. He read the words limned in delicate calligraphy.

“I, Mutin Oroshu, do confess to conspiracy to interfere with the Directorate election of RY 764 and the murder of Ahrun Vadras with several conspirators named herein, along with the illegal incarceration of his ward, Kalara Vadras. Pfft!” He read the first sentence aloud and didn’t even bother with the rest before laughing dismissively and tossing the paper down with contempt. He sneered at her. “Why would I? You can prove nothing! You’ll have to kill me first!”

“Will I?” Her voice and the slight laugh that came with the question chilled him to the bone and he fell silent again.

“For years, I’ve thought about the ways I would kill you. At first, I thought I might have assassins find you and slip poison into your lips from a string as you slept, but that was too easy. Inelegant.” The way she mechanically recited her methods hinted at the insanity of the demon burning within. In her hand, he noticed a glint of metal as she began to twirl a length of silver between her fingers while she spoke. “I’ve always been a fan of poetry. I had this made for you, see?”

At the mention of the object, she moved her left hand into the light, the scar from her crucifixion coming into full view as she laid the silver stake down gently across the confession.

“The finest craftsmanship went into this bit of silver. Only the finest would do for you, not the crude length of iron they shoved through my hand.”

The threat of the stake’s sharp tip and its story hung in the air between them for a long moment before she finally continued, Oroshu too flustered by the sight of the thing to respond at first.

“...but I don’t need to kill you anymore.” She leaned on his desk again, seemingly towering over his hunched form as her eyes flashed with emotion, even as she spoke firmly and calmly. “I realize now seeing the crumbling old man in front of me that I will have a thousand and more years to undo every brick you have laid. I will right every wrong you’ve committed day by day long after death comes for you. Long after you’ve lived your next life and the one after that.”

“You have no power anymore, venerable grandfather, and I will outlive you and your legacy.”

With that, she began to turn and make her leave, letting one last thought linger with her back turned to him. “When I leave, you will sign that confession by morning. You will face your fate and all will be settled.”

Stunned for a moment, Oroshu couldn’t believe she intended to leave him there with her foolish demands. Indignant anger washed over him. He would not allow this demon to rule his life anymore, to threaten him in his own home!

“You thrice-damned foolish girl! Do you know what happened the day before Ahrun was to be elected? Do you?!”

The question stopped Kalara in her tracks, but she did not turn around.

"I tried to warn him. He was my good friend. My confidant!" Oroshu drew strength from the anger, unleashing his words with bonedeeep hatred. "He had a bright future in the Directorate! And then you came along and the only words he could speak were yours!" Oroshu stood up from his seat, clenching one fist with the other on the desk to steady himself.

"When he didn't take my warning when we met for tea that day, I slipped the poison into the leaves... I couldn't let him bring our Guild crashing down. You were a devil even back then! You poisoned his soul and I did the only thing I could do to save him from himself, to save us all, to save him from YOU!"

Oroshu didn't have time to react before she was on him in a flash. Yes, this was what he wanted. His death at her hands would be the proof they all finally needed that she was the devil he claimed. His righteous death would be the spark to ignite the cleansing war the Guild needed!

But the blow never came, only the white hot pain as she drove the silver stake through his hand on the desk, nailing it through the scroll and the desk below it. He squealed with agony as Kalara kept him from crumpling with a hand on his cheek, her other hand resting on the top of the stake. He was too afraid to move against her to grasp at the stake through his hand, his eyes wide and scared as her face revealed in the full light hovered mere inches from his own. He expected garish anger and violence. Instead, tears had caught in her eyes while her lips moved, her face otherwise emotionless.

"You killed the only person who ever cared about you..." She said quietly, her voice almost a whisper. "...You killed the best future of the Guild that day." The heavy moment of silence hung in the air between them as he waited for the killing blow that never came. "What will you do in the next life with these sins hanging on your spirit, I wonder?"

And then she let him go, Oroshu immediately crumpling into his chair. He watched her wordlessly as she exited into the shadows that had brought her. He worked up the nerve to pull the stake from his hand, the smooth metal easy enough to remove from the cleanly made wound. The sight of her leaving stuck in his mind.

He stared at the paper already marked by a handprint of his own blood and knew there was only one thing he could do.

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Out in the hall, Kalara walked in silence, her fist clenched. She wasn't shaking like she thought she'd be afterwards. An eerie calm had settled over her. She couldn't tell if it was a good or bad thing just yet. She had never known how her father had been poisoned until this moment.

"So...you didn't kill him huh?" Night's voice came from the ceiling above her.

Neither phased nor surprised by his hiding place, she responded flatly. "No..."

Night continued the conversation as he walked along the ceiling to pace her. "Do you think he'll really sign it?"

“He will.”

“How can you be so sure?” Genuinely perplexed, he hopped down from the ceiling and landed beside her to continue the conversation as they walked away from the home as if they had only been mere old friends dropping by for a visit.

“Your re-con was quite thorough.” Kalara explained plainly as she walked with surety from the estate, assuming the air of a simple tourist walking with a friend through the streets of Nexus. “Every morning, he reads the missives from his shops in town. Except for this morning, one of those missives was made to look like it was from one of his merchants. I hid a message of my own within those words. Woven with power and sealed with a breath of essence.”

Night skipped a step at the explanation, more than a little surprised at the sheer simplicity of what she had done.

“The compulsion was simple...” Kalara explained with her eyes closed, mind still haunted by the choice she had chosen not to make this night. “...If he should see my back as I leave the office, he will sign the confession by morning and hand it in to the Guild himself.”

“...huh!” Night huffed in surprise, no doubt because he had been expecting her to kill the man. Part of her still wanted to. A blessedly smaller part that was outweighed by the part that wanted to move on to the lofty promises she had made to Oroshu about the measure of his life.

“It was as much as a test for you as it was him, wasn’t it?” Night mused, as astute as ever.

She nodded simply and slipped her hands into her pockets. It was a nice night for a walk. Clear starry skies wheeled overhead through a slit in the clouds, a rare site for this dank city. It had been a long time since she’d wandered her old stomping grounds in Nexus.

“The student becomes the teacher.” Night nodded sagely and kept pace with her. “So what now?”

It was a good question. What did one do after a would-be assassination attempt and a lifetime plot of revenge fulfilled?

“Come on. I know a place around the corner that makes the best Southern food! If they’re even still open after all these years.” Kalara found herself smiling again. Ahrun had taken her there more than once, a little taste of home in a bustling metropolis of strange sites and smells that had all felt so alien to her when she had first arrived, a sad little slave girl with no idea of the future ahead of her. Maybe now with this night behind her, she could start focusing on those quiet, happy moments with her father again. She could sleep thinking about memories of his life rather than his death.

“Ugh it’s going to burn my insides again, isn’t it?” Night cringed and held his stomach at the memory of the last time he’d had Southern food with her.

She only laughed, which meant yes, and the two golden devils made their way to the avenues like any other tourists, the both of them content with a simple moment in the universe before they were set against the anvil of the world’s chaos once more. There were far more things to

worry about than one old grudge with a whole new world of demons and madness awaiting them.

But the chaos could wait on spicy noodles for at least one night.

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Author's Note: Inspired by the events of [Sorrow Resplendent – City of the Free](#), a campaign within the Exalted 2e setting played by myself and dear friends. Featuring adventures in Solar city-building, intrigue, and epic feats. Read recaps of our adventures [here](#).