

When she was seventeen, a cloaked figure had come to her family's estate on Obulette and promised a life of freedom. She would have the chance to become more than the dismissed bastard daughter of a dismissed bastard son. She would have power, recognition, respect. All she had to do was kill someone she already wanted dead: Lord Timuron Balis.

Her father.

Timuron, like Seraine, was the product of an affair between "Lord Balis" and a forgotten Zeltron woman. Bastard sons didn't rise in Tapani society, and he'd had no redeeming qualities otherwise. He was a cheat, a womaniser, a mean drunk, and a terrible gambler. Seraine would be doing the family a favour by disposing of Timuron, and the cloaked figure would be doing her a favour by keeping her well out of reach of Tapani justice.

Seraine had snuck into Timuron's bedroom at night, with a blaster her great-aunt had provided. Timuron was comatose from whatever combination of drugs and alcohol he'd ingested that night. Approaching his bedside had been trivial. Holding the blaster millimetres away from his forehead had given Seraine a rush of adrenaline. Finally, she'd get her revenge for how this bastard of both temperament and bloodline had thrown her and her mother aside. *Rot in the Abyss*, she'd thought, as her finger flexed on the trigger.

Then, by fate or fickle fortune, Timuron woke up. Lord Balis might've been too addled to recognise her, but he apparently knew what a blaster's muzzle looked like, because his eyes went wide with terror—and Seraine felt it too, curse her Zeltron empathy. Her breath caught in her chest. Her limbs went leaden. The diminutive blaster pistol Aunt Estalle had given her seemed almost too heavy to wield, even with both hands.

"P... p... p..." Timuron's stammer couldn't into words. After a moment, he fell silent, and they stared at each other.

*I sense your anger*, the cloaked figure had told Seraine. *Let your hatred burn away the chains of fear. Destroy your father, and you will be free of this place.*

She wanted to. By everything she'd ever known, she *needed* to. The urge clawed at her insides. *Pull the trigger!* she screamed at herself. *Do it! KILL HIM!*

Seraine sensed confusion starting to dilute Timuron's fear. Her panic slowed slightly, enough for her mind to register the numbers on the chrono over her father's shoulder. She only had seconds before the guards would be close enough to hear a blaster shot—but damn it all, her fingers refused to move.

***KILL HIM! KILL HIM!***

She couldn't.

The chrono ticked down.

*Time's up.*

Seraine's legs unlocked before her hands did, and self-preservation took over. She watched her father's form fade into the darkness as she backed out of the bedroom, on to the balcony. As she leapt over the railing and into the night, her eyes filled with tears.

There was no need to report the failure; the fact that Timuron Balis was still alive in the morning was proof enough of that. The next meeting between Seraine, Great-Aunt Estalle, and the cloaked figure, disappointment hung in the air.

Great-Aunt Estalle and the cloaked figure barely exchanged words. Seraine didn't speak at all. She simply watched as the cloaked figure boarded their shuttle to leave. As the ramp

closed, Seraine felt a spark inside her flicker out. For a split-second, she thought she saw a different version of herself look back from the top of the ramp.

The shuttle rose into the sky, carrying Seraine's future with it—and leaving her with her failure.