

The Assassin - Zoe, Year 7, NSW

Branches leap out at me and scrape my face. Sweat pours out of me. I keep running. Stopping is not an option – it would mean my certain death. I see something large ahead of me. Oh no.

The huge grey wall swoops into view. I've reached the end. To continue pass this wall is forbidden – it marks the border between two countries, both equally corrupt and dangerous. Actually, the one ahead is probably safer in my case. But if anyone found out that I'd crossed the border then... I'd meet a similar, if not worse, fate than the one that would await me if I stayed.

The crunching of leaves and twigs announces the arrival of my pursuer. I've run out of time. Whatever shot I had at surviving has just vanished – slipped just beyond my reach.

I can see the Assassin now, as they reach the edge of the clearing. They stop, quickly loading an arrow into their deadly black bow, and aiming it at my throat...

#

'Just one more, Azalea.'

'No.'

'Come on, Azalea.'

'No. I'm not doing it.'

'Why?'

'I've been doing this for you for years! Since I was eleven! I've killed countless people for you, and you want *more*?!'

'Keep your voice down!' Uncle says, looking around worriedly.

'Do you even know how it feels? Do you know how horrible I feel about it?'

'Yes, Azalea,' Uncle says tiredly, 'I've killed too. It'll pass.'

'No, Uncle. I want to stop.'

'This is the only way to earn money! Enough money to survive! And if we quit now, especially now with the uprisings, the Chancellor will be angry. He'd have me killed if I left or caused even an inkling of suspicion – he can't risk the possibility of me telling anybody anything.'

I swallow. ‘No.’

‘Azalea, you *will* do it,’ he tells me sternly, ‘Or don’t bother coming back here again. And if you did leave, the Chancellor would have to have you killed because you know about his illegal business with us. And don’t forget that you owe me. You wouldn’t be alive if I hadn’t taken you in all those years ago and cared for you since.’

I know that he knows that he’s won. And even though he has been telling me that I owe him every time, it is true – I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for him. And what would I do if I stopped?

‘Fine. Who?’

‘You know who. You *were* there, weren’t you?’ he asks suspiciously, ‘The one who caused the mayhem at the execution the other day. The Chancellor wants to use him to scare any terrorists out of causing any more trouble. He wants his body displayed in the square where the prisoners were shot.’

I nod. I knew who he was speaking of. A boy who appeared to be about my age. A few days ago, he tried to save a group of rebels that set fire to and vandalised a building honouring the leader of the country, likely because he knew a member in some way. Anyone in the group that wasn’t killed at the scene was caught and executed – except for him.

#

I see the noose hanging from the wooden beam in the middle of the square in front of the parliament house. A crowd has begun to gather – attendance is mandatory at public executions. A man standing on a small platform set up beside the beam perched upon its’ wooden doors begins to read the list of people being hung today.

‘Vera Valentine,’

She’s being hanged first! I manage to get a spot at the front of the crowd. I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes. I can’t cry here. If they think that I’m associated in any way with these rebels being hung, they’d kill me too.

‘All these people have been found guilty of being associated with the recent terrorist attacks...’

I can’t watch. Maybe I should try and leave?

‘And shall be executed as punishment for their crimes...’

No. I must try and do something. Anything. Whether it will make a difference or not, I can't walk away from here without trying.

I can see the prisoners being lined up beside the wooden beam, facing the crowd. Heavy looking shackles around their wrist and ankles restrain them. I spot my mother just as she finds me in the crowd. She knows better than to cry out, so she just looks me in the eyes for the last time, tears streaming down her face.

As Mother is lead to her position on the wooden doors, my sweaty, grimy hands feel beneath the folds of my clothing. I find the cool metal handle. I'm a decent shot, especially when it comes to throwing knives. I know it probably won't prevent her death, but I have to try.

I take a deep breath, and throw.

The knife finds its mark, severing the rope noose. I turn and run as the gunfire starts, bullets hitting some in the crowd, trying to get a lucky shot on the thrower. Bullets undoubtedly taking down the prisoners, eliminating any hope of their escape using the cover of the crowd's mayhem.

I try to stay around the outskirts of the city, where there's less of a chance that anyone would recognise me. I hide, covering my face, scavenging for scraps of food that have gone unspotted. I don't really have another option. Who knows what they'd do to me if they caught me. So, I continue to hide.

But each day, I can't help but wonder: 'What if I do?'

#

In the middle of the night, I wake up screaming. The pleading gaze brimming with hopelessness that all my victims gave me haunt my dreams, punishing me for stealing their lives. They scream at me words of torture they never got to scream at me. They whisper again their last words. Their gnarled remains rake my skin and pull me further and further into an oblivion of inky black darkness that suffocates me. The bodies of sandpaper skin and bones crush me, choking me further.

I scream, but not a sound exits my mouth, darkness with the taste of blood entering instead. Every time I think I can feel death's embrace beginning to close around me, a gasp of frigid air delays it.

This is my punishment. This is their revenge, I think. To feel death's escape next to me but to never be able to taste its relief, instead being forced to endure the pain that dissolves my body and the agony it is to only gulp enough air to keep me alive and conscious.

I bolt upright in the few thin sheets that is my bed, forcing cold air down my throat. My body bears no evidence of my struggle with my victims' remains – just cold sweat. I look out my window and see the full moon high in the sky.

I should start hunting now – just to make sure I get it done before sunrise.

Shivering, I put on my gear. I strap my quiver, full of black arrows to my back. Taking a deep breath, I grip my bow and stealthily slip outside under the cover of night.

#

Unexpectedly, the Assassin's hands begin to shake. They shake so badly, I can see it from here, fifty metres away. But I stay still as a statue, too afraid to make even the tiniest of movements.

I watch in silence. They're not as big as I initially thought they were. Still holding the bow and arrow, their arms drop to their sides. I break my law of absolute stillness and risk a tentative step towards them. The Assassin makes no movement.

What am I doing?

A moment ago, they were about to take my life, add it to their collection. And I had believed it, that my chance of living has vanished. But here I am now, an unbelievable second chance positioned in front of me by the hands of miracle-makers and I am walking away from it? Stupid.

I turn towards the brick wall, surveying it. It taunts me, daring me to go and attempt to climb it.

I walk towards it, but freeze when I hear a muffled sound behind me. I hear another sob and turn around slowly.

The Assassin has crumpled like a piece of fabric to the ground and removed their black mask. It's a girl. I'm surprised. She looks about my age. Her tears slide off her grimy face and hit the ground. I know she must work for the government, but why?

Surely, she has not chosen to do this. Especially if she is here, crying before me. She must be forced. Forced to steal human lives to survive.

Slowly, I walk over to her and offer her my hand. She gives me a questioning look before accepting and following my gaze to the looming grey wall.