

**Dance Till You Die**

Amadeus Hein

*(excerpt from part of chapter one)*

Ask most professional murderers and they'll tell you that killing is the easy part, even a trained ape can do it. I was awaiting my current contract in his home. My mission? To make sure that he was not breathing by the end of the day. It could be hours before he turned up, but I enjoyed times like this. You had time to think—time to reflect. I don't agree, killing is a lot harder than it looks. The men stating otherwise clearly do not remember their very first kill. I do.

It was a while back. Heck, it's been more than awhile. It must have been six-seven years ago when I was still in my teens. You see, I used to be a dancer at the Divine Curves Brothel. Yes, dancing may just have been one part of the job, but when you're a girl left alone in a big city like Tarantia, it can be a good source of income. Sometimes.

The sweltering sun was setting all too quickly and I had yet to acquire enough copper for a dinner at the local Cosy Retreat Inn. Business had been slow for the whole week. There was a new dancer at the Divine; she called herself 'Angel'. With her golden locks and perfect body she didn't exactly make friends with the rest of us dancers. Most visitors said I was too skinny. Maybe I wouldn't be if they'd paid better. I wasn't jealous of Angel though; my sweet papa always told me that jealousy was one step closer to the underworld. And besides, when income was low I had one more trick up my sleeve—nimble fingers.

I left the Divine early that evening. It was obvious I wouldn't earn much money as long as perfect Angel was on stage. Simone, the brothel owner, caught me at the exit. "Hey Ildiko! Where you going?"

"I'm just popping out for some fresh air. I'll be back in a minute."

She nodded at me and I was free to continue outside. The streets weren't as bustling as I had hoped. The shops were closing and most townsfolk had already returned to their homes. Then I saw someone that stood out from the colourless surroundings. It was a nobleman, his green and red clothing giving him away. He walked in the direction of the richer quarters and I decided to follow. I was hungry, the simple reason why I was about to do something careless, but as I approached him my starving eyes were firmly fixed on the nobleman's pouch and I cared little of what was happening around us. The pouch looked heavy and teased me with its thin string attaching it to his leather belt. Had I looked up, had I not broken my rule number one, I might not have turned out the ruthless killer I am today. Gripping the silver ornamental dagger I use to tie my hair around, I cut the string and let the pouch fall into my hand. I was overjoyed by the weight of it. There were probably several days of loot here, but I had forgotten my rule—patience is key.

Someone gripped my arm tightly as I was about to turn away and head back. "Young sir!" He was shouting for the nobleman. "I believe you've lost this".

I kept my gaze towards the ground, not daring to look at whoever had caught me in the act. I felt my heart racing and from the corner of my eye I could see the nobleman turning around. I quickly fiddled my dagger into the sleeve of my dress. Maybe I could try and talk my way out of this.

"Lost what?" His voice was slightly irritated, slightly annoyed.

I remembered Eliza, poor, careless Eliza. They chopped off her hands for a similar crime and she died in the gutter shortly after. My heart was beating so fast and so hard I was almost certain they could hear it.

Before I could say anything, the man gripping my arm answered. "It seems this girl was kind enough to notice that you dropped your pouch, probably saving it from the filthy thieves in the neighbourhood, my dear sir."

I raised my head and looked at the nobleman. He was smiling sincerely. "It's not often you meet such honest folk as yourself, especially not here. What's your name girl?"

"Ildiko." I gave him back his pouch, returning a nervous smile. "I mean, Ildiko, sir."

"There might just be a copper or two in return for the trouble, Ildiko." He opened the pouch and fiddled forth some coin into my hand. I tried very hard not to shake.

The nobleman nodded at us then turned around and continued his walk. I felt the grip around my arm tightening, hurting me. "A favour for a favour." His voice was not as soft as before.

I allowed myself to look at him. He was large and muscular built, at least three heads taller than me - not a chance that I could manage an escape. His tribal tattoos reminded me of a Cretorian, barbarians, but I've been forced to do worse. I nodded slightly and he started to drag me towards a more secluded place. I looked around for help; but it was hopeless. After all, these things are ordinary, everyday business, in Pretoria and few dare to stand against a seven feet tall Cretorian. Well, maybe if Angel was the prize.

The murky stables. He pushed me down into the hay, ripping open my dress. To this day I still resent the smell of horses. I felt one of his hands making its way up my thigh, the other violently stroking through my hair. His lips at my neck. By the gods, may this be over quickly.

I panted as he kept pounding at me, his bodyweight slowly crushing me beneath him. It was then something triggered inside me. I twirled around placing myself on top, adrenaline rushing-breathing heavily. He gave me an excited look. I leaned down to kiss him, caressing his torso, and then let my hands search the floor around us.

I smiled.

Using all my force I thrust the stone at his face. Not stopping until the large body under me seized twitching.

I can laugh about it now. It's a damn fine way to go. But I cannot remember if he saw it coming. If he screamed. What I do remember, however, is sitting on top of a dead body, covered in blood, and attempting to grasp the situation until dawn.

Finally, my contract had arrived. While I enjoy the quiet moments where I can reflect my early life, it was due time for action. I stood behind the curtains and as he passed I gripped him from behind, placing my dagger at his throat. His screams for help were muffled beneath my hand.

After seven years, it's so much easier. I let the blade turn crimson and the lifeless body fell to the floor.

"The usual?"

I nodded at the bartender who poured the dark beverage into a rusty tankard, probably not cleaned since this shack opened. And by the looks of him, neither had he. I honestly don't know why this was the chosen location for all our meetings. Perhaps Aleksei didn't have better taste. Or he might feel at home with the ruffians and brutes sharing drinks and experiences here. I didn't mind, though, they only tried their luck once, when something touched my behind and made a grunting noise. After that something touched the floor and made a squealing noise.

I slid a few copper coins over the counter. "Aleksei?"

"Over there." The bartender pointed to the back of the bar.

I nodded and took a sip of the ale. Grimacing I put the tankard down. "Still tastes like piss."

"You're wrong, madam. Piss tastes better." He smiled, revealing his toothless mouth.

I rolled my eyes and smiled back. "Yeah, you'd know." I walked over to where the bartender had indicated.