

Two guards stayed on either side of the door while Beatrice advanced towards her captive. A few hours of sleep had not helped Aëlyss condition. She looked at the court sorceress with disgust. A third man kept Pricilla in check, although she was smart enough not to do anything foolish.

— Rejoice, Princess. Today, you will receive treatment that will save your life, hissed the livid woman. I look forward to seeing you again in better shape. Take her.

A couple of armed men entered the cell and seized the helpless elf. Unceremoniously, they threw her into the cart that had brought her here several days before. The reindeer snapped, the horses set off. There was a smell of urine, meaning that other unfortunate people had passed through the cage in the meantime.

They reached the central avenue, but instead of leaving the city, they continued towards the northern district. The neighborhood was modest and uncrowded. The cobblestones of the road sank into the mud, forming potholes and puddles.

Aëlyss looked around her and, only for a moment, she saw two furtive silhouettes behind a low wall spying in her direction. A jolt knocked her off balance, and when she looked into the distance again, she saw no one. It was then that her thoughts turned to the Shadow. She knew it was prowling around the city. She felt it. It was looking for a way to enter, to find her.

— I'm sick of this ! I'm supposed to be on leave, cursed the militiaman. We've been guarding that damn door for hours and nothing happened!

— Orders from Court Adviser Beatrice, his companion retorted. “ One of the catacomb entrances has been forced. Send men to search for the intruders. “ I say, it is better to wait for them at the exits rather than trudging in there blindly.

— We would get lost for sure...

— Aye !

— When I think that crank spends her time at the castle, doing horrible things to prisoners. She's down mad, I tell you tha'

— I'd be down to bend her over her desk.

— What ?

— Well, she's old and all, but... I mean, I would still shove my cock in her ass, you know...

— Shut up ! Don't say that out loud, man. Don't forget that Lord Lutzen himself chose her and Captain Caspian as advisers.

— I wonder if... Arg !

Oscar knocked the guard out and jumped on the second, pushing him against the wall. Alhuia rushed and hit him on the temple. He collapsed, freeing the way towards the cathedral. The man took off his cape and rolled up his weapons

inside before slung it over his shoulder. The elf readjusted her damaged hood and hid her saber as best she could. They then entered the small staircase leading to the main nave. Alhuia looked through the doorway.

— Damn, it's crowded ! Painters restore the statues, but the priests still welcome the faithful.

— This could work to our advantage.

— It's true, but you'll have to use finesse, it's impossible to run to the exit without getting caught. There must be access to the priests private quarters. Probably on the other side of the nave. A group of pilgrims arrives here. As soon as they're at the door, we'll come out and mingle with them, understand?

Oscar nodded. The Watcher remained frozen. Suddenly, she made a sign and went out discreetly. Hot on her heels, the man also joined the group. Terrible agitation reigned. Artists came and went, hoisting planks and paint on ropes. Those who weren't painting were busy moving the scaffolding. Meanwhile, the faithful lined up to receive the blessing of the archbishop, a crooked old man in a richly decorated throne.

It didn't take long for the presence of the two intruders to be noticed within the group. Suspicious faces turned towards them with more and more insistence. Murmurs arose.

— Your face means nothing to me, my boy, grunted a paunchy guy with a pockmarked nose. You look like you just had a fight with a dog ! Where did you come from like that ?

— You have holes in your clothes! shouted a child, tugging on the elf's sleeve. Ah! What is this ?

She withdrew her hand, stained with the blood that still soaked the fabric. Her mother witnessed the scene and the tone rose suddenly. The crowd parted, allowing the guards outside to see the troublemakers. It was time to force things. Oscar pulled Alhuia by the arm and crossed the hall to the east wing. The priests intervened, but he pushed them back. The soldiers hurried on. Oscar and Alhuia discovered the door they were looking for and rushed inside. They barricaded the entrance with a chest and climbed the steps to reach a long room occupied by tables and benches. Several doors gave access to the floors and dormitories, but all were closed. The man cursed as he grabbed a chair before throwing it through a window. Stunned cries echoed below.

The fugitives hoisted themselves onto the eaves and joined the alley, clinging to the sculptures and the ledges. A cold drizzle made their progress dangerous, which left time for passers-by to warn a patrol. They had barely set foot on the ground when the cobblestones rumbled at the approach of the angry militiamen. The guys screamed as they grabbed their weapons, the crowd panicked. Intrigued by so much agitation, an old woman opened her door. Alhuia jumped at the opportunity.

The adventurers entered the house and crossed it in the blink of an eye. Back

outside, they took many winding paths, getting as far away as possible from the screams and the soldiers. The narrow maze that formed this particularly dense district made their escape easy from their heavy armored pursuers.

The alarm hadn't gone out all over the city, not yet. However, their appearance had already played tricks on them, also, they concluded that they would not try their luck again. They continued to remain discreet, avoiding open paths and patrols. They finally stopped behind a low mossy wall. They were surprised by the unpleasant sound of iron-rimmed wheels on the wet cobblestones. They huddled in silence but still ventured a glance out of their hiding place. Oscar first noticed the armed and caparisoned horsemen escorting the chariot. This was enough to dissuade him from trying anything in their presence. Alhuia, for her part, felt the power hidden in the cage. She could not see the mysterious occupant, but its aura was of a very particular, unique nature.

- There is an elf, no... An elven woman in this cage, she whispered.
- And there will be two if you make the slightest move. We noticed the welcome given to yours when we arrived. It's no wonder some are less fortunate than us.
- She's a mage, a master. I have never felt this before.
- Never mind. It's none of our business.

The cart stopped in front of a small hut with a very steep roof. Rickety shutters hid the windows. Pulling on the chain hanging from her handcuffs, the guards led Aëlyss to the door. They knocked vigorously, which made the entire facade seem to shake. A moment later, a woman with a curly red mane came to open. She stood in the doorway and crossed her arms over her chest. Her gaze landed on the prisoner in pitiful condition.

- I'm an apothecary, not a miracle worker, she squeaked.
- Lady Beatrice gives you one day, after which she will return to the dungeon.
- Are you joking ? Not only did it take bloody forever for you to arrive, reducing available time, but also... Well, look at her for fuck's sake ! Damn, she could turn to dust at any moment !
- I don't give a shit. You will see about that with Lady Beatrice.
- Take her in, sighed the redhead.

The guards put the elf into a chair in the center of what appeared to be a laboratory. The woman glared at the men who invaded her home.

- Very well, now get the fuck out of here.
- No way. We are watching her.
- You bunch of morons, she's wearing handcuffs heavier than herself, which aren't far from tearing her hands off ! She doesn't have the strength to speak, and you think she's going to start running ? There are six of you, that should be enough to watch the only door in my house, right ?

The men in gray and blue tunics looked at each other in silence. Finally, one of them waved the others out. He gave a sinister look at the apothecary and

slammed the door.

— Finally... By the Gods, poor girl. That crone did this to you, isn't it?

Aëlyss nodded, tears rolling on her cheeks. The apothecary took her face in her hands and brushed the dirty locks from her forehead. The elf tensed at first before lowering her guard slightly. This simple gesture acted like a balm on her suffering body.

— We do not have much time. I will take care of you.

— No, articulated the elf. Don't do anything, please. She's counting on you to save me so she can continue to torture me. Do nothing, find an excuse.

Fairglade felt anger and frustration burning in her stomach. She pulled herself together despite everything and sighed, tying her hair into a large puffy ponytail.

— From a purely selfish point of view, this degenerate ordered me to heal you, and I'm not about to give her an excuse to burn down my shop. I'm no longer in Lord Lutzen's good graces. My life here hangs by a thread.

She looked into the elf's teary eyes before continuing :

— That said, there's no way I'm letting that bitch do you any more harm. I refuse to participate in this madness, but for that you must give me time. We're both going to have to play the game, is that clear ?

— Not at all, but I will do my best, apothecary.

— Call me Elise. I need to get hold of someone in town. That dumbass didn't tell me he was there, but I know it. He might be able to lend us a hand, if I...convince him with enough fervor, she clarified, pouting.

Aëlyss smiled for the first time in weeks. Elise's vitality was contagious. This, combined with her sincere and expert care, allowed the Scholar to release the tensions that stiffened her battered body.

— My appearance doesn't seem to bother you, continued the elf.

— Are you referring to your atypical pallor ?

— I am.

— This may surprise you, but you're not the first mutant I've come across.

— Mutant ?

— Indeed. Something inside you has changed, causing general depigmentation. This is extremely rare, and I find it delightful.

— I thought I was alone in this case.

— Isolated, but not alone. Those I crossed paths with lived far from here, in Baheida. There, you would have received the title of albino.

— "Without color" sneered Aëlyss. "White Princess" suits me better.

Elise carefully washed the elf. She added medicinal oils to the hot water to soothe her burning wounds. When she discovered the runes on her back, she repressed a flowery curse.

— These markings...

— Debilitation runes, Aëlyss clarified. She boasted about letting me know, but I knew it already. They will weaken me, disrupt my use of magic. Over time, if I focus on healing, I will be able to move past it.

— I thought you had given up all hopes, whispered the apothecary.

- Some people can change your mind...
- Are you hungry ?
- I... I do not know. Pain is the only thing I feel.

The young woman brought a bowl of fresh fruits and a large cup of water to her patient. Aëlyss devoured her meal in silence, under the satisfied gaze of Elise. She applied poultices to the runes and an odorous mixture to her wounds.

The hours passed slowly, disturbed only by the deep sound of the soldiers' voices outside. The creaking of the floorboards betrayed the presence of the guy standing just outside the door.

- Your flesh will recover with rest. What worries me is the weakness of your organs and mind. I'll be honest : to make sure you don't die before I get you out of there, you need to undergo shock treatment. This will be quite a ride, elf.
- I trust you. Do what you have to.

The redhead returned with a box containing three vials. She poured the first pink liquid under the Scholar's tongue who was immediately seized with tetany. Her eyes roll back as a muffled gasp filtered through her gritted teeth. Tremors then appeared, and the veins in her neck doubled in size. Elise kept her seated and held her head up. The elf let out a heartbreaking howl, battered by the toxins inoculated by Beatrice which fought against the antidote.

The guard rushed in, sword in hand. When he saw the elf however, he blanched and shivered. He was used to war, blood and mutilated men. Magic and alchemy, on the other hand, were things beyond his comprehension. Their effects were disproportionate, making them unpredictable for ordinary mortals. He backed away silently and closed the door.

Aëlyss gradually came back to her senses. Her vision cleared and she heard her heart pounding in her skull. Elise grabbed the second bottle.
– Another effort. This won't last long.

The Scholar felt as if the liquid was freezing her guts. This time, she fell to the ground shaking all her length. The apothecary made sure she didn't swallow her tongue and placed the handle of a spoon between her teeth. The prisoner curled up before straightening up, moaning in pain. Finally, she emerged abruptly and knelt down. With a hiccup she spat out a dark mass which Elise hastened to throw into a bucket of boiling salted water.

The last potion plunged Aëlyss into a coma punctuated by profuse nasal bleeding. She woke up an hour later, looking haggard. Elise collapsed in an armchair, her hands covered in blood. After the last ingestion, the elf felt more alert. The apothecary had done wonders by forcing her to expel the various poisons. It hadn't been easy, and she thought for a moment that she couldn't get out of it.

— That court bitch used the worst products at her disposal, Elise sighed. When I think that some come from my own shelves... These plants produce excellent remedies for many ailments, but also terrible poisons. I didn't know at the time that she would opt for the second option.

— The Lord of Mistcastle allows it ?

— I say, Beatrice and Caspian are the true rulers of this place now. Lutzen ain't governing shit. He's old and weakening by the hour. I'm sure these two traitors are keeping him from getting any better.

Elise got up, cleaned her soiled hands and brought more fruits to Aëlyss who accepted them with great pleasure. The apothecary seemed to know what elves were craving.

At the end of the day, the guard reappeared. After what he had seen, he was not playing tough anymore. He just said that they would be leaving soon. Then, entered Beatrice's page. Elise gave him a haughty look and dropped the box of ingredients unceremoniously on the man's frail arms. She undid her ponytail before adding :

— This is all your mistress asked. Give her this note and make sure she reads it to the end. It is essential if she still intends to let off steam on her.

The servant climbed the steps with great difficulty, tripping his feet several times in his long tunic. He came in Beatrice's office.

— Ingredients, Mistress, he stammered.

— Is everything there?

— Yes, Mistress. There is also a note from Fairglade.

— Burn it.

— She said it was important for you to... continue what you do with the elf.

— Damn woman ! Give it to me ! I can not wait to punish her. She's useless to me now.

Beatrice took the letter. The next moment she jumped out of her large armchair and slammed her point onto her desk.

— Fucking whore ! This is it, before next full moon, her head will be decorating the high walls. She playing with me for way to fucking long !

— What is happening ? Can I help you ?

— Shut up, you would not understand. I don't know if this is a trap... Damn, it might be one, but I can't risk letting the elf die, not now. Let the apothecary know that I'm giving her one day, just one day. Tell her also that I've got my eye on her. Leave !

The page left in haste. As he walked down the steps, he thought back to his life before, on his uncle's farm. He had not imagined for a single moment that serving a great court mage would come down to this. He ran a finger over the scar on the back of his head, a memory of her last outburst. Back at Fairglade's, he delivered her message in a trembling voice.

- A full day ? This is more than I expected from this fair lady, Elise hissed.
- She's letting you know that hum uh... She doesn't like you very much. You are in danger.
- I know. You are too. Find another master, or another life, as you want...

The apothecary put on her felted wool hood and went outside. The common people had to rely on each other if they wished to survive. Elise had set up a true network of spies among the beggars. She was always aware of the comings and goings in the city. Beatrice's constant threats had pushed her to always be one step ahead. Thus, she knew that her long-time lover was back in Mistcastle, although he had not shown up. Instead, he was playing grave robber with another woman. She didn't want to admit it, but a pang of jealousy stung her heart.

- He thinks he's discreet ? scolded Elise. What an imbecile... Her anger masked a sincere concern and this sneaky mixture weighed on her guts. At the bend of a sinister alley, she ended up learning that he was lounging at the “Squeaky Rooster”.
- He prefers this shithole to my room ? Goodness, I'm going to give him the beating of his life ! What a cad !
- She stormed in and looked around the room. Pushing her way through the drunks with her elbows, she finally reached a table set back.
- Did you intend to avoid me for longer ? she said in a loud voice.
- Elise, Oscar replied.
- Oh ! Excuse me ! Is she your new soul mate ? Well what ? You know that nothing escapes me within the walls of this city.
- I suppose she is the one you thought about for hosting us ? whispered Alhuia.

Oscar remained silent. He stood up slowly and faced Elise. He was way taller than her. She raised her chin and did her best to hide the arousal rushing in her belly. However, she noticed in his eyes a distress that she had not seen in years. Without flinching, she resumed :

- Do you know that your exploits have not gone unnoticed ? By tomorrow, the entire guard will be looking for you.
- It was probable, added the elf. But we will be gone before dawn.
- What ?
- I am not staying, Elise, Oscar added. We didn't want to put you in danger by getting involved in our business. We're heading back to the South in an hour.

The apothecary choked back a sob and grabbed Oscar by the collar. She remained silent, not knowing how to react. The man placed his hands on hers, urging her to let go. She noticed their torn clothes awkwardly hidden under their cloaks.

- You look like shit... Both of you. Come, I'll give you some fresh clothes.
- Elise, guards are...
- I get it ! The militia is already watching me ! I too have problems with the wrong people, and what I plan to do next won't help.

- What are you planning to do ? asked Alhuia.
- Something very stupid, and I was counting on him, she said pointing to Oscar, to accompany me. We'll talk about that in private.