

— She's going to die, Elise said. If she resists to Beatrice, which is unlikely, Caspian will finish the job. They want her secrets at all cost. Now I met her, I can not let that happen.

— She is a prisoner, right ? Oscar asked.

— Indeed.

— Do you know why ?

— Well, no. I... I feel it is not justified though.

— It does not matter anyway. We can not enter the prison without alerting the guards. She got caught, that is too bad for her, but it is not our problem.

— I know you were far from the most altruistic man, but now you sound completely heartless, hissed the apothecary.

Oscar sighed and looked at Alhuia, who remained silent for the whole discussion.

Aëlyss was sitting on her bed, barely breathing in order to respect the silence Priscilla asked for. The human captive had to know if her abilities were back. She was powerless for days, and they were running out of time. The elf agreed to not disturb her, even though she had doubts.

— We found what we came for, admitted Alhuia. However, it is not the end of our journey. Time is precious and we can not afford wasting some to make new enemies. Having a human lord and mages against us would be unwise.

— And, the man added, guards are already searching for us.

— Well, growled Elise. At least your priority are clear enough ! So be it, as saving an innocent soul is not important for you two, I will do it myself. I am used to be on my own after all.

She offered Oscar a piercing gaze.

— I guess you should run while you can... Before I call the guards myself. Oh, and don't you dare come back to see me, she concluded in a trembling voice.

The man walked closer to her. She tried to push him back but he grabbed her by the shoulders.

— This city took you so much already. Beatrice waits for a final excuse to kill you. Do not give her one, please, Elise.

— Lord Lutzen is dying while this hag and her dog are tormenting the people within these walls. I can not let them do so, this is beyond my strength, I have to step in. I would not be able to forgive myself if I walk out now... I remember a time where you would be the one telling me this. I guess everyone changes...

— Elise, no one can fight on all sides at the same time, especially alone.

— In a few years, when all their opponents will be hanging by the neck, they will rule Mistcastle and aim for Valitta. I have to do something about it, or hundreds will suffer. You see, this is not only about this colorless elf !

— What did you say ? Alhuia intervened. How did you call her ?

— This woman is an albino, if you know what it means. That is why she is captive.

These people have unmatched magical affinities, and Beatrice will break her to get her knowledge.

- They truly are exceptional beings, added the elf. I met one, years ago.
- What do you think she is capable of ? I mean, without her anti-magic shackles.
- Hard to tell ! For an unknown reason, common mortals can only learn a set amount of spells. Albinos don't have the same limit, if they have any. They can learn and keep all the knowledge they find. Besides, complex spells seems to lower this limit even more, that is why there are two schools of learning : Those capable of casting lots of simple spells, and those focusing on fewer strong spells. This occult rule is source of frustration within the magic orders, as you can imagine.

Alhuia stood up and looked at Oscar.

- This elf must be the one I felt in the chariot earlier. She could be a valuable ally.
- I see where this is going, sighed Oscar.
- You will need help on your journey. I was wrong to tell you to avoid involving people. I spent so many years alone than I learned to only rely on myself, but that is not a possibility anymore, not for you.

Out of nowhere, Priscilla chuckled. She wiped the sweat on her face and walked closer to the cell door, under Aelyss' intrigued eyes.

- Hey ! Jailer ! the woman shouted. Are you there ?
 - What do you think, silly ? he croaked.
 - Turn around, I think you have a visitor !
 - Can't believe how much bullshit I hear everyday ! You better shut your mouth, honey, or I'll stuff it with my... By the Gods ! Who the fuck are you ?
- Aelyss jumped on her feet, waiting for explanations. Priscilla raised a hand, inviting her to stay calm and quiet. The jailer shouted and cursed several time. No one answered. A chair fell and a loud slam followed. Finally, the old man's footsteps resounded in the corridor as he grumbled in his beard. Priscilla displayed a large smile.
- Ready to leave this bloody cell, Princess ?
 - You are so strange, human...

- I can enter the castle, admitted Elise.
- How ? Oscar asked.
- Why do you care ? You don't want to help anyway ?
- I will help you, Alhuia added.

The man grunted and inspected the alleys outside. Something was happening, people were agitated. Guards were everywhere.

- Our time here is nearing its end. The streets will not stay safe for much longer. Besides, if I am the only one able to wield this sword, no one can help me.

— Oh please, are you that naive ? shouted the elf. This blade does not make you invincible and all mighty ! Your allies can watch your back, offer your resources, connexions, shelter, advices. They can support you in battle, heal your wounds, gather troupes ! This world bears many warriors better than you are, and mages with powers you can only dream of !

Elise chuckled and crossed her arms on her chest. She knows Oscar was a good man, but he could easily become the most stubborn of them if something came to occupy his mind. She had to put him in his place a few times already, though, witnessing it happening was also very satisfying to her. However, the apothecary took no pleasure in his distress. She came and pressed herself against his arm before adding :

— I lied to Beatrice to gain a bit of time. She granted me one more day to finish healing the elf. I know she will keep her word, as keeping her captive alive means too much to her plans. Thus, I have twenty hours left to help the elf.

— You have a safe-conduct into the prison, but not me, Alhuïa replied. Also, I doubt they will leave you alone with her at any time.

— I can take care of the guards once I'm in. Some of them at least. Honestly though, I do not know how to get you inside too, they know I work alone.

— By the catacombs, sighed Oscar. You just have to use the one we already opened and find you way into the castle's crypt.

— That is a very good idea ! It will be tricky to navigate the underground though.

— I know a guy, grinned Elise. He will gladly help you...

— I can alter people's perception, admitted Priscilla. I can make them see things, hear noises, shape their dreams. That kind of things.

— Illusions ?

— I guess.

— You do not seem to know how it works to be honest.

— Well, that is not far from the truth ! I did not learn these powers, I... received them unwillingly.

— I beg your pardon ?

— I am not a sorceress. I am in charge of a merchants' guild. Well, I was. It is only later that... We do not have time to chat, Princess.

— How...

A scream resounded nearby, in the upper floors. It was already late at night, and a creeping cold invaded the prison. Aëlyss understood and terror struck her down.

— What the fuck is this ? the little man stammered while holding his nose. Whaddya want ? Do I know you ?

Blood was spilling on his chin and between his callous fingers. He staggered back, intimidated by the man who just broke in.

— Debts have to be paid someday, growled Oscar. You owe a hefty amount of

money to Fairglade, right Jorn ?

Said Jorn Smallfoot tried to escape by a window. Oscar jumped on him and grabbed him by the cowl and threw him against an old table. Oscar lifted him back and pushed him against the wall.

– You thought you were well hidden ?

– They are watching me ! I had to lay low for a bit before reaching back to her, that's all !

– Everyone's watching everyone in this city, that's no excuse.

– Of course ! Our lord offers gold to find any sorcerers, mages, ya know, that kind of people.

Oscar turned Jorn around and bent his arm. The guy begged in a trembling voice.

– I'll pay ! I'll pay, let go !

– I have an offer you can not refuse. Fairglade agreed to wipe out your debt in exchange for a favor. Sounds nice, right ?

– I hum... I think I prefer to give her money...

– Too late, friend. You have maps, I think. Sorry, you draw maps more precisely.

– Y-yes.

– Folks say that you even have one of the catacombs...

– Oh no ! Not this one, I can't give it ! The belly-scratcher wanted it too, and I said no. If he finds that I gave it to you... Arg, p-please, stop !

– So, you have the map...

– Quick ! intervened Alhuia. I hear movement nearby.

– Scream, continued Oscar, and you will not have enough teeth left to eat bread.

– Alright, I give up. I give you the map and you run the fuck outta here, right ?

– Exactly.

– Its in the fireplace, in the flue.

– Fetch it for me, I don't want you to try anything foolish while I look away. I am just behind you, friend, so take it easy.

Smallfoot hobbled toward the hearth and reach his arm up the flue. He pulled out a long darkened iron tube and gave it to Oscar. The later gave it to the elf for her to verify its content.

– It is the map, let us go now.

– Thank you so much Jorn. You are no longer in Fairglade's debt, congratulations !

The intruders vanished in the narrow streets. They witnessed the panic among the citizens, without understanding the cause. Someone else seemed to have caused lots of trouble. Then, an alarm bell ringed in the barracks close to the castle.

– I dislike your behavior, whispered Alhuia. You looked like a real mugger back there. It seems like it was not your first time.

– I survived this past years as I could...

Back at Elise's house, they found the packs she prepared for them. Rescuing the elf was only the first step, then, they would have to leave the city. The redhead also traded her dress for tight pants, high boots, a shirt tucked under a corset and a ample sturdy vest. She tied her hair with a beautiful scarf.

– You still have it, Oscar said.

Elise smiled and winked, finishing to dress. She saw the iron case in the elf's hand.

— That's the map, right ?

— Indeed.

— Perfect. Get dressed, we have to be quick.

— Something is wrong outside, Alhuia added.

— Let's hope it will be in our favor.

The apothecary gazed at Oscar as he removed his worn out clothes. She felt her cheeks becoming red and heat in her stomach. She then glanced at Alhuia, a bit farther in the room. Her elven beauty was not limited to her face, which made questions sprout in Elise's mind. What were they doing together ? Who was she to him ? She swore to get answers as soon as they would be out of this place. For now, they had more pressing matters to attend to.

— Elf, you will reach the castle by the underground.

— I am going with her, the man said.

— Are you now ? hissed the redhead.

— You are doing this anyway. I might as well lend a hand.

Elise hoped close to him and kissed him. She then witnessed Alhuia's embarrassed look and decided to avoid any questions.

— Very well, once you reached the crypt, you will have to find the prison. Listen carefully. Go straight through the inner chapel and follow the stairs on the right, this is the servants access. Follow the hallway without entering the kitchens or bedrooms. Find the old corridor reaching the east wing, very close to the cells. Doors will be locked for sure, you will have to improvise.

— That is not a problem

— Do not forget that if you can't find your way, I'll be alone.

— We will be there.

— If you can do something, then now is the time, stammered Aelyss. Please, hurry.

— What is happening ?

— She is coming. She comes to find me. The Shadow is in the Castle.

— How did this thing passed the guards ?

— She killed them.

Priscilla got back to the door.

— Jailer ! Strange things are happening above us !

— Not my business, and certainly not yours !

— I would love to see that for myself.

— Ah ! Good luck dumbass !

— Would you kindly open the door for us ?

— Shut up bitch ! Your voice is getting on my nerves !

— Enough ! she shouted. Come open the door, stupid old man ! I am the sorceress Beatrice and I order you to obey !

The jailer jumped from his chair and whispered a few words before walking

toward the door. Priscilla more intensely. Sweat rolled on her face and a drop of blood dripped from her nose.

— Of course ma'am, said the man as he walked down the hallway. Excuse-me, I didn't recognize you. I must be tired eheh, well, I have the keys.

— Hush ! Be quick !

— Yes, yes... I'm here.

His steps were slow and irregular. Voices rose from the other cells. Some reached a hand out, some shouted. The old Engelbrecht walked like a drunkard and reached Priscilla's cell. He grabbed his large key ring and started looking for the right key. Aëlyss was shocked. She shivered.

— And do not forget to remove the elf's shackles.

— I don't... I don't have the key for that, ma'am.

— Why's that ?

— You have it, Lady Beatrice.

— That was certain, whispered Aëlyss.

— We will find a way.

The lock resisted. Wrong key. Engelbrecht tried a few ones. Each time, his hand was shaking a bit more. Finally, he slid another key in, it fitted nicely. Then, he blinked and gasped. The old man leaned against the door before sliding down, laughing like a mad man. Seconds later, he stopped moving for good.

— His mind broke, whispered Priscilla. I am so sorry, Princess.

— You tried...

Two men blocked Elise as she walked toward the gate. She was holding a crate full of vials and pouches. They stood silently, letting the sergeant taking care of the talk. Elise was in a hurry.

— I'm awaited, she said. I need to take care of a valuable asset.

— You are awaited indeed, but not in the middle of the night.

The apothecary's heart skipped a beat. What a mistake ! She added :

— You know who I'm supposed to heal then.

— The pale elf.

— She could die at any moment.

— And ?

— I guess it is too hard to understand for you. Can I have your names ? That way I can explain to Lady Beatrice who prevented me to save the precious creature she wants to study. I'm sure she will understand and be very grateful for your impeccable behavior.

— Horace, lead her to the prison.

After a few mistakes, Oscar and Alhuïa managed to find the end of the underground maze. The elf put out the torch and they crouched behind the door. With the tip of his sword, the man lift the simple latch. They entered and progressed quickly, reaching the chapel in no time. What looked like a chance at

first became a source of worry. Never, under normal circumstances, the guards would leave this access without surveillance. Surely, they were taking care of another problem.

The soldier was walking fast. Elise struggled to keep up the pace with the crate in her arms. Men were running in all directions, called by the alarm bell.

- What is happening ? she dared to ask.
- I dunno. Seems like a guy wreak havoc in town.
- Havoc ?
- He attacked people.

Then a man screamed a few words in a nearby room. Things heated up fast. The guard escorting Elise drew his sword and grabbed her by the arm.

- What are you doing, you fool ? We have to go to the cells !
- I need to check what it is. I'm not letting you wander alone We'll go down there later. Oy ! What was that shout ? he asked after opening the door. You...

A soldier was lying against the wall, his neck forming a gruesome angle. Another one had some kind of arrows stuck in his chest. In the opposite door frame, was standing a blurry silhouette with bright round eyes, like two golden stars in a black void.

The guard cursed, released Elise and pointed his weapon toward the intruder. The killer remained still. In a blink of an eye, a shape traversed the room, reflecting the moonlight.

Oscar and Alhuïa followed the redhead's instructions perfectly, razing the walls, reading to jump on anybody crossing their path. They looked everywhere for the east wing door. Time was running fast, without much success. Voices rose more and more around them. When they reach a large corridor with multiple hangings, they heard footsteps coming toward them. To many opponents at once. The elf pulled the man behind a large tapestry. Servants ran past them.

- Them found dead people ? a young man said.
- There is a dangerous criminal in the city, we better be careful !
- I heard he's in the castle already !

Once silence was back, the intruders sighed in relief. Leaving their hiding spot, Oscar's attention went to the other hangings. One was different, in a way better condition. Pushing it aside, he cursed and discovered the door. Despite his efforts, the lock hold in place.

- Your turn, elf.

Alhuïa rested the tip of her blade on the lock. She recited in haste an incantation, and another. Then as the last words left her mouth, she protected her face and the door shattered.

- Someone could have heard us. Hurry !

Oscar rushed in, making his way above abandoned crates and barrels. This served as a storage for years before being closed for good. They progressed slowly, though, the slight glow of a torch in front of them announced the exit.

– Fuck...

– What ? the elf asked.

– It is locked.

A gate of sturdy steel gates blocked their way out.

– This is getting out of hand.