

– Nothing could justify killing this man, spat Oscar.
– He was about to kill your friend. The bolt was already flying to her head ! Thank you for your gratitude anyways, human !
– Saving Priscilla did not imply ending an innocent life ! He had nothing to do with this, in a way, we were on the same side ! Well, I guess deliver the final blow to your own kin is not something unfamiliar to you, right, Princess ?
– You bastard. You have no idea what you are talking about !
– Enough you two ! shouted Alhuïa. We have enough to deal with already ! What is done is done. Everything could have happen differently, but they did not. What is most important is the path ahead of us all. And it will be perilous, you both can count on that.

Oscar clench his teeth and after a few seconds of silence, he walked closer to Aëlyss.

– Thank you for saving Priscilla, he said. If we are to watch each other's backs, we have to agree on this : no useless bloodshed.

The White Princess fixed her gaze on him and inhaled before replying :

– You lack knowledge and still spit venomous insults. You are not forgiven for your words, human. Moreover, I am not intending to follow you anywhere. After leaving this city, I hope we will never cross paths again.

– Whatever.

– The Shadow is very close. We have to leave.

– We're almost ready, Elise replied.

– What is this creature ? Alhuïa asked.

– If only I knew. The only thing I am sure about, is her ability to track me down anywhere and to get rid of any obstacle in the way.

– This thing shares a strong bond with you, Princess. It imitates your very mind, admitted Priscilla.

– How do you know that ?

– I sensed it, in our cell.

– You are a sorceress now ? Oscar intervened.

– That is a long story. We will speak about it when we are safe.

The group left the apothecary's house and sneaked into a nearby alley. The next moment, an armed troop surrounded the building. The militiamen searched the surroundings, forcing the outlaws to flee. Dawn was breaking.

– I can steal two horses at the East Gate stables, whispered Priscilla. To do so, I need to be alone. Let us meet at the pilgrims' stele, at the edge of the woods.

– I know the place, we'll be there, assured Elise.

– Be careful, all of you.

The gray haired woman nodded at Oscar before leaving. Still in sight of Elise's house, Alhuïa added :

– We need to take back our mounts. Two steeds will not be enough to carry us all far from the city.

– True, replied Oscar. The guards will see us though. We need to strike fast and hard.

– Alright. We can do it together. Elise, Aëlyss, you both go quietly out of here.

– Good, concluded the redhead. You come back alive, both of you.

She kissed Oscar's lips and fled in the shadows, the White Princess following her. The remaining two crept back towards the potion shop. Their mounts were still attached to a pole. The guards were turning the store upside down, but there was no sign of the witch.

- This man, whispered Aëlyss. Is he your lover ?
- I know, Princess, he's stubborn. Most of the time.
- That is beyond any doubts.
- Still, he is one of the very few worth knowing in this world
- Well, if you say so...
- Trust me, you will see it soon enough.

Like a hunting wolf, Oscar followed a guard and knocked him out far from the other men. Meanwhile, the watcher progressed in complete silence. No doubt a spell concealed the sound of her boots. She came behind the back of another militiaman posted outside the courtyard and struck him with a precise movement. She accompanied his fall in order to attenuate the sound.

They grabbed the horses' reins, pulling them out of the courtyard. The terrible sound of their hooves on the stones put an end to their silent escape. The troop rushed out of the house and from several streets, weapons drawn. Voices rose. Alhuia recited an incantation while twirling her saber. A blinding flash stunned the infantrymen, allowing her to flee, Oscar on her heels. Very quickly, however, arrows whistled above their heads.

Aëlyss and Elise progressed with ease. They were coordinated and agile, watching each other's back at all time. They bypassed the patrols and postponed the pursuit as long as possible. Though, as time passed by, more and more guards were roaming the streets. Most paths were over strict surveillance. The morning bustle began to fill the city. Processions of farmers were setting up crates and bags for the market, dogs were barking. Women carried baskets of laundry towards the wash house. This would allow them to blend in, but would slow their progress at the same time. Elise led the way to the lower levels staircase.

They had to stop under cover when a creaking chariot passed by, escorted by armored horsemen. On it were chained a woman in rags, covered in filth, and a young boy. "Witch" and "Thief" signs hung from their necks.

- They are on their way to the gallows, Aëlyss whispered through gritted teeth.
- I know. We can't save them. Soldiers will slaughter us.
- We should go, before I do something foolish.

They left, putting the macabre procession behind them. At the corner of an enclosure where three pigs were lounging, Aëlyss jumped when a flower pot break. She glanced back and noticed the presence of a young girl, paralyzed. The next moment, the silhouette of the Shadow appeared. The creature pointed a sharp blade towards its helpless victim.

— No ! shouted the elf while reaching her hand forward.

In a single word, she deflected the projectile. The innocent woman locked herself in her house, leaving the Shadow to face its true prey. The creature threw a volley of shards at the Scholar who ran away. She threw herself in a perpendicular alley, catching up with Elise. The elf cursed, noticing the small glass dart stuck in her hip. Unable to take care of the wound now, she ripped the shard out and kept running.

Chaos followed the Shadow's steps. The cries multiplied, drawing the soldiers on alert. Very quickly, the first victims collapsed. Orders were heard amidst neighing and heavy footsteps. The chain mail clanked everywhere, assuring the fugitives that the trap was closing on them. A fearsome bolt of glass exploded at Elise's feet as she emerged onto a wider road. A troop of archers spotted them. They rushed on their heels, notching their arrows. The growing crowd moved in all directions.

The monster did not appear, however, suggesting that it was trying to cut them off elsewhere. Aëlyss felt a shiver run down her spine. The situation had suddenly taken a disastrous turn. They turned into a narrow street. A bolt shattered a bottle sitting on a window sill, splashing the elf with sour wine. With a backward movement she knocked down a pile of crates eaten away by mold, giving them barely a few seconds of head start. As she passed an crossroad, Elise saw the black creature out of the corner of her eye. She gasped in astonishment.

— How can this bloody thing be so close to us by walking so slow ?

— I do not want to know, hurry !

Fatally, pushed away from their trajectory, they found themselves at the foot of the northeast wall. The horses' shoes screeched on the cobblestones, preceding the arrival of a large troop. They reached the door of a high tower and the elf shattered it. However, Beatrice's runes began to take effect, inflicting her dazzling pain as she used her magic. Aëlyss staggered at the foot of the staircase. Elise supported her until she was able to stand on her own again. Guards appeared on the landing and prepared their shot. The apothecary threw a bottle at the wall next to them. The gas seeped under their hackles and they collapsed in the blink of an eye. The redhead repeated the operation, neutralizing more adversaries. Their fall down the stairs slowed the others long enough for them to rejoin the walkway.

They stood almost forty feet above the ground, overlooking a large part of the city. Below, the archers released arrows and bolts. Their pursuers were quick to join the walkway too, ready to fight. The two women walked back from the tower, exposing her to all dangers. Then, from the opposite tower came the Shadow. Aëlyss uttered a swift elvish curse as she froze. The apothecary threw more vials

into the streets, spreading an opaque cloud around the shooters. A long blade appeared in the Shadow's hand.

— Take this, elf, barked Elise.

She gave her an exotic curved dagger. The redhead eyes betrayed the fear taking hold of her. They rushed towards the creature which, as things stood, seemed less formidable than the troop of six men dressed in chain mail and armed with spears who stood on the other side of the walkway. The duel between the elf and the Shadow was a display of fury and skill. The elf did all she could to force the creature back into the tower whereas the apothecary used her last resources to blind and stun the soldiers.

Time was running out. Now inside the next tower, Elise barred the door behind them. Seconds after, soldiers were ramming the sturdy boards. The White Princess danced around her enemy, finally managing to pierce its chest with her blade. The Shadow only took a step back before preparing to retaliate. Aëlyss growled, multiplying kicks and dodges. She fought tooth and nail until she pinned her opponent against the railing overlooking the free fall to the bottom of the tower. Then, with an acrobatic gesture she struck the monster's throat with her heel. The elf roared, rearing up before glancing down. The carpet of black fragments assured her of the Shadow's momentary defeat.

— No one fights like that around here.

— Orcs are almost all gone, but their techniques can still be learned, with the right teachers.

— You seem to come straight out of a tale, Princess.

The door cracked open. The women ran again, still forced to follow the high walkway. Archers below spotted them and got in position for the next volley. This time, the next tower was already guarded. The elf wiped her sweaty face and grabbed Elise's arm.

— Hold on to me and do not let go !

— The redhead reacted instinctively, grabbing the elf by the waist. She later put an arm around her shoulders before lifting her from the ground. She stepped on the parapet and jumped out of the city. Aëlyss gathered all her remaining strength, pushing through the burning agony caused by the runes in her flesh. As she reached the end of her fall, she extended her arm toward the rocky mound at the foot of the wall. Unable to lift the whole ground, her telekinesis spell bounced back at her, pushing her in the opposite direction, slowing them both. She felt the pressure in her bones, yet, it was not enough to stop them completely. The elf curled up around the terrified apothecary. They hit the ground and rolled over the stones into the grass of the plain. The spell had worked well enough, considering the situation. They hadn't crashed, they hadn't died instantly.

The princess coughed and spat blood. She stood up with difficulty and came to assist Elise. She was unconscious, a large bruise covering her forehead. She was breathing. Aëlyss pulled her towards the forest which extended to the north, close to the meeting place. No sign of the others though. The archers' helmets appeared

above the wall. Two arrows whistled and landed near them. The elf deflected another bolt that would have killed Elise but felt her magic abandoning her. A crow cawed. The shooters moved into position and the ropes snapped.

A resounding voice rose through the air in a supernatural way. A veil of light unfurled, shattering most of the projectiles. Most. Aëlyss collapsed screaming, her left hand against her, pierced with an arrow. A stream of blood flowed as she crawled to safety. Alhuia caught up with her and before dismounting, blinded the soldiers with a burst of light. Oscar jumped down and picked up Elise. The group slipped away, returning to the meeting point. Priscilla arrived shortly after with two sturdy steeds.

— To the northeast road, the forest will cover us, announced the watcher. Then we will deviate south, to safety.

He arrived at Mistcastle in the afternoon. The news was so astonishing that he did not take the time to eat before galloping off to meet his colleague. The mage captain Caspian returned to the castle and rushed into Beatrice's office. He slammed the door open and threw his chain coif on the table. Beatrice turned around, raising one eyebrow. She met the black gaze of the second counselor.

— You let her escape, the mage fulminated. Stupid hag, you lost her ! How ? How is it fucking possible ? One can't escape our men in a finger snap !

— She is stronger than us.

— In a fight, probably. But unarmed, and chained ? I doubt it. Unless your abilities have been seriously diminished in my absence, you should have gotten something a long time ago.

— Our assumptions about her were wrong. She is an exceptional creature, even if she has not yet reached her full potential.

— What makes you say that?

— I've glimpsed things in her mind, although thinking otherwise satisfies you.

Caspian walked by a small circular table covered in bottles and flasks. He grabbed a cup and poured a dark liquor with golden tints in it.

— We must warn Lutzen. We need him to order to form a platoon, a squadron... Fuck, an entire battalion if necessary.

— He thinks she is dead for days. My care makes him lose track of time, and will also erase what little he understands about the incident. It doesn't concern him anymore, the livid witch muttered.

— A bounty then.

— Yes, a generous one. We will take what is necessary from the city vault. Three thousand crowns should draw the best trackers to us.

— This will mostly fuel the greed of the region's worst lowlifes. If this is going to be done unofficially, let's get to the bottom of it. Let's send messages directly to big names. Let's play the efficiency card, the price doesn't matter.

— We have to rely on a small group, it would become difficult to get rid of too much hunters if necessary.

They agreed on the terms of the contract, defining a value of four thousand crown s: two thousand in coins, two thousand in gems, more common on the black market and among Dry Islands merchants and pirates. She had to be brought back alive, but anyone with her could die. In addition, a bonus of five hundred crowns awaited the person proving Fairglade's death.

- Tereka is dead.
- I did not know that. How ?
- Poison.
- Of course. How about Sigismund Krebs ?
- Nice choice. It seems that he's lurking around the Princly Alliance, looking for deserters. He will need a few days to arrive here.
- Doesn't matter, we need him. Who else ?
- The Blue Jay.
- Excuse me ?
- Herlinn Veit of Breuille.
- Oh, I see... grumbled Caspian. A woman...
- One of the best trackers.
- Certainly.

The mages shared a bottle of Lilac-Hills from Mount Vaultaise, took from the lord cellar. Beatrice sat on her imposing polished leather armchair. Caspian was rocking nonchalantly on an ornate chair. The weight of his armor tortured the joints of the seat, making the skeletal witch seethe. She served his colleague again, hoping that this would be enough to make him get up.

- Aurlon Adalren was in Valitta last week.
 - Interesting.
 - With him, it should be enough, concluded Caspian.
- He stood up and drank his cup in one gulp before removing his gauntlets and letting them fall heavily on the table. Then he pulled Beatrice's cup from her hand and walked around her desk.
- I'm sick of this bloody armor. Take it off me.
 - I'm not your servant... Besides, you stink like horse.
 - And you are a spoiled witch living at the expanse of our dying Lord.

Beatrice sighed, letting her heel strike the floorboards loudly while getting up. She helped the mage removing his heavy cuirass. She had to refrain herself from cutting him with her sharp nails.

- That's better. Now, spread your legs for me, would you ?
- I'd rather be dead.
- Don't play the plaster saint with me, we both know how much you crave for cock.
- Certainly not yours.
- Probably, but no one here wants to touch you I'm sure.
- Careful, mage. My spells are not only made to torture prisoners.
- Try me.

With both hands, Caspian grabbed the woman's shoulders and turned her around. She tried to fight back, but the mage was firmly holding her. With one foot, he forced her to spread her legs. Then, he bent her over her desk, pushing her chest hard on the wooden surface while lifting her dress up around her slender waist. Quickly undoing his pants lace, his cock came rubbing on her crotch.

— See ? You were already wet.

— Ah... I was thinking about all the soldiers that fucked me this past week.

— Bullshit, you were all alone in here, as always.

She pushed her hips against him, as if she tried to make him step back. He only reinforced his grip on her, leaning over her.

— What do you think you are doing, witch ?

— Oh for fuck's sake, j-just get to work !

He chuckled and spat right on her holes before letting his shaft slide between her pale buttocks. Without any more consideration, he pressed his dick in her pussy. It was tight and Beatrice covered her moan with an insult. She felt him stretching her velvety walls while her face bobbed against the desk. Caspian immediately started with hard thrusts, his fingers delving into her skin. The bad smell, the humiliating position and the pain started to crack the witch's shell. She panted with each thrust of the man's cock between her labias and started to shiver.

Feeling her letting go of any resistance, Caspian grinned, pinning her down harder. His hands circled her frail neck, arching her back and revealing her perky tits bouncing up and down.

— I know what you are into, what you used to do let farmer boys do to you in their barns.

— Shut up, you moron.

The man let his cock slide out in a sloppy sound. The next moment, he pushed inside her ass all the way to his balls, making her jump and gasp. The mage was just here to unload, and thus he rammed her like a beast, squeezing her neck more and more as he came close to ejaculating. Beatrice felt tears rolling down her cheeks as she was looking for air. Her hands were locked on the desk's border as she tried to oppose resistance to the heavy pounding. She then felt her legs failing her and her back aching. That much pain was burning her insides and yet, drowning her in syrupy lust.

— H-harder, she panted.

Caspian bent over the witch without releasing her throat from the pressure. His hips clapped against her ass, forming foam around the edge of her stretch ass hole. As Beatrice let a trembling moan out, strands of cum slipped on her thighs and burst out of her pulsing hole. Caspian panted and pulled his dick out, letting her gaping open and covered in sticky goo. He finally removed his hands from her neck, now showing red markings.

— F-fuck, you made a mess.

— Then clean it. Knowing how much of a freak you are, you'll probably lick it

from the ground.

— You better leave, now...

— I'm already out.

Caspian put his pants back gathered his gear and left without adding anything. Beatrice remained still, hands on her desk to keep her head up, cum still flowing out of her hole. Once alone again, she sat in her armchair and let her hand run on her crotch. She then licked her fingers off the fluids, guilt tainting her livid face turned red by the pain and effort.

Looking by the window, a sinister grin appeared on her face. Beatrice thought back about what she learned inside Aëlyss' mind. She would make sure to keep it for her own profit.

— You are such a burden, dear Caspian, she whispered.

Removing the arrow was the easiest part. Elise applied an arnica-based antiseptic while waiting for Alhuia to cast a healing spell. This contained the hemorrhage and regenerated some tissues. It was too early, however, for the Scholar to use her hand.

They were not pursued. Priscilla regularly scouted the surroundings to ensure this. They had been progressing through the forest for a few hours and had recently headed south.

The atmosphere was gloomy. They were all exhausted and the apprehension of the long road ahead did not help. Oscar held Elise on his own saddle. She was still unconscious. Aëlyss joined him in silence.

— I am sincerely sorry, she sighed. I protected her as best as I could, but, the fall...

— A voice screams at me to hate you for that stupid idea... Jumping off the walls ?

— We were surrounded and...

— Though, continued Oscar. My guts are telling me to thank you. I know that was your only choice. I disagree with your methods, but for now, thank you for saving her.

— I understand.

They were descending a pleasant gentle slope bordered by a low rocky plateau. A floral scent soothed their nervous minds. They were in no condition to face a new danger, yet fortune was not done with them yet.

Gregor Oberholtzer was a complete thug and an inveterate killer. Originally from a small mountain village in the ancient Vancilic Principalities, he began his life in chaos. His mother died in childbirth, causing hatred to germinate in the heart of

his older brother who, as a result, beat him for years. This treatment continued at the hands of his father, a violent drunk when he was not working in the nearby granite quarry.

A day came when he was, however, able to fight back. At eleven years old, he killed his brother with a spade and gave his body to predators after dragging him several leagues. Following this, he concluded that violence was the ideal solution to solve his problems. So, five years later, discovering that his father had stolen his few savings to buy poor quality artisanal vodka, he literally nailed him to the floor and burned their house down.

He took the road and fell into an ambush set up by cutthroats. His ferocity was enough to save his life and find a place among the thugs. As an adult, he quickly became the leader of the group and decided to aim for bigger preys. Gregor did not hesitate to eliminate those deemed weak in order to replace them with bloodthirsty brutes.

Nicknames about him were rife, both among his men and his victims. We most often heard about the "Ghoul" or the "Defiler". His body became an intimidating, almost indestructible fortress of muscle. His most horrible scars showed injuries that would have killed normal men. Gregor remained alive, and undefeated. All those who opposed him, on the other hand, suffered atrocious tortures that he took great pleasure in inflicting.

For years, he traveled through isolated regions to pillage poorly defended villages and merchant caravans. One day, he judged that the time to expand his empire had come. Most eyes were on the front, towards Dehest. A boon that would allow him to strike on the outskirts of major cities. He left the eastern territories for the kingdom of Laaria. Avoiding the roads, he plunged into the forest towards Mistcastle. What was just a reconnaissance mission turned into an impromptu raid when he saw a group of exhausted travelers. With a predatory smile on his face, he drew his large falchion, signaling his thugs to get ready to kill.

They only noticed their attackers at the last second. These colossi hadn't roared like common bandits did. They had sneaked close and would have massacred them if Priscilla had not been standing behind, witnessing their silent progression. The gray-haired woman drew her weapon, alerting her comrades. Oscar's mount lost his temper and he not only had to calm it down, but also get Elise to safety before he could fight.

Aëlyss, unarmed and deprived of one of her hands, tried to overthrow the bandits by launching her steed at full speed. Alhuña redoubled her efforts until her companions came to help her. Her saber fell in all directions, screeching as it met the killers' blades. Oscar leapt near her, his sword raised, and struck with a bellow. The attack cut through the small shield of skin of a shirtless man covered

in crude tattoos. His arm cracked and the blade stopped on his collarbone. He rolled to the ground grunting as his companions surrounded the young man.

Then, Priscilla charged and split the skull of another guy. Aëlyss knocked three of them to the ground as she rushed through their ranks. The watcher jumped from her saddle to avoid any injury to her steed. She spun around, slashing the thighs of a massive opponent. She finished him off, grimacing as he gesticulated on the ground holding his gaping wounds. Oscar had already killed two more enemies who were now lying at his feet. He screamed and taunted the others. Priscilla was separated from the group, exchanging quick passes with an agile opponent. Aëlyss also ended up leaving her saddle and picking up a sword near a corpse. She pushed back several enemies and managed to wound one in the armpit.

The raid should have only taken a few seconds, however, it dragged on and turned into a bloodbath. Many of his men were lying in the dead leaves and the others were struggling.

— I want these horses !! Roared Gregor. I want these women !!

His rageful gaze fell on Oscar. The Ghoul sneered as he raised his weapon, ready to unleash all his might. He lunged and leapt from his elevated position. The young man deflected the attack by pivoting and counterattacked with a precise gesture. Gregor dodged, laughing harder.

Oscar got rid of the last warrior preventing him from facing the leader. The later brought down his weapon with phenomenal force. He barely aimed, but his rapid and sweeping movements were formidable. Despite his bearish build, he had a disconcerting speed which pushed the young man's reflexes to their limits. With a quick glance, he noticed that his companions could not help him. Suddenly, he hit a tree while backing up.

This second of inattention was enough for Gregor to charge, holding his gigantic falchion in both hands. The blade missed Oscar by a hair as he threw himself to the side, and almost cut through the entire tree trunk. The next assault was just as brutal and disarmed Oscar under the impact. Sure of his victory, the leader of the bandits set off in pursuit of his prey. The young man ran down the slope to get back to his horse and drew his second, enchanted, sword from the sheath hanging on the saddle.

In a single spin he unsheathed the blade and struck blindly toward his pursuer. A roar shook the forest followed by a heartbreaking wail. Some warriors covered their ears. Gregor fell to the ground, purple vapors curling out of the large cut on his chest. Light got dimmer, trees bent and creaked around them. The killer's scream of pain, as powerful as it was, ended up covered by the laments growing in the very air of the forest. It was as if the world around them was about to fold

on itself, swallowing all lives.

– Sheath it back !! Alhuïa shouted

Oscar jumped and obeyed instantly. The skirmish ended with the bandits flight. They dragged back their leader, still agonizing. No doubt that he would not reach the edge of the woods. The young man was petrified, his eyes fixed on the dark hilt of the mysterious weapon. Alhuïa ran close to him and took his face in her hands. She examined him carefully, also seized with terror.

– How do you feel ?

– I am fine. What happened ?

– We all witnessed the magic contained in this blade. I told you, it is a force you have to fear at every time. Its origins are full of uncertainty and bad omen.

Once the group was pulled back together, they left at good pace, putting the blood-soaked battlefield behind them. They were all resolute to leave Mistcastle's surroundings once and for all, and took the road south.