

Elise threw herself into the doorway and darted down the corridor just in time before the shards of glass pierced her chest. The soldier, for his part, screamed and charged. He died without reaching his adversary. The apothecary glanced behind her before heading down the stairs. Fear struck her when she saw the dark figure with glowing eyes coming her way.

Time was running out, faster than before. She arrived on the lower floors, disoriented and trembling. The soldiers were everywhere. Though, those who crossed her path paid her little to no attention, they were looking for the murderous creature. Most of the militia was already gathered in front of Lord Lutzen's quarters, guarding doors, windows, and dark corners. Mistcastle's regent was safe, but he never was the target.

— We won't get through, let's go back, whispered Oscar, struggling with the gate.

— Hide ! shouted Alhuia.

At the other end of the corridor stood a soldier armed with a crossbow. He had just discovered the smashed door and was inspecting the darkness. He was quickly joined by two other men. One of them carried a torch and came forward first. They stepped over the crates. The crossbowman pointed his weapon in front of him. They were about to discover the intruders when a voice rose.

— What the hell are you doing here ? We have a monster upstairs killing our guys !

— Do you see that this doors has been smashed open ?

— So what ? It's a fucking dead end !

The trio grumbled and walked away. Oscar and Alhuia sighed with relief. They exchanged a look, however, intrigued by the alarming words of the militiaman. A monster ?

Elise stepped into the dungeons. She was about to face the jailer but found no one to stop her. The gate leading to the cell corridor was wide open. A quick inspection confirmed that the keys were not there. She advanced into the prison amidst the cries, groans and insults of the prisoners. Some were banging on the doors so hard that she thought they were going to tear them open. Finally, she found the lifeless body of old Engelbrecht. He lay with his fingers curled and rigid.

The redhead also noticed that despite her delay and the detours she had had to make, Oscar and the elf had not yet arrived. Then, she discerned the shape of the keyring a little further in front of her. Arriving above the body of the jailer, she was surprised by a powerful voice.

— Stop right there ! Who are you ? What are you doing here? Eh, but it's the apothecary. Guys, we have a nosy in the dungeons !

— No, please, Elise replied. I am supposed to be here...

— Shut up, and don't do anything stupid.

The guard stepped forward, holding his baton in a firm hand. He was threatening, although incomprehension was evident on his face. Elise backed away slowly, not knowing what to do. The militiaman arrived in front of the old man's corpse and pushed him with his foot, as if to check if he was dead. Suddenly he banged on the next door.

— Shut your mouth, you too ! Get away from the door ! What the hell is going on tonight ? And what do the others do ? Oh ! Move your arses...

He staggered as he dropped his weapon, putting a hand to his throat. A trickle of blood leaked between his trembling lips as he fell heavily to his knees. Elise saw the glass blade stuck in the back of his neck. She then discovered the assassin dark creature, a few feet behind the dead man. She ran away, taking the keys with her.

— Stop right there ! Who are you ? What are you doing here? Eh, but it's the apothecary. Guys, we have a nosy in the dungeons !

— No, please, a feeble voice replied. I am supposed to be here...

— Shut up, and don't do anything stupid.

A guard just spotted a woman in the hallway. Priscilla didn't heard her coming. The woman knocked on the door and shouted.

— The keys ! Open us, please !

— He called her "apothecary". It is her ! Elise, added Aëlyss.

— Elise ? Is she...

— Shut your mouth, you too ! Get away from the door ! What the hell is going on tonight ? And what do the others do ? Oh ! Move your arses...

He fell silent and the sound of his body hitting the ground bore witness to his sudden death. Priscilla was about to renew her call for aid but the Scholar elf stopped her. She signaled her to be quiet. Her round, icy eyes betrayed a terrible fear. She whispered :

— It is here... Right close to us...

They were about to turn around when Elise appeared on the other side of the gate. She sighed upon discovering her companions, relieved to no longer be alone.

— We are stuck.

— I think I have what you need, she said, uncovering the keyring.

After several unsuccessful attempts, the lock finally opened. Alhuïa pushed the gate. Oscar grabbed the apothecary by the shoulders and examined the scratches on her forehead.

— It's nothing, she whispered. We have a problem though. A killer prowls the corridors. He followed me into the dungeon. If we go back there, we risk finding ourselves face to face with him. He's... I don't know if he's human.

— If you ask me, we should forget about the elf. But I know you well.

- I need to try and save her.
- I lead the way then, concluded Oscar while drawing his sword.

Aëlyss was prostrate in a corner. Helpless as she was with these handcuffs, she felt the hour of her end approaching. The evil aura behind the door was almost palpable. Priscilla didn't know what to do. Short, regular knocks made the door creak. The noblewoman knelt down and closed her eyes. She tried to get closer to the mind of the assassin, to have an angle of approach to influence him, to manipulate him. With great effort, she perceived something. For a moment she thought she had made a mistake. How could she detect two almost identical minds ? That of the Scholar, and that of the killer.

- Do not judge me, please, Aëlyss said, tears on her cheeks.
- I am not.
- If we make it out tonight, I will owe you explanations.
- If we make it out, repeated Priscilla.

Suddenly, a dull hit followed by the crash of broken glass thundered in the corridor. Priscilla and Aëlyss jumped away from the door. Footsteps dragged to the door and crunched over debris.

- Princess ? I deeply hope you are still here, in one piece, hissed Beatrice. Yes, you are alive, I feel it. That is reassuring. I would not suggest you try anything foolish now. The situation here is highly alarming. Bodies are stacking up, and strangely, they all are in front of your door ! Ma dear, you are one of a kind for sure. And this... strange being... Well, it is no longer now.
- Be damned, spat the elf.
- So rude and cruel ! Oh ? Look at who is here now ! shouted the witch.

- Could this be the reunion of the whores ? The red haired bitch herself ! And who are these strangers ? A commoner and an elf, in my castle ? The sentence will strike you hard !
- Last I checked, said Elise, it is not your castle yet, although I saw through your shenanigans. Back off !
- You will never be able to threaten me ! Be kind and throw me the keys. Take a single step and I kill you all. On second thought, I'm going to kill you anyway.

The sorceress raised a skeletal hand, her eyes widening. Elise reacted in the blink of an eye and threw the keyring at Beatrice's face. A bluish cloud filled the blood-soaked tunnel. The witch screamed, flailing. She bumped into a torch and tripped over a corpse. Oscar had noticed his lover's dexterity when she grabbed a vial at the same time as the keys. A single delicate and swift movement that saved them all. He, in turn, walked forward, holding his breath, and knocked the sorceress unconscious with a pommel strike. The apothecary picked up the keys and opened the cell door.

— What in the world ? shouted Priscilla while getting out. Is this an illusion ?
Oscar straightened in a second. He could have recognized this voice from miles away. He met the noblewoman's gaze and their faces lit up.

— What are you doing here ? Is it really you ?

— It is me, my dear, replied Priscilla. I thought I'd lost you. This is such a joy to see you again !

They hugged warmly in front of the stunned looks of the three other women. Oscar then looked at his old friend with a worried look.

— Many things happened, my dear. We will speak later.

— Right. Let's hurry.

— Wait ! shouted the elf. This horrid witch must have the keys to these cuffs ! That's for sure !

— You mean this key ? grumbled Oscar while showing it to Aëlyss.

— Give it to me, human.

— You could very well be a killer. After all, you were in prison.

— Oscar, Priscilla said. I assure you, she is trustworthy.

Alhuia witnessed the black fragments spread across the floor beginning to shiver. Then, they rolled and gathered on a strange looking corpse nearby. Aëlyss gasped.

— The Shadow is regenerating itself ! Free me or we are going to die !

— We can handle this ourself.

— Unlock these fucking handcuffs now ! screamed the Scholar elf, torn between furor and fear.

Oscar cursed and agreed when he felt the remaining shards slipping under his boots. The second the cuffs clicked open, the princess jumped away and threw the shackles with all her strength at the growing pile of glass. It shattered again and a shrill sound rose in the air.

— That was a voice, right ? whispered Alhuia.

— Yes. It will come back soon.

— Can't we do something ? asked Priscilla.

— The Shadow can not be killed.

The group began to head back to the catacombs, but soldiers were arriving from all sides. The confrontation seemed inevitable. They ended up being surrounded in the servants' dining hall. Apparently, the soldiers did not expect to come across such a party, as they hesitated a second too long. Oscar charged and rammed his shoulder into the first man's ribs. He grabbed his abandoned sword and threw it to Priscilla.

Elise cracked a small clay pot behind them, creating a thick smoke screen. A bolt whistled, flying an inch away from Aëlyss' head before breaking against the stone wall. She was too weak to use her full potential, turning small objects into flying projectiles was all she managed to do.

Alhuia and Priscilla knocked down two more guards before they all rushed out of the room. The skirmish did not end there, of course, and more footsteps soon

resounded behind them.

Bolts started to rain again while the intruders ran into a narrow spiral staircase. Alhuia declaimed a powerful incantation, spreading her arms. A white veil appeared and broke the bolt that was about to hit Elise. Finally, they reached the underground chapel preceding the passage to the catacombs.

— Intruders ! Fire ! screamed a man hiding behind a bench.

A projectile cut Oscar under the arm as he threw himself to the ground. He fell heavily and Priscilla pulled him to safety. Hunkered down in the back of the room, the group heard their pursuers in the stairs. The Watcher deflected another bolt with her veil, protecting the other elf.

Soldiers were efficient, two of them keeping them from moving while the last one reloaded his crossbow. Then, they started to advance, closing the gap with their defenseless opponents. The noise intensified in the staircase. A corpse rolled down the last steps and fell face down on the ground. The fellow's back was riddled with crystalline blades. A second body collapsed, then the Shadow appeared, slowly descending the bloodied stones.

Its gaze turned toward Aelyss. She felt her heart pounding in her chest. Clenching his teeth, Oscar jumped and grabbed the creature by the waist. Another bolt almost ended up his life. The man sent the Shadow crashing against a column, forcing it to fall to the ground. The creatures' fingers changed into long sharp claws, ready to tear Oscar's flesh apart. He cursed and sent his knee right onto its glass head, cracking it open in a shimmering cloud. The man fell back down, a black shard stuck in his thigh. Elise crawled close to him and used the scarf in her hair to make a tourniquet.

They stayed in each other's arm, not knowing how to get out of this. Then, one of the soldiers dropped his crossbow and ran away.

— Filthy bugs ! he screamed They are eating my guts ! Pulled them out !

He disappeared into the crypt, both hands holding his stomach. His voice resounded long enough to make his companions shiver. Priscilla sighed, blood dripping from her nose. Then, she jumped against the bench, staggering the shooter arrived behind. This was enough for her to get close to him and knock him out.

The last man though, was right in position, ready to release his bolt and strike her down. The bolt rushed towards her chest. Yet, it stopped at the last moment, only piercing her skin. Under the soldier and the woman's eyes, the projectile turned around and stuck the shooter.

— No ! shouted Oscar. What happened ?

— I... I don't know, stammered Priscilla while getting back up.

The man then crossed Aelyss' look. She did it. They reached the catacombs and ran into its darkness. Alhuia led them using the stolen map. Oscar grabbed Priscilla's arm.

— She killed him, he said. Your new friend killed a guard.

— That is probable.

— Are you still asking me to trust her ? Look at her, she acts like a wild dog !

Priscilla looked grim and nodded. They left as quickly as possible and reached a blocked access. With a spell, the white elf threw a stone through the wall, then, they returned to the surface. The noblewoman and Elise had to carry Oscar through the last alleys. His injuries were significant and he had lost a lot of blood. They rushed into the apothecary's house and placed the him on the table.

— We don't have much time, said Elise. By now, I'm surprised Beatrice is not still here. But she's coming, I can tell you that ! And with enough men to burn this place to the ground. Hold him still.

— What was that creature ? Oscar panted while looking at the shard in his thigh. How long will it pursue us ?

— It is following me, continued Aëlyss. It has been months already and it will keep going until I find how to destroy it for good.

— Or if it kills you.

Oscar's gaze was heavy. The White Princess winced and looked outside between the shutters.

— You can hate me if you want, I am used to this. Now, stop moving. I have to remove the Shadow's shard before it leads it here.

She moved her hands and whispered a few words. The glass blade shivered. Oscar bit the belt between his jaws and almost passed out. Slowly the shard rose, leaving his flesh. The Scholar elf grabbed it and threw it outside. As she was closing the door, she heard voices. Alhuïa finished healing the man's leg and everyone sighed in relief.

The fugitives quickly changed and equipped themselves. Oscar took the enchanted sword out of its hiding place and strapped it to his back. Departure was imminent.