

The Bonding of two souls

Shapeshifter Wars Chronicles (Volume I) recorded by Gurmet of Serscamp, Historian of Nuit

After the murder of both her parents, Alexis's early childhood has been harsh and full of abuse. Talgard, a stable owner in a town close to a large military garrison, takes pity on her and buys her from a ruined paedophilic gambler. The work is hard, but her elderly foster father treats her kindly. Appreciating his kindness, she too grows very fond of him. Alexis is 14 at this time, a stubborn and headstrong adolescent.

The narrow ways of the town were thronged with night-revellers. Torches and lanterns flared. The night was full of noise, the weather hot and humid. Not a single breeze had stirred the leaves for a fortnight. The oppressive heat made people nervous and edgy. Rain would have helped, but didn't come. Bedizened wenches ogled near-drunk passers-by and sent simpering smiles after potential customers. In the evenings the taverns were always full, what with half the garrison on leave every night. Nerves were strained in this stifling weather. Emotions often ran high and the occasional fights seemed to increase night after night. The jails were packed with drunken brawlers. Civilians avoided the streets at night, as even the town militia did. They too had occasionally suffered severe beatings from gangs of quarrelsome drunks. An army without a war to fight was difficult to control. The garrison-commander allowed this behaviour from his men as it helped to avoid war within the barracks. Too bad that one fight had to end with a barkeeper dead. The event was unfortunate and the culprit was of course executed.

The faint sound of laughter and song emerged from the neighbouring tavern - The Mad Baron. The huge tavern with

its tight-shuttered windows and gaunt black walls had a bad reputation and was known to be frequented by quarrelsome hoodlums.



Alexus stopped sweeping the floor of the stable and carefully wiped her brow with her apron. The hot air thick with the smell of horses was oppressive. Sweat glistened on her face. Her shirt clung to her body. She sighed. It had been a long day and she was very tired, but she was almost done.

No one was around and she took off her shirt and dipped it into a bucket of fresh water. Putting it back on it gave her some relief. Her small breasts and her pert nipples showed through the fabric. She pulled her long red hair from the collar of her shirt and let the wet strands glide over her naked arms. Unfortunately the freshness of the water didn't last for long. One of the horses behind her playfully nudged her in the back with his nose. Stumbling forward she accidentally kicked the bucket. The water spilled out across the floor.

Turning towards the horse she put her hands to her hips – woman-fashion- and feigned anger:

“Striker! See what you made me do, stupid horse! Now I have to clean up this mess and I won't have time left to take you for a ride.”

Striker bared his teeth at her and snorted loudly.

“Okay, okay. You’re too smart for your own good,” she smiled. Still laughing, she pushed the horse’s nose away playfully.

She was already a stunning beauty. Her features were regular, but her childhood plumpness was still there and her small breasts were still blossoming. Her hips still had some expanding to do, but she was growing fast. Sometimes too fast, which often made her knees hurt. She grimaced as her hand accidentally touched a fresh bruise on her cheek. She hadn’t been quick enough to open the stable doors for a mercenary from the garrison. The man was already angry because he had missed most of the evening. He had lost his temper and he had struck her a vicious blow across the face. Her foster father Talgard had protested furiously, but the violence had turned on him. Only the tears and supplications of Alexis had made him stop. She had stabled the horse and the knight had stormed out cursing.

“It won’t take long before the bastard’s drunk,” groaned old Talgard. His breathing rasped falteringly. He held his left arm protectively to his ribs, where the soldier had kicked him. A sudden fit of coughing sent spasms of pain through his body. As it subsided he smiled weakly at Alexis. Drops of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

“Help me get to bed Lex. I’m afraid you’ll have to finish up alone tonight.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Alexis replied. *“I will fetch healer Istvan as quickly as possible. I just hope he isn’t too drunk himself.”*

“Never mind about Istvan,” replied Talgard. *“This looks worse than it is. I’ll be all right in the morning. It’s just breathing that’s a bit painful.”*

Alexis protested, but the old man stubbornly refused her pleas to get Istvan. She finally gave in, but with her mind in turmoil her only thoughts were thoughts of revenge.

"The bastard. I'll..." she swore between her teeth.

Talgard frowned at her through his pain.

"I know what you're thinking. Don't! Even if your life seems full of monsters, don't become one yourself by dwelling on revenge!"

"Stop your old-fashioned black-and-white preaching," she retorted sharply. She regretted her words as soon as she had spoken them. Although she felt that he was right, she bit her lip stubbornly.

He leaned heavily on her shoulder as she helped him into the house and to bed. Bruised and battered, he had kept arguing strongly that he would be all right again in the morning.

Alexus was unaware that he had refused a healer for fear of letting her go out alone so late at night. Returning to the stables she noticed the man's horse gone, and decided to try and forget the incident. She still had her own and her foster father's chores to finish, and it was already nearing midnight.

Leaning against the foot of a small mountain, stood Talgard's small house. This mountain was part of a lone range of peaks west of the Khalpurian Mountains in Estwood. Next to the house and built into the side of the mountain hung a huge double door - the entrance to the stables.

These stables consisted of two large circular caves. The bigger upper cave lay on top of a smaller one. A 100-yard-wide airshaft ran like a spear through both caves and into a pit below them. This was actually how the town had gotten its name 'Godswound', inflicted by a spear striking the mountain during a battle between Gods. The actual horse stable was built at ground level in the lower cave around the enormous hole. The pit was used as a dumping hole for refuse. Somehow Alexis had always felt guilty about sweeping the dirty hay and dung into it. For countless years that was what the pit had always been used for, yet it had never filled up. Nobody knew

how deep it was. A few young hotheads had once ventured to reach the bottom, but after the accident the local mayor had wisely forbidden such actions.

The town's grey wizard Safpin had once claimed he had found a pre-Flood document that described these caves as inhabited by two blue dragons. This was the first and the only time he had tried to tell such a story to the village. Godswound didn't have much patience with wizards, particularly one who had always been ridiculed as the town's fool. Who on Nuit would ever believe a crackpot who was known never to have cast a spell in his life. The mayor even claimed that he couldn't even read or write his own name, let alone a pre-Flood document. Somehow Safpin had always been careful to elude challenges to disprove these accusations. Of course, his behaviour didn't help his precarious situation. Alexis found out why completely by accident.

One day visitors had been scarce at the stables and she had finished her daily chores early. She sneaked into Safpin's cottage intending to play a joke on him, when he suddenly opened the kitchen door. She thought he had caught her by surprise. Although she stood in the middle of the kitchen in plain view, he didn't seem to see her at all. His startled curse, as he hit his shin against a chair that she had displaced, made her realise the awful truth. He was blind. First he had tried to dismiss her question as a good joke, but had confessed at last that he'd gone blind so long ago that he couldn't even remember how.

"Yeah, right! Not remember how?" Alexis let this pass. She would get the truth out of him someday.

Safpin insisted that she never reveal his secret to the villagers. Needless of course. He was after all her friend. One of the few she could tolerate these days. His stories about the old days had made it an easy friendship. How he had managed to

conceal his blindness to the complete town, she couldn't fathom, but she had made the promise in exchange for some small blackmail on her part... his stories about the mythical dragons of Nuit. And he told them gladly to his eager listener. She was fascinated and never stopped asking about the how, the where, the when and the who... And Alexis began to believe... believe that once there had been real dragons... that maybe... just maybe... some were still around somewhere. Her fascination became a longing that filled her dreams at night. Dreams... that would soon become very real.

She was unaware that glistening blue eyes were observing her sharply. As Alexis finished sweeping at the other end of the cave, a slim figure crept quickly down a ladder and out of the barn leaving the door slightly ajar in its haste. The creaking of the hinges made Alexis come and investigate. Had a soldier come in for his horse? There was no one there. A sudden shout from the outside drew her curiosity and she threw a furtive glance outside through a crack in the door. Apparently another brawl had starting outside. Looking more closely she noticed three drunks pushing a slight hooded figure around. They were clearly enjoying themselves harassing a poor girl. Recognizing the mercenary who had struck her the blow, she pulled the stick out of her broom and left the barn silently. Creeping stealthily up from behind, she struck one of the drunks against the temple with the end of her stick and knocked him out cold. He never knew what hit him. The soldier however recognized her and smiled cruelly:

“So... if it isn't the lazy little slut. Come to join the fun, eh? You shouldn't...”

He suddenly grabbed the stick and jerked it from her hand. As he swung the stick against the back of her knees, she fell flat on her back with a thump. The fall knocked the wind out of her lungs.

"... meddle in the affairs of grown-ups!" he finished as he approached his helpless victim.

Unable to catch her breath, she managed however to kick him hard between his legs. His groans alerted the third man who straddled the other girl pinning her arms to the ground. He looked back and released his hold for just one moment. His captive managed to free a hand and drew her sharp nails across his face and eyes. She pushed him off of her and still on her back crawled away from him. Still gasping for breath, Alexis limped towards her and urged her towards the barn. She closed and bolted the doors behind them.

"Are you all right?"

She gasped and fell silent as she saw the girl's delicate features. The hood from her torn cape had fallen back, revealing tears and dirty streaks on her white winsome face. Long azure-silver hair fell in lazy graceful waves to her waist. She was utterly beautiful and captivating, but it was the odd sapphire eyes and the pointed ears that made Alexis stare.

"You are an elf!"

She had never seen an elf before but the pointed ears were evidence enough. Long, drooping lashes, lent unimaginable charm to her narrow slanted, piquantly alien eyes.

"What remarkable eyes," was all she could think.

They were ocean-blue... pupils and all. The sheer force of those eyes was mesmerizing...

The elf fainted. She was hurt and exhausted.

A sudden pounding on the door. The three men outside hadn't given up. They were angry and their hurt pride cried revenge. Alexis dabbed the elf's face with a wet mop. As the elf came to, she managed to help her up the ladder and hid her beneath a stack of hay.

“Stay here and for heaven’s sake be quiet! They’re not very friendly about elves in this town. I’ll talk my way out of this much better without you around.”

Alexus wasn’t very confident about what would happen if those three men got inside, but she would sure as hell give them a hard time. As she jumped to the ground, the door crashed inward followed by the knight. He was alone. The other two had apparently preferred to continue their drinking. This man however had murder in his eyes. Alexis jumped towards a pitchfork, but was too late. The man struck her in the spine with his fist and she slumped forward to the ground barely conscious from the pain. He turned her on her back and punched her cruelly in the face breaking her nose.

“Dirty little brat! What do you think you are, you good for nothing slave? And where the Hell is my horse, thief? I’ll show you what I do with thieves. You will even enjoy this if you treat me gently!”

He struck her another harsh blow with the back of his hand across her cheek. Grinning he reached beneath his cloak and pulled out a dagger. Holding the blade’s edge to her throat, he ripped her shirt open and glanced down hungrily at her blossoming breasts. His blood ran hot with anger and lust. The point of his dagger bit into her throat. Red drops glistened. Helpless fear clenched her belly. Her heart raced in despair, nearly suffocating her. He started fumbling with the laces of his pants. Her blood burned; his groping touch made her skin grow cold and clammy. Memories fuelled her seething anger as she clung to consciousness, but she suddenly stopped struggling and stared at what was transpiring behind her tormentor’s back. Her brain turned to oatmeal. Oblivious of her tears and pain she saw the elf, or what should have been the elf. Her face morphed... grew... elongated...

Her attacker suddenly noticed that his victim wasn’t behaving akin to the situation. He was just starting to look over his shoulder as a powerful wave of fear hit him. He cowered

behind his arms before the enormous white dragon towering over him. His cowardly whimpering ceased abruptly as the dragon struck him furiously with one enormous claw, driving her nails through his chest and catapulting him through a fence and into the pit in the middle of the barn. He was dead before he hit the bottom – if there was a bottom. A look of fear and horror had been grafted onto his corpse’s face.

“*Never again!*” growled the dragon. Her eyes flashed ferociously like naked sword-steel to a cold, steely rage. The white of her scales suddenly flashed a radiant blue. Softening her deep voice, she growled “*I owe you my life. Thank you, girl.*”

My blue dragon soars through the clouds towards the Antarian armies. Looking over my shoulder I motion to the following blues and reds to attack the platoon of knights on horseback. Their retreat on the ground is orderly. Only a few horses are panicking, but they are well-trained combat-experienced warhorses and their riders quickly regain control. They seem prepared for what should have been futile resistance. “They’re expecting us!”

Alexus came to and tried to sit up, but her head was pounding. She couldn’t focus her eyes and blood was streaming from her broken nose.

“*Stay down! I will help you.*”

The blue scales of the dragon suddenly shifted again to a hazy white. Her huge body oozed back into the shape of the elf. She was again slender as a willow. Quickly she donned her torn dress and knelt beside Alexis. She whispered softly: “*I know it hurts. Be strong, I will get help quickly.*”

Pulling the hood of her cape over her face she ran off through the barn door into the night. She didn’t have far to run. There was only one person in this town that she trusted completely.

Old Saffin sat in his rocking chair. Disappointed, he had given up waiting for Alexis. She had become the light of his life. He had even started to hope that she might be his way back to his magic.

He knew who was on the stairs even before the hasty rap on the door sounded. The panting figure stood before him desperately trying to find her breath.

“Well, well. Damsel Myste! This is a surprise. Must be about ten years since...”

The happy smile that graced his face faded quickly as he realized something was seriously wrong. Myste blurted out what had come to pass. With an agility that belied his old age he grabbed his pouches containing his herb collection and followed the elf towards the stables.

As they passed Talgard’s house he suddenly slowed down and looked up with his sightless eyes towards the bedroom window on the first floor. The expression on his face became grim. He shook his head in frustration.

The elf looked back and sniffed the air.

“I know... I can feel it too. Her ordeal seems without end.”

They entered the barn; Saffin with some difficulty in these unfamiliar surroundings. Myste grabbed his arm and hurried him over towards Alexis. She was a sorry sight. Her face was all bloody with one eye swollen shut, the other red from fatigue and pain. She had managed to pull herself onto a pile of hay and tried to wash the blood from her bruised face. It was to no avail. The blood kept running freely from her battered nose and torn lip. She started to retch. She hadn’t eaten since noon, so nothing came out. The fit passed, but her colour had changed to a deadly white. Her breathing came too quick and too shallow. Saffin opened a satchel and took out a small brown leaf and pushed it between Alexis teeth.

“Bite this, but don’t swallow it. The pain will lessen and you will feel better.” Turning towards Myste he said: *“Go. I hear the town guard approaching. They mustn’t see you.”*

"Your ears are still better than mine," said the elf. She didn't wait for an answer but quickly kicked at her claw marks in the dirt to obliterate them and ran over towards the ladder. Clambering up to the upper level of the cave she hid herself between the haystacks.

"Alexus! Listen to me!" Safpin's voice rang out with a stern insistence. The words penetrated as the fog in her mind began to clear. *"Be strong! You have not seen Myste! Dragons must not exist! Dragons cannot exist! The man attacked and tried to rape you, but he fled as I came in. He will probably desert for fear of execution. Stick to that story... whatever else may happen!"*

His emphasis on *'whatever else'* made Alexis look up into his eyes.

"I... know!" she slurred through swollen lips. One of her front teeth was chipped. *"I...not stupid! ...at... haven't you... told e, Sav?"*

The wizard sighed and his shoulders drooped. At that moment the town guards burst into the barn with swords brandished.

"What's going on here?" the captain-at-arms shouted. His men spread out checking all corners of the cave suspiciously. She spat out the bloody leaf. The smarting had become more bearable. With a pained determination on her face, Alexis managed to stammer out the story. Her voice grew stronger as she continued. Though she was still dazed from the blows, she remembered to forget the part about Myste. The captain listened with deep commiseration.

"... I didn't know the girl... I tried to help... managed to get away from that male pig that held her down... You should be able to find him easily... Look for the bastard with nail marks across his face... It was too dark to see her face. She ran towards the market square. Haven't you seen her? She must have run straight to your office."

"Damn. This girl is a born liar," Safpin thought.

The officer shook his head. *“No. She didn’t. Probably one of the hussies...”*

He exchanged a few words with Safpin and turned towards his men.

“Laudar, get to the other patrol and tell them who to look for! You men, split up. You three... Go and search in the direction of the market square! The others come with me! We’ll patrol the road towards the garrison! We will find him! Dead or alive!”

The men started off. Their efficiency equalled their leader’s. The captain was the last to leave, but he stopped suddenly. A glint of metal had caught his eye. He looked briefly at the partly destroyed fence around the pit and turned towards Safpin.

“Mage Safpin, you said that as you came in he jumped on his horse and rode away, didn’t you?” he remarked in a hushed voice.

Safpin had heard him stop, but had not expected the question. He froze for one brief panicky moment, but he had nevertheless recognized the sympathetic undertone in the man’s startling question.

“I... guess so. It was all very confusing... with this poor girl crying and all,” he stammered sullenly. He was aware that he did not sound very convincing.

“I understand!” said the captain. He picked up the dagger and flung it into the pit. He touched the rim of his open visor with his forefinger and nodded curtly at Alexis. The stoic mask of the professional man-at-arms was back on his face. He turned on his heels and left in feigned pursuit of the villain.

The elf came down from the loft as soon as the militia had disappeared. She ran towards them, shoved the wizard firmly aside and knelt in front of Alexis.

"This will hurt a lot..." she whispered softly. "... but if you don't want a crooked nose for the rest of your life, bear with me."

As the elf straightened Alexis's nose, Alexis gnashed her teeth to avoid groaning, managed to bite her own tongue and yelled out anyway. She would have preferred to faint, but she was forced to endure. She barely noticed the words of magic spoken by the elf. The blood stopped flowing. The pain lessened.

"This will have to do for now. Healing you completely would be too suspicious."

As her mind cleared Alexis opened her eyes and looked into the 3000-year-old eyes of the Nether elf.



"I'm Myste", the elf said. "I wish we could have met in other circumstances."

"I don't", said Alexis grinning painfully. "I wouldn't have met you in other circumstances." And she added with a frown, "I think I know what happened to that horse..."

"I'm sorry if I caused all this," said the elf. She pushed a stray lock of hair away from Alexis's face and gently cupped her face with both her hands. Her voice was soft and compassionate

"I can't tell this without hurting you, girl... Your father has died."

"He's not..." Alexis closed her eyes. *"...my father."*

Myste followed the single tear that ran down Alexis's cheek. It dropped down onto one of her sharp inhuman nails. She rubbed the tear between two fingers and sniffed it. She

touched the tear to her forehead and continued to stroke the girl's head in comfort.

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Safpin arranged the funeral to be a quiet one, but the towners thought otherwise. Talgard had been a kind old man well in his seventies. In his long lifetime he had never turned down anyone's plea for help and because of this he was well known and well loved with the older folks in Godswound. Even the garrison-commander sent his regrets about the crimes committed by his ex-soldier. He didn't do this in person though, but sent a letter to the mayor. Was it lack of courage? Probably not. Maybe he couldn't find the time, or maybe he wouldn't. The people of Godswound interpreted the letter as 'not caring', and they were fed up. Subsequently the town council had an emergency meeting. They decided to close down all inns, taverns and shops in the evening in protest of the abuse they were suffering. The mayor took it upon himself to demand an audience with the commander and handed him back his unopened letter and their new decree. The commander took the obvious reprimand with a slight smile. He had accepted the criticism all too gracefully though and the mayor kept pondering about this on his way back to town. By the time he reached the gates of Godswound his optimism had turned into dread for what the next evening would bring. What could a bunch of unhappy and unorganised civilians do against a garrison of military men? He fervently wished that the garrison had been filled with Falandrians. At least they would have stuck to their code of honour. Terror would not have been their way of amusement.

Nothing happened that evening. No soldiers came to town. Nor did any try to visit the taverns the next evening... and the evening after. This had to be a blessing granted by the almighty Xia herself. The peace and quiet was overwhelming.

The town gradually came alive at night. Children played in the streets and were allowed to stay up well past their bedtime. Neighbours found time to chat and even forgot to go to sleep. The mayor even organized a roasted pig in the market square to celebrate their victory. Their worried lives had finally changed for the better. The news that the garrison had marched out on a prolonged campaign didn't bother anyone. Only a skeleton force had been left behind to guard the fort and these men rarely came into town. If they did, they just bought some supplies and left again. Where then did this joy suddenly disappear to after two weeks? The laughter in the streets disappeared. People had found other things to worry about. In their joy the town had forgotten that they lived and thrived on the money spent by the soldiers. The inns and taverns soon opened again in the evening, but nobody came. Some six weeks passed before the news finally arrived that the army was returning. A sigh of relief ran through the streets. Festivities were organized. Floors and tables were polished. Not that this mattered very much. They would be filthy again within hours. The town felt the need to prepare, because soon everything would be back to normal. The people of the town bent again to their petty little household tasks. As people always do, easily and willingly forgetting what ill had befallen them in the past.

All this commotion meant very little to Alexis. She had been too young for sorrow when her grandfather Leonex the White had murdered her parents. Her anger had only started to grow as she herself grew older. There were only two ways for such a young life to develop. The abuse and the misery could have destroyed her, but instead she drew strength from her anger. Talgard had constantly worried that this anger would change to spite. That this would draw her over to the dark side. She felt genuine grief for the first time in her life. Only now did she understand what having no parents meant. She had had a

taste of a more normal life with old Talgard and her friend Safpin. Her anger remained, but she had changed. She was determined to find a better life for herself... at any cost. Safpin had asked her to stay at his house for the time being. She had accepted gladly. Not really for the old mage's sake, but because of Myste.

"Stop looking so worried Saf. If you can't see the world around you, why worry about it?"

"It's not the world I'm worried about girlie," Safpin answered.

"Don't call me girlie! In case you haven't noticed, I've grown breasts for quite some time now and I've got hair in all the right places!"

Alexus was angry again, but she regretted her impetuous words immediately.

"I didn't mean to... I'm sorry..."

Safpin chuckled quietly. *"That's all right, girlie. I can imagine what you've got, but at my age I don't want to start groping for what I can't see. I don't particularly enjoy getting slapped in the face, if that's the only thing you do. I've heard from Istvan that you've provided him with a few patients lately. It seems that they were in perfectly good health before they met you."*

"They asked for it," Alexis mumbled between her teeth.

Safpin tried to keep his face stern, but the twinkle in his sightless eyes remained. *"So... What did these poor boys do, that you had to beat them up like that?"*

"They weren't boys and I said no."

Safpin frowned and his voice suddenly became serious.

"Some of those soldiers have been bothering you, haven't they?"

Alexus shrugged her shoulders.

"I should have seen this coming."

The way he said the word *'seen'* made Alexis look over her shoulder at the frowning old man.

"This is becoming too dangerous a place for a pretty girl like you," he continued.

Alexis said nothing and went back to staring into the fire pit in front of her. She sat with her knees drawn against her chest and her chin resting on her knees. She enjoyed the warmth of the fire against her naked legs. Living in Safpin's home felt cosy. Although she missed Talgard, the old wizard made her grief bearable. A burning log suddenly toppled and rolled forward showering the carpet with sparks. Safpin casually waved his right hand and the sparks blinked out. Alexis didn't notice. Absent-mindedly she kicked the log back into the fire.

"I can take care of myself and I don't need an old man to meddle with my life," she thought. For once she had managed to resist saying the words aloud, to avoid hurting the old man's feelings. She was even proud of herself for keeping this to herself.

"Of course you don't need an old man to meddle with your life, since you clearly can take care of yourself," Safpin echoed with a faint smile on his face.

Startled, Alexis turned her head towards Safpin.

The door to the kitchen suddenly burst opened and Myste appeared in the doorway. From the look on her face she was not in a very good mood. The smell accompanying her dishevelled and dirt-smearred clothes gave a pretty good idea why. Alexis started laughing.

"What happened? Did someone drop a dung heap on you? I told you that they're not very fond of elves around here."

The smile died quickly on her face as the elf threw a baleful glance in her direction. Myste dropped a handful of sparkling green emeralds on the table.

"This will have to do. Somehow I would have imagined that people would be more respectful of my lair."

“If they had had only the vaguest idea that Godswound was a dragon’s lair, I don’t think they would have left those lying around,” said Safpin as he pointed a white, bony finger at the emeralds.

Alexus looked at the finger and at the hand. It was frail and slightly twisted from old age.

“How old are you Saf?” she suddenly asked.

Safpin didn’t answer but scratched the white stubble of his beard with his index finger. Sometimes he didn’t bother to shave in the morning. What was left of his thin long white hair had fallen loosely over his shoulders. He swept the few strands of hairs that were left up over his head, trying to deny his baldness in vain. Alexis smiled. His aquiline nose curved down like an eagle’s beak. The mage wore a grey robe, which might once have been white. Grey robes – the mark of those who chose not to commit their magic to one of the nine alignments – suited Safpin for whatever were his reasons.

Alexus could see how those clear brown eyes could belie his blindness. They were a reflection of the sharpness of his mind.

Why then did he prefer to go through life as the town fool?

Alexus thought he looked even smaller and older than usual.

The leathery wrinkled skin of his face made him look ancient.

“I should not have left Oldstown,” he mused with a thoughtful expression on his face. Alexis was used to his riddles about his past, but she suddenly and vividly remembered one of his stories - a bitter story about a mage in Antares, or Oldstown as it was called these days, in the middle of the Purist wars. But this was supposed to have happened more than 300 years ago. She dismissed the similarity with a shrug. Humans didn’t get that old.

The elderly mage dreaded the night and the nightmares that were sure to come in his sleep. The herbs had helped him to

stay awake, but the lack of sleep and the addiction to the drug were destroying his health. And for what?

When the Emperor had introduced his Whitewash Decree, this white mage had been overjoyed at first. Finally the weeds of evil would be routed out at the roots once and for all. How better to destroy evil than to eliminate all human bastards with their soiled elven blood. Surely nothing but evil could come from people consorting with beasts.

“No Weapons Allowed,” read the sign. Smaller letters continued: “By order of his supreme majesty Emperor Alberth II, the use and the possession of all weapons is hereby forbidden. All violation of this decree is punishable by death. Permits can be requested at the Ministry of Purity.”

Unfortunately those few who dared to apply for such a permit often vanished mysteriously.

The emperor instructed his dreaded Doom Guards to seek out and separate the guilty and their families from all purebloods. His wizards roamed the land to round up all accomplices.

The furnace in the smithy stood cold. The adjoining shop with the leaky roof sat empty. The door with its cracked hinges, stood propped up in the doorframe in a vain effort to keep out the icy cold. The mage himself had killed the smith for cursing at the Emperor. A dismal place only fit for the beggars they had become. His starving children had stopped their feeble sobs days ago. Death entered the house silently.

Whenever guilt was suspected, the perpetrator was punished... punished by death. Such was the only way that absolute success could be guaranteed. People had been reduced to mere animals by this mockery.

A sickly mother-to-be who hadn't had a decent night's sleep for months was put to death because of a dream. A ridiculous nightmare about her child being born with pointed ears.

A child would have died for stubbornly refusing to throw away its favourite elvish doll. But the wizard walked out of the city to start a new life.

Should he have stayed to fight this injustice instead of running away? As skeleton lords pay for their crimes with death for eternity, Xia had blessed this mage with eternal life. Or perhaps this was Xia's joke for 'cursed'?

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"I should have stayed instead..."

"He's more than 400 years old," her full and red lips curved in a faint enigmatical smile. Myste confirmed what Alexis had suspected after all. She kissed him fondly on the head and rubbed her fingers teasingly through his hair.

"Stop that, old stinker! You're ten times my age!"

He slapped at her hands and the 'old' Myste suddenly found herself on her knees with her nose painfully caught between Safpin's twisting fingers.

He sniffed with a look of disgust on his face.

"Go get yourself cleaned up, dirty old lizard. Alexis will help you. That should make her stop laughing..."

He tried to kick Alexis's behind, but she quickly rolled out of his reach. Safpin's sandal however continued the journey on its own and sailed cheerfully through the air right into the hearth.

Safpin let go of the nose and began to restore order to his disturbed hairs. Giggling, Alexis pulled Myste behind her out of the kitchen and slammed the kitchen door shut

on the hem of Myste's smelly robe. She was forced to open the door again to remove the cloth.

Myste rubbed her painful nose.

"I keep wondering how the blind old bat does that."

Alexus didn't notice that Myste's lips hadn't moved.

"I don't now. Perhaps he's just pretending to be blind, but I must agree that his sense of smell works fine. How on Nuit did you pick up that smell?"

Alexus suddenly raised her eyebrows in understanding.

"Do you mean that the pit in the stable is your lair?"

"No. Fortunately it's just the entrance," growled Myste. "And you and your father have been sweeping dung into it for years!" she continued indignantly. "It took me over an hour to get through? I couldn't very well burn out the place, could I? I must admit that I was tempted though."

"I'm sorry," Alexis said feeling guilty again, *"but how was I to know that you were living down there?"*

"Lucky for you I wasn't. I moved down South after the Great Floods." Her casual remark made it sound like this had happened just a few months ago. Of course, dragons - or elves for that matter look - upon the passing of time differently.

—

The comet had struck Nuit's lonely white moon. Nature suffered dearly and Nuit was thrown into absolute chaos. From chaos came forth wild and uncontrollable magic. For 40 millans the planet and its moons sought to find a new balance. Where finally nature succeeded, the inhabitants of Nuit could not. Chaos ruled their unbelieving hearts and souls. Sombre and terrible were these 40.000 years. Historians nowadays call these 40 millans before the Great Purge the Chaos Forty.

Far away the war between the Gods had ended and the fleeing losers arrived on Nuit. They did what they could to restore

order to their new home. Sometimes they tried to be noble and generous; sometimes they were cruel and terrible. Threats and promises were in vain. Each new millan the Gods created a new wonder, but the humanoids were not impressed. Finally the Gods gave up on humanity with their tenth and final wonder, The Great Floods. With these floods they invoked The Great Purge and order finally returned. Order? Of course! There was hardly anyone left alive on the planet. 3338 years ago history had started anew.

Alexus led Myste through Saffin's herbal garden and down a small footpath surrounded by beautiful yellow-flowered brushes. Myste was impressed with the neatness and the loveliness of the moonlit garden. She fitted in quite nicely, like a small, beautiful dragonine. In the back of the garden a cluster of trees and the brushes underneath them were effectively hiding a small brook from spying eyes. The stars gleamed brightly in the red-blue night sky. Three moons hung reflected in the swift-rushing water. The twin-moons Naia & Nerea chased the bloody moon Colima with jealous purple frenzy. While the oppressive heat of the day still lingered, the water looked fresh and inviting. Myste waded in and started to rub herself vigorously. Alexis threw off her own dress and splashed in after Myste. Myste's soaked dress clung teasingly to her skin and to every curve of her body. Wet garments hid little of her glorious figure. The moonlight gave her silhouette a supernatural red glow. The elf's beauty was mysterious and enchanting, yet surrounded by an eerie haze of ancient wisdom. Alexis reached up for the string about Myste's neck, which held her ruined gown in place. She untied the knot and peeled the fabric down over the delicate shoulders and let it drop in the water. The elf lifted her feet from the dress and let it float away with the current. The stench didn't bother Alexis

as much as it did the elf. After all she worked at the stables. She joined Myste to try and scrub the smell from her body.

Huffing and puffing Safpin forced his way through the brushes. A vague shape of blackness against the moonlit trees. This was one place where he couldn't hide his blindness. He finally caught up with both girls.

"You may like to use this soap!" he called out at them. *"That smell will cling to you like the smell of death clings to a zombie! If you don't wash it out carefully, you'll carry it with you for the rest of your days!"*

He sniggered quietly, careful not to let Myste hear.

A soft grumble sounded from Myste's throat. Alexis broke out laughing teasing Myste out of her bad humour. Myste's azure blue eyes twinkled in amusement, but she pouted her lips in pretence of her hurt feelings and gave Alexis a push. Alexis tried to keep her balance but lost her footing on the slippery rocks and went down on her back. She disappeared below the surface to re-emerge moments later coughing and spluttering water. It was Myste's turn to laugh now.

Alexis crawled towards her antagonist. All the rest was mere fun and mock combat.

Sitting on a fallen down log, Safpin was thoroughly enjoying himself too. He seemed full of adoration with the two naked combatants rolling about in the water. How ironic. Alexis's childhood had so cruelly ended and now a scant few weeks later the evening seemed so peaceful.

The splattering suddenly stopped. Looking back and forth at each other and at the smiling old man, they understood each other wordlessly. Without warning they suddenly rushed through the knee-deep water towards Safpin. As if he had seen them coming he jumped up and started quickly back towards the house.

"I'll get the tea ready by the time you are finished," he called back at them.

“He can’t have seen us coming,” said the Alexis astonished. She yelled at Safpin. *“You’ve been...!”* she swallowed the *‘lying to us’*. Safpin had knocked his forehead violently against an overhanging branch. He cursed loudly and groped around on hands and knees trying to get back to the house. Alexis picked up the bag of soapflakes where Safpin had left it on the log and stepped back into to the water.

Myste’s frown was thoughtful as she saw Safpin struggle through the brushes, failing completely to find the narrow trail leading up to the house.

“There’s something weird about Saf’s blindness. Sometimes he seems to find his way around easily enough.”

“I’ve noticed that too,” Alexis agreed. *“Especially when he doesn’t know that we’re looking.”*

The elf pulled her silver water-sparkling hair away from her back. As Alexis rubbed the soapflakes to foam across Myste’s shoulders the elf moaned with pleasure. The foamy moisture ran down her spine between her buttocks and down the inner side of her thighs. The bubbles rushed away with the water’s current. A tiny quagmire-squirrel hanging from a branch across the creek clawed at the floating mass of bubbles. Chittering angrily it ran along the shore in pursuit of the elusive creature.



They found Safpin sitting behind his writing table in his underground study, his hands wandering over the pages of an open book. The white tome was clearly magical, bound with worn and cracked yellowish dragon leather. Myste scowled at the book and stomped off indignantly towards the other side of the library.

The study was built deeply underground. A room strangely barren in contrast to the rest of the house which was full of rich tapestries on the walls and deep carpets on the floor. A

saggy oaken table splotted with dark burn stains, six worn-down matching chairs. A spacious library occupied the biggest part of the room. Countless bookshelves with a myriad of books of all colours... bound in various kinds of leather. There were no scrolls. Safpin had no use for scrolls inscribed with spells that needed to be read aloud to activate their magic. Alexis felt her skin crawl as she traced the back of one of the books with a finger. Words silvered out under her fingers revealing a title in a strange language that she could not read. The letters seemed to crawl back into the dull cracked leather of what must be a necromantic spell book.

"Please return..." Safpin mumbled with a melancholic timbre in his voice.

Both girls looked at each other. They were somewhat embarrassed about what they were about to do, but they nodded to each other determined to continue their ruse. Myste put the teakettle and the cups on the table. Alexis saw to it that she was nowhere in Safpin's line of sight. Holding her breath, she quietly took a heavy book from a nearby shelf and placed the thick obstacle next to Safpin's desk directly in his path towards the table. Her fingers tingled painfully from the magical sensation rushing from the leather through her fingers. She was sure he could not have seen what she had done. In the mean time Myste was busy arranging the table with enough noise to wake up a snoring dragon. When she noticed Alexis's wink to indicate that all was prepared, she called her friends to the table for tea.

"Come on Saf, don't look so sad. Surely we can find a way to cheer you up. Let's have some tea together, just the three of us."

"Yes. Please and tell us another story!" Alexis exclaimed perhaps a little bit too eagerly.

Safpin sighed and his wrinkled smile returned to his face. He pushed back his chair slowly and walked round his desk towards the table.

“Maybe there is a way for you to cheer me up,” he said as he looked in Alexis’s direction.

Alexis couldn’t help but glance quickly down at the big tome just in front of Safpin’s feet.

“Since you two clearly find it necessary to test this poor old man, I think it’s time that I reveal to you what is on my mind and why I need your help.” Uttering those last words, he looked Alexis straight in the eyes and stepped gingerly over the book on the floor.

“I knew you were just pretending to be blind!” shouted Alexis victoriously. *“You’ve been fooling us all this time!”* she protested indignantly. Her cheeks nevertheless turned red with mortification at their irreverent piece of deception.

“Why?”

“There is no why,” answered Safpin as he pulled back a chair and sat down with a sigh. *“I can only explain the how. I’m sorry to say that I am as blind as a flearymouse.”* He paused to let the words sink in into their minds.

“You saw...” Alexis began.

“Maybe I did, or maybe you did?” Safpin interrupted her quizzically. *“Stop being a typical woman, and be silent for a moment,”* he added.

Alexis shut her mouth at the condescending remark and bit her lower lip angrily. The way he had said ‘woman’ to her for the first time, softened the sting of the remark.

“You two deserve an explanation, but first I need your promise that what I’m about to tell you will remain a secret between the three of us! Why? Because I am fed up with the jokes and the pranks I have been forced to suffer at the hands of those bigots of Godswound.”

His anger flared out through his words and both girls looked at each other, amazed at the harshness in his old voice.

“I will explain how I have managed to keep my blindness a secret, but just to the two of you,” he repeated. *“Promise!”*

Taken aback by the vigour in what sounded more like a command than a question, they stammered their agreement readily.

The kindness in his voice returned as he continued.

“Look behind me, Alexis. I know there is a fly somewhere, because I heard it buzzing around. It has landed somewhere and I don’t know where it is.”

Both women searched the wall behind the old wizard, but it was Myste with her keen elven eyes, who spotted the creature’s red aura in a dark corner under the ceiling. She pointed out the spot to Alexis where the fly had met its untimely demise. A black jumper had caught it.

“There are nicer ways to die,” said Saffin.

Both girls looked at him clearly doubting his sincerity.

“Astonishing, isn’t it?” he smiled mysteriously at the two women.

He rubbed the back of his head with one hand. *“Yet I don’t seem to have an extra pair of eyes in the back of my head.”*

The women almost smiled but said nothing. They had to agree that he couldn’t have seen the spider. But how did he know?

“My hearing is still quite good, but I couldn’t have heard that jumper, could I? Well... Actually, I have been looking... but through your eyes, Alexis. I can do this with most people; unfortunately I’m quite helpless when I’m alone.” And he rubbed the darkening spot on his forehead where the tree branch had hit him.

“I haven’t yet succeeded with you, Myste,” he said looking towards the elf. *“Apparently your dragon mind is too shielded for me to penetrate.”*

“If it is, I wasn’t aware that you had tried, but you are quite welcome to try again if I can help you,” Myste said earnestly.

In the sombre darkness of the library her strange blue eyes seemed to shine with a light of their own. The jumper continued chewing its grizzly meal

“Thank you, my dear. But let me continue... I have learned this...” He paused for a moment and continued: *“let’s call it a spell for now, from an old shaman from Asodonia. He was not a chanting, mumbling conjurer like you would expect. He had mastered the elements and he understood that natural forces could produce magic. His spells just happened by the use of his mental powers alone. T’was as simple to him as making fire is to us. But his magic is as unfathomable to most of us as making fire would be to an ape. It took me years to master just this one spell of mental displacement. This spell allows me to move my mind’s eye into your mind and look through your eyes at the world... and at myself. This mental bridge isn’t very difficult to cross, but I have to make myself act upon what I see through strange eyes and that is an entirely different matter. While I look at myself from a distance, I must command myself from that same distance - what to do and how to do it.”*

He grinned suddenly. *“The master ordering his pet.”*

The grin fell and the tone in his voice grew strained.

“Years of carefully trying out this blessed and cursed salvation. Years of stumbling along through the village as if I were drunk and gradually being turned into the town idiot.”

His bitter voice reflected the hard times he had suffered.

Alexus closed her eyes and tried to imagine looking at herself through the old wizard’s eyes...

My Blue Dragon soars from the clouds towards the Antarian armies. I command the following blues and reds to attack the platoon of knights on horseback. Their retreat on the ground is orderly. Only a few horses are panicking, but they are well-trained combat-experienced warhorses and their riders quickly regain control. They seem prepared for what should have been futile resistance. “They’re expecting us...”

Alexus regained consciousness, dazed and complete unaware of what had happened. Myste helped her sit up and lean against a table leg.

“Are you all right?”

“I don’t know. What happened? My head hurts!”

Alexus touched the painful bump on her forehead.

“Ouch! What happened? Where did this bruise come from?”

“It’s best that I continue my explanation first,” insisted

Safpin. *“You will understand in a minute.*

You wondered what it would be like, didn’t you?” he asked

Alexus.

“Yes. I... just tried to imagine... what it would be like..., she stammered apologetically.

Safpin’s wrinkles deepened into a worried frown.

“This is one of the dangers. One that I wasn’t aware of at first.

You reached out to me by accident and somehow you

succeeded. But you lost control of your body. Your mind

jumped towards me and forgot all about its own body. The

bump on your head as you fell was the result. It could have

been worse!”

“I’m sorry... I won’t try this any more...” Alexis stammered

her face very pale. She was suddenly very relieved that this hadn’t happened sitting in her favourite spot in the upper cave just above the pit.

“Years passed by before I realized that I had inadvertently

passed this apparently contagious ability onto others. It took a

few accidents, even a near fatal one; before I realized that I

had to be careful whose eyes to use. And especially how often!

Fortunately the village is big, and there was less danger if I

was careful not to use the same people all the time.”

A thoughtful frown grew between his wrinkles.

“Apparently one can grow immune to this spell. I’ve been very

careful and I’m quite sure that only you two know about this.

However, more and more of the older villagers have managed

to block their minds against me.”

The sudden frown in his forehead smoothed away as he turned to Alexis.

"I'm sorry to say that I have used your eyes more often than I should have."

He quickly continued, preventing Alexis from speaking.

"There is something else you have to know..."

Safpin hesitated.

"...The mind link makes me experience thoughts and emotions. I know some people would kill me for knowing some of their secrets and that is why I need you to keep this to yourselves. Maybe I should have confided this to you sooner, Lex; at some point you were even aware that I was reading your mind..."

Unnoticed by the others, Myste's eyes twinkled and she smiled secretly.

Safpin continued: *"Fortunately not many have this gift to intrude upon other people's minds, but those who do rarely use it for unselfish reasons. A man, who has lived for as long as I have, tends to be rarely afraid of the future, but... you know now that I have read your private thoughts."*

He paused and looked intently at the anger building on Alexis's face.

"I'm afraid now that I have lost your friendship. So be it. Despite your feelings towards me I must make the necessary amends. I have already discussed this with Myste. You have a knack for soldiering, so I want you to learn to fight properly..." And in a barely audible whisper: *"and I already know that this is your heart's desire."*

"Myste has a close friend who runs an excellent school on an island called Serscamp."

Alexis stared blankly at the wall. The jumper had vanished towards its next meal. A shiver ran goose bumps along her back. She turned her head and found Myste's eyes. The elf smiled and nodded encouragingly, but Alexis stubbornly returned her eyes to the teacup in front of her. She had no intention of following Safpin's advice.

“Everyone knows about the existence of this martial arts school. Many have tried to find it. Like most of our wizard towers this school is magically hidden. You could never find it if it doesn’t want to be found. Apparently your pretty friend over here is one of the few who knows where it is.”

He remained silent for a few moments and regarded Alexis with the twinkle of a smile in his eyes.

“You don’t want to...”

Alexis shook her head. The soft whisper of Myste’s words penetrated her angry thoughts clouded in refusal.

“Your mother knew where it is...”

Alexis’s eyes flashed full of surprise towards Myste’s.

“My mother? But she was a sorceress?”

Safpin continued. The twinkle had not left his wrinkled eyes.

“This is not just an ordinary school for mercenaries, girl. It is an elite school of magic toos. Tess, your dear mother, got their letter of invitation. She studied magic there for eight years.

Myste would have taken you there, but of course if you don’t want to...”

There was a long silence. Alexis’s mind was in turmoil. She knew they had been toying with her. Her fingers tore small strips from the parchment on the table in front of her. They had both known perfectly well that she would not refuse this chance.

“If you had been anybody else, I would have killed you, but I know that you mean well. You and Talgard were...” Her voice faltered, but she swallowed her re-emerging grief.

“You are the only one who really loves me despite my stupid self.”

Her voice broke. This conversation was getting too emotional for her taste; she forced back the tears and cleared her throat.

“I am done with this self-pity!” Her confusion and anger surfaced again. She almost shouted *“I will go to this Sexcamp of yours!”*

“Serscamp”, Myste corrected.

Alexus looked at the destruction she had wrought on the parchment in front of her.

“It will be very hard work,” Safpin said. He did not mention to Alexis that her grandfather Leonex had attended that same school. And he had turned evil through his anger, hadn't he? He did not voice his fears that her own anger might turn sour too.

“You know that I'm not afraid of hard work,” Alexis protested.

Her eyes returned to the parchment letter in front of her. A strange blue waxen seal shaped like a bird spread out both its wings. She lifted the sealed letter to look for the strips she had torn off in her confusion and anger. There were none. The letter was completely unblemished and was addressed to...
HER.



She cracked the seal and opened it curiously.

“Alexus Quintha, you are hereby summoned to accompany the bearer of this letter to Castle Tengu. This invitation will stand until the 27th day of Serpenthia. Failure to arrive at the appointed time will cancel the invitation.”

The short letter was signed: *“Blue Dragon”*

“Serpenthia! That's the first month of Havet, the hot season. We're still Grenthagro and Serpenthia is three months from

now... Although she had no idea where this island was, she somehow knew that they would need the time that was left to get to the castle."

Strangely hot was the Groveth season, also called the season of birth. The Havet season would be even hotter. Blue pupils scrutinized Alexis. *"You will like it there. Even though it's a school...I promise!"* Again Myste's lips had not moved.

Safpin smiled, but more to himself than to the girls. *"But first I must have a little revenge of my own,"* he thought. His smile turned serious as he addressed the girls. *"Of late I have felt such hatred and bigotry in this town that I can no longer tolerate this to go unpunished!"* *"Is it not your own hatred that you want to avenge?"* asked Myste softly. A slight twist of her head accompanied her question, like a chameleon following its prey before the strike. *"How reptilian she behaves,"* marvelled Alexis. The sudden image in her mind of a forked tongue streaking out and catching a fly in midair made her almost explode with laughter.

Myste's eyes flashed towards her. *"Is that not what I am? And stop changing the subject!"* Her face hot with shame, Alexis resorted to biting her lower lip. *"Is everybody able to read my mind?"* she thought, angry again.

Myste repeated her question to Safpin. *"I suppose I have grown to hate this town and I suppose I do want this revenge a little bit for myself. But you yourselves have experienced how prejudiced the towners in Godswound have become. I don't know what has happened. They didn't use to be like this. What did they do when they saw those pointy things on your head?"*

The irony was aimed at Myste but the question was left without answer. “

“Sure they take abuse from the soldiers from the garrison, but that doesn’t compare to what they do to those that don’t fit in with their own schemes. I am the tolerated fool that magic has forgotten. I have lost my powers and I’m not dangerous to them. They’re only concerned with themselves. Enterprising strangers whose businesses grew too successful have disappeared mysteriously and their affairs were usurped. Have you seen a cleric of late? Of course not. The local wizard’s school sits empty too; no teachers and no apprentices come here any more. You both must have seen the ugly poverty in the slums.”

Safpin’s voice gradually grew louder and angrier. He looked like an angry priest preaching to a crowd of mortal sinners.

“You know how the poor and defenceless are treated by the populace of this town. They take the abuse from the soldiers from the garrison, not the merchants. The money ends up, as always here, into the pockets of the wealthy. And that hogwash mayor conveniently protects them and his own investments and intimidates and quashes all protesters at his will and whim.”

“The unfortunate events that have happened these last few days have already placed us upon an important crossroads. Each of our choices may be critical to our future and I have begun to suspect... perhaps to the future of Nuit. The little game that I have in mind to play might turn a bit messy. So if you don’t agree, I will not insist. If we cannot tip the scales of this town towards Xia, at least we will have had the last laugh. This fool will be a fool no longer!”

Awed by the power in his voice both girls nodded their conspiratorial agreement silently. The wizard continued explaining his plan well into the night and his two accomplices did not back down.
