

Chapter 1

Alyssa and Satre argued about whether to give me a job, and I didn't know who I wanted to win. The job sounded terrible. Even if Alyssa won, I should decline. The problem was she knew this. When I'd mentioned I didn't need their money, she counter-offered with, "What if we gave you a lot?"

And looking for a diplomatic way to say no, I asked, "How much is a lot?"

One of those things that weirds me out but I can't explain to anyone is that Pallas has offices. When I go talk to a sorcerer or a wizard, we often meet in their office, and it's an office. Alyssa's office had a desk breaking the space in half, and a little sitting area by the door with five comfy but mismatched chairs. On that side she had bookshelves of mostly modern law and a wine sideboard. On her side of the desk, she had maps and files. In each corner of the wooden room and before the full-wall window behind her desk, she grew catnip and owenge, an orange pitcher plant that smelled faintly of lavender. There were two small fireplaces, one for each side. Baroness Alyssa, ruler of Citi Kageran, had an office. It wasn't even an office of doom; it was an office-office, where you get advice about your taxes or to update your will. The last was good because I was going to need one if I broke into a sorcerer's prison.

After Trui had left, Alyssa asked me to explain why I had sold a bunch of wheat options when I was obviously not a wheat merchant. I said that's why I'd sold them. I didn't want them. She asked me to explain, so I laid bare the entire ordeal of Bloodharvest. The Baroness listened to with polite interest while Satre, her husband, made us a round of drinks. I asked for quarter wine. Well-water in Kageran occasionally gives you dysentery, so drinking straight water wasn't an option. Three drams water to one wine is about as non-alcoholic as I care to go.

Alyssa moved around to our side of her desk and took a slightly-lumpy oak chair, knees together, shins at a slight angle while she faced me, holding a stemless wine-glass in both hand like a teacup. When I finished, she asked, "Could you rescue someone from a prison that isn't run by goblins?"

And I, like an idiot, said, "That would be even better!"

Which was true, but I should have said something like, 'No, I'm done breaking people out of prison.'

Satre had taken an armless chair beside her and sat at an angle. He leaned against the chair-back with his left shoulder. His right hand bore the huge signet ring of Kageran he'd used to officiate the transaction, and he hadn't used wax. Satre had held his hand over a fire, then smashed his fist into the document to burn the Crest of Ozymandias into the paper. Now the same hand swirled the water and wine because their wine wasn't very good, and sediment kept collecting in the glass-bottom.

He looked from me to Alyssa and cocked an eyebrow.

Alyssa said, "Like the sorcerers of Whitefire."

My brain caught up with my mouth, and I put up a hand. "Um, I don't know."

Satre squinted. "Who's there? Other than a bunch of sorcerers?"

"Kyria," said Alyssa.

"Good!" he exclaimed, loudly and unexpectedly enough to startle me into squeaking.

"But Elegy could get her out," Alyssa told him.

"Or she could not and let Kyria rot."

Why were they bringing me into this? "I don't know Kyria," I said.

Alyssa ignored me. "But we could help her. Elegy rescued Prince Aehr from Bloodharvest. We need to check, of course, but we can ask the elves. No offense." She smiled at me.

"They said they'd provide references," I replied quickly, but as soon as the words escaped, I tried to slow down. "But how does that lead to Whitefire?"

"Because you just said you can rescue someone from a different prison."

I....dammit.

"Who's Kyria?" I asked.

"My sister," said Alyssa.

Looking for support, I glanced at Satre.

"Alyssa, this is a terrible idea," he said correctly.

I nodded.

He continued. "If Whitefire turned on her, leave her to them. She tried to kill you."

That's a pretty strong argument. Points for Satre. He spoke wisdom.

"No!" said Alyssa. She waved a hand at me. "I am not going to let my sister die in captivity, while Elegy here makes a profession of getting people out!"

I mean, I had done it twice. I don't know about making a profession of it.

"Who cares?" yelled Satre. "Elegy just got paid! Elegy, did you just get paid by Hyrma Trui?" He looked at me, following Alyssa's wave.

"I did," I said.

He turned back to Alyssa but waved at me. "See? She's happy. She doesn't need more money."

Well...

"Elegy, are you interested in taking another contract?" asked Alyssa. Both of them looked back at me: Satre shaking his head and Alyssa nodding.

I stammered. "I'd like to take a little time off right now, you know, just to spend a little money--"

"What if we gave you a lot?" interrupted Alyssa.

I froze, and when I unfroze, I made my mistake. "How much is a lot?"

A lot was two hundred and fifty Celephian marks. I'd gone through Bloodharvest for sixty three in options, nine over seven as elves do numbers. I'd resold them for twice that. A Celephian mark is a gold coin about the size of my palm, stamped with Kuranes the current on one side and the White Ship on the other. Each coin

weighs about half a pound. Alyssa was offering me a me in Celephian gold.

Satre said, "We are not going to give her that," and they started fighting.

I'm Elegy. I'm a normal-sized woman surrounded by tall people. Some of y'all think you're cool when you reach high shelves and see over horses. You walk like you're being chased, trying to get away from me because I have little legs. You should! I'm fierce down here.

Normally I keep my hair short, but it had grown out over the last half a year. Now it wasn't long enough to pull back but long enough to get into my face. I was considering putting it up in pigtails, but then I look like I'm twelve. I wear a reversible cloak of gray and green, loose clothing, and everything I have is stitched in curves. I don't have a clear outline to break up. I hide small knives in boots and belts, and one, the Blade of Luthas, up a sleeve. That knife frightens me, and I'm a hair shy of throwing it into the sea and forgetting it exists.

I could do that in Celephias. It's an island. They make money. I could throw the Blade of Luthas into the ocean and drink something in a coconut mug. I listened to the married couple fight, thinking about drinks in coconut mugs on beaches with warm sand. Winter was cold in Kageran, and even with the fireplaces warming my face, drafts scurried around my feet with the chill of outside. I could also go back to the Solange, elvenhome, with elegant lords and ladies. I had royal friends there.

Hell, I could hide in a ditch and pile rocks on my head. It would be better than sorcerer prison.

I spaced back in. The married couple were still fighting.

Satre said, "And isn't she dead?" Which I guess is a question, but he didn't say it like he wanted an answer.

But he got one.

"No, she's not!" said Alyssa. "For years now people have been accusing me of killing her (which I didn't!), but the only defense I've had is 'she probably died when she set her own tower on fire.' Van's raising an army because he says I'm still settling old scores, and I didn't settle scores in the first place. Besides, I just found out she's alive. If Elegy rescues Kyria, the twins have nothing to say." Alyssa threw an invisible something at Satre, a silent chew-on-that gesture.

"Until they all team up to try to kill you. Again." Satre didn't seem to be chewing-on-that.

Alyssa made a face. "Team up? Gods no. They hate each other."

Satre scowled. "Didn't you just say they were defending her?"

"Yeah. Her memory! No one likes Kyria in person. Didn't you ever meet her?"

Satre sort-of grumbled. "Yeah."

"Do you hate her?"

Satre scowled to the left, right, and center. "Only because she tried to kill you."

"That's very sweet," Alyssa said. "But you just don't want to agree with me, do you?"

Satre took a hard, tense breath and held his hands up, open but shaking. "Alyssa, she tried to kill you!"

"We were at war. A lot of people tried to kill me."

"That doesn't make it better!"

Satre threw a fake smile at me; his face looked like cracked wood.
"Could you excuse us, please?"

Alyssa looked from him to me too. "Thank you."

"Okay," I said, and we all stayed perfectly still.

Oh right, they were royalty. 'Excuse them' meant I had to leave.

I stood up and moved to the hallway, shutting the door behind me. A page standing outside smiled at me. He would see me if I tried to listen at the door. I smiled back, stepped a polite distance away, and tried to decide if the royals were running a blind or if this was a real argument.

Let me bring you to now.