

Shael watched through the café window as, across the street, the knight and the mage were bailing their roguish friend out of jail. She knew she was asking for trouble – a bastard Russian half-elf in Paris – but the three expatriates she had been observing came highly recommended. Her French was only passable, and finding them had been occasionally awkward. She was fairly certain the hotelier thought she was looking for the slave market, the existence of which was still an underbelly rumor around the city. As they headed up the street away from the jail, she stepped out of the café to follow.

The American, who had just spent the night in jail, had degrees in chemistry and mathematics; he had also spent six years in his country's army and had seen action in Cuba. Like most of the Americans she'd met, his biggest weaknesses were women and money – in his case, in that order. Convincing him would not be an issue. The knight, on the other hand...

The knight was a Welshman; he had had a distinguished career in the Royal Army until his engagement went south and the social fallout had seen him resign his commission. Neither money nor a bit of flirting were likely to catch his attention.

And the mage. She shook her head slightly at the thought. He had been a seminarian; he still wore the style, but not the priestly collar. The Boer Wars had scarred him, driven him from the seminary, which was just as well, as they would have been harsh when the magic became apparent.

"That's the third time this month," the mage was saying to the American.

"We ought to just leave your arse in there next time," the knight muttered.

"It was just a simple misunderstanding," the American protested.

"Simple misunderstandings don't involve you feigning ignorance of French."

"I didn't know she was married."

Shael got on the omnibus they boarded, sitting close enough to them to be able to hear the American murmur to his companions,

"That woman is following us."

She smiled faintly as they fell to whispering hastily amongst themselves, debating what to do about her – ignore her, lose her, confront her. She disappeared more purposefully into the crowds on the street when they got off the bus; the American stood a moment, frowning, as he looked intently at the mass of faces, trying to pick her out. His companions pulled him up the street after them, and she resumed following them, taking more care to stay out of sight.

They were, more or less, out of work, running low on cash, and restless; Shael waited until they'd hit the bar in their hotel that evening to approach them. Once the mage and the knight were watching the gaming on the far end of the bar, she settled next to the American.

"So what do you know about Mongolia?" she asked quietly. He turned slightly to give her an incredulous look.

"You've been following us all day just to ask *that*?" he asked.

"Of course not. You've been ignoring my employer's letters—"

"Your employer is a vampire," he frowned, recalling the letters.

"He is in an unfortunate state of undeath requiring regular infusions of living blood," she shrugged. "There are worse things in the world than he."

"Name one," he said, just antagonistically enough to goad her.

"The Mongol horde," she frowned. "He was right; I should have just gone to Gerard. He's more methodical, anyway—"

"*Gerard*," the American growled, catching her arm and angrily pulling her closer, "is an opportunistic son of a bitch who would sell *anything* if the price were high enough."

“Ah, but you do not wish to work for a vampire,” she said.

“Your English is pretty good,” he said, his eyes on hers now, trying to puzzle out the color – an amber unfamiliar to him. “Where are you from?”

“*Sibir* – or rather, Siberia, as you probably know it,” she said. “If you’re not interested, I should go. The trip takes time, and there is only so much time.”

“No, you’re going to talk to Harry,” he said. “The vampire has taken far too much interest in us. Harry!”

Shael frowned vaguely as he called the knight over; the mage followed after a moment.

“Again already? Was last night not enough to cool your heels for a little while?” the knight said.

“This is the vampire’s girl,” the American said, pulling her around to stand her between himself and the knight.

“I am *not* his *girl*,” she said, the frown more definite now. “I do work for him, yes.”

“Was silence not clue enough to him that we’re uninterested in whatever jobs he may have?” the knight said.

“The alternatives are not as scrupulous,” she said.

“Like a vampire worries about scruples.”

“He puts his nose where others daren’t because of what he is,” Shael said. “If you’re not interested because of *him* I should be going.”

“There are those who would pay for his head,” the American said.

“The shift in the balance of power in the world’s undermarket would not be pretty,” she said, raising a brow. “He is not the only vampire in this world, and there are forces the vampires keep in check that you would be remiss in ignoring.”

“What does he want that he can’t get himself?” the mage asked quietly.

“It’s not something he wants,” she said. “It’s something he wishes remain forgotten.”

“And how is someone to manage that?”

“Find it first and hide it better,” she shrugged.

“And what is it?”

“Something better not mentioned so publicly,” she said. “There are complications, of course. Several teams of... scholars are already looking for it. And, although I have not yet approached him, my employer *has* written Gerard—”

The American’s grip on her arm tightened slightly. “Then why are you talking to us?”

“The odds are better than even that Gerard would not give it up if he finds it.”

“We could use the money, Harry,” the mage said.

“Assuming the vampire paid us and didn’t kill us to keep his secret,” the knight frowned. “I’m not going to work for an abomination, Chris.”

“What do we do with her, then?” the American asked.

“Let her go,” he shrugged.

Gerard was risky; Shael was reluctant to see him if she didn’t have to. Given that the other three weren’t interested, however—

She was not entirely surprised when the American sat down across from her in the café where she had gone after leaving their hotel. He had put on a longer coat, which suggested to her that he’d put on a gun underneath it, as well.

“So are you here about the job, or my employer?” she asked once the waitress had walked away again.

“I can’t be here about you?” he asked.

“I was under the impression you were not interested in those of blood not entirely human,” she said.

“I suppose that would explain the eyes.”

“More or less. I understand the hesitancy to accept work from him; many people are reluctant to deal with the undead on any level.”

“Why do you?”

“Because my father is afraid of him,” she said, smiling slightly. “There are things in this world people like to call *necessary evils*. Evil is perhaps not the perfect word, but Grigor falls into that grouping.”

“What has that got to do with your father?”

“My father is an elf, a warrior of the third tier, although I suppose that means little outside their world. He was very unhappy when I left *Sibir*, and Grigor is generally persuasion enough to keep him at arms’ length, so to speak.”

“So this job...”

“I cannot speak of it here,” she shook her head.

“If you’d like to suggest somewhere more private...”

She smiled faintly again. “Your reputation does precede you, Mr. Wallace, and you are not *that* lucky. But if you’d like to walk with me...”

They were followed shortly after leaving the café, and Shael looped her hand around his left elbow as they walked. It was late now, moonless, but the Parisian night glittered. She took him across the Seine, to the Eiffel Tower, and they took the elevator to the second level.

“Someone has realized I am in town, I think,” she said once they had settled along the railing in a relatively secluded corner.

“One of Gerard’s goons, I think. Not that lucky?” he asked, leaning closer.

“To see the inside of my rooms,” she said, her eyes, for the moment, teasing. “I generally prefer my goods a little less... used. Shall I assume the three of you were not in agreement about this?”

“Harry always takes some convincing. And I am not eager to find out what kind of terms this vampire might throw out. Chris, though, is unusually interested.”

“He is the most difficult of you to read,” she said. “But I understand his experiences in Africa were difficult ones, which may be why.”

“So you know something of us, then.”

“Well, yes. One does not offer these sorts of jobs around without having an idea of whom to offer them to.”

“Are you going to explain it?” he asked, a little impatiently.

“So American,” she smiled. “In *Sibir*, in the taiga, you learn to wait. But do you know anything of Mongolia?”

He shrugged slightly. “Deserts.”

“Hm. You have heard of Genghis Khan, yes?”

“Conquered most of Asia. What of him?”

“When he died, he was buried in an unmarked grave, and those who knew the location were killed. There are those who seek it.”

“So?”

“It is not his grave we are concerned about them finding. Genghis Khan led the conquest of an empire greater than that of Alexander. He did so on the back of a horse. The leather of the

bridle will have rotted, but the bit will not have. We are looking for the bit.”

“A bit? Across the entirety of Central Asia? Are you mad?”

“People who have had it do not realize what they had. It was not buried somewhere. The bit is the controlling element, and this one was guided by a man whose ability to lead eventually consolidated a fifth of the world.”

“And he didn’t have more than one bridle over the years?”

“He most likely did. This bit in particular was made from the iron of a meteorite. He may not have known that, but it absorbed... not his soul, no, but something of his spirit. In the wrong hands – or, I suppose, depending on your point of view, the *right* hands – someone could lead a new horde to glory.”

“So why do you need us, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You suggest it is not lost, but merely in someone’s possession who does not realize they have it.”

“The Russians are looking for it. The Germans are looking for it. Even the faltering Qing are looking for it. It needs to be found, before they do, and more firmly lost than just *somewhere* in Mongolia.”

“And you need us because...”

“Mostly because you are men,” she shrugged. “I cannot go to Mongolia alone, not with who is already looking. Intelligent men, even if you *are* Westerners, will be a great help.”

“So what would you have us do?”

“Go with me, provide a little muscle if the locals or the competition are too unruly,” she shrugged. “Unless one of you speaks some dialect of Mongolian, I am mostly looking for a show of force that can think their way out of trouble if need be.”

“And your employer’s interest in this?”

“Avoiding a modern Mongol horde? There are too many dangerous egos in the world right now to risk that.”

“What’s he offering?”

“Pounds sterling, I believe. In the neighborhood of five thousand.”

“That’s a good number,” he said, leaning over to kiss her, but she caught him halfway.

“I’m not part of the deal, Mr. Wallace.”

“No? Pity.”

“Do let me know tomorrow if I should be booking tickets for Istanbul.”

“Where?”

“Constantinople, if you must.”

“Constantinople? If you’re going to Mongolia, wouldn’t you want to take the Trans-Siberian Railway?” the mage asked once the American had returned to their hotel.

“I don’t know. I don’t like the idea, Chris,” he said. “She’s not entirely human, and she works for one of *them*.”

“Grigor Lenskorev is mostly an unknown,” Chris replied.

“Antiquities and diamonds,” Harry, the knight, said. “Half the vampires in the world seem to be involved in one or the other.”

“He’s not another Constantine, regardless,” the mage asserted. “Would we even need to see him?”

“I doubt it,” the American shrugged. “She makes it sound like he’s not looking for

someone to do this job so much as to make it possible for her to do it.”

“It sounds like a bad cover story for something else,” Harry said.

“If it pays five thousand pounds sterling, does it matter?”

“Are you thinking about the money or the girl, Sheridan?” Chris said, almost teasing.

“She’s not biting,” the American said, frowning slightly at his middle name. “Anything but, Chris. Ma’am was mad to name me that.”

“The reference is lost on me,” he said blandly.

“Philip Sheridan? Burned parts of the Shenandoah Valley down to nothing? I don’t know what she was thinking.”

“He’s referring,” Harry said, “to a war that ended before he was born. A proverbial chip on his shoulder. At least she didn’t pick Sherman.”

“God, I’d have been lynched before I was out of grammar school.”

“William Wallace is not an entirely popular name in England,” Harry said. “You would not have been much better off there.”

“Ma’am was of Scottish extraction,” he said. “It was to be expected, marrying a Wallace as she did.”

“So, Mongolia, then?” Chris broke in. “Not that Bill’s family peculiarities aren’t fascinating—”

“Why are you so eager to do this?” Harry asked. The mage was quiet for a moment.

“Paris is... quite cosmopolitan, yes. But the Church knows, and eventually, wherever we go, the local parishes hear. I could go home to Meerkerk, and they would leave me alone, but I think being out in the world makes them nervous.”

“They’ve no cause to bother you. It’s not like you’re involved in the occult.”

“Right, but eight out of ten of the people they run across who can use this kind of magic are,” he said, sighing slightly. “I don’t know why. Defying the laws of physics is mostly just convenient. A séance with a demon doesn’t seem like it could ever end well.”

“That’s because you’re a sane, logical man,” Harry said. “And Dutch. When are the Dutch ever anything but practical?”

“Well, she’s expecting an answer by tomorrow. Otherwise she’ll likely take Gerard,” Bill said. “And Gerard does not need yet another reason to gloat.”

“There’s still the problem of the vampire,” Harry said.

“I doubt he’s going to Mongolia,” Chris said. “If it’s all done through the girl...”

“What do we know about her?” the knight asked, shifting his eyes to Bill.

“Siberian. Says her father is an elf,” he shrugged. “Her English is quite good, considering.”

“Better than your French,” Chris offered.

“Ha. Well, she wasn’t interested, regardless.”

“Is there a skirt you *won’t* chase?” Harry asked.

“Madame Serena D’Avignon,” Bill offered.

“Good to know the undead are off the table for *some* things.”

“Her leer was a little disturbing,” he said. “I’m fairly sure she was admiring my throat.”

“Well?” Chris asked. “Are we telling her yes or no?”

“We’re short on cash, and other work hasn’t been cropping up,” Bill said. “Another, what, week and a half? And then what are we going to do?”

Harry sighed. “You’re going to make me decide, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m going to make you think about the conversation if you have to go back to

England and explain to your father why you're coming home," Bill said, leaning forward slightly. "My mother wants me to come home and take a job in my father's accounting firm. My God, I have advanced degrees in chemistry. *Accounting?*"

"Not that you've done anything with those degrees," Harry said. "Fine, we'll go. Did you even get her name?"

"Ah, well..."

"Bill's not particularly good at getting names," Chris said.

"Or at checking for rings, apparently," Harry said. "Tomorrow, then."

Shael was sitting in the lobby of the men's hotel when they came downstairs mid-morning; she stood as they approached her. She had taken care with her hair that morning, leaving the bulk of it loose so that the raven curls fell halfway down her back. The American, as she had expected, was suitably distracted; she did not want him asking too many questions of substance.

"*Zdravstvuyte*, gentlemen," she said. "Are introductions in order, or shall I go?"

"Bill Wallace," the American offered before either of the others could aggravate him with his middle name. "The not-quite-Father is Christoffel van der Meer, and our knight-bachelor is Sir Harris Lloyd."

Shael curtsied slightly. "Formally, I am Ashaelaria Vranisovna Progdyova, but I am generally called Shael west of the Urals. Shall I arrange passage, then? It would be better if I got out of Paris sooner rather than later."

"How soon?" Harry asked.

"This evening may be possible. Shall I meet you here at, perhaps, three o'clock?"

Bill, as he'd introduced himself, was watching her eyes, and she was uncertain of his intent. Apparently the hair had not been enough. Perhaps a little cleavage—

"So did Gerard's goon give you any trouble last night?" he asked, and she frowned slightly.

"Not as such. I doubt he will be a problem."

"Gerard, or the goon?"

"The *goon*, as you call him. Gerard?" She just shrugged slightly.

"You know him fairly well, don't you?"

"Shall we say, better than I would like to?" she frowned. "Grigor likes that he is direct. It is a difficult personality to work with in situations requiring... delicacy."

"It's good of you to say it," he said, leaning forward to kiss her, but she caught him by the shoulder again.

"You Americans are notorious for theft of kisses," she said. "I'd much prefer to keep mine."

"Fair enough," Bill shrugged.

"Three this afternoon?" Chris broke in.

"Yes. That should give us time to make the train."

The Gare de l'Est was bustling; Shael had given the tickets over to the men at the hotel and had let them handle arrangements after that. She smiled to herself as she stood in the foyer; give them direction and a timetable, and they would do most of the work for her. The mage rejoined her first.

"You do realize you have booked us two doubles in the sleeping car," he said to her.

“Grigor is generous, but not so generous as to pay for private rooms on the express,” she said. “I had assumed at least one of the three of you was enough of a gentleman to room with. On the Mongolian steppes, privacy will be... minimal, anyway.”

“Ah. Well.”

“Preferably not the one who is intent on a kiss,” she said, frowning slightly, “or he may discover that the daughter of a warrior of the third tier can be much more assertive about telling him no.”

“So why Constantinople?”

She smiled faintly. “That is not for explaining here.”

“Is it really that dangerous?”

“Only if someone else gets to it first. I would rather not inadvertently lay my hand on the table so early in the game.”

“I don’t think any of us trust your employer.”

“It’s generally better not to,” she said.

The train was the Orient Express, and the men found Shael to be familiar with its layout. She retired early, immediately after supper, but the three men lingered in the restaurant car a while.

“Well?” Harry said quietly to the other two.

“One of us ought try to get something more concrete out of her before we’re in over our heads,” Bill said, a cigar firmly between his teeth, fishing in his pockets for his matches.

“She has you on edge.”

“Despite what she said last night, she apparently doesn’t want me thinking too hard about what she’s asking us to do,” he said. “She’s a woman; she’s going to be up to *something* anyway.”

“You’ve never really been the brains of this group,” Harry said lightly.

“Not for lack of aptitude,” Bill said. “Why else would she be all dolled up today rather than yesterday?”

“Whoever shares a room with her tonight should probably talk to her,” Chris suggested.

“That’s unusually forward, coming from you,” Harry said.

“What, you didn’t look at the tickets? We have four beds in two staterooms. Unless one of us is going to sleep in a chair...”

“Well, this is going to be awkward,” Harry said, frowning at Bill’s suddenly innocent eyes. “No, not you. You can’t be trusted to keep your hands to yourself.”

“You’re not likely to get anywhere conversationally,” Bill countered. “Christ, you can hardly order breakfast from a woman.”

“Then I suppose we’ve narrowed it down to Chris,” Harry said.

“I suppose we have,” Bill said, frowning at the mage.

“I—but—”

“Well, go on,” Harry said. “Before she’s asleep.”