

And So It Begins
by Kim Switzer

“Hello.”

Alice stepped away, putting her back against the tottering bookshelf she had been browsing. She eyed the young man in front of her, narrowing her eyes slightly. Judging him harmless, she gave him a slight, sharp nod and moved away.

“Wait,” the man spoke again, taking a step toward her.

Alice glanced around, but the aisle was empty except for the two of them. She knew if she raised her voice Mr. Perkins, the shop's elderly owner, would hear her even over the Mozart streaming from the speakers overhead, but she didn't want to involve him in any trouble.

She stared hard at the young man, hoping her glare would drive him away, but he just stared back, his brown eyes wide and hopeful. She blew out an impatient breath.

“I'm just here to look at books,” she told him. “I'm not looking for conversation.” When the man didn't move, she added, “Besides, I'm seeing someone.”

“Really?” His eyebrows shot up into his fringe of bangs. “I thought Queen's Guards were supposed to stay unattached, focused on the job, all of that. Of course, you have been away for a long time. I supposed it's easy to grow lax after so many months.”

Alice stiffened. “Queen's Guard?” she asked, feigning ignorance.

“It's all right.” The young man leaned closer and lowered his voice. “I know who you are. You're Alice. Benny told me. Told me how to find you. I'm Andrew.”

He held out a hand. Alice stared at him, ignoring the hand until Andrew dropped it awkwardly. He stared back, blinking. Then he brightened. “Oh! I forgot. Sorry. Benny said I'm supposed to tell you 'mongoose.’”

Alice nodded slowly. She recognized the code word, but she also knew that it was nearly a year out of date. Something was clearly not right, and all her senses were on high alert. She thought about running but decided to play along.

“Benny told you how to find me? How is Benny?”

Andrew frowned slightly. “What? Oh, he's good. Fine. Um...”

“So why did Benny send you to find me?”

“He didn't send me. Just told me how to find you. I...” Andrew paused and looked over his shoulder. He leaned closer and whispered, “I need your help.”

Alice rolled her eyes. She was stuck now. Even this far from home, as part of the Queen's Guard it was her job to help when someone called on her for assistance. But she didn't like the feel of this at all.

“How can I help you, Andrew?”

“Someone has taken my sister. I think it was someone from the Empress' Guard.”

“Why would you think that? No one's even sure they still exist.”

“Oh, they exist.”

“If they do, why would they take your sister?”

“My family.” Andrew looked uncomfortable. “I don't really want to go into it. A long time ago, my family was connected to the Empress. It was a long time ago,” he insisted. “But you know how it is, people won't let things go, they hold grudges. You know.” His voice rose, pleading with her to understand, to believe him.

“I know,” she soothed him. “So what do you need from me?”

“I know where they have her. Benny heard things from some friends of his who heard things.”

Alice nodded. “I get it. Benny hears a lot of things from a lot of friends. So where is your sister?”

“I need...I need protection,” Andrew said. “I need to go in and get her, but I can't do it alone.”

“Okay.” Alice set the books she was carrying on a rolling cart at the end of the aisle and headed toward the front of the store. “I need to go home and change and pick up a few things for the trip, then we can go.” She paused to look back at him. “Don't worry. We'll get your sister back. I promise.”

An hour later they were heading down a narrow alley between two buildings in Old Town. Alice had swapped her jeans and sweater for cargo pants, a black turtleneck, and a mid-thigh length leather coat with hidden pockets filled with knives and tools she hoped she wouldn't need.

At the end of the alley, the buildings widened, and the walkway became too narrow for a person to fit through. Alice pulled a small mirror on a chain from the front of her shirt and held it in her right hand. She looked back at Andrew. “You have the token?”

“Right here,” he said, holding up a small, round faceted stone.

“And you're sure your sister is in the same place where you left the other token?”

“I'm sure. I mean, she's not right where I left it, of course. But she's in that building, I'm sure of that.”

Alice nodded. “Okay.” She grasped Andrew's wrist with her left hand. “Be careful. Stay out of the way if anything happens but make sure we don't get separated. And be careful when we cross; it's easy to lose your footing. Got it?” At his nod, Alice tightened her grip on his wrist and held the mirror up toward the opening in front of them. “Let's go.”

Alice broke into a run, heading straight for the brick wall. Andrew squeaked but ran with her. They hit the wall and pushed through. To Alice it always felt like pushing her body through partially set gelatine.

She released Andrew's hand as they emerged into a long, narrow room filled with stacks of wooden boxes and sheet-covered furniture. She rolled into a crouch, letting the mirror bounce against her chest. She looked over to where Andrew was rolling clumsily onto his hands and knees, panting. "You okay?" she whispered.

"Yeah, okay. Yeah." Andrew stayed on his hands and knees, his head hanging limply. "Is it always like that?"

"You get used to it." Alice rose, a flashlight in her left hand and a small knife with a cord-wrapped handle and a Damascus blade in her right. She checked behind the first boxes and moved cautiously through the room, motioning for Andrew to follow her.

Lights blazed overhead, and Alice moved quickly to put her back against the nearest wall. She waved at Andrew to move out of the center of the room, but he just shrugged one shoulder and smiled at her. "Sorry. It's not quite what I made it out to be." He waved at two men approaching down the center aisle of the room.

"I see that," Alice said. She put the flashlight back into her pocket and slid another knife out of one of the interior pockets of her coat. She edged back toward where they had come in.

"If you come with us you'll make things easier for everyone," said one of the newcomers.

Alice's eyes widened as she took in the purple suit and top hat. She shifted the throwing knife in her left hand a bit. "That's not going to happen. I'm going to go back where I came from. If you stay out of my way and let me do that, **you'll** make things easier for everyone."

"I'm afraid that's not going to work for me," he said. He started sliding his right hand out of his coat. The man who came in with him started running toward Alice.

Alice threw her knife at the second man, catching him in the upper arm. He pulled the knife out and kept coming. She switched the other knife to her left hand and pulled out another throwing knife, feinting a throw at the first man, who bobbed out of the way, leaving her line of sight clear to the second man. This time the knife hit his cheek under his right eye, and he dropped to the floor with a scream.

Alice closed with the first man, rushing him and slicing at him with her knife, nicking his calf as she dropped and rolled away. He unwound a leather scarf from around his neck and flicked it at her, leaving a line of cuts across the top of her hand where the barbed wire fringe struck her. Alice rose into a crouch, throwing another knife at the other man who was stumbling to his feet. It stuck in the hollow of his throat, and this time he dropped soundlessly and didn't move again.

Andrew was no where to be seen, but Alice moved to keep her back near a wall just in case. She didn't think he would be much of a fighter, but it never hurt to be cautious. "Now what?" she asked her remaining opponent. They stood watching each other warily, neither of them making a move.

"You're not going to get out of here. You might as well come with me."

"I don't think so," Alice said. "I have this feeling my odds of survival would go way down if I go

anywhere with you.”

“You don't really have a choice. You're stuck.”

“Not really,” Alice said with a small smile.

The man looked puzzled. Alice's smile broadened. She grabbed the mirror around her neck and turned it toward him as she ran at him. His eyes widened, and he tried to dive out of the way. Alice hit his legs, feeling them splinter around her. His scream faded in her ears and she fell with a thud onto the dirty asphalt of the alley.

She rose unsteadily to her feet and headed back up the alley, looking around suspiciously before stepping out onto the sidewalk and joining the flow of pedestrians. She looked back at the entrance to the alley and shook her head. She had escaped, but she knew this was only the beginning. Nothing was going to be the same again.

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