

## **Liat's POV**

They headed back to the hotel Liat was staying at in order to gather his things, let them know he was leaving and then headed out. He was a little bummed he wouldn't get to visit with his foster family but he figured he would find time at some point when work inevitably slowed down enough for him to take a short vacation. As of right now, he needed to find out what was going on with the quest Echo had taken on.

Instead of them asking the same questions he had come to expect, things about what happened to his arm, the reason for his scars, and so on, she had commented on the things that had just happened. Maybe she realized that she had looked at him wide-eyed after the lights came on and was trying to compensate. Either way, he was glad she kept the same old questions to herself.

"Got a quicker way through layer two or are we climbing it?" she asked. He was startled out of his thoughts, not really used to having someone else with him on most missions.

"I have a spell transporter we can use to get to layer three's headquarters. This is a secret of course, so don't go spilling it to others," he said. Echo nodded.

"No problem. I don't usually talk to most people anyways," she said, glancing away. He started to wonder if she was worried about staring at him too long. He chose to ignore the gnawing in his gut.

Before he could think, he blurted out, "shy or because of your shades?" he asked. She glanced back up with a small smile.

"The shades mostly. And my soul weapon. People don't typically trust me very much due to my appearance. Can't say I blame them but it does make it difficult to make friends, much less have any meaningful relationships with anyone," she admitted.

"Family?" he asked. She shook her head.

"Nah, they wanted me to hand over my scythe and money to the blacksmith who had taught me the craft, stating that I basically snubbed him even though that wasn't the deal. I ended up launching myself off of layer six in order to start my life over without

them,” she said with a laugh. Her eyes had focused on nothing, probably stuck in those memories. Liat knew the feeling all too well.

*Maybe she wasn't actually gawking at me for my arm then.*

“I know the feeling of not having a reliable family. It was my father’s fault about my arm,” he said before he could think about what he was saying. For some reason, he felt that he could trust Echo though he couldn’t pinpoint why. Maybe because they shared similar pain.

“I’m sorry that ended up happening. I’m sure you get a lot of grief about it. People have a tendency to act differently when you look different,” she said. Liat nodded.

“Don’t I know it,” he said with a humorless chuckle.

### **Echo’s POV**

As much as Echo wanted to know more about him, they knew better than to push. After all, they didn’t like it when people had too many questions about her. Especially where her shades were concerned. She had gotten them when someone tried to curse her parents but got her instead. She’d bet money the same thing had happened to Liat.

As they came up to a wall of rocks, Echo prepared herself mentally for the climb before Liat put a hand up.

“We’re here,” he said. Echo looked around before getting the idea.

“The transporter is hidden in the stone,” she said, amazed. Liat smiled a little and Echo stomach did a backflip.

“Exactly. Want to hide something, put it in plain sight,” he said before saying something under his breath, making the rocks move aside, revealing a shimmering portal behind it. Echo’s eyes widened as she walked towards it.

“That’s amazing! I had heard of these types of spells being set up but never knew someone could actually make them work,” she said.

“They take a lot of time and magical training to be able to create them. Which is why they’re only used by certain agencies. Don’t want people taking a short cut with the climb but we want to be able to get to places when needed without having to take all the time to get there, especially when it’s time sensitive,” he said. Echo nodded.

“I just walk into it?” she asked. Liat nodded.

“I can go first if you’d prefer?” he offered. Echo shook her head.

“It’s alright, may as well get it over with,” she said and walked into it. There was a strange feeling as if she had been flipped upside down before she found herself in the middle of a massive clearing. A moment later, Liat walked up behind her. She moved to give him space, feeling her face heat up when he was close enough that their hands brushed. To distract herself, she pulled out the quest papers.

“According to the directions to get back to the client, they’re on some sort of trail away from Aurelion,” she said, reading off the directions. Liat nodded.

“I think I know where that’s at actually and I’m not happy about it,” he said. Echo looked up in alarm.

“You’ve been there before?” they asked. His face took on a grim look.

“One of my father’s old contacts,” he said slowly. While Echo’s curiosity was strong, her common sense was stronger. Whatever happened between him and his dad was none of her business and she was starting to think it was even confidential so she nodded and gestured to the clearing.

“I can understand why the portal on layer one was hidden within rocks but why the location for this one? This is hardly a good hiding spot,” she pointed out. Liat gestured for her to follow and she did.

“The entire clearing is actually hidden,” he said, holding some vines out of her way as they exited. When they turned back around, the clearing was gone. Echo tried walking back in, only to find that the area was dense with trees and wasn’t passable.

"Wow, you guys really think of everything, don't ya?" they asked. Liat smiled, happy for the praise.

"We try," he said and started walking. Echo didn't mind him leading the way, after all, he obviously knew more about where they were heading than she did and if it was as dangerous as he was making her think it was, she was glad she wasn't walking into this alone.

## **Liat's POV**

*That bastard hasn't changed, he's still trying to lure people in for testing.*

Liat knew exactly who set this up and he cursed at himself for not realizing it sooner when Echo first told him about it in the woods. At the time, he was too preoccupied by the mission at hand and he had been sure this particular tatsukoi had been apprehended by now but he guessed that he was wrong. Glad that Echo wasn't asking questions but now he was perplexed with another emotion. Wanting to share everything. He was unsure why but Echo didn't make him feel like he was putting on a show. It seems like they were willing to accept the answers he was willing to give but not push. Which if anything, made him want to share it more. Maybe another time...

"Have you ever thought about joining the force instead of doing quests off those boards? You seem capable enough to pass the tests," he offered. Echo seemed to consider this before answering.

"Up until now, I hadn't given it much thought. I guess that's a byproduct of always being told I'd never amount to anything," she said with a laugh that tugged at Liat's heart. He knew the feeling of being told he was worthless by someone who was supposed to give care and love.

"I believe you could do it. I didn't get to see much of your fighting but you took out several of those spellcasters so that counts for something," he said. She seemed to be far away in thought at this.

"Maybe. After this, we'll see," she said. Liat nodded, thankful she was at least willing to consider. Though he wasn't sure where that came from.

Sooner than he remembered, they came up upon the cabin he remembered so well. Not much had changed. In fact, he was sure there was some sort of time freeze spell at work because even the plants hadn't grown. Echo must have noticed something because she laid a hand on his arm.

"You alright? You're shaking," she said gently. Liat noticed that she was right and took a few steadying breaths.

"I'll be fine. There's work to be done and he forced himself forward. This guy and his father had been business partners for a while and had had similar tendencies. He knew the front door was a trap so he headed around back to a tree in the backyard where he knew the secret entrance was hidden. The only problem; he was now too big to get through it.

"Secret entrance?" Echo guessed. He nodded. When Echo went to go through, he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "You're too big and they might be expecting you. I can sneak in," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, not feeling right about sending her in there alone. She smiled and his stomach and chest felt warm.

"Wouldn't be the first time I walked into something of a trap," she said with a light laugh. He nodded.

"When you reach the bottom, go straight. There will be five paths, take the one marked with a red triangle, the paths shift so it's never the same one but they're always marked. Once inside, do an unlocking spell and I can get in the front to help," he said. She nodded and started down the ladder within the tree before he reached out and touched her shoulder gently. "Be careful," he said. She grinned.

"What's an adventure without a little danger?" she asked then descended. Liat hoped he wasn't sending her in to die.

## **Echo's POV**

Truth be told, she was a little scared but she had a job to do, much like he did. She had to see this to the end so someone else wouldn't meet a worse fate. At least with having Liat with her, she hadn't walked blindly into something dangerous that she couldn't handle.

Just as he told her, she came to five pathways, the one on the very right holding the same colored symbol he had told her it would. Taking that path, she hurried along, not wanting to be caught off guard. At the end of the path was another ladder leading up through some type of wooden door. Climbing it, she pushed gently on the trap door and it let up without much fuss or noise. As she crawled out of the tunnel, she quietly closed the door underneath her and did the unlocking spell he had mentioned. She heard a click then heard something snap as a cage was dropped from somewhere above her, catching her in it.

"You must have met someone along the way who gave you precise instructions I see," said a voice from the darkness. Echo glared around her.

"Show yourself coward!" she shouted. The voice laughed.

"How original you are. Your magic will be a nice addition to my storage," they said before Echo started feeling the magic drain out of her. She glared and summoned her scythe.

"I don't think so," she growled before slashing at the bars, hearing the voice laughing at her futile attempts. Through the haze that was rolling in, she decided on one last desperate move. Throwing her scythe as hard as she could, she nailed the bladed edge into the door, forced it through and then before she started to fade, summoned the scythe back to her, splintering the door enough to allow Liat through, breaking the lock spell in the process.

### **Liat's POV**

He had heard when the unlocking spell went wrong and things started happening inside. He immediately started getting the traps disengaged from the front door when a scythe was suddenly sticking out of it and the door was gone. Stepping through, he saw that Echo was fading in a cage that was sucking out her magic. In one turn, he swept the old mage out of the shadows and onto the floor, stopping the spell in its tracks. Forcing him to reverse it was easy enough, he had always been a coward.

"Your little play thing should learn better manners, as should you, you useless welp!" he spat. Knowing sleeping spells would do nothing to him, he knocked him out with a swift strike to the head with his mechanical arm.

"Shut up for once," he muttered before running over to Echo who was barely conscious. He removed the cage and then gently picked her up and brought her outside.

"Echo, can you hear me?" he asked. She stirred but was obviously too weak for anything else. Her shades bobbed around her silently, mirroring his anxiety. He took a few steady breaths before he gently forced some of his magic back into her. A moment later, she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Did we do it?" she asked. Liat grinned.

"That we did," he said.

"Good, you owe me lunch," she said, falling against him. He chuckled.

"You can have anything you want," he muttered quietly against her hair.

"How about you then?" she said so softly, he almost hadn't heard her. Almost.

At that moment, his backup arrived that he had summoned the moment the mission took a turn. His superior from the forest hurried over to them.

"Are they injured?" he asked.

"Magically drained by the lunatic, I gave her some of my magic to sustain her until I could get her to a healer. If it wasn't for her, we never would have gotten him," he said, as he watched as his colleagues dragged the still sleeping tatsukoi out in magical cuffs. A healer from the unit came over and returned the stolen magic that had been stored in the cage she had been in. Echo gained full consciousness back and immediately jumped up, looking sheepish.

"Hope this doesn't ruin my chances of joining up," she said with a lopsided grin. Liat smiled and glanced at his boss.

“She could be a valuable asset to the cause,” he said. His superior seemed to think for a moment before nodding.

“Yes, I think this will work out well. You can skip the tests as I’ve already observed some of your abilities and if Liat of all people is willing to vouch for you, well you have my vote of confidence. Granted, you will be assigned to Liat for one year before a re-evaluation will be conducted. He will teach you well and I think this will be good for him to not be alone all the time,” he said and turned to go back the way he came and follow the mages who carried the crazy out of the woods. Before he went, he glanced back at him. “Maybe now you’ll learn to trust someone, hm?” And with that, he left, leaving Echo and Liat staring at each other. Echo smirked.

“So I guess I have a job now, huh?” they asked. Liat smirked back.

“That you do,” he said.

“How about lunch first?” she asked. He chuckled.

“Sounds good to me.”