

## Echo's POV

Once again, Echo found themselves chasing quests on the quest boards in the taverns. Only this time, it was for a place in the Basin which he had not been expecting. The quest was a simple one it seemed. Retrieve an item that had been lost. Simple enough right?

Echo followed the written instructions, careful to keep her slitted skirt keeping the right leg that had her soul weapon tattoo from view. There was nothing she could do about her three shades of course but she was used to the stares she got from people. Over the last several months of her doing these types of quests, she had been given several nicknames, but the one that was funniest to her was "The Essence of Death". It was hilarious because despite her appearance, she was actually pretty kind so long as you weren't causing problems or being rude. She always preferred to deescalate a situation versus get angry or have to fight. Which people usually found ironic given the fact that not many people had a soul weapon. Some people told her that she was wasting it by never using it. She disagreed.

Looking back at her notes for what she was supposed to find, it was an odd one. Apparently, there was some sort of doll their child was missing that they didn't realize was gone until they had started the climb. First off, she found it strange that they would be doing the climb with their child since usually people would wait until they were adults in order to handle the strain the climb came with, and second off, she always found it interesting how people just randomly lost things. She always had the same items with her in her backpack but she chalked it up to everyone being a bit different.

As she entered the woods her notes said they lost it in, the light suddenly went from midday to late evening. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her shades started floating back and forth in a nervous type circuit.

"It's alright, I'm going to get to the bottom of this," they said though she hoped she was right on this. The sunlight suddenly phasing out wasn't something she knew the spell to.

She continued on for several minutes. As the darkness started creeping in further, she held up her hand and cast a light spell so she could see. Instantly, there was a swooping sound and next thing she knew, the light went out and she was on her back with something huge pressing down on her.

"Don't struggle," said a gruff voice above her. She glared in the darkness.

"Easy for you to say when you're not the one on the ground being pinned for no reason by a stranger," she managed to choke out as the air from her lungs and air sack was struggling against the weight. The pressure lightened only a little which caused her to stop struggling as much. Figuring she could get out of this by talking seemed the better option.

"What are you doing here?" asked the gruff voice though it was more a demand than a question.

"Looking for a toy a kid left behind, it was a quest on the cork board on layer three. Slow day, I know," she said, trying to crack a joke. Though she couldn't see squat in the darkness, she could see a glint of light bounce off something to her left, something that was pinning her shoulder to the ground. The weight shifted just a bit.

"Any proof of that?" they asked.

"If you let me up, I can show you the flier and my notes I took, though I doubt you'd be able to see anything in all this," she said. A moment passed where Echo didn't think she would be taken up on that offer but the weight suddenly disappeared completely and she was dragged up by her shoulders as if she weighed nothing.

*How strong is this guy? I'm not exactly light weight!*

Rummaging through her bag in the pocket she always kept her information in, she pulled out the folded papers and offered them in the direction of where the light was glinting from something on the stranger. They were taken a second later and the smallest of lights came from their fingers. It wasn't enough for Echo to see their facial features but it was enough to show her how large the other tatsukoi was. He was the tallest person she had ever seen and by far the biggest. She began to run numbers in her head about how much he would weigh and how when he had her pinned, he must not have been putting that much weight on her. After a few more moments she saw him nod.

"Checks out," he said, putting the papers back in her hand. "You should leave, there's something else going on here that I've been assigned to find out the origin of," he said as he started to turn away.

“Hold on one second!” Echo said, scrambling after him. “I can probably help! I’ve been on loads of quests before and this is starting to feel like one I recently had,” she said. The other tatsukoi stopped and turned, she only knew this because there was no other sound in this forest except them.

“What was the origin of that one?” he asked.

“It was on a much smaller scale than this but it was in someone’s house. The homeowners wanted someone to come in and dispel it but it was a really strange darkness that just seemed to hang in the air, just like this one. There was a book that was anchoring the spell but my theory is that it could be any item the spellcaster selects,” she explained.

“Did you ever find out the origin of who cast it and why?” he asked.

“Yes, unfortunately, the person who cast it was their daughter and she was messing with magic she shouldn’t have. When the item was disturbed, the spell was broken and that’s when we found her, er, what was left of her anyways,” she said, shifting uncomfortably. The aftermath of that situation had not been a good one and Echo wasn’t equipped to handle a grieving set of parents. “It looked like any magical blasts and some experts that came in afterwards confirmed that she had been using magic she shouldn’t have,” she explained, hoping this would mean she could go with him. She wasn’t keen on trying to get out of the woods by herself now.

The other tatsukoi seemed to be weighing her words carefully before speaking.

*At least he’s not one of those dumb officers that acts first, thinks later.*

“Alright, you can come with me. Besides, I’m not sure that sending you back out of here on your own would be a wise idea. The person I’m looking for has been known to be dangerous and I don’t want to have to deal with a hostage situation if I don’t have to,” he said. Echo nodded though realized he couldn’t see it and immediately felt stupid.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said as she followed the sounds of his footsteps though it was really difficult. For someone so big, he made almost no sound as he walked. She tripped over a root or something and found that he was catching her with little effort.

“Sorry,” she muttered out, embarrassed by her own two feet. She felt a hand take her arm gently as they started walking.

## **Liat's POV**

As much as he didn't want to have someone else along for the investigation, he had to admit, it was too much of a coincidence that the other tatsukoi was here on a quest at the same time he was here for this incident. He suspected that the two things may be connected in some way and he didn't want any casualties this time.

As they made their way through the forest as quietly as they could, Liat's arm on the smaller tatsukoi's, he began to wonder about the girl who cast the spell in their story.

"How are we supposed to find this thing if we can't see?" they whispered.

"I can sense magical items. This one will be difficult because of how vast the forest is but it's like a beacon drawing me towards it," he explained quietly.

"But what if it's a trap?" they asked.

"I'm prepared for a fight. Are you?" he asked.

"If I have to, I have to," they said with a sigh. Suddenly, Liat was interested in the full story of this tatsukoi though he tried to force the curiosity down. "I'm Echo, by the way. Any pronouns," they said quickly.

"Liat." He wasn't much for talking about himself and he hated introductions. He hoped his new companion wouldn't mind but he shut that part of his brain down. There wasn't time to worry about whether or not Echo would be offended by the lack of pleasantries or not, he had a job to do.

"Do you think the lack of noise is due to the spell? That wasn't something I noticed the last time but it was only one room instead of a whole forest," she said.

"Either that, or it's a separate spell. On my way over this direction, I fell into the river because I couldn't hear the water moving. Definitely not a place you want to be if you can't see very well," he said.

"May even have to do a sweep of the forest once we're done in case anyone wandered in and got in trouble," she suggested.

“Agreed,” he said and continued on. The call was getting stronger.

As they came up on a hill, there was a pulsing of power that even Echo could feel. Down below, there was a group of people in robes, chanting quietly around a fire with several books floating in the air around them. Echo couldn't understand most of what they were chanting but he supposed it had to do with the current spells at work.

“Game plan?” she whispered.

“Put a stop to the chanting, I don't care how. Any amount of damage you do to them will be excused due to the circumstance. You may have to kill. Are you alright with that?” Liat asked, fixing Echo with a stare neither of them could see in the darkness.

“Yes.”

“Then let's go,” he said, then walked forward, blasting an electrical blast towards the ground behind them.

“This is your one warning to drop the spells and come quietly in for questioning as commanded by the Magic Enforcers. Resistance will be met with force,” he said, his voice booming across the field.

Just as he thought, the group immediately split into two groups, one to keep the current spells going and the others to fight the two of them.

Liat was careful not to use any spells that gave off any light, feeling like any spells giving off light would just feed into the spell the others were still keeping going. Controlling the plant roots was vital in tripping up the ones he had, still trying to detain at least one of them for questioning while Echo went in, trying to subdue the spellcasters. At one point, Liat looked over as Echo was in the middle of a fight that almost resembled a dance with how elegant they were. They had a scythe out and were blocking most things they were throwing at her while sweeping their legs and magicking the books out from in front of them, disrupting the spell. Slowly, the light started filtering in through the trees, the darkness dissipating. Echo looked over at Liat whose eyes went wide at the sight of him. He looked away, used to that sort of look. People always seemed so surprised by his height, build, scars, and most notably, the mechanical arm. He knew he was a mess but he didn't have the luxury to care. Making sure the six spellcasters were tied with magical bindings to cease any magic they could do, he signaled with a flare to the person who was his overseer for this mission. They had been searching from the other side of the forest, they'd be here soon to get them

moved. In the meantime, he knew he had to wait. And with Echo walking towards him, he knew he was in for the same questions he had answered a million times.

## Echo's POV Soufflé

*Holy shit, he's so attractive.*

Echo was suddenly very glad that the lights hadn't been on during the fight because Liat was breathtaking. The scars nor the mechanical hand bothered her none.

"That went better than expected," she started, unsure what else to say. Liat almost looked surprised.

"Uh..yeah," he said.

"So, I'm guessing the spellbooks were it, wasn't it?" she asked, desperate to keep the conversation going. She at least wanted to know more about him.

"It definitely looks like it," he said, then noticed something by the fire that was now smoldering. "Does this match the description of your quest?" he asked. Echo pulled out her papers and nodded.

"That would be it," she said and hesitated a little before taking it from him. It looked like a regular old doll but there was something strange about all this.

"Why would it be out here right next to them?" he asked the question she was thinking.

"I have no idea. But I might get a clue if I return it," she said. Liat nodded.

"I think I should go with you. If these things are connected, you may need back up and this may be more dangerous than what you're prepared for," he said. Echo nodded, though it wasn't just because he was right. Any chance to get to go somewhere else with him would be interesting, she just knew it.

"You're probably right. This definitely isn't the first crazy thing I've walked into, it probably won't be the last," she said with a chuckle before banishing her scythe back to her leg. Liat looked at her curiously.

"You have a soul weapon?" he asked, obviously impressed. Echo grinned.

"Yup! I keep it hidden though so people don't know I'm armed but also the questions got to be really annoying after a while when everyone always asks the same things," she said. Liat smiled a little.

"I know the feeling," he said, absentmindedly rubbing his metal arm.

"I can only imagine," she said, truly feeling for him. She could at least hide her tattoo, there wasn't much he could do to hide his arm.

Out of some bushes came another tatsukoi. He was tall but nothing like Liat.

"My superior," he explained shortly. Echo nodded and stepped away to let them talk.

The area that they were in looked nice in the afternoon light now that the spell was done. Her shades wandered around her, almost as if prodding her to look back at Liat. She rolled her eyes at them.

"Don't even. I know you have no sentience so I know this is only my own brain but no. He probably already has someone or is married to his job. There is no way anything is going to come of this. I need to get that thought out of my head," she said to herself before looking back at him. "Though I can at least admire the view during the commute to layer three," she muttered to herself. He was nicely muscled and he had already proven to be a good and intelligent fighter. Taking a few deep breaths to steady herself, she turned back and walked towards them when she saw him gesturing in her direction.

His superior had a few questions for her and agreed by the end of it that Liat should go with her to complete her quest. She smiled and glanced at him.

"When do you want to leave?" she asked.

"Now would be fine if there's nothing else," he said. She nodded.

“Fine with me.”

So