A Spy Today Keeps The Prey At Bay

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A Spy Today Keeps The Prey At Bay

by WriteOfMoon

Summary

Moze meets a suspicious figure who turns out to be more than meets the eye. He's wrapped up in a game of cat and mouse as he tries to uncover the mystery looming right underneath his nose.

Chapter 1: Part 1

Part 1

Moze had been keeping watch over a tour group at the Xianzhou Yaoqing... a part of his job, albeit not one he particularly enjoyed. He observed closely from his position atop one of the roofs with his hawk-like gaze, idly juggling his long dagger with one hand.

His boredom was soon interrupted when he noticed a certain visitor acting suspiciously, seemingly slipping away from the group and disappearing into a narrow alleyway.

Their sudden departure caught his attention, prompting him to follow with his dagger at the ready. As the visitor reached the end of the alley, they were greeted by the sound of Moze's stern voice echoing from behind.

"Leaving the tour without authorization is against the law," he said. "You must state your purpose, or I will be forced to take action."

The person kept their back turned. "Then, I suppose I've broken two laws here. You've caught me. Now what?" a feminine voice came from the concealed figure, spoken in a rather cheeky tone as she slowly lifted her hands in surrender, with one holding a tied bag.

Moze narrowed his sharp lilac-colored eyes, watching her closely as she raised her hands in mock defeat. He tightened his grip on his blade, not buying her innocent act for a second. "Turn around. Slowly," he ordered, tone cold as ice. "I want to see what's in the bag. No sudden movements."

"Easy there, boy. I won't bite," she said whilst obeying.

Beneath her hooded cloak, she was wearing... rather skimpy clothing. Albeit very filthy and torn ones. Her faded white top looked like it could rip at any second, only covering her bosom with the thick threads of the center barely concealing her cleavage.

Her skin-tight, brown skirt was equally as bad. Her knee-high black boots were probably the only thing in good condition. Even her black leather gloves that only exposed her fingers, were pretty worn out.

She dropped the bag from her hand, which opened up on impact of hitting the ground, revealing some stolen food; bread and cheese.

Moze raised a brow in disbelief when he saw the contents of the bag.

Bread and cheese?

How... underwhelming.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he asked, unable to hide the mockery in his voice. He approached her, stepping closer as he continued to eye her. "You went through all this trouble just to steal food?"

The woman, Stelle, met his gaze with her own. A smug little smirk on her face. "No, handsome," she corrects. "I went through all this trouble to save a life."

She was being outright honest, but she intentionally made herself sound more suspicious just for the fun of it.

Moze studied her carefully, his expression neutral. The look on her face, coupled with her ambiguous words, put him on edge. He couldn't tell if she was being truthful or if she was merely toying with him.

He moved even closer, closing the distance between them. Now standing directly in front of her, his tall frame towered over her petite form.

"Save a life? With bread and cheese?" he said flatly, though his tone dripped with skepticism.

Stelle chuckled at his puzzled response. Finding the way he said it rather comical. She enjoyed making people say things that sounded silly out of context.

"What? Is that so hard to believe? Aww~ You're just adorable, aren't you?" she teased. "But alas, I've been caught by the handsome hero and I am at his mercy. Oh, whatever shall he do with me?" she half-mocked.

Moze's expression hardened, his irritation surmounting. He found her insolent attitude and demeanor particularly annoying.

"Enough games," he bit out, grasping her wrist roughly with one hand. He brought her closer to him, leaning down menacingly so their faces were inches apart. "I'm not some naive fool. Why did you steal this food? What are you really up to?" he demanded firmly.

"Mmm~ Feisty now, are we?" she purred. "I told you. I'm saving a life. Well, tried to, before you stopped me."

He tightened his grip on her wrist, his annoyance further increasing at her coy retorts. "You're being awfully vague for someone who's claiming to be 'saving a life'," he said through gritted teeth. "Either you talk, or you can face the General in prison."

"I could tell you. But I believe it would more convenient if you see for yourself," she answered with a seductive wink. "You can keep me chained if you want. But you'll still have to follow me."

With his grip on her wrist still firm, he used his free hand to produce a set of reinforced cuffs, then quickly locks them around her wrists. “You’d better not be leading me into a trap,” he warned, still wary of her intentions.

“Oh, come now. I couldn’t possibly want to trap such a good-looking snack… but then again, who wouldn’t?” she teased. “Right this way. Stay close~ And don’t forget to bring the food,” she said, before dashing off further down the alley at tremendous speed.

Smoothly keeping up with her pace, Moze remained cautious, not entirely trusting her as he gripped the bag of stolen food closely behind him. His eyes swept their surroundings warily as they treaded onward. Despite his better judgement, he found himself strangely intrigued by the mysterious woman.

It wouldn’t be long before they arrived at the destination. She led him to a hidden dark alley where two homeless figures had taken refuge.

A mother -who was now dead- and a crying, starved child.

Stelle’s gaze flickered with pain at the sight. She was too late.

Then she takes a deep breath, composing herself. “There. Have a look,” she tilts her head in their direction.

Moze froze for the briefest moment as his sharp gaze took in the scene; the lifeless mother, the trembling child… The stolen food suddenly made sense. His grip on Stelle loosened, then released entirely.

“You didn’t report this to the Harbor Patrol?” he asked, voice low and controlled, though less harsh than before.

Without waiting for an answer, he knelt down and opened the bag, handing a portion of the food, and even some water, to the child. His movements were precise and efficient, but not unkind.

The child looks behind him at Stelle, who nods to her with a gentle, yet pained smile. “It’s okay, sweetie. You can trust him,” she says. The child wipes her face and accepts the sustenance from Moze, then begins downing it between sobs, muffling a 'thank you'.

“…You’re reckless,” he muttered to Stelle, “but clearly not malicious.” He then glances back at her as the little girl continues eating. “Next time, signal a guard or find a doctor instead of stealing from the Red Fox Theater’s kitchens.” Then he quietly adds, “I’ll make sure more rations are sent here.”

Stelle’s gentle expression fades towards Moze. *You think I haven’t tried that?* - she internally fumed. She stifles a groan before speaking.

“Bummer. The handsome lad is clueless,” she leans against a nearby wall and crosses her legs. “Hate to break it to you, sweet cheeks, but *no one* is going to help these people. They never have, and they never will. We wouldn’t be in this situation if it were otherwise,” she states. All signs of her playful demeanor had long gone out the window.

Moze stood slowly, his poker-faced expression apparent as he turned to face her fully. The lilac hue in his eyes darkened with something colder... recognition, perhaps. He’d seen this

truth before. Buried beneath regulation and order, ignored by those who preferred not to look.

“You’re wrong,” he said quietly, like distant thunder. “I can’t change the system in one night. But I *can* make sure this child and many others like her survive it.”

He moves his hand to his ear to activate his comms device. “Shadow Guard Moze to Yaoqing Central Relief,” he spoke with finality, relaying his current coordinates. “Medical and humanitarian aid required immediately. Unregistered civilian casualty and a survivor.”

Then he drifts his gaze back to Stelle. “Call me clueless again when they’ve forgotten you were here.”

In other words, he was letting her go free.

Stelle momentarily raised a brow. “A top dog, huh? But that doesn’t prove anything, I’m afraid. In fact, I’m willing to bet that in less than the next 5 seconds, you’re going to receive a 'no' from your contact. They’re gonna tell you they don’t have the hands to spare. Riiigghht now-”

[Negative. No available units.]

Moze’s jaw clenched as the denial rung through his ear, just as she predicted.

For a split second, a hint of a challenging, competitive glare flashed in his eyes. He opens communication again, determined. “*Prioritize* this child,” he repeated, voice brooking no refusal. “Authorization: Sentinel Dragon.”

He waited. The tension in the air thick with anticipation.

Stelle shakes her head. “Oh, you sweet puppy. Hurts to be in denial, I know. But the reality is, they’ve always got their hands full. And you know this. They don’t have time to spare their *precious* resources on us underlings. Not even for a child.” However, her victorious smirk was met with surprise compliance on the other end of the device, to which she expressed unexpected shock of her own.

[Medical shuttle dispatched. ETA: Three minutes.]

Moze himself dared not hide a speck of satisfaction on his face. “You were saying?”

“Well now, you’ve certainly got connections. I’ll give you credit, but it’s not enough to sway me. You may have the power to save this girl now, but you can’t save everyone. There isn’t enough manpower to make a difference. And even if there was, there simply aren't enough of those 'leaders' who give a damn,” she spoke, taking slow steps backwards into the shadows - and with a taunting sway to her hips. Only the piercing glow of her golden eyes could be seen.

“You’ve impressed me, hot stuff. But you’re going to have to do a lot more than that if you want to woo a woman like me. See you around,” she added, before vanishing into the darkness, leaving the cuffs to fall onto the ground.

Moze stared at the empty space where she had stood, the fallen cuffs glinting faintly under the distant glow of the alley lights.

She'd been able to break free this whole time, it seems.

He exhaled slowly. More breath than he realized he'd been holding.

"A woman like you…" he muttered under his breath, picking up the cuffs with two fingers, "...is more trouble than a Denizen of the Abundance."

He turned back toward the approaching shuttle, and a thought occurred to him as he watched the little girl being assisted.

He never got to learn the cunning woman's name.

Chapter 2: Part 2

Part 2

Stelle had made her way back to a hidden, underground hideout in the slums, deep within the city, where her master would be waiting. She flops backward onto the couch in her master's office. Lying back across the sofa, her legs are crossed over the armrest with a hand resting behind her head. She begins juggling one of Moze's daggers with her free hand, waiting for her boss to finish his phone call. She managed to swipe it when Moze handcuffed her.

"Your head is in the clouds, little one," her master spoke, disrupting her dazed state.

"What, am I not allowed to think about other men?" she teased upon sitting upright.

"You're not particularly one to think about *anyone* but yourself," her boss, Hoolay, comments flatly, earning a smug look from her. "And yet, I see interest in your eyes. You've met someone," he observed.

Stelle rose to her feet and casually strides toward Hoolay, twirling Moze's dagger around her finger. "I did," she confessed. "A man considerably high in the hierarchy, it seems."

"You were caught," Hoolay quickly hissed at the implication. disapprovingly so.

"Yes, but I escaped, as you can see," she states, taking a seat on the corner of his desk, with a palm planted behind her on the flat surface. "He saved the child I was trying to feed."

"So what? Any of those bastards are capable of doing that-" he growled, but Stelle put a finger to his lips to hush him.

"But *this one* is different. He's one of the goody-two-shoes," she continued.

"Then we'll use him. Find a way to earn his trust. We will need all of the support we can gather, and take back our rightful place on the upper ground," Hoolay commanded, to which he received an elegant bow from Stelle.

"As you wish, master."

Moze sat behind his desk in his office aboard the Yaoqing, his focus split between a stack of reports and the dagger missing from his belt-- a discovery he made shortly after the child had been settled.

In the quiet of his quarters, he twirled his remaining blade idly in his hand. A small habit he'd been performing lately, more than usual. His mind kept circling back to that odd woman he

met. Her wit, her annoying demeanor, her unexpected charm...

Charm?

He quickly shakes off the thought. A distraction is what she was. He returns his attention to the documents laid out before him.

Some days had passed since that fateful night.

Stelle remained unseen by the public eye, and even more so by her new favorite toy. She'd kept hold of his dagger all the while.

Occasionally, she would spy on him here and there without being caught. Waiting for the right moment to catch him off guard, so she could make herself visible for his eyes only. It certainly proved to be a challenge and quite the wait. At least she learned his name from his peers in passing. But for now, she'd get her entertainment out of watching him whenever she got the chance. Her primary focus was to protect and assist her own people. The ones on the streets and in the slums who were neglected.

Moze's routine had remained the same -strictly regimented, with little deviation- except for the moments where his mind inadvertently strayed to the enigmatic, golden-eyed lady. He caught himself on edge frequently. Every shadow and sound seemed a little louder and a little more menacing. He brushed it off as nothing more than a temporary distraction.

Though often at night, when he would lie down to rest, he'd picture her face... her smirk, and those piercing golden eyes that penetrated the darkness when he last saw her.

One night, he'd just gotten home from yet another long day. He opened the door to his residence and-

"Looking for this?"

Stelle was laid across his bed on her stomach with her legs up, crossed and swinging away idly, while her chin rested in her propped up palm. She smugly twirled his missing dagger in the darkness of the room. "Or were you too busy thinking about me?"

Moze had tensed in the doorway, a hand instinctively near his side where his missing blade was supposed to be. His eyes narrowed as he took in the sight. The woman whom he frustratedly couldn't keep his mind off of, was now on his bed like she owned it. And with infuriating grace.

"You broke into a Shadow Guard's quarters," he said cooly, "and committed theft before me more than once." He then steps inside, closing the door behind him with deliberate calm. No alarm. No call for backup. Just silence... and that dangerous glint in his eyes.

Stelle, on the other hand, watched his every move with great interest as he continued.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?" He advanced slowly, his tone laced with taunt. "That dagger isn't just a weapon. It's my own signature." He continues his slow approach. "You've

been carrying it around like a trophy… but it's been whispering your presence to me every time you drew near."

Now standing before the bed, he leaned down slightly. "So tell me… were the theatrics worth walking into my trap?"

"Mm? What trap? The one *I* laid out for you? Why yes, absolutely! You need better security if you can't realize this little kitty likes to bite back," she smiled innocently, shamelessly carrying a seductive tone.

His gaze darkened. She was toying with him again. Taunting, teasing, mocking... fueling his irritation and... amusement, somehow. "Your audacity is matched only by your poor sense of judgement."

In a quick, fluid motion, he snatched the blade from her grasp and tossed it aside with a clatter. He was in her face, leaning over her -one knee braced on the bed as he caged her between his arms. "No more games."

"Mmm~ *I like this*," she purred. "What are you gonna do, big guy?" she arched a brow suggestively.

He leaned in close, just enough that his voice could be felt as a low and controlled hum against her ear... dangerous and deliberate. "What any just person in power would do with a criminal in their vicinity." He lets the words hang for a moment. "But not tonight."

He pulled back far enough to hold her gaze, his own sharp with restraint. They stare at each other for what felt like an eternity before Moze exhales through his nose. "You're insolent and clearly have no regard for order."

His hand moved- not to cuff her this time, but to the strap of his cloak. Then it's tossed over her in offering before he climbs off of her.

"You have influence down there. And you acknowledge mine. Stop wasting time breaking the law and consider working with me instead," he proposes. "The next person you find who needs help, leave them my cloak. I'll know."

He turns toward the now open window. One he intends to keep open from now on.

Why?

An invitation, perhaps?

Or maybe... something more.

There was undoubtedly something there. Something neither of them could explain.

Stelle breaks the suffocating silence with a chuckle. "Aww~ puppy is in denial again. But that's alright. I like a man who plays hard to get," she teased. Maybe a tad disappointed

things didn’t escalate. “Jokes aside, I’ll... consider your proposal. *If* you can prove you’re capable of making a bigger difference than I've seen,” she stated, rising from the bed.

“I’ve told you before. You’re going to need to do more than a convenient little 'bird call' for just one child to woo me.” She slides her hands up his back and arm, bringing her lips close to his ear. “I’ll be watching you,” she whispers, then immediately jumps back before he can swat at her.

Seizing the opportunity, she kicks at the dagger he’d previously thrown from off the floor. “Hehe, the name's Stelle by the way. Don’t let me down, hot stuff~” she suavely winks, before leaping out the window and out of sight.

The dagger had landed on his bed. She’d essentially returned it. The first sign of establishing trust, mayhaps. Moze sighs, shaking his head as he eyed the blade, running his fingers over its surface. The metal was... pleasantly warm. Now a remnant of her infatuating presence.

He had to admit she was right about one thing.

Opportunity and privilege don’t grow on trees. They need to be created. And that was exactly what she was asking for. He can't make a difference without generating a cause.

Stelle returned to the hideout to report to Hoolay on her progress. Just when she thought there was light at the end of the tunnel, she was in for a shock once she came through the doors of his office.

Before she had time to react, she was shoved to the wall by the neck, held up in place by Hoolay’s intimidating strength. His grip was tight around her throat, and the back of her head was in great pain from the impact- evident by the cracked wall behind her.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, little street rat,” he snarled as she struggled to breathe, disregarding her futile attempt at prying his hand off.

“You’re on *my* leash, so you *will* do as I say. If I catch you trying to pull another sneaky stunt, I’ll make sure you’re grounded into nothing. And trust me, you won’t see it coming,” he threatened before finally releasing her, letting her drop to the floor. Vision blurred, she was gasping for air, clutching her now bruised neck as she coughed vehemently.

“Leave me. And don’t come back unless you’ve brought that man with you,” he ordered.

Without a word, Stelle left his vicinity, limping out of the brooding fortress.

Damn him! How’d he know?

Her thoughts ran wild after that scare. His cursed words raged through her mind. She was trapped. He didn’t need to remind her. “Ugghhh!” she punched the nearest brick wall, scraping her knuckles red, panting with fury. Her other hand lifted to graze her bruised neck, trembling from the memory.

She feared nothing more than Hoolay himself. And she hated it with every fiber of her being.

Ironically, she found herself back in the dark alley, where she had taken Moze to show him the mother and child who were in need.

It was almost a cruel joke. Like she was staring in the mirror that reflected her own looming turmoil.

The corpse of the little girl’s deceased mother still lay there. The missing child at least served as a reminder that there was hope through Moze.

For once, she’d found a ray of light in the darkness of her world to hold on to. And *hell be damned* if she let go.

"I *will* set us free. *All of us.* I promise," she quietly swore to the dead woman. A testament to all who suffered much like her. Whether under Hoolay's rule, or the Xianzhou's.

Chapter 3: Part 3

Part 3

Moze woke at sunrise, as he usually did, without a single moment of wasted time. Despite his mind being preoccupied with the events of the past week- and Stelle, who seemed to occupy every corner of it, whether he wanted her to or not - he still managed to push through the morning routine efficiently. His attention remained sharp and focused throughout the persistent train of thought. He took a moment to check his comms, expecting to be briefed on any assignments or reports he had to tend to.

In the meantime, Stelle was about to head off to locate Moze, with the intent of spying on him like usual, but when she turned the corner in the alley, she bumped into someone- quickly apologizing.

“Sorry, ma’am! Are you alright?” she asked as the lady’s husband assisted Stelle in helping her up.

“Oh, that’s alright. No harm done- *Aeons above*! What happened to your neck??” the woman gasped. Her husband looked equally shocked at the sight.

Stelle instinctively lifted her hand to cover her neck, having forgotten it was clearly visible. "C-Clumsiness on my part. It’s nothing. I was just heading off to get it looked at,” she awkwardly chuckled.

The couple exchanged a concerned look. They knew she was lying. Though they figured it was best to play along. Whatever business she had going on probably wasn’t in their interest to be involved in.

“Goodness, girl. Try to be careful out there, alright? Here. I have some bandages you can use.”

“Oh. That's very kind of you. Thank you,” Stelle accepts them and assures the two she’d be alright before taking her leave... only after making sure she covered as much of her neck as possible. *Heavens forbid* her showing off that ugly bruise to anyone else.

She officially sets off to find her target. One she hoped wouldn’t be nosy about it.

Communication with Moze on assignments had been eerily quiet. Even the normally bustling comms hub aboard the Yaoqing was quieter than usual.

Unsurprising, given the absence of any imminent threats, but still... Moze couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding lingering in the back of his mind. Something in the air was amiss.

He tried to focus on his rounds to push down that nagging unease, but it stubbornly refused to go away.

“Up here, kitty kitty~” Stelle’s smug voice suddenly rang around him from above.

Moze, who’d been standing on the roof of a ten-story tall building, shoots his gaze upward in an instant to find the source of his disturbed peace.

She was perched on the edge of the balcony railing from the nearby building, wearing her usual provocative grin.

“You have a severely bad habit of showing up unannounced.”

“And you have a ‘severely bad habit’ of not paying attention to your surroundings,” she playfully retorts, before jumping down to his level. “Something on your mind, pumpkin? Me again, perhaps?” she teased whilst strolling towards him, and with a deliberately suggestive sway.

His eyes followed her every step, expression unreadable. The morning light caught the sharp angles of his face as he crossed his arms. “You could say I’m wondering how you *still* have the audacity to show your face, after stealing from me *and* breaking into my quarters...” he lies.

Then his gaze drops -just for a second- to where the bandages obnoxiously covered her entire neck like a thin cast. And strangely, his expression reactively hardens.

“...You’re hurt.”

Not a question. A statement. Cold. Clipped, yet laced with something along the lines of genuine concern.

“Nothing to worry yourself over,” she immediately deflects. “So you *were* thinking about me. How cute,” she smirked as she strode past him. “How’s little Lena, by the way? The girl you rescued for me.”

He narrowed his eyes at her blatant dismissal, but obliged her anyway. “She’s in good care now,” he responded, turning around as Stelle stopped at the edge of the roof. He moved to stand beside her, close enough to notice the tension in her stance. “But you didn’t come here just to ask about that child.”

She huffs. “No, I didn’t,” she admits. Her smile fades. “I came to ask a favor.” That rare tone of seriousness was present once more.

His brows raise just a tad at the unexpected turn. He shifted his attention fully on her, guard up, but listening. “A favor, huh?” He mulled the word over, wondering what sort of thing a troublemaker like her would ask of him. “Let's hear it.”

Stelle shut her eyes momentarily, taking a deep breath before turning to face him, resting a hand on her hip. “My master... has expressed his desire to meet you. *You* alone,” she informs. Making it clear that he meant *Moze* himself. Not the organization he worked for.

His eyes darkened with caution, but remain unwavering. This was… unexpected to say the least.

“And what business does he have with me?”

“Your influence. You’re higher up the chain than the average person knows. And given your apparent goodwill, he sees an opportunity to utilize that in his favor,” she says. “And before you ask, because that look in your eye is so obvious, yes. He is the one who did this to me,” she points at her neck with her free hand. “So, I hope you understand that you don’t exactly have a choice here.”

Moze clenched his jaw. He read between the lines. A warning coated by an ultimatum; that her Master would have this meeting one way or another. Either through compliance, or collateral damage. And she was sent to him with a show to make that point clear.

It was looking like this master of hers was quite the unruly fellow. Daring to make demands of a higher power like a tool to be used at their discretion.

Two could play that game.

Like the poker-faced expert he was, he showed nothing of the brewing anger beneath the surface. He was quiet, for a long, tense moment. Gauging her with steel resolve.

“Where, and when?”

No hesitation. No room for debate.

“Right now,” she states. “I will personally escort you to him, so long as you keep your lips sealed. And don’t even think of calling for backup. You’ll only make things worse,” she warned. “Only *you* are allowed to know the location, so no sharing it with your colleagues either. Those are the terms.”

He processed the conditions calmly, then gave a single nod in agreement. He wasn’t happy about walking in blind, but he was more than capable of getting himself out of a bind. He was the top Shadow Guard for a reason. No harm in playing along for now. “Lead the way.”

Without a word, she turns on her heel and leaps off the building to take him underground. They use a passage in one of the city’s sewers, that not even he was aware of, to make it to the slums. On their way there, Moze would receive judging stares and snarls from her peers. And some rather furry ones at that.

Soon, they’d arrive at the main lair where Hoolay dwelled. She didn’t even need to knock.

“Come in,” his rough voice commanded through the door.

Stelle opens the door and enters with Moze right behind her, stepping to the side to let him through.

Moze walked in to a dimly lit room with all his senses on high alert. He was acutely aware of his surroundings, coated in dark shadings and predatory figures watching; the silence broken

only by the faint crackling of torches. He made an effort not to let his gaze linger on their hidden forms, focusing instead on his would-be negotiator sitting at the end of the room.

He calmly stopped in his tracks when he was roughly a meter from the imposing figure. “I hear you were looking for me.”

“Correct. I am Hoolay. I’m very pleased to see you grace me with your presence. You’ve previously met my subordinate,” he aimed his large hand, with rather long claws, towards Stelle, who was now silently standing at his side behind the desk. “I trust she hasn’t been a burden.” Then he props his arms up on his elbows atop the desk, clasping his hands together for his chin to rest on. “She tells me you have something that will be useful to my cause. I wish to borrow your services, if you wouldn't mind.”

Moze doesn’t respond immediately, his eyes sweeping over Stelle for a moment before settling back onto Hoolay. He couldn’t ignore the subtle tension in the air. The way the shadowy figures in the room all seemed to be poised, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. “And what exactly makes you think I’d agree to that? You’ve yet to divulge what said cause this is for.”

“I’m sure you’ve seen it. The suffering of those without homes- and lives. How much your superiors ignore those truly in need,” Hoolay starts. “Those are *my* people. I merely want to bring them solace. Stelle here has told me what transpired when the two of you met. You appear to be different from those in your orginazation who choose to cast them aside. And to me, that’s a valuable power we can both stand to gain from.” He leans back in his chair. “You help pull my people out of poverty, and in return you receive all of the unwavering support we can give,” he proposed.

Moze takes a long moment to contemplate his offer. Hoolay essentially brought up the same argument Stelle had before- using the suffering of others to his advantage. It was a cheap tactic, one that grated on him, but he wasn’t exactly doing a good job of concealing his true motives. The threat, by way of Stelle’s current state, made it that much more obvious.

“And if I refuse?” he asked. “...You’ll, what? ‘Resort to violence’ like you did to her?” His tone was even as his eyes briefly flickered to Stelle for emphasis, but there was a hint of warning in his words.

Of course, that leak didn't fly with Hoolay. He'd made a mental note to deal with her later.

Stelle, likewise, tensed at the reveal. Cursing herself for not making Moze keep his mouth shut about that.

“On the contrary, your so-called leaders will be the ones causing the violence. Your refusal to work with us here would simply be an act of negligence and place you on the same level of cruelty as them. Whether you join them in their crusade or not, watching from the sidelines is equally cruel.” As Hoolay said this, he eyes Stelle with a silent warning. One that meant she’d pay the price for lying about Moze if the deal didn’t go through. She looks away with a huff. “So, if what Stelle says about you is true, then you should have no reason to refuse my request.”

Moze narrowed his eyes coldly at his manipulative attempt. He held his gaze, matching Hoolay's composure. He was done with the mind games. It was his turn.

"How about this... I'll only consider offering my assistance on one condition. And it's a *non-negotiable* one."

"By all means. Speak, child."

"That Stelle is taken into my custody," Moze simply states, his expression carrying an aura of challenge.

Hoolay's eyes glowed with a discerning glare, and Stelle looked at Moze in surprise. Neither had expected to hear that kind of requirement.

Hoolay makes a low growl, slightly turning his head in Stelle's direction, while keeping his gaze locked on Moze. "Were you aware he would be asking for you?" he accused.

"N-No, master," she replied, still in shock. *What the hell was he planning!?*

"Hmmm…" Hoolay adjusts his head to face forward again, his posture now leaning forward once more. *Either this man is very clever, or he's incredibly stupid...* he thought to himself. And he really had to think it through what that ultimatum truly meant.

If he handed over Stelle, that would be giving Moze -and possibly his faction- full transparency of their plans. He'd no doubt demand the information from her.

On the other hand, it would also mean giving Stelle exactly what she wanted: Her freedom.

Which meant Moze was trying to gauge his values, and by extension, his motives.

It was hard to tell if Moze and Stelle were in cahoots... but given what Hoolay has seen and heard from his other sources... does he take that risk?

"Before I answer that, I'd like to hear your reason for this ultimatum," he asks with a challenging glint in his eye.

Moze had to refrain from showing a victorious look. It was time to use his own manipulative tactic against him.

"Simply the fact that she's your most valued subordinate. Handing her over will show me how serious you are about this arrangement. Since, for lack of a better word, I don't trust you."

So... two birds with one stone. -Hoolay thought. "Hm. Clever then," he says. *Too clever.*

The fact Moze chose to be transparent about his intentions, just to make a mockery of Hoolay's obscure nature, proved he underestimated the cunning guard.

Moze was a threat. Hoolay knew what to do.

“I’m afraid I must refuse that request.” His tone made it clear he had no intention of reconsidering. If Moze thought he was going to fold over a tactic like that, he was sorely mistaken. This ball was going to remain in his own park.

“We’re done here. But before you go, let me teach you a little something about proper negotiation, boy,” Hoolay leans back in his chair, clasped hands now in his lap. “A bargaining chip must be a disposable mark of trust from *all* parties. Not a currency exchange built on spite.”

In other words, Hoolay would've only accepted the terms if it meant Stelle would take the fall should anything go awry.

It was never a negotiation to begin with. It was a test. And both men knew it.

“This meeting is over. All are dismissed.”

And that was that. Everyone began filing out the door when Hoolay called out. “Not you, Stelle.”

At that, she internally sighs before turning back around.

Moze left with undeniable disappointment. Part of him expected the refusal, but he’d still held out some shred of hope it would work. Hoolay proved to be a formidable opponent.

After everyone was gone, including Moze, the door was shut as Hoolay began his interrogation.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” he snarled.

“Whatever do you mean?” Stelle remarked, to which Hoolay slams his hands on his desk with a booming voice.

“Don’t act coy with me, girl! I can see right through you.”

Stelle merely looks at him tensely.

“You tried to warn that boy about my intentions before bringing him here,” he stated.

She momentarily widened her eyes in realization, before narrowing scrutinizingly. It wouldn't have mattered if Moze spoke of her injury.

“You sent a spy,” she accused.

“I told you not to be defiant. You’ve been out there trying to break free from your collar. You forget it's on tight, for good. Though... not tight enough, apparently," he mutters that last bit to himself. "As I have told you countless times, the only freedom you will ever gain is through death. And that can only be granted by *me*. This is your last warning,” he declares. “You’d better hope that boy doesn’t go against his word on keeping quiet, or you *will* pay the price. Mark my words.”

Stelle casts her eyes downward defeatedly, resigning to her prison of a leash. “Yes, master...”

Outside, Moze had been listening to the conversation through the window. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but he’d heard enough.

His hand had balled tightly, the words he’d heard replaying in his mind. He knew she was trapped, but it went deeper than he thought. He wasn't sure how to get her out. For now, at least for her sake, there was nothing he could do. Not without jeopardizing her life.

Chapter 4: Finale

Finale

After all parties went their separate ways, Stelle was never seen again. Confined to Hoolay’s side, she was no longer allowed to venture out. The last bit of her freedom had been stripped from her as punishment for defying his will.

As Hoolay had initially warned Moze about, the Yaoqing had begun to make their preparations... for calling martial law. When that time comes, Hoolay and his followers would be ready to fight.

Over the coming days, Moze kept his attention firmly fixed on his duties as a Shadow Guard. However, his thoughts would inevitably stray to Stelle. He found himself feeling an uncomfortable ache of some kind in his chest every time she came to mind. Her words from the day they met came back to mock him.

He couldn’t save everyone, no matter how hard he tried. And she was yet another person he couldn’t seem to help. Her complete absence was hard to ignore.

He tried to dismiss the feeling- to tell himself that it didn’t matter. That he was too busy to worry about the likes of her. But the feeling persists against his will.

Two weeks later, on the day martial law had commenced, Hoolay gathered his subordinates to rally for the fight.

Amid his speech, Stelle was in her room going through her belongings, bidding a final goodbye to the place, when she laid eyes on something familiar folded neatly in her drawers.

Moze’s cloak.

’The next person you find who needs help, leave them my cloak. I’ll know.’

Those were the words he said to her when he passed it on. His promise.

So much for that.

A bittersweet smile forms on her face as she picks it up fondly. Even though things didn't go the way she hoped, he'd really been a boon to her. A true symbol of hope in her life. As she clutches the cloak closely in her arms, she could only feel glad to have met him.

While the rallied crowds were preparing to march, Hoolay had called Stelle to his office to have a word. It seemed he had something important to say.

“You called?” she answered upon entering.

“You’ve done well as of late. Quite obedient. I’d like to reward you with your freedom as thanks for your relentless loyalty. You can consider yourself unleashed once this is all over. Am I clear?” he said.

“Yes, master,” she nods with acknowledgement.

“Good. Then let’s be on our way, shall we?”

Stelle knew better. She knows exactly what he truly meant. He'd said it before...

'The only freedom you will ever gain is through death...'

She steeled herself as he walked away from his desk.

I will set us free. All of us. I promise.

She recited the words to herself with resolve, before Hoolay swiftly gashed at her abdomen with his claws, sending her flying to the wall with incredible force...

...all while she’d managed to throw a poisonous dagger at him and successfully penetrated his neck.

If she was going to die, then she was taking him down with her.

She coughed up blood after sliding down the wall to the floor. Excruciating pain from her wounds left her paralyzed, and the quick loss of blood was rendering her to lose consciousness.

“Y-You… son of a-“ Hoolay fell over onto the ground. When did she find the time to secure poison?

Then it occurred to him. *Oh... of course. She must’ve gotten it after meeting that shadow guard. Damn her, cunning... I was.... careless.....*

And then everything went black.

The muffled war cries of those rallied outside could be heard, signifying the battle had begun- unaware that their leader had just been killed.

Stelle’s final thoughts before passing out were filled with relief that the bastard was finally dealt with... and the regret that she would not get to see Moze one last time. If only to thank him for what he'd done.

Moze was on the battlefield fighting alongside his fellow Guards on his orders. His focus was fixed on the task at hand; eliminating the enemy and protecting his allies and civilians in the process.

He moved through the chaos like a silent whirlwind, slicing down anyone and anything that dared threaten him. No room to think about anything else when your life is on the line. Not even for Stelle.

As time went on, with so many lives lost on both sides, the war became futile and the battle eventually came to an end... on the grounds that a truce was made to end the bloodshed and make an effort for peace talks.

Many mourned the loss of their loved ones. And it was only during this time that one of the undergrounders thought to question Hoolay's whereabouts. No one knew where he was. No one had seen him at all.

Jiaoqiu, a foxian healer, was scouting for survivors amongst the rubble with Moze in tow. A sudden holler from afar could be heard from one of the underground dwellers.

"We found him!"

Others began to gather at the location, full of hope that their leader was well. Only to be met with quite a shock, when they were told that he'd been found deceased in his own office.

"What? Who killed him!?" one of his most devoted followers demanded to know.

"I think we're looking at 'em..." another pointed at the answer. To Stelle, who was the only other person in the same room. Lying still against the wall in a large pool of blood -a wound that could have only come from Hoolay himself.

With the news spreading like wildfire, it didn't take long for it to reach Moze's ears. And eyes.

He froze. Eyes wide. Thoughts having come to a halt as the words went through his head.

She... died?

What made his chest tighten most was the fact that... she was even wearing his *cloak*.

The pang in his chest felt like a knife had struck through him. The memories of their earlier interactions since their first meeting flashed across his mind. The smug looks, the defiance, her annoying flirts and touches, her obnoxiously coy taunts, her sincerity towards her fellow victims, the no-nonsense attitude she had towards the powerful figures she disliked, the warmth he felt on the dagger she returned to him... never to be seen again...?

"Let me see," Jiaoqiu pushed through the growing crowd, insisting on confirming for himself. He checked Hoolay's body first. The dagger visibly plunged all the way to the hilt into the side of his neck, and notably laced with the purple liquid that seeped out -the poison.

He shakes his head, informing the others of his fate. "Dead. By poisoning," he states. Then his gaze falls on Stelle. His eyes widen. *Wait…* He recognized that cloak.

Surprised, he instinctively looks over at Moze, who was standing there with a shocking expression he never thought possible.

The look of a man with a shattered heart.

He knew her?

The sight of her wounds would be enough to know it was fatal. But as a doctor, he was bound to check and truly confirm the status regardless. Especially, for the sake of a close comrade, who never showed his emotions.

When Jiaoqiu closely inspected her, he could've sworn he felt a pulse. Barely noticeable to the average person, but to a well-experienced doctor, it was there.

“She’s… *alive*,” he said under his breath. “She’s alive! Quickly! Help me get her to medical. Now!”

There was no telling how much time she had left.

Moze didn’t hesitate. In an instant, he zoomed through the crowd, shrouded by dark mist, towards Stelle’s motionless form. He gently lifted her into his arms, cradling her close.

Jiaoqiu was already barking orders to clear a path as Moze followed close behind.

She wasn’t gone yet. He truly hoped she could make it. And if she did, he’d make sure this never happened again.

Hours had gone by. Jiaoqiu tended to Stelle’s injuries, with relentless determination as best as he could in solitude. Moze’s actions towards her idly sat in the back of his mind, fueling his will.

As one of his closest friends, he could tell that Stelle was very important to him, even if Moze himself didn’t actually realize it. He’d make sure he would be able to bring Moze good news.

With the last surgery done and his patient in stable condition, Jiaoqiu leaves the room to meet with his comrade.

“The worst has passed. Your friend will live,” he informs. “A rather stupendous miracle, I must say. She’s incredibly lucky to have survived that long enough for me to help her, as fatal a wound it was," he comments. "But, I’ve done everything I can for now. She will be needing a lot of rest during her recovery. I'm not really supposed to do this, but... just this once, I’ll allow you to see her,” he gives him a firm pat on the shoulder as he walks past, offering him some privacy.

Moze nodded in silent gratitude, still attempting to maintain his poker face. Though, the look in his eyes hinted at the relief he was feeling.

He took a deep breath before walking into the medical room. He approached her bed slowly, footsteps light and careful not to disturb her rest. He stared down at her, taking in the sight of

her current state. As he took a seat beside her bed, his hand moved of its own accord, grasping hers with a grip that was unusually tender.

Eventually, Stelle woke to him sitting there. It took her a long moment to realize she was *very much alive* and currently bedridden.

“Well... this is a predicament. My entertainment is here sulking at my bedside. Come now, you can’t be looking at me like that,” her voice came out raspy, but there was still enough strength in it to emit that playful and teasing tone that had begun to grow on him.

It was only matched by the rare look of sorrow on his face. The guilt he felt for not trying hard enough to save her. He didn’t let go of her hand, grounding the two to the present moment.

“Don’t talk. You’re still recovering,” he said sternly. The edge from before was gone.

“Aww~ prince charming actually cares about little ol’ me? How cute,” she beamed. She missed messing with him.

She sighs. *What a joke.*

Here she thought she’d be dead after Hoolay’s attack. She planned to take him to hell with her if it meant freeing the others from his rule. Willing to accept that the only thing she wanted, the only thing she couldn’t have, was the desire to see Moze again.

Apparently, death didn't want her. There she was, lying there bandaged and stitched with a wound that would leave scars for life. And with Moze sitting right there beside her.

“Tch! Fate sure has a way of toying with me,” she spoke to herself before shutting her eyes.

Moze had no response to that. Not with words, at least.

Instead, he reached up slowly, almost hesitantly, and brushed a loose strand of her grey locks away from her face, his fingers lingering just a moment too long near her temple. His voice was low when he finally spoke.

“You’re not allowed to die. Not without my permission.”

His tone was flat, but beneath it, a crack in the armor. Something raw.

Although his words fell on deaf ears since she’d fallen asleep... The exhaustion had wiped her of any energy she had left. Her days would surely be filled with much needed sleep until her wounds healed.

It was a shame she wasn’t awake to feel Moze planting a delicate kiss to her head.

…And secretly watching from outside the room, was Jiaoqiu.

Good for you. He smiled, happy to see that his friend had found someone special.

A couple of months passed before Stelle was finally cleared to be up and about again.

“You’ve recovered wonderfully. Though you will carry those scars for the rest of your life, let it be a reminder of the miracle you fought for and earned. Your freedom,” Jiaoqiu smiled.

“Thanks, Doc! Mmm! It’s good to be up~ No offense.” Stelle performed the largest stretch she ever did in ages.

“Haha! None taken. Now off you go. If I recall, Moze should be in his office right now. With your divine beauty gracing his vicinity, no doubt he’ll be *elated* to catch a surprise break from all that exhausting paperwork,” he added.

Sly fox.

“Hehehe~ You read my mind,” she winked. And off she went.

Moze was indeed buried under an unholy amount of paperwork. Reports, documents, forms, notes... everything. His jaw was clenched in barely restrained annoyance as he signed off on yet another tiresome report.

The sound of the door opening all of a sudden caught his attention. It was supposed to be locked. His eyes flit up from the document in his hand, exhaustion already well-worn into his expression.

Only, when he saw the door open, there was no one there. That familiar foreboding creeped into his gut.

And then suddenly-

“Down here, pretty boy~” Stelle’s head randomly emerged between his legs from beneath his desk, wearing that delicious smirk.

Moze had to struggle suppressing a startled jolt at the unexpected intrusion. His face went from surprised to annoyed in a matter of seconds. He glared down at her. “...You’re unbelievable.”

But even as he said the words, his shoulders visibly relaxed, now aware of no real threat.

Stelle couldn’t hide her victorious chuckle as she slowly rose to her feet, pressing a finger to his lips as she playfully uttered a hush, before cupping his face and gracing his lips with her own.

She let them linger for a few moments before pulling away swiftly- stopping before the doorway after flipping backwards over the desk, just to stick her tongue out with her hands behind her back. Cheeky brat.

He went still. The warm tingle that bloomed on his lips as she kissed him was gone as quickly as she pulled away. And her audacity to wink at him with her tongue out....

Damn this woman!

He was up in an instant. Before she could escape, he caught her around the waist and pushed her against the door, where he could take a good long look at her.

“Ohoho~ When *predator meets predator*,” she purred under her breath, meeting his eyes with an alluring glint.

She was dressed clad in brand new garments that matched the color scheme of his uniform - courtesy of Jiaoqiu- and of course, it had to stay as shamelessly revealing as her old clothes.

And her scar....

Moze lightly grazed his fingertips along that dark memory across her abdomen, before leaning in. “Then you won’t mind if I keep you.”

He then ported her to his desk through his shadowy mist, and had her laid across it, hovering himself over her while pressed between her legs.

Lilac eyes burned with a silent intensity that equally matched her lustfully golden gaze. There was no hiding what was there behind that mask of his; longing, possessiveness, desire.

Before she could tease him again- he kissed her. Not gently. Not remotely close. Firm. Assertive. Claiming. Like he’d been waiting months to do it....

...Who was he kidding? He absolutely had.

~Fin

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