

The Witch Who Escaped

The Grand Cathedral of the Order of Martyrs
399 Salvation Era

“The bishop has made another request. Today, I’m going to find out what’s going on.”

Kheli Lasteer pulled on her surcoat, shaking her head. The deacon was a rising star in the Order, only thirty years old but already in charge of security for the Grand Cathedral. She was muscular and broad, with a handful of scars marking her dark skin and her black hair cut into bangs just above her eyes, curling around her face and drawing attention to her piercing green eyes.

“Are you sure? You could be accused of heresy.” Lounging in bed, Kheli’s companion gave her a worried look. Blakeley Ghent couldn’t be more different than Kheli; six years younger, short and curvy and pale, dark freckles dotting her face and her strawberry blonde hair hanging down around her shoulders. She had come to the Order as an archivist, but Kheli had paved the way for her to become assistant to the senior librarian, while also ensuring that the librarian knew what would happen if he took advantage of her. Blakeley was *hers*.

Kheli chuckled, looking back at her companion. “Either the bishop is operating with the church’s blessing, in which case there’s nothing to fear, or she is doing something criminal, in which case that knowledge could open the door to my rise to a higher position. I’ve proven my reliability to her, but I’m nobody’s pawn.” She crossed to the bed, running her hands through Blakeley’s hair, and then reached down to give her a fierce kiss. “Besides, I have you as insurance. You’ve documented all of our dealings, and all of the bishop’s assurances. If she should try anything, you’ll be prepared.”

“Of course, love.” Blakely took a deep breath. Her access to the library had helped Kheli before, and she would do anything for the woman who had lifted her up from poverty. “But be careful.”

“I will.” Kheli ruffled Blakeley’s hair one last time, and then left for the Order’s reformatory.

The reformatory was not, at any given time, particularly full. Sequestered in the lowest basements of the Order, away from the eyes of supplicants or squeamish clerics, it featured a dozen private chambers for the interrogation and coercion of suspected heretics and traitors. Only those suspected of the worst crimes were brought here; most of the Order’s punishments took the form of social humiliation or debasement, after which the accused was allowed to seek atonement. Right now, only seven of the twelve

cells were occupied, and it was one of those that Kheli moved towards. She nodded seriously to the guard at the door. "I've come to take the heretic," she said simply.

The guard nodded. "Do you need my help with her? She could be dangerous."

Kheli shook her head. "Go check on the other prisoners. I've got this one."

The fates of suspected heretics were not recorded, and had not been since the Order's formal founding at the start of the Salvation Era. Ostensibly, this was so that if they were found innocent, they would return to their communities without shame, but Kheli knew that it was common for ranking members of the Order to take advantage of this to conscript them into servitude or execute heretics quietly, without drawing the eye. As long as no one knew how many people were released and how many vanished into the mazy depths of the Order, there was no way to protest whether this is what the Martyrs died for - not that anyone would be foolish enough to do so.

Stepping into the cell, Kheli looked over her prisoner. Lira Redgrave was a young woman of 24, with ragged brown hair and lightly tanned skin. She had been a hunter before her capture, lean and wiry, but after two weeks in the cells she was approaching skinny, eyes slightly sunken and tanned skin marked with a patchwork of bruises. Lira had been captured after binding a wood spirit into the body of a rival lover, driving her mad. The Order had suspected her of being involved in a Witch cult, but interrogation had revealed nothing.

Right now, she was standing on the tips of her toes in the middle of the room, arms pulled up behind her in a punishing strappado pose and head pulled down by a rope around her neck, which led to two tight nipple clamps. She didn't look up as the cell door opened, and anything that she might have said was obscured by the metal pear-gag filling her mouth. Her long, dark hair fell down around her face, obscuring her view of anyone who would come in; her head craned slightly as the door opened, followed by a whimper as the motion tugged on the clamps.

"I have wonderful news," Kheli announced warmly, crossing the cell. "The questioners have come to believe that although you are a heretic, you acted alone and are deserving of mercy." She leaned down, brushing hair out of Lira's face, and gave her a kind smile. Her hand cupped her chin, then came up to slowly unscrew the pear gag until it was retracted enough to be pulled from the prisoner's mouth. "If you repent of your deeds, the Order has a use for you."

"What do you want?" Lira asked tiredly.

"I will undo your bonds and take you to the Bishop. She will explain your new purpose in life. You will be demure, respectful, and above all grateful to be given this chance. Do you understand?" Kheli asked. When Lira looked down at the floor, she grabbed her by

the hair and yanked her head up. Lira squealed in pain as her arms were pushed further back and her aching nipples were yanked on.

“Yes. Yes!”

“Good.” Releasing the prisoner, Kheli walked around behind her and undid the ropes pulling her wrists up, and loosening the rope around her neck so that it hung loosely. As Lira tried to stretch her aching muscles, arms still tight behind her back, Kheli took a large sackcloth from the corner, with a hole cut in the middle, and pulled it down over Lira’s head, covering her from her shoulders to just above her knees. The cloth was scratchy and rough, but it would conceal her shame. Before Lira could say anything, Kheli added a burlap hood. “Follow me, and be silent. If you speak, you will be punished. Now come along.” She took the rope dangling from Lira’s neck and tugged on it, pulling on her nipples, and began to stride from the room. Lira stumbled, trying to follow as quickly as she could while bending to keep herself from choking without being able to see where she was going.

Kheli led her prisoner down the back corridors of the dungeon, easily avoiding anyone who might be curious about where she was taking her. Soon, she was at the quiet contemplation cell where she met with her patron. She knocked three times in quick succession, and then entered the sparse room where Bishop Madine was waiting for her.

The bishop gave Kheli a beatific smile. The bishop was a tall, statuesque woman in her middle age, with flowing locks of golden hair that curled around her shoulders, wearing a white robe enchanted to resist stains, embroidered with blue sigils of the Order of the Martyrs. She turned her attention to Lira. “This is the heretic, then?”

“Yes, your Eminence.” Kheli bowed. “She repents of her sin, and is ready to serve the Order.”

“Wonderful.” Madine looked into Kheli’s eyes, and the deacon shivered at her considering look. “You have done well, Kheli. You have accomplished all of your tasks without question. I think that you are ready to be inducted into the mysteries.”

“Thank you, your Eminence! You are too kind.”

“Remove the heretic’s hood, first.” Kheli nodded, pulling Lira’s hood away, and Madine looked the heretic over thoughtfully. “You had congress with spirits,” she said. “You set them upon an innocent woman. But there is room in the Order’s light for you. Will you accept?”

“Yes, your Eminence,” Lira whispered, not meeting the bishop’s gaze.

“Good.” Bishop Madine stepped over to one side of the cell, and laid her hand on the wall. Kheli and Lira stared in confusion as the stonework melted away, revealing an uncarved tunnel of dark rock lit only by the glimmers of phosphorescent moss. “Bring her, Deacon.”

The three made their way through the dark, winding stone passageway for several minutes, heading deeper into the heart of the mountain on which the Cathedral was built. Kheli kept a grip on her charge’s leash, pulling on it whenever Lira stumbled, scanning the passageway for any signs of its purpose. She knew that the Order had many secret ritual sites, but she’d had no idea that there was one down here. Perhaps this was how a witch’s power was purified? She had always assumed that the bishop was doing something more *mundane* with her captives.

Ahead, she heard a strange sound - a low rumbling hum, accompanied by the quiet sound of mumbling. Kheli glanced at the bishop nervously, but she was serene and unbothered.

Then they came around the corner, and Kheli saw the chamber. It was large, hewn from stone by magic, lit by slits that reflected the sun from far above and by more of those glowing flowers in brilliant blue and purple hues. But that wasn’t what drew her eye. What drew her eye was the massive honeycomb hive filling the center of the room, stretching dozens of feet into the air, surrounding by buzzing bees that filled the room with the hum that she had heard. And embedded in the hive were over a dozen pairs of human feet, each one on either side of what Kheli almost thought was a smooth egg, before she recognized it as a human head without eyes or a mouth. The heads quivered and shifted, unable to do more than squirm in their captivity, and the air was filled with the muffled sounds of what she now realized were swallowed screams, trapped in the throats of their captives.

Lira took one look at the hive and attempted to bolt for freedom, jerking her leash out of Kheli’s hand as the deacon stood in shock. Madine gestured absently, and the sackcloth enveloping the girl tightened; she fell to the ground as the burlap crushed itself tightly around her chest and legs. “Welcome,” Madine said, “to the Witch’s Cauldron.”

“What is this?” Kheli whispered.

“This is... this... I’m sorry, I have to deal with this.” Madine turned to Lira, whose terrified screams were echoing through the room. “That’s quite enough out of you, dear.” She gestured again, and Lira’s eyes bugged out as the skin around her mouth melted and flowed, forcing her jaw shut and erasing her lips. Her screams dropped to match the muffled grunts of the other captives, and her squirming attempts to escape intensified as the leash around her neck began to slowly but inexorably pull her towards the hive. Ignoring the squirming captive, Madine turned back to Kheli. “This is where the Order’s divine honey is cultivated. Centuries ago, your forebears trapped a witch in the heart of the hive, drawing on their arcana to feed your own power. The bees stole their magic,

stinging them whenever they moved, feeding on the dregs of their soul.” Her smile turned sinister. “They thought that I could never escape. They were almost right.”

“You’re not Madine,” Kheli said in horror.

“No. I am Metrice, the Witch of Ugallu. I spent literal centuries trapped in that hellish prison. I almost lost myself.” Metrice laughed. “It was ironic. I only escaped because of the extra punishment I put here to deal with the Templars that I thought I’d tricked. There is a spell, you see. You can hear what’s happening all over the Cathedral from here. And over many, many, years, as your Order slowly decayed and turned ever-more cruel by the year, I learned to listen. Learned how to use that voice to forge a pathway, until I leaped out of my body and into the body of Bishop Madine, using her voice as my route.”

She looked back at the hive, as the would-be heretic was dragged towards it, face-down on the ground, dragged by the clamps on her breasts as she was roughly bumped over the floor. “Of course, this left me with an issue. Without my arcana, the honey your hive produced would rapidly lose its power, and you would notice I was gone. So I set to work.” Metrice strolled to the hive, stepping over Lira as her prisoner looked up at her with desperate eyes. “I kidnapped a few chaplains, and then arranged for the handover of as many heretics as I could manage. All thanks to you, my dear Kheli. They don’t have nearly my reserves of arcana, of course, but there are enough of them now that I should have several years before the weakest ones burn out and need to be replaced.” She stopped at one of the lowest heads, running her hand over it. “And, of course, I added my political opponents to the mix. You may recognize this one.”

Her captive made desperate sounds as Metrice ran her nails over her trapped soles, head jerking back and forth. Kheli’s eyes widened as she recognized the splash of freckles under where eyes might have been. “Blakeley...” she whispered.

“Your little kitten!” Metrice agreed, continuing to torment her prey. Blakely grunted miserably, craning towards the sound of Kheli’s voice as Metrice’s nails ran over her fingers, bucking as her involuntary jerking woke the bees in the hive behind her, which proceeded to deliver terrible stings to her breasts and ass. “I moved her down here as soon as you left her chambers this morning, now that she’s no longer needed.” Her lips curled into a predatory smile. “I trust you understand. I can’t have the information you’ve been gathering come to light.”

Kheli fell to her knees. She couldn’t imagine running, not after what had happened to Lira. “Please,” she said. “I won’t tell anyone. I’ll serve you.”

Metrica laughed again, walking forwards. Behind her, Lira squealed as the leash twisted around her, drawing her ass-first into the hive. The waxy cover parted around her, and her legs kicked out as she tried in vain to stay free. “Oh, really? Just abandoning your

love like that? How very mercenary of you. I like that.” She glanced over her shoulder, watching Lira’s body vanish into the hive inch by inch. Lira immediately began to scream as her intrusion woke the bees and they began to sting her. “First thing first. Goodbye, little heretic. You might have become a witch one day... and I don’t need the competition.” She made a sharp shooing gesture, and the skin around Lira’s eyes closed over, sealing her in darkness. Kheli watched as her captive was pressed into the hive, reduced to no more than a faceless head and a pair of trapped feet, just like the rest of her fellow prey.

“Now, I have good news and bad news,” Metrice said, walking back towards Kheli with a slow, deliberate pace. “The good news is that you are about to be famous. You see, it’s about to transpire that Bishop Madine has been capturing witches and performing dark rituals to feed on their arcana, in the hopes of gaining arcane powers for herself. Terrible, really. Extremely heretical. I’m afraid that your little bird Blakeley was helping her ferry prisoners from the cells.” She reached out with one finger, tapping Kheli on the nose. “You will be pursuing and confronting the Bishop, at which time she will reveal her dark powers, lose control of them, and be destroyed by you.”

“You want to be killed?” Kheli asked uncertainly.

Metrica giggled. “This body’s soul is running thin. When Madine dies, I will be flitting away to take over Cardinal Radolph. I’ve been preparing his network of political allies for the past six months. As the woman who took his rival down, you will, of course, become his - or should I say my - newest prodigy.”

“Thank you, milady!” Kheli said fervently. “You won’t regret it! I’ll be loyal to you forever!”

“Ah, well. That’s where the bad news comes in.” Metrice took a step back and raised her left hand, pointing at Kheli. “While I need your body for this plan, I have someone else in mind to occupy it. But don’t worry, we’ll come by and visit you regularly.”

“Wait!” But before Kheli could get out another word, Metrice barked out a few words in a language Kheli had never heard, and the world swam around her. She felt her body falling away, and for a timeless moment, everything was dark.

Her sight was the first to return, the world looking golden around her as the sun beat down on her. She could see the outer square of the Cathedral, and for a moment she tried to tense to run. Hearing was next, the faintest, muffled sound of the crowds that came to receive benedictions. And then came touch, and with it the torment. There was a terrible pressure pushing on every part of her body, filling her lungs and her womb, choking her and holding her eyes open. Kheli tried to scream, but her throat was coated in amber, holding it silent. She tried to stretch her arms, but they were trapped behind her back, elbows pressed together and hands held rigid and immobile. Her legs were even worse,

bent backwards across her to an impossible degree, her feet pressed against the back of her head. For a moment, she couldn't understand what was happening, how she was trapped in this horrible position, why she was alive when her lungs screamed for air and her muscles begged for release.

And then she thought about the golden hue, and she understood. She was trapped in the body of the Witch Alys, the one witch who was known to still exist, staring desperately at everyone who came to jeer at her, to pleasure themselves with her, to know that the Witches had been cast down and would never return. She was locked in a trap meant for the most powerful beings in existence, meant to punish them for eternity, and in the body of an immortal witch she might never escape.

Kheli's eyes stared perfectly ahead, as she tried with all of her might to make one of the petitioners see her, recognize her terror, and know that she wasn't the person they had come to mock and torment further. But as the latest batch of petitioners advanced towards her, laughing and joking with each other about so-called witches, she knew that she was struggling in vain.

Back in the Witch's Cauldron, Metrice knelt on the stone floor, listening to the muffled moans around her. Lying on her lap, the eyes of Kheli's body slowly flickered open, and the soul now inhabiting her body looked up at her with a slow, uncertain smile of relief. "Metrice," she said softly. "You found me."

"Alys," Metrice said to the Witch of Abzu, running a hand through her hair. "Welcome back. Stay down for a minute. Your soul is running on fumes. Another few decades and I think I would have lost you."

"What happened to the others?"

"Not sure. I've heard rumors, of course. I think most of them are broken or dead, but some might still be around, in the corners of the world. We'll have time to figure it out."

"When I felt your thoughts, I didn't know if it was real. I didn't know if you would really come for me."

"Silly girl," Metrice said, leaning down and offering Alys a gentle kiss on the forehead. "I'd burn the world to get you back. And now that we're together, we can start over. Be more careful this time, more subtle. There's no one left to stop us, after all."

"That sounds lovely," Alys said quietly.

The two witches sat in the darkness, surrounded by their victims, and dreamed of the revenge that was to come.