

## Elementsia

It was a dark, frigid winter's night. A teenage girl – Eloise, huddled silently around a fire, starting intently into the coloured flames. The girl's adoptive mother, Guenivier sat close to her daughter, a tattered blanket wrapped around the both of them. The winter wind blew fiercely into their faces, as if trying to push them away from each other. But the young girl just stared into the flames. Eloise had always been fascinated with fire. She couldn't explain her fascination, but she liked to think that she and the fire were somehow connected. Perhaps it was the wildness of the shooting flames and flying sparks. Perhaps it was the hidden beauty of the colours dancing within the fire. Whatever the reason, Eloise was somehow attracted to it, and she would soon find out why. It wasn't long until the fire burnt out and the two drifted off to sleep.

The next night after dark, Eloise strolled through the lantern lit streets with Guenivier, shuffling along and kicking away the snow from their tattered shoes. The two were poor – very poor – but they always found a way to make the best of their days. “Even if we don't have anything,” Guenivier always said to her daughter, “We'll always have each other.” Eloise never truly understood those words. As they walked, a large horse drawn carriage passed them. The horses, tall and strong, snorted as they trotted along under the control of the driver. Their breath showed up like fog in the cold. The driver, a skeletal-looking elderly man was crouched low to protect himself from the wind. His heavy black cloak was littered with flecks of white snowflakes. He eyed the two girls in disgust as he passed. A carriage was being hauled behind him. Guenivier looked at her daughter. “Ready?” she whispered. Eloise nodded. The older woman pounced like a jungle cat onto the side of the carriage, cracking open the door. Without hesitation, Eloise jumped up beside her mother and they both silently slid into the carriage, closing the door behind them. Oblivious to the pair, the driver continued to press forward through the snowy streets.

A burst of stale, warm air forced itself down their throats as they entered. Inside were two wooden seats facing each other, and candle lit lanterns on either side. It was a warm and inviting space. Both woman and child took off their scarves and breathed in deeply. “We will get out in a few moments, but I must admit it is nice to warm!” Guenivier laughed as she fixed her unruly red hair. Eloise had always wished she had hair like the woman, red like fire, and curly, like a creeping vine over the side of the building. But the young girl had straight brown hair and matching almond shaped eyes. “Will we get caught?” she questioned, worry spread across her face. “Not if we keep quiet.” Guenivier smiled and lovingly brushed a loose strand of Eloise's hair back from her pale face. The young girl glanced over at a candle, barely visible within the glass of the lantern beside her. They sat silently for a moment until Guenivier spoke again. “Would you like to see a trick?” She asked mischievously, unlatching the lanterns door and pulling the candle out from its metal enclosure. Eloise watched in amazement as her mother passed a finger through the middle of the exposed flame. Then, slowly, she took Eloise by the wrist and did the same. Careful, she aided her daughter's hand through the dancing flame. “The middle of the flame has the least amount of heat,” Guenivier said simply. She watched the light of the flame glint across her daughter's freckled face.

As Eloise lifted her finger away from the candle, miraculously, a separate flame stayed lit on the tip of her nail. The young girl watched, slightly terrified yet slightly amazed. Guenivier stood with her eyes widened, unable to move. Slowly, Eloise moved

her finger around in front of her own face, the flame sitting contently on the top. She expected it to burn her delicate skin; she expected it to spread, but it just.. stayed! Then all of a sudden, the carriage lurched to a halt, sending both girls off their feet onto the floor. The flame on the top of Eloise's finger vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. "The man! He might have noticed us!" Guenivier said in a low voice. "How can we get out? He will be at the door!" Eloise whispered. Within a fraction of a second, Guenivier was back up on her feet, opening the carriage door, and pulling her daughter behind her. As it turned out the man WAS at the door, and when Guenivier swung it open, it knocked him over into the snow. The two girls leaped off the platform of the carriage and took off in the opposite direction, with the man calling after them. "Yeah run ya' little crooks!" He howled, as the girls faded out of sight. "Just wait 'till I find you again! Then you'll be in for it!"

After finally slowing to a walk, Guenivier looked over at the young girl. She was panting and, despite the weather, her hair clung to her forehead with sweat. "Was that supposed to happen?" Eloise asked between gasping breaths. "Well, no of course not, I wanted to get out before he realized we had even been there." Guenivier explained. "No, no, I meant the flame," Eloise said quietly, looking down at her snow covered feet. "Oh, no that was definitely... different," Guenivier admitted gently. "What's wrong wit me, mother?" The girl asked. Guenivier shook her head. "Nothing Eloise! You are just like everyone else! Now, I don't want to hear anymore of this, understood?" Her tone sounded angry, something Eloise wasn't used to. She nodded, not wanting to speak of it anymore.

They settled in their usual spot for the night, a tiny alleyway, mostly shielded from the cruel wind. The two girls huddled together under a blanket, struggling to contain any warmth between the two of them. Eloise silently waited for her mother's breathing to change. When she was sure Guenivier was asleep, Eloise slipped away from her mother's grasp onto the winter ridden street. She pulled her scarf farther over her nose. The wind was violent, biting her face and taunting her bare eyes. Eloise knew where she was headed, and after walking alone, in the darkness of a late winter's night, she came to the building. It was tall, with stained glass windows and a wooden cross planted proudly in the earth in front it... The church – the only building that could be easily accessed, that WASN'T illegal. She knew the pastor would still be inside, but he didn't mind the little girl coming to visit. On many occasions Eloise had suggested that she and her mother spend nights in the church, but for some reason Guenivier couldn't embrace the idea. Eloise trotted up the large stone stairs and lugged the wooden doors open. A flurry of wind and snow flew into the warm building. "Eloise! What a pleasure! Please come in my dead, come in!" The man was tall, with black hair and a kind face. Eloise smiled and joined the pastor beside the fireplace positioned in the middle of the church's back wall. Eloise stared into the roaring fire. "What brings you here tonight my dear?" he questioned, watching the girl's eyes which were still glued to the fire. "This.," replied the young girl quietly, submerging her hand completely in the flames. The man gasped, reaching for the young girl's arm.

He wrenched it away from the fire. "What are – ?!" he started, only to be interrupted by an extraordinary sight. All five of the girl's fingers had flames seemingly growing out of her fingertips. She held her hand out for inspection, now unafraid of this strange new occurrence. The man's eyes lit up, realizing what he was looking at. "Point

at the lantern,” he whispered. “What?” Eloise asked, slightly confused. The flames still flickered prominently on her fingers. “Point at the lantern there,” he repeated, nodding to an unlit lantern mounted on the wall beside them. Despite the odd request, Eloise did as she was instructed and pointed with all five fingers to the lantern and then turning into sparks, making the lantern sway from side to side. Eloise was amazed! “How did you know what would happen?” she asked. The man was already rummaging through a dusty bookcase. He picked up an equally dusty book and flipped through it hastily. After a few discontented grunts his eyes finally lit up. Slamming the book onto his podium, he pointed to a picture.

“*Populus de elementum*,” he said in a flawless accent. “It means, ‘people of the elements’. They live in a land called Elementsia. And if I am correct, this is where you come from.” Eloise shook her head and walked to the book. She inspected the picture closely. It looked like a strange man and woman. The man was blue. He was being suspended from the ground by a spontaneous wave of water. The woman, who was green, was twirling a finger, making a tree grow from the earth.

“I do not get it! How does this link to me?” The young girl was mystified and bewildered. “*Plurrimi vulgaris elemental vox errant terra, unda quod aer. Is est said ut incendia vox errant valde rarus quod extremus validus ut proprie instructus*,” the pastor continued. “Which mean, ‘the most common elemental powers were Earth, Water and Air. It is said that fire powers were very rare, and extremely powerful when properly trained.’” The man was just as amazed as Eloise. “But from what I have heard, the People of the Elements were just a myth. Yet you are proof!” he continued. “Are you telling me I’m part of a different race?” Why aren’t I blue or green, or red like the people in the book?” Eloise questioned, unsure of herself. “Different species,” the pastor corrected her. “And my guess is that one of your parents was human.” Eloise cupped her face in her hands and shook her head. “This may be a lot to take in dear; I can understand your frustration.” The man attempted to comfort the young girl. “You don’t understand, I MUST see my parents, I MUST see my parents,” she pleaded.

“If you wish to reunite with your parents, it will be a long, and perhaps dangerous, road. If you wish to go, you must follow what I am about to tell you completely. Understood?” the pastor asked. Was she crazy? Maybe. Perhaps she would regret this, but the thought that she might belong somewhere excited her. She couldn’t walk away from this, not now. The girl nodded. The pastor held up his hand. “Wait here, I will be back in a moment,” he said, disappearing behind a large wooden door. Within a few minutes, he emerge with something covered with a black piece of fabric in one arm, and a basket in the other. He replaced the book on the podium with the other objects.

Eloise eyes the mysterious black blanket covering what appeared to be a small metal cage. First, the pastor unloaded the basket. The contents were; a sheathed iron dagger, a gorgeous, stark, white cloak, a coil of rope, and a leather messenger’s bag. “This cloak will protect you from the harsh winter,” the pastor said, wrapping the large piece of clothing around the girl, tying the tassels at her neck to keep it from slipping. Next the pastor gave Eloise the dagger. The girl unsheathed it and read the inscription stencilled into the handle. *Held obviam sol solis may Althalos adveho dico*, it read. “Held against the sun, may Althalos come calling,” explained the pastor. “Althalos?” Eloise blinked thoughtfully. “What is that?” she asked. The pastor then pulled away the piece of

black fabric from the metal cage. The girl's breath caught in her throat. It was impossible!

Yet here it was right in front of her face. A griffin. A very tiny griffin, but a griffin nonetheless. It had collected itself into a tiny ball, head and legs tucked into its large, white feathered wings. Its exquisite eagle head then peeked out from its hiding place and jolted around. "This is Althalos. He is less than a month old. I found his egg a while back in a hole in the ground. Foolishly, I took it and hatched it. I have grown quite attached to the little one, but I would like him to join you on your quest. He is still a baby," the pastor said happily, reaching a finger into the cage and petting the creature's lion body. The griffin stood up with a contented cry. "Whenever he flies too far away from you, hold this dagger up to the light. I have charmed it; Althalos cannot resist its calling," he explained. Watching Eloise put her dagger back in its casing. "He is amazing," she said, astonished. Althalos gave another squawk and flapped his wings.

The man smiled and reached out for the messenger bag. "This bag will come in handy for many things. I have already stocked it with a waterskin, but you can also put Althalos in here when you don't want him flying." Eloise nodded again; she seemed to be doing a lot of nodding lately. "One last thing Eloise. Are you sure you want to do this?" he questioned her, placing two hands on her shoulders. The girl was about to nod again when she stopped herself. "More than anything," she replied. "Then I suggest you stay here until morning and set off early. You must tell no one where you are going! I think our little world is better off not knowing about this more advanced, higher powered species." He chuckled to himself, despite the seriousness of the conversation. "What about Guenivier?" Eloise asked, feeling sad for the woman. "She will understand. I will tell her my dear." Eloise smiled. "Thank you."

The next morning, the pastor woke her up from her slumber on a church bench and helped her equip all the things he had given her the night before. They filled her waterskin and packed a loaf of bread into the messenger bag, along with a coil of rope. The pastor also ripped a map from the book for the girl to follow. "Okay Althalos, you protect this girl, you understand me?" The man whispered to the griffin, which he held protectively in his arms. The creature cried his compliance. Reluctantly, the pastor handed Althalos to Eloise and she covered him in her messenger bag. "I'll let you out when we are past the city gates," she told the animal. "Eloise – you power; promise me that you will practice it whenever you can. There may be more to it than just submitting your hand into flames." Eloise's hair on the back of her neck stood up. The pastor had called it an 'power'. A power, hardly – more of a curse... However, she agreed. Eloise knew practice might come in handy

After a solemn goodbye, Eloise and Althalos departed the church together. "This is it, the beginning of my journey," she whispered to herself, pulling the hood of her white cloak over her head to protect her bare face from the wind. Althalos squawked at her from inside the messenger bag beneath her cloak. It was too early for anyone to be out on the streets, so she need not be worried about being spotted leaving the city. Still, she was cautious trudging through the snow, which was getting deeper and deeper by the day.

It didn't take long to reach the outskirts of the small city. When she did, Eloise opened the flap of her messenger bag to let Althalos out. "Come on out, just stick close to me," Eloise said. The griffin looked up at the snow filled sky and, without hesitation,

launched himself up into the air with a trill. What a spectacular sight it was. The creature spread its wings, spiralling fifty feet towards the morning sun, and then, making a swift decline back to earth, Althalos landed not three feet from Eloise was standing. He flapped his wings to shake off the snow. "Show off," Eloise muttered, grinning despite herself. Althalos huffed in protest. The young girl looked at her surroundings: a winding path through some scattered pine trees. It seemed as though once you left the city, you left civilization itself. Eloise then turned her attention to the map she had taken out of her bag. Eloise knew that the path she was following went for about five miles, and then ran into a main road that could be followed into the forest and then, eventually, back into the city. She knew that she couldn't follow the road for long; she needed to cut through the forest. Eloise shivered, she couldn't bear the thought of the darkness of the trees enveloping her. Could there be a way around it? She further inspected the map. No luck, she would have to go through. Eloise sighed. "Well little guy, let's get going. If we hurry we might be able to get through the forest before dark, then we can set up camp on the other side." She knew those chances were slim. Even as she spoke they were burning daylight, and fast. Althalos was still on the ground, burying himself in a pile of snow when he realized he was being spoken to. He cried and dug at the snow with his lion paws.

Eloise trudged through the snow with Althalos soaring above her head. She was quiet, not that it mattered much, even if she tried to speak, her words would have been carried away in the whistling wind before her ears heard them. Was this a mistake? She could die out here, following a map to a place she wasn't even sure existed. She pulled her white cloak's hood farther down her face, shielding herself from the wind. She wondered how Althalos could handle flying in the cold. She looked up to see him contently gliding through the air, swaying side to side. She smiled at the creature, who was completely oblivious of what danger may lay ahead. At least she wasn't completely alone on this mission.

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