

The part of the university where items were displayed didn't get many visitors. Tibs hadn't bothered with it, or those in previous places where he'd done his research, because they wouldn't tell him anything about what he wanted to learn. Those that had essence could show what was possible, but Tibs still wasn't to the point where he could make weaves. He was nowhere near that, as far as his attempts showed. So his research focused on scraps of information sorcerers might have let slip about that when he wasn't looking for hints as to where wild dungeons might be.

But if the guild wanted the spear, shouldn't he study it? Find out if it was just something out of its past, or if there was a power there they could use. That he could use against them?

It looked unassuming. A wooden shaft and metal spearhead. Both were in good condition, most likely because of denser essence and the weaves. A wooden card had information about it in multiple language.

What it was called: The Corbin Spear.

Where it was found: The kingdom of Joleis, at the ruin of an unidentified city believed to have been called Carsitar.

He'd come across the kingdom in his reading, but he didn't remember details. The city he'd didn't remember reading about, nor the spear, or even who had founded the guild. He wondered if that was something they hid, or something he hadn't looked hard enough for. He didn't think knowing about who had created the guild would help him destroy it.

"It is quite an artifact, isn't it?" the woman who'd positioned herself next to him said.

He'd sensed her, but until she spoke hadn't known she was the person who'd spoken with Alistair. He needed to focus on the details of how the essences flowed to be able to tell people apart, and that had never been worthwhile for those without an element.

"It looks old."

She chuckled. "It is. It is older than most histories."

He indicated the card. "Then how do you know what it is?"

"Research, of course. What do you study?" Her tone was quizzical.

"Books."

Her laugh was airy. "Yes, as we most of us here do. What is your subject of research?"

"The dangers of the world." The books he read would support that, if she bothered looking.

"The is an unusual area of research. I don't think I have met anyone investigating that specifically before."

He shrugged.

"And is that what interests you about this item? That it was a weapon?"

"I overheard you and that man talk. It made me curious."

She had noticed him, so he wasn't revealing anything.

"Curiosity is a good thing for a researcher. Tell me, Tilan, where did you train?"

"Trustost University."

"A good place to learn. What brought you to your unusual field of study?"

"Curiosity."

She laughed again. "You are indeed unusual. Most researchers here take any chance

to speak about what interests them and never relinquish them.”

He shrugged.

“Still, I am curious. There are many other fields that could interest a man such as yourself. Why chose one that won’t change much to our understanding of the world?”

The snort was unbidden. That understanding they were all so proud of seemed to be lacking in what mattered, and wrong in so many places. But she wouldn’t appreciate hearing *that*.

And, as always, he had a ready story. “My mother.” He studied the spear, noting its details. People had an easier time believing real stories when they had to pry them out of the person who’d lived it.

The spear head was etched with patterns of flames, and he wondered if they were representative of what the fire within the weave had done.

“She had an interest in the wilderness?” she prodded.

“The wild took her from me,” he replied flatly. The rope that held it in place was a tight weave of wood, metal, and air.

“Ah. And that prompted you to understand how it could happen?”

“Nearly dying from it made me want to find out why anyone would make roads through them and make it easier for the wilderness to take people.” Remembering the unfairness of those guards taking his mother from him, all the while laughing, made the anger in his tone real.

“The world is harsh,” she said in a conciliatory tone. “I’m glad that you had people to help you and that you used what happened to help understand it.”

He wasn’t gentle in batting her hand away from his shoulder. “I fought my way to be able admitted to the university. I struggled alone. I wasn’t one of them, with coins overflowing their pocket to pay for everything they needed. I earned my place here through work. Not through help.”

She didn’t react to what had to be an offensive act from someone well below her. “I am still glad you took a hardship and made something of it. Many join our institutions hoping to be spoken about, instead of seeking to help others through the understanding of the world.”

“You told the man from the adventurer’s guild that the spear was connected to its creation. How so?”

She shifted her attention to it. “Little is known about the man who founded the adventurer’s guild. He is reputed to have been a great fighter, someone with an element, and a will that couldn’t be broken. He tamed kings and forced them to see reason. Forced them to stop fighting each other over the dungeons and created the organization to stand between the two. There were many attempts to remove him. To destroy what he built.”

“But the guild is still here. Him?”

She laughed again. “No one lives so long, not even with an element. But it wasn’t age that took him.”

“Battle of Thuross?”

She nodded. “The dungeon there unleashed creatures on the city. He and many adventurers came to its defense. And they stopped it, but at great cost. The kings tried to take the guild down after this, but others stood up to them the way he had, and it endured.”

“Who was he?”

“His name is lost to time. All that is left are his exploits and some of the items reputed to have been his, like the Corbin Spear.”

“Is it special?”

“Oh, it is enchanted. We had a sorcerer test it.”

“Why does it do?”

“Nothing, anymore, according to him. The enchantments are too degraded to understand how to reweave them. As for what it could do? The stories that survived ascribe so many magic to it that, if true, it could do anything.” Tibs stared, and she chuckled. “And that is the problem with items so old. All that survive of their exploits are the stories told about them. And after so long, none of them are true anymore, and we have no way to know what that was.”

“Magic?”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Adventurers with void as their elements are supposed to be able to see events out of sequence. Couldn’t one of them tell you what actually happened?”

“That is odd knowledge for someone in your field of research to have.”

He chuckled. “No one writes about how and why the wild is so dangerous. It’s all in notes scholars make in the margins of the books they write about what actually interested them. I have to read everything, looking for what helps me. Some of it stays in my head.”

“I expect someone tried it, but my role, in regard to these items, is to see to their preservation. Ensure no further damage is done so that those who have to study them as part of their research can do so.”

“Or so you can give it away in exchange for favors.”

“Field research is dangerous. I expect that’s how many of those margin notes end up there. Having an organization like the adventurer’s guild look at us favorably helps ensure our researchers survive those dangers.”

If the spear’s enchantment no longer worked, and couldn’t be rewoven, it couldn’t be turned into a tool for the guild. Of course, someone could be lying. She wasn’t, but the sorcerer was connected to the guild. She’d have no way to know if he’d lied. And he could have known the university would give it back in exchange for favors.

Ifs and could haves.

Insanity waited for those who traveled too deeply into those forests.

What mattered to him was if he believed depriving the guild of the spear would hurt them enough to make the risks worthwhile. And it didn’t. The only people affected would be those who cared for its history.

“Thank you for answering my questions. I should return to my reading.”

“Of course, sharing knowledge is part of why we are here.”

For those who had the money.

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“How about a drink?” Charlie asked, falling into steps with Tibs. “I’ll pay for the ale.” This time, the man was dressing in better quality clothing. Nothing ostentatious, but close enough to what Tibs wore as a researcher, they wouldn’t attract attention. He patted a pocket and seemed satisfied by the coins he felt there.

“If I agree, will you make sure it’s the last time?”

“Why would it be? Me and my teams are staying for a while. We haven’t lined up the next job yet.”

“Because I don’t linger on the people from my past. I look forward.”

“Isn’t that lonely?”

He shrugged. Loneliness was preferable to the pain of losing people.

Charlie watched him. “Okay. We share a drink and I go away.”

They stepped into the first tavern they encountered and Charlie got them each a tankard. “So, what have you been up to? It’s just the two of us, Thibaud, so I don’t think you need to lie.”

“I traveled.”

“I don’t think you do ‘traveling’. You go places with a goal. You do what you set out to do once you’re there, then you move on to the next place. I have no idea why you spent so much time in the library, but everything you did was to help make that happen, or to pay us.”

“I like to read.”

Charlie snorted. “I heard this song, while we were holed up in a traveler’s inn waiting for a storm to pass. The bard sang about the Green Grifter, who went about talking the nobles into giving their money to those in need until they trapped him in his hideout and burned him down. Was that you?”

“It’s the Green Drifter,” Tibs said in disgust. He didn’t see a point in denying who he’d played all those years ago. Charlie already knew he did it. “And there was no talking involved. They’re always changing what happened,” he grumbled. “And they didn’t trap me. The nobles certainly don’t bother being the ones trying to stop thieves. They pay guards and adventurers. They weren’t planning on burning the house they’d cornered me to. I tricked them into doing that, because I’d done what I had to do and I was ready to leave.”

“So all those stories of thieves who’ve terrorized nobles over the years, they’re you?”

“Do I look that old?”

Charlie chuckled. “They inspired you.”

He shrugged. “They’re always singing about people doing stuff that no one does. I thought I’d make it easy on them. And they’re still changing what happened.”

“Making up stuff is what they do.”

“Except they claim to sing about what happens. How many people believe those songs to be true?”

Charlie smiled. “You can always correct those bards when they sing the wrong things.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “How would I know they’re wrong?”

“Then you should stop caring what people believe.”

That was what led to people thinking the adventurer’s guild was there to protect them. That it knew better than everyone.

They drank in silence for a time.

“What happened to you, Thibaud? What made you so driven to read?”

“I told you. My mother was taken from me. I had to survive.”

“And that explains the thievery. Not the reading. Scholars read. Sorcerers read. Even nobles don’t read the way you do. What are you looking for?”

“Nothing.”

“Whatever it is, I’d help.”

Tibs shook his head. He wasn’t dragging anyone in this. He wouldn’t be responsible for the guild killing someone around him.

Tibs finished his tankard and stood. “I hope the job goes well.”

He walked away, leaving someone from his past behind again.