

His control slipped, and the wind nearly threw Tibs off the roof. With a curse, he leaned against the chimney to block it as he regained control through air essence, then it stopped buffeting him about. Having to hold at bay such strong wind as he ran was a strain on his focus. Had he ever had to actively hold on to essence for so long before?

Thunder sounded in the distance, followed by, seconds later, the flash of lightning. He raised his head to the sky and the chilly rain ran down his face and under his armor, cooling him until it got uncomfortable. He iced it over his skin, forming the essence so it wasn't cold, and pushed himself from the chimney. This wasn't about enjoying these new roofs. It was about reaching the Brokerage and figuring out how to get in. Once that was done, he could rest.

He stopped before the building was visible through the rain, as it entered his sense, and he felt something, no, someone, on the roof of a building lining the open plaza around the Brokerage.

The person had no element, which was why their faint life essence only registered now; there wasn't enough of it for him to tell them apart from background essences at the edges of his sensing range. The only reason he could tell that it was a person, instead of a weave or the essence that made out everything around them, was that life essence had something of a glow to it, to his sense, which nothing else had. He didn't know why.

He went around them, to approach from a different direction, and sensed someone else on that roof on the outside of the plaza. He kept going and there was someone on the next roof, and the one after that.

Guards, he decided, once he was back where he'd started. Each roof had one or more of person there. They were close enough that even with the rain, they could make each other out. On a clear night, they would see each other's lanterns and the outlines of those on the roofs next to them. He could feel their fire, protected from the wind. It was strong, so a large wick and plenty of oil.

He approached until he was a roof away. This one had three guards huddled under a makeshift awning against the chimney. The one on its left had one standing under a more permanent shelter that consisted of a roof and a wooden wall that the guard moved to block the worst of the wind, leaving the lantern untended on the small table.

In this weather, even with their attention focussed, all he needed to slip by was to create a gust of wind strong enough to threaten snuffing out the lantern before running along the side of the roof.

He made a disk of water, intent on using them to cross to the Brokerage, and rain clattered surprisingly loud on it to his ear; and that of the guards as voices were raised and two of them forgot about the lantern to come to the side. Tibs let the disk go as he dropped to his stomach and pressed against the parapet.

"What was that?" one asked, the rain making her sound further away than she was.

"It sounded like rain on the roof of the tinsmith," the other replied. He sounded quizzical, more than worried.

"This high? There's no tin anywhere close, and where did it go?"

"Well, whatever it was, it's gone."

Tibs made a bubble of still air around him for the way it kept sound from moving past it and immediately let it go as the rain beaded and ran down the dome. Fortunately, it didn't

attract attention. Unfortunately, to workout how to make the water disk silent, he needed the rain to fall through, which might get the guards investigating.

He added that to his never ending list of tasks as he crouched. This was the closest he'd make it; so he'd make the best of the situation.

He focused on the Brokerage's roof and top floor, bringing in his sense to increase the details of what he sensed. Immediately, something felt odd about the weave within those walls and the roof itself. The best term he could fit to how it felt was worn. The way a fabric that saw uses every day became thin in spots until the strands broke.

Did weaves thin with time? Was that what happened here? Or was it the result of poor work? He didn't know enough about weaves to tell, and he had no one to ask...

And whose fault was it? Who had alienated Don, again?

He'd been trying to go talk to him, Tibs reminded himself, but that didn't help him now. The one thing he could hope was that since Don hadn't told on him to Tirania, he might not do it by the time he returned to Kragle Rock. Not that the delay would make Don more amicable to a conversation.

He focused on the floor below, and it had the same wear, the one below that wasn't as...deep. The one below that one had no wear to its weave. Was something leeching the weave downward? Was that a thing?

He rubbed his temple and added finding that out to the list.

Why ever it happened, It meant that all he'd have to worry about, when he reached the roof, were the...

Where were the guards?

He'd been so focused on the weaves he hadn't noticed there was no life essence on the roof. That confirmed it was where he'd get onto the building. Now to work out how to get in.

He couldn't see the window, but knew it was there by how the water hit and dripped along it. It had a different feel than what hit the stone wall or the wooden beams. He knew there was a lantern of sort inside the room even if he didn't see its light through the rain; he sensed the fire essence in it. The impression of the shapes in the room from how the essence stopped on the things in it, made him think it was a bedroom.

Using his sense of the rain, he made out the windowsill. It was large enough he would be able to hold on to the one above and rest his toes on the one below.

If he could touch them without the weave reacting.

He expected the weave in the roof wouldn't react to being walked on. Unless the lack of guards was how it always was, instead of them not bothering because of the weather. But would the windowsill be the same? Why would it? It wasn't like guards had a reason to hang from them.

How could he go about checking if that weave would trigger, without it sounding the alarm? What could he do to a weave to keep it from reacting to his presence?

Why did everything seem to always come down to questions he couldn't get the answer to? Couldn't he get something easy to figure out once in a while?

And no, it wasn't like even if he was on good term with Don, he'd be of help here.

What he needed was information. Since he only knew one person here, and it was his fault Tibs had to deal with this forming headache, he might as well start providing answers.

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The archer stared at Tibs. “What do you take me for? A scholar? You’re the one with the magic. You should know all that stuff.”

“I’m not even officially Lambda. I shouldn’t know anything about weaves, and I haven’t been able to ask my teacher a lot, because that would make him suspicious. And the one person I might have been able to convince to answer these kinds of question, you were adamant we didn’t have the time for me to talk with him. You’re the one who wants this done. How come you don’t know anything about what’s needed to get in that building?”

“I know plenty, just not about that. What I know about magic is to not mess with it, or people who have it.”

“Unless you can force one of them to do your bidding.”

The man sighed. “This is going to help you as much as me; tell me you see that? Tell me you aren’t going to change your mind in the middle of this and hand me over—”

“Who would I hand you over to?” Tibs asked in annoyance, then wondered if people were after the archer. “No, I’m not going to hand you over to anyone,” he said at the suspicious look the man gave him. “It would get that letter handed to the guild. And I do want the troubles from my town to stop. I just don’t like the way you went about forcing me.”

The man shrugged and stretched on the bed.

Tibs leaned against the wall. “What’s needed to get into the Brokerage? The normal way, I mean. How do people who need to go in do it?”

“They have made an appointment with someone there.”

“Can you make one? I could go in as your apprentice.”

Archer shook his head. “When you make the appointment, you need a referral letter, the plan outlining what you’ll need from then, and show that you have the funds to pay them with.”

“It can’t be that hard to convince them you have all of that.”

The man chuckled. “Clearly, you have no idea how business is run or how hard it would be to make happen. And even if I could, you couldn’t come. Your eyes give away you have magic, and putting lenses on them to hide their color would draw even more attention.”

“I can—” he stopped. If Archer didn’t know he could let go of the element and have normal eyes, he wasn’t revealing it. Since the archer wouldn’t help, Tibs left the room and took seat at the bar, placing a copper on the counter.

Sania replaced it with a tankard. “You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

“I don’t have enough.” He took a careful sip and was pleased it wasn’t as spicy. “I don’t know enough to do what Archer needs me to.”

“That doesn’t sound like him. He has contact all over the place.”

“Not for this,” Tibs said, annoyed. “Do you know a sorcerer who’d be willing to answer questions?”

“I tend a tavern,” she replied with a chuckle. “Unlike how the bards like to sing, those are not the types of people who congregate here. Why don’t you just walk up to one? With your eyes, I’m sure they’d be willing to help you.”

“My experience is that if someone had knowledge, they aren’t interested in sharing it unless they’ll gain something in the process. Their preferred thing to gain are coins, and I don’t have enough of those here.”

“Couldn’t Archer get you into the library?”

“He said he knows nothing about magic.”

“The city library,” she said, and Tibs stared. “It’s where the scholars store their work.”

“I thought those went in universities.”

“They work there, but the library is where the books are kept.”

“And they let anyone in?” he asked, suspicious.

She chuckled. “Of course not. Only scholars, researchers, and sorcerers can go in.”

“I don’t exactly look like one of those.”

“Looks are easy to change,” she replied casually.

“But I don’t know enough to pass myself off as...”

Okay, he couldn’t claim to be someone who belonged in such a place, but he was short, and strangers still confused him for nothing more than a kid when he was out of his armor. Kids caused mischief, and if one of them was wealthy enough, that mischief could be forgiven in exchange for coins.

He finished the ale in a long swallow and coughed. Not as spicy didn’t mean it went down any easier if he drank it too fast. Then he left the tavern to find a marketplace. He needed to get himself properly dressed, and that meant he needed to get coins.

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The enormous hall echoed with each of his steps. Tibs did his best not to let the stiff clothes bother him as he followed the wealthy man and woman through it. He’d slipped behind them as they’d approached, close enough to be mistaken for their son, but far enough they wouldn’t notice unless someone pointed him out. The guards by the entrance lazily looked them, and him, over as they passed and didn’t react. He’d had to remind himself he wasn’t channeling an element, so his eyes were their normal brown and uninteresting.

Now that he was inside, he needed to find the information he was after. And find it in a language he could read. Carina had taught him the letters from her kingdom, not his. The letters were the same, but arranged so the words were different.

He was still pondering how much of a problem it might be as they crossed an archway, and he came to a stop as he saw the bookshelf.

The tall bookshelf. Then the one next to it, and another, and still more. The room was long, with shelves after shelves tall enough ladders were attached to them in case someone wanted a book that was too high to reach. And where there were balconies above those with yet more shelves filled with books. Six balconies, each so long he couldn’t see their end.

Tibs swallowed at the wealth represented in so many books.

The couple he’d followed in was nowhere to be seen, and he fought the urge to run and hide. He belonged in this place, or at least came in with people who did. His parents, who had wandered off without noticing that their son had left them, attracted to all the books. He was dressed the part of a lower noble’s son, so now he needed to act the part.

He stepped to a bookcase and looked at the spines. They were thick, with the names in gold letters. The book merchants in Kragle Rock used the thickness to determine a book’s value first, Tibs had noticed, then how decorated it was.

If he could leave with only one of them, and have Darran sell it for him, he’d have enough gold he’d be able to pay what he owed to the guild when he reached Epsilon.

Not that he planned on there being a guild left by then.

And he wasn't here to fill his pouch, but his mind.

He reached for a thick one, and a woman spoke. He didn't understand the words, but the tone held warning; and he sensed her behind him. He'd been so awed by the sights, he'd ignored his sense.

Again, he fought the urge to run.

He was a noble's son, used to getting his way. He turned and readied himself to tell her off for keeping him from doing whatever he wanted. The severe gaze of her hazel eyes kept the words from forming. Her hair was lighter, short and streaked with gray. Wrinkles lined her face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, swallowing the lump in his throat, then realized he wasn't looking at Mama, and that his reaction had given him away.

"You shouldn't be touching the books," she said in an accented Pursatian. "I am Oshara, and who might you be, child?"

"I'm..." what was he supposed to call himself? "Tiber."

Her smile kept him from adding anything. There was no maliciousness in it, but it became rigid, the way those who didn't believe what they'd heard kept themselves from reacting. She'd call the guards and have him sent to a cell. Well, probably not. He was a child, and she seemed kind. But her next act would be to send him out and make sure he couldn't return.

"And what drew you here, Tiber?" she asked, amused. "You seem rather young to be an apprentice, and I expect that if you were here with your parents, they wouldn't have let you wander and touch precious tomes without the proper preparations." She took her hand from behind her back. It was covered by a thin white glove that had a delicate weave through it. Sensing around, anyone handling a book wore gloves with a similar weave.

He hurried to put his hands in his pockets.

"I'm afraid it is too late for that, Tiber. You have already given yourself away."

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked, more ashamed at having been caught so easily than afraid of her answer.

"That will depend on why you sneaked in. Are you here to steal a book?"

He shook his head.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm curious."

"And regarding what?"

"So many things?" he replied, unable to keep the exasperation from his voice.

Her chuckle was unexpected. "Curiosity is a good thing for a future scholar to have."

"I'm not—" Right, his eyes were brown.

"No, of course you aren't, yet. But that you went to such length to gain entry tells me you have the determination, along with the curiosity, required. I am certain that when you are of age, you will be able to convince a university to take you in."

He didn't think it likely once he'd taken down the guild and avenged Mama. "I guess I should go."

"Is there something specific I can assuage your curiosity about?" she asked before he turned away. "Or did you simply wish to see our vast collection?"

Tibs eyed her suspiciously. There was no light on her words, but... "Why aren't you

angry I broke the rules?”

“Tell me, have you ever been told that is it dangerous to want to know things?”

He shook his head. For as often as Alistair had been exasperated at his questions, he’d never told him to stop, or that he should stop. It was always because ‘now isn’t the time’.

“Well, I happen to believe that curiosity, with the right application of determination, should always be rewarded. So, tell me. What is the one thing you wish to learn about now that you are here?”

“Magic.” He already had something of a story to explain it.

She raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I am wrong and sorcery is in your future.”

“I couldn’t go into a dungeon, but I like the stories bards sing with magic in them. Magical items, magic on buildings the hero has to defeat. I heard one about this hero who got into a building because the magic was...” what word would a bard might have used. “Old. Is that a thing? Can enchantment grow old?”

She smiled and motioned him to a table. “That is a very interesting question. The answer depends on many factors. For example, how skilled were the sorcerers who laid the weave? How many times did it have to fight back assaults?”

Tibs sat and pulled purity out of his bracer. As much as he needed the information, he could already feel the headache getting it would give him.