

Tibs stood at the window, looking out and annoyed at the clear sky. Of course, today would be when the bad weather cleared.

Over the last week of incessant bad weather, Tibs had returned to the Brokerage. On the first night, he'd found that his hooks had barely deteriorated, and the two strands were still in place on them. So, he'd set about, each following night, enduring the mind numbing pelting rain as he carefully moved more and more strands to different hooks. He'd considered putting them all on the same one, but he didn't know how much 'interaction' they could endure before triggering. Two nights before, he'd found he'd moved aside the last of the strands he could identify.

Which left far too many he couldn't. How would those respond to being pulled apart? He could sense the Arcanus, but not all of them acted the same way depending on the essence they were used with. And while he'd managed to deal with the Arcanus he hadn't known on the strands he could identify, by simply copying them when he needed to extend how they stretched. The combination of an Arcanus he didn't know on a strand he couldn't identify the element of seemed too risky to attempt.

So he'd called it a night, then had returned to the Library the next day, spending coins on another set of good clothing, and including gloves like the one Oshara had worn. He couldn't copy the weave through them, but counted on being able to keep away from anyone with an element. There, he'd struck up a conversation with another scholar closer to his age, claiming to be new, and through him, was able to speak with enough of them his questions were spread and didn't raise suspicion.

What he'd left with was some confidence that a weave could be 'deformed' to a point, without it 'breaking'. That would trigger some effect, it could be the intended one or not. But if they could be deformed, they could be moved. All he'd needed was a way to do that. He'd had to come up with that on his own, as he suspected that question would get him noticed as not a scholar in training.

He had water, and he knew the correct filigree of Fey hardened it. He spent the hours before the early night the heavy rain brought experimenting until he had strands hard enough other strands didn't 'move through' it, but still flexible enough to wrap around strands and 'tie' them into loose bundles.

Then he'd carefully done that with the strands left, parting them like a curtain. Even with making it as wide as he was comfortable, the opening was still tight. He rested on the roof for an hour to confirm the alterations hadn't been detected, and then he sensed the light increasing ever so slightly, letting him know that even if he couldn't see it, dawn was approaching. Since this wasn't something he wanted to do at anything but his peak, he headed to Archer's room to sleep, then, as soon as it was sufficiently dark, he'd get in, finish the job and go home to his friend, and clear the air with Don.

"So, it's tonight?" Archer asked, not sounding particularly eager to have his coins.

"No." So, of course, today had to be the one the rain stopped. If he believed in luck, he'd be cursing it. From what he remembered Carina explaining, a long time ago, it felt to him, the weather was caused by all the elements far above them interacting. When they were distributed evenly, they had clear sky. A little too much water and there were clouds; air brought winds. Too much, and the weather turned bad until the excess was spent. The balance was never perfect, she'd told him, but usually only off enough to add the pleasantness of a breeze to the day, or the shade of passing clouds.

The skies of Shellbridge seemed to never be in balance, except when he needed them to be so.

Torus was to his left, its horns seeming thicker than they did in Kragle Rock. That seemed to be the case in a lot of the cities he'd visited. The one time it wasn't was when he stayed within the same kingdom. Otherwise, they might be thinner or thicker. He didn't understand how that could be, but that was one question he wasn't in a hurry to get the answer to.

He already had too many of them unanswered.

Claria was nearly full, her eye on Torus's horns.

Below, people were out in droves, as if the clear weather was cause for celebration. Which it might, since it was the first day of it since Tibs had been here.

"You said you'd start once you got up." There was no accusation in Archer's voice, and no light on the words. Tibs didn't remember speaking with him before falling asleep.

"I need the rain to hide me from the guards." He leaned back against the window frame.

"Can't you use magic to hide from them?"

He should his head. He didn't have the training to make anything reliable from darkness. The moment he lost his focus, the essence dissipated. "I'm going to have too much to do to depend on essence. There might be more I have to do on the weave, and there's one position with a direct line to that window. The others only have to look to the side slightly and they'll make me out against the pale stone."

"I can distract them."

"The goal is to not attract attention. I get in, get the coins, get out, and they don't know anything happened. By the time they find out, I want to have been back in Kragle Rock for days." He pushed from the wall.

"Where are you going?"

"Out. Since I can't work, I'm going to enjoy the city."

"Don't get in trouble."

He wouldn't get in trouble. If trouble got in his way? Well, he'd deal with it. A quick bowl of the tavern's stew along with a tankard of their ale, which no longer felt quite as spiced, and he was outside, letting the crowd jostle him.

Once he had enough of being bounced about, and his coin pouch felt heavy, he suffused himself with water and slipped between the people until he reached an alley. After a few houses, it opened onto a courtyard where a group gathered around a brazier. They were too jovial, and the building too nice for them to be Street. He greeted them with a nod and continued to another alley. The next street was smaller and not as busy.

Without the heat of the crowd, the chilly wind slipped into the holes in his armor until he stilled the air around him.

Cold was strange. It was around so much, he'd expected it to be an element. One that worked with some of the others, the way the Arcanus did. Other than fire, the four core elements could be cold. Purity, Light, Darkness, and Corruption didn't feel like anything, neither hot nor cold. As best as he could tell, it was in how he set the essences that created the cold, since it wasn't because he stilled water into ice that it was cold.

With air, it was in how it moved, so stilling it kept the cold from happening. It wasn't

simply motion that caused it, though. He had to will it into a specific pattern, otherwise it was simply the air moving and was no warmer or cold than what was around.

Earth was harder to explain, even to himself, but not complicated to make happen. It had something to do with its heaviness—the best word he could think of. How if he let some of it ‘sink’ lower in a specific way, cold happened.

The one element he hadn’t worked out how to do it with was fire. It seemed like all it could do was make heat and use it to consume what was around. But, since the other three could, Tibs was confident it was only a question of finding the right way, and then he’d have cold fire.

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He shielded his eyes against the sun on exiting the tavern, then adjusted the essence so it wouldn’t bother him. He’d forgotten how bright it was in the constant gloom of the rain. The wind had died down, but it was still cool and he took a moment to soak in the heat from the sun.

Heat, he didn’t bother trying to work out how it happened. He had a far too easy source of it already. He didn’t need others.

His wandering led him to a courtyard with tables before a building and people eating at them. He had a meal and an ale. It was more expensive than the tavern, but also better. Slices of vegetables and meats layered over each other with a spiced sauce. Even the Ale, which he’d asked not to be spiced, was. It seemed they didn’t know how to make anything that didn’t have spices in them

Even the local candies were spiced, the strongest one feeling like it was fire on his tongue. That one was, appropriately, called Red Fire. The shops clerk had been amused at Tibs’s reaction.

What he found interesting in all those spiced things, especially those that burned, was that they had no more fire essence in them than others that didn’t burn. He didn’t know how the effect was created, and he didn’t care. He was discovering he enjoyed it.

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Archer dropped in the chair opposite Tibs in enough of a dark mood he was surprised he couldn’t see darkness essence clinging to him. “How long until you have to go back?” He motioned to Sania, and she nodded.

A glance at his bracelet and he shrugged. “Once it turns red, I have two days.”

Archer cursed. “I haven’t been able to find anyone willing to make it rain.”

“They can do that?” what kind of reserve did it take to reach so far up and affect the essences there? He couldn’t sense that far, and Tibs expected few people could sense further than he did.

“Magic can do anything,” Archer said as a server placed a plate and tankard before him. “But in this place, no one wasn’t to stop the little sun they get by making rain.”

She motioned to Tibs’s nearly empty bowl of stew and he shook his head. He was taking his time before heading out for another exploration of the city.

“Give them more coins.” He took another forkful and savored the taste.

“The point of this excursion is for me to have money left when we leave.” He sipped his tankard. “I’d have to promise more than I’m going to get.” He motioned to Tibs’s covered arm. “If that turns red, and it’s not raining yet, you’re going in anyway. I’ve scouted the area

and I'll be able to distract the guards. I figure that ultimately it doesn't matter if they see you leave, you'll be able to lose them in the city."

It was good to know he'd be left to his own devices when it came down to it. "How am I carrying all those coins? The way you talk about it, I'm going to be carrying bags of them. That's not going to make leaving easy." He wasn't telling the man about the hiding places in his armor. Not that he thought they could handle all those coins. Sto had warned him he couldn't hide as much in them as Jackal could in his bottomless pouch.

"I'll have something for you before you have to do it."

Which meant he already had it, since neither knew when it would be time. Tibs decided not to bother searching the room. The man was clever enough to know it would be the first place Tibs searched, and he was more familiar with the city. For all Tibs knew, Archer had asked Sania to hold on to it until he needed it.

"It would be easier if I had it now." Still, there was no harm in trying. "That way, I won't have to wait for you to get it to start."

Archer eyes him. "And have you fill it with so much other stuff between now and then my coins won't fit?"

Interesting. It would be something like Jackal's pouch and the hiding place in his armor. But also limited. Possibly more than his, but for all Tibs knew, Archer thought he'd go around emptying houses of their entire contents if he had it.

"I'm not going around stealing."

"I've seen some of the places you've been eating at Tibs. Runners don't have that much silver to them."

Someone hadn't looked at what the Runners in Kragle Rock were managing, Tibs thought. Since, at this point, any team that made it past the second floor had worked out ways to keep more than the guild wanted them to from the runs.

"That's not the same thing. It's just a pocket here and there."

"Only a thief makes that kind of distinction between what they steal."

"I'm a rogue."

Archer snorted before taking a few mouthfuls. "Here, you're a thief. No one cares you're with the guild. Telling them you are isn't going to keep you out of a cell if you're caught. No dungeon here to give the guild power, and no king they can scare into making sure everyone defers to them."

"I thought everywhere had kings."

"Every kingdom has a king," Archer said. "But the further a city is from the one where they live, the less influence they have. There are some exceptions, like here, but they'll only focus on enforcing what matters to them. Not the guild. And something else you should know about this city. Cells tend to be empty, but not for a lack of criminals being caught."

"I'm not getting caught."

"I'd be a lot happier if you stopped entirely until we're done."

"I have to keep training." Tibs grinned. "You don't want my fingers going stiff, do you?"

The man sighed, then went on eating.

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The thunder woke Tibs with enough force he thought the building shook from it.

He was at the window looking out into the night when, by the sense of the patrons in the main room, it has to be afternoon. There were always more people once the sun set.

How could it be so dark? Thunder sounded again, then lightning outlined roofs and buildings.

“I guess today’s the day.” Archer rubbed his hands before pulling a bag from a chest and throwing it at Tibs.

Really, he’d kept that in a chest in the room they shared? Tibs sensed the weave as soon as it was out of the chest. Then again, Tibs hadn’t searched the room. So maybe it wasn’t that Archer wasn’t clever.

There was a lot of darkness essence in the bag’s weave, along with many other, but it wasn’t as dense as what Sto had put in Jackal’s pouch.

“A bag of holding,” Archer said. “It’s also enchanted to make it harder to detect. And there’s one so you don’t feel the weight of what you put in it.”

The bag was an actual bag, looking to be twine made fabric. Like all bags, it didn’t have a way to hook to his belt. “If I need to hold it once the coins are in, it’s going to make things harder.”

“It’s the best I could get,” he replied with a shrug. “Anything convenient has already been claimed by people with more money than me. She lent that to me because I know her. And she knows I’m fine using her practice bag.”

“You’re sure it’s going to work?”

“I’ve used it before. The enchantments are fine, it’s just that she never bothered making it convenient to use.”

“How many coins will it hold?” Tibs hooked an end under his belt and tied it around. Doing that to leave would depend on how the outside bulged from the coins.

“More than they’ll have.” Tibs stood and moved, adjusting the bag along the belt to minimize how it bounced. “What?” he asked, feeling the man’s eyes on him the entire time.

“I’ve just handed you something that can hold more than you can find in that building, and you just tied it to your belt without checking how that was possible.”

“Magic. The inside is larger than the outside. That’s how the chest in the dungeons work. Something like that—” he motioned to the small chest Archer took the bag from, “—can hold a full set of armor. It isn’t as amazing as you think it is.”

“Just to a Runner,” Archer muttered. “I nearly fell into it when she told me what it did. I had my arm in to my shoulder trying to feel the bottom and almost lost my balance.”

He untied the bag. “I wonder what it’s like to be inside one of them.”

“She advised against it, adamantly. When I asked why, she said I wouldn’t be able to stand finding out.”

Tibs opened the bag. “I’m not like—”

Archer took it out of his hands. “She knows the life I live. The things I’d seen and done. If she says I can’t stand knowing those details, I believe her. So should you.” He handed it back.

He tied back in place. He’d ask Don, if the sorcerer was willing to speak to him by then. If not, he’d have to remember to ask Ganny during the next run.

He chuckled. Unless Don decided to be more of an asshole about the whole thing

than Tibs thought he could be, no matter what happened, he'd be able to talk with Sto and Ganny during the runs again.

"What's that about?" Archer asked suspiciously.

"Just something for when I'm back home."

"You aren't keeping the bag. I need to return it to her."

"I don't need it."

The suspicion intensified.

"I don't steal from my home."

The look turned to disbelief. "You mean you aren't the one always getting into nobles' houses and taking their things?"

The noble's quarter was barely part of his home, as far as Tibs was concerned. "I don't take their stuff. I just go in for the training." Since the guards hadn't dragged him to the cells for it, either the nobles didn't realize they were missing a few coins, exaggerated what was taken or, and this one was more worrisome, planned on dealing with the issue themselves.

Another thing to add to his list, once he was back home.

Archer's expression made it clear he didn't believe him, which was fine. Tibs didn't care what the man thought of him. Once the job was done, he wasn't planning on seeing him ever again.