

Tibs regretted not waiting for a caravan well before reaching the city.

The idea had seemed like the best one. He had nothing to gain from the runs anymore, so he'd have to spend most of the time in the village, or out 'hunting'. It would have given him chances to talk with Firmen and Merka, but it also meant he'd have to deal with that hunter as well as the villagers.

Vanishing reinforced the forest was dangerous, if only because of the weather.

What he hadn't remembered was how boring traveling along was. The quiet was nice for a few days, but then because overbearing. And it hadn't taken long for his walking to become trudging. There was so little to do, other than walk.

Finding the road had been easier than he'd expected, because he sensed the break in the trees. But that didn't make walking easier, or harder. Even when the snow was too dense for air to blast it out of his way, moving it with water essence was only slightly more time consuming.

He'd hunted for meat, foraged for frozen berries or root plants, and walked.

The potential respites from the boredom, he had to avoid.

A lone traveler arriving to a village in the dead of the cold season would lead to too many questions, too many stories. Even if his beard would make him unrecognizable once he was able to shave it, it couldn't risk the stories.

So he went wide around them and endured the boredom.

Even the occasional distraction of his first time in the wild had the good sense not to be around when the weather turned this cold. Bandits needed caravans for their survival, and those didn't brave the road once snow was possible.

So the few camps he came across were deserted, with barely the dredge of an ale barrel left behind.

He'd become so numb to everything that he didn't notice the warming weather until his foot sank in the mud to his ankle. And it took too long for the meaning to register. Snow was still high under the shade of the trees, but the road was now more puddles than snow banks.

He remained alone on the road for weeks. The road was mostly dry by the time he saw the caravan approaching. Then a man on horseback rode to meet him.

Tibs didn't know what he looked like after all this time alone, but by how quickly the sword was drawn once the horse stopped, he couldn't be a pleasant sight.

"State your business," the guard woman stated.

"What's the name of the city?" he asked, his voice raw. Rigel would have told him, since it was their destination, but that was so long ago he couldn't remember it.

"Brokentia," she answered after studying him.

"Then I'm bound for Brokentia to test my good fortune."

She considered him, then sheathed her sword. "Get off the road. Don't approach the wagons of the people."

"Or?" Tibs asked, unable to stop himself.

"Or you will be dispatched."

He chuckled. "Good luck with that." Then he stepped off the road to continue walking among the trees. That hadn't been smart. But it had been so long since he'd talked with someone. Even as he listened to the indistinct conversations among the wagon, he was

tempted to defy her.

But there was a city ahead, and he'd find people to talk with there until he couldn't stand them anymore. A few hours, he expected, was all it would take.

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"State your name and business," the guard demanded, hand on the pommel of his sword after going through what had to be the same demand in two other languages Tibs didn't know. Next to him, a small woman had a board before her, held by cords around her neck. On it were papers, an inkpot and a stack of quills.

This was where Tibs became a person again. He'd even made himself as presentable as he could. He'd found a lake to wash in, had tied his hair back in a tail and had put on one of the better set of hide clothing he still had. He'd trimmed his beard and given time for the smell of burned hair to leave him.

"I am Thibaud, coming here from Arteron," he answered in his best version of the same language. His accent might make them ask where he was from originally, but he was ready.

"And what brings you to Brokentia?" the bureaucrat asked in a bored tone, while the guard eyed Tibs suspiciously. He probably did the same to any lone traveler making what had to sound like a preposterous claim.

Tibs beamed. "Why, I'm here to rob your nobles blind, of course."

The statement only garnered him a raised eyebrow from her and a smirk from the guard. Were nobles openly disliked here? Or did they see his claim for the embellishment it was?

"I am a scribe of great skill, here to be well paid to immortalize the true history of the noble families of Brokentia."

She wrote the information down. "Since you are here to conduct business—"

"Art."

"—you need to register with the merchant's offices before you can offer your services. They'll explain the processes to document the services you render."

"I was expecting to be directed to the artisan's guild."

"The artisans operate under the merchant's offices," she answered without looking up from her writings. The tone made it clear this was not the first time she'd had to explain that detail.

Every kingdom had its way of doing things. It was a truth of the world.

"Very well, and where might I find said offices?"

"Second street," the guard said. "Is called Office Street. So long as you know your letters, you can't miss it." The man's tone told Tibs how little worth the guard put in his proclamations of being a scribe.

"I see, and office begins with Ohm, right?"

The guard's expression darkened. "How about I explain how we spell Cell here?"

Tibs smiled. "That's quite alright, I make it a business to never get close to that one word. Far to distasteful. I'm certain I can find someone willing to guide me to the correct office, if you'll give me leave to enter."

The guard looked at the bureaucrat, who nodded. "Go in. Don't let us catch you causing trouble."

Tibs smiled. “No worries there. I never do.”

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Tibs turned to gawk at a display of glassware, and his packed knocked into someone. He hurried to turn, careful it didn't bump into the display or anyone else, and caught the woman's arm before she stumbled.

“I am so sorry.” He righted her. “I've never seen so many people in one place.” He righted her robe and straightened her belt before she stuck his hand away.

“Unhand me.” She looked him up and down distastefully. “How dare you even step this close to me?”

“I can't I?” he asked, giving her a lewd smile. “When such a woman is within reach?”

Her expression turned horrified. “Who let such filth in this market?” She looked around, for support, or a guard, then left with a huff when she found none. He'd picked her because of how out of place she looked. Not quite a noble, but was too wealthy for such a market.

He returned to a previous display and placed the silver he'd taken from her on the counter. “The hottest sweets you have.”

The young man looked at the coin, then Tibs. “A whole silver's worth?”

“If you don't have enough, I'll take half so others can enjoy them, and the rest two from all the others.”

The man hurried to partially empty one of the containers on the counter, then added candies of various colors to the pile. Tibs took one from the first and breathed in its aroma. The spices emanating from it burns the inside of his nose slightly.

He popped it in his mouth, closed his eyes and—

Abyss the sweetness was delectable. The heat, as it traveled down his throat, made it hard to breathe. His face warmed from it, his fingers and toes curled.

He opened his eyes to find the young man staring at him, box of candy in hand, and fingers in it.

Tibs's face burned from more than the candies' spices. “It's been a long time since I'd had candy this good.”

The young man seemed to have trouble believing him. He shook himself and went back to adding candies until the pile was significant. “I...” he trailed off, uncertain. “I don't have anything to carry them in.”

Tibs took the pack off his back, careful not to hit anyone with it. He opened it, then dump all, except a handful of candies in a variety of colors. “No need to worry.” He shouldered it and walked away, feeling the man's disbelieving eyes on him while he scanned the crowd for more coins. He needed a room for the night, then clothing fitting of someone living in this city, then to arrange for long-term lodging, and then he could explore the city to see what he had to work with.

His initial plan, back when he'd hired on Rigel's caravan, had this city as only a stop toward Kartarosa and the dungeon there, but now, Firmen had given him possibilities. He only had to hope Brokentia had what he needed to turn those possibilities into actions.

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The library was a sprawling building well within the wealthier part of the city. Tibs popped another candy and made a face at its sourness, watching the men and women

entering it. He stayed in the alley, because his clothing would draw too much attention. Dressing as to blend into the crowd walking the road would require visiting at least one noble's home in the night. Paying to gain entry? He couldn't know just by watching. He'd have to ask questions for that information, and that meant he needed more coins.

He disappeared within the alley to return to a part of the city where he would be unnoticed, and those he permitted himself to rob would be the ones drawing the attention.

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The point of the dagger pressed into Tibs's side. "Don't be an idiot," the woman whispered, "and come with me."

By the time Tibs had realized someone had drawn a dagger next to him, it had been too late to do something that wouldn't attract attention. And he was curious what this was about. The way she was dressed made it unlikely she was hired by a wealth-holder who had realized Tibs lightened their pockets.

She took him to an alley where four others waiting. A group of five. The idea soured the meeting. Once they were well out of sight, they surrounded him.

"You're outside your neighborhood," the oldest of the group proclaimed. He looked to be older than Tibs appeared to be, but that could easily be the work of the grim they were all covered in.

"I don't have a neighborhood."

The young man stepped forward, getting in Tibs's face. "Well, this is our neighborhood. And we don't let just anyone work here."

"I didn't know. I'll find a different neighborhood to work out of." There were plenty of places that straddled the wealth line more on the lower than higher side.

Someone snorted.

"They're all taken," the man said. "You want to get one of your own, you talk to the Master."

Tibs stifled the groan. If there was someone claiming rule over the city's criminals, his time here wouldn't be as simple as he'd like. He hadn't been in many cities where someone claimed dominion over any one aspect of it, but each time, it had added complications to what he needed to do.

"Can't I just do what I need to do, then leave? I'm not going to be around for long."

He hadn't come across the type of organization Jackal described his family as being, but it seemed, to him, there was always someone who wanted to own everything.

"We have rules. You don't want to work by them. We break you."

"Fine. Where do I find this master?"

"You don't find him. He finds you. We'll pass the word and you can wait to be summoned."

"Alright. I'll stay out of trouble until then. Can I go?"

They exchanged looks. "We catch you working in our neighborhood again, and you're not going to have to worry about meeting him." The two blocking the way to the alley's exit moved out of his way.

Tibs took three steps, then stopped. "Oh, you should add someone to your team."

"Why?" The leader asked.

"Think of it as safety in numbers." Tibs was at the alley's mouth when he realized this

suggestion might have sounded like a threat. He shrugged. It could come back to cause him trouble, but at least he wouldn't have to explain what he'd meant.

He headed to his lodging, since he couldn't do anything else for the time being. He'd hoped this would be a simple time with a few robberies, then too much reading, but it seemed he needed to put together a team.

There had to be other people in this town who didn't care to work under that nameless Master.