

Finding out what he'd need to enter the library proved simple enough. He stepped to their doors dressed in the finest clothing he could obtain that wouldn't make him memorable and asked why they barred his way.

The look the guards gave him said he wasn't dressed well enough, then he was told to present his family's crest, the referral for his visit, and to pay the twelve silvers for a day's access. All of it told in a tone that made it clear they didn't think he had any of it.

The clothing and coins would be the easiest for Tibs to get. Finding a family's crest would take longer since this was a city where it didn't mean a design on a shield or on the entrance of their homes, as no noble house had something like that. The referral letter would also take asking questions in a way that wouldn't draw the attention of the thieves' guild, since those most likely to have the answers he needed would be affiliated with them a way.

Finding candidates for his team proved easy.

There was no lack of street criminals being beaten for doing their trade without the guild's approval. The issue Tibs faced was finding some skilled enough in the positions he needed, who were strong minded enough not to give into the guild's threat to work within it, and willful enough not to leave the city for easier ones to work out of. It would make for an interesting team to lead, but Tibs enjoyed interesting people.

Over the weeks of weeding down his options, he learned that a family's crest was an emblem each member carried on their person to prove who they were and the noble family they were associated with. They were carefully regulated, but version of them were issued to those in the family's employ.

Stealing one was out, as they were needed to enter any building catering to the nobles. While shadowing a handful of them, Tibs watched as each needed to produce the palm size medallion a dozen times over a morning. Short of kidnapping one while he used the crest, its theft would be noticed too quickly for Tibs to be able to make much use. And his research would be a many days, possibly months, thing.

He'd need a duplicate made.

And that would take far more coins than the twelve silver his entry would require. Especially if he wanted to afford a forger that was both good enough and willing to work for someone not affiliated with the thieves' guild. Or at least one who could be convinced not to report the work they were being very well paid to do.

Which made the team the priority.

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Tibs was impressed by her ability to hide the limp caused by the beating she'd received days before. It was healing well, all things considered, but the pain had to be substantial. And yet, she smiled as she approached the merchant, dressed in clothing slightly more impressive than the man she was planning on swindling.

Knowing her destination, Tibs had entered the shop well ahead of her, dressed as a man able to afford the work on display, and with a finickiness that meant the apprentice was still helping him chose a set of engraved pewter goblets for his son and woman's new home. Unlike her, since he wasn't looking to convince the merchant to part with a large portion of his money, Tibs wore fine clothing just on par with the man.

"Judas," she exclaimed, "It is good to see you again. Have you thought on my offer?"

“Cynta,” the merchant replied, having gotten over his surprise. “When you missed the previous meeting, I thought you’d found someone else for your client’s stock.”

“I would never do such a thing. Didn’t my message reach you?” The man shook his head. “Abyss, it’s impossible to trust messengers anymore. They’ll take your money and immediately go about spending it instead of doing the work.” She sighed. “The client had new stock, better stock. But vultures were ready to far underpay his worth. You saw the silver he can provide. But, because of them, I was able to get an even cheaper price for what I was offering. So I can increase the delivery numbers for the same price.”

Tibs only half-listened to their conversation as he expressed concerns, and she soothed them. As he tried to haggle her to a ridiculously low price, by her reaction, and she convinced him what she wanted wasn’t only fair, but barely left her with any profits for further endeavors that would lead to even more affordable silver for the artisan, should he decide to continue doing business with her.

He continued examining goblet after goblet, pointing out perceived flaws, asking for slightly larger ones, smaller ones, even tankards are one time. Then to see one with more embellishments, fewer, one with specific colored stones, did they have something with inlaid gold? Silver? Something that would glimmer in red to match his son’s woman’s hair?

The apprentice no longer hid his impatience, but continued to serve the client without protest, as his position demanded.

Tibs was waiting for one of two developments, and, as the merchant slowly gave into Cynta’s haggling, he thought he’d be approaching her as she celebrated her newly acquired money.

Then, three ‘customers’ entered the shop. They were dressed passably, but the clothing was worn nearly through in places and one of them had a cudgel hidden under the shirt. Tibs asked for an item not on display and walked around the shop, passing the door, and headed for Cynta and the merchant.

The good thing about how he was dressed was that behavior could make it pass as fitting an array of position within the city. He made himself meeker as he reached the counter.

“Forgiveness, Mistress,” he said, making his accent thicker. “But I was sent to get you urgently.”

She took him in with a professional glance and adopted a mildly annoyed expression. “What is this about?” she used glancing in his direction to also quickly take in the rest of the shop. Tibs couldn’t tell if she’d noticed the guild’s thugs using their browsing to approach them.

“Something’s happening to the stock you’ve been promised.”

“Is there something wrong?” the merchant asked.

She sighed. “Probably those vultures I mentioned.” She looked at Tibs expectantly.

“I don’t know anything about any birds,” he replied. “I was just told to get you so you could help.”

She rubbed her face. “I swear, sometimes it feels like there are no honest business people left in the world. I hope you’ll excuse this. I’ll return as soon as it’s resolved and we can finalize our business. I promise that this time, if I have to delay, the messenger will deliver the message.” She looked at Tibs. “Won’t you?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

She motioned him to the door while the thugs’ attention was on a display, and they were outside before they noticed their departure. She headed left, and he stayed at her side. He couldn’t sense who was or wasn’t working for the guild, but the six that broke from the crowd watching a bard sing about some bird of fire to follow them had to be the thugs’ back up.

He grabbed her arm. “This way.” And pulled her into the alley. “Tell me you can run with your leg injury. We need to put distance before they reach the entrance.”

“You better explain who you are once we’re safe.” She ran ahead of him, and Tibs caught up. “And if this is you trying to con me, I have a knife ready to use.”

He didn’t call her out on the lie, making the turn before the thugs stepped into the alley.

“That roof,” he said, pointing three buildings ahead.

“What about it?”

“We’re going up it.”

“I talk, not climb.”

He grinned. “I’ll handle the climbing. Just take my hand when I reach for you. They can’t be that far behind us.”

Tibs jump and grabbed the second-story window and reached for her, adding earth essence to both arms and hands, locking the hand in place on the windowsill. “Don’t scream,” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up and over, letting go of her to land on the roof and then following.

He crouched next to her and soon after, voices sounded from the intersection, sending people in each direction. Steps passed them, then yells, letting the others know they couldn’t see her. They ran by again, and Tibs silenced her with a finger to his lips, looking over the edge of the roof in both directions; sensing them return to the street.

“I think we’re clear,” he whispered.

“Then it’s time you explained who you are and what this was about.”

“You mean other than keeping you from another beating at the hand of the guild’s thugs?”

“Yes. I’m grateful, but I don’t know anyone who helps strangers without wanting anything in return.”

“Then think of this as my way of showing you that having a team working with you goes a long way toward avoiding getting hurt.”

She leveled green eyes on him. “Let me share a piece of information that’s saved my hide more times than I can count at this point. Anytime someone found me and claimed they’d gone through all that trouble to help me, they were lying. Without any exception. So how about you tell me what you really want?”

“I need a team. One that is fine working around the guild. I need to do a few jobs to get what I’m after, and making sure they’re big enough everyone on it will end up with purses heavy with coins works just as well for me as only getting what I need.”

“The more people working together, the better the chances one of them is going to betray you to them.”

“Would you sell me out to the guild for a good sum of money?”

“Never,” she spat. “They’ve made this city worse than the guards ever did. That Master person demands so much to be allowed to work here there’s nothing left for us to have a good life.” None of the words glowed.

“The people I have in mind are of a similar mindset. And I plan on giving the guild and guards someone else to notice, instead of us.”

Her expression was speculative. “And what do you expect me to do on this team of yours?”

He smiled. “What I saw you do so well, already.”

“Talk?”

Tibs grinned. “Think.”

She snorted. “So, what’s your name?”

“Thibaud is what I’m going by here.”

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“Stop!” a woman yelled, her voice carrying authority. “By order of the King, stop!”

Tibs ignored her, his dark green cap flowing behind him. He had gathered three guards after clumsily accosting and stealing the lower noble’s coin purse. He would have preferred more; more meant the story would spread faster, but this had always been about working within this market’s location and he was reaching the end of it.

He loosened the cord on the heavy purse as he stepped on the barrel and threw it over the crowd to free his hand so he could grab the edge of the roof and pull himself onto it. He stood facing them, face hidden behind the leather mask as his hood fell back.

“Rejoice!” he yelled, exploding the ball of metal essence in the purse and sending coins flying in all directions. “For Fleet Fingers now graces your city. Those in need will receive, those who have will give, that they want to or not. And those who chase will lose.”

He gave a bow to the now chaotic crowd and watched the guards shove their way through the people before turning and running to the other side of the roof. He waited until the guards were at the end of the building before dropping to the ground and letting them chase him.

After all, he’d made a bold claim. Now he had to prove he was able to. He kept the guards at his heels until the next major road, then ducked in the alley and climbed to the roof before they reached it. He waited, only moving when the woman in charge called for one of them to check the roofs.

This was going to be fun. This city had smart guards.

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Tibs leaned against the chimney, using darkness essence to help the shadows hide him, watching the man three building over string his bow. It wasn’t the bow he’d had earlier in the morning. The guild had seen to that. The price for beating the two thugs that had been sent to explain the flaw in his obstinance at not joining the guild. With destroying that one item, weeks of planning had been rendered moot. The damage had been worse than if they had broken his arms.

At least until Tibs had arranged for a wagon transporting weapons for the guards to tip over and the crate with bows in them to break open, spilling its content, one of which had slid to this man’s feet.

There had been no hesitation as the presented opportunity, and now Tibs got to watch

how he was planning on using the bow.

The house the archer aimed at was that of a middling noble family. They had interests in a variety of business that brought them money and influence over the city. None of the questions Tibs had asked came back with any horrible act they'd committed, but they were nobles, so they'd be there.

What puzzled Tibs was how the rope he'd tied to the arrow would help him enter the building. The window sill was wood, but an arrow in that wouldn't hold once he put weight on it. Even the rope seemed barely able to hold a person's weight. The walls were brick, so shooting that wouldn't work. The only other object along the wall was a thick metal pipe connected to a small wooden stove in the living room. It was secured to the wall regularly, and it would be how Tibs reached the window, if he needed to do that from the ground.

The archer let the arrow loose, and Tibs figured he'd missed as it passed by the window, only to stop when the archer grabbed the rope, drop, then hang on one of the brackets securing the pipe to the wall.

Tibs was impressed. The gap was hardly larger than the arrow's thickness.

The archer pulled until the arrow caught against the wall and pipe. As hard as the man pulled, it didn't move. Now, the composition of the arrow made sense to Tibs. It was wood and metal, layered together. Nothing of its essence felt manipulated, but the mix of material made it lighter than just metal, but tougher than only wood.

The man tied the rope around the chimney, then carefully put more of his weight on it until it held all of it. He then used it to cross the gap. Hanging upside down, he unlatched the window and entered the house.

Tibs used the time to make it to the archer's roof and studied the rope. It was the thickness of a finger, and this close, he confirmed there was no wood essence in it. It was surprising. Most ropes were made of plants, so wood was the most common essence in them. He'd been surprised how many fabrics were mostly wood when it came to the essence they contained.

The archer exited the window sooner than Tibs expected. He hadn't cased the building, but he sensed the people there, and nobles tended to have their office on a busy floor to make reaching it harder. The archer hadn't left the floor he'd entered.

Tibs stepped back into the shadows to watch how the man would finish his job. He returned along the rope, then relaxed. He untied the rope and lowered the arrow until it touched the ground, then he let the rope go.

Unstrung bow in hand, heavy purse at his belt, he made his way down and cautiously made it onto the house's grounds to retrieve the arrow, pulling the rope until he had it looped around his arm.

Tibs dropped down, waited for the man to return to it. "I have a proposition for you," Tibs said, stepping out of the shadows.

The man was against the wall, bow at his feet, hand against his chest. "Abyss, what are you trying to do? Kill me?"

"No. Although you should be more aware of your surroundings, considering who you have as an enemy."

"I don't need anyone's help."

Keeping Cynta's words in mind, Tibs said. "But I can use yours making sure the guild

doesn't get in my way. And it's going to pay well." Then he went about convincing the man to be the team's lookout.