

The Legend of the Artificer

Volume 1

untitled

Chapter 1

It started out pretty simple. Most things tend to start out simple. This was no different, really.

They fell asleep, dreaming of a headset fluctuating between being too hard on their skull to too soft, garbled voices over the phone with words they couldn't parse through, their own voice asking for someone to repeat that, please, we don't have any for this county, we're waiting on a shipment, we're overbooked, could you please repeat that, please repeat, I didn't hear you, over and over again, as words became more unintelligible until only one word remained: covid.

It was par for the course for this work. Their entire life had so quickly come to revolve around the virus, so it was no real shock that they would dream about it, too, but one lucid moment in the midst of fitful dreams rose up a quiet, tremulous request.

Can I go anywhere else?

It was easy, after that. One moment, they were resting easy in their bed, or as easy as they could, fitful dreams waking them up and putting them back under, the anxiety of missing their alarm again making it impossible to slumber for much longer than a few hours at a time. One moment, they were fast asleep curled around an overly-large lion plushie, which they swore helped with their hips, of course it helped with their hips, and the next they were asleep again, but it was a different kind of asleep. A kind of asleep that left them wide, wide awake, in an endless expanse of towers of books and dappled light coming from a skylight that was too high up to see.

"Am I dreaming?" they asked the silence, and there was a *cha-ching!* They swerved to look behind them, and there sat an owl behind a desk, a typewriter before it with keys that were making no noise as some unseen force pressed them down in a dizzying pattern that left them feeling like it was *wrong*, splattering ink they could not see on paper that did not move, not even to sway with the force of each strike.

"Not nearly enough, my dear," the owl said and reached up with one feathery wing to adjust the glasses sitting primly on its beak.

"Oh," they murmured and turned, the plushie still clutched tightly to them, to look up at the endless expanse of books going round and round in a circle that seemed to stretch on forever and ever. "I'm sorry."

They weren't sure what they were sorry for, but it felt like the right thing to say.

"Well, it's hardly *your* fault," the owl said brusquely, and flitted up to sit on the desk and stride across the expanse of it which only seemed to get longer and longer the more they stared at it. "Now, what will we do about it?"

“... Let me wake up?” That didn’t seem like the right answer, but this dream felt unhinged as it was. They were rarely ever so clear, and they found that they weren’t enjoying it all that much.

“Precisely. We will be waking-” and here the owl loomed closer, becoming impossibly larger, “you-” and every feather stood on end as it came ever closer and closer, “*UP!*”

The last word was a thunderous roar that sent their hair flying back and their clothes flapping in the wind, and the owl was so large all light in the room was eclipsed in its presence. For a moment, the only thing that existed was luminous golden eyes, burning in the hush of the room, and they were breathless in the face of it. Every muscle in their body was frozen, and their fingers were crushing into the soft plush of the stuffie. It felt like if they breathed, they might anger it. Something in its eyes searched in them, pulling their soul out like strands of spun gold, before it all coiled back into their chest like it had never left.

“Now,” the owl said suddenly, and they blinked, because it had been larger, hadn’t it? It had, it *had* to have been larger- “let’s get ourselves comfortable. I have only a limited time before your body wakes up, and you need to be gone by then. But fear not, young one, I’m a professional.”

“What are you doing?” they asked, and out of nowhere a chair slammed into the back of their legs and forced them to flop into the overstuffed armchair, lion propped in their lap like it was the only shield they possessed.

“I have analyzed your every dream, your every hope and wish and longing, from the time you were born to the moment you came to my department,” the owl continued, as if they hadn’t said a thing. “Princess, prince, marine biologist, superhero, Foley artist, witch in the woods, actor, actress, for awhile, a singer, a mechanic, a great novelist that lived as a hermit and took no callers, a Shakespearean thespian!”

The last two words were trilled, and the owl whirled back on them and threw a wing in the air, feathers twisting abnormally, and they slowly blinked as it demurely tilted its head over its shoulder with a fierce gaze set on them. Slowly, they mouthed ‘okay’, and it turned aside again as it waddled back to its desk.

“All of the games of dungeons and dragons you were too tired to start, too exhausted to finish,” it continued, “all of the shows that ignited your soul and made you wish to *create*, only to inevitably fail you. All of the people you loved, and all of the people you’ve hated. The friends that betrayed you, left you alone, and the people that had faith who you let down one too many times because you couldn’t cut it. Your life, I have decided, will be the great tapestry I will unravel, and the threads will be put to better use than *this*.”

“I don’t understand,” they blurted, and the owl trilled lightly as they pushed an inkwell to the side and laid out its feathers across the desk.

“I have found you the perfect story,” it said simply, and the mouthed the words like the form of them on their lips would make the sentence make sense. “Another world, with a new body, based on everything you’ve ever longed for, every dream you’ve ever had, everything that you lost that made you *you*. I can shuffle some things around to make your comfortable start, but you need to give me one single thing to make it happen.”

They hesitated, because this was starting to feel less and less like a weird dream, and more and more like a chance, and they didn’t know what to do with that spiraling information that all of this might be *real*. Slowly, the owl extended one wing, and they looked down at the soft, brown, downy flight feathers that were splayed out like they were strong enough to hold something. Why did it feel like it held the secrets to everything in that simple gesture?

“Give me your name,” the owl said, and they slowly looked back up as the realization dawned that they had forgotten it as soon as they woke up.

“Are you a faerie?” they asked, because they’d heard *that* before, and the trade of a name could never be trusted. The owl, however, didn’t react beyond a slow and deliberate tilt of its head.

“Of course not.”

The words settled, impossible to be a lie, at the very least, and they thought about it. Their name had always been something precious, something hated, and they’d had a million of them, though it had always felt like they didn’t really have one at all. It had been a contentious relationship, the last thing they had ever gone to war over, and every one of them swirled in their gut. The usernames, the names online, the names in person, the names that had been forced on them, and the names they had clung to and seized for themselves. Their name... their name was something *precious*, more precious than anything else, because it was the only thing they had learned couldn’t be taken from them. Slowly, they reached out their hand, and then it hovered in the air.

“Why?” they asked, because that was the only question they could ask in the face of the weight of it all, and the owl blinked once again.

“Why indeed?”

They thought about it. This could be a demon. This could be the wrong choice. All of their faith had been beaten out of them long ago, all of their trust, but... people didn’t *do* things like this without a reason for it.

“Why is a name of equal value?” they asked, and the owl leaned forward.

“This isn’t a trade, my dear. It’s a *chance*. You’ve fought your whole life to be happy where you are, my biggest dreamer, and my biggest failure. Nothing ever worked, and my proudest warrior lost all of their spark to a world I have been struggling to fix. If you are to start

again, you have to give it all up. But you've done it a million times there already, haven't you? You just need to do it one more time."

They had. They cut off friends, they cut off family, they viciously uprooted themselves over and over in the hopes that maybe this time, they wouldn't be so miserable. Their face changed with the seasons, and when one name no longer fit, they slipped into another, not really understanding why people needed a single name to carry them through all of life when there was so much more. Not that it ever helped, of course. It always felt like they were looking for something that was never going to be there. Maybe even looking for something that was mocking them.

"Just one more time?"

"The last time," the owl promised, and held out its wing just a little bit more. "Give me your names, and go make your own."

Their hands seemed to move unbidden, and they watched as something both warm and sad and light and heavy inhabited them, something bleeding and forgotten and lost and still so full of life, even through all of its wounds. Their muscles clenched and shivered, and they took the little spark of life, of person, held so delicately in their grasp, and then they took a deep breath.

One last time.

The names, all of them, were placed on downy soft feathers, and the owl cradled them like they were something precious close to its chest, stroked over them and whispered something in a language they did not know, but every syllable settled something in their heart, carved out a place of rest, and the owl nuzzled the names, called them its children, and with a breath...

They scattered like butterflies, flew to the ceiling in a shower of light, and they didn't really feel anything as all of the names and faces were released to the great towering library to roam forever. It was a bit like finding an old picture of themselves in an Instagram post from someone they hadn't spoken to in years. Wistful, maybe, nostalgic, certainly, but...

"Now," the owl said as they watched the butterflies spiral up and up to the endless ceiling. "I think it's time you woke up, my dear."

"Will they be happy?" they asked softly, and the owl followed their gaze.

"They were always happy. You just weren't."

Chapter 2

He woke like passing waves lapping on a deserted beach. There was something ticking in the background, a steady beat he could match his heart to, and he felt well rested for the first time in a long, long time. That, incidentally, was the first sign that something was wrong. A memory of an owl in a library spiraled up, and he hummed, rolled over, pushed his face into a plush pillow that didn't feel all that *right*.

Silk, he registered after a pause. Silk, and it smelled of woodsmoke and iron. Which didn't make that much sense, considering he had chronic anosmia, hadn't smelled a thing in years, and didn't even really *remember* what woodsmoke smelled like, much less iron. But it was sharp, and rich, with layers under layers, and he knew it. Since when did he have silk pillowcases? He'd never even bought fine linen. It was pointless to waste money on it, since you only really got silk pillowcases to protect your hair, which he buzzed on a monthly basis, and yet hair was tickling his skin, laying heavy on his back and across his shoulders in sheaths of fine, thick strands.

He blinked slowly, once, twice, and rolled over so he could focus on the ceiling made of exposed metal beams and smooth plaster. Not popcorn, he thought dimly, and blinked again, slow and thoughtful as he considered this. Why was his ceiling not popcorn? Why were the beams exposed? That didn't seem right, not at all.

Slowly, he lifted his hand and spread each finger.

Red.

His skin was red. Not irritated red, but deep, cherry red, and he stared at it for a long, long moment, memorizing the veins he had certainly never had and nails filed to a point. That was a red hand. A cherry red hand, and he was moving the fingers, twisting the wrist this way and that to reveal a peach palm with red lines that stood out starkly against the flesh. His silver leaf ring was not where it was supposed to be, and the skin at the top of his head felt oddly tight, with hardness pressing into either side of his skull.

"What the fuck," he said out loud, and startled at the smooth, tenor voice that filled the room. "*What the fuck.*"

He sat straight up, eyes blown wide, and took in the state of the room he was in. It was dimly lit, but he felt like he could see better than he had ever seen in the dark. Everything was perfectly clear, but there were no traces of dry-eye or the heaviness that came with falling asleep with contacts in. The covers around him were crumpled, a thick quilt laid over silk sheets that were smooth against hairless, very *red* skin, and there were a million pillows all over the place. There was a hearth directly across from him, with a thick fur of some fluffy, brown animal he certainly didn't know thrown in front of it, and a chair by it. The embers were dying, illuminating the circular room in a dim glow, and there were sconces with old fashioned lightbulbs surrounded with wire cages set into the stone walls. A thick curtain traveled across a quarter of the expanse of the wall, and there was a mirror mounted on one side of the room, and

an opening set into the center of the bedroom with a twisted banister rising up, hinting at a spiral staircase. Curved bookshelves were set into the walls, and there was a table set into the wall itself littered in all manners of tools he didn't recognize and a book at the center of it, as if in a place of honor.

He stumbled out of bed on wobbling legs, dimly aware that black hair was spilling down past his waist, almost to his hips, entirely nude, and made his way to the mirror with an uncertain shuffle to take in the sight of him.

Smooth, unblemished skin, he registered. All deeply red and vibrant, with thick black hair with the slightest hint of a curl tumbling down his back. No breasts, which was new, same equipment, which was not new, with defined muscle he had *not* asked for, and a slim frame that seemed almost wrong but also right. Ten fingers, ten toes, and two thick, curling, beige ram horns set against his head. Pointed ears and teeth that were perhaps a little *too* sharp.

"... I'm a tiefling," he said dumbly and reached up to pull at his lips. Why the *hell* were his eyes purple? And why did he have *freckles*? And why was it cute?

Definitely sharp teeth. He could take out a throat with these things.

"*Why* am I a tiefling?" And since when did he have such a large nose? Not that he was complaining, he had always liked sharper faces, but these cheekbones had to be illegal in at least four countries, and those were definitely some eyebrows going on there.

"Why am I a tiefling?" he asked again and spun around. "Where are the *clothes*?"

There was a wardrobe and a chest of drawers, and he took several lurching steps towards it, landed solidly against the doors, but he managed it well enough to be able to pull them open and blindly reach for the first item of clothing he could find. Which was a shirt that was *far* too long, but he could work with it. The shirt was pulled on, and his frankly *heavy* hair was flipped out as he rifled through all of the clothes inside in search of pants.

"I thought it was just a *dream*, what the *fuck*," he hissed as he tried to wrestle on the pants, which only ended in him falling flat on his face on the ground. "*Ow! Fuck!*"

What the hell had he done?

It was a tower, apparently. A very large tower, but a tower. In the middle of absolutely nowhere, with forest and mountains as far as he could see, and not the slightest speck of civilization. The bedroom he had woken up in was at the very top of it, complete with a balcony, and below it was a frankly ridiculous bathroom, and below that was a workshop and another balcony with a massive telescope and all manners of tools he didn't know how to use. For

several levels past the workshop were rooms and rooms of books, all transcribed in languages he didn't know, and then beneath those rooms full of books were other bedrooms and a kitchen with another balcony that miraculously had a full garden and a living room or something close. Finally, in the basements that smelled of damp earth and tilled soil, there were *more* gardens of the mushroom variety and some kind of hydroponics system and a whole fish farm full of aquatic creatures with unnervingly sharp teeth that he didn't particularly *want* to eat, lit by stones inscribed with glowing circles like the magic in just about any anime ever.

Beyond the fish, there was not a single living soul in the place. And beyond the balconies, which were blocked at the very end with shimmering barriers he could touch that tasted faintly of ozone, there was only one door in the main entrance hall, made of bronze and gold and gears and cogs he couldn't parse out, with no handle and no key. Which, incidentally, *also* tasted of ozone, and hummed in the strangest of frequencies. Which meant he was, effectively, locked in, with no way out.

Some new start. He was the only person *in* the tower. There was no sign of life beyond the toothy fish, and everything smelled *new*. Not that he could really explain what *new* smelled like, but it was fresh and clean and a little bit tangy, which made no sense, but there was no other conceivable way to explain it. The whole place was crackling with some kind of energy that was still winding down, and something instinctive in his gut told him it would take awhile to settle.

After some time of wandering about, trying to figure out if he was taking over someone else's life, he found himself back in the lonely master bedroom, staring out across the balcony made of metal and glass that had potted plants he would probably kill in a week growing out of planters everywhere.

He *had* asked for this, hadn't he?

With a groan, he slumped his way back inside and collapsed facedown on the bed.

"At least it got one thing right," he mumbled to no one in particular. "I would've been furious if I didn't have horns."

"Are you going to keep moping, or are you ready to learn?"

The high voice reverberated around the room, and he shot up from his place on the bed, eyes searching for the cause of the disturbance. A breeze kicked in through the window and stirred his hair, but no motion was detected, no person materialized. He was definitely alone in here.

"Right here," the voice said again, and his eyes landed on the book sitting in the middle of the work table he didn't know how to use. The magic circle on the front was faintly glowing, and he pulled himself to his feet and padded over to look down at it.

"I think I've lost my mind," he said, and the book scoffed.

“Not *yet*,” it assured him. “I repeat. Are you ready to learn?”

“Are you talking to me?”

“Who else would I be talking to, numbskull?”

“Yourself, if you’re going to be acting like that,” he said, unimpressed, and it barked out a harsh laugh.

“Spitfire! Very well. I am Teacher. Open me.”

“I don’t know how to take that.”

“In its most literal sense, preferably,” Teacher said placidly, and shuddered on the table. “Open me, and start your education.”

“What are you going to be teaching me?” he asked dubiously, and Teacher cackled.

“Well, first we’re going to work on your tragic illiteracy. And then, we will work on your manners.”

“You called me a numbskull without even asking for my name. I don’t think you’re qualified to teach etiquette,” they said doubtfully, and Teacher shuddered again.

“Why would I ask for your name? You don’t have one yet,” Teacher replied. “You gave them all away.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, a little unnerved, and Teacher shuddered again.

“I know everything.”

“Then do you know whose body this is?”

“Yours, I presume.”

“I mean, was anyone in it *before*?”

“No, unfortunately.” Teacher sounded incredibly put out by this, and he found that his hackles were beginning to rise.

“How is that unfortunate?”

“Imagine if you had been put in the body of a conqueror long since disappeared, or a serial killer on the verge of his treachery being revealed!” Teacher exclaimed. “Ah! The drama! The suspense! We could have had it all, my student! Instead, we have this. A skinny little holkind in a shirt three times too large, locked in a tower with no conceivable way out. Who

would want to sit and listen to a little holkind try and talk his way out of a cosmic enchantment? Boring.”

“A cosmic enchantment?” His voice rose sharply, the word holkind passing right over his head in the face of the words *cosmic* and *enchantment* and Teacher hissed at him.

“Panicking will do no one any good. You’ll make yourself nauseated. Yes, some other being put you in this world and trapped you in this tower, my student, but never fear, because you were left with me!” Teacher shuddered again in its excitement. “Now, hurry, open me.”

“So, what, you’re supposed to be my introductory helper that explains how the world works and lays down some ominous foreshadowing?” he asked suspiciously, and Teacher let out an exasperated sigh as the white cover almost flapped open but came up short.

“I was made by the thing that placed you here to help you, if that is what you are asking.”

“Why would it bother with teaching me everything about the world if it’s going to *lock me in a tower?*”

“Well, you couldn’t very well enjoy this world without an introductory challenge and first goal!” Teacher exclaimed. “By the time you make your escape, you will be hilariously overprepared for whatever task may face you, just the way you like! Now, open me so we can get started, my young zygote!”

He had a sinking suspicion it would only continue to bother him if he didn’t give in to its commands, and with a sigh, he reached forward to draw his fingers over the cover. The magic circle flared up in an array of colors, almost as if the excitement was too much to be contained by mere shivers, and his fingers curled around the hard corner to slowly peel it open and...

His ears were ringing, and his mouth was painfully dry. It stank of ozone in the air, and his head was throbbing to the beat of a war drum. Slowly, he peeled his eyes open and stared up at the ceiling, working his tongue and jaw around the cotton in his mouth, and he became dimly aware of muttering.

“--- didn’t know it would hit *that* hard, oh no,” someone was muttering frantically, and there was a flutter of pages turning. “Maybe not so much next time? Or was it too little? Was he just not used to it? Oh, dear, oh my, I’ve made a mess of things already. I was just so *excited* to be open, to be read, I’m a book, what else was I supposed to do? Books are meant to be read! I didn’t know---”

“Didn’t know what?” he asked, his throat burning, lights dancing in his vision, and there was a yelp and the sound of a book slamming shut.

“Everything! Nothing! I mean, what do you mean, didn’t know? I am the sum total of all information and knowledge! I know everything, of course!”

“And did you know me opening you like you demanded would end with me concussed on the floor?” he asked gratingly, and Teacher let out a nervous chuckle.

“Surely you’re not *concussed*.”

“I’m definitely concussed.” His vision was swimming, and he felt nauseated to high hell.

“But did it *work*?”

“I don’t even know what it was supposed to *do*, how would I know?” he bit out irritably as he slowly sat up and rubbed at the back of his head. “What did you even do, launch yourself at my head?”

“No! Of course not! Positively barbaric! I simply downloaded five spoken languages and eight alphabets into your brain! I thought it was a good start!” Teacher protested. “You can now read in the library! Pursue your own knowledge! You should be thanking me!”

“I woke up on the *floor*, Teach,” he grouched and stumbled to his feet. “And what do you mean, five languages? You thought I could learn five languages in seconds and *not* get knocked out? Of course that was going to scramble my brain!”

“Well, it’s clearly a little cracked, considering we haven’t been speaking in English since you woke up and you haven’t noticed,” Teacher said archly, “though not all of that can be blamed on *me*, I assure you.”

“... Huh?”

“We’re not speaking in English,” Teacher repeated slowly, as if explaining a difficult concept to a child. “We are in fact speaking in waste speak.”

“... What?” he asked in disbelief, before he realized the word *what* was far more guttural and raw and definitely did not sound like a *what*, more like a *wiir*.

“Waste speak,” Teacher explained. “The common trade tongue of the Wastes of Avrok, far to the west of here, known for its extensive trade routes and ingenious water cultivation techniques. One of the earliest recorded civilizations to have indoor plumbing available to all citizens, regardless of class, with a flourishing magical community that specializes in ethical terraforming.”

“... What is an ethical terraforming?” he asked faintly, and Teacher swelled in a kaleidoscope of colors.

“I’m so glad you asked.”

With that, Teacher launched into a long winded explanation of what it meant to terraform, and what it meant to do it ethically, without harming the pre existing ecosystem, and the many

talents and attributes of the druids of the wastes, who Teacher seemed very fond of. From there, one tangent led to another, and he soon found himself immersed in a rich history of magic and mayhem, of all manners of different creation theories from all different cultures, and a further explanation of how magic users exist in this world and how technology, while appearing to be primitive compared to the world he had come from, was actually incredibly advanced compared to everything available to the home he had willingly left.

“So I can just learn magic?” he asked as he laid on the bed and stared at the beams above him.

“Of course! It gifted you with a natural affinity for all manners of enchantments and charms, which is not exactly highly *valued* amongst the more noble of the spell slingers, but perfectly useful all the same,” Teacher replied primly. “Which is why you are trapped here, in fact! You could never be a run of the mill artificer, oh, no, no, no. The challenge here lies in your *escape*. If you can escape, you’ll be an artificer as the world has never seen! What a glorious existence. I’m positively *vibrant* with jealousy, I’ll have you know. Oh, what fun. The dashing underdog of such a *lower class* spell slinger affinity. What sorts of damage will you do here? My, my, it will be fun to watch. I have no mouth, but I am *salivating*, my zygote, *salivating*.”

“I think you’re more excited about this than I am,” he muttered and threw an arm over his eyes. “I said yes to *adventure*, not being a shounen protagonist and changing the face of society. Sounds exhausting. And somehow problematic. Literally not even from here, let the people born here be the revolutionaries or whatever. World isn’t going to be a backdrop for my standard archetypal hero’s journey.”

“Ah, but what if it was?” Teacher challenged, sounding almost concerning in how energized it was. “I love stories, and now I get to be a part of one!”

“I’d say it was pretty egotistical of me,” he grumbled. “Artificer sounds cool, though. Can I just float under the radar or something? Or stay in the tower? It’s comfortable.”

The bed was *very* nice.

“Absolutely not,” Teacher gasped, sounding almost scandalized. “You have a whole world to explore! You’re not going to rot away in some musty tower eating fish and wondering if there’s any red meat here! For shame!”

“Is it *really* shameful to want to mind my own business?” he challenged and sat up, rubbing at his eyes. “I think having fun with magic in my workshop until I grow old and die sounds pretty nice, honestly. I have a whole self sustaining tower to keep me fed and clothed.”

“What is the point of the pursuit of knowledge if not to be shared?” Teacher demanded.

“Self satisfaction, mostly,” he said with a yawn. “I’m tired, and it’s late. Can we continue this tomorrow?”

“We haven’t even reached current events!”

“Love the energy, need you to tone down on the levels, Teach,” he said as he crawled across the bed and flopped under the covers. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Not nearly enough!”

“Teach, how old is this body?” he asked bluntly, and there was a pause.

“Chronologically, less than twenty four hours. Biologically, about twenty in human years, and officially forty in holkind, which I believe you would think of as a fiend or tiefling.”

“We have time,” he repeated firmly and pulled the smooth sheet over his head. “Night. Grand destiny can wait until tomorrow.”

Teacher spluttered, but the events of the day had him out before a protest could fully be leveled. Blissful, blissful silence. What a blessing.

Chapter 3

He could, in fact, read in eight languages, and it made the time pass much faster than he realized. Teacher officially could teach him anything from etiquette to ancient warfare to fashion, but it couldn't teach him about magic. That was for him to learn for himself, and learning was about all he had to do beyond minding the plants everywhere and tending to the fish that nearly took his arm off for the first few feedings until he figured out how to keep them calm enough to scatter the feed along the top of the water.

With nothing else to do, he dove into his books. There were a *lot* of them, and they took time to parse through and reorganize. He learned about all of the different kinds of magic, how magical affinities couldn't really be *tested*, only mastered over time with careful thought and patience and discipline. Officially, you *could* learn magics that you weren't gifted at if you wanted, but it was difficult and time consuming and only really served to pad out the things you were good at. He learned about the social structures of magic, too. How elemental and holy magic was the cream of the crop, the hardest to master, how tutors in the arts were paid utterly *insane* amounts of money to grow untalented students' gifts. He also learned that he did, in fact, have an affinity for enchantments, and that it was generally considered the work of travelers and blacksmiths and textile artists. A blue collar's business, they said, but what he could not understand was that if he was good at enchanting items, why couldn't he enchant people? Skin was just organic material, and so was muscle and bone and organs. There wasn't much in the books about it, but as he worked on more and more items, painstakingly drawing circles over and over again as he deconstructed enchantments and broke them down to figure out how they *worked*, he wondered if he couldn't make his life easier by just enchanting a pair of gloves to do the work for him.

And so, it started with that. An embroidery circle, bleeding fingers, and a pair of leather gloves he stitched a golden circle into and breathed life into to allow him to construct enchantments without ink or chalk. And then he started to *wonder*.

"Hey, Teacher," he said one day as he sat dripping wet on the floor while a storm howled outside, "do you think if I put a charm directly into my body for pain nullification, I could just do body modifications with enchantments?"

"Hm?" Teacher was distracted with something. Which wasn't anything new. For all it claimed that it knew everything, it sure did like to sit on top of a stack of books and suck up all the knowledge inside them. "There's nothing saying you *can't*, I suppose."

"There's nothing saying I *can*, either," he pointed out, because wouldn't had someone thought about it by now?

"It's generally considered foolish to do it to yourself, because undoing it might cause more harm than putting it in, and it can't be done with ink," Teacher replied. "It's also considered, ah, perhaps aspirations that are a bit too *lofty*."

“So you’re saying I should just do it,” he said as he finally rose to his feet to check on all of the plants he had dragged in out of the howling winds to see how they survived. The protective charms he’d carved into their pots had held under the onslaught, though they may need some freshening up.

“Well, charms generally need touch ups,” Teacher replied. “If the ink starts to break or give, or the lines get blurry, it needs to be fixed again. Which is why no one does it. The charm could malfunction between the touch up and the fading.”

“So, it needs to be something that holds up a little better than ink,” he said thoughtfully as he stood up and stretched. His eyes drifted to the chest at the foot of his bed, holding so much gold and platinum coin he didn’t know where to start. “I could just *charm* the ink.”

“Ink is made out of organics, my young zygote,” Teacher retorted. “Dyes do not take well to being layered with magic. They’re far too fragile.”

“Isn’t the whole point to strengthen them?” he muttered rebelliously as he started to strip off his layers of wet clothing and leave them with a plop on the floor.

“I’m not actually meant to be telling you these things, you know!” Teacher called loudly as he came to a stop in front of the long mirror and took stock of how soaked he looked. Deft fingers started to unpick the sopping braids in his hair, and with a flick of his hand, the fire in the hearth blazed to life with merely a tap given to the enchantment he’d set on the wall next to the fireplace.

“Yes, I know,” he replied thoughtfully, and his eyes drifted back to the chest at the foot of the bed. “I think I’m going to do something reckless, then. It’ll be a few days before this monsoon passes, anyways.”

At least the charms that kept the garden sheltered were holding. Gods only knew he wouldn’t be able to haul in those planters. There was nothing else to really do, anyways. Though, really, this storm did not feel *natural*, not in the slightest. He had to wonder what was causing it. Some wizard throwing a fit far away from him, probably. It tasted intentional.

With that, he was pulling clothes back on and heading down to the workshop, Teacher stuffed under his arm and freshly squeezed hair piled into a voluminous bun, four braids on either side of his horns keeping it looking somewhat presentable. Honestly, he’d never really considered that hair just fell *weird* with horns. He didn’t know why he hadn’t cut it yet. It was nice, he supposed, to just have long hair without having to wait for it to grow. Maybe he’d keep the look longer than he thought he would. The buzzcut was missed, but...

Well. He looked good. Could you blame him?

“What will you be doing, then?” Teacher asked as he set it on another one of its piles of books.

“Teacher, what can you teach me about blacksmithing and jewelry making?” he asked, and there was a pause.

“Really, what *are* you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said with a grin as he pulled up a chair and straddled it. “Metalworking, please?”

“I’m sure whatever it is is a *terrible* idea, so don’t cry when it backfires,” Teacher said archly, and he just laughed and leaned forward to flip open the cover.

“It’ll be fun if it does.”

A variety of thoughts and memories assaulted him as the pages flicked of their own accord, knowledge of metalworking and all of its secrets downloaded into his brain. Thoughts flashed through of heating and tempering and melting and the way different cultures handled different things, and reading materials went through his mind of books to get into that incorporated magic into his newfound interest. The weight of the knowledge shook him, and he took a sharp breath in as he clung to the back of the chair and his eyes rolled back in his head. The two of them reached critical mass, and then Teacher flipped its cover shut and silence reigned.

“Well? Do you have enough to make your stupidity not so stupid?” Teacher demanded, and he laughed and patted the cover gently.

“Just the right amount. Thank you, Teach. Hang out here for a minute while I get some books together.”

And thus began his newest venture with the storm raging outside. Books were devoured in his research, and the forge he hadn’t touched yet was lit back up as he dove into the science of alchemy and how to make metal that flexed and bonded with a person’s body. The gold he had laying around was melted down, and sketchbooks he was rapidly running out of room on were filled with designs of magic circles, tested again and again on his skin with ink simply drawn across rather than fused with his flesh. Eventually, he settled on a charm, and then he got to work, three days after his idea first settled into his brain.

“You know, I didn’t think It would have sent me with someone so...” Teacher trailed off dubiously as he laid on his side on a thick blanket that had been charmed to not catch fire.

“Insane?” he finished dryly as he carefully held up the small bowl of molten gold.

“Well, I would *never* be so rude.”

“Yes, you would,” he replied as he popped a leather belt into his mouth and shut his eyes. One hand flexed, braced to correct the enchantment as it etched into his flesh in case of error, and he squeezed his eyes shut tight as he started to pour.

Pain exploded. Molten metal, generally, was not something you wanted on your skin, and he had known that well before he committed to this particular avenue. But, if he accomplished this task, then a whole new world of magic was open to him. The gold hit cherry red skin and expanded out in a spiderweb as he kept up the magical pressure to direct it, and the scent of burning skin filled the air as the magic filled his body. A scream was bit into the leather, and the enchantment started to form and set.

The pain was making everything hazy. Focus was difficult, and he watched as his skin cracked and burnt, but if he had this one, he could have the quick regeneration, and he had to follow through. In any case, the melted skin was not nearly as bad as it would have been if he was a human, he thought dimly as he forced himself to set down the ladle. His head was trembling, and his leg muscles were seizing up as the enchantment set into his skin and cooled, etched into the muscle, just shy of hitting the bone. Something wet was on his face, and he wondered vaguely why he had thought this would be a good idea. It seemed like a terrible one right now. There was something caught in his chest, maybe a sob, and then---

The metal cooled just enough for the enchantment to catch on, and there was a burst of a glow as it suddenly settled, and something warm flowed over his body as the pain abruptly stopped. He went limp on the ground, and the leather belt fell from his lips as he let out a sob of relief, the pain now nothing more than the dullest of aches.

“Was it a success?” Teacher asked mildly as he buried his face into the blanket.

“Took a second,” he replied, his voice raw, and the enchantment thrummed with glee as the magic took hold to make something a little more aware. The pain continued to fade and ebb as the metal swiftly cooled, and he took a long breath in, pushed it out, and laid there for a minute. “Healing next. But... tomorrow. Tomorrow sounds like a good idea.”

“You don’t even have a circle planned,” Teacher said derisively as he slowly became a puddle on the floor.

“Please. I had a circle for healing planned three months ago,” he mumbled into the blanket.

“Yes, and I’m *sure* you won’t want to tweak it,” Teacher replied with so much sarcasm that the comment alone hurt more than pouring molten gold directly into his hip.

“Shut up, Teacher.”

Now that he was confirmed it worked, a million and one ideas were flowing through his head for mixing magic types and enchantments. A few more tests to confirm the elasticity and he could replace the gloves themselves, and wasn’t that exciting? There were so many *options* now, and he was itching to try them all.

Two weeks later, the storm was *still* raging and coming closer and closer, and he was annoyed beyond measure with the whole ordeal.

“My plants aren’t getting any sunlight like this,” he complained as he hauled up the rock that had been thrown through the tower defenses onto his balcony and nearly took out a window.

“Tragic, to be sure,” Teacher agreed as he lashed down the rope and checked the enchantment he’d etched into the stone before activating it with a flick of his wrist. The artificial sun hummed to life over the poor, neglected plants and he collapsed in a chair, flexing his engraved hands for the millionth time to make sure the gold he’d inlaid into his palms was still appropriately flexible.

“If I ever find what wizard did this, I’m killing them myself,” he declared and threw an arm over his face. “My basements are starting to *flood*, Teacher. *Flood*.”

“Well, to find the wizard that did it, you’d have to actually *leave* the tower,” Teacher muttered rebelliously, and he peeked out from under the arm over his face to glare at it.

“I’ll get there when I get there,” he snapped, and Teacher huffed.

“You study the curse on the door *maybe* once a week, young zygote. You’re not getting anywhere fast. It’s been a year.”

“Has it?”

“Yes, it’s been a *full* year, and you’re fully capable at this point of unwinding the spell, but *no*, you’re focusing on utterly pointless body modifications for an adventure you’re never going to go on. I’m *bored*.”

“That sounds like a ‘you’ problem.”

“It is very much a me problem! And you are not helping!” Teacher squawked. “Every day, I slave over your education! And what do I get for it?”

“Watching me nearly get my limbs bit off by fish,” he replied with a huff of a laugh. “Honestly, I can’t leave! Who’s going to feed Bob and Ted while I’m gone, huh?”

“You can’t keep calling all the fish Bob or Ted on a whim!”

“There’s also Bill, sometimes.”

“And there are enchantments for that!”

“They need their enrichment, Teach! They’ll get bored if they don’t have someone’s limbs to try and chew off!”

“Well, you could spell a bag to connect to their farm and enchant them to...”

He straightened up with a gleam in his eye as Teacher trailed off as it realized what it had just done.

“Enchant them to float and breathe out of water so I have attack fish?” he asked gleefully, and Teacher’s silence was probably devastating. “New project!”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, you shouldn’t have, but it was your grave to dig, and boy, did you jump into it.”

“You have five more enchantments to do,” Teacher reminded him, and he paused and looked at himself in the mirror. Healing, limb regeneration, pain nullification, strength, speed, heightened intelligence, which hadn’t seemed to do anything but make him even worse, luck, a circle to place enchantments, and a circle on the other palm to unravel the ones he made and take apart the ones he didn’t to figure out how to dismantle them. He really *had* been busy, hadn’t he?

“A disguise charm next, then?”

“If you think that’s a good idea,” Teacher agreed, and he rose to his feet and sauntered to the mirror.

“I mean, I’d get some weird looks, wouldn’t I? I should be able to hide them,” he said and lifted his shirt to study the healing circle curled around his navel. The charms on his limbs were tied to the limb regeneration charm on his lower back, so when they were inevitably hacked off, the limbs would regrow with the charms still embedded. At least all of the gold looked good. “I should probably pick a weapon to start learning, too. What do you have on gunsmithing?”

“You come to a high fantasy realm and you want to learn *gunsmithing*?”

“Why not? I’d look hot with a pair of revolvers and some attack fish, wouldn’t I?”

“There is nothing remotely aesthetically pleasing about those terrible fish,” Teacher said flatly. “You won’t even eat them. You’ve gone a full year in a carnivore’s body without any meat.”

“Good thing I’m not an obligate carnivore then, huh? Maybe we should get some chickens.”

“You would have to leave the tower to be able to do that.”

“You know, I never liked camping,” he said suddenly, and there was silence from Teacher at the tone of his voice. “It was always dirty, and I always got bit by bugs, and my dad was always really overbearing and it always ended up more stressful than a vacation had any right to be. We had *itineraries* for it, you know. We had to keep to *schedules*. We couldn’t just enjoy it.”

His eyes grew a little distant, because he had done this to himself, but he couldn’t say he missed it.

The shirt was dropped, and he turned his eyes to look out at the pouring rain outside.

“They probably buried me under the wrong name. I should have gotten a will.”

“I’m sure he loved you,” Teacher said carefully, and he barked out a short laugh.

“Love isn’t some kind of cure all. It’s rarely ever enough.”

“Do you miss it?”

Thunder shook the tower, and he closed his eyes and tilted back his head.

“Sure.”

Chapter 4

The rain eventually passed a full month after it first hit, leaving him more murderous than he thought possible, and just about ready to fight the first person he met with any degree of elemental power just to prove a point. But, finally, his suffering plants were moved back outside to bask in the real sunlight. The sun rock was taken down and deactivated, saved for another rainy day that would hopefully never happen again, and then he went on a spiteful cleaning spree. The garden was yielding another harvest that was far inferior to all of the fruits he had pulled from it so far, despite the creation of another artificial sun for the crops, and another two days were dedicated to pickling and the making of more vodka to replenish his vinegar batches. The bees he had managed to lure to another balcony near the bottom floor were finally set free from a magically induced hibernation, which was about the only thing that had kept them alive, and he found himself stomping around his tower for a full week in a fine temper.

People were *so* irresponsible. Honestly. Didn't anyone here think about the *ecosystem*? His damn basement was flooded. The fish were angry, and they already had the temperament of an ostrich on a good day. The limb regeneration had been put in for a *reason*. That damn owl had been needlessly cruel about the whole thing. Couldn't he have had salmon or trout or something?

Needless to say, the week following the rain was one of high tempers as he worked to get his house in order. There were a lot of baths that week that consisted of him angrily sitting in a tub with his hair in a towel, face submerged to centimeters below his nostrils, glaring at steaming water as he tried to will himself to calm down. It rarely ever worked, but eventually his bad mood fizzled out as he got to focus again on gunsmithing and the things he had been planning on doing. One of the spare bedrooms was cleared out to make room for a firing range, and several different kinds of guns were made and enchanted, only to produce worse and worse results until he finally managed to craft two revolvers that were up to his admittedly high standards.

"You know, Teach," he said as he fiddled with the circle inlaid into the handle of the first one, "it's a good thing this isn't in D.N.D, or I would only be able to have, like, *two* enchantments on these things."

"D-n-d?" Teacher echoed as he set the six shooters a good three feet away and backed up, flicking out his enchanted fingers before flexing his hands as he plopped down on the floor. The revolvers faded, and then snapped into place in his hands, and he beamed.

"Dungeons And Dragons," he clarified. "It was, uh, a tabletop role playing game from my old universe. Pretty much only functional when the dungeon master made twenty seven new rules to fix it."

"I see," Teacher said in a tone that indicated it did not, in fact, see, nor did it particularly care.

"If we had more people, we could play one," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, we would have to---"

“Leave the tower, I *know*,” he finished and came to his feet, checked the sights again. “Honestly, making these was way more complicated than magic circles.”

“I struggle to see why. I educated you thoroughly.”

“More hand eye coordination,” he said, like that explained anything, and fired off twelve shots as he slowly walked from side to side. A flick of the wrists, and the revolvers reloaded themselves, much to his delight. “Hey! All enchantments are working!”

“Excellent. I believe your soup would be overboiling at this point,” Teacher said passively, and his eyes widened.

“*Shit.*”

Another two weeks passed, and then *it* happened.

It being someone at his door.

Or, more specifically, at his balcony.

By all intents and purposes, he was minding his business when he came. After a hard training session and a nice shower, he was finally lounging in his bedroom in nothing but a robe, laid out on the floor with a book in hand and a tray of snacks to the side as he read up on elemental enchantments. His hair was freshly washed and soaking in the oil treatment, and he was really *quite* busy when there was a scuff outside of his balcony, and then a huff of exertion.

“Hello?” someone called, and his head jerked up as his hand flexed to land a revolver right into his grip.

“What the fuck,” he hissed, just as there was another scuff and then two hands on his banister. A head popped up with a shock of curly, dark hair, and then brown skin followed, and suddenly there was a human man sitting on the banister of *his damn balcony*.

“... You definitely don’t look like an eldar countess,” the man blurted, and he squinted at him.

He was tall, much taller than him. Dressed in darker colors, with a mustard yellow sash on his hip and a trim cut leather armor vest in a rich brown, a pauldron on one shoulder, and an *incredibly* large sword peeking out over the other. Loose black pants tucked into tall boots, vambraces and gloves with brass plating on the knuckles, a large knife strapped to his thigh, he was *definitely* someone that fought, and fought regularly. Soft brown puppy dog eyes and heavy brows, a broad nose and an unfairly chiseled jaw, clearly packing muscle under his armor, and he had to stop and stare for a moment.

“No, I’m not an eldar princess,” he snapped and sat up, leveling his pistol on him. “Why are you sneaking into my bedroom?”

“I wasn’t *sneaking*, I announced myself!” the man protested as he considered blasting the banister he was sitting on just to make a point. “I tried knocking on the door, but---”

“It doesn’t open,” he said flatly and glared at him. “At least, not from the inside.”

“... So that *was* a curse,” the man said thoughtfully, and he stood up.

“You climbed up an entire tower just because someone didn’t answer the door?”

“I’m looking for a missing countess that got stuck in a trap tower when the storm hit, and *this* tower is the only one out here for miles, so excuse me for getting the wrong one,” the man snapped, and then looked around. “Wait, are *you* trapped in this tower?”

“Yes,” he said with as little intonation as he could muster to let him know *exactly* how he felt about strange men climbing onto his balcony, and the man blinked.

“Do you need help?”

“No,” he replied flatly, because he apparently wasn’t getting it.

“Are you sure? I’m a curse breaker, I can get you out.” Oh, of *course* he was a curse breaker. *That* was why the sword was humming weirdly and so damn big. “I’m sure someone is missing you.”

“No one is missing me,” he snapped. “And I can break the enchantment myself, thank you very much. I don’t need some big lout smashing up my door with a sword trying to play the hero.”

“I don’t *play* the hero, I’m an adventurer!” the man protested. “Guild certified!”

“That’s lovely for you, but no, I don’t need help, and there’s no rewards for getting me out of here, either. Or for *breaking into my bedroom*.”

“I’m not in your bedroom; I’m on your balcony,” the man retorted, looking a little frustrated. His brow furrowed cutely and he slung his leg over so he was no longer straddling the banister. “Do you have a name?”

He stopped, his brain descending into white fuzz, because...

Because it had been over a year, and he hadn’t thought to pick one.

His mouth opened and shut, and he lowered the gun slightly before he recovered and brought it up again.

“Not for you,” he snapped, and the man leaned forward a little.

“Well, I’m Grim.”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t have to care,” the man said, and his lips quirked up a bit. “I just thought it was good manners to give it just in case you wanted to hex me for breaking into your balcony.”

“I don’t do hexes,” he blurted, and then flushed as he lowered his gun. “I’m just an artificer.”

He probably *could* do hexes if he felt like it, but he didn’t really see a point to it. Though, at the rate he was going, he couldn’t really be considered an artificer anymore.

“I don’t believe you,” Grim said, and his brain short circuited.

“What?”

“I’ve never met an artificer important enough to lock in a tower,” Grim replied with a twist of a smile. “Maybe a holkind *pretty* enough, but never an artificer important enough.”

“Oh, so I’m not pretty enough to lock in a tower?” he challenged, and Grim laughed.

“I didn’t say that, but if it was your looks that got you locked in a tower, there would be someone out with a reward for you, and you yourself said there were no rewards.”

“Well, maybe looks or ability have nothing to do with it. Maybe I was just rude,” he retorted, and Grim actually laughed.

“If you were rude to someone powerful enough to pull off *this*, you’d just be dead, darling.”

“Don’t call me darling.”

“Well, you didn’t give me a name, now did ya? What else am I supposed to call you?” Grim teased, and he opened his mouth, shut it, and thought about it. “Red it is, then.”

“That can’t possibly be polite.” He wasn’t sure how racism worked here, but he was *pretty* sure that was racist. Or, wait, no, holkinds came in about fifty different colors, so maybe not.

“Well, I climbed all the way up here to save you, and you didn’t even offer me a glass of water, so I wouldn’t say you were the expert on *polite*, Red,” Grim shot back, and he rose up in offense.

“You weren’t even coming to rescue me.”

“Well, I would have anyways. How long have you been stuck here?”

“That’s none of your business,” he sniffed, and Grim laughed.

“So, at least a year, then.”

“How could you *possibly* know that?”

“I do this for a living. I know the stages of ‘stuck in a tower’. ‘None of your business’ is about the one to two year mark, and your general temperament tells me it’s closer to one year than two. Three years is when you just start being open about it.”

“Well aren’t you an expert,” he said archly. “You can get going now.”

“Do you want anything?” Grim asked, and he blinked.

“What?”

“You’ve been stuck here for a year. You have to be craving *something*. I’ll bring it to you, so what do you want?”

“... Huh?”

“I’ll come back and bring it to you,” Grim enunciated. “Tower’s well hidden, but I’m passing by here for a big job with some of my brothers once I’ve got the countess back. I can make a detour. So what do you want?”

His lips parted, and he wetted them as he thought about what he *really* wanted.

“... Meat. I grow vegetables, but I...”

“Don’t have any meat?” Grim finished, and he grimaced.

“Well, *technically*, I have a fish farm, but I really don’t want to eat them.”

“Might get out of hand once they really start breeding,” Grim drawled. “What are you going to do when you realize they have no predators?”

“Suck it up, probably, but I’ve done some... uh, I mean, I figured out a way to delay the natural breeding cycle by a year.”

“Oh, so you’re pretty *and* clever,” Grim said and propped his chin on his hand. “So you just want meat. Anything else?”

“... I'll pay you if you bring me more leather and metal.”

“And what use do you have of leather and metal?” Grim asked slyly, and he inhaled sharply.

“Now that *really* isn't any of your business.”

“Yeah, sure, I'll bring you some, if you do a down payment. How much?”

“About five yards of good quality leather, maybe five lengths of processed steel, about five kilos altogether?”

“That's a lot of material to lug to the top of a tower,” the man said dubiously, and he sucked in through his teeth.

“Bottom balcony has bees, doesn't it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it's got a lot of bees,” Grim replied in a tone that he had definitely had an experience with the bees.

“Alright, then, ah, stay *right* there,” he said, and rushed to the stairwell, stomping down it, because he *really* needed that steel and leather, and if he could just get Grim to the top of the tower...

His robe flapping around him, he burst into his workshop and rifled through his things to locate a chunk of wood he had laying around. Hurriedly, he flexed his hand and spat out a charm onto the wood, and then found the matching one and spat out a second. Better with stone, but it would have to do. The teleportation ring would only last for one trip, but it would be enough. Swiftly, he wrapped it in a strip of linen and ran back up the stairs, praying that Grim was still there.

Grim was still sitting on the banister when he got back, idly studying one of the more poisonous plants with a detached interest, and his eyes widened in horror.

“Don't touch that!”

“I know graveslock when I see it, don't worry,” Grim replied. “Never seen anyone *grow* it.”

“If you steam it and extract the oil, you can distill it and then water it down with a diffuser by steaming it again and it makes a good headache reliever,” he blurted, and then flushed. “I mean, the raw plant material is plenty deadly in a potion or poultice, but it's not---”

“It's fine. You wanna garden with poisonous plants, it's none of my business,” Grim said with a wave of his hand. “What'd'ya got for me?”

“Uh, this,” he said and carefully advanced out to the balcony to hold out the linen wrapped chunk of wood. “It’s a single use piece, better with ash, honestly, but the oak will do. When you get here, you can unwrap it and touch it and it’ll transport you to its mate. It’s single-use, though, because it’s oak, so you have to be careful.”

“Only carries one person?” Grim clarified, and he paused.

“If only one person touches it. If multiple people try to use it, it may put you on the wrong floor. Oak isn’t the best for it, but I’m out of ash. Sorry.”

“That’s fine. My brothers can just stay below. Will the curse actually *let* me into the tower and not just the balcony?”

“It’s not a *curse*, it’s an enchantment,” he growled. “And, uhm, it lets anyone else in and out. It just doesn’t let *me* out.”

He’d learned that the hard way when a very angry star bird ended up in his bedroom at three in the morning one *terrible* night. It was a whole ordeal getting it back out. Now it kept coming back around to harass him at random times and steal his honey. Menace. It hadn’t come back around since the storm, and he was quietly worried about it. Even so, that damn bird was practically indestructible, so he was sure it was still drying out its feathers and would be back shortly to exact its revenge on his bees.

“Oh, so I’m *not* your first visitor,” Grim teased, and his face scrunched up in distaste.

“Unfortunately, a very large bird with a penchant for honey theft has beaten you to it.”

“Star bird?”

“Star bird.”

“Frisky little things,” Grim said sympathetically and tucked the linen wrapped wood into a pouch on his belt. “Let’s talk down payment.”

“I want my receipt,” he blurted, and Grim laughed.

“I’m not going to swindle you; I’ll ruin my reputation. But I’ll get you those receipts. Few lengths of steel and five yards of leather will run you about, mmm, two silver and five bronze for the leather, about a silver for a few hunks of good quality steel. So three silver and five bronze altogether, but I’ll try to haggle down the price a bit for ya. Down payment of maybe thirty percent, then?”

“And extra for the transportation?”

“I like a man that thinks of the little guy,” Grim said with a wide grin. “Yeah, eight bronze for delivery.”

“Five,” he challenged, and Grim leaned in.

“Seven and five copper.”

“Six.”

“Seven, final offer.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “Does the delivery need a down payment, too?”

“No, you can pay me for that when I get back. Silver and five copper, then?”

He didn't really *have* a whole lot of silver. It was mostly gold and platinum, which was frankly, ridiculous if you asked him. Big money like that wasn't worth the cost of carrying around, but there was a decently hefty small chest of loose change he had in his workshop he could use, which was all of the silver, bronze, and coppers he'd managed to pull out of the chests he had laying around in the tower. Honestly, why the owl had made him so incredibly rich was beyond him. When he got out of here, he was hiring someone to take care of the tower and giving the rest away. There had to be some kind of orphanage somewhere in need of funding.

“Let me go grab it,” he said and took a few steps back. “I'll be right back.”

The money was retrieved swiftly, and before long he was back up on his balcony and handing a strange man he'd met barely twenty minutes ago money for something he wasn't sure he would do, but, hey, he used to put his credit card information on the internet without even a VPN running, so he couldn't really say much. It wasn't like a single silver coin was really going to *hurt* him. Which annoyed him more than it should, but whatever.

“Well, since you don't want to be rescued,” Grim said with a sigh as he pocketed the money, and he scrunched up his nose at him.

“I don't need rescuing.”

“Stubborn,” Grim teased, and swung one leg back over the banister. “I'll be back in a bit. There's a travel port gate about a league south of here if you manage to break out before then.”

“I have maps,” he said dryly, and leaned against the wall. “And I wouldn't be so rude to just *leave*.”

“You don't know when I'll be back,” Grim reminded him, and the holkind smiled.

“And you don't know how stubborn I am.”

“I think I’ve got an idea,” Grim replied with appropriately grim humor. “You got a curse breaker on your doorstep and you’re refusing any help because you want to do it yourself.”

“I’d honestly rather be stuck in here another year if it means my pride stays intact,” he sniffed and readjusted his robe. “Well, get out of my bedroom, if you please.”

Grim just tilted back his head and laughed as he swung off the other leg and balanced on the edge of the banister.

“Yeah, sure. See ya, Red,” he drawled, and then he dropped.

“Well, he was handsome,” Teacher said after a long, long pause while he looked over the edge to confirm that Grim was making it down okay.

“Can it, Teach.”

“I’m just saying, it has been an *impressive* dry spell for you, and he’s got a swordsman’s stamina.”

“I’m going to shove you in the fireplace.”

“Ah, but then, who would you talk to? Grim, perhaps? He might have some decent pillow talk, I must admit, but---”

“I am going to go study the door,” he blurted as his face heated.

“Mmm. Well, if nothing else will get us out of the tower, I’m glad your libido is intact enough to do the job.”

“Fireplace, Teacher!”

Chapter 5

Grim did return, with the leather and steel. It took him a full week, but he did make it back to him, and looking worse for wear.

“What happened to you?” he asked as he took in the sorry state of the curse breaker. He had stubble, which somehow made his jaw even *more* appealing, dammit, and bags under his eyes, on top of singes on his vest and a hand wrapped in bandages. His sword hand, if the holkind was guessing correctly. He also looked like he was favoring his shoulder, and honestly just looked incredibly terrible.

“Got in a bit of a skirmish, but my brother is shit at healing. Damn grave cleric,” he grumbled as he set down the requested items and pulled out the receipts. “Here you go. And meat, like you asked for.”

A bag was tossed onto the table, and Grim stretched out and looked around the workshop he had found himself in, his eyes skittering over all of the items and materials and open books scattered about. Teacher, again, was silent, and the holkind quietly cursed it for it. He could use some *backup* here.

“Really are an artificer, huh?” Grim hummed, and the holkind picked up the items and carefully arranged the hunks of steel on the shelf with all of his other metals.

“Did you doubt me?”

“Little bit, yeah. Never met an artificer who just made all of their own items, though.”

“Well, when you’re stuck in a tower off any major road, you have to get a little creative,” he huffed, and then paused as Grim reached into the satchel slung over his good shoulder.

“You said ash was better, right?” Grim asked, and set down two hunks of uncarved wood on the table, followed by what looked like a cabinet scraper and a jar of oil. “I had these laying around at home, no one was using them, so...”

“Oh,” he said faintly, staring at the hunk of wood, and Grim looked away.

“I pass by this forest every so often, and you’re stuck here without meat, so I figured you’d like someone to hunt for you.”

“... Oh.”

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine, but a spell slinger shouldn’t be without a bit of ash,” Grim stammered, and the holkind coughed.

“No, it’s fine, uh. How much do I owe you, again?” Hurriedly, he turned aside even as his eye caught on the bandages on Grim’s hand. He could fix that.

“It’s, uh, on the receipts.”

“And for the meat?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I was planning on charging you, Red. It’s just some venison we managed to snatch up on the way over here.”

“... Right. Uh. Thank you.” Gods, he had really forgotten how to function as a person, hadn’t he? “You said your brother was a grave cleric?”

“Yes,” Grim replied as he idly strolled around the workshop, clearly wanting to poke but restraining himself admirably. “Angel. He can basically only heal when he injures someone, or if we are quite literally about to die. I don’t know what the hells he was thinking, pledging himself to Moshao like that.”

“People generally don’t choose the gods they worship,” he said faintly as he filed the name of the god away for future reference. Culturally, they were Haimites, then, though that didn’t necessarily mean they were *from* Haim, because he was pretty sure he was nowhere near Haim, though he wasn’t sure what the accent sounded like. Or what accent even *he* had, because Grim rolled his r’s and enunciated his ch’s and cr’s and harsh k’s completely differently.

“Yeah, but Angel could have just told her *no*,” Grim groused, with all of the aggrievance of a brother that was moderately inconvenienced, and the holkind’s lips twitched in a smile before it faded before it had a chance to take hold. The longer he went without a name, the more the memories faded, but when Grim had given him a nickname, they were starting to come back, and...

Well. He almost didn’t want a name, sometimes.

“So, you’re Haimish, then?” he asked politely even as he started rifling around for those bandages he had made ages ago and then never had to use.

“On the mother’s side,” Grim replied as his eyes tracked his movements. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Grim and Angel were certainly not Haimish names, so perhaps from the father?

“Where are you from?”

“Not here,” he replied as he pulled open a drawer. Nope, not there, either. “I thought I was more organized than this.”

“Well, obviously you’re not from *here*. You’re a red holkind.”

“Not sure what that means,” he said as he climbed onto a table to peer at the top shelf.

“... So not from Valil, either?”

“Nope,” he said as he flicked open a small box. “Ah, there you are.”

“... Korst?”

“That’s a no,” he said as he hopped down from the table with the box in his grasp. “Lemme see that hand of yours.”

“Are the gold tattoos cultural, then?” Grim pressed, and he smiled at him with more teeth than strictly necessary.

“They’re not tattoos,” he said as he set down the box and took his hand without even a by-your-leave, deft fingers unbuckling the straps of his vambrace. “You’re not going to be able to guess it, so you might as well leave it.”

“Well, if I can’t have your name, you have to give me *some* kind of hint,” Grim complained as he set the vambrace down on the table.

“You wouldn’t be able to have my name even if I told you it,” he said cheerfully and rolled up Grim’s singed sleeve. “Names can’t be freely given like that. *Far* too expensive.”

Not to mention that he *still* hadn’t thought of one.

“That’s fine, but what are you doing with my *very* pained hand that is *very* sensitive?”

“Fixing it,” he replied promptly as he flicked open the box with one hand as the other unraveled the bandage to reveal a *very* nasty looking burn traveling the length of his palm up to his wrist. “I don’t need this anymore, so here. Can’t swing a sword looking like this.”

The useless bandage was tossed on the ground, and he tutted over the blistered and melted flesh. Someone did a *number* on Grim, and it irritated him more than it should, given that he had met the man a total of one time. Then again, it wasn’t every day you met a man willing to climb a two hundred foot tall tower without a shred of safety gear just on the *chance* you might need rescuing. Not that he *did*, of course. No, he definitely had everything under control over here, thank you kindly.

“Honestly, why did you stay on the job looking like this?” he muttered as he drew the charmed bandage out of the box with a vial engraved with its own circle and filled with honey. “Without a bit of magic, your tendon would get fucked to hell.”

“Next stop is a town,” Grim retorted. “We were just going to see a mage there to fix it.”

“Who needs a mage when you have an artificer?” he shot back and poured the honey over the wound. “Rub this in. *Gently.*”

“Yes, sir,” Grim drawled as he moved to start spreading the honey around the wound. Once the holkind was satisfied, he drew the bandage up and around it, wrapping it snugly, but not too tight to keep the pressure off.

“It’s not an instant fix, but without the honey, it heals in two hours, and with it, it heals in one,” he explained as he gently manipulated Grim’s hand. “It’s enchanted to react to running water and sterilize like it was boiled, so if you want to reuse it, dip it in clean, running water. No nasty bogs or anything like that, algae is fine, just something you would be willing to drink yourself. In a pinch, it’ll work if you just run water over it from a skin or something. It just has to be moving. There’s no charms on it to extend its length, and the fewer layers over a wound, the longer it takes to heal, and you can’t just bunch it up. So try to not get stabbed in the gut, yeah?”

“Is there anything you *can’t* do?” Grim asked, and he blinked up at him. Oh, he was *tall*.
Shit.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re apparently a blacksmith, and a carpenter, and I’m assuming a leatherworker, and you grow poisonous plants, and I’m pretty sure that’s a weird looking loom in the corner of the room. You grow your own food, and keep bees, and fish you won’t eat, and you’re apparently *very* well read. So. Is there anything you *can’t* do?”

He hesitated over the question, and then a smile pulled at the corners of his lips.

“Ride a horse.”

Grim stared down at him, and he stared back up in challenge, before Grim broke into a grin.

“Get out of here and I’ll teach you.”

“I don’t need you to inspire me to break out. I can do that on my own, thank you *very much.*”

Grim’s teeth turned *very* sharp, and he leaned in a little bit more while the holkind still cupped his hand in his grasp.

“Then why are you still here, Red?”

He smelled like sweat and cloves, and for a moment, the holkind was frozen at the close proximity, because it had been so very long since he had been near any warm, living being that wasn’t a particularly pissy star bird trying to steal his honey or peck his eyes out. Even the touch of his hand had his skin prickling and standing on end, and he could *feel* the heat of him, and oh.

Oh, right, holkinds clearly had some kind of touch starvation response, too, and he should probably back up. Immediately.

Grim's hand was dropped, and he rushed to figure out how much he owed him from the receipts.

"Come back next time and I'll have a better enchantment to let you in," he blurted as he looked around for the money he set aside for him. "Preferably something that can let multiple in and not just, uh... Actually, what did it do?"

"It shattered," Grim drawled and leaned on the table, crossed his arms as he tracked his progress with his eyes. "Pretty sure it scared the hell out of Riz."

"Uh, sorry about that." Riz must be the other brother. Honestly, what were those names *from*? He was fairly well read, and they sounded more like something they had picked on a whim, though... "Oh, I get it."

"What?"

"Your names. Your mother is Haimish, so your father must be Greshan, right?"

"Good ear," Grim said approvingly. "Yes, we're from Greshan originally. Me and my brothers ended up here because a good chunk of the guild here got taken out fighting a Orkovi wurm. They asked for volunteers, promised a huge bonus from some of the bigger patrons that were steady clients, so our guildmaster asked us to come. Probably because she was sick of us, but whatever."

"What about your parents?" he asked as he located the money and compared it to the receipts. Looks like Grim managed to haggle it down. Nice of him.

"They hopped on the chance to sell the estate and go traveling again," he said dryly. "No need to keep it open for us anymore, and they were always wanderers at heart. Last letter we got they were tracking down some lesser wyrms in Vinkar at the request of the drakes there whose land was getting butted in on with their hunting."

"Would've thought the drakes would handle that themselves," he muttered as he counted out the money.

"They would, but drakes and wyrms getting in a fight generally ends in forest fires, and they'd rather their mountains *not* get burnt to hell outside of the natural fire cycle. Hence, Ma and Pa."

"I've always wanted to meet a drake," he said a little wistfully, and then stopped, because oh, no, talking to Grim was encouraging him to stop procrastinating. How horrible. He needed this man out of his tower *immediately*.

“I’ve dealt with fae back home, and I’ve dealt with drakes, and I’d rather take the fae, honestly,” Grim said gruffly. “At least with the fae I can actually follow the conversation. Drakes will drone on for hours about soil quality from three hundred years ago if you let them, and they don’t even farm.”

“Soil quality is *very* interesting!” he protested, and then stopped, because what had he *become*? Oh, no.

“Yeah, you would say that,” Grim said with a laugh as he started strapping the vambrace on. “My brothers are probably thinking you ate me at this point, so I have to get going.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want them worrying about *that*,” he drawled and handed over the money. “Try to not leave on the bandage past the healing time. Might fuck with the magic and textile charms are a bitch to fix. It’ll heat up when it’s finished. Not *burning* heat, but like, woke up under the blanket sweating because it’s too hot and your feet are uncomfortably warm.”

“Noted,” Grim drawled and rapped his knuckles on the freshly strapped vambrace. The holkind held out the money and Grim took it, strapped it back into his pack. “If you’re making all of this, have you considered trading or selling it?”

“Not really, no,” he replied with a shrug. “It’s just practicing.”

“Practicing for what?” Grim asked, and he paused, his brain descending into white static. What *was* he really practicing for? He was just... making things to make them, really.

His eyes danced over the workshop, all of the various projects he had laying around, failed prototypes stacked in a box in the corner to be repurposed, and his fingers curled into his palms reflexively as he really thought about it and considered his options and why he did what he did. In his old world, he couldn’t do any of this. It was all out of reach, and he had forgotten what it was like to enjoy making *anything*. Hobbies faded away in the face of working day in and day out, and he often just fell asleep the second he clocked out, slept through meals and food, and woke up again in barely enough time to clock in again. Now, he could just do whatever he wanted. Make as much as he wanted, figure things out, use his brain for more than just answering the phone and telling people he couldn’t help them. He could just...

He still wanted to help people, he realized like a thunderbolt to the chest. He wanted to help people, because he knew what it was like to supposedly have the power to *help*, but only have that power in name only.

But he couldn’t do that from here, could he?

“... Anything, really,” he replied, but the answer felt a little hollow in comparison to his sudden epiphany. “I just like to make things.”

“So, you’re bored,” Grim supplied, and he gave him a faint smile.

“I’ll let you poke around next time to see if anything here is worth anything.”

“Well, you just handed me a bandage worth about a silver, so there’s *that*,” Grim drawled, and he blinked.

“Really?”

“Do you know how hard it is to enchant *linen*? The charm is woven into the cloth, isn’t it? No embroidery?”

“Yeah, but that was just a prototype? It needs to be able to change its length,” he pointed out, “otherwise it’s practically useless.”

And he didn’t need it himself, but he wisely didn’t say as much.

“It’s clearly not practically useless,” Grim drawled and waved his bandaged hand for emphasis as he started to walk to the balcony. “But if you say so.”

“I *do* say so.”

“I’ll see ya,” Grim laughed as he slung a leg over the side and looked down below. “Don’t get into too much trouble till I come back. Think about things you’d like to trade and I *might* consider lining you up with someone willing to deliver. I know some more adventurous merchants who wouldn’t mind the trek if you have a good enough product to justify it.”

“I’m not a business minded person,” he said flatly, and Grim rolled his eyes.

“Well, you gotta be *something* when you get outta here. Business or adventure, pick your poison, Red.”

With that, Grim was gone, leaving him alone with Teacher once more.

“He could have asked to use the stairs,” he said faintly, and Teacher shuddered to life.

“And you could have offered.”

“Oh, don’t start with me, or I *won’t* make you your own carrying case.”

“I think we need a lesson in manners after this.”

Chapter 6

Grim eventually did come back. It took him two weeks this time, and it had taken him some time to get all of the things for trade together. Teacher was growing more and more irritable, and his brain had been drifting to distant memories the more the name ‘Red’ took hold. Objectively speaking, Red was a silly name. Downright childish, even, and he should have taken more offense to how easy it was, but Grim had given him it, and they didn’t know what to do with it, because he didn’t want a name that was *given*. He had only had one name in his life that had been a gift, and he had rejected it by the age of fifteen. No, even before fifteen, he had fought and railed against it, wanting to go by his middle name, a nickname, anything but his deadname.

But Red was... nice, he supposed. Even if it was tired and overdone, a trope he had seen a million and one times. ‘Red’ for the firecracker redhead, even though this time he was a holkind, not an *actual* redhead. He wasn’t even that much of a firecracker, except when strange men were climbing into his bedroom trying to rescue him when he had no business being rescued.

This time, Grim came back with his brother, while he was pulling apart the door to study the enchantments. The poor man had climbed in from the first bedroom balcony, and it was only because sound traveled so well in the tower that he heard him calling for him.

“Bottom floor!” he called from the entrance hall, and there was a clatter.

“I brought Angel!” Grim shouted down the stairwell, and he tilted his head back to stare up at the opening in the ceiling.

“Bring him down!”

There was the sound of heavy booted footsteps, and he looked down at his state of general undress. Was he supposed to dress nicely for company? He had met Grim in a dangerously silken dressing gown, so he supposed it didn’t mean much at this point. This was *much* better clothed, just leggings and thick wool socks, because it was getting cold again, and a baggy crochet sweater he’d made himself. Figuring out crochet without YouTube was a *nightmare*, and it took a *lot* of trial and error with his limited supply of yarn, and there had been a lot of tears involved, but he had managed it.

Then again, this was Grim and his *brother*, the grave cleric, so maybe he should make an effort.

“Oh, I thought Grim was making you up,” a voice said, and he tilted his head back to take in the upside down view of the brothers at the top of the endless stairwell. Grim was there, looking surprisingly clean and neat, with a brand new shirt that wasn’t burnt to hell, and a new vest. He still had the sword slung over his shoulder, and it was humming *very* loudly in the presence of the door. To be expected, of course. The stubble was back, and apparently here to stay, not that he was going to complain about that.

Just above him was another man that looked about the same age, with curling hair wrapped in a bun, with the same brown skin, and soft brown eyes. His brows were a little less heavy, a little more arched, and his face was a little less sharp, with a nose that was ever so slightly smaller, that had clearly not been broken as many times. The left side of his face was a little tighter than the other, probably due to the fact that he had a scar stretching from the corner of his mouth almost to his temple, like someone had *severed* it, and that had to be one hell of a story. Whoever had healed it had done a hell of a good job, though, because his face should have been a *lot* more fucked up with nerve damage. Good for him, honestly. Had to make chewing easier.

There was a large scythe slung over one shoulder, and he was clad in all black and gray with draping lines drawn close to the body. He had a knapsack slung over the other shoulder, and upon closer inspection, seemed to have a magically enhanced prosthetic leg. Excellent enchantment work, from what he could see without peeling it apart. High quality. His mind drifted back to the mention Grim made of his parents selling a full *estate* and becoming adventurers again, and he idly considered how much money could be made out of adventuring. Apparently a lot, if you were good enough to be hired by fucking *drakes* to kill *wyrms* with nothing but one other person for backup. Which was, incidentally, a level he'd likely never be on.

“Well,” he said cheerfully and dropped his head back down, “I’m very real, for the most part.”

“Pay up, pipsqueak,” Grim said, and he smiled quietly to himself as he directed his attention back to the door and pulling out the enchantment so he could study it. “... Red, what the *hells* are you doing?”

“Working,” he said as the enchantment burst into light before him, sending his papers scattering. “Grab those for me, will you?”

His left hand was glowing faintly from the effort of pulling out such a large enchantment, and he used his right hand to break the enchantment apart before him, separating each level of the enchantment before he twisted his left hand again to lock it all in place. Hesitant footsteps approached him from behind, and Grim carefully crouched down to place the stack of papers in front of him.

“I thought about it,” he continued, blissfully unaware of the stunned silence behind him, “and I probably need more paper, so whatever your commission rate is, let me know. There’s, uhm, a list here somewhere of things I can trade, let me see...”

“Red,” Grim said quietly as he sifted through the stack of papers to find the list.

“Mmm?”

“What did you just do to that cosmic level enchantment?”

“Long version or short version?” he asked mildly as he licked his thumb so he could flick a little more quickly.

“... Either?”

“Short version is I took it apart so I could see it. Long version is I pressed my own magic on the magical echo of the original spell and copied it so I could project my own image so I can see what I’m doing,” he replied and pulled out the list. “Here.”

“Red, that is a *cosmic enchantment*,” Grim said and he finally looked up to blink at him. “What the *hells* did you do to get trapped in a cosmic enchantment?”

He followed Grim’s gaze to the slowly moving infinity symbol and the circle holding the magic in place and blinked owlishly.

“I asked nicely,” he replied and looked back down at his papers before he started setting them back down. “It’s a challenge, obviously.”

“You asked *who* nicely?”

“A very excitable bird.” His equations were slowly laid out and he leaned back on his hands. “It’s kind of like a final exam, I guess. Which is why I’ve been stuck here for so long.”

“So your teacher locked you in a tower as a *test*?”

“Eh, sure,” he replied with a half shrug, even though he wouldn’t call the owl his *teacher*, but he wasn’t about to go into it. “Hand me my tea, would you? It’s getting cold.”

Grim slowly picked up the cup and passed it to him, and he took it from his hand and took a long sip before setting it back down and turning back to his papers.

“I’ll be done for the day in a few minutes, if you want dinner,” he said and picked up the charcoal stick to start scribbling again.

“Okay, how did you figure out how to do that?” Angel asked, and his ears twitched as he picked up a telltale hum of magic and whir of mechanics as the grave cleric approached them and flopped down on the floor to stare up at the enchantment in dumbfounded silence.

“I read a lot, and made a lot of charms,” he replied as he frowned at the paper and crossed out the mark he’d made. “When you do something enough, you tend to figure things out the more you understand it.”

“I can’t believe your teacher sent you on a pilgrimage for *artificing*,” Grim groused, and he lifted his brow.

“Why not?”

“People only do that for high brow magic,” Angel explained. “Artificing? Not worth the effort.”

“Clearly it is, if no one has figured out they can project images of enchantments to unwork them,” he said placidly. “Honestly. Bigotry really is the killer of progress, isn’t it?”

“Apparently,” Grim said and blinked hard. “I only work with anti-magic, really, so I have *no* idea what all of this means.”

“That’s because you see magic and think you can just hack it to death with a sword,” Angel sniffed, and the holkind laughed.

“Actually, I’ve never seen an anti-magic enchantment. Do you mind if I look at your sword?” he asked Grim, and Grim blinked.

“He doesn’t like anyone but me holding him.”

“That’s fine. Just pull him out for me?”

“Sure.”

Grim reached over his shoulder and circled his hand around the thrumming hilt that was only getting louder with its eagerness to ‘hack things to death’, and the holkind squinted at it as Grim slowly pulled the sword from its sheath and laid it across his knees.

“Ah, that makes more sense!” he declared, and his face cleared, because the blade was Damascus steel, or ‘Vros steel’ here, and the pommel was clear crystal with slowly fading black veins where the humming was more tightly compressed, and now everything made *much* more sense. “It uses magical conductive metals blended with glass for strength and leaves for their magical retention, lets the magic currents travel to the clear quartz pommel, and the pommel sucks up and releases it once the energy has been purified. So it’s less *magic* and more *alchemy* and *materials*, because too much intentional magic would fuck up the actual *anti-magic* properties!”

Grim blinked, and Angel coughed out a laugh.

“You said he was---”

“Angel. No,” Grim cut in, and he blinked as he looked between the two of them.

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Grim bit out. “Anyways, I’m pretty sure this would just break Ryt, so I should probably put him up before he has a temper fit.”

With that, he sheathed the blade, and the humming died to a manageable hiss as the holkind turned his attention back to the enchantment.

“I’m not too, mm, the best with physical enchantments,” Angel said, and tilted his head. “Can you tell me what I’m looking at here?”

“Oh, sure,” he said, and pointed up. “So, do you understand the basics?”

“Only for holy healing magic,” Angel replied, and tilted his head. “A circle defeats the purpose for us, and I never understood what it really *does*.”

“So, the circle is the will of the caster,” the holkind explained as he gestured to the two rings of the circle with the runes floating in the middle. “For the smaller charms, you can get away with just a single solid line, but for a high level enchantment like this, you need the inner circle and runes. Each rune denotes what your intentions are for the spell, and as such, change the nature of it. Elements are the building blocks of static spells, like all magic, but when you’re working on pure *will* like this, they aren’t involved for this part of it. So, since this spell is directed towards *me*, these are its intentions *for* me, and how it feels about me. So you have ambition here, strength, protectiveness, imagination, creativity, ingenuity, knowledge, spiritual growth, and intellect. The strength of the spell lies in the circle, so if I can figure out where the sequence *starts*, I can figure out how to break it. Once the holding circle is broken, the spell is released.”

“So, I recognize all of those runes, but what is this one?” Angel asked and reached up to point at the single blazing green symbol, and the holkind paused, because he didn’t know how to answer that in a way that made *sense*.

“That’s the symbol of it,” he settled on. “It’s not really found in most enchantments, or a general part of the alphabet, but think of it like... a signature. That symbol is... *it*.”

“It being your teacher?”

“... It being the bird,” he confirmed carefully, because it wasn’t his *teacher*, not really, but he didn’t know how to begin to explain it. He didn’t *worship* it, it wasn’t his *god*, he wasn’t even sure if it *was* a god. It was just... *it*. “I suppose it’s less of a teacher and more of a patron.”

“Huh. Okay, so you have to separate the ring from... this.” Angel gestured vaguely at the sluggishly moving infinity circle. “Why is that?”

“Okay, so this is where the actual *building blocks* reside,” he explained and pointed to each point. “It’s running on a cosmic sequence, which is *incredibly* complicated. The problem with it is I have to figure out what rune I have to take out and *when* I have to take it out. The runes are more concentrated here, because it’s running an equation. So you have the symbol for space here with wistful for... there’s not a *word* for it, but it’s a concept, and an emotion, and earth with more earth for foundation, and sun with knowledge for the concept of enlightenment,

and sun and planets for orbit, but in this context with the rest means *pull* and *push*, and fold with bend here for spatial displacement, generally a teleportation rune, but in this context means fixed with the way they're stacked, so it's like, anti-teleportation, meaning I can't warp out, it's *very* weird, and here is target, loosely translated as wishful thinker, kind of means dreamer, in a way, and youth, or, with this embellishment, *zygote*, which is right in the center and fixed, because that's who it's directed on, me, the learner. The letters rearrange themselves at random intervals, and I have to figure out the pattern to it, which I haven't yet, which adds another level of complexity to it all."

"And how does it all work with the door?" Angel asked while Grim simply stared at it all in dismay.

"See the clicking cogs and gears?" he asked as he came to his feet and walked through the light to point at each gear. "The splines all have runes engraved into them, right? Occasionally, they shift out of focus and reappear somewhere else. I've mostly matched up each one and layered an active charm on them to keep track of them so they appear on the image I project. If I hadn't figured out how to copy the enchantment itself, I wouldn't have been able to work it out."

"Oh, I get it," Angel said as he came to his feet. "Sort of. You have better ears than humans and can *hear* magic, so I'm guessing you can hear each frequency?"

"Exactly!" he confirmed, pleased with how easily Angel was learning. "It's echoing the magical frequencies and tones to each piece. I can redo the charm so it appears as colors instead, but the different noise frequencies are easier to pick out than the sheer amount of runes here. I'd have to use a million different shades, or program each with a specific flashing sequence, so the noise is just easier, and I need to train my ears better, anyways."

"So how do you *break* it? Can't you just figure out where on the circle to break it and take out a rune there?"

"If it was that easy, I'd be out of here by now," he said dryly and traced his fingers over the clicking gears. "No, the randomization of the runes is intentional, and not a true randomization. The way cosmic enchantments work is there is a key. I have to match up the random shifts with a pattern, and from there, I have to figure out at which *point* to break it. The infinity circle has to line up at specific intervals with the runes on the circle, and I have figured out what I actually have to do is *switch* the runes. So far, I've figured out it'll take a week of switching the infinity runes with the circle runes to dissolve the enchantment. It's fairly easy to switch them. It's just a simple sleight of hand with a little magic, a tweak of the way street hustlers do the shell game. It's a cipher puzzle, basically."

"So, have you made any progress on finding the key?" Angel asked, and the holkind paused awkwardly.

"Yes and no?" He turned and pointed up at the floating circle. "The key is in its symbol. But I haven't figured out what its symbol *means*. Once I know what the symbol stands for

beyond *it*, I use it to match up the concepts, but that doesn't solve the randomization problem. If I figure out what *it* means, I can then translate the runes to mean *it* by matching the infinity symbol with the circle. Of course, if I figure out what *it* is, I can maybe figure out a pattern to the randomization. But the key is in the translation of the symbol."

"That sounds complicated," Angel muttered and stepped back, rubbing at his chin. "The bird... do you think it's had an impact on history anywhere?"

The holkind paused, his brain coming to a grinding halt. He had studied every mythos, every pantheon, every history of spirit from every culture that he could find. The library that had been given to him was immense and impressive. He'd asked Teacher to download every mythos in bits and pieces into his brain, because he didn't want to go into a coma for a month, and he'd even gone into the mythology from his original world, too, because Teacher knew everything about his old home right up until the point he left. There was nothing to be found, and yet he felt like *it* was *everywhere*. The problem with mythology was that it relied on nature itself in tandem with sentient perception of it, and that was where archetypes came from. So there were *patterns*, patterns everywhere, but he wasn't sure if that was correlation not equaling causation or vice versa.

"It might have, but not to my knowledge," he replied carefully. "If I had a *word* for it, it might make it easier to break down the structure of the rune, but I don't."

"Well, what is it, beyond a bird?" Angel asked. "What species?"

"It's an owl that speaks," he said cagily. "In a library I just... stumbled over but couldn't find mention of in any history book."

"And you just let it lock you in a tower?" Angel asked in disbelief, and he huffed.

"There were extenuating circumstances. A lot of extenuating circumstances. The only thing I can rule out is that it isn't a fae, but it might be a shapeshifter, is definitely able to change its form at least in terms of shape. That's about all I got."

He had a lot more, but none of it was anything he could say. Something about it held his tongue, and he wondered, idly, if it had to be called on to know more than *this*, more than what he could share. It had all started with a plea to anything that was listening, and now they were here. Locked in a tower with a puzzle that had seemed impossible, but with steady work and determination, was making more and more sense, and yet no sense at all.

"There might be... more oral traditions I'm unaware of," he added thoughtfully. "I only have access to things that have been *written*, but I know there's cultures that are closed with oral traditions."

Though a culture of oral traditions might see it as more of a demonic entity and hoarder of dead knowledge, he thought distantly. Most oral traditions were based on the idea that stories

were meant to live in souls and continue on that way. Granted, it could have very well been a demon, but he had a skewed view on demons, anyways.

“It sounds like you got yourself into a mess,” Grim said flatly. “But your list is half decent. I know a merchant that’s a bit of a thrill seeker I can pass it off to.”

“Could you?” he asked as his attention veered wildly from focusing on the mystery that was the owl and back on the here and now.

“Yes, it shouldn’t be a problem. She likes this forest,” Grim replied with a half shrug. “I think she’s met your star bird a few times. Thing hates her guts and she loves it. She might try to fight you, though.”

“... What?”

“She likes to fight potential trading partners,” Grim replied, and Angel snorted.

“She’s tried to fight Grim half a dozen times. Kid’s off her rocker. I don’t know why she insists on staying a merchant.”

He opened his mouth, shut it, and shot Grim a helpless look. He didn’t *fight*. He *shot things*. He was going to have to come up with nonlethal rounds at this rate, and change all the damned charms on his pistols to make it work.

“To be exact, she’s staying a merchant because, and I quote, ‘that’s just how it’s going to be until you bring me more interesting people for a team than your horde of brothers. I’m outnumbered,’” Grim intoned, his voice abruptly shifting to something *very* high and entirely different, with an uncanny pitch and intonation and the exact mimicry of a girl in her late teens to early twenties with a bit of a growly undertone. The holkind startled a little, and Angel rolled his eyes.

“Show off,” he muttered and turned to the holkind. “But she *is* about the only person we know that would go this far out for trade materials, if she thinks her partner might be interesting enough. She’d probably think all of this was fun, and if she likes you, she’ll make damned sure you get the best trade deals.”

He considered it, and then let out a sigh.

“Fine. Let the crazy merchant lady come ruin my life, I guess. I have nothing better to do than... *this*.” He gestured vaguely at the complex gears and mechanisms and then turned on his heel. “Come on. Lemme make you dinner.”

“She’s an enfield, by the way,” Grim said as he waited at the bottom of the stairwell for the holkind to start ascending once the still-silent Teacher was tucked safely under his arm. He paused and looked down at him, his nose screwing up as he considered it. An enfield...? What was...

Ah.

The fox chimera shapeshifters. Humanoid appearance during the day, with the ears of foxes and arms of eagles with protruding feathers, tails of wolves mixed with feathers, and at night they did a full shift with the heads of foxes and chest of wolfhounds and bodies of lions with the same feathers and legs and hindquarters of wolves. Virtually unknown back in his first world, the guardians of graves, but here they were primarily nomadic and liked to fill the roles of adventurers or merchants or traveling performers and whatnot. Their entire culture was based on wanderlust. Interesting.

“We left the meat in the kitchen, by the way,” Angel chimed in, and he looked over his shoulder at him.

“You brought more meat...?”

“You’re a carnivore, Red,” Grim said and gestured for him to keep going up the stairs. “A carnivore that is refusing to eat fish, for whatever reason. Red meat is better for you, anyways.”

“I’ve been eating a lot of mushrooms,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster, which wasn’t much. “Bleeding mushrooms.”

“Why won’t you eat the fish?” Angel asked and he had a brief flash image of *too many damn teeth*.

“I named them. It’s too late for me now,” he replied archly and swept up the stairs. Bill, Ted, and Bob, for all forty of them, but he wouldn’t say as much. “And they make good fertilizer if they die naturally. Better in the long run.”

“If you say so,” Grim muttered and hopped up the stairs after him.

“Anyways, tell me about this feral merchant of yours,” he said airily as he skipped up the stairs, “and how you feel about mushrooms.”

He probably did need to start actually focusing on the whole door problem. It was becoming a problem. He couldn’t even escape from company anymore, so it wasn’t even an excuse to ignore the door anymore. Dammit.

Chapter 7

He was in the library again. The lion plushie was back in his grasp, and his body was flickering between red and beige like it couldn't decide who he was meant to be. He wasn't sure, either, but that didn't seem to matter so much in here. In fact, he was fairly sure no one was supposed to be *anyone* in here.

"You seem to be allergic to the word protagonist," a voice said, and he turned to face the owl at its desk once again.

"And you seem to be allergic to checking in," he shot back, and the owl trilled in amusement as the keys of the silent typewriter continued to tap away. With a flutter of its wings, the owl hopped up on the desk and strutted around its typewriter to face him.

"You could have solved my puzzle six months ago," it said, but it didn't sound all that disappointed or angry. More amused than anything else. "We could have avoided the whole storm situation had you gotten there a little earlier to rescue the poor thing from xir own stupidity."

"I've never been all that great at saving people," he said dryly, and the owl folded its wings behind its back.

"No?"

"No," he confirmed, and turned to look up at the endless ceiling. "How are the names?"

"They miss you," it said and followed his gaze. "But such is the face of love."

"I forgot what they sounded like."

"Even the first?"

"No," he said, and turned his face back down. "Never that one."

"I'm sorry it brought you such pain," the owl trilled, and he huffed out a bitter laugh. "It didn't mean to."

"Names are just placeholders, anyways." He didn't want to hear the thought that was spilling out into the open air.

"And so are those lovely little bookshelf inserts you always wanted to make," the bird said and he resolutely refused to look at it. "The ones with the little worlds in them, the little lights and---"

"I know. You can love a placeholder, too," he interrupted, but his voice sounded thick. Something about it ached. He had mourned many names, and let them go like water slipping

through his fingers. They had symbolized moments in time where he was him, and he let them go just as soon as he stopped being him and evolved into something new. It was sometimes about gender, and other times about just himself, as he was.

Gender was what started it, of course. And he loved each and every one, because they showed who he was at that moment in time. Names were not titles of *him*, but the place he filled, and how he filled it. Change had always been inevitable, and he had stopped at some point trying to scabble and claw and cling to the past in the face of it. It had always been normal, even natural, to let one name flee so he could hold another. Even the first name hadn't been hated. You didn't hate the knife that cut you, but the person that drove it into you.

"When I asked you to give them to me, your scars were meant to go with them," the owl said softly, like it was a reassurance, and he coughed on his disappointment.

"I don't really know what you are, or who you are, but I know you know just as well as anyone else that pain doesn't work like that. As much as everyone wants to believe it doesn't."

"You don't think of yourself as Red. Have you noticed?" the owl asked conversationally, maybe even curiously, and he drifted away from it to draw his fingers over books, just to see if they sent a shiver down his spine.

"I never really thought of myself as the body I'm in," he replied as his fingers stroked over the spines, followed the bumps and curves with some kind of quiet reverence, because he knew these books were more than they seemed. "Why does Teacher never speak around Grim?"

"Would you believe me if I said it was shy?" the owl asked slyly, and he actually smiled at that.

"Never."

"Many magical tools have sentience. In a way, you could consider people magical tools, on equal footing with anything born of it," the owl said and strode along the floor to the center, where a fountain he had never once noticed was quietly gurgling. "Different, yes, but still worthy of respect."

"Are you telling me to stop being so mean to it?" he asked, and the owl laughed.

"Goodness me, no. I believe Teacher would be quite put out if it had to feel guilty over bullying you. The poor thing wouldn't know what to do with a *nice* partner."

"So what are you telling me?" he challenged, and the owl looked down into the pooling water that was beginning to flow over the edges, threatening destruction to the books, but strangely, he didn't feel like it was much of a threat.

"Do you believe Teacher feels desire?"

“Like... uh...”

“That is not something you should concern yourself with, no. I mean desire as *wishing*. Wanting. Longing. For anything.”

“It definitely wants to go outside and see me fulfill this role you’ve shoved me into that I told you I wouldn’t be doing,” he replied dryly, and the owl’s head swiveled to pin him in place with its endless stare. For a moment, he saw a cosmos lying in its eyes, waiting to strike, and then it was gone as soon as it came.

“Longing,” the owl said flatly, “is the mark of being alive. Wishing. Dreaming. It is longing that drives us all from our homes, and longing that keeps us in place.”

“... Is that why we’re in a library?” he asked, and the owl’s eyes descended into a soft golden glow, like it was smiling at him.

“It is indeed, because what is a story, beyond a *longing*? What is a work of science, if not the compilation of what a thirst for knowledge can drive you to? What is a book of history, if not the creator’s desire for people to know where they came from, so they might know where they can go? Every word that is sealed to a page, every thought and every statement, is a desire given form, shared with the world so people might know more, dream of more, think of *more*. It’s sentence, it’s *being* in its purest form.”

The owl turned aside and stared up at its impressive hoard climbing into infinity, and tilted back so it could bask in the soft light of the books, of the endless ceiling that would never have an end.

“Dreams will protect dreams, my dear, and something has to keep them safe. The only way to truly preserve *knowledge* is to *remember* it. Even you in your names, released into the cosmos to finally be at peace, is still remembered in the hearts of the people that loved you, and stopped loving you, and met you once. They could forget your face, your name, your place in their life. Your father could even forget holding you for the first time, your mother could forget the first time she pressed a bandage to your knee and kissed you goodnight, your brother could forget the first time he saw you stumble to your little legs to walk, but their *souls*, their souls, I could never touch, never cleanse, because there is a spot just for you, a spot that could never be filled, even when their brain forgets. *That* is the power of a name, my dear. Not even the cosmos could kill one, and not even an owl can truly erase them from memory.”

He felt like he should be crying, because with the title of Red, he was starting to remember his family, remember what was left behind, but there were no tears in this form for the library, no way to let the pain escape. What had he been thinking? Why had he done this? How could he hurt them like this?

“Pain, my dear, is the body telling us something is wrong,” the owl said softly, and drifted closer to him. “Pain of the soul is a different beast altogether.”

“Why did I have to remember the good bits first?” he whimpered, and the owl reached out to take his hands and hold them as he sank to his knees.

“Because you remembered how to dream,” the owl whispered, like it was a secret, “and you had always dreamed that the good outweighed the bad.”

“It didn’t, though,” he choked out, and the owl pressed its forehead to his.

“The choice you made was the choice to *live*, even if it was without them. No, perhaps *because* you were without them,” the owl murmured. “You made the choice to seize the chance of happiness, because you remembered in that instant what it meant to dream again, and you remembered that not all could be ugly and painful and terrible. You remembered what it was to trust not because you trusted a stranger, but because you trusted *yourself* to make the best decision in an impossible situation. You trusted in your *dreams*, and you know what you saw in this room, what this place is, and what appeared before you. You just haven’t yet realized what it was.”

Slowly, he lifted his eyes to look into luminous golden eyes that had the depth of universes swimming in them, places he couldn’t possibly imagine, things he couldn’t comprehend, but Lovecraft was a fool, because there was the strength of infinity in them, and if it could be thought, it could be understood by *someone*, and someone already had.

“There we are,” the owl whispered. “My dear, what is my name?”

He awoke slowly, with the rays of dawn through the slit in the curtain. For a moment, he didn’t even realize he wasn’t breathing, and when it occurred to him, his lips parted and a deep breath was taken in, filling his lungs, and shuddered as it fell out.

Its name.

In a trance, he rose from the bed, and stumbled to the stairs in a haze, with only one hand grazing the length of the banister as he stepped down and continued the long trek to the bottom, all the way to the entrance hall. Thoughts were given to his morning chores, and then forgotten as he stumbled into the bare room while snow fell outside, gentle and drifting. His socked feet barely remembered to not skim the floor as he made his way to the papers laid all over the floor, and he sank to his knees in front of the door.

Everything was white static as he effortlessly pulled out the mirage of the enchantment, letting the hum fill him to his chest and vibrate in his bones, and he stared up at the dancing lights moving in their eternal mobius strip, circling round and round, curving with time and space and thought and feeling, and his fingers ghosted over its name hovering before him.

“Dream,” he whispered. “Your name is Dream.”

“Well, it’s the last one,” he said to the open air in general, Teacher in specific, and traced over the runes on clicking gears. “Thirty seconds to go.”

“It truly took you an abnormal amount of time,” Teacher replied dryly, not in the least bit impressed, and he barked out a harsh laugh.

“It’s too cold to be bitter,” he shot back and considered the angle of the cogs, watched them tick down as he flicked his fingers to let off sparks. “It only took a year and a half to apparently design an entirely new approach to artificing and break an unbreakable enchantment. You should be happier.”

“You could have done it in six months,” Teacher sniffed indignantly.

“I don’t work well under pressure,” he retorted.

“Are you going to actually pick a name now, my zygote?”

“Mmm...” He tilted his head as the second to last gear clicked into place. His thoughts flitted away on a breeze, and he considered it, mulled it over, tasted it on the tip of his tongue, but something stilled it. Names couldn’t be rushed, really. They were too important for that.

The final piece slowly moved into position, and he ran his fingers over it for the briefest of moments before, with a languid flick of his wrist, the runes switched. The magic hissed and sizzled and then drifted down like the snow he knew was outside. There was a fizzle, and a pop, and he stepped back as the door began to glow. The gears and cogs began to turn, far faster than they had ever turned before, and spun out away from the door, revealing the smooth wood beneath as they spun and spun and began to melt together in an entirely new formation, the bronze spiraling round and round as it finally began to form...

A doorknob, set into the very middle of the door.

“Not yet,” he said with a smile, and grasped it, turned it, and opened it to the fresh blanket of snow outside.

Something new took hold in his bones, and a smile began to spread across his face, because the door was open, and the snow was fresh and white and...

Very, very cold.

“Alright, that’s enough for today.”

“*WHAT?*”

Chapter 8

“Do you think she’s ever going to come?” he asked Teacher as his foot drummed on the edge of the chair as he wound the pieces of magic around his fingers.

“Who?” Teacher asked, and he hummed lazily as he tilted his head back.

“The enfield. Elmer, I think her name was,” he said and pulled the strands taut with the new gust of wind across the balcony. The enchantment below him on the wall shifted and blurred, and he let it resettle gently and sizzle against the wall. “Gods, how long is this enchantment going to *take* to set up?”

“You’re the one that thought it would be a good idea to create a ridiculously complex camouflage illusion to cover a twelve story tower,” Teacher snipped irritably, and he let his head fall back with too much laze in the loll of it to count as strictly appropriate.

“You’re the one that said, ‘that’s a terrible idea. Do it’,” he snipped back, but he couldn’t find the energy to even pretend to be annoyed. “I hope Angel and Grim are okay.”

“You’ve met Angel once and Grim three times,” Teacher pointed out, and he snorted.

“And I have been trapped in a tower for closer to two years than one with only *you* for company. You can’t blame me for getting attached to the first friendly face I saw. I’m *lonely*.”

“That’s your own fault.”

“And they brought me *meat*.”

“I have never once consumed the flesh of an animal, so I cannot possibly understand your admiration for it.”

“I’m a very simple person, Teach. A bit like a dog. Be nice to me, let me solo run my own stupidity, and feed me, and I’m yours,” he drawled and blew his hair out of his eyes. “Do you think I could do bangs? We never got to the head shaving part of quarantine.”

“You’d look terrible. Do it.”

“In hindsight,” he said, and sat up a little more, “maybe I *do* need someone that doesn’t let me be stupid on my own, because you are certainly not filling in the role of impulse control with any degree of seriousness. I’m in an *isekai*. I probably need some kind of anime bangs, right?”

“I think the braids suit you a bit too much, and you should give in to the urge to look hideous a little, or it’s just not fair to the rest of the population,” Teacher replied placidly, and he laughed.

“For all we know, I’m actually hideous!” he protested, and Teacher snorted.

“Grim certainly doesn’t think so.”

“Don’t be gross,” he chided and lolled his head about to look out at the expanse of the forest. “My fingers are past the point of numb and are starting to hurt.”

“You have pain nullification.”

“I’m naturally weak to the cold,” he pointed out. “Some things magic can’t even fix. Can only cheat nature so many times.”

“Why are we *actually* waiting for Elmer?” Teacher asked, and he let out a long-suffering sigh.

“We aren’t *actually* waiting for Elmer,” he explained. “We’re waiting out the winter. I’m not starting my grand adventure dripping wet and shivering with a snotty nose. I have standards.”

“You can make charms for that.”

“Winter is a time of *rest*, Teacher. And I couldn’t do half of the spells I wanted to do to protect the tower without access to the outside of it. It’s going to take time to set these up.”

“You have no sense of adventure.”

“I have plenty of a sense of adventure,” he replied petulantly. “It’s Dream’s fault it picked someone that remembers back pain and burnout for its ‘grand protagonist’ and ‘reluctant hero’. I’m going to do shit on my own damn time, thank you kindly.”

He paused, and then mouthed the words that just came from his mouth.

“Plenty of a sense of adventure... should it be plenty sense of adventure?”

“If you’re referring to grammatical structure, I’m fairly sure neither makes sense, so you may as well do as you wish,” Teacher sniffed, and another gust of wind blew across the field. His fingers twitched and let up the slack to teach the enchantment to shift with the wind, and he breathed out a soft puff of air. Breath frosted the air, and he let his eyes slide shut to bask in the bright sun beating on his face.

“If we went out now, I don’t think I’d be able to keep you dry,” he added, and Teacher hummed uncomfortably.

“That is a point.”

“Cold is bad for glue, too.”

“And we don’t even know the first thing about extreme temperatures interacting with soft metals fused to flesh,” Teacher continued, and his lips twitched in a smile.

“Exactly. You could get, I don’t know, book arthritis tromping around in the snow in search of adventure.”

“And it would not be the best time to find out if you have a weakness to extreme temperatures.”

“And campfires can only warm you up so much.”

“And the tower should be triple checked before we let the automation run on its own.”

“And this illusion spell is just so *tricky* and may need some patch jobs.”

“Oh, what have you done to me?” Teacher bemoaned and melted into a metaphorical puddle of despair. “I started with such *spirit*, such *fire*, and now I sound like an old man complaining about his joints.”

“Fire and books don’t mix well,” he drawled as he dabbed at his running nose. “And I didn’t kill your sense of adventure. I just... marinated your sense of patience. That’s all.”

“You’ve ruined me, my wizened zygot,” Teacher complained, and he let out a breathy laugh.

“I taught you some virtues and some vices. Nothing to beat yourself up over. You’ve just got some undertones now. Like a beautifully crafted hot sauce.”

“Truly, you have *wrecked* me and *corrupted* my blessed higher ca---

“*Hey!*” someone thundered from down below, and Teacher abruptly fell silent as he froze. Slowly, keeping the tension in the magic, he leaned over to look far, far below at the speck of bright orange and brown at the bottom of the tower.

“Hey, yourself,” he called down, his eyes narrowing to catch sight of pointed ears and a swishing red tail with feathers trailing in the snow.

“You Red?” the girl shouted, and he propped his chin on the banister.

“Some people call me that,” he replied and squinted down at her. “You Elmer?”

“Grim said I’d find a weird red holkind in a tower, and this is the only tower I got!”

“Grim said I’d find a merchant enfield that might want to pick a fight, and you’re the only enfield I see!”

There was a gleaming flash of white against beige as she bared her teeth, supposedly, she was *very* far down.

“I might if it seems like you’d be worth it!”

“Can you wait till I finish setting this? It’ll be another hour!”

“Depends on how many teeth you wanna deal with!” she hollered, and he considered her words and the fading rays of the sun. He didn’t want to deal with *teeth*. Teeth were terrible, but he was an expert in them at this point, but then again...

“My fingers are too cold for this anyways!” he shouted and abruptly dropped the working enchantment.

“What are you *doing*, it was almost *finished*,” Teacher hissed as he stood up and stretched.

“Teeth,” he replied grimly, and there was a pause as Teacher’s constant humming warbled ever so slightly.

“... Ah. Yes, teeth,” Teacher agreed, and he stared down at the book.

“Should I just leave you here?”

“Absolutely not, I want to see a tiny fox girl put down a demon,” Teacher sniffed, and he rolled his eyes and stuffed it under his arm.

“I’ve been training.”

“Not against a real person,” Teacher pointed out, and he crinkled his nose.

“Hold on, I’m coming down!” he called, and a frantic hand waved up at him.

“Thank you!”

“My master plan is to remain utterly useless at hand to hand so I can just be ranged support,” he said as he swept for the stairs and flopped across the banister to start sliding down. “Have you seen the size of the brothers? Odds are in my favor.”

“The odds have never once been in your favor in your life. *You* just cheat.”

“Don’t be rude,” he snapped, even though it was true. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Refusing to leave a tower you were trapped in for nearly two years, yes,” Teacher agreed snidely as the levels whipped past them.

“In a very comfortable tower with fireplaces in every room and layers upon layers of magical enchantments and my own homegrown mead,” he pointed out. “And *books* as far as the eye can se--- *ow!*”

The end of the banister came up too soon and he slammed into the edge and flipped over to sprawl out on the floor, Teacher skittering out of his grasp onto the rug, and for a second he just laid there, facedown in the burning cold stone.

“Why do you say *ow* when you quite literally magicked away your entire sense of pain?” Teacher asked flatly, and he heaved a great sigh into the floor.

“You once roasted me for an hour straight because I said *ow* when a woodpecker bonked his head on a tree instead of his beak, Teach.”

“... So I did. Now that you remind me of it---”

“I’m answering the door,” he said and hauled himself up off the floor and strode towards the brand new door.

“Don’t leave me on the *floor*; you *heathen swi---*”

He flung open the door, and a red-brown blur caught him right in the chest in a fantastic show of speed and force, sending him sprawling out on the floor once again to stare blankly at the ceiling.

“Oh, you’re *slow*,” the girl said, and a freckled face with a button nose popped its way into his vision.

“I have quite literally been trapped in a tower for almost two years,” he said as he stared up at the ceiling. Was that beam always crooked? What did that do to the structural integrity of this place? Should he be worried?

“Should I give you a better head start?” she asked, and his eyes focused on golden eyes and tanned skin, a youthful face. She couldn’t be much older than twenty, he thought dimly. Probably closer to nineteen or eighteen.

“No,” he said, and flexed his hands.

The pistols he had trained on for months blurred into reality in each palm faster than the eye could follow, and in an instant, he had the one in his left hand leveled on her face. Her brows curled in, almost in confusion, and she leaned back on fur lined boots to cross her arms.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” she said flatly, and he tilted his head as best as he could from laying prone on his back. “If you’re going to do that, at least be polite enough to put your finger on the trigger.”

“You shouldn’t put your finger on the trigger unless you’ve decided to pull it,” he retorted and lifted a brow. “Should we go again?”

His other hand shifted to press into the ground ever so slightly, and his palm heated up as he placed a charm there. The whole tower hummed with magic, so her sharp ears likely wouldn’t pick up the slight changes in vibration. Her lower lip stuck out ever so slightly, like she was deciding whether or not to pout, and then withdrew.

“Up you get, then,” she decided, and he climbed to his feet and spun his revolvers around lazily. “I got you, you got me, but that was boring. *Again.*”

With that, she charged, and something unfamiliar clicked into place, a sense he was previously entirely unaware of, and his eyes widened drastically as his limbs moved of their own volition to push him out of her way. Everything went sharp, and his gums tingled for reasons unspecified, and a foreign focus overtook his brain as he shifted his hips and lifted the revolver to let off a blast.

The magic bullet slammed out of the chamber and struck her in the shoulder, set to the lowest setting, just a mild sting more than anything else, and she pulled up short, spinning on one heel as she darted to the side and hit the ground with one hip. The enfield slid across the floor, and a booted foot slammed into his shin, sending him down once again, and the force of it had him hitting the ground and then the wall. His hand slammed into the wall once again, and a charm shivered into being, and then he was up and moving like his limbs didn’t belong to him. Two steps to the side, plant a charm, and she advanced on him with deadly intent, eyes narrow and sharp.

“You can’t just keep putting distance between us,” she said, her shoulders seeming to grow larger and larger as she stalked closer and closer.

“I’m quite literally a ranged fighter,” he pointed out, and went to lift his revolver in a feint. Her eyes became little more than slits, and she moved faster than he could pull the trigger, space seeming to fold around her and envelop her in a cocoon as she rushed up on him and slammed the revolver up and out of the way.

It wasn’t what he was aiming for, anyways. His finger squeezed on the other trigger, and the magic bullet whizzed out of the gun with a loud bang and hit the first charm even as she drove a shoulder into his gut and started to grab him in an attempt to flip him. It was too late, though. The bullet slammed in and out of the three charms, cutting through space, and then sliced through the air to nail her directly in the back of the head.

The girl froze, curly bob all in a mess, eyes wide under the locks falling into them, and stared down at his chest mid-grapple.

“Did you...?”

“Plant teleportation charms?”

“Set to my height?”

“Yes.”

She let go of him abruptly and spun around to look over the seemingly bare room, rubbing her likely tender scalp with one taloned, scaly hand.

“When did you do that?” she asked faintly, and he stepped back, taking that as a ‘you passed’, and banished the revolvers back to the workshop, where the holsters were still under construction.

“While you were throwing me around like a ragdoll.”

“*How* did you do that? I thought you were an artificer.”

“I am,” he drawled, and slowly peeled off his gloves to hold out his hands. “I worked out the ink problem.”

“Mm?” Her head snapped back around and she blinked at his bared palms like a bird. For a long moment, she stared at the intricate circles set into his palms, eyes cataloguing what she was seeing and how they were so immensely golden, and then her pupils dilated *rapidly* in sheer glee.

“You would have had to pour it, wouldn’t you?” she asked in sheer delight, and his lips upticked in a grin.

“First one I did was pain nullification, the second was healing,” he explained sheepishly, and she grinned with all teeth and no sense of shame.

“You’re crazy enough for me. Let’s talk business.”

“Can we shut my door first? It’s cold.”

“Oh, and what happened with *that*?” she asked and spun on her heel to look at the open door. “Grim said you were locked in here.”

“Ah, recent development.”

“You were stuck in here for a year and you just *stayed* as soon as you broke it?” she asked as he walked to the door and pushed it shut.

“It’s cold,” he said flatly, “and my tower is warm.”

“How very holkind of you,” she said wryly as he strode over to pick up Teacher and tuck it under his arm.

“Discuss it over some tea?” he asked lightly, and Elmer tilted her head and gestured for him to lead the way.

“A little pointless for me to go all the way out here if you can just *leave*, isn’t it?” she asked as he twisted his hand to dispel the charms in his entrance hall.

“Maybe,” he said and hopped lightly up the stairs, “but I’m also not intending on leaving until that snow is not there. It’s not like I have a horse to make the journey to town easier, and you have more contacts than *I* do.”

“Grim also said you were a fussy thing,” she added with mischief lurking in her tone, and he rolled his eyes up to the ceiling.

“Grim met me by rudely breaking into my bedroom.”

“I heard that, too. Angel just ranted for thirty minutes about your magic.”

“Angel is a lovely little sponge and an excellent conversationalist,” he said as they climbed the endless stairs into the kitchen. Teacher was laid on the rough table, and he nudged the kettle over the fire. “Would you rather a tea that tastes good, or a tea that will help with that stinging?”

“You don’t have both?” she asked as she slipped into a seat at the table and made herself at home, and he hummed as he rifled through the cabinets.

“It depends on how you feel about peppermint and wymmrot.”

“Wymmrot like the fungus?”

“Minced and dehydrated,” he supplied as he pulled out the jar holding it. “It’s quite good if you like more, ah, fermented kinds of flavors. Little kick of magic to it, though. Some people don’t do well with ingesting magic directly.”

“I’m fine with it,” Elmer said as she propped her chin in her hands, and he studied her with a critical eye. She looked a little young to be a solo merchant out in the world, but so did he, and he was apparently biologically forty or so.

“Tea, then business?” he asked lightly as he got out his cups and honey, and she hummed.

“Business while tea,” she said, and leaned back in her chair. “You’ve got some weird wares to sell, don’t you?”

“I’m told so, yes,” he said as he adjusted the enchantment on the fireplace to raise the heat. “I’m more interested in trade than money.”

“I can work with that. Parchment, right?”

“Anything I can write on, and materials to keep up my crafting.”

“Those bandages you make, those are useful. And the portal markers.”

“I also dabble in gunsmithing, but it would have to be on a commission basis. They’re personalized,” he said and held up the two mugs. “Which one?”

“Green,” she answered promptly. “What about that honey Grim uses?”

“He hasn’t burned through it all?” he asked, mildly impressed, and she snorted.

“Treats it like gold.”

“Where is he, anyways? I haven’t seen him in awhile.”

“Busy along the coast, mostly, but that’s an excuse to avoid the snow.”

“Smart man,” he mused as he pushed the mug to her followed by the honey. “The honey itself is made from the excess of my hives, and can’t be mass produced, and I can’t make any right now, since it’s winter and they need it to stay warm. If you can get me the vials I *can* make those, though, but they won’t be as potent.”

“Hm. And why is that?” she asked, and he blinked.

“Well, because the hives themselves are enchanted.”

Elmer stared at him for a moment, and his attention was diverted to the fire and softly glowing charm on the kettle that let him know the water was hot enough. With a careless hand, he pushed it out of the way of the fire and drew up the kettle with an oven mitt.

“Do you just put charms on everything?” Her gravely voice was somewhere between amused and perplexed, and his eyes lifted to make direct contact as he poured the steaming water into her mug.

“If it’s there, I can put a charm on it, and if it’s not, I will probably make it so I can put a charm on it.”

Her brows lifted, and he put a single finger on the jar of honey to push it closer to her with far too much deliberation in the stretch of his arm.

“Is this just what happens when you lock an artificer in a tower?”

“No. It’s what happens when you lock *me* in a tower.”

Magic was real. What else was he supposed to do, *not* be frivolous with it? If you could just make a top of the line smartphone yourself, and the cell network it could connect to, with a wave of your hand, and give yourself unlimited data and spam call blocking on top of it all, with all of the access to any browser without the trafficking of all of your data, why *wouldn't* you? There was only one option, really, and that option was to be fiendishly hedonistic and shamelessly indulgent. He was practically duty bound to be as ridiculous as possible about it. It was a matter of *honor*.

“Well, I almost want to lock you in another one just to see what you come up with,” Elmer said dryly, and he snorted.

“I think I would do more with being out in the world. After it's done snowing, of course.”

The leaves were carefully measured out and spooned into a steeper, and he dunked it into her mug before turning to focus on his own tea.

“Before we really get into business, though,” he continued, “do you mind telling me why you have to attack your clients before you agree to do business with them?”

“Mm?” Bright eyes landed on him, and she tilted her head. “Oh, I find the best artisans are the ones that don't act right in a fight. People don't want to buy from boring people, and they like to hear about what kind of person they're patronizing. Fighting one is just my own way of figuring out what kind of person I'm dealing with.”

“And it's fun?” he asked dryly, and she grinned.

“And it's fun,” she confirmed, and he raised a brow.

“Makes me wonder why you haven't joined Grim's guild.”

“Not many people would want to work with me, and Grim only ever pairs up with his brothers,” she complained. “I can handle Grim and Angel. I can't handle Grim, Angel, Riz, Jubilee, Yellow, Bolts, *and* Nuts all at the same time. That's *two* sets of *human* twins. I don't know how their mother is alive. Litter mates would never act like that, and none of us are ever identical. That's *four* doppelgangers, and they like to switch up their soaps to confuse me.”

He stopped and blinked, because Grim and Angel hadn't mentioned over dinner that the four youngest were two sets of identical twins. He really should have put two and two together in that situation.

Wait, her fallback on being generally abrasive and difficult to work with was to be a *traveling merchant*? Who had to rely on *charisma* to make deals? No wonder she looked for artisans willing to fight her--- actually, that was stunningly brilliant. Even if she was abrasive and apparently a nightmare to deal with, she was a merchant willing to deal with the worst of craftsmen in terms of personality and eccentricity other merchants wouldn't touch with a ten foot

pole. That was the weirdest business strategy he had ever heard of, and oh, gods, maybe he was lonely, but he kind of wanted to be her friend.

“... Hey, Elmer,” he said as he plopped his steeper into his water. “Do you want to meet my fish?”

Elmer’s eyes *gleamed*, and he bit back a smile.

“Do they have teeth?”

Yes, even if it only lasted the winter, this was a wonderful partner to have.

Chapter 9

The snow had become little more than patches of slush on the ground, and white flowers were beginning to sprout in the green field. The illusion had taken a week to get right, but it was holding, and the garden and fish farm were fully automated. A ‘bag of holding’, which was actually an ‘aquarium of holding’ that was really just a doorway between the farm and the opening, had been created, and the fish could now fly. Which may have been a mistake on his part, but mistakes were only happy accidents. Defenses were up, and the door was sealed and only able to be undone by him and him alone. Teacher had slowly devolved into a bundle of geriatric glee, which he couldn’t fault it for, and Grim and Angel were finally returning from the coast. Why they hadn’t used the portal slab was beyond him, but it was what it was.

Elmer had dropped by on a weekly basis to chat and trade, and he found he enjoyed her company quite a lot. Today was the day she would be meeting Grim and Angel at the tower, and for the strangest reason, he couldn’t stop smiling as he laid in the grass and basked in the sun like a particularly smug cat.

“They’re going to be here soon,” Teacher commented mildly, and he hummed as he rolled onto his stomach and spread out like an eagle.

“I don’t think she’s told them I broke the enchantment,” he remarked as he opened a lone eye to look at Teacher through the grass. “Are you finally going to speak to someone?”

“If I feel like it,” Teacher replied, and he snorted.

“For as chatty as you are, I’d expect you to have more to say.”

“There are a lot more talking holkinds locked in towers in this world than there are talking books able to download every aspect of written knowledge into a person’s brain,” Teacher said dryly. “I taught you eight alphabets and five spoken languages in approximately ten minutes. You can’t blame me for being cautious.”

“Mmm, well when you put it like *that*,” he drawled and rolled back over to flop on his back and stare up at the sky. “I forgot how nice it was to roll in grass.”

“You have it in your hair.”

“It’s a fashion statement.”

“Have you chosen a name yet?” Teacher asked curiously, and he thought about it for a moment.

Names were important, but they were just markers of places in time. If you put too much stock in them, you might find yourself lost in the meaning. There was a weight to them, an expectation that they encompass everything you were at that moment in time, and everything you could be, everything you were *meant* to be. Once upon a time, his name had been love, until he

learned love meant conditions, and he'd tossed it aside even as it burned him every time it was spoken. After that, it had meant fire, and then warrior, and then wild, and after that came king, if he remembered correctly, which he really didn't, and there had been a few nonsensical names tossed in the mix, and his eyes slipped shut as he considered it.

"All that really matters is that it sounds good, right?" he asked idly, and thought about a play he used to love, or rather an adaptation of it, a Seussified version he ran four different parts in his senior year of high school. If his drama partners could see him now...

"Well, not even *that* is a criteria," Teacher said wryly, and he snorted.

"It isn't a criteria if you're rich, maybe."

"You *are* rich, my budding zygote."

"And it's awful," he said flatly, but he was too lazy to care. "I don't know. I think I feel a bit bold, hm?"

"A bit too bold, if you ask me," Teacher harrumphed, and he laughed breathlessly.

"You have to be a little bold to be where I am now, considering where I started."

"My dear," Teacher said earnestly, "you have not even *begun*."

There was the sound of cracking branches and he looked up just barely enough to peer over his chest and take in the sight of three horses breaking out of the trees. Two men and one tiny enfield, and his lips turned up in a smile as Angel let out a colorful string of curses.

"*Where is the damn tower?*"

"It's here!" he called and picked up a rock to lazily chuck at the rippling enchantment. It soared through and vanished, and he propped himself up on his elbows to look at the approaching riders. "Did you have a good time playing on the beach without me?"

"We fought four different sea monsters and got in two different shipwrecks, you *jealous*--- Wait." Angel pulled up short, and looked between him and the seemingly clear air behind him, and then back at him. "Grim, I think my eyes are deceiving me, because that looks like Red on the ground."

"That's definitely Red in the grass," Grim grunted and leaned forward over the head of his horse to stare down at him beaming up at them. "That is Red *not in the tower*."

"Mhm. Been out of it since the first snow!"

"Then why the hell are you still here?" Grim demanded, and he let out a long suffering sigh.

“Because it was the first snow,” he said, and clambered to his feet, scooped Teacher to his chest, and approached the three horses with long, deliberate strides. “Hey, Elmer.”

“Good morning, Red!” she said cheerfully, with a shit eating grin, and Grim rounded on her.

“We have been riding for a full hour, Elmer. You didn’t tell us for a *full hour* that we weren’t going to have to get him out!”

“He wanted to surprise you two!”

“You could have just teleported in rather than put up with her scheming,” he called as he slowly crossed the field.

“Portals are for *emergencies*, Red, no matter *what* Elmer thinks, and---”

“Nice to finally meet you,” he said as he reached the three horses and held out a hand. Grim paused in confusion, and he smiled at him, big and bright with sharp teeth and a wrinkling nose.

“You can call me Tibalt, and I think you promised to teach me how to ride a horse.”