

Tibs froze as lightning illuminated the city. It only lasted a second, but he hoped it would leave spots for anyone who didn't have light as an element. He still couldn't take a chance an attentive guard might notice his darker form against the pale wall through that and the downpour. If not of how many roofs he'd had to run to reach The Brokerage, he'd have dressed in something lighter, but the city guards were more attentive to the roofs here, and many building had them posted there to watch over them.

Thunder sounded, deafening him, and he got back to work.

The window had more than the usual latch those this high up settled for. It had a lock, with false gates and tolerance so tight any thief attempting to pick it while hanging from the overhang would fail. The only way it could be more secure was to make it so the key needed to be enchanted, like those at his rooming house. But that would add to the enchantment that should already be protecting the whole building.

For Tibs, he was simply a question of willing the ice he had within the lock to push the tumblers appropriately, then turn, and the window pushed in quietly. It didn't disturb the strands of the weave still in place, since it was part of what they protected. The opening in that, from those pulled aside, was half as wide as the window.

Another flash of lightning froze him as in the process of pulling himself up. He suffused himself with earth, so he'd keep his body rigid when needed, twisted at the angle needed to pass through the gap in the weave. Once he was as far in as his hold allowed, he reached in, placed a hand on the stone wall, wrapped that in stone and moved fully inside. With a shove, undoing what held his hand and suffusing himself with air, he landed silently in the center of the room.

Well, it should be silent. Thunder sounded as he landed and his ears rang from it.

He gave himself six and zero heartbeats to ensure that, in spite of his caution, and the added cover of the thunder, no one had noticed his entrance. He closed the window and absorbed the water it had let in—he'd already, reflexively, kept himself from getting wet. Then set about the job.

Tibs had two jobs, one for Archer, the only one he needed to do, as far as the man was concerned, and the one for himself. The one that ensured Kragle Rock would no longer be bothered, even if the archer said the lack of coins would be enough.

The contracts documenting what Sebastian wanted done, as well as who the Brokerage had hired to make it happen, had been mentioned in passing, as part of Archer explaining how the organization worked. Tibs had to insist on answers to his questions to get the details.

Those papers were required for the work to be done. Most organizations used contracts. If one went missing, they no longer had a way to prove the work needed to happen. Archer knew where they were, and that Sebastian's contract as well as the ones for those hired would be kept together as part of how they were handled. But he told Tibs where only after he got him to promise the coins would come first, and that they wouldn't be jeopardized in attempting to get to the contracts.

Tibs had agreed, and found out the coins were kept under the building, while the contract stored two floors below him. The Brokerage had so many coins, Archer said, that they couldn't trust to the wooden floors to hold them. Tibs was dubious about it. Coins weighed little. He could hold a handful for hours without feeling it. Even a bag of them was

hardly noticeable. Because he'd promised to get the coins first, it meant getting the contract on the way out.

He took off the dark clothing to reveal the set of better appointed ones he wore over his armor. Archer had wanted him to go in without it, since it made the clerk's clothing hang not quite right, but Tibs wasn't heading into the potential danger the job represented without protection he was comfortable wearing. He took a stack of papers out of its hiding place. Another spending he'd had to do, since clerks had papers. He'd written accounts from the previous weeks since those were the kind of thing the papers Tibs had seen within the guild building had.

An ear to the door to confirm the people he sensed walking by. No one in the building had an element.

He let go of his, as the corridor emptied, opened the door, and walked out.

The Brokerage was filled with what Archer called bureaucrats. Clerks with illusions of grandeurs. Which was why Tibs had spent more on the clothing that he'd liked. They handled more money, so imagined they had more power.

He didn't acknowledge the people he passed, and they didn't him. He wore the same preoccupied expression they did. Even this late, there were a lot of them in the building.

The Brokerage never slept, Archer said. Tibs had taken that to mean they were always on their guard, but he'd quickly realized, as he cased the building, that it was literal. Day and night, bureaucrats came and went; people dressed richly enough, or too suspicious looking, entered and left.

He walked by guards. Some stood at attention by a door, not the one holding his contracts, he was relieved to see. He sensed people inside, metal boxes with weaves thought them, but didn't have the time to get details. Other guards walked around, although they seemed to be going places, rather than patrolling. Tibs avoided anyone who looked like they belonged on a harsher version of his Street, as did any of the clerks.

The ground floor was the same set of corridors and rooms, only differed in that it had a door at one end of the central hall, with an entryway where customer sat, and a less impressive door at the other. That one opened onto an alley, by the sense of the other side.

The other difference was that behind one door in the central halls, a guarded door closer to the front than back, were stairs going down. The only set of them. It also had a lock on top of being guarded. The guard had the key, and Tibs watched as a man offered a paper for the guard to read before he unlocked the door and let them in. He couldn't know what the paper said, so that was not how he'd get down.

As with the other corridors, it was well lit, and the oil lamps were protected from tempering by a glass chimney. It wouldn't prevent him from dousing them and plunging the hall into darkness, but all it would do was raise the alert.

Unless he could provide a justification for it. Such as an exceedingly powerful gust of wind. He was in a straight hall with a door at each end, after all. And there was a storm raging outside. The wind hadn't bothered him since he had air, but it had been strong.

Not strong enough to extinguish lamps, but Tibs could make what moved through the hall strong enough it could be believed it had.

All he needed was for both doors to open at the same, and the right time, and he would have his justification. The back door had a metal bolt, currently latched, but that

wouldn't slow him, and since no one was paying it attention as they walked by, they might not even know if it was or wasn't latched after the fact.

To avoid drawing attention while he waited for someone to need to go down, he walked along the other corridors on the floor. He sensed everyone moving, and it was simple to be heading toward the door each time someone slowed as they reached it.

Too many people did so. Enough Tibs was sure someone would notice how often he came by. Each time he tense, ready to open the bolt, shove the doors open and bowl over everyone with storm wind.

Once he'd nearly done it, but the man had stopped as he looked through the papers he held, then turned around.

When the woman approached, he was already in the hall, from the circuit he walked, so he saw her holding the paper as she slowed and offered it to the guard, who looked it over and handed it back. As the key went in the lock, Tibs forced the bolt to unlatch and grabbed hold of both doors. The key turned and the lock click.

Darkness fell into the hall at all flames extinguished. The doors slammed open, and the wind was strong enough it could have propelled Tibs to the door, where he shoved the woman out of the way and pulled the door open. Her complaints were taken away by the storm.

He sent a torrent of wind ahead of him and snuffed the lanterns that lined the stairs. He stumbled the last steps and held onto the wall as he stepped into the room's light. A woman was struggling to catch papers the wind had sent flying and Tibs kept her distracted as he straightened himself and his clothing while continuing. He ignored her question; he didn't understand the language, but she had sounded curious, not alarmed.

The hall was well lit again, but no doors guarded. The guards were inside the rooms, by the armor some of the people in them wore. The room he wanted, the one Archer had told him, held all the coins Sebastian had given the Brokerage to accomplish his revenge contract, had two guards, and three clerks.

That would be a problem. One he needed to resolve before he reached the door. He didn't think he could wander without being questioned. He needed to deal with them without alerting those in the other rooms. He could make out faint conversations from the doors, so if dealing with the guards got too loud, he'd be in trouble.

He could suffocate them, but he had no way to know how long it would take. He'd unsettled one of Sebastian's thug that way, but it hadn't taken him down quickly. What he couldn't do was only focus on them. He needed to ensure they had no way to find air, so he removed it from the entire room.

The door was bolted from the inside, but that didn't stop him. He undid it before pulling the door and pushed back the surprised guard that was reaching for it. He closed the door and put metal spikes into it and the frame to ensure no one could get in.

She steadied herself and unsheathed her sword. He sent a ball of air as she locked eyes with him and she flew back. He cursed as she drew a quick breath before landing, then she got up.

The three clerks were by their desks, gasping for air. The other guard was already still. His life essence was fine, but Tibs had no idea how long that would last without breath. The longer she lasted, the least likely it was anyone would live, he expected.

So he needed to end this fast.

He blocked her attack, with his earth covered bracer, to protect it, then strengthened his punch with the same element. She landed with a gasp, then choked, before regaining control and getting to her feet, her expression more determined. Tibs told her to stay down, only for his words not to go anywhere.

So it wasn't just that he could use air to bring words to him, they needed air to be.

The sword strike hit him in the chest, and he looked at her, annoyed at his distraction and yet more holes in his still repairing armor. He punched her in the face and she staggered back. She attempted another swing, her expression fearful, but she staggered again and dropped to a knee. She forced herself to stand, the determination back, stronger. Tibs shook his head. Pointed to the floor.

She came at him, sword high, steps unsure. Tibs stepped out of the way of the swing with ease and the motion took her off her feet. Her sword silently slid away as she landed. Then she gasped, the fear back, as she watched him approach.

It wasn't only words that needed air to be. Any sounds seemed too. Was this what Alistair had done when he'd given them privacy? Somehow used water to divide the air on one side from the other, preventing sounds from passing?

He watched her growing still, and sensed for the others, cursing as he noticed the guard's life essence had thinned to almost nothing. He brought back air, and his gasp was loud. As was that of his opponent.

"No." He kicked her across the face and she was still.

The safe was a metal box, taller than he was, woven through with essence. Most of it metal, earth, and purity. Some air, light and darkness, along with others he couldn't identify. No threads reached out, so the weave would be to reinforce it. If it sounded an alarm, it would come from it, instead of being a trigger for something elsewhere.

Knowing what he now knew about air and sounds, he removed it from around the safe, then proceeded to undo the weave.

It resisted. Those he didn't know acted in concert to strengthen the whole against his will. So Tibs changed tactic. He poured corruption through the weave. Purity fought it, but Tibs had an unending reserve while it only had what was within the weave. It was overwhelmed, and the rest melted away with it.

Then the safe sagged and Tibs hurried to pull the essence out. He needed the contents intact.

He undid the door and looked in, awed at the content.

Stacks and stacks of coins, wrapped in leather. Copper, silver, electrum, gold and something silver like, but with blue in it. On a shelf were bars of the same metals. On another, stacks of papers.

He shoved the coins into Archer's bags, swallowing his giddiness. This had to be the most coins any rogue had ever held. Before putting the bars in, he sent one of each to his hiding place. It was the same metals as the coins, so had to be valuable. When that was all in, and the bag hardly bulged, he considered the papers. They weren't the contracts, unless the man had been wrong, and there were too many stacks of them, bound in leather, for that. He couldn't take the time to figure out what they were, so they all went into the bag. Once he was away, and before he reached the tavern, he'd looked them over.

He sensed no one in the corridor, and his ears confirmed it. A glance added to that, so he exited. The woman at the desk had collected the papers and was assembling them into orderly piles. She barely glanced at him as he headed for the stairs. The lamps were lit again, and the door's handle unlocked the door as he turned it. He didn't have the time to wonder about the mechanism as he readied himself for the guard.

Who didn't look at him as Tibs headed for the stairs leading to the upper floors. The hall was lit again, but people were still picking up papers and other items that had been sent flying.

He couldn't take the time to go in and take the contracts anymore, but he also wasn't leaving them in the Brokerage's possession. Some of the other rooms under the building had had even larger safes. There would be enough coins in those for them to keep paying to have Kragle Rock attacked, no matter what Archer believed.

So he needed to destroy them.

Sensing the room Archer had told him about, it had many safes with weaves similar to the one he'd undone. What Archer hadn't told him was which safe it would be.

The solution to that was simple. He'd destroy the content of all the safes. He figured fire deserved a feast.

He poured it into each of them as he walked up the steps, having to keep adding to it. Since the moment stopped, the weave acted to douse fire. Again, it was fine, as he had far more essence than it. A bell sounded. Rung by someone in the room, since the weaves didn't connect to anything. While fire was contained inside the safes, eagerly devouring their content, the heat it generated filled the metal walls and leaked outside.

When he reached the floor, people were screaming, running away. Tibs felt the heat pouring out of the room from the stairs. A man stopped, pointed at Tibs, and yelled something.

Maybe his eyes had given him away.

That was fine. Fire was useful here, too. He waved his hands and fire licked around them. People yelled again, moving away from him. When someone didn't, he flung fire at them as he kept running up the stairs. He kept the fire from harming them, but everyone knew how hungry it was, and that fear was enough to scatter everyone he encountered.

Guards were running after him by the time he reached the floor, and three happened to be before him. Tibs let go of fire and channeled metal, suffusing himself and pushing the essence through his armor and clothing. Hopefully, that would work to keep them intact.

The swords glanced off him as he shouldered them out of his way. Then he was through the door and running for the window.

It and the surrounding wall exploded under the blast of air and he didn't slow as he threw himself out, pushing away from the building and using air and water to form a channel below him to slide along onto the roof of the facing building.

Lightning flashed, and the explosion of a spire a few buildings away was covered by the thunder that made Tibs's ears ring.

He laughed as he landed on the roof and rolled to his feet. He'd done it. Had gotten the coins, destroyed the contracts and only had two holes in his armor out of it.

He straightened at the sound of swords being pulled out of their scabbards.

Right, the roofs had guards.

He turned to the sound of another sword being drawn, and another.

Instead of the one or two guards he'd expected, Seven stood in the lantern's faint light, moving into the darkness to surround him. They all look angry.

Well, he had just broken out of a building they were supposed to be protecting, so they had reasons to be angry at him.

He grinned. "Metal swords, and me without a weapon. This should be—"

The air crackled around him as two guards ran in his direction. He frowned at his hand as bursts of lightning jumped between in fingers and to the raindrops.

Metal didn't make lightning... did it?

Tibs exploded with light, and the thunder was so loud it left utter silence in its wake.