

The city of Dermirion didn't have a library or a university. Tibs considered that a good thing. After his time in Brokentia, he didn't want to spend any longer than he had to here before heading for the region of Ashimeter. Entering either of them would have required setting up the proper identity, which meant money. That meant a team, and he wasn't ready for that yet.

He still needed information about the region, but being in the same kingdom meant finding someone who had been there was easier, and if not the person themselves, someone who had talked with them.

People who tended bars were good for that, so long as someone didn't mind paying for drinks, and remembered that stories changed with each telling. But what he was starting from wasn't reliable, so more recent information would be better, even if it wasn't accurate.

"Why'd you want to go all the way there?" The thin woman behind the bar asked.

"To see the monsters, of course," Tibs replied with the enthusiasm of someone who'd never had his life threatened.

She snorted. "There aren't any monsters there."

"Really?" Tibs says, making his tone disappointed, then drank a long swallow from the tankard. "Jermia told me that a cousin of his had talked with the sister of the merchant's man, who travels there for the Harvest market and he sounded certain there are monsters in that forest."

"And how many tankards did he sell you before he told you *that* story?"

Tibs frowned, looking in his nearly empty tankard. "I don't remember. Quite a few."

"If you don't remember that, how can you be sure of what he told you?"

Tibs's smile was that of someone who'd had a bit more ale than he should. "Because I was paying attention." The slurring was light, but he didn't want this to devolve into her trying to understand him. He motioned for a refill.

She considered him, then refilled it. He slid the copper and looked at her expectantly.

She sighed. "The way I heard it. It's some savage animal."

"Aren't all animal savage?"

"More savage," she replied. "And that was years ago. Whatever that would be tavern owner said, no one I've talked with, who has been there, said anything about anyone vanishing recently."

"Oh. So there's no point in going?"

"Not if getting yourself killed is what you're after."

"I just want to see a monster," Tibs said, frowning. "Not get killed by one. I'm tired of just hearing bards sing about them," he added, dejected. "I want to feel the awe of watching a feather covered blob ooze up taller than I am. Or the horned stone horse of Slademir barreling at me. Or the giant of Torrel making the ground shake with each step she takes."

"Even if there are monsters in Ashimeter," she said, looking at him like he was an idiot, "I don't think you'd encounter those there."

"Oh." Then Tibs smiled the way only those on the way to being drunk could. "But I could see something else. Something no bard's sung about. I could get my own song!"

She chuckled with a roll of the eyes. “Do you want more ale?”

Tibs looked into his empty tankard. “Didn’t you fill it already?” he asked, as if he had no memory of drinking it.

“Yes, but do you want more?”

He considered it, then smiled, offering the tankard. “Only if you tell me more of the monsters of Ashimeter.”

“There aren’t...” she sighed and took the tankard. “It’s not like you’re going to remember any of this by the time you sleep this off, anyway.” She returned the filled one and took the copper. “My grandfather knew an adventurer who actually went there looking for those supposed monsters.”

“I knew it!” Tibs grinned like this was a victory. And it was. He’d heard rumors, and more than one barkeep had hinted she’d know something useful.

“You’re going to be disappointed if you remember any of this, because as amazing as this story’s going to sound, what my grandfather told me is that it’s all a fabrication. That the adventurer made it all up because she couldn’t take the shame of going through what she had for nothing.”

Tibs continued to grin as if he hadn’t heard those words, and she set about telling him the story.

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Tibs ran, jumped, threw himself from tree to trees and he felt great. The wind against his skin was an experience nearly as good as when he’d—

He staggered as that memory reminded him of who he was, and not Fever. He grabbed onto the branch and sighed, looking down at how his body had reacted. At least that would go down on its own. He wasn’t ready to get release that way yet.

He didn’t like that it had taken that memory to snap him back to himself, but at least this time it hadn’t been what he’d almost done with that bear.

Fever had no limits when it came to sensuality.

But he needed to learn to remain himself. Fever essence could be too useful to ignore.

But this was enough for one day. He set about locating his clothing, then his pack, before continuing his trek.

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The woman pulling the bull the plow was attached to was nearly stepped on as she stared at Tibs walking along the path through the field. He waved at her, and once he was sure she’d be fine, continued on.

The trek had been long, but he’d been prepared this time. He’d mostly followed the trail, except for when he’d wanted to practice channeling Fever. Even the suspicion someone might wander along the path to be influenced by Tibs under the sway of the element terrified him.

But the months by himself, except for the occasional stay in villages, had been good. Even the winter had been good, and unlike the last time he’d reached his destination, making himself presentable hadn’t been an ordeal. With Fever, he’d made his hair fall off so that now it was short. Shorter than he liked, but it would grow out. Facial hair was no longer a problem.

He didn't understand why it worked, but with Fever being the element of the body, he could make small changes, the way he could alter wood or stone, or any of the other element with a physical version, or at least one where the element was the majority of it. If he pulled his fever essence in a little, the hair fell out.

It itched as it grew in, but that was preferable to burning himself when he didn't have an obsidian shaving knife. Which would be useless eventually, since Tibs was certain that even if he wasn't intent on getting all the elements, crystal would find him.

They might say that it's all on him when and how he got his elements, but too many times had happened out of his control for him to not suspect they were trying to prod him along.

The village was named Dunsy, after the family who had settled here. The story Tibs had been told was that they were on their way further, zenithward, but their carts broke, and in the process of waiting to work the iron to fix it, they discovered the land was fertile and settled on it. Now, they grew most of the grains that made its way nadir all the way to Dermirion.

He'd have to walk sunrise ward for half a day from here to reach the forest, but it was the closest settlements on this side, and to reach the other would have meant traveling with a caravan sunrise ward from Dermirion until he was on the other side, then the same trek zenith, and once he reached that village, he'd be at the edge of the forest.

Even without thinking about traveling with a caravan without have control while channeling Fever, and no depression to keep the temptation at bay, it would have added months to the trip, and no guarantee that village would be closer to the dungeon what might be in this forest than this one. The Ashimeter was vast, and records of the interior of the forest all hearsay and bards' songs.

He attracted more stares as he entered the village proper. "Good day," he greeted the mother as she pulled the children to her. "Can you point me to where I might be able to get lodging?" he didn't mask his accent. A traveler who didn't speak properly was less suspicious than one who'd already mastered the language. The dialect was close to what he'd learned in Dermirion, but he hadn't stayed there long enough to master it, and it had shifted the further he walked from that city.

She pointed further in, but not to a specific building. He thanked her and continued on. The woman who hurried out of a long building, flour flying off her in the process, to intercept him, was massive. He paused and waited, which caused her to slow and hesitate.

"And who might you be?" she asked tentatively.

Tibs bowed the way a noble would bow to his woman. "I am Tiobard, scholar of the wild. I have heard stories on the Ashimeter—" he made a sweeping gesture toward the unseen forest "—and I have set upon confirming, or disproving, them."

"And that means?" Her tone turned suspicious.

Now, he looked uncertain. As if he didn't understand that his erudite tone and language hadn't conveyed all that she needed to know. Acting like he was better than them in any way would make interacting with them harder, but he was making himself a scholar for his time here, and people who spent all their times in universities had little concept of how those living simpler lives were, Tibs had noticed.

"Well, it means that I plan to venture into the forest and observe the creatures I see

there. I will record notes, and once I am satisfied I know the truth of the stories I have heard, I will return to the university and let everyone know.”

“What are you doing here, if the Ashimeter is what you want to know about?” the tone didn’t lighten.

“Well...” he had trouble not smiling. “I expect you and the people who live here, so close, will have knowledge...stories?” he added tentatively at her frown.

He wondered if this was how it felt to the theater people. Acting like moods they didn’t feel. Usually, Tibs didn’t have the time to think about how he should act. He was too busy looking for signs the other was catching on, but she was acting exactly the way he’d expected.

“Of course there’re stories,” she said in a ‘don’t you already know that,’ tone. “But they’ve been told to everyone who passed through. You’ve heard them coming here.”

“But no story is as true and when told...” her expression made it clear she was getting tired of this, and while Tibs was confident a scholar would continue on, thinking he could use his intelligence to get her to understand. He actually wanted them to help him, and he needed her to approve of him. “Stories change when they are told, and I think the people here will have the most accurate version of them.” The trick was making his idea of a scholar trying to speak on her level not sound like it was an act to get her to like him. “And I’ll need a place to stay while I record them. I can pay,” he added.

The mention of money didn’t have the soothing effect on here it had in cities. So far from them, it had less impact on their lives.

“We don’t have anything that’ll make a city folk like you happy.”

“That is fine. I am used to the hardship of travel.”

She snorted. Did she think Tibs had stayed at expensive inns each night he’d spent traveling here? Maybe she simply couldn’t imagine anyone from a city doing otherwise. Still, she led him inside the large building where four women and two men were preparing food. They barely paused to take him before returning to their tasks. At the back, she opened a door to a storage room containing bags of grains and flour.

“You can make something to sleep on out of this.”

No scholar would agree to this. Tibs was certain of it. “And how much will this cost me?”

“A copper a night,” she said with the finality of someone who didn’t care how expensive he thought this was. It would be more effective if he didn’t think she was undercharging. He’d look for ways to pay the rest during his stay, since he couldn’t haggle the price up and maintain his role.

“Very well. Regarding food? What will the arrangements be? How much will you charge for it?”

Her expression made it clear she had no idea what to do with those questions and finally, annoyance won out. “We eat when the farmers come in from the fields. If you’re here, you can eat with us. If you’re not, you deal with it with what you find outside.”

“That is acceptable.” He placed his pack down. “If I need to ask the village folks questions, can I bring them here?”

“Don’t bother people,” she replied. “We’re working folks here.” The tone made it clear she didn’t think city folks did much.

“You have my promise that I will not interfere with anyone’s work.”
She rolled her eyes and left him there.

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Tibs didn’t have to work at finding people to tell him about the forest. He presented himself at the dining hall as soon as folks stopped streaming in, and was stared at until the woman whose building this seemed to be told him he was some scholar from a city here to learn about the Ashimeter. That announcement seemed to make Tibs someone normal, and they all resumed to taking bread from the long table, along with bowls of stew and dried fruits before taking a seat at one of the tables.

Tibs took some of everything on offer, then found a seat at an occupied table. Before he’d started on his food, they were telling him stories they’d heard from someone in their families who had ventured into the forest and returned to tell the tale.

The stories were good, if their veracity might be questionable, and the food better than he expected for being made of vegetables and meats that had survived through the winter.