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Strongheart: Honor Among Thieves (Thesis Excerpts)

By

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STRONGHEART: HONOR AMONG THIEVES

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

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Prologue: Westpond

Dip's Bar and Inn was the center of the town of Westpond. The town was settled four hundred years ago by elves fleeing war across the sea— people who had nothing when they arrived, people who could only take the damp clay around them and mold a new community together. The foundation that became the bar was already there when they arrived. They said the bar had to have been built first, though it might not have always been one, because it was near enough to the water's edge for the rest of the town to rise up around it. As Westpond grew, the old homes nearest the pond became known as the Eastside. The houses were crammed together, the oldest right along the lip of the water, often rebuilt or patched haphazardly after crumbling from poor and hasty construction. The worst of them were rough-looking and made of clay, like mounds molded by giants' hands. The best often housed three or four families to a room, and the entire Eastside, right up to Dip's door, smelled, tasted, felt: damp—like the swampy pond.

As humans moved in, the town built away from the old center and moved west, to dryer land. There were a line of shops leading out of the Eastside, past the bar, to town square. The shops and town square made a new circle in the west—out of reach of the moist air. Then came the estates and manors which cast a towering shadow over the Eastside, and made another circle past town square. These additions made Dip's bar sit slightly left of center on the map of Westpond, though Dip's continued to be the primary landmark for merchants coming and going through town. The main road through town went from the edge of the pond to town square, then out of the town walls. Dip's sat right in the middle of the cobbled path, forcing the road to divide and circle around it. No one knew if the road was as old as the foundation, or if the elves had put

it in after.

The building itself wasn't anything extraordinary. There were two floors and a cellar. It was well broken in with scratches and dents in nearly every surface, and stains that would never wash out of the floor. The wall behind the bar was decorated with notes, letters, sketches, and no less than three warrants for Dip's arrest in far off towns. Another wall had a bulletin board for odd jobs. There weren't many paid postings, and the papers still pinned there had yellowed with age. The bar, like the rest of the Eastside, smelled *damp*, first. While the straw on the floor trapped the musk, Dip always had something cooking, so the appealing scents of the region's common ciders and greasy dough would lure people in when the door swung open and let the drunken friendly laughter out. Crabapples trees surrounded the town and much of the region, and Dip made good use of them for his limited menu. He often experimented with mixed drinks, though few, even among the regulars, took him up on the offer. At the far end of the bar counter was usually a short glass of pure black liquid. It was an awful bitter drink called The Sheol, named after the darkest place in the world: an underground realm filled with monsters, an unending maze of tunnels, and all manner of peoples twisted by the darkness they inhabit. Only one of Dip's patrons ever wanted the drink, so for that patron Dip kept a glass ready on the counter. Rooms on the top floor were available for rent, but most of the Eastside couldn't pay. Dip never collected.

Dip was the oddest thing about the bar, and perhaps the town. He was bartender and proprietor, and the only ant elf anyone in Westpond had ever met. Ant elves, more politely known as subterranean elves, were the descendants of the elves banished to Sheol during the Beginning of Time. These descendants were often seen as omens of filth and treachery; not many ventured to the surface, where they stood out and were ill-suited for survival. Dip had been

surviving in Westpond for more years than any regular remembered, despite looking like the quintessential ant elf. Like other ant elves, Dip had ashen, pale, gray skin that was hard to the touch along his forearms and shoulders. Unlike surface elves, these elves could develop additional appendages, and Dip had a pair of smaller, thinner arms under his primary arms. Like all elves, Dip had a pair of long antennae extended from his forehead. Ant elf hair color ranged from snow-white to dusty gray; Dip's stark white hair grew long, as traditional among all elves, and he kept it tied in a high ponytail while cooking. His primary eyes had red irises and black sclera. His other eyes were smaller and pure black, and rested just below his brow, though they were usually covered by a black domino mask. Though secondary eyes weren't uncommon among surface elves, subterranean elves typically possessed much more of them.

There were some from the West who dared not step foot in the bar because of Dip's lineage, but everyone from the Eastside knew they were welcome there. Strangers who walked in would demand to know why an ant elf was there on the surface, and what was hidden behind the mask? Dip always laughed. Those that belonged there quickly warmed up to him, and those that didn't, didn't belong there, the regulars would say. Dip never barred anyone. For 300 years, he offered a place to call home to anyone in need of one.

Chapter One: Dip's Bar and Inn

“Dip, I’m in love,” Elijah said.

Dip chuckled and handed him a glass of cold spiced cider, Elijah’s favorite drink.

“So you’ve been saying,” Dip said. “You’re always in love.”

“What kind of response is that? I have a lot of love to give, you know.”

Elijah Silver hadn’t asked for the drink, nor made any greeting beyond this declaration as he opened the door. The bar was more home to Elijah than anywhere he’d lived in his life. It was before noon, so the shutters on the bar windows were closed. This didn’t mean the bar was closed, but an attempt to protect Dip’s sensitive skin and eyes from harsh sunlight. The dim light was more suitable for Dip, and Elijah was used to it after years as a regular, and good friend. Elijah was a half-elf; he lacked the insectoid traits of a full elf, but had short pointed ears, unlike Dip’s long full-elven tips. Elijah’s single set of eyes was brown, and he had thick, dark, curly hair. His clothes were unassuming, unless you knew where to look for hidden daggers and signs of leather padding underneath. He didn’t usually bother hiding these tell-tale signs of a rogue

when he was among Dip's crowd. Dip's was his home, and Elijah always felt a man should be allowed to be as naked as he'd like in his own home.

"I know you do. Do you want another drink?" Dip asked

"It's too early to be drunk. I don't think I'm *that* lovesick."

"I thought you could use the drink. I'm surprised you can be in love right now, given everything else going on." Dip made a clicking noise, somewhere between a parental tsk and an insectoid sound. Despite stepping away from the work, Dip was still the most connected man in town. He heard and saw just about everything, and he shared most of it with Elijah, whether Elijah wanted the news or not.

"Trust me, if I could turn off my heart I would. But today isn't any different from the troubles of tomorrow or yesterday, anyway," Elijah said.

"You would not."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Turn your heart off."

"Bah." Elijah drank his cider and said nothing for a moment. "What are you so worried about, anyway? Something big happen?"

"Why don't you tell me about your infatuation?"

"Dip. What happened?"

Dip busied himself cleaning a glass. Elijah watched his four hands work for a moment. They had known each other for years now, but sometimes Elijah still wondered about the eyes behind the mask, and the things Dip never said.

"Things have been bad for a while. You said yourself. But I think they're about to get a lot worse. Strongheart announced his run for mayor."

Elijah tensed and rested his head in one hand, tangling his fingers in his own hair.

“He’s all but mayor already. What does he want with mayor?” he muttered.

“He won’t need public approval anymore. He can save on bribes, I bet. He’ll have more control than he already does, and that’s only conjecture. Who knows what he’ll really do? Then you, me, Tsippi, we’re done,” Dip said, gesturing with two of his hands, while the other two kept wiping the counter.

“You’re not involved with us anymore, he has no reason to do anything to you.”

“You think that matters to him? As far as Strongheart is concerned, anyone too poor to wear silk is complicit in what Tsippi and you do—anyone east of this bar, you know that.” Dip gestured in a wide arc and Elijah had to grab his glass so it wouldn’t be knocked over. “And once he has a foothold on power, I doubt he’ll give it up so easily. And he’ll win, since Potiff is so spineless...”

“Maybe I’ll take another drink after all,” Elijah said. Dip refilled his glass. Neither of them spoke while Elijah took a slow sip.

“Strongheart already has the guard under his thumb, and most of the West thinking our neighborhood is full of blood cults, or something,” Dip finally said, running out of spots to wipe on the counter.

“I know.”

“And it’s not like Potiff was our biggest fan either, but at least he’s offended by Strongheart so he’ll oppose where he can. For Strongheart this is just a stepping stone for something more, he doesn’t even think Westpond matters.”

“I know,” Elijah said again. He stared into his glass. He’d always hated politics; every few years the election came around, but there was rarely an opponent for Potiff. Elijah never paid

attention to politics, never felt he had to. Potiff would make empty threats and promises, and then after the election nothing would change. What did it matter, to Elijah? But Strongheart had moved into town only a few months ago, and already he was making frightening changes.

“He knows he’ll lose the vote to someone like Strongheart. Money alone,” Dip was still rambling.

“I know, Dip,” he said, and looked down the bar counter. It was still too early for any other customers, but Elijah couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen the place packed. When had that stopped? His eyes rested on a short glass of pitch black liquid at the empty seat on the end of the counter. It was always there.

“Lije?” Dip called him back.

Elijah shook his head. He hated politics. He just wanted to do his job; he hated how much harder it was becoming. Was he old enough yet to long for the good old days? By human standards, maybe, but to an elf he was barely an adult now.

“I should get going. Tsippi has a job for me,” he said. He finished the rest of his drink in one motion and stood.

“Be safe, my friend,” Dip sighed.

#

Elijah realized only after the door closed behind him that he had never finished telling Dip about the redhead he’d seen. Elijah wasn’t new to sudden and fleeting infatuations, but despite his reputation, and his own jokes, he rarely pursued relationships. In his line of work, romantic relationships were few and far between, and meant to be kept at a distance. Elijah had ruined the deal before, by falling in love. He thought about the dark glass at the end of the bar.

He’d seen the figure a block before town square. There were a few residences there, thin

homes with the occasional second floor, that were most commonly home to the shopkeepers and their families. Elijah had seen the red hair only briefly before a hood was brought up, a cloak pulled tight. The figure had ducked into the bookshop.

Though he wouldn't tell Dip, it wasn't the hair that had pulled his attention. Before turning to the bookshop, Elijah's eyes had met the stranger's across the road. *Such eyes...* Elijah had never seen anything so intense in his life. He'd been paralyzed by the mere glance.

The bookshop owner, an elf called Bibi, had been an informant for Tsippi for years. He and Elijah didn't get along. When Elijah had tried to follow the redhead into Bibi's, he couldn't find them. Bibi hadn't paid attention to the figure coming or going, as he was reading behind the counter, so he was no help. Elijah was impressed someone could stealth around him so expertly. The show of skill only increased his intrigue.

Chapter Two: The Cobbler's House

The sun was high in the sky. Elijah had joked some nights before that with the increased attention of the guards on the eastside, and the curfew, it would probably be easier to pull off a job in the middle of the day rather than the dead of night. Of course, then Tsippi agreed, and tasked him with getting a good look at their mark in broad daylight. It wasn't his favorite part of the job, but she said he was the most observant of her friends. He figured what she really meant was "obsessive," and he hadn't dared to say at the time that he was the only one of her friends left in their line of work now. Either way, he headed west, where the money lived. He didn't wear a cloak or hood, and he didn't keep his head down. He kept a moderate and easy-going pace—he was no amateur. There weren't many who would recognize him past Dip's, though he nodded to passerby occasionally.

On the corner by Town Hall he recognized Bo, a dwarven shoe shiner. Elijah smiled and tossed him a copper, and Bo waved to him. Bo was still a child, but getting bigger every day, Elijah thought fondly. He winked to the boy and kept on. He could see a wood platform stage

being prepared at the center of the square. A man in nice clothes was chattering on and handing out fliers to anyone in reach. Elijah politely took one as he passed through, but shoved it into his pocket without reading it. A debate was being prepared, and Elijah had no interest in it. He had to do his job like he always did, and he might be able to use the politics to his advantage. The debate would give the upper-crust a place to be, and that would help with the daylight break-in. Elijah could do what needed to be done, but he couldn't turn away from anything to help his odds.

He wasn't as professional as Kor, but he was no bumbling burglar. Elijah had been a thief long before he moved to Westpond. He had only been in town a few nights when Tsippi found him. He'd stolen from one of her marks, and she was impressed. He was impressed by her, too, enough to agree to help with another job. She promised him he'd still get his share, and he'd be helping her take care of her "people." It didn't take much to be considered one of *Tsippi's* "people." Elijah himself had been in town less than a week before the label had been given to him, too. When she wasn't thieving, Tsippi gave out meals on the Eastside, and helped others find work. Sometimes the work was for her, sometimes she used other resources, though Elijah was never sure where she pulled her resources from. Somehow, she always seemed to make things fit. She always found a *way* when she needed one. And, as Elijah knew all too well, it was difficult to say no to Tsippi Quickfoot. That was why, after fifteen years, he was still working for her. Though, he wasn't sure he believed so idealistically that he was really helping the Eastside, like she believed and like Dip used to believe.

#

There used to be more of Tsippi's helpers: Besides Elijah, Kor and Dip were among the most skilled of Tsippi's old crew, but there used to be many others, too. Over the years, the number

dwindled. People would move on from Westpond, or retire, or simply disappear. Tsippi used to be able to cover the losses, but Strongheart had made the job rougher in the last few months.

Though Strongheart had come to town three months ago, he had apparently spent the first month in private preparation. Then he invested in the guard, and was given a position on town planning committee. The guards' number doubled. A curfew was instated. Then came the edicts: Being caught outside after curfew was punishable by fine, and if the fine couldn't be paid, by time in jail. Large gatherings were forbidden without prior license from the town planning committee. Resisting the edicts or "interfering with the job of the guard" were given a more dire treatment in the law and could be punishable by lifetime imprisonment, or hanging. Any thievery, from petty pickpockets, to robbery of town officials, could be punishable by hanging.

No one was prepared for the first night the edicts came down. Two of Tsippi's runners were arrested on the way to warn her, and half of her informants were taken the day before. Even Elijah had barely retained his freedom, and no one had seen Yeska since that night. Elijah was always so lucky, Tsippi had said, while she'd begged him not to quit. Elijah never considered quitting, but he never considered himself lucky. Not that night, especially. Sometimes he still ached from his narrow escape. After the edicts hit, it was only him and Tsippi left to do the work.

#

Elijah first headed east to collect the target address from a hiding place. He passed the cobbler's first. It was in better shape than most other buildings in the area. The other side did occasionally have their shoes repaired there, so the cobbler had to keep the shop looking presentable. The building was made of wood, short and flat, and had a short cobblestone path leading from the main street to the store door. The door itself, Elijah knew, had a broken latch; during bad storms the family pushed a table against it to keep it swinging open. He had fixed the latch once for

them— he was good with locks after all— but it broke again the following storm. During business hours, weather allowing, the door was propped with a rock that the cobbler’s kids had painted with flowers and knights. Or, what Bo claimed were knights. He was not yet ten, and the rock was a few years old already: The “knights” to Elijah looked more like silver stars holding toothpicks and cheese. He told Bo so once and the boy didn’t talk to him for two days after. All was well again once Elijah brought him a sweet roll and told him his sister’s flowers weren’t great, either. Elijah liked the rock and the drawings. He liked the cobbler and her family. She had done a good job on his boots last season.

The wooden houses nearest the outer curve of the Eastside didn’t look as sturdy as Dip’s, or the cobbler’s. Typically the houses here had two floors, and were packed to bursting. One of these apartments didn’t have a door. None of them had glass windows. One of the apartments had a small painted sign that read *The Sunset Orchid*, and had their windows shuttered all hours of the day. Elijah had lived in that building when he first came to Westpond. People were always coming and going from that house; Especially coming, and especially on cold nights. The door swung open as Elijah passed, and he smiled fondly when he got a whiff of the cheap perfumes inside. It was a welcome smell to combat the swelling scent of mold, mud, and musk.

#

Elijah dropped a couple of coppers each in a few beggars’ cups as he passed. The cobbled road this far into the Eastside was rough, missing patches. The air became heavier as he neared the water’s edge. If he slowed his step and listened, he could hear the low croaks of the frogs. He left the area of the wooden houses and entered the clay-and-straw neighborhood he called home. The smell of soaked straw reminded him of the farms he’d left.

He looked at the doorways and walls as he walked, searching for the unassuming and

ever-changing symbols he and Tsippi used to mark places for each other. This time he found the symbol of two triangles touching, like an hourglass on its side. He ducked into the alcove the symbol marked and found a folded bit of paper shoved between two stones, and it held his target address.

“Tsippi Quickfoot you are going to get me killed...” It was an address from the West Estates, and he had a sinking feeling he could guess the target’s name. Under the address Tsippi had left a coded message: Information. Elijah was sure she was sending him to Gregor Strongheart’s residence in broad daylight. At least the debate would keep him busy, Elijah thought, but only if he hurried now.

As he stepped out and rubbed the paint off the alcove, he wondered if they should find another method. *He found us so easily the first night. No telling what he’d do with even more preparation*, he thought.

He passed the cobbler’s wife on his way back West; she was beating a rug outside the shop. She was tall, for a dwarven woman, and had beads braided into her beard and hair. Elijah knew the kids helped her pick those out.

“Lucky weather, huh?” he said.

She looked up at the sky.

“It’ll rain tonight,” she said with certainty. “I can feel it in my knees. If you see my babes, tell them to come back early. I don’t want them caught in anything.”

“Will do, Ma’am.”

#

Chapter Three: Town Hall

The cobbled road widened until it became the town square. Sitting on either side of the square were Town Hall and the guard barracks, which had been relocated recently to a new building farther west. No one questioned why, but there was a Strongheart campaign poster prominently displayed beside the main door. Clearly, Strongheart's money had arrived before the man himself.

Town Hall itself had become a joke among the Eastside. It was a large enough building, with a facade like the west manors, but inside it was mostly empty rooms, from Postiff's staff growing smaller and smaller over the years. Town Hall was well kept, but an empty shell casting a shadow over the town square. Many considered it almost too perfect a metaphor for Potiff's role in Westpond. The jail was attached to the back of Town Hall, out of sight. It was another joke at Potiff's expense among the Eastside, though one with far more bitter a tone. All agreed Strongheart was worse by far, but Potiff had always been a "hard on crime" mayor. Even if the guard weren't well executed under Potiff's command, they were still rough and overly active for

the poor, and had always tried to target Tsippi's people. All the worse: town funds that could've gone to rebuilding and re-homing the dwindling Eastside always seemed necessary somewhere else, or gone entirely, when Potiff distributed taxes.

Town Hall stood as a testament to Potiff's incompetence, and this incompetence was the biggest threat to Westpond in the election. With such negative public favor, Potiff was all but voting for Strongheart himself.

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Chapter Four: West Estates and Town Square

Elijah kicked a pebble into one of the posts Town Hall's facade, narrowly missing the well dressed man who was hanging a poster.

"Oops," Elijah said, but the man didn't seem to notice the rock. Instead, he shoved a flyer into Elijah's hands, muffled a "Good day sir," and hurried into the square proper, towards the stage that now held two podiums.

"Public debate! Hear from the candidates yourself! Vote for the Good of Westpond!" the man called out as folks bustled around the square on their own business. Some stopped and mumbled, and by the time Elijah had crossed the square, there was a respectable gathering by the stage. Elijah looked up at the sun, estimating the time. It looked like the debate would start any minute; though a part of him wanted to stay, this could provide a good cover for his break-in. A handful of guards were about—likely at Strongheart's request—which meant less security around the west estates. That many guards in one place made Elijah's stomach twist. He felt like an amateur, but after the last month it was hard to ignore the danger. He shook his head to clear

it.

He forced his feet away from the stage. He heard a spattering of polite applause behind him as Potiff and Strongheart stepped onto the stage.

Elijah rolled up his sleeves and fixed his collar. He tried to smooth out his hair, but that was a losing battle. The paved path to the west circle of estates began only ten feet before the iron gate. It was never locked, but the gate alone said enough. There was a guard sitting next to the tall surrounding wall. The houses may not have been impressive to the average city-goer, but they were more than three times the size of anything east. More importantly, they took up space: the estates were surrounded by empty grass, ornate fences or hedges, and occasionally decorated with flower beds or saplings. The exteriors were embellished with stone work and clay crowns, and the doors were heavy. One house Elijah passed even had a brick-laid walkway from the fence to the door.

Elijah thought about how only two of Dip's six rooms were currently open, and how Dip hadn't collected a single copper from them in months. He couldn't smell the pond anymore; instead the heavy moist air was replaced with a lighter floral scent, lavenders and roses. There was no sign of mud— even the dirt was organized in flower boxes, or neat circles around trees. It wasn't Westpond.

#

Arnold Potiff was a chronically unimpressive man. He was only a tad shorter than average, nothing noteworthy. His receding hairline was peppered with gray. And though wasn't particularly old, people said even for a human, he was aging badly. Few had love for Potiff: he had been mayor for so long no one remembered who else to attribute their problems to.

Gregor Strongheart was, in almost every way, the visible opposite of Potiff: tall, sharp eyed, with thick, dark hair and always seen with a smile. He was powerful, as a man of learned magic, and the next in line to lead the most rich and widespread noble family— intelligent, capable, untouchable; and he knew it.

“Thank you for coming, everyone,” the man in the nice clothing, a cousin to Gregor, said to the gathered crowd.

#

The guard by the front gate looked drowsy. If Elijah waited, the guard might have nodded off enough for him to pass by, but then the squeak of the gate might rouse him again, and that would make things harder. He checked his collar one more time and then walked past the guard. He gave a nod of greeting. The guard blinked awake and peered back at Elijah.

“Where are you headed?” the guard barked.

Elijah gave a polite smile. He pointed to his right. “Weeding. They’re getting a little high around the back fence.”

The guard leaned back in his chair. “Oh, yeah, it was looking a little rough, I suppose. You better get to it.”

He went around to the backside of the houses, staying near the fence and occasionally bending to appear to be picking weeds. Despite what the guard said, nothing around looked overgrown.

His target was at the very back of the west circle, farthest from the rest of the town and most recently built. The other estates looked the same to Elijah, but as the final house came into view, it towered over the others. The walls seemed brighter than the surrounding homes and the windows seemed shinier. Elijah followed the fence around the house. There were a line of

young pine trees around the back, close enough to the fence for him to touch between the metal bars.

He's hoping for privacy, looks like, he thought. Elijah climbed the stone base of the fence, and then vaulted up and over the tall metal part in one movement. He landed softly on the other side, hidden now by the trees. He waited there, counting seconds in his head. Two guards passed in five minutes. *Privacy, and protection*. His hunch had been right: Tsippi had sent him to scout out Gregor Strongheart's residence.

#

"It has been decades now since the good town of Westpond had a proper electoral debate," Gregor's cousin continued, gesturing in wide arcs at the crowd. "But then, hasn't it been decades since our good man Potiff has had a worthy opponent?"

No response from the crowd.

"Well, a debate is an important part of every proper election! The matching of wits, the airing of terms, the challenging of beliefs—"

Strongheart cut him off with a clearing of his throat. The man immediately stopped his animated gesticulating.

"Each candidate will make an opening statement. Then, I will ask them each prepared questions, and then they will answer questions from all of you...fine people," he ended quickly. Even Strongheart, though smiling, seemed annoyed.

The opening statements of both of them were vague, and the prepared questions began. Potiff was asked what changes he would bring into the new term, and he answered with promises even he knew he couldn't keep. Strongheart was asked how he planned to implement his infrastructure overhaul, and his answer, though long and intelligent-sounding, came down to

money. They began taking questions from the still growing crowd.

#

Elijah moved from between the trees to the back wall of the house during the gap in the guard rotations. There was a window just above the ground there that Elijah thought might be a good entry point. He didn't see a lock on it. He ran his finger along the edges of the window and felt a tingle from the tip to his middle knuckles. He frowned and rubbed some dirt off the frame, revealing small runes etched in. The window had magic protection, either an alarm or a lock. Either way, that ruled it out as a point of entry. He only had fifty seconds left before one of the guards would come around the corner and see him. He continued cursing Tsippi in his head, and looked up at the higher windows. A gutter ran along the back to the ground. Elijah was sure he could climb up that way. The higher windows were less likely to be magically protected, the same way an upstairs window was less likely to be mundanely locked than a ground-floor window, but that assumed a typical home and resident. He couldn't consider his odds for very long: He estimated it would take him only ten seconds to climb up. The guard wouldn't have a reason to look up, but Elijah didn't like the chance.

He grabbed the gutter and gave it a test shake. It didn't move much at his pull, and made a dismissable amount of noise. He pulled himself up on the gutter, bracing only the tips of his toes against the wall; not enough to leave footprints. With his upper arms doing most of the work, he was able to scale the wall quickly. From two stories up, he saw the guard starting around the corner. There was a dormer just out of his reach— He could hide there, but he'd have to jump from his current position, and he knew that move wouldn't be silent.

The guard had fully turned the corner, though didn't look up yet. *Now or never*, Elijah thought.

He moved his body to the farther side of the gutter pipe, then pushed off with one foot, swinging around the pipe and using the momentum to make the jump to the dormer roof. He slammed his knees on the side of the roofing and had to roll himself the rest of the way up. He lay flat on the roof, gripping one panel.

“What was that?” he heard the guard say.

Elijah kept his eyes on the sky. It was starting to gray.

“Who’s there? Last warning,” the guard called again. Elijah tried to listen for the guard’s footsteps, but between the grass and the blood pounding in his own ears, it was difficult to tell.

“Did you hear something?” another voice asked.

“Something hit the roof.”

“I hope it isn’t more birds. Last ones were fucking nasty.”

“Not a bird. If it’s some damn kids I’ll bring them in for trespassing and burglary. Not in the fucking mood.”

Elijah started to shuffle across the roof. He stayed flat on his back and moved an inch at a time, shifting to the space most out of sight. He pressed against the side of the house and saw there was a window not far above him. Only half extending his arm, he pushed against the bottom of the window and found it wasn’t locked. If Tsippi were there, she would make some comment about his luck, but Elijah didn’t feel particularly lucky at that moment. He would have to move at the perfect moment, or he would be seen. He needed the guards to be looking elsewhere.

The guard returned, along with the *ka-chink ka-chink* of the ladder jostling as it was carried. Elijah rolled slowly onto his stomach and put one hand on the bottom of the window. He bent his knee and moved one leg up slightly, resting his weight on the side of his foot, then

whistled, low and short like the birds he heard to by the pond.

“Sounds like a nest after all.” The guard sighed.

“Could be just the one.”

“I’ll go up, you hold the ladder. Here, you have to unlatch it like this,” the first guard said. There was a click as the latch was undone. Elijah imagined that if he couldn’t time his movement perfectly, he wouldn’t be making it back to Dip’s for his nightly ale.

Elijah heard the *chik-thunk* of the ladder against the house, and leapt at the same time. With one motion he raised the window, and pushed off the roof with one leg. His other leg swung into the opening, and the rest of him followed. He closed the window quickly behind him, but was careful not to slam it.

“Sounds like the little guy might have taken off.”

“Maybe, but I’m still gonna check for a nest.”

Elijah looked around. He had to take stock quickly; the danger wasn’t over yet. He was in a bedroom, though it didn’t look like it was used often. The bed was dressed with plain-looking sheets, and there were no personal affects in the space. There was a dresser on the same wall as the window he’d come from. He opened the dresser door and moved behind it, propping his legs against the dresser leg and the windowsill so his feet wouldn’t be visible if someone opened the door to the room. The guard climbed up the ladder, and Elijah stayed put until he heard the sounds of the ladder being folded up again.

Well now the easy part’s done, Elijah mused, and drew the curtains on the window before searching through the room.

As he expected, there wasn’t much there. There were extra sheets folded into the dresser, and a set of night clothes that matched. He put his ear to the door, and opened it a crack when he

didn't hear any footsteps. There were four other doors in the hallway outside, and a staircase leading down. He waited and watched. A house of this size would never be empty; There were guards outside so there might be one or two inside, but there would definitely be many servants. Sure enough, after a minute a maid opened one of the doors across the hallway and went downstairs. Elijah waited until he couldn't hear her on the stairs, and moved to the room he saw her just come out of.

He had to assume that this was the master bedroom. It was double the size of the room he was in previously, and much more gaudy. Everything looked expensive, but in the way of a decorator trying to show off just how expensive everything was. All of the fabric was brightly dyed, and the furnishings were a white imported wood. There was a framed portrait of a young man over the bed, and a floor-to-ceiling mirror mounted on the wall opposite the bed. There was a filled jewelry box, and an over-filled closet. There were gem amulets, long strings of pearls, and a collection of gem-inlaid, magically enhanced watches. The robes in the closet were just as brightly dyed as the rest of the room, and felt like the smoothest cloth Elijah had ever touched before. Left pinned in one of the robes was a cuff-link bearing the Strongheart crest: a sword over a dragon's head. Elijah turned the cuff-link over in his hand and thought it must be made of pure silver, judging from weight alone. If he were there for any other reason, he would swipe the links and the pearls, and maybe a watch just for his own amusement... but he was there for Tsippi, so he had to be careful. No one could know he'd been there, so he left the links, the pearls, and the watches where they were.

Instead, he went to the desk in the corner, where his target likely was. The desk was large, about the size of Elijah laying down twice, and made of a different wood than the rest of the room. The wood was so dark that the color was unclear; almost black, but when a beam of

sunlight from the window touched the desk's surface, the wood seemed to glow red. Elijah felt along one side, but if the desk were enchanted (as he suspected), he had no way to tell. It didn't give off the same tingle the runes in the window had, and that tingle was the beginning and end of his arcane intuition. The desk drawers didn't open, though they didn't have visible locks and there were no relevant papers on top of the desk, only sealed inkwells of various colors. One Elijah could tell was magic, but only because it helpfully glowed with a pulsating green aura every now and then.

Spread on the desk was a map of Westpond and the surrounding region. Elijah recognized the small woods just outside the town walls, and the much larger and more mysterious wood to the north of the region that was simply called The Forest. The Forest was old, unknowably deep, and rumored to be the birthplace of old magicks and curses. This arcane wood, and Emper's Peak to the east, were what cut off the region surrounding Westpond from most of the continent, and kept trade (and people) rather insular. Also marked on the map was the spartoi village Cresteven, Westpond's neighbors by only two day's travel, and Arrenstay, the largest city of the region, and center of trade in the area. Arrenstay was marked in gold lettering, and the artistic detail on the depiction of the city was much more intricate. The map must have come from there; Strongheart, too.

It wasn't marked on any map, but in the top corner, in the spot covered by the ornate compass rose, Elijah knew there was a tiny farming community called Riker's Landing. It was never on any map.

#

After a question about the state of crime in the town, Strongheart interrupted Potiff and stepped in front of his podium.

“Our good town cannot be great while our people suffer,” Strongheart began, voice cutting clear through to the back of the crowd. His eyes looked above the crowd, his arms were outstretched and raised, inviting the people to him. “We cannot become a strong, united people while we allow part of our town to decline. I understand how Potiff has failed our families on the Eastside. I understand how he has left them hungry, homeless, with no choices in how they must survive. I do not blame our forgotten people for this. I do not blame them for feeling separated from the whole, for feeling like it is them versus us. How could they not, when Potiff has told them so? However, if we are ever to rise, we must stop protecting and celebrating criminals. We must stop celebrating terror and division. We must stop these Spirits of the Eastside!”

Murmurs swept through the gathering. Even this usually ambivalent lot weren't sure what to make of this.

#

Though there was nothing of value to Elijah in the attached master bathroom, Elijah went in anyway and took a single bar of carved soap. The bar smelled of strawberries and mint, and was carved into the Strongheart crest as well. There were windows in the bathroom, but no clear way down to the ground that way. It would be easiest to get back across the fence if he left from the bottom floor, but as the sun was still in the middle of the sky, he knew all the servants would be downstairs preparing the midday meal. That meant Elijah's best chance out was still the way he came in, however unappealing the prospect. He briefly toyed with the idea of leaving through a servant's exit, but he knew before he even finished the thought that it would be too risky. He was charming, even he knew, but he couldn't guarantee the servants wouldn't rat him out. He didn't know how much Strongheart paid, after all, or how strongly he disciplined.

He went to the door and listened for footsteps. He heard a light *pat pat* and waited until

the sound passed before opening the door a crack. The maid left one of the rooms and stepped into another. The room she'd just left was the one next to the bedroom Elijah had come in through; that felt close enough, and he moved across the hall again. As he left the master bedroom he noticed a black leather belt on the floor, halfway under the bed. He didn't think much of it, except that he felt sorry for whoever had to sleep in that room with Strongheart. Elijah waited for the guards to pass by outside, then climbed out the window of the guest room. In the cover of night, he might have slid down the gutter, or jumped once he was halfway to the ground, but in broad daylight that would make too much noise. Instead, he climbed down the same way he'd gone up. As he vaulted back over the fence, he took one more look at the house and saw the maid had opened the curtains. He ducked behind the trees and cursed to himself. Maybe she hadn't seen him. He'd leave that out of his report to Tsippi.

#

Elijah avoided the main gate on his way out and got back on the cobbled road. He walked with his head down, and hoped the soap didn't smell too strongly to passerby. He didn't make it far across the Square, as the crowd was now tightly packed and held rapt by Strongheart's speech.

"They do not care for you, my lost people. These wicked Spirits haunt you; their criminal enterprises control and ruin you!"

Elijah's blood went cold.

"Do you want to be represented by these thieves? These ingrates? Forgive my language, but I cannot watch idly as a town I love is destroyed from the inside by this participation in the immoral. We must do away with these Spirits, so that together we can build this beautiful town."

Do away with. Dip hadn't been far off, Elijah thought. Strongheart was as charismatic as the rumors said. The crowd was swayed, nodding and mumbling agreements. Of course, none

of them lived on the Eastside. None of them depended on Tsippi for every meal, for shelter. Easy for them to call it immoral, when they didn't need Tsippi, the Spirits, to live.

“Until these so-called Spirits are in our custody, the Eastside will continue to be a sick wart on our healthy town, and it will ooze the wretched puss until we are all sick with it. Even with the edicts I proposed and enacted as head of the Town Planning Committee, Potiff has failed in his leadership to enact them strongly enough. Despite increased guard numbers, funded by myself, and a curfew I encouraged, the crime continues because there is not enough enforcement, nor follow through. I know the people of this town are good and strong. If you have information on the Spirits, do not hesitate to come to the guard, or to me directly. Under my leadership, without Mayor Potiff's interference, I will finally be able to cut the immoral filth from our faces and we will be a great and prosperous Westpond! Thank you,” he ended with a low bow, and went back behind the podium.

The crowd applauded. Someone whistled. Strongheart was still smiling, and Potiff dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. Elijah felt sick.

He made his way around the crowd and out past Dip's again. He had to talk to Tsippi, report on his recon. Had Strongheart said those sorts of things before? He was gaining followers by giving the ignorant a common enemy. This common enemy was all the more effective being faceless, formless, and weak. No one but Dip knew the true identity of the Spirits of the Eastside. To the rest of the town, to Gregor Strongheart, the entire population was responsible for the destruction of their potential utopia. It didn't matter that they'd never had a utopia there before.

Elijah shook his head, hoping to clear it. He had to report to Tsippi. He couldn't get worked up about politics.

“What good will it do?” he muttered to himself. The poor of the Eastside *are* Westpond.

Strongheart's barely lived here a year, but now this is the town he loves?

He couldn't get worked up. There was work to do. Elijah crossed into the Eastside and slipped into a hovel just passed the cobbler to wait for Tsippi.

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