

Chapter 5

Seph wandered between the vibrant stalls selling their wares in the merchant's square. He was looking for a specific kind of ink and paper for his personal research efforts. Luckily, he still had some money left over, and did not have to worry about it running out just yet. He had changed out of his uniform and had donned a dull hat and jacket to conceal his identity. Someone recognizing him was something he definitely did not need right now.

He found the traveller's stall with little effort. Paper of numerous shapes and sizes were secured to the decorated display table by colourful weights, rustling slightly in the cold breeze. Whilst he looked for hexagonal spell card paper, he was pleasantly surprised to find that there were also narrow black bottles of metallic ink. He indicated to the stall keeper that he would like fifty sheets and one black bottle. Not open to haggling, the shop owner insisted he paid the full price, and he reluctantly handed over sixty rounds. The price of magic paper had started to rise again; he would have to use them wisely. Seph carefully packed the items into his bag and continued browsing.

It had been three and a half months since his world had turned upside down. Most of his colleagues and friends now acted like he didn't exist, and he had been shunted away to a secluded part of the governance station to do menial tasks. He was glad he had something to do, however, he did not have anywhere to live. To continue living in the barracks would have been terrible, and Seph shuddered to think of what could happen if his identity was unmasked in the places where he knew uprooted wanderers settled. He was glad that he already knew how to live outside, but it would soon be winter, and he hated how bitterly cold it got. Winter wear like warm socks and boots would make the cold more tolerable.

It was possible for Seph to magically alter his clothes to make them better at keeping in heat, so far he had only managed to create a spell card to make materials better at repelling water. The process took a lot of magic, which he supplied at his own expense. He had yet to try to experiment with alterations to reduce heat loss, as they required many test runs, which meant using magic sheets, ink and energy. He

needed to preserve his personal magic levels for more important and pressing spell cards. Some swaying knitted socks corded together on a stall's awnings caught his attention, and he headed towards them.

After procuring some reasonably priced woollen socks, he sat on a bench to inspect and admire his purchase. The sun had finally decided to peek out from the packs of clouds that patrolled the sky, and the market was bathed in the warm sunlight. Seph smiled slightly whilst rubbing the sock's dense beige fabric. Stray invisible fibres caught the light as he held it, and he looked around, breathing in the crisp air. He would go back to the station's accommodation and try the socks on later, maybe he could ask Tony if he wanted to visit the stuffy canteen this evening. His eyes widened, and his smile froze. He forgot, he couldn't go there any more. His smile faded. No one would welcome him back now. The wind rattled the trees behind him, buffeting his ears, and hunger gnawed his stomach. The clouds closed in and shadows swept back over the market square. He stared blankly at the pavement as the cold wind whistled through his old jacket.

At the bench backed by swaying yellow trees, the man's shoulders sagged; he looked down, hat obscuring his face, and carefully placed the sock in his bag. Marth watched the man suspected to be the notorious noble behind a newspaper on an adjacent bench. He looked surprisingly ordinary.

"*Did you find him Marth?*" his mind registered the words as if he heard Erika next to him.

Erika was positioned outside a café overlooking the plaza that connected to the market square on the south side. She sat at a wrought iron table drinking tea.

"*Yes, my Lady. He is currently sitting on a bench. It looks like he might leave soon.*" Marth replied.

"*Oh, good.*" Erika commented absent-mindedly.

She struggled in crowded places, focusing on one distant mind among the multitudes in the swirling maelstrom required a will of iron. It was a battle of distractions. If she let it, she would be swept away like a leaf in rapids. A distressed person could pull her in like a whirlpool, and she would struggle to break free of them. She gripped the cup tightly with her gloved fingers, and the warmth seeped into her hands. Gritting her teeth, she bent her focus towards the distant mind that flickered like a pocket mirror. She felt their soles press into the paving as they stood up. She felt penned in.

"Is your man in position?" Erika asked.

"Yes, my Lady. I will make my way to him now." Marth waited for the suspect to walk past before swiftly standing, storing the newspaper under his arm and shortcutting through a narrow alley that led to the plaza's east side.

Erika stared blankly ahead of her, as she tracked the man's progress through the crowding bodies. Everyone seemed taller than usual. She felt Marth's anticipation, he had made it to the central fountain and shared a brief word with his selected volunteer, and waited for her signal. It would be ideal if the man did not see any of them; it would give them more room to manoeuvre. The man had looked down to check something. Perfect. She alerted Marth.

"FAARROW!" came the call from the plaza.

The reaction was instantaneous, in the crowd Joseph flinched painfully, and his body stiffened, braced against attack. He was surrounded. His eyes scanned frantically under his lowered cap, and his heart hammered in his chest. They were going to kill him. His lungs screamed for air. People in the crowd turned their heads in bewilderment, and others muttered and stared at the man by the fountain. Joseph had recovered partially and took in air in measured gulps. They had not noticed him yet. He tried to walk nonchalantly to the plaza's west exit. He had to get away from the murderous man that had screamed that name.

Weaving between coats and jackets, he stared resolutely ahead and forced himself to walk. He prayed that no one recognized him. If anyone saw Joseph Farrow, he would die here. It felt like an age before he reached the west exit. He increased his pace and took the next alley he could find, and broke into a frantic run. Shadowy doors rushed past him, and blood thundered in his ears. He ran with reckless abandon, bag jostling wildly on his back and his shoes slapping against the uneven paving. He had to get away. Away from Joseph Farrow. From Alderbrush. From everyone. And everything. His foot struck a door step, and the alley blurred as he fell forwards. He slammed the ground hard, scraping his knees.

Joseph immediately came to and gasped for air. His palms and knees stung. Struggling into a sitting position, he awkwardly shuffled and rested against the alley's nearest wall to gather his racing thoughts and breathing. He was exhausted. His arms tightened uneasily around his bag. He opened and rifled through it, searching for something. He could not find it. Where was it? Where was his wallet? His breath wheezed as he searched desperately for it. His hand reached the bottom of the bag without touching the smooth leather. He knew he had dropped it. It would be stolen by now. Tears fell on the bag's dark leather. He needed that money and he'd lost it. What was he going to do now? He hadn't finished the spell card yet. Not yet, he wasn't ready yet. He shoved the bag violently away from him, disgusted. A despairing wail was strangled by his constricted throat, and he covered his face in the deserted grey alley and sobbed silently.

Erika jolted as scalding pain pierced her fingers, the heat of the tea cup had finally permeated her gloves and she became aware of her surroundings again. She welcomed the painful intrusion from Joseph's fear and despair. Marth was pretending to read a newspaper at the fountain, whilst the embarrassed volunteer laughed and deflected questions. It must have been only a minute or so afterwards. She felt ill. Cradling her head in her hands, took a couple of breaths and forced herself to stand. Erika left five round's payment on the table, hooked her bag securely on her shoulder and eased herself into the crowd. Despite her carefully drab outfit, the crowd still parted for her. The wind tugged on her coat's brown sash as she searched the ground of the central plaza.

She found what she was looking for, a black leather wallet lay on the flat stone. Erika stooped to pick it up, inspected its contents and drew in a sharp breath. The wallet was full of notes, at least a thousand round's worth.

"My Lady." Marth said, approaching her from her right, "Were we right?"

"Yes we were, Marth." she confirmed grimly and held up the wallet, showing him the contents. "He dropped this."

"How did he get that much?" Marth asked, Erika answered saying she did not know.

"I know you don't know, I was being rhetorical." Marth thought back, exasperated.

"I beg your pardon?" Erika snapped back.

"Um," Marth paused, "that thought wasn't meant for you, my Lady." he said with a careful expression on his face.

"Horseshit." she declared, making Marth break into an involuntary smile as she watched him indignantly.

"Apologies for my rudeness, my Lady." he said, quickly recovering, "And I am glad you are looking better, shall we head back?" he asked.

Erika agreed and allowed him to escort her to the carriage. She wondered about Marth's response, was it irritation or was he trying to distract her with a joke. A sarcastic comment like that would not be completely surprising, as a rule people were generally unreserved when they weren't talking. She guiltily thought about the plan's result and Joseph's flight. How could she return his wallet? The money was clearly important to him.