

A Sudden Abundance of Opportunities

The shop was quiet today. Smoke's apprentices were working on minor charms, but there'd been no commissions for major wards in some time. Smoke wasn't too worried, on the whole. Their business of crafting wards was not lucrative, but Smoke had enough money in savings to cover expenses until business picked up.

In the meantime, Smoke's daughter, Ember, had invited them to visit. On the one hand, Smoke had not seen Ember since her wedding last year, and they missed her. On the other, Ember had been worried about Smoke ever since their spouse passed away two years ago. Having one's grown daughter attempt to find one a lover was a ... unique ... experience.

So they were still contemplating the offer when the shop bell tinkled. A kith in smartly-tailored livery entered, and brushed Smoke's apprentice, Walnut, aside to stride to Smoke with a determined smile and set ears. She bowed with a flourish. "Master enchanter! My employer, Lord Autumn, wishes to hire you and your staff to ward his new estate at Lees. As soon as possible, if he may. He is prepared to pay double your normal fee in return for priority service."

Smoke blinked a few times, startled. They knew of Lord Autumn; the Lees estate had been under construction for years. "Isn't Bee handling your wards?"

The messenger's smile tightened. "There have been a few difficulties in that area. Your work comes highly recommended by Lady Rose, and he greatly wishes to retain your services, Enchanter Smoke."

Before they could answer, the bell tinkled again, admitting a magnificent draka in humanlike form, wings mantled and horns swept back from elegant features. He, too, ignored Walnut and the pard messenger alike to address Smoke. "Excuse me, master enchanter, but your government urgently requires your services. Courthall has aserious issue with its wards. We are prepared to pay handsomely for immediate service."

"All of Courthall?" Smoke asked. The draka nodded. Courthall was the seat of the nation's government. Both jobs would be huge undertakings, several weeks of work for Smoke's entire staff.

"Whatever they offer, Lord Autumn will top it." The noble's messenger lashed her tail.

"Please." The draka leaned forward, wings half-spread and lowered in pleading. "Your country beseeches you."

Smoke could only take one. Lord Autumn might pay better now, but one government contract was the key to more: steady, well-paying work for a business that had been struggling ever since their spouse's long illness and death had taken so much of Smoke's time away from it.

Public Service

Smoke looked between the two messengers and the letter from Ember. Well, too much to do is better than not enough. "We'll accept Courthall's offer, thank you, sir." The draka offered a deep bow, relief written on his elegant features. Smoke turned to the kith. "I can offer referrals for Lord Autumn, if you are interested?"

The kith messenger's tail twitched, ears flat. "Lord Autumn will be most disappointed. Are you sure of your answer?" At Smoke's nod, the woman left, tail tip lashing.

The draka, Blackwood, did not look eager to discuss the situation at Courthall in public, so Smoke led him into their private workshop in back. They waved him to a chair and perched on the workbench themselves. "So, what's going on with Courthall's wards?"

"The pesticide component has failed. Our last contractor insists they're working, but there are fleas infesting the carpets and ants in the kitchens. We've even had rats spotted in the compound. Please, master enchanter, when can you start? We'll provide transportation whenever you're ready." Courthall was a half-day's journey away.

Smoke's ears flicked back. An enchanter's wards were proof against disasters, but no enchantment could stop a deliberate saboteur, which was usually what it meant when wards were intact but you had a problem anyway. However -- fleas, ants, and rats? Not anyone's usual choice of weapons. All three at once certainly pointed to a warding problem, perhaps at some overlooked point of entry.

On Their Way

"I can leave this morning," Smoke told the draka, and was rewarded by the lift of his ears and a warm smile. "Let me pack a few things and tell my apprentices what to bring. They can follow on in a few days."

Blackwood rose and offered another bow. "Excellent, thank you. I will carry you back myself, if that is acceptable."

Smoke's apprentices were surprised but not dismayed by the sudden big commission. Walnut let out a triumphant whoop at the new. "YES! No more laboratory fireproofing charms for me!"

Smoke laughed. "For now! Pack everything we've got in the way of vermin repellents." They rattled off a list from the top of their head while the apprentices took notes, and finished with, "Check the references to see what other supplies we might need on site. Don't stint on packing: if we might need it, bring it. We'll find space for it somehow."

Smoke threw a few things of their own in a bag, and made sure their personal anti-flea charm (ugh, fleas) was in good order. They packed a couple of books for the trip, then left to meet Blackwood outside.

The draka messenger had shifted from his humanlike form to full dragon: a sleek, graceful creature of glittering dark grey scales, with black horns and a silky silver-grey mane. He was not large by dragon terms, perhaps thirty feet long from nose to tail tip, most of that neck and tail. He curled his head about to help Smoke into the harness on his back, then launched into the air with swift, sure wingbeats. "We'll arrive in four hours," he told them.

"So soon!"

He preened a little. "I'm a swift flyer."

"Wait, did you just fly in this morning? Aren't you tired?"

"Not at all. A Courthall messenger keeps all hours," Blackwood assured them. He proved to be good company on the flight, equally willing to chat or to let Smoke think in silence, as his passenger preferred. He seemed young but knowledgeable, full of tidbits about the landscape they passed above, and curious about Smoke's work.

Not a Natural at Flirting

Smoke had never ridden a dragon before. The sensation was exhilarating: the wind rushing past their face, the drag of gravity when they rose, the light-headed weightlessness when they dropped, the toy-like look of the scenery as if passed below, languid and far-distant. It was oddly intimate as well. Smoke could feel Blackwood's muscles tense and release with each wingbeat, the warmth of the dragon scales between their legs, the living, breathing body that made this flight possible. They wondered if it was intimate for Blackwood, too, to carry another person so effortlessly. Or was it as effortless as he made it feel? "Is it harder to fly with a passenger?" they asked.

He had his ears tilted back to listen to them. "A little, perhaps. But it's no trouble at all to carry you, master enchanter." They felt the vibration of his speech almost better than they heard his

words, warm with sincerity. "And everyone at Courthall is eager for your arrival and end to the pests. We prefer the remarks about 'vermin at Courthall' to be more metaphorical."

Smoke laughed. "Is Courthall as bad as that metaphor makes it sound?"

"No, no, not at all. The politicians are actually quite kind. Not nearly as divisive as you'd think."

"Kind?" Smoke tried to imagine it. The national government of Lightshel was a guided republic. Representatives elected by popular vote made the laws and confirmed all major bureaucratic appointments, under the guidance of the hereditary nobility. The nobility had no voting power, but they ran the committees and made most procedural decisions. Smoke supposed that perhaps the nobles could afford to be kind; their positions were secure. But the elections were always full of bitter rancor.

"Truly! The venom is only over matters of policy. In personal matters, they are respectful and generous." Blackwood related various anecdotes in support of this contention. One was about Representative Willow, who'd been incapacitated by a brain injury that left her unable to comprehend speech properly. The other representatives had protected her seat until a telepath could be found to act as liaison and speak for her. Other stories were less serious: Representative Sky, an elf enby, was renowned for their over-the-top absurd pranks, like organizing a 25th anniversary party for Lady Flax, who had never been married and was only thirty-two at the time. "They provided her with a husband for the occasion, and an irate mistress for additional flavor."

"Oh dear. Was Lady Flax very upset?"

"Not at all! She was delighted. Started courting her faux-mistress afterwards, in fact."

Based on his conversation, Blackwood's favorite person in Courthall was the master of ceremonies, Corydalis. Another draka, Corydalis managed the staff of Courthall and was ultimately responsible for all the day-to-day operations as well as social events.

The flight passed quickly -- closer to three hours and than four, in fact. Before Smoke knew it, Blackwood had landed in the beautifully landscaped park at the heart of Courthall. Tall government buildings surrounded them on all sides, from the General Chambers where lawmakers met in committee and full assembly, to the private offices in buildings flanking it on either side, to the museums and the famous Diplomatic House opposite. Blackwood helped Smoke down from his back, then shifted back to his humanlike form. He escorted them to the House of Chambers and procured a visitor's pass for them. "There, now you shan't be bothered while you inspect the grounds and our wards. I'll let Master Corydalis know you've arrived, master enchanter."

"Please, call me Smoke. I'm just here to serve the government as you do, good messenger." Smoke swiveled their ears, feeling unaccountably nervous.

Blackwood's ears flushed, and he bowed. "As you wish, m -- Smoke. Please, call me Blackwood. Would you like me to find you a guide?"

Gathering Intelligence

"Would you mind showing me around, Blackwood?" Smoke asked. "Er, if it's not too much trouble -- sorry -- " they abruptly remembered that Blackwood must have risen before dawn today to bring them Courthall's message, as well as flying them all the way back here.

But Blackwood smiled at their request and bowed. "It would be my honor, mas -- Smoke." One corner of his mouth curled higher, wry.

Smoke grinned back. "Not a lot of people around Courthall who aren't attached to their titles, I'm guessing."

"Not so many," he conceded. After asking the receptionist at the House of Chambers to have Courthall's master of ceremonies notified, he returned his attention to Smoke. "Where would you like to begin?"

"Somewhere central, with a good view. I want to set up a gatherer. Unless I need special authorization for that?" A gatherer would collect information on the nature of Courthall's warding spells and their efficacy in repelling attacks.

"You were authorized to perform all necessary ward-related enchantments before the offer of work was extended. Master Corydalis wanted to ensure there would be no delays. I'll show you where our original contractor has theirs set up, if you like?"

Smoke's curiosity about this Corydalis person grew, but they had a job to do. "Please."

Blackwood led them back out of the grand, echoing entrance hall to the House of Chambers. "It'll be fastest to fly up there." He shifted to dragon form and bore Smoke up. A colossal sculpture stood at the center of the Courthall park, some eighty feet tall at its highest. A large pedestal supported statues representing each of the Four Peoples of their nation: kith, draka, human, and elf. Together, the four held aloft a beacon. At night, Courthall lit the beacon, but at mid-afternoon, it was a pearlescent globe twenty feet in diameter, ringed by an observation platform. As Blackwood rose above its peak, Smoke noticed a figure -- human or elf, hard to tell at a distance -- knelt at the top. While Blackwood swooped over to it, the figure disappeared into it.

Blackwood landed atop the beacon. It had a flattened top a couple of feet across, hinged on one side: the person who'd just been here must have gone down through it. A squat gatherer enchantment curled there, visible to Smoke's enchantsight as a squid-like creature of semi-solid light, tendrils outstretched until they attenuated to imperceptible threads to cover the compound.

Just Maintenance

"Who was that?" Smoke asked as they dismounted. At Blackwood's blank expression, they added, "The person who was just here."

"I'm not sure. Maintenance, perhaps?" Blackwood folded his wings as he perched tidily on the slope of the globe. "I thought it must be the previous contractor at first, but now that you ask, Master Corydalis said their contract is terminated. Perhaps they needed to dismantle their gatherer?"

"No, it's still here." Smoke frowned, and tested the hinged hatch in the globe. It was latched from the inside. There wasn't any point to dismantling a gatherer after one was erected; it wasn't as if the components of the enchantment could be re-used for anything.

"I'll be right back." Blackwood shifted to drop to the observation platform that ringed the globe, then shifted to his humanlike shape and went inside.

Smoke studied the gatherer that was already in place. Just as the Blackwood had related, the gatherer's tendrils all showed that the compound was secure. The wards secured Courthall against all the normal axes of disaster: flood, fire, earthquake, tornado, hurricane, and a long list of individual pests: mice, rats, termites, kitchen ants, fleas, rabbits, moles, carpenter ants, and more. Wards could not protect against sapient sabotage, but everything else was covered.

The wards, according to the gatherer, were braided, which made Smoke cringe inwardly. They disliked that style of warding. Braiding one's wards meant that every part of the ward: protection against each different kind of disaster -- was tied to every other kind of protection. Braided wards were very strong in some senses: they rarely failed due to insufficient power. Where a single-strand ward against earthquakes might crack under a sufficiently powerful earthquake, a braided ward was more likely to have the resilience to withstand. But braided wards were weak in exactly the way that might cause the problem Blackwood had reported: if one strand of the ward had been constructed badly, it was hard to parse out that it wasn't doing its job. The gatherer would tell you "this is a ward designed to do this long laundry list of things, and the ward is still here, so it's presumably doing all of these things". Braiding had been the most popular way of doing wards for a few decades, until individual strands started to fail and one

couldn't easily parse out what had gone wrong. If all one knew how to make was braided wards, one couldn't fix a single strand on the ward: one had to take it out and replace the entire thing..

That wasn't a problem Smoke had: they could install individual wards against different types of vermin without needing to reinstall the other portions of the ward. That might explain why the government had wanted to hire them, specifically. Most enchanters specialized in either one or the other. Smoke had trained in both, even if they preferred to craft single-strand wards.

While Smoke was still trying to sort that out, the hatch in the roof opened. A human woman with bright black eyes flashed a grin at Smoke.. "Hello, honored," she said, politely, as she climbed up. "I'm Licorice. I work in maintenance. My friend here said you had some questions for me?" Blackwood followed behind her, with a bemused tilt to his head as he stood to one side on the roof and watched them.

"Hello, Licorice." Smoke offered their hand. "I'm Smoke; I was hired today to repair the Courthall wards. I was just wondering if you'd been working on the gatherer here?"

"The what?" Licorice bowed over Smoke's hand, like a servant to a superior. She wore a uniform of green with gold buttons: the same colors as Blackwood's, but hers had an informal look rather than crisply tailored. Her glossy brown hair was braided into a long tail; there was something sleek and fit about her small frame, despite the baggy clothes. "No, honored. There were some complaints that the seal on the door up here leaked, so I was looking into that. Is there anything I can do for you?"

New Around Here?

Smoke glanced from Licorice to Blackwood. "So you two have met before?"

Blackwood shook his head. "No, I don't believe so."

"Yeah, I only started a few months ago. Courthall is huge.." Licorice gave them an engaging smile. "You would not believe how many hundreds of peons it takes to keep a bunch of high-ranking muckity-mucks from burning the whole place down. Wards or no wards."

Smoke half-smiled in answer. "I guess high-ranking muckity-mucks don't change no matter where you are."

"No, honored, they sure don't. Anyway, if that's all, I should get back to work ... " Licorice stooped towards the handle on the hatch.

"Mmm." Smoke tapped their foot lightly against the side of the hatch. It was ringed in dark grey rubber that showed signs of use but didn't look worn out. "So what was wrong with the hatch?"

"Hmm?"

"You said it was leaking?"

"Oh! Right. Nothing was wrong with it. A bit of debris got caught in it. In the hinge back here." She pointed. "Kept it from closing snugly. Just had to clear it out, good as new again." There was no clear indication of recent work, like the hinge being recently oiled or cleaned, but for the problem Licorice described, there probably wouldn't be.

A New Perspective

"Actually ... " Smoke offered a warm smile. The black-eyed woman watched her warily in return; Licorice wished the new enchanter would just let her go already. *I am a boring maintenance worker, you are not interested in me, go away*, she thought fiercely. The enchanter continued, oblivious: "I don't know how busy you are, but I've been hired as the new enchanter, to repair Courthall's wards. I could use someone from maintenance to show me around, because I need to know where all the entrances are -- side, service, maintenance, even sewer. I've been making Blackwood do it, but the poor draka's been up since before dawn to fetch me and I feel quite ruthless keeping him. Would you be able to ?"

"I do not mind, truly, Smoke," Blackwood protested.

"Umm." Licorice blinked, taken aback. *Say no, tell them you're busy, say no, say no.*

"Please?" Their ears canted back and to the side, whiskers spread optimistically.

"I'm not exactly a tour guide, honored ... " Against her will, Licorice considered the idea. Hanging around the new enchanter would be one way to find out what they were planning to do with the wards, after all.

"But I'll bet you do know every possible entrance. Even the ones that no one ever uses and are supposed to be blocked off but, perhaps, haven't been?"

"I am pretty good at getting around," Licorice admitted. *This is a terrible idea. Angels and demons, you idiot, do not let yourself be swayed by a beguiling smile from the tall gorgeous enby. Say no.*

"Perfect! Thank you so much, Licorice. Would you mind flying us over to the House of Chambers, please, Blackwood? I want to set up a new gatherer where it won't conflict with this one." Smoke turned that irresistible smile on the draka, who of course agreed. Which is how Licorice found herself seated on a dragon's back with her arms around the enby kith's waist, clinging for dear life as they glided across the gap. *Oh, this is such a bad idea.*

Suspicious

Something about Licorice made Smoke suspicious, even if her story was more-or-less plausible. But that made them want to keep her close a little longer.

They did have a job to do, and Smoke was perplexed by the old gatherer's results. One or two strands failing, and Smoke could see it not being precise enough to recognize the problem. But with three strands failing -- ants, fleas, and rats? -- it should show a problem. Smoke had already reviewed the gatherer's records of incursions that the wards had fought off in the last several weeks. It reported protecting the windows on the south side from damage from a windstorm, securing the roof against fallen tree limbs, keeping the carpet from being singed by a dropped candle, preventing flooding in a sub-cellar after heavy rains -- a litany of prevented disasters that went on for some time, which was what Smoke would expect. The last report involving rats was one trying to enter through a storm drain in a wine cellar. It was killed by the ward. There were no mentions of ant or flea incursions at all. That suggested catastrophic failure of those threads: if they'd just been inadequate, they'd report some repelled incursions, at least.

Yet the gatherer should have detected a catastrophic failure on two different strands, braided wards or not. Maybe the gatherer itself was what had failed.

Blackwood set them down on the House of Chambers. "Thank you again," they told him, offering a hand despite not being quite sure of the etiquette for parting with a dragon-sized draka.

The dragon placed one talon lightly against their palm. "It was my honor to be of service. Please, let me know if you need anything else."

"I will." Smoke hoped their ears didn't show a blush.

After Blackwood left, Licorice fidgeted while Smoke set up their own gatherer atop the House of Chambers. Smoke included some protections for their gatherer: specifically some extra detection spells to let them know if anyone interfered with it, and report if anyone else reviewed

its information. After completion, it'd be a few hours before it would have harvested any new information for them.

So Smoke asked Licorice to show them to the foundation when that was done. They took a service stairwell from the roof to the ground floor. On the way down, Smoke asked, "Do you think someone sabotaged the seal on that hatch?"

"What?" Licorice blinked at them.

"You said there was some debris in it. What would get up there except what people left? It's the highest point in the complex."

"Oh! No, it was just a twig. Some bird dropped it, probably."

"Ah. May I see it?"

Licorice gave them a what's-wrong-with-you look. "No, I didn't keep it."

"Ah, of course not." Smoke chuckled. They reached the first floor, and Licorice led them out a service exit. "So, since the wards haven't been doing their job, what has maintenance been doing about the rat problem?"

Licorice whipped her head around, black eyes narrowed, as if Smoke's question had personally offended her. She seemed to realize the oddness of her reaction before she spoke, because she gave a tight forced laugh. "Let's just say I don't think rats are Courthall's biggest worry."

Methodology

Smoke canted back their ears at Licorice's reaction, making their enby earrings chime with the gesture. "I'm sorry. I was just making conversation; I didn't intend to hit a sore spot. Is there something else you'd like to discuss?"

The human put her hands behind her back, rubbing one hand up and down the other arm. She gave a nervous chuckle. "Sorry, I kinda overreacted there. I mean. Any issues we've had with the existing wards aren't your fault. So ... um, you said Blackwood flew you in? Where are you from?"

"Crescent Bay." Smoke peered with enchantsight at the wards that wrapped about the House of Chamber's foundation. The braid of it encircled the door and the first-floor windows as well.

"Oh wow. You came from there today and you're still willing to work now? You must be made of steel."

Smoke laughed. "I'm not, but Blackwood is. He flew there and back today! He's fast, though. Maybe three and a half hours?" They studied the braided ward, walking slowly along the perimeter with Licorice pacing them. To their surprise, the ward looked as solid as the gatherer had reported it was. They knelt to touch it, parsing out the strands of its components.

"Ouch. Now I see why you wanted to give him a break." She watched them work, head tilted curiously. "So what is enchanter's sight like, anyway?"

"Like translucent rainbows that you can feel, overlaying the ordinary world." Smoke picked out the exact threads for repelling ants, fleas, and rats, and all three looked solid. They were aggressive wards, designed to kill vermin -- not to repel, sterilize or redirect.

"It sounds beautiful."

"It is, actually. One of the best parts of being an enchanter." Smoke darted a smile to Licorice as they followed the ward around the foundation to see if the threads weakened anywhere. "What do you like about your job?"

"Um, well, you meet some pretty interesting people," Licorice said. "So, can you tell what's wrong with the wards?"

"Not yet. I'm wondering if they missed an entrance. Are there any tunnels that lead inside?"

"Yeah, a few from the cellars to other buildings. I'll show you." Licorice led them back inside. "So, how are wards supposed to stop vermin, when they work? Is it like an invisible wall to insects or what?"

"It depends on the enchanter. These ones are supposed to kill any of the creatures they forbid."

"... is that safe?" Licorice laughed. "I mean, for the creatures they aren't forbidding?"

"Generally," Smoke said. "It can catch insects that aren't specifically targetted but look kind of right. Like a ward against wasps might kill bees too. But it won't kill a human. Not even one wearing black and yellow stripes."

Licorice giggled. "Is that how you do your wards, too? By killing ... pests?"

Humane

"No." Smoke shook their head, and gave Licorice a half-smile. "Among other things, no one likes to deal with the corpses at the edge of the ward, or the scavengers that come for them."

Licorice laughed. "I'll say!" She winked back at Smoke. "Good of you to keep us poor janitor-types in mind. What do your wards do, then?"

Smoke wondered if she was being facetious or if corpses were still an issue at Courthall. Normally vermin stopped trying to enter in any quantity with lethal wards as old as the Courthall ones. "I use a combination of deterrence and sterilization. If it's a small incursion, like a single nest of ants or a couple of mice, the wards only prevent them from entering the building. If the wards keep encountering a type of creature -- for example, termites keep exploring the edge of the ward -- then it infects the insect with a contagion spell, one that will sterilize that individual and pass itself along to any other insects of the species it encounters. The contagion can only replicate itself so many times, so it won't exterminate a species. But it provides some population control for the overall area without having to put any death-magic into the environment. It also does some good against the rare vermin that are unaffected by preventive or death wards, because the contagion will still stick to them and infect their fellows."

Licorice tilted her head. "Some vermin are immune to wards? Is that how they're getting through?"

"No -- or at least, that shouldn't be it. The gatherer should have noticed if something just walked by the wards. And immune vermin are extraordinarily rare in the three species that are a problem here. Immunity is more of a concern with cockroaches." They'd reached the cellars by now, and Smoke frowned, studying the wards down here. The braided wards covered floor and the top and bottom few inches of the walls, but not the entire wall. That was sufficient for most things the wards were designed to protect against, but Smoke always did a lattice over the entire wall in any underground areas when she was warding against vermin. Yes, in theory, crawling insects couldn't get down from a wall without crossing the top or bottom barrier, and fleas came in through entrances on people or pets, not through walls. In practice, things got shoved up against walls, and insects could crawl along shelves to find a safe path down. Someone must have already warned Courthall about that in this cellar, because the shelves, cabinets, and other furnishings were all set back at least six inches from the walls. Smoke crouched to examine the gap. "Did they rearrange the cellar after the infestation?"

"Mm? Oh, yeah. Couple months ago. I think the old enchanter said they couldn't stack things against the walls. Didn't help, though."

Ants almost always had their nests outside of buildings, so it should have helped if that was the problem. Still, in a building the size of Courthall. Smoke scrunched her whiskers, thinking.

Ants!

Smoke straightened from her examination of the wards along the wall. "Would you show me where the ants have been seen?"

"All right," Licorice said. "But if you want to go to where the fleas are, I'm changing into boots first. Ugh."

"The flea problem is bad enough that they're biting humans?"

"Yes. The House of Chambers isn't too bad, but the House of Diplomacy has the worst flea problem. No one even goes into the fourth-floor conference rooms any more. You'd think the fleas would starve, but no luck so far."

"It takes a long time to starve fleas out," Smoke said. "Their eggs won't hatch if there's nothing around to eat, so they'll just lie in wait for months until something comes along and causes enough vibrations to make them hatch. Assuming they're not living off of someone's pets. Or," they added, thoughtfully, "the rats. Hmm."

"Yay," Licorice said without enthusiasm. She led Smoke back upstairs. It was late enough now that the halls were empty. Night had fallen outside, but the halls of the House of Chambers were well-lit by glow-globes in sconces along the walls. They went into a kitchen on the first floor. It had a relatively small footprint for such a large building, clearly intended more for snacks and drinks than to prepare meals. A few staff were on hand, cleaning up or preparing dough to be preserved for baking the next day. The room smelled of cinnamon and warm apples, strongly enough to remind Smoke that they hadn't eaten since lunch and it was after supper time. Licorice waved to an aproned man sweeping up. "Hey, Teak!"

Teak, a trim kith man with a slight build, strong arms, and ginger stripes, looked up with a wary look. "We don't have any leftover cookies tonight, Licorice, you're too late."

"Aww." Licorice pouted briefly, in that adorable big-eyed, out-thrust-lip way that only humans could pout. "It's fine, Teak, I'm not here for cookies. This's the new enchanter, she wants to see about the ant problem. Are you still seeing them?"

"Not so much. We cleaned out all the cabinets and threw out some canisters that weren't sealing properly, and they seem to have lost interest." Teak leaned the broom against a counter and beckoned them to the rear wall, where he opened the lower cabinet doors. "These cabinets here were the worst affected, don't know if there's anything to see now."

Smoke crouched down and peered into them. Their freshly-scrubbed condition was evident from the spotless surfaces. Even the canisters for different kinds of flour and sugar had been cleaned. There were no ants or ant trails. But at the back of the cabinets were a few little heaps of dust, near cracks that made the fur on Smoke's neck prickle. They scraped at one heap with a claw tip. It was powdered wood. "Teak, what size were these ants?"

"I dunno. Ant-sized?"

Smoke closed their eyes. "I mean, were they very small -- " she held her fingers perhaps an eighth of an inch apart " -- or bigger, like rice-grain-sized? Did they smell bad when you squished one?"

"Oh, they weren't that tiny. More rice-size, I guess. I don't remember them smelling after they were crushed."

Smoke rubbed at their face and stood. "Those are carpenter ants. They're not here to eat your food."

Teak brightened. "Really? That's good."

"That depends on your idea of 'good'. What they're eating is the building."

Teak and Licorice exchanged looks, while the other staff glanced at Smoke in alarm. "That sounds not so good," Licorice said. "What were they doing in the kitchen, then?"

"Not sure. Might've been drawn here for moisture. You haven't seen them in other rooms?"

"Some of the other kitchens and the dining halls," Teak said. "That's it as far as I know."

Smoke flicked their ears back; carpenter ants did need water as well as wood, but it was still a little strange that their signs would only be in eating areas. "All the same size?"

"Uh. I didn't pay that much attention. I thought ants were just, you know. Ants," Teak said, sheepishly.

"When did people first start seeing them?"

"I dunno. Couple weeks ago?" Teak turned to others in the kitchen, who nodded concurrence with this estimate.

It's hard to tell how bad this is, although Smoke's gatherer should give some information about that in the morning. It's not likely to get significantly worse in the next few days, however.

Hunting Down Food

Smoke pinched the bridge of their nose and shook their head, curly black ponytail falling over one shoulder with the motion. "Well, it's a big building. Ants aren't going to eat it all tonight." The staff in the kitchen looked more alarmed by this remark than reassured, so Smoke added, "Really. If you ignore carpenter ants for years, they can make a building structurally unsound. But in weeks? No. I don't mean to keep you all late, please, go back to your duties."

The kitchen staff nodded and went back to work. Licorice lingered, as if disappointed, or uncertain if that included her. "Thank you for your help, Licorice." Smoke clasped the woman's hand. Licorice beamed up at her, black eyes bright. "If you need anything from me to let your supervisor know what you were doing, I'll be happy to oblige. I didn't realize how late I'd kept you."

"Oh, she's usually understanding. I'll tell her to see you if she has questions. You're calling it a day?"

"Yes, I'm going to hunt down some dinner." Smoke glanced to her and smiled. "Would you like to join me?"

Licorice's expression took on an odd cast, either intrigued or alarmed: human features are hard to read, with no ears or whiskers for cues. Then she grinned. "Sure! As long as I'm ordering from the menu and not on it."

Smoke grinned back. "Deal. Um. Do you think Blackwood would like to come? I don't want to requisition him in his off hours ..."

But Licorice's face lit. "I have no idea! Let's find out." She slipped her arm through Smoke's and led them to the main hall. "He's adorable, isn't he? Those wings! He's like Master Corydalis only not terrifying."

Smoke laughed. "Is Master Corydalis so bad? Blackwood spoke well of him."

"Oh, I don't mean he's bad, or cruel, or anything. He's just ... " Licorice gestured with her hands, as if to sketch a colossal figure. "Enormous. And important. And the kind of person who could get you doing something before you realized you'd been asked. You know. Terrifying."

Smoke had no idea. Licorice asked the guards in the main hall about Blackwood, but they didn't know. Undeterred, Licorice rummaged through the deserted receptionist's station for clues. "Oh, look, there's a note for you." She handed the sealed envelope to Smoke.

It was from Blackwood, and contained hotel reservations for Smoke, and a packet of meal vouchers. It also said that Master Corydalis wanted to see Smoke in the morning, at their earliest convenience. He'd also left his directions in case Smoke needed anything else. He had an apartment at the Courthall, on the far side of the park. "Swank!" Licorice remarked.

Smoke had some misgivings about disturbing Blackwood at home. But surely he would have told them to talk to the duty officer or somesuch if Blackwood had been bothered by the idea.

As luck would have it, they met him outside his building. His face lit when he saw them. "Smoke! I hope everything's gone all right? Is there any way I might be of assistance?"

"Well ... you could recommend somewhere to eat? And perhaps keep us company?" Smoke asked. "If you wanted, not as an obligation. It seems I've some meal vouchers now, but I don't know what the commissary's like. Or how good it is."

"It's pretty nice," Licorice said.

Blackwood did not contradict her, but his ears had perked at the invitation and then dipped at the mention of the vouchers. "It would be my pleasure to join your party, Smoke. I was on my way to The Quarry, it's a meats-variety place. But I've no strong preference."

"I've never been there!" Licorice tilted her head, intrigued. "My favorite place near Courthall is The Big Cheese. They don't just have cheese, though. I promise!"

The Quarry

"The Quarry does sound interesting." Smoke licked their lips. "I do like meat."

"You'll love this place, then. Would you like to ride? I was going to fly, it's a couple of miles from here."

Licorice bounced on her toes. "Yes please!"

After three hours of flight earlier in the day, some of the novelty has worn off, but Smoke was still perfectly willing. Blackwood shifted to his dragon form, and flew the two of them there. Licorice wrapped her arms about Smoke's waist as they straddled his back, and rested her cheek against Smoke's back. "You make the best friends, master enchanter!"

"You should call me Smoke," they answered. "'Master enchanter' is way too many syllables."

Licorice giggled. "Some day I want a title with too many syllables in it. You'd think a janitor could be a high-muckity-muck, we do enough mucking-out-the-muck!"

"You were in an elevated position when we met," Smoke replied, teasing.

Blackwood flapped his great charcoal-grey wings to rise higher above the city. "And are again now!"

Licorice squeaked and clung tighter to Smoke. "Are you suggesting I shouldn't try to rise above my station?"

"I thought I was suggesting you already had, miss," Blackwood replied.

"Oh. Well, the view's great and all, but I guess I'll stick with just Licorice for now. No 'Miss' required."

The Quarry was busy, but the maitre'd recognized Blackwood, and ushered him and his party promptly to a table near the back. The service did not take orders: instead, they brought around plates of food on rolling, steaming carts. Some of the plates were small, and some large platters. The majority of them were meat dishes in a wide array of styles: grilled steaks, breaded and pan-fried cutlets, deep-fried chicken, lamb kebobs, ground meat mixed with sauce and grilled, nuggets of beef smothered in sweet sauce, and dozens more.

Blackwood took three platters for himself, filling his side of the table. "I have an account here," he explained at Licorice's stare. "One of the reasons I like the Quarry. A draka messenger eats a great deal."

"All those hours in dragon form?" Smoke guessed. When they'd stopped for lunch, he'd eaten in dragon shape, and a proportionate amount to his size.

"Just so."

The waiters encouraged the kith and human to try one or two of the small plates, and take more later as they came by. Licorice took two plates, one of batter-fried shrimp and another of sliced lamb cut fresh from a spit. She ate like a ravenous rat, although she could not match Blackwood's brisk efficiency in putting away food.

So Unreasonable

Licorice's favorite of the dishes proved to be little pasta-wrapped dumplings, pan-fried and full of spiced meat. She closed her eyes in bliss at her first mouthful. "Oh, Smoke, you have to try these!"

It was mouthwatering, if not as spicy as Smoke preferred. Most of the dishes were a little bland for their tastes. Hallston, the city where Courthall was located, didn't see as much trade as Smoke's native Crescent Bay. Maybe spices were scarcer here, or tastes simply different. Still, the food was well-prepared otherwise, and some dishes Smoke loved even without spice, like the thin-sliced steak grilled so briefly it was almost raw, hot and dripping with juices.

As they shared morsels from one another's plates, Smoke asked Licorice, "So is there a particular title with too many syllables that you covet? Or do you like your current work?"

Licorice washed down her latest mouthful with mulled cider and waggled brown fingers at Smoke. "It's all right. I like it when they trust me enough to give me tricky assignments. Like figuring out the problem with that hatch!" she said, with a touch of pride. "But it's not what I planned to be back when I was an apprentice."

"Mm? What field did you apprentice in?" Smoke asked.

"Enchanting," Licorice said, and then winced. "Not that I was any good at it! Please don't quiz me, master enchanter!" She cringed in mock fear.

Smoke grinned, though they were inwardly surprised. Licorice had asked what enchanter's sight was like earlier in the day, and that was something apprentices usually learned early. "Why did you leave?"

"Oh, um, turned out the master and I had an irreconcilable difference of opinion."

"On what?" Blackwood asked.

"On how much time it was acceptable to spend napping when one's master thought one was running errands." Licorice ducked her head sheepishly.

Smoke bit back a grin. "And how much napping did your master regard as acceptable?"

"None! Can you believe it?" Licorice sighed melodramatically. "So unreasonable." She licked dumpling sauce off her fingers.

"Is maintenance more, er, reasonable on this count?" Blackwood pricked his long ears. "I may have gone into the wrong field."

"I don't know." She frowned as if in thought. "I haven't really needed a nap during work shifts at Courthall. Maintenance must be less tiring than enchanting."

What Brought You to Courthall?

"So how did you end up working in Courthall?" Smoke asked. "Did you persuade your old master to give you a glowing reference for your superior napping ability?"

Licorice giggled. "You'd think so! But not so much. I knew a few people who worked around here and they found me an in. What about you, big guy?" She glanced expectantly to Blackwood.

Blackwood blinked at the descriptor; he wasn't large for a draka, only a few inches taller than Smoke. But then again, Licorice was short for a human. "Same, I suppose. My mother used to work with Master Corydalis, before he was master of ceremonies. She wrote to request a post for me. I started as a page and became one of the long-distance messengers after I proved my speed."

"Do you like it?" Licorice asked.

"I love it." Blackwood said, unabashed. He swallowed a strip of meat with brisk efficiency and continued, "I have been to cities all across the nation, from Crescent Bay to Glovesbrook to Candleton. If I'm to wait for a reply, then I spend a few days at leisure in some exotic locale at no expense to myself. And it gives me an excuse to spend all the time I want flying in dragon form."

"You need an excuse?"

He smiled wryly. "I need a budget for it! I need to eat a great deal more to feed the dragon than the man. If you don't have a job that requires the strength or flight speed, it doesn't make much sense."

Licorice picked at her food more delicately now, savoring it instead of wolfing it down. "Huh. I never thought about that. It is kind of convenient to be smaller."

"And here I always thought more height would be useful." Smoke motioned with one hand above their head. "For reaching the top shelf. Only moreso."

"Different forms have different advantages," Blackwood said. "It's a privilege to be able to switch."

"Yeah," Licorice said, wistfully. "It is."

"You're not a shifter, are you?" Smoke asked.

The human widened her black eyes as if alarmed by the question, then shook her head. "Hah! No. Imagine me as a cat!" She curled the fingers of one hand and pawed the air. "Mew! Mew!"

Blackwood grinned at her antics. Smoke was a little puzzled by Licorice's initial expression. Human-feline and human-canine shifters were uncommon but not rare. There were prejudices against them in some other nations, but not in Lightshel. Not for the typical forms of shifters, anyway.

"What of you, master enchanter?" Blackwood asked them. "Do you enjoy your vocation?"

"Yes!" Licorice rested her chin in her hand and gazed with interest at Smoke. "What's it like when you didn't sleep through all your lessons?"

Enchanting

Blackwood watched as the master enchanter glanced from him to Licorice and back again, their feline ears splayed, startled. They ran a hand through thick auburn curls and wrapped one lock around a finger. "Ah, well, yes, I love my work, but -- you don't really want to hear about it, do you?"

"Of course we do!" Licorice motioned encouragingly with one hand. "C'mon, tell!"

"Please, Smoke." Blackwood felt self-conscious calling them by only their given name, but he liked the intimacy of it.

Smoke's ears canted further, their enby earrings chiming with the motion. "It's a great job; I hardly know where to start. There's this quality about channeling magic: it's both fussy and exacting, and very rewarding when you get it right. Like playing a delicate instrument, one that you have to tune after every song because it's so precise. But then you get it right and play and the notes are more than pitch-perfect: they're rich and full, and the song fills the room and it's amazing." They ducked their head and covered their face with one hand. "Ugh, that sounds ridiculous."

"Not at all," Licorice said. "It's just like the way you described enchantsight."

"What's enchantsight like?" Blackwood asked, fascinated and hoping to set them more at ease. Although their flustered demeanor was endearing, at odds with the brisk professional image he'd had of them from earlier in the day.

"Like seeing a different kind of light, colorful and tangible to the touch, that overlays the ordinary world. When you're crafting an enchantment, it's like sculpting with light. You pull it out of the Wall and position it just so."

"The Wall?" Blackwood asked.

"Sorry, enchanter jargon. The Wall is where magic comes from; it's a kind of barrier around the physical world that constrains material action. You manipulate the Wall to change the way things interact in the physical world; that's what makes magic. And it's the way you pull on it, the way you sculpt it, that gives enchanted items their power. If you sculpt it wrong, it makes a blobby mess and you just have to smooth it back into the Wall. But if you do it right, it's magic." Smoke laughed, self-consciously. "I guess that's obvious. But it feels like magic, too. You can feel it click into place, like puzzle pieces fitted together. You develop an instinct for it; you just know that this time, it'll do what you meant for it to do. I can't feel it the same way on enchantments once they're complete. I'm much more attuned with them while I'm casting. So examining an enchantment to see if it's working isn't the same connection. But there's still a beauty to it. The Wall itself is hard to see at all, just a faint haze, like an aura, around everything."

"Wow," Licorice said. "Now I'm sorry I slept through it."

Smoke ducked their head again. "I'm sure if you asked my apprentices, they'd have a different take on it." They smiled wryly. "It's not for everyone."

"How did you get an apprenticeship in the field?" Blackwood asked.

G'night

By this time, even Blackwood had finished eating, and the waitstaff had surreptitiously placed a ticket on the table. Smoke splayed their ears at the question, the insides reddening. "Oh, um, well." They picked up the ticket; it only tallied their meal and Licorice's, since Blackwood had an account. "I didn't realize it had gotten so late! I didn't mean to make you fly back in the dark, Blackwood. I should let you go." They scooted out of their seat and headed for the counter to pay.

Blackwood exchanged a glance with Licorice, who gave an exaggerated shrug. The two headed after Smoke. "I apologize for my impertinent question, Smoke," Blackwood said. "I did not mean to presume."

Smoke turned and gave him a dazzling smile. "What? Oh, no, not at all." They touched his hand in reassurance. "I just know how early you had to rise this morning, and of course I have that meeting with Master Corydalis. And I've already made both of you work so hard today -- "

Licorice licked sauce from the corner of her mouth. "I've worked a lot harder, believe me."

The kith enby smiled at both of them. "You're very kind. But I should get checked in to my hotel." Smoke turned back to pay for the ticket, stifling a yawn.

Blackwood offered them a ride, which both accepted. Smoke's hotel was closest, so he dropped them off first. Licorice claimed a good-night hug from the enchanter. Blackwood felt too self-conscious to shift to humanlike form when he still had to drop Licorice off, and envied her that hug. "Good night, master enchanter," he said, subdued, long neck snacked to bring his draconic head level with them.

Hugs!

"I thought I told you to call me Smoke," the enchanter told Blackwood with mock sternness. Smoke stepped in to slip their arms around the dragon's neck and hug him. Heartened, Blackwood returned the hug by tucking his chin against their back, then they took their leave.

As he carried Licorice to her building, they chatted idly for a minute or two. In a lull, Blackwood asked hesitantly, "Am I being paranoid, or did I make a terrible mistake in asking them how they became an enchanter?"

"Terrible mistake," Licorice confirmed, bluntly. Blackwood winced, and the human leaned down in the harness to pat his shoulder consolingly. "It'll be all right. I think they forgave you."

*

They were very nice people, Smoke thought, waving as Licorice and Blackwood flew off. *But I'm not getting into that whole sordid story with people I've only just met. Still, I could've handled that more gracefully.*

With a sigh, they checked into their room at the hotel and prepared for bed.

The next morning, they rose early, with plenty of time to consider their approach.

Sabotage

Breakfast at the commissary was starch-laden, bland, and unfathomably sweet. Most of the foods were baked or pan-fried concoctions of fine-ground grains, milk, and eggs. The commissary then offered to top these already-sweet goods with a variety of sauces, all of which were so syrupy-sweet that the fruits scattered within seemed tart by comparison. There was no

spice in any of it, unless one counted the one set of pastries that had a filling of butter and sugar with a hint of cinnamon. Even the sausages were unspiced, in addition to being of unidentifiable provenance.

Smoke did not linger over their platter of various-textured sugars. They were almost surprised there weren't kitchen ants in the commissary, with all these sweets to lure them.

But a quick check revealed signs of carpenter ants in the commissary, and none of kitchen ants.

Smoke did a quick round of the wards on the outsides of the buildings in the complex: they all looked much the same as the ones at the House of Chambers. Adequate, undamaged braided wards. They went to the roof of the House of Chambers to check on their gatherer.

Their gatherer reported incursions, one of rats and a different one for fleas, through two different spots on the outside of the existing wards.

Smoke would have found this report of normal, predictable problems much more heartening if the gatherer-analysis spell they'd left on it had not reported that there were problems with the gatherer.

The analysis spell couldn't tell Smoke what had caused the problems, only that it was reporting false positives on penetrations. Meaning attacks that had been repelled might show as successful. That bias would be particularly pronounced for ones connected to rats or fleas.

It was conceivable that Smoke had made a mistake in setting up the gatherer, or that some accident had caused the gatherer to have issues with its data. But Smoke found both the timing and the problem suspicious.

Smoke re-adjusted the gatherer, then went to the sites of the reports. They couldn't find any signs of bodies. Flea corpses, they could've overlooked. Rats, not so much. They went inside to find maintenance to ask if any rat corpses had been cleaned up overnight. But once inside, they realized it was only a few minutes until their meeting with Master Corydalis.

One of the guards escorted Smoke up four flights of stairs in the east wing of the House of Chambers, and down a marble hall. The building was beautifully crafted, the carved moldings and frescoed ceilings that depicted famous places from across the nation. Paintings and sculptures gifted by foreign dignitaries adorned the walls and stood on pedestals. It felt almost palatial.

Most of the doors in the hall were closed, though lights through frosted glass panes showed they were occupied. The office of the master of ceremonies had an open door to an antechamber occupied by a young kith man. The inner office door was closed.

Smoke introduced themselves to the kith, who assured them the master of ceremonies would be with them momentarily.

Behind the inner door, Smoke heard muffled voices, a deep bass rumble and a vibrant alto. The alto had begun with aggrieved, angry tones that mellowed as the conversation continued. Smoke debated asking the secretary where maintenance was and telling him they'd be right back.

Before they'd made up their mind to do so, the door opened. An elf woman with the kind of beauty elves were famed for stepped out. She moved with a fluid, natural grace, possessed of delicate features and full lips, skin warm brown and thick black hair woven into box braids and secured by golden clasps. She wore a flowing red overrobe over cream trousers.

Behind her was the largest humanlike-form draka Smoke had ever seen. He was so tall that he had to duck to keep his gold horns from scraping the door frame, and his shoulders broad enough that he seemed to fill it. He had gorgeous features and striking coloration: skin midnight-black, mane a burnished gold a few shades paler than his horns and eyes.

"Thank you so for your help, Master Corydalis." The elf had her head tilted back to watch him with fond eyes as he escorted her to the door.

"Of course, Representative Meadowlark. You know I am glad to be of service." He smiled as she stepped into the hall. After she left, his smile lapsed into a fleeting, pained expression, then he rallied and turned his smile upon Smoke.

It was a powerful smile.

"Good morning, honored. How may I be of assistance?"

Don't stare, Smoke told themselves. *Do not stare at the giant sexy draka. He is your boss. Remember this.* They tilted their head back to meet his gold eyes. Smoke was not a short person: they were of a height with an average draka. But their head didn't even reach Master Corydalis's shoulders. "I, um, I'm your new enchanter, and would you be able to tell me where maintenance is? I need to ask them a quick question and then I'll be right back. Sorry. It's related to the job." They canted their ears back, making their earrings chime.

Master Corydalis raised his eyebrows, bemused. "Certainly. Their main office is on the second floor, at the far end of the Green Hall. There's a sign on the door."

"Great." Smoke backpedaled to the door. "I'll be right back. Thank you. Sorry." They fled down the hall, thinking *I am not prepared for this.*

The maintenance office did log animal corpse removal, thankfully, and verified that they'd removed a dead rat from the west side of the building, on the outside. Smoke's gatherer had reported three rats as passing through the wards, and no deaths. So ... it still didn't add up.

Frowning, they started back to their employer's office. A draka enby emerged from the office to call after them: "Excuse me, master enchanter?" Smoke paused, letting the other enby catch up. "You were asking about the rat corpse from this morning?"

"Yes?"

"I found it, and it was ... strange. I did cleanup yesterday today, and didn't see it then. But when I found it this morning, it looked like it'd been dead for days, to be honest. I'd've thought a dog or cat had dragged it there and left it, but it was only crow-pecked."

Smoke's frown deepened. "Thank you." That ... didn't make any of this more sensible. They dashed back up the steps to the fourth floor. The kith secretary waved them into the inner office this time.

Master Corydalis sat at a massive desk, reading a report when Smoke stepped inside, but rose with a smile at their arrival. "Good morning, master enchanter. I am Corydalis, master of ceremonies for Courthall." He came around the desk to offer his hand.

His grip was warm and firm but considerate; Smoke hadn't felt this small next to someone since they were a child. It was different with a dragon-form draka: one expected them to be huge. "I'm Smoke. Master enchanter. From Crescent Bay. And you already knew all that. Um. Sorry about running off on you." *And this must be the worst first impression I've made on anyone since my apprenticeship.*

Corydalis's smile widened. "It's a pleasure to meet you, honored. I'm glad to see you are already hard at work on our troubles here. I'd not expected you for a few days, at least. Much less to be already too busy for a meeting. Please, have a seat. Have you uncovered anything already that you wished to share?"

They sank into the chair opposite the draka's. At least he didn't loom so large sitting down. His coloration was still gorgeous, though. Smoke fixed their eyes on the desktop. *Focus.* "A few things, master of ceremonies. The existing wards at Courthall are a sloppy affair, as I expect you've already surmised."

The draka grimaced. "I hope you're not going to follow that with 'and they need to be replaced entirely.'"

"No." Smoke took a deep breath and raised their eyes to meet Corydalis's. "To be fair, I'm not sure the wards are the cause of your vermin problem. They might be a component, but part of Courthall's problems look like sabotage."

Corydalis sat back in his chair, blonde eyebrows lifted, as he returned Smoke's attention. "I see. What leads you to this conclusion, master enchanter?"

The Causes of Suspicion

"A lot of small, odd things," Smoke answered. "The wards look functional, and even with braided wards I'd expect to see signs of a problem in the braid if three different strands weren't working. I'd certainly expect to see signs of it in the existing gatherer. But I don't. And a woman from maintenance reported that there was a problem with the hatch by the existing gatherer. Which doesn't mean anything, but it's an odd coincidence. Moreover, tampering with a gatherer is easier than tampering with a ward. The old gatherer doesn't have a spell to detect abnormalities with it. But the one I put up yesterday did, and my analysis spell said it was already maladjusted this morning, in a way that would increase the chance of false positives. It reported a three-rat incursion and no rats repelled last night, at a spot where maintenance found one dead rat. One dead rat that had probably been dead for a while but the corpse only showed up last night. You have carpenter ants -- ants that eat wood -- showing up in the food areas. As opposed to ants that eat food."

They took a deep breath. "It's possible to explain all of this without sabotage, but 'sabotage' requires far fewer strange coincidences. Even the kinds of problems you're having are suggestive of sabotage: the fleas and rats are annoying but not dangerous in the short term, while carpenter ants can do serious structural damage in the long term. Like a two-pronged assault designed to make the complex uninhabitable without hurting anyone. Is there anyone who would have wanted the previous enchanting firm fired?"

"Aside from me?" Corydalis smiled wryly. "They're a large organization and they've been both difficult and expensive for years. They're well-connected, however. Perhaps they've inherited some enemies from their connections."

Smoke nodded. "Another possibility -- is there anyone who stands to gain if the seat of government left Courthall?" Replacing all of the wards would be a costly endeavor. Some of them were installed when a building was constructed, and were almost impossible to correct afterwards.

The draka's mouth thinned to a hard line. "That is an all too real possibility. Speaker Iris has wanted the government seat to relocate to Kindewood for years, and the inability of Windbreak Enchantment to solve our latest problems has given her movement more supporters." Corydalis

folded his hands before him on the desk, and leaned forward to study Smoke with intense gold eyes. "If it's not a problem with the wards, master enchanter, is there ought that you can do for us?"

Smoke considered. "There are ways I can help, although only one of them is what you hired me for. The existing wards are still sloppy and I can improve them in various ways. I can also install more gatherers and monitor the situation to help you find the saboteurs. Or I can take steps to mitigate the problems the vermin cause. I could even talk to Windbreak Enchantment myself, in case they're more helpful towards another professional."

"Ah. And in your professional estimation, which of these measures would you recommend come first?"

Priorities

Smoke bit their lip, considering Corydalis's question. "Install more gatherers first. You'd normally only need one for a job like this, but multiple gatherers will have overlapping reports and be harder to tamper with. You can't really lock up a gatherer; it needs to be exposed to collect data. But if you can spare some people you trust to keep an eye on them and make sure no one tampers with them, that would be good.

"After that, my next priority would be to speak with Windbreak Enchantments. That shouldn't take long. Then work on mitigation. Once the gatherers have had some time to work, I'll have a better idea of where the current wards are weak and can reinforce appropriately. It'll give my apprentices time to arrive from Crescent Bay with my equipment, too."

The tall dark draka nodded, his gold gaze thoughtful on her. "I endorse your plan, master enchanter. I'll ask Security about guards to watch the new gatherers; if you want to designate one a priority, that will be more feasible than all of them. Windbreak Enchantment's address is in here with all our other documents on them and Courthall's wards." Corydalis offered a blueprint case along with a folder. "Courthall will cover your expenses. If you've never worked with the bureaucracy before: be sure to keep receipts and itemize everything. Document everything. It will make your life much easier in the long run." The corner of his mouth twitched up with an apologetic quirk.

He rose and came around the desk. Smoke stood as well, which did not make them feel any less dwarfed as Corydalis took their hand. "Thank you for your advice, Master Smoke. This is already the most productive conversation I've had with an enchanter in years. Is there anything else I can do to make your work easier?" he asked, the expression on his face sincere and considerate. For a dizzying moment, Smoke felt as if the full power of Courthall might be at their disposal, just for the asking.

No Actual Squealing

Smoke dropped their eyes, hesitant. "As it happens, I normally only need one gatherer for a job like this. So I did not bring enough supplies to create several. It's too late now to have my apprentices bring the supplies when they come, so I should buy components on site. Would you direct me to whatever forms I need to complete for an advance?"

The master of ceremonies gave another of his quirky smiles. "Of course. Allow me to expedite the process. How much do you need today?"

Their eyes rolled up, trying to do some quick calculations. They named a conservative figure. "It'll be at least that, but I can cover any excess out of my own funds for now."

Corydalis walked to a wall safe in his office and opened it, then extracted a sheaf of shek from a cash box. He counted out the sum Smoke had named, then increased it by 20%. "Let's not take any chances. I'll need a receipt from you." He wrote out two on a pad of paper, then had them sign it. "The budget office has expense on hand ... " He rummaged through a desk drawer to produce one with a flourish. "I'll direct this amount to be repaid to petty cash for my office ... " He filled in a box on the second page, then handed it to them. "There. It takes them a few weeks to reimburse, and I do not want you delayed."

"Thank you." Smoke smiled at him, then glanced at the page and gave a daunted laugh. "These are very ... thorough, I see. I'd better consult them for directions. Unless perhaps you could give me pointers? Over dinner?" Smoke canted their ears to the sides, caught between optimism and the desire to cringe at their own forwardness. They were afraid to look up from the form.

But when they did, Corydalis smiled at them as if it were any ordinary request. "Of course. It would be my pleasure."

Smoke was pretty sure they responded with something normal, like "Thank you, master of ceremonies. Good day," before they left. And probably no actual squealing. But they would not have wanted to swear to that in a court of law.

In any case, they recalled themselves to their job when Corydalis's secretary gave them a pocket map of the complex, with directions to an unused office and a key. "You can work out of there, if you need some space to review blueprints or store your equipment or whatever."

Smoke stopped by to make sure the key worked: it was a little windowless cube in the interior of the Hall of Bureaucracies. They dropped off the blueprint case, but took the folder with them to review while they took a floater to the nearest arcane supply store.

The folder told a grim story of the history between Windbreak Enchantments and Courthall. It began with the usual fare: negotiations between the two, a commitment list from Windbreak, followed by invoices and then maintenance correspondence. But over the last couple of years, Windbreak had become increasingly unresponsive. A half-dozen copies of letters from Courthall were answered by curt notes: "Will discuss in person at meeting." It wasn't clear if there were always notes from these meetings, or if the meetings even happened. But what notes did exist were unproductive. No wonder Corydalis had wanted to be quit of these people. The folder didn't contain the maintenance logs for Courthall. Smoke made a mental note to ask after those when they visited Windbreak Enchantments.

When they reached the enchanter's supply store, Smoke found the prices there lower than the same supplies in Crescent Bay. But they were completely out of stressed oakleaf ivy. Other kinds of stressed ivies could be substituted, and they had grenache which would be adequate for a gatherer. But oakleaf made for more durable, long-lasting enchantments. Smoke knew of a technique for using titanium-gold wire that was supposed to make even better gatherers than oakleaf, and the store did have titanium-gold wire. But they'd never actually tried using it because the wire was so much pricier. They asked at the counter, and the clerk recommended a couple of other stores in the area, but didn't know if they'd have it in stock either.

Monograph

After a few moments of dithering, Smoke asked the clerk, "Have you any good references on substitutions, or titanium-gold wire? I've heard good things about it, but I've not worked with it personally."

At the question, the kith clerk's blue eyes lit. "Oh, yes! We have a new monograph on metal wires, by Clover of Darkwrit City -- have you heard of him? He's very good, you'll love it." She led them to the shelves, sable-pointed tail flirting behind her. "We have three different alloys, but you'll want the 7:2, Clover says it's the best for information magic." It was also the cheapest, giving Smoke more confidence in the recommendation. "Are you an enchanter?" they asked the clerk.

"I want to be! I haven't found a master taking apprentices, and the colleges of magic are all too expensive for me." She sighed, wistful, then flashed a smile. "That's why I like working here! When it's slow, I can read through all the books."

Smoke felt a moment of regret that they didn't need a new apprentice. They purchased the book and the other supplies, and remembered they were having dinner with Master Corydalis tonight and they hardly knew any restaurant in town. "Do you have any recommendations for places to eat?" they asked the clerk.

Her ears perked. "Sure! Do you want fancy or homey or what? Do you like spicy?"

"Who doesn't like spicy?" Smoke asked, honestly bewildered. "Uhh ... one of each?"

The clerk grinned. "A kith after my own heart! My favorite fancy restaurant is Sunflare, which is all fondue and will make the broth and sauces as spicy as you like. For more casual, there's Curry This, which has like a million different curries and they're all great."

"Thank you!"

On the return ride to Courthall, Smoke skimmed through the book. It made for fascinating reading; Smoke didn't want to put it down to work on the gatherers. But after making sure they had a solid understanding of how to use their new reagent, they started putting up gatherers around Courthall.

They added five new ones, total, each on top of one of the tall buildings surrounding the complex's park. By the time they finished the last, it was near dinner time.

Genderfluid

Smoke had only brought one change of clothes to Hallston. They were expecting their wardrobe to catch up with them when the apprentices did, tomorrow. But they didn't want to wear the same clothes to dinner when they'd been tromping around dusty rooftops in it all day. Not that they'd changed for dinner yesterday, but Master Corydalis's day suit had been more formal than what Licorice or Blackwood were wearing. So they stopped at a ready-made clothing store instead of going back to the hotel.

They browsed through the sorts of things they usually wore: long jackets in rich colors or dark ones, silk scarves, crisp shirts, and the like. None of felt right, and Smoke found themselves drifting towards fancy, frilly clothing.

An evening gown like the sun rising caught their eye, dyed fiery red at the ankle-length hem to pale yellow at the high collar. It had a matched short jacket with lace cuffs, lending it an air of professionalism despite the long, draping skirt. It didn't have the beading or jewels of the most formal gowns.

Smoke didn't own anything like it.

They tried it on, and stood before the dressing room mirror, staring at a feminine reflection. Slowly, Smoke exchanged enby earrings and put on a pair of female ones she had in her jacket pocket. She was surprised to find how much she liked the drape and swish of the dress, the hidden girdle that slimmed her waist, the way the jacket suggested more bust than she possessed, the cheerful pastel colors, everything womanly about it. She wanted it at once, and second-guessed that desire almost as quickly. *Is this the right kind of dress to wear to a dinner with my new employer? Why did I ask my new employer to dinner anyway? Do I want to be female because Master Corydalis is so very imposingly male? Am I afraid that being enby is too much like competing with him, and I can't? Am I trying to conform to some ancient stereotype of little female paired with larger male? That sterotype doesn't even work for draka, their females are taller.* Smoke's train of thought derailed as she tried to imagine a person bigger than Corydalis. ... *usually taller. Maybe not taller than him. Would Master Corydalis find a smaller male more appealing? Do I care this much about what he thinks? Is this about him?*

Or do I just want to wear a pretty dress and be female for a few hours?

Smoke rolled her eyes. The whole thing felt like a debate that ought to have been settled a century ago, when gender-signal earrings fell into fashion and people stopped policing the gender identities of others. But here she was.

She made sure the expense form fit in one of the gown's pockets, then strode out of the dressing room with the skirt swishing pleasingly about her ankles. "I'll take this, please." She let the clerk talk her into matching slippers, but held the line when he tried to persuade her to add costume jewelry or a flashier pair of female earrings. She didn't want her outfit to be too fanciful.

When she returned to Courthall, she found Corydalis already in the House of Chambers' lobby. "Oh! I hope I've not kept you waiting long, sir."

Corydalis half-turned at the sound of her voice. His motion froze, arrested, wings raised slightly for balance. Then he completed the move and delivered a courteous bow. "Not at all, master enchanter. I came down from my office only a moment ago."

Smoke relaxed, returning a curtsey. "Good timing, then. Did you have any place in particular in mind? Someone recommended I try Curry This and it sounded good."

"I've not been there, madame, but I am game to try." He offered his arm. "Please, lead on." As she took his arm and they glided out of the giant lobby, he asked, "So, how did your first full day at Courthall go?"

Burbling with Excitement

Master Corydalis looked, if anything, more astonishing than he had at their morning meeting. He'd changed as well, into a jacket with a long, swishing train and a high front: considered a feminine cut in Lightshel, though it looked good on every gender. Corydalis, with his broad shoulders and narrow hips, wore it very well indeed. As she stood beside him, she thought he was even taller than she'd thought, until she realized from his stride that he was wearing high-heeled boots. Heels were masculine choice, for the extra height they gave and the elegance they lent a man's walk.

Absorbed by the look of him, the striking contrast between gold hair and black skin, the feel of his muscular arm beneath her hand, Smoke almost missed his question. Her words tripped over themselves to make up for the pause. "I had a great day! The supply store was out of treated oakleaf, which is my usual durability reagent for gatherer spells. But I'd heard titanium-gold wire was superior, and they had that. So I got it, and a book on techniques, and it was amazing! There are so many applications for the stuff, and it has a lot of properties that will make information spells much better. For instance, I have an analysis spell that I use on all my gatherers, and with this wire, I was able to make it a much more detailed spell. It's much better at pinpointing the source of anomalous reports, whether it's interference through the Wall, or a physical event, and even what kind of physical event: weather, water, fire, physical disruption by living or nonliving material. Also, it'll make the gatherer itself more resilient against that kind of interference."

Smoke beamed up at him as she babbled on, "and that's not even all! I haven't finished the book yet, because I needed to get all those gatherers set up. Which I did! Five of them. But I'm looking forward to rest of the monograph because my work is so dependent on good information, and this is a treasure mine. I do hope it's not overstating the matter." She ground to a halt, abruptly realizing she'd been burbling technicalities at a non-practitioner. Her ears tilted back. "My apologies, Master Corydalis, I didn't intend to ramble on. I hope your day went well?"

He smiled, setting Smoke at ease. "My day was fine, if not so engrossing as yours. When will your work of today bear fruit?"

"I'll check them tomorrow. They'll have records of any activity that happens between setup and then. There's some overlap with the new ones and the one I set up yesterday, so I'm curious to see if they give different results. The new ones will indicate ant activity inside the wards even if the ants don't cross the barriers -- that's a feature of the new wire! -- so I can find where your carpenter ant nests are, since they're likely to be inside the buildings."

Corydalis's eyes lit. "Now that is excellent news."

The Master of Ceremonies

"I told you I could help, Master Corydalis." Master Smoke gave him a playful smile. Corydalis smiled back, and then ducked his head quickly as one horn caught on a tree branch along the path to the street. *Watch where you're going, not just her,* he reminded himself. *What are you, besotted? You shouldn't be staring like that at a contractor in any event.* He schooled his eyes forward as Smoke said, "I feel silly for not knowing, but, um, what exactly does a master of ceremonies do? I mean, here at Courthall. I gather it's not like the theatrical equivalent."

Corydalis chuckled. "Not exactly, no, although sometimes the job does feel like directing a three-ring circus. I am the head of those functions of Courthall that are not directly related to governance. So, for example, maintenance, catering, scribe and messenger services, Courthall security, groundskeeping, entertainment, events planning -- these departments all ultimately answer to me. The representatives and nobility have some personal staff, and they organize the committee and general assembly meetings and other affairs of governance."

Smoke's blue eyes rounded, her ears canted to the side as she gazed up at him. "Oh. That sounds like a lot of work."

"It is," he said, ruefully. "But I have a great deal of help. When I have too much to do, it is almost always my own fault."

"How is that?"

By now they had reached the street, and Corydalis spread his wings and held out a hand to flag down one of the patrolling floaters. He handed Smoke into its cab, then followed behind her. "Because it means that I have chosen to do work myself that I ought to delegate to someone else. Or I have chosen the wrong delegate for a job and I need to hire the right one. There are some fires one cannot avoid having to put out oneself, of course. But the art lies in getting the right people pointed in the right directions, and then loosing them to their tasks. If I do that properly, there's nothing left for me to do."

Smoke leaned back in the floater seat, her grey features thoughtful. "That still sounds like a lot of work. So if you're in charge of all the non-governing stuff, who do you report to?"

"The prime minister," he told her.

She gave him a sidelong look so alarmed that Corydalis laughed. "You report to the prime minister?!"

"Don't worry, it's not contagious."

"I don't mean -- that is -- what are *you* doing managing a replacement enchanter *personally*?"

"My job." He gave her another rueful smile, and added, "Badly. The details comprise a complicated political equation."

In the Details

Smoke watched him, ears tilted in a listening pose. "What are the details, if I may ask?"

Next to her in the floater, Corydalis grimaced. On the one hand, gossip did not become a person in his position, and on the other, the details might be relevant to Smoke's work. "It's hard to decide where to begin. You know the stereotype of corruption, where lawmakers hire their friends and relatives to do work instead of hiring the person best suited to the job?" At her nod, he continued, "It is rarely so simple as that stereotype. Sometimes one befriends people because one admires how well they do their job. Or one's relation offers the best rate for a contract. Or some other objective measure shows them the most qualified."

He gestured with one hand to wave that aside. "But you get the idea. It is difficult to pick apart relationships or be assured of true objectivity.

"Windbreak Enchantments was first hired by the government fifty-seven years ago. Their work was, at the time, considered good. When Courthall's were the only buildings in that part of the city to survive the Hallston Inferno forty years ago, Windbreak's reputation improved to impeccable. They started trying to convince us to switch to a new style of wards -- more costly upfront, but cheaper to maintain -- thirty-five years ago. Twenty-eight years ago, when my predecessor and the general opinion of the day concluded the new method well-established and sound, we made the switch. Around that time, the company accepted an apprentice, Rain. Rain's older brother is now Representative Kite. He was mayor of Hallston at the time. One of W.E.'s masters, Berry, married Ash, the brother of the Duchess of Deeplakes.

"Since then, Windbreak Enchantment's founder has retired. Four partners, including now-Master Rain and Master Berry, ran the firm for several years. Then Rain left under acrimonious circumstances, the details of which do not reflect well on either side. Rain founded her own enchantment firm, Pouring Magic. Representative Kite has tried, several times, by various means, to place the contract for Courthall with Pouring Magic. The Duchess of Deeplakes was adamant about maintaining the contract with W.E. The maneuvering between the two has become the source of its own feud."

Corydalis took a deep breath. "Two years ago, the maintenance department started having communication issues with W. E. Our department claimed they weren't keeping agreed appointments, their department claimed the appointments didn't exist or were at another time. They said Courthall wasn't taking necessary steps, our side said we'd never been told to do so, etcetera. We changed the contacts on both sides, things settled for a couple of months, then got worse. Pouring Magic has been courting my people in maintenance, to convince them we should switch. The Duchess of Deeplakes found out and accused Pouring Magic of sabotage. Not of the wards, mind you -- at the time we didn't have any problems with the wards themselves." Corydalis spread his hands. "But of the ruining the professional relationship, by stealing or forging correspondence between us. Courthall security conducted an investigation and found no evidence of this. But by the time we did start having issues with the wards, the atmosphere was thoroughly poisoned. Windbreak Enchantments is convinced of bad faith on our part, and most of my subordinates are convinced of bad faith on theirs. I went to Crescent Bay to find you, Master Smoke, because the local situation is simply impossible. And I didn't ask you to report to maintenance because they are justifiably embittered by months of dealing with fleas, rats, ants, and enchanters who insist all three are directly or indirectly their fault. Moreover, I don't want to bring the weight of the duchess's disapproval down on them, and likely you, in addition to everything else. So. That is how I end up with you as my direct report." He smiled wryly. "Are you sorry you asked yet?"

Dramatically Alarming

The master enchanter gave Corydalis another of her wide-eyed looks, ears canted downwards in dismay. "No! Not at all; I need to know these things to do my job. How are you going to keep my work from being sabotaged, or me from being run off by your partisan legislators?" She put a hand to her forehead dramatically. "This is extremely alarming!" With a little twist of her torso, she swooned backwards towards him.

Startled, Corydalis caught her in his lap, one arm behind her shoulders. His other hand crossed over her chest catch her arm against her side and ensure she didn't slide off. "Er. Master Smoke?"

She cracked open one eye, as if spying surreptitiously. "My hero! You'll protect me, won't you?" Smoke gave him a little mischievous smile and added, "All right, maybe not that alarming. But I admit it is disconcerting. How do I keep out of all these machinations?"

He chuckled. "In fairness, until you came into my office this morning, actual sabotage or circumvention of the wards had not struck me as at all probable. If Pouring Magic was willing to conduct sabotage, the wards would have been the place to start, not something they'd attempt two years after the accusation. Moreover, nothing in the investigation indicated P.M. had engaged in any wrongdoing. There wasn't just insufficient proof: there was no evidence. The two companies have an acrimonious rivalry, but that's a far cry from criminal conduct or tortious

interference," he answered, gazing down at her. Her slight frame felt beguilingly comfortable against his lap. *This is not professional behavior*, he told himself. *Laugh at her joke and help her sit up*. Instead, he found himself shifting his legs to provide better support for her back.

"So you don't think they've done anything unethical." As Smoke started to sit up, the floater turned up a steep slope and gravity tipped her against his chest. She paused, her cheek snuggled against his lapel.

"Eh." Corydalis raised one hand enough to waggle the fingers. "Unethical is a much broader term." *Encompassing things like cuddling up to one's contractors*, he reminded himself, and then countered with, *oh, lighten up. Holding her for thirty seconds is nothing like sexual intercourse, and it's not like she's throwing herself at me to get the contract. She already has the contract*. He cleared his throat and continued, "I judged W. E. guilty of avoiding work, a tendency exacerbated by a bad personal relationship with Courthall employees. And P.M. guilty of nothing worse than pursuing the contract with uncommon vigor, exacerbated by a vindictive streak. Neither company has stirred up rumors of bad behavior outside of their conflict with one another, and nothing within the conflict has any evidence. It felt more like the situation when the wind knocks over a vase, and two siblings hear the crash and immediately point to the other. "He did it, Dad!" He smiled at Smoke again. "As an unrelated party, I did not anticipate any trouble for you from them. And I still think sabotage by Pouring Magic is unlikely. But Courthall security is investigating the sabotage given your information. And I did position a lookout to keep an eye on your new gatherers. We'll be increasing overall security in the buildings starting tomorrow to watch for saboteurs. Are there any other particular measures you'd like me to take to assure your safety, or that of your work?"

The Crown District

"Mmm." Smoke curled one arm up to touch Master Corydalis's forearm. She hadn't meant to mock-faint into his lap: she'd been aiming for his shoulder and missed. Now that she was here, she hadn't quite figured out how to leave. He had a very comfortable lap. Lying in it was probably taking too much advantage of the casual atmosphere. "No, you sound like you have everything under control. Although, wait, I am concerned about my apprentices, who will be arriving tomorrow. I normally have them run errands for me and do independent work, but I'm not sure that's advisable given the atmosphere. Could I -- I don't know -- get a local assistant? Someone who know their way around and could keep my boys from stepping into any hornets' nests?"

"Certainly that can be arranged." Master Corydalis was still smiling at her, with that devastating smile he'd employed at their first meeting. His legs shifted under her. He had a very comfortable lap. Those long legs and strong arms provided plenty of support.

"Thank you, sir. You're very kind." *I can't get up now*, Smoke told herself. *That'd make it look like I flopped against him just to extract a promise or something. I need to make getting up look natural.* "How far is it from Courthall to the Trade District, do you know? I've not gotten my bearings in Hallston yet."

"Not far. Two miles or so, perhaps. The address you gave for Curry This might be two and a half. We're in the Crown District now."

"Oh, are we?" Smoke straightened; the draka gracefully assisted her, as if strange people fell into his lap all the time. Maybe they did. She gazed out the floater window on her left, away from him, and watched the Crown District. It had a lot of ancient mansions and manor houses. To Smoke's eye, they were over-ornamented and sprawling. She liked the height and grandeur and cleaner lines of Crescent Bay's skyline better. As residences for a single family, they were imposing. She couldn't imagine the army of maids needed just for dusting. "Are we going to pass the Palace?"

"Not exactly. You'll be able to glimpse it on the right, when we reach Candid Street. But we'll be several blocks shy of it. We could ask the driver to detour, if you like."

Smoke turned to look past him. He'd obligingly leaned back so she could see out his window.

The Hallston Palace

"I would like to see the palace," Smoke admitted, even if she did expect to be in Hallston for a while and there was no urgency.

With an unselfconscious ease, Corydalis slid open the panel at the front of the floater and requested the driver detour to circle the palace. "To the left, if you please," he added, before sitting back. To Smoke, he continued, "There are tours of the public areas of the palace interior a few times a week, if you decide you'd like a closer look. But the exterior is worth seeing too."

The Hallston palace encompassed a full city block, and had a grandeur unlike the houses of the nobility around it. It was a feat of combined architecture and enchantment. It was all in alabaster white, faintly iridescent and illuminated by bright rows of light globes along its trim. Its wings rose to either side of the main building, in smooth arcs over private gardens. The glass bottoms of the wings cast light into the gardens. The grounds were a fanciful menagerie of plants, bushes, and flowers sculpted into the shapes of mythical animals, as well as suggesting the mysterious cliffs and exotic locales where such creatures might be found. Smoke pressed against the glass of her window to take it in: Corydalis's request to the driver meant the palace was on her side of the floater, rather than his. "Oh, it's marvelous! Is the Ruler in residence now? Is it as improbable on the inside as the out, or does it look like a place where people live?"

"The Ruler is not in residence at this time. I believe they are due next in a few weeks. The private quarters look like a place where people live. The public tours of the inside are just as unlikely as the exterior. It's a work of art."

Smoke glanced over her shoulder at him. "Have you seen the private quarters, Master Corydalis?"

"A couple of times. As assistant, not guest; I helped with the preparations for one of their majesty's private events."

Smoke raised her eyebrows. "You must have an interesting employment history, sir." She sat back in her seat as the floater completed the circuit of the palace and continued on its way to the restaurant.

The black draka shrugged. "No more so than anyone else, I should think. Did you train as an enchanter at a young age, Master Smoke?"

"At fourteen, yes. That was a normal age of apprenticeship when I was young." The normal age had been twelve, actually, though by law apprenticeships didn't start until sixteen now. Autumn was eighteen and Walnut seventeen. "I've never held a job out of the field." Smoke changed the subject quickly, before he could ask for more details. "Do you have family in Hallston?"

"My youngest daughter is an adjunct at Hallston University, and so busy that I only see her a little more often than her two older siblings," he said, with a wry smile. "I didn't grow up in the area, but I've lived here for the last thirty years."

"No spouses...?" Smoke asked, both curious and cautious of prying.

A shake of his head made a stray lock of gold hair fall across one eye. "My former wife and I divorced eight years ago. You?"

"My wife passed away two years ago," Smoke answered, wistful.

"Ah, my apologies. I am sorry for your loss."

"It's fine. I raised the subject." She smiled at him. "I have two grown children, too. A master goldsmith and a bookbinder. I still miss my wife, but I've no regrets."

"As it should be." The floater arrived at the Curry This, and Corydalis helped her out with a natural grace. He offered his arm, and they walked in together.

Everyone's So Helpful

Curry This smelled delicious even before they stepped inside, the scent of cumin, coriander, pepper and other spices hanging in the air. Smoke breathed it in, with a growing confidence that the food here would not be bland. Corydalis and she were overdressed for the atmosphere here. The staff wore simple off-shoulder dresses, or tunics with trousers, and the other patrons were dressed either as if they'd come from work, or in similarly casual attire. Heads turned their way as they waited to be seated. Smoke couldn't help thinking that Corydalis would draw eyes no matter what he was wearing, though.

If the draka noticed, he showed no sign of discomfort with the attention. His eyes were on her. "You look like you've come home."

"I love curry," she admitted. "My father made curries all the time when I was growing up. Coconut milk and chicken curry is my first comfort food."

"I hope Courthall is not driving you to comfort eating already."

Smoke laughed. "No, not at all. The exact nature of the problem is a conundrum, but I like puzzles. And all the people have been helpful and solicitous. Especially Blackwood and Licorice." The maitre'd led them to one of the tables near the center of the room. The restaurant was busy enough that the ones along the walls were all full.

"Ah, I am glad to hear it." He gave a slight shake of his head, smiling again. "I admit, I have had a private and rather irrational fear that you might find Courthall as difficult as your predecessor."

"Not at all! Blackwood not only flew me all the way back to Courthall himself, but he offered to guide me around on arrival. He showed me where the old gatherer was, and took me to the top of the House of Chambers so I could plant my own. Licorice was kind enough to show me about the rest of the building. She's the one who showed me the kitchen, where I discovered you had carpenter ants."

"Excellent! Ah, excellent that they took good care of you, that is. I remain unenthusiastic about the carpenter ants." He gave her another wry smile, and Smoke giggled. Corydalis hesitated a moment, then asked, "What department is Licorice in?"

"Maintenance."

Blond eyebrows drew together over gold eyes. "Hmm. Did she say what division?"

"No. She was fixing a problem with the hatch at the top of the Four's globe when we met," Smoke offered. "Why?"

"No reason. It's a large campus; I fear I don't know every employee." He said it apologetically, with the air of someone who thought he ought to know everyone. Or perhaps someone who had thought he did know everyone. Corydalis glanced down at his menu.

Strange Happenings

Corydalis studied the menu in front of him, conscious that he'd already spent an inordinate amount of time studying his fascinating new enchanter. And it bothered him that he didn't recognize Licorice by name: he made a point of knowing and meeting everyone who worked for Courthall. Yes, that was over a thousand people and it was unreasonable to assume he could remember them all, but it still niggled at him. *Perhaps I should ask her what Licorice looks like; that might jog my memory.*

Before he said anything, Smoke asked, "Has there been anything else strange going on at Courthall, apart from the influx of vermin?"

Corydalis chuckled. "I imagine that depends on what counts as 'strange'." At the tilt of her head, he added, "Most people find the machinations of representatives and nobles are often a little ... arcane. Perhaps even more arcane than actual arcana."

Smoke giggled. "Enchanting is a straightforward matter of applying the correct forces in the correct fashion. It is not easy, mind you. But when you know the art, it's perfectly logical."

"I daresay the same might be said for the art of politics. But the motivations of the players and their causes are always changing, and that means the nature of the game changes as well." He paused to consider her question in more detail. The cause of Rep. Meadowlark's complaints of this morning might qualify as a strange event, but discussing that struck him as too much like gossip. Another event did come to mind, however. "We did have something of a locked-room mystery."

"A locked-room mystery?" Smoke blinked at him.

"Nothing serious, mind," Corydalis added. "Just strange." He paused as the waiter returned to take their order. This story was a trifle gossipy too, but it was also common knowledge at Courthall. When the waiter had left again, the draka continued, "Several days ago, Lord Sky met with two representatives in the morning to discuss a proposed bill. They took a break at lunch, and Lord Sky locked the meeting room with their notes inside. When they returned, their notes were gone. Lord Sky locked the door again, and all three of them, with Sky's secretary in tow,

came to cry murder and thievery at me. I accompanied them back to the meeting room. Lord Sky unlocked it -- and all their notes were on the table."

"What? Where they'd left them in the first place?" Smoke asked.

"To all appearances," Corydalis said. "Although Lord Sky's secretary, Mr. Hawthorne, thought they'd been rearranged from where he'd left them before lunch. Mr. Hawthorne was the one who'd been taking notes. But all four thought nothing was missing."

Smoke frowned. "Could they have returned to the wrong room the first time?"

"No, and that's one of the interesting parts. Lord Sky is more paranoid than most, and this was a private meeting room adjacent to his office. He has a special style of lock on it, with a clever arrangement where the keyhole is never visible," Corydalis said. At Smoke's perplexed look, he waved a hand. "You kind of have to see it to understand, but there's a cylinder that holds the key. You socket in the cylinder, then you can twist the mechanism so that it lines up with the key in the cylinder. Then you depress a button on the cylinder that puts the key in the lock, and turn that. I'm not convinced this mechanism is actually unpickable, but it's not pickable in the ordinary way. Lord Sky has the only key, and it's the only room in Courthall with that particular key. And the room has no windows or other entrances."

"Well, if you've not a master key, why did they come crying to you about it?"

Corydalis chuckled. "Because I am the master of ceremonies, and it's my job to hear complaints if things disappear mysteriously."

The Head Monkey

"Isn't that a job for Security?" Smoke took a sip from her drink, a beverage of carbonated water and unsweetened yogurt, flavored by salt. Corydalis had tried it before and found it too sour, but Smoke gave every sign of enjoying it.

Corydalis leaned back in his chair, half-smiling. "Ultimately, yes. But the nobility is accustomed to attention from the top of the chain of command. If they're upset about some problem, they come to me first."

"You don't discourage that?" She watched him over the rim of her glass, head tilted in curiosity.

He wagged the fingers of one hand and reached for his own glass. His was a fruity concoction adorned by a trio of grapes impaled on a wooden skewer. "It's complicated. I dislike it when a lord pressures my people to appease him with immediate results, or delivers an angry diatribe accusing them of incompetence. If a noble has some minor inconvenience, I trust them to tell it to the nearest flunky, if only because a flunky will be close at hand. But if the noble is truly upset, enough to find 'whomever's in charge', I'd rather they complained to me than my head of security. I'm not going to spend the rest of the day rattled because Lord Sky called me the head monkey at a zoo in the care of thieving pigeons and lackwit squirrels."

Smoke laughed. "Did he really call you that?"

Corydalis grinned back. "I regret to say he was rather more vulgar and rather less inventive than that."

"But someone did?" she asked. "Or have you had occasion to deploy that one yourself?"

"Ook ook," he said, with calm aplomb, and Smoke chuckled again. He liked the way she looked laughing, unselfconscious, the fine grey fur around her blue eyes crinkling with her amusement. Corydalis glanced away, pretending to admire a colorful gold-framed landscape on the restaurant wall.

"I suppose mysterious disappearing and reappearing papers are not likely to be connected to your ant problem," Smoke conceded.

"Probably not. Although the ants could have gotten into a locked room, granted. Do carpenter ants eat paper?"

She shook her head, smiling. "They don't actually eat wood, even. They dig homes and tunnels in it to hollow out living spaces."

"So much for that possibility. I know the fleas definitely don't eat paper. Not that it would explain the reappearance of the pages in any case. Security assures me that an enchanter would have to have broken the door, or at least the lock, to get inside. They haven't given up on the puzzle yet, but I don't believe they've made any progress on it. I don't suppose you've any insights?" Corydalis returned his gaze to her face, careful to remain leaning back and his posture casual. He was well aware of how easy it was for an individual of his size and position to intimidate others.

Not Yet

"Not yet," Smoke admitted with a smile of her own. She liked the aura about him, a kind of gentleness at odds with his great size. "What bill were they working on?"

"A bit of legal arcana, as I recall," Corydalis answered. "They're trying to create a legal definition of a person."

"... isn't there one already?"

"Not as such. If I understand correctly -- realize this is not my field of expertise -- it's a matter of common law. Everyone knows what a person is when you see one, so you don't need to define one. It's surprisingly hard to define 'person' in a way that encapsulates everyone you'd want to define as a person without including things that you don't. A senile shapechanger trapped in their feline form, for instance, is clearly still a person. But a cat who can't shapeshift is just as clearly not. A mute elf is a person and a parrot isn't. You can say 'anyone born to members of the four races', but would that mean that if I don't know my parentage, I'm not a person? What if my parents don't know their parentage? Does the government issue documents at birth that certify personhood and do you stop qualifying as a person if you don't have one?"

Smoke blanched. "That sounds nightmarish. Why don't they just leave it as a matter of common law? Then the courts can decide on a case-by-case basis where they have all the specifics before them, right? Did a court rule that some person oughtn't have the rights of a person and they're trying to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

"No, not so far as I am aware. But some legislators, Lord Sky among them, believe that the absence of a consistent legal standard of 'person' opens a path to corruption and people registering their dogs to vote or somesuch." Corydalis's lips twitched as he tried not to smile. "I am inclined to agree with you that the matter is best left to individual judges to interpret as needful, and perhaps not the best to present Lord Sky's position that the legislature must weigh in upon the subject. But the matter is outside of my bailiwick."

"Mm. Mine too, I suppose." Smoke contemplated the subject. "Why would anyone want to make their notes disappear? Is it a very controversial subject?"

Corydalis wagged the fingers of one hand. "It has the potential to be. Several legislators are strongly opposed to Lord Sky or anyone else working on the subject. But it's not even a bill in committee yet, just a topic that he's thinking about presenting a bill upon. It is a long, long way from becoming law. I don't even know what his group's working definition is, but judging by the volume of their notes, they are putting a lot of thought into it beforehand."

"So you don't know what incident motivated them to start work on this bill?"

Corydalis shook his head. "Or if there was an incident, for that matter. Sometimes legislators look for things that could become problems in the future and address them now."

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Conversational gambits

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<poll-item>Ask if there've been any other odd events like this one.</poll-item>
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