

I woke up in Master's arms. He was watching me as I stirred, my eyes unfocused at first and clearing up once I realized I was awake. I gave his cheek a gentle lick, and he chuckled and stood up. I stretched, curled my tail, and spread my wings. It's hard to miss, but: I'm a dragon. My name is Princess, and my Master is a man named Tola. We live in a mage tower in a land known as Terra, but it turns out we're both from Earth. I was turned into a dragoness by the previous owner of the tower, a mad wizard named Elimaio, and together Tola and I defeated him. Now Tola has taken over the tower in order to save me from the chopping block, and this led to him studying the books left behind and starting to learn magic on his own. Over time, I came to realize I actually liked being his pet, so now he's my Master. And just recently, we realized that the weight I've been putting on is actually a clutch of eggs. My life is certainly wild.

After a quick breakfast with Master giving me double portions, we spent the morning preparing for another trip to Winselton. Shane's bi-weekly wagon was going to be here soon, and we had no idea what to expect, so we were grabbing what might come in handy. Well, Master was grabbing. I was following him from room to room, and pointing things out.

A recent purchase had been a set of leather straps and buckles, which Master was arranging around my body. Properly worn, it was a harness with rings to attach things to. This let me haul some of the heavier items, like the bags with books in them. He was bringing a couple to read and reference on the road, as well as his "spellbook". I wondered if all wizards made their spellbooks the same way, as a sort of cheat-sheet, quick-reference, memory-jogging type of thing instead of copying entire spells from start to finish. Probably. The only other wizard I knew was Elimaio, and we didn't exactly talk shop. He definitely wasn't in the mood to make friendly conversation after I shredded his upper body and throat... I shuddered a little at the memory. Even if it wasn't as bad as it was before, it still bothered me to remember that moment. Still, if I hadn't, Elimaio would've killed Tola, and I never would've been able to have the life I do now.

The packs were clipped firmly in place on my harness, and I took a few steps to make sure they were sitting right. I nodded, getting a quick pat on the head, as a shout from outside interrupted our thoughts. "Mage Tola, uh, Sir! You are still coming with us, correct?"

We quickly headed out, greeting the driver of the wagon. His horse didn't like me much, and my glaring at it only made it more uneasy. Sometimes I forget I'm something of an apex predator, and the effect that has on herbivores. Either way, we quickly got settled in the back of the wagon, in the small open space left after all of Shane's trade goods had been packed.

Once on the road, the driver felt the silence to be uncomfortable, and tried to make conversation. "So, still got the dragon, do ye? She didn't have bags on her last time, I thought."

"No, the harness is new. She's taking to it well, though. She's a good girl." I huffed a little, blushing.

"Aye, seems helpful, I s'ppose. You aren't worried about her... just taking off and flying away? With all your stuff?"

"Not really, she's had plenty of opportunity to leave if she desired. She stays because she wants to stay." Master gave my head more rubbings, scritchng behind my horns. I couldn't help but let out a soft purr.

"You really don't keep her with magic, then? You just... trust her that much?" He definitely seemed worried. Probably picturing a wagon full of supplies with an angry Shane demanding coin for it all.

“She’s never once caused a single problem, has she? I trust her, and she trusts me. Are you saying I lack the wisdom to know what I’m doing, with how I treat my pet?” Ooh, I always cracked a smile when Master started bringing out the Imperious Mage Voice, usually to impress someone who was being annoying. It was more of a bluff than anything else, but it was amusing to see people backpedal.

“No, no! Beggin’ yer pardons and all, I just... Well, I ain’t never seen a dragon before, you know? Can’t help but want to make sure nothing’s gonna happen, is all.” Rare was the person who didn’t fall for The Voice.

“Do not worry, Princess is a total sweetheart and would never do anything to harm you or your cargo. Unless, of course, you gave her very good reason to...”

“No reason! I swear it!”

If the silence was awkward before, it was even worse now, as he made very sure to be focused intently on the road ahead of him, and not even glance at the passengers behind him just in case. I spent the rest of the trip half-doing with my head in Master’s lap.

We arrived at Winselton, the wagon continuing on its way after we disembarked. The city gates were pretty impressive, you simply didn’t see walled cities like this back on Earth. We stepped inside, and I couldn’t help but slink a little, trying to shy away from people on all sides while staying close to Master. The streets were as busy as ever, but we’d been to our destination before: The Guard Towers. They were located pretty close to the city gates, probably a guardhouse near each one and others scattered through town. Master knocked on the door, and I sat at his feet slightly behind him. I really didn’t like this building. The last time I was here, I was locked in a cage while guardsmen discussed selling me to a butcher and getting a nice cut of the gold. It’s a little unnerving to be aware of the monetary value of your body parts.

The same Guard Captain as back then answered the door. She might not have recognized Master right away, but the moment she saw me, she did. “Ah, you. I hear you’ve been settling in nicely, that Hammerfell is happy to have you. I’m glad you seem to be more upstanding than the tower’s previous occupant.” She almost seemed disappointed not to be arresting us.

“Yes, well, as much as our previous meeting was a touch... adversarial, I actually have something to report that should be of interest to the Crown. It seems Elimao had dealings with a group known as The Brotherhood of Shadows, and they are hoping to establish dealings with me. From what I’ve learned of them, I have no desire to assist them in any way, and it seems likely you’d feel the same way.”

“The Brotherhood? Here? They try to establish a foothold from time to time, but it’s been a while... Perhaps they are simply better at hiding it than before.” She looked a bit concerned, and it threw off her usual bravado. Good.

“Yes, it was my hope I could bring this to your attention. I’m a touch concerned that upon learning of my refusal, that Princess and I could become targets.”

“The Princess? You’re having dealings with the Royal Family?” Her eyes were wide, now, as if trying to calculate exactly how much trouble she was in for her earlier rudeness.

“Ah, no, I mean just Princess. My dragon? You’ve met her?” He gestured at me, my head dipping a little. “After I rescued her from a tower, twice, the nickname stuck. Sorry for the confusion.”

“Oh. You actually kept that thing? You must be spending most of your day cleaning droppings out of your tower, then.” Maybe she wanted to make up for lost rudeness by doubling down. Maybe I should speak up, see if I can convince her I’m actually royalty.

“She’s been an invaluable partner, and she’s perfectly capable of going outside on her own. I’ve never once had her make a mess, unlike heavy-booted guards that left mud and broken furniture and upended drawers everywhere...”

“Harumph. Well, keep her under control, and it’s your loss to not cash in on her hide.”

“A loyal, loving pet is worth far more than whatever sum of Sovereigns her scales would fetch. I’ll not hear another word of any harm coming to her.” Huh, that’s really getting under his skin. That made me feel kinda warm in the heart. My tail wagged a little without thinking of it.

“Yes, yes. Anyway, come inside, we can discuss what you know of the Brotherhood.”

We stepped inside, and we were led to a room with a desk, where the Guard Captain sat and motioned us to join her.

“Okay, start by telling me everything you know about the offer.”

“We were interrupted by a knock on the door. A courier for the Brotherhood meant for Elimaio told us the Brotherhood had a package ready, but wanted their payment. He implied this was a regular arrangement, I believe he mentioned ‘pay in the usual way’. When I tried to protest that I knew nothing of this, the courier seemed surprised that I was not Elimaio, but said that he wasn’t told much, he only passed along the message. He claimed he didn’t know anything more, so he might have had no association beyond being hired to deliver the message. Some of the things that he claimed would be in the package, I later learned were highly illegal. Retchweed, powdered dragon scales, things like that?” Master carefully left out that the courier actually delivered the package, and that we were definitely on the hook for a pile of contraband sitting in our tower... Some of those ingredients were very useful, after all, and hideously expensive to get otherwise.

“I definitely know of Retchweed, yes. The temple has to treat cases of poisoning at least once a month. I don’t think I like the idea of someone as dangerous as Elimaio having a large supply of it.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve had trouble investigating on our own. Even if someone did know something, they’re often quite reluctant to actually speak on the matter.”

“I can understand why. Well, we have some knowledge ourselves, and it’s good you brought this to our attention. In fact, if you’re interested, having even a novice mage such as yourself would be a great addition to the task force we’re putting together. The reward could knock a good chunk off of your outstanding debt with the Crown.”

“Us? I mean, we’ve never really... done this kind of work before?”

“You wouldn’t be thinking of refusing, of allowing the Brotherhood of Shadows to solidify a presence in the area, would you...? Or even entering into dealings with them?”

“Absolutely not! It’s just... I don’t know how helpful we would be in a combat situation, is all. Given the rumors, it’s a concern.”

“You won’t be expected to fight, just help with investigation. Often, magic can be useful in bringing things to our attention that traditional means may miss. I don’t want to leave

anything to chance. And forgive me for questioning you, it just seems... strange, that someone with such a large debt that we've been graciously allowing you to delay paying is turning down an offer to reduce that debt... To show gratitude towards the Crown and the Guard for our assistance." The implied threat was definitely there. This was clearly not an apology, just a chance to put the pressure on with no way out of it. Maybe it was my imagination, but I think she liked the chance to see Master squirm.

"I make no promises, but I can try to help, yes..." I can't blame him for not liking this kind of position he's being put into.

"Perfect. As for the actual fighting, that you can leave to myself and a warrior we've hired by the name of Lance. The three of us should have no problems handling anything they have standing in our way."

I made a soft chuffing sound, sitting up with a paw on Master's knee, lifting my head up above the edge of the desk. Master chuckled softly. "The four of us. I think Princess would be very upset with me if I tried to leave her behind and go somewhere dangerous."

"Hm, I suppose a beast could be handy. Just make sure she doesn't cause problems and we'll be set."

"You know, if we're going to be working together, shouldn't we introduce ourselves? My name is Tola, and you already know Princess." Master put his hand out, trying to be civil. Or just remind her to be.

"I usually just hear 'Captain', but Captain Aesis is my name. Not, however, just Aesis."

"Certainly, Captain. Since you're in charge, what's our next step?" Master pulled his unshaken hand back and sat down again.

"Get some rest, it's already evening. Tomorrow morning, report here and we'll have Lance with us, and we can get started. I've got someone to interview. Dismissed." I hope she's just used to briefing her guards, but Master chose not to push back. He just nodded and stood up, waving for me to follow as we headed out. The Captain stayed at her desk, as if we'd stopped existing the moment she said "dismissed".

We returned to the same inn we stayed at last time. With a couple libraries in the area as well as a shop that did bookbinding for the libraries, and likely some sort of school, the inn was named "The Scholar's Retreat". It reminded me a little of college towns back on Earth.

The man at the counter was just as grumpy as last time. I bet him and Arlong would get along well. Or maybe they would be bitter, mortal enemies. I couldn't see them being anything in between. "Ah, Sir Mage. You return. I'm glad our inn meets your approval."

"Yes, well, I admit I might not have if I hadn't had such a pleasant morning afterwards."

"My wife told me about meeting you. I had no idea you were a friend of Maifen, my apologies. I'm sure you understand, I have to keep my inn at the front of my thoughts."

"Oh, I'm not offended, don't worry. This is your livelihood, and your home. I would be protective of my own home too."

"I'm glad to hear it. I take it you and your... pet, will be staying with us tonight?"

"That was my plan, yes. My business in town is going to be longer than I thought, the town guard has requested my assistance." Not technically a lie, but it does make it sound like we were sought out. Perhaps if we did a good job, we'd get more customers. Not that Captain Aesis seemed like the kind to spread good word of mouth.

“Excellent. Have a seat, and I’ll have a meal brought out to you shortly.”

“Two meals, Princess needs to eat as well.” The man almost seemed to wince at that. He still had a bit of pride that didn’t like the idea of his cooking being “wasted on an animal”, it seemed.

“Right, of course. Two meals.” Sure enough, he brought out a pair of plates, once again setting both on the table. One had a full meal, with a small loaf of bread and a pile of steamed broccoli in addition to the slices of roast, while the other just had a set of slices of meat. Master thanked him, taking my plate and setting it on the floor for me. The innkeeper went back to his counter, leaving us to eat in peace.

There was enough conversation around that I was able to lean in, nosing Master in the side, and when he got close enough I could speak without being overheard. “Next time, I’m just going to eat at the table, if that’s how he wants to do it.”

Master grinned, rubbing behind my horn. “You know what? That would be great.” The food smelled really nice, so I didn’t say more before digging in, tail wagging as I licked the juices off the plate. Master ate slower, so I was done before he was.

I spent the second half of the meal with my head on his leg, just being there and half-listening to the conversations around. A pair of young men nearby were talking about the Mage’s Guild, and their not-so-great chances of passing the entrance exams and becoming Initiates. One was hoping he could find a way to cheat his way through, while his friend was saying that perhaps they should find apprenticeships in town instead.

I had stopped listening to them, but then one of them came over, waiting for Master to finish his meal before placing his hands on a chair and asking if he could sit. He was dressed pretty plainly, simple breeches and a shirt, and I didn’t smell anything on him that was cause for alarm, so I simply watched.

“I see no reason why not.” Master waved to the chair and nodded.

“Wonderful. See, my friend and I, we were thinking of applying to the Guild this spring, and... well... We were kind of hoping you could perhaps... give us some advice for the entrance exam?” The kid sat at the table, hands folded in front of him, leaning in eagerly.

“Advice?”

“Yeah, I mean, like, you had to go through it, right? Was it hard? You have to already be a student to learn magic, so they can’t ask you to cast anything before, right? How does it work?” He seemed so eager to ask questions that he barely got one out before starting the next.

“Ah, well, I’m not—”

“Oh, hey, look, I’m not asking for specific answers, I don’t want to be called a cheater, I just need to know what kind of things I should be reading up on, you know? What they expect?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Look, it’s fine, you don’t have to tell me anything you’re not supposed to.”

“I’m not a Guild member!” Master had to practically shout it out before he could get cut off again.

“You... but... but you... have a dragon? A-and the guy called you a mage?” The kid seemed so genuinely confused that I almost felt bad for him.

“Yes, but I’m not part of the Guild. I taught myself, after I ended up with a library full of books. I’ve never even been there, or know where it is. I really can’t help you. Honestly, I’m starting to get a little tired of everyone just assuming I’m a member.”

“Wow, really? I heard it’s super dangerous to be self-taught though... S-sorry about assuming, it’s just... Dragon, and everything? You pretty much never hear of someone who didn’t learn at the Guild, even if they got kicked out later. You, uh, didn’t get kicked out, right?”

“No, I didn’t get kicked out. Like I said, I’ve never been.” Master’s voice was a little strained.

“Oh, right, sorry. Anyway, uhh... Maybe you have some tips for, like, starting out? That’ll help with learning once I’m in?” Maybe he just didn’t want to come away with nothing, or maybe he didn’t want Master to feel useless, but it definitely sounded more like he was asking to be polite than asking with a real expectation.

“Well, I only know how I learned, I don’t know how much that will apply to others. And how I think of magic is... kind of tied to where I grew up, which is pretty far from here, to say the least. I guess the best advice I can give is, ‘make sure you fully understand each rune in a spell before trying to put them together’? Maybe? I must admit, I’m still pretty new to magic myself.”

“Hey, well, thanks for the advice and everything. Maybe if I get in, I can tell them you were nice? Or maybe if I wash out, I can look for you in case you’d like an apprentice? What’s your name?” The kid put a hand out to shake.

“I’m Tola. This is Princess. I don’t think I’m in a position to take on an apprentice, I doubt I’d qualify to be much beyond that myself after all, but perhaps in the future. I live in a tower just outside Hammerfell. If you ask for me there, anyone can point you in the right direction, if needed.” Master shook the offered hand.

Once the kid left, he went back to his friend, telling what he had learned, and was only a little disappointed to find that he wasn’t talking to an Elite High-ranking Muckymuck or whatever. Master and I decided we might as well retreat to our room, leaving my plate up on the table before heading to the counter to collect our key. We weren’t charged a deposit this time, I guess he didn’t want another earful from his wife.

Safely upstairs, Master sat on the bed. “What a day, huh? And tomorrow’s going to be even more wild. Are we even up for this?”

I sat in front of him, my tail swaying a little. “I think we can handle it. We’ve got each other, after all. You sell yourself short, you’ve made amazing progress in studying magic. I mean, if someone had told you last year where you’d be today, would you have believed them?”

He looked up at me. “Last year? Last year, I was still on Earth. So, I very much would not have believed them, no.”

“See?” I placed a paw on his knee. “I mean, last year, I was still on Earth too. And everything else. And now I freaking FLY. Face it, we’re incredible, and together we’re unstoppable. Just imagine how far we’ll have come by next year!”

“Heh... You fly, but... Well, I mean, you lost a lot, didn’t you? And the reactions you get all the time... Everyone always assumes the worst about you.”

“Rrreh. Not like people didn’t assume plenty of bad things about me as a human. I don’t care what they think, I know who I am, and you know me, and that’s all that’s important.” The tip

of my tail flicked a little, betraying my words. Okay, maybe it did get to me a little, but I was trying to cheer up Master right now.

“Yeah, I do know you. You’re a Good Girl.” He rubbed my head, scritching behind my horns, and I drifted my eyes closed with a purr. “Yeah, you’re right. Besides, if there really is any fighting, I’ve got three people to keep me safe.”

“Hmph, comparing me to ‘people’ like them...” I tossed my head in mock insultedness.

“Oh, not a ‘people’, then? Fine then, two people and an animal.” He kept rubbing.

I... didn’t know how to feel about that. On one hand, it was weird to think of myself as “not a person”, and to think that Master was thinking of me as an animal too. On the other hand, it was weird to try to think of myself as a “person”, and realizing that I hadn’t been thinking of myself like that for a while now. Was I really an animal? Was I somewhere in between? Did I want to be one or the other? If I did pick a side, what would I be giving up to do so?

“Something wrong, girl?” I made a soft “chrrp” noise and looked up, blinking. I hadn’t realized how lost in thought I’d gotten.

“Oh, no, nothing. Sorry, just... was thinking about tomorrow. And how hilarious it would be to spook the Captain by talking, and then if we both just pretend it didn’t happen and she’s hearing things.” I hadn’t been, but it was an amusing idea, and hopefully it would cover my silence. If it didn’t, Master took it as a hint that I didn’t want to talk about it. I never could tell how much he picked up on.

“All right. Probably best if we don’t do that, though. Last thing we need is her distracted at a critical moment, right? But let’s get that harness off of you so we can get some sleep.”

“Right. You know, honestly, I’d almost forgotten I was wearing it. Arlond did a really good job fitting it.” He started to undo the buckles, loosening the straps. I lifted my wing out of the way dutifully, turning when needed.

“Well, it helps that he knows you can talk, so you could give feedback and get things set up just right.” The last of the straps were off, the harness set aside. Master laid on the bed and patted the spot beside him, so I jumped up and nestled in against his side. I rested my cheek on his chest, tucking my nose in under his chin, purring softly as he draped an arm over me and stroked along my scales.

Eventually, we drifted off to sleep. My dreams were pleasant nonsense.

I woke up to a gentle prodding of my flank. Blinking in the morning light, I found I was sprawled across Master’s chest and stomach, my tail hanging off the edge near his shoulder, my head next to his leg, and a wing draped over his face and against the wall.

“Mind getting up, Princess?”

“Mrrrhp, sorry... One sec, let me just, um...” I lifted my wing, tucking it against my side like usual, extricating myself one limb at a time, and eventually climbing off the bed and standing on the floor. “Look on the bright side, there’s no fur in your mouth?”

“Yes, yes. Dragons are the superior pet.” The tone of his voice was more of the long-suffering sigh of someone who had probably been laying awake for an hour waiting for a heavy weight to wake up and move. Okay, I didn’t get all that from just the tone of his voice, most of it was guesswork.

I puffed out my chest in exaggerated pride. “Damn right. This dragon even more so.”

Master got out of bed and stretched. "I'm not so sure, apparently this dragon rolls around in her sleep sometimes."

"That just means you got more of my beautiful scales pressed against you. That's a good thing."

I got a chuckle and a patting of the head for that, before he started picking up the harness straps. "C'mon girl, let's get you dressed so we can head to our meeting."

"Chff, yes, Master." I stepped in and obediently stood still as the buckles were strapped nice and snug once more.

With everything properly tightened, we checked out of the inn and headed towards the tower. Checking out, of course, involved a lengthy session of petting and attention from the innkeeper wife, who seemed completely tickled by my harness. Eventually we were on our way, though.

We arrived at the tower, dropping a pair of skewers from a street vendor into a trash bin. The sauce on the meat had a tangy flavor that Master insisted was sweet, but I couldn't taste it. Captain Aesis was already there, of course, so then it was waiting on the last member of our little group.

"Huh, I thought for sure we'd be waiting until lunch for you." The Captain raised an eyebrow as she said that.

"You did say in the morning." Master raised an eyebrow in return.

"Yeah, I just figured you mage-types were usually pretty soft and lazy."

"You figured incorrectly. I didn't want to disrespect you or your time by being late."

Silence for a moment. Then Captain Aesis nodded. "I apologize for being rude. I've had bad experiences with mages in the past, and I took that out on you. You didn't deserve it."

"Apology accepted. I look forward to working with you, Captain." He extended his hand again, and this time the Captain shook it.

I laid down across Master's feet, while they sat at the desk. It took nearly half an hour for Lance to show up, plopping himself into the other chair and leaning back. "Hey, Captain. Who's the—Woah, you've got a dragon with you? Are you coming with us?"

"Yes, I have a dragon, yes, I'm coming with you, and my name is Tola, the town mage of Hammerfell." There was a weary strain in his voice. I didn't blame him, I didn't like this guy either, so far.

"Well, that should make things interesting, at least. Never worked with a dragon handler before." Lance went back to leaning in his chair, reminding me of the self-assured high school football quarterback ignoring the class he was in.

Captain Aesis cleared her throat. "Now that you've joined us, with only half the morning gone, we can get started. I have a report from one of the warehouse workers that they had a robbery. I suspect the Brotherhood was involved, so my plan is for us to investigate there to start. We'll interview the worker, and see what we turn up. Any objections?"

Lance shrugged. Master spoke up. "Sounds fine to me. If his answers match with my knowledge, we'll know we're on the right track. If not, maybe we'll have a new one."

"Okay then, let's get on our way." The Captain stood up and we followed her through the city. I took the time to look over Lance better. I could tell he was wearing some kind of armor, seemed to be leather studded with plates. It reminded me of my own scales, in a way. Through



gaps such as his armpits, it looked like there was a layer of chainmail underneath, or perhaps only covering the gaps. At his hip was a pretty large sword, hanging down past his knee. It seemed to fit perfectly naturally, he didn't once smack it against someone's leg or the side of a stall as he walked. Perhaps that's a benefit of my lowered stance, I could pay more attention to the way his hips moved as he walked. He was definitely sure of his movements, and I guessed that in spite of his personality, he would be a competent fighter. His armor had enough padding that it wasn't even that loud as he walked, and he didn't have the same heavy stomp as most of the guards did.

Captain Aesis, by contrast, was definitely all power. She wore plate armor with a cloth tabard over it, bearing the emblem of the local Duke signifying that she was a member of the guard and an official of the city. The fancier embroidering made hers stand out, especially if she was standing with other guardsmen. She walked like she had a personal grudge against cobblestones, and I think she liked the sound of her armor clanking. She had a shield with the same emblem strapped to her back, and a sword that wasn't quite as long as Lance's fastened to her hip.

Watching their movements had occupied me the whole trip, as I found our group suddenly stopped in an area of the city I hadn't been in before. Captain Aesis called out in a commanding voice for the warehouse manager, and a sturdy-looking fellow came to answer.

"Allo, allo? Ah, Miss Guard, come about the theft, 'ave you?"

"Captain, and yes. I was told you might be able to give me more details about what was stolen, and what your men have seen."

"Captain Guard, then. Miss Captain? Miss Guard Captain...?"

"Just 'Captain' is fine." She must have figured if she didn't say something, the man would just keep trying permutations until he found one that made less of a scowl on her face. That would've probably taken days.

"Captain, right. Well, come with me and I'll fetch the paperwork." The man led us inside. On his way to his office, he gestured at an area of the building, but it was impossible for me to tell which boxes had been disturbed in what seemed like haphazard piles. Lance wandered over and started checking the ground for footprints, but with the dust and activity, I doubted he would get anywhere. Partially just to look like I was doing something, and partially because I didn't know what else to do, I started sniffing around, mostly out of curiosity.

What I was not prepared for, however, was a patch of ground that smelled like nothing. Not just "nothing out of the ordinary", I mean "nothing". Like, if I didn't feel my chest expand, I wouldn't be sure I was even breathing in. No dust, no dirt, no wood, just nothing at all. It was honestly disorienting, like listening to a crowded room and having it suddenly go dead silent, without so much as the sound of a single breath or heartbeat. I moved away from it and the smells of the room came back, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Sniffing around more, though, I found other, smaller patches of "un-smell", in a trail that headed towards the back door. Hm, that was interesting. Lance hadn't seemed to notice it, so I went to catch up to Master who was with Captain Aesis.

"Hm. These items," Master was pointing to entries on a list, "are definitely ones I've seen referenced in my books. They could be planning to deal in some highly dangerous magic, or they could just be hoping to sell their stolen wares to someone. Someone who is deciding not to go through official channels for their goods."

"I was afraid of that. But to know where exactly to go, that sounds to me like they have someone on the inside." Captain Aesis tapped her foot in a way that almost made me wonder if she's used to having a tail too.

"Aye, I thought of that. I've got my eye on a few of my men, especially one what started not too long ago. But I don't know for sure I'll be able to get anything useful out of him, even if I can get a confession. Maybe I can catch him in the act. I tried bringing in hounds, but they couldn't do nothing."

At that, I headbutted Master's leg lightly, looking up and giving a soft whine. When he looked, I gestured with my head that I wanted to talk to him.

"I'm sorry, I need to tend to Princess. I'll be back shortly." He made the excuse, knowing people would rather let him be than risk having to clean up a mess. I led him out the back door where the trail had led, and once we were clear of people, I was free to speak up.

"I know why the hounds couldn't help. One of the things in that package we got was used. The one that smells like Nothing. The thief must have used it to try to cover his tracks."

"Well, that's going to be a problem."

"Not really. I mean, it's pretty easy to follow a trail of Nothing. I assume he treated his boots with it, because every footstep is a small spot of Nothing. A hound needs a sample to follow, and smelling this stuff is... not pleasant, so they'd avoid it because they can't understand the need."

"Oh, you mean you can track them down?" Master seemed like this was the first piece of good news he'd gotten all day.

"Definitely. The trail led out this door, so we can start from here." I couldn't help but be a little proud of myself. We went back inside.

"Sorry about that. Did I miss anything?" Master gave my head a pat.

Lance spoke up from his spot where he was leaning against the wall. "No, just that I found traces of Hound's Bane. Whoever did this came prepared. Our only chance now is going to be to start interrogating workers." His hand moved to the hilt of his sword.

"I take it Hound's Bane is a sort of scent-erasing compound?" Master looked to the Captain for confirmation.

"Yes, it's difficult to make, but it can make it impossible for an animal to pick out their scent. The dogs will just shy away from it like they got hit on the nose and usually won't even go near it."

"Well, we can try Princess, then. I'm willing to bet it smells different to a dragon nose." Master patted the side of my neck.

"It's not going to work, friend." Lance shook his head. "There's no smell to track."

"Can't hurt to give it a try." Captain Aesis looked eager for any break. And if the mage was shown to be less useful than Good Old Fashioned Legwork, that was a win too.

We were back at the boxes. We had to put a show on, after all. "Okay, Princess. Start tracking." He pointed at the area to start. I put my nose down and sniffed. Eugh, yeah, that Nothing was still strong. Lance chuckled at me recoiling, but I ignored it and started sniffing the area. Finding the spots I knew were there again, I started following them, lifting my head to make sure the others were following. "There, see? She's got the trail!"

“Huh, I’ll be damned. I thought they were just overgrown armored dogs.” Lance shrugged and followed.

Outside the back door, I sniffed around, finding the tracks leading... to the side of the building. Huh. So I sniffed at the wall, and sure enough, spots there. He must have climbed up. I looked at the top of the building, took a step back, and spread my wings. I launched myself up into the air, flapping to get to the roof, and settled down on it, sniffing around again. The others were left on the ground, so at least I didn’t have to hear any more out of Lance.

The tracks were pretty easy, they’d reach the edge of one building’s roof, and so I’d jump across to the other and find them there. He must have been pretty confident he wouldn’t be followed, he wasn’t trying at all to double back or hide his trail aside from Hound’s Bane. Each time I moved to another building, though, I made sure the others saw me and followed below. Finally I reached a spot where there wasn’t a building across the way, but the wall looked pretty easy to climb down. A couple of flaps of my wings and I was at ground level again, sniffing at the ground. The stuff must have mostly worn off, the spots of Nothing were small, but it was such a powerful sensation that even a tiny amount was hard to miss. They led directly into a building that looked like it hadn’t been touched in decades.

I stopped at the door. I was feeling pretty awesome, my tail wagging and my chest puffed up proudly. Captain Aesis regarded the building, then looked at me, then Master. “I’m impressed. I’ve never heard of anyone tracking someone using Hound’s Bane before. Your dragon DID track it, right? It didn’t just run wherever and lead us randomly?”

Master looked at me, and I gave an annoyed chuff at being questioned. A soft one, hopefully the Captain wouldn’t actually think it was in response. “Only one way to find out. Shall we?”

The Captain looked like this was the highlight of her day, as she readied her shoulder, and charged the door. It was a lot more solid than it looked, and took the first blow, but the second sent it crashing open with a cry of alarm coming from inside. Lance followed quickly, while Master retrieved his spellbook from one of my bags. I let him enter while I guarded him from behind.

Inside was a sight. Three men dressed in dark-dyed leather armor drew their blades as we stared them down. Captain Aesis already had her shield in front of her, and Lance was crossing swords with the one on the right. Master opened his book to a page he had prepared before and began to chant, since it was clear talking wasn’t going to be an option. Within moments, lances of ice shot from his outstretched hand, forcing the man who thought he’d slip between the two fighters to rethink his decision, falling back enough for Lance and Captain to close the gap.

I tried to step forward, but a sudden yank at my throat stopped me with a yelp. A fourth man had gotten behind us somehow, and he had grabbed my collar, a dagger slicing through the leather before he ran to the side, leaving me to stare at the pink strap and feel my naked neck in shock. “Hah, enjoy having your own beast turn on you! You can’t control it now!”

“Shit! Mage? Get the damn thing back under control, now!” The Captain seemed almost panicked.

“It’s fine! Princess, get him!” He pointed at the man that had cut my collar, and I growled deeply. Oh, it was on, now. That was my collar! That was a gift from Master! That was the symbol that I was a Good Girl! And more than that, he did that because he thought I’d hurt

people! That simply would not be tolerated! I dug my claws into the floorboards and launched myself at him. He clearly didn't expect that, he must have thought I'd go after the closer "target", but he brought his blade up anyway. So I let out a blast of fire in his direction, hearing the blade clatter to the floor as he shrieked and ran.

Captain Aesis did like she did with the door, using her shield to slam one of the attackers into the closest wall, which made him crumple with the wind driven out of him, gasping for breath. The middle man must have thought he'd gotten a chance to strike, going for the Captain's exposed side, but an ice lance caught him in the arm, sending him spinning as another "thunk"ed into his gut.

Lance took a cut to his arm, just below the short sleeve of his armor, but the man who did that got Lance's sword through his chest instead. Not what I'd call a fair deal. He fell to the ground, and Lance drew his blade back.

That was three downed, the one I singled was still at large. That's when I heard a clatter from somewhere in the back of the room, and spotted a flash of light. Instead of following, I ducked out the front door and took to the skies, knowing I'd be more likely to spot him this way. Sure enough, the darkened armor was fleeing into an alley, looking behind him when he should have been looking up. I landed on him, sending him sprawling to the floor with my weight on his back, a forepaw on the back of his head, growling so he'd know to stay still. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long until the others arrived. Captain Aesis produced a pair of manacles and clasped them onto his wrists, and I took it as my cue to return to Master's side.

My heart was still pounding a bit, even though the fight had been quick. We had caught them completely by surprise, after all. But now I could take breaths and calm down. It helped that Master was scritchng behind my horn gently.

"My thanks, Mage Tola. He scared me when he said he had broken your control." The Captain looked warily at my bare neck.

"Princess isn't kept captive by magic. She's my partner and my pet, we trust each other. She's with me because she wants to be." Master was using both hands to pet me, kneeling down so I could push my head into his chest. With the adrenaline gone, I was starting to shiver at the thought that things could have gone much worse.

Lance just shook his head, as if this was the craziest thing he'd ever heard in his life. But he couldn't argue with the results, so he pulled out a cloth to wipe his blade clean, before putting it back in its sheath. "Still, we've got three men you can question, and a fourth you can use to send a message. I'd say that was a good day's work, Captain."

"Yes, quite impressive, both of you. And you too, Lance." She said with a smirk. It took me a second to realize that she'd actually included me, even if was just to tease the mercenary. "Let's get the others rounded up. I'll have to send a guardsman to the temple to fetch a healer, if I want anything out of the one Tola struck down. Not that I'm complaining, far better than taking his sword."

We were back in the Guard Tower, with the men behind bars. Captain Aesis presented Lance with a pouch of gold, and a piece of paper to sign, accepting his bounty. A similar paper was brought for Master, but this one stated that the bounty was being applied to outstanding debt to the Crown.

Lance took his pouch and waved. "Sir Mage, you said you were of Hammerfell, yes? I might have to visit some time, if I feel I need backup. Feel free to ask for me, as well, should you feel the desire." With that, he left.

"Well, Captain, I guess that about wraps up everything for us today? You'll tell me anything I need to know, when you know it?"

"Of course. One more thing, though." She reached into her own purse and brought out a handful of coins, about ten. "I wanted to give you my personal thanks, on top of your bounty. You helped out far more than I expected, both you and Princess, and I'd have a sword in my chest if you hadn't stopped him."

"No, I... I don't need extra, I'm just glad to help. I didn't do that for a bounty."

"I know. But you still need to eat and sleep, and you can't do that with a receipt. Here, my treat." She held the coins out more insistently.

Master took them, nodding. "All right. Well, still. I worry I'm not out of the woods, so to speak, so I'd still like to be kept informed, and to help where I can."

"Very well. I'll try to have a report by tomorrow, and in the future, I can send word to you at your tower."

"I'd like that, thank you, Captain." And with that, it was our turn to leave.

It was early enough that we could do some shopping before retiring to the inn, which was a nice way to end such an exciting day. We spent the time tracking down somewhere that we could get a replacement collar, simply because it just felt too strange to be without. I got another pink one, because I liked the color, and I was able to get a cute bell to hang from the front of it like my last collar. It made my tail sway happily to hear it chime again, as Master and I headed towards the inn for a much-needed rest. It felt like a weight had been lifted from our backs, and it was nice to feel like we'd earned some rest. We were heroes, it felt like. Tomorrow would be another day, and surely we'd have more adventures, but for now it was a good meal and a warm bed.