

LOOT, STRINGS, AND HEARTBREAK

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PROLOGUE

In the depth of the night I have always felt most comfortable. The stillness and quietness, but for the sounds of the wind and every so often a creak as a building adjusts itself, lets me feel like I've some control over my thoughts. The lack of stimulation allows my mind to breathe, and I can think clearly and focus on the task at hand. That is at least until *he* ruins it by opening his mouth.

"Do you think they're out?", Bill wondered aloud. As always he wasted words on things so obvious. To an external observer this might have seemed like a perfectly innocent and valid question. But, Bill and I have been at this a while and all the signs are there in front of him, same as me. To ask such a question fills me with worries about his competence for this job.

"No, the bedroom window is open."

"How'd you know that's the bedroom?"

I knew this would continue until daybreak if I let it. Bill has lived with me long enough to know that I heard his

question and was purposefully ignoring it. I swear once this is done I'm leaving this city, and not just because of Bill...

Entering into a house whilst the inhabitants are home has its upsides and downsides. I knew, for instance, that the item we've been asked to procure is never far from its *current* owner. The downside of course being that looming danger of being heard, seen, attacked, or any number of horrible things that someone will do to protect themselves when feeling threatened. I mulled over the various details of the building as I moved towards the narrow alley off to the side. I'm certain I would have been thinking more clearly if I wasn't being stalked by my shadow of a partner.

Normally, we wouldn't take such a specific job as this, but when my fence, Edith, specifically recommended me I was of course intrigued, I assumed that she had some inkling to my interest in planeweaving. Otherwise, it would be very bizarre to ask for Bill and me when other, much more experienced and reliable thieves could have done. Sealing my interest and quelling my suspicions about the nature of being handed a job rather than apply (as was the norm), was the small fortune in gold which was the prize offered by the person(s) making the request. The amount of gold would be enough for a new start, and a clean, guiltless break. Bill would be giddy enough with his split that he might not even notice my departure for a few days. I made a point of not planning past this, whilst I personally had issues with Bill, he didn't make it this far in life on dumb luck. If I planned, if I left a clue to my next move, then I'm sure he could have followed if he was so inclined. He was an unknown and I did not want to find out what

he was capable of. Thus, my next move will be a surprise, even to me.

But first, Ellen, focus.

"I'm going to go in through the top window. You wait here and watch the..." started Bill as he looked for a foothold to begin climbing.

"You can't see it from here, but the windows all have metal bars across them" I interrupted. In all fairness, I have always been our scout for heists. Walking past several times in the past week allowed me to notice some things which darkness hid.

"Oh, right. I'll go in through the front door then." snorted Bill sarcastically.

"Look", I pointed to the long, thin, rectangular windows just out of reach. "They're used for ventilation, and it'll be a squeeze, but I think we both could shimmy through."

"Good spot", Bill said as he jumped for the small ledge.

Swinging his legs up and holding himself alongside the window, he showed why he was in this line of work. As if having practised this exact manoeuvre a thousand times he reached into one of his many pockets and drew back his hands now coated in a tacky substance. Placing his hands on the glass of the window he pulled. Slowly, steadily, and taking care not to lose his balance on the thin ledge he pulled the ventilation window open. I couldn't help but smile at this display of ingenuity.

Taking a step backwards I took a steadying breath, lunging forward, left foot on the cobbled stone, I pushed upwards, right foot connecting with the wall and continuing the momentum I reached for the ledge of the window. Without stopping, I pulled myself upwards and, just

like Bill had done a moment before, I swung my legs and body upwards and sideways. However, with the window open and Bill already through and into the house, I passed through and into the darkness of the ground floor, silently.

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