

TALES OF LORCASTLE

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There were two types of beast at Basil's pub, those that knew how much they should be drinking, and those that did not. Given the odds, Finley Scout was sitting near at least one of each, but given the hour, he was in no position to judge.

"Finley, Finley!" called the bartender, Basil.

"Ugh, yeah? What do you want?" the frustrated badger asked.

"You... you're a personable guy, right? Like, friendly and stuff?"

"I... suppose, though this is not quite the time to ask."

Basil was a large fellow, large even, for a hedgehog. Hedgehogs grew mighty well in these parts. Most animals did, actually.

"But like, you can read people, see what they want, what they're looking for?"

"Yeah, it's... my job, but... as a bartender, it could be argued that it is even more-so your job."

Basil leaned forward, a pair of broad, prickly forearms pressing against his front table, "just looking for a second opinion. That silver fox over there, in the corner. Guy has been here all day."

"Basil, I have been here all day."

"Well, yeah, but you done did something. More than something, and you a friendly folk. He has just been cleaning out my stock of sardines."

Finley looked up, almost interested, "you mean, the sardines you let out for free because no one else but Phillip and me will eat them? Good; let him take out the garbage."

"Fine. It's just, this guy... looking all shady and stuff. Like, literally shady, all draped in blacks and blues, y'know? Something seems fishy with him, like a character in one of your books."

Finley sighed, "some folk just like to wear black, it's a very slimming colour,

you know. And besides, the 'mysterious man in the corner of a pub' thing is so cliché that not even the trashiest books in my library resort to it anymore. I'm sure even you have read a few novels, no?"

"Well, fine. I trust you, you're good with people. But if anything goes missing, if I find myself looted or something', I am gonna blame it on him."

"Why him? If anything you should blame yourself, Basil, for spending so much time looking at that guy over there and ignoring the little brats trying to siphon some drinks from you over—"

Basil caught two pine marten kids tip-toeing around his kegs, grabbed them by their cuffs and their collars, and tossed them straight over the counter.

"—Hey, you little shits! Finley, you got this?" With one paw on the counter, the hedgehog leapt over it, tipping over some drinks, and knocking over some barstools as he ran after the two thieves.

"Yeah," Finley tried to keep down a yawn. "I got this."

"He's going to take a while, isn't he?" the silver fox in the shadowed corner spoke up.

"Yeah, a little while," Finley suddenly felt anxious. He could watch over the bar, but he hadn't promised much more.

Finley felt the ground beneath him rumble, "Don't worry, I am not here to take anything," Finley acted more relieved than he actually felt.

"You, uh, new in town? Had a drink yet?"

"Yes, well, kind of... and no... but don't worry, I am fine. My name is Allard, Allard deBurgh, I think I used to work with your family"

"Pardon?"

"You're at the library, right - Brakebills Books?"

"I am," Finley answered, trying his best to remember what family he did

not remember, and what they might have to do with his library.

“Then look for the name Middleton. *Garin Middleton*; I’ll see you around.”

Finley Scout was not often one short for words, but he was in this particular moment.

#

Finley Scout came from a family of badgers best known for not acting like they should, but usually getting away with it anyways. He was no farmer, no fisher or tiller of fields, he did not use his size to guard New Lorcastle, or any of its neighbouring settlements. No, Finley lent and sold books, and he did so from the first floor of his place in the middle of town.

It was a nice enough place, it was a two story brick building with the first floor exterior painted with a rather tame shade of yellow. The window’s architrave and lower siding were the colour of a cheap merlot, and read *BRAKEBILLS BOOKS & LIBRARY* were painted in a strong bronze.

Finley landed this job a decade or so ago. He did not lend an incredible amount of books, nor did he barter away many more, but in a city this large, there were enough of a customer base to keep himself going. It was hardly a job Finley envisioned himself having as a little kid, but it was one he enjoyed, and one he was seemingly good at.

“Welcome to Brakebills, we do barter, trades, and borrows - anything I could help you with?” Finley asked a blonde marten after the few minutes he gave her to peruse to her isle of choice.

Her thoughts swished back and forth in her head. It was not her first time here, but it was her first time here alone.

“What here can you recommend?” She asked.

“Well,” Fin said, eyeing the spines before him, “what kind of thing are you

looking for? We have stories about myths, like this one here, *Duke of Magic*... more contemporary pieces like *Card of Lankhammer* is a good read, if not a bit dry. I just finished *Birds of Yore*, and then there are a few liturgical and paraliturgical texts from recovered churches - Martin the Warrior, the Elder Tree and that lot. Those are an interesting read, I can tell you that much."

She looked lost in thought for a half-second, "what were those first two you mentioned about? *Duke of Magic*, *Card of*..."

"*Duke of Magic* and *Card of Lankhammer* - the first is about a duke in one of Martin's kingdoms that found a talking dragon in a cave; the latter is about, what was it?" Finley tapped his fingers for a few rounds, "right! Politics behind the Civil War of forever ago. The two novels have more to do with each other than you might imagine, actually."

"Then I guess I should try those two, no?" She asked.

"Whoever recommended them for you must be wonderful at his job."

Fin wrung up her books and saw her to the door. Let it be known that Finley never claimed his job was an exciting one.

"Uncle Finley!" cried one of the best parts of this job. He could not help but have his entire face enveloped by a smile.

"Hello Avery," he said, knowing exactly who was standing right behind him. "Did you finish your book? Hello Wanda."

"Yup!" The little mouse yelped, jumping up and down in utter and completely adorable excitement.

"He sure did," said the house-mouse to his side. He was still stocking shelves, but these two had been patrons of his for long enough Fin to know exactly what their routine looked like. He would call it a tradition, but I was still deciding on how long something had to be something for that term to be appropriate.

Regardless of the terminology in use, it was deserved.

"Well that is mighty curious," Fin said, in a tone exaggerated enough just so Wanda would know what's up.

"This book, this... this book just doesn't want to fit. Hey Avery, could you give me a hand up here?"

"Mom, mom, could I?!" he begged.

"Of course you could, Avery. Where do you need him?" Wanda asked, aware that even in his mothers arms, Avery was not going to reach very high.

"I got him" Finley reached out and let the little mouse crawl up his arm and make perch on his shoulder. "Now Avery, you're small, right?"

"Yup!" He answered.

"But how small are you?" Finley asked.

"Pretty small, I would have to say..."

"Do you think," Finley chuckled, "do you think you are small enough to reach into the back of that bookshelf?"

"Mom?" He asked.

"Give it a shot," she answered, still trying to guess what the bloody hell Uncle Finley was up to.

And so Avery scooted. Near the higher shelves the books were starting to reach the size of some of the cities residents, and when those residents had children it just started to look ridiculous. At least Avery was big enough to block enough sunlight to keep him from seeing what he was actually looking for.

"Uh, Uncle Finley? I think I found it, but I can't turn around, could you—" and before he could even finish asking, Finley had him by the shoulders and was pulling him out.

"Okay, maybe I need somewhere else for him to find things..." Fin muttered to Wanda.

"A candy!" Avery shouted, finally taking a look at whatever he pulled out. He ran straight up Uncle Finley's arm, almost letting go of the gaylede he just found that had been curiously getting in the way of Finley's book. Finley was well aware of Avery's fondness for the sweet, almondy fig.

"Well there we go," Finley said around a grin, sliding the book into place, "see? Fits perfectly."

Avery leapt onto the table Fin was standing beside.

"Now what do you say, Avery?" Asked his mom.

"*Thankouverymuch* Uncle Finley!"

"Well thanks for the help!" Fin replied. "So what can I help you two with?"

"You know, Fin," Wanda hopped up to sit beside Avery on the table, "you have a thing with kids, they all love you."

"Well, this one does," he said, watching Avery trying to peel away whatever wrapper was around his prize.

"I mean it," Wanda assured him, "if you are ever looking for a change of pace, you would make one hell of a teacher, you would."

"Well, thank you, but I am not sure how much I would help in the classroom."

Wanda nodded him closer to her and uttered under her breath, "to be fair, these kids are not bright enough for you to need to know much to teach them."

They both chuckled.

"How did he like the book?" Fin asked.

"He loved it!" Wanda answered.

"Then, Wanda," Finley started, pawing his way through a pile of books he had at his side, "he might be ready for this book, *Mice & Kings*. It deals with a few more mature things than *Sands In The Mountain* did, but it is still in his age range. Nothing mature, nothing lewd or too dark, just... old. He is long past the age of kings, so it's going to sound very different to him."

"Kings, eh? Kings are good, I like kings. It's an interesting era to read of, that is for sure. Hey Avery? Ah whatever, I think he got lost in your books again."

Finley replied with little more than a smile.

"Heard anything from Vicki?"

"Sorry?" he asked.

"Victoria, doofus. The girl you left Kat for. The one that's been out East with her dad for months longer than she promised.

He inhaled deep, "Nothing consequential. She is just... still there. Way over there. I don't know why I agreed to this thing..."

"Because you love her? Or do you sti—"

"—I think I do. I mean, I think I do. I want to..." he answered, in a bit of a whispered tone.

"Well," Wanda replied, "you have until she returns to make up your mind. How long did she first say?"

"She said 3-4 months, and that was 5 months ago."

"Ouch."

"Do you think—" she adjusted her seat.

"—no, no, if something did, they would know by now," Fin adjusted his seat in turn, "and if they knew, we would know. Stuff just takes time."

"You did promise, I was there..."

"Yeah... but I didn't thinking 'whenever' would take this long."

"Well," Wanda said around a hug, "you still got me."

"And me!" shouted Avery out of whatever mess of books he was hiding behind.

Finley smiled.