

Libramoor

A Short Story of Hevna

These days, they called him Libramoor Verind, but at a mere age of twenty-five years and faced with the three people in front of him, Verind dearly wished he could go back to just being 'The Boy'. He wasn't mentally ready to train apprentices, even if he knew perfectly well he was more than capable, physically.

"Ser Ederik permits that up to two may pass, or all may fail, Libramoor," droned the man responsible for bringing him the three youths. "And he leaves the choice and manner of training in your hands. I would remind you, though, that tis a strange job we do here, and applicants are few to come by. The workload is... quite significant."

Verind kept his face straight with practiced ease. The Groundskeeper, one Malik Daarmin, spoke in his usual nasal tone, showing no concern as to what he said, in front of whom. Stooped and graying at the temples, Malik wore the robes of the Floating Library with a shabby and ill-fitting air, a by-product of the fact that his work rarely allowed him the environment to wear anything as loose or inconvenient as official dress. Despite the rich cloth of burgundy, trimmed in the green of the outdoors staff, there was as ever something entirely earthy about Malik, from the peaty scent that always seemed to follow him around the grounds, to the ever-present stray leaf in his thin and stringy hair.

*He is one of the longest-serving members of the non-scribe staff, give him the respect he thinks he's owed. Verind carefully kept his thoughts from showing on his face. Humor him, and he will go away satisfied. Antagonize him, and you'll be here all afternoon and eating nothing but the most shriveled carrots for a week. Be polite, even if he did just tell these children they're not **all** welcome.*

"Thank you for bringing them to me, Ser Daarmin," he said smoothly. "Your counsel is, of course, wise, and I will do my best to ensure our prospects are skilled enough to fill the vacancies." He watched the gardener puff up at his choice in wording and fought not to grin. "Perhaps you would be so good as to show them to the apprentice quarters while I prepare my materials for the first lesson this very evening?"

He watched the groundsman begin to smile, and then the expression froze halfway across his face, leaving him with a faintly perplexed look. With a serene smile, Verind held the door open in a polite manner as he watched Malik search for some soft way to refuse him, to avoid the trek all the way back across the open ground to the docking building with the three charges. Winter had made the path especially grim, as winter meant the Library was 'enjoying' a customary light dusting of sleet-riddled snow.

When no immediate way to weasel out of the request presented itself, at least not without rejecting the politeness sent his way, Malik stepped back out into the biting cold with a grudging half-bow and beckoned to the three confused looking youths.

"I... will see to it, Libramoor," he sniffed. "When will you require their attendance?"

"Eight of the evening bells, in the Vestibule Aqua. Please ensure they are duly instructed on how to get there. Thank-you, Ser Daarmin."

As the group left his office, Verind closed the door with a soft click, added another small log to the wood burner in the corner to banish the cold they had brought in with them, and then began to count under his breath while he stood by the window looking out over the long arcing path back upslope to the docking building. From here, he could see the three airships currently visiting hanging in the gray and shrouded air like giant, pale fish. Two bore the carrack shape of combination air-and-sea vessels, and the third had the distinctive balloon of a cargo dirigible, but for all they had brought food, supplies, and trainees all the way up to the Library, they were of far less interest to him than the voices of the newcomers just as he reached a count of ten, under his breath.

"But ser, we only just walked down all this way!" complained the taller of the boys as they moved into his line of view, snow dusting their attire before melting away to leave them still damper than when they had come into his room.

"Put aside yer whining and be glad for the opportunity to even tread these paths, child!" Malik snapped back, moving with surprising agility for his bad posture as he climbed the familiar slope. "Do you have any idea how few people will even set foot on this sacred ground? Do you? All the world's knowledge is kept here, the great and the good travel months just to enjoy a days appointment with a single Libraris Scribe or Scholar, and for the

want of a few meager years of your life and some hard work, you will live here, amid the words of the greatest men time has ever known!”

Quelling a chuckle, Verind stepped away from the window. The speech, or rant if one was honest about it, was one he had heard many times when he had been younger, and the drudgery of his apprenticeship had seemed far too much to bear. It was a litany of words poured forth by the aged gardener any time a junior complained about the difficulties of living at the Library, and as familiar and well worn to near every member of the staff as a favored coat.

Verind filled the swinging cauldron over his little fire with water and returned himself to the comfort of his armchair. He picked up the book he had been reading prior to Malik’s arrival at his door, and flicked back through it to the page he had left off on.

While his work required him to steadfastly perform rigorous checks in the Library stacks, protecting and guarding some of the most high-minded and influential works in the entire world from harm... nothing was more relaxing during his time off than burying his nose in the latest ten-penny mystery story by Grisa Hergen and whiling away an hour with the tawdry and shallow text whose only goal was a bit of fun.

Not like I will need to do much before supper to test these children anyway, he justified to himself, turning another page. He only rose again when the water came to the boil and that was only to make himself a steaming mug of Ceja to drink. After the first sip, he reached into a drawer by his chair and set three dark *tlaki* sweets on his table. For a moment, he stared at them, then made himself a mental promise to only eat one for each apprentice that he would be immediately sending home.

After all, three sweets in one night won’t make me fat.



Unlike the rest of the Library, for Verind, the last official meal of the day generally signaled the *start* of working hours.

After his calm afternoon with his book, the feast that made up dinner offered a sumptuous start to his activities and also indicated a supply ship had indeed docked today. The cooks outdid themselves, as was usual for a delivery day, so his plate ended up as a mess of small servings of favoured dishes, from the light and piquant lemon-dipped forest scallops to a much richer palate of shallow-fried port venison medallions.

Hidden behind a platter of diced fruits, he discovered a dish of bitter-sweet shrimp, alongside a tray of herb-stuffed bread and for dessert, he almost ascended to the Lights when he found a large tureen of mandarin sorbet, with a fresh raspberry coulis.

At the other end of the hall, he could see the nervous faces of the new apprentices. With some degree of satisfaction, he watched them huddle together at the end of the lowest table, the boys sitting either side of the one girl with them.

Maybe they'll do a little better than I expected... he thought, *at least they aren't isolating each other yet.* He watched them from the corner of his eye while he devoured his sorbet, watching them talking and poking at their plates. Their repast was not nearly so pleasant as his own, though their fare was much better suited to what would be expected of them, assuming they weren't back on a boat out of the Library the very next day. From his vantage point among the other Libramoors, he couldn't really make out what exactly they had been served, but his guess was some form of thick stew and brown bread, or perhaps a curried dish with potatoes. Anything heavy, warming and full of energy for menial chores, that was how it had been for him, and how it would be for the generations that would eventually follow even after he had passed on.

If they're smart kids, they'll eat whatever it is even if they don't like it. If not, they'll learn soon enough, he smiled to himself, then turned his attention to the other people sitting at the higher tables.

The tables for the Libramoors weren't the best in the grand hall. Those went instead to the Libraris scholars and scribes, no matter rank. Auxiliary staff like himself, irrespective of accomplishments or merits, would never carry quite the same status as the actual intellectuals, but he had never really been bothered by the distinction. The Library remained only *because* of its prestige and guaranteed excellence of its scholars, so it was no wonder they had their own tables at which the visiting dignitaries accessing the Library would also sit. It was all part of the

mystique and grandeur of the Library, and he was more than glad to be out of it, not least of which because the idea of eating with golden tinted cutlery just irked him.

His distaste doubled when he caught sight of today's guests, two of whom he was all too familiar with. Ser Balan and Serina Kirbard Dunn were fairly regular visitors to the Library. Both born to the old rich elite of Wessenland's aristocracy, they had spent significant amounts of their wealth on Library visit bookings in the days leading up to the civil war. While their contemporaries had been busy facing down the rioting mobs of peasants over the distribution of capital, the Dunns had simply moved their money into the Library and pretended to have none to their name. They had been among the first of the nobility to turn against the old King and to support the Council of Wess once it was formed. To the aggravation of many, they had only gained in status and wealth after the war was over, their close links to the Library ingratiating them with the still-young Council in a manner entirely at odds with the original intent of their deceptions.

To make matters worse still, Serina Dunn was the kind of lady who possessed a shrill voice, a range of opinions, and a need to bring both together anytime there was a spare pair of ears to listen. Right now, she was talking to a very tense-looking noble from Rasaal. It seemed she was busy trying to justify her position regarding the Nagan races and their rights... or more, her belief they deserved no rights at all.

How can you spend so much time in these walls, and not absorb a shred of wit or intelligence, woman? he thought to himself. *You'll be lucky to walk out of here without a black eye if you keep talking like that to a member of Empress Anka's court. Nagu are a key part of the Empire.*

The presence of the Dunns turned his stomach sour as he finished the last of his dessert and pulled a face, then he noticed one of the more relaxed Scholars grinning down at him. Memory eventually provided the name 'Professor Jim Thomvaas', a history specialist, and Verind gave him a knowing smile and roll of his eyes, which the Professor echoed.

Buoyed up by the silent exchange, Verind rose and bowed formally to Ser Ederik, currently the most senior of the Libramoors, and excused himself to make his way to the West Wing for his nightly rounds. Despite now having apprentices to deal with, they did not take away from his normal workload, especially as the Natural Sciences Section on the ground floor

of the wing was an area always at a greater risk for damage than anywhere else in the Library.

Still, even if the Wing is the usual trouble, it'll be infinitely more enjoyable than listening to Serina Dunn until the Eighth Bell.



By night, the Library was a strange place. Unlike the daytime, when the gas lamps lining the hallways kept the shadows at bay, the night was given over to only every third lamp left lit, as dim as could be gotten away with. The Library itself was as tall as the Grand Cathedral of the Seven Lights in Arlatene, but unlike its religious counterpart which was never entirely quiet or empty, the Library had an eerie silence to it after hours, almost as if something... some great and tenebrous thing... was waiting and watching in the shadows. Verind never felt any malice as he walked the darkness... but he always felt he was being watched, none the less. The faint background noises of the great aether engines in the rock beneath his feet and the ponderous clicking of cogs in the clock far above his head only added to the sensation and sent tingles down his spine when the clouds outside parted to suddenly bathe him in moonlight.

Verind shuffled quietly down the central hall in his soft slippers, quashing his reactions to the aged building, until he reached the grand wood doors and pulled them open on oiled hinges. With a soft sigh, the ancient dark wood passed under his hand until he could step into the corridor beyond. Stack upon stack stretched away from him to his left and right, tinting the air with the familiar smell of softly breathing manuscript and parchment from their deep recesses. The shelves marched into the distance, interspersed periodically with gaps leading to study tables, workspaces or even alcoved rooms in the outer walls, though he had no way to see any of it as the door closed behind him and shut out all light save that from the moon outside the grand windows at the distant end of the long wing.

By day, the Wing was lit on both the ground and upper floors by aether lamps. As expensive as it could be to run aether lighting with the use of Magus globes, especially in the Weft when the resource was incredibly scarce, there was never any question about running gas

lighting into the Wings themselves. The vapors and smuts such lamps gave off were absolutely unacceptable to have around the precious books of the Library, thus the only answer was the pure and clean light of Magus globes. It was just such an orb he carried in his personal lamp, which he now unhooded in order to find his way to the center of the extremely long room as fast as possible. Blue-green light spilled out over the floor as he clipped the hooding mechanism up out of the way and trotted down the room.

He passed long display cases of parchments, including the Helzetian *'Treatise on River Animals'* from a time before Helze was bordered by desert, and a physical specimen of a mummified Laughing Owl from the LiLi islands, now sadly extinct. Other similar, and familiar, exhibits passed by in a blur until he finally reached the grand seal set into the floor.

It depicted an anatomically correct skull of the Wessenland Giant Rat, its teeth pointed south and the center of its brow resting in the exact middle of the Wing. Verind knew it picture-perfect after all these years, and exactly where to place his lamp to best do his job. He placed a square of felt onto the floor to prevent any scratching, placed lamp on top, then straightened to his full height.

Underlit by the rising blue glow of aether, he opened the front of his robe to pull out a collapsible rod, which he extended and held in his left hand before he closed his eyes. It wouldn't do to crash into anything once he started working, and he always found it easier to identify where he was needed with his eyes closed. Double checking the lamp light was still in the blue spectrum, he grunted to himself, closed his eyes... and began to Weave.

Around twenty-five percent of the human population born during any Great Storm, year had the gift. Scholars from this very wing were currently theorizing this was due to some fluctuation in how a baby was formed when aether was present, but for now, no one knew for sure and nothing had been proved. Whatever the case, Verind felt blessed to be among the few and to have access to the realm of 'potential'.

He formed the middle finger of his right hand into a circle with his thumb, then drew a straight line across his chest and reached out with his sixth sense.

During a Storm year, the aether would have been everywhere, flowing around him like silvery snakes of power, just waiting to exist. The Spin, as it was called, became entirely that as Weavers spun their hands through complex motions to turn the potential of intangible aether

into real-world energy and effects. After a Storm moved on, though, and the Weft set in, only stored aether could be used to replicate similar feats, and only for so long as the stored charge lasted. Any crystal or reflective orb could contain aether, and so it was Verind had to reach out for the power stored in his lamp to use his abilities.

Aether seems so strange when it's tightly mashed together like this... I swear it only glows with light out of frustration at not being able to flow... Musing internally, he used the circle of his fingers as a guide for the power as he pulled it out of the orb and into its natural 'strands', fashioning every mote of potential available into a series of 'snakes' floating around him, then cast them out into the stacks.

Most Weavers had a relatively small range in which they could maintain their manifestation of power, and most were best capable of active effects in the forms of either raw strength, fire, lightning, or cold, though the most controlled Weavers of all could manage extremely fine manipulations and restorative effects. In all technicality, Verind knew he belonged to the latter just due to his range of control, though his thirteen years of training had made him so specialized in what he did, he would never compare to men who would otherwise have been his peers.

But they will never be able to smell the way I do, he thought smugly, extending his senses through his coursing snakes as they perused the entire wing at speed, poking their invisible snouts into and over everything stored on the ground floor.

Books had a uniquely enjoyable smell, and nearly everyone in the world could agree on that and identify it, but Verind could sense that smell in a way the average person never would. It came to him in tones and colors, in tastes and sounds. Some were repellent, while others were doubly enjoyable to him, like burying his nose inside the cover of a freshly printed novel. His job right now was only to find the 'bad smells' though, and remove the item in question from the shelves for treatment.

Book scent, he knew from extensive lessons, came from naturally occurring molds that thrived on parchment, papyrus and most of the other materials that were anything softer than actual stone. It gave books their delightful odor, the pages a thick feel, and as the mold slowly progressed into the page, it could also give readers a slight high or buzz if inhaled sharply. After that, the mold began to devour the page, consuming the tiniest particles day after day, until the thick page became brittle and worn, and holes began to show where the parchment was now

thinnest. It may take a decade, a century, maybe even longer depending on the material used and the inks and processes involved, but every single precious work on the shelves was subject to the goals and acids of mold. Left untreated, the eldest works of the Library would have been so much dust long before he was even born. Preventing that was his life's goal, as it had been for those who had worked here before him.

A sharp tang to the left pulled at his mind. The Natural Sciences wing contained rare samples as well as books, even boasting its own research stations. These useful factors, though, made the area more susceptible to the spread of mold from one work to another than anywhere else in the building. Rare was it for Verind to get through a whole week without finding a work in need of care, and tonight was no different. Keeping his eyes closed, the Libramoor followed the 'tail' of the alerting aether serpent to its head, tapping the floor and sweeping his cane gently to avoid walking into anything until he was stood before the offending shelf.

To his inner eye, the rows of books and scrolls were a pleasant background hue of muted purple, but to the left of the shelf, one work in particular seemed to glow with a distasteful and clashing orange. He set his cane against the shelf and pulled on white gloves, then took the book from the shelf, a quick sniff proving its scent to be it as repellent as the color inside his mind's eye. Vast experience of the smells of books confirmed his diagnosis before he even turned the first few pages. Just under the warm and pleasant must of the work, there was indeed the acrid twist of mold at work, acidic and dangerous. To anyone else, it would have been undetectable and maybe gone unnoticed for another decade... more, if no one had cause to access the book for study, but it was a piercing alarm to senses as honed as his.

He waited a few more minutes with the problem book in his hand, making sure his Weave had due time to find any other issues in the wing, then he slowly opened his eyes, and released the power from his grasp. For a brief second, the mentally perceived snakes, invisible as they had been during their work, flashed with a brief glow as the last of their aether burned off... and then he was stood in the dark once more. With the aid of his cane, he made his way back to the seal to collect his now-dark lamp, then walked back to the door into the rest of the library, guided by the dim glimmers of moonlight. Only once he stepped back into the hall and stopped under a gas lamp did he get to find out exactly *which* book he had pulled from the

shelves.

He reached up to twist the knob on the lamp up to get more light, then turned the volume over in his hands. *Vander's A to Z of Home Gardening and the Importance of Bees*, he read with a slight smile. *Not a work likely to be missed for a few weeks... this will do.* He tucked the book into a pocket of his robe made for such, followed by his cane and lamp as he returned them to their stowage, then he turned the gas back down and made his way towards the service stairs into the bowels of the Library's bedrock. He was a fashionable quarter of an hour late for his meeting with the apprentices, as intended.

Smiling grimly to himself, he skulked down the steps and kept his ears open.



"I just don't think it's fair, that's all. *And he's late.*"

Verind paused as he reached the last turn in the stairs, leaning against the cool smooth stone to listen in as a peevish young voice reached his ears.

The Vestibule Aqua ahead of him glimmered with rippling purple-blue light that filtered up through the water channels from the aether engines below, so he could see the shadows of the three youths dancing against the far wall. Tucked in the lee of the stair-well though, they did not yet know he was there. With slow motions to stay silent, Verind slid down the wall to sit and eagerly listened in on his prospective students.

"That's because it isn't fair, Deena, but that's life," said the taller of the two, skimming a stone into the nearest water channel. "Why did you think it would be any different here? If there are only two positions, then there are only two positions. Wishing and complaining won't change it, and adults get to set the schedules, but not necessarily keep to them. At least *we're* here on time."

You're right about that, kiddo, Verind thought with a nod. *Nothing changes unless you make it, and you can only control yourself.* He could see the shadows of the other two children, one choosing to sit down with a huff, while the girl, Deena, crossed her arms and began to

pace. It was she that broke the glum silence they fell into about a minute later, kicking another stone into the water.

“Do you know anything about the Libramoor, Charles?” she asked, with what Verind decided was faux levity.

“You mean the group or the one we’re assigned to?” answered the shorter of the two boys.

“Both.”

“Well, Libramoor is just the term they give to all certified staff in the Library that don’t come under the Libraris staff - you know, the Scholars and Scribes,” said the youth identified as ‘Charles’. Verind raised an eyebrow in surprise at the response, not really expecting any of the children to know much about the Library and its internal structure. *He* certainly hadn’t, the day he had arrived.

“Everyone else either has a title for their job or just ‘Libramoor’,” Charles continued. “The only exception is the Libramagis, of course. He’s the head Libramoor and thus given honorary Scribe status, but they don’t have one right now. I heard the old Libramagis, Sendik, passed away this Spring. There won’t be a vote for who takes his place for another month or so.”

“So, if we get in and learn everything... we’ll be Libramoors one day too,” stated the taller boy slowly.

Let’s see... the file Malik dropped off said you were all from the same poorhouse, but I’d put good money down that ‘Charles’ had some education before he ended up there, but you other two haven’t, Verind mused to himself. *Interesting.*

“That’s right, like Ser Verind, our tutor...” Charles was saying, before giving an expressive shrug that made his shadow dance across the wall. “I don’t really know anything about him. The Library doesn’t really send out pamphlets about its staff, after all.”

“Do you think he’ll be nice?” Deena asked, anxiety in her voice.

“Not sure. He didn’t seem very happy to see us when we first arrived...”

Charles said and Verind made a mental note to keep an eye on the child - he was perceptive for his age. “I guess it doesn’t really matter though. He doesn’t have to like us, and we don’t have to like him... we all just have to do what we’ve been told to do. He *said* he wanted to make sure two of us passed, but I’m not sure he really meant it...”

“Why is this job so complicated?” demanded the bigger boy sourly. “I mean,

they don't talk about becoming an apprentice for the gardens anywhere near as much."

"Well, you don't have to be able to Weave to garden, for one thing... but haven't you noticed something we have in common?" This time, it was the girl showing a degree of insight, and Verind was glad they couldn't see him or his grin as they talked.

"...we all came from St Jena's poorhouse?" suggested the big boy.

"No, not that..." Deena said with a degree of exasperation. "I mean about us, ourselves. Our Weaving."

"...well, we all *can* Weave, though you and Bastion are much better than me, Deena," Charles chipped in.

"But that's just it, isn't it? They asked us which of us would maybe want to work here... and about eight Weavers all said yes. Even Bastion and I aren't the strongest out of that group, it should have been Tristan or Hilda if that was the case. And it wasn't that they wanted the best educated because they didn't choose Matilda. You know what I think they were looking for?"

"What?" the big boy, Bastion, asked.

"Distance," Deena said firmly. "Us three always got hauled into the cloth-house because we can Weave far enough to push the dropped fibers all the way across the room under the machines without having to crawl in and maybe get caught in them... but I don't get why that's needed for joining the Protector Libramoors..."

"How can Weaving help protect books?" Bastion said, shaking his head, and Verind decided it was time to step in.

He stood up noisily, slapping his feet on the stairs. In response, he heard them scramble to their feet and whisper a quick warning to each other, so he took his time coming around the corner as if he had only just arrived. When he did, all three were lined up and gave him a shallow bow with swept left arms, typical of common Wessenland decorum.

"Good evening, Ser Verind," they chorused as one.

"No, no, no..." he sighed. "You aren't in Wessenland now, and that sort of thing just won't do."

"Not in...?" Bastion started, then swiftly shut up as Verind shot a sharp glare at him.

“No. Not in Wessenland. Wessenland might be below us right now, and we may call parts of it ‘home’, but we are not in Wessenland.” He paused to let his words sink in, and the confusion blossomed on their young faces. As patiently as he could manage, he tried to explain. “The Floating Library is *of* Wessenland, boy, but it is *not* Wessenland. We have no political allegiance or agenda, we are simply the home of knowledge and the protectors of discovery. We are a neutral place, where warring leaders have even sought middle ground to sign some of the most important peace treaties in history, so it hardly does to adopt one country’s customs over any other,” he said, crossing his arms as he inspected them.

Each was dressed in brown robes, with soft leather shoes technically of better quality than his slippers, but the sashes they wore at their waists were misaligned or upside down, their badges were shoddily placed, and the state of their hands was reprehensible. Just like himself, when he had been their age. And just as unacceptable.

“Ye... yessir...” the bigger boy mumbled, glancing in confusion at the other two, both of whom just shrugged.

“Still, it will do for now,” he said, relenting. “I don’t expect any of you to be here beyond the morning, so we may as well press on, though I will say this... ‘Ser’ and ‘Serina’ are terms for laymen or your juniors. Your seniors are *always* ‘Libramoor’ or ‘Libraris’, ‘Libramagis’ or ‘Librascholaris’.”

The trio passed another set of significant looks among each other, and Verind became truly aware that the three must have known each other for most of their lives, and had their own personal language of body motions and signals he would have to be sharply on the lookout for.

“Erm, yes Libramoor Verind... but excuse me for asking... why won’t we be here past morning?” ventured Deena, braver than the two boys.

“Because, Girl, I sincerely doubt you will make it past the first test of your abilities.”

Even he could hear the capital ‘g’ on Girl as he spoke. When he had been young and Libramagis Serdik had been training him, he had always been able to hear the difference between ‘boy’ and ‘Boy’ in the old man’s tone... and now it seemed that somewhere along the line, he had picked the trick up too. He saw Deena open her mouth to say something, and then think better of it. He smiled grimly and stalked past them towards a series of low benches in the

corner of the room. *I'm guessing you and the Boy are about fourteen... and the Kid is about eleven, maybe twelve... and yet you're so grown up for your ages, comparatively. Lights be with you, because if you can handle this place... things will get better. For you... they can only get better.*

“As you can see, the Vestibule Aqua is the inlet point for all water used by the Library,” he said, turning his tone to his closest approximation to ‘instructive’. “The aether engines which keep us aloft also draw cloud matter through four condensers on each cardinal point of the island and the moisture then drains through a sediment strainer into these channels, before dropping into the reservoir below us through one final meshed grill.” He pointed to the visible elements of what he described as he talked, until the children were clustered around him. “Recently, it has been the job of the junior technicians and maintenance engineers to keep these channels clear, however now that you are all here and trying to attain the rank of Libramoor, it should again fall under our jurisdiction. Keeping the channels clear will be your job from now on if you make it past today.”

“Um... that’s fine, Se... Libramoor Verind... but why? I don’t understand what this has to do with protecting the books?” asked the Girl, her tone turning plaintive.

“An excellent question, and one which will occupy us until midnight, I expect. Come, there are notebooks under the benches, I suggest you use them. You have a great deal to learn.”



He hadn’t been joking, at least about how much they would have to study. Verind didn’t hold back as he simply front-loaded the children with information about the Library, forestalling their questions about what any of it had to do with being a Libramoor of Book Preservation until they could at least parrot back to him some of the very basics about how the Library functioned.

The Kid, Charles, knew the most. Frequently, Verind found himself surprised at the base level knowledge the child had about the various wings of the Library and their locations, the

nature of the contents therein, the types of people who made up the permanent residents of the islands and even some of the protocols for accessing and reading the books. He did not, though, know anything about how the Library functioned mechanically, which was as it should be. Here, Verind took the most time, detailing the location and use of the aether engines that kept the island miles above the land and water below and provided the shield over top of them to keep the air from becoming too thin or plants from freezing.

“Why, though? Why not have the Library on the ground?” Girl asked, crinkling her brow. Lit by the blue rippling light coming through the water channels, Verind realized she had all the makings of a fairly pretty girl, once she got a little more meat on her. The kind of pretty that would one day blossom into beauty enough to distract the most dedicated Scribe or Scholar. *And if she is noticed by some visiting dignitary, will she bother to stay here? Or instead, seek the lap of luxury on some nobleman's arm? That would be a waste of my time, and hers...* He shook himself free of the speculative thoughts, focusing on the here and now, instead of an uncertain future.

“It used to be,” he answered. “Truthfully, the original reason it became the Floating Library, instead of the just the Wessen Repository, was not because of some grand plan, but simply because we could. A large amount of the new discoveries made are tested here every year, and engineering is just a form of applied science. Once it became known that such a thing may be possible, it was only a matter of time until it was tried, so why not here? The result has been that our purpose has become more focused since it is far easier to protect the books from unscrupulous hands, and make ourselves accessible to the select few when we are so hard to reach.”

“Isn't that a bit silly? Why don't you want *everyone* to read the books?” Bastion asked on impulse, kicking his feet so that his slippers made scuffling noises on the stone.

“Please don't misunderstand, Boy. Remember that the books here are the precious first editions or newest treatises... copies exist the world over for most of our stock, and anything new is copied most studiously by the Scribes for distribution first to the Collegiate towns, and then out to other libraries as quickly as possible,” Verind said passionately. “We do not hoard the knowledge *away* from people... we simply protect the actual source, for the good of the people. *All* people. Now, tell me again the first rule of understanding.”

He watched the sudden change of tack and demand for information he had last asked them about an hour ago cause them all to blink.

“...true understanding,” the Kid started, before the other two suddenly perked up and joined in with him, “comes from judging a work on the whole of its content before forming an opinion. All works should be read in full before discourse, decision or dispute.”

Verind nodded, satisfied. “Good. While our job is not to grade the books, this rule is as important to us as to the Scribes and Scholars. If we do not protect the pages fully, and content is lost, how can any work be judged or discussed in the fullness of truth or understanding? The first rule of understanding underpins the work of every single man, woman and child permitted to live or visit here. Never forget it.”

“Then when do we get to how we protect the books?” Girl asked, furrowing her brow petulantly at having to ask the question again for the umpteenth time.

“Very well, very well,” Verind sighed, brushing a stray strand of ochre-colored hair away from his face as he glanced upward. “It’s almost time anyway. You can all Weave... and it seems you have used it for physical effects in the past... I just hope you can be precise with your abilities.”

“We’re going to be Weaving?” Kid asked, his voice turning much less sure than he had been until now.

Verind nodded and pulled out a handful of Magus globes, rolling them expertly over his fingers as he spoke, the blue-spectrum light of each playing over his face to cause strange shadows and ripples.

“We rarely see thieves, or pirates up here. We are simply too tough a nut to crack. But the world has far more insidious issues for our books than mere people. Tomorrow, assuming you handle tonight, I will teach you about mold, but tonight... tonight our job will be fauna. Tell me what you know about Magus creatures.”

“Erm... Charles?” The Boy, Bastion, glanced sidelong at the smaller child, seeking answers the Kid seemed all too ready to give.

“No,” Verind said firmly. “Not the Kid. One of you other two answer, for once. Unless of course, you intend for me to tutor him alone and send you two home.”

“N... no.” Bastion swallowed hard as Charles closed his mouth, and Verind could almost see cogwheels turning in the child’s head as he sought knowledge he may not

have ever been taught. The poorhouse cared only for output, not education, but some dim bulb seemed to spark behind the Boy's eyes, and he tentatively spoke his thoughts aloud. "Um...Er... Magus creatures are animals in tune with aether, in the same way Weavers are for people."

"Exactly the same as with us? Can it be that three weasels are normal, and one can Weave?" Verind asked, clacking two of the Magus globes together so that tiny sparks of aether discharged from them and curled upward.

"No, that would be silly," Girl laughed. "It would be more like there are two *kinds* of weasel, a normal weasel breed and a Magus weasel breed, and the Magus weasels can use aether, but they tend to be much rarer..."

"Silly?" Verind asked, holding back a smile at the Girl's certainty, and her sudden unsure expression with his question, but he moved on instead of pursuing the matter. "Why are they more rare?"

"Well, Weavers are less abundant than mundane men, so I guess it's the same for them?" she suggested, clearly not having considered that question before.

"Or s'just that we kill 'em more," said Boy. "When I was young, my Da used to go out for Fire Rat tails when the Weft set in. The cloth-house didn't like having any of 'em around in case they used up any of the Magus globes, so they used to pay for the tails."

"Very good," Verind nodded with approval. "You both make valid points. Magus creatures are indeed more rare than more mundane variants, but the great works of this place will come to teach you that so long as there is some resource to be exploited, animals and people will come, and change if necessary, to consume it. Of course animals use aether, and of course, they seek it out deliberately."

"The engines..." breathed the Kid, understanding dawning in his eyes immediately. "That's why you wanted us to know how the Library flies... it attracts animals that like aether."

"Especially in the Weft," Verind confirmed with a nod. "The engines vent in series, one after the other, between midnight and 1 in the morning, when everyone is asleep and the flares and slight tilts in the ground won't bother them. And of course, that's when the pests that keep making their nests here wake up..."

"Oh no... please don't tell me it's bats... I really hate the way they flap..."

Verind grinned and stood up, tossing a Magus globe to each of the children for them to catch, before he drew the power out of his own, and kept it neatly flowing around him like a

tight corona.

“Well, I have good news for you, Girl. We don’t get bats. They prefer caves they will not be disturbed in, and to poop all over the floor. No... we don’t get bats, we get something worse.”

Flicking a few sparks of aether into both the water and up to the ceiling, Verind woke the lurking swarm just as the bells far, far above started to toll midnight in a sonorous chorus. By the third strike, all three kids were already screaming.



In water, most species of squid were capable of jetting backward at about twenty-five body lengths a second. Verind knew this because chasing the damn things in the water channels was a thousand times worse than trying to catch them in the air, where they could *not* move so swiftly. Other facts he knew, intimately, included the fact that they had donut-shaped brains with tubes through the middle, odd hooks on the inside of their mantles to let them seal their ‘jet chambers’, and could exude a sticky mucous ink, usually sepia-toned, to annoy and confuse predators.

The Meddlesome Magus Squid, found the world over, could also ‘ink’ in the air, as they sailed through it on jets of aether, supported by the wide bladed mantle fins. And it was all Verind could do to maintain a straight face when, after ten minutes of pure panic, he was still watching the children squealing in disgust as the swarm of about one hundred small squids chased them around the Vestibule. The damp little creatures persisted in squirting foul smelling ink-mist and clinging to arms, legs, walls, and anything else they crashed into.

Mastering himself, Verind moved towards the top end of the Vestibule to guard the exit into the other areas of the Library up the stairs, snapping aether out in small darts to pierce the bodies of any squid that crossed his vision, dropping them like flies to the ground, where their bodies added to the growing pools of slippery goo.

Some of the squids hid in the water, now they knew it was not safe in the air of their lair

and their bodies became immediately invisible thanks to the pigments in their skin. Verind ignored them, as they couldn't pass through the grills at the end of the room and there would be plenty of time to pick them off before the night's end. For now, he was mostly interested in watching how the children chose to handle the situation. If they panicked and ran for the stairs where he stood, or started flailing aether all over the place without checking their targets, then there would be no place for them in the Library so far as he was concerned. *Even less so if they don't help each other or work together.*

"Ow, ow, ow! Get it off!" Girl shrieked, fighting with a squid that had wrapped around her arm, its eyes whirling madly.

"How can these things hurt so much?" Boy demanded, shaking an arm ineffectually in the hope of freeing himself.

"It's in my eye!" Kid whimpered, rushing to a water channel to try and wash the mess off, only to have another squid try to grab him from under the surface.

Under any other circumstance, rather than actually experiencing it, the scene was entirely comedic.

"They have beaks in-between all the tentacles, and toothed-suckers on each appendage, of course," Verind said conversationally. He periodically snapped a jolt of aether out to eliminate a squid off of a child as they passed inside his range. For himself, he used his right hand to Weave attacks on the squid, while his left protected his body with a thin veil of aether that shocked anything that came too close.

"Gross!" the girl shrieked, ducking behind a pillar to try and hide from the line of charging cephalopods swarming in a flock above her.

Verind settled back and watched. As unexpected as the attack was, it wasn't surprising that to start with, the kids were mostly concerned with looking after themselves and trying to get away from the problem. Girl had her hiding spot, Kid jumped into the water and hid under the arch of a water inlet, and as for Boy... he had figured out that if he slammed into a wall, it at least crushed the soft-bodied creatures enough for him to pull them off him.

Once the immediate threat was gone, *then* the children began to marshal thoughts to deal with the problem as a whole. Initially, that meant each of them picking off the squid closest to them. Boy was slow, but everything he hit simply flopped to the floor instantly after being pierced with energetic javelins of aether, drawn from the globe the boy held. Similarly,

Kid was taking his time and aiming carefully though in his case it seemed to be more about making his strikes count, ephemeral as they seemed to be. Girl was much faster, but less accurate and driven by a personal fear of letting another squid grab her, rather than trying to prevent the animals from approaching the exit points. *Well*, he thought, shaking his head, *this isn't the best start.*

“If they get into the Library,” he said aloud, and distinctly, “they will eat the exhibits, whether paper or preserved animal. Worse still, if they get into the south wing where the machines for aether study are kept...”

He let the unspoken issue hang in the air. He could vividly remember the first time he had encountered the squid, which old Libramagis Sendik had antagonized in a similar manner, but during the Spin. There had been a huge mother squid with the podlings back then, too, and he'd have been dismissed instantly had it not been for his panic exhibiting itself as an area blast of power that had thankfully not hurt anyone else, and thus allowed him to pass it off as purposeful. No matter how one felt about cephalopods, one night of dealing with a panicking squid swarm in mid-air was usually enough to make one allergic to calamari for life. Right now, the children were showing all the signs they were not cut out for the task, but with the memory of his own past in the front of his mind, he waited and gave them time to surprise him.

“Libramoor, can you please throw the spare Magus globes into the center of the floor?” Kid asked a minute or two later, ducking under one of the benches to avoid a stream of squid moving in a school over his head, now he had scrambled out of the cold water.

“Charles, what are you doing?!” Girl demanded, pulling an errant squid off her arm with difficulty. The flailing creature left red welts in little circles from her wrist to her elbow, which began to bleed immediately.

“They're hungry, right? Let's give them something to eat,” Kid reasoned. “Deena, can you use a wind to round them up and drive them into the middle?”

“Not with them clinging to me!” she snapped.

“I'll zap them off you,” Kid promised. “Bastion, get ready to send a current through the water, just the length of the channel, no further. I'm not strong enough to just kill them, but I can get them off you if you two can work together and dispose of them.”

“I'll try,” Boy said with a shrug, then slammed his back into another large stone pillar to crush a squid clinging to his back.

“Remember... you are being assessed,” Verind said, watching them intently.

“Only two of us can pass...” Boy said uncertainly, biting his lip and glancing between the other two.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Girl said firmly. “I doubt your Da argued with his buddies over who got to kill which rat... all that mattered was protecting the cloth-house, right?”

“...right.”

Verind nodded and threw the remaining three Magus orbs he had into the middle of the room. Immediately, they were pounced on by the nearest squid, which tangled into a hungry ball around them. Flashes of light arced across the room as Kid indeed focused on relieving his friends of their woes, then Girl spun in a full body Weave with clearly practiced ease, drawing a gentle but insistent wind around the edges of the room, that then began to inch inward.

Verind whistled lowly at the reach she had on the Weave, as well as the control. The Boy, Bastion, ducked under the vortex so he was on the outside of it, and waited as Girl tightened her Weave, smaller and smaller. Only when the squid were all mustered over the central channel of water did he throw his own Magus globe up into the air, pulling power out of it *and* the pile in the middle of the squid heap. The Boy then concentrated the strands together, pulsing them outward in a wave of lightning that shocked and eliminated the entire group in one swoop, as well as those in the water. With a nod of approval, Verind stepped back involuntarily as the jolt of power stopped just shy of his slippers.

Other than the unpleasant popping of fried squid settling in a pile on the floor, silence descended. Verind let his Weave go, and raised an eyebrow at the three children, all of whom were breathing hard and covered in lacerations. Blood dripped off of each of them, where beaks had scored flesh during the unexpected struggle and he half expected at least one of them to start to cry - mucus in open sucker cuts certainly stung enough to warrant it. Instead, the Kid hurried over to the other two, and they actually started to laugh.

“Oh Lights, Bastion, you look awful...” Girl giggled, wiping the slime off her less injured arm.

“Wait until you see your hair...” the Boy guffawed in response.

“It’s going to take a week to get the smell of these things out of my nose...” Kid said, wrinkling up his face. “I thought squid was a delicacy... they smell like an outhouse...”

Verind watched them for a few minutes, and the bond of friendship they clearly all shared, then he shrugged and began to Weave once more. The south engine was currently venting for the night, and its discharge was more than enough power for the Libramoor to send out double the snakes he had used in the Natural Sciences wing to scoop up the corpses and dump them into the buckets around the edges of the room. Clearing the squid from the water took a little longer, and by the time he was done there were six full buckets of dead cephalopods and three children staring at him slack-jawed as he manipulated the water from the channels to wash clear the dirtied stonework until the Vestibule resembled its former pristine self once more.

“A job is not complete until all clean up work has been done,” he said mildly, knowing the level of control he had just shown was no doubt far in excess of anything the children would have seen before. *In time, they will be able to do that too. If I teach them. And I suppose someone has to.* “For you three, clean up means depositing the waste in those buckets on Libramoor Daarmin’s compost heaps. The Meddlesome Squid may be poor for eating and terrible on our exhibits, but they make excellent fertilizer. After that... clean and dress your wounds carefully. Then you may go to bed.”

“Ye... yes, Libramoor. Is this... what you do every night?” Boy asked.

“No, as there is too much for me to do alone,” Verind admitted. “When there were three of us, the numbers of squid never got this high, but now... alone... I can only clean this place every two weeks. When I am satisfied you can handle the squid by yourselves, it will become your job to check it daily so I may focus on other chores.”

“Then... are we staying...?” Girl asked nervously.

“You have a long way to go, but if I don’t teach you, I’ll just have to do this all over again with whatever mess they send to me next time,” Verind sniffed gruffly, refusing to meet any of their eyes, or register the relieved excitement his words put into them. “We will convene at three of the afternoon bells in my office tomorrow, to begin basic studies of fungal species. I expect you all to arrive with your sashes and badges properly positioned and displayed next time. If I hear that even one of you has forgotten how to address your fellows while you are representing both the Library and the Libramoors, it will go very hard for all three of you.”

“All three...” Kid breathed, finally relaxing fully.

“Those squids aren’t going to move themselves,” Verind snapped. “Two buckets apiece, including you, Girl, and run along. I have other work to attend, without you under my feet.”

“Yes Libramoor!” they chorused, and he could hear them laughing and talking all the way out of the under-croft.



Six weeks later, Verind found himself sitting and staring at three sweets, still present on his table, mocking him. He’d happily eaten an entire box of Rasaalian candy in that time, of course, but these particular three sweets had become grand as mountains in his short time so far as a tutor.

“I’m sorry, Verind, but I don’t have any choice in the matter.”

He harrumphed at the intruding voice, grudgingly taking the proffered cup of Ceja Libramoor Ederik passed him as he crossed back from the fireplace and sat down opposite him. Sipping the drink, Verind scowled at the man who had not only decreed he was only permitted to allow two students into the Book Protection apprenticeship but was also technically his boss. Almost certainly his boss, after the vote in a few days’ time.

“Is it because of the Libramagis position? Don’t want to rock the boat?” he asked, keeping his tone level.

“That’s rather blunt...” Ederik said primly, tightening his grip on his own cup as Verind met his gaze.

“It is,” Verind responded without looking away. “But you know I won’t judge either way for the answer. As long as you tell me the truth.”

“I have never been in the habit of lying,” sniffed the older Libramoor, then he sighed. “I suppose the vote is partly to do with it, but even without that, I think we would be having the same conversation. Politically, I already have the strongest hand for the Libramagis position when the Scholars decide, but with or without it, and even if Sendik was still with us... nothing will change that our staff amounts will always be limited by what the Library can

physically support.” Ederik spread his hands and shrugged apologetically, his hard and lined features softening briefly. “It’s the price of living on a flying rock.”

“One mouth soon becomes more if rules are allowed to slip, I suppose,” Verind said with resignation.

“The only leeway is given to the Scribes, you know that,” Ederik agreed. “Your job is designed for three, and unless you want to resign yourself... one of the children has to go.”

“They are a very effective team,” Verind said, leaning back in his seat to rub his temples. “They showed that the first night with the squid, and since then they’ve been very competent at using what they are each best at to finish jobs in an hour, where it would normally take me half a night.” With a grimace, Verind met Ederik’s impassive gaze and sighed. “I understand, though. How much longer will you give me to decide?”

“A week,” the Libramoor responded instantly. “It seems appropriate to let them know at Year’s End, no later. But I must say, I’m surprised you’re this conflicted... you always said you didn’t want to teach.”

“I don’t,” Verind snorted instantly and passionately, “but my loyalty has always been to the Library, and what is best for it. These three are young, foolish and brash, but they have potential... together.”

“You have to decide, Verind. Libramagis Sendik saw something in you, whether you know it or not, and I have faith in *his* faith. You’ll make the best choice, I’m sure, and it will be nice to have a full staff looking after the exhibits again. You’ve been much overworked this year.”

“I’m fine...” Verind replied, “but I won’t deny some help would be pleasant.” With a little effort, he fought down his defensive responses. He cleared his throat and gave a small nod. “Alright, I’ll have my decision sent to you inside the week, but I must insist on being permitted to teach as I see fit in that time. I don’t need Malik shadowing me half the time and trying to insinuate I should keep the two boys, and get rid of Girl.”

“I will find work for him away from the main building, but the sooner you choose, the better it will be for you, and for them. Good luck.”

Verind grunted as Ederik got up and drained the better part of two-thirds of a cup of hot Ceja in one go, as was his usual way. Watching the elder Libramoor cross to his door, Verind said nothing as he left, and instead went back to staring at the three sweets as the latch to his

quarters clicked back closed.

“Three turn up, and I’m only allowed to keep two... what a crock.”

The afternoon, when it rolled around, found him as sour as ever when the children knocked on his door.

“Come,” he called, rising from his armchair where he had been dozing to re-seat himself at the head of his small table, ready for the days lessons. Boy, Girl and Kid trooped in and came to a stop on the rug, then in unison, they brought their left hands to their chests and dipped their heads.

“Good afternoon, Libramoor,” they chorused, sashes straight and badges gleaming.

“Good afternoon. Take your seats, we have much to do, as usual.”

Six weeks had made a lot of difference. The trio had all been fairly well muscled from day one, the poorhouse having been more than happy to put anyone in its care to physical labor where possible, but they had all been thin and somewhat sickly with it, as if their muscles were piano wires, holding onto cracking ivory. A month of truly decent meals, suitable rest, and baths where possible had turned the group from tenacious rats into sleek hunting dogs. Sending any of them back to their old way of life would be borderline criminal, in his mind.

“What are we studying tonight, Master Verind?” Girl asked eagerly, oblivious to his conflicted thoughts and mood. “Are we going to Weave? I’ve been practicing...”

“We all have!”

Yes, you all have. I haven’t seen a squid inside the Vestibule in weeks, and Copper has even stopped whinging at me about slime making it through the ducts...

The Meddlesome Squid had only been the start of things, though. Girl had proved herself truly perceptive to the mold problems the books suffered from and could pick out the as-yet-untreated ‘*A to Z of Home Gardening*’ from any location, stack or hidden place he could think to put it, unerringly. Boy was doing best with fauna. After the first night, and learning how to deal with the squid, he had gone on to root out a nest of mice that had been eluding Verind for months, and trace what had turned out to be a stray cat that had snuck up to the Library on a delivery ship all the way to a crevice in the amphitheater no one had even known about

before.

And then there was Kid. He had adapted to the Library best of all, hoarding knowledge from any book Verind gave him like a sponge soaking up water. It didn't matter if it was the life cycle of the papyrus plant, intricate details on airing the various Library wings to minimize risk to the books, or emergency procedures in the event of an attack or critical flight failure, he retained information with ease. At first, Verind had assumed that while he would be good at parroting the knowledge back, he would prove no good at actually using it... but that hadn't turned out to be true either, as Kid could see the practical applications of his knowledge clearly and had even come up with some novel solutions to problems Verind himself had never thought of. The only time Kid seemed to falter and lose himself was when it came to Weaving, an area in which the child was weaker than his peers, but no less well controlled with what little he could do, and his reach was definitely on par with Girl and Boy.

The other two were as keenly aware as he was that Kid was definitely the best of them, but it hadn't seemed to deter them from steadfastly remaining a group of three, and supporting each other. Kid would share his book smarts and help the others memorize critical elements, while Girl used her own Weaving next to her companions to help them feel the flow necessary to mimic her own successes. Boy, for all he seemed the most intellectually stunted of the three, noticed little details that led him to intuitive successes the others were then able to cue in on. And they never ever seemed to discuss what they would do when the day came that one of them would have to leave, understanding that Verind would only keep on all three until he knew which two would be best to retain.

Whether their willful ignorance on the matter was a result of having grown up in the uncertainty of the poorhouse, or just simply that they had a childish ability to live only for the moment, Verind didn't know... but it wasn't making his job any easier, at least in terms of how to make his final choice.

With another of his now all-too-familiar sighs, he thumped open the huge and well-leafed book on his desk, turning to the 'w' section, where a bunch of papers lay wedged into the book, covered in drawings, recipes and other notes from Libramoor Protectors going back generations.

"Tonight, we will discuss the problems of woodworm, and how to treat the very shelves our exhibits rest on. Get out your notebooks..."



On the fourth day of the final week, Verind sat watching the spiders work. Machines made of metal and instructions, they roamed the high vaulted ceilings of the upper floors on threads made of steel cable, clearing away the webs and insect bodies left behind by their living brethren. Moving with soft clicking sounds, and the ticking of cogwheels turning to propel them forward, the small machines roamed the tightropes above in small numbers, barely keeping the grand painted ceilings clear, let alone clean, while they were in the Weft.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to those things,” Girl shuddered, following his gaze as she approached him.

“When the Spin returns next year, you’ll have to get over it quickly... that’s when they bring out the big brass Broodmothers to oversee the deep cleaning.” Verind extended a slender, bony finger and pointed towards one among six other large wooden boxes mounted behind the pillars where they met the ceiling, and the large brass plates covering the holes that were normally there. On each plate, there was an etching of a large spider with a number beside it.

“...those look horrifying!” she said, averting her eyes from the little silvery robots above, and the lairs of their hidden ‘mothers’.

“On the contrary, the Broodmothers are a marvel of aetheric technology. Despite their size, they only need a single Magus globe to power them, and they can coordinate and direct mobs of twenty spiderlings a piece. They’re truly impressive to watch, and they even repair damaged steel wires ready for the next Weft. I find their clicking very soothing.”

“I feel like we still barely know anything about the Library,” the girl sighed, setting down the books she had come to shelve before the wings closed for the evening.

“That’s a true assessment,” Verind agreed, sitting forward and looking at her properly. “You know the bare minimum, partly because there is so much to know, and partly because I have no intention of sharing any of the deeper truths of our home until I know which of you is staying.”

“You... really have to send one of us away,” came the glum response.

“Or all of you,” he reminded her softly.

“...yes. Or all of us.”

She looked at him and bit her lip, then looked away out over the stacks, to where Boy and Kid were busy helping a member of the cleaning staff to buff the brass railings on the lower floor. Currently, they had their respective hands buried to the wrists inside the ammonite shells at the end of the railings - a filthy job he had hated when such things had been up to him to clean. The scent of polish hung heavy in the air, a pleasant scent to contrast to the bitter thoughts he could see moving over Girl's young face.

“You're thinking that you would prefer to leave all together if you can't stay together,” Verind said, smiling when she whirled around to look at him in surprise.

“How do you know that?” she demanded. He simply shrugged with a smile in response.

“It isn't your choice, I'm afraid. You said you wanted the job, and if I send you all away, Libramagis Ederik will be very angry. After all, a degree of competence has been observed by people other than myself. It would be an obvious lie to say you were all useless.”

“...I want to stay,” she murmured, laying her hands on the books she had brought upstairs, caressing their covers through the white gloves she was wearing to protect the precious papers from herself. “I like it here. It's better than St Jena's...”

“I know.”

“You can't possibly know!” she snapped, and he could see the tears welling in the corners of her eyes, brought on by some unknown memories she would carry forever, and never share with anyone. Anyone other than the two boys below, that is.

“...I know,” he said again, quietly. “Where do you think I came from?”

Verind watched the girl open and shut her mouth a couple of times. It wasn't her fault. He had assumed every single person at the Library was from a select family too, once upon a time. Certainly, no one in the grounds today treated him like an orphan anymore, and no visitor would have reason to suspect and therefore bring prejudice to their interactions.

“No one is defined by how they were born or raised,” he said, holding her gaze as she blinked away the wetness welling under her eyelids. “You are only your own choices. I will be making mine soon, so I suggest you work hard, Girl.”

“I have a name, you know. We all do,” she pouted, falling back on teenage annoyance, rather than consider the future.

“Yes. You do.” Verind agreed. “Tomorrow, bring the Boy and the Kid down to the stream by the amphitheater, instead of my rooms. The squids have relocated thanks to your enthusiastic work in the Vestibule. Now, run along, Girl.”

For a few moments, the child wavered, almost asking him something, or perhaps almost ready to volunteer something instead... but then the faint call from Kid drew her attention away. Running to the rail, she glanced back at Verind one more time... and then went downstairs.



On the fifth day, he carried a picnic with him, down to the stream. The children were already there when he arrived, up to their knees in the cold wintery water, without seeming to care about the awful chill it was no doubt giving them, even in spite of small icicles hanging off the muddy banks and overhanging decorative bushes.

“You’ll catch your death of cold in there,” he scolded, shivering a little himself as a gust of wind flowed over the top of the slope above them and curled down into the gravel and grass lined hollow the stream pooled in.

“Boy made a fire,” said the Kid pointing behind him, and Verind found himself smiling. It was far from the first time any of them had lapsed into calling each other by the descriptors he had assigned them, but it was always charming to him when it happened. He looked over the top of Boy’s head, and indeed there was a tall pyramid of sticks built up in a neat, safe ring of stones, waiting for a light.

“Well, then I suppose it’s a good thing I brought marshmallows with me.”

He relinquished the basket to eager hands as the children scrambled out of the stream, leaving a pile of squid on the far side. He nodded in approval - after this many weeks, he shouldn’t need to tell them to get started with work they had already mastered, and it seemed they had taken it to heart. Someone had at least sensibly gone to the Vestibule to collect a

bucket to put the refuse in, and he could only hope it had been one of the children he had flagged to remain in the apprenticeship program.

“Oh, there’s *tlaki* treats from Rasaal in here! And sugared ria pods!” Kid squealed, delighted.

Foods you wouldn’t have been able to recognize, two months ago, Verind thought, smiling as he cleared a rime of snow from the bench under the tree and sat down.

“Hey, what’s this?” Boy asked, holding up a vial of something red, and a pipette.

“Gather some of the clean fresh snow from the top of the banks into cups, and I will show you,” Verind smiled. “I asked the chemists to make enough to teach you about Year’s End in Nofdur. They mix this with snow to make a cold, slushy drink. Now pay attention, we have a lot of customs to learn about, and most of them are food...”

After an hour, and more treats than he would be willing to admit he had been storing for the winter, Verind finally sent them back to the water to clean out the last of the squid, using his own Weaving and a pair of Magus orbs to waft warm air around the three as they worked, from the fire Boy had sparked to life. When he spotted movement on the path above them, he rose from his seat and waded into the water too, catching squid dodging away from the kids with practiced ease.

“Well, I suppose I ought to let you three off for the day. Your assessments were technically over yesterday, after all.”

He looked up as the three suddenly stopped working, all staring at him with a mixture of both surprise, nerves, and hope. It took all his willpower not to smile, or admit a fondness for all of them, even to himself.

“And... did we...?” Girl asked softly... then yelped as the squid she had been holding soundly bit her on the thumb and she dropped it with a most unladylike curse.

“Libramagis Ederik has your results, but remember... if you have passed, all it means is that you are committed to these lessons for as long as it takes until I am satisfied you are fit to serve the Library as anything other than a *student*.” He dropped the last word like the curse it technically was, to the staff of the Library. Old Sendik himself had always said that the least efficient part of the Library was its habit of entertaining *students*.

“Ye... Yes Libramoor,” the three said.

“Well then? Don’t keep lollygagging around here... I have this mess to clean up before dinner, and the Libramagis isn’t going to wait at the top of the slope forever.”

He watched them spin on their heels, heard the intake of breath from each of three throats, no doubt in response to a second rush of nerves. The girl led the way, scrambling up the embankment in a most unrefined manner, closely followed by her two companions. He sat back, dumping the handful of squid carcasses into the bucket next to him and watched as they bowed formally to Ederik, the customary motion no longer stilted on any of them after so many weeks.

He couldn’t hear what the Libramagis said to them, but it didn’t matter - it would be a gentle lecture on the importance of hard work and pride in all you had achieved. The standard words of a man softening a blow before handing over results packages. Boy opened his first, and the whoop he gave out could certainly be heard at this distance, eliciting an unwitting smile from Verind as he wiped ink off his hands. Girl did a little dance as she opened her own parcel and pulled the sheet up, not even managing to get it fully out of the envelope before she was hugging Boy. The joviality was short lived however, both Boy and Girl realizing within seconds that their own positive results could have only one outcome for their third. Joy immediately became gloom, even for the two who had passed, as their fears returned full force.

Kid stood silent. He watched the young man turn his eyes slowly downslope to rest on him. The child’s expression was carefully neutral, his eyes alone questioning Verind, searing into his soul. Even without Weaving his snakes into existence, Verind could sense and taste the avid disappointment and surprise from the little group above him, could guess at the thoughts running through their minds. Boy and Girl both knew, as he did, that Kid was the smartest of them. The most competent. Silently, Verind held Kid’s gaze, watching to see if he would cry or demand an explanation, but he did not, he just stood still and calm. Marshalling himself to keep his own expression neutral, he raised a finger and beckoned Kid to come down to him, fighting doubly hard not to smile when Girl and Boy brazenly came too. They were a trio... and he was going to split them up. *They might not ever forgive me for that*, he thought, and stood up.

“Were you polite to the Libramagis?” he asked in his usual gruff tone when dealing with the group.

“Yes, Libramoor,” they chorused, and he could see Girl about to open her

mouth and demand to know why Kid hadn't passed. He silenced her with a raised finger and focused on Kid.

"What is the first rule of understanding?" he asked, taking them back to their first lesson.

"True understanding comes from judging a work on the whole of its content before forming an opinion. All works should be read in full before discourse, decision or dispute. One cannot be a master of an item's knowledge if one does not know the entire content," Kid answered, promptly but glumly.

"And yet, I see you have not properly reviewed the papers given you."

He stood silently while Kid frowned, and checked his pack again. This time, he pulled the paperwork fully out of the envelope, so that he could see everything below the 'denied entry' stamp on his application to the Libramoor ranks. There was another, smaller envelope attached to the bottom. Girl and Boy both held their breath as Kid opened it, scanned the single rich sheet of paper within, then the child sat down heavily.

"What is it, Kid? What does it say?!" Girl asked with nervous excitement, Boy craning over her shoulder. Kid, for his part, just stared up at Verind, hardly able to speak.

"Really?" he asked hoarsely, and Verind nodded.

"Really," he said, crossing his arms. "I only get to sponsor once a decade, so you had better not waste it, Kid. I expect great things."

"Yes... yes, Libramoor! I... I won't..." Words failed the normally quiet child, and he simply stood up and embraced Verind tightly, almost sobbing with relief as he buried his nose in Verind's robes while he patted him on the head, finally letting himself smile.

"Wha...?" Boy asked as Girl picked up the letter and read it for herself, then squealed with delight.

"A Scribe!! You sponsored Kid to be a Scribe!"

"Two may pass, or all may fail... but you did not abandon each other for your own gain, and Kid taught you almost as much as I did. Remember each other, work hard... and protect the Library," Verind said sternly.

"Yes, Libramoor!"

The other two suddenly embraced him, so hard he almost couldn't breathe and had to beat them all off with his usual faux gruffness.

“Go on, the lot of you. This is not behavior suitable for juniors or scribes! Go and wash up for dinner, and Kid, you can get rid of this bucket of slop, as your last duty to me. I will see you at dinner, and you may have tonight off, Girl, Boy. Tomorrow... we clean the Vestibule Aqua at eight of the bells, sharp.”

“What about you, sir?” Boy asked, cocking his head to one side.

“Me? I’m going to go and have a shower... and then, I have three sweets waiting for me. Run along.”

He watched them run laughing up the slope, and around the edge of the amphitheater, whooping and yelling, then turned with a smile to Libramagis Ederik as he came down to join him.

“I thought you said you didn’t know how to be nice to children, Verind,” said Ederik casually, the new pin of his Libramagis rank sparkling in the last glimmers of winter sunlight.

“I don’t,” Verind snorted. “A nice person would have helped them, and given them his own knowledge to succeed, and no doubt followed the rules. Three enter, at least one must leave? How stupid. Everyone is good for something, Libramagis, but no one achieves their potential without their own desire to do so, and friends to help. They had to work for it, and in the coming weeks, they will come to see that I have been far from kind in splitting them up, and sending the best of them to another department.”

“I take it you are not concerned about spending your nomination on one of the first applicants ever brought to you?”

“Charles will either make it, or he won’t, and he will do it on his own merit. I merely opened the door. If he lets it slam in his face, it’s his nose that will be most put out, ser, not mine.”

Libramagis Ederik turned a slow, calculating look on Verind, then gave a soft smile. “I see a great future ahead of you, Libramoor. Libramagis Sendik would have been most proud.”

“...old Sendik would have scolded me for not getting them to this point a month ago.”

“Heh. I suppose you’re right. Well, you’ll just have to do better next time.”

“Over your dead body, ser,” Verind smiled affably.

Behind the rising spire of the clock tower, which seemed to vibrate as the bells sounded the fifth hour, the sun finally dipped below the floating rock of the Library and plunged them into a deep evening ahead of the rest of Wessenland, miles below. Verind bowed to his senior and carried himself up the slope to his office and bedroom, and set his swinging cauldron over the fire to boil. Next to his chair, someone had left the newest work by Grisa Hergen, and his three *tlaki* treats sat atop it invitingly.

Laughing, Verind sat down and popped the first in his mouth.

End