

“You know,” Beris grunted, doing his best to hoist his friend just a little higher, fingers interlocked beneath her boot, “when I said I didn’t have any prior engagements tonight, that wasn’t me volunteering to help you commit a felony.”

“If you didn’t want to get pulled into my plans, you shouldn’t have admitted to being free,” Tenna said dismissively, huffing with exertion as she reached for a vine just above her head. Though the balcony she was struggling to reach was technically on the first floor, with the slope of the hill and her relatively short stature, the dwarf was having considerably more difficulty reaching her destination than she had predicted when coming up with her plot. Damn human buildings — always so rudely tall!

“Consider my lesson learned.”

“We’ve known each other since we were both in leading strings, you should know better by now. Besides, it’s not a crime if it’s for love!”

“Breaking and entering is now considered romantic, got it.” Beris often wondered if the two of them would have ever become friends if they hadn’t been the only two dwarves their age in the otherwise human nursery where they had spent their early years. Surely, if there had been any other choices growing up, he would have had better sense than to align himself with this lovesick fool.

“I told you, it happens all the time in romance novels! It’s the height of romance!”

“I think the height you should be worried about is the one from which you might fall if you don’t keep steady. Besides, if we’re going to take advice from cheap fiction, shouldn’t we actually try to follow the plot? Since it’s usually the male who dramatically scales walls and

other nonsense, shouldn't you be, I don't know, sitting picturesquely by your window with your embroidery while you wait for him?"

"Don't be ridiculous, he has no idea where I live." Tenna waved a hand dismissively at the thought, the motion causing them both to sway haphazardly. "You are awfully confident in your teasing for someone who has read enough of my 'cheap romance fiction' to be able to recognize the common plot tropes."

"It's not my fault that you're late sometimes or you take too long getting ready to go out and it's the only thing there!" Beris insisted, rising to the bait.

"I shall be incredibly magnanimous and pretend that I believe you."

"Remember that I am the one holding you up, not the other way around." Beris grumbled.

"And if you weren't holding me, I would kick you. So really, you're the one in danger."

"What makes you think this is a good idea?" Beris said, shifting the topic back to the task at hand. "Does this man know anything about you beyond your name?"

"Of course he does! We've spoken several times when he's come into the shop for bread!" Tenna snapped. Her tone, while obviously irritated by her friend's lack of blind support, lacked any real malice. Bickering felt as easy as breathing between them; friendly insults flowing through their conversation like water down a stream.

"Ah yes, the most romantic of questions – 'do you have any rye left, or are you out for the week?' It's truly a surprise he hasn't proposed already."

"We've talked about more than just that! He also asks if I'm having a nice day or says something about the weather. And don't forget the book!"

“The book, how could I have forgotten? The book of human poetry with little comments written in the margins that he just so happened to have forgotten in the bakery one day that had neither his name in it nor anything addressing it to you. The fact that you can so easily recognize his handwriting is a bit disturbing.”

“It is not my fault you are so hopeless at recognizing romantic gestures. Most people don’t get free drinks from strangers who ‘just so happened to see you sitting there’ you know?” Tenna chose not to acknowledge Beris’s last comment. Who didn’t know the handwriting of their one true love?

“Sometimes people are just nice! Besides, if someone wants to show interest, they should just say so rather than beating around the bush like a coward.”

“My poor romantically illiterate friend, I feel for you, I really do. After tonight, I promise to help the next helpless fool that I approve of who falls for you to sweep you off your feet.”

“Please never interfere with my love life.” Even as Beris voiced his protests, he knew they would be of no use. Though Tenna did know him better than anyone else, perhaps she wouldn’t be the worst person to set him up. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to let her take over the trouble of his romantic life. Not that he would ever admit to such a thought.

Tenna finally managed to find a vine that didn’t immediately tear away from the wall upon the smallest of tugs and pulled herself just a little bit higher. The change in position caused Beris to stagger, trying to keep steady under Tenna.

They really should have brought a ladder, Beris reflected as he found himself once again with a face-full of Tenna’s silky, completely impractical green dress. “Couldn’t you have at least worn something a bit more conducive to climbing?”

“I can hardly seduce Fabian in work pants,” Tenna said, using her free hand to pull up a sleeve of her dress from where it had begun to slip down one of her shoulders. She was beginning to second guess her wardrobe choice. It had seemed like a good idea earlier that night, standing in front of the mirror, but out here it started to feel a little foolish. And far more low cut than it had looked in her bedroom. Was the dress a mistake? Oh well, it didn’t matter. She had made her decision and there was absolutely no way she would mention any of these doubts to her best friend. “Besides, you should just be glad I warned you not to wear your pretty boy boots.”

“Oh shut up,” Beris could feel heat creeping up his neck. “You’re the one who encouraged me to buy them!”

“I only gave you the push you needed, you had been coveting the elven boots for months. I think this is the first time I’ve seen you without them in over a year.”

“They cost a lot, I’m trying to get my money’s worth!” It was true, they were the most expensive single item he owned. They were soft black leather with real gold detailing, enchanted to be warm in the winter and cool in the summer. They were a truly beautiful work of craftsmanship and Beris always stood just a little taller whenever he wore them. And they would have been absolutely ruined sliding around in the mud tonight. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to look nice!”

“Of course not. I’m just reminding you of my incredible thoughtfulness at keeping your pretty boy boots from being ruined.”

“Remind me why we can’t use magic to get you up there? It’s not like you’re bad at floating charms.” Beris said, deliberately changing the subject. He stretched the fingers of his left

hand as best he could without dropping Tenna. They were in danger of going completely numb from strain at this point.

“I told you, that would be cheating!”

“And me helping you isn’t?”

“It’s different,” Tenna grumbled. She was so close now, her fingers skirting the cool stone edge of the balcony, almost far enough to grip the iron railings. “Magic would make all this too easy and nothing good ever comes easy. However, we have helped each other with every difficulty we’ve faced before, so you being here is just to be expected. You’re basically an extension of myself, it’s no different to me bringing a rope or using my hands to climb. Now push, I’m almost there.”

Beris refrained from mentioning that bringing a rope would have probably been a good idea. He wasn’t offended by Tenna’s likening him to a tool, he knew what she meant. They had always been together, it felt only natural that he would be here to either help her get her true love or drown her sorrows later, even if he did grumble about it.

With a final grunt, Beris hoisted his friend the last few inches she needed to wrap her fingers around the slick metal above her head. Releasing her weight might have been a mistake, Beris realized as he immediately ducked to dodge a leather clad foot kicking wildly in his direction.”

“Watch it! Don’t forget that I’m doing this as a favor to you. I am not leaving tonight with a broken nose.”

“Oh no! Wait, come back! I’m about to fall!” Tenna squealed.

“Absolutely not, you are not falling on me.” Beris took another step back, looking up at the fool dangling above him.

“Just let me stand on your shoulders or something. I’m really slipping, quick!” Beris briefly considered just letting her fall. She wouldn’t get too hurt. Probably. And it might even mean she would think twice before roping him in when the next bit of barely thought out mischief came to her.

“Fine,” Beris moved back into position, grabbing Tenna by the ankles to keep his face safe and rest her feet on his shoulders. He would never really leave her, no matter how tempting the idea was at times.

“Thank you,” Tenna let out a breath, some of the panic from a moment before receding from her voice. Steady once again, Tenna finally pulled herself up, clinging to the bars of the balcony railing. Luckily, they were fairly widespread and with only a bit of discomfort, she managed to squeeze through them.

Finally on the balcony, Tenna stopped to fix her dress, trying to smooth out some of the wrinkles created by the journey up.

“Well, go on.” Beris urged.

“Hold on, I need to fix myself. How’s my hair?”

“A bird’s nest as usual, stop dawdling.”

Tenna glared down at her friend while trying to finger comb her long hair. Some of the hair oil she had used that evening to prevent it from frizzing came off on her fingers.

“Be serious. Does my hair look greasy? I tried a new product, I may have used too much.”

“It looks fine. You have wonderful hair, the most beautiful in all of town and the envy of anyone who gets to bask in its presence.” Beris deadpanned.

“You don’t have to be so rude.”

“Really Tenna, you look nice,” Beris reassured, seeing her wavering confidence. Perhaps he had been a bit too mean.

“What if I’m wrong about the book?” Tenna's whisper was almost too low for Beris to catch her words.

“What?”

Tenna turned back to her friend, brows drawn together with sudden uncertainty. “What if he really doesn’t care about me and all those times we’ve spoken, he was just being polite? What if leaving the poetry at the shop was just an accident?”

“What?” Beris repeated dumbly. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Wait, are you really having doubts? After all of this effort, now you’re having doubts? You couldn’t have thought of this before you dragged me out here tonight?”

“No, listen. This might have been a mistake. I don’t know about this, what if it makes him uncomfortable? I - I think I should probably come down. You were probably right and he doesn’t even know I exist. Let’s go home and forget this ever happened.” Tenna shuffled back toward the edge, eyes on her feet. Shit. It looked like Beris’s words really had gotten to her. Well, he’ll be damned if he was the reason this plan fell through.

“Absolutely not.” Tenna looked up in shock at her friend's words. “We are not leaving, not after all of this. Sure, this might have been an enormous mistake and he could have no idea who you are. And if that happens, we’re going to the nearest tavern and drinking until dawn

while we try to pretend that none of this night ever happened. Or this goes swimmingly and he professes his undying love for you. In which case, I go alone to the tavern and try not to think about my best friend being ravished. Either way, I am ending this night with a drink in my hand and you are getting some sort of answer to your feelings. Besides, are you really going to be a coward and run away?"

"That's not fair," Tenna tried to answer, but Beris barreled on.

"Are you really going to give up and admit that I was right?" That stopped Tenna cold, just like he knew it would. It was a tenet of their friendship. They could grumble and go along with each other's ideas, aqueous to the other's will while insisting that they changed their mind of their own will. However, they would never admit to the other was right, no matter how obvious it was.

"Fine," Tenna bit out, shooting a glare at her friend. "Toss me the lute."

"Go serenade your pretty boy," Beris grinned, gently throwing the instrument into the air. The lute, making a far easier trip than Tenna had moments before, landed safely in her hands.

Tenna was just about to turn back to the door when a scraping sound to her left drew both of their attention. With twin dumbfounded expressions, they watched as a man in rumpled sleeping clothes and mussed blond hair wondered out of the balcony beside them. His pants hung low on slender hips and his pale linen shirt was unbuttoned just a little too low to quite be polite. Tenna quickly hid the lute behind her and tried to look as casual as one could while braking into someone's home.

"Tenna, is that you?" Fabian yawned, rubbing sleep from his eyes and staring at her.

"What are you doing on my brother's balcony?"



“I... was... robbing him?” It was the most shrill Beris had ever heard his friend sound.

“What?” Fabian let out a slightly incredulous laugh before glancing down. “Oh hi, Beris. Should have known you were here.”

“Hi?” Beris was proud that his voice sounded more normal than Tenna’s. Though not by much. His embarrassment at being caught was only slightly eclipsed by his surprise. “You know who I am?”

“Of course I do! We may not have spoken very much, but I would be happy to call any friend of Tenna, a friend of mine. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of you without the other when not working. What a marvelous friendship you have. Now, back to the matter at hand, is this some sort of prank?”

“Yes!” The dwarves immediately responded, grabbing at the excuse. “Finnegan tracked mud into the bakery last week. I spent forever scrubbing it off the floor and swearing my revenge.” Tenna continued.

“Oh, wonderful!” Fabian replied, looking considerably more awake than he had moments before. “The bastard stole my favorite shirt the other day and returned it with a huge stain right on the front. I’ve tried everything to get out, but have you ever tried getting blackberry jam out of white clothing? A nightmare, truly. What were you planning on doing?”

“I was thinking to... cover his balcony in flour. You know, because we have a lot of it at the shop? My family owns the bakery. The one in town?”

“I know where your family’s shop is Tenna,” Fabian laughed, “we’ve been shopping there for years.”

“Yes, of course you know. Don’t know why I even... Anyway, it seems that we forgot to bring the flour, so we really should be off.” Throughout her meaningless chatter, Tenna continued to slowly creep toward the edge of the balcony. The railing was so close now, escape was almost in her hands.

“Oh don’t go!” Fabian reached out a hand, causing Tenna to still once more. There were spells to get someone to freeze like that, but Beris was sure that Tenna’s unmoving state was caused by simple mortification. “I have flour! Or we could do something else; the flour might get washed away if it rains again. Let me get some proper clothes on and we can think about it.” Fabian disappeared back into his room, leaving the dwarves alone outside.

“Don’t you dare leave,” Tenna hissed down to Beris, who guiltily paused in his slow backing away from the scene.

“I can’t believe you got the wrong room.” Beris didn’t laugh out loud, but it was a near thing.

“Oh, Tenna?” Fabian called from inside his room, drawing the attention back to him.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, did you find the book I left for you last week? I meant to give it to you in person, but I don’t think you were working that day. I only realized later that I forgot to even leave a note.”

“You left it on purpose?” Beris responded with surprise.

“Of course, I wouldn’t have forgotten it. It’s one of my favorites. Tenna’s always reading, I thought she might like it. Sorry about the writing in it by the way, it was my personal copy and I’m afraid I can’t seem to read anything without marking on it.”

“It’s lovely,” Tenna bit her lip, suppressing a rising squeal of delight. “It’s very romantic.”

“I knew you would appreciate it!” Fabian came back outside, this time dressed in a far more appropriate tunic and pants. “Now, I haven’t thought of anything devious enough yet, but I am sure we can come up with something together.”

“Actually,” Beris interjected, “I am supposed to watch one of my nieces in the morning, first thing, so I really shouldn’t be staying out so late. I might have to leave this in your capable hands.”

“Oh that’s a shame,” Fabian frowned, “well, we’ll have to come up with some mischief on our own then, won’t we, Tenna? Hm. It would probably be a bit hard to plan with you over there though. You wouldn’t mind would you?” Fabian raised his grimoire questioningly. After receiving a nod, Fabian rested a hand atop the book.

Fabian’s eyes glowed slightly as he softly recited a fairly simple calling spell. At first the spell only seemed to have the strength of a light breeze, picking up the ends of her long hair and making them dance about. Then, the rest of her body followed suit, slowly succumbing to weightlessness as she drifted up and over to the man. Tenna had to grab the tail of her dress as it too was affected, threatening to reveal far more of her legs than she had planned for the evening. At least the part of the evening that Beris was to bear witness to. Finally, on the correct balcony this time, the spell dissipated, leaving her to fall gently into Fabian’s waiting arms.

“Hello there,” the man grinned down at Tenna, “why, don’t you look stunning. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you in a dress.”

“Well, there’s a first for everything,” Tenna breathed. Now came a socially acceptable moment to set her down. Fabian only beamed down at her, making no move to let her go. Beris smirked at the sight. So, it turned out that tonight wasn’t a waste of time after all.

“It looks like you have it from here,” Beris called, breaking the moment between the two on the balcony.

“Of course, you can trust in us!” Fabian called, finally placing Tenna on unsteady legs.

“I’ll see you later,” Tenna didn’t even glance down at her friend.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Tenna. I look forward to hearing all about the mischief you get up to.” Beris was already turning away from them, grinning as he considered all the new things he could use to bully Tenna with after when he next saw her. As he walked away Beris heard soft foot falls as the two entered Fabian’s bedroom.

“By the way, Tenna, what was the lute for?”