

Ash and Sooth

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EXT. BAZAAR - SUNSET

Bustling crowds of people move between the city streets in the heart of the capitol, HELKANO.

Between the clearing of the thick clouds and tall, picturesque buildings of the richer district, the city's ivory palace resides at the highest peak of their mountain, enveloped in the last rays of golden sunlight.

The air is dry, thin, and frosty, nipping the ears and noses of the men and women weaving between each other, visiting stands at the main bazaar of the district. Pedestrians are dressed in thick, expensive sets of fur, leather, and jewelry.

As darkness grows, the city's lanterns grow brighter.

Through the hubbub of laughter and shouting, a YOUNG MAN with a devilish smile hurriedly pushes past.

An angry SHOUT punctures the air, fading away as the man weaves between the crowd, walking faster and faster.

His golden brown hair catches the fleeting rays of the sun, locks neatly tucked away in a low ponytail. Draped in a pink and purple checkered cape lined with golden accents, the man underneath sports neat black slacks, a powdery white shirt, and a silk sash tied around his waist.

Disguised as an aristocrat, he blends in with his targets.

The THIEF tightly clutches a stolen satchel, coins jingling inside between each step he takes. Adrenaline carries him through the winding streets of Helkano.

Taking a turn behind the corner of an alleyway, he waits and listens.

A beat.

It's quiet.

The man sighs and grins.

THIEF
(chuckling)
Thank Twins.

His smile fades. He slumps over, staring at the satchel tightly clutched between his hands.

He sighs.

His stomach growls. He licks his dry lips.

The faint smell of seared meat wafts through the air. A smell like that can weaken any man with a good appetite.

The THIEF gravitates toward its source, pushing, squeezing, and stumbling between crowds.

CUT TO

EXT. FOOD STAND - NIGHT

The THIEF comes across a small, dimly lit stand at an empty corner of the bazaar.

Two uniformed cooks, young and old, bicker amongst each other as they shove each other back and forth between each served meal.

The younger one, COOK 1, grumbles. Blonde, lanky, seething behind a well-manicured mustache, angrily chops green onions and seaweed, he gracefully alternates between his station, the keg, and his few fellow customers.

COOK 1

(waving his knife between each
break in his sentence)

It's true. Why would you think I would
lie about something like this?

He stares at his co-worker, wide eyed.

The older one, COOK 2, smiles and shrugs. Not old enough to be his father, but close in age to be a paternal figure to his co-worker.

Dark-haired, stocky, donning a proud, thick, grizzly beard, rolls his eyes at his co-worker.

The two cooks share more than just a bond between co-workers, rather the relationship between UNCLE and NEPHEW.

The UNCLE's beefy arms speed through searing pork, beef, and fish on his pan, all while keeping an eye on each batch of boiling noodles behind him.

UNCLE

(chuckling)

It just seems like a myth, kid. The

Royals aren't *all knowing*. They're not gods.

(pausing, somberly)
That goes against the word of the Twins.

It seems like all these rumors getting to your head is the reason you ended up here again.

The NEPHEW immediately scoffs, angrily chopping his vegetables.

Coins clatter on the countertop as customers leave and thank the duo for dinner.

The THIEF pulls up a stool, lowering his head, quietly listening. He grabs a menu, motioning at the cooks.

THIEF
(pointing to the menu)
This and a beer, please.

The NEPHEW nods and stabs the cutting board with his knife. Picking up a stein, he stomps towards the keg in the back.

The UNCLE hands the THIEF his meal.

NEPHEW
(coming back, sliding the beer toward him)
Here's your drink, sir.

He turns away and huffs.

The THIEF takes a swig.

The NEPHEW picks up his knife and points it at his co-worker.

NEPHEW
I'll have you know that *I* left the Royal Guard *on my own*. And don't you go telling anyone about it either.
(reluctantly)
It wasn't exactly...allowed.

He pauses, staring at his knife and cutting board. His UNCLE, warmly but firmly, pats him on the back.

NEPHEW

(continued)

All I was getting were graveyard shifts! This beats staying up all night, standing around a bunch of empty doorways with a sword gathering dust in my belt. You'd think I'd actually get to use it, for one. Not even once! What a joke.

His UNCLE guffaws. The THIEF smiles down at the counter.

NEPHEW

You couldn't even go anywhere. Everything's blocked off for no reason.

(exasperatedly)

Nobody tells you anything. They order you to do something, you do it, no questions asked. Otherwise, you just stay at your post, watching paint dry.

UNCLE

Alright. I take back what I said. Working at the Palace *does* seem like a drag. Nothing gets past that big, white hunk of pretentious marble.

With the flick of his wrist, a flaming hot flare-up bursts through the air, followed by the popping sizzle of the seared vegetables and meat on his pan. Boiling noodles bubble behind him.

THIEF

(suddenly)

Actually, can I ask you something?

The COOKS are startled.

NEPHEW

What's it to you?

The THIEF smiles. He wields a calculated grin that can make anyone's heart stop.

The NEPHEW pauses. Something clicked.

THIEF

I'm just curious, as anyone else would be.

The NEPHEW laughs to himself, in disbelief.

He gently sets his knife down on the cutting board.

With the wave of his hand, he signals, *You have the floor.*

THIEF

Isn't there a chance that a bored guard just like yourself would want to pass the time making up fantasies like that?

NEPHEW

(sighing)

Let me tell you something.

He pulls in close, lowering his voice.

NEPHEW

You can't shake off rumors like that. Everywhere I went, there were whispers of *something* the Royal family didn't want you to know about.

THIEF

What kind of object is so special that even its own guards don't know what they're protecting?

He's silent. He looks down the counter to his right. Then to his left. Empty.

His UNCLE scoffs.

NEPHEW

A *book*. An ancient book, from before *Fallna*.

THIEF

(chuckling)

All that fuss just for a dusty old relic?

NEPHEW

Not just any old relic. An enchanted one--that reads you your future.

The THIEF raises a brow.

UNCLE
(sighs, under his breath)
Not this again.

The UNCLE shakes his head, getting back to his station.

UNCLE
(over his shoulder)
Fallna made sure to snuff out those
pagan fantasies. The Twins are the
only divine beings. Quit your fairy
tales and get back to work.

UNCLE turns back, draining the noodles in a colander.

Silence fills the air.

The THIEF shrugs. He turns his stein upside-down, shaking the
last few drops of beer into his mouth.

The NEPHEW suddenly draws close again. The THIEF chokes and
coughs.

NEPHEW
(whispering)
I know who you are.

The THIEF blanks. Then smiles.

THIEF
Really? Have we met somewhere?

NEPHEW
The Smiling Thief. *Samir*.

THIEF
(laughing)
Whoa, buddy, I think you might have me
wro-

NEPHEW
The best thief in all of Kram, sitting
right in front of me. You're famous.

THIEF
Am I?

NEPHEW
(whispering)
Between you and me, *Samir*, we know
there is a reason we've won every

single war that's come our way. The question is: are our victories thanks to the grace of the Twins, or because an ancient book kept us more than two steps ahead?

A beat.

The thief, SAMIR sets his empty stein down. He sighs, leaning back on his chair.

He stares down at the counter, then laughs, lifting his hands up in defeat.

Leaning forward, he clasps his hands above the countertop.

SAMIR
(somberly)
You'd have to abandon one fairy tale
to believe in the other.

He pulls out a golden coin from his stolen satchel, dribbling them in between his knuckles.

The NEPHEW's gaze follows.

He catches it between his pointer and middle fingers.

SAMIR
One more question.

The NEPHEW smiles, scoffing.

NEPHEW
Shoot.

THIEF
How come *you* know one of the Royal
family's most guarded secrets?

The NEPHEW is silent for a moment.

NEPHEW
The White Rabbit. Follow her on the
inside. If you can even get in.

The THIEF's stolen coin clatters on the counter. He chuckles.

THIEF
Now, say I do follow this White
Rabbit. How would start to I go about

it?

The NEPHEW crosses his arms. He looks down at the THIEF's stolen satchel.

The THIEF rolls his eyes. He lifts up the satchel, dropping it on the counter with a heavy, metallic thud.

The NEPHEW looks down at the counter, somberly. He smiles once again, sliding the satchel over toward him. He looks up at the THIEF.

CUT TO:

The THIEF emerges from crowd behind him, wiping foam off the corners of his mouth with his sleeve.

He picks out a pair of black leather gloves from his pocket, staring at them in between his palms for a moment.

Looking up, between the clearing of the thick clouds and tall buildings, his gaze sets on the ivory palace at the top of the mountain, enveloped in a glowing silver moonlight.

His next quarry.