

Arcana

By Avarice

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It was a dark day, with the rolling clouds making their way slowly across the sky like an impenetrable shadow. Sarai looked up towards the overcast sky with a look of mild dread, as she felt the first droplet of rain hit her cheek and roll down her face, leaving a trail of icy cool. She wiped the water off in a brief gesture, smearing in a bit of dirt at the same time by accident, and then continued to watch her steps on the uneven, pebble covered street. The dark scene looming above her was one that promised continued rain across the coming nights, and winds that howled like a pack of dogs through the emptied streets. Well, empty apart from the poor souls who had no money or shelter to ensure their protection from the brutal nature of the tempest, Sarai being one of them. But, like your average homeless person, she was accustomed to living through small disasters such as this. Especially considering strong storms were no uncommon occurrence in a city situated right on the coast.

She was prepared to be even more risky with her pick-pocketing than she was now, if the money got her one days shelter and a decent meal; a luxury she hadn't experienced in a long time. Right now it was the busiest time of the week, when the market was on, and the city gates stayed open. She could go through the gates from the slums and into the wealthier area, which would have more pickings, but on the other hand more guards.

Sarai cursed the separation of classes bitterly for the hundredth time, and kicked a pebble in front of her, glancing about at the crowd of people that bantered for goods and scattered as the rain started to fall. She didn't have long.

The slums that she lived in were dirty, full of crime and poverty, while on the other side of the gates the inhabitants lived in relative peace. It was for those who could afford a decent home, which didn't come within the range a seventeen year old homeless girl could summon up, even after a year of pick pocketing. Sarai had to eat and get shelter when storms came, so that was most of her money gone. A change in clothes was nice every now and then as well. It wasn't like you could blend in on the decent side of the wall when you were covered in mud and clothes so stiff with dirt they were like cardboard.

At this night every week, the gates were closed until market day on the next, and anyone without accommodation was chased out of the city. If they found you between then and the next time they opened the gates, you would most likely be sent to prison.

Sarai glanced at the sky, and deciding she should be able to get something before then, approached the gates. Before the walls, low level goods were sold, but after them the difference in quality was almost

painful. Shining metal necklaces, flowing dresses, mouth watering foods, all stacked high. Sarai grimaced, and then giving the two guards standing on either side of the massive gate a glance, she passed through into the prosperous streets of Arcana.

Rather than dirt, the main street was cobbled and lacking any litter that would have been present in the slums, and also lacking any beggars or ill old men that lie on the side of the road, waiting to die.

The buildings were made out of some sort of stone rather than wood, and the windows had shutters to keep out the cold. Some even had flowers on the window sills, or name plates. It was shocking how fast the environment changed, just by crossing the wall between wealth and poverty, and it enraged her. It was like when the gate closed, the poverty was hidden from these fortunate people's eyes, and thus it didn't exist.

Sarai walked along through the sea of people with a scowl on her face, keeping her eyes peeled for a likely target. She didn't make a habit of pick-pocketing in the wealthier half of the city, because if she was caught they might just chop her whole hand off, or maybe even just a finger if she got lucky. A homeless young lady was nothing to all of these people.

Robbing from the occasional guard too drunk to stand steadily in the slums was much easier. Those few guards that were stationed in the slums were often not much better of than its occupants though, and normal slum dwellers were not an option, as she couldn't bring herself to rob from people barely better off than herself.

After walking for about five minutes, acting like she was examining the merchandise, Sarai turned around to do another sweep of the crowd. It didn't look very hopeful today. Sure, there were plenty of rich people's servants, and the middle class, flaunting their cash around on less than meagre goods, but none of them had their pouches on clear view, or in string bags. She could steal from them anyway, but it would be taking a big risk, which she wasn't quite prepared to take.

Suddenly, thunder sounded above the square in the darkening sky, almost making her jump, and the rain which had been only trickling down, started to increase. People chattered, and started to move towards buildings on each side of the market square in a mass of rushed movement and confusion. This was her chance.

Sarai dove into the sea of bodies, her trained eyes fixing on anything she could grab and run. It didn't take long. Someone wearing a hood, with his head down and back bent, had a bag that secured around his waist. A simple cut on the leather and it would be free. She had a knife; one she stole from a pub, but it was blunt. She pulled it out and tested it on the edge of her tunic. Satisfied, she moved the two steps needed to collide with the man, and while her arms were hidden between them, deftly cut the string and let it fall into her hand as she swung forward past him. The man kept his head down, but she could feel

his glare as she steadied herself, one hand casually by her side where he wouldn't see it. She muttered an apology, and then was lost in the crowd once more.

Elated with her success, she rushed through the packed crowd, dodging elbows and arms that swung her way. Within a minute she was back in the slums, with the rain weighing down her own hood, and soaking the strands of fiery red hair that poked out of it. She wore the hood to prevent recognition, for someone with red hair wasn't very hard to forget, especially if they robbed you. She had seen only two people with the same colour hair as she, and that had been a long time ago.

Her breath coming fast, she continued to walk as she fiddled with the fastening on the small bag. Finally her shaking fingers managed to open the pouch, but what resided inside made her pause.

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