

“As with everything,” the scholar said, “enchantments do fade over time.”

“Everything fades?” Tibs asked before he could stop himself? “What about mountains? Haven’t they always been there? The sky? Claria, Torus?”

“Everything,” she stated. “Some will simply take longer, or require violent actions from the elements before it is their time. Consider the main element that makes the item in question when thinking of how long it will take. Mountains, for example, are made of stone, which is the element of Earth. Earth is slow to react to anything, which makes it resistant to change. So the effort on the part of the elements to bring them down will be much greater than, say, a tree, which is composed of the Wood element. Size also comes into play, since the more of an element something has, the more effort is required to affect it. A larger tree will resist its end longer than a smaller one.”

“But metal’s hard too, and that’s always breaking.”

“But under violence,” she replied. “When left to itself, it too will last a long time. Most metal items end up breaking because people are involved.” She considered something. “But keep in mind that Metal isn’t a core element, and is in opposition to Air. As such, when the element of Air is used against Metal, it deteriorates faster. Have you seen how metal items will have a reddish dust or flakes on them?”

“Rust.”

She gave him an indulgent smile. “Yes, they call it that.” The implication she included him in that ‘they’ was strong. “What it actually is, is another element. When a core element interacts with any of the others, weakening it, a new element is created.” She said a word he didn’t quite understand; it, along with most of those before that, had a faint glow to them. Not an outright lie, he’d learned over time, but a lack of certainty in what she said.

“Po-tin-cia?” he tried.

“Close enough.” She smiled. “It’s an old Arcanus word. It is the name of the element of change. It is the one that is always created when a core element weakens another.” That had the same faint glow, so it was what she wasn’t certain about, despite her seeming confidence.

“And that Po-tin-cia element is always there when a core element acts on one of those that isn’t core?”

“Yes.” The light was brighter, so she knew it wasn’t always the case. He tried to think of a way to prod the truth out of her, but he couldn’t think of how a bard might sing about something like that.

And his curiosity was leading away from what he was important. “So, because enchantments have many essences in them, they also get weaker? Does it only happen if there are both core and the others? What if the enchantment only has core elements?”

Her chuckle sounded strained. “Yes. Interaction between element causes enchantment to weaken, but the skill of the sorcerer who created it has an effect on how... sturdy, the enchantment will be.”

He ignored the faint glow. Her uncertainty didn’t mean what she said wasn’t right. And she sat here, answering his questions, while anyone else he might ask could simply kick him out. “How about essences outside the enchantment? Can they cause it to get weaker too? And you said the Potincia element comes when core and other essences act on each other. Wouldn’t that get in the way of the enchantment working?”

Her smile was bright, and that stuck to the words as she spoke. “Exactly. You are quite bright. I can see you have a strong career within the scholarly academies ahead of you. Potencia is part of what breaks enchantment down over time. And it’s why skill is important when crafting them. The sorcerer has to account for that if they don’t want their work to fail prematurely.”

Tibs rubbed his temple. He didn’t get most of what she said, but why would she bother lying to him? She couldn’t know why he was asking. Was she trying to make him feel smarter so he would... what, join a university? He was too young, and she had to be smart enough to know that her lies would unravel when he brought up her stories about part of what made him want to join.

“And it’s always like that?” he asked, hoping to sound like he didn’t understand, and that forcing her to clarify would reveal something that was true, or why she was lying. “Potencia—Potencia, is created within the enchantment. That, along with the degradation caused by the core elements, weakens it until it fails?”

“Not everyone agrees it’s what happens,” she said dismissively. “Some—”

“Wait. What do you mean, not everyone agrees?” There had been no light on the words. “I thought universities were about finding out how things worked. That the books told us how that was.”

“Universities are where we investigate how the world works. And then, the scholars write their books to document how their research demonstrates that their beliefs are the correct ones.”

“Then you keep the books of those who are right.” He thought that made sense, but her offended expression said he was wrong.

“How would I know who is right? How would anyone?”

“Whoever the magic says is right?”

“Magic can’t tell you what is right and what is wrong,” she stated.

“Light can,” he replied, immediately realizing he was wrong.

“No. Light can be used to tell you if someone believes they are telling the truth or not. But that isn’t the same as them being wrong. Magic is a tool. And like all tools, it can be used for many purposes. Even some that oppose each other.”

“Then, why would anyone read books if they can’t know if what’s in it is true?” He thought of Carina, and how she relied on books for everything she knew. How she’s so wanted him to read because she thought it would help him. Had she been wrong?

“If you mean the common folk.” She gave a dismissive shrug. “I expect those who can read do so to make themselves feel superior to those who can’t. If you mean scholars? Then, in reading someone else’s work, I can glimpse something that will help propel my research further.”

Tibs fought against his disappointment. None of them help then. “What you’re saying is that what you told me about how enchantments weaken over time might not be how it happens.”

She opened and closed her mouth on the glow. Her stance shifted as she studied him. Was that suspicion in her eyes? Had he given himself away? When she spoke, it was in the careful tone that people who wanted what they said to sound true as they lied did; only there was no light on the words.

“We know some things.” She paused and let out a breath. “Good scholars don’t say things like ‘we know for certain’. But some things have been demonstrated with one experiment after another to always happen, so those are things we can be confident are true.”

“But not certain?”

Nervousness, that was what he was seeing as she shook her head. As if she’d realized he’d caught her in the lie.

“One such thing is that elements interact. They work together to form effect. The right combination of them can be used to make just about anything happen. They also interact without sorcerers being involved. That rust on metal, for example.”

“Potentia and when the core elements weaken—” He stopped as she stiffened.

“Maybe,” she finally said, uncertainly. She let out a chuckle and relaxed. “It’s what I believe happens, and many of my experiment have shown that when a core element interacts with another one, a change happens. That means another element must come of it. Other experiments support my belief.” She hesitated. “But they don’t support that Potentia is the cause. The element is real,” she assured him, and there was no light on the words, “but exceedingly rare. Adventurers who have spoken about the element with scholars all spoke of it in different ways, as if it was different for each of them, but the one thing they seemed to agree on is that what they do stands at the cusp of change. It is why I—” she closed her mouth on the light, took a breath, and continued without it. “I believe it is what is present when elements interact.”

Tibs was careful. He had the sense the effort of honesty had been hard for her and he didn’t want to undermine that. “But it could be something else.”

Her nod seemed to carry acceptance. “It could. Academia isn’t about proving that I am right. It is about demonstrating why my beliefs are better supported than others.” She chuckled sadly. “We, I, tend to forget that sometimes.”

“I’m sorry. I just asked about a story.”

This time, her chuckle was filled with amusement. “That is the danger of speaking with a scholar. We so love to explain what we’re about.” She let out a slow breath. “But to return to the story, without all the minutiae. Yes, enchantments grow old and weaken. In such state, they are more susceptible to malicious alteration, or simply not doing what they are supposed to. It’s why anyone who relies on magic for their security has the enchantments rejuvenated regularly, and why old places, lost places, will have not only weaker enchantment, but unpredictable ones. Even if they were made by an Alpha sorcerer, time will take its toll on them.”

“So that’s how the adventurer in the story got into the old building. She altered the enchantment.”

She laughed lightly. “It’s a bard’s story. She got in because the story needed her to get in. But yes, out there, where adventurers might encounter a tower from back when sorcerers worked alone, or some forgotten warlord’s vault. They could take advantage of an enchantment’s weakened state to pry and tease it apart until they could get in.”

“Woudn’t they have to have the same element? In the stories, if they don’t have the right element, they can’t really do much to defend themselves.”

“Again, stories don’t care about what is real. And we are straying from what I know confidently.” She thought about it. “The right element might simplify it. Some element lend

themselves more to that kind of work than others, but when it comes to magic, what I have read all seems to agree that skill with the element and how much of it they have access to is the determining factor in succeeding in whatever task was set before them.”

Tibs wanted to ask which element she through would be best to tease the enchantment apart, but even if she knew the answer, it would be too telling of what he was after.

“Does this answer all your questions?”

“No,” he said, unable to keep from sounding indignant. He rubbed his temple again. “But I think it’s all I can stand right now.”

“Cherish it, it’s a good pain.”

“Pain’s never good,” he countered.

“It’s the pain of your mind stretching,” she said with a smile. “That is a good thing.”

He stared at her. Hadn’t someone else told him that before?

He stood. “I should go.”

She stood with him. “Do you need assistance finding your parents? I’m surprised they haven’t come looking yet.”

Right. She’d assumed he’d gotten separated from his family. “They’re probably still reading. I’ll find them. Thank you.”

He made a circuit of the shelves, keeping his sense on her until she walked to the third balcony and paused before a shelf. Then he headed outside and let the rain cool his headache.

He wished Purity helped with this type of pain, but he figured it was just like that element to want him to work through it to improve.

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Tibs hung from the top of the window frame, the rain pelting against him hard enough it could be fists. It was a good thing water didn’t hurt him anymore, or all of them might have resulted in his death.

He studied the strands of the weave before him, as he’d done the three previous nights. This time, he thought he’d worked out enough of those he could identify to attempt something. Distance shouldn’t matter, so long as he sensed the weave, so he could do this from the roof, but the feeling that the closer he was, the better sense of it he would have wouldn’t leave him.

From this close, he knew it wasn’t true.

He wished he could simply throw corruption and watch the weave dissolve. It would be easy since he couldn’t sense anything that might protect against that. But that would result in the chaos of a destroyed enchantment and attract attention. What he needed was to part the strand around the window without breaking them.

He’s spend the previous nights studying how the strands flowed. How they connected to those around them, and where they had come ‘detached’. Tonight was his first attempt at widening the space between two of them.

He studied the Arcanus that made out the filigrees that connected the strands. Finding one with only those he already knew was easier than he expected. Jir, Ank, Bor, and Kha seemed to be unexpectedly common. Maybe because they represented Air, Fire, Earth, and Water, which seemed to be considered the more important ones of the core elements.

Fey, Maur, Dhu, and Lyl then seemed to be used and after that, Ike was the only other one he knew, since that was Metal and there were few of them.

Researching the others was somewhere on his list of things to do.

He teased the two he selected further from where they'd detached and studied how the still connected Arcanus reacted. They stretched and stretched again before they deformed and he stopped. He figured that if they changed too much, they would break. It might not be a problem, considering the strands were already separated where he 'held' them, but he also had no idea if there was a point where too many breaks would cause a reaction.

To alleviate the strain, he added more of the Arcanus within the filigree, stacking them 'atop' each other until they covered the gap. Then he waited.

When nothing happened, he pulled again until those Arcanus started deforming and added more. With the next pull, he had the added complication of not tangling the strands with others. By the fifth addition of Arcanus, his problem became fighting impatience. It was clear no one was noticing what he did, so he could hurry this along.

But even bards' stories made clear what happened when a rogue thought he could rush thing along. They took for granted everything would be as before, and they ended up captured. In the stories, it led to more adventures, a daring escape. For him, it would lead to a stay in the cells, maybe. Archer made it sound like the people in the Brokerage might not bother getting the city guards involved.

Ever so slowly, those two strands were far enough Tibs could fit through. So his new problem was; how did he keep them that way?

It had been something he'd thought over while studying the weave. He couldn't risk attaching them to other strands without understanding how they might react. He needed to place the strand against something that would hold it for him. Water, Air and Fire wouldn't work. None of them did solid easily; even adding Fey to them until they were hard would require him to remain focused. What he'd do was more of an etching than a weave.

It was nothing like a weave since he didn't know how to make those yet.

It meant Earth or Metal. There was hardly any metal within the wall, but plenty of earth as part of the stonework. He moved a strand of his earth essence within that of the stone, moving it under and over, around and back, weaving it until what he had felt more solid and didn't immediately fray when he stopped focusing on it. He formed a 'hook' out of the essence and rested one of the strand from the enchantment on it. He did the same on the other side of the window.

He'd done it. He'd made a gap he could pass through; well between those two strands. There were several of them left within the window's enchantment.

He pulled himself to the roof, still without guards, and lay on his back. His arms didn't hurt; Earth ensured holding on was effortless. But his head pounded from focusing so hard and long, as well as what this taught him.

Weaves could be altered.

If they were able to sense the strands and knew the Arcanus that made out the filigrees, someone could move an enchantment out of their way.

Maybe.

For this to work as he needed it, the two strands and hooks had to remain there not

only while he moved the others, but also while he was in the building getting Archer's coins from some safe he knew nothing about.

His headache would not go away so long as he remained in this city; he was certain of that. But for tonight, the work was done.

He'd check the state of the hooks and strands tomorrow, and move on from there until he was able to go in.