

### The Wizard's Art Thieves: Part Three

San and Torren stayed behind while Mander and Aren went to finish the deal with the buyer. It was a four-day journey on horseback, the painting tucked into a metal tube on Aren's back. Mander led the way, beyond the limits of Temnin, past Laeros, and through the Ives to the north-most point. He stopped outside of a small house--little more than a cottage with a stone chimney--releasing gentle billows of storm cloud-colored smoke. There was a sheep in the front yard, bleating as it foraged for grass in the lawn.

"This is our buyer?" Aren asked, dismounting. "You told me he had forty thousand gold suns to pay us...each! Does this look like a rich man's house?"

"Could be a meeting point, you ever think of that?" Mander asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or he bought the tiny house so people wouldn't think he has all that money? You're not the only mastermind in the world, ya know."

"Point taken. But if we get screwed—"

"Trust me, ok? I have plans for this payout, too. Tell ya what, if we get screwed, we'll take his sheep and you can keep the painting."

"Now I almost hope he isn't here..." Aren said, covetously cradling the painting in her arms. She followed Mander up to the house and knocked on the door. There was a shuffling inside and Aren gripped the painting tube to her chest. The door opened and a hand beckoned them inside.

The man in the house was tall with a powerful build. His salt and pepper hair matched the beard that covered his scowl as the pair came inside. His jacket was simple, black with silver buttons, and his boots were older and scuffed with use. The hut was mostly empty aside from a few books and a small kitchen. The large table had four cups arranged on it and a steaming pot of tea in the center.

"You made good time," the man said, sitting in one of the chairs. His voice was deep like he was scolding someone, but Aren felt his eyes were surprisingly gentle. "That bodes well for our...transaction."

"I'm sure you'll be more than satisfied," Mander said, sitting at the table. "There is still the question of—"

“Payment? I agree. If you’ve provided the services requested.”

“Aren, care to show him?”

Aren hesitated a minute, but relaxed and opened the tube. She unrolled the painting and spread it across the unoccupied space on the table. The man stood and looked at the painting reverently. Aren watched him look over the painting as if it would disappear at any second. He reached for it, but Aren pulled it away.

“Who are you?” she asked with a glare.

“Your employer.”

“You have a fine coat, but old boots. You can afford nice things, but not often. You are in good health, but the calluses on your hands suggest you’re not unfamiliar with work. If you made money doing hard labor, you couldn’t pay half what you’re promising.”

“And?”

“You don’t strike me as an art enthusiast judging by the lack of aesthetics in your home, though well read for sure. Local to Ives rather than Temnin judging by your accent. That tells me this has personal value to you...some kind of historical academic interested in reclaiming the history of Ives?”

“You told me your partner was clever.” The man told Mander. He studied Aren for a moment and rewarded her observations with a smile. “Yet you failed to mention she was so observant. To answer your questions, miss: My name is Alker. I am rich, but only because I’m wise enough to save money rather than spend it on frivolous things. My work isn’t labor intensive, though some would strain to call it academic. And to answer your last question: my interest is historical, but in a more personal way than you may currently understand.”

“She’d feel more comfortable,” Mander said, calming the tension, “with payment for services rendered. That’s fair, don’t you think?”

“As agreed,” Alker nodded. He stood and walked over to the kitchen. He opened one of the cabinets and took out a large chest. He set it on the table, careful not to touch the painting with it. Mander opened the box and looked over the thick mass of gold coins. He looked to Aren and grinned, but his couldn’t return the glee yet.

“What are your plans for the painting?”

“Aren, who cares?” Mander urged, closing the chest. “No offense, but—”

“No offense taken,” Alker raised a hand with a gentle smile. “She is right to be curious... and suspicious.”

Alker took a sip of his drink and swallowed, looking at the painting. “Do you know the story of Idore of the Ives?”

“She was a muse,” Aren said. “Someone who Master Riovani fell in love with and he painted her. He gave the painting to the king as a gift.”

“I supposed so,” Alker said. “The real story is a little deeper. She was a young woman with dreams and hopes, but Riovani wanted her. When the Temnin Court came, he pursued her endlessly. Day and night, he tried to convince her to run away with him, but she refused. She knew who he was... a monster. And when she refused, he took her.”

“He kidnapped her? And then painted this?” While Aren listened, Mander was busy counting coins as Alker chatted about ancient history.

“Master Riovani was no more a painter than I am a steer.”

“I thought he was—”

“The Greatest Painter of his time,” Alker said, disdainfully. “Yes, he was quite fond of that title.”

“You knew him?”

“The King’s Court came when I was a young boy. I saw Master Riovani pursue Idore with only the desire to have her on his mind. No, he was no painter. He had some skill with a brush, but more for runes in spell diagrams than trees in landscapes.”

“Runes? He was a wizard?”

“The King’s Wizard. Exceptional even among his peers. I spent my life studying his work... and the work of those who came before him. He was a master of magic, not the arts.”

“How does this relate to the painting?” Aren asked.

Alker stood and walked down the length of the table, looking over the painting. “I told you it was a personal reason.”

“And those should be your own,” Mander said, closing the chest and hefting it. “We should be getting back. Our comrades are expecting their share—”

“What are you going to do with it,” Aren asked, very intent on protecting the portrait.

Alker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small glass vial full of green liquid streaked with cobalt swirls. “I could tell you. Or I could show you.”

The vial shattered a moment after Alker dropped it from chest height. Aren bit back a scream and felt Mander hold her back. The fluid bubbled and roiled, smokey tendrils searching around the air. The paint swirled and melted, the layers of paint pulling away from the canvas as a hole with burnt edges started to form. The burnt hole didn’t show the table beneath it, only darkness.

A hand slammed against the table from the hole, grasping for anything to hold on to. It was skeletal and frail, but still moved and twitched like a living corpse. More of the arm came through followed by another hand, gaining more muscle mass and shape as the entity in the painting came through from the smoking ether. Alker reached out and grasped the hands, gingerly pulling and lifting the form of a human out of the hole. The painting burned away, leaving nothing but a tattered canvas with burnt pieces. Alker set the form on the table again as the body fleshed out and became whole again. Alker took a sheet and set it over the body as the skin became more supple and smooth. The decrepit face filled out and dark hair sprawled down the shoulders. As the rebirth progressed, Aren noted the barest hint of something familiar. Fear and confusion tainted Idore's beautiful face from the painting. The first sound that Aren heard from the body was a desperate gasp of air.

“It’s alright,” Alker said, smoothing her hair. “Idore? Can you hear me? Breathe...you’re safe now.”

The young woman took a few shaky breaths and looked over Alker’s face. She sat up and studied him for a moment longer before finally speaking in a raspy voice. “Father?”

“I’m afraid not...he died many years ago.”

“Died? But...Alker?”

“It’s good to see you again, Idore.”

Idore fainted closed her eyes, falling back against the table. “Help me move her,” Alker said, motioning to the thieves. “Get her on the mat there, close to the fire.”

Aren couldn't move, but Mander was able to help Alker move Idore from the table to the sleeping mat on the floor. She was limp in their arms, but breathing smoother now. Alker touched her gently and smiled before turning back to Aren.

"She always looked so much like our mother."

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"When I said he took her," Alker said, "I meant that he stole her. Master Riovani even named it after himself: 'Riovani's Holding Spell' to those who know where to look."

"Holding Spell?" Aren furrowed her brow. Alker had offered them more tea to drink, but it had gone cold by the time Aren had finished all her questions. Idore was lying by the fire, breathing easier now and more relaxed. Mander had taken the respite to recount their earnings while Aren probed Alker with questions.

"There are lots of spells," Alker said, "Master Riovani used his spell often, as a favor to the king, though my sister was a personal acquisition of his."

"And you saw him cast it?"

"The tail end," Alker nodded. "Enough to see my sister disappear and get drawn into his painting. Our other brother Rol saw it too. But when he saw it, he rushed to challenge the wizard and Riovanni beat him for it. Just barely alive in the end. I decided to take a...delayed path."

"We call that a Long Con," Aren said.

"I spent a lifetime studying...learning what I could from books and creating spell schematics. I made my money the same way Riovani did, though I worked for entire towns rather than one man. Weather and crops, mostly, but I also did dabble in the healing arts. And, when I could, I would study Riovani's Holding. It was an obsession of mine, but it paid off. When I understood it completely, I was able to break it into pieces. That led me to a way to free her...a potion that could counter the effects of the cursed portrait. I hired you because I needed the original portrait to free her."

"And you figured we were expendable?" Aren asked.

"I figured if you failed, I still had a chance. I use my magic for good, you must understand that. But I would do anything to save my sister."

"And now she's free?"

“She is,” Alker sighed. “We can start over...far from Temnin and Riovani. I have no use for either now. My sister’s life was stolen and I’ve given it back.”

“Two questions,” Aren said, leaning on the table. “Does this mean every painting in the Galleria is a person trapped by this spell?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Then my final question: Can you do it again?”