

DISCARDED

DUMPSTERMANCER: BOOK ONE

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Delirious
Scribbles Ink

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For Larry who convinced me to get out of my own way
and have a little fun.

For B, B & J.

1: Beauty's Beast

Darrin paced back and forth in the plush little lobby. Waiting test subjects no longer chatted excitedly on the colorful cushions. Thoth couldn't risk bringing the public close enough to discover its victims or villainy.

He chewed a palm full of antacids and eyed the elevator. A little number climbed steadily toward him, tightening the knots in his gut.

Maybe this test will reveal the problem.

He popped more antacids.

Maybe this subject won't end up—

A bell barely warned him in time to hard swallow the chewables and force a smile. Opening doors revealed Francis' bulky frame and dour expression.

He doesn't look any happier about this than I feel.

The corporate security officer wordlessly gestured a petite brunette out of the elevator. "Nicole, Darrin will escort you from here."

Nicole wore a business suit from the same bargain racks Darrin normally patronized. Her eyes met his for a blink before fleeing to the floor behind a curtain of hair. “Hi.”

Francis shook his head behind her.

Darrin took a long, slow breath. “If you’d follow me?”

Darrin led her out of the waiting area into a long clinical corridor disguised with wall screens showing off dazzling, ephemeral beauties. Nicole’s eyes flit from image to image, not taking in the frosted glass doors, biometric-runeguard locks or the shadows lurking behind both.

A shadow slammed against a frosted glass and screamed.

Nicole jumped away. She clutched her purse high against her chest, fingers almost atop one of Thoth Corp’s eyeSentinel shield charms.

Darrin forced a nervous chuckle. “Sorry about that.”

“W-what is that?”

He refused to meet her eye. “You know how people can get when they’re bored. Everyone’s got to be a practical joker.”

“That’s it?” Nicole asked. “I’m not in any danger, am I?”

Darrin glanced at a nearby wizard eye monitoring the corridor. He knew what he’d been instructed to say by heart, but repeating the cowardly answer ate at his soul.

As if I have a choice any more.

“Well, you’ve signed all our waivers,” Darrin said. “So, you’re aware there’s always some danger when working with magic.”

She seemed to gather herself, lowering the purse to her side. “Right. It’s all worth it.”

“May I ask why you volunteered for this...,” Darrin frowned. “...quality assurance survey?”

She pushed a lock of hair from her face. “You know. Ugly girls don’t have a chance at finding Mister Right these days without a little magic, especially after you guys released this new Glamour spell.”

The woman had no future in the modeling circuit, but she had a subtle loveliness Darrin usually sought when he carved out time for an occasional date. “You’re hardly ugly, Nicole.”

She snorted, covering her reddening face in a rush. “There’s a twelve-month backorder on the Glamour spell lease, let alone the components. Volunteering for your survey is the only way I’ll be able to bring home a man next Thanksgiving and shut Mom up.”

You’ll be lucky to go home at all...unless.

Darrin stopped and looked deeply into her eyes. “How about you skip the test, and I take you to dinner?”

Her eyes fled his, sweeping up and down his slacks, dress shirt, and the dark blue lab coat which designated him a spellweaver despite his only marginal gift. “How about I finish the survey first instead. Then we’ll go out and celebrate the new me?”

He pushed his spectacles up and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, we’ll, um, do things your way—a dinner befitting the new you.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder. “Are you all right? Are you worried I won’t want to go out with you after I’m beautiful?”

He glanced at the wizard eye and shook his head. “No, you’ll probably still want dinner with me after.”

She squeezed him and offered a bright smile. “Let’s make me beautiful so we can go out and celebrate.”

Darrin gestured her further down the hall, popping more antacids behind her back. She chattered about how she hoped she’d look after the spells. At long last, they came to a double security door marked “Test Lab 2.”

Darrin scanned his eye and fingered the rune unlock spell. The doors parted, revealing a sizeable pentagonal lab ringed with tables and bustling lab techs in white coats. Inlaid concentric metal circles and accompanying rune marks sectioned the otherwise single stone tile. Sour urine and vomit smell from their last test subject lingered just below overpowering waves of artificial lemon.

Above, a glass-fronted mezzanine looked down on them. A half dozen lawyers sat in front row seats, braced by a videographer and Thoth Corp’s two top executives.

“Who are they?” Nicole asked.

Before Darrin could answer, a gorgeous woman with radiant deep brown skin offered Nicole a thousand megawatt smile. “Welcome to Thoth Corp, Nicole. I’m Thecia Crospe, Chief Operations Officer and this is Adam Mathias.”

An element of awe suffused Nicole’s voice. “Thoth’s CEO.”

She gazed up at Adam as if looking upon a god. Adam’s smile sent her eyes scurrying behind hastily rearranged hair.

“Proceed, Mister Silus,” Adam said.

Darrin closed his eyes, took a deep breath and nodded. He led Nicole to a table inside the innermost ring just offset from the room's exact geometric center. He showed her placement marks for their new model spell board, stepped to the opposite side of the table and gestured to the components arrayed on its surface.

"Now, Nicole, you're going to go through the spell like any other consumer."

Nicole picked up a thick elm wand. "I don't have anything as nice as this at home."

"Yes, we'll be providing all the implements and materials, but I need you to read and follow the instructions exactly." Darrin took the wand and set it back on the table.

For all the good it'll do.

Nicole picked up the spell lease scroll and flipped from the legalese to the spell directions. The lawyer line shifted closer, scribbling notes. She touched each of the items as she came to it in the instructions.

"What's this chest?" she asked. "I don't see it listed."

Darrin opened his mouth, but Adam spoke first. "Safety equipment, should Mister Silus be forced to...assist you."

Darrin nodded without meeting Nicole's inquisitive gaze. "When you're ready to begin, please walk us through what you are doing, step by step."

"All right. First I need to be sure I and my wand are safely within the power radius of the mananet." She searched the walls, quickly finding the five glowing mananet pylon crystals mounted at its corners wirelessly projecting magical energy

throughout the area. “Looks good, now I’m going to insert the rune chips into the wand haft in order.”

Nicole picked up the first delicately-inscribed crystal wafer, inserting it into the slot nearest the silver-embossed Eye of Thoth corporate symbol. She fumbled with the second chip, initially trying to insert it upside down. Darrin corrected its orientation, earning blushing thanks.

She double-checked the instructions once more, unfolding a thin interlocking elm mat and arranging it within the marked floor diagram. “This sure is a lot of stuff.”

“Transformation spells aren’t on-the-fly magic,” Thecia said. “It requires a lot more power as well as precise component placement.”

“Will I be able to do this spell at home?” Nicole asked. “I live on an Edison block.”

Darrin shook his head. “Not unless you have a tier two or higher mananet within range—”

“But,” Adam spoke over Darrin. “All Thoth eyeStore locations have spell actuation chambers available for a small fee.”

She frowned, collecting the patented, octagonal component cylinders from the table. Each clear, chemically-neutral plastic container holding the components was uniformly two inches in width but varied in height as needed to hold magical ingredients. She consulted the instructions once more before bending to the mat. A push and a twist clicked component nodules into their proper spell locations. Nicole reviewed the directions one last time and looked expectantly at Darrin.

“That look all right?” she asked.

“Mister Silus may not advise you during this test,” a lawyer said.

Right. Can't have me confirm she's done everything correctly before testing our spell ruins her life...or worse.

Nicole walked herself through the wand motions three times then took a deep breath. “Transformation means you’re changing the real me, right? So this is going to hurt?”

“Spell subjects may feel some discomfort,” another lawyer said.

Nicole smiled the shy, expectant smile of a child about to open a Christmas present. “Beauty is pain.”

She invoked the spell.

Magic flared in the spherical receiver crystal on the wand’s end. Power drawn from the mananet flowed over and around Nicole in a gentle shower of pink sparkles that smelled like spring rain.

Nicole’s screams tore out of her throat, the sound of her agony threatening to peel paint.

She’d positioned everything perfectly. She’d followed the directions without error. Her wand moved well within allowed deviation, but once again the spell went wrong.

Slightly stained teeth transformed into dark needle-sharp fangs. A dark mint green tinted her skin, pockmarked by oozing brown pustules. Her eyes shrank, pupils turning a glowing, vomit yellow. Gnarled claws replaced her delicate hands. Her screams became snarls. She launched herself at Darrin.

Darrin dove backward. “Second ring, fifth rez, mag one!”

A swirling, milky cylinder sprang up around Darrin, Nicole, and the table. She leapt at him over the table. Her claws shredded his pant leg. Blood welled from deep gouges that hadn't started to hurt yet.

Darrin leapt over her prone form and spun. He bent and grabbed her around her midsection, trying not to grope the writhing woman gurgling blood-curdling obscenities.

"Darrin!" Thecia yelled. "The chest!"

"You think I don't know?" Darrin shoved Nicole into the milky wall.

"Watch your tone, Silus," Adam snapped.

Darrin ignored him, cringing as he slammed Nicole's face into the wall once more. He seized the chest as he rounded the table to the cylinder's center. He dumped rats from the chest atop the spell board as Nicole vaulted the table at him.

"There you go," Darrin shook his head. "Dinner."

The squealing rats fled. Nicole's nose went into overdrive. She abandoned her assault on Darrin. She fell upon the rats with mystifying rage typical to all worst-case Glamour victims. Nicole thrust her first catch into her mouth, ripping open the writhing body and spraying her suit with blood.

Darrin threw himself against the far outer circle. He kicked the nearest rat toward Nicole and the spell board. "Close the first ring!"

Another milky white cylinder swirled to life, pinning him in the safe ring between swirling magical walls. Nicole feasted two-fisted on screaming rodents within the new circle.

Darrin turned away, unwilling to watch her a moment longer. He closed his eyes to hold off tears, breath short and

heart hammering. The second ring disappeared from where his forehead pressed against it. He sniffed, wiped his eyes and marched to the monitoring station, looking over the feeds with another technician.

Bury it in work. It'll be there this time. This will all be worth it when we fix the spell.

“Darrin?” Thecia asked.

He slammed a fist, rubbing the stinging hand. “Nothing. None of these problems arose in initial testing, but I can’t figure out what’s changed. Four dozen victims and—”

“Test subjects,” a lawyer corrected.

Darrin shot the man a furious glare. “And even after this *test* turned Nicole into a *victim*, we have nothing. We don’t know any more about the cause of this corruption than we did after testing the other *victims*.”

“None?” Adam asked. “Results have varied widely from irreversible disfigurement to this worst scenario. Surely somewhere in all the data we’ve collected, there’s a way to identify and correct this aberration.”

“Let’s not forget the cases where the spell worked, making the subjects beautiful,” Thecia said.

“Except it made them *permanently* beautiful,” Adam said. “We can’t sell this spell if the temporal thread we added isn’t functioning properly.”

“Of course we can’t,” Darrin snarled under his breath.

“Darrin?” Thecia asked.

He balled his fists and looked up into the gallery at the two of them. “Eli’s original spell was meant to permanently

correct disfigurement of bad burn victims. Maybe if we consulted with him we—”

“That *criminal* has nothing to do with this spell or this company,” Adam said. “Not anymore. I’ll thank you not to mention him, Mister Silus.”

“Maybe Eli could—”

“I pay *you* to figure these things out, Silus,” Adam snapped. “Now get Nicole into a cell and fetch our next candidate.”

“We need to take the Glamour line off the market,” Darrin said. “People are being hurt, attacking their neighbors. If this gets out—”

“Our lawyers assure us that both the disclaimer on the product and the lease damage waiver protect us from litigation,” Adam said.

“Maybe Darrin has a point,” Thecia said.

“If Mister Silus wants to help our customers, then he should do his job.” Adam turned his scowl from Thecia to Darrin. “Spell engineers are supposed to fix spells. They aren’t entitled to express opinions that affect this company’s bottom line.”

2: City of My Death

The bus engine coughed a miasma of diesel fumes as it drove into the underground depot, its electric counterpart losing connection with the nearest Edison node. An anguished metal on metal cry pierced my ears as the bus stopped with a stuttered jerk that threw me against the next seat. While I recovered, the other passengers jostled each other to be the first into the aisle and out of the shuddering hybrid.

I let them. The last place I was in a hurry to arrive was Seufert Fells, but I'd had no other answer when asked for a release destination. I certainly couldn't go home, not ever.

The driver gave me a mocha-skinned smile. Sparkling eyes weighed down by industrial-grade eye luggage undressed me. "If you'll give me a minute, honey, I'll finish up the arrival paperwork and get your luggage—a little personal attention."

"Yeah," I frowned. "Don't have any."

"How about dinner then?" She winked. "I'm off tomorrow."

The mention of food made my mouth water and stomach grumble. I hadn't eaten since before departing the Wasteland, but I only had a hundred dollars and no ready options to replenish what I spent. Besides, it seemed pretty clear she wanted a layover lay. I might physically be in my thirties, but my appetite for intimacy had dried out after going without for the first thirty years of incarceration. Seven subsequent decades without giving the prospect much thought, I hardly even remembered the taste of a woman. "Thanks, but I'm just going to go."

I exited the bus and threaded through the milling passengers, keeping my eyes down so as not to catch anyone's gaze. The body-enveloping thrum of the mananet hit me the moment I exited the garage into the station. My heart thumped in my chest, kept inaudible to the other passengers by heavy rain pattering on the station roof. Shudders swept through me as vibrant power tingled against my suddenly sweaty palms.

It's not for me. Not anymore. Not after what it cost me.

I drew in a deep breath as I crossed the bus station threshold, only to break down coughing from an overwhelming aroma of chemical pine.

Despite stubbornly rejecting the power filling the air, my eyes flit unerringly to the nearest of the miniature crystalline pylon hung from the wall. Lesser siren songs drew my eyes to the next nearest pylon and the next. The first mananet pylon drew me over like a recovering junky lured into a den of his addiction.

Closer to the pylon heady magic caressed my dark skin, a long forbidden pleasure turned into aching torture.

Don't give in to it, be stronger, smarter. Push it away. There's no good to be had indulging in magic when you're barred from the means of practicing. You don't need it, not after so long.

Analytical inspection of the node gained me enough distraction for a few detached breaths. Grungy green corrosion scaled the pylon's copper mesh and cast the delicate silver filigree in tarnished emerald.

Poorly maintained. The corrosive layer is jeopardizing operating functionality and increasing the risk of malfunction. At least a pylon failure won't prove as catastrophic as might be the case within the coils of an Edison node. This unit should be cleaned immediately and replaced at the first opportunity.

The node before me only vaguely resembled my last design schematic, but I recognized my protégé's penchant for inefficient but delicate filigree below the Thoth logo. I shook my head

Darrin, Darrin, how many times did I explain to you that a geometrically aligned mesh extends node range?

A thought stiffened my spine.

This is Adam's fault. He probably insisted on the prettier but hampered design to sell more nodes. The delicate filigree probably corrodes faster too.

I forced my eyes away. Pylon designs weren't part of my life anymore. Thoth practices were no longer of my concern.

Adam and Thecia made it abundantly clear that I had no part in that world anymore.

My stiff neck zeroed in on the exit and the pouring rain beyond. A floor to ceiling screen beside the doors drew my

attention. Men and women rotated on the digital advertisement, frolicking in the wilderness, tossing long, luminous hair and otherwise epitomizing the ephemeral beauty of elven fairy tales.

A provocative voice whispered out of the speakers. “*Glamour*, true beauty is no longer just illusion. Available at a Thoth eyeStore near you. Seek out the Eye that sees your dreams and makes them a reality.”

The blazing orange Eye of Thoth logo filled the screen, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the elaborately stylized representation that was just so Adam. The ad repeated, offering me a chance to really listen to Thoth’s marketing doublespeak. Their ad promised a powerful illusion straight out of ancient folktales and fantasy novels.

What they’re offering is impossible with illusionary cosmetics. Nothing short of fey glamour can do what they’re claiming, and the fey went extinct centuries ago. Once a liar always a liar.

I debated braving the rain or staying within earshot of Thoth’s bullshit innuendos. The rising heat along my neck shifted the decision. I shoved my itching, bunched hands into my suit pockets and turned toward the exit.

Before I do something that lands me in trouble.

A ghost from my past watched me from the doorway, shaking rain from a London-style raincoat. “Hello, Eli.”

On the list of people I never wanted to see again, my protégé fell in the top five. “Go away, Darrin.”

His stare mixed disquiet and excitement much as it had in my lab that very first time. Time had filled out the last corners

separating him from the boy I knew and the grown man blocking my escape. His spectacles seemed the same, though whether the same pair or a new one of a similar model I wasn't sure. His damp, brown hair was still a little too Beatles for me, but he dressed like he'd found success in my absence.

He rushed forward to embrace me. I dropped back, lowering my eyes. He grabbed me anyway. "Jesus, Eli. You look like a scarecrow."

The sudden emergence of his boyish grin made him look years younger, but the smile faded when I didn't embrace him back. He stepped away, turning two shades ghost and three more green. "Eli, about that. I'm so sorry. You told me to tell them the truth. I never imagined they'd twist it around like that to—"

I folded my arms. "I don't want to talk about it."

"If I'd known—"

The words attacked him in an ursine snarl. "I'm over it. That was a century ago. Leave it alone."

He fiddled with a Thoth Corp security badge on a retractable lanyard connected to his belt. He followed my disapproving glower, flushed and shoved the badge into a pocket. "I had no choice, nowhere else to go."

"You're bright and talented, you could've gone anywhere."

"Adam made it clear defending you in court and claiming to be your friend would kill any chances I might otherwise have had at another company. He claimed Thoth would be the only company willing to overlook our association."

"Adam's full of shit. He bamboozled you."

Darrin looked away. “Yeah, but I didn’t realize it at the time. He’s made me do things since then he could misconstrue like...well, I can’t leave no matter how much I want to quit.”

I should’ve felt bad, should’ve pitied Darrin for his predicament. I didn’t. “Why the hell are you here?”

“I thought, well you’re going to need a ride, right?” He wiped his glasses, a nervous tick that usually preceded bad news. “Let me drive you, keep you out of the rain, and we can get you settled into a hotel and, well, unless you have an apartment waiting—”

“No.” It came out sharper than intended. The first test of my resolve twisted my insides in painful knots, but I would not let the system win. I’d take no part in that world. I’d not surrender one more inch. “Goodbye, Darrin.”

I marched past him toward the exit, lifting my oversized, once tailored jacket over my head.

“Eli, I need your help.”

“I’m walking away.” I couldn’t help the venom in my voice, and I didn’t want to try. “You don’t want to be associated with me anyway.”

“Elias, please.”

I turned, pushed aside any desire to help my former protégé and met his gaze despite the urge to drop my eyes. “Leave me alone.”

I exited, ducking the waterfall rolling off the awning into pouring rain that had brought icy cold with it on its trip over the Rockies. After a century in an apocalyptic wasteland, the sound and fresh smell of rain almost made me grin.

Except the last thing I want to be is cold and wet.

My feet took me down slick sidewalks, carefully sidestepping under shop fronts and awnings when doing so didn't require a full-on cold shower. I had no idea where they were taking me. Truth be told, I had nowhere to be.

Holographic and illusionary advertisements pounced on me each time I drew too near to a storefront. The streets themselves weren't that different from those I remembered, but storefronts and advertisements emphasized the changes I'd tried to prevent.

And gotten framed for my efforts.

Evidence lined the sidewalks of mass-produced examples of corrupted arcanology. Even hidden by night and darkened storefronts, the changes that had gone on during the long decades and short years of my incarceration made my stomach physically ache.

The reality I'd feared had come to pass.

Society hadn't hesitated in my absence. They'd plunged down the slippery slope of magical solutions for every frivolous want. Everywhere ads offered an endless supply of franchised magical sloth—solutions that undermined craftsmen and made humankind increasingly more dependent on Thoth and corporations like it.

Magic for laziness sake wasted doing what technology already can. My eyes itched, and I blinked away rain dripping from my curls.

Magic should be reserved for solving big problems technology can't touch yet.

My feet took me in and out of mananet and Edison blocks, powering the various city blocks with either magical or

wireless electricity. The former seemed far more frequent than I remembered of the world I'd left behind. Pylon crystals glowed atop streetlamp poles, sometimes just above the remains of decapitated Edison coils hung by a last few stubborn wires.

Hospitals had been among the first public institutions targeted with magic as a backup power that an EMP couldn't knock out. The mananet—much like the Edison initiative—had taken the magical power that had always existed and spread it through the air. The design regulated the ebb and flow of the wild power, homogenized it to the benefit of those few of us that could innately feel and manipulate magic. As the mananet spread, more and more people took an interest in arcanology and the things magic could do to help society.

Big money moved in, creating monopolies that capitalized on thin competition bringing miracles to the common man. Adam, Thecia and I witnessed one too many miracles held ransom and started Thoth to change the cycle—or at least I thought that was what we'd all wanted. We were going to change the world, make it a better place. Adam convinced me—as the only one of us that could touch magic—to design basic safety spells: protective barriers for police, fire protection charms for firemen, or rapid heal spells for trauma wards. We undercut the competition and with those moneys funded bigger research projects like the burn treatment spell which seemed the logical basis for their Glamour line.

Greedy rat bastard.

Big tech companies and more established arcanology corporations tried to stop us through lobbying and

government regulation. They capitalized on accidents, allergic reactions, whatever they could to slow our growth. Adam proved the slipperier snake, and I supplied him the oil of better spell designs and safeguards to satisfy all the laws and regulations that licensed spell use.

A glowing orange Eye sprang to life, drawing my gaze into a franchise Thoth eyeStore. Illusions blossomed across the storefront beneath the Eye, heartbreaking displays of cosmetic illusions, lost key seeking spells, food enhancers, party decorations and dozens of frivolous, magical conveniences.

I stormed away from the corruption of my life's work. Other stores offered similar products but probably not real competition.

Adam will probably just buy them out if they become big enough to be a threat to his profits.

When my headlong flight from roiling emotions came to an end, I found myself in the park where I'd spent lunches with Thecia and sound-boarded ideas with intern spell architects like Darrin.

I shouldn't be surprised.

Decorative lighting illuminated flowering bushes arranged in esoteric beds of a hundred varieties. Mananet pylons disguised as rustic streetlights filled the already wondrous garden with literal magic. I stopped at the garden's center, at the foot of a bronze griffon statue and looked up at the meticulous majesty invested in the park's guardian statuary.

"I used to love this place." My eyes drifted over the statue to the glowing orange Eye crowning Thoth Corp tower. *Used to...*

My feet turned me from the griffon, Thoth Corp and its so-called Eye of Thoth logo. The eye was actually an Eye of Horus. Adam had liked the eye and its history, but he hadn't wanted anyone calling our upstart company, "Ho's R Us."

We'd argued about the technical inaccuracy of the corporate name, but Thecia and Adam had insisted that fact was less important than perception. If only I'd understood then what that truism would mean to my future.

The rain worsened in time with my mood. I started to shiver. I could afford a night in a hotel, but only one. My parents had started with nothing. If they could find success despite their circumstances and the color of our skin, then I could too—or so they would've told me if I was willing to talk to them.

Alley by alley, I fled Thoth Corp, yet remained beneath its orange eye. Maybe I braved the alleys in the hope of danger; perhaps fear of freedom made me reckless.

Who am I anymore but an emaciated ghost haunting the streets of my victories and eventual condemnation in a once-tailored suit?

Hot raindrops ran my cheeks with the icy.

I pushed a dumpster from against a brick corner, flipping open its doors to tent the space behind. I huddled beneath the plastic roof and tried not to be washed away with the rest of the trash, one more piece of refuse alongside a stream of floating detritus.

Soaked and dispirited in the future I'd failed to stop, I tried to count my blessings like Dad taught us. Only one occurred

to me, thankfulness that whatever the dumpster contained didn't stink.



“Hey, wake up. You can't be here.”

I groaned, stiff and cold.

“Seriously, you have to move.”

“Leave me alone.”

Whoever he was seized my arms. Wasteland instincts woke faster than I did. I grabbed at the white kid's silvery sleeve, but he proved stronger than he looked. He yanked me out from behind the dumpster, grunting as we both slammed into the far alley wall. I pulled a fist back to hit him, but a sudden boom drew my eyes to the dumpster as it slammed into the brick corner.

My assailant's arm slipped my grip. In fact, he wasn't anywhere up or down the alley. The garbage truck driver rolled a window down. “Damn, man, I'm sorry. I couldn't see you.”

I blinked up at the driver. “What?”

“I'm glad you heard me coming and jumped out of the way,” the driver said. “I could've killed you.”

Would that have been such a bad thing?

“You don't have to sleep here, you know. There's a shelter three blocks up on Tennyson. If nothing else, she has blankets and hot food. Keep you from freezing to death, you know?”

My stomach woke at his mention of food. “Tennyson?”

“Yeah, look, I'm already behind schedule, or I'd show you.”

“It’s fine. Thanks.”

“Yeah, there’s not a lot of space along here. I imagine that’s why no one lives in this alley. If you’ve got to live on the streets, make sure you don’t hunker down where we might hurt you.”

I stepped out of the path of his truck and waved my thanks. The big electric behemoth hardly made a sound trundling past me. The rest of the alley remained empty. Only a small alcove offered a man without any possessions space not easily crushed by garbage trucks. Despite that shortcoming, the mananet barely covered the alley. The barest overlap of outer edges accounted for the thin magical field which suited my aversion to making a crutch out of the alluringly ready magical field.

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