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BRANDON
SANDERSON



FROM THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE

EDGEDANCER

**BRANDON
SANDERSON**

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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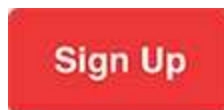
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PROLOGUE



Lift had never robbed a palace before. Seemed like a dangerous thing to try. Not because she might get caught, but because once you robbed a starvin' palace, where did you go next?

She climbed up onto the outer wall and looked in at the grounds. Everything inside—trees, rocks, buildings—reflected the starlight in an odd way. A bulbous-looking building stuck up in the middle of it all, like a bubble on a pond. In fact, most of the buildings were that same round shape, often with small protrusions sprouting out of the top. There wasn't a straight line in the whole starvin' place. Just lots and lots of curves.

Lift's companions climbed up to peek over the top of the wall. A scuffling, scrambling, rowdy mess they were. Six men, supposedly master thieves. They couldn't even climb a wall properly.

"The Bronze Palace itself," Huqin breathed.

"Bronze? Is that what everythin' is made of?" Lift asked, sitting on the wall with one leg over the side. "Looks like a bunch of breasts."

The men looked at her, aghast. They were all Azish, with dark skin and

hair. She was Reshi, from the islands up north. Her mother had told her that, though Lift had never seen the place.

“What?” Huqin demanded.

“Breasts,” Lift said, pointing. “See, like a lady layin’ on her back. Those points on the tops are nipples. Bloke who built this place musta been single for a *looong* time.”

Huqin turned to one of his companions. Using their ropes, they scuttled back down the outside of the wall to hold a whispered conference.

“Grounds at this end look empty, as my informant indicated would be the case,” Huqin said. He was in charge of the lot of them. Had a nose like someone had taken hold of it when he was a kid and pulled real, *real* hard. Lift was surprised he didn’t smack people in the face with it when he turned.

“Everyone’s focused on choosing the new Prime Aqasix,” said Maxin. “We could really do this. Rob the Bronze Palace itself, and right under the nose of the vizierate.”

“Is it ... um ... safe?” asked Huqin’s nephew. He was in his teens, and puberty hadn’t been kind to him. Not with that face, that voice, and those spindly legs.

“Hush,” Huqin snapped.

“No,” Tigzikk said, “the boy is right to express caution. This will be very dangerous.”

Tigzikk was considered the learned one in the group on account of his being able to cuss in three languages. Downright scholarly, that was. He wore fancy clothing, while most of the others wore black. “There will be chaos,” Tigzikk continued, “because so many people move through the palace tonight, but there will also be danger. Many, many bodyguards and a likelihood of suspicion on all sides.”

Tigzikk was an aging fellow, and was the only one of the group Lift knew well. She couldn’t say his name. That “quq” sound on the end of his name sounded like choking when someone pronounced it correctly. She just called him Tig instead.

“Tigzikk,” Huqin said. Yup. Choking. “You were the one who suggested this. Don’t tell me you’re getting cold now.”

“I’m not backing down. I’m pleading caution.”

Lift leaned down over the wall toward them. “Less arguing,” she said. “Let’s move. I’m hungry.”

Huqin looked up. “*Why* did we bring her along?”

“She’ll be useful,” Tigzikk said. “You’ll see.”

“She’s just a child!”

“She’s a youth. She’s at least twelve.”

“I *ain’t* twelve,” Lift snapped, looming over them.

They turned up toward her.

“I ain’t,” she said. “Twelve’s an unlucky number.” She held up her hands. “I’m only this many.”

“... Ten?” Tigzikk asked.

“Is that how many that is? Sure, then. Ten.” She lowered her hands. “If I can’t count it on my fingers, it’s unlucky.” And she’d been that many for three years now. So there.

“Seems like there are a lot of unlucky ages,” Huqin said, sounding amused.

“Sure are,” she agreed. She scanned the grounds again, then glanced back the way they had come, into the city.

A man walked down one of the streets leading to the palace. His dark clothing blended into the gloom, but his silver buttons glinted each time he passed a streetlight.

Storms, she thought, a chill running up her spine. *I didn’t lose him after all.*

She looked down at the men. “Are you coming with me or not? ’Cuz I’m *leaving*.” She slipped over the top and dropped into the palace yards. Lift squatted there, feeling the cold ground. Yup, it was metal. Everything was bronze. Rich people, she decided, loved to stick with a theme.

As the boys finally stopped arguing and started climbing, a thin, twisting trail of vines grew out of the darkness and approached Lift. It looked like a little stream of spilled water picking its way across the floor. Here and there, bits of clear crystal peeked out of the vines, like sections of quartz in otherwise dark stone. Those weren’t sharp, but smooth like polished glass, and didn’t glow with Stormlight.

The vines grew super-fast, curling about one another in a tangle that formed a face.

“Mistress,” the face said. “Is this *wise*?”

“Ello, Voidbringer,” Lift said, scanning the grounds.

“I am *not* a Voidbringer!” he said. “And you know it. Just ... just stop

saying that!”

Lift grinned. “You’re my pet Voidbringer, and no lies are going to change that. I got you captured. No stealing souls, now. We ain’t here for souls. Just a little thievery, the type what never hurt nobody.”

The vine face—he called himself Wyndle—sighed. Lift scuttled across the bronze ground over to a tree that was, of course, also made of bronze. Huqin had chosen the darkest part of night, between moons, for them to slip in—but the starlight was enough to see by on a cloudless night like this.

Wyndle grew up to her, leaving a small trail of vines that people didn’t seem to be able to see. The vines hardened after a few moments of sitting, as if briefly becoming solid crystal, then they crumbled to dust. People spotted that on occasion, though they certainly couldn’t see Wyndle himself.

“I’m a spren,” Wyndle said to her. “Part of a proud and noble—”

“Hush,” Lift said, peeking out from behind the bronze tree. An open-topped carriage passed on the drive beyond, carrying some important Azish folk. You could tell by the coats. Big, drooping coats with really wide sleeves and patterns that argued with each other. They all looked like kids who had snuck into their parents’ wardrobe. The hats were nifty, though.

The thieves followed behind her, moving with reasonable stealth. They really weren’t *that* bad. Even if they didn’t know how to climb a wall properly.

They gathered around her, and Tigzikk stood up, straightening his coat—which was an imitation of one of those worn by the rich scribe types who worked in the government. Here in Azir, working for the government was real important. Everyone else was said to be “discrete,” whatever that meant.

“Ready?” Tigzikk said to Maxin, who was the other one of the thieves dressed in fine clothing.

Maxin nodded, and the two of them moved off to the right, heading toward the palace’s sculpture garden. The important people would supposedly be shuffling around in there, speculating about who should be the next Prime.

Dangerous job, that. The last two had gotten their heads chopped off by some bloke in white with a Shardblade. The most recent Prime hadn’t lasted two starvin’ days!

With Tigzikk and Maxin gone, Lift only had four others to worry about. Huqin, his nephew, and two slender brothers who didn’t talk much and kept

reaching under their coats for knives. Lift didn't like their type. Thieving shouldn't leave bodies. Leaving bodies was easy. There was no *challenge* to it if you could just kill anyone who spotted you.

"You *can* get us in," Huqin said to Lift. "Right?"

Lift pointedly rolled her eyes. Then she scuttled across the bronze grounds toward the main palace structure.

Really does look like a breast ...

Wyndle curled along the ground beside her, his vine trail sprouting tiny bits of clear crystal here and there. He was as sinuous and speedy as a moving eel, only he *grew* rather than actually moving. Voidbringers were a strange lot.

"You realize that *I* didn't choose you," he said, a face appearing in the vines as they moved. His speaking left a strange effect, the trail behind him clotted with a sequence of frozen faces. The mouth seemed to move because it was growing so quickly beside her. "*I* wanted to pick a distinguished Iriali matron. A grandmother, an accomplished gardener. But no, the Ring said we should choose you. 'She has visited the Old Magic,' they said. 'Our mother has blessed her,' they said. 'She will be young, and we can mold her,' they said. Well, *they* don't have to put up with—"

"Shut it, Voidbringer," Lift hissed, drawing up beside the wall of the palace. "Or I'll bathe in blessed water and go listen to the priests. Maybe get an exorcism."

Lift edged sideways until she could look around the curve of the wall to spot the guard patrol: men in patterned vests and caps, with long halberds. She looked up the side of the wall. It bulged out just above her, like a rockbud, before tapering up further. It was of smooth bronze, with no handholds.

She waited until the guards had walked farther away. "All right," she whispered to Wyndle. "You gotta do what I say."

"I do *not*."

"Sure you do. I captured you, just like in the stories."

"I came to *you*," Wyndle said. "Your powers come from me! Do you even *listen* to—"

"Up the wall," Lift said, pointing.

Wyndle sighed, but obeyed, creeping up the wall in a wide, looping pattern. Lift hopped up, grabbing the small handholds made by the vine,

which stuck to the surface by virtue of thousands of branching stems with sticky discs on them. Wyndle wove ahead of her, making a ladder of sorts.

It wasn't easy. It was starvin' difficult, with that bulge, and Wyndle's handholds weren't very big. But she did it, climbing all the way to the near-top of the building's dome, where windows peeked out at the grounds.

She glanced toward the city. No sign of the man in the black uniform. Maybe she'd lost him.

She turned back to examine the window. Its nice wooden frame held very thick glass, even though it pointed east. It was unfair how well Azimir was protected from highstorms. They should have to live with the wind, like normal folk.

"We need to Voidbring that," she said, pointing at the window.

"Have you realized," Wyndle said, "that while you *claim* to be a master thief, *I* do all of the work in this relationship?"

"You do all the complainin' too," she said. "How do we get through this?"

"You have the seeds?"

She nodded, fishing in her pocket. Then in the other one. Then in her back pocket. Ah, there they were. She pulled out a handful of seeds.

"I can't affect the Physical Realm except in minor ways," Wyndle said. "This means that you will need to use Investiture to—"

Lift yawned.

"Use Investiture to—"

She yawned *wider*. Starvin' Voidbringers never could catch a hint.

Wyndle sighed. "Spread the seeds on the frame."

She did so, throwing the handful of seeds at the window.

"Your bond to me grants two primary classes of ability," Wyndle said. "The first, manipulation of friction, you've already—don't yawn at me!—discovered. We have been using that well for many weeks now, and it is time for you to learn the second, the power of Growth. You aren't ready for what was once known as Regrowth, the healing of—"

Lift pressed her hand against the seeds, then summoned her awesomeness.

She wasn't sure how she did it. She just *did*. It had started right around when Wyndle had first appeared.

He hadn't talked then. She kind of missed those days.

Her hand glowed faintly with white light, like vapor coming off the skin. The seeds that saw the light started to grow. Fast. Vines burst from the seeds

and wormed into the cracks between the window and its frame.

The vines grew at her will, making constricted, straining sounds. The glass cracked, then the window frame *popped* open.

Lift grinned.

“Well done,” Wyndle said. “We’ll make an Edgedancer out of you yet.”

Her stomach grumbled. When had she last eaten? She’d used a lot of her awesomeness practicing earlier. She probably should have stolen something to eat. She wasn’t quite so awesome when she was hungry.

She slipped inside the window. Having a Voidbringer was useful, though she wasn’t *completely* sure her powers came from him. That seemed the sorta thing a Voidbringer would lie about. She *had* captured him, fair and square. She’d used words. A Voidbringer had no body, not really. To catch something like that, you had to use words. Everybody knew it. Just like curses made evil things come find you.

She had to get out a sphere—a diamond mark, her lucky one—to see properly in here. The small bedroom was decorated after the Azish way with lots of intricate patterns on the rugs and the fabric on the walls, mostly gold and red here. Those patterns were everything to the Azish. They were like words.

She looked out the window. Surely she’d escaped Darkness, the man in the black and silver with the pale crescent birthmark on his cheek. The man with the dead, lifeless stare. Surely he hadn’t followed her all the way from Marabethia. That was half a continent away! Well, a quarter one, at the least.

Convinced, she uncoiled the rope that she wore wrapped around her waist and over her shoulders. She tied it to the door of a built-in closet, then fed it out the window. It tightened as the men started climbing. Nearby, Wyndle grew up around one of the bedposts, coiled like a skyeel.

She heard whispered voices below. “Did you *see* that? She climbed right up it. Not a handhold in sight. How...?”

“Hush.” That was Huqin.

Lift began poking through cabinets and drawers as the boys clambered in the window one at a time. Once inside, the thieves pulled up the rope and shut the window as best they could. Huqin studied the vines she’d grown from seeds on the frame.

Lift stuck her head in the bottom of a wardrobe, groping around. “Ain’t nothing in this room but moldy shoes.”

“You,” Huqin said to her, “and my nephew will hold this room. The three of us will search the bedrooms nearby. We will be back shortly.”

“You’ll probably have a whole *sack* of moldy shoes...” Lift said, pulling out of the wardrobe.

“Ignorant child,” Huqin said, pointing at the wardrobe. One of his men grabbed the shoes and outfits inside, stuffing them in a sack. “This clothing will sell for bundles. It’s exactly what we’re looking for.”

“What about real riches?” Lift said. “Spheres, jewelry, art...” She had little interest in those things herself, but she’d figured it was what Huqin was after.

“That will all be *far* too well guarded,” Huqin said as his two associates made quick work of the room’s clothing. “The difference between a successful thief and a dead thief is knowing when to escape with your takings. This haul will let us live in luxury for a year or two. That is enough.”

One of the brothers peeked out the door into the hallway. He nodded, and the three of them slipped out. “Listen for the warning,” Huqin said to his nephew, then eased the door almost closed behind him.

Tigzikk and his accomplice below would listen for any kind of alarm. If anything seemed to be amiss, they’d slip off and blow their whistles. Huqin’s nephew crouched by the window to listen, obviously taking his duty very seriously. He looked to be about sixteen. Unlucky age, that.

“How did you climb the wall like that?” the youth asked.

“Gumtion,” Lift said. “And spit.”

He frowned at her.

“I gots magic spit.”

He seemed to believe her. Idiot.

“Is it strange for you here?” he asked. “Away from your people?”

She stood out. Straight black hair—she wore it down to her waist—tan skin, rounded features. Everyone would immediately mark her as Reshi.

“Don’t know,” Lift said, strolling to the door. “Ain’t never been around my people.”

“You’re not from the islands?”

“Nope. Grew up in Rall Elorim.”

“The ... City of Shadows?”

“Yup.”

“Is it—”

“Yup. Just like they say.”

She peeked through the door. Huqin and the others were well out of the way. The hallway was bronze—walls and everything—but a red and blue rug, with lots of little vine patterns, ran down the center. Paintings hung on the walls.

She pulled the door all the way open and stepped out.

“Lift!” The nephew scrambled to the door. “They told us to wait here!”

“And?”

“And we should *wait here!* We don’t want to get Uncle Huqin in trouble!”

“What’s the point of sneaking into a palace if not to get into trouble?” She shook her head. Odd men, these. “This should be an interesting place, what with all of the rich folk hanging around.” There ought to be some *really* good food in here.

She padded out into the hallway, and Wyndle grew along the floor beside her. Interestingly, the nephew followed. She’d expected him to stay in the room.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he said as they passed a door that was open a crack, shuffles sounding from inside. Huqin and his men, robbing the place silly.

“Then stay,” Lift whispered, reaching a large stairwell. Servants whisked back and forth below, even a few parshmen, but she didn’t catch sight of anyone in one of those coats. “Where are the important folk?”

“Reading forms,” the nephew said from beside her.

“Forms?”

“Sure,” he said. “With the Prime dead, the viziers, scribes, and arbiters were all given a chance to fill out the proper paperwork to apply to take his place.”

“You *apply* to be emperor?” Lift said.

“Sure,” he said. “Lots of paperwork involved in that. And an essay. Your essay has to be *really* good to get this job.”

“Storms. You people are crazy.”

“Other nations do it better? With bloody succession wars? This way, everyone has a chance. Even the lowest of clerks can submit the paperwork. You can even be *discrete* and end up on the throne, if you are convincing enough. It happened once.”

“Crazy.”

“Says the girl who talks to herself.”

Lift looked at him sharply.

“Don’t pretend you don’t,” he said. “I’ve seen you doing it. Talking to the air, as if somebody were there.”

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Gawx.”

“Wow. Well then, Gaw. I don’t talk to myself because I’m crazy.”

“No?”

“I do it because I’m *awesome*.” She started down the steps, waited for a gap between passing servants, then made for a closet across the way. Gawx cursed, then followed.

Lift was tempted to use her awesomeness to slide across the floor quickly, but she didn’t need that yet. Besides, Wyndle kept complaining that she used the awesomeness too often. That she was at risk of malnutrition, whatever that meant.

She slipped up to the closet, using just her normal everyday sneakin’ skills, and moved inside. Gawx scrambled into the closet with her just before she pulled it shut. Dinnerware on a serving cart clinked behind them, and they could barely crowd into the space. Gawx moved, causing more clinks, and she elbowed him. He stilled as two parshmen passed, bearing large wine barrels.

“You should go back upstairs,” Lift whispered to him. “This could be dangerous.”

“Oh, sneaking into the storming *royal palace* is dangerous? Thanks. I hadn’t realized.”

“I mean it,” Lift said, peeking out of the closet. “Go back up, leave when Huqin returns. He’ll abandon me in a heartbeat. Probably will you, too.”

Besides, she didn’t want to be awesome with Gawx around. That started questions. And rumors. She hated both. For once, she’d like to be able to stay someplace for a while without being forced to run off.

“No,” Gawx said softly. “If you’re going to steal something good, I want a piece of it. Then maybe Huqin will stop making me stay behind, giving me the easy jobs.”

Huh. So he had some spunk to him.

A servant passed carrying a large, plate-filled tray. The food smells wafting from it made Lift’s stomach growl. Rich-person food. So *delicious*.

Lift watched the woman go, then broke out of the closet, following after. This was going to get difficult with Gawx in tow. He'd been trained well enough by his uncle, but moving unseen through a populated building wasn't easy.

The serving woman pulled open a door that was hidden in the wall. Servants' hallways. Lift caught it as it closed, waited a few heartbeats, then eased it open and slipped through. The narrow hallway was poorly lit and smelled of the food that had just passed.

Gawx entered behind Lift, then silently pulled the door closed. The serving woman disappeared around a corner ahead—there were probably lots of hallways like this in the palace. Behind Lift, Wyndle grew around the doorframe, a dark green, funguslike creep of vines that covered the door, then the wall beside her.

He formed a face in the vines and spots of crystal, then shook his head.

"Too narrow?" Lift asked.

He nodded.

"It's dark in here. Hard to see us."

"Vibrations on the floor, mistress. Someone coming this direction."

She looked longingly after the servant with the food, then shoved past Gawx and pushed open the door, entering the main hallways again.

Gawx cursed. "Do you even know what you're doing?"

"No," she said, then scuttled around a corner into a large hallway lined with alternating green and yellow gemstone lamps. Unfortunately, a servant in a stiff, black and white uniform was coming right at her.

Gawx let out a "meep" of worry, ducking back around the corner. Lift stood up straight, clasped her hands behind her back, and strolled forward.

She passed the man. His uniform marked him as someone important, for a servant.

"You, there!" the man snapped. "What is this?"

"Mistress wants some cake," Lift said, jutting out her chin.

"Oh, for Yaezir's sake. Food is served in the gardens! There is cake *there!*"

"Wrong type," Lift said. "Mistress wants berry cake."

The man threw his hands into the air. "Kitchens are back the other way," he said. "Try and persuade the cook, though she'll probably chop your hands off before she takes another special request. Storming country scribes!"

Special dietary needs are supposed to be sent ahead of time, with the proper forms!” He stalked off, leaving Lift with hands behind her back, watching him.

Gawk slunk around the corner. “I thought we were dead for sure.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Lift said, hurrying down the hallway. “This ain’t the dangerous part yet.”

At the other end, this hallway intersected another one—with the same wide rug down the center, bronze walls, and glowing metal lamps. Across the way was a door with no light shining under it. Lift checked in both directions, then dashed to the door, cracked it, peeked in, then waved for Gawx to join her inside.

“We should go right down that hallway outside,” Gawx whispered as she shut the door all but a crack. “Down that way, we’ll find the vizier quarters. They’re probably empty, because everyone will be in the Prime’s wing deliberating.”

“You know the palace layout?” she asked, crouching in near darkness beside the door. They were in a small sitting room of some sort, with a couple of shadowed chairs and a small table.

“Yeah,” Gawx said. “I memorized the palace maps before we came. You didn’t?”

She shrugged.

“I’ve been in here once before,” Gawx said. “I watched the Prime sleeping.”

“You *what*?”

“He’s public,” Gawx said, “belongs to everyone. You can enter a lottery to come look at him sleeping. They rotate people through every hour.”

“What? On a special day or something?”

“No, every day. You can watch him eat too, or watch him perform his daily rituals. If he loses a hair or cuts off a nail, you might be able to keep it as a relic.”

“Sounds creepy.”

“A little.”

“Which way to his rooms?” Lift asked.

“That way,” Gawx said, pointing left down the hallway outside—the opposite direction from the vizier chambers. “You don’t want to go there, Lift. That’s where the viziers and everyone important will be reviewing

applications. In the Prime's presence."

"But he's dead."

"The new Prime."

"He ain't been chosen yet!"

"Well, it's kind of strange," Gawx said. By the dim light of the cracked door, she could see him blushing, as if he knew how starvin' odd this all was. "There's never *not* a Prime. We just don't know who he is yet. I mean, he's alive, and he's already Prime—right now. We're just catching up. So, those are his quarters, and the scions and viziers want to be in his presence while they decide who he is. Even if the person they decide upon isn't in the room."

"That makes no sense."

"Of course it makes sense," Gawx said. "It's government. This is all *very* well detailed in the codes and..." He trailed off as Lift yawned. Azish could be *real* boring. At least he could take a hint, though.

"Anyway," Gawx continued, "everyone outside in the gardens is hoping to be called in for a personal interview. It might not come to that, though. The scions can't be Prime, as they're too busy visiting and blessing villages around the kingdom—but a vizier can, and they tend to have the best applications. Usually, one of their number is chosen."

"The Prime's quarters," Lift said. "That's the direction the food went."

"What is it with you and food?"

"I'm going to eat their dinner," she said, soft but intense.

Gawx blinked, startled. "You're ... *what*?"

"I'm gonna eat their food," she said. "Rich folk have the best food."

"But ... there might be spheres in the vizier quarters...."

"Eh," she said. "I'd just spend 'em on food."

Stealing regular stuff was no fun. She wanted a *real* challenge. Over the last two years, she'd picked the most difficult places to enter. Then she'd snuck in.

And eaten their dinners.

"Come on," she said, moving out of the doorway, then turned left toward the Prime's chambers.

"You really *are* crazy," Gawx whispered.

"Nah. Just bored."

He looked the other way. "I'm going for the vizier quarters."

"Suit yourself," she said. "I'd go back upstairs instead, if I were you. You

aren't practiced enough for this kind of thing. You leave me, you're probably going to get into trouble."

He fidgeted, then slipped off in the direction of the vizier quarters. Lift rolled her eyes.

"Why did you even come with them?" Wyndle asked, creeping out of the room. "Why not just sneak in on your own?"

"Tigzikk found out about this whole election thing," she said. "He told me tonight was a good night for sneaking. I owed it to him. Besides, I wanted to be here in case he got into trouble. I might need to help."

"Why bother?"

Why indeed? "Someone has to care," she said, starting down the hallway. "Too few people care, these days."

"You say this while coming in to *rob* people."

"Sure. Ain't gonna hurt them."

"You have an odd sense of morality, mistress."

"Don't be stupid," she said. "Every sense of morality is odd."

"I suppose."

"Particularly to a Voidbringer."

"I'm not—"

She grinned and hurried her pace toward the Prime's quarters. She knew she'd found those when she glanced down a side hallway and spotted guards at the end. Yup. That door was so nice, it *had* to belong to an emperor. Only super-rich folk built fancy doors. You needed money coming out your ears before you spent it on a *door*.

Guards were a problem. Lift knelt down, peeking around the corner. The hallway leading to the emperor's rooms was narrow, like an alleyway. Smart. Hard to sneak down something like that. And those two guards, they weren't the bored type. They were the "we gotta stand here and look real angry" type. They stood so straight, you'd have thought someone had shoved brooms up their backsides.

She glanced upward. The hallway was tall; rich folk liked tall stuff. If they'd been poor, they'd have built another floor up there for their aunts and cousins to live in. Rich people wasted space instead. Proved they had so much money, they could waste it.

Seemed perfectly rational to steal from them.

"There," Lift whispered, pointing to a small ornamented ledge that ran

along the wall up above. It wouldn't be wide enough to walk on, unless you were Lift. Which, fortunately, she was. It was dim up there too. The chandeliers were the dangly kind, and they hung low, with mirrors reflecting their spherelight downward.

"Up we go," she said.

Wyndle sighed.

"You gotta do what I say or I'll prune you."

"You'll ... prune me."

"Sure." That sounded threatening, right?

Wyndle grew up the wall, giving her handholds. Already, the vines he'd trailed through the hallway behind them were vanishing, becoming crystal and disintegrating into dust.

"Why don't they notice you?" Lift whispered. She'd never asked him, despite their months together. "Is it 'cuz only the pure in heart can see you?"

"You're not serious."

"Sure. That'd fit into legends and stories and stuff."

"Oh, the theory itself isn't ridiculous," Wyndle said, speaking out of a bit of vine near her, the various cords of green moving like lips. "Merely the idea that *you* consider yourself to be pure in heart."

"I'm pure," Lift whispered, grunting as she climbed. "I'm a child and stuff. I'm so storming pure I practically belch rainbows."

Wyndle sighed again—he liked to do that—as they reached the ledge. Wyndle grew along the side of it, making it slightly wider, and Lift stepped onto it. She balanced carefully, then nodded to Wyndle. He grew further along the ledge, then doubled back and grew up the wall to a point above her head. From there, he grew horizontally to give her a handhold. With the extra inch of vine on the ledge and the handhold above, she managed to sidle along, stomach to the wall. She took a deep breath, then turned the corner into the hallway with the guards.

She moved along it slowly, Wyndle wrapping back and forth, enhancing both footing and handholds for her. The guards didn't cry out. She was *doing* it.

"They can't see me," Wyndle said, growing up beside her to create another line of handholds, "because I exist mostly in the Cognitive Realm, even though I've moved my consciousness to this Realm. I can make myself visible to anyone, should I desire, though it's not easy for me. Other spren are

more skilled at it, while some have the opposite trouble. Of course, no matter *how* I manifest, nobody can touch me, as I barely have any substance in this Realm.”

“Nobody but me,” Lift whispered, inching down the hallway.

“You shouldn’t be able to either,” he said, sounding troubled. “What did you ask for, when you visited my mother?”

Lift didn’t have to answer that, not to a storming Voidbringer. She eventually reached the end of the hallway. Beneath her was the door. Unfortunately, that was exactly where the guards stood.

“This does not seem very well thought out, mistress,” Wyndle noted. “Had you considered *what* you were going to do once you got here?”

She nodded.

“Well?”

“Wait,” she whispered.

They did, Lift with her front pressed to the wall, her heels hanging out above a fifteen-foot drop onto the guards. She didn’t want to fall. She was pretty sure she was awesome enough to survive it, but if they saw her, that would end the game. She’d have to run, and she’d *never* get any dinner.

Fortunately, she’d guessed right, unfortunately. A guard appeared at the other end of the hallway, looking out of breath and not a little annoyed. The other two guards jogged over to him. He turned, pointing the other way.

That was her chance. Wyndle grew a vine downward, and Lift grabbed it. She could feel the crystals jutting out between the tendrils, but they were smooth and faceted—not angular and sharp. She dropped, vine smooth between her fingers, pulling herself to a stop just before the floor.

She only had a few seconds.

“... caught a thief trying to ransack the vizier quarters,” said the newer guard. “Might be more. Keep watch. By Yaezir himself! I can’t believe they’d dare. Tonight of all nights!”

Lift cracked open the door to the emperor’s rooms and peeked in. Big room. Men and women at a table. Nobody looking her direction. She slipped through the door.

Then became awesome.

She ducked down, kicked herself forward, and for a moment, the floor—the carpet, the wood beneath—had no purchase on her. She glided as if on ice, making no noise as she slid across the ten-foot gap. Nothing could hold