

[I need a chapter for the time after the battle and when the caravan reaches the town. Can't think of one now, so I'm jumping ahead]

“Where do you think you're going?” Graiden demanded, and Tibs turned to see Jeremy, three steps behind him, doing the same. The chief's eyes were fixed on the younger man.

“I'm going to the town with the others,” Jeremy answered.

“No, you aren't. You're needed here to help with setting up the wagons.”

“But the others...”

“It's the new guys who help,” Graiden said. “You're new, so you help.”

“Tyborg's new too.”

The chief of the guard narrowed his eyes. “Tyborg's always helping, even when he doesn't have to. So if this time he wants to go in town and pass the time in a more pleasurable way, I won't be stopping him. You, on the other hand, have a habit of only doing the minimum unless you know he's watching. So if you leave with the others, you better be sure this is the town you want to stay in for a while, because I am not taking you back.”

“Please, I'll work harder when we get back, I promise.”

Tibs watched the resolve on Graiden falter. “Just do what you hired on to do, Jeremy.” He had no idea how Jeremy did it, but he had a knack for getting his way. “If you didn't want to pay the price of traveling with the caravan, you should have stayed in your city.”

“But...” Jeremy fell silent as he looked at him. Tibs wasn't quite glaring, but he was willing to go that far if pushed.

“Look,” he said, his resolve wavering under the pitiful expression. “I'm just going for a drink and get off my feet for a bit. When I get back, I'll help you with the rest of what Gray will have given you to do.”

“That isn't your job,” Graiden said, his expression hard again.

Tibs shrugged. “I just need the quiet of a dark corner for a while and an ale. I'd be back to help, even if Jeremy wasn't the one who'd need it.”

The young man looked torn, but eventually gave in and returned to the wagons, dragging his feet.

When he started walking, a group of the guards was waiting for him.

“You shouldn't be so nice to the boy,” Afread said. “It's not doing him any good to have you always rescuing him.”

Tibs snorted. “He's paid plenty for some of his mistakes. I'm just making sure he learns not to make the big ones until he's able to deal with the consequences.”

“You think he's going to learn anything when you step in like that?” Lidia said.

“I'm sure he wasn't going to learn something if he'd gotten his hand cut off because Loren misplaced a trinket.” He paused as they passed the wooden gate. “It's his first time away from everything he's known. I wish... I wish there had been someone there to help me when I left home.”

I'm coming with you.

No.

Why, Tibs?

Even after all these years, the pain in Jackal's voice hurt. He could have used his help, but his brother had someone more important to look after.

"Coddling him isn't going to help," Afread said. "Mark my word, when you aren't around him anymore, he's going to make a mess of whatever he does next."

"If he can't learn, then he deserves what he gets."

Tibs kept going as the others entered the first tavern.

The town was large enough it would have more than one, and it might have something else.

He'd been surprised at how uncommon inns were. The one in Kragle Rock had been built while it was barely more than a village, and in his travels while being a runner, he'd always gone to cities, since it was where travel platforms were located.

It had turned out that none of the villages he'd travel to with the caravans had inns, only taverns, and not even that if they were too small. A caravan had stopped at one for a night where ale wasn't even available because the only woman making it had already been drunk out for the week.

Even if this town didn't have one, the further away from the gate by with the wagons were setting up he went, the less likely he was to have one of the guards for company while he rested.

The tavern he settled on was close enough to the opposite gate Tibs could see the forest through it along with a road cutting through it. The town was nestled partway into the forest, its wood probably providing for the wall that surrounded it.

Another thing that had surprised him. Nearly every town was walled and, without exception, all the cities he'd traveled to. He could count on one hand the times someone living in a town protected that way remembered it being needed, but they all had stories of when such a wall had saved them, or of towns falling because they didn't have one.

Another place Kragle Rock had been different, because of all the adventurers the guild employed.

The crowd filling half the tables barely took notice of him as he entered. The few who did dismissed him as he headed for the bar. The lean man on the other side watched him warily.

"I'll take one of your ale." Tibs place a copper on the bar. "I'm with the caravan that just arrived. Taking a break." The information did little to assuage the man, but he handed Tibs a tall tankard before taking the copper.

Tibs took the furthest table and while he wasn't hidden in darkness because of the many windows, it gave him a sense of aloneness that he increased with an etching of air that lowered the conversations to a soft hum.

He hadn't lied to the others when he'd told him he was doing his best to help Jeremy, but that didn't keep the young man from becoming a chore after a while. He was always around, always ready to help him, and always with the questions. Tibs appreciated curiosity, but Jeremy never seemed to be sated.

When he reached the bottom of his tankard, he paid for another and sipped it, forcing himself to enjoy the taste.

No two places made the same ale, and he expected there were people who could say where an ale came from simply for the flavors. He just wanted a reason to delay his return

to the caravan. A little more time of quiet.

The woman who rushed in had a frantic expression as she spoke from the doorway loudly enough Tibs could almost make out the words through the etching. He undid it.

“—in the forest!”

The unease that spread at her declaration was palpable. The men and women looked at one another and seemed to actively refuse to acknowledge her.

“What is wrong?” he asked.

“My man went to get wood yesterday for the oven,” she said, hurrying to his table, too distraught to realize he was a stranger. “He wasn’t back when I went to bed, but it’s happened before. But he wasn’t there when I woke.”

“He went too deep,” a woman whispered, then looked away as if realizing she’d voiced the words without intending to.

“He wouldn’t!”

Tibs motioned to the barman for another ale and for the woman to sit. When he delivered it, he seemed wary of her as much as of Tibs, as if what had happened to her man, whatever it was, tainted her.

He handed her the tankard, and she drank half of it in quick gulps.

“Why wouldn’t he go too deep?” he asked when she placed the tankard down.

“He knows that’s where it is,” she said. “We all do.”

“Where what is?”

She hesitated.

“The monster,” a man said.

Tibs frowned. Monsters, the way bards sang about them, were rare. Tibs had encountered one, in all his years of traveling, and he’d had to research its existence for more than a year before he’d pieced enough information to start looking. The creature hadn’t been as impressive as the stories and lore he’d collected made it to be, but it was definitely something a dungeon had made. Short but lean, skin of scales and fur in patches with clawed fingered, four of them on a hand, three on the other, the second to left one being broken off. Showing it’s inside wasn’t flesh but something white like bones left in the sun for a long time.

It had attacked him on sight, and had been stronger and more ferocious than he’d expected, but he’d defeated it. It hadn’t crumbled into nothingness as the creatures within Sto had, and it didn’t leave loot behind.

He hadn’t known what to do with it. So settled on burning it so its essence would return to their elements, if that was what happened to dungeon creatures.

The thing was that even if it wasn’t a monster the way the bard sang about them, there was something roaming the forest that endangered them, and that was monstrous enough.

“How deep is it?” He asked the room. “That monster?”

He received shakes of the heads, as if to answer him would bring it closer.

“What direction is it in?” he asked.

“You looking to die, boy?” an older woman said.

“I’m looking to help. It’s only been a night. Her man might just be lost.”

“He’s dead,” she spat, then her expression softened. “I’m sorry, Korela, but you know that’s true. If he ventured deep, then he’s dead. It got him.”

“Just give me a direction and I’ll go search for him,” Tibs said. “If it gets me, then it isn’t one of you who dies.”

“I’d never send anyone there,” a man said. “Not even someone I want to see dead. Is too horrible.”

“Someone saw it?” If someone had seen it, Tibs might be able to work out what animal it was. There were some very scary ones out there. The first time Tibs had encountered a bear, he’d been certain he’d fought a dungeon creature, but it bleed as he did when he cut it. It had still managed to injure him badly enough by the time the fight was done that without Purity, Tibs wouldn’t have survived. There could be wolves, too; dogs that had gone wild and vicious.

Anything people weren’t used to easily became a monster.

“It’s long, like the serpents of the water,” a man said.

“I heard it’s short and stocky,” a woman countered. “Like a rock with legs and arms and fangs.”

“It’s covered in fur the brown of dirt,” someone else said, “and prowls low, ready to pounce anyone who gets too close.”

No one had seen it, was what Tibs got from the various descriptions. He looked at the woman seated across from him as arguments over who was right started.

“How do I go too deep?” he asked her, keeping his voice low. She shook her head vehemently. Maybe it was the talk of the monster, but she seemed reluctant to send him to his death, even to rescue her man. “I grew up hunting in forest,” he said. “Whatever’s there, I’ll be able to deal with it and…” there was only so far he was willing to lie. “And I can bring him back to you, however he is now.” He couldn’t promise he’d find him alive, but he could that he’d bring him back.

She swallowed. “Almost as soon as you leave the gate, the road turned zenithward. If you get off it and continue sunsetward, you’re heading in its direction. Half a day is what I heard for how far it is.”

Tibs placed a hand on hers. “I will find him.” Then he rose and left the tavern.

The man leaning against the wall, with a polearm resting against it, watched him leave without comment. Tibs suspected that if he’d recognized him, he’d have inquired as to why he was heading into the forest, and warned him to stay close.

He felt the man’s eyes on him as Tibs continued sunsetward instead of following the road.

Half a day of walking within a forest didn’t have to be very far, or even an actual half a day. It wasn’t always easy to see the sun through the leaves, and shadows could be dense enough you couldn’t tell their direction.

He’d gotten lost in a forest a few weeks after leaving Kragle Rock and it had been a harrowing experience. He’d never felt in danger. Little had, back then, with the runs still fresh in his mind, but he had had times when he’d wondered if he’d ever make it out.

He sensed as far as he could and made out the animals a head and the people in the town behind. He made sure to keep his distances from the larger ones. He wasn’t here to fight with them.