

Finding Don took longer than Tibs expected.

The sorcerer hadn't been in their room, the inn, or training at the guild, so he'd cast his sense over his town and started walking. Don was the only person with corruption, other than the sorcerers working on the building over the pool, so Tibs shouldn't have had the difficult time of it that he did.

Again, he was reminded that, for as much as his sense had expanded, Kragle Rock had grown faster. From one side of it, He could just about sense the center, which was no longer the transportation platform. The town was growing unevenly, stretching more toward the midday sun than the other directions. He sensed some with corruption, but they were too powerful to be his friend. Sorcerers taking breaks from the construction work, he decided.

Where he finally found Don, and Tibs cursed himself for dismissing the place out of hand, was the corruption pool. He knew how the concentration of the element muddled his sense. So he shouldn't have assumed Don wouldn't be there. Even the old Don was known to help out when it served him. And having the academy, where he would do his research once he was free of the guild, finish what they were building here, would certainly serve him.

Tibs figured the old Don would have done only as much as needed to show he was helping, while his friend was dressed in rough worker's clothing and sweating while he hammered planks in place with other, much stronger, sorcerer.

The sight amused him a little. The element liked things to be easy. When he'd channeled Corruption that first time, whatever seemed the easiest was what he'd done, careless of the consequences. Even his first encounter with one of their sorcerer, as she tried to swindle Don out of a pool he didn't own, had supported the impression bards sang when it came to them.

Never trust someone with corruption as their elements. They will trick you into doing all the work and giving them all the rewards. Take care if any of them are on your team, but take especial care of the Sorcerer who wields corruption, who is only less trustworthy than the rogue.

Yet another reminder, as if he needed them anymore, that bards didn't sing about how things were. They twisted events to make 'good' stories. And twisted how people thought of those in the songs in the process.

Tibs hesitated in calling out to his friend. Searching for him after leaving the guild had moved the sun until there was only slightly more than a full hand-span until it touched the horizon. He was hungry, and Don was working, and wouldn't it be safer if he went to another corruption sorcerer for help? One who didn't know so much about him. Who would have an easier time believing the tale Tibs would tell them?

But would they be able to help him if they knew so little about what he could do? Would his questions lead to questions of their own as to why he was so curious about an element he couldn't use? Or could he pass himself off as a Runner with corruption and hope they wouldn't know Don was the only one? He could claim to be from outside and—

"Tibs!" Don called, waving. He spoke to another of the sorcerers before placing the hammer in a bucket and stepping around stacks of planks that seemed precariously balance to Tibs. "What are you doing here?" He wiped his brow.

"Looking for you, but if you're busy with something you need to do to be part of the academy, I can—"

“No, I’m not forced to do this,” Don said, chuckling. “I was tired of not getting anywhere with that book I got from the dungeon, so I came to help to have something else to think about.”

“I didn’t think sorcerers who work at an academy would be hammering planks in place,” Tibs said.

Don looked around and lowered his voice. “You can sense they are all sorcerers?”

Tibs shook his head. “The pool makes it difficult, but there is a sense of a lot of the element above it. And I don’t think workers would walk around so at ease over the pool.”

Don looked back. “I hadn’t considered that. But the reason they’re doing the work, beyond being a change of pace from so much research, and something the acolytes in training can do to learn that even the academy isn’t only about sitting down, reading and writing, is that the weave needs to be done as the construction happens. It’s well beyond me, but each plank has a weave that ‘locks’ in place with those around it. It makes the building more secure, and serves as a base upon which further enchantments will be added to keep experiments from escaping the walls.” He looked at Tibs, smiling. “But as curious as you are, I doubt you came here to learn about what goes into building a sorcerer’s academy.”

There was no avoiding it anymore. “You said you wanted to train me and—”

“I believe your words were. ‘I need to deal with something.’” The tone was severe.

“I’ve dealt with it.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Don said, far too casually.

“I’d like not to almost kill everyone the next time I have to use a lot of essence.”

Don watched him. “I’m sure we’d all appreciate that.” He looked toward the sun. “Let me wash and change, then we can eat, talk about how I expect you to work, and then we can settle down and do exercises to help you gain control.”

Tibs bit back telling his friend that wasn’t what he wanted to work on. He’d have to come at this far more indirectly than he preferred.

“Alright,” he replied, hoping he didn’t sound as disappointed to Don as he thought.

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“And I expect you to respect the schedule I set,” Don said as Tibs finished his meal. Mez had joined them, ate and left. Jackal was still in bed, getting over the corruption in his essence. They might have to pass on their next run at the rate the fighter was healing. “Not just for showing up to the training, but in doing your exercises.” He looked up at the approaching warrior.

“Tibs,” Quigly greeted them. “Don.” He looked around the room before sitting. The inn was mostly filled with Runners. The tables occupied by others were townsfolk or visitors. While Kroseph’s father had a policy that everyone was welcome, the Runners had made sure the guards felt they were the exception. He placed a pouch on the table that looked like a worn version of Jackal’s. If he focussed, Tibs could make out a weave throughout the leather. He wanted to ask where Quigly had gotten it. Considering how much essence Sto had said it took to make Jackal’s pouch, he didn’t think it came from there. Sto also didn’t make items that look old unless told to.

The warrior reached into it slightly further than the size implied and pulled out a ring. Was it because that was only as deep as this pouch was, or because he wanted to avoid attracting attention? Not every team had something like that, and even Jackal was careful

when using his in public.

“Should I bother asking how it is the dungeon is making those?” Quigly asked, tapping the ring on the table. He turned the pouch toward Tibs. “If you hadn’t told me what they do, I’d never have bothered with them.”

Tibs shrugged, opening the pouch and looking in. Where he’d expected darkness, as with Jackal’s and the bag Archer had provided him, the inside was more like the chest in the dungeon. Clearly larger than the outside, but the space was finite, even if he couldn’t tell how large it was. And it was filled with plain looking brass rings.

“How did the dungeon know to start providing us with food?” Don offered. “Or weapons for Sebastian’s assault? It must have a way to know what its town needs to survive. And if you think about it, providing items we need also serves as incentive to get Runners to go in, so it also benefits.”

“Sure. That makes sense.” Quigly only glanced at the sorcerer before fixing his gaze back on Tibs.

“When do you need it back?” he asked, tying it to his belt.

“Now,” the warrior said.

“I don’t have anything to put the rings in.” Even if he’d been wearing his armor, he wouldn’t have revealed its hidden space. Not that he was sure it could hold this much. It had held the promises, but those were papers.

“Fine, tomorrow then. I kept a few for my team to give to the people who matter to us.”

Tibs nodded. He’d resigned himself to the Runners thinking about them before the town, but they would have enough anyway in time.

“Won’t Cross shove that down…” Don hesitate, then smiled, “your throat when you give that to her?”

“She can do whatever the fuck she wants to me, after she puts it on. There’s too much riding on it.”

“I really thought she’d made it clear she didn’t care about your heart,” Don said dismissively.

Quigly leaned toward the sorcerer. “How about you keep that corrupt nose of yours out of stuff that isn’t any of your business? And if you can’t, do like that cleric of yours. Keep what you think of it to yourself.”

“Noted,” Don replied, grinning over the lip of his tankard. “I won’t comment on your impressive attempts at getting that woman to kill you anymore.”

The warrior pushed away from the table, grumbling insults about the sorcerer.

“Don’t,” Tibs said, as Don opened his mouth. “I don’t want to know about them. I don’t want to know about Mez and his girls. Or anyone you know that’s involved with someone else.”

“You really don’t like knowing about couples, do you, Tibs?” Don wiped the remaining sauce off his plate with a chunk of bread.

“I can’t not know about Jackal and Kroseph,” Tibs replied darkly, earning himself a chuckle in response. “That’s more than I ever wanted to know about what anyone did with their special someone.”

“You only say that,” Kroseph said, taking his empty plate, “because you haven’t found

yourself someone.”

Tibs snorted.

“How about you Don? Chasing anyone?”

The sorcerer smirked. “I’m not the chaser. I’m one of the Heroes of Kragle Rock. And unlike Tibs, I don’t ignore those chasing me. In fact, there is lady from the Rose Blossom’s quarters who has been quite dedicated in her attempts to get me to—”

“Can you just not.” Tibs glared at his grinning teammate. “Since you aren’t talking about how I need to do it anymore, maybe we can move on to the actual training?”

“You’re training?” Kroseph asked in surprise.

“I do train,” Tibs replied, eyes narrowing at the server.

“When your teacher calls for you,” Kroseph replied. “Or, when something happens you hold yourself responsible for.”

Tibs pointed up before even thinking about it.

“He isn’t that badly hurt,” he replied with a roll of the eyes. “He’s just enjoying having me tending to him. I won’t be surprised when he jumps up all better the day of your run.”

“Like you need an excuse to ‘tend to him’,” Don said, grinning, while Tibs shook his head. Unless something happened, Jackal wouldn’t be out of bed by then.

“What can I say? I’m a caring guy. I am happy to tend to whatever needs my man has.” Kroseph grew serious. “But the way he explained it to me, you didn’t do it. And he doesn’t hold you responsible, Don. It was that other person who’ll want to watch itself the next time Jackal finds them.”

“Kro!” his father called from behind the bar. “Are you working for the inn, or did you join the guild when I wasn’t looking?”

“Work calls.” The server left.

“Don’t start with the ‘everyone needs a special someone’ stuff,” Tibs warned the sorcerer. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“They don’t have to be special,” The sorcerer replied, grinning at the glare Tibs gave him.

“Are we training or not?” Tibs raised a warning finger as he saw the mirth in Don’s eyes.

With a chuckle, the sorcerer stood. “Come on. We’ll need somewhere without people around for this.”

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The wooded plaza was all that was left of the wood that had supplied the early material for the building of Kragle Rock. Someone had come and made trees grow, and they’d remained. It was no more than four blocks in size, but once inside, there was an air of mystery many spoke about. A sense it was larger, that there were hidden things here.

It wasn’t until now, the first time he stepped in, that Tibs remembered his audience with Darkness. Was it because of the element that the guild wasn’t aware of it? Or was it that they hadn’t made the connection yet?

“We shouldn’t be disturbed here,” Don said. “And we aren’t going to start with so much essence you can lose control. These are basic exercises to sharpen your will, and make it hard for someone to take control away from—”

“Don, how would you go about making corruption hard?” he asked as neutrally as he could.

The sorcerer sighed. “Tibs, now isn’t the time. This is about practicing your control. Please set aside your unending curiosity for when we aren’t working on something else.”

“I will, but I’m just curious. I noticed that no matter how I will it. Corruption never seems to do that. How am I going to use it as a weapon if—” Tibs stopped as Don stiffened.

He turned and leveled a hot glare. “How about I make you a deal, Tibs? How about, instead of trying to manipulate me, you tell me exactly what you’re after, and let me decide if I want to help with that?”

Tibs looked away. “Sorry.”

“At least you are remorseful about it.” Don ran a hand over his face. “So. What is this about?”

“I need a weapon.”

“You have plenty of weapons, Tibs. Of everyone I know, you are possibly the one with the most possibility when it comes to making weapons.”

Tibs hesitated. “It has to be corruption.”

Don tapped his chin. “Corruption isn’t something that lends itself to a useful weapon in the dungeon, considering how it protects itself from that element. If your goal was to make those fights easier, you’re better looking to improve something else. Which means... How serious is this, Tibs?”

Tibs swallowed. “Enough, I didn’t want to involve anyone else.”

“And you were hoping to trick me so I wouldn’t know what you’re planning.”

“I didn’t want you to get in trouble if someone asks what you knew about what I’m planning and they used light.”

Don sighed. “If I insist, will you tell me?”

Tibs shook his head. As much as he could see Don making this easier, he wouldn’t risk him. Or the others.

“What if I make my help conditional on knowing?”

Again, he shook his head.

“Abyss, Tibs. Whatever you are planning, if you need a weapon made of corruption, it isn’t something you should undertake alone.”

“I won’t risk anyone else. You all have someones, and I won’t be the reason they lose any of you.”

Don stared at him. “Is that why you don’t want someone? Because you were always planning this?”

“I’m a Runner. Sto’s going to beat me one day. I don’t want to hurt someone the way losing... Carina hurt me.”

“Tibs. That’s only until Epsilon.”

“Then the guild is going to send me against something else.”

“That’s why you should—”

“No.” He didn’t have to work at making his expression hard. “I don’t want this. You want it, Jackal has it, Mez is stuck with it. Even Khumdar had someone like that. I don’t want it. I don’t know why, okay? I just don’t. I see Jackal and Kroseph, I listen to Mez talk about his girl, and I don’t want any of it. I know you all think I just have to find the right person, but

I don't want to find anyone."

"Because you don't want to hurt them when you die."

"Yes." He shook his head. "No. I don't know, okay? All I know is that when I try to think about someone I'd look at the way Mez looks at Tandy when he thinks no one's watching, or Jackal at Kroseph all the abyss time, I don't see anyone. I don't feel anything. And I am tired of always being told I have to look for that person." Tibs stopped, panting.

"I'm sorry Tibs. I didn't—"

He raised a hand and Don fell silent. "That doesn't matter, it's a me thing. What matters right now is if you'll help me even without knowing what I'm planning. You don't have to. I understand if—"

"I will, but under one condition."

"I'm not telling—"

"I know, Tibs. It's not that. My condition is that this is the last time. It's the last time you skirt your training. I will spend tonight, however long it takes, to help you etch this weapon you need. But come tomorrow, come any day after tonight. You are going to follow the schedule I have set. I don't care what else happens. I don't care what the dungeon does, or how Commander Irdian complicates your life. Those things will get shuffled around the training. Is that clear?"

Tibs nodded.

"Tibs, this is me, as a friend, warning you. Don't abuse my generosity."

"I promise, Don. I will train. I will follow what you tell me to do. I need to do this, but I also don't want to be a threat to the team, either."

"Okay." Don let out a breath and looked around. "For what you need, we can't do that here. Come on. I know a place that should keep the surroundings safe from what we'll be doing."