

Planning-1

With a scream, the wind ripped the crate apart, and the broken wood flew in all directions, one shattered plank hit the wall, embedding itself in it. Tibs kept screaming as he tried to keep the pieces within the whirlwind. When the last of it flew out, the wind died, and he dropped to his knees.

He wiped at his eyes and cursed himself for it. He didn't have the time for tears or the pain of loss. He wished he could keep himself filled with ice and not feel it, but he had to train and he needed to channel other elements for that. Water was a great element to fight and defend with, but if he was going to bring the guild down, he needed to master all his elements.

They knew he had Water, and they'd have many adventurers multiple ranks above his. Tibs's one advantage was his multiple elements. So he had to train in them. Figure out how to recreate what he'd seen other Runners or Adventurers do with them.

He got back to his feet and gritted his teeth.

He'd seen Carina use Air to turn items into projectiles. He'd even seen how she'd woven the essence to make it happen.

He recreated the weave, and as the wind picked up in the center of the abandoned warehouse, it was already frayed at the edges. He concentrated, willed the edges back into place, added essence to increase the wind and fought to keep the weave from breaking under the added pressure.

Dirt from the floor rose into the whirlwind, along with smaller debris left over for the day's previous practice. There, that was how it should be. All he had to do was alter the weave like—it broke apart, dirt, small pieces of wood and nails dropping to the floor and Tibs screams.

"Why? Why can't I do this?" he demanded, but didn't wait for an answer. It wouldn't come. Air was too busy having fun to bother with helping him avenge someone who had been dedicated to her.

Killing Sebastian hadn't been enough. He'd been the one to kill Carina, but he'd only been able to do so because the guild hadn't upheld its part of the bargain with the people of the town, with the Runner it had brought here to serve as food for the dungeon. To indenture in its service when they survived.

That was what Alistair told him in a softer way. What Bardik showed him through his punishment. Everyone within the guild acted like Runners were valuable.

And yet, they'd been left to fend for themselves when Sebastian had first tried to gain control of the town, and then when he returned to destroy it.

To destroy Tibs.

Tibs screamed, as he couldn't keep from seeing the man running the knife along Carina's throat. As he tried and was kept from saving her life.

He wanted to channel fire and let it feed his rage, but there would be nothing left of the building if he did, of the neighborhood. As angry as he was, maybe the only thing that would survive would be the guild, and that was the opposite of what he wanted.

He switched to Earth. Sent it out to make the ground ripple, then flatten it. He wove it around the dirt, lifted that in the air. The weave still frayed, but not as much. There was something in the way the earth essence behaved that led to it wanting to stay.

He moved the dirt, added essence to get it to increase speed. If he couldn't get wind to make the sand blast the way Carina had, maybe earth could do it.

The problem with Earth was that it didn't want to move fast. Skilled adventurers could make columns of earth that slammed into their opponents, crushed them, buried them. Tibs had done it with some thugs that

had attacked the town as a distraction.

But this wasn't what he wanted. He wanted a whirlwind of dirt and sand to blast everything it touched. He wanted the sand to fly around him and the people he wanted to protect.

All it did was move in a lazy circle. Cursing, he pulled air essence from his bracer and wove it through the earth to have it gain speed, but the weave exploded as the essences mixed, instead of working together.

That could be done! He knew it, since Sto was filled with weaves containing multiple essences. Sorcerers could pull multiple essences and weave them together. Carina had told him. She'd been looking forward to learning how to do it, had prepared for it.

With a scream, Tibs gathered the earth essence into a ball and threw it at the other end of the building, where one of the few remaining crates exploded from the impact.

"Fine!" if that wasn't going to work, he'd practice something else. He channelled corruption. "Let's see how you like this one," He growled.

He let the essence spill away from him, and the air took on a putrid smell. This didn't like the smell, but it no longer made him want to throw up. The ground bubbled there something had fallen there or was trampled just under the surface. The broken planks rotted, nails melted. Everything took on a purplish tint to them as, even if some of the elements could resist corruption, they still had parts of them that could be affected.

The dirt in the ground wasn't all Earth. It had whatever had been dropped and got mixed in. There were insects, and small burrowing animals. He didn't let the essence seep into the ground. He didn't want to kill those. Even the rats he knew lived in the cracks of the walls.

He hated rats, but they hadn't done anything to him. It was the stone ones Sto made Tibs took pleasure destroying.

He pulled the essence to his hand and made it spin. He had a whirlwind of it, but other than melt what it came into contact with into putrid goo, it did nothing. He needed a weave for it to have a controlled effect, or an etching. Recreating his 'x' attack with any element other than water did nothing useful.

The knife flick worked better, since all he needed to do was pull the essence at the point of the knife and flick it at his target, but he couldn't do that with only a thought now, and doing it with fire or corruption had destroyed the knife. One melted the metal outright, the other melted it into goo. He had to focus harder when using those to keep them from affecting the knife, so why bother?

He stilled the essence and sent it flying at a broken crate. The wood rotted away again. This element, like fire, was nothing but destruction. At least this one let him remain in control, no matter how raw his emotions were.

"What have you been doing in here?"

Tibs spun and flung the essence at the speaker. No one had any business bothering him.

He realized who'd spoken as the man's skin turned stone gray at this approaching purple cloud. It was the only sign Jackal was worried.

"No!" Tibs yelled, and dissipated the essence until there was too little for it to do much. There was always corruption around them, just like every other element. Everything was composed of most of them.

Tibs glared at the fighter and yelled. "What are you doing here? I could have hurt you."

"It's time."

Tibs spun and channelled light. He'd yet to find something useful to do with it, which meant he had to practice more. "I'm not going." He made a ball of it, and it glowed over his hand.

"Tibs," Jackal said. "You have to come. She'd want you there."

"You think her parents want me there?" He demanded, whirling and throwing the ball of light at Jackal. The fighter stepped aside, and the essence hit the wall, splashing light and nothing else happened. "I got her killed!"

"No, Tibs, you didn't. My father did that. Everything that happened is on him, and you made him pay. Now it's time with Carina so her family can do the rites they need."

"They don't need me for that." He channelled darkness this time. It was more than the light's opposite. It weakened, possibly to the point of death, Tibs thought. That he could make use of—

"It's not about them, it's about you."

"I don't want to go," he repeated. How much essence would he need for something to become so weak it wasn't able to live anymore?

"You have to go."

"No. I don't!" he caught himself about to throw the darkness at his friend and let go of the essence. He

let go of all of them. "I don't want to see her again! Not like that!" the tears came and let them. "It's not fair. She was going to be a great sorcerer and because your father wanted to hurt me, she's dead!"

Before the pain could overwhelm him, Jackal had his arms around Tibs. "I know. But it's what happened. Now we have to go on, and that means going to her home, being there for the rites and saying goodbye to her."

"I don't want to," Tibs said as he sobbed, holding on to the fighter.

"I know."

"They're going to hate me."

"They won't. If they have to hate anyone for this, it's going to be the guild. They were supposed to protect Carina and us. She died because they didn't do what they should have."

"I hate them," Tibs growled, envisioning that building burning, or melting to purple goo, or filling it with darkness until no one in it had the strength to draw breath anymore.

"I do to."

Tibs shoved himself away from Jackal. He'd intended to push his friend, but even if he wasn't stone anymore, there was still Earth essence through the man anchoring him to the ground.

"How can you say that and be so fucking calm about it!"

Jackal looked at him and Tibs wanted to hate his friend for how calm he looked.

"Because if I let myself be angry, I'm going to hit stuff."

Tibs laughed and motioned at the wreckage he's made of the inside of the warehouse. "So hit something!"

"I don't want to hit something, Tibs. I'll want to hit people. I'll want to hit those who let this happen, but I won't be able to, so I'm going to want to hit anyone that's in reach, and I can't use the pit, because there's no one to fight there. Even those who are healed aren't in a state to fight. So I can't let myself get angry. I'll do that during our next run. Sto can take the damage I'll cause."

Tibs ground his teeth. "Fine." He channeled Water. Then he used it to cool his anger. As before, he had to make ice before the desire to switch to fire and burn everything went away.

Jackal nodded and motioned for the exit.

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Tibs thought he recognized one of the three women holding the stretcher over which Carina's body rested. She might have been at the meal Tibs had shared with Carina's family, which would make her a sister, cousin, or an aunt. None of the five other seemed familiar.

He'd expected to arrive as they were about to step onto the platform. Instead, he now had to put up with being used for another of Tirania's show.

"Tragedy strikes in all forms," the woman said, and Tibs contemplated letting go of water. He wouldn't pick fire. There were too many here who were innocent, had not been here when they were attacked, or were Sebastian's victims, too. But she thought him subservient, so he would catch her by surprise as she went on about those left behind. He could wrap her in corruption, watch her melt into goo.

It would feel so good to hear her screams turn to gurgles.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. Spoke of how he was continuing through the pain of loss, how everyone needed to use him as an example.

Maybe he could explode her with light. If nothing else, it might get her to admit all this was a lie. Then the down might do his work for him.

But what would killing her accomplish beyond his immediate satisfaction? The guild would simply send another one like her to rule the town. Just like they's replaced the guard leader until one did the job the way they wanted it done. They would act like they cared for the people here while secretly... what? Tibs still had no idea why the guild did what it did. Alistair spoke of it having reasons, but hadn't said what they were. He hadn't sounded like he knew.

Ice was good for that. Jackal could hold his anger away simply by deciding not to be angry. Ice did that for Tibs and kept him from acting rashly. It amused him that Water and Earth could be alike in ways.

No, if he wanted to keep Kragle Rock safe from the guild, he had to find out how to end all of it, not just the person in charge of his dungeon.

"And we will march on," Tirania said. "We will honor the fallen by rebuilding, by becoming stronger. When the next challenge comes at us. We will know we can defeat it because together we already defeated many."

The crowd cheered, but not as enthusiastically as on the day after Sebastian's death. People had had

time to think and consider what Tirania had meant then. Maybe her words no longer sounded true to them as Tibs knew them to be false by the light they were carried on. Not all of them were lies, just too many for Tibs to care about those that weren't.

The woman Tibs thought he recognized looked particularly angry as she stood there, listening. Could clerics or any of those who had Purity as an element use it to know when someone lied? Wouldn't lies be impure? Paulo had made it so Tibs understood their language because there was something about information words carried having pure meaning. Or something like that. Tibs didn't remember. He'd been dreading going hungry in the dungeon and hadn't paid as much attention as he should have.

"May all the dead return to the Elements," Tirania said, "as this fallen hero does." She stepped aside, and the procession climbed the steps to stand in the center of the platform.

Tibs stepped down and rejoined what was left of his family. They would be the next ones to go. The only ones allowed to go. Others had asked, he'd been told. Tandy wanted to go, had demanded to be allowed, even begged.

Tibs could probably have helped. He might have if he'd learned about it sooner than as they walked to the platform. But he'd been too busy training. That was the best use of his time right now.

The essence shifted over the platform; the air turned golden, then the progression, along with the Attendant, vanished.

The Attendants.

They were cowards, but Tibs didn't hold them responsible for the deaths. There would have been fewer if they'd stayed to transport people away, but the guild wouldn't have let the Runners go. It never will. He might feel differently once he let go of the ice, but they had never promised to protect anyone. Their job was to ferry people back and forth. Sebastian had targeted the platform and the Attendants during the Siege. They had every reason to believe they would be attacked, so fled.

He understood cowards. He if hadn't killed Don for abandoning him to his fate, he couldn't hold the Attendants responsible either.

At least that was how he felt with the ice in him so cold it cracked as he walked up the steps and stood in the center.

Tirania hadn't even bothered having them wear the bracelet as a way to force them to return. Did she think their actions had showed they were so devoted to the town and the guild the threat wasn't needed anymore? Was she lying to herself and believing loving the town meant loving the guild?

She didn't have to worry on his account, at least. Tibs would return.

Tibs would be back and he would make her regret ever making him think she cared for any of them.

Planning-2

The city came to be around Tibs, and he barely noticed it. A way had been cleared through the merchant's booths surrounding the transportation platform for the procession, and it allowed Tibs and what was left of his family to rejoin them quickly.

People stopped their buying or selling as they watched them walk through the booths. Once past the market, people only looked up from their work, gave a nod of acknowledgment, and went back to it.

Tibs didn't care; he hadn't allowed himself to thaw. But with those living here, Tibs understood why they barely paid their respect to the dead. Purity was about dedication to work, and that meant anything else only got little attention.

Some paused longer. Some outright stopped. Not everyone had the same dedication to the element their dungeon and city revolved around. But there was someone nearby to remind them the procession wasn't important in the view of their element. It might be a guard, or simply the person working next to them, noticing the prolong pause.

Tibs wondered how or even if her family had rites for the dead. Did anyone following Purity acknowledge an event that meant someone would no longer be dedicated to the work the element demanded? If they did, what would it be?

On his street, the dead were left where they fell, to be collected by somber women dressed in robes of brown so deep they could be black. Where the bodies were taken, Tibs didn't know. He'd never asked or tried to find out. Mama had remained hidden in their small home until the warm weather returned and her smell pushed even Tibs away. He'd accepted she was gone by then, having had to fend for himself through the cold times. On the coldest nights, he hadn't returned to her since she hadn't provided heat or safety in too long.

He'd felt a pang of pain when he returned to their place and found she was gone, but he'd been too hungry to be able to wonder where she'd been taken. Staying alive had meant he couldn't afford to think about her often.

When they stopped, Tibs didn't recognize the drab buildings. They looked only slightly better than those closer to the platform, so this could be where Carina's family lived. Someone stepped behind Tibs, and he only looked when the hand was placed on his shoulder.

Zackaria smiled at him, squeezed his shoulder, and let go. Ahead, Paolo stepped before the procession, looked at Carina's body, pulled the hood of his robe up, then turned and started walking.

The procession followed.

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When they stopped, they were in a large courtyard in the mountain's shadow that marked the east side of the city. Men and women were assembled there, waiting for them. Tibs recognized Carina's mother and father. Others seemed familiar, but otherwise were strangers.

"Another one fell."

The voice was so unexpected that even as frozen as he was, Tibs startled. It was both Val's voice and the solemnness in it that caught him by surprise. They were further from the mountain, therefore the dungeon than anything Sto could reach.

"What's he doing here?" Craren asked, sounded disgusted.

"Not now," Val replied. "Can't you see how sad he is?"

"All I'm seeing is how cold he's made himself."

"Why do you think he did that? He isn't the first. Our people will make connections with others. And

they have their own way to deal with the grief of the loss of someone who mattered to them.”

“He doesn’t—”

“Not now.” The firmness in Val’s tone silenced Craren.

How long had it taken the dungeon to push her influence this far? Why wasn’t she making this part of herself? There were houses between them and the walls that marked the compound around the dungeon’s entrance. Tibs thought it showed where the dungeon’s influence started. He’d been well inside it when Val and Craren had noticed him that first time.

Didn’t the fact he heard them here mean each house was a room within a dungeon? Carina had talked about it once. That it was why the wall was there, a way to ensure the city’s people were safe.

But that had been before they’d known Sto was a person, not an animal.

Val had silenced Craren. She’d been respectful of the progression when she’s noticed them. Thinking back on what he’d overheard them say, before they found out he heard them, they spoke of the other clerics with respect, even when they were amused at their antics.

Maybe... Maybe Val wasn’t doing anything here because she wanted the people in the town to live unhindered by her creatures. She had to have creatures. Fighters and archers couldn’t all go through the same tests of endurance they had put Tibs through, not once they had their audience at least.

Ahead, Carina’s mother stepped before the procession. Paolo placed a hand on her shoulder, then moved to stand with the others.

“My daughter chose to work a different path than that of her family,” She said, voice steady. “And I failed her by not understanding that her choice did not mean she rejected what we stood for. In demanding that she adhere to my way of working, I pushed her further into her own, while never realizing how hard she worked to achieve it. She broke our rules, made her way to forbidden parts of the Great Library, and all I saw was that she disobeyed me, not how hard she had to work to make it past the security keeping the uninitiated out. My actions led to her being discovered, not her own. If I had understood what she craved, allowed her to pursue those craving, she would have followed the steps and been allowed in the library. Instead, my stubbornness in only seeing what she wasn’t doing led to her being taken away from our element, led to her having to choose another.”

She paused, and Tibs felt it was more to let her words sink in than compose herself.

“My daughter honored Air. She added lightness to her dedication to her work, but she did not replace one with the other. My weakness pushed her to another element, but my daughter remained true to who we are. The Whiteblood have been clerics, but before that, we have always been hard workers. My daughter worked hard at everything she did. She worked hard at becoming a sorcerer, she worked hard as surviving a dungeon she was never prepared for. We were fortunate to see her again, when, as is the tradition with the young dungeons, those sent there are allowed to return home while it transitions to a higher difficulty, and my daughter chose to return home. Chose to spend some of the little she had away from that place with the person who had forced her there.”

This time, when she paused, Tibs could tell she needed the time to steady herself. “I got to meet the woman my daughter became. I found out the work she put in becoming her. She—” her voice cracked. “She forgave me for my stubbornness.” She took slow breaths. “I am not here grieve the daughter I lost. I am here honoring the woman she was. The woman who fought to protect the town she lived in. Who only stopped working hard when that work was brought to an end by a man who should never have been allowed to come close to that town.”

She straightened. “My daughter is of Air, but she made Purity proud.”

Tibs swallowed, felt the ice crack inside him, then a tear fall, before he took control again and froze the pain before it could reach out for him.

She stepped aside, and the crowd parted to reveal a pyre.

“As is our traditions,” she said. “We call on Fire to release our elements so we may rejoin those we are aligned to. My daughter will go to Air, but I have no doubt some of her will also go to Purity, and that Purity will take her in without hesitation.”

Carina’s body was placed on the pyre. Then Paolo stepped to it, holding a lit torch.

“Sweet travels, Child of Air,” Val said, as the cleric lowered the torch to the wood. “I did not get to test you, but you proved yourself to one of the elements, so know that I will remember you, Carina of the Whiteblood.”

“Your essence will rejoin those who came before you,” Craren said, solemnly. “And the spark that made you will guide those who come after.”

“Goodbye, sis,” Jackal whispered. “Fuck, I’m going to miss you.”

Planning-3

“How are you doing?” Zacharia asked from behind them as Tibs and the remnant of his team walked back to the transportation platform.

Jackal stopped and turned. So Tibs did the same, as did Mez and Khumdar.

“And who are you?” the fighter asked, with an edge to his voice.

“I’m Zacharia,” they answered, smiling gently. “I met Tibs when he and Carina visited. I’m glad you found your element, Tibs.”

“They’re Paolo’s special person,” Tibs said. “He was the cleric who healed me in Mountain Sea,” he added at Jackal’s questioning look. “I’m fine,” he told them.

Their smile turned sad. “Tibs, she was special to you, you can—”

“She wasn’t my special girl.” The ice cracked, and he fought the pain that tried to escape.

“She was still special. I could see that. It’s alright to acknowledge you’re in pain.”

“I’m not,” he replied sharply.

“We are dealing with her death as best as we are able to,” Khumdar said.

They smiled at him, frowned and seemed to search the cleric’s face, then shrugged. “Be there for each other, and you will pull through. It is what family is for.”

“We know that,” Mez said. “We don’t need some stranger telling us.”

They nodded. “Of course. I didn’t mean to intrude. If you ever need to talk, Tibs, or any of you, I’m here and always—”

“We won’t be able to come back,” Jackal said. “We’re Runners. They only let us leave if the dungeon’s closed.” He rubbed his left wrist. “This was a special circumstance.”

“Then send word to me, and I will visit your town.”

“We will,” Tibs said and turned to continue with leaving.

“If I may,” Zackaria said, “what is your name?”

Tibs caught Khumdar stiffening out the corner of his eyes and faced Zacharia again.

“It is Khumdar,” the cleric answered.

“Have we met?” they asked, searching his face again. “You seem—”

“No,” the cleric lied, the word bright to Tibs. It wasn’t often the cleric let a lie be visible.

“Alright. Be well then.” They turned and headed back to the others.

Tibs started walking as well, and the others fell in step with him.

“You think he,” Mez hesitated, “she?”

“They,” Tibs said. Zackaria had worn pants this time, along with a loose shirt, but both only search to highlight the combination of their curves and more masculine features.

“That they picked up on Khumdar’s lie?” the archer said. “I don’t have light, like Tibs does, but that ‘no’ sounded as false as anything I’ve ever heard you say.”

“I did not expect they would recognize me,” the cleric said, sounding defensive. “I was much younger the last time they same and less hearty.”

“You realize you just told us you’re from this city, right?” Jackal said.

Khumdar shrugged. “We have been a... family long enough that is one thing you can know about me.”

“That’s real generous of you,” the fighter said, sarcastically, “to grant us this one secret.”

“It is indeed,” the cleric agreed, smiling slightly.

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Kragle Rock appeared around them and the first sounds were that of a commotion. Guards were subduing a group of respectable looking men and women.

“Watch for the pouch,” one of them said, a knee to the back of a woman on the ground. Tibs recognize the sense of the Everburn as the man continued. “The last group had theirs filled with Everburn. I don’t want that stuff spilling out and igniting.”

Quickly, pouches were removed from their belts.

“Looks like your uncle’s finally taking his role seriously,” Mez commented once they were out of Market Place.

“It’s about time,” Jackal replied. “I just wish it hadn’t taken him standing by, watching the town be destroyed to get his head out of his ass and be a man.”

Tibs didn’t care that Harry was finally doing his job. The man had already done too much damage doing what the guild told him. All around them, the buildings were burned husks. How long would it take to rebuild the houses, the shops that had set up at the edge of Market Place?

Filled with ice as he was, Tibs didn’t care that they were people who needed them rebuilt so they could live there, instead of wherever they were at the moment. That merchants were losing their livelihood without a shop to house the wares that had survived Sebastian’s attack. But he understood that to survive, the town needed them rebuilt. The town needed more merchants than those on Merchant Row, who had escaped the worse of the damage because the Runners made sure it did.

Merchant Row wouldn’t deal with the needs of a growing town. It was what Market Place had done.

Would Kragle Rock even grow anymore? The numbers didn’t look good for it. Darran had told him the numbers when Tibs had visited him. Not to check to see how he was doing, he didn’t care about that, but to know how the merchants as a whole were managing. With so many of the Runners killed by Sebastian’s people, with so much of the town destroyed and the people in it without houses or jobs, it had to affect the merchants.

Darran had gone on about it, giving him numbers, ratio, profit margins, and since he didn’t care, Tibs found the numbers were interesting. He even though he understood some of what the merchant had explained through them.

What had been clear was that without those extra shops, those houses, the town was in trouble.

As soon as they stepped into the inn, Kroseph hugged Jackal tightly. They exchanged quiet words while Tibs continued to their table. Not long after he sat, Kroseph placed a bowl of stew and tankard before him.

“Please eat,” the server said, squeezing his shoulder.

Tibs wasn’t hungry, but he know his friends would worry if he didn’t eat.

Someone brought a chair to the table and sat.

Tibs kept eating.

“I know you don’t want to deal with it right now,” Quigly said, “but with how effective the guards are being. We need to pull the people we have left together or even the merchants will feel depending on the guards is enough.”

“I’ll deal with that tomorrow.”

“Tibs, believe me, it can’t wait.” The warrior put a hand on Tibs’s arm.

“I said tomorrow.” His voice was hot with anger and the ice cracked.

Quigly’s one eye searched his face. The left side of his face was still covered with bandages, but Tibs had seen the mess that the eye had been before Clara had started healing him. The warrior had stopped her the moment he was no longer bleeding, ordering her to see to those with worse injuries. She’d warned him that unless she healed his face now, it would take a better cleric than the town received to fix the damage later, but Quigly had waved that away.

“Tomorrow,” the warrior said. “Be careful it isn’t always tomorrow, Tibs. There isn’t much left to control right now, but after too many of them, you won’t have anything.”

“We’ll sit and deal with this tomorrow,” he replied, filling the crack with ice. “I’m not letting the guild take the town away from us, no matter how much work Harry puts into it now. I won’t give them the chance to betray us again.”

Satisfied, Quigly left him alone.

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Tibs stepped into his team’s room. He told himself he should go roof running. That he’d feel better up

there, rather than in here, but he was tired.

He could use Purity to deal with that, but that meant letting go of Water and he needed the whole of his reserve to keep the ice intact, his bracer would be nowhere near enough, even if he first fill the eight reserves in it with water essence.

He looked at her bed. Could see her sitting on it, laughing, or chiding him for throwing the clay tablet aside in frustration.

The ice cracked, and he swallowed hard. He forced himself to breathe and took off his armor. He was alone in the room, but he didn't care. Jackal had Kroseph for comfort, Mez had his girl and Khumdar had... Tibs had no idea who the cleric had.

Tibs had the ice to make sure none of it bothered him.

He sat on his bed, looked at her bed next to his.

He didn't care that it was empty too, he told himself as he pulled his knees to his chest.

He didn't care that the others had someone, and he didn't.

He didn't—

The ice cracked.

He wouldn't—

The ice broke.

He—

He lost hold of Water as tears flowed.

He missed Carina.

He missed Mama so much

It all hurt so much that he couldn't reach for the one thing that took his pain away.

Planning-4

Tibs looked at the names on the list. Two and three of them. Those were all the Runners he had to protect Merchant Row. Half of those were still injured, since the guild wouldn't let the clerics heal them until it was time for their run, and they hadn't announced when those would start again. There might be twice that number who had survived Sebastian's Raid.

Could they even have runs with so few Runners?

Only two were archers were on the list. Eight were fighters. He didn't know the exact distribution among those not working for him, but he knew fighters had disproportionately survived.

There was no way all of them could be on teams unless the guild allowed more than one type of runners on them again, as they had in the start. Even then, including what was left of his team, that means they'd have, at most, ten teams plus the nobles. They'd go in twice a week.

That would make Jackal happy, at least.

"Tibs?" Quigly asked. "What do you think?" He was seated opposite, at the table in the inn.

"It's going to be difficult to keep all the business safe if thieves come in drove. It's a good thing Harry's guards are stopping most of them as they arrive."

"Those aren't thieves," the warrior pointed out. "When we catch those they missed, they're intent on destroying something. They don't seem to care what."

Tibs hadn't expected Sebastian's revenge from beyond death to start so quickly. He'd hoped to have weeks and months to rebuild his force and the town. If not for the guards, Tibs would be overwhelmed trying to stop them.

"I'll speak with the rest of the Runners. After surviving the raid, they should see how important the security is."

"Or they won't want to have anything to do with anymore fighting," Quigly replied. "Not all survivors become hardened soldiers."

"They're Runners," Tibs said. But he knew that didn't make them people who wanted to fight. The dungeon didn't give them a choice, and neither had Sebastian, but how many then did the bare minimum to survive their next run? Went to the training appointed to them by the guild and then just enjoyed themselves? Acted as if their next run would be their last, instead of making sure they'd survive it.

It surprised him how many with that attitude survived.

A handful of those left had paid to be here, been stuck when the Attendants vanished, and hadn't left the instant they returned. They were among the more serious of the Runners, but Tibs wasn't sure if he should bring them into his group. They were here willingly, so they didn't suffer the guild quite as harshly. They could leave, and all it cost them were the coins they'd paid to be a Runner.

They weren't nobles, so had that going for them, but they weren't street, and Tibs had kept the few interactions he'd had with them outside the raid to offering help with the runs.

"I'll see who I can convince," Tibs finally said, "and we'll do the best we can with that until the guild brings in a new group of convicts more likely to want to work with us in opposing the guild."

Quigly watched him, and Tibs ignored the look. The warrior had been the one wanting Tibs to get back to running things. Now he could accept how he wanted to deal with them.

"Alright, how do you want to divide the patrols?" Quigly asked.

* * * * *

Tibs watched the workers laying down the paving stones along the path going from the town to the

steps leading to Sto's door. People were crowding buildings because of how few of them had survived the raid, and the guild wasted time turning a dirt path into a paved one. Shouldn't they be bringing workers to rebuild houses?

Mez's noble friend, Amelia, had hired workers to rebuild housing, while the rest of the nobles took advantage of the destruction to separate themselves from the town. The wall wasn't started, but only days after Sebastian had been killed, the rubble where it would be had been cleared, which included tearing down some houses that had been untouched by the destruction.

Tibs didn't know who had owned them, if they were alive and left using the coins the noble gave them. Right now, he didn't care. It was just the nobles doing what nobles did; whatever they wanted.

The workers closer to the steps, working on each side of the path, weren't hired by the guild. They didn't have the aprons and leather chaps protecting them from mishandling the old and worn tools they had to work with. These were townfolk, leveling the ground and building more permanent structures.

He spotted Cross helping and headed there.

The townfolk cheered on seeing him, slapped his shoulder, thanks him for saving them. He was the Hero of the Town, Killer of the Raider, and other names he didn't care for. He'd wished Don had done his usual games and diverted at least some of the attention away from Tibs, but as had been pointed out, the sorcerer was no where to be found.

If not for the fact that, as someone brought here from a cell, Don wasn't allowed to leave, Tibs would have expected the coward to be first on the platform when the Attendants returned.

"Tibs," Cross called, wiping sweat from her brow, "lowering yourself to our level and offering to help?"

"Don't make me bigger than I am," he replied, his protest flat. He didn't care that she was making a joke or that he hated being made into something he wasn't.

She looked at him oddly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He motioned to her leather armor, with the metal weights attached to it. "Wouldn't it be easier to work without all that?"

"That's the point," she replied, looking at him for a few seconds before returning to her shovel digging with the others, leveling the ground for something that would be the size of a house.

They were at the bottom of the hill that went up to the town, and still some ways from where it sloped up to the dungeon, but nowhere was flat. The workers had leveled the path as they laid the stones. Now the townfolk were leveling the area to that height.

"Have you asked some of the runners to help? This would be easier with Earth essence."

"They've done enough," a woman said, her accent thick and smiling at him, "making sure we live. They'll be going back in there soon enough. They deserve the rest."

"We aren't asking heroes to work like this," a man said, raking dirt in place.

"We aren't heroes," Tibs replied, and got amused looks in return. "You did as much as us," he told Cross. "So why are they having you work here?"

She snorted. "They aren't having me do anything. I'm getting paid to guard this area. You know that."

Tibs indicated the shovel.

"You have any idea how boring it is standing around when there's nothing to temp the would be thief? And I'm not a Runner, like you, or someone who took on dozens of thugs like a certain fighter we both know. Or how you did, if some stories are to be believed."

"You just took down slightly smaller groups," Tibs countered, "without an element. What you did is more impressive than anything one of us did."

She shrugged. "And what's bringing you to this part of the land? If you're hoping to convince them to let you in, I don't think you're going to have much luck." She nodded to the guards standing on each side of the open door at the top of the steps. "I think they're overcompensating for standing around doing nothing while you went and saved everyone."

"I'm just walking around. I spent the morning with Quigly going over schedules for Merchant Row. Until new Runners are brought in, we have to be careful not to over exhaust the patrols."

"We'll help," one of the younger worker said, a muscular girl who had been swinging a pick at a boulder embedded in the ground.

"It's okay, you've been through enough. We'll handle it."

Cross gave Tibs an odd look. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

She looked like she wanted to ask a question, but shrugged. "I'd better get back to work. I can't be seen

standing around and being a bad example.” She grinned at him and Tibs nodded.

He continued on the paved path.

“Tibs,” Sto said once he was a few steps away from the townsfolk. “Finally, you’re not busy with them anymore. What is going on? My door’s open, but no one’s coming in. How long is that going to last?”

Tibs stepped off the path before reaching the steps and walking alongside the slope. “We’re still getting over the attacks,” he said. “The guild isn’t letting us go back yet.”

“Is that going to take long? It was fun listening to the people I protected, but that was a while ago.”

“Only a few days.” He sat and looked at the workers.

“That’s still too long, and I... Tibs, are you okay? You seem, I don’t know, different.”

“Carina died. Sebastian killed her before me.” He tightened his hold over the ice to keep it from cracking.

“Oh Tibs. I’m so sorry. I know how close you were to her and—”

“It’s okay,” he said, the ice fighting him. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, all right then. So do you know how long until you’re doing a run again. Or anyone else, I’m getting bored and... wait. No, you don’t just sit there being fine when someone dies. You hurt, and you miss them. What’s going on Tibs?”

The ice cracked at the reminder of the pain that was pushing against it. “Nothing.”

“Ganny! Something’s wrong with Tibs!”

“Tibs?” She said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“Carina died,” Sto said.

“Oh Tibs, I am so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay,” he said, “I’m fine.”

“Okay, there’s something wrong with him.”

“Oh, good,” Sto said. “I was worried I’d been wrong.”

“You called me over, Sto.”

“Yeah, but how often do I get stuff wrong about them? You’re the one who gets them. That’s why I called you over. I was pretty sure there’s something wrong with Tibs, but now I know. So we can fix it.” Silence. “How do we fix this?”

“What’s wrong, Tibs?” She asked, sounding like she’d moved closer. He wondered if the ground under him was riddled with tunnels now that Sto’s influence extended this far. Were they walking among them when their voice sounded closer or further.

“She died,” he said, not intending to, and the ice protested.

“Did you make Sebastian pay for it?” Sto asked. “What? Don’t look at me like that. You heard the things Tibs said when he didn’t know I could hear him. Tibs doesn’t just sit down and miss someone who dies.”

“I did.” His smile cracked the ice easier than the pain. And if not for how quickly one could switch to the other, he’d let some control go. He wanted to enjoy how he’d felt shattering the man piece by piece. “I broke him until there was nothing left of him.”

“Why aren’t you angry, Tibs?” Ganny asked.

“Because it hurts too much. If I let myself be angry, I want to burn everything down. I hate everyone for allowing Carina to die, even those who had nothing to do with it.”

“And if you did that, the guild would know you have more than one element,” She said.

Tibs frowned. “Yes, but I’d have hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt.” Her comment was a reminder that for as much as Ganny knew, she didn’t always get people correctly. Neither of them knew much about people, and most of it seemed to be from listening to the Runners.

“Of course, I’m sorry. Isn’t there a place you can be angry and not hurt anyone?”

“If I get angry, I’m going to channel fire, and I’m going to let it eat everything. Ice is safer for everyone. It’s easier to deal with everything then.”

“But is it safe for you?” she asked.

The way Kroseph looked at him each time Tibs said he was fine. The way Quigly had looked at him every time they weren’t talking about the schedule this morning, or how Cross had only minutes before to Tibs. They didn’t like what he was doing, even those who didn’t understand how he did it.

“I don’t know.” He didn’t care enough about the consequences to bother lying. And neither Ganny nor Sto could do anything about it, so—

“Would it help if you could be angry somewhere no one would get hurt?” She asked.

“Ganny, What are you doing?” Sto asked.

Tibs chuckled at the idea anything could be safe if he channeled Fire right now. Then he clamped down on it as cracks spread through the ice.

“You remember what Robert said when he was talking about his father, and all that anger he kept bottled up?”

“That was a while back. He’s the one who was eaten by the rats when I added them to the second floor boss room, right? Yeah, I remember that talk he had with the rogue on his team.”

“He said it killed his father. He had so much of it, that it was like thorns growing in his chest until he died.”

“That wasn’t real, was it? It was that thing you said, a figure of speech.”

“Yes, but his father still died from it. Do you want that happening to Tibs?”

“Of course not, but I know that when you say ‘somewhere no one will get hurt’ you mean in me, and that does hurt. I’m not saying I won’t do it,” he replied in a tone that made Tibs think that if Sto had eyes, they were rolling. “Just reminding you that this is my body you’re offering for him to burn.”

“Just part of it,” she said.

“No,” Tibs said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Tibs, I can deal with it,” Sto said. “And if it’s going to help—”

“No.” Tibs stood. “I’m not going to hurt anyone. It’ll pass. I got used to Mama not being there. I’ll get used to Carina’s absence, too.”

“Who’s Mama?” Sto asked.

“Tibs,” Ganny said gently. “If doing this can kill you, aren’t you hurting yourself?”

But he, at least, deserved to be hurt.

Planning-5

Tibs felt the weaves in the wall as he walked through the guildhall, but he could only sense a small part of them and he didn't have the knowledge to work out what even that might do, although he could guess at the basics.

The Earth throughout the building had to be about reinforcing the building. Water could be about helping deflect attacks, as well as air. Darkness could make it... what? More difficult to find? It was the largest structure in the town still.

He simply didn't know enough about anything.

But he was hoping to fix some of that now.

He entered the training room, and Alistair was waiting for him.

"I'm glad I didn't have to send a reminder this time," the man said.

"I don't have a lot keeping me busy, now that Sebastian's dead," Tibs replied flatly.

"Now that you killed him, you mean?" his teacher said in an accusatory tone.

"He killed Carina," Tibs replied hotly, the ice cracking. "And I didn't hide I'm the one who avenged her."

"Avenged?" the man said with a short snort. His expression softened. "I am sorry that she was killed, Tibs. I truly am. But what you did, it goes beyond avenging her. What you did means you lied to me."

Tibs watched his teacher, trying to work out what he might have discovered. Did Tibs leave something behind, showing he'd used more than one element? He had the excuse of having used an item, or maybe he could lay the blame on Sebastian. The man had so many enchanted items, anything could be blamed on him.

"You aren't simply at the edge of Lambda," Alistair said. "That's why you didn't want to be tested. Somehow you've advanced beyond what you should have and you want to keep that from the guild. Keep it from me. Why? I agreed to help you. To postpone your test so your team would remain intact. Why didn't you trust me with this, Tibs?" the man sounded hurt, but Tibs didn't believe him. Alistair was guild, and like all of them, the only thing he cared about was the guild.

"Where were you when Sebastian raided the town?"

"I was away," the man said, the words bright.

"If you'd been here, you would have disobeyed the guild? Come and help us?"

"I..." Alistair closed his mouth on the glowing words he'd be about to speak and sighed. "Tibs, it isn't as simple."

"No, of course it isn't. I'm sure the guild thought about for a long time before deciding to just guard the dungeon. To force us to protect the town, to take the noble's coins and protect them. To sacrifice the town so the Everburn didn't touch this precious building. Since you were away," he said mockingly, "you didn't have to see what your guild did to us. So don't ask to think nice about them. This is about training, so train me. Teach me about weaving essence."

"You aren't ready for that," Alistair said dismissively.

"How do you know? You have no idea what I can do."

"Not as much as you think you can." Alistair's smile was amused. "What you did to that man tells me you've grown in power, Tibs. But what we do is about more than power. It's about control. That, I don't think you've gained since our last training session."

Tibs snorted. "You're one to talk about control. You didn't even know amulets could be used as reserves."

“I never needed—”

“Exactly! You never needed anything while I’ve had to fight for everything!” Tibs stopped himself. Found the spreading cracks and iced them. “Having more essence means you don’t need to have control.”

“That’s a fighter’s way to think, Tibs,” Alistair said in disappointment. “We’re rogues. We have to be cleverer than them, because they’ll always have more power than we do. You’ll be hard pressed to find one fighter who does more with their essence than make themselves or their weapons harder and stronger. There’s a reason they pick Earth and Metal. Even those who go with crystal barely do anything clever with it.”

“Aren’t there fighters for all the elements? Harry’s light.”

“I said you’d be hard pressed, Tibs. Not that you’ll never find one. Tell me, how does the fighter on your team use his element?”

Wastefully, Tibs thought. “That doesn’t change things. More power means I don’t need as much control.”

“What do you think weaving is, Tibs?” Alistair demanded. “You think it’s just about pouring more and more essence into something? It is called weaving after the weavers of fabric. Have you looked at clothing with designs on them? Are they simply more and more threads pushed together?”

“Teach me and I’ll make it happen,” Tibs demanded.

“No. I don’t care how much you’ve increased your reserves, how quickly you can pull essence in to them as you use it, or how many amulets you are secreting on your. Without control, we will be wasting our time.”

“I can have control,” Tibs snarled.

Alistair smiled. “Then show me. Land one strike against me.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Do that, and I’ll teach you essence weaving.”

Tibs placed a hand on the pommel of his knife. “You want me to use an essence attack on you? Anyone will do?”

“That, or your sword, so something else. Even your fist will—”

Tibs flicked his knife and the jet of water flew at the other rogue, only to deflect to the side with only a raising of Alistair’s eyebrow.

“Really?” the man asked.

Tibs formed his sword, and the jagged blade formed to the cracking of water turning into ice. Alistair shook his head, the disappointment clear on his face. Tibs remembered his teacher’s talk of anger causing this sword to be like this. He smiled, shook it and with a cracking sound, the jagged pieces fell off, leaving a smooth and straight blade.

“I’m glad you have gained at least that much control, Tibs. But you haven’t landed a blow yet.”

Tibs ran at the man, swung, and was shoved aside, barely remaining on his feet. All he saw was the flash of a knife, but it hadn’t come close to him. There had been essence too, but too quick for him to get the detail. He rushed again, and this time Alistair simply stepped aside as causally as if Tibs was a passerby his teacher disliked.

With a snarl, Tibs sent a wave of essence, the water forming a wall that distorted his teacher. With a slice up of his knife, a few flourishes and essence trailing the point the entire time, Alistair parted the wall before it was close to him. Tibs sent another and another, and each time that slice up or down and the wall parted.

On the next one, he threw a knife and smiled as Alistair reflexively moved his arm to block it. His teacher had said any contact counted, and this would—

The air crystallized in front of the arm, the clear ice as intricate as gems nobles wore. It intercepted the knife, shattering from the impact, but sending the blade careening to the side. Tibs stared for a second, then attacked again. Waves of water, shards of ice. He even tried to encase his teacher in it, and the man simply stepped aside, or undid it with quick motions of his knife and trailing essence.

Tibs gritted his teeth but in annoyance and at the strain of keeping the ice filling him from breaking.

Etching, his teacher was stopping his strongest attacks with just etching. Other than the flick and ‘x’, it hadn’t come up again, but from speaking with Carina, he’d gotten the sense etching was weak, something Runners did as a transition to weaving, not something they learned to depend on.

Tibs ran after the wave, sword high. When Alistair parted it, he brought the blade down hard. His teacher smiled as he moved only slightly and the blade slide away just before making contact. Tibs reversed the attack, but Alistair was already out of reach.

Tibs added water to the floor with the jet of water he sent, flicking water around to give the man more

to focus on. He iced the floor as he ran, but Alistair kept his footing. Tibs dropped to his knees and slid under the water attack he sent, sword extended, ready to cut his teacher leg as he slid—

The abrupt stop sent him face first on the stone floor and the pain was followed by water falling over him. He groaned and pushed himself up, only to fall back. He hadn't realized how exhausted this had made him. He still had ample essence, but all he could do at the moment was keep hold of the ice.

He'd catch his breath, channel Purity long enough to get his stamina back and—

"This is what control can let you do, Tibs."

Tibs looked at his teacher, who stood well out of reach.

"Wielding all that power comes at the cost of exhaustion. Control lets you find ways around that."

"You used etching," Tibs said, panting accusingly.

Alistair smiled. "I used all the tools I needed to teach you this lesson. It doesn't matter how powerful you are, Tibs. How vast an adventurer's reserve is. Control and cleverness can always come up with a way to get the upper hand."

"I want," Tibs said, panting angrily. He didn't even have the strength to fill the cracks in the ice. "To learn etching."

"Yes," his teacher said. "I think you've reached the point where I can teach that to you. But, there will be rules Tibs. No more lying to me about what you can do. I know you don't like the guild and I understand why, but I am your ally in this."

Alistair's words were dark, but that didn't mean Tibs had to believe him. "Fine. I'll tell you everything I've figured out how to do," Tibs lied.

* * * * *

Tibs frowned as he watched the tents being put up behind where the buildings were being built.

"Tibs?" Sto asked. "What's going on?"

Tibs wasn't sure. They reminded him of when he'd arrived and the town was nothing more than a collection of tents, but they were larger.

"I think," he whispered after making sure no one was close, "the new runners are going to arrive soon."

"Yes! I hope that means you're all going to be doing runs again."

"Getting hungry?" Tibs asked, smiling.

"What? No, of course now, that isn't how—oh, right, because you all refer to me absorbing those who fail the tests as eating them. No, that's still fine, so long as I don't do too much work. I'm just bored. Ganny says that by this point, most dungeons have so many runners, there's always people in them."

"You mean they don't all close their doors at night?"

"Ganny?" Sto called after a few seconds of silence. "Do I have to close my door like I've been doing?"

"Don't you want some time to rest?" she answered, her voice gaining strength. "Hi Tibs."

"Don't you think I've gotten enough rest at this point?" Sto replied.

"So you're done making adjustments to the floors?"

Sto snorted.

"There you go. You can't do that when people are inside."

"I can, all I have to do is block off the parts where.... Okay, I see how having time without anyone here will make that a lot simpler. Still, I could leave it open when I don't have anything to do."

"People like things to be regular," Ganny said. "If they can't tell when the door will be open or not, they're going to get irritable."

Tibs didn't think the Runners would care, but he could see how it would disrupt the schedule.

"So that's why you insisted I did it for the same length of time."

"That and to try to get you to understand how time works. I can't believe anyone else is having this hard of a time getting their dungeon to understand such a simple concept."

"Do you understand time, Tibs?" Sto asked.

"I know how to count it," he said. "Well, how to tell it by where the sun is, as well as Claria and Torus at night. I think it's got something to do with void essence."

"Really?" Sto asked. "And the sun isn't something in my area of sense, Ganny, neither is Claria and Torus, so don't even bring them up. What's that about time being part of void? I have plenty of that, and it never did anything with time."

"Like you'd know if it did," Ganny mumbled.

"I'm not sure. Something Carina said, how adventurers with void as their elements sometime end up being aware of time in different order."

"I wonder how that happens?" Sto mused.

"And I'm going to say we wait until you have a better handle on that essence before trying anything."

"Why are you making such a big deal of me losing a room?" Sto asked.

"I'm not making a big deal of you losing the room. I'm making a big deal of you losing the entire section of the cavern it was in."

"How do you lose a room?" Tibs asked.

"Go on," Ganny said, "tell him."

Sto sighed. "I don't know. I was experimenting with the doorways we've made to reach the lower floors. I thought that I could make a puzzle out of those the way Ganny's made puzzles on the third floor, and... well, I don't know. When I activated the weave, the room just went away." Ganny signed exasperatedly. "Fine, more than the room. There's this entire section on the fourth floor that's just not there."

"How can part of something inside a mountain, inside you, just not be there?" Tibs asked.

"Yeah," Ganny said. "That's why I think we need to not experiment with void anymore."

Planning-6

Tibs stopped a step into the office. The summons to Harry's office—now he knew why the guard has simply said his commander—hadn't been a surprise. While Tibs didn't have many Runners to keep Merchant Row safe, he had them do their job, and when the guards tried to do it for them, it had led to altercations and a few of the Runners ending up in the cells. He hadn't done anything to get them released. There were no runs to be missed and their stay was only a few days. But he had expected Harry to summon him about this.

Only it wasn't Harry sitting behind the desk, hard metal gray eyes fixed on Tibs. He looked older. This black hair, tied in a tail, was streaked with gray, as was the short beard. His uniform was leather, with strips of metal attached to them in a way that left Tibs thinking they were more there as something he could use with his essence than to add protection.

The concentration of the gray essence made him weaker than Harry, but definitely in the Gamma range of Adventurers.

"Where's Harry?" Tibs asked. If not for the ice, he might have demanded or accused. He was annoyed the guard leader wasn't here to give his ultimatum. For all the problems they had, Tibs at least deserved to be yelled at by the leader of the guards and not a subordinate.

The silence stretched, the man unmoving. If he thought he could out wait Tibs, the man was in for a surprise.

"No here," the man finally said. "He left."

"Left for where?"

"I don't know, and it's not what you have to think about. I'm in charge and, unlike him, I'm not going to humor this little game you're playing at."

"I don't play games."

"You and your friends are playing at being guards. That ends now."

Tibs snorted. "I'm not letting you betray us the way Harry and the guild did. You can have what Harry protected. I'm keeping Merchant Row and the area around it. The guards can tell you what's mine if Harry didn't leave you the information."

"What's yours," the man said in a flat tone, "is that room you pay for. That table in the inn you've claimed, and the team you do your runs with. Tirania might indulge you because you're useful to her, but I don't. You will tell the Runner to stop interfering with my patrols, or I will take harsher actions than throwing them into cells for a day or two."

"Like what? Feeding us to the dungeon? Leaving us alone the next time someone tries to destroy the town?" Tibs smirked. "There's nothing you can do to scare us. We survived Sebastian."

"My job isn't to scare you. My job is to make sure order is maintained. You're interfering with that."

"I'm a rogue. Breaking rules is what I do."

"Breaking the rules comes with consequences."

Tibs shrugged. "Have fun trying to catch me doing it."

The man raised an eyebrow. "I've already 'caught you.'" The door opened. "Take him to the cell."

"Sir?" she asked. "They're kind of full after that bunch we arrested."

The guard leader's smile was cold. "Just put him in with them. It's my understanding he's who they are here for, anyway."

"Sir, Runners are supposed to—" she stopped at the cold glare.

"I'm not my predecessor," the man said. "He abandoned his post, left behind Runners who think they

get to set the rules. They break it, and they're going to be treated like any other criminals. Throw him in a cell."

"Yes, sir." She placed a hand on Tibs's shoulder and guided him out of the office and through the building. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "After everything you did for us, he shouldn't be treating you like this. I'd let you go if it was up to me."

Tibs nodded, still thinking about what the man had said. Harry had abandoned his post. Not simply left, abandoned. What could push Harry to do that? The guild was everything to him.

The cacophony as they reached the bottom of the steps pulled Tibs out of his thoughts.

"The Hero's getting the tour?" one of the two guards by the barred door asked, amused.

His escort hesitated. "He's getting to share in the accommodation."

"What?" the other guard asked, as the other lost all humor. "Is this a joke?"

She shook her head.

"Doesn't the captain know what he did?" the other asked. "There wouldn't be a town here if not for Tibs and Don. I get throwing the occasional Runner in there when they get uppity, but him?"

"You're welcome to go tell him that," she said. "But until you get him to change his mind, Tibs is going in a cell."

"How the fuck are we going to clear one of them for him? They're already packed."

"He's going in with the rest of them," she said. "Captain's orders."

The two by the door looked at Tibs. "They're going to rip him around when we put him in there without his armor or weapons."

"The captain didn't say anything about removing his armor," she said.

"But it's..." the man smiled. "Right. The rules are we disarm anyone we put in a cell. The armor's always just been something we agreed to do, so none of the rougher ones would get an advantage. I'm going to have to take that knife."

Tibs handed it to him. He'd get out of his armor if they told him too. He wasn't worried about people. He had enough essence to make sure they left him alone.

"Don't bother trying to do the water thing you do," the guard said, securing the knife in a chest. The lock was simple enough. "They cells have all kind of enchanting on them to keep magic from being used in them."

"They can do that?" Tibs asked.

The guard shrugged. "It's magic. What can't it do?"

A lot, Tibs wanted to tell them.

The door was unbarred and opened. Voices became deafening, only to fall into silence as Tibs was escorted past the door. The silence was hungry. The men and women dressed in clothing going from Street to wealthy looked at him as if he was the answer to all their problems. No, as is his corpse was the answer.

Only a few looked away when they noticed Tibs looking at him hungrily. Townsfolk Tibs expected were here for causing problems after drinking too much.

As with everywhere within the guild, the weave of essence in the walls and the cells' bars was so tight Tibs had trouble teasing the strands he could sense apart, but whatever effect they had, didn't affect him.

"Make space," the guard told to the men and women in the cell they stopped before. It was the third out of four on this side, with four matching them on the other side. There were easily a dozen people in each, and if this one had fewer of them, it was only by one or two. "This is Tibs. He saved this town, so you're going to treat him with respect, or I'm going to come in there and teach to respect heroes. Is that clear?"

They stepped back, away from the door, but there was nothing in their expression that made Tibs think respect was what they were going to give him once the guard was back on the other side of that thick door.

The key was thick and loud as it turned in to lock. So this would need a knife to open. His picks weren't tough enough for the kind of strength it would need. It didn't matter. Tibs wasn't breaking out. He was going to see this through and show that man, as well as his people, that he would endure the same fates they did.

Tibs stepped through the door and had to fight to keep the ice from shattering as essence bombarded him. It was violent, but uncoordinated. A case of using quantity instead of precision. A case where Tibs applied Alistair's example, and limited its effectiveness by being precise in how he countered it, molding the essence within him with angles that caught the assault and deflected it.

When he opened his eyes, any essence he pushed past his skin was ripped to nothing, but he had control of the ice again. He counted the men and women looking at him hungrily, barely out of arm's reach as

the thick wooden door slammed shut and the bar closed on the other side.

Thirteen of them. One of which Tibs thought was one of the townsfolk. No one was immune to greed. And if Tibs believed Jackal, Sebastian would have been all the coins he had to convince people to avenge him.

"I'm not Tibs the Hero," he told them flatly. "I'm Tibs the Dungeon Runner. I've been up against the dungeon and survived. If you think you're deadlier than him. Try me."

The first to come at him was a woman. Two steps were all it took for her to be able to swing at him. He blocked and hit her in the stomach, then groin, then the chest, and then the face. She fell back, groaning in pain. Tibs had tried to add Earth to the ice to increase his strength, but that was ripped away by the enchantments. He added working out how to move the essence from his bracer within him to the unending list of things he had to do.

He kicked the knee of the man who attacked next, breaking it. Then one of them had Tibs pushed against the bar, punching him in the face, and Tibs let the ice crack a little.

With an angry scream, he knelt the man in the balls, then smashed his elbow in the side of his head. As the man fell, Tibs kicked him in the face.

These people weren't responsible for Carina, for what had happened to his town, for the pain he felt. But he didn't care. He wanted to lash out at someone, and they seemed happy to volunteer.

Tibs was hit often and hard, but after so many runs, so many fights against Sebastian's thugs, pain was something that needed to be intense for it to bother him. His grunts were barely heard over the pained screams of the people he hit, and that was buried under the cacophony of conversations from the other cells.

* * * * *

"Please," the man pleaded, arms protecting his face, "I'm sorry."

Tibs had him against the back of the cell, the one part that was stone instead of metal bars. He was the last one left from the others in his cell, and Tibs realized, and he reforms the ice, that he hadn't attacked him. Tibs had been the one to grab him, intent on hurting him like the others. Even the few from the adjoining cell who'd thought to get in their shots when Tibs had found himself pressed against the bars separating them. Those weren't as injured as the ones in his cell, but Tibs had also made them regret trying.

Tibs recognized the man as one of the townsfolk, and let him go. The man scurried as far from him as he could.

Tibs looked at the unconscious and groaning people on the floor, on the bench and on top of one another, and smiled in satisfaction. Maybe Jackal had a point about the pit and how useful just hitting people was. He dropped onto the bench and leaned against the wall.

All the cells were quieter now. What conversation took place was worried. The door opened and the guard who'd led him to the cell stopped in front and looked at the damage Tibs had caused.

"I did tell them to treat you with respect. Do you need anything?"

"An ale would be good," Tibs said, then looked at his hands. "Something to clean off this blood. I'd use Water, but..." he motioned around him.

"I'll see what can do." He looked at the injured. "Did you hurt any of them badly?"

Tibs chuckled. "I don't know. I just used fists, feet and any part of my body that would connect, so they're all alive, but a cleric should look at them."

"I doubt any of them can afford to pay one. Don't worry about them claiming you started this. Everyone else here will say you just defended yourself." He raised his voice. "Isn't that right? Or should I move Tibs to your cell?"

Tibs chuckled at how loud the agreement was.

"I'll bring you a tankard and some old cloths," the guard said before stepping away.

* * * * *

Tibs opened his eyes to the sound of the bar being removed from the wooden door. Everyone in his cell was conscious again, and giving him as much space as they could. He still hurt. He'd considered letting go of Water just long enough to suffuse himself with Purity, but on top of not wanting to let his emotions go out of control, the guard has seen his cut face. Tibs had no way to explain that kind of healing.

Two sets of boots approached, and Tirania was the first to become visible as she passed the mass of people pressed against the bars. With her was the man responsible for Tibs being in the cell.

She looked at Tibs, the injured people in the cell, and pursed her lips. "Why is he in here?" She demanded.

"That's where criminals belong," the man replied. He looked no happier than she did, but he was glaring at Tibs.

She turned to face him. "He is not a criminal. He is the Savior of the Dungeon. The Hero of the Town. Do you have any idea what it would look like if he isn't among those going into the dungeon tomorrow?"

"It'd look like if you break the rules, you get punished," the man replied flatly.

"Not everyone is—"

"I enforce the rules," the man cut her off, and Tibs stared. Even Harry had never done that to her. "Cutting them any kind of slack leads to what you've had to deal with ever since the runs in this dungeon started. So yes, everyone is subject to the rule. If you aren't happy about it, have me replaced."

While they glared at each other, Tibs tried to understand how it was the man was here if Tirania hadn't put him there. Wasn't she in charge of everything taking place within the guild?

"Tibs is getting out of that cell, now," she stated.

"Are you overriding my authority?" the man asked, his tone flat.

"In the one case, yes."

He nodded and motioned. A guard came and unlocked the cell. Tibs exited the cell and turned to follow Tirania, but the captain of the guard grabbed his arm.

"Don't think her getting you out of here means you can do whatever you want. Stop playing your game, or I will throw you back in here again."

Tibs locked eyes with him. "I never play games." He wrenched his arm out of the man's grip and caught up to Tirania, already making plans to ensure his people no longer ran into the guard's patrols.

Planning-7

Tirania glanced at Tibs as they walked. "I really should take the time to have you clean up," she said, pursing her lips.

Tibs pushed essence to the surface of his skin, through his armor, and formed water around the blood coating it and him. Then he brought the dirty water to his hand, leaving only enough to keep the blood and other stuff suspended in it. He could take all the essence, leaving it dry to drift to the floor, but he expected Tirania wouldn't be happy with that.

She raised an eyebrow at the display. "That is a rather... pedestrian use of your essence."

Tibs shrugged. "It's quicker than getting a bath ready, even if someone heats all the water at once. Where do you want me to put this?"

"There's a latrine on the way to my office."

The latrine was a room with stalls for people to do their business in. The whole had a complex weave of essence in it, and the ball of dirty water vanished on entering it, broken down into the base essences and then siphoned deeper into the building.

Tibs wished that was in his housing building, instead of the bucket that had to be dumped into the outhouse.

In her office, Tibs stopped a few steps in, glaring at the sorcerer in the deep purple robes with the hood up, slumped forward in one of the chairs. Tirania sat and motioned for Tibs to take the other seat.

"As I told Irdian, the runs are about to start again," she said once Tibs was seated. He forced himself to look away from Don, who hadn't even acknowledged his presence. "The new batch of Omegas will be here soon, but there are enough Runners we will have teams go in until they arrive. With all the training you've received at part of defending the town, I expect the latests floor each has explored will be much easier to survive, and in your case, we don't expect the fourth floor to be ready for a few years still."

She stipped her fingers as she rested her hands on the desk. "Because of that, it's important teams be complete, so Don will join your team, Tibs."

He stared at her, the surprise such it took a few seconds for him to react, and the ice to crack. "No."

"Yes. You've had time to—"

"I'm not letting that abyss kissing, selfish, asshole on my team. I don't care what you want, you can't make me take him."

Don didn't react to Tibs's insults.

She leaned back in her chair, studying Tibs.

"I know that while you protected the town, there were some difficulties with working together. But you overcame them and—"

"He got his team killed," Tibs said through gritted teeth. "All he cares about is looking important. If you're going to put him in a team, put him in one that can deal with not trusting him."

Tibs paused so Don could rant at him about all the ways what had happened hadn't been his fault. Then he'd bring up how the sorcerer had left Tibs to die too. But Don didn't say anything. He didn't even move. If not for sensing the essence coursing through the sorcerer, Tibs might wonder if he'd died there.

"You don't have a sorcerer."

"I'll find one."

"You had ample time for that. You're the only team left who hasn't refilled the missing positions. There are no sorcerers left for you to choose from."

"Then we'll take someone from another class."

"I'm allowing teams having two if the same class until the situation with the clerics has been resolved," she answered calmly. "But I will not allow a class to be missing. You need a sorcerer. Don will be him."

"If I can only have a sorcerer, then I'm going to wait until the Omegas are here and take one of them. We'll pass on the runs until then."

She shook her head. "I need your team to go in first. You saved this town, both of you. So it's only right that you go first. Even if Don hadn't asked me to put him on your team, I would have done it. You are a symbol of what can be done working together."

Tibs snorted derisively, but part of him wondered why Don wasn't reacting to the praise. The man lived to drink up people talking about how important he was.

"You can't make me take him," Tibs snarled.

She fixed her gaze on him. "Would you prefer I assign your friends to different teams so I could make one for you that doesn't include Don?"

"You can't do that," he snapped.

She smiled. "Tibs, I'm the guild leader. I can do whatever needs to be done to ensure the guild prospers. I think that having you two on the same team will show how, even in adversity, the guild succeeds. But if whatever mistakes Don made at so much you can't work with him now that the danger is past, my alternative is turning each of you into the leader of a team and show how the guild makes good use of the assets it has. That will also inspire people to come and try to join us."

"You're not the leader," Tibs said before he could stop himself. "There's someone else giving orders. That's how come there's a new guard leader." He ignored how none of the words she said glowed. The fact she wasn't lying didn't mean what she said had to be true.

"Of course someone gives me orders," she replied, amused. "The guild is much too large for me to be the one in charge of all of it. And yes, they assigned Iridian after Harry vanished, because they found out before I did. I was busy making arrangements for Omegas to be sent here. But this dungeon is my responsibility, so I have the authority to do what I see fit to strengthen the guild. What will it be, Tibs? Will your team be the Team of Heroes? Or do will I have five teams lead by heroes?"

Tibs forced aside the confirmation she wasn't in charge of everything. His plans were vague enough it wasn't that much of a problem and Don was what he needed to deal with right now. "Fine." Tibs filled the spreading cracks so he wouldn't scream. He stood and left. When he tried slamming the door shut, Don caught it, exiting with him, then closed it gently.

He glared at the sorcerer, getting his first look at his face. His gaze was distant, hollow. The bones showed more than Tibs remembered. In the hood's shadow, the skin looked pale. He dismissed what that meant and spun, making his way to the building's exit. He ignored Don falling in steps behind him.

He didn't have to acknowledge the sorcerer.

This wasn't the place to—the ice cracked, and he spun again. "Why the fuck are you letting her do this?"

Don stopped and looked away.

"What? You think that because she forced you into *my* team, we're going to let you become leader? Is that it? You think that we're going to let you cower behind us until you get someone else killed?" he yelled. "Well? Say something!"

"Why did you save me?"

The question was so soft Tibs wasn't certain he heard it over the pounding of his blood in his ears. "Because even someone like you doesn't deserve to be one of Sebastian's victim." The people in the hallway gave them space. Some looked annoyed, others amused, but none slowed or intervened.

Don's snort was weak. "You're wrong," he whispered. "I didn't deserve to be saved." He looked at Tibs, tear falling. "You're right. I got them killed. I didn't mean to. I didn't want them to die. But it's my fault we walked in the ambush." He started to look away, then stopped. "Yes. I hide behind them." The shame was loud, but Tibs ignored it. "I'd used up my reserve, but some of them had those fucking green stones. And I got scared. I hide behind them while I tried to think of something that would make us win. Then the arrow hit me, and I realized I was the only one left. I wish they'd just killed me, instead of using me to draw you out. I wish you'd never heard me scream. That you'd let me die. Why didn't you let me die, Tibs?"

Anger cracked the ice, but it remained muted enough Tibs could keep filling them, keep from screaming, from telling the sorcerer that he too wished he'd let him die. That he'd been the one to die instead of Carina. He was so tempted to let the ice shatter and unleash everything he felt on the man. Only a few more cracks and maybe he'd find out how much damage he could cause to the building as he obliterated Don.

Then he'd be the guild's prisoner for always.

"Too many people had died already." Too many had kept on dying.

"You should have saved someone else. I ran away from that fight and left you to die. You should have left me to die because of that."

Tibs snorted. "I survived it."

"Not because of me," Don whispered.

"That doesn't matter." Tibs was sure he'd have survived still with Don's help. It simply wouldn't have been as fun or satisfying to limit himself to only Water.

The sorcerer dried his eyes. "That's why I didn't say anything. I want to learn how to do that. Not care about how someone wronged me so I can do the right thing."

"I care," Tibs said, the ice cracking, his voice growing hot.

That seemed to surprise Don. "Then I want to know how to do that. Still do the right thing even when you hate me."

* * * * *

"Is this a joke?" Jackal asked as Tibs found him and Mez at their table at the Inn. Don was with him. He had fallen silent after stating why Tibs was stuck with him, and followed him.

"It's that," Tibs answered, dropping in a chair, "or Tirania splits us up, each to a different team."

"This is the guild leader's idea?" Jackal asked in disbelief.

"Don requested it. She agreed. Said it's going to show people how well the guild works. Get more to join. A new batch of Omegas is on the way." He motioned to a server for food and drink.

"I figured they were coming; with the tents and everything before the dungeon. Are you sure you want him here?"

"I don't. But I'm not letting the team be broken anymore."

"Sit down." Jackal pointed to a free chair. "I'm not craning my neck while telling you I'm not going to take any of your bullshit. You try to order any of us during a run, and I am going to throw you at one of the monsters hard enough you'll both break. Is that clear?"

Don nodded as he sat.

The food arrived, for both him and Don, which surprised the sorcerer and Tibs. The server put the tankard before them and move on to other customers.

"You're going to have to talk with Kroseph," Mez said. "If he finds out Don's at our table by having to serve him, things are going to get ugly."

Jackal nodded and then looked at Tibs, hope in his eyes. "Do you want to handle that?"

Tibs shook his head, and the fighter sagged.

* * * * *

The argument wasn't pretty. Jackal and Kroseph stood on the other side of the nearly empty inn and the gesticulations were sharp, with a lot of fingers stabbing Jackal's chest and Kroseph pointing to Don, now sitting along at their table. Kroseph hadn't forgiven the sorcerer for leaving Tibs to die.

Tibs wasn't sure the argument was resolved by the time Jackal joined him. Kroseph threw up his arms and walked away.

"Are you sleeping in the room with me and Khumdar?" Tibs asked as they exited.

"I don't know. Once he calms down, I'll try to explain again how we don't have a choice, and if I'm lucky, he won't punish me for someone else's decision." They walked past damaged buildings. "You know, having Don on the team's going to cause nothing but trouble, right? How are you going to practice with your elements during our runs?"

"I don't know."

"How about talking with Sto? How is that going to affect how it—"

"I don't know," Tibs snapped, the ice cracking. "I argued against it, but she's doesn't care what we want, as usual. It's all about making the guild seem like a good place, or something like that." He breathed and hardened the ice. "Maybe Don will get himself killed during our first run and that'll be the end of it."

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

"So," Jackal said, "about Don getting killed during the run, how much help do you think we should give the dungeon in making that happen?"

Tibs closed his eyes and let out a breath. "None." With how much he and Don hated each other, Tirania would know it hadn't been the sorcerer failing Sto's tests. Tibs needed her to be angry at him right now. As much as he hated it, he needed to be on good terms with her. Especially now that he needed to figure

out who gave her orders and how he'd be able to bring them here so he could deal with them.

Planning-8

The placement of the tents and path, along with the nearly finished buildings, created a space much like that around the transportation platform at the base of the steps leading up to Sto's open door. Tibs stood with his team, and the two and six other teams, waiting. Nine teams were composed of Runners, the others were noble teams. That left a lot of open space.

Everyone had been surprised when the call to assemble came. No board had been set up where the teams could find out what order they went in. And no new Runners had arrived yet.

Guards had come to the inn and told the Runners to be there at zenith. And almost entirely out of curiosity, Tibs had made sure he was there on time. His friends, and Don, had joined him as most of the Runners arriving. The nobles had been more leisurely about their arrival, and it was well past zenith when the last of the team was entirely there.

It was some time more before anything of note happened, other than Sto commenting on the assembly, growing more and more excited at the prospect of the run restarting. When something did happen, it was the positioning of a board next to the bottom step. Plaques with names already hung on it, but Tibs couldn't make them out. He looked around and saw his curiosity reflected in the others, but no one stepped forward to look at the order.

Just as Tibs's curiosity grew enough he considered going to see, Tirania walked down the paved path, accompanied by Irdian, two guards, a cleric, and a handful of administrative types that seemed to make out most of the guild. She stepped up to the second step and looked them over. Tibs felt a shift in the essence over the field. It reached further than he could sense.

"Today marks the day when life begins anew for you and Kragle Rock," she announced, her voice coming from around them. "In a few days, the Omegas will arrive. Reconstruction of the town will begin tomorrow. And today, the first team will start its run."

The only one to exclaim his excitement was Sto. If the lack of reaction meant something to her, Tirania didn't show it.

"Because of the part they played in protecting the town, the Team of Heroes will go first."

Again, if the lack of reaction affected her, she didn't show it.

Tibs was surprised none of the nobles protested. Maybe she'd learned from the last time and informed them privately, or they'd learned the futility of arguing with the guild leader. Sub-leader? Tibs wasn't sure how to think of her now that he knew she took someone else's order.

"Once they are inside, you can consult the board to learn which team will go first tomorrow and on the following days. Because you have earned the guild's respect with your actions, there will no longer be a need for you to pay to go early. The teams who went in early will be moved to the back when the next schedule will be set."

Tibs figured it had more to do with no runners bothering paying to go in early than any privilege they had earned. Had the nobles given more than a coin by the end? That was all it took for them to be first. Two, since Don's team had always come after them.

"As is the practice, each floor is allocated a fixed amount of time to be completed. Four Upsilon teams and Two Rho will go in a day, and are expected to start on the second and third floor, respectively."

Were there any Upsilon teams? A few Upsilon Runners had survived Sebastian's revenge, but enough to make full teams? There were no rogues or sorcerers at Upsilon as far as Tibs knew. Quigly's Rogue and Sorcerers were Rho. Was the team leader's rank what determined the rank of the team? Was it arbitrary?

Two and six teams meant they'd go in at least once every one and three days. If a few of those were Upsilon, it could be as often as once a week. Jackal was going to be happy with that.

"You are all worthy representative of the guild, and I look forward to the day you all become adventurers." She stepped down as the two guards and cleric headed up the steps. Irdian left with Tirania. The administrative types gathered around three tables that had been placed next to the board while she spoke. One of them, a short man with blue eyes, seemed surprised when he saw Tibs and his team still there.

"Go," he said, motioning to the stairs. "What are you waiting for?"

"Yes!" Sto exclaimed. "Ganny, Tibs's coming in! Wait a minute," he added as they went up the steps. "Tibs, what he doing with you?"

Tibs didn't answer. He couldn't. It was fortunate the ice was already there, because he expected he'd be screaming at Don for keeping him from talking with Sto.

"Ganny, what am I supposed to do? If Don's part of his team, does that mean he can't use the room I set up?"

"Maybe he knows what Tibs can do," she replied.

Tibs glared at the ceiling.

"I think that's a no," Sto said. "And Tibs would talk to us if Don knew."

"That going to be a problem. How is Tibs going to practice his other elements with him around?"

"Maybe I can redo the third floor to force them apart, or at least get Don away. That way, Tibs won't have to worry."

"And how long until Don questions what's going on? He's one of the smarter Runners."

"What's he going to do?" Sto asked. "Tell *them* I'm targeting him? It's not like he's going to tell the guild, since they think I'm some kind of animal. Maybe I can just arrange for him to die."

"That's going to take some doing," she replied. "Setting something up so he'll die will endanger the whole team."

"Tibs'll be fine."

"And I expect so will Jackal, but what about Mez and Khumdar? You know how Tibs feels about you killing his friends."

Sto grumbled something Tibs couldn't make out as the cleric looked them over, finishing by glowering at Don. Who hadn't even taken down his robe's hood.

"Are we going directly to the third floor?" Mez asked. "Or clearing out the first two for the loot?"

"We're starting on the third," Jackal replied.

"You're passing on easy loot?" the archer asked.

The fighter stopped before the section of the wall where the doorway to the third floor was, but looked further down the hallway. "You bunch is who insisted I stop being an idiot. The loot's better on the third floor." He sighed as he placed a hand on the wall. "And I'm hoping the dungeon's made its creature extra tough, because I need to hit something really hard."

* * * * *

Tibs sliced the golem person, then rolled back before it brought down the large hammer where he'd stood. He wanted to ask why a hammer, but as with the previous times he had a question for Sto or Ganny, sensing the Corruption within his team forced his mouth shut.

He stood and shortened the blade as he etched in the air. Straight lines gathered, Alistair had explained during his last practice. When two of them intersected, the essence focused there. The more intersections, the more and quicker the essence gathered, but there came a point where it took longer to etch the lines than the speed gained. It was why the 'x' attack only had two lines intersecting. That couldn't be done wrong by someone still early in their training. If the extra lines didn't intersect correctly, then it was two points or more, pulling at the essence and diminishing the entire result.

Tibs quickly traced four lines and fed the essence into them before stabbing the center. The jet of water threw the golem person into a wall hard enough it died, melting away as it slid to the floor.

Alistair had showed him how to add to those lines, other lines and loops, and ways to have the touch to add effects, but he hadn't had the chance to practice them while being attacked.

The clang of metal against stone made Tibs turn in time to watch Jackal rub his jaw.

"No bad," He said, blocking the next punch, "But you're going to have to learn to hit a lot harder." His punch caved in the metal helmet. "If you want to put me down." He slammed a fist down on its head and the golem fighter dropped to the floor.

"I thought you'd made that one harder and stronger," Ganny said, "after how easily he dealt with the

Gnolls in the last fight.”

“I did. That hit should have knocked Jackal off his feet. He wasn’t even anchored. Tibs, what’s going on with him?”

“He—” Tibs clamped his mouth shut, glancing at the sorcerer. Don had stayed at the back with Mez, but he’d helped, just as he had in the previous fights. Silently and with precision. Tibs didn’t have the attention to spare to sense the details of what Don did, but the lance of corruption was visible as the air darkened on the way to strike his target. The spot hit immediately turned dark, and in a real person, Tibs expected the pain alone would bring them down. On a golem person, it had to spread until the limb melted off.

Don didn’t boast about how effective his attacks were. He didn’t argue with Jackal’s instructions, or mock Tibs when he’d missed a trigger and they had to redo a hall to open the right wall. Don had said nothing from the moment they’d gathered for Tirania’s announcement. The silence was the oddest thing. While fighting Sebastian, Don had always had something to say, a comment to make, a mockery to throw. The man was full of himself, and during those times had no problem letting everyone know.

Now, it was as if all that had leaked out of him and left... Tibs had no idea who Don was without the ego.

“How is everyone?” Jackal asked.

“Good,” Mez replied. Don nodded.

“I have been better,” Khumdar said, holding his arm against his chest. “The dungeon took your challenge to heart, and I am the one suffering for it.”

“Tibs, can you—” Jackal closed his mouth. Tibs wasn’t the only one forced to watch what he said. His friend had all grown comfortable with what Tibs could do, and the dungeon had been the one place where they didn’t have to worry about what they asked him to do.

“I have one of the healing potions in my pack,” Mez said. “I’m guessing this is a time worth using it?”

Jackal nodded. “We all need to be in top shape for that room.” He motioned to the crest at the end of the hall. Once Tibs put the pieces back in their correct order, it would be the lion, which meant that on the other side was the game of Conquest.

Tibs didn’t know if Sto was compensating for his inability to heal his friends, or if he’d never paid attention to how many potions they got out of the loot, but they had come across enough that any times one of them had been badly injured, they’d had a potion available.

Putting the squares in the right order went quickly, then the door slid open, revealing the room and the five golem persons placed on the board. As before, they were in different position, which meant Jackal or Khumdar would need to come up with a new strategy.

“Alright,” Jackal said. “How about you tell us where we should go, Don?”

Planning-9

“What?” the sorcerer asked, looking at them as if he was only now realizing where they were. He shook his head. “I’m not—”

“You know the game, don’t you?” Jackal asked. “King Killer is what you call it. That’s what Tibs said.”

Don looked at Tibs and for a second there was anger in those eyes, as if it had been a secret Don had shared when he’d mentioned the game. Then it was gone.

“I shouldn’t. I’m not in charge.”

“I’m in charge,” Jackal said. “You’ve pulled your weight in the fights, and now I want you to do the same here.” The fighter motioned. “How do we do this?”

Don hesitated, then stepped to the edge of the room. “The first thing we have to do it determine which piece each of us represents.”

“I’m the Lord,” Jackal stated.

“What? No.” Don replied, sounding more like his old self.

“Let me guess. You’re the lord?” Jackal said derisively.

“Of course not. Why would you want to have a King on the board?”

“Because without a *Lord*,” the fighter said, “we lose the game.”

“You lose a game, if it’s a standard match.” Don motioned to the room. “We lose the game if we die. Have you done this room before? How the fuck did you survive it?”

“They cheated,” Sto said.

“More like they exploited how I think,” Ganny said.

“Same thing,” Sto replied.

Jackal and Khumdar looked at one another.

“We got lucky,” the fighter said.

“Luck’s not a thing,” Tibs and Don said at the same time. Tibs reflexively, while Don sounded annoyed at having to point it out. They stared at each other in surprise, and the sorcerer shrunk in slightly.

“Don,” Jackal said, pointing to the room when the sorcerer remained quiet.

“Jackal and Tibs are Infantry.” He studied the placement of the five pieces. “Khumdar, you’ll be the Queen, Mezano, you’re the archer and I’m the sorcerer.” Then he indicated the square they were to stand on.

“Now what?” Mez asked once they were in place, bow at the ready.

“We wait for the dungeon to make its move,” the sorcerer replied.

“You think if I don’t do anything they’re going to lose patience and try something?” Ganny asked.

Tibs looked up and glared.

“What’s your thoughts on the dungeon, Don?” Mez asked.

“Maybe try that with another team,” Sto replied.

“I don’t have any.”

Ganny’s archer moved as Sto snorted.

“Okay, what did you do to him?” the dungeon asked. “He has more idea about what I am and how I think than anyone, even that noble sorcerer who said he had a whole library explaining all there was to know about us.”

“Jackal, one forward.”

“Don, you’re a sorcerer,” Mez said. “You have to have read something on dungeons. Carina had—”

For a few seconds, the silence in the room was complete.

"Sorry, Tibs," Mez said softly.

Tibs nodded.

Don sighed. "According to treatise I was able to read, Dungeon evolved as a way to keep the flood of monsters and came from the World Rifts back in the Days of the Dawn. They are all of them, and that's why nearly every dungeon has the same set of templates. Like those Gnolls. Because they all come from those original dungeons, they know what they knew, and as they grow, they can make more and more powerful types. Khumdar, three in diagonal to your right," Don said after one of Ganny's infantry moved forward.

"Would the Days of Dawn refer to the time Purity created the world?" Khumdar asked.

"Purity didn't create—" the sorcerer looked at the cleric. "I didn't think you were a believer of *that*."

"I will not claim to believe," Khumdar said, "but I have heard of how before there was more than the elements, Purity formed the world and then how the other elements took advantage of it to put what they wanted there, ruining the perfection Purity had created. I have heard other stories in my travels, so I understand how many kingdoms have their own beliefs about how the world came to be, but that one always felt... more credible."

Don snorted. "The Elements came after the world, not before."

"And how can that be known?" the cleric asked. "Something must have created the world. So the Elements must have been there before."

"No. No one knows how the world came to be. The only thing we have is stories and beliefs and people arguing over who's right. But no one has been able to establish what happened."

"Then the Elements could have been there before the world, and Purity might—"

"Fine! Yes, maybe that's what happened," Don snapped. "We don't know. So anything's possible. If believing Purity made all this helps you keep going, good for you. It doesn't help me." He ran a hand over his face.

"Don?" Jackal asked, then motioned around them. "What's the next move?" While he'd been talking, Ganny's sorcerer had moved to the center of the floor, giving it many places it could go, but no one was endangered because of it.

"Okay, Next move is yours, Tibs. But after that, that sorcerer's going after either Jackal or Mez. So be ready." Don waited for them to acknowledge what he said. "Tibs take that infantry."

Tibs formed ice swords as he stepped to the fire infantry, and it responded with blades of fire. He tested its skill, then went on the offensive. Dodging as he swung. Heat made it through his armor as he cut the infantry's side and Tibs gritted his teeth at the pain. He kicked it away, then lunged and screamed as he slammed both swords into its chest. The fire blades went out and Tibs straightened. He looked at the cut in his side. Instead of the gaping hole in his armor it had felt like, the line was thin, and there was no blood. The fire had seared his flesh on contact.

"Mez," Jackal said, and by the time Tibs turned, the archer jumped out of the way of a beam of light, firing fire arrow after fire arrow. Tibs stepped forward to help as Mez got to his feet, but couldn't move past the edge of the square he stood in.

The arrows splashed against a faint circle of light before the sorcerer.

"Can you see the shield?" Tibs asked.

"No," Mez replied, quickly stepping aside from another beam of light. "But I'm getting a sense for it, with the way the fire's curving around the edges." He took an arrow from the quiver at his hip and fired that between two fire ones. The shields deflected it. "So much for that idea."

The next arrow was lower, and the shield moved to intercept it.

Tibs reached for the light essence that made up the shield and attempted to grasp it. It resisted slipping away, and he focused.

"Okay," Ganny said, "this is odd."

Tibs mentally pushed as Mez loosed another arrow and the shield shifted enough part of the fire caught the sorcerer.

"What's odd?" Sto asked.

The shield moved back into place, and Tibs adjusted his hold.

"Nothing," she said, sounding annoyed. "Tibs's found a way to help."

"Go Tibs," Sto said.

"Really?" she replied as Tibs felt the resistance increase.

"I mean, bad Tibs." Sto didn't sound convincing.

When the Sorcerer staggered, it caught both Tibs and Ganny by surprise. The arrow's wooden shaft pierced its calf. Mez bounced another arrow off the floor and under the shield's edge and its other calf was pierced. The sorcerer flayed as it fell to the side.

"Cover your eyes," Mez called, as essence accumulated at the head of the next arrow.

The explosion left Tibs blinking spots away, but the pieces flying in all directions made it worthwhile.

"Forgot he could do that," Ganny mused.

"Tibs can manipulate essence away from him," Sto said.

"I mean Mez, but yes, I also didn't take that into account. I thought the interference I put on this floor would keep him from doing it. And he can't tell me how it affected him either, not with Don here."

"Jackal," Don said. "Diagonal to your left. That archer might go for you, if the dungeon's confident of the King's position."

The archer didn't attack Jackal. The next series of moves seemed to be only about maneuvering the remaining pieces until Don was able to destroy the archer, which left the lord and another archer.

Three moves later and Khumdar fought the lord, which ended with his staff planted through its chest.

The wall opened to the loot room and Don strode through, only to stop a few steps in.

Tibs followed.

The room was smaller and instead of the five pedestal, it contained only a chest.

"Check it for traps," Don instructed.

"Don," Jackal said, as Tibs headed for the chest, "Don't start giving orders."

"I'm," the sorcerer said, turning to face them, then faltered. "We can't trust that the chest's safe."

"We know our role," Mez replied in a gentler tone than Tibs thought Don deserved.

"Yeah," Jackal added. "In this team, we don't have to order people about."

"Unless it is to keep Jackal from doing something idiotic," Khumdar said.

"There's no need to order me even then."

"No," Mez said, "I remember us trying to just suggest you stop trying to get yourself killed, it only started working once Tibs threatened to kick you in the shin."

"Higher," Khumdar added.

"The only person who's able to suggest you do something," the archer continued, "and you actually listen, is Kroseph."

"Whose suggestions come with far more weight than out orders," the cleric added.

Tibs glanced over his shoulder and Don looked at them, baffled.

"Can we get on with this, instead of bashing the team leader?" Jackal asked in exasperation.

"I do not believe we have much else to do until Tibs has confirmed the chest is safe to open."

Jackal looked at Don with his 'can you believe I'm being treated this way' expression only to close his mouth and scowl. "Fine. Anyone think it's odd we're back to having just a chest instead the choice of items?"

Tibs glanced at the ceiling before focusing on the chest.

"Oh, right," Sto said, "you only had one run after you asked me to help arm the runners. The others were finding it strange how I let them have all five, instead of forcing them to pick one. Since you talked about how having the guild ask question about what was going on was a bad thing, I went with chests. And now I'm not sure it's worth going back to the pedestal."

"The chest's safe," Tibs said, once he was done looking it over. He opened it and stepped away.

Mez was to the side, by the entrance, talking with Don in a low voice. Tibs considered shaping the air to hear what was being said, but he didn't care enough.

"Tibs?" Jackal called in a low voice as he took items out of the chest, then mouthed 'enchanted?'

Tibs pushed the leather chest armor with a foot, then a knife and the amulet. Jackal glanced at the sorcerer and archer before slipping the knife in his pouch.

That would be why Mez was keeping Don away. Tibs helped put the leather armor in Khumdar's pack, then they left.

"Just remember that you're part of a team," Mez told Don as they approached, then the Sorcerer stepped away and looked angry for a second, before the expression cracked with indecision.

Planning-10

"I'm fine," Done snapped under his breath as Tibs looked over the shallow cut along his arm. His dark robe only had the light armor enchantment Sto put on all the sorcerer's robes, and it hadn't proved effective against the golem person with void essence who had blinked from place to place, dodging Don's attacks until it was close enough to cut him. It has then allowed the sorcerer to put a hand on her and push corruption essence in, melting it before it could blink away.

"It's not like you can do anything about it, so stop trying to be a hero."

"We look after each other on this team," Tibs replied. "Even if the person hurt is an asshole."

When Don didn't snap a reply, Tibs looked up from the arm. The sorcerer was looking away, mumbling something angrily.

"We forgot bandages, didn't we?" Mez asked. Then Khumdar offered a roll of linen.

"Traveling as I did, being prepared has always served me well, especially when I did not expect to need it."

Tibs took it and wrapped the cut, making a splint of his essence around it to speed up the healing.

"Are you really a cleric?" Don asked.

"I do not care what you believe," Khumdar replied flatly then walked away.

"I wasn't—" the sorcerer called, then closed his mouth. "Is he?" he asked Tibs.

"What do you care?"

"Don't you care that someone on your team's lying about what they are?"

"We're all lying about something," Tibs replied.

"I'm not." The way the words lit up marked him as a liar, but Tibs didn't call him out on it.

"The only thing I care about is that Khumdar has our back, and he does." He secured the bandage and rerolled the rest of the linen.

"I—" Don closed his mouth. Tibs was mildly curious as to what he'd intended to say, because there had been no light.

* * * * *

The last line of the boar's crest slid into place, completing the design and the door raised up, revealing the uneven floor of the room. Don let out a whispered curse.

"You have this Tibs?" Jackal asked.

"Just wait here while I check the pattern is the same."

"Pattern?" Don asked.

"There's an order to what column on the floor causes the others to move," Mez said in a reasonable tone, causing Jackal to close his mouth.

"I never noticed that," Don replied, awed.

"Did you let your rogue try to work it out?" Jackal asked, rolling his eyes.

"Jackal," Mez said. "That's not helping."

"He—" Jackal pointed at the sorcerer.

"I agree with Mez," Khumdar cut him off, and earned himself a stunned stare from the fighter.

"Didn't you walk away from him asking you a question?" Jackal demanded.

"Yes, so the situation would not become aggravated. We are a team. None of us will gain anything by fighting and arguing. We know this. I believe you have all seen the result of teams who could not work

together during your early runs. That we agree with the decision or not, Don is part of our team. We must put our conflicts aside while inside the dungeon, or we will not survive the run."

"I didn't expect you just let him be intolerant of you," Jackal said.

"I'm not—" Don started.

"I have lived with intolerance directed at me my entire life. It is a large part of the reason behind becoming who I am. I no longer care how people feel about what I am. I find it easier to ignore them, instead of engaging and wasting time explaining something they have no interest in understanding."

"I'm not intolerant," Don whispered in the silence.

Tibs was on his seven column by the, and the behavior of the others matched his memory. "I'm ready to guide everyone through," he called. "Don, how are you at jumping?"

"Don't worry," the sorcerer replied. "I'm going to be fine."

Jackal snorted.

"He needs to know so he can point you to columns you can reach," Mez said.

"I misjudged my capabilities our first time in this room," Khumdar said. "And did not complete a leap properly. Recovering from that proved difficult."

Don looked at the cleric suspiciously.

"I'm not... great at jumping," Don finally admitted.

Jackal closed his mouth at the glare Mez gave me.

Tibs gave the assignments, making sure Don had the easiest ones to reach.

"How did your team get through this room?" Jackal asked, when there were roughly in halfway to the partially closed path right before the end of the room and Tibs was testing a set of column.

"Setareh rushed it," the sorcerer finally said. "She ran through, jumping from one column to the other before the center path closed."

"Setareh did have a love for jumping and running," Khumdar said.

"You knew her?" Don asked, surprised.

"She and I shared interests."

"I had to melt a column that rose in her path the first time."

"You melted a column?" Tibs asked, losing track of the movement his jump caused. "With corruption?" He glanced up.

"Don is powerful," Sto said.

"It only worked that time. The next one, I though I'd melt a path, through, but the dungeon made them resistant somehow."

"I learn fast," Sto said proudly.

Tibs studied Don's essence. It was dense, it matched Jackal that way, but that couldn't be all there was to it. He'd used up a lot of his fire reserve before he'd damaged the Ratling's camp walls, and Sto hadn't woven protection into them against fire like he had corruption. Skill had to come into it. Alistair had shown him that skill could defeat brute force, and it had to have been what Don had done. A weave or an etch that make his essence more effective. They weren't supposed to learn about weaves until after Lambda, but sorcerers read a lot of books, so Tibs wouldn't be surprised Don knew methods the teachers didn't want him to know. He'd have to find a way to get the sorcerer to talk about them so he could figure out how to apply them to his essence.

He had to back track to get the sequence again, but then it was simply a matter of moving the others appropriately from column to column until they were all on the other side. The lever opened the door and lowered the floor.

* * * * *

Tibs looked at the shield at the top of the intersection. Reaching the dragon crest had taken longer than they'd planned. Since he couldn't ask, he didn't know if the information that had been written down had been wrong, or Ganny had changed the triggers in this section of the floor, but following the papers had gotten them lost, and required restarting from the boar's crest.

"How long do we have left?" Jackal asked.

Tibs shrugged. Not a lot of time, but beyond that?

"A candle's worth at the most," Don said, studying the shield also.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." The sorcerer rolled his eyes. "Didn't you bring one to work out how much time the line represent?"

"We figured out it was when the next team enters," Jackal replied. "But unlike you, candles aren't

something we waste coins on.”

Don was the one who rolled his eyes. “Being able to know how long you have isn’t a waste.” He motioned to the jumbled crest. “Is one candle enough time to solve that lock?”

Jackal narrowed his eyes at the tone, and Don looked away. “Tibs?” the fighter asked.

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t studied the puzzle yet. He could tell the idea was to reform the dragon too, but it wouldn’t be like the other two. And he didn’t know how long a candle took to burn. He knew they took the same amount of time, and that they were used to count time, but Tibs had never had much use for knowing time like that. Looking up at the sun or moons had always been enough.

He stepped to the crest and immediately, he knew sliding the tiles wouldn’t be how this was one solved. Each tile was connected to a dot in the corners that allowed four of them to spin around each of those dots. There was resistance, and when they were realigned a subtle click felt through his fingers. There was essence throughout the crest, but Tibs figure it was to allow the square to turn around the center point and their edges pass through the other squares at the edges, instead of being what he had to overcome.

By the time he had the bottom row lined up, half of the line in the shield was gone. “I’m not going to have the time,” he admitted. “I don’t know how I’m going to get the last pieces to line up.”

“Then next run we come here first,” Don said.

“No,” Jackal replied and glared at the sorcerer. “We do the other two room first, then we come to this one.”

“Jackal,” Mez said. “I think Don’s right. Loot’s not that important—”

“It’s not about the loot.” Jackal sighed. “It’s not just about the loot, but yes, it’s in part that. And no, it’s not me being stupid. One of the reason for the runs is to get the loot. The coins from the fights in the halls and the few caches there isn’t as much as what we get from the rooms now that we aren’t limited to one item. With this guard leader not liking Tibs, there’s no telling if the merchants will be allowed to continue paying him, and Tibs is going to insist on helping the Omegas when they arrive and that’s going to take coins. Unless someone knows something I don’t. We aren’t in a hurry to clear the floor, so it’ll take however long it needs to take to work out this door after we clear the previous two. Now, lets head back. If we’re lucky, the dungeon will through some golem people or Gnolls in our way, I still want to hit stuff.”

“I can make that happen,” Sto said.

“Does anyone else find it odd that Jackal had stated he is not in a hurry to reach the boss room?” Khumdar asked.

“I think Kroseph replaced out leader with a more sensible one,” Mez replied.

“No,” Tibs said, walking by them, as he followed the fighter. “He just threatened to withhold *them* time if one of us told him Jackal’s been stupid. Not you Don. He’s not interested in what you think.”

Planning-11

Tibs found Cross in the Drunk Worm, laughing with a bunch of guards. As soon as one of them noticed him, the laughter died down, and they left her table as he approached. A few of them mouthed a 'sorry' as they walked by him.

"You've become quite the fun killer," she said, grinning. She motioned to the tankard on the table. "Fell free to sample what one of them left behind in their hurry to run away from you."

Tibs sat and sipped the one before him. As with most of the tavern in the town, the Worm's ale was passable. "They didn't have to leave."

She smirked. "When your boss doesn't like someone, it's not a good idea to be seen sitting at the same table as him."

He nodded and placed the paper before her. "Have you ever seen a puzzle like this?" he'd hurriedly drawn how the dragon crests puzzle pieces moved with arrows showing directions.

She glanced at it as she sipped her drink, then frowned, putting it down. "The pieces are square?" he nodded. "And they pivot around that corner?"

"There's essence involved."

"There's have to be. You can't have squares spin like that. The corners get in the way. That makes it magic. That's not the kind of puzzles I play with."

"I don't think the essence is how the puzzle's solved. It's just there to let the pieces move like that."

"You sure?" she studied the paper.

"The other two puzzles are sliding square puzzles. The first one's just your normal type with one space used to allow them to slide. The second one uses void essence to let the pieces slide out from the edges and appear on the opposite one."

"How do you know it's void? My understanding is that adventurer can only sense their essence."

"With training we can sense others too, but I don't know, it's void. Void essence is the only one I know of that lets something do this. It's behind the transportation platform. But it doesn't matter which essence for it, because that's not what solves the puzzle. It's still just about moving the pieces until I reform the crest."

"Which is why you figure it's the same with this one."

Tibs nodded.

"And each grid of four squares can move around that center pivot? You've drawn it so that every individual square had a pivot at all corners. That would mean it can go with any larger grid."

"I can only change the center pivot when they're properly aligned with the surrounding squares."

"Does it work in a large grid?"

"No, only in two-by-two packs."

"And you're sure magic isn't how this is solved?"

Tibs hesitated. "The dungeon's consistent. The hallways are fights, sometimes with traps we need to step around. The rooms unlocked by the crests are puzzles, but that mix thinking and doing something physical. In the Lion room, we have to play a game of Conquest. King Killer?" he said at her frown, then continued. "But when we confront a piece, it's a fight we have to win. The Boar's room had columns that move up and down, so we have to cross the room, leaping and climbing, but each column makes others in the room move. So I have to work out the pattern. This one's easy so long as no one falls or misses a jump. The crests are puzzles where I slide the pieces to unlock them. So the dragon crest will be the same."

"And the magic's just there to let the pieces move around."

Tibs nodded.

“Do you know what the mechanism is like?”

He shook his head.

“Have you worked out something about it?”

“It moves physically. I mean, the pivot doesn't have essence in what lets it move. I can feel when the edges align with what lets me change which pivot is used.”

“Anywhere other than a dungeon, I'd say that's too complex of a puzzle to work. It's going to need layer upon layers of gears to control all those pivots and determine when they are lined up. I can't even think of how the mechanism will tell everything's in the right order to unlock.”

“It unlocks when the crest is formed.”

“But how does the mechanism know?”

Tibs frowned. “Isn't this like the puzzle box with sliding pieces? I slide them around until all the notches are lined up and the cover can be removed.”

“But those kinds of puzzle only have one way any piece can move.” She tapped the paper. “This has them move in any way around the pivot. Are you sure magic isn't how this works?”

He couldn't be sure. He also couldn't be sure that Ganny wasn't the one to unlock the door when she saw the crest was complete. He shrugged.

“With the information you're giving me, all I can tell you is that you're going to have to break it the hard way.”

Tibs nodded, not surprised by her conclusion.

* * * * *

The guards patrolling the tents and permanent buildings before the dungeon eyed Tibs suspiciously, but he stayed in the lit path until he reached the steps, then headed along the length of the cliff. He sensed the guard following him until Tibs was well away from the buildings. They'd have more at the periphery, expecting he was planning to use the darkness to return undetected.

Tibs walked to the cliff face and set, resting his head back against the stone.

“So,” Sto said, “Don?”

“It wasn't my idea. Tirania forced him into my team. Threatened to break us up if I said no.”

“I can arrange it so he won't survive the next run.”

“She's just going to find someone else to force on us. At least, Don's not incompetent. Did you know about not having to put a Lord on the board?”

“That's not how the game plays,” Ganny said. “But he was right. So long as you don't die, you win, so on your side, the Lord isn't required.”

“Doesn't that mean you don't have to use it either?”

“I guess, but while I can't force the Runners to have one, I want to stick to how the game works.”

“I won't tell the others teams,” Tibs said.

“You can be sure Don will,” Sto replied disgustedly.

“I.. don't think he will.”

“Really?” Sto asked. “You haven't heard him during his runs. ‘I know everything about this.’ ‘I know more than you about that.’ ‘I'm going to make sure everyone knows how much better than them I am.’”

Tibs smiled at the perfect imitation of Don's voice Sto did. “Did you hear him say anything like that during our run?”

“There was that moment after winning the game where he was bossing you around.”

“But what about the rest of the time?”

“No. He was surprisingly subdued.”

Tibs nodded. “He's been like that out here, too.”

“Why?”

Tibs shrugged. “Sebastian's attack hurt everyone. He got his whole team killed in an ambush. He wanted to die there. Now he wants us to teach him how to be better.”

“Other than Jackal letting him decide how the game of Conquest went, it didn't seem like there was a lot of teaching happening.”

“How do you teach someone to be good? You are or you aren't. Don only thinks of himself. Once he's over whatever this is, he's going to start doing that again and he'd going to be impossible to deal with.”

“I can take care of that for you,” Sto offered.

“No.” Tibs was tempted, and if not for the ice, he'd say yes. But cooling his anger let him see beyond

the immediate satisfaction. "I told you, Tirania's just going to find another one, and he's going to be worse. All she cares about is using us to make herself look good to the town. Make them forget how she abandoned us to Sebastian."

"If you can get her inside me, I could make her go away."

Tibs chuckled. How good would that feel? But again, he could see the problems it would cause. Whoever was actually in charge would put someone else to run the guild. That was who he needed to remove, who he needed to have step inside Sto.

But would that even work? Tirania was powerful, Tibs sensed that, and power determined how was in charge, so the person who told her what to do had to be more powerful. How did Sto compare to them?

"I don't know if you could kill her."

Sto snorted. "I'll remind you that what I'm putting the runners through are tests. If I wanted to kill all of you, it would be easy."

"But we're Rho and Lambda at this point. She's Beta. They consider you to be Rho. That's a long way to Beta."

"That's because they don't know anything about me."

"No, Sto," Ganny said. "The guild's studied a lot of dungeons. For everything they have wrong, they have a good sense of how powerful we are at each stage. Otherwise, they wouldn't know who to send in, so we didn't just wipe them out, or have them outright destroy one of us."

"Come on Ganny. Beta's only five places above Lambda, so, that's like me dealing with five or six of Jackal. Sure, it's going to be a fight, but I'm going to win."

Tibs chuckled.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Sto said.

"You have it wrong, Sto," Ganny said. "How many Omega Runners would it take to match one Upsilon?"

"I don't know, a lot of them, but that's because Upsilon have an element. They're a lot tougher once that happens."

"Alright, how many Upsilon to match one Rho?"

"I... don't know."

"Yes, you do. Just look at what the second and third floor. What's different during those fights?"

"No, that's not the same," Sto replied, "by the time they reach the third floor they've learned more. That's why they're better in the fights and figure out your puzzles. That's not the same thing as being more powerful."

"You don't think that someone who reaches Beta had learned a lot more?" she asked. "Remember Bardik, and how easily he killed the second floor creatures?"

"He was Epsilon," Tibs said. "He'd been stronger, but the guild made him weaker as a part of his punishment."

"And you made him weaker still," Sto said.

He had? He knew that draining his essence had made him grow older, as if without all that essence, he went back to the age he really had, but he hadn't realized he'd taken away some of his power. But now that he thought about it, it made sense. His own increase in power, as all that essence broke his reserve open, had to have come from somewhere.

"Alright, maybe you're right and a Runner at Beta would be too strong for me to kill. But there's always what I did to the room I could use."

"You don't even know what happened to it," Ganny said.

"But I know what I did to make it happen. If I put her in a room and did that again. She'd be gone."

"Only if she can't stop it from happening. Her element's crystal. That's everywhere."

"But that isn't going to help her. I didn't use Crystal when the room vanished."

"It's not going to matter," Tibs said. "They're just going to send someone else. Someone I don't know. I can use Tirania, I might not be able to use whoever replaces her."

"Use her how?" Sto asked,

"And to do what?" Ganny added.

"I don't know how, yet," Tibs replied. "But I'm going to use her to make the guild pay for letting Carina be killed."

Planning-12

“Ah Tibs!” Darran greeted him jovially, only to turn serious. “What happened?”

Tibs eyes the cuts in his shirt, and the blood that had soaked the sleeve where the knife had sliced his arm open. “I’m fine.” That had been the first attack, the only one his would be assassin got in. She’d probably thought the poison would be enough to end Tibs, but corruption in it hadn’t done its work. The other cuts had been pieces of his shirt he’d had to sacrifice to get close enough to end her.

He didn’t use essence, since killing with them might leave something behind a skilled adventurer could use to guide them to the culprit. Tibs could sense the water essence his sword left after he cut an opponent, and he could absorb that. But what else could be used to find where an attack using essence originated? Bards were full of song about adventurers doing impossible things. Maybe that was one of them. Tibs didn’t know, and he couldn’t take the chance.

With the increase in thugs, troublemakers, and would be killers coming to Kragle Rock to claim his head, and the bounty Sebastian has set on him post-death, or the lower one from destroying the town, there were plenty of skirmishes that left bodies. Hers would be one of those.

“You are bleeding,” Darran stated, stepping around his counter. “Why aren’t you wearing your armor?”

“It’s Kragle Rock. I don’t need to wear my armor in town.” He also didn’t wear it when visiting Darran. The merchant had sold him the original, and the man was attentive to details, as any successful thief should be. Tibs didn’t want to risk him realizing his armor was now one Sto had given him, and that it repaired itself. Darran might not think much of it, since the dungeon handed out loot for every run, but the guild was supposed to claim anything enchanted, and then the Runners had to buy it back from them. How many coins would it take for the type of armor Tibs had?

If Darran noticed anything, it would lead to Tibs having to tell him things that could put his life in danger. He did trust Darran, to a point, but the man was a thief, and possibly worse, he was a merchant.

“Well, let me look at it. I can’t have my favorite customer die because the wound got infected.”

Tibs added a layer of ice to the open wound to replace the essence wrap he’d had in place.

He’d used the opportunity the injury presented him with to practice with Purity essence. He’d let the weave heal the cut, but forced it to break up before it was done. It fought him. Even as his essence, once the weave was formed, it wanted to continue with its work until it was all spent. It might be another difference between a weave and etching. If he could get Alistair to teach him about weaves, he’d be able to ask.

It had left his injury looking shallower than it had been, and bleeding only slightly.

Darran studied the cut, not commenting on the blueish skin using ice as a patch caused. It wasn’t the first time the merchant had seen that on one of his injuries. “This isn’t as bad as all that blood made me think. I thought they’d cut deep enough to reach the major blood line.”

“It’s hers.” That was believable enough. He had more of her blood on him, even if the rest was much lighter. He hadn’t thought to use water essence to clean only that blood, and he wasn’t sure he could do it in a way that wouldn’t remove all of it, with would lead to questions of where the blood from the injury had gone to. Since he wanted to keep some level of injuries to avoid anyone aware he was under attack from asking questions, this was something he might need to practice.

“What did you do with her body?” Darran cleaned the cut with a cloth soaked in something astringent that stung when it got in the wound as the ice melted.

“I left it in the alley. Irdian can’t catch all the killers at the platform. The guards find a body every few days. So long as they’re killing one another instead of townsfolk, no one’s going to care.”

“And are they? Killing one another, I mean. Or are some people looking out for you?”

Tibs shrugged. He'd asked Jackal after a guard told him of the bodies, and his friend had shaken his head, disappointed. He hadn't had to kill anyone after him. Mez had caught one trying to destroy a building and had handed him over to the guards. Tibs expected that if Khumdar stopped one, no one would ever find out what happened to them.

But that left Quigly, as well as the other Runners. Not all of them would kill someone trying to cause problem, but those who might would do the same he had with the body.

Once Darran was done applying an unguent over the cut, he wrapped it. “There. It'll work until your next run and the cleric heals it.” He wrapped the rest of his healing pack. “Now, what can I help you with today?”

“That knife.” He pointed to an ornate on display.

Darran smiled. “Upgrading your equipment, finally.” He took it. “Come, its sheath is in the back, and it needs to be treated with care. I'll show you how to use the whetstone on it.” Tibs followed the merchant to the back room, then a smaller storeroom. The door was thicker than normal, and the walls doubled, with a material between them that made it harder for those outside to hear any discussion inside. There was no essence in the material, but Tibs had tested it and even pressing his ear to the door, it was difficult to make out anything spoken inside.

The knife was the signal Darran had set for when Tibs wanted a private discussion. Even if there was no one in the shop, the merchant was always aware someone might want to eavesdrop.

“Have the guards been harassing you?”

“It's not their job to harass an honest merchant like me,” Darran replied, all smiles as he took a blade from one of the many layers he wore.

“Then about the less than honest ones,” Tibs said, sitting on a crate, “who pay for protection, instead of accepting that which the guild offers?”

“Ah, then, harassing is too strong of a word, but yes, a guard has come around to all of us and explained how having anyone force us to pay protection is a crime and that it is in our interest to report them to the guards immediately.”

“And have they?”

“I don't believe you'd be walking about if any of us had.”

“I was sent to a cell.”

The merchant nodded. “That wasn't because any of us talked. They came around with the warning after you were arrested. I expect that was the new head of the guard making a point.”

“And do any of them want to end the arrangement?”

“Are you in a position to continue offering it? You lost a lot of runners fighting Sebastian.”

“I've been able to keep the patrols going. So long as there isn't an assault on Merchant Row, we can deal with it. Once the new Runners are here, I'll find more to increase our numbers if Merchant Row wants us to.”

Darran smiled. “You're letting us decide.”

“Of course.”

“You'd make a poor merchant.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “That's because I'm a rogue.”

The merchant shook his head. “It's because you're a decent person. To be a good merchant, you have to be willing to seize any opportunity to increase how many coins you get, and that will often mean taking advantage of someone in a less fortunate situation.” He handed Tibs the sheathed knife. “That'll be three silver.”

Tibs looked at what Darran offered him. “For those coins, I'm going to take the one you had on display. I doubt that's worth three coppers.”

“Tibs, you hurt me. The one on the shelf is among the best I have, easily worth three times what this one is worth. I couldn't—”

“So it's sharpened then? That's all that's needed to make it better than the rest, isn't it?”

“Now you're just being disrespectful. Have any of the knives I've sold you let you down?”

“None of them will hit what I throw them at.”

“That's more on you than them. How about you give me a silver and six copper and call it fair?”

“How about I call the guards and call it thievery? Anything more than ten copper's going to be that.”

“You haven't even looked at the work that went into the leather wrapping the pommel. That alone is worth the three copper above a silver I ask for.”

Tibs unhooked the pouch from his belt and Darran smiled as he looked through it. He took a silver out. "I don't have any copper, so I'll give you a silver for it."

The smile fell. "You, my boy, are a thief."

"I'm a rogue," Tibs replied, taking it and pulling it out of the sheath. "The edge needs to be ground and sharpened."

"What do you expect, for a silver?"

"Something like this." He sheathed it and put it to his belt. "The agreement?"

"None of my associates have said anything either way. I expect that they might not be aware you're still offering it."

"I'd be expecting payments in ten days."

Darran nodded. "I'll discuss it with them. You will get pushback, now that there is an alternative."

Tibs shrugged as he stood. "If they trust the guards, they're welcome to let them do their job."

"The guards aren't charging us anything," Darran said.

Tibs nodded. "And you like saying that you get what you pay for." He tapped the cheap knife he'd bought, and the merchant smiled.

* * * * *

Tibs stood away from the transportation platform, watching the group appear. The first arrival had sent a ripple through the town, and now the Runners and what seemed like most of the townsfolk watched as another group was led down the steps and on their way to the gathering clearing.

"You ever seen anyone looking so pitiful?" someone asked, and no one laughed.

"Maybe the cells they were taken from are in the habit of beating them daily," another answered in a serious, if disbelieving tone.

"Those aren't guards," Quigly stated. "They're soldiers."

The group had to be three and zero in numbers of young boys and girls escorted by the soldiers. Maybe half of that carried someone in their arms. If those were sent into the dungeon, Tibs wouldn't be the youngest to go in anymore, not by a great many years. He was reminded of one of the reasons Bardik had told him for why he'd tried to kill Sto. So the guild wouldn't be able to throw babies in to feed it. Could he talk Sto into going easier on them? It's rather no longer be the youngest to survive his runs, than know they'd all died.

He didn't think any of them were Street, even those in nothing more than rags and dirt. They had the beaten down sense to them the Street instilled in all who lived there, but Tibs saw nothing of the spark of defiance that was needed to survive it. The boys and girls he watched walk by had all given up. They had no fight left in them.

What kind of cell did that to someone? And babes? How could babies deserve to be in a cell? Bardik had talked of those coming of relationships nobles had with lower classes as enough to entitle one to a stay in a cell with their mother. But where were the mothers?

"Those aren't criminals," Quigly said with enough sadness, Tibs looked at him. "They're war urchins."

Planning-13

“You have suffered the kind of loss few people can imagine.” Irdian told the large crowd of young boys and girls.

Tibs had watched close to a dozen groups arrive, and no one had been older than Jackal had been when he'd first met him as far as he could tell. Now he stood at the back, where the ground rose toward the town, watching what he thought the crowd must have looked like when he received his version of the welcome speech.

“You have lost not only your homes, but your hearts. You had nothing to do with the conflicts those in power created. Even your parents had nothing to do with it, but they were pulled into it, leaving you alone. Leaving you hollow. Leaving you afraid for what is to come.”

The guard leader's voice carried all the way to the back by the metal sheets that were suspended on wooden poles throughout the crowd. Tibs seen workers putting them up and hadn't understood what they were for until now. Ardian used metal essence to have them emit his words. They even carried the sorrow in them. Tibs wished he was close enough to see if they lit up or not. He couldn't tell if Light should reveal the lies when he heard the word like this.

“I wish I could tell you that your burden is going to ease. I wish I could tell you that here, you will be able to put your worries for the future aside and focus on being children. I can't. You haven't been taken from that hardship to be delivered into peace and quiet. I'm sorry. This world you find yourself in is one that will take his toll, and probably your life. I can't be gentle about this. Gentleness isn't something you will have much of from now on, and I don't want you to believe otherwise. You are going to be molded into Adventurers, but it is a hard and deadly path. One that most of you will not survive. If it helps, does of you who do will become powerful. You will be able to avenge the needless death of your parents and other loved ones. Become strong enough, and the guild might let you topple the king behind the events that led them to die.”

Tibs looked at Jackal, Mez, Don, Khumdar, as well as the other Runners listening to the speech and saw the anger on their face the ice kept him from feeling. Tibs didn't need Light to know Ardian was lying. The guild didn't care about kings and nobles stepping on the poorfolks. If they did, they would stop them. They had to power, but only used it if it made the guild stronger, and looking at the number of urchins the guild now had to send into the dungeon, wars served the guild's quest for power.

“But you will not be simply thrown onto this path with no preparation. That is not the guild's way. You will be tested to find your aptitudes. You will be given training to increase your chances of survival. And you will be given places to stay and people to look after you between runs.”

Snorts of disbelief from the Runners echoes Tibs's muted one. Was this another lie? Was the guild really going to spend coins getting them ready, instead of letting Sto do the sorting for them?

“This isn't fair,” a Runner muttered.

“For the time being,” Ardian continued, “you will be staying in these tents. As caretakers are brought in, and houses rebuilt, you will be assigned to them. I give you this warning. Don't get attached. You no longer live a life that makes attachments useful. Making friends will only lead to you feeling the pain of their death. Those of you who survive until you can leave this place will be sent on missions with others not of your choosing. I have been where you are. This warning comes from experience. Caring hurts. Caring can kill you. Caring can cause those you care about to die.”

The ice cracked, and Tibs swallowed. Were those last words directed at him? A reminder Carina had died because Tibs had cared about her?

“Trainers will come and guide you to be tested. Do not fight them. Their methods will feel harsh, but they do this so you have some chance at surviving what is to come. You are no longer children. You are

Runners. One day, some of you will be Adventurers. It is a hard path, but a rewarding one. This will sound hollow now. It did when I heard those words, but embrace the path, for it will make you strong, it will give you purpose, and it can give you life.”

“That’s a load of bullshit,” another Runner said.

Among the cracks came the hope that it wasn’t. If, somehow, this group could get the preparation they needed to survive. If this was how the guild actually treated Runners and not what Tirania had put them through, then maybe there was some good that could come of this?

“I’ve got a silver that says not even half of them come back from their first run,” someone said.

“I’ll put one that says not a quarter surv—”

“No,” Jackal stated. “We aren’t putting coins on who’ll survive or won’t. They aren’t here for your amusement.”

“I’m just—”

“I said no.” Jackal glared at the Runner.

“Did he tell the truth?” Quigly asked, and Tibs turned to tell him that wasn’t something he could know, but the warrior was speaking to a woman whose eyes glowed.

“I don’t know,” she answered nervously. “I’m not good at telling when someone lied, and my trainer—” her voice hitched. “—he’s done, so I don’t know if anyone else is going to help me. I can’t tell anything at this distance.”

Tibs stared at her. If her trainer was gone, did it mean it had been Harry? He hadn’t realized he’d trained anyone. If he had, he could have gotten her to ask him questions about how Light essence worked. So long as he worded it in a way she believed it was for her benefit, Harry wouldn’t have picked up that it could also help Tibs.

The crowd barely moved as older men and women walked among them, taking small groups and leading them to the large tents. As when they were walking away from the platform, Tibs kept thinking there was no life left in them. They didn’t argue; they didn’t resist. They let themselves be led around the way Tibs had seen the herd master leading some of his animals to be slaughtered.

He turned to face the Runners. He wanted Ardian to have told the truth. He filled the cracks with ice. But he couldn’t afford to hope. “Jackal is right. We aren’t here to bet on who will live. We’re here to make sure as many of them do. Do you trust the guild to have their best interest in mind?”

“If it serves them, sure,” someone said.

“And do you think all of them surviving the runs, becoming strong enough to stand up to them, serves them?” Tibs asked. How many would he need to stand with him against the guild so they could bring it down? How quickly would this act of want the best chances for them last? Even one would help him bring it down, but how many of them could he get to help him?

“We can’t save all of them,” Quigly stated, and the ice cracked.

Tibs glared at the warrior. “We can’t leave them to die.”

“There are thousands of them, Tibs. There’s forty-three of us. We can only help a few of them. Let along to equip every team. We’re going to need enough armor and weapons to provide what the damaged ones are repaired, and we’re going to have to pay for that. Even if we continue to be paid to patrol Merchant Row, we’d have to ruin them to attempt to have the numbers we’ll need.”

Tibs nodded. “I don’t have to like it.”

“I hate it,” Quigly said. “I know these aren’t my fault, but I’m responsible for war urchins. If I’d known that would happen, I’d...” he trailed off.

“We have to help them,” Tibs said. “We can’t help them all, but we still have to help them. We’ve learned not to rely on the guild. I want us to be there when they do, too. We aren’t going to mock them. We aren’t going to bet on who live or dies. We are going to help them. If that means being there to offer support as they are carrying the dead’s equipment for the copper the guild will give them, then that is what we will do.”

“You want us to hang around the steps all day long?” someone asked in disbelief.

“What would you have done for someone to hug you when you came out that first time?” the guy next to him asked.

“I’d have stabbed anyone who touched me,” was the response.

Tibs looked at the Runners. Too many of them wore hard expressions. Too many of them seemed to think the urchin should suffer the way they had and Tibs didn’t know the words to convince them that they couldn’t be allowed to suffer anymore because they’d already lost everything.

The ice cracked. Abyss, what wouldn’t he have given for someone’s comfort after Mama was taken

from him.

"Tibs," a woman said behind him, and he stiffened. The Runners looked annoyed she was there.

He turned to face her. "Lady Amelia," he greeted her coolly, remembering Mez's imploration he treat her with respect, and all the ways she had helped them during the Siege and Sebastian's revenge. With her were eight nobles. Two he recognized as siblings of hers, the others he's only seen in passing and done his best to ignore.

"If you'll allow us to help," she said and snorts from some of the Runners.

"You going to give us all the coins we'll need?" someone asked in a mocking tone.

"We aren't taking your coins," Tibs stated. He tried to think of her as a Runner. Every encounters he'd had with her showed her to be a decent person who cared for the town and those in it. But she was a noble, and Tibs couldn't separate that from her.

"We can see to it those who wait for the returning Runners have bandages for their injuries, ale to settle their nerves."

"I'll take that," someone said.

"Shut up," Jackal ordered.

"Aren't the clerics going to heal them?" someone asked. "They're here now, so why would they let them suffer?"

"Because they're the guild," another answered.

"I don't know what the guild intends," Amelia said at Tibs's raised eyebrow. "For all the real words the guard leader told them, there is a tradition of harshness beyond the necessary for the Omegas."

"Let me guess," someone mocked, "you went around trying to get into all the other dungeons but had to settle for poor little us."

"I did not settle," she replied with the first hint of harshness in her tone. "I have money. I could have paid any of the guild's fees, no matter how exorbitant they are. I chose to come here, because I did not want to simply do my time in the dungeon until my goals were achieved. I wanted a place when my presence would matter. Where I could help." She paused the length of a few breaths. "I did not know so many of you would have come to despise anyone bearing the title of noble due to how those around you tarnished it so."

"You've helped before," Tibs said, but stopped on what he was about to add. She'd never asked for anything in return for her help. She hadn't even asked that Tibs show her 'proper' respect as a noble. She'd always treated him, and anyone she interacted with, with the respect of being someone who mattered. He couldn't say the same of everyone with her at the moment, but she wasn't here looking to put any of them in her debt. He had to remember that She seemed to be what Mez claimed nobles could be.

"I'll accept you help again."

"Thank you," she said, while grumbling behind Tibs told him what they thought of the idea.

It was like they'd all forgotten the work she'd done to help. They should keep their animosity for the nobles who deserve it. Or at least keep it to themselves when she was there.

"Do you know anything about those caretakers Irdian talked about?" he asked.

She shook her head. "There are groups that will help those orphaned by wars, but that isn't the sense I got from how he spoke."

So maybe that had been a lie to keep the urchins docile. Tibs had no idea how he'd go about...

Actually, he knew exactly how to find out.

* * * * *

The essence woven through the thick wooden door didn't react to his knock. He had no idea how to tell what a weave did, and that bothered him.

"Enter," Tirania said, her voice sounding as if the door wasn't there. Tibs didn't think the weave only allowed her voice to pass unimpeded.

She raised an eyebrow as he entered and set the quill in the inkpot. It looked out of place in the immaculate office; the pot was stained and scratched and the quill's top listed because of a break a finger's width from the tip.

"What can I do to help you?" she asked.

"I want to start by apologizing for my behavior when you told me Don would be on my team. I'm a Runner, not a child. I shouldn't have thrown a tantrum."

She studied him. "And how is he working out?"

Tibs shrugged. "It isn't the disaster I was afraid it would be."

"I'm glad to hear that." She smiled and motioned to a chair. "Now, what is the other reason for your

visit?"

"The urchins." He sat. "Irdian mentioned caretakers were being brought in. What is that about?"

She took her time answering. "You need to understand," she said, and already she was lying. "When can't treat those orphans the way you were treated. You were a criminal. Your kingdom was more than happy to foster you on us in return for better considerations when they need our services."

So many lies in just those two phrases. The only thing she says that didn't glow was about the kingdoms getting better considerations.

"With the orphans, the king didn't want to just hand them over to us." Another lie. "He demanded concessions from the guild that in other circumstances we wouldn't grant." More lies, but Tibs didn't know which part was the lie or how it was a lie. "But we need the Runners." A truth. "You and the nobles aren't enough, and with your ranks, we can't keep the dungeon fed simply from those willing to pay for the chance to become Upsilon." Another truth.

"So there are no caretakers."

"Oh no, they are coming." A truth. "And we're making sure housing is being built for them." Not entirely a truth. The light dimmed and brightened. "It's simply taking time, and I decided it's best not to have them here until then." A lie. Tibs suspected it wasn't her decision. Irdian's? Whoever gave them orders? He wished he could press, but this was about getting her to trust him, as well as getting information.

"Are they really going to get training before their first run?"

"You don't trust me."

"Did you give me a reason to?" he asked, not intending to, but the ice cracked.

"You don't—" she stopped. Which was good. The words already had a glow to them. "Tibs, like you worked out, someone assigned me this position. I give the orders here, but orders come to me from them."

"And they ordered you to let us die?" more cracks in the ice, and Tibs was worried his anger would make it through and ruin everything.

"No." She took a slow breath. "I'm not proud of it." Not a lie. "But it's what I had to do." Not a lie. "The guild exists to guard the dungeons and protect the world from them. My first priority always has to be that. It doesn't matter how weak a dungeon seems to be, they can unleash creatures without warning." Not quite a lie? The words glowed, but not in the same way as when she outright lied. An exaggeration maybe? She chuckled. "And there aren't as many of us here able to fight as you seem to think. Most of the administrative staff stopped training once they reached Epsilon." Not a lie, but Tibs had seen more than a few of them strong enough to be delta or gamma.

"You could have stopped Sebastian."

She shook her head.

"You're the strongest one here. Harry told me that. You have to be strong to become a guild leader. Harry could have stopped it." The cracked widened, and he closed his eyes to focus on filling it, cooling the heat underneath. He was surprised she waited for him to open his eyes.

"Sebastian Wells, for the criminal that he was, was a man of power and respect within his city and his kingdom. His king paid attention to him, and because of that, my actions would have become that of the guild against him, the king. You're right, I am powerful. The guild is powerful. But we aren't here to hold kingdoms accountable. We're here for the dungeon and to prepare for—" she smiled and shook her head. "There'll be time enough for *that* once you've reached Epsilon. Suffice to say that if I, or Harry, or anyone directly affiliated with the guild, had taken action against Sebastian Wells, his king could have decided we were targeting him." Mostly true. More true than Tibs expected.

"You're responsible for some of the destruction," Tibs said, his tone controlled, the ice uncracked. She seemed willing to talk about it, even if it wasn't entirely honestly, so he might as well see what else he could get out of her.

"Hat was an unfortunate accident." A lie so bright that if it had been from a lantern instead of essence, Tibs would have had to look away. "As I said, the administrative staff isn't trained for situations like this, and we needed everyone to help. They misjudged how to handle Everburn." Something of a lie. Tibs didn't think she'd told them to sacrifice the town, but she hadn't told them to be careful of it either, he was sure of that.

He stood. "Thank you for answering my questions, Tirania."

"That's what I'm here for, Tibs. You know that."

He'd reached the door when she called his name, and he looked over his shoulder.

She smiled at him. "Tibs, I'm glad you came and talked with me about this. I was afraid the animosity was going to fester." That was not a lie.

Planning-14

Tibs watched workers cleared away what was left of the burned-out houses from the rooftop. He'd climb up because he'd wanted quiet. He wanted away from the discussion about the Omegas who were filling the new training fields. The complaints and the demands.

He'd thought being up here would make him feel better. That looking over Kragle Rock's roofline would remind him that things were improving. They had survived Sebastian. Ardian seemed able to keep most of the thugs trying to implement the man's revenge from doing serious damage and those his guards missed, the Runners took care of.

Things were bright, things were good.

So why wasn't he feeling like they were?

He ran. He jumped from roof to roof. With so many destroyed houses, navigating the town wasn't as easy as it was before. It would be again soon. The workers he watched weren't the only ones. The guild had brought a veritable army of them, and all over, the memory of what Sebastian had brought to the town, what Tirania had allowed to happen, was being removed.

He stopped at the line of demolished buildings that separated the noble's neighborhood from the rest of the town. What would they do as the town grew? Would they stretch the wall all around them until they had created a walled district within the town? Build themselves an enclave that could be easily turned into their prison?

He should be amused at that.

Leaping the distance was simple with the use of a little air essence. Then he was on a noble's roof. He was slower on moving here. They had adventurers patrolling the streets, and those know to look up every so often. Tibs still made it into one of the houses by a third-floor window. Then it was simple to move about unnoticed. The servants were busy in the kitchen. In an office, he carefully searched through a desk until he found a metal box that was locked, unlocked it and looked at the coins. Not finding a copper one, he took a silver, relocked the box, placed it back in the drawer, made sure everything was as it had been, and made his way out.

On the roof, he turned the coin over in his fingers. He'd broken into a noble's home, stolen from them. It was something insignificant, especially compared to everything nobles had taken from those on his Street, but he'd done it and it had been easy.

Too easy?

Was that why he didn't feel any satisfaction? Should he seek one of the nobles who used more essence based locks. Would beating those make him feel like he'd accomplished something?

He'd have to think about that.

He pocketed the coin and ran out of the neighborhood. He had to get back to the inn before Jackal worried and came looking.

* * * * *

The lines of air essence intertwined as Tibs swung them in the warehouse, but were kept from touching by the filigree he'd added between them. He'd pick something that did nothing, because this was about getting a sense for what it took to maintain an etching as it moved.

What Alistair had taught him to this point involved making the etching, using it to form the essence flowing through it and then having that create the result, which destroyed the etching in the process. Only that couldn't be the limit of what could happen, and Tibs knew that was true now. He didn't know if this could

do anything, but etching did not have to be fixed in place.

He didn't know if this was something Alistair didn't know could be done, didn't realize that when he did it that it was nothing more than an etching, or that he was taking things slowly with Tibs. He suspected the latter, but there had been enough times when Tibs had taught something to his teacher that he couldn't be certain that was it.

He let the essence go, and pulled earth from the bracer, forming and etching it the same way, and as he swung, it shattered, sending pebbles in all directions as lines intersected and pulled essence before exploding. The symbol he'd used as the filigree hadn't kept the lines apart, the way it had with air.

He needed three small scale tries, each with a different symbol, before he had one that did the trick.

This one was called Ank, the one he's used for the air essence was Kha. Each of the symbols had a name. There were thirty-four of them. Each did something specific to the line of essence and they interacted, the way the letters written did to make words. Alistair had explained a broad stroke what the symbols did, but it had been too much for Tibs to remember.

Alistair hadn't been surprised, and they had focused on Ank, Kha, Fey, and Bor. By themselves, they did little, which was why his teacher used them. But together made alteration.

Simply by willing it, Tibs could take water and turn it into ice. He could even do it partially, making shards of ice that floated in the water. But what he couldn't do was change the 'thickness' of the water. Turning it onto something that flowed slowly, like the syrup Mez loved for the seared Rump of Ashgar Russel prepared when they could get the meat.

Using Ank and Fey made that happen. Fey helped hardened essence, but by itself it took more than the result was worth. Ank made the essence less. Tibs had not understood one word of the explanation Alistair gave him, and even his teacher sounded more like he was repeating what he'd been told more than he understood it.

How could essence be less? It was or it wasn't. The once thing Tibs had understood was that Alistair didn't mean less in the way of more dispersed through the other element, the way Water was dispersed a lot in the air around them. This was something else entirely.

But when put together, Ank and Fey changed how thick the water was, how much of Ank, compared to Fey, determined the thickness. There were formulas, Alistair told him, but they were mainly used by sorcerers because they ended up working with multiple elements. Since all they did was work with water, making alteration to Ank and Fey until they had the result they wanted was easier.

And, as Tibs started his private practice in the warehouse with air, to see what thick air was like, he discovered why the sorcerers might use formulas.

Ank and Fey did not make the air thicker.

As far as Tibs could tell, they did nothing to the air. It was why he'd used Ank as the filigree to keep the strand of essence apart. And why he wasn't surprised when it had done something to the earth essence, not that he knew what it had been.

If the essence letters did not have the same effect from one essence to the next, a sorcerer would have a hard time remembering everything. And what about using multiple essence in an etching? How would someone remember which of the letter did what, and if it touched two different essence, what then?

And he still had no idea how a weave was different from an etching.

Or did what clerics do qualify as etching or weaves? Clara called it a weave, but it was more in the way of a cloth she applied to the wound, like the way Tibs had grown to call using his essence to wrap an injury a splint, when it was really... what was it? He'd never put thought into that. It wasn't an etching. He could tell that, now that he was working with them. Could it be a weave?

It didn't feel like what the weaves he'd sensed side. There were no filaments weaving together. It was more like how he used water when he turned it into ice. He simply willed it there and hard. The rest just happened because... it did?

He rubbed his temple.

Now he wasn't sure he should have demanded to learn about etching. It had sounded simple, but now, it reminded him of his early days learning his letters.

He let go of earth and pulled fire from the bracer. Air did nothing as a whip, and earth would only be a rope of stone? Something like the whippers used?

He needed to check with Sto if the essence letters were something he used.

But fire by its nature caused damage, so a whip of that should be a way to use it in a controlled manner.

The essence letter that kept the strand of fire essence apart was Vex. One of the multitude Tibs didn't know how it acted when used with water essence.

He stretched it until it was five times his height, then swung slowly. It took focus to keep the etching together. They weren't fighting him, but they acted as different weighed bags attached to the threads, so he had to will them to remain attached.

Once he had a sense for the motion and it no longer demanded that he actively think about it, he swung the whip as an unmarked remnant of a crate. He'd have to bring more crates as targets. He was running out of stuff to hit.

The line of essence went through the wooden face and left a barely singed mark behind. So for it to be effective as a weapon, he'd have to increase the threads until quantities would be enough to burn on contact, or figure out the letter or combination of letters that would increase the intensity of the threads already there.

Wondering if he could do more than burn with it, he willed the end into a loop and had it fall over the broken crate, then pulled on it, the way Radcliff had pulled when he'd caught Tibs's foot in his lasso.

Pain erupted as the fire essence spread from the bracer into him, turning the water essence in his reserve into it and exploding the ice that filled him.

With a pained scream, he dropped to his knees.

It hadn't been fair! Radcliff had been a decent person. Don should have been the one to die that day and fuck the mission, fuck passing the destruction onto him and feed his unending ego. Tibs should have killed Sebastian then and there for it. That way Carina wouldn't have—

He wailed.

Why her? Why did she have to die just because she was his friend? That she'd care about him, wanted to help him achieve more than just be some other Runner who'd end up dying in a dungeon.

Ardian was right.

Tibs panted, on all fours.

Caring for anyone just brought him and them trouble.

With another scream, he forced the fire in his reserve back into water.

He filled himself with water.

If he could, he'd pushed them all as far away from him as possible. Even Don didn't deserve to be caught up in whatever Sebastian's revenge would look like.

He turned it to ice.

But that was something the guild wouldn't let him do. Tirania didn't care about the danger she put the people around Tibs in. So Tibs would stay on his guard. He would come up with a way to protect them until he'd removed the guild and could ensure he wasn't close to any of them.

And he was never, ever using fire again.

Planning-15

Tibs walked among the Omegas working on the locks and triggers. Failing with them. They were bad at it. Nearly without a fault, each one of them would get caught or killed if they were to go into the dungeon right now. Worse than that, few of them seemed to enjoy working with the lock picks or small tools needed.

There were more girls than boys, and with a few exceptions, they were all the smaller of the urchins. Those who were taller or broader, were among those who seemed to enjoy the training, and were progressing faster.

Tibs kneeled next to a small girl and kept her from throwing the lock in anger. He didn't try to comfort her. He didn't ask her name, or details about how she'd become a war urchin. He didn't think she'd survive her first run, even if the others on her team worked at keeping her alive. She didn't want to be here; she didn't want to learn about locks and traps.

Tibs didn't ask what she wanted. He did his best to explain how to feel when there was too much tension on the pry tool, how to tell when the pin locked in place. What locking the pin in place meant.

He didn't pause when he felt the eyes of an instructor on him. Tibs didn't care what they taught of him helping, or if they objected. They asking boys and girls who had done nothing to deserve it to walk into a dungeon with barely the skills needed to survive.

He'd do the little his free time allowed to raise those odds.

Even if he was doomed to fail.

When she succeeded in opening the simple lock, she didn't rejoice or look at him for his opinion or approval. She sighed dejectedly, locked it, and started again. Tibs hadn't been there when the instruction had been given, but it seemed that they weren't being trained on the variety of locks he had had to train with when he'd arrived.

Of course, his training had consisted of the trainer assigned to his group pointing to boxes with locks and trap triggers in them and told to get to it. He couldn't recall one time with the instructor had taken the time to help one of them, the way those here did occasionally.

Tibs stood, and the instructor gave him a small nod before continuing on her way, then crouching to help another to the Omega rogues in training.

He wondered if the test to classify them as rogue has involved more than looking at their short statures, and the guild was counting on the dungeon to weed-out those without the temperament to be effective rogues.

Another of the instructor noticed him walking among the trainees and said nothing. Tibs stopped by a boy of his height and a look of determination as he felt between the gaps with a tool for how the trigger was built. When he triggered it, nothing more happened than the click and a pin jutting out from the side. With a sigh, the boy looked around and handed the trap to Tibs on noticing him there.

Tibs reset it, handed it back, and the boy got back to work. Maybe this one had a chance.

* * * * *

Tibs glanced at the shield to see how much time he had left, then what he still had to set right for the dragon crest to be complete.

"I won't be done in time," he announced, rotating a series of four pieces until he had the dragon's left horn complete.

"Really?" Don said sarcastically, "so why are we—"

"Don," Jackal warned, and while Tibs didn't see the sorcerer, he had no trouble envisioning him

stepping back as if struck, and the sneer shatter into the more common meekness and uncomfortableness. The sorcerer didn't often show hints of who he was before, but stress, pain, and annoyance brought that to the surface with more ease.

And this run had brought plenty of each for all of them. Sto had increased the strength of the creature roaming his halls, Ganny had switched around the triggers, and now, some cache were empty, so taking the time unlock them was a waste of time.

Jackal had been particularly affected by that. At the second empty cache, he'd screamed at Sto, and Don at looked at the fighter as if he was insane, and seemed baffled that no one else acted like that was an odd behavior.

Sto hadn't commented.

Tibs wasn't sure if the dungeon was too busy working on the fourth floor, or if it was Don's presence causing Tibs to be unable to respond, that was the cause, but other than greet them when they entered, Sto had said nothing. Tibs didn't even know if the dungeon was watching them.

"Are staying past the time limit?" Mez asked, leaning against the wall to give his leg a rest.

With how much more brutal the fights had been, and Tibs's inability heal them because of Don, they had gone through the healing potions and the regenerative ones that somehow refilled Don's reserve.

How something that didn't contain corruption had replenished a corruption reserve was beyond Tibs, and without being able to ask Sto, his curiosity was a distraction.

"Do you think you'll have the crest finished shortly after?" Jackal asked. "It'd be good to at least see inside and get an idea of what we'll be facing."

Tibs looked at the third of the crest that was still jumbled and shook his head. The rotating of the pieces, instead of simply sliding, was making figuring out the pattern needed to control where the pieces ended difficult.

"Then get as much of it done as you can so you can figure it out, and we'll head back." The fighter looked at the ceiling. "You know, putting doorways neat these crest would really make thing easier on us."

"Why do you do that?" Don demanded, sounding crept out.

"Makes me feel better?" Jackal asked, and Tibs heard the smirk.

"There's nothing there!" the sorcerer replied. "All it's doing is making you look daft to the rest of us."

"That means stupid, right?" Jackal asked, again with an audible smirk.

"Yes!"

"Then it's fine."

"How is that fine?" Khumdar asked. "Have you not told Kroseph that you were going to be smarter now that you have promised to be there for him?"

"I promised to *try* to be smarter about stuff, but he knows that only goes so far."

"How are you okay with your leader acting like that?" Don demanded.

"Why?" Jackal replied, "you think you'd do a better job?"

"I wouldn't be—" The sorcerer's voice broke. "No, I don't mean that," he added nervously. "I shouldn't..."

"Don," Mez said in an understanding tone, "we're used to Jackal's 'I'm the biggest idiot this side of the abyss' act."

"Hey, I'm the biggest idiot on both sides of the abyss," Jackal replied severely. "And it's not an act."

Tibs chuckled.

"Don't let it get to you," Mez said.

* * * * *

The iced cracked and cracked again as Tibs leaned against the house's wall, catching his breath. That had been too close. His would be assassin had come out of nowhere and nearly planted the knife in Tibs chest.

Not out of nowhere. Tibs had been aware of the faint essence, but he'd dismissed it as inconsequential. Just another of the townsfolk relieving himself in the shadows, or one who drank too much and needed to let the ground level out under their feet again.

He hadn't even considered this could be another attack, or that the woman would be skilled enough to make him word for his victory.

He knew better.

The ice cracked, and he focused on filling it instead of healing himself. Anger over this led to remembering other reasons for him to be angry, which forced him to think about why he was angry and those reasons hurt too much.

And fire resided in that anger; it made the ice brittle. So he had to cool it down to ambers before he did anything else.

Once he was healed, he gave the body one kick, then pulled it into the shadows again. The rats and dogs would get to it before it smelled enough to be found. He went through her pockets and came away with a couple of silvers and handful of coppers. The knife he took to add to the supplies for when he started training Omega teams.

What he didn't find was an indication of who had paid her to attempt to kill him. He knew Sebastian was ultimately responsible, but with him dead, there had to be someone hiring the killers and trouble makers.

Jackal didn't know. His father had had lieutenants and gang bosses, but he hadn't wanted to be involved, so paid as little attention to how they hired out help.

Tibs paid attention to everything around him as he headed back toward the training grounds.

* * * * *

"Darran, my good friend," Jackal exclaimed as he and Tibs entered the shop.

The merchant was immediately on alert. "Greetings," he said cautiously, then glanced at Tibs, who shrugged. Jackal had asked him to come along, and lied when he'd said it was because he wanted Tibs to keep the merchant honest, but Tibs hadn't pressed.

"I have a question for you," the fighter said.

"I shall endeavor to provide you with an answer."

"Perfect." Jackal rested his elbows on the wooden counter. "Let's say that I'd gotten my hands on some dungeon enchanted piece of armor. What would you say to that?"

"I would say that you have handed it to the guild, as you are required to, unless you paid what they asked, then I'll say you were swindled."

"I'd never pay what they want," Jackal stated. "But what if I told you that I came up with a way to sneak one of them out of the dungeon without getting caught by the guild?"

Tibs stared at Jackal in disbelief. He couldn't seriously plan on telling Darran about his pouch. The merchant wouldn't be able to keep from pressing for more answers.

"I would say," Darran said, his eyes flicking to Tibs, "that you are playing a dangerous game, if you have indeed attempted it."

"Succeeded." Jackal grinned. "So, could you find me a buyer willing to pay good coins? You'd get your cut, obviously."

"A buyer I can find you without trouble. The quality of the coins will depend on what you are offering."

"Like I said, dungeon enchanted armor. Leather chest piece, plain looking and enchanted to be tougher, and slowly repair itself."

"That is not something that will attract the highest quality, but there is always someone interested in acquiring dungeon made items since the guild limits their availability. So long as you can prove it came from the dungeon."

"My word's not enough?"

Darran smiled. "Your word is all I need. Unfortunately, the collectors of such items demand more than the word, twice removed, of a Runner."

"I don't know how to prove it came from there," Jackal replied, looking at Tibs, "other than asking the guild."

Tibs shrugged. How did the fighter expect him to help?

"An expert can be brought in," Darran said.

"For coins," Jackal added, and the merchant nodded.

"How can a sorcerer tell that it's from the dungeon?" Tibs asked.

"It won't be a sorcerer," Darran replied. "Jackal couldn't afford one of them with what he's describing. From what I have observed of how they work, there are tools that let them see the weave of an enchantment and, that with enough knowledge of the dungeon, it is possible to match that to where it came from. Which raises another issue you'd encounter. With the dungeon being so young, I'm not aware of anyone who's studied it yet. Outside of the guild, I mean. They are as tight-lipped about their findings on dungeons as they are closed fist about the items they hoard."

"You're saying there's no way I can get good coins for it," Jackal said.

"I am saying there is no way, now, for you to get better than good coins for it. How long can you hold on to it? In a few years, experts will be doing in weekly with their teams to study what makes this dungeon different from the others, and with the knowledge, it will be possible for you to show this is where it came

from.”

“In a few years,” Jackal said, “I’ll be taking out stuff from deeper floors. If I’m even doing runs anymore. I’m going to be an adventurer then.”

“That is certainly the conundrum you are facing. But it will still be worth more than is it now.”

Tibs watched Jackal think, wrestles with his greed. More coins were always better for the fighter, but coin now was also quite good. “How much would you give me?”

“I’ll have to see it to say,” Darran answered, not showing any of the joy he had to be feeling. “I do promise to give you the fair price for what you show me.”

“A merchant’s promise,” Jackal replied dubiously.

“A friend’s promise,” Darran countered.

“A merchant’s promise,” Jackal repeated with the same dubious tone.

“My friend,” Tibs said. He might not trust the merchant with everything, but he considered him among the friends he had in the town.

Jackal nodded. “Tibs’s friend’s promise. That I can take. When do you want me to bring it?”

At least he wasn’t taking it out of the pouch right now, Tibs thought.

“It might be simpler for me to stop by the inn. I expect your man is aware of what you are doing and can keep it somewhere discreet where I will be able to look at it.”

Kroseph knew about the pouch and Jackal sneaking out items. He had to know Jackal planned on selling them, but how pleased he would be about it happening this way? Tibs wasn’t certain. Jackal’s man wasn’t as greedy as the fighter was.

* * * * *

The knock on the door pulled Tibs out of his thoughts. He’d been lying on his bed, the only one occupied in his team’s room at the moment, waiting for sleep to pull him under. He’d prefer using Purity to remove the need, but he had to suffuse himself with the essence for that to happen, which meant letting Water go and that mean feeling everything.

He opened the door, and Don stood on the other side.

“I need a bed,” the sorcerer said after Tibs stayed quiet.

“Why?”

“The is our team’s room, isn’t it?” the sorcerer snapped. “I have a right to a bed here.”

Tibs stepped out of the way, and Don didn’t seem to know what to do. He looked at Tibs suspiciously, then attempted a smug expression, only for his shoulders to sag, look to the stairs, sigh, and step in.

He mumbled something as Tibs closed the door.

“I said I’m sorry for snapping,” he snapped, then seemed to realize Tibs hadn’t said anything and looked confused.

Tibs shrugged. He knew it was offensive behavior on Don’s part, but he didn’t care. “Take any of them except the ones at either ends, and that one.” He pointed to the bed next to his as he headed to sit on his bed.

Jackal and Mez always spent the nights with their special someones, or at least at her house, in Mez’s case. Tibs didn’t know if the archer did anything with his girl. He no longer talked about her or his time there, and she no longer stepped outside the noble’s neighborhood.

“What happened to your room?”

Don checked the firmness of both beds before sitting on what had been Mez’s. “I was kicked out.”

“Didn’t you have the coins?”

“Yes, I have the coins,” he replied angrily. “I’m not like Jackal and always spending my money. The owner of the house wouldn’t let me pay for the floor. He said he’s got better prospect coming, so he forced em to take all our possessions out and now I’m... here.”

“You paid for a floor?” Tibs asked as the sorcerer pulled his knees to himself, leaning against the wall and rested his head down on them.

“You think I was going to stay in a place like this any longer than I had to?” the look Don gave Tibs was defiant, but didn’t last.

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“You can do anything your money lets you do,” he said in surprising anger.

“Where’s your stuff?”

“I leased space in a warehouse until I...” he rubbed at his eyes. “Until I contact the other’s families and find out what they want to happen to their things.”

Tibs nodded. “There’s some space in the chest. I’m the only one who uses it now, and all I leave there is

my armor." He stretched on his bed.

"Why didn't you tell me to go fuck myself?"

"You're on the team. This is our room."

"How are you so fucking calm about this? You wanted nothing to do with me when I—when Tirania put me on your team."

Tibs closed his eyes and considered how to best answer the sorcerer. "I'm calm about this, because I don't think the town will survive it if I stop being calm about anything."

* * * * *

It happened surrounded by people.

Tibs had watched a group of people arrive. They weren't runners; they were too old, dressed too well. Some were dressed the way nobles were, but they were under guards. The guards also looked to be of a higher status. Their armors polished, and in bright colors.

Instead of being escorted toward the dungeon, they headed into the town, and Tibs lost interest. He'd walked away to head to the inn, where he had papers to deal with. Kroseph's father had joked Tibs should rent a room as his office, for all the work he did at the inn.

The problem with a room was that it couldn't be as secure as keeping the satchel with his papers on him or in his room. He also didn't want to work on them alone. In the inn's common room, Kroseph could force him to stop and eat.

The crowd became thicker and rowdier. Tibs pocketed a few coins without looking at what they were.

Then a yell somewhere ahead and the crowd shifted, pulling him along. They wanted to avoid the commotion, and Tibs had no issue doing the same as they stepped into one of the larger alleys to go around it.

That was where it happened.

The crowd halted, and as Tibs bumped into the person ahead of him, he felt pain in his back. Someone pulled him away from the person ahead of him, and Tibs looked down as his forearm's length of a sword extended out of his chest.

"Sebastian sends his regard," a man whispered in Tibs's ears. "And I thank you for making me rich."

The man let go of Tibs, and he slowly fell to the ground.

Planning-16

“I had wondered,” a woman said in a stern tone, “if you would come.”

Tibs gasps in and his hand reached for his breast, then stopped so he couldn't cut himself on the sword that was...

He wasn't dead... How could he not be dead? The sword had skewered his heart. He looked at his chest. There wasn't even a rip in his shirt.

“It did not,” the woman said. “If it had, you would not be here.”

He looked around. The space was large, the surfaces gray and filled with sharp angles. The speaker was... also gray, and while her form reminded Tibs of a woman, someone familiar, she too was covered with angles that looked sharp enough to slice him open.

He looked behind him, and the wall he nearly rested against looked ready to cut him to ribbons. He wanted to move away, but the floor looked so safer.

“Metal,” he realized. “You're Metal.” He looked around again. “How am I here? How can I have an audience? It's supposed to happen somewhere close to the element. I'm supposed to feel a lot.”

She tapped his chest, cutting the shirt and his flesh in the process. “I cannot think of being closer to the living than against that which keeps them living. Any closer and the living would have ended for you, far too early for you to be ready.”

And he'd been dying. The pain of her touch reminded him of that of the sword going through him. The man whispering his thanks and his message. Sebastian had done this to him, just like he'd killed Carina, tried to destroy his town.

Tibs screamed, holding himself. The pain as he fell to his knees was nothing compared to what was inside him. He reached for Water; he had to numb himself before the pain killed him, but it wasn't there. Where was Water? How had he lost his essence?

“This is me,” the woman spoke. “My brethren will not hold dominion here. Now, stop whimpering. Thing of man. You are supposed to be special. Show me.”

Tibs glared at her. Whimpering? His life had been ripped to shred, and she thought this was whimpering? He reached for Fire—he was going to show her what pain was like—and found nothing. His anger became an inferno. Element or not, he was going to make her pay for belittling what he had lived through.

He launched himself at her, ignoring the pain slicing through his feet.

“Stop.” The word was emotionless, but firm. An order, and Tibs found he'd stopped, held in place by points of metal pressing against all of him, but not piercing his body. “Is this what you are?” she asked. “A thing driven by what it feels? Without control? Will you bend under any weight put on you? Will you be nothing without us?”

Tibs tried to glare at her, but she kept walking out of his sight and any motion made the points dig into his flesh, reminded him of the damage they could do.

That he could do to himself.

She hadn't hurt him. She hadn't attacked him. This pain he felt because of what she had placed around him was of his doing.

He forced his breathing to slow. He pushed the pain of losing Carina aside until he remembered where he was, what he should do now that he was here.

The anger clawed at him, and without Water to ice it, thinking was difficult. What did it matter what

he had to do when she was forcing him to feel all this pain? She had to pay for that, be made to feel the pain, too. The consequences could go to the abyss for all his anger cared.

But he wasn't his anger, Tibs reminded himself. As all engulfing as it felt. Tibs was not his anger. He forced it to the other side. Away from his pain so they couldn't feed on each other.

When she walked before him again, his mind was clear enough he could search for it, for the shadow within her. He didn't see it then, among the angles and sharp edges, so he looked around as much as his immobilized head let him. Everything here was Metal, so he couldn't get fixated on her, on the body she had created to interact with him.

Not within anything he saw either.

He studied her again as she walked before him. The edges that made her body glinted as if light shone on them, and it reminded him of Tirania's crystal eyes. And he knew who Metal reminded him of.

Her. The guild leader. With her rules and unbending ways, unless it served her. Then Tibs expected rules no longer applied.

His anger blossomed, but he forced it down. Now was not the time for it. Outside, once he was back—he pushed the fear he might not make it back away too.

"Why do you look like her?" he asked when she was before him, and she paused. She might be naked, or clothed, with all the edges it made that impossible to tell.

"Like who?"

"Tirania." With her remaining still, the glints settled, creating areas of shadows in the light that—

"What is she?"

The question pulled his attention away. "She's a bitch," he said before he could stop himself and fought his anger back down. "She's in charge of the guild here. She's the reason Sebastian was able to destroy most of the town, twice. She keeps lying about there being reasons for why she does what she does."

"But what is she?"

Now the question puzzled him and he couldn't go back to what he'd noticed. Did Metal mean which element? No, the elements knew of each other and even interacted, but they didn't express much interest in who wielded them. Who Tirania was as a person? What she acted like?

"She's harsh. She won't compromise, even when she acts like she will. It's all about her and what she wants."

Metal nodded. "Now you know why you see me as this."

He shook his head. "You make yourself look like that."

"You make me out of what is here—" she motioned around her "—and here." She tapped his forehead and Tibs ground his teeth at the pain, then shoved it with the rest.

Tibs snorted. "If I'd made you, you'd be soft shapes." And what he needed would be easy to find.

"I am not made for softness," She said. "And you cannot make us what we are not. That will never be something you can do."

Tibs nodded and focused on the play of light and shadows. The shadow was what he was looking for, and only she had them. Even standing still, the light glinted and created shadows. It did the same all around, except for the shadows. Those were only on her.

One of them, then? All of them? Did he have to grab the right one? How could he reach for any of them when he was unable to move?

No, that was untrue. He could move. If he was willing to endure the pain.

What he saw, being only able to move his eyes, showed him enough points against him that if he pushed, he'd feel more than pain. He'd feel his body cut apart, just as when he'd tried to get the shadow out of Purity, there would be nothing left of him.

Except, there had been.

This wasn't the real world. His body didn't behave entirely the way it did there. He reached for his essences again and found nothing.

No, there was something. His essence was present, and mixed in were earth and fire, not much of them. All of this was Metal, and she could keep the other essences out. Was she allowing those three elements? If this happened without her knowing, what did it mean? Could he use it to get the shadow?

He couldn't see how. Maybe if he was more advanced in his studies of etching.

Suffusing himself? Earth would make him more resistant to the pain and damage, but would it keep him from being ripped apart? Even completely stone, Jackal's body cracked when one of Sto's creature hit him with enough force.

Fire then? He could—

No. He wasn't using fire. His emotions were already difficult enough to control.

His essence? He had no idea what it did beyond representing some aspect of things that lived.

He couldn't think of another way.

He move his arm slightly and pain lance through it as point pressed in and others cut him. That part would be horrible. He pressed forward and immediately stopped. That felt like more pain than forcing his hand through Purity. It couldn't be, but still felt like it.

He looked at her, searched the shadows he could see as he steeled himself for what he needed to do. They all looked the same.

How long could he take? Was he bleeding-out out there? Time passed. He knew that. Jackal had been worried about how long his audience with Earth had taken, but did it pass the same way? Sto didn't understand time the way Tibs did, even Ganny only understood it in relation to what the Runners did.

The elements existed somewhere else entirely. What did time mean to them?

But it did mean something to Tibs, and he couldn't shake the feeling he was running low on it.

With a scream of determination and pain, he pushed through the metal points, reached for one of the shadows, then was free and tumbling into her, through her. He felts the shadow meld into him, the reserve form among the others, then he was on the other side, on the ground, trying to work out which of the shadows it had been.

"Good," she said.

He looked up at her. Saw the remnant of a body held in place by the thin spikes and opened his mouth to ask—

* * * * *

The breath came in ragged and painfully.

Tibs was confused. He'd been looking at... and now he was in so much pain. He could smell the blood, feel the metal through him.

Metal.

He'd ripped himself apart to reach her and the—

No, he'd been stabbed. What he sensed was the sword through his chest. He took it, broke it into its base essences, nearly all metal and some of the others. He let them all go. His essence was fading.

He suffused himself with Purity and immediately, breath easier and the pain eased until it vanished and he was left with only one desire.

He growled as he got to his feet.

Where the fuck was the man who had stabbed him?

He was alone in the alley, standing in his blood.

It didn't matter. He knew how to make sure that man died.

He reached for fire.

No!

The pain of realizing he'd killed so many of the townsfolk crashed into him and dropped him to his knees.

Yes!

Who fucking cared how many died, so long as the man who'd done that to him was one of them? He'd acted on Sebastian's orders, took his coins, that meant Tibs could do anything to—

"No!"

He reached for Water, channeled it, suffused himself with it. He could imagine it turning to steam until the heat of the anger he tried to control.

Then he was panting as cracking ice was all he was. He filled the cracks as they appeared and slowly his anger cooled and he could breathe again. When the cracks were all gone, he stood.

He was halfway between two turns in the large alley, keeping anything taking place here from being noticed by anyone not in the alley. Which had included a large crowd. Why had none of them come to his aid? Had they been afraid of his would be killer? How long had he been following Tibs to be right there when the crowd had formed and shifted away from the altercation in the street.

No one had come to his rescue. It didn't matter if no one knew who Tibs was, someone in that crowd should have reacted to the attack. Some of the townsfolk were brave enough to take on Sebastian, one should have tried to stop what had happened. Which would have meant a second body, possibly more.

His would be killer had arranged it all.

The crowd that had formed around Tibs, the altercation that caused it to shift in this alley, the man stopped so Tibs nearly walked in to him.

Then they'd gone away after the deed was done. Had left him to bleed out.

And Tibs had been too distracted to even notice.

What had he been distracted by?

He'd been thinking; about the inn, the work he needed to do, planning for the first Omega team that would be trained.

Tibs had been doing a lot of thinking recently. The ice made it easy to think. It kept the distracting thoughts away.

He looked around.

And kept him from paying attention to what took place around him, it seemed.

Well, at least something good had come of it.

He sensed the reserve for metal. He'd have to make time to practice channeling it... which would mean letting go of Water.

How much damage could metal do? He felt the skin through his sliced shirt. Too much.

And would he be able to keep from reaching for fire?

No. He couldn't take the chance.

What he could do was ask someone how it was he'd had an audience with Metal.

Planning-17

The lake was now just over two and zero paces away and the ground at the town's edge was already marked to show where more buildings would be added. Tibs wasn't sure what would happen once the lake was in the town itself. Would it be turned into the place where baths would be set up? Would the clothes washing shops move around it and turn the water gray?

He crouched next to it and placed a hand in the cool water. He sensed the essence in it, looking for some difference. The corruption adventurer Tibs had wanted to hire to remove the corruption pool on one side of Merchant Row, had told him that something had happened that connected that pool to the element, making removing it impossible. The only thing that had happened, other than its creation, was that Tibs had had an audience with Corruption through it.

And he had had an audience with Water in this lake.

He sensed nothing he identified as 'different'. There was a lot of water essence, and nearly none of the other elements, but this was a lake, so he expected that. What had Alistair said when he'd taken him to the cavern with the waterfall of his first audience? Closer to the element made refilling their reserves easier and faster?

What did that mean? Tibs could already refill his reserve quickly, with access to this amount of water. He could do the same within Sto's pool on the second floor. His teacher had said something about the reserve refilling as quickly as the essence was used.

Tibs looked over his shoulder. Maybe when the town was much further away, he could try the one etching he could pour as much essence into as he had access to so he could test that, but the explosion of water that would cause would be too easy to notice now, even with the sun so low.

And this wasn't why he was here.

He stepped into the clear water and kept walking until the water was over his head. He kept going, keeping himself at the bottom of the water until he was in the center of the lake. Not quite the lowest point, as that was to his left, a hole through which water flowed into the lake.

He was surrounded by water, as close to the element as he knew how to be. Now, he needed a strong emotion.

He couldn't drown. He understood that now, so he couldn't trick himself into believing that and cause himself to be scared he'd die. Water could no longer hurt him simply by being there. He didn't have to create air to be underwater. It just made the experience more comfortable.

But strong emotions were more than fear of dying. Tibs saw how powerful Jackal's love for Kroseph was in the way the fighter had changed his outlook on life for him. He saw Mez's dedication to his ideal through the pain he endured to maintain them. Tibs had neither of those.

But he had a strong emotion buried under all the ice. All he had to do was let it shatter and Tibs would feel more than he wanted to. More than he thought he could endure. At least here, when he exploded, the town would be safe.

He chuckled. Unless the explosion was such that the lake was sent into the air and fell down on it.

He stopped channeling Water and waited for the explosion.

How much destruction would the lake cause Kragle Rock if it fell on it?

Water could cut mountains into two. That was how powerful it was. But it didn't happen quickly. It took ages for the flowing water to remove enough of the stone to make the division. Thrown at the mountain quickly, it just splashed.

He didn't remember how the question had come about, but Carina had laughed, and then explained how—

Tibs screamed as Sebastian's knife moved across Carina's throat, blood gurgling over the blade. Tibs screams as his essence was couldn't find purchase within Carina to save her. Tibs screamed as he pulled his essence out of the Water sorcerer, then the Earth, the Fire and all of them. Tibs screamed as he shattered piece after piece of Sebastian.

Tibs screamed, and the water around him boiled.

* * * * *

"That is enough," the gentle woman's voice said.

No, it wasn't. It would never be enough. Tibs wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of Sebastian's legacy or the guild. He would burn—

"I said that is enough." The voice was no less gentle for being firmer, but it pushed Tibs's anger away. It didn't encase it in ice, the way Tibs did, cooling it until it was barely an ember. Water put distance between it and Tibs. He knew it was still rage, but the distance reduced its effect.

But it didn't remove it.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why did she have to die?" Getting to his feet. "Why did you let her die?"

Water smiled at him sadly. "I do not have influence on your world, Child of Human."

"Why not? Your essence gets there, so why aren't deciding who gets it and what they have to do to use it? Why aren't you and the others making sure we stop always hurting each other?"

"You know why," she answered. "You simply chose not to acknowledge it because you want to hurt someone."

Tibs closed his mouth on the reply. He wasn't here to lash out. He was here for answers. He forced himself to ignore the anger.

"How did I have an audience with Metal?"

"You met the requirements."

"But you didn't tell me to have one. You said that after I had Corruption, Light, Purity, and Darkness, I'd have unlocked what happened next. I can turn my reserve into any element I channel now."

"And you thought that would be the end of it?"

Tibs sighed. "Will it ever end, or am I going to have to chase after all the elements?"

She considered him. "You are not required to do anything. You are on a path..." she smiled. "You are on the steps of a stairwell, and each one of us can help you step further along it. You can stop anytime you desire, you can return to it, or not, as you decide."

"And what happens once I reach the top of that stairwell?"

"It ends."

That sounded ominous.

"But I don't have to."

"This is your path, Child of Humans. How far along it you go is only for you to decide."

"Do you have any advice for me?"

"Choose wisely. The path will bring you power, and with it comes danger."

"I already know to be careful not to let the guild know what I can do," he replied bitterly. He'd hoped for something more useful. Then he noticed the sad smile she gave him. She probably meant something else. Others in general? Was the power itself dangerous to him and those around him? He already knew fire was.

"Can you explain what you mean?"

"Warning you it exists is the limit of what I can do. The rest is for you to work out."

Tibs nodded. "Is there an order in which I should seek out the other elements?" How many of them were there?

"The order is also for you to decide, although, because of what you are, some may come to you without having to seek them. What you are will not protect you or ensure you will reach them, so remain vigilant."

Tibs touched his chest. Only a little to one side, and the sword would have killed him, instead of sending him to an audience.

"Why?" Tibs asked. "Why does the shadow exist? Why can I take it? What is this about?" there had to be a reason. He didn't want to believe it was just random.

"I do not know. The shadow was there when I became aware. Throughout what you refer to as the ages, some have noticed it, and a few took it. It is the rare one who returned to speak once they had it." She smiled. "Do not be hasty, Child of Human. There is time ahead of you to accomplish what you set yourself to

do.”

He frowned. “It this about—”

* * * * *

Water filled his mouth, and he trashed. He was underwater. Where was the surface? He couldn’t drown right after having his audience with Water.

He closed his mouth, annoyed with himself, then angry. How could he forget so easily Water wasn’t a threat to him? Was he going to be afraid of a tankard of the stuff next? Was he going to cower in fear if the next would be assassin splashed water on his face?

The blade slicing across her neck. His essence not finding purchase. The snap as he broke off another piece of Sebastian.

Tibs opened his mouth to—

He turned himself to ice so hard the water surrounding him crackled and snapped, pressing against him. Then he sensed himself and the block of ice he was encased in move toward the surface.

He willed it to stop and fought with it. Ice floated, so it resisted being submerged. He melted it and moved to the edge, then stopped. He sensed people near the lake. Mostly townsfolk, a few guards, but the metal at their hips, and some adventurer. There was still light, so he’d be seen if he went any closer.

Was he responsible for attracting their attention? Had Water not taken him to his Audience in time to stop the boiling he’d initiated? There was no indication in the essence of what had happened, so he waited until they lost interest and returned to the town, then until the sun set fully, and exited on the opposite shore.

* * * * *

Water, it turned out, hadn’t taken him before the boil exploded; Tibs found out the next morning. It hadn’t sent the lake up and falling on the town, or even any water that way, but it had sounded like thunder and those on that side had seen the water erupt and fall. Stories of what had caused it circulated. Some wondered if it was left over Everburn that had found its way into the lake and caught. Others thought it was a creature that had escaped the dungeon that had caused it. On the heel of it, was a story about adventurers fighting said creature.

Jackal had asked Tibs what he thought it was, barely able to keep from smirking. Tibs had almost replied he’d been sleeping, but remembered Don now shared the room. So he told them he’d been roof running and hadn’t noticed it. By the time Kroseph asked Tibs opinion too, Don had left to table, book in hand, so when Tibs repeated his story, the server patted his shoulder condescendingly.

“Of courser you didn’t, Tibs. What was I thinking?”

* * * * *

The houses looked nice, Tibs thought. They were the first to be finished, and he wanted to see what guild sponsored work was like. He was impressed. Each house was two stories and looked to accommodate a family of six or seven. No nobles would want to live in one, but they were suitable for townsfolk, or the people who’d been brought to look after the urchins.

One such couple didn’t seem impressed, though, commenting on the material used, the color, or the plainness of the furniture. He didn’t understand their complaints, since the guild let them use the house without having to pay for it, other than by looking after the urchins assigned to them.

Even paying coins for it, Tibs had been happy with the team’s room, and it was much smaller and plainer than that.

A snuffle at his calf made him look down, and the dog looked at him questioningly. This one was larger than Thump, and its fur bright red. Its brown eyes glinted with mischievousness.

He pulled a piece of jerky, then jerked his hand away as Serba tried to grab it.

“It’s for…” Tibs indicated the dog.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Ravager,” she said.

Tibs looked down at Ravager in surprise. He didn’t see any of the violence he’d expect from that name in its eyes. “I think it tricked you,” he said. “Trickster’s a better name.”

“She,” Serba corrected, “is going to be the most dangerous of them.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Tibs said, crouching and giving the dog the piece of jerky. “You’re going to be a fun loving one, always getting the other in trouble with her, and pulling them out of trouble too.” He leaned in and whispered. “You’re a rogue, aren’t you?”

“If you listen to one word he says, Ravager, I will—” Serba closed her mouth. “What am I doing? She doesn’t understand you. She barely understands my signals yet.”

Tibs rubbed between the dog’s ears as he straightened. “I didn’t think the guild would spend the coins

for them,” he said, indicating the houses.

Serba looked at him, then at the houses. “The guild didn’t pay for them to be built.”

“Then who’s paying?”

She shrugged. “Whatever family sent their undesirable members here.”

“Why would any family not want some of them?”

She stared at him and snorted. “You do remember Jackie wants nothing to do with the rest of his family, right?”

“And he left. You did too. Sebastian didn’t send him away.” The ice cracked just mentioning him.

She considered that. “These are from wealthy families. Minor nobles, merchant families, would be nobles. All sorts who have two things in common. Lots of money and a need to appear respectable. Those kinds of families will always produce unwanted members. Men and women not interested in behaving in a ‘proper’ way. Could be as simple as not dressing in the family’s colors or associating with the ‘wrong’ kind of people, or they bedded the wrong person and now have an heir no one can know about. Making sure those indiscretions don’t come to light isn’t easy. Our father had scores of people whose job it was to discover them. Those filled his coffers easily.”

She watched the arguing couple. “She’s the one they needed to have leave, and he is her lover, probably from a rival family, so both families might have put money toward sending them away. His family’s not as rich. He’s used to having less. That’s why she’d doing most of the complaining. From what I gathered, the guild sent word that for a modest price, they’d take in any unwanted family members.”

“So the guild didn’t do this?” the ice cracked again. Why was he even surprised?

“It did it, in that he gave them the opportunity, but no, the guild isn’t who put up the money to get the house built.”

“Then why aren’t they happy with it if they paid for it?”

Serba chuckled. “These people didn’t pay for the house. Their families did. And they only paid the minimum they have to, so this would happen. The families willing to spend money on their unwanted relatives don’t have to resort to sending them away to some unknown dungeon town.” She glanced at him. “Are you really that surprised?”

“I was hoping...” Why had he even bothered.

“The guild makes adventurers, Tibs. Adventurers only work for money. Forget the bards and their songs. For every one adventurer out there risking her life because she thinks it’s the right thing to do, there are scores and scores of them sitting in a tavern waiting until the people suffering around them a desperate enough to pay them to do something about it. You think they learn that somewhere other than the guild?”

Tibs shook his head. Every day that Alistair trained him, it was three gold Tibs owed the guild. He was fortunate in that his teacher didn’t believe in useless training sessions, so only came a few times a week to evaluate where Tibs stood in his practices. Now he was here every other day, because learning the essence letters didn’t take as long. But once it Tibs had to train in applying them to his essence and get them to work together, he expected Alistair wouldn’t be over as often anymore.

Jackal had to see his trainer every day, as had Mez and Don, and most of the other Runners.

He would owe the least to the guild by the time he was Epsilon, and he still had no idea how he could ever repay that much gold.

Planning-18

Tibs watched from the rooftop as the group of urchins was brought to the house. This one was slightly more ostentatious than the others, and while the man welcomed them with warmth, the woman remained distant. Tibs knew little about them. He'd asked Serba to find out more about the people who'd take care of the Omegas, but she'd just rolled her eyes.

They didn't seem to think of the other as their special person. There was none of the warmth or playfulness Tibs saw in those he knew. They didn't even seem to get along. Tibs had watched them argue before the urchins were close enough to be seen, and the little he'd been able to get the wind to bring to him seem to revolve around the sleeping arrangement.

She wasn't interested in sharing a room with him, which made them one short for the urchins. He'd tried to convince her, but she wouldn't give in.

Tibs didn't know how much of a problem some urchins sharing a room might cause. He'd be happy just having a roof that didn't leak and walls that didn't let all the icy wind in. If he had to share the space? He'd claim a corner and be happy with it. But he'd seen how the townfolk were different. Some had their children share a room and the bed. Usually, they were the least wealthy; workers building houses, or servers and other manual labor. Some gave each child a bed, the way his team room was arranged, while the wealthier ones had a room for each child.

Maybe the two here were from different social group. The man's clothing was more expensive than hers, and that was why they didn't agree.

The group of urchin had three girls and two boys, not including the two that were carried in their arms. He wondered if they were a team.

He knew the babes might not be related to the one carrying them. Quigly had told him war caused such ravages it was rare for sibling to remain together. Often, they formed groups much like the Runners did at the start. Whoever was around that could help.

The information he'd gathered told the urchins came from four separate wars. The warrior had told Tibs the name of the kingdoms, but they were meaningless to him. Unless a war threatened his town, he couldn't worry about what armies did. Ensuring Kragle Rock thrived in spite of the guild was work enough.

Once the group was inside the house, Tibs left. This was the fourth such meeting between urchins and their caretakers he'd watched. It hadn't been the warmest, but also not the coldest.

The first couple and been so cold toward the group that would live with them Tibs had felt in on the air all the way from his perch. He'd do his best to observe each household. He knew too well that not everyone would be as nice, or as horrible, to their charges as he thought they might be.

* * * * *

Tibs, Jackal, Quigly, and a dozen Runners hurried to move the boxes out of the shop's basement. Tibs had found the paper under his tankard when he'd returned from using the outhouse, warning him the guards had found out where he kept the equipment they'd lent the Omega Runner, back when they were helping train them, and they would be confiscated that evening. No one at the inn had seen who had put it there, and after checking the area to make sure it wasn't a trap to catch him moving them, he'd arranged for a new storage location.

When they were done, Tibs took position on a roof and waited.

The guard team was eight strong, and the one in the lead showed a paper to the shop's keeper before being allowed in. A few minutes later they left, the one at the lead unhappy. Tibs waited until he was sure they

were all gone and checked in with the shop owner. The paper explained what the guards were doing and looking for. It was a step they were required to follow before they could raid a shop. And it needed to be signed by the Magistrate of the Law. It was a position assigned by the kingdom, not the guild, and any settlement that reach the level of a town needed to have one.

The merchant didn't know more than that.

* * * * *

"Do you know about the Magistrate of the Law?" Tibs asked Jackal as the team ate their meal.

"I know he's around," the fighter said.

"She," Don corrected, then looked at his food.

"You know about her?" Tibs asked.

"Lady Arabel of Cananey," the sorcerer said.

"She's a noble?" Tibs asked, the ice cracking.

"She's..." Don sighed resignedly. "She's titled. I don't know her that well, but the position is usually assigned to a scholar who made studying the laws of the realm their focus. In the larger cities, the Magistrate is assigned by the king directly, but for the smaller cities and towns, he has a committee who handles that, although for us I expect the king made the decision. Kings and the guild have a contentious relationship. Making sure a Magistrate who won't let the guild overstep their authority is assigned to a dungeon town is one of the few ways a king has to push against them."

"Why did she let them destroy half the town, then?" Tibs asked.

Don shook his head. "Her authority doesn't extend to what Sebastian caused. That was them defending themselves. She's there to stop the guild from abusing their authority."

Jackal snorted.

"I must say that I am underwhelmed with her work," Khumdar said, "considering the guild treats the Runners as cattle to feed the dungeon."

"That's different." It looked like Don would wilt under the disbelieving stares, then he straightened. "We, the Runners, aren't citizens of the kingdom. We are owned by the guild. Somewhere in one of the many halls of the guild, there is a contract stipulating, with all the right legal terms, that we have no rights. That we handed them over to the guild for whatever benefits they offered."

"I didn't sign anything," Mez commented.

Don shook his head. "You were arrested for a crime. During that time, you belonged to whatever penal system your kingdom employs. It was the same for each of us." He hesitated, looking at Tibs. "Except possibly Tibs."

"I was in a cell."

"But you're also Street. No city can ever get read of that, but they try, and as such, few kingdoms give those people even the basic rights they'll give their other citizens."

"Like making sure the guards keep them safe from abuse by the nobility?" Mez asked.

"In theory." Don raised a hand. "Keep in mind the nobility is a class apart, and as a group close enough to kings to think they are entitled to special treatment and have the money to make that happen." The sorcerer's tone became hot as he spoke, and he had to calm himself before continuing. "They could have swept the area, gathered anyone they wanted, and under the laws, it would have been acceptable to hand those people to the guild."

"The urchins?" Tibs asked.

"War is... different. Whoever wins gets to dictate the laws. Not every kingdom is kind to the losers, even if they weren't active in the fighting. As bad as them being here is, it could have been worse."

"Being sold as house servants is common," Khumdar said.

"And that would be among the least horrible thing," Don said. "Taking advantage of the losers is a grand tradition in some kingdoms."

"You're talking about bedding the children of the fighters?" Jackal said, disgusted.

Don didn't reply, but his expression was answer enough.

"How can the magistrate force the guild to do anything?" Tibs asked. "All she did here was sign a paper the guards showed to the shopkeeper."

Don studied Tibs for a few seconds. "If the guild decides not to obey the laws, there's nothing the magistrate can do about it, other than report to the king. The king will have to decide how far he wants to push the guild in return. In the end, it's nothing more than symbolic. I doubt that even if all the kingdoms banded together, they'd be able to take on the guild. But it's a symbolic relationship that's been respected for

close to a thousand years.”

Tibs nodded. “So, if the guards want to do anything in town, they have to get her to agree?”

“Not everything. It’s mainly there to protect the merchants.”

“And nobles,” Jackal said, still looking at his food like he wasn’t sure he could eat it.

“No officially,” Don replied, but then shrugged. “Money gives people power, and nobles have a lot of both. Anyone below kings and the guild are cautious of angering them, and that includes a magistrate of the law.”

Tibs wasn’t surprised. That was one thing he’d already seen happen. “What does it mean for her to be titled?”

“To be titled basically means that the king, or whatever committee they’ll have handling that, granted the title, instead of them inheriting it. In the case of a magistrate, he also indicates something else. Because they have to act for the kingdom, and not the people in it, a magistrate can’t officially be a noble. But most scholars are from noble families because of how expensive it is to attend the academies. I’m sure the history books will explain when and what caused it to happen, but in being titled, the magistrate is officially separated from their families. In effect, they become their own families. No, that doesn’t mean they won’t work for their family agendas still. But it’s why a king will be careful when picking a magistrate for any city of importance.”

“And the position in Kragle Rock is important because the guild is here,” Tibs said, and Don nodded.

“If you’re thinking of talking her into protecting you from the guards,” Don said, “she can’t.”

“But Tibs’s helping,” Mez said.

“I’m breaking the rules.”

“Technically,” Jackal said, “What Tibs is doing with the merchant’s a protection racket. It doesn’t matter that the merchants approached him, and that we are making sure there are no retributions if they can’t afford what they agreed to pay, but under the law, that is what we are doing.”

“But helping the Runners?” the archer asked.

“We aren’t citizens of the kingdom,” Tibs replied. “There’s nothing the laws can do for us.”

“The writ was to protect the merchant,” Don agreed.

“Then, so long as we keep storing the stuff in one shop or another, we’ll get warning and we can move it elsewhere,” Jackal said, eating again.

“That will be highly inconvenient,” Khumdar said, “and depend entirely on being warned in time. I expect the guards will quickly realize someone tips you off and take steps to keep that from happening again.”

“Or use it to catch you in the act,” Don added. “Not to mention how disruptive doing this to one merchant after the other is going to be. If you alienate them, the money you need to help the Omegas will disappear.”

“We’re going to have to find another hiding place for all of that,” Jackal grumbled.

Tibs nodded. They’d put everything in the warehouse he used to train, but it couldn’t remain there. Even if he didn’t plan on training close to them, he used the warehouse because losing control endangered nothing valuable.

Someone whistled a signal before the commotion at the door started. Tibs looked in that direction, surprised that anyone used the warning that guards were approaching here. When Kroseph parted the agitated crowd, glaring at those who tried to make something of his intervention, four guards were revealed. They weren’t the usual sort that came to the inn to enjoy the food and drinks. The one in the lead was the one who had handed the paper to the shop owner. The three with him looked ready to take on anyone in the inn if it came to it, but none of them had essence.

Kroseph spoke with the leader, then stepped aside and the four headed for Tibs’s table.

“Tibs Light Fingers,” the man said, looking them over and finally setting his gaze on Tibs. “You are being brought in for interfering in guild run business. Don’t resist. If you do, I have been authorized to restrain you.”

Jackal snorted. “We have a run Tomorrow. Come back after that.”

“If you’re that interested in that,” the leader said, “then you should ensure no one on your team breaks guild rules.”

“What business has Tibs interfered with?” Khumdar asked. “Other than the dungeon, I’m not aware the guild has any business in the town.”

“Training of the Omegas is guild business, and Tibs Light Fingers has been identified as someone meddling in it.”

“Like he’s the only one,” Mez said. “I—”

Don shook his head. "You don't want to give them any reason, Mez. Remember what I said."

"We aren't citizens of the realm," Tibs said, standing.

"Tibs, don't just do what they say." Jackal stood too.

"I'm not going to cause any problems. Not here," he told Jackal, "not elsewhere," he told the guard. "I'm sorry you're going to miss the run because of me."

"The abyss can take the run," Jackal growled. "This is because that boss of yours doesn't like Tibs."

The leader shrugged. "The complaint came through the proper procedures." They surrounded Tibs as he headed for the door.

* * * * *

The cell's door shut behind Tibs and he looked at the other occupant of the cell, trying to ignore the discomfort of the weave pressing down on him. There were fewer, but looked no friendlier than his previous stay.

Two days, the guard told him, was the time he'd spent in the cell for his infraction. Considering Tibs had been going to the training field from the first day, Irdian had arranged this to keep his team from going on their run.

"Well, well, well. I didn't know runts got thrown in with the big boys," a massive man said as he took a step in Tibs's direction.

"Do you see my eyes?" Tibs asked.

The man snorted. "Magic don't work in here."

"That isn't what it should tell you." Tibs was on the man before he was done taking another step and had him writhing in pain on the floor with only half a dozen well-placed blows.

* * * * *

"I hope you have learned your lesson," Irdian said as he opened the cell's door. If he was disappointed that Tibs was unharmed, he didn't show it. That he was here confirmed to Tibs he was behind his time in the cell.

Tibs didn't reply. He stepped out and headed for the exit.

* * * * *

Tibs walked among the stalls lining the now paved path, studying what was offered, as well as the Omega runners waiting for their turn into the dungeon. It was their second days going in. Tibs had missed the first because he had been in the cell. As expected, they didn't fare well. No better than they had when Tibs had first gone in. The one difference he noticed was that they weren't as confused about what was going on. They'd received better explanation than simply. When you're called, show up and you'll be assigned a team. They also knew what to do with the equipment that was handed to them at the guild's table.

He stayed out of Sto's range. He didn't want to know how poorly they were doing. It was clear when the guard at the bottom of the stair sent up the next group without the previous one exiting.

Among those still waiting, he saw a mix of fear, bravado, determination, and resignation. Bravado and resignation wouldn't help them survive, and hopefully it wouldn't lead to the rest of the team dying.

He spied a Runner at a booth selling swords and shields, and stepped next to her. He nodded to man on the other side. He didn't know him, but had seen him at the Weapons shop on Merchant Row.

"Can I ask you a question?" Tibs asked, surprising the man. "It's for her, but it's best if no one notices."

"Me?" she replied, confused, looking at him.

"Might be best if you check the weight of the shield, Miss," the merchant said, nodding to Tibs. He handed her a small one.

"What did they tell you about the rules of the runs?" Tibs asked.

"Rules?" she didn't seem to know what to do with the shield. "Just to survive and help each other."

"Did they say anything about how far you need to go?" Tibs took a short sword and looked it over.

"No." She hesitated. "I figured we had to reach the end of the floor. That's how we get to the second one and graduate, right?"

"You don't have to finish the floor on your first try. If you don't think your team can survive the room, you can turn around and wait until your next time."

She looked him over. "How do you know that?"

"He's one of the first to have gone in," the merchant said. "That's Tibs Light Fingers."

Tibs stifled the sigh. There went any chances he had of the new Runners not calling him that either. "We weren't told much either. We discovered the rules as we went. You don't graduate by reaching the end of the floor. You graduate by surviving long enough to become stronger. That means you want to walk out of that

door.” He looked at her. “Even if it means you’re the only one doing it.”

Planning-19

Tibs paused and looked at the mess he'd made of the crest. If he'd done this correctly, once he was done with the next sequence, the dragon would be formed and the door unlocked. This puzzle had stolen enough of his confidence in his ability that he wasn't certain he'd done it correctly. He glanced at the shield at the top of the corner. If he made a mistake, he wouldn't have the time to redo it. As it was, he wasn't sure if they'd have enough time left to tackle the room.

"Tibs?" Jackal asked, and that was enough to get him to focus.

He gave the fighter a nod and began turning the pieces, moving through the sequence. Small cracks appeared in the ice and he fought the desire to pick up speed as more of the dragon formed. Haste could undo all his work.

The last of the pieces turned, then clicked into place.

Tibs's relief as the door lifted stole his strength and Jackal had to pull him away. Nothing happened, but it had been stupid to simply stand there. This could have been the room where Ganny had a trap, ready to pounce, as the door opened.

Beyond the door was a corridor instead of a room. At a glance, it was three paces wide, and it had a line in the floor running across every three paces. The walls and floor were so white it reminded Tibs of the building in MountainSea, but they had had the sun shining down on them, while there was simply very white stone.

"What are they?" Jackal asked, standing at the threshold and examining the wall. "The isn't stone."

"Don't," Tibs warned as the fighter went to touch it. He pushed the exhaustion away and stepped to the doorway. Jackal was right. They might look like stone, but they were a weave different from any Sto used in the dungeon. It was so tight Tibs could only get an impression of the essences in it, instead of feeling the threads.

Corruption essence flew at it and spread, moving in a way that reminded Tibs of feeling a wall for a hidden panel.

"It's resistant to corruption," Don said.

"Like the rest of the dungeon," Mez replied.

"No, this is different. The way it's woven into the stone elsewhere is clearly an afterthought. The dungeon reacting to something done to it, the way an animal who survives a trap become wary of anything resembling it. I can feel around those threads, and I'm confident that if I had to, I could undo some of it."

"I told you that's what he was doing," Sto stated.

The essence continued to move against the wall. "This is... purposeful. It's more advanced than anything I've read, but if I had to make a guess, I'd say the essences are woven in such a way as to make it impossible for any essences to interact with the walls. Guessing further, I'd say all the essences are involved and that only if we had thirty-two Runners, each with a different essence, would we have even a chance of undoing it."

"Okay," Ganny said, "I didn't think anyone would work that part out."

"Why Thirty-two?" Tibs asked, trying to sense anything of the wall that would give him that kind of impression.

"That's how many elements there are, didn't you know that?" some of the sneer slipped into the sorcerer's tone and he mumbled a; "sorry."

"That many?" Jackal asked, looking at Khumdar.

"I am unsure why you would expect me to be able to corroborate Don's statement."

"You mean in all that 'traveling' you've done, you never learned everything there is to know about the elements?"

Don surreptitiously studied the cleric, or he tried to, Tibs expected. Only Jackal and Mez would miss the look.

"I am amused that you still keep trying to get me to admit to something I made clear I have no interest in discussing. But no, my traveling was geared toward learning what it meant for me to be a cleric of Darkness, not investigating all there is to know about the elements. I leave those types of queries to those better suited for them." He leveled his gaze on Don and smiled, causing the sorcerer to look away, blushing.

"So we can't just undo the walls," Mez said. "Which means we need to go through whatever these corridors are about."

"It's a room," Tibs said, looking at the corridor.

"It looks like a corridor to me," Jackal said.

"The other two were rooms. This is going to be a room, too." He looked at Don.

The sorcerer startled. "You want—" he shook himself and some of his confidence returned. "I agree with Tibs. The previous two crest revealed rooms, so this one is too. The dungeon is predictable that way. Each floor has its style and maintains it. This one is the most different, but it still has it. It combines physical trials with mental ones. Each crest has been a type of scattered puzzle, and we had to figure out the rules by which the pieces move to complete them. The—"

"Let me guess," Jackal said with a smirk. "You'd have worked them out."

"Of course," Don replied, straightening, while Tibs and Mez glared at the fighter's attempt to goad their sorcerer. Don looked at them and lost some of his confidence. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I could, in time. It's complex, but it is primarily about thinking. But Tibs is clearly more adept at solving them."

"You've got that—"

"That's enough," Tibs said. "Don is trying to work with us. Stop prodding him."

Jackal looked at him with surprise and hurt, while Don's surprise was tinted with speculation.

Tibs didn't have time for this. "Stay here." He stepped into the corridor.

Nothing happened.

He studied the floor, then the walls. The weave went about three paces deep under him, then he sensed regular stone. There was no change he could sense within the floor or the walls that would indicate triggers, but with this kind of weave, Tibs wasn't sure he'd be able to tell the difference.

He crouched at the line in the floor. A groove in it, instead of marking where two blocks abutted. He sensed at the junction of the wall and floor for another, but as far as his sense told him, it was all the same weave.

It was wrong, he decided, on noticing the line doing up the walls, where the groove in the floor reached the wall. It was faint, and going by his sense, wasn't there. That would play a part in how the room worked.

He stepped over the groove and waited.

Again, nothing happened.

The walls had the same line going up between them, the same sense of being one weave. He was tempted to push and see if anything happened, but with so little time left, triggering some trap could strand him inside for far too long.

"Anything?" Don asked.

"The walls aren't one unit," Tibs replied, looking over his shoulder. "But I think the floor is. So that's one part we won't have to worry about."

"The ceiling?"

Tibs studied that. It was a little over twice as tall as Jackal and had matching grooves. He couldn't tell if they were actual grooves at this distance. "It seems to be like the floor."

"I can lift you," Jackal said hopefully. He was pacing the hall, looking bored. Mez sat, eyes closed, and Khumdar simply stood a few paces away from the door, looking into the distance.

"Stay there until I figure out what this room is about." He looked ahead, then stepped to the left. "There's a turn to the right six tiles ahead."

"That makes this room larger than the one where we played Conquest," Don said.

Those tiles were closer to two paces across, so it was already larger. "I think it's larger than the shifting floor room."

"You think it's a maze, the way this entire floor is?" the sorcerer asked.

Tibs shrugged. He stepped onto the next tile and waited.

Nothing happened.

He took a pace toward the other side and the floor trembled in time to stone groaning against stone. Tibs turned in time to see the Don step back before the wall on the right of the first tile closed against the wall, sealing Tibs in.

"You cheated," Tibs said, looking at the floor, sensing it for anything. "I didn't trigger anything."

"Yeah, I did," Sto replied. "Tibs, we need to talk."

"Ganny, are you going to let him cheat like that?"

"This is the only way we could think of getting you away from Don, since you wouldn't let Sto get rid of him."

"He's on my team, and—"

"And that's the problem," Sto said.

Tibs frowned. "We need a sorcerer, and Tirania assigned him to my team."

"And you're okay with that?"

The ice cracked, and Tibs filled them before answering. "It's what it is."

"Stop that," Sto said. "Just let the abyss water go and answer me."

"I have answered you."

"Tibs," Ganny said gently. "This isn't good for you."

"The alternative isn't good for everyone else. They matter more."

Sto sighed.

"You're not going to do anyone any good," Ganny said, "if you can't feel anything."

"I can think. That's more important than what I'd be feeling. And I do feel; just not as strongly. So it's fine."

"No, it's not." Sto sounded exasperated. "Just let go to the water, channel fire, let it out. It's safe to do that in here."

Tibs looked around. The walls, the weave. How Don said it would take every element to have a chance to do anything. "Is that why you made this room? Because you think I want to let fire loose?"

"No," Ganny replied. "I designed this room so those facing it would have no choice but to rely on themselves. It's only when you returned the way you are Sto realized it was a place where you could let it go."

"Thank you. I appreciate what you're doing, but I'm fine."

"No, Tibs, you're not," Ganny pleaded. "You feel. That's what makes you, you."

"I can still feel; the ice is just letting me stay in—"

"You don't stay in control, Tibs," Sto said harshly. "You're someone who gets angry when I ate someone you hardly knew just because he was nice. You screamed at me and you made me break rules I know better than to break because your pain hurt."

Tibs swallowed as more cracks formed.

"I know what you're trying to do."

"Then stop fighting me!"

Tibs chuckled. "When have I ever done that?"

"Tibs, I'm trying to help you."

"I know. But I don't need the help. I am grateful, but I'm fine."

"Tibs," Sto pleaded.

"We did what we could," Ganny said. "Tibs. We're here when you come to your senses."

"I don't think that's—"

"I'll make you a door that isn't guarded," Sto said.

Tibs closed his mouth. "You can do that?"

Sto sighed. "I'm Stone Mountain Crevice. Of course I can. This is all me. I can affect anything I can reach, and anywhere we can talk, I can reach."

"I heard you call for help when I was in the town. Does that mean you can reach there?"

"No. That was desperation. Yelling as hard as I could and hoping you'd rescue me." The silence stretched. "I wish you'd let me return the favor."

"I'm not yelling to be rescued."

Sto sighed. "You would if you weren't so filled with ice."

"That isn't what people are meant to be like," Ganny said.

"How do you know?" Tibs asked. "You admitted you know little about people."

"But I've seen others who did what you're doing."

"You did? Who?"

"Harry," She answered. "He was so filled with light that the first time he stepped where we could see him, he blinded us."

"The new guard leader," Sto said, "Ardian. He's the same with metal. He feels like he could cut his way through my stone just by leaning against it. Tibs, I can feel the cold emanating off you from the floor above."

"I'm not like them. I'm doing this to protect everyone else."

"No," Ganny said. "You aren't. You're doing it because you think it's protecting you. I just hope you realize it isn't before you turn into an ice version of what those two are and come to us for help."

"Alright. If this becomes a problem, I will come. Just tell me where the door will be."

Ganny's sign stopped him.

"I just agreed with you. What is the problem?"

"It already is a problem, Tibs. You just don't want to see it."

He didn't reply. She only saw what she wanted to see. Nothing he said would change that. "How do I explain to the others how I undid the trap?"

"Think of something," Sto snapped.

"Sto, I'm sorry that you aren't understanding what I'm going thought, but—"

"He left," Ganny said.

"I'm sorry he feels hurt, but this is my decision. It's only affecting me."

She sighed again. "Just push on the wall to your left."

Tibs looked at the wall, three paces wide, and twice Jackal's height. It felt cool and solid to the touch. He wondered if this was a trick to get him to let water go to channel earth.

Instead, he pulled the essence from his bracer and wrapped his arms and legs in it. He tried to anchor himself to the floor as he put his shoulder against the wall, but just like the corruption hadn't been able to find a way in, earth couldn't. He'd have to rely on his increased strength and the traction from his boots.

He put all that strength into the push, then he was on the floor as the wall moved back far too easily. The one before the door moved slower, revealing the rest of his team. The only one of whom looked concerned was Don.

"I told you he'd be fine," Jackal said. He started to step forward and stopped. "Is it safe?"

Tibs stood. "The walls move along the grooves." He indicated the new one that was revealed.

"So it's safe to move around?" Jackal asked.

"I didn't see Tibs touch anything before the wall closed the entrance," Don said.

Tibs shrugged. "There must be something still wrong with this room, so we shouldn't risk it until our next run."

Planning-20

Tibs opened the door after the knock and sighed. The man on the other side was dressed in fancy armor, regalia, he'd heard that kind of attire called, and the fire essence coursing through him marked him as an adventurer, Epsilon, Delta at the most, but he was still a guard.

"What does he want now?" Tibs asked.

The adventurer didn't react to Tibs's annoyed tone. "Guild Leader Tirania requests the presence of Tibs Light Fingers and Don Arabis to a function held at the guildhall on the seventeenth of Mertal two hours before zenith." He looked down at Tibs. "She will expect you to be dressed properly."

"Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Be on time."

Tibs nodded and closed the door. This was the month of Mertal, the seventeenth was in three days. He headed to the chest and opened it. The new schedule wouldn't be up until the twenty-second, so this wouldn't interfere with their run. He took the silvers from the hiding spot in his armor and sent them to his pouch. How many would he need? He wasn't dressing like a noble, no matter what she might want, but even the set of good clothing Carina had made him buy wouldn't do. He put two and zero in the pouch, and three in his coin pouch.

"What are you doing?" Don asked as Tibs headed for the door.

"I need the right kind of clothing to attend that event."

"No. What are you doing, Tibs?"

He looked at the sorcerer. He was on his bed, a book in his lap, studying Tibs.

"I just told you."

"You've just been summoned like some pet to be put on display," Don replied, his tone growing hot, "and you're just going to get the right clothing to go?"

"I need to play the part if I'm to get the information I—"

"And you're okay with it?" Don all but screamed, jumping to his feet.

The cracks in the ice refilled nearly as quickly as they appeared. He hardly had to think about anymore. "It needs to be done."

"You don't have to be so fucking calm about it! The Tibs I knew, that drove me to pull my hair out, wouldn't just be standing there calmly going about the steps needed to get his plan to work. He'd have slammed the door in that adventurer's face, he'd have screamed and bitched, and then he would have gone on with getting the plan to work."

"And that Tibs would have destroyed this building in the process. I can't afford to have him around right now. Once I've made Tirania pay, then I can afford to get angry."

Don was next to him in three steps, then grabbed his arm. He looked where his hand was holding Tibs, surprised.

"You aren't suffused with water," the sorcerer said, his anger giving way to curiosity. "How are you doing it? The little I've read of people using their element to block how they feel requires them to suffuse themselves and never let go."

"Is that what you're reading about?" Tibs nodded to the book on the bed.

"No, that's a treatise on the role corruption play in the way the world function. My teacher's obsessed about demonstrating that corruption's a good thing for the world and he's having me read all sorts of stuff that's got nothing to do with my training so I can echo his stupid beliefs."

“You don’t believe corruption can be good for the word?”

Don snorted. “I know it is. I just don’t feel the need to scream it in the ear of people who aren’t interested in listening. Nice try at sidetracking me. How are you doing it?”

Tibs shrugged. “I just do. I’ve had to learn a lot of ways to get around not having much of a reserve when I started. I don’t spend a lot of time questioning how I do what I do. I just do it.”

The sorcerer let go of him. “That makes sense, in a way.”

“It does? I’d expect you to argue that everything has to be done in a set way.”

Don dropped on the bed and move the book to the floor. He leaned against the wall and opened his hand, corruption floating above it in a cloud that took the shape of a kitten, then a duck.

“Why do you think that you don’t use Water the same way as the archers, fighters, or sorcerers with the same element?”

Tibs shrugged. “Because we don’t think the same way.”

Don nodded. “But why should that matter? Water is Water. Corruption is Corruption. Same with the other element. The element is. So how is it that who you are means it’s going to behave differently?” He waved his hand, and the cloud danced around it.

Tibs looked at his hand, made a cloud of mist, and moved his hand through it. The cloud parted, but didn’t dance. He took hold of it, made ice crystals that reflected the light, and moved them around, creating a dance of glints and reflected light on the wall.

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly.” Don smiled. “You don’t know. And unlike most of us, me included, you aren’t letting the guild tell you how it works.”

“I’m listening to my teacher.”

“What did he or she tell you about suffusing yourself with your essence?”

Tibs thought back on it. “That I had to be careful in how I did it. That I could hurt myself.”

“Were you?”

Tibs remembered the pain as he absorbed more and more of Bardik’s essence. How what he’d thought of as his limitless reserve filled and then cracked open.

He shook his head.

“Are you sticking to the lessons your teacher teaches?”

Tibs shook his head again.

“That’s what I mean. Because you couldn’t learn the way I did, the way the rest of us did, you didn’t learn to just follow the training you were given. I’m not anymore, but it’s hard for me to not let what I’ve been told can’t or shouldn’t be done stop me.” The cloud took the shape of a spearhead. It wasn’t still, although it no longer looked like a cloud, but a solid object made of a dark purple material.

“Corruption isn’t hard,” Don said, his breathing slowing as his gaze remained fixed on the spear, what Tibs now recognized as the sorcerer focusing. Something happened to it, both in how it looked and in how the essence was structured. “By its nature, it oozes around and through cracks. There are very few places corruption can’t insert itself and then affect what is there. But being hard, solid? That isn’t something that is in its nature.”

The edges became more defined, sharper. Almost as if the essence was pulling in on itself, while still taking as much space as it had before. When the light glinted off an edge of the object, Don was sweating slightly, but he smiled and flung it at the wall.

Tibs had ice coating it and that is what the spear head embedded itself into. Immediately the corruption spread through it and Tibs let it, moving the ice away from the wall, making it a ball of water floating between the two of them.

“Maybe you shouldn’t damage the place we live in.”

Don blushed. “Sorry.”

“If Corruption isn’t supposed to be hard, how did you make it like that?”

“The same way you make the water ice. You put your mind to it.”

“It’s not hard for me to make water into ice.”

“Because ice is something water can be. But in the end, that’s always what we’re going with the essence. We use our mind to make it do what we want. Some ways of thinking about it make getting specific results easier.” Don gestured, and the corruption flew out, leaving only clear water behind. “But that’s still just what we’re doing. Any time your teacher tells you something can’t be done. What they mean is that no one’s come up with an easy way to do it.”

“And that’s what sorcerers work on, finding easier ways to do what’s hard.”

Don shrugged. “Some do. Most just try stuff and write about the results and move on to something else. As a group, we don’t really care about the world. Our ideas are more interesting than anything out there.”

“Is that how you feel?”

Don hesitated. His mouth glowed as he opened it, but he closed it before the words left. “I don’t know.” There was no light with the words. “Before I got here, I had all these ideas about what it meant to know stuff. I was going to be a scholar. My families had already paid the university, then...”

The corruption around his hand slowed its dance. “Now, having to survive the dungeon so often, I can’t help thinking that the only thing I should focus on is learning how to be stronger for the sake of being stronger and nothing else.”

There was a faint light around some words and flashed around ‘nothing else’. Don wasn’t telling him everything; but then no one ever did. It was the one thing Tibs had learned, being able to see lies and secrets. Even when there were not bad intentions behind it, no one ever told the complete truth,

Except, possibly, Harry.

Don shook himself and absorbed the essence. “Okay, you are a master as sidetracking, Tibs. This was supposed to be about you, not me. That thing you’re doing with the water, however you’re doing it, it’s not healthy.”

Tibs sighed. “I’m fine.”

“Was Harry fine?”

Tibs frowned. “He did his job, what he was told to, I don’t—”

“But was he fine, Tibs?”

Tibs didn’t know how to answer.

“Did you see his expression when Jackal told him he was a Wells after all? That, like all of them, he’d found a master to obey without having to think?”

Tibs remember Harry looking like Jackal had struck him.

“That wasn’t the look of someone who was okay.”

“I’m not like him.”

“Not yet. How long do you think Harry was like that? So filled with light there was no space to feel anything? Especially that one thing he didn’t want to feel?”

“A long time.” It had to have been. How else did a man go against his family and gave himself entirely to another group without realizing they weren’t all that different? “I’m not going to stay like this. Once I’m—”

“Done, yeah, so you said.” Don leveled his gaze on him. “But do you believe it?”

The cracks spread and Tibs swallowed.

“I—” He closed his mouth as the light of the lie shone in his mind. He had to have imagined it. He’d often thought lies, and this hadn’t happened.

“I do,” he said.

The smirk Don gave told him the sorcerer didn’t believe him, but he didn’t comment further. “You’re really going to spend money of looking like her pet?”

“I need her to trust me if I’m going to be able to pull this off.”

“So, you have a plan?”

“I have the start of one, now that I know that—”

“Don’t tell me.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll help however I can, but don’t tell me what the plan might be. Once you know what it is and what you’ll need me to do, then tell me.” He stood. “And if you want to be dressed properly to get her to trust you, you’re going to need me to help pick the right clothing.”

“You know what that kind of event requires?”

The sorcerer rolled his eyes. “I’ve stood at the periphery of enough of them to know what’s expected.”

Planning-21

Tibs exited the clothier, mildly annoyed. She's been ecstatic to make him and Don a set of good clothes for what Don say was a reasonable number of coins, but she wouldn't stop swooning over them as she measured them and how the Heroes were at her shop. Partway through, townsfolk started coming in and watching the spectacle. Even Don seemed to grow annoyed at all the people and them telling stories of the two of them and the ways they protected the town.

The sorcerer grumbled as they walked through Market Place, and Tibs ignored him in favor of thinking of a way to get information on the function they were to attend. If Tirania wanted them there, would there be people above her attending? Was she going to use them to impress her superiors? What was the point of having him and Don—

He stopped as he felt the corruption. Someone powerful. Delta, possibly Gamma.

"Tibs?" Don called as he changed direction.

They weren't moving, so Tibs took a circuitous path, keeping booths between them. When he saw them, they weren't what he expected.

She was dressed in a simple blue robe with dark trim. A purple belt held pouches, and in them he sensed every element he could and more he couldn't identify. Some were concentrated in a way he figure they were amulets, while others felt like they were an object that had a lot of that element.

She laughs at something the seller said, as he handed her roasted meats on a skewer. It caused Tibs's stomach to rumble as a reminder he hadn't eaten anything since morning. She ate and said something that caused the seller to beam. Then she walked to another booth, where she talked with that seller before receiving a tankard.

"What is it?" Don whispered, sounding concerned.

The woman paused and looked around. Her gaze passed over Tibs and Don initially as they stood seven booths away and then returned to them. She beamed as she waked in their direction.

She waved. "Are you Don Arabis?" she called. "Corruption Sorcerer in training?" she had an accent like anyone not using magic to be understood.

Tibs looked at Don, who frowned, then straightened. "I am. Who are you?"

She gave a bow. "I am Anuja Kasaju, here on behalf of Tine Lemaire."

Don reacted to that name. "What does the head of the Derbinor Academy want with me?" he asked stiffly.

"Word of the pool that formed in this town reached us, and I have been sent to negotiate purchasing it from you."

"From me?"

"I inquired with those in the know within the town, who pointed me to a merchant. While he proved adeptly terse, I gathered enough to conclude he acted as agent for one of the Runner. Which is clever of you, since if you'd tried to own it yourself, the guild would have taken it from you the moment they realized what it is."

"And you think this merchant is acting for me?" Don stated.

"You are the only Runner with Corruption as an element. Who else would it be? The guild clearly doesn't understand, not that they ever did. All they care about are dungeons. They don't see the long-term potential of that pool."

"I see." He thought about it. "What are you offering me for it?"

“To start with; in exchange for ownership of the pool. Once you reach Epsilon, the Academy will pay what you owe to the guild. You will also be granted membership to the academy and access to our research.”

Tibs couldn't tell if she was lying, but she was doing something to her words. He sensed the corruption in them, as well as light and darkness. He now had confirmation she was a sorceress. They reached Don and sunk into him, dispersing through his essence, but Tibs couldn't tell their effect.

“What else?” Don asked.

She smiled. “What more would you want?”

“I could use a trainer who—”

“What's the catch?” Tibs asked, and she startled.

“Tibs, I don't think you should get involved in this,” Don said. “This isn't like negotiating with the merchants.”

“What's the catch?” Tibs asked again. “There's always one. No one's generous like that just for some pool that eats anything you throw in it.”

“That you think of it just as a pool,” she said, her words laced with the same elements as those she'd told Don, “show that you don't understand enough to be involved in this discussion.”

The essences went into him, and he let them move about. The corruption wove through channels of dense essence within him, while the light and darkness moved up to his head, and as they moved about there, he agreed with her. This was clearly beyond anything he knew how to deal with, so he should leave them be.

He absorbed the essences. “Maybe I don't understand much,” he said, deciding to walk the line between what she wanted and not leaving Don alone with her. “But I do understand that no one with a lot pays fair to get something from those who don't have much.”

Don frowned. “He's right. Your offer is too generous for what you'd get. You either know something I don't about the pool, and yes, I know it's special. I can feel how deep the essence is. It's deeper than where my trainer took me to have my audience.”

She pulled her attention away from Tibs. “You indeed know much. But I don't think you understand what that means to—”

“The ability to ask for an exorbitant amount of money,” Don said, raising a finger, then a second. “A place where you can pull on the essence without fear of ever running dry. Access to a dungeon for anyone you need to push through training. It's too low right now for anything significant, but in three or four decades, it'll have at least six floors and that will put it on par with most other dungeons. The only way this would be better was if the dungeon used corruption in its structure.” He smiled. “Which you'll have learned it does as a reaction to the attack on it.” He looked at the three fingers. “Did you orchestrate the attack?”

“No,” she replied simply. There was no essence in the word and no light, so she was telling the truth.

“Could someone else in your group have planned it?” Tibs asked. He knew enough now to understand that Bardik could have been manipulated into it by a group like them.

“If they did, they didn't have the approval of Academy Head Lemaire.”

“Alright,” Don said, “so let's get back to the pool itself. That you'll pay the guild what I owe them is generous enough. Access to the academy feels like you're making sure I can't say no. Which means I need to be careful. So what is the catch?”

“It isn't a catch,” she said, her words again laced with the essences. “It's simply what is expected of anyone who joins the academy. You will have to help with the research others are doing until you have learned enough of our methods to be trusted to do your own research.”

He wanted to pull the essence away from the words, but even if he could manage the strength to beat her will, she'd know. She might not tell it was him, but it would make her suspicious. He didn't know enough about sorcerers to know what she sensed of the other essences she used, or how easy those would be to pull away.

Don nodded.

“What if he decides he doesn't like it?” Tibs asks.

“Why wouldn't he like it?” she replied, directed the words at Tibs. “The Academy is prestigious. Out scholars and sorcerers have pushed the boundaries of what is known of corruption and the way the world reacts to it.”

He nodded and absorbed the essence. “What if Don prefers exploring the world?”

“That is for adventurers,” she scoffed. “Whatever he'd want to know about the world once he had qualified to do his own research, he'll be able to pay to have one of them investigate it.”

Tibs saw Don studying him. “What if he just wants to leave?”

“Why would he ever want to leave?” she asked.

Tibs shrugged. “He has family.”

“Who let him rot here,” she countered.

Don’s expression hardened.

“What if he just wants to leave? Travel, experience the world?”

“What class have they given you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “You’re too small for a fighter. You wouldn’t be asking those questions if you knew anything about research and sorcery. You’re either a rogue or an archer. Either way, you don’t understand that to us, what’s out here is only relevant in how it can help us advance our research.”

Tibs nodded, remembering something Don said just this morning. “So you don’t care about the rest of us.”

She chuckled. “We can’t care about something that small when we’re looking to change and improve the entirety of the world.” She turned her gaze to Don, who had his expression attentively neutral again. “You understand that, don’t you?”

Don didn’t react to her words, even as Tibs sense the essence seep into the sorcerer and move about. Then something happened with Don’s essence. It traveled through the channels and spread through his body from them. The darkness and light essence were pushed out, while Tibs lost track of her corruption as Don suffused his body.

The smile he gave her was...

Ice cracked as Tibs remembered how he’d been when channeling Corruption. Don’s smile wasn’t as vile and self serving as Tibs remembered feeling, but in it, he saw an echo of how he’d acted as well as something of who Don had been until recently.

“You make good points,” the sorcerer said, and she didn’t look happy. “How can I get in contact with you once I’ve made my decision?”

“I was hoping to be able to return to the academy with the good news today.”

Don made a show of considering it. “No, I’m not going to have an answer for you today. I have too much to do. If you won’t stay, return in a few days and ask for me at the inn. They’ll know how to get a message to me.”

“Which inn?” She asked.

Don chuckled. “This isn’t a city. There’s only one inn. Just ask for where the Runners go.”

“Alright,” she finally said. “I’ll return in three days and I—”

“Four days,” Don said, and she glared at him. “I’m going to be busy that day. I am being honored by the guild for my accomplishments. The day after is better.”

“Four days,” she said darkly, “and I’ll expect you to hand over ownership of the pool.”

“Four days,” he said, “and I will give you my answer as to if I’ll hand over the ownership.” Don walked away. “Come Tibs,” he said imperiously. “I still need to get ready.”

Tibs considered not going, simply because of the tone, but it was best she didn’t see them disagreeing right now.

Don walked back straight, looking more like a noble among common folks than he had the first times Tibs had seen him. It lasted until they were out of Market Place and he turned into an alley to put the house between them and her.

He sagged against the wall, panting, and his essence went back into its reserve. “The bitch tried to manipulate me,” he snarled. “You have no idea how close I came to giving her everything she wanted. If you hadn’t asked questions and distracted her, I’d never have realized what she was doing. I fucking should have.” He calmed himself. “I guess she didn’t think enough of you to use essence to manipulate you,” he said with a hint of the smugness reminiscent of how Don used to act.

Tibs shrugged. “How did you stop her? And is that what made you act like the old you?”

Don seemed shocked by the statement. “I’m sorry. Now you’re probably thinking I don’t actually mean it when I say I want to be better.” He watched as Tibs shrugged again. “I protected myself by suffusing myself with essence. Sort of like you’re doing right now, just not had hard. I didn’t realize how exhausting it is to maintain it. How are you not unconscious from doing this all day?”

“Does Corruption make you resistant, the way Water makes me slippery when I suffuse myself with it?”

Don gave him another speculative look. “I don’t know if this is something Corruption does, or it’s simply that once suffused, there’s no space left for intruding essence. Clearly she wasn’t trying all that hard, because she has to be powerful if she’s second to the Head of an academy.” He snorted. “One time when being

thought little of works in our favor.”

“And do you own—”

“Look Tibs,” Don cut him off. “That there, it wasn’t me. I mean, it isn’t who I want to be.”

“I—”

“No, you don’t understand. Maybe it was because of all that essence I had through me. Corruption is reputed to be about making things easy, and it was easy to act like that. Comfortable, and I am sorry for talking to you in that tone. I wasn’t thinking, I just acted.”

Tibs nodded and waited. “I understand,” he said once Don remained silent. “And I appreciate doing what you have to, so you’ll get out of a situation. I’ve had to do that often enough on the street. I do have one question.”

Don looked at him worriedly. “No, I don’t own the pool,” he said before Tibs could ask.

Tibs nodded, thinking of the possibilities. “Would you like to?”

Planning-22

“Let me see if I got this right,” Don said, looking from Tibs to the merchant. “You, Tibs, found out there was something special about the pool when you tried to hire an adventurer to remove it.”

“One of the adventurers the guild brought in to clean up what was left of Sebastian’s house after we attacked it.”

“Right, a corruption adventurer because of how much of that was left behind from what I did to it.” There was no light with the words, so Don believed he had been responsible, but there was uncertainty in the tone. “So you came to this merchant.”

“Darran,” the merchant said with a smile.

“Right. And you bought the pool for Tibs.”

“After finding who officially owned the land the Garden Palace stood on, since the owner and his family died in that incident. It had reverted to the guild, by the way.”

The sorcerer nodded, then looked at the sorcerer and asked in an exasperated tone. “Why?”

The question took Darran by surprise. “Because if Tibs had gone to the guild directly, he, rightfully, worried they would have questioned why he was interested in it, and they would have looked into it and realized the potential for profits it represented.”

“Not that.” Don pointed to Tibs. “Why did you buy it for him and not for yourself?”

“Tibs approached me to buy for him,” the merchant answered, sounding as if he couldn’t understand why Don didn’t see that as evident.

“He’s a Runner. Why didn’t you just buy it for yourself? You’re a merchant; money’s what drives you.”

“He isn’t a Runner,” Darran stated. “He is a customer, and I happen to think of him as a friend.”

Don scoffed. “Sure, because he arranged to protect you and the others from that criminal.”

“I thought of him as more than a customer before then. And while yes, money is something I chase, sometimes too hard, I also value relationships. Any merchant will value them.”

“Really?” Don said mockingly. He gestured to the rest of the Row. “Then why the fuck am I not entitled to the same treatment everyone here seems to give Tibs?”

Darran’s chuckle was humorless. “Because of the use of that word.”

“What?” Don asked, confused.

The merchant sighed. “You walk into the shops demanding that we treat you ‘right’. That you are entitled to the best of what we have to offer.”

“I pay for what I ask for,” Don stated.

“Yes. That, and your well-known taste for getting back at those you feel have wronged you, is why I suspect no one has swindled you. You may be disagreeable, but you are honest.”

“I’m not dis—” Don closed his mouth on the retort. “I just—” he closed it again and deflated. “I’m not like—” He closed his eyes. And whispered, “Fuck.” He ran a hand over his face. “Why is it so fucking hard to be treated like a person in this place?”

“Act like one,” Tibs said, and Don glared at him. “Instead of acting like a noble.”

The sorcerer’s expression darkened, but he remained silent.

“It can be difficult not to start acting like those you hate,” Darran said, and now Tibs raised an eyebrow. He hated nobles much more than Don ever did, and he’d never acted like them.

“What do you know?” Don asked, sounding uncertain.

“Nothing of you and your history, other than what I saw when you all arrived.”

“Okay, fine.” Don looked at Tibs. “And now you want to sell me the pool. Why?”

“Because it isn’t doing me any good. Corruption isn’t my element. I had Darran buy it for me because I didn’t want the guild to have it. By selling it to you, I get coins I can use to help the Omega Runners.”

“I don’t have anything like the money you need to do that.”

“But you can get it from that sorceress and the people she talks for.”

“You can too.”

“She already thinks you own the pool. She’d question why I didn’t stop you from claiming you did. Then she might question why I bought it in the first place, and I don’t know how friendly she is with the guild.”

“So, I’m nothing more than your agent.” He nodded to Darran, “just like him.”

“All I care about is getting coins to buy equipment and making sure it can be repaired. Darran knows how much I need. Anything else you can get her to give is yours.”

“Minus my commission in assisting you to write up the contract,” Darran said. “Unless you think you can write one sorcerers won’t be able to turn to their advantage?”

Don shook his head. “You can write it. Those were never something I studied.” He looked at Tibs. “And you trust me to honor my part of the deal?”

“You’re my teammate,” Tibs replied.

“Not by your choice.”

Tibs shrugged. “I guess I’ll find out if you’re being honest when you say you want to do better.” Tibs knew Don meant it, but he also knew how easy it was to slip into habits. How often had he channeled Fire after telling himself never again?

Don studied Tibs, then nodded. “Alright. You’ll get your coins, I’ll get my money and whatever I can out of them. The first thing we need to make sure of that contract is that I don’t end up indentured to that academy past my apprentice stage.”

“You’re going to let them own you even for that?” Tibs asked.

“It’s how things are done. Even as I scholar, I’d have been expected to spend something like a decade being nothing more than a servant to a master of the craft while I learned enough to do my own research and studies. I don’t know how long it’s going to be with sorcerers, but it’s got to be shorter than what it would take me to repay the guild. So I’m okay with it.”

“Are you willing to open the negotiations demanding the entire abyss?” Darran asked, smiling.

Don’s momentary confusion was replaced with determination. “You know how to write them, so I’m going to have—I am going to trust you to get me the best that can be gotten out of them.”

The merchant clapped a hand on Don’s shoulder. “I do like this new you. We are going to have fun skimming absolutely everything we can off those academicians.”

“But you aren’t scamming Don on my behalf,” Tibs stated, knowing that if he didn’t, there was a chance Darran would see it as a challenge to get Tibs more than he asked for.

The merchant looked at Tibs, hurt. “Would I ever do such a thing?”

“Yes,” Tibs and Don said together. Him seriously, while the sorcerer sounded amused.

“Well,” Darran said, acting far more offended that Tibs knew he was. “I have never—”

“Yes, you have,” Tibs replied, and the merchant chuckled, then grinned.

* * * * *

“Do you have a plan?” Don asked, as they walked toward the Guild building.

“Go along with whatever Tirania wants.” Tibs was dressed in a dark blue sleeveless doublet over a pale blue tunic, with leather pants and hard boots in the same dark blue. The one thing he wore that wasn’t blue was his bracers, which were covered over by the tunic’s sleeves, which were tied at the end.

“That could turn out to make the situation worse.” Don’s robe was its usual dark purple. It had been the one detail the sorcerer had disagreed on with the clothier. She had wanted to clothe him in something not as dark. Their compromise had been to trim the robe in gold and silver.

“What do you think it’s about?”

“She sent out invitations, but I don’t know to whom. The people I know within the administration couldn’t find out. She handled that personally.”

“So they’re going to be important? Like other guild leaders or the person giving her orders?”

“Important, yes. But I don’t know who they could be. I don’t see why she’d want us there for a meeting with other guild leaders.”

“Do you know anything about the enchantments protecting the building?”

“No. As far as I can tell, no one knows what they are, or who put them on.”

“Isn’t enchanting something like that hard?”

Don chuckled. “It’s the kind of thing that kings can’t afford. I expect the guild keeps sorcerers close, just for things like that.”

Tibs nodded as the building in question came into view at the end of the street. A large box of a building, with a battlement on the roof. The windows were narrow enough only the thinnest of rogues could slip in by them, but like every surface outside, the weave of essence on them was so tight Tibs had trouble making out the essences that composed it.

An adventurer in regalia of gold and black, just like the one who had told Tibs and Don about Tirania’s request, stood on each side of the entrance. One had metal as her essence, the other’s eyes were a dark red Tibs had never seen before and were Epsilon. They nodded to Tibs and Don as they entered, but otherwise, didn’t move.

Inside, an attendant, also dressed in gold and black, looked them over. His eyes were the multi color of crystal, but Tibs sensed no essence, so this was only a visual evaluation. He nodded and led them deeper into the building.

Tibs counted his steps, as he did every time, and again, the numbers didn’t match. Now that he knew about the weaves protecting the building, one of their effect had to be to make it difficult to know how far anything was, as to make it harder for a rogue to reach their target.

Their escort opened the door to a room that seemed large enough to take the entire side of the building. People, dressed fancier than Tibs and Don were, paused to look in their direction, then went back to their conversations.

In that glance, Tibs recognized the dismissiveness of nobles, the evaluating gaze of merchants, the amused look of those who recognized what Tibs and Don represented, and other expressions he couldn’t decipher.

There were a lot of people here. On the left wall, which was much further than Tibs thought it could be, was a long table with raised trays containing plates of food as well as crystal goblets filled with liquids. Fancy alcohols, he expected.

Before he could head there, Tirania was before them.

“Tibs, Don.” She smiled. “I am pleased you could make.” She wore a green vest of heavy fabric with crystals sewed into it in what seemed random locations. None of them contained essence. Her pants were black, and the buckle of her belt was an amulet. One with a reserve of essence nearly as deep as Tibs’s own.

“I wouldn’t have wanted to miss this,” Don answered, and Tibs nodded.

“Come with me.” She led them to the center of the room, where essence gathered and a dais of translucent stone formed with three steps leading up it. Once they stood in the center, she cleared her throat, and the room quieted.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “I know that the events of the previous months have not made the town of Kragle Rock an attractive prospect as a place for you to send those who need training. I know that some of the decisions that had to be taken to ensure the protection of the dungeon did not be the guild, and me specifically in the best of light. So again, thank you for accepting my invitation.” She let the murmurs quiet.

“I asked for you to attend so I could explain why I was able to make the decisions I did. Why I put the guild on the task of keeping the dungeon safe at what appeared to be the town’s expense.” She placed a hand on Tibs and Don’s shoulder. “This is Tibs Light Fingers. Water Rogue. This is Don Arabis, Corruption Sorcerer. You may have heard their names already. They are the Heroes of Kragle Rock. Each responsible not for one act of heroism, but two. Tibs took on attackers and protected the dungeon by himself. Slowing their progress long enough, the guild was able to stop them altogether before they killed it. Don chased away the man who tried to take the town. Who was able to infiltrate the guard and use them to sow distrust and discord. Then, together, they protected the town when that same man returned to wipe it from the world.”

The responding sounds were a mix of scoffs and appreciations.

“They are the reason I was able to focus on keeping the dungeon safe from the attacks those on the town served to distract from,” she lied, the light bright enough Tibs saw it without looking up in her direction. “Yes, the town suffered, and we lost people and Runners, but I knew I could rely on these two fine examples of what it means to be Runners to act and keep as many as possible safe. They looked after that town so that the guild could look after the dungeon. These are the kind of people we train. Those who can make the hard decisions you will need made when your enemies come calling. I do not promise you easy training, the way some other guild leaders do. This dungeon is hungry and takes its toll. You’ve heard of what I’ve had to do to ensure I had enough Runners. You’ve questioned why you should send your sons and daughters here because of

it. Why send your retainers to die here? This is why. A hard dungeon produces strong Runners. Hard Runners. The kind of Runners who can walk into the enemy camp and remove them. The kind of Runners who will do whatever is needed to keep you safe.”

The room was silent once she stopped talking.

The looks Tibs received were many things, but not one of them dismissive. Despite knowing she'd used him and Don to convince them to send more people to Sto, Tibs stood straighter under those gazes.

They were seeing him.

They were seeing someone to pay attention to. Someone to be watched and to treat with care. They weren't seeing an urchin from the street.

Some of the ice melted. They were seeing Tibs Light Fingers, and they were worried.

Planning-23

Tibs felt the essence move within the crowd. The people who had an element. The only ones at Epsilon or above worked at the guild. The guards at the periphery of the room, the staff walking among them, taking empty goblets, serving the people there.

These people weren't powerful because of their essence, but because of their coins, or their position within society. He'd been into enough noble's homes to know not all of them had coins enough they overflowed the coffers. Some merchants had more coins than some nobles, but less power.

The way power worked within cities still seemed strange to Tibs. As an urchin on the streets, power had meant physical strength. He hadn't had that, so cunning had been his strength, but it hadn't given him power. Nobles always came escorted by guards, so he'd thought that was how they showed their strength. The coins nobles had was just how they purchased that protection; the same way those on the street paid thugs to keep them safe.

Once he'd learned about the elements, he'd thought that was power, and the guild certainly reinforced that belief. But Sebastian had shown Tibs coins were a power of their own. And watching the nobles in Kragle Rock, he'd learned that position within society was another kind of power.

It was all strange to him, but he was learning to see it, so he could use it.

The man approaching Tibs had Metal as his element, and Tibs tried to sense something about it that would let him know he was suffusing himself with it, the way Sto said Ardian always did. He could sense the density of it, somewhere within Gamma, but no details other than it was there, through the channels everyone had.

He stopped before Tibs and studied him. Tibs returned the look.

"Don't think any of this is about you," Irdian stated, then took a goblet of water from the table. There weren't many of those, as nearly everyone here preferred alcohol. "You're just her pawn."

"Why those that matter to you?"

"Just reminding you of your place." He took a sip. "I wouldn't want you to think you're more powerful than you are and reach so high your fall will pull down your friends with you."

"Don't threaten my friends. Sebastian did."

"I don't threaten."

Tibs filled the cracks in the ice and changed the subject to one that had a use to him. "Isn't it dangerous, having all those powerful people here, in the guild building, in this one room? What if one of their enemies finds out and sneaks in an assassin?"

Irdian shrugged. "If they can't ensure the people with them are loyal, that's their problem, not mine."

"What if one of them sneaks into the building?"

The smile was small. "I'd love to see them try."

"You don't think they could? Even without an element, r—thieves are resourceful."

"Your kind isn't smart enough to get through the defenses."

"My *kind*," Tibs said, emphasizing the word, "isn't interested in trying. Thieves would be. Any lock can be cracked, any trigger jammed. All it takes is time and experience. That's one thing the runs have taught me."

Irdian rolled his eyes. "The dungeon's not teaching you anything about the world. All it's doing is helping you get stronger. But that's not going to mean anything in the end. You're just going to think you can get away with everything and you're going to be crushed."

"Then the guild will teach me."

Irdian snorted.

Tibs faced the man. "For someone working for the guild, you don't seem to care for it all that much."

"I'm a guard. I guard things. Doesn't mean I have to make believe they're better than what they are."

"Then why are you trying to stop me, if you don't think the guild's doing a good job?"

Irdian turned and locked eyes with Tibs. "Because rules are what keep the world from descending into chaos. Yes, I'm well aware the guild doesn't always follow its own rules, but there are others in charge of dealing with that. My job is making sure things outside the walls don't descend into chaos. Stop what you're doing, and I'll stop bothering you."

Tibs shook his head. "I don't trust you."

Irdian shrugged. "I don't care. I will enforce the rules on you, like I do anyone else."

Tibs snorted. "I'm not seeing you enforcing the rules on the nobles."

Tibs sensed the stone essence in the crystal goblet react to the pressure as Irdian's hand tightened on it. He couldn't tell if it was what was holding it together, or if it was one of the other essences or the whole of them. The essence within object wasn't woven, it was just there. But the goblet didn't break, and Irdian loosened his grip.

"What you're seeing is me being prevented from enforcing them. Sometimes, the guild lets people who shouldn't have it, keep the power others grant them."

Don joined them. "Guard Leader," he greeted Irdian.

"Sorcerer," Irdian replied in a cool, but not as brusque a tone as the one he'd used with Tibs. "Enjoying being paraded for her benefit?"

"One's position comes with requirements. I have no problem accomplishing the one to keep the other."

Irdian drained his goblet. "Yeah, you're be a perfect fit for the guild." He put it down and walked away.

"He seems to like you," Tibs commented.

"I'm not sure he likes anyone, but I'm not making his life difficult."

"I'm not making his life difficult," Tibs replied. "He's making mine difficult."

Don smiled. "Perspective can be interesting like that."

"Is this about more than what it looks? Is Tirania just looking to get more people to do runs?"

"She wants more people to invest in the town, help it grow. The town, well, a city is as much what draws people to a dungeon as the dungeon itself. The two usually grow side by side, since the dungeon will draw more people as it goes up in rank, and with there being more people, the dungeon can grow faster. We've had a series of setbacks that disrupted the usual progress. She's looking to set that right."

"Why?"

"There are expectations placed on her. She is in charge, so responsible for what happens."

"What happens if those expectations aren't met?"

Don shrugged. "She'd be replaced, I expect. But they'll send people to judge the work she's doing first."

"Who'd do that judging?"

"I don't know. At an academy it would be the supervising master, or their master, if they were the ones being judged."

"So, whoever gives Tirania her orders would come here to judge her work, if things don't improve?"

Don glanced at Tibs. "I guess. I don't know how the guild works, but they'd be the ones who know what she's supposed to accomplish."

Tibs nodded. He wanted to ask more questions, but this was not the place. What he needed was to gain more information still.

"I think we should talk with people," he said, "see what it is they are looking for in a place to send people so." He smiled at Don. "So we can make Tirania's work easier."

Don covered up his suspicion quickly, then nodded.

Tibs kept having to fill in the cracks in the ice as, time after time, he was dismissed, or talked down to. The nobles hadn't held on to their belief he was important for long. They'd realized what Tirania was doing, and Tibs felt like some of them were only humoring her, but the attitude shifted as the nobles were lower on their perceived hierarchy. Many were more amicable with what she wanted, even understanding much of it was a show. They could see a way for them to gain more privilege over other nobles.

Those of the merchant class seemed the most eager to go along with her, many not seeing through the act, but thinking of the advantage of having someone within their family with the power to protect them represented. Their distrust of Tibs came from his place as a rogue.

It was the rare merchant who could look beyond someone's larcenous tendencies to see they too were needed for a system to work. By the time a meal was served, Tibs was ravenous, and by the time it was over, he was exhausted. Fortunately, by then many of the attendees were leaving, and Tirania had no objection to Tibs leaving too.

He couldn't wait to reach his bed.

* * * * *

Tibs didn't reach his bed.

Jackal met him halfway to the rooming house with the news that the guard had taken everything. And now Tibs stood in the empty storage, the ice cracking and refilling as he controlled his anger.

The only thing that kept him from outright exploding was the knowledge that this was only a setback and not the destruction of his organization.

Let Irdian think he'd stopped Tibs.

The guard leader wouldn't drop his guard because of this, but he would allow himself to shift some of his focus away from Tibs for as long as Tibs could keep from attracting it. He'd have to be careful about how he procured the new equipment, and where he stored it, but he would have the coins to make it happen.

* * * * *

The sorceress sat opposite Don, with Tibs on his left and Darran on his right, reading the papers. Tibs didn't understand why there were seven sheets, when all this was about was selling the pool, but that was why he let Darran deal with it.

"This is your work, merchant?" she asked, taking a quill out of a pocket in her robe. The quill had essence woven through it, Water, Earth, Metal, and others. "You understand, I can't agree to this." She wrote on the pages and ink flowed without her needing to use an inkpot.

"Of course," Darran replied. "I would never presume a sorcerer of your caliber would simply agree to the first offer given."

"Or that I wouldn't seek counsel," Don added.

She smiled at the sorcerer as she motioned for the server. "No, but I'd hoped you wouldn't be quite this much of what we look for in a sorcerer."

"You can ask most who know me. Pleasing others isn't something I'm known for."

She scratched out a line and wrote something. "I had hoped this would be quick," she said.

"Where is the fun in that?" Darran replied.

Tibs groaned. He'd expected this to be done already. How long was it going to take?

* * * * *

It took most of the day.

More than once, Tibs considered leaving the table, but the worry Darran wouldn't be able to hold on to the negotiation kept him there. He couldn't do anything about it; he was just there to witness, as far as the sorceress was concerned, and it all went well over his head when they discuss this clause or that one. They even argued over the definition of words.

Tibs understood that words changes when they were spoken or written in one of the other languages, but they were written in [need to track down Carina's language] which Darran and the sorceress understood, so how could they disagree on what a word meant?

But, by the time it was all done, and the sun was far lower in the sky for Tibs's liking, she left, smiling, Don held onto the copy of the papers she'd made appear, like they were made of gold. Darran had ordered the best food and drink for the three of them, then told Tibs what he'd gotten out of the deal.

"That's more than I asked for," Tibs said, not understanding how that could have happened.

"That's the beauty of a good deal," Darran replied, pausing only to take a bite of the fragrant slam of meat on his plate. "Everyone comes out of it with more than they wanted."

Tibs looked at Don, who had carefully rolled the papers and put them in a small leather tube, which was now strapped to his belt. "I got everything I wanted, and they've agreed to pay me during my apprenticeship."

"But all she gets is the pool. That isn't more than she wanted; it's just what she wanted."

Darran nodded. "But she expected to have to pay much more than what it cost her."

"But she said she hoped Don wouldn't be smart enough to get help." Tibs wasn't understanding of any of this. He'd haggled, but the looser always ended up with less than what they'd hoped for. That was the point of haggling.

"Of course. But she's also smart enough to know he might get someone skilled. She figured out what

Don might ask for, what she was willing to agree to, and we negotiated ourselves to a point where we all ended up with a little more than what we hoped for. Which, in her case, meant not having to give out as many coins as her limit, or too many freedoms for Don.”

Tibs thought it over. “Doesn’t that mean we didn’t ask for enough, then?”

“You can look at it that way,” Darran replied. “But what do you gain with more coins, at the expense of her displeasure?”

Angering a sorcerer was never a good idea. Every story bards sang about made that clear. “I still don’t get how everyone can end up with more than they wanted.”

“That’s why merchants like Darran are around,” Don said and started eating. He stopped after a few bites. “Thank you.” He looked thoughtful. “When Tibs mentioned you, I didn’t expect to get such a skilled negotiator.”

“That is quite alright. I don’t make much of that aspect of my trade. And I expect Tibs mentioned me because we have a history of helping each other, more than he was aware this was something I could assist with.”

“If you couldn’t, you would have told me who can,” Tibs said.

Don watched them, then turned serious. “Darran, am I really so disliked by the merchants?”

“You are abrasive, or you were. I have seen you act, and this is not what I saw. As I said before, you believe you are entitled to what you ask. That it is true or not isn’t what matters. It is the attitude you approach one of my associates with that does. Tibs is entitled to anything he pays for out of my shop, but he does not enter it with that belief. He understands it is an exchange, and that, just like the negotiation here, it can be done while respecting the other participant. To be clear, I have tried to swindle Tibs, and he has spun me stories about some of the items I bought off him. But when one caught the other, we accepted it.”

“I’ve never tried to get more than what I sold was worth,” Don stated, “or demanded I pay less than what something is worth.”

“But you still demanded. It might have been fair, but it is the demanding that is irritating.”

“So I should lie about what I bring to a merchant? Expect them to swindle me?”

Darran shrugged. “That will depend on the merchants you deal with.” He smiled. “But you could start by allowing them to negotiate.” He paused with the fork nearly to his mouth. “You might find you enjoy it.”

Planning-24

Tibs sliced up, and the Gnoll fell away. He blocked the other's attack with his shield and skewered it. The heat struck him in the back and unbalanced him, but the ice over his armor kept the damage down. It wasn't the first time one of the Gnolls used fire essence on him, and each time one of them showed up, they were slightly more clever about how they used it on him, like this time, ganging up on him from the front so he'd be distracted and forget about that one.

If not for the fact they were created by Sto, Tibs would think they were training and learning how to use their essence when the Runners weren't killing them.

Tibs etched water essence quickly. The lines as a spike, the letters pulling more from the air as it flew, making it stronger, harder.

It didn't survive the blast of fire the Gnoll sent at it; the etching had been too quick to have the precision needed to create the full effect Tibs had intended. But as a distraction, as Tibs ran after it, it did exactly what he wanted it to.

He leaped through the wall of steam the two attacks had created, giving himself a little more height with the help of air essence, and came down on the Gnoll sword first, impaling it in the creature's head.

He spun and readied himself for another attack.

Jackal slammed his last one against the wall. Khumdar had two in a cloud of shadows, a determined look on his face as they dropped to a knee, then fell on the floor, and after a few more seconds, were absorbed into it. The cleric dropped to a knee, panting and using his staff for support.

Don was still battling three, but they were melting from his attacks before they could get close and Mez was—

Tibs ran to the archer, who was leaning back against the wall, holding onto his bleeding side. The wound was grave enough Tibs could see the essence diminishing. On a normal person, they'd have died long before Tibs reached them.

He had an essence wrap over it before pulling out bandages. Then he tightened it as he applied them.

"I'm missing when you could just heal us," Mez whispered, resting his head back.

Tibs nodded, glancing at Don. The last of his attacker was writhing on the ground, and the sorcerer had a self-satisfied smirk that reminded Tibs of the old Don.

"We have the potions," he said.

"We only got two at this point. It's best we keep them for when we have a battle that can challenge us. This was just one of them getting in a lucky throw. And yes, I know luck's not a thing," Mez added as Tibs opened his mouth. "But it's better than me admitting I wasn't paying attention to the metal user just because it'd only made swords for most of the fight. I didn't notice the javelin it threw until I felt the pain. Good thing it was a bad shot." The archer smiled. "I wasn't. Even in pain, I had my next arrow in its eye."

"Are you okay?" Don demanded.

"I'm fine," Mez replied, and the sorcerer nodded.

"Jackal, Mez needs a—" Don stopped as Jackal narrowed his eyes. "I mean, shouldn't he get one of the healing potions?"

"I'm fine," the archer replied. "Tibs got the bleeding stopped with the bandage. We don't know what's going to be beyond the dragon room."

"The boss-room," the fighter said.

Mez nodded. "Then I'll take one before that fight if no one else needs it."

"It might be best to take it before entering the dragon room," Khumdar said. "There is no telling what kind of challenge it will pose."

"It's just moving walls, right?" Mez asked Tibs.

"I don't know. I just know the walls move from the last time. This is going to be the first time exploring it."

Mex started walking, then slowed, putting a hand over his injury. "Then let's go. We're making good time, but if we just stand here talking about it. We'll never reach the boss' room."

Tibs looked at the time shield. Only half of it was used up, so they should have ample time.

The shifting floor room was quick now. Tibs had the pattern, so it was just a question of moving among them until the passage opened, and no one falling and undoing the pattern. The game of conquest was also faster now. Tibs didn't think he'd win against an experienced player, but the setup Ganny gave them to deal with was more like puzzle, where the rules dictated the method needed to tackle it. It was more complex than the shifting floor or sliding puzzles, but Tibs was good with them, and Don knew the game better than Jackal.

Without being able to take with Ganny, Tibs couldn't find out if she was keeping herself from making them too difficult, or if they were simply so used to them at this point. They hadn't lost one runner to the third floor over the last week of runs at this point.

Of course, that would change once the Omegas started graduating and testing themselves on the lower floors. Already, there were two full teams at Upsilon.

Unlike when Tibs started, the guild pulled those runners out of the teams they had formed and created Upsilon only teams. The two Tibs had heard of that had been sent on the second floor hadn't fared well.

He finished the dragon shield marginally faster, he thought, then looked at the corridor. Five large tiles, then it turned to the left. He studied the first, confirming it had no triggers, then stepped in. The second one also had no triggers. He looked at his team, waiting on the other side of the threshold.

Did he want to give Sto a chance to lock him in, just to talk and ask Ganny? Or give them a chance to explain why they didn't like what he was doing with water? He missed talking with Sto, but until the dungeon stopped bothering him about that, Tibs appreciated the quiet.

"Get in, stay on the tile behind me. That way, we'll be together if the walls shift without notice."

"Or we'll end up crushed together," Jackal said.

"No," Tibs replied, glaring at the fighter, who raised his hand to placate him and grinned. "And I don't think there are triggers. I just want to be sure before I let you walk around."

He reached the turn with his team at his back, and no triggers found. Three tiles more and the corridor turned to the right and ended four tiles in.

"Did we take a wrong turn?" Jackal asked.

Tibs retraced his steps, looking for clues about how to proceed. The walls could be shifted, but he didn't know how or what the result would be. Sto had moved the first one that time to lock Tibs in, so he didn't think that was part of how it worked.

Other than the lines on the floor and up the walls dividing them into tiles and sections, there were no marks on them. Like the shifting floor, this would be trial and error until he worked out the pattern.

He picked the fourth tile from the entrance as his starting point. "Get on this tile," he told the others. Tibs studied the right wall again, in case he'd missed something, then ran a hand over it. The surface was uncomfortably smooth, but not slick. It was as if he could tell at a touch there was something unnatural about the way the essence formed it. He applied pressure, and when it didn't move, he pushed.

It resisted, then, with a grind, began moving. When Tibs stopped pushing to study the walls on each side, this one kept on moving, stopping only once it had cleared the tile. There was no changing his mind once he pushed one into motion.

"Don't move."

The entrance was still opened. He walked to the end and back. Nothing had changed.

Tibs frowned. He'd been certain each move would create a cascade of others, like the shifting floor. He returned to his position and placed his hands on the wall again.

"Are we staying here?" Mez asked.

Tibs looked. They were on the previous tile. He didn't think two walls so close together would respond to one another, but...

"Move here." Once they were in position, Tibs pushed. Like before, there was resistance. Then the wall moved and kept moving without his assistance. He cursed as the wall on his right was missing, and his team

tensed.

Sword and shield in hand, Tibs moves onto the widening tile, looking into what turned out to be a room. Three tiles deep and wide, with a chest in the middle.

“Loot!” Jackal exclaimed and rushed it. He knelt before it, hand almost grabbing the lid when he stopped. “I guess you should look it over,” he said, standing.

“Don’t you ever get enough chests?” Don asked in annoyance.

Mez snorted and Jackal looked offended.

“How many runs have you done with us?” the fighter asked. “And you still don’t understand the wonderfulness of loot?”

“It’s an act, isn’t it?” Don asked as Tibs did a visual check of the chest. “Like the idiot you spent a long time convincing everyone you were.”

“I am an idiot,” Jackal stated, “when compared to you, Tibs, Mez and Khumdar and just about every Runner who does more than run it, bash things and swoon over loot. This thinking thing, before I act, is so I’ll keep my man. He got tired of me nearly getting killed in this place once too often.”

“I have no idea what part of that’s true or not. How can any of you deal with this?”

Tibs ran a hand over the joint where the lid touched the bottom of the chest. He hardly had to think about what he did anymore, but he had to pay attention to what his fingers told him. Sto and Ganny learned from the Runners just like Tibs did from them, and the traps on the chest had gotten more subtle.

“You get used to it,” Mez said.

“What you must keep in mind,” Khumdar added, “is that Jackal will only depreciate himself. Putting himself down is something he has mastered, and there is nothing he will not say to maintain that, even now that he has agreed to be smarter about how he act for the sake of not leaving Kroseph alone. If he is downplaying himself, it is most likely a lie. If he is raising others, that will be true.”

“I will never get used to all of you.”

“You will,” Mez said as Tibs opened the chest. Jackal grumbled something under his breath Tibs didn’t make out, but the tone wasn’t flattering.

He took a small round shield out of the chest with air essence woven through it and handed that to Jackal.

“That’s it?” the fighter asked. Opening the chest again. He looked up. “Really? You give us amazing stuff in the other two rooms and this here? What’s going on?”

“And is that an act?” Don asked. “Or does he expect a dungeon to understand him?”

“How do you know it doesn’t?” Mez asked.

Don stared at the archer. “Do you expect a dog to understand you?”

“Yes,” Tibs said, walking before Don on his way to the wall. “And the dungeon isn’t a dog. That’s insulting.”

“To whom?” Don asked. “The dog?”

Tibs stopped and turned. The others were also staring at the sorcerer.

“Did you... make a joke?” Jackal asked uncertainly. He stepped to Don. “Is that stick actually pulled out of your ass far enough you can joke about something?”

“I do not have—” he tried to shove the fighter away. “I have acted in perfectly reasonable ways with—”

“Acted,” Jackal said, leaning in. “Don’t think I can’t see what you’re doing, *acting* like you belong with —”

“That’s enough,” Mez said, interposing himself between them. “Don is trying, Jackal. Just like you’re trying to be smarter about what you do. I don’t see you succeeding all the time.”

The fighter took a slow breath and let it out. “Tibs, any idea how we continue?”

“I’m going to have to test each section of the wall until we reach wherever the trigger is.”

“There’s going to be a pattern,” Don said.

“I know, I haven’t worked it out yet.” Tibs headed out of the room, and back to the main corridor and stopped. “We aren’t exiting the way we entered,” he said, stepping to the wall now closing the room’s entrance. He tried pushing it, but it didn’t move. It was large then the doorway, so that made sense. He tried to grab hold of an edge, but even water essence couldn’t get between the section.

“Did that happen in response to the section you pushed?” Don asked. “Or is locking us in the room always the first thing that will happen?”

Tibs shrugged.

“Is it possible other section of the walls have also moved in response?” Khumdar asked.

“Stay here,” Tibs said. He went to the end and back. “Nothing changed, but that doesn’t mean it won’t the next time.”

“So we stay close while you test the walls?” Jackal asked.

“And listen for anything else moving when I push.” He sensed the wall. Its weave, along with the saturation, meant Tibs couldn’t get details from the other side. He knew it was the room with the chest, but his sense only registered it as more of the wall. He pushed, and the wall didn’t move.

This would be a maze again, but one where he needed to not only work out how to get through it but also open the path as he went. He tested the walls on the left and right, and one section on the left before the one that had moved on the right, the wall moved in.

“I hear an echo,” Mez said.

“I’ll check,” Jackal said. He returned quickly. “Nothing’s changed.”

“Then any move Tibs make can have repercussions we can’t account for,” Don said, then hesitated. “It might be best to work out how to open the entrance, so we aren’t stuck here when the time runs out.”

“Nothing will happen,” Tibs said, taking position before the section of wall already in. “Other than we might encounter the next team.”

“How do you know?” Don asked. “It’s not like anyone’s risked it since the time shield appeared.”

“Are you ready?” Tibs asked, and his team moved on the tile. He pushed, the wall moved, and he heard the echo again.

“Should I check again?” Jackal asked, and Tibs nodded. “We lost the left turn,” he said once he was back.

The first move had done nothing each time, other than taking them out of the main corridor and kept them from seeing what had happened. Was that on purpose? He’d check when the next time one in that corridor moved.

He pushed again, and the wall didn’t move. He put his shoulder to it, and Jackal helped, but it wouldn’t budge. Tibs pushed the one on the left, and it moved. He pushed, and it moved again, and another sound came along with it.

“That wasn’t a wall moving,” Mez said, just as steps sounded behind them.

Planning-25

Tibs was next to Jackal as they turned the corner. Before them were a team of golem people. The archer letting an arrow loose, which Tibs stopped with an ice wall. Jackal was around it, grinning and running at the other team.

Tibs sent jets of water around the fighter to keep the enemies distracted, then joined in, short sword in hand, shield over his arm and targeting the sorcerer whose element Tibs couldn't determine.

The faceless sorcerer gestured, etching essence before him. Tibs couldn't tell the exact nature of the spell, but the lines converged, which nearly every offensive spell Tibs had watched done did.

He brought his shield up, thickened the ice, and readied himself for the impact.

The attack hit his shield, moved through and around it, then detonated into Tibs, sending him backward and on his back, jerking uncontrollably, his mind in shambles, his hold on his element slipping. He couldn't work out what had happened, where he was, who he was. All that he knew was how painful it all was.

There had to be something he could do, but he had no idea what was happening. He grasped for something, anything would do, if only there was—

There.

I pulled on whatever that was and the essence assaulting him fled into the floor. He could breathe again. Think. He switched to Purity to end the enduring pain, then back to that element in case the attack returned. He didn't know why metal had made that element go away, but he'd stick with that until he was sure no more would come back.

He raised his head, looking for the sorcerer who had hurt him.

"That, fucking, hurt," he growled as he stood.

He pulled the essence and realized he had no idea how to use it. Fine. He didn't need anything more than to coat himself with it. Metal was hard. It could take hits, and it protected him from the sorcerer.

"Tibs?" Mez said, looking over his shoulder at him. His eyes went wide. "Don, keep them busy!" he instructed as the sorcerer started looking over his shoulder too. Then the archer was before Tibs. "What are you doing?" he whispered. "What's with your eyes? How did you get metal?"

"I had an audience," Tibs replied, pushing Mez out of his way. Jackal and Khumdar were fighting the rogue and archer, respectively. The fighter had trouble landing a hit, and when he managed it, water rippled over the golem's skin, deflecting it. Khumdar was deflecting arrows after arrows, but couldn't get close enough to land a blow, or pause to focus on using essence. The sorcerers' attacks seemed to cancel each other, lightning and corruption erupting into a sickly cloud between them.

Mez caught Tibs's arm and pulled him to a stop. "You can't do this now. How much training do you have?"

Tibs fixed his eyes on the archer. "Let go of me, Mez, or I will make you."

"None." The archer let go and Tibs headed for the sorcerer again.

"What is he doing?" Don asked as he walked by.

"A Jackal thing," Mez replied angrily, and arrows joined the attack against the sorcerer, but lightning broke from the cloud to intercept them, shattering even those made of fire.

Tibs ignored the bits of essence that splashed out from the cloud, as well as the rest of the fight. They didn't matter. His team could deal with them while he kicked that sorcerer's—

"Tibs!" Khumdar yelled, just as an arrow impacted and staggered Tibs.

He regained his footing and glared at the golem archer. That one was next.

He returned his attention to the sorcerer, who had noticed him now. A quick gesture and lightning hit Tibs, traveled over him, stung, then sank into the floor. Tibs kept walking, a grin forming on his face. That barely qualified as pain.

The sorcerer shot lightning at him over and over as Tibs closed the distance, and the stinging increase to pain, but Tibs didn't care, he was going to make it pay for that initial pain, no matter what he had to endure to get there.

It didn't show fear, or anger, or irritation. The smooth face showed nothing, but Tibs figured Sto was trying to figure out what was going on, if he was paying attention. The dungeon didn't seem to be around his team all that much anymore.

Maybe Tibs should have a talk with him about that at some point. Sto was supposed to like him, so why wasn't he watching?

He added earth to the metal over his arm as he raised it. From this close, when the lightning hit him, it definitely hurt, but he was not letting that stop him.

His fist impacted the golem's stomach and sent it back against the wall. Before he crossed the few steps to it, arrows and corruption impacted it and it dissolved. Tibs frowned. It should have been his kill. He'd remind them of that after he dealt with the other one who had attacked him.

Tibs turned to the archer as corruption splashed on it, and Khumdar took advantage of the distraction to break it into two with a hit of his darkness covered staff. Another of his kills they'd taken from him. How dare they!

He turned to remind them of how things were and found Jackal blocking him from them.

"Stop," The fighter ordered.

"They—"

"I said, stop."

"I will not—"

"I'm the team leader," Jackal said, earth spreading through his body. "You follow my orders. Don't make me stop you."

Tibs glared up at the man, what mattered to him now warring with Jackal's friendship.

"Now," Jackal said. "Let it go."

"I need to—"

"Not like this," Jackal snarled quietly. "Not until we've had a talk about you keeping this from me. Water. Now."

Tibs ground his teeth, considered putting his unending reserve of metal to the test against Jackal's vast one of earth, as well as his years of practice at kicking people's asses. There would be time later, Tibs decided. When the fighter wasn't expecting it. He was a rogue, after all. He shouldn't be looking for face-to-face fights.

He let metal go, and pain drowned him for the far too long instant it took for him to take hold of Water and filled himself with it. Just that rendered the pain of the loss he'd suffered bearable, but he didn't want bearable. He wanted it gone. He iced the water and felt like himself again.

"I'm good."

Jackal snorted. "I doubt that, but that's also for another time."

"I'm sorry for—"

"Later, Tibs." Jackal turned from him. "What do we have?"

"A pair of boots," Mez said, taking them from Don, who was staring at Tibs, "an iron bracer from that fighter."

"Coins, from the sorcerer," Khumdar said, "eight silver." He nodded to the bow. That was all that was left of the archer.

Tibs turned, and where the sorcerer had been, a leather tube lay on the ground.

He checked it for traps, then pulled the top off. Inside were papers, and on them were diagrams. Lines and symbols. "Don, what are these?" He offered them to the sorcerer.

Don took them, but kept on looking at Tibs for a few seconds before looking at them. His eyes went wide as he looked through the four pages.

"Spells, these are spells." He looked at the others. "I'd read about some dungeons having spell pages on their loot, but I never thought—" His face fell. "I never thought I'd get to see some."

"So they're just for sorcerers?" Jackal asked.

Don shook his head. "As far as I can tell, these only contain one element, so anyone with that element

could learn from them. I can't tell which element they are about without research."

"Okay, then once we're out, you can get to work on that," the fighter said. "Tibs, how do we—"

Don laughed bitterly. "Get on that? What, you think the guild's just going to let me borrow these and the books I need to research them?"

"We're not giving that to them," Jackal said, taking the boots and putting them in Khumdar's pack.

"Is this wise?" the cleric asked, while Don seemed stunned into silence.

"He's on the team, right? And that can help him."

"How are you going to get that by them?" the sorcerer asked. "They have magic to know what comes out of the dungeon. I know teams who tried it. They didn't succeed and none of them were around after that."

"That was back in the early days," Jackal said, looking the bracer over before adding it to the pack.

"You think they stopped paying attention just because we've become more skilled at all the things we do?"

The fighter faced the sorcerer. "Are you, or are you not part of the team, Don?"

The sorcerer took a step back. "I— yes, of course I am. I— I was put on it."

"Then you need to start trusting that we know what we're doing."

"That would be fucking easier to do if you weren't all hiding stuff." Don pointed to Tibs. "Like, what was that? An arrow glancing off his shoulder hard enough to stagger him, but not damage his armor? What's with your 'cleric'? Where are you getting all that essence for your arrows, Mez?"

"No complaints about me?" Jackal asked.

Don rolled his eyes. "I know you're just playing at being an idiot."

"Ice is hard," Tibs said. "It's harder if I put more essence in it."

"Ice doesn't deflect lightning the way it was dancing over you and doing anything," the sorcerer snapped.

"Don," Mez said, "you should—"

"Don't 'I should' me, Mez. I'm fucking trying, but how the fuck am I supposed to be part of the team, if I don't even know the people I'm on the team with?"

"Maybe you should have thought about that," Jackal said, "before you went out of your way to piss off each and everyone of us."

"Don has never had that effect on me," Khumdar said.

"Where did the team sticking together go?" Jackal said with a sigh.

"Ah," the cleric responded. "Yes, Don, you really should not have exasperated me do much if you wished for me to share my secrets with you." He looked at the fighter. "Better?"

"Yes, although it would be even better than that if you shared some of those secrets with the rest of us."

"Maybe you too have exasperated too much."

"I know Tibs hasn't."

"And how certain are you I have not shared some of my secrets with him?"

Jackal closed his mouth, thought about it, and nodded. "That's a good point."

"Do you ever take anything seriously?" Don demanded.

"Not if I can help it," Jackal replied.

"One thing," Tibs said. "You take one thing seriously, all the time."

"No, I don't... oh, yeah, right. That." He grinned at the sorcerer. "I take Kro very seriously."

"How have any of you survived this long with that kind of attitude?"

"We've survived this long," Mez said, "because that's how we act. It took me a while to get it, but this place is most likely going to kill me at some point. If I let that stress me too much, that's going to kill me faster. Once I realized that, I also realize it applies to most of my life. I joke where I can, because the rest of the time, I'm pretty busy trying to survive."

"That... that doesn't make any sense. Surviving requires attention and focus. Even Tibs knows that, considering what he's doing with his element."

"And how long can you maintain that, Don?" Jackal asked. "How long can you spend thinking only about how you're going to survive, while you let people around you die?"

"That is unfair," Mez snapped, as Don's face fell. "Don has his problems, but you are not helping by constantly shoving his mistake in his face. You don't hear us always bringing back how you've thrown yourself into fights without us and nearly died in them."

"Actually," Khumdar pointed out.

Mez let out a breath. "Right, really bad example." He rubbed his face. "Look, you keep telling him to trust us so he'll be part of the team. How about you start trusting him beyond how he can help the team and as an actual person?"

"Maybe If—"

"I'm sorry," Don whispered.

"Don," Mez said, "this isn't you that—"

"I'm sorry I was an asshole when we first met. I'm sorry I treated you like trash when you were on my team, Mez. I'm sorry I blamed so much on you, Tibs. I know that after everything I've done, it doesn't mean much, but I am sorry. It doesn't matter if you never see me as anything other than how I acted back then. I do want to change." He looked at them and let out a breath. "I told Tibs I was going to be a scholar before I ended up here. What I didn't tell him was that my family ways—"

"Stop," Jackal said.

"I'm trying to explain why I did what I did."

"And I appreciate that." The fighter motioned around them. "But this isn't the place, and we don't have the time right now. So what's more important, having this conversation, or getting through this room so we can find the actual loot it's holding?"

"You'd give up loot so I can explain myself?"

"Yes, Don, I am able to put something before loot."

"Is this a joke?"

"Do I look like I'm being funny?"

"No. And that's kind of disconcerting."

Jackal grinned. "Good. Tibs?"

"I think we have more to gain by resolving this with Don. The room's going to still be here on our next run."

"I was afraid you'd say that. Mez?"

"I'm for giving Don the time to tell us what he needs to say."

"Khumdar."

"You know I am always pleased to listen to secrets being exposed."

"It's not a secret," Don protested. "I just don't volunteer the information."

"Alright, then Tibs, work on getting us out of here so Don can tell us his life story."

Planning-26

The inn was busy, but not as much as before. Most of the people there were townsfolk, instead of Runners, and the Runners there were like Tibs, experienced. The Omegas and the few Upsilon teams didn't come to the inn. They stayed with the families that housed them. Tibs wasn't sure if they'd be allowed to move out on their own before they reached Epsilon, or if this was how the guild intended to do things from now on.

Kroseph brought their food and drinks, paused only long enough to exchange a concerned look with Jackal, then moved on to serving others. Jackal ate heartedly, while Don barely touched his plate. Tibs ate without concern for the tension at the table.

"Alright," Jackal said, leaning back on his chair now that his plate was empty. "Don, whenever you want to start." He emptied his tankard and motioned for a refill.

"Like I told Tibs, I was going to be a scholar. My family were nobles, but we had wealth enough we could mingle with them and not be overtly ostracized. It was a good life. I lacked for nothing, and the inconveniences I had to deal with were minor in comparison. Unlike many in my family's position, I didn't have aspirations of being a noble."

Jackal snorted, and Mez was the one to glare at him.

"I was going to be a scholar," Don said softly. "My dues to the academy were paid already. All I needed was to be of age. I'd demonstrated my aptitudes and some of the lower masters had expressed an interest in taking me on as their apprentice. My future was set, my dreams were about to come true."

He fell silent.

"What went wrong?" Khumdar asked.

"My family were successful merchants. We traded primarily in textiles, and we had contacts all the way to the neighboring kingdoms. As I said, we had wealth, and that is where it came from. We imported mostly raw textiles, but my father was investing in tailors as a way of ensuring what he brought to the city was turned into something that would be seen. Nobles wore clothes made of our textiles. What we didn't know was that in doing that, my father made himself a rival of a noble who had discreet holdings in a large number of the tailors in the city. None of them dealt with my father, but our tailors gained popularity and he lost customers."

He sipped his ale. "Nobles are not keen on honest competition against a family that isn't of their stature. Instead of pushing his tailor to offer better quality, or lower their prices. He destroyed my father. He had him accused of sabotaging other shipments of textiles, had evidence found. My father's businesses were taken from him, his—our family's wealth, when with them. We lost more and more until we could no longer live in the neighborhood I had spent my life in. We moved to a smaller house. It was hard. My father continued destroying himself fighting against the accusation, that noble, the drinks. But we still had enough that we managed without having to resort to menial work. And within months of that happening, I would no longer be a burden on them, as I would move to the academy, live there."

Again, he fell silent.

"It did not happen," Khumdar stated.

Don shook his head. "I was no longer suitable to attend the academy. The academy has standards, you know. Only the best of the best is accepted there," he said bitterly. "They mean only those with the social status, not the ability. We had paid," he spat. "Masters had looked at me, at the work I had done to demonstrate I met the requirements and judged that good enough to consider taking me on. But I was now part of the rabble, beneath them. My work was now subpar." He slammed the tankard on the table. "Of course, then never returned what my family had paid. We could have used the money."

He paused, picking up only as Khumdar opened his mouth. "I was angry," he growled. "My family had been good and decent folks, and we have been ground into the ground by those 'better' than us. I decided that their way was the way things happened. I was no longer let anyone push me around. I would be like them and ground others under my boot." He smirked. "And it worked. I couldn't get back what they'd taken from me, but no one took from me again. And it got me books. It got me people doing my bidding. It got me respect."

He drained his tankard. "It got me caught for possession of academy material and sent to a cell for as long as my family needed to pay the restitution for what I had taken. They acted like me touching those books had destroyed them and demanded more gold than my family had, even when we had wealth. My stay in the cells did not improve my attitude. Then I was sent here, given a change to be a 'worthwhile' member of society again," he spat. "As if I had been nothing more than..." he trailed off, looking away.

"Me," Tibs said.

"A thief," Don corrected. "It isn't an excuse, but I was going to be a scholar. And because of some noble's machination, they only saw me as a thief. I lashed out the only way I knew at those I met. Did what I could to ground them under my boot. I'm sorry Tibs."

"Did your father commit those crimes?" Jackal asked.

"Jackal—" Mez snapped.

"No, Mez," Don cut him off. "It's a valid question. The truth is that I don't know. If you'd asked me that then, I would have told you without a doubt that my father would never do such a vile thing. But I've seen too much of the world, did too many vile things myself and felt justified in doing them to be certain of anything anymore. I want to believe my father is innocent, but he is so lost in the drinks now that I couldn't get him to answer me." He sighed. "And it no longer matters. I let what happened then turn me into a man no one could stand, not even those claiming to be my friends. Of everyone I surrounded myself with, I think no more than four didn't look at me with hate when they thought I couldn't see them. I don't want to be that man anymore."

"You think telling us that makes what you did go away?" Jackal asked.

"No. What I did to you isn't something I can ask you to forget or excuse. I am merely providing context leading to our encounters. Mez I needed to belittle because you represented everyone who had caused me pain. I couldn't see past your need to hold yourself and other to a better code than what was considered normal. All I saw was pretense, so we would look up to you. You, Jackal, terrified me. It wasn't that you'd beaten the men I had then. I didn't care about them. It was that not even a day in knowing him. You were stepping between me and who I wanted back, who was mine. No one had dared doing that since getting my element."

Jackal smirked. "You might remember I was kind of full of myself back then."

"That didn't matter. You had decided someone I thought was dirt deserved to be protected from me. So I hurt you as much as I could to teach you your place."

"Never was good at learning that lesson," Jackal replied.

"That made you scarier, because I had to believe you would get back at me. I made you and Tibs monsters looking to make my life miserable. And then, we had to work together against your father."

"Would that not have let you see they were not such monsters?" Khumdar asked.

Don snorted. "Only if I bothered looking. The scholar never assumes, always studies. Turns out I make a lousy scholar."

"You were angry," Jackal said. "That's going to mess with your thinking. But why corruption? Why not go for something like fire or metal. Something that tells everyone how dangerous you are?"

"One of the first things our instructor told us was to think carefully about which element was best suited for us. That picking one that didn't align would make our progression harder than he needs to be." He looked at them. "Didn't yours tell you the same?"

"Once I made that crystal glow," Mez said, "I was taken to another archer who told me I could pick an element and gave me a list to pick from. I went with fire because it seemed more useful than everything else, especially those I didn't understand. How is mind an element?"

Don looked at Tibs.

He shrugged. "Tirania told me to pick one of the four core elements. When I asked about the rest, she said they weren't as good. Between water, fire, earth and air, water seemed more suited to what I do. But I didn't get much of what it meant."

"They told me I might as well get earth since I'd already shown my skull was as thick as it," Jackal said.

The sorcerer looked at Khumdar.

"I did not go through the same as you. Darkness called to me and I answered."

Jackal snorted. "Our cleric loves wrapping himself in mystery. I don't think he's answered that question the same way twice."

“Right,” Don said disdainfully, “Cle—” He snapped his mouth shut. When he spoke again, his voice was controlled. “Wouldn’t you be interested in answering some questions? I’m curious as to what it means to be a cleric of an element other than Purity.”

“Not particularly,” the cleric replied, with a smirk.

Don looked like he would push, but stopped himself. When he opened his mouth, Jackal pushed papers at him.

Don took them, looked at the diagrams on it and then at the fighter. “Now you expect me not to ask how you sneaked them by the guild.”

Jackal looked at the others. Mez nodded. Tibs studied Don. He believed that he wanted to be better, but this was something that could cause problems if he wasn’t careful, not just for them, but for every Runner. If the guild learned there were items they couldn’t detect easily, they would scrutinize everyone.

He nodded. They’d never know without testing the sorcerer.

Khumdar shrugged.

“The dungeon dropped a pouch, a few runs back, that can’t be detected and that fits a lot of stuff in it.”

Don narrowed his eyes. “You expect me to believe that you got lucky enough—”

“Luck’s not a thing,” Jackal said, smirking.

Don breathed slowly, but when he spoke, he was calmer. “Do you understand how rare such an item is? That as far as I know, no such item has ever come from a dungeon?”

“How would the guild know?” Mez asked.

“When the Runner hands it over they—”

“Why would a Runner hand something like this over?” Jackal asked.

“How else are they going to...” he trailed off. “You were able to tell what it is.” His expression became thoughtful. “How does it work? How did you know?”

“How it works is beyond me. As for how I knew, after the chests that are larger inside than out, we’re no longer taking anything for granted. Reaching in to see if it contained anything, I couldn’t touch the inside, so I kept reaching further. I had it to my elbow.”

“And we can’t tell there’s a weave through it,” Tibs added, “unless we touch it.”

“What about something enchanted you put inside?”

“It vanishes from sight and senses,” Jackal said.

“Can I touch it?”

“Not without my man’s permission,” the fighter replied.

“What?” Don asked, perplex. “Why would he have a say in...” his pale skin turned red. “That’s not what I’m taking about.”

Jackal burst out laughing. “I know. But it was too easy. And yes, you can, but not here.” He stood. “How about we retire to the team’s room? It’s been a while since I’ve been there.”

Planning-27

“Not so fast,” Jackal had said, after Don was done being amazed at his pouch of containing, like the fighter called it.

The sorcerer had reached in and pulls out on the sword Jackal hadn't sold yet, then had spent a long time staring and glaring at it, as if that would make it reveal its secret before handing it back and heading out, muttering about looking for special books.

“So,” Jackal said as he and Tibs walked toward the warehousing neighborhood, “Metal?”

Tibs nodded.

“How did you manage that? And why didn't you tell me?”

“One of the assassins stabbed me with a sword, but missed my heart. Instead of dying, I had an audience, and—”

Jackal grabbed Tibs by the arm and spun him. “An assassin? And this is the first time I hear about it?”

“I didn't die, and I've dealt—”

“Because you were lucky.”

“Luck's not a thing.”

“And it's a good thing you dealt with them. That means I don't have to hunt them down.”

“Not him. He was gone when I came back. It's the others I dealt with.”

“Others.” Jackal glared at him. “There have been other attempts on your life and you never thought to tell me?”

Tibs shrugged. “I figured you knew. You told me your father would have something in place to avenge his death.”

“Yeah, these attacks on the town, the guards have been mostly dealing with. Because you never told me you were also a target, I figured my father never thought to tell anyone about you specifically.”

“They know.”

Jackal glared at him, then his expression softened and he let Tibs go, walking again. “And you didn't tell me about metal because you didn't want me to know about the attacks?”

“I just didn't think about. It's been busy, with the guards constantly on the lookout for our patrols and where we kept our supplies, then working with Darran to get more without attracting attention, figuring out where to store them, and looking into which Omega teams we're going to help train. With them living with people instead of the barracks like before, it's complicating things.”

“So that's also why you didn't train with it. It's the reason you were all murder focused after switching to it to deal with the lightning.”

“Yes,” Tibs lied. “Metal is stubborn. Not really flexible about how she goes about getting what she wants.”

Jackal chuckled. “Metal, inflexible. That's funny.”

“Why?”

“Because metal tends to be rather flexible. It takes a lot to break a sword or a piece of armor that's made of metal.”

“I thought it was just because metal's hard.”

“Stone harder, well, some are. But it's not flexible, so it's easier to make it shatter than metal.” He motioned to the warehouse as they approached. “But right now, you're going to train with it, because I don't want that stubbornness to be why Don finds out about you.”

"Telling him about the pouch is dangerous."

"Yes, but the reason I gave him works, if the guild asks. And everyone knows I'm so greedy that I'd keep something like that."

"And after that, they are going to have ways of checking every team for something like that they're hiding."

"Which they won't find, since we're the only ones who... Oh, Abyss, I didn't think about that part. Do you think he's going to tell them?"

"Don isn't lying when he says he wants to be part of the team, and when he says he wants to change, but he wants to be important too. He could decide that telling the guild will get him that."

"Abyss. I'll tell Mez so he can keep an eye on him. They seem to be getting along." Jackal opened the door and stepped in, stopping at the people there, clearing debris left from Tibs's training.

Tibs looked around at them. He should have been paying attention. He'd have sensed the workers.

"Can I help you?" a woman asked, noticing them as she picked up a broken crate.

"We heard the noise," Tibs replied, "and came in to see what was happening."

"The new owner needs the space cleared for his stock. No one realized the inside had been vandalized during the attack."

"I thought this was Harmel Leather Works' warehouse."

She shrugged. "No idea about that. I just do the work." He nodded to the door. "And you two shouldn't be in there."

Tibs headed out, and a second later Jackal followed.

"Well, that's a problem," the fighter said.

"Who's Harmel? I don't remember any shop owner with that name."

"That's because they aren't real. My father had a bunch of business like that for when he wanted to establish a footing in one of the neighborhood that were able to keep him out directly."

Tibs frowned. "We started using it before your father knew you were here." Jackal didn't answer immediately, which made Tibs glance at him.

"It's possible this is how he found out. When I told you no one would care we used it, it's because I had Harmel take possession of it. I know who my father's legal contact is for those kinds of acquisitions, and the codes that tell her this is something not to be discussed. And because my father's careful, he never uses the same people to communicate with her, so she wouldn't have a reason to question any of it. My father shouldn't have been aware of what I did, but it's possible he did. Sorry."

Tibs shrugged. "Can you arrange another one?"

"I doubt it. Right now, my brothers and sisters are fighting over who'll take over, and any of the other groups who were looking for any chance to break my family's hold over the city. Every one he employed will know of his death and that until the dust settles, nothing is to happen. Some will vanish with whatever coins my father had entrusted them with. Other will remain loyal to my family and yet others will that the coins of whoever offers."

"So once someone is in charge, they'll stop the attack on the town?"

Jackal considered it. "I doubt anyone will know how. We all knew how vindictive he was. It's what kept my siblings from removing him, but because he knew it was a possibility, he arranged it without any of them knowing. So, they can't stop it. I wonder if my father left any coins for the family to continue, or he dropped it all in his revenge."

"So this will never end."

"Well, that assassin thinks you died, so once he claims his reward, there won't be a reason for things to go on."

"How long will that take?"

"No idea. What did he take for proof?"

Tibs shrugged.

"No missing limbs you used Purity to regrow and didn't tell me about?"

"I can do that?"

"What can't you do with all those essences?"

"Too much."

Tibs considered that. He could heal himself with Purity and regrowing part of his body was just a form of healing himself. How did he go about finding out? He'd have to cut off something. It would have to be small, and a part that wouldn't impede him if it didn't regrow. A toe? The little one.

Now, where could he go to test that?

"I preferred you when you got solemn and angry," Jackal said.

"That's not useful."

"But you'd have told me about the attack and the audience then."

"I was—"

"It wouldn't have mattered. You'd have been angry, you'd have looked for your attacker, you would have told me so I could help. This cold isn't you, Tibs."

"It's what I need right now."

Jackal sighed. "So you can have more audience. Which one's next?"

"I don't know. I asked Water, and she said any one I want."

"And of course you didn't tell me about that audience either. So, which one do you want to get first then?"

"I don't know. The only sure way to have the audience I know of is to nearly die from the element. How do I die from the mind element?"

"That one's easy; think too hard."

"How about Void? Crystal? Wood? Or any of the others I don't know?"

"Don can tell you about them, I figure. Crystal and Wood are easy. A weapon made of them stabbed nearly into your heart."

Tibs glanced at his friend, trying to decide if there had been an edge to the words. "I'd have to explain to him why I want to know."

"You're just curious about it," Jackal replied. "That's worked every other time you have some question about something no one thought you should ask about."

Tibs nodded. "Do you know a place we can go to so you can cut off my little toe and I can see if I can regrow it?"

* * * * *

Tibs moved his toes in his boot as he looked over the report Darran had sent him. He had all his toes, because Jackal had refused to help him and forbidden him to even try. Tibs didn't have to listen to the fighter, but he'd realized that to suffuse himself with Purity meant letting go of the ice. He could do so for short period of times, but how long would it take to regrow a toe? What happened if the pain overwhelmed him in the middle of it?

Ultimately, he decided he didn't need to test it now. Eventually, Sto would hurt him in a way that required him to do something drastic to heal himself. And the dungeon was a safer place to have a meltdown if it happened.

The report was a list of equipment Darran could get him with time frames and costs. He was a lot of coins now, enough, he realized, that he might be able to pay what he owed the guild once he reached Epsilon, if he hadn't destroyed it by then. And right now, it was better invested in helping the Omegas and developing Upsilon survive.

He made notes regarding which he wanted, balancing the selection toward armors and weapons he could get sooner, rather than better of cheaper. Once he was done, he added a comment about obtaining a building where all this could be kept that wouldn't be noticed by the guards.

* * * * *

Don was seated at the table when Tibs quietly stepped into the room after his nightly roof-running and breaking into a noble's house. The only illumination was the lamp the sorcerer used to write notes on papers while looking over the diagram from one of the pages they'd gotten from the dungeon.

Tibs made it to the chest, opening it, before Don noticed him. Tibs removed his dark clothes.

"How late is it?" Don asked.

"Very." The house had been challenging; a mix of good locks, subtle use of enchantment and attentive guards. He'd still made it inside and into an office. There he'd taken a silver since he couldn't find a copper.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to do anything with these." Don tapped the diagram. "I haven't reached the stage when my teacher's explained how to add the etching to create more complex results."

Tibs stepped to the table and looked at the lines and symbols. "Don't the books tell you?"

"I've asked for the merchants to bring some, but they're too expensive and no one here is advance enough to make it worth their while."

"That's Kha," Tibs said, tapping one of the symbols. "This one is Bor, that one is Ank." He looked through the others. "I don't recognize any others."

Don stared at Tibs. "You read Arcanus?"

Tibs shrugged. "I don't know what it's called, but Alistair's started teaching me how to add them to my etchings. Ank, Fet, Kha and Bor are the ones we're been working with."

"You aren't even Lambda. What is he doing teaching you advanced Etching? My teacher has started preparing me for my test to graduate to Zeta and he won't teach that to me yet."

"What's the test?"

"What? The test?" Don seemed confused at the sudden change. "It's about taking the essence I've suffused throughout my body and getting it to flow through only one specific channel. Once I can get that to happen, I can graduate to Zeta." He narrowed his eyes. "Can you even suffused your body with Water yet?"

Tibs nodded. "How do you make that happen?" He sensed for Don's essence. There was the usual hint of it that tinted the essence coursing through his body, the way everyone had the life essence coursing through them. Were they the channels he meant?

"It's about exercising my mind on— wait. Why am I answering you? Why is your teacher telling you about Arcanus when you're just Rho?"

"I told him to. We've had to work differently from the start because of my age, so I'm continuing."

Don watched him. "My teacher told me that I couldn't work with Arcanus until my body was strong enough. Are you telling me he lied to me?"

Tibs shrugged. "He works for the guild. But," he added, "Alistair did warn me that there are reasons the guild does things in a specific way. And that most of them are about ensuring we survive the learning."

"But that Alistair is still teaching you these." He tapped the diagram.

"We're rogues," Tibs answered. "Following the rules isn't really what we do."

Planning-28

Quick Note: I made the decision that when Tibs returns from his audience with Metal, his would be assassin will still be there and Tibs will deal with him then and there.

Tibs slipped in through the broken window and sensed around him. The house was at the edge of Kragle Rock's Street and it too was neglected. Which made it for a good location to meet with one of the guards, or for a trap to be set.

He only sensed one person, two floors below, along with three dogs.

He relaxed slightly. Serba was someone he believed he could trust. But she was a Wells, and as Jackal had made a point to tell Harry, Wells either led or followed. He wasn't sure if being at the head of her pack of dogs made her a leader, or who she was following if it didn't.

He moved quietly; he knew enough about essence and the elements to know it wasn't only darkness that allowed someone to hide from detection. As far as he could tell, every element could do its version of what any other element did, if the user was powerful and knowledgeable enough.

The guild was both.

He made it to halfway down the last section of stairs before being detected. One of the dog growled. Next time, he'd wrap himself in darkness instead of trusting to his skills.

Serba stood when Tibs stepped into the lamp's light, sword in hand. It was a well-made sword. He could tell that by how the essence aligned. It didn't quite feel like the work of someone with the element, but it was closer than most of the metal weapons and tools Tibs sensed in the town.

"You just can't help sneaking around, can you?" she said, sheathing it.

"I can't be too careful when the guards' leader considers me a troublemaker."

"You saying you aren't?" She sat, and Tibs joined her at the table. As soon as he sat, Thump nuzzled his leg.

"I'm just doing what I have to keep the town safe." He dropped the pieces of jerky to the floor, and a second dog joined Thump. The third, Serba had a hand on the head of. "Why did you want to meet?"

"I thought you'd want to know where your stuff's being kept. The equipment that was confiscated in that raid a few weeks ago," she added at his frown.

Tibs nodded. Getting that back would be good. He'd be able to equip a few teams before the new stuff arrived.

"It's on the floor below the cells. It's where anything confiscated ends up. I can't tell you which of the rooms it's in, but that's where it will be."

Tibs frowned. "I didn't know there was a floor below the cells."

"I didn't either until I had to bring a bunch of illegal herbs there. The door to the stairwell's down the corridor on the left after you exit the stairs taking you to the cells."

Tibs shook his head. "There isn't a corridor on the left. It's on the right."

"No, it's on the left. There's two guards at the bottom of those stairs, a clerk with the key to take you in, and guards regularly patrol the floor. I don't know how you'll deal with them, but that's where your stuff is, if you want it back."

Tibs focused on her, sensed for anything out of the ordinary on her person, then extended it to the dogs.

Nothing.

“Did they give you something before you headed there?”

“No, why?”

“Have you noticed how the dimensions inside the guild building are always changing?”

She thought about it. “I thought there was something odd about it.”

“Irdian mentioned it’s part of the building’s security. Now it sounds like some areas do more than change size. There was no corridor on the left when I was taken to the cells, but there was one for you.”

“Can that be done?”

Tibs chuckled. “We can bypass entire floors in the dungeon by walking through a doorway. I don’t worry about what can’t be done anymore. Just how I’m going to figure out how it works.”

“So you think that the adjutant who escorted me there had something on him that stopped the magic?”

“Who is he?” Tibs asked. That would be a way to ensure only authorized people reach sensitive areas.

“I don’t know. I’ve seen him around, but never interacted until then.”

“Can you get his name? If he has something that lets walk around unaffected, I’m going to need it to reach my stuff.”

“I can’t get you whatever it is.”

“I’ll handle that. I just need to know who he is.”

She stood. “I’ll get you that information.”

* * * * *

Tibs sighed as he sensed the person attempting to sneak up on him. He was getting tired of these attempts. And with the amount of corruption tainted liquids on their person, there was little more than an assassin they could be.

Tibs turned into the alley to get away from the people in the street. When he sensed only his follower was around, he pulled Darkness from his bracer, wrapped himself in it, and waited.

The woman who walked by him was pretty, he supposed. Wearing a dress that hid knives and poisons and probably other things he couldn’t identify. One of his would be assassin had something Garran had identified as a garrote. Which was nothing more than a string with handles on each end.

He stepped behind her, considered how to proceed, then simply touched her and pulled his essence out of her body. She dropped, lifeless. He softened the ground until she sank into it, let her sink until he thought no one would accidentally dig her up, and reformed the ground as it had been before continuing on his way.

* * * * *

Tibs pushed the wall until it revealed the corridor on the left, which opened to the room with the chest. He opened it and left the others to store whatever was in it. The exit was closed, just as the previous time. He found the next section of wall and paused before putting his weight on it. If he was wrong about the pattern being set, he might lock his friends in the other room.

He pushed it. He wasn’t wrong. He listened and didn’t hear the echo announcing another section of walls had moved.

“That was dangerous,” Don said, as he and the others stepped out of the other corridor.

“No, I knew nothing would happen.” He went to the end of the corridor and pushed the on the right wall, instead of taking the left turn. It didn’t move.

The last time, pushing it in four steps, then the right wall two had revealed a switch with the dragon crest over it. Pulling it had open the exit. The only difference was that the wall he’d pushed wasn’t at the end of its motion.

“Pushed the wall until it stops,” he called.

He heard it ground, and twice, there was an echo. He did his best to locate it, but there was no direction to the sound.

“It’s not moving anymore,” Jackal said. “You want me to push the one on the left like last time?”

“That’s where the attack is triggered,” Mez pointed out as Tibs was about to say yes.

“Let me get in place.”

Tibs stepped close to that opening. There had been two moves before the attack. He nodded to the fighter at the end of the corridor, and Jackal pushed, disappearing on the left with the wall moving. There was a pause.

“Again,” Tibs said and concentrated on sensing. He had an idea what to expect, but he wanted to feel the doorway form this time so—there. He looked up and saw the shimmering on the ceiling. “Incoming,” he called, and the golem people dropped through it, immediately turning in his direction.

With a curse, He backed away from the approaching fighter and rogue. Both had Earth as their element, just like the last time. Tibs threw himself to the left as the rogue flung a knife, rolled and cursed again halfway through coating a knife in Corruption to deal with the extra protection the two golems had. Don would sense it, and almost certainly be able to tell it wasn't some poison.

Tibs absorbed the essence and send the knife back to its hiding place. He formed a sword and shield out of ice and readied himself. The Sorcerer golem flew out of the corridor and crashed into the wall, Jackal trailing behind him and the archer golem fell out, fire covering its back.

Tibs clocked the fighter's sword and slashed the rogue. He jumped back, and then to the side, avoiding Khumdar's staff. Tibs saw the lightning jump from the sorcerer's hand to Jackal, then had to focus on the fighter before him. Taking hit after hit on his shield, waiting for an opening.

When it came, Tibs stabbed, lengthening the sword until it pierced its stomach. Unlike with a real person, all this caused was for it to lose some of the life essence that powered it.

"Tibs," Don called. "Out of the way."

Tibs threw himself at the rogue, distracted by the cleric's attacks, and left the fighter for Don. Together, they tore the rogue apart quickly. The fighter was melting under the corruption. Jackal broke the sorcerer in two, his armor scorched and smoking from the lightning hits. The archer and other fighter were already dissolved back into the dungeon.

"Lightning," Don said, indicating the melting sorcerer, "Earth, Earth, Wood," he pointed to the floor where Tibs expected the fighter had been, "And Metal." Where the archer had been. "Same as the last time. Is it a coincidence?"

Tibs shook his head. "Only the loot and hallways are random in the dungeon." He stepped to the right wall at the end of the corridor and pushed. It went in. "When the dungeon changes something in a room, it's in reaction to us getting too good for how it's set up. We aren't there yet." He pushed it again and once more. Then the left wall, twice, and the switch was revealed. "It's all about the patterns on this floor." He pulled the switch and heard a wall move.

"The exit's opened," Mez said.

"I know." Tibs tested every wall section. None of them moved. He turned to the others. "Opening the exits prevents us from continuing with the room."

"That makes sense," Don said. "The dungeon will want to limit our options."

"So we have to pick between leaving now, or continuing?" Jackal asked.

"I doubt it," the sorcerer said. "I suspect that we will get other opportunities to unlock the exit, but each time, it'll be at the expense of stopping our forward motion."

"There may also be situations where levers will become hidden again," Khumdar said. "And it is possible we will not be able to unhide them."

"We'll only be able to find out as we progress and test the situations as they arise," Don said.

Tibs nodded.

"And since you pulled the switch," Jackal said. "That means we're done. At least you waited until we got the loot from the chest and that fight."

"I couldn't open it until then."

"So they only become accessible in stages," Don said. "That's good to know. We'll want to start building a map of our progress."

"You're in charge of that," Jackal said, heading for the exit. "Good job dealing with that fighter."

"Thank you," the sorcerer replied, taken aback. "It was simpler, since its attention was focused on Tibs."

"Maybe we should do that all the time from now on," Mez said, "have Tibs get their attention and us attack from the rear. I did enjoy it too."

"That only works when I know there's going to be an attack," Tibs said, following Jackal out. "And if I tell you it's coming."

"If you keep the information to yourself," Don said, "that's an easy way to end up dealing with them on your own."

"Nah," Mez said, "Jackal's always going to be there to come to his rescue."

"I thought it was Tibs who was always rescuing him," Don said.

"We give and take," Tibs replied.

"It is how healthy relationships are made," Khumdar said.

"I already have a man!" Jackal called, "so stop trying to set me up with my brother."

Planning-29

Don grumbled something angrily, and Tibs cracked an eye open and watched as the sorcerer scratched something he'd written. Tibs had been hoping to rest before running the roofs, but that was proving difficult to do with Don getting frustrated by his work on the diagrams.

"You should give that a rest," Tibs said.

"I will figure them out," the sorcerer snapped.

"Not if you're so angry you rip them up."

Don glared at him.

"Why do you want to understand them so badly?"

Don turned in the chair, waving the pages at Tibs. "These are power. They're spells the guild isn't going to teach us for a long time. If I can figure out the language, I'll be ahead of where they want me, and that's only going to help."

"Is one of them for corruption?"

Don frowned. "No."

"Then how is it going to help?"

The sorcerer took a page from those he held. "This one is Water. You'll be able to use it."

Tibs sat. "I thought only sorcerers did spells."

"I shouldn't call these spells. They're etchings. Spells need multiple elements. But it's all diagrams too so, that's how I think of these."

"But only sorcerers can work with those. You need to think the right way to use them."

"No, anyone with the right element can learn from one."

"Alistair said that how we think affects how we use our essence. Which is why I can't learn how to do what an archer does."

"He's only partially right." Don placed the pages back on the table. "But he misses a detail. You don't think differently from me because I'm a sorcerer and you're a rogue. You think differently because you're you, and I'm me. Our upbringing will play a part in that, and yes, you'll think more like another rogue than one of the townsfolk, but that's because you'll have done a lot of the same kind of things, which need you to think in similar ways."

"So, how can I use them?"

"The same way you learned from your teacher. You learn to think in a different way. We can all do that. It'll be easier for some than others, but by working at it, everyone can change how they think. That is what the diagrams are for. To help you think the way you have to execute them."

"So, it's possible for me to stop my essence from fraying at the edges?"

Don frowned. "Your etching frays?"

"No, when I mold essence to do stuff, like when I coat the floor with water, or..." he searched for an alternative to his attempt at Carina's whirlwind. "Make a funnel with it. The edges aren't defined the way Naila uses her water essence."

Don nodded. "She's a sorcerer, so she is used to thinking in precise ways."

"I have to be precise too; locks and traps need precision to open."

"But it's going to have to be a different kind of precision, or not as important in the overall way you learned to think. I can't tell you why you think you way you do, Mind isn't my element, and I doubt even one of them could. But an etching isn't the same as what you did. How much fraying is there when you do an

etching?”

“The good ones don’t have any.”

Don smiled. “So you’re able to think in such a way that the fraying goes away if you need to.”

Tibs thought about it. And now that he considered it, not all his essence of use was frayed to the same level. His air platform barely had any. He’d worked on it so hard when he barely had any essence, trying to get it to support his weight, that it had been a nearly perfect concentration of essence.

“Then why can’t I recreate what another Runner does when they’re doing that?” he was thinking of Carina’s whirlwind. It was simply her pulling and pushing the essence, manipulating it, the way he manipulated water.

“I guess it’ll depend. How important is it to you to succeed? How different the thinking to make it happen is. If all you have to work with is how their essence feels to you as they work, you’re missing a lot of important information. It’s why Etchings exist. They are a representation of the steps needed to get effect to happen.”

“But they don’t feel the same as when I manipulate Water.”

“That’s because that’s just you pushing your will on it.” Don considered something. “Okay. You’ve made waves of water, right?”

Tibs nodded.

“Do you think you could take that and turn it into something resembling your water jet?”

Tibs formed a ball of water over his palm. Shaped it into a rod and willed it across the room.

“How much effort did that take?”

“Not a lot.”

“Can you make something that would cause the kind of damage your attack does?”

Tibs formed another cylinder, then made it larger. He realized his first problem, well, second. The first one was the damage he’d cause the room if he let the water go. He’d have to keep adding water to the jet the way his attack kept pulling from his reserve until he forced it to stop. He could do it, but he also had to project the water with enough force to do damage.

Essence slipped his mental control as he searched for a way to have both things happen.

He absorbed the water after he couldn’t keep more from dripping to the floor. “I’m going to have to work on it.”

Don nodded. “But why would you want to, when you have an etching that lets you do that easily, and when you’ve worked out how to make an etching without having to trace it with a point?”

“You noticed.”

The sorcerer shrugged. “Hard to miss a jet of water saving your life when the Runner making is his also busy holding off his attackers. Don’t worry,” he added as Tibs kept his gaze fixed on him. “I doubt the others realized it. If I hadn’t read about it being possible, I’d have figured I just missed you make the quick etching.”

“When do you think the guild will teach that?”

“I don’t know. I won’t be surprised if it turns out it is something else they expect us to work out on our own eventually since it’s not as useful for everyone. As a researcher, I’m not sure when etching without tracing it will be something I need to do, not to say I’m not sure how it’ll work when dealing with multiple essences.”

Planning-30

“That’s him,” Serba said, indicating the man looking over fabric at the merchant’s booth. Tibs had trouble making out details about him through the busy crowd. The first day of the bazaar was always the busiest one. “His name is Brogan Roche. He’s third under the boss guard, so he’s careful with his stuff. I tried to figure out what the thing was, but I couldn’t.”

Tibs nodded. The man wore pants and shirts out of a rough gray-green fabric with lighter trim.

“I don’t know where he lives and don’t ask me to find out.”

He nodded again and made his way closer.

“This is good fabric for work clothes,” the merchant said as she places a bolt of gray fabric on the table.

Tibs sensed what the man on him, but he had nothing with essence. Tibs would have to find him when he was on duty. But now that he knew who his target was, he was off to find a candy merchant to spend the coppers he’d accumulated since walking into Market Place.

* * * * *

Tibs detours on his way to the training room as he saw the guard lieutenant. He sensed, trying to make out how the item worked. But like anything containing elements he couldn’t identify, it didn’t help. It told him it was small enough to hold in the palm of a hand, and from Serba’s description, it didn’t need to be used with anything else. It might need to be activated, but once that was done, it would cancel the magic that made it difficult to work out the size of the guild building.

The outside was always the same, as was the entrance and hallway leading to the training room. Beyond that, Tibs never got the same distances to get to the same places, and if he focused too much on counting his steps, he ended up in the wrong place entirely. He was never sure exactly how he made it to Tirania’s office. He knew where it was, based on his first visit, and it felt to him like he always took the same route there, but if he paid too much attention to the way, he ended up lost.

He retraced his way to the entrance once Brogan stepped into the stairwell leading down, counting his steps. He avoided getting lost, but as with the previous times, the distances were different.

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten,” Alistair said as Tibs stepped into the training room.

“I got lost trying to figure out the size of the building,” he replied. At his teacher’s

raised eyebrow, he continued. "I noticed some time back how the distance between places is never the same. So I've been trying to figure out how it's happening."

"How do you think it's being done?"

"Magic."

Alistair chuckled. "But what kind?"

"I can think of mind or void as what might do it. The dungeon makes doorways that lets us cross to different floors, so it might be able to change the length of the corridors. Mind can change how I'd think about counting my steps. I figure other elements have their own ways of doing it."

"And remember that enchantments combine elements, which increase what's possible." Alistair crossed his legs as he sat on the floor. "How about you show me what you can do with Ank and Kha? Keep it small."

Tibs made a dagger out of ice, something simple without ornaments, and etched a quick line of water essence, adding more Ank than Kha. Once he was done, the result was a water that fell to the floor between them, then slowly oozes flat.

"What use can you think of for this?" Alistair asked.

Tibs looked at the unmoving puddle. He willed it together, feeling the resistance. It wasn't that it didn't want to obey him, just the thickness the combination of letters caused. He touched it, pushed his finger through the surface, then pulled it out, the water clinging to it.

"I could use this to slow someone."

"Good. How about another thing?"

Tibs willed it into his hand, moved it, turned his hand upside down and watched it stretched until it was a bulk connected to his hand by a thin strand. "Without doing more to it, I can't think of it."

Thick water splashed Tibs's chest, clinging to his torso and one arm. As he tried to pull his arm away, the water resisted, trapping it in place.

"It's good for subduing someone."

"Isn't this just slowing them down?"

Alistair chuckled. "I suppose it is."

"And in a dungeon, that isn't really useful. Making something hard and spiky ends fights faster."

"That's limited thinking, Tibs, and you can't limit what you do to the dungeon. You will be acting in the world soon enough." The water holding Tibs vanished. "Catch."

Tibs caught the ball of water. Unlike what had held him, it didn't shift. Other than it not being cold, it could be a ball of ice. He sensed the essence; the etching wasn't as tight as he'd expected, and he recognized Fey between the essences.

"Isn't it easier to just make it ice?"

"If the purpose is just to have a ball to throw, yes. But this is about practicing adding the letters to the essence so that you'll be able to, eventually combining them so they will interact and create a wide array of results."

"Like that mist which kept people from listening to us."

"Yes."

Tibs turned the ball in his hand. "Didn't you say Fey was the letter representing

darkness? How does Darkness make this harder?"

"The fact one represents the other isn't an indication of what it can do. After all, you're not manipulating darkness when you make the letter. It's still water essence."

"Then why say it represents it? Why not just call it Fey and say it makes something hard?"

"I don't know why it's linked, and to say it makes something hard is limiting what it can do. Even on its own, the arrangement of Fey will alter the result. It's one of the few letters that has an effect on its own."

"More of it makes it harder?"

"It's not quite as simple."

"It never is," Tibs said, and Alistair chuckled before launching into an explanation.

Planning-31

Tibs followed Brogan Roche as best as he could throughout the day. He spent most of his time on duty within the guild, relaying orders, talking with other officers of the guards. His duties seemed to revolve around making sure everyone else had something to do. Tibs sensed a magical item on him, but couldn't get close enough to locate it on his person. When he left at the end of his shift, he no longer had it.

So Tibs would have to either get it within the guild, which he felt was a last choice thing, or come up with a way to get the man to leave the guild while he was on duty and hope he kept it then.

Two more days of trailing the man revealed another complication. He didn't simply leave the item, a disk, as far as Tibs made out at a distance, in his office, but he handed it to the guard's quartermaster, before ending his shift.

That meant Tibs couldn't simply take it and hope the man thought he'd misplaced it. He had to take it, use it, and return it all in the span of time Tibs could keep him outside the guild.

Or, he realized, he had to get himself a working copy of it in that time.

* * * * *

Tibs tested the walls while Jackal gathered the loot from the bodies. "There should be a time shield in here so we know how much time we have left."

"With the moving walls, I don't think it can be done," Don said. "They'd either get ripped off as a wall move or tell us one can't be moved."

Once he'd tested them all, he was left with only the one that opened the way to the switch.

"Wasn't this a risk?" Don asked.

"Why?"

"What if you'd found one that moved and it blocked the others in the process?"

"The first one doesn't move any other. The dungeon wants us out of the path before something will block the way."

"You can't know that."

Tibs shrugged as he pushed the wall. "It hasn't happened."

"Three attempts are not enough to make that kind of statements. You need to be more careful with the team. Of your friends," Don added at Tibs's shrug.

"We got armor," Jackal said, joining them, "a magic sword, coins, and bottles that

rebuild essence.”

“Can you keep me one?” the sorcerer asked. “My training’s been draining. This will let me push harder.”

“We can keep all of them for you,” Mez said. “The stronger you are, the better it is for the team, right Jackal?”

Tibs opened the way to the switch.

“It’s best if I only take one,” Don said after a stretching silence. “I don’t want to learn to depend on them. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but a lot of what we’re learning can be done by over using essence, instead of being precise with what we have.”

Tibs tested the walls and the one opposite the switched moved.

“Tibs has mentioned that at one point,” Khumdar replied.

“It’s the way some of the adventurer forgot how difficult what we’re learning is,” Tibs replied, as he pushed. “They have so much essence they can do it just by using brute force.” It moved again and stopped. The left one moved.

“That is often how things are,” the cleric said. “If one is willing to over use one thing, similar results can be achieved to doing it the ‘correct’ way.”

“Or if you don’t care about what else gets broken in the process,” Jackal said.

“A lot like if you over saturate yourself with essence,” Don said, “it might have unintended consequences.”

Tibs ignored the comment and pushed. Three times and an opening was revealed.

“Yes!” Jackal exclaimed at the chest in the middle of the room. Tibs had a wall of hard water up with a quick gesture. Tibs had noticed how simply it was to insert Fey within the essence. The fighter collided with it with a surprised ‘ow,’ then looked at Tibs, rubbing his nose.

“Don’t rush in until I’ve checked it.”

Don tapped the water, then peered through it. “How advanced is your training?”

Tibs shrugged, pulled Fey out of the etching, and Don jumped out of the way of the falling water.

“You did that on purpose.”

“Yes.” Tibs moved the water over the room’s floor. “The essence was already here, so I’m using it to check the floor for traps. Of which there are.” He sensed the trigger, then felt for where it was. Distances weren’t always easy to determine through water. Something about how it flowed made it imprecise as a measuring tool.

“You could have warned me.”

“You afraid of water?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t want my robe getting wet. This isn’t fabric you just let get wet.”

“But letting it get ripped and bloody’s fine, right?” the fighter asked.

Don sighed. “Okay, yes. It’s not rational. But this was expensive. I’d like to try and not get it needlessly damaged.”

“Jackal,” Mez said, “maybe now’s the time?”

“Tibs, what do you think?”

Tibs shrugged, trying to determine if turning the water into ice within the mechanism would lock it up or trigger it.

“It can wait,” Jackal said.

“Something else you aren’t telling me?” Don asked, his tone sharp.

“Just as there is much you are not telling us, is there not?” Khumdar countered.

“Like you’re so forthcoming with information,” the sorcerer replied.

“We all have secrets,” Jackal said. “Believe it or not, we are used to that.”

There, Ganny was clever, but not clever enough. So long as he only iced that one part of the trigger, it would jam. “The room’s safe.” He absorbed the water. “I’m going to check the chest.”

He made it halfway to it when he felt essence shift above him.

“Trap!” he yelled, forming a sword and shield.

“Someone’s getting overconfident,” Ganny cackled as Gnolls dropped through doorways in the ceiling.

The ice cracked as Tibs berated himself for missing a trigger, and snarled, slashing the closest creature before it could react. More of the ice cracked. If he was going to get angry, he might as well unleash it on those who were here for that. He slammed his shield into another; the spikes cutting it as he staggered away. He yelled as the Gnolls charged him, and more of the ice cracked.

Tibs saw the danger coming, but he was too busy defending himself to see to the cracks.

“What’s going on Tibs?” Ganny taunted. “All that essence and not able to handle a few Gnolls? Come on, tell me you’re not that weak.”

Tibs snarled, elongating his blade as he slashed and an arc before him opened up, but more filled in the gap. What was Ganny doing? Tibs worried. Was she looking to kill him? He added metal to his armor, along with the ice and earth, in time to take a club to the shoulder. He dropped to a knee, but nothing broke.

He stretched his shield over his head as blows came down hard enough it too was cracking. He couldn’t move or do anything other than focus on keeping the ice around him from breaking until the assault.

Ice wasn’t going to save him, Tibs realized. He needed to go on the offensive. Something brutal. Something that would teach Ganny not to mess with him.

He reached for fire.

An angry roar accompanied the lessening of the attack. Then someone was beside him, filled with Earth. “I’m here,” Jackal snarled. “What the fuck are you up to?” he yelled and sent Gnolls flying.

Tibs was finally able to breathe, and with that he realized what he’d been about to do. He filled the cracks and stood. He flung water with Kha and Ank, turning it gummy. The Gnoll he hit were slowed and those whose limbs were caught weren’t able to swing their clubs.

The heat of fire finally reached him as arrows cut down the creatures at the edge, progressing closer to the center as more of them fell. Tibs cut any that came within reach. He caught sight of Khumdar slipping between Gnolls as he struck them as if there was more space there than Tibs could see.

He formed an ice knife and threw it at the Gnoll about to hit the back of the cleric’s head. The pommel hit instead of the point, but it distracted the creature and made Khumdar aware of its presence.

Then Tibs was busy staying alive.

* * * * *

“What’s the big idea?” Jackal yelled at the ceiling, when it was only the five of them still alive, if not all standing. Khumdar was lying down, catching his breath. Mez was seated against the wall next to Don, the two for them drinking a healing potion.

“It’s okay,” Tibs said. “I know what it tried to do. It failed.”

“That makes one of us,” Don said. “Is the dungeon going back to eating everyone?” he asked, sounding scared.

“No.”

“Are there going to be other attacks like that?” Don asked.

“I don’t know,” Tibs replied when Ganny didn’t say anything.

“Maybe we should head out,” Mez said, “the switch—”

“No.” The ice cracked. “I’m not letting her get away with this.” Tibs headed for the chest, coating it in water, pushing it in whatever cracks were there. He added Fey to it and pulled. The chest resisted for a few seconds, then—

“Tibs, No!” Sto yelled as the chest exploded.

* * * * *

Tibs groaned.

“Oh, you’re alive,” Sto said.

“What happened?” He mumbled, turning on his side to push himself up. He checked the ice and filled the cracks. Now was not the time to lose control.

“I think,” Don said, “that you might have broken the dungeon.”

“It takes more than that to break me,” Sto replied. “But that did hurt.”

Tibs force an eye open, then both snapped open, and he stared at the hole in that side of the room. It was six sections of wall deep, and formed a ball where the walls, ceiling, and floor weren’t there anymore.

“How?” Tibs asked.

“You broke open the chest and destroy it,” Sto replied.

“I think,” Don said, “that you gave us a demonstration of what happens when Void Essence is exposed to the rest of the world without control.”

Tibs tried to understand what the sorcerer meant. “The Attendants use Void essence outside. That doesn’t happen.”

“That is controlled essence,” Don replied. “Void isn’t an essence that’s found—” he motioned around them. “I don’t know why, never came across a book touching on that, but I read one where there was the summary of an experiment where sorcerers created a point of void, then just let it go.”

“What happened?” Jackal asked.

“They didn’t survive. What was left of their bodies was mist sprayed over the walls of the experimental chamber. If you’d been any closer to that, Tibs, you’d be just like them. As it is, the concussive blast that resulted from whatever happened threw you and us across the room. It’s a good thing some of us still had potions in us, because that hurt.”

“You knew it would happen,” Tibs said.

“I didn’t know those chests could even be broken,” Don replied. “So not really.”

“I have been experimenting with the essences, Tibs,” Sto said, “but I’m with Don. I

didn't think they could be broken open."

"And you want me to let go of the ice?"

"Sorry, am I missing something?" Don asked.

"So much," Jackal replied.

"If you don't let it go willingly, and in a safe place, Tibs. What will happen when something pushes you to the breaking point?" Sto asked.

"I believe this demonstration gave us much to think about," Khumdar said. "As to the necessity of keeping yourself so controlled."

"Well, that's it for this run," Jackal said. "Hopefully, the switch still works, otherwise we're going to find out what the dungeon's like overnight." He looked at the damage. "I hope that's fixed by morning, because I don't want to think what the guild's going to say if the first Lambda team of the morning tells them some rooms aren't working."

"Jackal doesn't have to worry about that," Sto said. "This is easy to repair."

Tibs looked at the damage again and wondered if he could sneak a chest like that in the guild.

Planning-32

The commotion disrupted Market Place more than Tibs had intended. When he set the Rho thief on stealing from one of the bazaar's booths and then discreetly tipped off the guards, he'd expected him to be caught quickly, and for Brogan to be brought in. Instead, the girl was giving them quite the run around. She might even give them the slip completely, and Tibs couldn't have that.

A small patch of ice under her foot and down she went. Before she was on her feet, the guards were on her, and dragging her away.

Tibs followed at a distance and covered with a layer of darkness to ensure he wouldn't be noticed, waiting for the guard lieutenant to join them. Tibs had followed him multiple times as he went to the criminal, instead of waiting for them to reach the guild. Brogan preferred dealing with problems as soon as possible to expedite the punishment.

Once they entered the building, Tibs had to accept that as he'd feared, an attempt at robbery wouldn't be enough to draw the man out.

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The house was on fire, and it was chaos.

The arsonist Tibs had paid had done as instructed and hadn't asked questions. Tibs had passed himself off as a servant, ordered to find the man by his master. He has the name of one of the lower nobles who'd used this tactic before, as part of clearing the houses where the wall was going up, but the arsonist only cared for the target and any instructions he had to follow.

The only instruction was the time, since he needed for Brogan to be on duty, and he knew the house's inhabitants were all out, working at the tavern.

The arsonist was caught quickly, impeded by the quick response of both the guards, who again, had been made aware of what was about to happen, and the townsfolk who were already forming a bucket chain to control the fire. As he followed the guard, he sensed a runner with Water heading in their direction, so the fire wouldn't cause anymore damage.

Brogan met the guards halfway from the guild, and Tibs moved closer, only for the crowd they attracted to get in his way. He slipped through them easily, already suffused with water, but the delay meant that by the time he reached Brogan, he was already questioning the arsonist, with the guards in formation around them, to keep the crowd from approaching.

Tibs waited until they were done and on the move again, but the crowd moved with them, forcing the guards to remain between his target and him.

He let them go.

He needed to rethink his approach.

* * * * *

Tibs found her on the fighter's training field, watching Omega and Upsilon fighters trained. None of the more experienced Runners dared take her on, and the younger ones knew they were outmatched just looking at her and all the metal attached to her armor.

There was more of it than Tibs expected. As well as the bars attached to the outside, there were sheets of metal under the leather, and it wasn't only the color of the metals that were different. Some bars and sheets had a more of the essence in them than others.

"Light Fingers!" she called when she saw him. "What's bringing you here? That team leader of yours here and I missed him? He owes me a fight."

"I didn't know that. Last I saw him, he and Mez were heading to the shops. I have a proposition for you."

"You're too young."

"It isn't for me."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're propositioning me on behalf of someone else?" she smirked. "I don't know that I'm interested in someone who has to go through you to get me to go with them."

"I want you to seduce someone."

"I'm not someone who seduces. I punch, and if I'm impressed I f—"

"But you sell your services, right?"

"Yes, but not usually those services." She studied him. "Just out of curiosity, how much were you thinking it would take to get me to do that?"

Tibs flashed the gold coin and sent it away.

She stared.

"Why?" she asked.

"Does that matter?"

She studied him again, this time harder and longer. "I guess not. Not for that kind of money. Now I'm worried about who you think would take that much to convince me to seduce."

* * * * *

"Him." Tibs pointed to Brogan as he left the guild for the day.

She looked at Tibs. "Okay, who is he? Because he's good looking enough, I might bed him without a fight."

"He's one of the guards."

"If this is about putting him in a compromising position to exhort something, I don't know that you're paying me enough. Those kind of things always turn ugly."

"I just needed him distracted for a few hours."

"Hours." She smirked. "Just how do you think this works?"

"You have fun for that time."

She snorted. "You realize that a man's not going to last for hours. Not without herbs and stuff."

"Jackal and Kroseph do."

"Those two have more to enjoy than I'll have with this guy. At least tell me he doesn't

have a special someone.”

“He doesn’t. He likes women. He doesn’t seem to care for how they look. He’s been with some skinny, some thick, tall and short. He sounds like they always have fun.”

“Sounds. So you haven’t watched him have his fun.”

“I have enough of Jackal telling me the kind of fun he and Kroseph get to. I’m not interested in watching it. I listened in to be certain that’s what was happening.”

“Right, you wouldn’t want to go through all this, only to realize he just enjoys reading to the ladies.”

“Exactly.”

She looked at him again.

“Okay, have that gold ready, because in a few hours I’m going to be back—” Tibs caught her arm as she moved away.

“Not now. Tomorrow, when he has his midday meal, and in a room at the tavern, he eats at, and you’ll need to get him out of his clothes.”

Tibs had already paid one of the servers to get him a double of the key to them.

“You’re paying for the room,” she said.

* * * * *

Tibs watched Cross speak with Brogan. She’d acted surprised to see him, and he’d been impressed by her, standing and offering her the seat opposite his. She was now seated next to him, leaning close and speaking in his ear. Whatever she said, he approved of. They stood, headed to the bar, where she spoke with the woman on the other side, then took the key and they headed up the stairs.

Tibs nodded to the server, and as soon as she was behind the bar, he headed for the stairs. They crossed path a few steps from it and he took the key. Walking through the corridor, he listened for Cross’s voice, then unlocked the room next to it to wait.

He didn’t have to wait long for the voice to turn to grunts and moans.

Tibs silently unlocked and cracked the door open. The sound of passion became louder. Cross was seated on the man’s hips and gyrating. She noticed him as Tibs looked away, and bend over to kiss Brogan.

Tibs stayed low and hurried to the pile of clothes, taking the magical medallion from it and gently closing the door on leaving, locking it again.

* * * * *

Tibs walked along the mountain, away from runner and merchants in the valley before the stairs. He didn’t know how far in this direction Sto’s influence stretched, but he was a ways from where he’d talked with him last.

“Hi Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m glad you came by. I was hoping you’d—”

“I need you to make me a copy of this.” He summoned the medallion to his palm.

“You need me to make you a copy,” Sto repeated slowly.

“You can do it, right? This isn’t more complicated than the armor you made me.”

“That’s not the issue,” Sto said. “Don’t you realize how you’re acting? This isn’t the Tibs I know.”

“Sto, I don’t have a lot of time. I need to put this back before Cross is done with him.”

“Tibs, friends don’t just—”

“Sto, can you do it?”

“No, he can’t,” Ganny stated.

“Ganny, not now,” Sto said.

“Come on, you aren’t going to let him treat you like that, are you?”

“Ganny, it’s my decision.”

“You know you’re not supposed to—”

“Really, Ganny? Aren’t we past what we are and aren’t supposed to do? Considering what we pulled, I’d think that if those Them of yours were real, they’d have showed up at this point.”

Ganny’s grumbling became fainter.

“I will do it, Tibs,” Sto said, “because friends help each other.”

“Good, I—”

“But, I’d appreciate it if, in return, you let the ice go when you do your next run.”

“No.”

“Tibs, it isn’t—”

“No. I’m not putting you or anyone at risk. If that means you aren’t going to help, tell me now, because I still need to make sure he doesn’t realize It’s gone.”

“Put it down and step away a dozen paces. I said I’d help you. I wish you realized what you’re doing to yourself,” Sto said as Tibs walked away. “How the way you’re acting isn’t like you at all.”

“I’m only doing what I have to, so those who let our town get hurt pay.”

“You’re not doing it for the town, Tibs.”

“Yes, I am.” He filled the cracks.

“At least be honest about why you’re doing it.”

“I’m protecting everyone. Once the guild’s gone, those of might want to hurt us are going to see were too strong. No one’s taken down the guild before. That’s why I’m doing it.”

“It’s done. They’re both where you left it.”

Tibs picked them up and sensed from any difference. “What do they do?”

“No idea. I haven’t seen a weave like this before. I’m going to have to play with it to workout what I can do with it.”

“I guess having something new to use against us is payment enough, then.” Tibs headed back.

“I told you Tibs, I did this because friends help each other.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t be trying to get me to let go of the ice.”

* * * * *

The server nodded to the stairs, confirming Cross and Brogan were still in the room. Tibs paused by the door as the man cursed loudly. “Where the fuck did you learn that?”

“Why? You want me to do it again?”

“I don’t think I can—” the rest was a string of curses.

He unlocked the door and cracked it only enough to see the bed. Brogan was on his side, his back to it. The top of Cross’s head was between his legs, and whatever she was

doing had Brogan tensing and cursing louder. Tibs hurried to the clothes, slipped a medallion back in the inside pocket, then exited.

He returned the key to the server, then headed to the inn for a meal. If the guild didn't explode with activity at the realization, the medallion was a dungeon made item now tomorrow, he'd go in to see how things changed.

* * * * *

With the medallion in his coin pouch, the guild halls were simple to navigate. If he crossed it from one end to the other, it was the same nine-times one-hundred and one and eight paces that he did it on the ground floor, the first, second, third, or fourth. Or any other corridors that did the whole length. On the narrow side, the building was three paces short of the half.

It only worked if it was in his normal coin pouch. If he sent the medallion to the secret pouch, Tibs couldn't figure out how to return to the entrance from where he was. He'd have to ask Sto why that was.

He located the door Serba had described, but before he could investigate it, one of the guards noticed him and Tibs hurried off.

Still, he'd made progress. He could move around only impeded by doors and people, and those he could figure out how to deal with.

Planning-33

Tibs headed for the counter as he stepped into the busy inn, grabbed the plate of today's meal Russel handed him, along with the tankard, and made his way to his team's table, where the others already were. Other than Jackal, they were done eating and were quietly drinking.

He felt their eyes on him and ignored it.

"We need to talk," Jackal said, once he finished his plate.

Tibs was halfway through the steak, drenched in a spicy sauce with slightly sweet vegetables. "Okay." He continued eating.

"Tibs, I said, we need to talk."

"I can eat and talk," he replied, doing that to prove his point.

"I'd rather you focus on us. The food can wait."

The food would get cold, but that wouldn't change how filling it was, just the taste, and that wasn't all that important. He shrugged and put the knife down and looked at the fighter.

"You have to let go of water," Jackal said. "It's starting to cause problems."

"Did you talk with—" Tibs stopped himself from saying Sto's name as he glanced at Don. He realized Jackal couldn't have talked with the dungeon, since he couldn't hear him.

"Fine," Don exclaimed. "Yes, I'm the one who brought it up. I figured you'd listen to him more than me."

"Why? You're the smarter one."

They stared at him.

"That's kind of what the problem is, Tibs," Mez said.

"Not that I'm the smarter one," Don replied, "but that you're so blatant about pointing it out."

"That statement," Khumdar said, "sounds suspiciously like you wishing you were not."

Don rolled his eyes. "It isn't because I'm the smartest person in this town that I think I'm better than everyone here."

"Yes, you do," Tibs said.

Don sighed. "This is me trying to be humble."

Khumdar hid his smile behind taking a drink. "You will need to continue practicing," he said after.

“Look, there’s only so much awesome I can hide, okay?”

“Hey,” Jackal said, “I’m the awesome one here. You’ll have to settle for bring great.”

Don raised an eyebrow. “I don’t settle. So that man of yours will have to get used to his man not being all that awesome anymore.”

Jackal snorted. “You are going to have to try a lot harder if you want my man to think you’re more awesome than I am.”

“Your man’s going to have to keep thinking you’re so awesome anymore, because even to prove you wrong, I’m not getting in bed with him.”

“That’s good,” the server said, placing a tankard down and taking Jackal’s empty one and plate, “since I’m starting to like you, and I’d rather not have to punch you.”

“That just means there’s one less person in the lineup,” Don replied. “It’s not like I’m going to notice.”

Tibs looked up from his food at the ensuing silence. The others were looking at the sorcerer.

“What?” Don asked them.

Kroseph patted his shoulder. “I think I like you a little more after this.” Then he headed for the kitchen.

Don looked at the others. “What did I say?”

“If you do not know,” Khumdar replied, “then it was definitely the right thing.”

The sorcerer looked at Tibs, who shrugged and went back to eating.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, “we still to talk.”

He considered continuing to eat, but it would simply lead to a repeat of earlier. He put the knife down and looked at the fighter.

“You have to—”

“No,” Tibs said.

“Tibs, your actions are affecting the town.”

“Everyone’s actions affect the people in the town.”

“But not everyone’s letting a house burn down,” Don said.

“Or setting up a Runner for cell time,” Jackal added.

“The Runner’s fine,” Tibs said. “She was released before their run. And there’s plenty of other houses for that family to use.”

“Are you going to buy one for them?” Mez asked.

“Why?”

“Because unless they own the house, it’s not like they can just move in it.”

“There’s plenty of people in house they don’t own,” Tibs pointed out.

“If you’re talking about the houses the people looking after the runners live in, they, or at least their families, own them.”

“There’s still people living in houses they don’t own. Don lived in one before moving to our room.”

“Just on one floor,” the sorcerer said, “and I had to pay for that, every month.”

“That family’s house you arranged to be burned down doesn’t have that much money,” Mez said. “They can’t pay for both.”

“Why would they pay for both? They’d already bought the house. And if they only

have to pay once a month, it's easier to manage. It's like how the shops pay for their security. If I asked for everything at once, they wouldn't be able to."

Mez looked at Tibs. "You have no idea how housing works, do you?"

"People spend coins to get a house, they live in it. When they move, they sell the house to someone else."

"It's more complicated than that," the archer said. Tibs shrugged. It wasn't like that was his problem. "And your lack of reaction is one of the example why you have to stop."

"I can't stop."

"You can," Jackal said. "Just let go of it."

"You've seen how dangerous that is."

"That's why you're going to do it in the dungeon," the fighter replied.

Tibs narrowed his eyes. That sounded so much like what Sto had offered. He had trouble believing Jackal hadn't been prompted by the dungeon. Although, Jackal had seen Sto survive Tibs losing control of Fire, so he could think the dungeon would survive anything.

"No. I'm not going to risk hurting him like that."

"Tibs, this isn't us asking you," Jackal said. "We're telling you to stop."

"I'm telling you I won't. It's too dangerous."

"It is not more dangerous than where we can see your current behavior taking you," the cleric said.

"You haven't seen what Jackal has."

"He described it."

"Not everything," the fighter added as Tibs glared at him.

"But enough we get a sense of what you're afraid of," Don said. "And I'm telling you, Tibs. Where you're heading can be much more destructive than that."

"I'm working toward freeing the town. That isn't something that happens without some people being hurt. I'm sorry it's happening, but I'm not going to stop just because you're afraid I'll hurt someone."

"Tibs, it's not just some people," the sorcerer said. "You are becoming so focused on your end goal that you might not see how much destruction you caused in insistence on doing anything you have to to win."

"That won't happen."

"Tibs," Don said in exasperation, "you already aren't—"

"It's not going to work," Jackal said, studying Tibs. "He's already too far gone to care about that."

Tibs waited. Jackal didn't say something like that without thinking he had a plan.

"Here's what going to happen, Tibs. Unless you promise to let go of water once we're in the dungeon. We're not going to have another run."

"You can't stop doing runs," Tibs replied, amused that was the fighter's plan. He'd expected slightly better. "The guild isn't going to let us." He went back to eating his now cool food.

"Maybe not, but if I'm in a cell, the team can't go on a run," Jackal said.

Tibs snorted. "You, ending up in a cell? You'd have to walk up to a guard and punch one to make it happen."

“I was thinking more of starting a brawl outside the Drunk Worm, since a lot of the guards hang out there after their shifts, but your idea does benefit from being quicker.”

Tibs stared at the fighter. “You won’t do it.”

Jackal smiled. “Test me.”

“That means you’re going to miss on all the loot in the dungeon.”

“It does.”

“You love loot more than anything other than Kroseph.”

“There’s one person I love more than loot, Tibs. And for you, I’m willing to sacrifice that a whole lot more.”

“I don’t need help,” he stated, filling the forming cracks.

“I don’t care what you think you need, Tibs. Until you promise to do it, the day before a run, I’m going to make sure I end up in a cell.”

The lack of light accompanying the words told Tibs the fighter wasn’t lying. He ground his teeth. He needed the runs. He didn’t care about the loot, but he needed to get stronger, and that meant doing runs. And now, Jackal was going to be stubborn and get in the way of that.

What he needed was a new team leader.

The crack nearly shattered his control. His hand tightened on the tankard’s handle to the point his knuckles turned white, as he filled it and iced everything back into control.

What he really needed was a way to show them he was fine.

He sighed and slumped forward. “Fine,” he said, defeated. “I’ll do it.”

“Promise it.”

He sighed again. “I promise,” he lied. Once in the dungeon, it wasn’t like they’d be able to force him, and if Jackal wouldn’t see reason... Well, the dungeon was a dangerous place, and even someone at Lambda might not survive it.

Planning-34

“Dhu,” Alistair said, “is the letter that represents Purity.” The shape that formed in water over his teacher’s hand didn’t make Tibs think of Purity. It was a mix of curves and lines, like it couldn’t decide which one it preferred. Purity would know. Purity wouldn’t settle for going partway. She would work the problem until she knew which one she wanted.

Tibs recreated it. The letters, this way, were simple, just a shaping of water into the form. It was etching them in combination with the lines of essence that created the difficulty. By itself, one letter wasn’t hard, since it was simply a question of dividing the line into ten, and affixing the letter at one of those points. Using only one letter also created only minor alterations.

In conjunction with another letter, each space better them was divided into ten, and would be again if there was a third and so on. Forcing the Runner to properly place the letter with a smaller and smaller margin for error.

“When use with Water, it’s ideal position is at three, six and ten, and it adds a sharpness to the attack you are etching.”

“Isn’t that metal?” Tibs asked. “Or maybe crystal?” the fragile crystals broke into shards that could slice skin open. “Purity should be—” he stopped. Revealing he knew her personality might make Alistair suspicious. “I don’t know, removing impurities or something?” That made no sense, but he was a kid, so Alistair would—

“You know better than that, Tibs. And I know you were paying attention. What’s distracting you?”

“Nothing.” He just wanted things to go the way he wanted, instead of this confusion of a letter to an element that had nothing to do with the effect. Or his supposedly friends intent on getting in his way.

Alistair studied him for a few seconds, then nodded. “Then, if you don’t mind, lets continue with the lesson. Etch a line, and see to placing the letter at three, six and ten. Once done, send it at that target.”

Alistair etched with his knife as he pointed to the back of the training room, and essence coalesced. Tibs tried to work out the letters among the lines, but it was all so fine and compact. The only thing Tibs got out of it was that the amount of lines and letters didn’t come from the few gestures his teacher made. Alistair didn’t lie when he told him something with a point was required to etch. Had he forgotten he could will the essence into the etching, or did how it was taught mean they learned to do it without noticing?

The essence formed into the torso of a woman on a pedestal. Tibs raised an eyebrow

as he recognized her.

“I figured you might want to let some of your anger out.”

“I’m not angry at her.” He formed the knife out of ice, showing how it had no jagged edges to it. Then etched his line, misplacing Dhu at the six position, then controlled how much essence that attack pulled.

The water splashed over her face, and Tibs has to step closer to see the scratches on her face.

“Not bad for a first try.”

“How much more damage can it do if I etch it correctly?”

“That’ll depend on how many lines, and how much essence you use. Also, this exercise isn’t about turning this letter into an attack. It’s about getting you comfortable adding it to your etching, so that you’ll be comfortable doing so in combination with other letters. But.” Alistair smiled and made a quick etching. It as simple as the one Tibs made, but the letters were exactly where they needed to be, and Alistair put much more essence into it.

The water splashed on Tirania’s face again, cutting it until it no longer existed.

“Properly motivated, even a simple etching like this can have deadly results.”

And waste far too much essence. Not to say that the more essence he let the etching pull, the harder it was to stop it. Tibs wanted something precise that wouldn’t splash evidence all over the place when he acted.

Or at least, didn’t splash evidence that would lead to him.

* * * * *

“He isn’t going to do it, is he?” Ganny said, angrily, as Tibs and his team walked up the stairs.

“He said he wouldn’t,” Sto replied. He sounded resigned. That was good. At least it meant Sto wouldn’t do something when his friends started insisting Tibs stick to his agreement.

“He helped you,” she snapped. “The least you could do was show you gratitude.”

“Leave it Ganny.”

She let out a huff, then was silent.

“Here?” Don asked, as they reach the doorway to the second floor.

“No,” Jackal replied. “We don’t want Tibs loosing it anywhere near where one of the guards can notice. He’ll let go of Water on the third floor, that was we’ll have privacy.”

Don opened the doorway, and they stepped through. The sorcerer opened the one to the third floor, then they were through.

“Alright Tibs,” Jackal said, turning to face him. “Let it go.”

“No.”

“Tibs, you agreed,” Mez said.

He snorted. “If you believed me, that’s your problem. We have a run to do.” Tibs walked past his team.

“Stay here,” Jackal said. “Me and Mister Light Fingers are going to have a conversation.”

“I question the wisdom of your actions,” Khumdar said.

“Well, ask anyone who knows me,” the fighter replied, “which includes you.”

Wisdom's never been one of my defining traits." Jackal joined Tibs as he reached the junction, but said nothing.

Tibs stepped on the triggers that opened the way to the lion crest. "You aren't going to talk me out of this."

Jackal replied with a noncommittal sound and Tibs kept watch in case the fighter's place was too close to way. He might think that would be enough to discourage Tibs.

As Tibs headed for the right branch, Jackal put a hand on his shoulder. "That's far enough."

With a sigh, Tibs turned to face him. "Jackal, as your friend, I'm telling you to stop pushing."

"Tibs, as your friend, if you weren't so full of it, you'd know I can't stop pushing."

"I'm warning you, Jackal. You aren't going to like what I do to make you stop."

"Jackal," Don call, I don't think you should—"

A pillar of stone slammed down, blocking the way, another one slammed down, blocking the passage to the right, then the left, and finally the center one.

Tibs looked at them, trying to understand how Jackal had done it. He hadn't felt him use essence, and he hadn't stepped on any triggers, so he couldn't have done it that way, not that any of them could close the entrance to the junction, it didn't have a door to close.

He glared at the fighter. "You arranged this with Sto."

Jackal grinned. "What? You've heard me talk to it just about every run we've been on. I can't hear it. I'm well aware it hears me. Or did you think I'd forgotten how you heard its yell all the way to the town when it needed your help. Since it made the stairs, I figured it could hear me if I was close enough."

"You can't do this," Tibs told the ceiling. "We're in the room."

"Actually," Ganny replied, "we can. Or did you forget that it's distance, not your presence, that controls what Sto can do?"

"What, he's scared to talk to me?"

"That you think that, Tibs, shows how bad what you're doing is. Please, let go of Water before things turn bad."

Tibs glared at Jackal. "It's too late for that."

Jackal had a piece of stone in his hand ending in a point, and Tibs made his shield, then his sword. Instead of throwing it, the fighter moved it before him and Tibs stared as essence followed the point, etching in the air. Earth, with Kha, Fey, Bor and two more he didn't recognize.

It was more that his friend knew how to etch, it was how precise each line, each letter was. Even on the days he thought the best of the fighter, Tibs never thought of him as someone who could do precision.

"What?" Jackal asked, looking offended. "I'm Lambda, did you think us fighter didn't get etching training?"

Tibs tried to work out what the etching did. That it remained meant Jackal was focusing on it. Etchings were done and gone unless they were consciously maintained. Breaking the fighter's concentration was all he'd need to do to bring it down, but what did it do?

Earth essence hung in the air, a pace before Jackal and close to a pace thick. It

shimmered, but didn't otherwise appear to do anything.

"This isn't going to help you."

"I think it's going to help me long enough for us to talk."

"There's nothing you can say that's going to make me change my mind." He did his own etching, using Dhu since the precious day's practice was still fresh in his mind, and all he wanted to do was make a point.

The water flew at the fighter, hit the shimmer of earth and ... scattered. It was as if each point of shimmering redirected a piece of the attack in a different direction.

"You are hurting the town, Tibs."

"I'm doing what I have to make sure the guild will never hurt anyone here again."

"That's going to be easy, because the way you're going, there isn't going to be anyone left here for them to hurt the way you're going."

"Those who are strong enough will manage. But you aren't going to be here to see that."

He etched another attack, Kha and Fey this time pushing more essence. If he couldn't have an attack outright reach the fighter, he'd overwhelm the defense. The thick water hit the shimmering and scattered, but didn't dissipate the way his previous attack had.

"So that's what you're down to. Killing me? What are you going to tell Kro? That the dungeon did it?"

"You're always throwing yourself at the creature in here. It's not going to be that hard to convince him that you weren't quite as strong as you think you are."

"You're going to break his heart, Tibs."

"Then don't force me to do this." He pointed to the door. "Leave. Take the others with you. I'll make myself another team. Another family. One that understands me, that supports me."

"One that's okay with letting you become worse than my father?"

Tibs snorted. "I'm never going to be like him."

"Tibs, what would Carina think of what you're doing?"

"Don't mention her!" the crack was so sudden it caught him by surprise and he felt the heat rush up, barely filling the crack in time before it reached him.

"Why not? All this is because of her, isn't it? Because the guild didn't act to stop my father and he killed her before you."

"It was their job to make the town safe," Tibs growled, the ice filling with spiderwebs of cracks.

Jackal snorted. "Come on, you know that's not true. Or that at least, it never applied to us. The thing I don't get. Really, the one thing that baffles me in all of this, is why you cared that my father took her."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No, I mean it's not like she was your girl, special or otherwise. She was just the sorcerer on our team. I mean I'm sure she was good looking, so you'd enjoy that but—"

"Shut up!" the heat didn't crack the ice, it softened it as it grew. "She was my family! I don't need to have put my dick in someone to give a fuck about them."

"But you wanted to, right?" Jackal smirked. "Considering how often you were with her, just the two of you. Learning your letters." He rolled his eyes. "All your talk of never

wanting to have a special someone, that's all it was, right? Talk. You wanted her. You wanted to bed her, you just didn't—"

Tibs screamed and Fire launched itself at the fighter. It hit the etching and scattered, but Tibs kept feeding it his rage. He was going to turn that man to ash for reducing what Carina meant to him to just fucking.

When he stop and the haze cleared, Jackal was sweating, but still standing.

"Oh, I am so glad that worked," he said.

"Once," Tibs snarled, and poured fire at the fighter, who only now realized the attack had destroyed the etching.

Jackal threw himself out of the way, and on landing tapped the ground and poured essence into it, lifting stone in intercept Tibs's next attack. It didn't last long, fire consumed even dungeon reinforced stone when it was a hungry as Tibs had made it.

Jackal yelled something, but Tibs couldn't hear it over the roar of the fire underlying his scream as he trailed him, but the fighter was fast, and when he couldn't quite stay ahead of the fire, he had stone block it, giving himself the time he needed to get out of the way.

Fine. Then Tibs wasn't going to give him any place to run. He filled the junction with fire, added more to it then when he'd let loose in the Ratling's camp. Let Jackal even try to survive that. When he thought he had been enough, he fed the fire even more. He wasn't taking the chance the man's stone body could survive that. He was going to melt the stone off him until all that was left was his essence and then he'd rip that apart.

Fire didn't stop willingly, but Tibs was its master. He panted as he turned in place, slowly taking in the empty space and snarling in satisfaction. He'd won. He'd killed Jackal for tarnishing Carina's memory. He'd killed him for bad mouthing his family.

Tibs had killed Jackal.

He'd...

"Jackal?"

No!

He looked around. He couldn't have. What had he done?

He snarled. "What did you force me to do?"

"Hey Tibs," someone said and turned in time for the fist hit him in the face. "That fucking hurt!"

Jackal was smoking, his armor was blackened and his stone face didn't look right, part of it was drooping.

"You're alive!" Jackal was alive! Tibs couldn't believe it he hadn't—

"No thanks to you," the fighter snarled. "I swear to the abyss, Tibs if that ruined my pouch, I will make you pay."

"You made me do it!" he screamed. And reached for Water. He couldn't let himself.

"No fucking way." Jackal hit him again. "We're not fucking done." The next punch went through Tibs as he suffused himself with air. Then he had a whirlwind around the fighter, trying to lift him, to send in smashing into the walls over and over until he was rubble in disticuishable from any of Sto's dead creature.

He poured more and more essence into the wind. How could Jackal be that heavy? He was just stone, and— the fighter's essence went into the ground from his feet.

"You're fucking cheating!" he let go of the wind and grabbed corruption, flinging it at

the running fighter.

“How are you surprised?” Jackal demanded, pulling the same trick as with fire and getting stone pillar to block the attack. “But you’re going to have to try harder Tibs. I guess she wasn’t enough of girl for you to care for after all. Aw, fuck!” Jackal exclaimed as Tibs filled the room with Darkness.

“I am going to make you pay for that.” Tibs headed for the man. “She was the most important person to me!”

“Okay, that hurt, I knew you longest.” Jackal had retreated to the wall, waving his hands before him as if Tibs couldn’t sense him.

“You aren’t the same! You’re a brother! She was...” he swallowed the pain. Then screamed as the punch connected with his face again.

“Come on, Tibs, try harder. It’s like you don’t know what I can do. Earth fighter here.”

Tibs pushed himself to his feet. “Then I’m a fucking Earth rogue.” He didn’t bother with pillars. He made spires of stones, thin and sharp, and sent dozens of them at the fighter from all directions.

Jackal couldn’t move in time. He was pierced from all sides, then he was still. It happened so fast he hadn’t even reverted back to flesh.

Tibs walked to the fighter skewered in place.

There’s he’d done it.

He’s made him pay.

He’d won.

Tibs dropped to his knees before the corpse of his friend, his family.

He was alone now. Utterly alone, again.

And he’d been the one to do it this time.

He wailed, wishing he could go back and take back the words, his actions. He should have listened to him, Jackal was smarter than he let on. If he had, this wouldn’t have happened. Tibs wouldn’t be alone.

Arms closed around him. “It’s okay, Tibs,” Jackal said. “I’ve got you. It’s going to be okay.”

Planning-35

“What happened?” the voice was Don’s. “Where did that wall come from?”

“I must have stepped on a trigger.” Jackal’s. The fighter was carrying Tibs. “You know me, the klutz.” Jackal should stop talking, Tibs thought, but he couldn’t work up the energy to say it. Jackal always tried too hard when he lied. Unless he was serious about it. Then, the fighter was terrifyingly good at lying. It should be funny, but Tibs couldn’t work up the energy to find it so either. He couldn’t find the energy to feel all that much.

“How did you get it to bring it down?” Don again.

“I got lucky.” Jackal.

No such thing. Tibs should find it amusing how often people relegated their planning to something that didn’t exist. He should feel a lot of things right now, but he couldn’t seem to manage it.

This wasn’t the same as when he was iced. He wasn’t channeling any element, so it was a good thing his eyes were closed. His emotions were there. They were raw, but he was drained. Drained of energy and of essence. He had been too lost in his rage to realize how much essence he’d used in trying to kill Jackal.

He’d tried to kill Jackal.

If he had energy for it, he’d throw himself into the abyss for that.

He wanted to cry. To bawl his eyes out.

It was funny. He’d spent months iced over because he didn’t want to feel anything. And now that he could, he was too drained to manage it.

“How are none of you worried about this?” Don again, sounding annoyed.

“It’s the dungeon.” Mez. “It’s not like this is the first time it changed things.”

“Sometimes, it is best to simply appreciate that events work out in our favor.”

Khumdar.

“But if the dungeon’s changed this, we have to—”

“Don, drop it.” Jackal, out of patience.

Don’s grumbling was indistinct, but a sign the dropping was temporary.

They walked out of the dungeon.

“He’s fine,” Jackal snapped, Jerking away.

“Then why are you carrying him?” a woman, sounding older, stern.

“He is suffering from essence exhaustion.” Khumdar.

The sun was warm on him, comforting.

He didn't want warmth or comfort.

Tibs didn't deserve it.

* * * * *

The door opened and closed. Tibs turned on the bed, putting his back to whoever entered.

It wasn't his bed.

He didn't want a private room in the inn. He shouldn't be comfortable.

"I'm not hungry," he said, as the smell of the broth reached him. He curled in on himself tighter to keep his stomach quiet. Going hungry was the least he could endure as punishment for what he'd tried to do.

The image of Jackal pierced by stone spears wouldn't leave him, and it hurt to know he'd done it. He'd done it intending to kill his friend, the last member of his family. It hurt to realize that he didn't think of Mez and Khumdar as his family. He'd always thought his team was his family. That simply being part of it was enough to make those in it so.

He definitely didn't think of Don as family, so there was that.

Still, Khumdar and Mez had been with him for long enough. They should be family.

It hurt to realize that somehow they weren't.

He wanted the pain to go away.

He wanted to reach for water, to ice himself, mute the pain, make it easy on himself.

But ice was how he'd reached the point where killing Jackal was acceptable.

It hurt to realize he couldn't trust the elements, even now that he had control over them.

He deserved to hurt.

The intruder hadn't left. In fact, they'd pulled a chair and sat.

Go away.

Why couldn't they let him wallow in his misery? Tibs had nearly killed his man. He should hate him for that. Not sit there, with a bowl of broth on the table.

Of course it was Kroseph. Who else would it be? The person had no elements and anyone else would ask him questions. How was he doing? Wouldn't he eat something? Shouldn't he get out of bed and join the others?

"Go away," he mumbled into the pillow.

They didn't reply.

They also didn't leave.

Why weren't they leaving? Tibs ground his teeth. Why weren't they leaving him alone? He didn't deserve company. Didn't they see that?

He turned and glared at Kroseph. "Get the fuck out."

The server smiled and shook his head.

Tibs snarled and sat. "Do you have any fucking idea what I can do to you?"

"Go ahead."

Tibs narrowed his eyes. He extended his sense. Jackal was probably by the door, ready to come to his man's rescue should—no, the fighter was downstairs, at their table, with Don, Mez and Khumdar. Tibs had expected the cleric, at least, to be at the ready to weaken Tibs if he tried anything.

As drained as he was, there would be little Tibs could do to resist him.

Only none of them were there.

Tibs coated his hand with fire. "I'm serious." it was all he could do. His bracer wasn't there. Jackal and Kroseph had undressed him on arriving and taken them away. Tibs hadn't had the energy to protest.

"Then do it," Kroseph said.

"I'm not iced, Kroseph," he snarled. "Do you have any fucking idea how angry I am right now?"

The server shook his head.

"Then—"

"Do it." Kroseph shrugged.

Tibs's hold on the fire faltered. His anger faltered. "How aren't you scared of me? I nearly killed Jackal. I could kill you with barely a thought."

"Because I know you, Tibs."

Tibs snorted and fell back. Then he turned his back on Kroseph again. "Why don't you hate me?" he asked when the silence got overbearing.

"Because I know you, Tibs."

"No, you don't." Tibs wasn't sure he knew himself anymore. If he'd contemplated killing Jackal, his best friend, the last family he had. The closest thing to a brother he'd ever known. What else might he do?

"You didn't kill him."

Tibs was seated. "I tried too! Isn't that enough?"

"That wasn't you."

"It was. I was there. I wanted him dead. I was so pissed at him for getting in my way, I was going to do anything I could to remove him." His anger ebbed. "I thought I had." He pulled his knees to his chest. "I thought I'd killed him." He rested his head on his knees and cried. It hurt so much.

"It wasn't you that tried to kill him, Tibs. It was the elements."

"That's not how it is," Tibs mumbles. "The elements don't influence us like that."

Kroseph snorted, and Tibs looked at him. The server hid a smile.

"What's funny?"

"Just remembering watching you out of control as you channel this element or that one. It's funny that you're now saying they don't influence you."

"I got that under control."

"The way you filled yourself with water, kept it iced for so long, that influenced you. Don says it's a documented effect of suffusing yourself with your element."

Tibs shrugged. Who cared what Don said. Tibs had been the one doing it. He'd been the one who had decided and planned how to kill Jackal. That he'd failed had more to do with underestimating the fighter than anything else.

He'd almost succeeded.

He tried to swallow the pain down.

Kroseph patted his shoulder. "You rest. You should have some broth before it gets cold." He stood and left.

Tibs curled up and wished for the abyss to swallow him.

* * * * *

“Why?” Tibs asked, his face buried in the pillow. Why was he back again? How many days now had Tibs been ignoring the server, his hunger. Wallowing in his pain, his punishment.

“Because I don’t want you to be alone right now.”

“It’s what I deserve.”

“No one deserves to be alone.”

“Then why isn’t Jackal here?” he demanded. Why should the fighter be here? Tibs had tried to kill him.

“Because he’s scared.”

That made sense. Jackal had no way of knowing if Tibs would try to kill him again.

“He doesn’t know how to comfort you, and he’s terrified of screwing that up.”

“And you aren’t?” Tibs hadn’t meant to throw the derision in there.

Had he?

Kroseph smiled. “Unlike my man, I have experience dealing with grief and pain in ways other than punching those responsible for causing either.”

“Well, this isn’t working.” Tibs turned his back to the server and hoped he believed him.

And asked the abyss he didn’t.

* * * * *

Tibs tried not to sense Kroseph approaching, but his stomach made that impossible. With the server came the smell of food, the offer of food, and Tibs was hungry. He was famished.

But he wouldn’t eat.

He didn’t deserve an end to his punishment.

The door opened and closed. The smell of broth, something with fish, reached him. He salivated. He tried to make himself not drink, but water was his element. Anytime he felt parched, cool wetness formed in his mouth and he swallowed before realizing what he’d done. Food was the only thing he could force himself to control.

The bowl was placed on the bedside table. The chair pulled closer and Kroseph sat.

And said nothing.

The silence was worse. Tibs wanted accusations, demands of explanations. He’d even take the accusatory glare. But all he got from the server was patience and understanding.

He ground his teeth.

It was like Kroseph was purposely aggravating him by doing the opposite of what anyone in his position should do. Tibs had tried to kill his man!

He was glaring at the server. “What do you want? Just fucking tell me what I have to do for you to fucking go away.”

Kroseph’s smile had none of the condescension it should. “I’m not going away. But I’d like it if you talked to me.”

“I already told you I tried to kill him. What else do you want me to tell you?”

“How do you feel?”

Tibs stared at the server. What kind of stupid question was that?

“I feel like burning you and this entire place down,” he snarled. “How’s that, for how I feel?”

Kroseph reached down, and came up holding Tibs’s bracers, then offered them.

Had those been there the entire time? Tibs should... no, the enchantments on them meant he only sensed them if he touched them. He was so used to wearing them he’d forgotten. Did it mean his armor was there, too?

“Are you seriously offering them to me? There’s enough essence in them to burn the neighborhood.”

“I’m not worried.”

“How?” Tibs asked. Tired of Kroseph’s nonchalance. Tibs had nearly killed Jackal. That showed how strong he was. He’d destroyed everything around the transportation platform. How was he not scared of him?

“I know you, Tibs.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “If you did, you wouldn’t come back like you keep doing? You’d have kicked me out of the inn, threatened me if I ever showed up again.”

“Threaten you with what?”

Tibs glared at the server for sounding amused. He sighed when the expression didn’t change. “Fine. What do you know about me that makes you think you’re safe if I take those?” he asked with derision.

“You care.”

“That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said. And I mean beyond Jackal level stupid.”

“Ouch.” Kroseph smirked. “My man’s going to be hurt that you think I’m better at him at that.”

“This isn’t funny!”

The smile told Tibs what the server thought of that statement.

Tibs let himself fall back on the bed and crossed his arms over his chest. “It isn’t,” he grumbled.

“Tibs, everything you’ve done since I’ve met you has been out of a desire to help those around you.”

Tibs snorted.

“You care.”

“I burned down an entire neighborhood.”

“You mean Market Place? Which you did, trying to prevent Jackal’s father from escaping, while channeling an element you didn’t have any control over at the time? By the time you did that, it wasn’t you anymore, Tibs. It was the element. And don’t tell me that’s not how it works. You know quite well that in your case, until you’ve figured out how to remain yourself while channeling an element, it does.”

“Trying to kill Jackal happened after I mastered water.”

“But while iced for so long you weren’t yourself anymore. You Tibs, can cause great damage. But you’ll do so, because you’re looking to save someone, protect them, keep them safe.” He offered the bracers. “So take them. I’m not worried.”

“I am,” Tibs whispered. His voice trembled as he continued. “You don’t understand how angry I am. I want to burn the guild down for how they let Sebastian run loose in the

town. How they let him kill Carina.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself once I have essence again. I don’t know I’ll be able to care who else gets hurt in the process.”

“Tibs, if that was something you had to be afraid of, Jackal wouldn’t have survived his fight with you.”

“He didn’t win because I didn’t want to kill him! He won because he was so much fucking smarter than I am!”

“Let’s never tell him you said that, okay?”

Tibs’s anger hitch on the humor of Kroseph’s reaction, and before it could restart the server continued.

“You broke down on realizing what you did, Tibs. If there was any danger you’d let others be hurt making the guild pay, you’d have made sure Jackal was dead, instead of being devastated by the realization.”

“What if I can’t resist icing up again?” He felt sick at the idea. But he knew that would go away too, under the ice’s influence. “Jackal’s not going to be able to pull that trick on me again.”

When Kroseph didn’t answer, Tibs looked up. The server was studying him.

“You don’t trust me either.” Somehow, that made him feel better.

“Tibs, do you know what kind of drunk is the most dangerous?”

“The angry one.”

This server smiled and shook his head. “It’s the one who thinks they don’t have a problem. Who thinks getting drunk is just something they do when they feel like it. They’re the ones who’ll drink when it can affect their livelihood. If they’re guards, it can lead to people dying. And like how you were, until they are broken by it, they never see the problem they are.”

“And once they’re broken, they know better than to go back to it?” Tibs asked, surprised at the hope in his question.

Kroseph shook his head. “A lot of them go right back to drinking because they can’t cope with what they did. But that certainty never comes back. They’ll always know what they’re doing isn’t fixing the problem. And with some, they eventually have enough of that and fight their way out. With friends and family, it’s always easier.”

“So I might go back.” Tibs slumped. What was the point of trying if he might fail?

“You might.”

Tibs looked up.

“But if you do, I know a fighter who will be right there, ready to punch you back to your senses.”

Planning-36

Before Don's 'betrayal' put a conversation with Sto about Tibs no longer being iced.

The cheer that went up as Tibs reached the bottom of the stairs nearly sent him back up as anger flared. How could they be happy to see him after what he'd put them through? What he'd been planning? He would have let each of them die to accomplish his goals.

I forced himself to move, failing at unclenching his fists or his teeth. He bristled when someone slapped his back and expressed how happy she was he was back as she headed for the counter. He shouldered another aside as the man put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. The sheer happiness they all expressed at seeing him was grating, and he—

"What the fuck is wrong with all of you?" he yelled, and finally the room grew quiet. When the conversations restarted, they were subdued, but what he picked up was still about him.

What did it take for them to just stop? He considered burning them down, for a second. That would make them shut up, but as angry as he was, it would be too easy to give into the temptation to let fire take him and them. He was worried he wouldn't stop until the world was burned if he did.

He was also tempted to use Water to cool his anger. But he didn't trust himself not to go too far in that direction either. For as dangerous as he'd become, there had been a comfort in not caring what happened to anyone else.

"How are you—" Don started.

"Don't," Tibs snapped as he dropped into his seat.

"Okay," the sorcerer said, smiling as he raised his hands in defeat. Tibs narrowed his eyes. Not trusting how easily Don was agreeing. When did he smile like that? And why were the others smirking?

"What happened while I was in bed?" he asked. He wasn't giving any of them the chance to ask how he was feeling. And he had too much to catch up on. Ten days. Ten fucking days he'd wasted in that bed, feeling sorry for himself when he should have been out there, making sure Irdian didn't take advantage of his absence to—

The askance look they exchanged told him enough.

"What?"

A steaming plate of meats and vegetable appeared before him, along with a tankard.

"I'm not—" he started to tell Kroseph, but the sweet and spicy smell punched through his anger and his stomach took charge. Tibs moaned as his mouth burned from the

spices, the sweetness only accenting them. Before he knew it, his plate was empty, and he was still ravenous.

“Shouldn’t you take it easy?” Don asked as Tibs motioned to Kroseph with the empty plate. “You’ve only had broth for a few days, if that.”

Tibs glared. “I’ll be fine.” Suffusing himself with Purity was something he could do without danger or being tempted to overdoing it. He didn’t enjoy his work enough to want to always do that.

Tibs paused after his third plate and sighed in relief as he leaned back in the chair. A full stomach made everything feel better. Even the ongoing discussions about him going on at the other table. They were mostly amused now, with some wondering if he was safe to approach now that he’d been fed.

That, Tibs decided, would depend entirely on why they approached him. He wasn’t interested in sympathy or well-wishes. There was too much to do.

“Okay, now it’s safe to tell me what happened.” He sipped his tankard.

“Without you to keep them on it,” Jackal said, “not a lot of the rogues kept up with protecting Merchant Row, or going after any of the troublemakers that the guards couldn’t catch. So some of the merchants didn’t pay when it came time.”

“No one ran things while I was in bed?”

“Me and Quigly did the best we can, but rogues don’t take well to brutes ordering them about.”

“What kind of damage are we looking at?”

“Darran will have numbers,” Jackal said. “But there’s been a rash of break-ins and breaking of stuff. Just wanton breaking. The big stuff was stopped, no building burned down, no one was killed because of my father’s revenge, but the small, sneaky stuff we couldn’t do much without the rogues.”

Tibs ground his teeth. Of course, that wouldn’t stop just because he was wallowing.

“Tibs?” Mez asked.

“I’m fine,” he growled.

“I’d be more convinced if your teeth parted to say that.”

Tibs glared at the archer, then forces himself to unclench. “I’m fine,” he repeated. “I’m just angry that I didn’t think about any of that when I went and fell into wallow.”

“You were healing,” Don said.

“I was wall—”

“You were healing.” The tone left no room for argument. “You still are. What you did caused you damage as much as what you inflicted on others. You are going to need time until you’re whole again. And that starts with accepting you made mistakes, that you will make more, and that’s okay. You’re angry and I get that, but you have to find a way to let some of that go, mainly what you’re directing at yourself.”

“What makes you such an expert?” Tibs snapped. “You read books about what I did?”

“Retired asshole here, Tibs. I have a sense of what it’s like to cause damage and—”

“Semi-retired,” Jackal said.

“No,” Don started. “I have put that—” he paused, thought about it, then glared at the fighter. “Fine, semi-retired. Some people are making it hard to put all of my assholiness behind me.”

Jackal smirked. "What's the fun in it being so easy?"

"I—" Don bit back the rest. He let out a slow breath and looked at the others. "Just how do you put up with him?"

"That," Khumdar said, "is a question that all of time shall never be able to answer."

Despite himself, Tibs smiled.

* * * * *

"Look," Tibs told the assembled rogues, "you can't just walk away from the work you agreed to do."

"You did," Sarsan said.

"I was healing," he said through gritted teeth, again.

"Like there aren't potions the dungeon gives out for that," she replied. "I didn't sign up to work for the merchants. I'm a rogue. I run the dungeon, and then I have fun. Running after other troublemaker's not as fun as you made it sound."

Tibs closed his eyes. Ice would be so nice right now. It might lead to him encasing her in the stuff, but at least he wouldn't have to deal with the forming headache she was giving him. Purity could only do so much when the cause was constant.

"Alright. Just to be clear. You're done helping. You want to go back to just being a Upsilon Runner and relying on the guild to make sure you have the training you need to survive the dungeon."

"Sound good to me," she said.

The uncertainty in the others comforted Tibs. They'd been taking for granted the training he and the older Runners had been giving them. Forgetting there was a price attached to it, even if it wasn't in coins.

"Alright. Any who aren't interested in helping keep Merchant Row safe, give me your name, and I'll pass the words so no one calls on you from this point forward."

Sarsan and five others stepped forward, three of which stepped back on noticing how few of them did it. Tibs could manage the loss of three rogues, especially with how many teams had graduated to Upsilon while he was in bed.

* * * * *

"What's to say you aren't going to just vanish again?" the baker demanded. She was a nice woman normally, baked amazing breads and pastries, due to having Wood as an element, Tibs was certain of that, even if she was unaware of it. [note: would there be a better element, not fire, that could be linked with baking/making food?] But she'd been the target of many attacks while Tibs was incapacitated.

"I am going to vanish again," Tibs snapped before he could stop. He forced his breathing to slow. "I'm a Runner," he continued once he was calmer. "Eventually, the dungeon will eat me. But I'm making sure there will be people to continue running things, and that everyone will keep you safe."

The gasp reminded him again that, unlike him; they weren't as aware of death. They had no problem believing it was something that happened to others until it happened to them. Tibs had to fight for his survival more now than when he was on the street, and that made it hard to forget death was only one mistake away.

"I'm sorry you were hit hard by the attacks. I'll do everything I can to make it up to you." He'd wanted to replace everything she'd lost, but Darran had stopped him. Coins

weren't the problem, he explained. It was the revelation he had them that was.

If the merchant realized Tibs had more coins now than they could ever pay him for the services he provided, there would be questions as to why he was requiring them to pay. Others would start seeing ulterior motives, begin doubting him. And it would only be a question of time before that turned them into antagonists.

So Tibs would only replace a small portion of what she'd lost with the money he had. The rest, he'd decided without telling Darran, he would fund through his nightly training.

* * * * *

"Why?" Tibs demanded. "Why the fuck doesn't it just work?"

Alistair looked at him, his lips curling up.

Tibs had tried not to let on he wasn't iced anymore. He'd approached his training calmly and systematically. But unlike when he was iced, when something went wrong with his attempt, he couldn't study what had happened, make careful changes, and have it go wrong over and over and over again until he got it right.

Now; Tibs got frustrated.

And his fucking teacher was amused by it.

With a wave of the hand, Tibs launched a torrent of water at the man. Catching him sufficiently by surprise, he sputtered water once it washed over him.

"Feeling better?" Alistair asked, still smiling.

"Yes," Tibs reluctantly admitted.

The water lifted off Alistair and moved between them. "Then how about you try it again? And this time, don't take for granted that your easy progress of before means you've done the work."

"But I was able to do it? I still know how. I can see it when I place Bor next to Dhu, but it just isn't working."

With a motion, the water stretched into two thick strands, with Bor and Duh written between them in fixed intervals.

"Look at it, study it. Now, close your eyes and recreate it. Don't try to sense it; I'll block you. You saw it, you studied it, use that to recreate it."

Tibs did as instructed, taking his time. When he opened his eyes, he shook with anger at the clear differences. He'd been so careful, he should—

"Before you explode, Tibs," Alistair said. "What you made is normal."

"It's wrong," he growled.

"Yes, but that's normal." Alistair absorbed the water. "What you did, while iced, it wasn't exactly cheating, not that it would stop us if it was. But it was a crutch. These exercises aren't exclusively about you learning how to do them. They're about helping you gain an instinct for how etching works. How Bor and Dhu interact, what their positioning feels, when you're going for a specific result. Learning while iced lets you do what needs to be done, but you have to think about what you're doing. Once you've mastered this way. You simply know how to do it."

"Why didn't you tell me to stop, then? You know I was iced, that I wasn't learning properly. Why did you let me continue? So you'd get more gold?"

"I wouldn't have been able to stop you. I know what it's like to ice yourself. I doubt there's one person with Water as their element who hasn't done it at least once. Many of us

became monsters because we were iced. Some had to be killed because they didn't want to stop. That's the thing with being iced. You won't stop unless you want to. Once you've made the ice, there's nothing left that others can use to convince you. There is no compassion to call on, not even reasoning to appeal to. Ice makes you care only about what you want, so until you want to stop, there's nothing I could have done."

That didn't match what Tibs had gone through. He'd always had to fight to keep the ice in from cracking. It had become easier the longer he did it, but if he got too angry, the cracks were larger, tougher to fill. It's how Jackal had broken the ice. Then Tibs had been driven by his rage until he had nothing left.

Was that because he had other elements? Was that why Harry never saw a problem with how he was acting? Without other elements to pull at the one he was suffused with. He saw nothing wrong with what he did?

"Is it the same with all the elements?"

Alistair shrugged. "You'd have to ask a sorcerer or a scholar. They're the ones asking questions about things that have anything to do with them."

"If that's your attempt at making me stop asking questions, it's not particularly subtle." Tibs paused. "Would you have stopped me if I became a danger?"

"The odds are I wouldn't have been here. If the other Runners didn't realize what you were becoming, the guild would have noticed in time and they would have acted."

"Could the guild have made me stop being iced?"

Alistair considered the question. "Maybe. The guild has access to more resources than I know exists. Maybe there's something in there that could force someone back from such an extreme. But Tibs, I think the better question you need to ask is if the guild would see a point in doing it."

* * * * *

Tibs forced the nonchalance as he walked. He felt the stares the people inside the guild gave him. They knew, he was sure of it. They knew he'd been iced, that he wasn't anymore. That he had the medallion that let him see through the distortions that made the inside of the building difficult to navigate. He'd never questioned it until he had the medallion, but now it made sense that Tibs was always accompanied when he needed to go to a specific location. Or that he'd always gotten lost when he didn't.

Why hadn't it ever occurred to him before to sense if the person taking him to his destination had a magical item on them?

The answer was simple. Magic had been too extraordinary for him to think just anyone here would have one. And if he'd thought to sense, it wouldn't have helped him. Everyone had something magical on them. Small things with tightly woven essence within them. Even now, he didn't know enough to tell if they did the same thing as the medallion in his pouch.

The clerk knocked on the door, then left Tibs there.

"Come in," Tirania said.

Tibs steadied himself before opening the door. He so needed ice to go through with this. How was he supposed to convince her he was still her ally when all he wanted to do was burn her?

She smiled at him. "Tibs, I am so glad you're better." She motioned for the chair.

“You had us worried for a moment there.”

Did she know? Did she know how much he hated her. That he'd been iced. That the only thing he'd wanted was to find a way to destroy her and her abyss cursed guild?

He sat. “Thank you.” She had to have at least realized about the ice. She was old, older than he could understand, he expected. And Alistair had said everyone who had Water as an element iced themselves at some point. She had to have seen the effect.

“I hope you are feeling better,” she said seriously, “because you made enough of a mark on Lord Galdain when he was here that he requested you be present when he returns for his children to decide if they will train here.”

“Me?” Tibs asked in disbelief. He had no idea who that lord was, or if he'd even interacted with him during the event he'd been forced to attend, but what would a noble want with him? He swallowed his immediate refusal. If he was her ally, he couldn't simply say no. “Wouldn't Don be a better choice? He knows how to act around them”

“This isn't about what I or you think is best. Galdain specifically asked for you. Basically said that if you weren't willing, I shouldn't bother contacting him.” She smiled. “Which is why I'm happy you're willing to accommodate him.”

That was not how Tibs would describe how he felt about this. If he'd known this would ever be something asked of him, he would have... gone through with it. He'd been iced. It would help him reinforce his position as her ally, so he'd have done it.

“What does it mean I have to do?” he asked. “I'm just a Runner. I don't know anything about what a noble needs or wants.”

She smiled. “You simply have to be there. Galdain will have a house while he's here, and that is where he will have the soiree. I suspect he might want you to act as a guild for his children, maybe take one of them with you on a run.”

“No.” He closed his mouth before he could tell her that was a stupid idea. “We run the third floor. That isn't a place someone who isn't a Runner yet should go.”

“I'm sure you can convince your team to do the first floor. This is just so they can get a sense of what waits them when they become Runners here.”

“Don would be better for that,” Tibs stated as neutrally as he could.

She smiled. “And I'm certain he can instruct you on how best to deal with them. I'm glad you and your team get along with him.”

“He's part of the team,” Tibs said. “And he isn't that bad of a person when he tries.”

She nodded. “Considering your history, I wasn't sure it would work when he ask I put him on your team, but I have to say that it's good the two Heros of Kragle Rock are working together.”

Tibs stared at her, not hearing the rest over the sound of his rage.

He was going to kill him.

Don had fucking played him

Again.

Planning-37

Tibs stormed through the room, ignoring the greetings from the other patrons in the inn. He'd sensed ahead and knew Don was there, along with his team, and he wasn't waiting to let the sorcerer know what he thought of what he'd done.

"You lied to us!" He yelled, slamming a hand on the table.

Don stared at him in surprise.

"Tibs?" Jackal said, "maybe you should—"

"He fucking lied."

"I don't know what—"

"You said Tirania put you on our team."

"You were there when she—"

"He told her to put you in our team. It was your idea, not hers!"

"Don?" Mez asked.

"I—" the sorcerer said, the word glowing. "Look." The glow was less, and he looked at the others. Jackal's and Khumdar's expressions turned suspicious, while Mez looked hurt. "You have to understand."

"Yeah," Jackal said sharply. "I'm sure you think we do."

"That's why!" Don snapped. "What the fuck did you expect me to do? Come to the people I've gone out of my way to be an asshole to and just ask to be part of your team? You would have kicked my ass, laughing at me."

"Don," Mez said, "We wouldn't—"

"Get off of it, Mez," Don cut the archer off. "After how I treated you, there's no way, you'd have welcome me in."

"You lied," Tibs snarled.

"How is it you missed it?" Khumdar asked cautiously.

"I don't know!" Tibs snapped. He'd wracked his memory, trying to remember every conversation they'd had. Had there ever been light with anything he'd said? Sure, there had, no one was always honest, but what about anytime him joining the team had come up? Tibs didn't know. Part of him hadn't cared all that much after the initial shock, so he hadn't paid that much attention. He should have. He should have known there was no way Don would be honest about anything. "I don't know what else he lied about."

"I didn't lie!" the sorcerer yelled, standing, the words glowing bright. "Not about anything else!"

Tibs snorted as those words glowed too, if not as brightly.

“Really?” Don looked at them. “How many runs have we done? How many times did I keep my mouth shut and let him screw up? And this is the little trust you’re showing me?”

“Why?” Mez asked, still sounding confused.

“I told you why,” the sorcerer said through clenched teeth,

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mez snapped. “In all that time, why did you never tell us what you’d done?”

Don looked at him in disbelief. “And deal with this?” he replied in disdain, including the four of them with a wave of the arm. “What? You think I want to be treated like I’m something you need to scrape off your boot?”

“We’d have—”

“Fuck this,” Don told Tibs over Mez’s protest. “I don’t need this. I don’t need you. I learned what I needed from your lot, not you can go fuck in the abyss for all I care.” The sorcerer stalked away from the table.

“Good fucking riddance,” Tibs snarled, ignoring how bright the sorcerer’s word had been. “We don’t need him.”

* * * * *

“No,” Irdian said dismissively. “Unless he’s dead, you can’t just change sorcerer.”

“He’s not working out,” Tibs said as evenly as he could.

The guard leader’s smirk told him it wasn’t as even as he thought. “That’s not my problem, Light Finger. Why don’t you take it up with Guild Leader Tirania? I’m sure she’ll be happy to bend the rules again, for you.”

Tibs stormed out of the office, going over all the ways he’d like to kill that man. Fire was too good for him. Dripping corruption over him ever so slowly would be appropriate torture for him not going along with what Tibs wanted.

As soon as he was outside, he climbed to the roof, surprising one of the clerks there enjoying a meal and a drink. Then Tibs threw himself to the closest roof and ran. He pushed himself until his muscles hurt and did not use purity to take the pain away. When he couldn’t run anymore he screamed.

Then he bent down, feeling like he was going to be sick from pushing himself so hard.

As tempting as it was, he wasn’t going to kill Don.

Maybe if they both went to Tirania and explained the situation wasn’t working she’d listen. Sure. Don was going to love going along with Tibs’s plan. The sorcerer was going to screw them over for as long as he could over this. Keeping them from their runs.

Tibs screamed again.

How could he have been so stupid to ever trust that guy? When had Don ever been about anything other than what Don wanted?

Fuck, he’d started liking him!

That was probably what Don had been after, making Tibs trust him enough he’d tell him his secret. The sorcerer had been probing a lot about what Tibs did these last runs. Tibs went over their interactions outside the run, looking for anywhere he might have let something slip. He didn’t think he had, but while iced, that hadn’t been something he’d cared all that much about. Tibs wasn’t sure he’d seen the guild learning about his element as

something that would get in the way of taking it down in those last weeks.

He looked around, trying to place himself. He saw the pillars of the transportation platform, so there was Market Place. Over there the quality and height of the houses made that the noble's neighborhood, so he was...

Fuck, hadn't he ever paid attention to the shifting landscape of the roofs while iced? No, of course not, they hadn't mattered to his plan. They were just a way for him to reach the nobles' houses when he felt like breaking into one of them.

Which was what he felt like doing now.

So he ran in that direction.

It wouldn't be the direct kind of suffering he felt like inflicting, but he'd know he hurt one of them.

* * * * *

Numbers. Numbers and more numbers.

Tibs grumbled under his breath as he went over the ledger. How had he ever enjoyed doing this? He looked at the list of repairs the equipment needed, what he had available, how much it would cost for the repairs, how much extra for the leathersmith to put his needs ahead of the other customers so he'd be sure to have armor for each team he was helping.

Maybe he should ask Sto to make armor for him. Nothing too special, just with the self repair his and the other's had.

The others.

Fuck, Tibs was so happy they'd never gotten to the point where Don got Carina's robe. That had been the plan, somewhere at the back of his mind, when he wasn't so iced or angry he could think in that direction. She'd want to help their sorcerer anyway possible, even now that she was gone.

Fuck it still hurt.

He pushed the ledger away before the tears feel onto them.

I'm sorry, he thought again. I'm sorry I didn't get there earlier. I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to save you.

At least he'd avenged her.

But that hadn't brought her back to him.

The satisfaction hadn't lasted long.

He wiped his tears.

He'd make sure that when the others responsible paid for it, they suffered for much longer. Those responsible for Carina and Mama's death.

But for now, numbers.

* * * * *

"The schedule's up," Jackal said, dropping in the seat. He was sweaty and bruised after his morning run and fighting. By the limp, it hadn't been training. Tibs looked around to ensure no one was paying them any attention, then wove purity and sent it to the fighter's injuries.

Jackal's sigh was faint, but his posture relaxed.

That was the nice thing about not having Don around anymore. Tibs didn't have to endure watching his friends suffer.

"On the afternoon in three day is our turn."

“I believe we have something of a conundrum to resolve,” Khumdar said, “if we wish to go for our run.”

“I can fix the problem,” Jackal said, cracking his fingers.

“I suspect the guards will not approve of whatever you would do to Don so we can get another sorcerer on our team.”

“The only other option is to have him there when we go for the run,” The fighter said.

“No,” Tibs replied, not looking up from his breakfast.

“I don’t see what else we can do, Tibs.”

“We don’t go,” he replied, and felt the stare.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, hurt, “it’s.... We...” there was a pause. “Help me out here?”

“I’m with Tibs,” Mez said. “I don’t want anything to do with Don. If that means no runs until he finds himself another team, I’m okay with that.”

“Can he do that?” Jackal asked. “Pull another team together?”

“How should I know?” Mez replied. “Not that he’s going to care what he’s allowed to do or not. He’ll get things to happen his way. He always does.”

“He’s going to screw us over as long as he can,” Tibs added.

“Maybe you should talk with him,” Kroseph said, taking empty plates.

Tibs stared at the server. “You don’t like him.”

“No, I don’t. I think that how he went about doing what he did is reprehensible, but I’ve watched him over these last months as part of your team, and that wasn’t the man I’d grown to know since settling here.”

“That doesn’t mean I want anything to do with him,” Tibs said.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, “maybe we should...”

“You can survive without loot for a while.”

The fighter gasped in horror and Tibs rolled his eyes. That has stopped working a long time ago.

“Excuse me.” Jackal stood. “I need to go see if I can pull Kro away from his work long enough to mend my heart back together.”

* * * * *

“He’s approaching,” Tibs said, pushing his plate away. Knowing he’d have to deal with the sorcerer had just killed his hunger.

“He might not be coming for us,” Mez said. “The inn is where the runners come.”

“He’s here for us,” Tibs stated. He was sure of it.

He felt the sorcerer enter, and the frost spread. Tibs glanced to the door before he could stop himself and there he stood, even more full of himself than before.

“Looks like he found that stick to shove up his ass again,” Jackal grumbled as Don strode through the inn. The runners watched him. The older ones smirked, while the younger watched with a mix of awe and confusion.

Don stopped by their table.

“Told you,” Tibs muttered, not looking at the sorcerer.

“The run is tomorrow,” Don announced. “And I decided that I won’t force you to miss it, therefore I am letting you know that I will be at the bottom of the steps—”

“We’re not doing it,” Tibs said, once he’d gotten over the shock of the sorcerer

statement sounding like he was being kind to them.

“You are not doing the run?” Don asked, sounding as if he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

“Can’t do it a member short,” Tibs stated.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, “maybe we shouldn’t be too hasty?”

“Unless you found a way to bring a new sorcerer on our team, we can’t,” Tibs said.

“I did offer a way,” Jackal replied. “You said no.”

“I am surprised,” Khumdar said, “that you must lower yourself to being with us to take part on a run. Were you not able to find others and form a team of your own?”

“Don’t think so fucking highly of yourself, cleric,” Don said, making the last word derisive. “People are lining up to be on my team.” The words glowed bright. “But, because I’m already part of one,” he said words curt, “I can’t have another team. Even my status as Hero of the Town isn’t enough for the guild leader to bend the rule.” He glared at Tibs, and the rogue grinned back. “So, yes, I must lower myself to be with the likes of you, if I want to go on a run.”

“And you want to?” Mez asks.

The sigh was heavy. “I am a Runner. I am here to run the dungeon. Unlike some, I don’t seek to shirk my responsibilities.”

“No, just use us to get your loot,” Tibs replied.

“Let’s make something clear,” Jackal said, cutting off Don’s response. “I am the team leader. If we let you do the run with us.”

“Let me?” Don asked, smirking.

“Let you,” Jackal replied. “You came to us, like Tibs said, we were perfectly happy not doing the run.”

Tibs was happy Don didn’t have light as an element. Jackal’s words were so bright the whole room could be blinded.

Don looked at the others at the table. “Very well, to ensure to you do not miss your run, I will agree to follow your leadership. No matter how horrible it might be.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow in surprise as how little light the words had.

Planning-38

(quite note: in draft two, I'll be adding a conversation between Tibs and Sto about him no longer being iced. So this is written as the dungeon being aware of it)

The guards by the door looked at them askance as Tibs and his team entered the dungeon. "What's up with them?" He heard one of them whisper once they were inside. Tibs didn't care enough about guards opinion to attempt to hear the reply.

They reached the doorway in silence, and Jackal opened it, then the one to the third floor. Tibs paused at the intersection, looked the tiles over. "There's been a change," he stated. "Give me a few minutes." It took him five to work out how the new sequence repeated so it would open all three passages.

The others waited in silence until he instructed them. Don watched judgingly, but didn't comment.

The Gnolls didn't fall on them in the same part of the corridor, as they had before, and other than Tibs warning the others which of the colored tiles were the traps, they fought silently. And had dispatched the creatures in a few minutes.

"Okay," Sto said, "just what's going on?"

Tibs glared at Don, who simply looked back as if he was too insignificant to matter. Tibs rolled his eyes and unlocked the cache, inside were a set of clothing fit for a noble with a loose weave within it. Light, Darkness, Purity and others.

He looked at Don. "Yeah, you're too good for them." Before putting them in Jackal's pack.

"Okay, where's the reply?" Sto asked. "Where, there banter? Tibs, what is going on?"

"Don't bother lying," Tibs told Don. The only way he could think to inform Sto of who was responsible. "We all know just how superior to even nobles you are."

"I have never made such a claim," the sorcerer said, and the word didn't glow.

"You never had to say anything," Tibs replied with a roll of the eyes. "Your behavior speaks loudly enough."

"I thought that you not being iced would make it easier for you to deal with stuff like people lying," Sto said, "it's not like he's the first to do it, of the only one. Seems to me people are always lying about one thing or another."

Tibs wanted to scream that this wasn't the same. People didn't lie when they claimed to be their friends, especially not about how they were forced in the situation. People didn't lie about big stuff like that!

There was another fight, this one against golem people. It took longer, they had elements, and once it was over, they used the healing potions the Gnolls dropped and they moved on once Tibs confirmed there was no cache there.

The board crest was quickly unlocked and then they were looking at the Conquest board with the five dungeon pieces on it.

“Where do you want us?” Jackal asked the sorcerer.

“Me?” Don replied, raising an eyebrow. “I thought you were the leader. The one who made all the decision? How would you trust me, after all the times I worked along side you and your team, not to maneuver you to your death?”

“It could have been our team,” Tibs stated. “If you hadn’t lied.”

“Don,” Jackal said. “I am the leader of this team, which you’re still a part of, and I’m telling you to take care of this puzzle. As for you causing one of us to die?” the fighter’s smile was nasty. “What would it looked like if you caused one of your teammate’s death?”

Tibs hear the sorcerer grind his teeth as he fought not to reply.

“Okay,” Sto said. “This is about the team. I understand why you might be angry, but I really wish you’d move away form them so you could explain what’s going on. This isn’t as amusing for me as you might think it is.”

Tibs glared a the ceiling. Did Sto think this was for his entertainment?

“If you’re done admiring the ceiling,” Don said. “Go take your position.” He pointed to a square. Tibs rolled his eyes, looking at the positioning. Of course he had him in position of infantry; the least valuable piece.

* * * * *

Tibs grumbled his congratulation under his breath after everyone else, even Mez, did so. He was forced to admit Don had, again, done a great job of controlling the board. Even once Tibs thought Ganny had maneuvered them into a trap, the sorcerer had revealed the one he’d set up, and had her on the defensive for the next five moves, at which point, he took down the Lord, of course. Who else but Don was good enough to go against the Dungeon’s leader piece?

Tibs ignored the glare and checked the chest for traps. Once he confirmed there wasn’t on, he opened it and considered closing it. Was this some joke on Ganny’s part? She hadn’t commented on any of it, but what else could a deep purple sorcerer’s robe be? It had the standard enchantment on it. More resistant to damage, better armor, but the weave felt denser. Maybe it was a stronger version?

“So, am I too good for this too?” Don asked, standing over Tibs and looking in the chest.

Tibs grabbed and shoved the robe in the sorcerer’s chest before walking away. “I’m clearing the way to the next crest. Don’t step on the wrong tiles and lock me in.” Immediately he heard someone following and turned, ready to tell Jackal he needed to be alone. The fighter would know what he meant.

Except it was Don, shoving the robe in his pack, who was joining him. “I’m part of this team,” the sorcerer said. “I’m not letting you leave me behind.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“You think this is about helping you?” the disdain was thick. “This is about helping myself.” The words glowed. “I need you to survive if we’re going to get through all the

rooms.” Those didn’t.

Tibs dismissed the whys of the lies. He didn’t care what Don was lying about. He was always lying.

“It might be best if we all remain together,” Khumdar said, “to ensure nothing happens to one of us.”

Tibs rolled his eyes at the look the cleric gave him. He wasn’t going to stab the sorcerer. Unlike him, he knew what it meant to be part of a team.

The Gnolls they encountered had elements, making the fight tougher, and there went more potions. He couldn’t wait for Don to convince Tirania to let him leave the team so they could find someone they trusted and Tibs could tell them his secret and he could tell Sto what he thought of his comments during the runs.

There was that Upsilon sorcerer Tibs has seen training in a way different from all the others with eyes that light orange (need a proper color for kinetics). He’d never seen that color before. She had to be more trustworthy than his team’s current sorcerer.

The lion’s crest solved, Tibs had his team moving through the shifting floor. Don didn’t question his instructions, but Tibs felt the suspicion each time. And he saw the sorcerer look over the room, probably seeing if he could come up with a better path.

This chest had a bandoleer to attack knives to, or potion bottles, Mez pointed out.

There were no attacks on the way to the Dragon crest, which did not make Tibs any more comfortable. If Ganny wasn’t attacking them now, she was setting something up for later.

As before, the dragon crest was harder to resolve, and Don snorted anytime Tibs made a mistake. He was tempted to walk away and let the sorcerer deal with it, but that was Don wanted, and then they’d be here until they ran out of time.

Tibs was surprised with how quickly they’d made it this room. The time shield hadn’t even reached the halfway mark. Maybe there was something to ignoring the sorcerer for most of time.

Tibs entered the room. “Don’t touch anything,” he told Don.

“When do I ever do something to ruin the run?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. Of course he’d say that. Until now he’d had to pretend to be part of the team. He’d probably hoped that Jackal would end up dying so they’d nominate the sorcerer as leader. Then he’d been lording over them like the noble he was. At least finding out about the lie had been good for that. They would never let him take charge now.

Tibs led them to the first chest room, then the second. They dealt with the ‘surprise’ attack by the golem people efficiently. Then Tibs opened the way past the first switch to open the entry door and let them leave. He made it to the second one on the knowledge he’d built from the previous runs, and ignored it. The switch they were looking for would be with the final chest.

Past it, Tibs was back to testing each wall, but he was systematic, and unlike before, his team was only a step behind, so when another surprise attack happened, they were there to deal with it. Two more minor chest room, another attack, this one nearly killing Mez. Don stepping before the golem person fighter and taking the sword in the side in the archer’s stead had saved him. And Tibs saw the gratefulness.

It wasn’t like Don had been all that hurt. His robe had absorbed some of the damage,

and the sorcerer had copied Tibs's trick of using his element as extra armor, so the sword had melted on contacting the coating of corruption, rendering it even less deadly.

Don had probably planned it that way anyway.

The section of all moved, revealing an opening with a chest, and a the dragon crest over it and a switch next to that.

"We made it?" Jackal asked. "Yes, we made it." He ran to the chest and Tibs was tempted to let him open it and find out if there was a trap the hard way. But the fighter stopped before reaching for it. "Letting my enthusiasm get the better of me again." He grinned at Tibs. "Been trying to work on that."

Don snorted.

This was starting to get on Tibs's nerves. Which had to be why he kept doing it.

The chest did have a trap on it. A simple trigger release on opening raising the lid. It was ease neutralized and then the contents were revealed.

One and five healing potions.

"I think this is a warning about the next room," Mez said.

"I guess that means the next room is the boss room." Jackal rubbed his hands together. "That means big loot."

"And a harder fight," Khumdar said.

For once, Don didn't comment, and when Tibs glanced in his direction, he could have sworn the sorcerer looked worried, before he was glaring at him again.

They collected the potions, three to each, and pulled he switch. Even Don, Mez and Khumdar looked around when the floor vibrated this time.

"That feels close," Mez said.

"That's not a reason to get careless," Jackal said. And all four of them were staring at him. "I'm never careless."

Don wasn't the only one to snort this time.

Tibs took the lead, examining the floor. He couldn't find any triggers as they wound their way until they returned to the corridor that would lead to the triple crest.

"I do not recall there being a passage here," Khumdar commented

"Probably one of the many shifts we heard but couldn't see," Don replied, with an edge to his voice. "This feels too simple."

Tibs stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Don was right, for once. Ganny should have put something on the way here. Have more triggers to trick them with. At least one attack.

"Maybe the dungeon knows that by the time we're done with the three rooms we're low on time." He pointed to the time shield. There was more than Tibs expected, about a quarter of it left, but that still wasn't all that much.

"Dungeons aren't that smart," Don stated.

"Really?" Ganny said. "And what do all the traps and fights and oh, the three caches you missed, Tibs, say about how smart I am? What happened to him since the last run? Know it all use to have a sense of what he was dealing with here."

Tibs was tempted to go back and figure out where they were. They had to be in the last section. He'd been too focused on the floor to notice much of the walls.

Jackal was already moving, watching where he stepped.

The crest were gray.

That had to indicate they were unlocked.

After a visual inspection of each, for more traps, and not finding any, Tibs touched the Lion one. There was a click, grinding and the wall parted.

On the other side was a room larger than any they'd come across before, even larger than the pool room. The walls were decorated with etchings, some of which Tibs thought might be people, but they were too far to make out the detail. Maybe fighting.

"That," Don said, sounding worried, "is a dragon." He had to mean the only creature in the room with them, at the other end of it. It didn't look imposing to Tibs, until he remembered how large the room was, so how big the dragon had to be for it to seem like it was only three times his height.

"Have you seen the size of the chest it's sitting on?" Jackal asked, awed. "Come one!" He ran at it, turning stone gray.

"Don't!" Don yelled. And Tibs smirked and followed after his leader. If the sorcerer thought now was the time to assert his leadership, he was mistaken. He heard the others behind him as he reached Jackal, then skidded to a halt as a ball of fire flew at them. Tibs made a wall of ice, and it exploded on impact, filling the room with steam.

Hidden from sight, Tibs channeled fire and absorbed the second fireball before its heat did more than register.

"Right," Ganny said, "you've been sticking to channeling water for long enough I stopped thinking of the other elements. Still it's not going to save you." She sounded far too pleased with herself. Tibs returned to water and absorbed the steam.

Between them and the dragon were at least two and zero creatures. Other than the rats and bunnies, every other kind they'd encountered on the floors were represented.

With a whoop, Jackal ran at the Whipper closest to them, catching the whip and yanking hard enough to pull it off its feet. Tibs made a sword and shield and approached the Ratling group. By the time he engaged them, Khumdar was fighting a golem person, and flaming arrows were peppering the creatures.

The Ratlings were better than those Tibs remembered from the second floor, but they weren't on his level. Once he dispatched them, he was dealing with a Gnoll, who had metal as his element, and Tibs was distracted by sensing how he used it. There was the obvious coating himself and his weapon, but he also did something else, that Tibs didn't understand until he stepped out of the way of the swipe and still felt the slice across his chest. Any closer or if he didn't have metal as an element, and he'd have been cut in half even if only the point of the sword touched him.

Tibs couldn't use metal essence until he gained control of the element, since he had no reserve of it, but that didn't mean he was defenseless. What Tibs had, was training.

When the Gnoll came for another attack, Tibs parried and blocked normally, waiting for the change in the essence that was the distance cut again. When it came, instead of stepping away, Tibs stepped forward, focusing his will on the essence around the sword and ripping it apart, leaving the sword normal, and Tibs within easy striking range. One hard swipe of his one sword and the surprised Gnoll lost its head.

Then he was fighting a golem person that might be part cat, with the way she was jumping around and over Tibs. She cut him, over and over as she dodged his attacks with far

too much ease for how she didn't have an element. Or at least one he could see or sense. Maybe she was doing the equivalent of suffusing herself and that—

The distraction let her plant her sword in him and Tibs discovered that even if it looked like metal, it was something else, because it hurt.

A lot.

He greeted his teeth, stabbed her, causing his ice sword to explode in her chest, then pulled the sword out and suffused himself with purity. He was still unsteady on his feet as he stood and blasted another golem person running at him with the reliable 'x' attack. He wasn't running the risk of screwing it up and someone ending up hurt.

He dispatch a Whipper, then a Bunnyling, and only him and his friends were left. Don was a distance away, but there was enough corruption melted bodied Tibs didn't comment on his cowardness.

Khumdar, Mez and Jackal downed potions and their injuries vanished.

"Let's go get that loot," Jackal said.

"Down!" Tibs yelled, sensing he light essence taking shape as a line, then darkness washed over them from behind and when the line met it, the two seem solid and as if they were struggling against each other.

Darkness lost, being sliced apart, but it had taken enough out of the light Tibs didn't think it would have done any serious damage if any had been hit.

Khumdar was on a knee, pale and panting. He pulled a blue bottle and drank from it and color returned.

He stood and spun his staff, giving Tibs a nod.

"Can we now—"

"Don't move," Don ordered.

"I'm the team leader."

"And you intend in leading everyone in to that?"

Tibs looked ahead, and what seems like twice the number of creatures shimmered between them and the dragon.

"We can," Jackal said, then lost some of his bravado. "Tibs? Mez, Khumdar?" he paused. "Don? Opinions?"

"They have the numbers on us, no contest," Mez said, sounding worried.

"I was under the expectation that the dungeon only created challenges that could be overcome," Khumdar commented.

"But not always the way you think," Don snapped. "This is obviously ment to look like a battle of strength."

"Which we can't win," Mez said.

"Therefore, it must be something else."

"Tibs?" Jackal asked.

He looked around for a clue as to what this was about.

"Tibs?" the fighter asked again.

"I don't know!" He snapped, then glared at the sorcerer. Tibs should have the one to catch on. He knew Ganny. He knew she didn't go for the obvious. "You—" He closed his mouthed and breathed. Accusing anyone wasn't going to help. "We rushed in without thinking. We got overconfident."

He looked the next group over. "I don't think we can fight through them. And I think that any movement we make in a direction other than back, will cause them to attack."

Jackal nodded. "So we retreat and come back to fight another day?"

They nodded. Even Don did so without smirking.

"You win this time Dungeon," Jackal said. "But we are going to come back and that chest is mine."

Planning-39

“How sure are you about this?” Tibs asked Jackal, as he lit a lantern to illuminate the large space.

The fighter shrugged. “As sure as I can be, now that I don’t have much of a network in the town anymore. Having my father’s people here might have been more trouble than they were worth in the end, but at least I could convince them to tell me stuff.”

“I mean with you and Kroseph being here. We don’t know how I’m going to be when I channel Metal. At the very least, it’s going to be sharp and pointy.”

“I’m not worried,” Kroseph said. “You aren’t going to hurt us.”

“And if you try,” Jackal said, smirking. “I’ll stop you.”

It would be so simple to stick to the reserve of metal in his bracer. There was enough he could keep himself safe. And he had so many other elements to use, to master, he could take his time before focusing on this one.

“Tibs?” Kroseph asked.

He nodded, going around the room and lighting more lanterns until the space was in shadows instead of darkness. He could fill it with light, instead, but he had no idea how to have it stay while he channeled another element. Which of the letters even interacted with it.

Yet once more thing he needed to practice.

But for now, it was metal.

He stood in the middle of the empty room and channeled it.

Jackal stoned up and went on his guard.

“How do you feel?” Kroseph asked.

“Fine,” Tibs replied, searching for some difference in how he thought.

“Nothing’s changed?” Jackal asked, his tone suspicious. Right, he had tried to fool them when he was channeling Corruption.

“Nothing that I can feel. Maybe I already think like metal?”

“I doubt that,” Jackal said. “You channeled it in the dungeon and you were... more intense.”

“It was in the middle of a fight and I didn’t know what I’d done.”

“No Tibs, it wasn’t the same kind of intense, it—”

“It was.” Tibs fixed his gaze on the fighter. “I’d know how I felt better than you, don’t you think?”

“There it is,” Jackal said.

Tibs rolled his eyes. Jackal knew nothing, well, nothing about this. He pushed essence out of his hand, watched the cloud of it, before making a blade. It differed from his ice sword, and that annoyed him. It was still jagged, and he didn't mind that. It was sort of his thing; he figured. Jagged and broken ice, but this sword looked broken, instead of having spikes jutting out. Like he was trying to meld multiple blades.

It looked ugly.

He focused on it and tried to will it smoother. The broken pieces shifted around, but didn't align, he pushed more essence into the blade, tried to will it into a semblance of an unbroken sword, but all that happened was that each broken piece grew, giving him a larger mess of broken pieces.

Why couldn't he get the abyss cursed thing to do what he wanted it to? He'd managed it with ice, forcing it into something smooth if he willed it hard enough, and Metal was definitely better than Water so this should be easier, not harder.

“Tibs,” Jackal said.

“I'll get this.”

The fighter chuckled. “Maybe you should leave that for later and try something different.”

“I said,” Tibs replied to clenched teeth as he turned and swung his hand in the fighter's direction. “That I'll get this.”

The broken sword came undone, and the pieces flew in Jackal and Kroseph's direction. Tibs cursed inwardly as the fighter stepped before his man. How had he lost control of that, too? Metal was his. It should do what he willed. He ground his teeth and recalled the shards to him.

Those that had embedded into Jackal's stone-body pulled out and returned. He had a sword of broken pieces again. That was not what he wanted.

“Well, that's useful, I guess,” Jackal commented.

“That isn't what I want.” He glared at the pieces. Used essence to shove them tighter, flatter into an actual sword.

“What do you want?” Kroseph asked.

“Kro, maybe you should stay behind me.”

The server walked to Tibs.

“A sword, what do you think I want?” Tibs replied without looking away from the pieces that just slid against each other instead of becoming a fucking sword.

“Why?”

“Because it's what I want.”

“Maybe it'll be easier to start with a knife.”

“I want a sword!” He glared at Kroseph and the pieces slip his control, shifting in all directions again. With an exasperated scream, he threw the mess away and reformed another sword. He'd get it to behave this time.

“Not one word,” he warned the server, as another mess of broken pieces formed.

“How about a few dozen of them?”

“So long as they aren't about what I'm doing.”

“What are you doing?”

“Making a sword. Can’t you see?”

Kroseth nodded. “Because you want a sword.”

“Yes. And I’m going to get one.”

“Why do you think it’s like that?”

“Because I’m angry,” Tibs replied. That one was easy. “It was the same with the ice. Alistair said that it’s because deep down I’m angry and it’s reflected in it. Like he had any idea how fucking angry I am,” he muttered. “Him and his fucking guild. Any time I channel fire, it’s a struggle not to use in on them, even if I know it won’t do anything with all the magic protecting the building.”

“Do you think getting angrier is helping you get the sword to behave?”

“I don’t care,” Tibs snapped. “It’s my essence, it’s going to fucking do what I will it to.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“No. I’ve got this.”

“Maybe you should take a break, Tibs.”

“I said I’ve got this!” He had the mess of broken pieces in the server’s face, and Jackal pulled him away.

Kroseth hadn’t looked worried.

“Tibs,” Jackal warned.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” he replied, focusing on the mess again.

“It’s okay,” Kroseth said.

“Kro, I really don’t know about this.”

“I think I understand how he’s thinking.”

“He’s turned stubborn,” Jackal said.

“No, he’s unbending in his thinking. Which is interesting, if you think about it, since metal is flexible when it’s well forged.”

Kroseth was next to him again.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Tibs said.

“That’s unfortunate, Tibs, because I’d like you to let go of the element.”

“I’ve got this,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Maybe, but I want you to let it go, anyway.”

“I’m doing this!”

“No, you’re not.”

Tibs glared at the server. “You’re getting close to making me want to hurt you, Kroseth.”

“Okay, what’s this about?” the server asked.

“Making a fucking sword.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Look at this,” Tibs snarled, shaking the mess he was holding.

“But that isn’t why you came here, is it?”

“Who cares about that?” He felt the server’s gaze on him, but ignored it. It was a distraction from getting the metal to obey him.

“I didn’t think you’d lose focus so easily.”

“What did you say?” Tibs snarled. He let go of all the pieces except one. He didn’t need all of them to cut this human. They were all sharp.

“You got distracted from the reason you came here. And easily.”

“I don’t get distracted unless someone causes it.” He glared. “Like you.”

“Really? Tell me. Why did we come here?”

Tibs raised the broken pieces, the reason behind everything he’d done.

He frowned and looked at it.

Was it?

It was what he wanted to deal with right now, but had it been why he’d come here with Jackal and Kroseph?

No. They’d come here so he could figure out how Metal affected him.

“I get obsessed,” he said. “I don’t want to think about anything other than what I’m dealing with now. I don’t care about the consequences, of course.” He smiled, then it went away as the need to deal with the sword returned.

He let go of Metal, then absorbed the essence from the piece he held. “This is going to be a problem until I get control.”

“Seems to me like you got control easily enough,” Jackal said. “Mind healing this?” he indicated the gash in his stone stomach, the worse of the damage. “You owe a shirt.”

“I’ll mend it,” Tibs said, weaving purity. “You need to be flesh for this.”

Jackal’s skin regained its tan color and blood flowed freely from it and the other cuts in the second before Tibs applied the weave. It slowed as the skin mended.

“That one went deep,” he commented, sensing the weave thin as it spread along the internal injury. “If I’d intended it, I think I could have sent it all the way through.”

“How about we don’t test that?” Jackal said.

“And I didn’t get control of Metal. I just let go of it.”

“It happened faster than with the other elements,” Kroseph commented.

“It was easier to notice how my thinking wasn’t the same once you forced me to look at it.” The weave spread so thin it was now difficult to sense it among Jackal’s essence. “I think that it’s because I’ve had to do it for the others. I’m learning to understand how I’m different channeling an element.” He smiled. “Maybe I’ll get to the point where I can just get a new element and not have to destroy a building to gain control.”

“Considering the state of the previous one,” Jackal said, indicating the shards of metal embedded in the wall, “I’d say this is good.”

“But I’m not done.”

“Do you want to channel Metal again?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs shook his head. “I need to rest.”

“Then you might want to absorb all of these.”

Tibs looked at broken sword pieces in the wall and on the floor. He couldn’t absorb them. He’d used his core reserve to make them, and now it was back to being life. He’d have to channel Metal again for that.

He undid the metal pieces and let the essence disperse. It wasn’t like he needed the essence. The amount he’d used as he obsessed with getting the sword to look like his ice one was noticeable, but only a small amount compared to how vast his core reserve was.

“Do you think it’s safe from Tibs to train here again?” Kroseph asked as Tibs cracked

the door open and listened for anyone in the dark alley.

“It might be best to avoid using the same place twice if he’s going to still add damage. The owner might miss the holes in the walls, but more and they’ll be sure to notice.”

Not hearing anyone, he carefully looked out.

“Don’t you just know if there’s people?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t want to depend only on one sense. There’s going to be magic out there that can fool it.”

“It’s not like anyone knows about how you do it.”

“There are still ways.” Tibs stepped outside. “Khumdar can hide completely from me with Darkness.”

“But he knows about your element,” Kroseph said.

“Any rogue who thinks he can’t be beaten is about to be dead,” Tibs said. “I’m not dying because of that one.”

“That’s Tibs,” Jackal said. “Wise beyond his years.”

* * * * *

Tibs walked the guild building, acting like he knew where he was going. He did. He was going to the training room, where Alistair would be waiting for him shortly, but he was taking the extremely long way around. He was now in a section he’d never been to before. More clerks walked around, barely paying him any attention. When one exited a room, Tibs got a flash of essence from within before the closed door blocked it all. All he had time to notice in that time was that it was woven essence. So enchantment. Magical items. Those Sto gave? Others? Why? And what did they do with them? If Tibs could get some of what was behind those doors, it could help him.

He made it to the training room as Alistair arrived.

“Why doesn’t Dhu interact with Darkness?” Tibs asked before his teacher could start on the lesson.

“How do you know it doesn’t?” with a flick of the wrist essence took shape in the center of the room, a mix of weaving and etching, or maybe it was just a different type of weave that included etching. The more Tibs perceived and thought he understood, the more he found out he didn’t.

“Khumdar told me.” Tibs had tried it. He’d tried etching with Darkness to see what he could make happen. Dhu hadn’t done anything, just like Kha didn’t interact with Water.

“I don’t know.” The water took the form of a person. A watery version of Sto’s people golem, only less distinct as the water kept flowing. “It should be apparent now that if it’s from outside our element, I know little of it. What I know I picked up from other adventurers I worked with, and is probably suspect. Some guard what they know, even from their friends. And some do so by spreading lies. So be cautious of what others tell you about what they can and can’t do.”

“Why didn’t you learn more?” Tibs asked. “You can go anywhere you want. You have enough coins to get whatever you want. Why don’t you know everything there is to know about everything? That’s one thing I’d do if I have as many coins as you do.”

It’s what he’d do if he could show he had all those coins, at least. Not that he had that much. But for now, he had to be content with using it to help others. Once he was free of the

guild, he'd take it and he'd find out everything he could.

Alistair smiled. "I never had your curiosity. If I need to know something, I learn about it, but unlike you, I don't have the need to know everything. Not that I could, even if I did. Everything is much larger than you imagine."

Tibs shrugged. "I'm still going to try."

"A rogue with the knowledge of a scholar," Alistair mused. "That will be interesting to see." He motioned to the form, who took a defensive position. "Now, I want you to use what you've been practicing to take your opponent down."

Tibs nodded and made a thin knife out of ice for his etching before running at the water creation, etching at the same time.

* * * * *

Tibs sighed as he put on the clothing. He hated them twice over now. Once because putting them on meant he was heading to the nobles, for Galdain's party Tirania had forced him into. Well, that he'd let her force him into, because he needed to maintain the impression he was on her side. And a second time because Don had helped him get them.

Probably just another step in his plan to have Tibs grow complacent and trust him until he no longer questions what the sorcerer said.

He kicked the chest. Why couldn't Don have been honest? He'd liking the man Don had pretended to be.

Which had been his plan.

He kicked the chest again.

Tibs should have known better, Don was nothing more than a self-serving asshole. He'd never change. That had been revealed now that the sorcerer didn't need to maintain the act. Anytime Don came to the inn, he sneered at all of them.

Oh yeah, he made no pretense of being the same anymore.

Tibs almost kicked the chest again.

Instead, he snatched the overcoat from the back of the chair and put it on. He made a sheet of water before him, then stilled it until he made out his reflection.

He looked... He pulled on the sleeves, adjusted the shirt.

He looked like a street urchin hoping to fool nobles into thinking he was one of them.

He wanted to rip the clothes off. Go in his armor. He was a Runner, not... whatever his reflection claimed he was. At least his bracers fit under the sleeve of the shirt. He'd gotten that out of Don and the tailor, even if she'd looked at him oddly. Having eight essences on top of water he could easily pull on comforted him, even if he couldn't do much with them without attracting unwanted attention.

He looked at his reflection again and forced his shoulders to unsag. He had an act to put on for the guild. He might as well get that over with.

Planning-40

“Where do you think you’re going?” the voice asked as Tibs walked between the sections of walls partially constructed. The noble’s neighborhood was going to have only three ways in, and this would be one of them. The lower hinges were already in place for when this part was finished and the door that would close them off to the rest of the town.

Maybe they’d be able to lock them in there and never have them bother anyone.

He turned to the voice. He’d sensed the adventurer guarding the way a few blocks away, Fire, somewhere between Epsilon and Delta in power.

She stepped out of the shadows and approached him. She had a sword at her hip, her armor was metal, scoffed in places. But she moved with a lightness that kept Tibs from considering her a fighter outright. Some fighters could move lightly, but there was... something of pretending with the way she was armored.

The way he was trying to pretend he didn’t feel entirely out of place on the ground, this close to nobles.

“I’m expected,” he replied.

She snorted. “I don’t think anyone here ever expects a thief to drop by their houses.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs replied, and played a hunch. “Do they expect you to be a rogue too?”

She smirked. “Like knows like, I see. And your eyes only mean you have Water as an element. I stop peddling the guild’s crap when I left them. Those titles are only there to make you think they make you better than we are. We’re thieves, but there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. It’s a...” She chuckled. “Noble profession in and of itself. And yes, they know what they hired. Who better than a thief to catch other thieves?”

“They aren’t paying the guild for your services? I thought all adventurers had to work for the guild.”

“Only until you pay off what they screwed you over with. So how about you head back the way you came and find your way back where I won’t see you and have to stop you?”

“So there are ways to pay what you owe? I thought they made it so you never managed it, kept you in servitude for always unless you were a sorcerer or got some other group to buy you from them, like the Attendants for the Void adventurers.”

“I see you’ve figured things out. You have to get creative, kid, but it can be done.”

“My name’s Tibs,” he said reflexively, and saw she recognized it.

“Tibs Light-Fingers?” she asked, looking him over anew.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know how to reach Galdain’s house?”

“It’s the one with the slanted rook of dark red tiles, with the four windows on the top floor. The largest faces the rising sun and as a balcony. The walls are so whitewashed they’ll blind anyone walking by with dark wood pillar they should do something about because they are too easy to climb.”

She chuckled. “You think you can recognize it from the ground?”

He shrugged. “If I have to, I’ll get there from the roofs.”

“That’s a good way to get yourself shot. They have archers watching those.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “It hasn’t done them any good the previous times I’ve walked those roofs.”

Now she studied him, and he realized he might have said too much. “Can I go through? I figure they aren’t going to be happy if I get there and their party’s over.” Except for Tirania being unhappy with him, the idea was appealing. If only he had a valid reason to be delayed.

Where were the would-be assassins when he needed them?

“I’ll escort you. That way, you won’t get lost.”

He thought about protesting. He didn’t need someone watching him to make sure he stuck to the path. But she could be a source of information. “Do any of the adventurers working for the nobles work for the guild?” he asked, walking with her. “I know I saw some of them acting as guards when Sebastian was causing trouble.”

“The Siege. I heard about that. I don’t know about every adventurer here. But I doubt it. The nobles don’t care for the guild. It has more power than they do. As for those you saw, I can’t know. Maybe those nobles didn’t have a choice. Those under duress have to make hard decision. For a noble, that could be one of them. Or... maybe those guild members were being creative in how they got more money. If the guild doesn’t know that you got paid, it can’t claim a cut of it.”

“Doesn’t the guild check where very coin comes from?”

“Do they do that with you?”

“No, but I’m a Runner. They know where my coins come from.” He pointed over his shoulder in the direction of the mountain.

She chuckled. “What about the coins you get when you’re not pillaging the dungeon?”

“I don’t get a lot,” he said. “Just one to prove I got into the house.”

“That coin can still be worth a lot,” she said. “One platinum from a noble’s coffer will cover a chunk of what you’ll end up owing.”

“I only take a silver from them, because they don’t seem to care for copper.”

She eyed him. “Why would you just take one? You could take a pouch full from some of them and they wouldn’t notice it.”

“Do you steal from them?”

“No, but I work for them. They pay me enough not to make it worth the risk. You aren’t in their employ, and trust me, but guild isn’t going to care.”

The guild might not. “Have you met the guard leader?”

She shrugged. “I’ve seen him, but no, I haven’t met him.”

“He’ll care if a noble complains about someone stealing from them, and he’s going to come make my life difficult.”

“Because you’ve been caught doing it before, or... because the city’s thieves report to you?”

“They don’t report to me.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

Tibs glanced at her.

“Word is,” she said, “that if you don’t clear your plans with Light-Finger, he’s going to hand you over to the guard himself.”

“I’ve never done that.” He paused. “She wasn’t a Runner, she was some out-of-town thief who was causing trouble and the guard couldn’t get her. And she tried to get me caught a few times. It was more payback than anything else by then.”

She motioned to the guarded iron fence before the white house with dark beams going up the walls. “That’s it. Galdain’s house. Story is he might get all his children to train here.”

“Great, more nobles,” Tibs grumbled.

“I won’t disagree with the sentiment. Even with how well they pay, I do my best not to deal with them. Have a good evening, and I promise to let you know if I decide to rob someone.”

“Don’t rob anyone,” he replied as she walked away. “You don’t need the training.”

“We always need to keep the fingers busy, Light-Fingers. You know that.”

Great, now he’d have to worry about some Epsilon rogue causing trouble.

Later, he reminded himself.

Right now, he had a different set of trouble to deal with. He had to convince nobles he actually enjoyed their company.

Where was that abyss curse assassin when he needed one?

“Light-Finger?” the guard asked as Tibs approached them.

“Yes.” He moved his jaw to keep it from clenching.

The guard produced a key and unlocked the gate before pulling it open. Tibs eyes the stone wall barely half again as tall as he was, then the gate. What was the point of locking that when the wall was so easy to jump over?

Nobles.

The property was lit with glowing stones on poles, each that wasn’t along the path illuminated flowers around a small tree with chairs. Here and there, a cobble path branched out from the main path toward one of the lights. A stone was anchored on each side of the door, and over each window on this level. It would make it difficult to approach the house unseen if someone looked outside, but none of the other floors had such illumination, making getting in from the roof just a question of bypassing the lock on one of the window.

As he wondered if he was supposed to knock or just enter, the door opened and a woman in plain dress looked at him. “May I have your name?” she asked when he didn’t say anything.

“Tibs. Tibs Light-Fingers.”

“If you’ll come in, Mister Light-Fingers, you are expected.” She stepped out of the way and Tibs entered the house.

The table by the side had carved stones on it. Over it was a mirror in a gold frame. A carpet of bright threads woven in various shapes ran the length of the hall. He sensed the people in a large room to the left; the archway was halfway to the end of the hall. There was enough he had trouble telling essence apart, except for those who had an element, although even they were faint enough Tibs had to pay attention not to lose track of them in the crowd.

With one exception. Someone's Earth essence was concentrated enough it stood out among everyone else. Epsilon, possibly.

"You're here!" A man ran out of the closest archway to the right. Tibs had been so focused on the crowd he hadn't paid attention to that one. His element was Crystal, and he was Upsilon. He was dressed in fine clothes, adorned with a handful of gems, and beamed as he stepped to Tibs, arms spread.

Tibs ducted under the arms and fought the urge to make a sword. Whatever that had been, Tibs was supposed to make a good impression.

The man turned and grinned. Was he really a man? He couldn't be much older than Jackal. "You're fast."

"Surviving the dungeon ensures that," Tibs replied cautiously. The boy didn't look to be armed, and Tibs only sense a knife in his boot, but it was enchanted. A loose weave composed mainly of metal, so not a powerful enchantment.

"I so can't wait for you to take me in."

Tibs narrowed his eyes, but swallowed his reply. "I shouldn't be so eager to have the dungeon try to kill you."

The boy waved the comment aside. "I'm not worried, not when I'll have you at our side." He straightened and gave Tibs a small bow. "I'm Lamberto of Fiaschi." He grinned. "Come on, let me introduce you to the others."

Tibs stepped out of reach when Lamberto tried to grab his arm and the boy chuckled.

"Come on." He motioned as he ran for the archway on the left.

Tibs seriously considered ice before following him. That or Fire. It was a harder decision than he'd expected. Knowing the monster he could turn into once iced kept him using that, and reminding himself that burning this entire place down, with the people in it, would hurt some who had nothing to do with how nobles acted. Some of the servants had to be here because they had no choice and not because they hope to leech power from them.

He stepped into the large room.

"Everyone," Lamberto said loudly, and waited for the conversations to cease and the eyes to turn in their direction. "I would like you to meet the Hero of Kragle Rock, the Savior of the Dungeon, Tibs Light-Fingers!"

He should have burned the place down the moment he stepped in, Tibs decided as the looks turned hungry.

Planning-41

“That’s the hero?” a man a few years older than Lamberto said, stepping forward. His tone was filled with sneer. “He’s so... small.” His jacket was red with gold thread and black highlights with emeralds adorning it. His element was water, and like Lamberto, he was Upsilon.

Three others stood a few steps behind him. Tibs marked the woman as a sorceress, by the golden robe with black highlights. Her eyes were the same golden. The man next to her had metal his is element, but with so much darkness in his essence, Tibs trusted him even less than anyone else here. The one on her other side had light as his element.

“Palden,” Lamberto said in a chastising tone, “it isn’t the size of someone that dictates their valor.”

Palden gave Lamberto an amused look. “And isn’t that fortunate for you?”

Great. Tibs was going to be used in nobles validating their egos.

“I heard you burned down part of the city,” the metal user said, his gaze calculating.

“Look at my eyes,” Tibs replied before he could think better of it, controlling his guild. He was supposed to be nice to them. Make them want to run this dungeon. But they weren’t going to make it easy on him.

“So?” the man snorted. “There are other ways to burn things down.” The man spoke from experience. Tibs was sure of it.

“How does a boy like you manage to claim a title like hero?” the sorceress asked. “Let alone of the dungeon.” She looked at the light use. “How does one become the hero to a dungeon? Why would anyone want that?”

“It’s savior, Gabrielle,” the man with light as his element replied. “But I wonder the same. Why would anyone save one of those things?”

“So we can train?” Lamberto replied. “Do you want to go through life barely improving? That’s what going to happen without a dungeon.”

“That’s what the guild wants us to think,” the man said. “So they’ll continue to lord the dungeons over us. We shouldn’t be paying them for the honor of training. They should be begging us to honor them with our presence. They’re just—”

“Perhaps you should be mindful of what you say about our hosts,” a man in gray said, joining them, “in the presence of their representative, Carlan.” He was the epsilon Earth user. He bowed to Tibs. “I am Theodore Galdain. I bid you welcome to my home, and pray you’re forgive my children. The need to move has been a strain on them.”

“I’m sure it has,” Tibs replied as neutrally as possible. There was no light around

anything the man said, so the need was real and not an exaggeration.

“And why, father, did the guild send th—him, instead of someone meaningful?” Palden asked.

“Because he’ll be taking us through the dungeon,” Lamberto exclaimed.

Palden looked at his father. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. His team is among one of the few original ones to have survived this long, and Tibs himself has to his name not only the claim of saving the dungeon and protecting the city, but he was the first to unlock the door to the second floor, as well as to discover the shortcuts that lets you bypass a floor once you’re ready.”

Palden walked away, muttering, “I am doomed to linger in obscurity.”

“Ignore him,” Lamberto said, “he wouldn’t know a good thing if someone slipped it into his purse. Our runs are going to be great, I just know it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Theodore said, smiling. “And with Tibs to guide you through the dungeon, you’ll all be Epsilon in no time.”

“Why is he even still here,” Gabrielle said, “if he’s so good? Why isn’t he Epsilon already and out saving the world?” the mockery was thick.

“Don’t you know anything?” Lamberto said. “Tibs had to work harder and anyone to get where he is. He started without essence.”

“We all do,” metal user said, rolling his eyes.

“No,” Lamberto insisted. “Even once he had his element. He didn’t get any essence. His eyes didn’t change color. He had to do his runs with nothing for his wits and skills.”

“You’ve been lied to, Lambert, again,” Gabrielle said. “Everyone knows that as soon as you get your element, your eyes change color and you can wield that essence.”

“Tell her,” Lamberto told Tibs.

Tibs struggled to remain in place. The door to the outside called to him. The roofs, where he’d be alone, did too. Anywhere but here. Especially with that noble putting him on the spot for his own entertainment.

Gabrielle and Carlan, along with their father, watched him attentively. Part of the crowd had also moved closer, parting to let the departing metal user pass.

“I’m told,” Tibs said, barely managing not to grit his teeth, “that I’m the younger Runner to survive the dungeon and get his element.” He was careful in how he said things. He wanted to minimize the chances they’d turn his word against him. And while he doubted Carlan knew enough to tell lies through his element, Tibs wasn’t taking the chances. He needed to take with a light user to find out when they learned that.

“Because of that, after my audience with Water, my eyes didn’t change color, and it took time until I had enough of a reserve to do much with the essence I had.”

Lamberto straightened and puffed out his chest, as if he’d accomplished some impossible task in getting Tibs to say this much.

The light user smirked. “You want a copper for that story?” he looked at his father. “Really? You’re saddling us with that? Some kid who has to lie to make himself feel important?”

“I didn’t lie,” Tibs said through gritted teeth.

“Let me tell you something you clearly don’t know,” Carlan said, stepping forward. “Light is my element. You can lie to me. Lies shine bright, and right now, your words are

blinding me.”

“More like yours,” Tibs replied, and the man stiffened. “Our previous guard leader had light as his element. And plenty of people lied to him. I did a time or two, and he’s Gamma. Are you even Upsilon?”

“Don’t you—” Carlan’s hand was raised, its back aimed at Tibs’s face, but his father caught it.

“I will not have you hit a guest and tarnish my name.” The man glared at his son. “I taught you better.”

“Yes, Father,” Carlan replied, glaring at Tibs. If his father noticed the look, he didn’t react. When his father let go of his hand, Carlan turned and he pushed his way through the crowds.

Theodore faced Tibs. “While he asked for it, I’d appreciate it if you refrained from baiting my children. They aren’t the hardened Runners that you are, so they require a more measured handling.”

“Father,” Lamberto whined, “We’re not children anymore. I don’t need Tibs holding my hand.”

Good, Tibs thought, because he might not be able to resist throwing the man to the rats in the boulder room.

“Tibs will do what is needed to ensure you survive,” his father stated. “If that means holding your hand, then you will let him do that, is that clear?” He looked at the close by crowd. “Alright, let’s get back to enjoying ourself. I’m certain that Tibs will be happy to answer your questions as he mingles.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and disappeared into the crowd.

“Come on,” Lamberto said, “I want to introduce you to my friends.” He nearly grabbed Tibs’s arm, but walked to a cluster of younger people. They noticed them, turned in their direction, studying Tibs.

Lamberto gave names, but Tibs didn’t pay attention. He was busy controlling his anger at the judgmental looks they were giving him. He shouldn’t care. He knew that. They were nobles and didn’t matter to him. But they weren’t that much older than he was, but they looked at him like he knew nothing of the world.

“Show us what you can do,” Lamberto said. “With your element.” Tibs looked at the boy while he tried to understand what he meant. “Henley doesn’t believe that you have an element.” He indicated a man Tibs could only describe as mousy, although the predatory look reminded him more of a rat.

Tibs nearly refused. He didn’t care what he or anyone else believed he could do. But he was here to make a good impression. And he should have realized it would involve displaying his element.

He extended his hand and moved water over it.

Mousy snorted. “So your hand’s wet.”

Tibs turned his palm up, pulled the water to it, then raised the ball until it floated over his hand. He smirked at the stunned expression. He moved his hand, and the ball dropped. He absorbed the essence before it hit the floor.

He almost rolled his eyes at the surprise in their eyes, then that was quickly covered and they were looking down at him. Some in anger, like he’d conned them, and they’d caught

on to him.

“Is that all you can do?” a woman asked, and Tibs turned. He was tall and looked down at him with an air of disinterest that belied the question. “I mean, they say you are some hero. Can heroes just play with water?”

Tibs flicked his hand up and iced the water as it flew out of his fingers, then caught the jagged knife.

She raised an eyebrow. “How, impressive.”

Tibs wondered if she’d be impressed with it planted in her stomach and ice spreading through her body.

“Can you make a sculpture?” a man said. “I’d love to see myself made of ice.”

Tibs remembered turning Sebastian into ice, piece by piece. Ice cracked when he turned a lot of water into it. If he did that to this noble, would he shatter without Tibs having to do more?

“Tibs’s a Runner,” Lamberto said, sounding offended. “Not an artist.”

“Yes, of course,” the noble said, amused. “How silly of me.” He looked the crowd over. “Theo, can I bother a servant for a large plate? I would like to see a demonstration of this,” he considered Tibs, “you man’s ability and he will require a target.”

“That is a splendid idea,” Theodore answered, then motioned to a servant. A silver plate close to half Tibs’s height was carried by two servants, then held it between them on the other side of the room, facing Tibs.

The man smiled at Tibs. “Do you think you can manage to hit that?”

Tibs flung the knife without looking, hardening it as he flew and mentally keeping it on target. Now was not the time to let his poor aim come into play.

It hit and pierced the plate, stopping at the guard. The plate’s reverberation sounded in the silenced room.

The noble looked at the target, then Tibs. “Yes, I suppose that was something of an easy target. Do we have anything more appropriate for his obvious skills?” he asked.

“How about this?” someone called out, lifting a dinner plate.

The man nodded and motioned for Tibs to act.

Tibs considered the situation, figure he’d have to extract something from Tirania, for her getting him into this, then made a knife and etched an ‘x’. He channeled the smallest amount of essence through it, and the jet of water flung the plate out of the man’s hand.

“Do that again,” Lamberto exclaimed, grinning.

With a roll of the eyes, Tibs looked to the other side of the room, where a handful of people held items as targets. Three ‘x’ in succession had three plates clattering away. For the crystal goblet, Tibs sent a whip of water, with Ank and Bor written within it. When it hit, the water coated the goblet and Tibs pulled, recalling the water, and it flung it in his direction. The water hit his hand, and then he held the goblet.

There was silence, then applause.

Planning-42

Tibs smirked as one of the noble lobbed a plate in the air. This time, Tibs hit it with a series of ice shards, spinning it and keeping it in the air until he etched a blob of sticking water that hit and stuck it to the wall, then gently slide down to the floor.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lamberto discreetly motion to him and reluctantly Tibs bowed to the ohhs and ahhs of appreciation of those watching.

Gabrielle handed him another goblet of dark liquid she and her friends, Tibs supposed, were drinking. He pulled out the corruption and then passed purity through it. Getting drunk with this crowd was not something he could afford. It wouldn't take much for him to tell them exactly what he thought of their kind.

He down the content and raised the goblet to louder applauses than any at what he'd done with his essence, as if drinking this was more of an accomplishment. He considered throwing the goblet at the table and seeing if he could have water there to catch it, but decided against it. The nobles didn't seem to mind when he broke one of them as part of some test of what he could do, but he didn't think they'd be as appreciative if he did so unprompted.

"That was amazing," Lamberto said, following Tibs to the table with the food. Each time he went to one of them, there was someone pointed to one of the small portion and expressing one form of amazement or another, or commenting on how their servants could arrange the table in a more appealing way, or with more variety or more colors or in multiple ways that sounded more like they were trying to impress those around them than convey anything of importance.

Tibs just wished there some something the size of an actual meal, instead of something he could pick up with his fingers. He was getting hungry, but no one did more than pick up an occasional small piece of hard bread with an even smaller piece of something else on it as they passed the table. Everything Tibs tasted was good. There simply wasn't enough on each to fill him.

"Tell me..." the noble looked Tibs over, "young man, I've seen you throw ice around, but can you do something about this?" he presented the crystal goblet he held containing an almost clear liquid. "Our host can't seem to keep his drinks cold."

"Of course he can," Lamberto said enthusiastically. "There's nothing Tibs can't do with his element. Isn't that right?"

Tibs wished the boy would stop. Just stop. He couldn't tell what his game was. Was he hoping to make himself more important by latching onto Tibs? Have Tibs think highly of

him for spreading his fame?

Not having much of a choice anymore, he touched the goblet and formed small pieces of ice in it until they stopped melting. When he let go, the man sipped the content, sighed in appreciation, and walked away without even thanking Tibs.

Gratitude was beneath such people.

Tibs turned to look the crowd over while chewing on the piece of bread and thin layer of meaty and spicy paste on it. A few of the nobles pointed in his direction while speaking to those around them. Smiles were exchanged, chuckles, then they were no longer looking at him. He could find out what they said. No one had air as an element, so there was no chance his use of it would be noticed, but he didn't care what they had to say.

He was surprised at how many of them were armed. They all had a knife at their belt, but many had one in their boot, or at their back. A few at their wrist and a woman had one in her hair, masquerading as one of the wooden sticks holding her braids in place.

Three even had theirs drenched in something containing corruption. Tibs added to his ever-growing list, finding a way to getting his hand on different poison so he could learn to recognize them by the composition of essences and how to render them inert. He suspected that with the better made ones, simply removing the corruption from it wouldn't be enough.

"You," a woman called, then threw a silver spoon at him. He considered just moving out of the way, but she, like the others, wanted another demonstration of his ability. With a flick of a finger, water lanced up from the floor before him and caught the spoon. He turned it to show he was holding it, then deposited it on the table.

The applauses were light this time.

"Come on," Lamberto whispered.

Stifling a sigh, Tibs bowed and the applauses increase.

Nobles and their stupid customs.

He watched servants enter, carrying trays, as he ate another piece of bread, this one with a sweet and sour jam. Maybe now they would get actual—

No, more platters with only tiny breads to replace the empty ones.

Tibs paused as he reached for another, a servant catching his attention. It wasn't the darkness within him that did it. She had more than the other servants, but Tibs had learned that secret did not mean bad intent. It was the attentive way she looked the room over. She was discreet about it, but Tibs recognized a rogue at work. Or a thief, in this case. The woman had no essence.

That another thief was active in his town annoyed him because it meant whatever he'd get blamed for whatever she was up to. Irdian would, again, summon him when the noble complained, Tibs might end up in a cell for a few days again, because the guard leader would hold him responsible.

He was beginning to consider setting up something to catch any thief that entered his town and explaining his rules.

He let her move about, returning to enjoying the taste of the smeared breads. Maybe she'd be good enough the noble she was targeting wouldn't realize what she'd done.

"You need to meet Lord Marton," Lamberto said, and Tibs nodded. Again, the boy paraded him before another noble. Explaining who Tibs was, his element, then offering for the man to test Tibs.

The noble seemed impressed, or at least acted the part. He had to have seen Tibs's previous demonstrations. But as the host's son, Tibs expected Lamberto was due the same kind of reverence his father was, and the boy seemed intent on taking advantage of it.

The noble threw his plate in this air. Tibs caught it with water and the man acted suitably impressed before engaging Lamberto in a conversation about his plans once he had mastered his element.

Tibs left them to it and returned to a table with food. Glad to be away from the boy finally.

"I must admit, this is one of Theodore's better event," a man with his back to Tibs said.

"I agree. I can't recall the last time I was this entertained," the woman with him said.

"The man has always been clever, and for him to turn his problems at him into an opportunity... well, that's just like him. Where else could he get such entertainment for nothing more than saying he will purchase a home, and have his children live there. He was going to do it, regardless."

"You can always count on Theodore to pull one over those who think themselves his better."

"As you'd know."

"Yes, well, unlike others, I've learned my lesson," she replied. "Did you see how the boy was?"

"Oh yes, with his throwing of water and ice. So impressive." The man chuckled mockingly.

"And how he preened afterward," she said. "As if that made him more than some dirt born child."

Ice covered the small piece of bread in his hand.

What they thought didn't matter, he told himself, as the ice inside him cracked.

Realizing what he'd done, he carefully thawed it, keeping hold of his anger as it rose. Of course, they were laughing at him. They were nobles. What else would they do? He hadn't come here looking for anything from them. This had been a duty forced on him by Tirania. Once that wasn't needed, it turned out.

So why was he so angry they were treated him exactly as he should have expected?

Because, he realized, it had been nice to be seen. To be acknowledged as something more than dirt. He hadn't wanted to be seen as anything like them, but he'd thought he'd seen respect for what he was capable of.

They'd been mocking him all this time. They hadn't been smiling, they'd been smirking.

"Tibs," Lamberto said, "come, you have to speak with Lady Treflein, she—" And the boy was the reason.

"No," Tibs snarled, keeping his voice low. "I don't have to do one cursed thing you say." Antagonizing everyone in the room wasn't a good idea, but he didn't have to take this one noble's condescending attitude.

"Tibs, I'm sorry, what it—"

"You can fucking stop. I get what you're doing now. Prancing me around like I'm your pet Runner."

“I didn’t—”

“Sure you didn’t. I know dogs who get treated better than you’re treating me.” Tibs walked away.

“Tibs,” Lamberto called as he caught up to him. “What happened? Let me help to—”

“You happened.” They were all paying attention to them now, but Tibs didn’t care. He wasn’t needed here, and he wasn’t going to let this noble try to convince him otherwise.

“You and your clinging to me. Your using me to make yourself more important to them. I’m done. I’m getting out of here and—”

The glint of metal distracted him. Not because it was there. Not even because it was a knife, but because it appeared out of nothing as the woman on the other side of the room pulled on it.

He ran before he understood what was happening. Focused on where the metal registered to his sense and got the hint of Darkness there thought he could make out a weave. It had been hidden by Darkness.

He collided with the man the knife was intended for, felt it cut his clothes and pass through his stomach, leaving behind Corruption he absorbed without thinking about it.

“Watched what you’re doing!” the man protested. “You made me spill my drink!”

Tibs elbowed Palden to get him away, forming a shield to block the knife as she tried to plant it in the noble. He kicked at her, ignoring the man’s ongoing complaints, but she stepped away.

She was the servant he’d noticed earlier.

He formed a sword, and the crowd awwed.

They were watching; he realized. Leaving enough space so they wouldn’t be endangered by the fight. Tibs considered walking away. They knew about the assassin now. Let them deal with her.

They’d probably bitch he hadn’t protected them, and Tirania would be unhappy and she might wonder how on her side Tibs was.

He grinned at the woman.

No, it was so much simpler than that.

He wanted to hit someone. Spend his anger on someone who couldn’t then complain about what he’d done.

He swung and blocked.

Her knife meant she had to get in close, but she was nimble, and easily dodged his attempts. Even when she slipped on the patch of ice, she’d rolled back to her feet quicker than he could take advantage of. Then she was under his sword, stabbing his side. He was quick enough is only sliced through instead of stab, but he was getting pissed that she was this good.

He had an element. She shouldn’t be cutting him more than he managed to cut her.

He could imagine Cross’s opinion of that.

He stuck her in place with a pool of sticky water, but that only let him cut her once before she had her foot out of her boot. He could tell he was making her work for it, but the fight should be over already, instead of dragging on.

A quick ‘x’ shattered a table as she jumped out of the way. He flung an ice shard, but she deflected it with her knife, then smirked as Tibs stared. She tried to take advantage of

her surprise, but he blocked with his shield, then had the spikes grow to—

She'd already jumped out of the way.

He followed her, and closed the distance as she stumbled, ready to finish this even as he realized there was no reason for her to have done so. He readied himself for whatever she had planned.

“Tibs!”

Someone slammed into him, and Tibs turned as he landed on the ground. Lamberto was where he'd been, a man, another servant, pulling a knife out of his stomach.

Tibs threw his sword at the man and it impaled him in his chest, then Tibs was up making a new one, ready to finish this.

Nobles were picking themselves up, making a line to the door.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts,” Lamberto whined, holding his bloody stomach. Tibs almost kept going, but the boy had kept him from having to explain things he'd rather not. And the woman was gone. He'd already lost track of her essence among those in the house.

He kneeled next to boy. “Why the fuck did you do that?” he demanded. He wouldn't be able to do much, not without people asking question, but he could make sure he didn't die.

“I couldn't let you be killed.” He looked away as Tibs ripped the sliced shirt open. “How bad is it?”

Tibs stared. Something glittered in the blood.

“It's that bad?” Lamberto asked.

Tibs wiped the blood away to reveal crystal filling the wound, keeping him from bleeding out.

“How did you do that?” Gabrielle asked.

Tibs smiled, then wiped that away.

Maybe one of that bunch had a chance at surviving the dungeon afterall.

Planning-43

Tibs ran the roofs.

He didn't have a destination, just a need to run.

To run away from the thoughts running through his head.

They'd started once he left the party. With the assassination attempt thwarted, he had no interest in remaining there. He'd saved a noble. How much more good will did Tirania expect from him? And it wasn't even needed.

He'd avoided paying attention to thoughts as he walked back to his room, but as soon as he lied down they grew in volume until he put on his armor, climbed to the roof and ran.

Was he a bigot?

Of course he wasn't. Tibs had reason to hate nobles. They were horrible people. They came into his street, his town, and tried to take over everything. Force people to defer to them for no other reasons than they were nobles, and therefor owed deferment.

There was no such thing as a good noble.

Except...

Amelia wasn't all that bad. Not bad at all, actually. And her brother wasn't horrible either, although Tibs didn't particularly like him. The man was full of himself, but the way people who knew more tended to be, not in the noble's usual 'just give me what I want' way.

Two out of all the nobles Tibs had ever encountered didn't mean he was wrong in considering all them bad.

There were a few more. Those close to Amelia.

But they were her friends. That didn't change—

He stopped running, panting, having trouble finding his breath.

He was not a bigot. Tibs had been under the heels of bigots too often in his life to be one. He knew better than to be one.

Bigots were only one step below nobles, when it came to being bad people.

"I am not a bigot!" he yelled to the sky.

Except he'd treated Lamberto horribly for no reason.

Not for no reason, because the boy has taken a knife for him. For no reason, because Lamberto had been nice to Tibs.

Over eager, and annoying in how he thought Tibs was so great, but he had done nothing to justify how Tibs treated him. Tibs had simply decided the boy was a noble, so deserved nothing more.

Just like nobles decided Tibs were below them without ever knowing him.

Then there was Don.

Tibs had decided Don had lied to manipulate him and his team because the sorcerer used to be an asshole. Maybe he still was. Tibs didn't know, because while he'd been too iced to care one way or another, he'd also not cared enough to pay attention.

Had he bothered paying attention to anything Don said to see if he'd been lying? He couldn't remember. Don was helping Tibs progress, and that was all he'd cared about while iced.

He cursed.

He didn't want to talk with Don.

He fucking didn't want to listen to his side of things.

Don was just a wanna be noble who'd put himself first no matter who suffered, and that was all there was to it.

And Tibs was a fucking bigot.

Why couldn't Light go about hurting him thinking that, like it had every other time he'd lied to himself?

Like the answer to that wasn't self evident.

He looked over the dark roofs, wondering where the sorcerer might be. He stretched his sense as far as it would go, but other than the pool, he didn't sense anyone with Corruption as their element in his range.

He thought it curious that those who'd bought the pool hadn't arrived yet. Considering how special they thought the place to be, he'd expected them to arrive the instant the sale was done.

He'd also have to talk with Lamberto, apologize for how he treated him, but Tibs doubted he'd be allowed to reach that house, and he didn't feel like breaking into it just for that.

And he'd have to guide that team through the dungeon. He could talk with him there.

He ran again, this time sensing for a direction, instead of running away.

* * * * *

This was not where he'd expected to find the sorcerer.

Tibs had expected to head toward one of the better parts of town once he sensed the corruption. Instead, he was in one of the poorer parts.

It couldn't be because the sorcerer didn't have the coins for better. The loot had been good on all their runs, and if there is one thing Tibs had learned about Don, it was that while the man like nice things; it wasn't at the expense sacrificing his comfort, so why decide to reside here, in a house that hadn't fared well in Sebastian's attacks and hadn't seen much work done on it since. By the feel of those in the other rooms, this was where the workers who couldn't afford a house of their own resided.

The only thing Don had arranged was to have a room to himself, instead of sharing it with half a dozen others.

The sorcerer sat at a table. A tankard filled with a drink Tibs couldn't identify. Alcohol, by the corruption floating in the liquid, but not ale. Don would prefer something better than that, Tibs figured.

Tibs climbed down to the window.

Room was dark. Not even a candle for the sorcerer to see by.

Maybe Tibs should leave the man alone.

He knocked on the window.

Even without the light, he had no problem seeing Don turn, look at him, and frown. Tibs took it as acknowledgment and pushed the window open.

“Like my day couldn’t get any worse,” Don muttered. He took a long swallow before putting the tankard down. “What do you want?”

“How much have you had to drink?” Tibs noticed the bottle on the table, empty. Don didn’t sound drunk, but this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have if the man wasn’t at least close to sober.

Don threw the tankard at Tibs, who caught it with water, then placed it back on the table, filled with it.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to get drunk when corruption’s your element?” Don demanded. “No, of course you don’t. You don’t know anything. You just like to think you do. Too fucking good for anyone.”

Tibs sat on the windowsill.

“Fuck off, Tibs. I’m not dealing with your condescension tonight.”

“What happened?”

“What do you fucking care?”

“You know what?” Tibs was halfway out the window when he realized what he was doing.

“Go on,” Don said as Tibs sat back. “Just leave. You don’t want me here anymore than anyone else.”

Tibs didn’t respond. He could feel the sarcasm building. Don kept proclaiming how much better off he was away from Tibs and his team. How people clamored to join his team, if only Tirania would let him build it.

“I’m sorry.”

“Of fuck off. You think I need your pity? You think that if you’re nice enough to me, I’ll swallow the bullshit and return to your team so you can all treat me like some Street-rated replacement for that—” He snapped his mouth shut.

Don looked away. “I’m sorry, that’s not fair to her.” He took a swallow, made a face, then took another.

“You’re not—” Tibs stopped at the glare.

“Why are you here, Tibs?”

“To say I’m sorry for how I treated you.”

“Oh, I get graced by Tibs’s apologies. Hurray for me.”

“Oh, will you—” Tibs closed his mouth on the anger. “I treated you badly,” he said through gritted teeth.

“And that’s such a revelation to you?”

“Yes,” Tibs whispered, unable to look at the man. He felt the stare. He forced himself to look.

“Do you expect me to believe that you didn’t know you were an asshole to me?”

“Do you realize it when you’re being an asshole to someone?” Tibs asked defensively.

“Oh, yeah.” Don smirked at Tibs’s surprised. “Unlike Jackie-boy, I don’t come by pissing people off by accident.”

Tibs stopped himself from asking why he did it then. They’d talked about something relating to that at one point while he was iced. He’d barely paid attention, having his curiosity sated being more important than the answers he’d received.

“I thought I was better than that,” Tibs said. Don snorted and Tibs had to swallow his anger again.

“What do you want, Tibs?” Don asked after a few seconds of silence.

“To say I’m sorry.”

“You’ve done that. You can go.”

He could, Don was right.

“Why did you lie?” he asked. “Why ask Tirania to say it was her idea?”

“Like you’ll believe me.”

“I will.”

Don rolled his eyes. “I was scared.” The words were dark.

“Of what?”

“Of you. Of you saying no. Of not having anyone around me who’d have the guts to call me on my bullshit. Jackie might be some clueless, muscle bound idiot, but it’s good for not letting jackasses like me get away with it.”

“He doesn’t like the competition,” Tibs said before he could stop himself.

“Ah, like he could ever compete with me.” Don studied Tibs. “You’re not calling me a liar.”

Tibs shrugged.

“Why do you believe me?” the sorcerer asked suspiciously.

Tibs shrugged again. He had no idea how to explain it without bringing Light into it, and he wasn’t ready for that.

“What happened? To make you seek me out, Tibs? I know you well enough to know this isn’t something you just do. You thought about it and decided to come ask me if I’d lied.”

“I’m a bigot.”

Don narrowed his eyes, but didn’t comment.

“I had to go to a noble’s party.”

“Galdain’s, I heard.” There was annoyance in the tone, but he didn’t add anything.

“Lamberto, that’s one of his sons who’ll run the dungeon, was all over me with how glad he was to meet me. He dragged me around and introduced me to everyone.”

“You let a noble drag you around?” Don asked, amused.

“Tirania told me to make a good impression, and I need her to think I’m on her side. So blasting the annoyance through a wall wasn’t something I could do.” He paused. “And he wasn’t that much of an annoyance.”

“You’re saying something not entirely horrible about a noble,” Don said. “He must be quite the man.”

“Boy. He’s barely older than I am. Well, maybe more like a little younger than you are. But I treated him horribly when it turned out everyone else at that party just looked at me like a trick to be watched and snickered at. I made it his fault, even if he was the only

one not taking part. He even told his brothers and sister to leave me alone.” He paused again. “And after I treated him like that. He still took a knife for me.”

Don raised an eyebrow.

“There was an assassin there after Palden. I got in her way, but she had a partner who tried to stab me while she distracted me. Lamberto shoved me out of the way and took it for me. He might have died before anyone could do anything, but he filled the wound with crystal and kept it from bleeding out. He has no idea how he did it.”

Don nodded. “Fear and a desire to survive can get you to do a lot you didn’t know you could. You should know how that goes.”

“You don’t sound surprised there was an attack.”

The sorcerer shrugged. “Back home, if there isn’t at least one attempt at killing one of the attendees, it’s not considered a successful party.”

“And you wanted to be like them?”

“Money, power, getting everything they want. Yeah, I wanted that. Especially after the little my family had was taken from us.” They were quiet again. Don drained the tankard and presented it to Tibs, who refilled it. “Why were you so angry when you found out joining your team was my idea?”

Tibs made himself a tankard out of ice and filled it with water to have something to do while he considered his answer. He hadn’t thought, when he found out, he’d just reacted. He’d simply lashed out. But why had he done it? Why had it—

“Because being angry meant I didn’t have to feel the pain the idea you’d used me for some selfish plan of yours caused. You aren’t that horrible of a person when you let yourself be, and the idea it had been an act hurt.”

Don nodded. “It was an act, of a sort. And I did have a selfish plan.”

“Trying to be better isn’t selfish.”

The sorcerer nodded. “But is that what it is if I have to deceive you to get it?”

“You were afraid. I get how that is.”

“And you were hurt. I get that too.”

They were silent again.

“What happens now?” Don asked.

“I’d like you to come back to the team.”

“The others might not go along with that.”

“Jackal will. He’s only angry at you because I was angry. Khumdar doesn’t care beyond the team being whole for the runs.”

“But Mez...”

Tibs nodded. “I can explain my side of it to him, but...”

“Yeah, I owe him an apology, too. He was the only one who tried to help me and with how I treated him when I forced him on my team. That puts him on the level of heroes of songs.”

“I think that once he knows why, he’ll understand.”

“If he believes me.”

“I can—” Tibs stopped himself. Sure, he could tell Mez Don wasn’t lying, and Mez would believe him, but, again, how did he explain it to the sorcerer?

He knew Don was truthful about why he’d done what he’d done, and if Tibs asked him

if he had any plan on betraying him or the team, he knew Don's answer would also be true. But Light didn't know the future, just how people felt about what they said. It was only a lie if Don was planning on betraying them.

If circumstances changed and the temptation presented itself. Tibs couldn't know what the sorcerer would do.

And that was still too much of a risk at the moment.

Planning-44

“So,” Jackal said, nodding toward the sorcerer speaking with Mez at the counter as Tibs sat at the table, “you don’t hate his guts anymore?”

“We talked,” Tibs started, and immediately, that didn’t feel adequate. “I listened. He didn’t lie when he said he was scared we’d refuse to let him on the team.”

“He was correct,” Khumdar said. “Without Tirania forcing it, you would not have allowed him to join.”

“I know.” Tibs looked at the archer and sorcerer. The conversation was heated enough people were moving away. Mostly Mez talking and gesturing and Don looking penitent. “I couldn’t see past how he’d been.” He shrugged. “But believe him when he says he wants to be better.”

“Believe, or know?” the cleric asked.

“He believes he wants to change,” Tibs said, “and that’s what Light sees. It doesn’t know if he will.”

“You’d need void for that,” Jackal said between bites.

“I’d rather not.” Tibs shuddered. “They all seem to turn strange.”

Kroseph placed a plate with spicy smelling meats and vegetables before Tibs. “I’m proud of you,” he said, squeezing his shoulder and adding a tankard.

Tibs didn’t feel like what he’d done was anything that should engender pride. He’d just done the right thing.

The server nodded to Don as they crossed path, then he and the archer sat at the table.

“You two going to be okay?” Jackal asked.

“We’ll see,” Mez replied, going back to eating. He paused. “But you don’t have to worry about me shooting him in the back anymore.”

“He made he clear he’d look me in the eye if he was going to do plant an arrow into me,” Don added.

“Good,” Jackal said, “it’s always good to know it’s coming. That way, you can think about what you did to deserve it.”

“Thank you for the advice,” the sorcerer said. “I’ll make sure to face you the next time you deserve to be hit.”

Mez rolled his eyes as Jackal grinned. “Better shoot him with corruption. You’ll just break your hand if you punch him.”

“And I do not believe that is an action warranting the use of a healing potion,”

Khumdar said.

“We know clerics, don’t we?” Don asked.

The cleric grinned. “But how many of them like you.”

Don opened his mouth, closed it, then narrowed his eyes at Tibs. “You know, I’m starting to regret this ‘being better’ thing.” The words glowed. “It was a lot easier to get stuff when I just went around scaring people into giving it to me.”

“Poor little sorcerer,” Mez said, “however shall you survive it.”

“You are so lucky I promised to be nicer to you, Mezano.”

The archer beamed. “Why do you think I’m taking advantage of the situation?”

“Jackal, can I get your permission to punch the archer?”

“Not unless he does something to deserve it,” the fighter replied, barely pausing his eating.

“He’s—” Don sighed. “You know, you guys are supposed to be the nice ones.”

“But this is us being nice,” Jackal replied in an offended tone. “We let you back into the team, didn’t we?”

“Just so I could suffer,” Don muttered.

“You’re simply not seeing the way they torture each other,” Kroseph said as he placed food and drink before the sorcerer. “Don’t worry, once the novelty passes, you’ll see they aren’t treating you any different than they treat each other.” He paused. “Other than Tibs. He has this way of never ending up on the receiving end of other’s barbs.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs said. “We’re good about avoiding blame.”

* * * * *

Tibs stepped through the booths strewed about the area before the mountain. It seemed that each time he came by, there were more of them, with merchants screaming the Runners their wares were better for their survival through the runs.

Tibs’s immediate reaction annoyance. Like any Runner had the coins to spend at this point, but then he looked at the assembled teams and lone Runners. More than the schedule called for, and better dressed than he expected. No one wore the rags they’d arrived in anymore, and while some were dressed hardly better, most of the Runners looked they were serious about their survival, instead of getting by on what they could salvage off the dead.

Was Sto more generous with the first floor, or had Tibs simply been too focused on everything else to notice?

He found the team easily enough. Palden arguing with a guard at the bottom of the stairs.

They were better equipped than the other teams, Palden and the metal user both garbed in chain mail. Palden had a mace at his belt and a shield on his back, while the other a sword on each hip. The archer—Karl-something?—had on a heavy leather armor and held an intricately carved bow, while Lamberto wore something lighter and had knives at his belt. Gabrielle wore the usual sorcerer’s robes, although hers were decorated with symbols embroidered in black threads throughout the light blue material.

“Tibs!” Lamberto yelled, waving at him. “We’re here!”

Tibs pushed the annoyance down. It was like the boy didn’t realize the danger they were getting ready for, that this was a visit to... Mountainsea? Tibs couldn’t think of anything close to the dungeon that might not feel life threatening.

“You,” Palden ordered. “Tell him to let us in.”

“Is it your turn?” Tibs asked.

“We’re early,” the metal user stated.

“The other team isn’t out,” the guard said.

“Then we’re waiting,” Tibs replied.

“It’s only supposed to be five to a team,” the guard said.

Tibs took the folded paper Tirania had given him after informing him today was when he was taking the nobles in and handed it to him. “They are getting... preferential treatment.” He wasn’t sure he managed not to sound disgusted saying that. “As per Tirania’s instructions.”

“Then we can go in now,” Palden said.

“No.” Tibs motioned away from the stairs. “Only one team on a floor at a time. The only exception is if your scheduled time arrives and they aren’t out. Then they’re considered to have died. How often does that happen on the first floor?” he asked the guard.

“It’s never happened since I’ve been here.” He folded the paper and handed it to Tibs.

“Then we wait until they exit.” Tibs motioned them away. “How much training do you have with your weapons?”

“I can give you a demonstration,” the metal user said, running a hand over the pommel of a sword and smiling. Tibs didn’t know if he was eager because Tibs was Street or the noble just enjoyed fighting that much, but he didn’t like it.

“Fighting’s not allowed in Kragle Rock.”

The fighter snorted.

“We’ve had as much training as was possible,” Gabrielle said.

Tibs looked at the knives on Lamberto’s belt. “How good are you with them?”

“I’m okay.”

“You should get a sword.”

“But I’m the team’s rogue. Rogues use knives.”

“Rogues use whatever gives them the best chance to win.” Tibs forms his sword and only Lamberto didn’t step back, looking at the jagged blade in awe. Tibs was starting to suspect anything he did would cause that reaction. “Whatever the rules are, we don’t play by them if we can get away with it.”

“Light Fingers,” the guard called. “You’re up.”

The team coming down the stairs was in bad shape, ripped armor and bloody clothing, but they were smiling, and there were five of them.

Palden hurried up the steps, and the others followed. Tibs trailed behind, not in much of a hurry.

“Should we start expecting this with noble teams?” the guard by the door asked Tibs.

“You need to check with Tirania,” he replied. “This is the only run I was told to be on with them.” For now. He hoped this wouldn’t become normal.

“Tibs?” Sto asked once he was on the other side of the door. “Why are you with them? You’re too strong for this floor.”

“I’m just escorting them,” he whispered. “They’ll be doing the work.”

“So your instructions are not to make sure they survive?”

Tibs snorted. He was pretty sure it had been implied in Tirania's suggestion that he made sure they had a good impression of the dungeon, but he had no plans on doing more than offering advice. He'd already told her Galdain didn't have choice in sending his children to train here. If she still felt they needed to impress the nobles, it was on her.

"There you are," Palden said. "About time." He motioned to the room. "Lead the way."

"That isn't what I'm here for."

The fighter stepped close to Tibs. "Listen here, street-trash. I'm the leader of this team and you're fucking going to do what I tell you."

"Palden," Lamberto said, trying to interpose himself between them. "Don't be like that. Tib's nice enough to—" the fighter shoved him away.

"Don't get involved, Sheeple, you'll just get hurt."

"It's okay Lamberto," Tibs said, smiling. Gabrielle helps the boy back to his feet. "I can handle your brother."

The fighter snorted.

"Just said the word, Palden," the other fighter said, hands grasping the pommels of the still sheathed sword. "We're in the dungeon now, kid."

"We are," Tibs replied, "in my dungeon. So you need to think about what you're planning to do carefully. Whatever training you've gotten, I got mine surviving three floors. None of your trainers are as merciless as the dungeon. I've lost countless friends to him. And I had to get better and stronger not to join them."

"You think I'm impress someone like you was lucky and cheated his way through all this?" the metal fighter sneered.

"Okay, I don't like him," Sto grumbled.

"Luck's not a thing," Tibs replied. "And I don't care if you're impressed or not. Surviving the dungeon didn't teach me to go easy on those of attack me. So try it and find out what happens."

"You can't kill us," Palden stated.

"If you mean I'm not capable of it, you're wrong. If you mean I'm not allowed..." he looked at them. "If no one but me walks out of the dungeon, who's going to question how you died?"

"Tibs," Lamberto said, worried.

"Don't worry, that's not my plan. I'm just going to hurt whoever attacks me, and then they'll have to worry about surviving their run while injured." He looks at the fighter. "If you want that. Tell your brother to attack me. Otherwise, you are wasting time." He motioned to the shield at the top of the wall. "That's how long until the next team come in. It's roughly two hours. The more time you spend trying to convince me you're so important I have to obey you, the less you have to reach the boss-room. Which one's more important to you?"

Palden glared at him.

"Fine." The fighter turned and headed for the room.

"Stop!" Lamberto yelled at Gabrielle said the same in a calmer tone.

"What?" Palden snapped, turning to face the two.

"You really want to walk through that without first making sure it's safe?" Gabrielle said.

“There’s nothing there.”

“And what did Father say about dungeons?” the archer asked.

Palden ground his teeth. “Nothing’s ever easy,” he finally said. “Sheeple, you’re up.”

Lamberto stepped to the edge of the room and Tibs stood next to him.

The room had changed.

It no longer looked like anything resembling a cavern. The room was hexagonal, with irregular tiles lining the floor, and colored hexagonal tiles on the walls. He easily saw the cache, but studied the colors, finding the pattern in them and matching that to the tiles on the floor that had the same shapes, amidst all the different ones. That was the easy answer, if Lamberto could figure it out.

“Do... do you have any advice?” the boy asked.

Tibs sensed around them, then looked over his shoulder to make sure the others had stepped away and weren’t paying them attention. He lowered his voice.

“First, I want to say I’m sorry for how I treated you during the party. You were nice to me, and all I did was be rude.”

“You don’t have—”

“Don’t excuse bad behavior, Lamberto. Not from anyone, especially not from yourself once you realize what you’ve done. As for the room. How much practice do you have with locks, traps, and triggers?”

“I’ve read a lot about them.”

Tibs stared. “You’ve read about them.”

Lamberto nodded. “Father also paid one of the city’s best thief to show me how to disarm traps, but he wouldn’t let him teach me lock picking.”

“You read about traps.”

The smile formed slowly. Carine had been right. There were books about rogue stuff. He couldn’t believe it. Well, he should, Carina had pretty much always been right.

“What?”

Tibs shook his head. “Just remembering an argument I had with a friend about books and things thieves would share. What did your teacher say about traps?”

“That if I’m not careful, I can trigger it instead of disarming it.”

Tibs nodded and looked the room over, considering what to say. “There is a way through this room, and all the others. It won’t be the same from one to the other and sometimes it won’t be the obvious one. But you need to remember there is a way to get your entire team through. So long as they listen to you. So, the first thing you want to do, usually, is make sure they understand that, so they don’t rush you. If you can’t finish the floor on a run, that’s fine, you’ll get other runs. Figuring out how to get through is more important than getting through it quickly. The more you practice this, the easier it’ll get and the further you’ll go.” Tibs looked at the others. Palden was glaring impatiently.

He lowered his voice again. “I know they’re your family, but if they can’t respect what your role is in the team, you need to find another one, otherwise they’ll get you killed.”

“They aren’t that bad,” Lamberto said, unrolling a leather pouch containing multiple fine tools. “Palden’s angry because Father wouldn’t let him stay behind. He’s not this nasty usually.” He stretched down at the edge and used two thin metal bars to test the space

between the tiles. “You’ll see. Once you know them better, they’re nice people.”

To other nobles, maybe, Tibs thought. He didn’t expect any of them would acknowledge his existence once this rub was over. Just like every noble out—

He stopped the thought. Not every noble was like that. Lamberto wasn’t. Amelia wasn’t. A handful of others weren’t. He had to stop putting everyone in the same barrel.

It would be easier to do if the nice nobles weren’t so rare.

But that didn’t mean he could excuse his bad behavior.

The click made him look down at Lamberto as Palden pulled him away. The stone spear was well over where his head had been, but Tibs was impressed at how fast the fighter was.

“Are you okay, Sheeple?”

And that was concern in his tone.

“I’m fine,” Lamberto complained.

The metal fighter stepped to Tibs. “I think I need to make one thing clear. If you allow Lamb to be hurt, there will be nothing left of you for the dungeon to eat.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow, but didn’t respond.

Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for the entire team.

Planning-45

“It’s done!” a man yelled as he entered the inn. The room fell silent as everyone looked in the warrior’s direction. “The third floor’s cleared!” Quigly raised his fist. “Soon it’s on to the fourth floor!”

“Any idea when that’ll be?” Jackal asked Tibs as cheers rose.

He shook his head. Not being able to have conversations with Sto during runs made having that kind of information drop difficult, and since his team had reached the boss room only once, he hadn’t needed to ask about the fourth when he sat by the mountain and talked wit him.

He noticed Don glance in their direction before looking at the approaching warrior. Quigly had his team with him.

“Take that, best team,” the warrior said. “We cleared it first.”

“It’s not a competition, you know,” Mez replied.

“Of course it is,” Jackal said, “and congratulations. Was the loot worth the fight?”

“Not that we got to keep it, but it was a full set of armor. Metal, and enchanted. Too decorated for my taste, but I’m sure a fighter who feels the need to look good could make use of it.”

“If it’s the same thing when the next team clears the room,” Don said. “I’m curious, how do you know it’s enchanted?”

“I felt the weave when I picked the helmet up. There’s metal in it.”

“And I could feel the weave in it’s entirety without needing to do that,” the man in the sorcerer’s robe next to Quidly said. “I am, after all nearly Zeta.”

Tibs looked at Don.

“For us to graduate to Zeta, we need to be able to tell essences in a weave apart.”

“You shouldn’t be telling them that.”

Don rolled his eyes. “You seems free enough with what you can do. And it’s not like they can do anything with the information. Only sorcerers can think in the ways needed to use more than one essence.”

“And tell me, Arabis. How are you coming along in your studies toward ranking up?”

“I’m getting there.”

“I look forward to observing your test then, as I ready to take the one for Epsilon.” The earth sorcerer turned and walked away.

“Kind of full of himself, that one,” Jackal said.

“I think it’s a sorcerer thing,” Quigly replied. “Them and knowing so much.”

“No, I can tell you that knowing more than the rest of you has nothing to do with someone’s ego,” Don said. “I know idiots who have larger egos than he does. Although, he only knows barely more than they do.”

“Yep,” Jackal said, “Sorcerers and their egos. Do have to love them. How hard was the room? We stepped in on our last run, and the first fight was tough. We didn’t risk the second.”

“It’s hard. Without giving you details, because this is one room I don’t want to risk the guild sticking to its ‘don’t talk about it’ rule and making us miss runs, it was our fourth time in, and for a moment there, I didn’t think we’d survive the boss after all those fights. I know how you feel about it, Tibs, be we got lucky.”

“You fought everything in the room?” Don asked.

“No choice. If you thought the previous boss rooms put your fighting to the test, this one makes the first time in each of the others feel like someone’s party.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Jackal said. “As unhelpful as it is.”

“Just stop up on the potions that drop. You’re going to need them.” The warrior turned and headed for the table his team had taken.

“Are you still sure there’s a way around the fights?” Jackal asked.

“Maybe be not all of them,” Don said. “The boss will probably be one we can’t avoid.”

“But the floor’s all about being clever,” Tibs added, “on top of being good at fighting.”

“So they cleared the room the hard way?” Mez asked and Tibs nodded.

Jackal smiled. “Which means that sorcerer of their and his rogue aren’t as smart that they think they are.”

“Like there was any doubt of that,” Don replied, rolling his eyes.

* * * * *

“Not so clever, are you?” Irdian said at a guard held Tibs before the guard leader. “This could make your team miss another run.”

“You can’t keep me in a cell for nine days,” Tibs replied. He’d waited until the schedule was up and that his team was down far enough this wouldn’t interfere with this.

“I can keep you for as long I think your crime deserves.”

“It was just a pocket,” Tibs said. “And a noble’s pocket at that.” He adding, grumbling. “I didn’t even get a silver out of it.”

It had taken a lot more work than it should have to get caught. He’d picked three pockets with guards looking in his direction before one finally noticed something and acted. Then, because Tibs didn’t want to make it too obvious he wanted to be caught, he’d slipped on of the grasp and realized he’d lost the guard in the crowd.

He knew these guards weren’t idiots. They were composed in large part of those who had survived both of Sebastian’s attacks on the town and his infiltration of them. But if not for Serba, even this attempt at getting caught would have failed.

She’d looked down at him, the large black and white dog that had tackled him to the ground sniffing his pockets. She rolled her eyes when he gave the dog a piece of jerky and was about to let him go when he told her to hand him over to a guard. She’d seem amused at

the request, then had roughly guided him to the guard who was still searching the crowd for Tibs.

Then, Tibs had been brought to the guard house, searched and brought to the Irdian once it was determined he had no tools of his trade left on his person. Tibs had bought a pair of bracers before this that hid lockpicks so he wouldn't risk his own, as well as a rogue's coin pouch. He'd secreted tools among his clothing, including a thin blade within his belt and he was pleased they'd found everything.

Except the one item he hadn't wanted them to find.

That one they hadn't found before Tibs had palmed it onto the guard searching him as she began and palmed it back once she was done, and placed the medallion in a fold of his shirt they'd already emptied.

"Are you under the impression nobles don't care when some thief pick their pockets?" Irdian asked in a bored tone.

"No. But they have to know what happened. He didn't even look in our direction when your guard grabbed me."

"And do you think you running from your capture will not go unpunished?"

"By adding seven days to the two picking a pocket gets us?" Tibs asked in dismay. He didn't expect Irdian to go that far. Unlike Harry, he wasn't all about the rules, but he was filled with so much metal he was unbending about how things were to be done. He'd add as many days to Tibs's sentence as he could justify, but not one day more. "And maybe if your guards were better I wouldn't have slipped away from him do easily."

"Insulting my people will not help your case, Tibs."

Tibs shrugged. "Think of it as me pointing out flaws in their training."

"Take him away," he told the woman holding Tibs's shoulder. "Four days in the cells. And next time, don't bother me with him. We have a system in place for handling criminals. He's to go through it the same as every other one."

"Yes, sir," she replied, leading Tibs out of the room. "Sorry, I thought he'd be more lenient."

Tibs didn't reply. He was too busy trying not to feel guilty about how what he was about to do would impact her. He hadn't thought she'd brought him to the guard leader because she was one of Tibs's supporter within the guards. Irdian had always handled him when Tibs ended up in a cell.

Of course, every previous time Tibs was brought in to pay for something his organization did. Not because of a petty crime.

They started down the stairs leading to the cells, and now that he had the medallion in his possession, Tibs saw the door on the left wall just after last step. There was no visible locks or hinges, so he hoped that whatever kept it closed so no one accidentally opened it would give way to him because of the medallion.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, then shoved her to the right, elbowing the door, which opened and running into the corridor.

"Stop!" she yelled.

Ahead, someone who looked more like a clerk than a guard turned at the sound of her voice. His eyes shimmer in the light. His element was crystal. Tibs felt essence move and slammed his will into that, undoing whatever the man had attempted to do, then he was

sliding between his legs and back to running. A desk with papers on his right, on his left an opening with a table with two chairs and remnants of a meal on it along with a set of dices. The corridor ended with a door on his left. Locked, but no weave on it.

He made picks of ice, and had it opened as more voices sounded the alarm.

He ran in the room and stopped.

It was large, he could tell that even in the low light. He hadn't expected that. He also hadn't expected the number of crates stacked one on top of the others. He felt weaves in some of them, but not most.

When he'd learned this was where the guard kept what they confiscated from crimes until it was processed—whatever that meant—he'd expected a dozen boxes, or the items piled on a few tables.

Not something that looked like a merchant's warehouse.

He was pulled out of the room, roughly dragged through the halls and shoved into the cell.

He hardly noticed the others in it move out of his way as he went to the bench and sat.

This wasn't what he'd expected at all.

Was it even possible to find the armors and arms the guard had taken from him. He'd only seen letters and numbers on the crates, nothing that looked like names or what they contained.

He leaned back against the stone wall.

He wasn't giving up on getting his stuff back.

Not yet.

But it was starting to look like he'd have to consider it.

Planning-46

“Mez, three and to the left, prepare to defend yourself,” Don instructed, and the archer moved to the indicated square. The opposing sorcerer acted instantly, forming a ball of earth and sending it flying. Mez crouched as he tapped one end of his bow on the ground. A wall of flames shot up, and the ball vanished into it. Tibs felt the heat from the other side of the board.

“That’s new,” Jackal commented.

“There’s only so much I can do with arrows,” Mez replied, dusting himself off as he stood. “My instructor made it clear he wasn’t letting me take my test until I showed I could do more than shoot trick arrows.”

“They do get annoying,” Don said, “with their constant push for us to be better, don’t they? Tibs, one forward. You should be safe, but watch for how the dungeon moves its pieces. Two could be used against you.”

“Ah, like I’m falling for that again,” Ganny stated. Her archer moved in what Tibs thought was a plan to set up an attack against Jackal, their lord for this game.

“Yeah, it’s almost like they want us to survive our runs,” the fighter said. “How inhumane of them.”

“Especially since all agree the guild has no interest in seeing any of us survive,” Khumdar said.

“Individuals aren’t the guild,” Don replied. “Khumdar, diagonal to your left, three squares.”

“Are you certain?” the cleric asked. “Is not Jackal more—”

“I’m the strategist,” Don snapped. “Jackal can take care of himself.”

Khumdar looked at the fighter, who shrugged.

Tibs tried to look at the repercussions of the move, but he didn’t understand the game well enough. He did know that while Don didn’t understand how intelligent Ganny was; he had realized there was a form of cunning there, and that the dungeon understood something of the people doing the runs. A lot of what the sorcerer had done in this game was try to trick Ganny into a mistake. Tibs just had no idea if it was working.

“I think someone’s in for a surprise,” Ganny gloated as one of her two sorcerers lined up with Jackal. The ball of fire wrapped around Jackal, then went out.

The fighter dusted himself. “I’m quite fine just improving on what I can already do.”

“You know,” Ganny grumbled, “I am getting tired of how you’re always getting stronger.”

Tibs smiled.

“Mezano, if you will,” Don said.

The archer moved sideways until he was lined up with Ganny’s lord, pulled on his bow’s string and held it, the fire arrow becoming so bright the others had to look away.

“How?” Ganny exclaimed as her lord exploded.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Mez said.

“The archer can’t do that move!” Ganny yelled as her other pieces melted away.

“How could Mez move like that?” Tibs asked. “He’s an archer.”

“According to whom?” Don asked. “I never said which role he had.”

“Each motion you had him do was that of the archer,” Khumdar stated.

“Were they?” Don smiled.

“You had him move and turn,” Jackal said. “Two of three ahead, then to the left or right, the rest of the move.”

Don beamed. “When did I tell him how many squares to finish the move by?”

Tibs thought back on the game. Each time he’d had Mez move, Don told him two or three, then a direction. He’d assumed the archer simply finished the usual movement, just as Ganny had.

“But he’s an archer.” Jackal motioned to Mez.

“Which I counted on the dungeon also assuming,” Don replied. “That’s the only role I’ve used him in until now. And after the board allowed that first move, I counted on that being an autonomous system independent of the one that decides how to move the pieces. Then it was just about keeping it enticed by the rest of you so it wouldn’t notice that Mez was not moving as an archer did, but as the lady could.”

“I hate you, Don, I truly do,” Ganny said. “One of these days, I will get the upper hand.”

Mez crossed the board and tapped the shield over the chest. “Tibs,” he called as the distant rumble vibrated the floor.

Tibs checked the chest, then opened it. Three healing potions, two of essence, a sword and a shield. Don got the essence potions, Jackal, Khumdar, and Tibs, a healing one each, then they headed for the next room.

* * * * *

“I swear,” Don grumbled, scrambling up the side of the pillar, “you are trying to kill me.”

“That wasn’t a hard jump,” Tibs said, studying the landscape. Don had grabbed onto the pillar Tibs had told him to, so nothing had changed.

“Not hard for you. You will throw yourself across a chasm for fun.” Don panted, on hands and knees. “I am a sorcerer. My idea of exercise consist of lifting heavy books.”

Except that he’d over estimated Don’s abilities. Had he underestimated them during the last run? The sorcerer hadn’t had this kind of trouble then.

“As a dungeon runner, it may be to your advantage to expand to something more physical,” Khumdar said.

“Clearly, you haven’t seen the books I’ve had to lift.”

“Khumdar has a point,” Jackal said. “You might become a scholar one day, but you need to survive the dungeon first.”

“I have survived.”

“You almost fell,” Mez pointed out.

“The fall wouldn’t have killed me.”

“It could have killed one of us.”

“I am sorry. What do you want me to say, Mez? I am doing the best I can. This just isn’t my kind of room.”

The archer looked at Jackal. “I want you to say you’re going to accept Jackal’s offer to train you.”

Don looked horrified. “You do want to kill me.”

Jackal grinned. “Now, I’m not that hard of a trainer.”

“You are stone through and through. It doesn’t get harder.”

“Think of what it’ll do to you to have some of that rubbing off on you.”

“Kroseth won’t be happy,” Tibs says, settling on a longer, but more suited path.

“Not that kind of rubbing,” Jackal protested.

“It better not be,” Don said, “otherwise I am going to corrupt something off you and Kroseth can come complaining to me all he wants.”

“He wouldn’t complain to you,” Mez said. “He’d chastised Jackal for doing something stupid, again. Then he’d get him to pay a cleric to grow it back so he could for him to go without until he begs for it.”

“You know, it’s scary how well you know my man, considering none of you share bed with him.”

“It may have something to do with how willing both of you are to share some of the things you get up to in said bed,” Khumdar said. “Even those of us trying not to pay attention will end up learning a thing or two we would rather not.”

“I thought you loved learning secrets,” Don said.

“Nothing these two do is secret,” the cleric grumbled.

* * * * *

“You know,” Jackal said as he and Tibs pushed the wall and revealed the passage. “This is almost too—”

Don pushed the fighter against the wall, hand on his mouth. “Don’t you even think of finishing that sentence.”

Jackal moved the hand off. “I was just pointing out that—”

Tibs kicked him in the shin.

“You know I don’t feel those anymore, right?”

“Just stop talking.”

“The dungeon listens,” Don said. “And it might consider anything you say as a challenge.”

“Fine.” Jackal threw his hands up. “I won’t say anything.” He grinned. “It probably already knows how I feel.”

Neither Ganny nor Sto commented, so they were busy elsewhere.

* * * * *

“How do you want to do this?” Jackal asked, standing at the open door to the dragon room. As with the last time, the dragon was at the far back of the room, and the line of

creatures an eighth of the way before them, standing, unmoving. The rest looked empty. Even to Tibs's sense, he couldn't make out any of the other creatures he knew to be there.

"We might have to sacrifice this run to figure out how to avoid triggering the other attacks," Don said.

"Quigly's team beat the room," Jackal said.

"And nearly died," Mez pointed out. "None of us is the strategist Quigly is."

"I'm stronger than him," Jackal said.

"This is not a room pure strength or toughness will beat," Don pointed out. "We'll have to be smart about it."

"Fine. Can we beat those, and then be smart?"

"What do you think Tibs?" Don asked.

"I want to check the floor first. There might be triggers that activate the next set of creatures."

"There won't be any," Jackal grumbled, but leaned against the wall.

Tibs was as meticulous as he could, while remaining aware of how much time they had. They'd made it through the other rooms quickly, but he couldn't waste that time here. Especially without knowing how hard the fights would be.

"The floor's clear. He said, returning to the others.

"I'm not sensing anything set to react to us," Don said, and Tibs raised an eyebrow. "I described what this floor feels like to my teacher, and I've been practicing sensing through this kind of miasma."

"You didn't say anything before?" Mez asked.

"We already know the way. Nothing in what I picked up contradicted what we already know."

"Good to know," Jackal said, walking toward the creatures. "Now we fight."

Tibs joined the fighter. "You're not rushing ahead after this fight."

"I'm going to need to help a bit before that."

"Not even then. You let me and Don do what we can first, then we think about fighting."

"I am the one in charge, Tibs."

"You want me to repeat that to Kroseph?"

Jackal grinned. "Actually, I'd like that. He'll feel the need to show me how I'm actually wrong and the way he pushes—"

"I don't want to know." He stopped Jackal with a hand. "This is where they attack."

"Don, you get anything here?" The fighter asked.

"There is a difference in the essence," the sorcerer said. "It might be the trigger for them. Or it could just be how the flow of essence causes it to be."

Tibs tried to sense what Don said was there, but it was all a mess of essence to him.

"Then we figure it's the trigger. Once we've won the fight, see if there's another like it." Jackal stepped through and the creatures became alive.

Tibs ran at the Ratlings, ice sword and shield forming. He cut one, then another. Blocked the Bunnyling that joined the attack, then grabbed it and put it in the way of the spear that formed where Tibs had been. He smirked at the metal sorcerer, then etched a quick sticky attack to keep it from etching anything. Sto's creatures all seemed to need to

move to etch; the way Alistair was teaching him.

He threw himself to the side as the wave of metal essence came at him, and the Gnoll who had been sneaking closer was cut apart.

Of course, he couldn't ignore what raw essence could do.

He blasted the sorcerer with a wave of water, shattering it against a stone column.

His smirk was broken by the pain the sword piercing his side caused. He turned and hit the rogue with a stone filled fist, breathing its face. How had it sneaked so close without Tibs noticing? How had he not sensed the sword?

Bone. The fucking thing was made of bone. Tibs pulled it out and filled himself with Purity. He'd drink a healing potion to explain it once the fight was over. He threw the sword at the rushing Gnoll, and missed, then slammed his spiked shield into it, growing the ice until they came out its back. He kicked it off, then searched for another creature to kill.

They were melting away, some leaving a silver in their place, or a knife, or piece of jewelry. Those were new. Mez drank a potion, reminding Tibs to do the same before Don question the damage to his armor and lack of matching injury.

"Don, Tibs. Do your thing while the rest of us collect the fallen loot," Jackal said. He looked up. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

Tibs was surprised at the lack of response from Sto. He'd expected him to be interested in these fights.

"Over there," Khumdar said, indicating a column. "Something is purposely hidden."

Tibs approached cautiously. The column was decorated with symbols that meant nothing to him and continued on the floor, forming a circle of them around it.

"Are these Arcanus?" he asked Don. "I haven't learned all of them."

The sorcerer shook his head. "They don't look like anything I've read about." He caught Tibs's hand. "Don't. There's something about the essence within the circle."

Tibs focused and thought he sensed something. But he wasn't sure. The way Ganny had filled the floor with essence wasn't even, so this could just be that, as far as he could tell.

"If I can't touch the floor, I can't check for triggers that way." He placed his hand on the floor before the circle and had water flow. He didn't feel any cracks, only the etching in the stone that formed the designs.

He had more than half the circle covered with water when he felt the essence react to something. A flare in his water matching some of the symbols.

"I triggered something!" he yelled, letting go of the essence and moving away.

The surrounding air shimmered, and creatures appeared.

They were new. Tibs had the time to notice the scaly skin and elongated muzzles before he was too busy fighting.

Planning-47

Tibs's sword slid over the scaled skin, barely leaving a mark, and he'd added metal to the ice's edge this time. If he could stab one of them, his sword went it well enough, but they were adept at avoiding that.

"They're resistant to fire!" Mez yelled.

"Of course they are," Don replied. "They're based on the dragons."

"I don't need a lesson, Don!" the archer replied.

"I'm not—" one of the creature's scream turned into a gurgle. "I was only—" Another flew over Tibs, its body dissolving into dark goo. "Why does it feel like the dungeon has it in for me today?"

"Oh, I don't know, Don," Ganny chuckled. "Why would I ever be annoyed at you after what you pulled playing Conquest?"

"That borders on cheating, Ganny," Sto said.

"No, it doesn't. It's just randomness that made this Dragolings extra sensitive to Corruption."

"Yeah. That sounds a lot like what you claim they'd know I was doing. You know. When you wouldn't let me do this kind of things?"

"You were helping Tibs," Ganny said. "I'm not."

"So it's okay to... adjust things if it's going to kill them, but not to help? Does that mean Tibs was right? I'm supposed to exist to kill them?"

"No, of course not. But like you keep telling me, who's going to tell them? Tibs?"

Tibs ground his teeth at the pain the claws caused as they cut his arm. He had to stop listening to them, no matter how interesting their conversation was, and focus on the fighting if he wanted to survive it.

He blasted the Dragoling away with a raw jet of water and, as it stood back up. The water steamed off it. So, some of them were also resistant to water. He added to the unending list of things to figure out: making water less susceptible to fire.

He blocked one's claws, stepped out of the way of a kick, slicing at the leg, and not only did it barely leave a mark, the sword melted around the edge, revealing the metal in it. With a snarl. Tibs stabbed the Dragoling in the chest and yanked up even as the ice melted.

"Something's happening!" Mez yelled, and Tibs became aware of the fire essence gathering at the back of the attack force.

"Details!" Don yelled.

“I don’t know! I just sense a lot of fire building and I figure that can’t be good!”

Tibs had to split his attention. He threw himself away and formed a wall of ice within the approaching force.

He sensed the etching within the essence, only it was more than he’d sensed any of Sto’s creatures do before. Were these also better at etching on top of... no. He realized the etching didn’t come from one source, but three.

Etching could be done in collaboration?

Ice exploded as a Dragoling pushed through and Tibs growled. He couldn’t afford the distraction.

Everyone was distracted, and this Dragoling was the only one that had broken free. The others all seemed susceptible to water.

Tibs opened the ground under the Dragoling, then closed it. It stopped its fall by catching the edge, so it was only half buried, but that was enough.

“Whatever it is,” he yelled. “You need to stop it.”

“I don’t know if I can. That’s a lot of fire.”

“You’re the only one with fire as an element,” Don said. “Divert it if you can’t stop it. Over us, around us. It doesn’t matter, but I don’t think we can survive whatever they’re etching.”

Tibs saw Mez look in his direction out the corner of his eye, saw the fear. Jackal and Khumdar had regrouped with them, holding the Dragolings away. Tibs nodded. Diverting he could manage. And Don would think it was Mez’s actions.

All he had to do was carefully time his—

The etching bloomed.

With a curse, echoed loudly by Mez, Tibs switched to fire and pushed his will against the essence rolling over the floor, through the Dragolings and at him and his team. He pushed as hard as he could, felt Mez’s fire form a barrier, but it was crude. Mez was powerful, but the etching was built to go through power, Tibs could tell that much, and there was also something making it harder to take hold of.

Or maybe the Dragoling sorcerers were simply that more willful than he was.

Tibs ground his teeth.

Oh, no. He wasn’t letting his team be beaten by a bunch of creatures just because they were able to etch together.

He stopped pushing and slipped his essence between the etching. He added Fey and Kha to make his etching harder and stickier.

Or was it Bor that did that with fire?

He cursed again. He didn’t have the time for indecision.

He pulled as hard as he could.

The etching veered away from his friend with ease, and Tibs realized the Dragoling had only planned against them trying to push it away, not toward one of them.

“Fuck.”

The fire engulfed Tibs, its roar and his pain burying Sto, Ganny, and his friends’ screams.

Fire fucking hurt!

He pushed it away from his body, but that was also harder. That fucking etching

resisting even this type of push. Why couldn't fire be like the other elements he had. Unable to hurt him.

Fine! If he couldn't push it away. He might as well pull even harder.

He pulled it into him. All of it.

His immense reserve filled to capacity, and Tibs wasn't done. He suffused himself in fire, and even that wasn't enough to take it all in. He forced the essence to be denser. And it fell into the channel coursing through his body.

For a moment, his perception of his surroundings changed. He had no idea what it was, but it was different. Something he'd never perceived before.

Then it all went dark.

He was panting. He felt himself doing that. The fire was no longer around him. He sensed that, but he couldn't tell what was there.

What he did know was that he was burning from the inside out.

He might have screamed as he let the excess essence explode out of him. He didn't know. It all hurt too much.

Then he was panting again. His hands were against the floor. But he couldn't feel the texture.

He wasn't cold, like the last time.

He also knew he wasn't dying. His reserve was full. What he'd released what the extra that had suffused his body. Filled the channels.

Those had changed.

Great. More, he'd have to deal with that he probably couldn't ask about because he shouldn't be able to do this yet. He was getting tired of those.

He sensed Jackal approaching, along with Khumdar and Mez. He couldn't hear them. Jackal, at least, should be calling for him.

He wasn't dying, but he was hurt. The fire had hurt him.

He switched to Purity and suffused himself with it.

"—you're okay." Jackal sounded scared.

"I'm okay." Tibs's voice was raw, not entirely healed. He'd swallowed fire, he realized. He moved his hands and felt the skin cracked. He opened his eyes. No, it was his glove that was cracking. He still had a glove. Two of them. They were burned, parts of them nearly down to nothing, but there were still there. And he felt the weave working already. Repairing the damage.

How long would it take until it was completely healed? Could he help it? Feed it the essence he needed. What essences made up leather?

"Tibs?" Jackal asked, and he looked up. The fighter winced.

"I'm healing."

"Your face looks like that burned dessert Russel made a while back," Mez said. "You remember? We had to break and scrub the burned layer to get to the sweet custard."

Tibs rubbed his face, and his hand came away with flecks of burned skin.

"That doesn't improve things," Jackal stated.

Tibs grinned. "But I'm getting there." He offered his hand to the fighter and Jackal pulled him to his feet.

His armor felt tight. Like he'd worn extra clothes before putting it on. He wasn't

looking forward to taking it off. He looked down at it. He was still wearing armor. But like his gloves, the damage was extensive. He could see his skin in places, a lesser dark than the burned part that was flaking off.

“How?” Don asked, staring at Tibs from where he stood. “No one can survive that kind of fire.”

“I—” Mez started.

“It’s—” Tibs said.

“Your eyes?” The sorcerer sounded scared.

Right. He was channeling Purity. He couldn’t let it go yet, and even if he could, the damage was done.

“I can explain, Don.”

Don looked at him, mouth agape. “You can explain?” he chuckled. “You can explain?” the laughter died, and he glared at Tibs. “What the fuck is there to explain? What are you?”

“I’m me. I’m Tibs, from the streets.”

“No one does this.” Don motioned up and down Tibs. “Survive being burned to ask. Have their eyes take on the color of Purity when it was Water before. Are you something the dungeon made? Some creature that it sent out to spy on us?”

“Can I do that?” Sto asked.

“No,” Tibs replied.

“I don’t think you know what I—”

“I’m not some creature. This is something I’ve...” Tibs trailed off. “After my audience...” he trailed off again. How was he supposed to explain this?

“Wait, after your audience?” Don asked. “You’ve been able to do this since back then?”

“Not all of it,” Tibs replied. “I had to—”

“That’s how you were so fucking better than me? You fucking cheated?”

“I didn’t cheat!” Tibs snapped. “It’s not my fault you didn’t know how this—”

“Don’t fucking put that on me! I did everything the way it’s done. I’m this strong because I fucking worked at it as hard as I can. I’m not some street born rogue who’s cheating his way into power.”

“I didn’t cheat,” Tibs growled. Don was lucky he needed to hold on to Purity because the temptation to blast him with water and force him to cool down was high.

“Oh no. Because the great and mighty Tibs always does things the right way. He never sneaks around doing stuff behind other’s backs. Stealing their success for his own.”

“Don,” Mez said, “that’s not fair, he—”

“He knew about this?” the sorcerer demanded.

Mez looked at Tibs, then away. “Yeah,” he finally admitted.

“You all knew?”

“Don,” jackal said, his voice firm. “Now isn’t the time. I know this is—”

“Oh, you know, do you? You know so well how it’s like to be thought so little of your team keeps secrets from you?” he leveled his gaze on Tibs again. “I guess your ‘no more secret’ talk only applied to me.”

“What did you expect me to do?” Tibs snapped.

“How about be honest, for once in your life?”

“And have you go to the guild with this, use that to make yourself look better in their eyes.”

Don stared at Tibs. “That’s what you think of me?” The disbelief was loud in his voice. “After everything, that’s all I am?”

“What to did you fucking expect me to think, Don? After all the ways you went about hurting me and my team?”

“That was before!”

“Before you abandoned me to Sebastian’s men, you mean? Before you lied your way onto my team? Before what, Don? What the fuck did I have to go by that would prove to me you weren’t going to put your need to be better than everyone about our survival?”

“You said you know he’d told the truth,” Mez said.

“Only that he believed what he said,” Tibs countered. “I can’t know if he’s going to change his mind later.”

“Knew I told the truth?” Don looked perplexed, then stunned. He threw his arms up. “Of course. Why would Tibs Light Fingers stop at three elements? Light, right? What else can you do? What other element did you somehow steal?”

“Alright, this is enough,” Jackal said. “We have a room to clear,”

Don snorted. “Of course that what you care about. Fuck, no wonder you’ve been sticking so close to Tibs. Your man has to be wondering what you get up to with him. He’s how you get all that loot.”

“Leave Kro out of this, Don,” Jackal warned.

“What, scared he’s going to find out you’re with another man and rip your—”

“That’s enough, Don,” Mez snapped.

“Yeah. I guess it is.” The sorcerer glared at them, turned, and walked away.

“Don,” Jackal called.

“Have fucking fun clearing the room,” the sorcerer replied.

“I guess that’s it for this run,” Mez said.

Jackal sighed. “Let’s collect what dropped and leave.” He looked at the dragon, impassively watching back. “It’s not like we were going to make it on this run, anyway. Thanks for saving our lives, Tibs.”

Tibs nodded and started collecting the silver coins. His armor was stiff and uncomfortable, but it was Don’s reaction that discomfited him the most. Once they were out, he’d have to find him and talk him down before he told Tirania everything.

“Are you okay, Tibs?” Sto asked.

“I’m healing.”

“That’s not what I mean. You did something to yourself when you absorbed the fire essence.”

Tibs sensed within. The channels seemed better defined now, or maybe he was simply more aware of them now that he’d felt essence flow through them.

“You must have seen other Runners with them.”

“Yes, but none of them went from those being barely there to entirely there like you did. Drastic changes like that tend to cause damages.”

“It hurt, but it was that or have the fire eat me. Do you know if there’s something I

can do so fire will stop hurting me? None of the other elements can hurt me now that I have them.”

“No. That’s one aspect about the elements Ganny doesn’t know about. Maybe you can have another audience with fire and ask?”

Tibs considered that. It should be simple enough to do. Fire hurt him unless he actively controlled it away from him, so like his second audience with Water, it would just be a question of making sure he let the element bring him nearly to death.

And then what, create yet another place around the town with a connection to an element? How many of those could there be before someone started wondering how they were appearing? Were there books explaining how they could be made? Would people looking at them closely reveal he was the one who’d done them?

“Tibs?” Sto asked.

“It can wait.”

Once the coins were collected, they headed out.

Tibs was surprised not to find Don at the entrance to the dungeon. Normally, Runners weren’t allowed to leave on their own. But who in their right mind would try to stop a Corruption Sorcerer from walking off? Especially one with Don’s reputation for vindictiveness?

Tibs sensed him, at the edge of his range already, halfway to the town. He’d catch up to him there.

He attracted stared, with how damaged his armor was, but no one questioned how he was uninjured. The wonder of the healing potions at work. They handed over the magical items they collected, minus the handful of amulets Jackal kept, and the enchanted picks Tibs was planning on selling to Darran.

Then he headed to their room.

Don wasn’t there, nor were there indications he’d been there. Tibs couldn’t sense him, but the sorcerer’s hideout was out of his range. He changed out of his armor and laid it on an unused bed. He didn’t know if it would repair itself in the crapped chest. It had never been damaged to this level.

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“Has anyone seen Don?” Tibs asked as he sat at their table. The sorcerer’s seat was unoccupied.

“Can’t you tell where he is?”

“I can’t sense the entire town. And he wasn’t at the house he was in last time.”

“He would recall how you found him there,” Khumdar said.

“Has Don been over?” Tibs asked the server as she placed the plate and tankard before him.

“No.” She thought about it. “The last time he was eating with you.”

That had been two days ago, before the run.

“He’ll turn up,” Mez said.

“Not if he’s at the guild,” Jackal pointed out.

“Wouldn’t they have sent guards to collect Tibs if he’d told them?”

“Maybe he’d letting Tibs worry,” the fighter said. “You know how Don is.”

The guild building was one place his sense couldn’t easily get through. If Don

suspected Tibs could track his essence, it would be where he'd go to hide.

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As far as Tibs could determine, Don was not in the guild. A training session with Alistair had been a reason to go in. Then walking around was mostly about acting lost when one of the clerks noticed him. He'd sensed one person with Corruption in his wanderings, but that had turned out to be one of the Corruption sorcerers, here filling papers about their research building. Tibs didn't stay to find out the details.

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"Are you sure?" Lamberto asked after Tibs explained the lock.

"What?" Tibs asked.

"Are you sure I'm supposed to use that tension bar with this lock? It seems flimsy."

Had he told him that? "Which one do you think it should be?"

"You're distracted." Lamberto took a thicker one and compared it to the key opening.

"Troubles with one of my teammates."

"Yeah, those will happen. My brothers are always bickering about the team. Sometimes it sounds like if Father let them, they'd go and form their own teams."

"Why won't he?"

"Punishment, I think. Their rivalry played a part in why we had to come here, so he'd forcing them to work together."

"That's going to get one of you killed."

"I don't think so. Now that we're doing our runs on our own, they're realizing we won't make it through unless they work together, so they set it aside for that." He smirked.

"Then pick it right up once we're outside. I'm sure your teammate will set whatever problem he has aside when your get your next run."

Tibs wished he believe that, but after four days unable to find Don, he was worried about whatever he was planning.

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"Mister Light Fingers," the official-looking guild clerk said, coming to a stop by Tibs's table. "I am requested to accompany you to guild leader Tirania's office."

Tibs did his best not to react. The man didn't look impressive, but his element was Earth and he was near Gamma.

So, this was it. At least he'd been able to enjoy a good meal first. He shook his head as Jackal tensed. They couldn't win against someone this strong. Tirania would have sent someone able to ensure Tibs went along. He wasn't sure what it said that she'd only send one person.

The walk to the guild was in silence and two blocks before it came into view, he sense someone with Corruption as their element walk out, turn and walk away. Not toward Merchant Row, so this had to be Don. He'd said what he had to say. Now, Tibs had to figure out how to turn the situation around.

He didn't want to destroy Don, but if he could make it like the sorcerer had lied because they had a falling out...

That would depend on if the guild had a way to test what element someone had and if it could test if they had multiple elements.

Too many ifs.

Maybe he should just run now, before he was inside.

Only he sensed more people in the surrounding streets with elements. Runners, for certain, but too many were more powerful. This close to the guild, they might just be there because they worked there. Or they were there in case Tibs ran.

Only, running marked him as being against the guild.

Talking with Tirania meant he could still have her think he was her ally. After all, he was just a kid. If he had to admit to what he could do, he could claim to have been too scared to tell anyone.

She'd have to believe him.

Right?

Once they reached the door, his escort knocked.

"Come in," she said. And Tibs entered.

"Please sit," she said, reading, her expression serious. The stack under the page she read was thick. Was that from what Don had told her?

Just what had the sorcerer said about Tibs?

Planning-48

Tibs sat still as Tirania read, nodding to herself and humming here and there in what he felt was an act to get him to fidget. Light wasn't showing any of what she did as a lie, but would it react to actions by itself, like it did to words? To distract himself, he focused on the weaves in the room, studying the details he was now able to perceive. It didn't help much. Even where he knew the element, he didn't know enough about weaving to figure out much of anything.

At least it kept him from worrying about how he'd get out of this.

"Sorry," She finally said, rubbing her temple. "This is just so much."

He fought the urge to swallow. He could get out of this. He had an edge over her. He'd know when she was lying, trying to get him to admit to something. Even all those papers could be a lie. She'd held them as she read, so he couldn't see if there was something written on them.

Although her words had no light to them. So there was a lot to what she'd—

"What?" he asked, realizing he'd missed what she'd said.

She shook her head with a chuckle. "I guess it's not that important in the end."

Had she emphasized 'that', or was it his imagination?

He nodded and swallowed.

She looked at him, and he waited.

"Aren't you going to ask why you're here?"

"I figure you'll tell me."

She chuckled. "Just when I count on your unending curiosity to get things going." She pushed the papers to the side. "The dungeon closed its door."

Tibs opened his mouth to protest and immediately closed it. "I didn't know," he said instead. Was she trying to get him to admit to speaking with Sto? Not that he'd said anything about it.

"It just happened. I expect the word will spread soon, but I want to be sure you and Don know about it first so you can use the platform before the before everyone gets their bracelets and rushes out." She took a bracelet from a drawer and placed it on the desk before Tibs.

He stared at it.

Was this a trick? She hadn't lied about any of it. But she hadn't said anything about the bracelet. What if there was an enchantment on it to compel him to tell the truth? There

was light within the weave.

“Like the last time, it’s not going to turn black. Red will tell you the dungeon’s door opened. And, of course, your team won’t be able to go in until you’re back.”

No lies again.

Now he was worried. Don would have told her Tibs had Light as an element, and there were ways to get around it. He wouldn’t be able to tell what of the multiple items in and on the desk with a weave through them let her lie to him.

“Well?” She watched him.

He shook himself. “I’m sorry. With the escort, I thought this was more than just telling me the vacation was starting.”

“Escort?”

“The adventurer you sent to fetch me.”

She rubbed her face. “Someone’s trying to ingratiate themselves. Sorry about that. Someone was just supposed to let you know I wanted to see you as soon as you could.” She motioned to the papers. “As you see, I wasn’t quite expecting you this quickly.”

“What are they about?” she’d already mentioned his curiosity, so he could use that.

She sighed. “Inventories, personnel files, records of what’s been going on in Kragle Rock for my superior. Which includes you trying to break into the repository, Tibs. What were you thinking?”

He shrugged. “Irdian confiscated my stuff. I was trying to see if I could get it back.”

She stared at him before searching through the papers. She read something and looked at him again. “How were you planning on taking six crates of armor, weapons and tool out?”

He shrugged. “That was just to find out where they were.” Six crates? Had he had that much stuff then? If he included the armor that was waiting to be repaired, the locks and traps used for the rogues to train with, probably. It had all been spread out within the warehouse.

She nodded and put the page back in its place within the pile.

“You’re not going to tell me not to plan on getting it back?”

She fixed her gaze on him. “Tibs, if you can find a way to take even one item out of the repository, it’s going to speak to a flaw in our security so large I’m going to have to bring in experts from the head-guild to look it over.”

“I guess your superior would have to come too.” Could he use that to get him here? How long would he stay?

She snorted. “It wouldn’t take anything that drastic to get him here.” She looked at the pile and her brows furrowed for a second. She shook her head and looked at Tibs again. Was there something in there he could use? Could he ask what she was worried about and use that?

This no longer felt like she was trying to trick him into admitting his secret. Which could be the trap. He picked up the bracelet before she wondered why he wasn’t, but didn’t put it on.

“If I’m not leaving the town, can I just leave it with you?”

“Sure, but if you change your mind, I don’t know how quickly you’ll be able to me to I can give it to you.” Was she trying to convince him not to give it up?

“I can get a normal one if I need to.”

“Those only get handed at the announcement later today.” She studied him. “Is something wrong? I’d expect you to be excited about the opportunity to travel.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” he answered. The memory of his last travel out of the town pulled him down. Carina’s body, the ceremony. Her family.

His loss and pain.

He wiped at a tear.

“I understand. Still, you should take it. In case you change your mind. I know Irdian would be happy for some time without you here.”

Tibs smiled with her. Yes, he was sure the guard leader would love for Tibs to be away so he could raid all the places he suspected supplies were hidden.

“Unless there’s something you need to discuss, Tibs, that is all.” She tapped the pile of paper. “Unlike you, my work is only going to increase.”

He stood and paused. “How was Don?”

She seemed surprised. “He was closed off. Not as talkative as usual. Did something happen?”

“We had another falling out.” Had Don really not said anything? Tibs had trouble believing it.

“Then some time away might do you both good.”

“Is he leaving the town?”

“He didn’t say.”

Tibs nodded and left her office, turning the bracelet in his hand before putting it in his regular pouch. He had to track down Don and talk with him. She might have items that let her lie to him, but Don wouldn’t. Or, if he did, Tibs would be able to sense the new magical item, and he’d know they were planning on trapping him.

He... hoped that wasn’t the case.

It meant Tibs had overreacted and... Don was right that Tibs should have trusted him with his secret, but Don had to understand that...

No, Don didn’t have to understand anything. Tibs’s action had hurt him, so he’d have to explain as best he could and hope.

But that was only if Don and Tirania weren’t trying to trick him. And he needed to find the sorcerer to confirm that.

He stepped outside building and sensed for him.

Don was... Tibs thought the distance and direction placed him among one of the small artisan squares that had formed since after Sebastian’s attack. The town had grown enough Merchant Row was no longer the only place merchants setup shop.

There would be a tavern there where they could talk.

He really hoped he was—

“About time you got out of there,” a man said, falling into step with Tibs. “You’re coming with me.”

The man had no elements, was the first thing Tibs sensed for. He had a few hidden knives, along with the one at his belt. There was a small item in the coin pouch that was enchanted, and the black boots also had elements woven through them. The rest of the clothing was ordinary enough, but the man was keenly aware of their surroundings.

“Don’t run,” he said as Tibs tensed. “I really don’t feel like chasing you.” Like Tibs

cared what the man felt like. “You run, and I’m going in there to tell them all the things you can do.”

Tibs froze.

The man took another step, stopped, and turned to face Tibs.

Tibs studied him. Looked for anything familiar, but he was a stranger. If a stranger knew enough to hint of a threat like that... had Don told others about Tibs?

No. Don wouldn’t spread that information. He’d take it to where it would do him the most good. The guild. No one else.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” the man asked, amused. He looked around. The street wasn’t busy. He lowered his voice. “The last time we interacted, I was on a roof shooting arrows at you. You were flying over them. You gestured in my direction and wind sent me tumbling away. Broke my arm, my leg, and my favorite bow. I can’t complain, in the end, cause I could easily have broken my neck. Before you lie to me. Your eyes are blue. That’s water. I’m pretty sure there’s some way one of you with Water can figure out how to fly, but there’s no way any normal Water Runners can also send wind at me.”

Flying and being shot at.

That meant when he chased Sebastian out of town after melting his house. He’d been having so much fun while channeling Air that time wasn’t clear, but he did remember the irritation as an arrow nearly hit him. Or had it gone through him? All he remembered clearly was the irritation and the archer, dressed in black, as Tibs sent air in his direction.

“What do you want?” he couldn’t deal with him here. Unless the man attacked him, Tibs couldn’t justify his actions with others watching.

“Your help.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow. “You don’t ask for someone’s help by showing up and telling them to come with them. Or threatening to tell on them.” Could he convince him to take this into one of the alleys? Where there wouldn’t be anyone observing the results?

“People who harbor secrets tend not to agree to meeting strangers.”

“Everyone has secrets.” They’d have to move away from the guild. This close, some adventurer or clerk with an element could sense something.

“I doubt anyone has the kind of secrets you do.”

“Fine. Then let’s go talk somewhere with fewer people.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “Before you carry through with whatever it is you’re planning, you should know there’s an envelope somewhere in the town. In it, I’ve documented everything I know about you and added a few of the things I suspect based on what was left of Sebastian’s camp. If you kill me, that’s getting delivered to the guild. I don’t know if the guild’s going to believe any of it, but I’m confident it’s going to make them look at you carefully. And if there’s one thing I know is that people with the kind of secrets you have do not want to be scrutinized.”

“You aren’t making me want to help you.”

The man smirked. “This isn’t about making you care about me, so you’ll help me. It’s about making sure you understand I respect the kind of threat you are and have taken steps accordingly. And I will point out I know you well enough to understand the stupidity of threatening your friends. Whatever happens between us, I won’t have anything happen to them.” He chuckled. “Not that I’d ever think to hurt Jackal. There’s still too much riding on

that kid.”

“Fine. I’ll listen.”

The man walked, and Tibs kept pace with him. The tavern they entered no longer had a sign. Only a couple of chain links where it has once hung from the wooden post. The inside was dark, with only a few people at the bar. The woman behind the counter looked at them suspiciously until the man handed her a copper for two tankards. Tibs followed him to a table in the corner.

The man sat so he could see the door, and Tibs next to him. He was not putting his back to those in the room, even if he could sense them. It would just be inviting trouble.

“I used to have a good thing going,” the man said, sipping at the tankard. “Before you ask, I didn’t work for Sebastian. He was my job. Keeping an eye on him, reporting to my employer.”

That sounded familiar to Tibs, but he couldn’t remember from where.

“I’m not what you’d call a follower of the law. My employer’s power, on top of Sebastian’s, gave me the freedom to do as I wanted within the confines of both jobs. And before you ask. No, I’m not as bad as some Sebastian employed. My employer understood that what I had to do meant I’d break his laws, but there are things he wouldn’t abide. I couldn’t kill wantonly, for example.”

His laws.

In Sebastian’s employ, but to spy on him. His favorite bow.

“You’re the one who warned Jackal Sebastian was planning something. You were among Harry’s guards. You shot that Runner who tried to force the attendant to take him away.”

The man nodded.

“You work for a king. What do you need my help for?”

“Jackal told you?” the man seemed amused. “The thing with working for someone like a king is that they tend to look at someone like me as a long-term agent. With this job over, since Sebastian is dead, he’s just going to find me someone else to go work for. Probably whoever looks poised to take over for Sebastian.”

“So? It’s what you do.”

“It’s what I did.” He looked in his tankard before putting it down. “I worked for Sebastian for a long time, and once he figured out I also worked for the king, it became a game with him to see how far he could push me. What could he get me to do against the king as part of maintaining my cover?”

“Doesn’t it make you worthless to the king if Sebastian knew the truth?”

The man smiled. “He’s the thing about people like Sebastian. Even when they know the truth, their ego is such you can still play them. And I did. Sebastian played me, I played him, the king possibly played us both. I was getting paid. It was all that mattered in the end.”

“And you don’t want to do that anymore.”

The man nodded.

“Then go.”

The man smiled. “I guess it looks that easy to someone like you.”

Tibs shrugged. “Just take what’s important and leave.”

“At least you understand that part. That’s good.” The man’s smile changed and Tibs

suspected he wasn't understanding him at all. "The thing is that for me, the important part of how I've been able to live. Sebastian and the king both paid me well. That's all gone now."

"You want coins."

"I want coins."

Tibs stood. "Get someone else."

"Tibs," the man warned.

He put his hands on the table and leaned forward. "I'm not some thief you get to steal from a king, or anyone else. Anyone can do that for you."

"I'm not stealing from the king. I'm not suicidal. And what I want is going to help you, too."

Tibs rolled his eyes.

The man smiled. "I want the coins Sebastian is using to pay those people that keep coming here to kill you."

Tibs frowned.

"Did you think they were doing it because they loved was man enough to want to avenge him?"

Nothing the man had said was a lie, but it wasn't like Tibs needed to do anything. The closest to success one of those killers had come to had resulted in him gaining metal as an element, and with that, the next tries were more bothersome than dangerous.

He could deal with them as they came.

He sat.

But they were bothersome, and he had more important things to deal with than those constant interruptions to his days.

"I'm listening."

Planning-49

The world that materialized around Tibs was cold. It was the first thing he noticed. The wind seeped in the joint of his armor and felt how he imagined ice to feel when it unexpectedly found itself in someone's trousers.

Or when Tibs made it appear into Jackal's. The fighter's earth essence might make him immune to kicks, but he still felt the cold.

Unlike the platform in Kragle Rock, as well as the one in Mountain Sea and Kadalisan, this one had a roof connecting the pillars that kept the rain from falling onto it.

"Of course, it's raining," the archer grumbled. "Come on. We need to get you an overcoat before this kills you."

"I'm fine." Tibs coated himself with a layer of water to keep the wind from reaching him, and he slowly felt warmer. He could ice it if he needed and he couldn't feel how cold it was. He could tell it was cooler than his body, but not so cold as to make him jump off the chair in surprise and drop his trousers to get it out of them.

That had been something he'd forgotten to consider. How Jackal went for the direct method of resolving a problem. Tibs had seen his friend without them often enough when they shared a room, but the rest of the inn hadn't.

While the commotion had been amusing to Jackal. Krosoph hadn't been pleased with Tibs over it.

"You only think that. The wind's going to force the water into your armor and then the cold's going to get you sick."

"Water's my element. It's not going to hurt me."

The man glanced at him as they walked down the steps. A gust pushed them back, and the archer cursed.

"Well. I need something to keep the wind and water out."

Tibs could keep the other man from getting wet. Since he knew about Air, he could even keep the wind from bothering him, although being the only ones walking without being pushed around by it would attract attention neither wanted. But after the archer constantly telling Tibs no, when it came to getting help and spending time getting ready, he wasn't feeling charitable.

No, he couldn't bring his team, or even just Jackal. Especially not Jackal. No, he couldn't tell them what he was doing. No, he wasn't going to tell Tibs where they were going. No, they weren't taking time in Kragle Rock getting information on where they were going.

No, no, always no.

The only reason the archer had agreed to let Tibs get his armor was that Tibs wasn't getting into this unknown situation without protection of his choosing. The archer had accompanied him to the room, but Tibs had managed to signal a rogue on the way. Write a quick message to Jackal letting him know he was leaving the town while Sto's door was closed and with whom he was going. He'd have added where, if he'd been able to get the archer to tell him that.

So the archer could freeze for all Tibs cared. So long as he told him about the building he was to break into, where the safe with the coins were and the kind of security he'd be dealing with. Tibs had what he'd needed to get the job done. And if the archer didn't survive getting sick from the cold?

Once he wasn't pissed at the man, he'd decide how he felt about that.

The archer pulled Tibs into the first building, which seemed to sell sheets of heavy fabric. The one the

man handed Tibs was wool coated in beeswax, and had a hole in the center he was instructed to put his head through. With it on, once outside, he barely felt the wind, and the rain beaded it instead of wetting the wool.

The man still had to use a hand to keep the rain out of his eyes, but walking was easier now, and Tibs focused on his surroundings.

The area around the platform had the feel of Market Place, with the booths and merchants clamoring about their wares, but there were also buildings here and there among them. They looked to have been hastily put up, but had a sense of permanence even the wooden booths didn't.

Outside of the market area, the buildings were made of stones, but not the large white ones of Mountain Sea, or the gray of Kadalisan. The stones varied in colors and had a roughness to their shape that created patterns as well had plenty of hand and foot holds. Climbing them would be simple.

The road was wide and, unlike his town, wagons pulled by horses, cows, or other animals Tibs didn't recognize moved back and forth. Even Mountain Sea hadn't had so many of them. Their contents were covered with cloth on which the rain also beaded.

Guard were easy to identify by the armor under their overcoat and the way they were all the same. Deep blue and yellow stripes. Some marched among the crowd. Some seemed not to pay attention to anyone, others looked at everyone with suspicion, while some talked and laughed with people under awnings. The usual mix of types, Tibs decided, and wondered if there were cities where every guard there took their work seriously.

They entered a tavern, and the woman behind the bar brightened on seeing the archer. She closed her mouth on noticing Tibs.

"It's good to see you're still around, Archer," she finally said.

Tibs eyed the man. "That's really what you're going to use?"

"It's my name."

"No, it isn't. She was going to use your name until she saw me."

"Why did you think I might not be around anymore?" he asked her.

"Word is you never reported back after Sebastian died."

"That put me in a situation that took time to deal with. I'm almost done with it. I'll report in after that."

It was fortunate for the man only Tibs saw the light on his words.

"Who's your friend?"

"I'm not his friend," Tibs said. "I'm how he's going to finish dealing with his situation. I'm Tibs."

"I'm Sania." She placed two tankards on the counter. "To help deal with the cold."

Archer took a long swallow and sighed in contentment.

Tibs sipped his and coughed at how spicy it was.

"Not used to good Jungen Beer?" she asked, chuckling.

Archer snorted. "They don't need it where he's from. The weather's nice there."

Tibs took another sip and put the tankard down. It was too spicy for his liking. Ale was meant to quench the thirst, not burn the throat.

"You're going to want your room?"

The man considered the question, then nodded.

She fetched a key from the back and handed it over. Tibs saw a long shaft and teeth. It had no essence in it.

The room was on the fourth floor of the tavern. Tibs listened to the tumblers as Archer unlocked the door. No unexpected sounds, but he knew better than to take that to mean it would be an easy lock.

The room was not what Tibs expected.

It was large, with a bed on the back wall, next to a shuttered window. There was a red and black carpet on the floor next to the bed and a chest at the foot. Next to that was a small table has a washbasin and a pitcher on it. On the opposing wall was an unlit fireplace, and on the left of the door was a desk with drawers, each with a lock on them. Everything had a layer of dust over it.

"You shouldn't give your real name," Archer said.

"You don't trust her?" Tibs motioned around the room. "Seems like you should, if you live here."

"I don't live here. This is just for when I have to work here."

"Don't you have a house? I'd think a king would pay well enough you can get one of those."

"If I had one of those, it wouldn't be where I need to work." He smiled a little. "I might get one after this. Far from here."

“Why are we here?”

“Don’t you want to rest before the work starts? Get dry?”

“I am dry, and I’d rather get this done with so I can get back home.”

“You rush this, and getting back might not be something you can do.”

Tibs showed the bracelet around his wrist and the yellow stone. “When this turns red, I’m leaving. If the job’s not done, I’ll deal with the consequences. And you’ll have missed your chance at all those coins you want.”

“How long until that happens?”

“I don’t know. You didn’t let me find out.”

“How long did the precious ones last?”

Tibs shrugged. “A few weeks, but we were warned it could be as little as two. Every dungeon is different, it seems.”

“Two weeks should be enough time.”

“I’d rather it take less than that.”

“It’s going to take as long as it needs to. I’m not interested in this failing because you’re in a hurry.”

“I’m not going to go any faster than I have to, but I’m not going to sit around not doing anything while you get comfortable. Where’s that building I’ll need to break into?”

With a sigh, Archer put the overcoat he’d just taken off back on. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

* * * * *

Tibs was impressed.

“That looks like a battlement.” Quigly had talked about them, all tall stone walls. Parapets and guards walking them at all times. Tibs had imagined them among a city’s wall, or the king’s castle, but this one stood in the center of the city.

The wind had died down as they walked, which made the rain less of a problem, but it continued to fall. They’d walked for what felt like five times the length of Kragle Rock, and he still couldn’t see walls that had to be there.

The buildings had changed as they crossed neighborhoods, the quality dropping and raising, the styles shifting. The quality in construction had gone up for the last few blocks, as had the attentiveness of the guards Tibs saw, and the number of people in the shadows.

Here and there he sensed someone with an element, an adventurer, by the concentration. The city didn’t have a dungeon, so they were here as part of work? For themselves of the guild? So long as they weren’t here to protect what Tibs was after, they didn’t matter.

The building was all stone. Six stories, making it two floors taller than those around. The stone work looked to be the same as most other buildings, so hand and foot holds would be present, but the constant guards would make climbing it undetected difficult. The roof would require jumping up from one of the surrounding buildings. Tibs could do it, using his elements, but it was a good measure against anyone else. But those buildings also had guards watching them. He’d have to start away and run the roofs, avoiding whatever guards were placed up there.

Then there were the enchantments.

He had no idea what they were, only that there were a lot of them. Or one complex one over the entire building. The only place he’d encountered with more woven elements into it had been Sebastian’s house in Kragle Rock.

That he’d been able to bring that down meant he could get in here, but he’d have to be more careful, since the plan was not to bring the place crashing down this time.

“What is this place?” he asked in awe.

“The Brokerage.”

Tibs tried to work out the meaning. “What do they break?”

Archer chuckled. “Broker. For the right amount of money, they make things happen. If you need someone killed, and don’t happen to have an assassin handy. You pay them, they will find one and ensure the word is done. How good that assassin is will depend on how much you’re willing to pay. It’s the same for theft, blackmail, or anything you can think of.”

Tibs studied the guards walking the street. “Those are city guards, aren’t they? Why are they protecting them if they help crimes happen?”

“Those aren’t what they officially help with, although everyone knows that The Brokerage also deals with them. They assist merchants by putting them in contact with providers or buyers. Noble employ them

when they need something rare or expensive found.”

“Stolen, you mean.”

“Not always. That’ll depend on how desperate the noble is to get it. But because they work with so many important people in the city, they are afforded the luxury of also helping with crimes.”

“They have too much coins,” Tibs said bitterly, “so everyone is afraid of them.”

“More afraid of what would happen if they ceased to be, suddenly. Sebastian’s death is still causing chaos. No one would want to add this to that.”

“Is this Jackal’s city?”

The archer didn’t reply.

“You know I can just ask someone what city this is, right? Then I can ask Jackal if that’s the city he’d from.”

“And what is it going to matter?”

Tibs considered that. Other than telling Jackal he’d been in his city, if that was where he was, would knowing the name help in any way? It wasn’t like knowing that would give him information about the city itself.

“I’d just like to know.”

“Shelbridge,” Archer said with a sigh. “The city’s name is Shelbridge. And no, this isn’t Jackal’s city. Just one of many in the kingdom where that one is.”

“Jackal said his father only operated in his city. You said his death is being felt here.”

“Jackal knows only a little of what his father’s operations did, because he worked hard at not learning. Even if Sebastian’s operations were limited to that city, it would have impacts on the others. No city exists alone unless they don’t have a platform, and even then, that only insulates them a little, not completely.” He looked at Tibs. “Sebastian had an effect on your town long before he set foot there.”

“Because Harry and Jackal were there.”

“No. Because there was something he wanted there. That it happened to be his son only made him more adamant about getting it, but Sebastian’s influence reached anywhere there was something he wanted. And Sebastian wanted a great many things.”

“Get we get inside the building?”

“Not without a good reason.”

“Wanting to see where they keep your coins isn’t good enough?”

Archer smiled. “They might not think it is.”

Planning-50

The wind nearly threw Tibs off the roof. He quickly regained control of the air essence around him and it stopped affecting him. He rested against a chimney. Constantly having to hold the wind at bay as he ran was getting exhausting. When had he ever had to keep hold of essence for this long?

He let his control go and counted on the brick chimney to protect him from the worse of the storm. Thunder sounded in the distance, followed, seconds later, by the flash of lightning. He raised his head to the sky and let the cold rain run down his face and under his armor.

He pushed himself from the chimney and ran again. This wasn't about enjoying the roofs, it was about getting to the Brokerage to figure out how he'd get in. He could rest afterward.

He stopped well away from the building as he sensed someone on a roof between him and the building. At this distance, the faint essence was a blob and only that it was Life told him it was someone, instead of a weave, or some object that... could normal object 'radiate' essence the way people did? Why did people radiate life? Was it something about the element itself?

He went around to avoid them and came across another, then another.

Guards, he decided once he'd walked the roofs surrounding the buildings, keeping watch on this path to the building. Close enough that in the daylight, even in the rain, they'd see each other. On a clear night, they should manage it still, especially with the lantern they had at their side. The flame was strong enough he felt it among the rain one roof closer.

He stopped one roof away from the guards, each huddled under a makeshift awning that used a chimney for a wall. In this weather, he'd be able to slip between them unnoticed. He still used the cover of a strong gust of wind to snuff the lanterns out before running between them.

He made disks of water to cross the distance and height and jumped from one to the other until he was on the Brokerage's roof. He dropped to his stomach and undid the disks. The rain had clattered on them, and the two guards were yelling between them to be heard over the rain. Tibs couldn't make out the words, but the tone sounded like questions. They'd heard the clattering and wondered what it had been.

He made a disk of water over him and listen to the rain as it hit it. He changed the composition of the essence, then switched to making it out of air, but short of actively keeping the rain from hitting them, it always clattered on hitting the hard surface. He'd have

to add letters to these etching to change them further, and that meant taking time to figure out the combination that would get him the result he wanted. If he even knew the letters that would do that.

There was so much he didn't know.

He chuckled. He'd add that to the list of things he needed to learn about.

Once the yelled questions stopped without an alarm raised, he crouched and sensed around the roof. He was surprised there were no guards here. He walked the entire roof to make sure they weren't magically hidden before moving on to the next part.

He sat and sensed.

Immediately, he sensed something odd about the weave within the top floor's walls. Trying to come up for a term to what he felt, he settled on frayed. Not the way the edges of his weaves were frayed, as if they didn't want to stay in place. This was the fraying of an old fabric. The thinning from being worn so long.

Did weaves thin with age? Was this what happened here, or was this the result of poor work? He didn't know enough about weaves to tell.

He sensed the floor below and that fraying was also there. On the floor below that, it changed. The fraying wasn't as deep, until, as the next floor started, it was entirely gone.

Was something leeching the weave downward? Was that a thing? He rubbed his temple and added that to the list.

Why ever it happened, it confirmed his entry point, if there was one, would be the top floor. He moved to the edge. He couldn't see the window below him through the rain, not even the light from the lantern in the room. He knew it was there by the way light essence moved from the lantern and out into the open space. Knowing that, he could make out the way the weave followed the shape of the windowsill. He'd have enough to grab on above and put his toes on below.

If he could touch them without the weave reacting.

It made sense to him that the weave under the roof didn't react to his presence. Guards had to come up here to check on things throughout the day, but no one had a reason to hang from a window, or climb a wall, other than a thief.

So, how did he go about checking that?

How did he check that without the weave triggering?

What could he do to a weave before it triggered?

He rested his forehead on the edge of the roof. Where did everything have to come with questions? Why couldn't some of them just be easy to figure out?

Okay. What he needed was information. And he only knew of one person here that might know more than he did about any of this.

* * * * *

Archer stared at Tibs. "What do you take me for? A scholar? You're the one with the magic. You should know about all that."

"I'm not even officially Lambda. I shouldn't know anything about weaves and I can't ask much questions without my teacher getting suspicious. I thought that with being older than I am, you'd know something."

"I know plenty. Just not about that. The main thing I know about magic is to do my best not to mess with people who have it."

“Unless you can force one to do your bidding.”

The man sighed. “This is as much for you as it is for me. Tell me you see that? Tell me you aren’t going to change your mind in the middle of this and hand me over to—”

“Who could I hand you over?” Tibs ask, now curious as to whom could be after the archer. “But no, I’m not going to hand you over to anyone. It would just get that letter you have hidden delivered to the guild. And I do want the attempts to kill me to stop.”

The man shrugged and stretched on the bed.

“What would be needed to get into the Brokerage, normally, I mean. How do people enter it when they need to enter?”

“They have business to conduct with them.”

“Can you arrange to have business to conduct with them? I could go with you as your apprentice.”

The man shook his head. “You don’t just shop up at the Brokerage’s door and tell them you want to do business. You need to be referred, have a plan for what you need from them, show you have the funds to pay them.”

“You have to be able to make them think you have all that.”

“Clearly, you have no idea what’s needed to make that happen. And even if I could. You couldn’t come. Your eyes give you away and putting lens on them to hide their colors would just attract as much attention.”

“I can hide the—” he stopped. If the archer didn’t know he could do that, he wasn’t revealing it.

He left the archer in his room and sat at the bar. Putting a copper down on it.

Sania placed a tankard before him. “You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

“I don’t have enough.” He took a careful sip. This one wasn’t as spicy. “I don’t know enough so I can do what Archer needs me to.”

“That doesn’t sound like him. He usually has contacts all over the place.”

“Not this time. Do you know a sorcerer who’d be willing to answer my questions?”

She stared at him. “I tend a tavern. I don’t exactly get those kinds in here. And with your eyes, why don’t you just walk up to one of them? I’m sure they’d be willing to answer any question you have.”

“My experience is that anyone who had knowledge isn’t interested in sharing it until there’s coins in it for them. And I’m low on those here.”

“Archer should be able to get you into the library.”

“What’s that?”

She stared at him again. “It’s the city’s repository of knowledge.”

“I thought those were universities.”

“Well, yeah. But the library is where the books are kept.”

“And anyone can go there?”

“Of course not.” She chuckled. “Those are for scholars, researchers and sorcerers.”

“I don’t exactly look like one of those.”

“Looks are easy to change.”

“But I don’t know enough to pass myself as…” okay, he couldn’t claim to be someone who belonged in that place, but he was small, and was still confused for a kid when he was out of his armor by those who didn’t know him. Kids had a habit of getting into

mischief, and if one was wealthy enough, that mischief was usually forgiven in exchanged for a few coins.

He finished the ale in a long swallow and coughed. Not as spicy didn't mean it could be downed. Then he ran out of the tavern. He had to get himself properly dressed, and that meant he needed to get coins.

* * * * *

The hall was enormous, and each step echoed. Tibs did his best not to let the stiff clothes bother him as he followed the man and woman through it. He'd slipped behind them as they entered, and the guards had taken him for their apprentice, or son, or servant. Tibs didn't care which. It had gotten him in.

Now, he had to find the information he was after.

They talked as they walked, and Tibs had no idea what it was about because he didn't understand the language.

That was going to be another problem. Would the books be written in the one language he knew how to read? People spoke in a variety of languages. Did they only write in one?

He followed through an archway, pondering the question, then came to a stop as he glanced about and saw the bookshelf.

The tall bookshelf.

Then the one next to it and another and another. He lost them in the distance. And there was a balcony over it with more shelves filled with books, and one above that and another one. Six balconies, so long he couldn't see their end. And they were all filled with books.

He swallowed. Whoever owned this place was rich.

He'd lost the couple he'd shadowed and fought the impulse to run and hide. He was supposed to belong in this place. Or at least act as if he did. He was the son of some noble who'd grown more curious than cautious. He was dressed the part, having paid good stolen coins for the clothes and overcoat. Now he needed to act the part.

He stepped to bookcase and looked at all the spines. They were thick, which meant valuable. It was how it went with the book merchants in Kragle Rock, he'd noticed. The thicker the book, the more coins they wanted for them. If he could leave with just one of them, he'd have enough coins to pay what he owed the guild once he reached Epsilon.

Not that he planned on letting that happen.

And he wasn't here to get coins, but to fill his mind.

He reached for a thick book and a woman spoke. He didn't understand the words, but the tone held warning, and she was standing right behind him. He'd been so awed by the sight he hadn't paid attention to his sense.

Again, he fought the urge to run.

He was a noble. He readied himself to tell her he could do whatever he wanted, as he turned, and frown as her severe gaze landed on him. Her eyes were hazel, her hair lighter and short. Her face wrinkled and before he could stop himself, he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Then, he realized she wasn't Mama and his reaction had given him away.

"Pursatian?" she asked and, after hesitating, he nodded. "We do not often have visitors from Pursatia." Her accent was lighter than Tibs expected. Every time he'd spoken

to a stranger who didn't speak the language of his city, they did so with a thick accent, unless magic was used. She wasn't using magic. She didn't have an element me, or wore anything with a weave in it.

"I'm..." what was he supposed to call himself? "Tiber."

Her smile stopped him. There was no maliciousness in it, but she didn't believe him. This wasn't going to work. She was going to call the guard and get him sent to a cell. Well, maybe not, she did seem kind, but she was going to make sure he was led outside and he wouldn't be able to sneak back in.

"And what drew you here, Tiber?" she asked, still amused. "We seem rather young to be an apprentice, and I'd expect that if you were here with one of your parents, they wouldn't have let you wander off to touch anything without the proper attire." She moved her fingers. They were gloved. A white fabric that had a sheen to it. A quick glance told him everyone here wore gloves. They weren't all white, but they all wore them.

He hurried to put his hands in his pockets.

"I'm afraid it is too late for that, Tiber. You have already given yourself away."

He nodded. "What are you going to do to me?" More ashamed at having been caught so easily, than afraid of her answer.

"That depends on why you sneaked in. Are you here to steal a book?"

He shook his head.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm curious."

"About what?"

"So many things," He said, unable to keep the exasperation from sounding.

She chuckled. "Curiosity is a good thing for a future scholar to have."

"I'm not—" he closed his mouth. Right. His eyes were brown. She couldn't tell he was a Runner.

"Of course you aren't, yet. But that you went to the length of sneaking in here tells me you have the determination, as well as the curiosity, required. I'm certain that once you return home, you will be able to convince the university there to take you in."

Tibs nodded. He didn't think they'd feel that way once he'd taken his revenge on the men who had killed Mama. "I guess I should go now."

"Is there some of your curiosity I can assuage, or was it simply about seeing our vast collection?"

Tibs eyed her suspiciously. None of her words had light to them, but he'd broken rules. "Why aren't you angry I broke the rules?"

Her chuckle was light. "Tell me. Have you ever been told that it is dangerous to want to know things?"

He shook his head. He could hear the exasperation in Alistair's voice at time, but his teacher had never told him to stop, or why he should stop, other than 'now isn't the time'.

She nodded. "Well, I happen to believe that curiosity, with the right application of determination, should always be rewarded. So, tell me. What is the one thing you wish to learn about, now that you are here?"

"Magic."

She raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I am wrong and sorcery is in your future, then."

He shook his head. “I couldn’t go into a dungeon. I just like the stories about it. Those with magical items, and magics on building the hero has to defeat.” He bit his lower lip and tried to construct a story that would help him, but he had never paid attention to how bards sung their stories.

“I heard a bard, once, sing about this hero, and she got into the building because one part of the magic was—” he searched for a word a bard might use. “Old. Is that a thing? Do enchantment grow old?”

She smiled at him and motioned him to a table. “That is a very interesting question, and the answer depends on many factor, for example, how skilled the sorcerers were and...”

Tibs sat and pulled purity out of his bracer. As much as he needed the information. He could already feel the headache getting it was going to cause.

Planning-51

“As with everything,” she said, “enchantments do fade over time.”

“Everything fades?” Tibs asked before he could stop himself. “What about mountains? Haven’t they always been there? Or the sky? Claria, Torus?”

“Everything,” she said solemnly. “Some will simply take longer or require a more violent action from the elements before it is their time. You can consider whatever the main element is to get a sense of if it will be quick or slow. Mountains, as an example, at mainly composed of the stone element. Stone is slow to react to everything, and it is hard. So it will take more before it’s their time. The larger they are, the more of the element they have, so the longer it will take.”

“But metal’s hard too.”

“And it too lasts a long time, unless it’s subjected to violence. It is how must metal item end up being broken after all.” She looked thoughtful. “Although we have to keep in mind that Metal isn’t a core element. And that air opposes it, so if air is involved, the metal will be worn quicker. You have seen how metal will sometimes have reddish brown flakes or dust on it?”

Tibs nodded. “Rust.”

The smile she gave him was indulgent. “Yes, they call it that.”

He had the sense she included him in that ‘they’.

“What it actually is, another element. When a core element interacts with one of the others, in the process of weakening it, a new element is created.” She said a word Tibs didn’t quite understand.

“Po-tin-cia?”

“Close enough. It’s an old Arcanus word. It’s the name of the element of change. It’s the one that’s always created when a core element weakens another.” Her words had a bit of light to them. Not enough, Tibs thought she was lying to him, but it made him think that despite her seeming confidence, she wasn’t entirely certain.

“And that Potencia element is always there when a core element acts on one that isn’t core?”

“Yes.” The light was brighter. She knew it wasn’t always the case. Tibs tried to think of a way to prod her about it. About the element, or find out how she was lying, but he didn’t think bard would sing stories of those things.

And his curiosity was leading him away from what interested him. “So, because enchantments have many essence in them, they get weaker. Does it only happen if there is a

core element among them? What if the enchantment is only made up of core elements?"

Her chuckle sounded slightly strained. "Yes, the interaction between element causes enchantment to grow weak over time, but the skill of the sorcerers creating it will have an impact on how... sturdy, the enchantment is."

Tibs nodded and ignored the faint glow. Her uncertainty didn't mean she was lying, and she was there, answering his questions while any others he might ask could just kick him out.

"Will elements outside the enchantment cause to get weaker, too? And you said that the Potincia element comes when core and the others act on each other. Wouldn't that get in the way of the enchantment working?"

She smiled and nodded. The glow started as soon as she opened her mouth. "Exactly. You are quite bright. I can see you'll have a strong career within scholarly academies. Potencia is part of what breaks enchantments down over time. And it's why skill is important in the sorcerers who craft the enchantments. They have to account for that degradation if they don't want it to fail too quickly."

Tibs rubbed his temple. Shouldn't the Purity he'd preemptively put through him mean he wouldn't get a headache? He didn't get most of what she said, but how her word glowed meant even if he did, it might not be helping.

"And it's always like that?" he asked, hoping that if he forced her to clarify, he might learn something he could use. "Potencia is created within the enchantment. That, along with the degradation caused by the core element, weakens it until it fails."

"Not everyone agrees that's what happens," she said dismissively. "Some—"

"Wait. What do you mean, not everyone agrees? I thought universities were about finding out how things worked. That the books told us how that was."

"Universities are about investigating how things work. And the scholars write their books to document how they progress in demonstrating that their beliefs are the correct ones."

"But you only keep the books of those who are right."

She looked offended. "No, of course not. How would I know who is right?"

"Whoever the magic says is right?"

She chuckled. "Magic can't tell you what is right and what is wrong."

"Light can." Even as he said it, he realized he was wrong.

"No, light can be used to find out if someone believes they are lying. But that isn't the same as them being wrong. Magic a tool. And like all tools, it can be used for many purposes. Even some that oppose each other."

"Then why would anyone read if they can't know it's true?" He thought of Carina and how she relied on books for everything she knew. How she'd wanted him to read so much because she felt it would help him.

"If you mean the common folk." She shrugged. "Those who read tend to do so because they want to feel like they are superior. If you mean other scholar. Then, in reading someone else's work, I can glimpse something that will help propel my own research further."

Tibs fought his disappointment. It wasn't relevant. Only...

"Then, what you're telling me about how enchantment weakens in time, it might not

be how it happens?”

She hesitated.

Her stance shifted slightly as she regarded him, and Tibs wondered if he'd given himself away. “We know some things,” She said in a careful tone. “The good scholars won't say something like ‘we know for certain’ but there are things that experiment after experiments show always happen. One of them is that element interact. They work together to form effects. The right combination with enough elements supplied can be made to accomplish just about anything. Another is that everything weakens over time.”

“Potentia and the core elements that—” he paused as she studied him.

“Maybe,” she finally said, and the words that follows were without light. “It's what I believe happens, and many of my experiments have shown that when core element interact with secondary ones, a change will happen, and that change means that another element has to come of it. I'm not the only one who has come to such conclusion, but other have written about different results, or different interpretation of the results. Potentia is real. While extremely rare, adventurers have been documented with it. Because they are so rare, there is little about what they can do. But all the records of them trying to explain what it is speak of the moment of change. So I believe it is what is present when elements interact.”

Tibs was careful when he said. “But it could be something else.”

Her nod was reluctant. “Ultimately, academia isn't about proving that I am right. It's about demonstrating why my belief might be better supported than others.” She chuckled. “We tend to forget that at times.”

“I'm sorry, I just asked about a story.”

“That's the danger of talking with a scholar. We love to explain what we're about. But to get back to that story, without all the minutiae. Yes, enchantment do grow old and they will be weaker. They are then more susceptible to malicious alterations. It's why anyone relying on magic for their security will get the enchantment rejuvenated regularly, and why old places, lost places, will have weaker enchantment, even if an alpha sorcerer put them together initially. It is also why some of those old enchantments will not behave the way they were created. They will have changed over time because they grew old.”

“So that's how the adventurer was about to get into the old building. She was able to alter the enchantment.”

He laughed lightly. “It's a bard's story. She was able to get in, because the story needed her to get in. But yes. Out there, where adventurers might encounter an old sorcerer's tower, or some forgotten warlord's vault. Because the enchantment is old and weaker, they could use their element to pry and tease it apart until they were able to get in.”

“Does the element they have matter?”

She thought about it. “It might make it simpler. Some elements do lend themselves more easily to that kind of work than others, but ultimately, like nearly everything about magic, it's more about how skilled the adventurer is than the element, or how much of it they have access to.”

Tibs kept himself from asking which element she thought would be best. Even if she knew the answer, that would be too telling of what he was after.

“Does this answer all your questions?”

“No,” he said, unable to keep from sounding indignant. He rubbed his temple again.

“But I think it’s all I can stand right now.”

“That’s a good pain. Cherish it.”

“Pain’s never good,” he countered.

“It’s the pain of your mind stretching. That’s a good thing.”

He stared at her. Hadn’t someone else told him that before?

He stood. “I should go.”

She stood with him. “Do you need assistance finding your parents? I’m surprised they haven’t come looking yet.”

Right, she thought he’d gotten separated from his family.

“They probably forgot about me reading. I’ll find them, thank you.”

He headed out, keeping his sense focused on her to confirm she didn’t follow him. Outside, he let the rain cool his headache. Maybe Purity couldn’t do anything when it came to the pain of learning.

* * * * *

Tibs hung by the top of the window frame, the rain pelting against him hard enough it might be fists. It was a good thing water couldn’t hurt him anymore, or he might end up dead from all those hits.

He studied the strands of the weave before him, like he’d done the previous three nights. This time, he thought he’d worked out enough of those he could identify to do something. He could probably do it from the roof, but he couldn’t get rid of the sense that being closer let him get a better feel when manipulating essence.

At this proximity, he knew it wasn’t true.

He couldn’t simply throw corruption into the weave and watch it dissolve.

Or rather, he could. It would be easy. He couldn’t see anything within it that would resist it. But he didn’t want the resulting chaos destroying the enchantment here would cause. What he needed to do was part it around the window without breaking the strands.

So he’d spends days studying how the strands flowed. How they were connected to the strands around them and where they had come ‘detached’. Tonight would be his first attempt at moving two strands apart and widening the gap. He’s studied the letters that were used to connect them, having to search through them all until he found a string with only letters he knew. Fortunately, while many of the strands were in elements he couldn’t identify, the majority of the letters were in water, fire, earth or air, with only the occasional one of light and darkness thrown in and an even rarer he couldn’t identify which element made it.

He teased the two apart where it was detached and studied how the connecting letters reacted, stretching until they reached what he could only interpret as their limits. Considering some were already broken, he might be fine allowing those to break too. The problem was that he had no idea if there was a point where too many breaks would attract the attention of whoever maintained the enchantment.

So he slipped in the string of letters to alleviate the strain, then waited. He split his attention between sensing the weave and the guards on the surrounding roofs. If someone detected the change, he expected they’d be how he’d know.

No one reacted, so he widened the gap more, until he needed to add another string of letters, then waited again. When he did it again, he had the added complication of not

tangling it with another of the strands. By the fifth addition of letters, he had to fight his impatience when waiting for a reaction from the guard. It was clear no one was noticing what he was doing. He hadn't sensed anyone with essence within the building when he'd last check, so he was fine.

And even bards stories made it clear that was when the rogue the story was found out, because he'd taken for granted everything would be as it had been before. In the stories, that lead to more adventures, the rogue's daring escape. Here, it would lead to him being caught, if he was lucky.

Ever so slowly, the two strands moved apart until the gap between them was enough Tibs could pass through. Now, the next problem. How did he hold them that way?

He'd thought about it as he studied the weave. He wasn't risking attaching it to another strand without understanding what it might cause. There was plenty of air within and around the building, but that didn't do solid with ease, same with water. He could make it ice, but he'd never tried to have ice stay without him there to focus on it. Would it melt away as it did in even cold water?

Fire? Out of the question. Even if he could workout how to make it solid and how to not have it ignite where it touched the window, he knew just too well how unpredictable that element was.

That left earth. Of which there was little directly in the frame, but plenty in the bricks around them. He pulled a strand of essence away from the stone on one side and wove it over and under itself until it had a structure that didn't need him to focus on. He secured that within the wood and gently rested the enchantment's strand on the hook that formed.

Then he waited and focused on the guards.

He did the same on the other side, and again he waited. While he did, he studied what he'd done. Moved two strands without breaking the weave. Given himself an opening to pass through all the other strands still in the way.

He pulled himself to the roof and lay on his back. His arms didn't hurt, stone ensured holding on was effortless, but his head pounded from what he'd learned tonight.

Weaves could be altered.

With being able to sense the strands, knowing the letters and the elements they were made of, someone could move an enchantment out of their way.

Maybe.

For this to work, these two strands had to remain there not only while he moved the others, but also while he was in the building getting the coins out of some safe he knew nothing about.

He was going to have a headache for the rest of his stay here. He was certain of it.

But for tonight, he was done.

If the strands were still in place tomorrow, he'd know that part of his plan worked and he'd move on to making more of a gap for him to squeeze through.

Planning-52

“So it’s tonight?” Archer asked as Tibs stood at the window, looking outside.

Once Tibs had returned to the Brokerage and found that the threads he’d move were still attached to the hook, he’d moved as many of them each night, enduring the mind numbing pelting of the rain. When he’d moved all the threads he could sense and interact with directly, he was left with too many of those that he couldn’t identify still in his way. He couldn’t guess at how much he could pull them away, since his inability to tell what element they were meant he couldn’t sense details about them. The threads were there, as were the letters, but how close to the breaking point they were? He had no idea.

He’d had to use threads he could control as ropes to pull the others out of the way. He’d been careful, moving them slowly until they were parted like a curtain. The gap was tight, and if he hadn’t been utterly exhausted at that point, he could have slipped in, found the safe holding the coins Archer was after, and it would have all been over.

Instead, he’d trudged by to the tavern and fallen onto his pallet and slept through the rest of the night and the day. He’d promised himself that as soon as it was dark, he’d be in there. He wanted to go home, back to his friends.

“No,” Tibs said, looking at the clear sky. Torus was to his left, its horns seeming thicker than they did in Kragle Rock. Every city he’d visited was accompanied with slight differences in how Torus looked. He didn’t understand how that could be, and that was one question he didn’t feel he needed the answer to.

He already had too many unanswered questions.

Claria was nearly full, her eye on Torus’s horns.

In the street, people were out in droves, as if the clear weather was cause for celebration.

“You said you were ready.” There was no accusation in the man’s voice, also no light on the words. Tibs didn’t remember speaking with the archer before falling asleep.

“I need the rain to hide me from the guards.” He turned and leaned against the window frame.

“Can’t you use magic to hide from them?”

He shook his head. There was Darkness, but Tibs didn’t have the training to weave anything out of it. He only remained hidden while in concentrated. “I’m going to have too much to focus on. I might have to work on the weave before I can go in, and there’s two guards who can see it without effort and a third that only has to turn and they’ll see me.”

“I can distract them.”

He shook his head again. “The goal is to not attract attention. I get in, get all the coins, and get out with no one knowing. Hopefully, it’s going to be days before they need to pay someone out of them and we’ll be gone.”

“Where are you going?” Archer asked as Tibs opened the door.

“Outside. I’m going to visit the city since there’s nothing else for me to do.”

“Don’t get into trouble.”

Tibs didn’t reply. He had no plans to do that, but he knew better than to promise on something out of his control.

He ate a quick bowl of the tavern’s stew along with a tankard of ale. Then he was outside, letting the crowd jostle him along.

Once he had enough of being bounced against the others, and his pocket felt heavy enough, he suffused himself with water and moves easily between them. He took an alley that opened into a courtyard with people gathered around a brazier. They were too jovial to be street and simply keeping warm.

Tibs nodded greeting as he walked by and exited via another alley. The other street he was in wasn’t as busy. Houses with the occasional candle or lantern by a window. The occupants were sleeping or out celebrating the clear night.

Without the heat of the crowd, the cold of the wind slipped through the joins in his armor and made itself felt. It didn’t bother Tibs, Air was his element and couldn’t hurt him in any form, but with nothing else to do, he noticed the cold.

Wind could be cold, as did water, even the ground, earth. With it being common thought multiple elements, Tibs had expected it to be its own element, working along with the other. Maybe one that pulled from the others. Sebastian had called the elements beyond the eight core ones their children. Cold could have been that. [or did I just justify why cold should be its own element? I’m willing to rework this, if that’s the case]

Instead, he sense that it was in the way the essence moved that the cold was created. What he found interesting was that it wasn’t the same motion of the essence that generated the cold. He couldn’t find words to express what he sensed, so he assigned them. It was in the flow of Air. In how some essences moved faster that the cold effect happened. It was in the heaviness of the Earth. In how some of the essence sunk that it happened. It was in the stillness of the Water. The part of essence that didn’t move among the rest.

If he took those essences and willed them to follow along the rest, the cold went away.

Another way he could do it was to introduce fire essence. He couldn’t create cold out of fire, and making it hotter was only about adding more essence.

He wondered if any of the books in the library explained why that was, then put the question out of his mind as he saw a shop selling candies. It had been too long since he’d had any.

* * * * *

Tibs shielded his eyes against the sun. He’d forgotten how bright it was in the nearly two weeks of constant rain. The air was still cool, but the wind had died down, letting the sun warm him. He found a courtyard by a restaurant with tables and found an unoccupied one. The ale was better than the tavern, and more expensive, as was the meal. Layered slices of vegetables and meats with spices. Nearly everything served in this city was spiced, and

the colder the weather, the more they added. Even the candies made locally were spicy, some to the point of feeling like fire on his tongue.

It was appropriately called Red Fire.

There was no more fire essence than in another other item, so Tibs didn't know how the burning happened, but he enjoyed it.

Archer dropped in the chair opposite Tibs in enough of a dark mood he expected him to be surrounded by Darkness essence.

"How long until you have to go back?" he asked. Waving to a server.

Tibs checked the bracelet. The gem was still yellow. "I don't know. Once it turns red, I have two days."

"I can't get anyone to make it rain."

"They can do that?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Magic can do anything. But in this place, no one wants to make it rain. They already get too much of it as far as they're concerned."

"Give them more coins." Tibs went back to eating.

"The point of this excursion of form me to have coins left when we leave." He accepted the tankard and ordered something called Harkan Soup. Tibs asked for some, too. "If it turns red, and it's still clear, you're going to have to go through it with, anyway. I've scouted the area and I will be able to provide a distraction that's going to let you slip in. I figure it won't matter all that much at that point if they notice you leaving. You can lose them in the city."

Tibs nodded. "Did you find a way for me to carry all those coins?" he wasn't mentioning his pouch or the hiding place in his armor to this man.

"I've had that for a few days. I'll hand it to you when you go do the job."

"It'd be easier if I had it now. That way, the moment the weather changes, I can get started."

"And have you fill it with other stuff between now and then?" the archer shook his head.

"I'm not going around stealing."

Archer indicated the bowl as the server placed them before each.

"That's not the same thing," Tibs said once she left. The soup was good, almost cool compared to the spiced plate he'd been eating. "It's just a few pockets here and there."

"Only a thief would make a distinction between what they steal."

"I'm a rogue." He altered the meats and the soup, enjoying the difference in level of spices.

"Out here, you're a thief. No one's going to care that you're a Runner, because trying to figure out how much trouble holding you will cause with the guild. Before you think that's a way to avoid ending up in a cell. They aren't going to know you're some hero to them. So guard will put you in a cell and others... well, the cells in this kingdom have a tendency of being more empty than other places."

"I'm not getting caught."

"I'd be happier if you stopped stealing entirely until we're gone."

"I have to keep training." He grinned. "You don't want my fingers to grow stiff."

The man shook his head and ate in silence.

* * * * *

The thunder woke Tibs. It was so loud he thought the building had shaken with it. He looked out the window. It seemed too early for how dark it was.

“I guess today’s the day.” Archer grinned. He pulled a bag from a small chest and threw it at Tibs.

He felt the essence woven through the bag once it was out of the chest. A lot of it was darkness.

“A bag of holding,” Archer said. “It’s also enchanted to make it harder to detect and so that what you put on it won’t weigh as much.”

The bag didn’t have a way to attach it to his belt. “If I need to carry it, it’s going to make things difficult.”

Archer shrugged. “It’s the best I could manage. Anything convenient is already claimed by people with more money than me. This was her practice bag.”

“And you’re sure it’s going to work?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve used it. The enchantments on it work. It’s just inconvenient to use.”

“How much coins does it hold?” Tibs looped the end under his belt and tied it around. If it didn’t bulge too much, he’d be able to do that once he filled it.

“More than they’ll have.” Archer studied Tibs as he stood and moved, then adjusted the bag on the belt.

“What?”

“I’ve just handed you something that can hold more than you can find in that building, and you’ve just tied it to your belt without even checking how it might do that?”

“The inside is larger than the outside,” Tibs said. “Have you ever been in the dungeon? That’s how the chests work. Something like that,—” He motioned to the small chest the bag came from. “—can hold a full set of armor. This isn’t as amazing as you think it is.”

“Just to a Runner,” Archer muttered. “I nearly fell into it when she told me what it did. I put my arm in to my shoulder trying to feel the bottom and almost lost my balance.”

“I wonder what it’s like to be inside one of them.”

“She advises against it. Strongly. When I asked why, she said I wouldn’t be able to stand finding you.”

“I’m not like—”

“She knows the life I live. The things I’ve seen. If she says I won’t be able to stand those details, I believe her. You should too.”

He’d ask Ganny during the next run.

He chuckled at the realization that he would be able to talk with her and Sto. If Don hadn’t handed his secret to the guild when he returned, they’d be able to talk through this problem.

“What’s that about?” Archer asked suspiciously.

“Just something for when I’m back home.”

“You aren’t keeping the bag.”

“I don’t need it.”

The suspicious look was back.

“I don’t steal from my home.”

Now the archer looked at him in disbelief. “You mean you aren’t the one that’s always getting into noble’s houses and taking their things?”

Tibs sighed. “I don’t take things from them. I do it for the practice.” The guards hadn’t dragged him to the cells for that, so either the nobles were just talking about it, exaggerating what was taken from them, or, and this one was more likely and worrisome, they planned on dealing with the issue themselves.

Something else he’d have to look into once he was back.

Archer didn’t believe him, which was fine. Tibs didn’t care what the man thought of him. He’d do this job and then wouldn’t see him again.

Planning-53

Tibs froze as lightning illuminated the city. It only lasted a second, and left him with spots in his sight, but any attentive guard could notice him through on the pale wall through the downpour. Once he could see again, he focused on the locked window. It went beyond a latch and requiring a key. The tumblers had false gates, and with only the frame to hang from as a thief worked, it would be nearly impossible to open it. The only way to make it more secure was to require an enchanted key, like those his rooming house used, on top of the enchantment on the building.

Because he didn't use picks, but water within the lock, it was simple for Tibs to be done, and then gently push it inward. Thunder accompanied the opening. The window didn't disturb the weave as it moved; It was part of the building.

The opening in the weave was half that of the opened window. Enough for him to slip in, if he was careful.

Another flash of lightning froze him as he was about to pull himself in. When he saw again, he used Earth to ensure his body was rigid and moved only as he intended it to. Straight as a plank, and twisted to miss the strands not entirely out of the way, he entered the building. Pushed himself away from the wall and wrapped himself in air to deaden any sound his roll made. He chuckled as thunder covered his landing.

Tibs waited to ensure no one came to investigate, then closed the window. He absorbed the water on the floor and in his clothing, then put his ear to the door. He had two goals, according to Archer. One for the archer, and one to stop the attempts on Tibs's life.

It turned out that stealing the coins wasn't the entirety of what Tibs needed to do to regain his peace of life. There were too many of them in the Brokerage, spread across too many rooms and floors to cripple the organization. Burning the building down wasn't an option. There was enough fire essence in the weave permeating the walls, Tibs figured they wouldn't burn. While corruption might work, there was little of it, or purity in the weave, it was too slow. Even with Tibs pushing it to work faster, they'd have time to get sorcerers to stop the destruction, and they might work out he'd been behind it.

What Tibs had to do was destroy the contracts that outlined how Sebastian had ordered them to use his coins, along with those documenting the assassins already out there, looking for him. When news spread the Brokerage couldn't prove who they had hired and for how much, every assassin in the realm would be more interested in swindling them than hunting Tibs, and then the Brokerage wouldn't have the contract from Sebastian, so wouldn't be able to restart the hunt.

It all sounded too complicated to Tibs, but this time there had been no light accompanying the archer's words. So he at least believed what he said.

The safes with the contracts were in a room two floors below him. Those with the coins under the building. Coins were too heavy for the floors, he'd explained.

Again, no light with the words, so the archer believed it. Tibs found it dubious. Coins barely weighed anything. He could hold a handful for hours without feeling it.

Two rooms on opposite end of the building.

Like this had been an easy job when all he'd needed was to steal coins.

He let out a breath as quiet fell on the other side of the door, straightened, opened the door and stepped out of the room.

He walked casually.

The Brokerage didn't have a uniform, but the people working there were of a similar type. Bureaucrats, Archer had told him. Clerks with illusions of grandeurs, he'd explained when Tibs asked. They had money, so dressed better than the clerks Tibs was used to, but that was the work they performed.

So Tibs was dressed better than he liked, and carried papers between leather bindings. He didn't acknowledge the people he crossed path with, trying to look preoccupied. Even this late, there were a lot of people. The Brokerage never slept, Archer told him.

Tibs had thought he meant they never let their guards down. Now he saw he meant they worked day and night. The handful of people he saw that didn't look like clerks were guards, and merchants and some truly unsavory types Tibs immediately moved away from on noticing them.

He wasn't the only one doing so.

Tibs made it to the ground floor and located the door leading further down. The guarded door.

It was in a hallway going from the door in the front of the building to the one in the back and lined with lanterns. There were hardly any shadows, and certainly not any close to the guarded door. No one was allowed through without presenting a paper. Tibs couldn't see what was written on it.

He'd need trickery to get through.

Tibs could handle that.

The lanterns were normal. A receptacle for the oil, and a burning wick within a glass cylinder to protect it from the wind. That wouldn't protect the flame from him, but if they just went out, it would make things more suspicious than helpful. They needed a reason to go on. One those witnessing might believe.

Such as wind strong enough to bowl people over. There was a storm going on outside, after all. If he could arrange for both doors to open at the same time, people would think that was how the wind was caused.

He walked the length once, twice, thrice. On the fourth time, he decided he couldn't afford to wait. The front door opened often enough, but no one had even approached the back door. The ground floor was much longer than the rest of the building, and the back opened onto an alley instead of the road.

The bold was metal, as was the lock.

The door he needed to access was closer to the front. The guards could see the back

door, but rarely looked left or right. They looked straight ahead unless they were addressing someone seeking entry.

Tibs needed to time everything, so the door was opened, he was near enough to enter it, but not blocked by someone. And no one could notice his eyes in the process.

The last one was simple enough. The rest... well, hopefully everyone would cooperate.

On his sixth walk from one end to the other, a woman approached the guards and presented a paper. Tibs slowed. Saw writing, but couldn't make out the words. He latched onto the metal in the back door bolt and readied Air. The guard looked the paper over, then reached for the door's handle.

As soon as he pushed it, Tibs dissolved the bolt and sent the strongest wave of Air he could that wouldn't hurt anyone. He snuffed the lanterns out even as some fell off the wall. He wrapped himself with Darkness and rushed the door.

He sensed the woman stepped in his way and shoved her. Her complaints were covered by the wind and thunder.

He sent wind ahead of him and snuffed a few of the lanterns, then slowed and straightened his shirt. When he stepped into the light, he held onto the wall and looked bewildered.

He shrugged when someone asked a question, going by the tone, since he didn't understand the words, then proceeded onward.

The doors weren't guarded. But each room had people in them, and by each safe, he sensed the armor they wore.

That would be a problem.

He found the largest of the safe and it was the only one in that room. It had two guards, and three others, seated at desks. Incapacitating the five of them would be simple. The only thing he couldn't control was how long any of them could hold their breath. He'd have to keep them in the room. He might have to fight the guards, too.

Would he kill them?

Not unless they gave him no other choice, he decided. He removed the air from the room as he approached the door. He needed them to be suffocating, but he couldn't give the guard enough time to reach the door. It wouldn't allow air in, but it would let them sound an alarm.

The door was bolted, but it didn't stop him.

One guard was a few steps from him as he entered. She paused in surprise, giving him time to close the door and fill the gap with metal to ensure no one else came in. She locked eyes with him and drew her sword. A ball of air sent her flying back. She took a breath in that moment, then she was on her feet.

The three clerks were on the floor, gasping for breath; the other guard was already on the ground, unconscious. The longer she lasted, the less likely anyone else in the room would live.

He blocked her blow with his arm; the shirt was cut, revealing the earth coated bracers underneath. He punched her and the earth empower blow sent her across the room, gasping and then choking on the lack of air.

The other guard's life essence started to fade, and Tibs made a bubble of air around

him.

She closed her mouth and forced herself to her unsteady feet. Tibs shook his head, but she staggered in his direction. He let go of the bubble of air. Hopefully that had been enough to let him deal with her.

Her swing missed him, then she was down on a knee. She forced herself up as Tibs's fist hit her jaw. She fell to the floor and didn't move.

Without her to distract him, Tibs noticed how silent the room was. There had been no sound of her hitting the wall, her sword falling to the floor. It was as if Air was what made sounds.

Was this how Alistair had ensured they had privacy back when Tibs had wanted that private conversation with his teacher? There had still been air in the room, but would a wall with none of it keep sound from moving past?

One of the clerk's life essence was nearly all gone.

Tibs let air back in the room, and that woman's gasp was loud. She coughed, but then was still. Not that he'd expected to pull this off without being detected, but this meant he had to hurry.

The safe was metal woven through with essence. A lot of metal, earth, and purity. Some air, light, darkness, and others he couldn't identify. It was self-contained, no thread reached out. The enchantment was probably to reinforce it, maybe sound an alarm.

He removed the air around and within the safe, then ripped the weave apart.

It resisted him. Enough of those he couldn't identify were woven through the rest they made it difficult, but Tibs had one thing they hadn't.

He sent corruption through the weave.

Purity fought it, and Tibs smiled as he poured more and more until that essence was overwhelmed and melted away with the rest.

Then the safe sagged and Tibs remembered he needed the content intact.

He pulled the corruption out, then hardened the safe before removing the door.

Tibs looked in awe at the content. Stacks and stacks of coins were held together by fine leather strips. Copper, silver, electrum, gold and others he didn't know. Along with those were bars of the same metal and stacks of papers.

He shoved everything into the bag, starting with the coins, then the bars and, after hesitating, the papers. With all of them in, the bag only felt slightly heavier as he tied it back to his belt, and barely bulged.

He swallowed his giddiness. This had to be the most coins any one rogue had carried. He exited the room and replaced the metal to keep the occupants from leaving it.

The guards barely looked at him as he pulled the door open and entered the hall. People were cleaning up the mess his wind had caused, and only a few of the lanterns were lit. He spent a few seconds admiring the chaos, then headed up the stairs.

He'd figured out how he'd deal with the contracts. Archer had told him which room, and it had many safes and people in it. He didn't think he had the time to deal with them, then each safe, since he didn't know which one contained the one contract that affected him.

So, he was going to burn all of them within the safes.

As he walked up the stairs, he poured fire essence into the safe. The weaves resisted. They had a lot of water in them, but again, he had far more essence than they could handle. A

bell sounded around him. Made by essence from within that room. He ignored it and kept on moving and pouring fire into the safes.

He felt it devour the content. As always, it was hungry and ate away as long as he added essence. Something about the inside he couldn't sense made the fire die out if he left it unattended, so he poured and poured essence and he walked.

Someone yelled something behind him. A woman yelled back. The door to the room opened and clerks rushed out. Tibs felt the heat escape with them. The fire wasn't spreading outside the safes, but the metal was turning red.

He smiled. Nothing within would survive.

Someone yelled, an angry sound this time, and the man was pointing at Tibs.

Maybe his eyes had just given him away.

That was okay. Fire was useful here too.

He waved his hands, and flames licked around them. He flung fire at the people as he ran and they scattered out of his way. It wouldn't hurt them, but fire was a terrifying thing for anyone that couldn't control it.

Guard ran after him, and they weren't deterred by the fire he threw at them. He didn't worry; they were behind and his escape ahead.

He made it up the last stairs and found three guards between him and the room he needed.

He formed a blade of fire and wove metal through it. He block the first blow, parried another one, kicked the other guard out of his way, cursed as he felt the cut at his back, but they were behind him too, so no longer a concern.

The door shattered as he shouldered it out of his way, then ran for the window. It exploded under the blast of air and he didn't slow as he put a foot on the sill and propelled himself out.

He formed a current of air to guide him to the roof on the other side of the street, where he saw the faint lantern light through the rain. Then rolled as he landed and looked up.

Lightning flashed and the explosion of a spire where it struck further within the city was accompanied by thunder that made his ears ring. He laughed.

He'd done it. He'd gotten in and out with the loot, and the contract destroyed and only a cut on his back he'd deal with in a second.

The sound of metal pulled out of a scabbard drew his attention.

Right, there would be a guard by the lantern.

He turned as another sword was drawn, and another.

Instead of one guard by the lantern, in saw seven of them in its faint light, and they moved to surround him. Each had a sword in hand and of the expression he could make out, they were all angry.

Well, he had just broken out of a building they were supposed to be protecting, so they were justified.

"Metal swords and me without weapons." He smiled. It wasn't like he needed weapons. He suffused himself with metal.

It was time to find out what that could do.

The air cracked around Tibs as two of the guards ran at him. Small burst of lightning jumps from his arm to rain drops. He frowned. Metal didn't make lightning.

Did it?

Tibs exploded with light, and the thunder was so loud it left utter silence in its wake.

Planning-54

Motes of light filled Tibs's sight; no, small lightnings. He blinked to clear them and tried to understand what had happened.

"You are here!" the words exploded like thunder within the lightning, the first on his left, the next to the right and above him. "I am glad you came. I didn't think you would. Few find their way to me." The volume lowered with each word until they no longer hurt, but each had the strength of thunder, and came from a different location. As if a crowd with the same voice hit within the lightning, and a random person spoke each word.

Or, Tibs realized...

"You're an element."

"Yes!" this time the word had enough strength Tibs felt pushed back.

He kept blinking, even knowing it wouldn't help. These weren't the effect of looking at the sun and then away. The surrounding light, the lightning, was the element.

"You're... Lightning?"

"Well, of course. You came to me, did you not, Child of Human?"

Tibs rubbed his temple. "Not..." he stopped. Could he offend an element?

Laughter boomed around him. "It has been a time since one came to me unplanned."

Tibs remembered a warning Mama gave him. *Never stay out in the storm. Seek shelter under a low building.* He'd never left her side then, so this had been so he'd be prepared for later, when she was no longer than to protect him from the world.

His heart tightened. She shouldn't have left him so early. He wasn't ready. What other lessons could she had given him so he'd have been better prepared for the word?

"It will pass," the voice said, the words dancing around him. "Nothing lasts."

"That doesn't help," Tibs replied bitterly. "What do you want?"

"To move, to dance, to flit and to be."

Tibs took a breath and ignored he wasn't breathing. There was no air here. Only lightning. "That sounds like something Air does. I thought you were all different."

"Air is everywhere. Ever changing, ever moving, never being fixed." The pause was filled with crackling. "I am here, and here, and here. I stay, then I go."

Each word was, again, in a different location. Tibs stopped trying to understand what Lightning meant. They weren't people, so he couldn't expect them to act or think like he did.

Alright. This was an audience. The goal of his audience was to get the shadow of the element. That would be within Lightning, but Lightning was all around him. He was within them.

"It is here!" the words had such joy in it, Tibs was smiling.

Looking around didn't do any good. He saw nothing other than the sparkles of lightning. He reached for some, the... darkness was the wrong word in this ever lit place, but the lesser light that followed a flash might be the shadow he sought. His hand closed over nothing.

The Element didn't laugh. Tibs wasn't even sure it was watching him. There was something in the stretching silence that made him think it wasn't aware he was there. No, that couldn't be right. He was within it, so it had to know he was there. Only it was what, ignoring him? No, that didn't feel right either. It was distracted? That felt closer, but what could distract an element within itself?

Now it chuckled. The sound dancing around him.

He attempted to use that to locate it, but it jumped all over the place, close and far, ahead and back, up and down, left and right. There had to be something there. A pattern he could work out and know where the voice would be.

He needed to get it to talk for that.

And for one of the rare time in his life, Tibs found he couldn't think of a question to ask. He already knew what it was. It has said what it wanted. Tibs knew why he was here, even of how...

"How did I get here?"

"The way all come to us."

"But I didn't have strong emotions. I was surrounded by guards; I got ready to fight them by suffusing Metal. I was calm, amused, then..." lightning danced around his fingers. He'd been curious about that, how it happened, but not emotional about it.

Then the flash of light, the explosion, the pain.

It hadn't lasted long, but the pain had been intense, more than anyone could endure.

"So pain counts?"

"You feel strongly enough," it said, "and if one of us he there, you come."

"Then how were you there? Why the lightning on my hand? Does Metal make lightning?"

Laughter all around him, bouncing around so quickly he couldn't follow. This wasn't going to work.

"Metal and I have a kinship, the way Air and Earth dislike each other."

Since trying to keep up with the voice didn't help, Tibs stopped. He looked ahead and let the words bounce around him.

"That doesn't make sense. Not liking someone isn't the same had having a kinship."

"Is it not? Metal and I are touched, the way Air and Earth are too. Connections are the same in that they are there. The flavor of them does not make them false."

He stopped trying to understand was Lightning meant. He didn't think it was on purpose, but it was a distraction from what he needed to do to return to the city.

"So that connection let Metal make lightning?"

The laughter again. "Metal can not make me, anymore than I make Earth, Corruption, Light."

"But there's light here."

"No, there is only me."

Tibs frowned and sensed. Lightning was right. He couldn't sense and light. Then how was it bright? Did Lightning create a different kind of light, the way cold came about differently depending on the element? He cursed himself. He'd gotten distracted and lost track of the voice.

"Can something act like an element, but not be that element?"

"Everything either is us, or comes from us. We make it, or it echoes from what we make." With each word, there was a stronger flash of lightning from its direction. "The kinship we share makes the rest."

Tibs reached, but the flash was already gone. The word in a different location. He reached again and again. But he couldn't move quickly enough. Lightning kept talking, but Tibs stopped listening to the words. They simply marked the place the flash took place. He'd find the pattern.

There was always a pattern.

Tibs stopped. No matter how fast he moved, how he tried to anticipate where the flash would appear, he just wasn't fast enough. It was a wonder he wasn't out of breath at this point.

The voice stopped in time with Tibs groaning.

He'd done it again.

He'd treated this place as if it was the world he came from. Acted like he had a body, when all he was was essence.

"Your kind does like remaining locked in the way they think," Lightning mused, and that sounded odd to Tibs, with each word in a different place. "You are, then you are not, and yet, you act as you will always be."

Tibs spread himself, wary of the voice and the flash trying to avoid him.

It didn't.

The voice moved in and out of Tibs with the words, too fast for him to get a sense of the flash that accompanied it, but the more he spread, the longer the voice remained within 'him', and he made out nuances in the flash. The way it didn't disappear and appear in the other location, but moved there, so fast that even when it happened within Tibs, all he was left with was the faint trail it took.

It wasn't so much a flash as the concentration becoming noticeable before it moved on to the next location. As if it caught its breath before the next word and place. It zipped around him, never stopping.

Tibs wondered what he might do to make it stop. If he forced it to ponder an answer, would it remain in place long enough for him to make out where the shadow was?

Only now that he sensed it moving, it kept doing so even when silent. Zapping from place to place silently.

“Are you able to stop moving?” Tibs asked.

“Can a human stop breathing? Can it stop eating? Can it stop being?”

“We can do it for a little while. Well, I don’t know about being. I think that’s when we die.”

“So can I.”

“And this is how long you can stop, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“So this isn’t because you are testing me to be sure I deserve the shadow. This is just you... existing.”

“You deserve what comes by achieving it. We do not test; the way the word exists in your mind. We do not seek for you to fail or to succeed. We seek for you to understand.”

“Understand you?”

“Us, you, all.”

The sense he got of the element was very much that of the lightning that had sparked over his hand. Strands moving in many directions along a trunk that jumped from place to place. And within that trunk, the intensity varied, causing brightness and shadows, and there, he saw the one that didn’t vary like the others. It was simply carried along as Lightning moved.

Tibs concentrated his essence around it, and it melted within him. His core reserve grew, although he could no longer tell by how much. A new reserve formed, crackling with Lightning.

“So that’s all this is?” Tibs asked. “Me, understanding what you are so I can get the shadow.”

“Nothing is all there is. Everything is. It all continues to move, even once it stops.”

“That...” What else did he expect. Lightning was an element. Not everything would make sense. “I guess that’s it, then. I can go back now.”

* * * * *

Tibs staggered. His legs shook with the need to move, to run. He giggled. There was so much to do; that he could do. Where to start?

Here? No, there? No, of course not. Why bother with starting here, or there? He should start both, and all the others. Oh, he could do so much now. And he’d never stop. Do, do, do, and do some more.

A woman groaned.

He looked around, his gazed flitting from one thing to the next, a person, a lantern, a sword, something burned, a shield. Another person, broken glass and pottery. He couldn’t understand what he was seeing. It was all around him; he was in the middle of them, but he couldn’t get what it meant.

Did it matter?

No, of course not. He had too much to do; he needed to move and—

Stop!

The horror the mental command he gave himself caused nearly sent Tibs running. He couldn’t stop. To stop was the end. He needed to move, always move, and do! How could he think of stopping?

Tibs kept himself in place. Fought the growing terror.

He wasn’t the element.

With that understanding came the realization he was suffused with Lightning. How? That wasn’t important. Knowing that, it was simple to let it go.

He nearly collapsed from the loss of energy. He panted. Channeling Lightning had left him feeling like he’d run the city’s roofs from one end to the other, even if he was still where he’d stood when the lightning struck him.

Seven bodies were sprawled around him. Each singed and burned. Three were dead, their essence fading beyond Tibs’s ability to pull it back as he sensed them. The others were hurt, but their essence didn’t fade. They weren’t dying. They had no bleeding injuries, and their essence felt... he tried to work out what was different.

Each time someone’s essence wasn’t normal, it indicated an injury. It broke with the bones or something else inside. Tibs wasn’t interested in opening a body to find what matched to the essence then. It leaked out for something bleeding. It became corrupted with poison.

This was none of those. So it was an injury he’d never encountered before. He adjusted the essence, removing the... it was like Lightning has slipped within the essence, causing the edges to turn frazzled. He

smoothed the essence.

Lightning hurt, and pain meant it caused damage. He looked at the three no longer breathing. It could kill.

The flash of light and explosion of sound shook him. His vision cleared quickly and stone debris fell. All he could tell was that it wasn't the Brokerage that had been hit.

He'd done what he could for the injured, short of getting them to wake. He wasn't risking that. A guard might consider doing their job more important than letting the person who'd heal them go.

Running through the rain, he found the building that had been hit when he had to detour around the shattered tower. Halfway to the tavern, Tibs slipped into an unoccupied room, dried himself, and lit the lantern on the desk.

He reached into the bag, then reached deeper, groping around. When his shoulder was nearly in the bag and not touching anything, he considered putting his head in, to see where everything was, but remember Sto's admonition against doing that.

He didn't have that problem with his pouch. All he had to do was reached in and what he wanted was there. The only difference here was that he didn't know what he wanted. He'd counted on the feel of the paper to be enough. He envisioned a stack of them. There had been writing, and they had been bound by a leather strip.

His fingers touched something, and he pulled one bundle out.

He sat and unclasped the leather. The paper was undamaged, although the bag, as with what Tibs wore, was singed. It was the size of his two hands side by side. He couldn't read the words in the center of the papers, written over three lines. The edge of the page was decorated with loops and flowing lines. The page under it was the same as was the next and the next. The stack had two and seven pages.

He studied two of the pages side by side, looking for differences, and found none. There was no weave within the pages, but would magic used to make them leave such a trace? When Tibs filled a bowl with water, there was no weave within it, only the water. Could the same be done with something as complex as papers someone wrote on? And why so many copies?

He reached into the bag and pulled out two and two more. Some had a few pages less. And the third line varied from one bundle to the other, while always being the same within the bundle. In total, there were five variations on the third line. And of each, all but one bundle had two and seven pages in it. That lone bundle for each went from seven pages up to two and five.

Tibs had no idea what that meant, but it was curious.

Did he trust Archer to explain them to him?

He didn't trust the man at all.

Tibs hid one of each bundle of two and seven in his pouch, and put the rest back in the bag. Archer hadn't mentioned papers before, so he couldn't expect Tibs would take them, or how many he did.

Darran would tell him what they were once he was back in Kragle Rock. And the merchant wouldn't question how Tibs had acquired them. Not that he'd care about them being stolen.

Planning-55

Tibs dripped water on the already wet floor of the tavern as he crossed it to the stairs and into the room. With the door closed, he dried himself and placed the bag on the table before the archer.

The man looked Tibs over, frowning. "What happened?"

Tibs looked at himself. Right, his clothing was singed. "Thing didn't go according to plan, but I'm okay." He dropped on the bed. "I wouldn't do that." Archer was in the process of up-ending the bag. "There are a lot of coins in there."

Archer looked the bag over. "How much?" He weighed it with a hand.

Tibs shrugged. "I emptied the largest vault I found in it."

Archer reached in to his elbow and pulled out a handful of coins. He whistled. He dropped the coins back in and pulled out one of the bars. "How many of these?"

"I don't know. A few. What are they?"

"They're a way to carry a lot of money. Each bar will be worth stacks of the equivalent coins. Did you take some?"

Tibs shook his head. "The deal was you get the coins, I get to not have to deal with assassins anymore." It wasn't like Archer would miss the one bar of each type Tibs had kept.

The man nodded and reached into the bag again. This time pulling out a stack of the papers.

Tibs kept from asking how he'd done that. Tibs had had to imagine the papers, and by the stunned expression on the archer's face, he hadn't expected to pull that from the bag.

"What are they?"

Archer's eyes flicked up at Tibs, then back to the stack. "Didn't you check them?"

"I don't know those letters."

The man nodded. "They're just accounts of what they accumulated." He gave the explanation casually, but the words glowed. Tibs hadn't needed that to know it was a lie. He'd filled enough pages on his ledger to know that accounts didn't look as uniform as those pages did.

"How did you deal with the contracts?"

"I burned them."

"How did you know which one to burn if you can't read?"

"I burned everything in the safes of the room you told me."

Archer stared at him. "All of them? Did you burn down the building?"

"I couldn't; too much stone. And there was a lot of fire essence in the weave protecting it, so that might have stopped it. I just burned what was inside the safes. They got hot, but nothing else caught." He stretched. "I'm going to sleep."

The sound of coins dropping on the table accompanied his descent into sleep.

* * * * *

"Did you hear?" Sania asked, placing a bowl of stew and tankard of ale before Tibs and Archer. "Some thief tried to rob the Brokerage."

"Isn't there always one?" Archer asked before digging into his breakfast.

"But this one nearly got away. They say he made it to roof before the guards caught and killed him."

"Good for them," the man said dismissively, and Sania returned to the bar.

"I guess I can leave if they say I'm dead," Tibs said.

Archer shook his head, looking around. "They say that, so no one knows they were robbed. A place like that can't have anyone thinking they can steal from them."

Tibs chuckled. "They think I'm dead."

"How can you be sure?"

"I was hit by lightning."

"You what?" Archer snapped his mouth shut as others glanced in their direction. "How are you alive?" he whispered.

"Magic."

The archer opened his mouth, then closed it. When he looked at Tibs, it was with a large amount of respect, and a little of fear.

"So, we're done." Tibs scrapped the bottom of the bowl. "You have what you want. You won't threaten to tell the guild about me again?"

Archer nodded and Tibs had to be satisfied with the fear since he needed the words to know if he was lying. If the man showed up again, Tibs would deal with him.

He drained his tankard and stood.

"Tibs," the archer called as he walked away. When he looked over his shoulder, the man hesitated, then shook his head. Tibs left and went home.

* * * * *

"Where were you!" Jackal demanded, and before Tibs could answer, hugged tightly.

Tibs waited, suffusing himself with Earth to survive the crushing force.

"Your message just said you were leaving with that archer!" the fighter let go.

"He was watching me. I didn't have the time to write much."

"Where did he take you?" Jackal frown and ran a hand on Tibs's shoulder, then looked at it as if he expected something to have come off. "What happened?"

"It was a city." Tibs headed for their table, and Kroseph had a tankard and plate there for him before he sat.

"Welcome back. I'm glad you returned whole."

"Like Tibs was going to let some city be a problem," Jackal said. "Which city was it?"

"I don't know. I didn't understand the people there, but it's in your kingdom. Your father had business there."

Fear crossed the fighter's face. "Why did you go with him, Tibs?"

"He threatened to tell the guild I have more than one element. He saw me when I was chasing Sebastian with air. I couldn't control myself back then. He tried to stop me, I sent air to throw him off a roof. Then he saw me use fire."

"I'm going to kill him."

"It's over."

"You killed him?"

Tibs shook his head.

"Then he can come back... He will come back and demand more. They always do."

"If he comes back, I'll deal with him. But I don't think he will. He wanted to get out of all that. Out from your king's employ. He needed coins for that. He had me rob the place that was arranging for the assassins to come after me. So that's over too."

Jackal stared at Tibs. "There was a place that took care of that?"

"A place called the Brokerage. How did you think your father was making it happen?"

"I don't know. My father was the only one with his hand on the coffers. I figured he had someone send all the money to all the assassins in the kingdom. You trust him when he says that took care of the assassins?"

"He didn't lie when he explained what the Brokerage did, and where the contracts were kept. If it doesn't stop, it's because he was wrong, not because he tried to scam me." Tibs considered something. "What will your family do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will they try to avenge Sebastian? Will they pay assassins to come after me?"

"I don't think they'll bother avenging him. My father held his position as the head of the family through fear, intimidation, and removing those who got too close."

"Your father had his family killed?"

"Or killed them himself. He never saw our family as more than a means to maintain his status. Like I

told you, Wells either lead or follow. He wasn't going to follow anyone, so any who thought they could lead in his place weren't family anymore, just an obstacle to be removed. Any who might, somehow, have remained enamored with him as their leader is probably fighting over who's going to lead now that he's gone. When that's dealt with, I doubt they're going to have much money to spend on getting you killed. By the time all that chaos is settled, you're going to be even stronger. So if they send them, you'll be able to deal with them easily."

"I already can; they're just annoying."

"I still think we should go and deal with him before he decides to come back demanded more of you. Can you find out how long until the dungeon opens its door? I can find out where he took you from my man within the Attendants."

"Sto's too busy to talk when his making changes. And he was leaving that city, too. He wanted someplace quiet, and he'd got the coins to get anywhere he wants."

Jackal narrowed his eyes. "How much did you steal for him?"

Tibs grinned. "A lot."

"Did you keep some?"

Tibs's smile broadened.

"Are you going to share?" Jackal asked eagerly.

* * * * *

Tibs hesitated before the door. He'd come up with an unending number of things to do before he needed to handle this on his way, and more than once had almost given into using them as an excuse.

He knocked.

The door opened, and Don looked at him in surprise.

He looked better than Tibs expected. Well dressed, clean, and while small, the room he stayed in was respectable. Nothing like where he'd ended up hiding the last time they'd argued.

The surprise gave way to anger, annoyance, then was brought under control with a slow breath. "I'm glad you finally found time to come see me." The sorcerer stepped out of the way and motioned for Tibs to enter.

He fought against responding to the tone. "I was planning on coming sooner, but something happens."

"Yes, of course. You are busy, after all."

"Don," Tibs snapped as he turned to face the man, then kept his mouth shut while he brought his anger under control. "After Tirania told me the dungeon was closed, I was accosted and blackmailed into leaving Kragle Rock."

"How?" Don asked, concern in his voice.

"They know I have more than one element. They threatened to tell the guild if I didn't help them."

"How do they know?" he asked, suspicious.

"When this started, I was affected by the element I channeled. I started acting like them, and that caused me to be careless. He was one of the men protecting Sebastian when we chased him out of the city. He saw me use air and fire."

"You could have said you had items."

Tibs shrugged. "I'm just Rho, as far as the guild's concerned. How do I get the kind of items that do that and they don't know about it? And he wanted me to steal. I can do that. So it was simpler to just go and help him. I managed to let Jackal know, and I hoped he'd tell you."

"I haven't spent time with the team."

Tibs nodded. Jackal had told him that much when Tibs had asked where Don was. He'd been forced to trek to the noble's quarter to find out.

"Mez knew."

Don sighed and sat on the bed, indicating the chair as the desk. "Mez's got it in his head to look out for me. Don't ask me why."

Tibs glanced at the books stacked on the desk as he sat. Had Don bought all of them? Borrowed?

"You didn't tell Tirania."

"Did you think I would betray you like that?" There was a hint of anger in the tone.

Tibs looked at the floor. "When I'm angry, I'll lash out. Make the other person hurt, too."

"And you thought I'd do that too?"

"Don—"

"Of course you did." The tone was resigned this time. "I'm the one who abandoned you for Sebastian's

men to kill. I went out of my way to make your life miserable more times than I can count. I'd be an idiot to think that after a few runs at your side, after a few months as part of your team, I'd have earned that kind of trust. I almost did. Tell her I mean."

Tibs nodded. "Why didn't you?"

"Because, as I waited for her to have the time to see me, I calmed down enough to remember the things I just mentioned. That this was exactly what I'd do before joining your team. Who I no longer wanted to be." He chuckled. "So we got lucky. I know, that's not a thing. It's still how it feels. If she hadn't been so busy that day, I would have gone back to being that petty asshole who's more interested in his hurt feelings than the justification behind why someone felt they weren't ready to tell me everything they could do."

Tibs wasn't sure how to proceed. He hadn't expected this to be a fight, but also not for Don to accept his actions.

"What do you want to know?" he finally asked.

Don chuckled. "What don't I want to know? Tibs, do you understand how impossible what you did is. What I think I've worked out you can do is? I want to know how it happened, why you, what else don't I know?" The sorcerer became agitated, and Tibs couldn't help imagine lightning coursing through his body.

"I don't know a lot of the answers. I don't know why me. When I had my audience, there was a shadow within Water and I reached for that instead of taking her as my element. I've only been able to find one other person who saw it, but they still chose the element."

Don's gaze became distant. "I don't remember something like that. Do you know why the two of you saw it? Do they have Water too?"

Tibs shrugged. "They don't have Water."

"And that shadow, it gave you all these elements?"

"No. I had to have audiences for each of them."

"You can't have more than one audience, certainly not with another element."

Tibs grinned. "Who told you that?"

"My... right, why should I trust everything the guild tells me." He studied Tibs. "You have Corruption, don't you? That time I tried to hurt you with it, you didn't react immediately. It's always bothered me that you'd been able to resist the pain even that short time, but it didn't actually hurt you, did it?"

Tibs shook his head.

"Sebastian's house, that was you?"

Tibs nodded.

"How? I figured it was me, that I'd somehow caused a reaction within the weave, but that was because I'm the only one with Corruption. How did you manage to throw so much essence into the weave?"

"My reserve is big."

Don nodded. "It gets larger as we become stronger."

"No, each time I get a new element, my reserve increases by the size of that reserve."

"So you have a full reserve for each of your element. That's what I... that isn't what you mean?"

"I have one big reserve, along with really small ones for each of the elements."

"You have one reserve. And it's the size of each reserve for the elements you have combined? Which element is it, then? And why the small reserves?"

Tibs let go of Water, and Don stared. "If I'm not channeling an Element, it's an element that... that Sto calls life."

"Who's Sto? No, let's leave that for later. What are you talking about? Life as an element? That isn't a thing."

"Everyone has it. In the townsfolk, it's thin. If there's a crowd of them, it's difficult to tell them apart. If a Runner's among them, they're all I can sense."

"And Runners have it too?"

"In Runners it's different. It's colored by your element. I can sense it's life, but I 'see' is tinted. Like with you, it's purple. Jackal's it's red-brown, Mez, it's red-orange, Khumdar it's black. It matches the Runner's element."

"So a Runner's essence is composed of our element and that..."

Tibs shook his head. "It's not the same. I can sense your element coursing through your body. When you use it, I can sense it pull out of your reserve and moving about." Tibs paused as Don's essence poured out of his reserve and filled specific lines. "I can tell you're filling your channels. What does it do?"

"Nothing yet. This is an exercise to strengthen them. I've read the theory, but my teacher won't

confirm any of it. Something about not letting what I know prejudice what I can do.”

“You can do anything.”

“No, our element limits what we can do.”

“No. It changes how it’s done, but if someone does something, you can to the equivalent with your element.”

“How do you know? If that something with having all the elements?”

“It’s something I noticed, and my teacher sort of confirmed it. He made it so no one could listen in on our talk, but how does water do that? It’s more of an air thing, right? It’s how the weave is made, how the letters are used within it.”

“Alright, but filling my channels with my element isn’t the same thing. That creates a specific effect. It’s documented. I’ve read books about it.”

“Okay, what if they’re wrong?”

“No. They wouldn’t write them if they thought they were wrong.”

“What if they don’t know they’re wrong?”

“They spend years researching the subject. They’ve worked out all the mistakes.”

“How many years has your teacher used his essence? How many ways does he use it from another adventurer with Corruption? Maybe you haven’t met enough. Did he tell you that an amulet works like a reserve?”

“Yes, I can pull from one when I need more essence. It’s why sorcerers have so many.”

“How do you refill it?”

Don frowned. “It happens over time. It absorbed the essence that’s around us.”

“Did you try pushing some of your essence into it?”

“That isn’t how it works.”

“According to who?”

“Everyone.”

“No me.”

Don went to a chest and rummaged through it. He pulled a small amulet and closed his fist around it. Tibs sense the essence flow from the sorcerer’s reserve and into the amulet. Don’s cursing was loud and colorful.

“Why would he hold that back from me? Do you have any idea the times having an extra amulet would have made handling the dungeon easier? Have two dozen in there I can’t use because they’re recharging.”

“I don’t think he kept it from you. When I showed that to my teacher, he was surprised. He’d never thought about it because he’s not a sorcerer, but if he’d know sorcerers who know about it, wouldn’t he have learned? Even if he didn’t think it was something a rogue could use?”

“You’re saying that even a sorcerer doesn’t know we can use our essence to refill an amulet?”

“Why would your teacher keep something this important from you if he knew about it?”

Planning-56

“Sit down,” Don instructed.

“I don’t think we should do this here.”

Don’t had been away from the town for three days after their talk, to do some reading, he’d said. As soon as he returned, he’d informed Tibs he was ready to assist him in gaining control over his latest elements.

Working on that in Don’s room hadn’t been where Tibs expected his training to continue.

“Just sit down, Tibs.”

“I told you how destructive I can be when I’m channeling a new element.”

“Yes, which is why we’re not doing that today.”

“I thought this was training.”

“You’re thinking of it wrong. You have from the start.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the sorcerer, but sat. “Don, I think I’ve been dealing with this long enough to know more about how to do this than you.”

Don smirked. “You know more about throwing yourself out of windows and off roofs, too. Doesn’t mean that’s the best way to reach the ground.”

“I didn’t tell you about that to be mocked.”

“Sorry, it’s just amusing to me how you seem to cause the problem first and then try to deal with handling it.”

“And how should I go about dealing with something I didn’t even know would happen?”

“But you do know what will happen.”

“No, I don’t. Once I channel Lightning, I’m going to need to move, to go places, do everything. I don’t know I’m going to do with the essence, but I know I’m going to destroy something.” He motioned around. “I turned the inside of warehouses into kindling trying to control an element. What?” he asked, exasperated at the smile.

“You just said what it was you need to deal with, and how you waiting until after the problem started to deal with it. And why warehouses? Seems like the dungeon is a better place.”

“I... I’ll explain that part during our next run. It’s going to be too complicated to do here. But it’s not like I can go in anytime I want. The runs happened once a week.”

“That shows how you aren’t going at it the right way.”

Tibs breaks slow and long before talking. “Fine. How should have I gone about it?”

“You really want to insult me right not, don’t you?”

“You are kind of rubbing your ‘I know so much more than you do’ in my face, so yeah, insulting you is temping.”

“Sorry.” Don’s grin didn’t help. “But I do know more than you.”

“Don.”

“Why are you waiting until after you’re out of control to try to gain control?”

“How else am I going to do it?”

“The same was you didn’t insult me. The same way you’re not in the guild right now, trying to burn it down right now.”

“I can’t do it. There’s too much magic protecting it.”

“But you want to.”

"But I can't!"

"You could try, then deal with the consequences."

"Don. I know you're trying to get me to understand something about how that's about my training, but I don't get it."

"You're exercising control before the fact."

"Because I know that to try it isn't going to do anything. Channeling a new element is the only way to figure out how to control it."

"No, it isn't."

"Don, I've tried—"

"It's all emotions, Tibs. That's what the element does to you. He increases one of your emotions past what you're used to."

"Which is why I have to channel the element so I'll experience it and figure out that how to handle it. It's not like I experience anything like that otherwise."

"I've seen you angry, Tibs. You don't need an element to experience being out of control."

"And do you know hard it is to control that?"

"I have an idea, yes. More importantly, you don't fly off in a rage at the slightest insult. You know how to control it before it happens."

"Not always."

Don nodded. "But most of the time, we're able to stand by Tirania as she spews the lies of how great the guild is without immediately stabbing her in the heart."

"Okay, but I had to work at it. Just like I have to work at controlling Metal and Lightning."

"But you can do that first."

"How? How can I learn to control something I'm not experiencing?"

Don leaned forward. "There's this set of belief out of the Kingdom of Terrobor that we have grown apart from the elements. They mean we as everyone. They believe that even people who don't have an element are connected to them. That our emotions come from them. And we lose control of them when one element gets too strong in our lives. I came across a passage about them years ago, when I was trying to decide what I would focus on as a scholar." He chuckled. "I'd read everything back then. I went back and read more about their beliefs."

"Okay. The elements I talk with say they don't influence people like that."

"Except you. But that they are right or not doesn't matter."

"I'd think it does."

"No, because in believing what they do, they worked out exercises that allow them better control over how they act and who they are."

"That sounds like... something a bard would sing about."

Don snorted. "It's not worth their time. There's no big adventure caused by someone controlling their emotions. Although maybe you can change that."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I'd rather not have bards out there singing about me. I'm a rogue. Being known isn't a good thing." He considered the implication of what Don said. "So, those exercises will let me regain control once the element overwhelms me?"

"No. The method. Which they call Oneness, is about learning to identify the moment when you go from one emotion to the other, so that you can decide if that's what you want to feel, instead of it happening without your decision."

"They think I can decide to be sad, or happy, or angry?"

"You already do, to a lesser degree than they think you can."

Tibs shook his head. "That's not how it works. Emotions just happen and I learn to cope with them."

"You've learned to see your anger approaching and take steps to keep it from taking over."

"Because I don't have a choice. I'm the one who destroyed what's Market Place now. I was so angry Sebastian was escaping I didn't care what burned along with him. Only he got away and I killed a lot of people."

"I thought he'd done that. Some magic to cover his escape."

"Jackal spread that story so no one would wonder how it happened."

"And it isn't fire that made you uncontrollably angry? That was before you controlled it, right?"

"Fire doesn't make me angry. He makes what I'm feeling more so. I was already filled with rage. I knew what would happen if I channeled fire. I just didn't care."

Don was silent. "I'm sorry."

Tibs nodded.

"But it does show you can make a choice. You learned it as a consequence of what you did, but you learned. The belief of Oneness says that if we learn to recognize those moments with all our emotions, we can learn to make that choice each time."

"Don, I don't think that because some people believe they can control how they feel that it means it's real."

"All right. Then tell me what you have to lose by trying it."

* * * * *

Tibs walked through Market Place, fuming.

Breathing.

He'd spent a fucking hour breathing because those Oneness people said that by listening to his breathing, he could learn to recognize his emotion and control them. Well, he was annoyed. He recognized it, and he fucking wanted to feel it.

It seemed that what he had to lose in trying that stuff was time.

Something he already had little of already. He should be at the inn right now, going over the papers to make sure the merchants weren't using the dungeon being closed as an excuse to short him. Or rather, which ones were doing it. But he wanted to be annoyed right now and that wouldn't be conducive to getting work done. So here I was, pacing Market Place, enjoying candies.

Well, trying to enjoy them. Crushing and swallowing them in annoyance made that short-lived.

"Don't tell me what I can't do!" A punch followed the scream and Quigly staggered back.

Tibs took a step to help his friend and stop as Cross stomped into view.

"I think I have a say in the matter," the warrior said, rubbing his jaw.

"The only thing you get to say is how the fuck it happened. I've taken precautions!"

Tibs turned around. He wasn't getting in the middle of that.

* * * * *

Darran looked through the pages carefully. He even raised one to the window for the light to hit the back and searched for something. "How many did you say you have?"

"Five stacks of two and seven. But they aren't the same from one stack to the other. What are they?"

The merchant looked at the page in the light before putting it down. "These are Promises."

"What do they promise?"

"This one—" he tapped it, "—promises that whoever brings it to the coffers of the Kingdom of Arliase, they will be given ten bars of platinum."

"Okay." Tibs hesitated. Platinum was a type of coin and Archer had said a bar was worth stacks of that coin. "How much is a bar of platinum worth?"

Darran laughed. "Tibs, remember how you were afraid the guild would own you forever because they charge you three gold each time you train with your teacher?"

"I wasn't afraid. I was angry."

The merchant waved the comment aside. "You don't have to worry about that anymore. A few of those Promises will pay everything you owe. The moment you reach Epsilon, you will be free."

Not that he planned on waiting that long.

"I'd think you'd be happier about it."

"I guess it's too much for me to understand."

Darran studied him. "I guess it can be." He handed him the page back. "Keep that safe. It can be used by anyone who takes it. It's why I expect those you took it from had it well guarded."

"They're in the safest place in town."

"Which is?"

Tibs chuckled and handed the page back. "You can have that one."

Darran stepped away. "Tibs, I couldn't."

"Why not?" he asked, suspicious.

"I'm a simple merchant. I couldn't take this from you."

"You could if you wanted to. Or is it that I'm giving it, and not that you're taking it, which bothers you?"

Darran's smile was small and quickly hidden. "Well, if you insist." A quick motion and the page was out of Tibs's fingers and vanished within the layers of the merchant's clothing.

“When I’ll want to use one of them. Can you handle that, or do I need to go to that kingdom?”

“If you need so much money, it might be best to simply hand one of them to the person you’re paying. Just make sure they don’t know you have more.”

“What if I need to pay many people?”

“Are you planning on taking over a kingdom?”

Tibs shrugged. “I’m just trying to understand what I can do.”

“You can do anything you want.” Darran exclaimed.

Tibs wished that was true.

Planning-57

“Gur, when use with Water essence, without any other letters, adds and element etherealness to it, that—”

“Ethera...?” Tibs couldn’t work out the rest of how to say it.

“Etherealness,” Alistair repeated slowly. “It’s... The ethereal is the... space in which essence is. It’s what is between essence.”

“Isn’t that air?”

His teacher shook his head. “First, remember I’m a rogue and not a scholar. What I’m telling you is what I remember being told. I expect I had that same confused expression then, so I might be wrong about some of this. Air is an element. The elements exist outside what we consider real, but they are still connected to the real, somehow. That is the Ethereal. It’s also part of everything around us, even if we can’t sense it. Scholars things that—”

Tibs raised his hand. “I’m getting a headache. I’ll ask a scholar if I want to know more.”

“When.” Alistair chuckled as Tibs’s frown. “When you want to know more. Your curiosity is never ending. It’s just a question of time until you decide to learn more about it.”

“Unless my mind breaks before that.”

“I’m confident it is strong enough to take in everything you feed it.”

“My headache says no, it’s not.” Tibs rubbed his temple. “What does this etherealness do with water?”

Alistair nodded. “You have seen mist and fog?”

“Some morning when there’s a lot of water essence in the air, it does something and becomes fog.”

“Something?”

Tibs closed his eyes and thought back, trying to remember what the essence had felt like. He released essence around him and moved it, brought it closer and tighter until it coalesced into beads suspended in the air. A little more and those beads touched one another. He opened his eyes, and the room was filled with a thin mist.

“This.”

“This is like etherealness.” Alistair moved a hand and wisps moved on the current.

“Then why do I want to use a letter if I can do it like that?”

The essence was pulled out of his control and the fog became a ball of water, which Alistair handed to him. Once he absorbed it, Tibs watched as his teacher’s hands moved between them. Water essence trailing his fingers, etching threads and a letter between them. It happened too fast for him to make out details. Once done, a wall of water separated them.

He touched it. The water was solid. He pushed against it and it resisted.

“That doesn’t seem like how you described ‘etherealness.’”

Alistair reached through the water and grabbed Tibs’s wrist before he could react. The water essence hadn’t changed as Alistair’s hand moved.

In such a wall, if Tibs had made it, the essence would have parted as his hand moved, but the strands were still there, going through his teacher’s forearm. When Alistair pulled on his wrist, Tibs’s hand connected with the water and stopped.

“Using Gur lets you set conditions for when or what it will react to. By itself, those will be simple. Right now, it’s letting my arm through because I added Gur to the essence within it so it would ‘recognize’ it. But combining it with other letters, on top of altering the precise result of what it will do, you can make it so that someone without essence can pass through.”

Tibs thought about the enchantment that permeated the guild. "Like having a security enchantment ignore someone with a specific key?"

"Exactly. Many broad enchantment will be created with such a key in mind, especially if more than the group who created it needs to pass through it."

"Like the way I get lost in the building. Do you have a key for it?"

Alistair took a medallion out of a pouch. It looked like the one he'd stolen.

"Shouldn't it be secret? What if I take it from you?"

"I'd like to see you accomplish that." The medallion was back in the pouch. "But then, you'd be able to walk around the guild without getting lost."

"And I could cause trouble."

Alistair nodded. "And then you'd get caught, put in a cell. Depending on the kind of trouble you caused, you'd either get reprimanded, or branded." He tapped his left wrist.

"So... I should make sure I don't get caught."

Alistair laughed. "Tibs, you'd get caught before you even started. The guild keeps an eye on anyone they think will cause them trouble. The moment they seem ready to act, they are stopped."

Tibs nodded. He wouldn't be able to have a trial run. Once he figured out how to get the big guild leader here, he'd have to act.

The wall of water dissipated. "Now, how about we forget any plans to rob the guild, and focus on working with Gur?"

* * * * *

Tibs walked through the crowd, paying attention to how he felt with each step.

He felt stupid; that was how he felt.

It was one thing to sit and listen to his breathing and pay attention to his emotions at the same time. But Don had instructed him to continue doing that the rest of the time. And that was just stupid.

He didn't have the time to pay attention to how he felt when he was out and about. It kept distracting him from reaching into a heavy-looking pocket, as he noticed he felt some guilt about it. He was just a copper, and the person was dressed well enough they wouldn't miss it. But by the time he'd worked that out, the opportunity had passed.

Or he'd end up with a copper in his fingers, having forgotten he was supposed to pay attention to how he felt.

It was all so much of a bother.

He was supposed to enjoy walking through the bazaar.

The merchants had arrived the day before, and while the crowd had been initially light, with so many runners out of the town, along with those who could afford to travel while the dungeon was closed, the travel platform had disgorged people all of today, filling Market Place with so many pockets for Tibs to choose from.

If he didn't get lost in realizing he'd felt pity for the person he'd chosen not to pick the pocket of. And why had he felt like that? Why has the fraying end of the coat made him think he should give them a pass when that coat was worth more than many families in the town earn in a year? Then debating with himself if he should or shouldn't pick the pocket specifically because he'd felt pity and...

Thinking about was he did was so much bother!

It was much simpler to just do it.

He hated the way Don was training him.

He reached in the pocket for a candy and didn't find any. Well, he had done one thing without thinking. He'd eaten all the candies he'd bought.

He rolled the copper in his hand. He could certainly buy more.

* * * * *

"No."

"Tibs." Don's tone was that Alistair used when he acted like he was being patient with Tibs's stubbornness.

"I said no. It's not doing anything."

The sorcerer's sigh was cut, as if he'd realized he hadn't meant to show his annoyance, and Tibs considered that a victory. "It's only been two weeks since we started. You can't expect results after only that short of a time."

"I can learn to Etched in a few days!" a quick, needless, motion had a sheet of water colliding with Don, then pouring over him the way he'd watch the artisan form soft candies at the bazaar on the last day they

were there.

“Really?” The sorcerer’s voice was muffled as water slowly wrapped around him. “Isn’t this childish, even for you?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You want me to show you what else I learned in a few days and leave you encased in this until the dungeon’s open again?”

“I want you to be a Runner and not a child.”

Tibs startled at the intonation of child. It was the way Mez said it when he used it to describe when someone acted in a way unbecoming of the kind of noble he aimed to be.

“I am not a child,” Tibs said through clenched teeth. Don simply looked at him, his face distorted by the sheet of water. With an angry gesture, Tibs undid the etching. “Don’t ask me how I feel.”

“I don’t have to; it’s quite apparent.” He motioned to the space on the floor. “How about we sit and breathe?”

Tibs thought of a bunch of nasty reply to throw in the sorcerer’s face. But he was simply angry out of frustration, and that wasn’t Don’s fault. He took a breath, let it out as he sat and crossed his legs, then slowly inhaled.

Don was doing this to help him. He didn’t have to. He was doing it because he wanted to. The least Tibs owed him in return was to give it his best effort, as he did with everything.

* * * * *

The string of curse that left Don’s mouth as he walked in circle, holding the arm Jackal had tapped, surprised Tibs. He hadn’t known the sorcerer knew quite that level of foul language.

“You didn’t have to hit me so hard.”

“I didn’t.”

“You nearly dislocated my shoulder!”

“I could have ripped it off.”

Don stared at the fighter. “And what would that accomplish?” he glared at Tibs. “You put him up to this, didn’t you?”

“Tibs has nothing to do with it,” Jackal said. “You’re too comfortable standing at the back and lobbing essence.”

“I’m a sorcerer. It’s what I do.”

“And cower.”

“Jackal,” Mez snapped as Don paled.

The fighter looked at them, confused. “What? When that Ratling managed to make it to him in that fight the last time we were in the dungeon, all he could do was wail in pain.”

“Those swords hurt!” Anger was helping Don get over how Jackal’s words had made him react.

“It’s a creature trying to kill you,” Jackal replied. “I’d hope getting poked by a sword hurts.”

“Then how about you make sure none of them reach me!”

“I can’t do that,” Jackal replied. “Which is why you have to get used to staying focused even, especially when you’re in pain.”

“So you’re going to break all my limbs until I learn?”

“Tibs will heal you,” Jackal said dismissively, then looked at Tibs. “You have told him you can do that, right? I’m not revealing something you’re keeping secret from him, right?”

“Yes, Tibs told me.” Don lowered the arm.

“Good. Then let’s go again.”

“Why in the abyss are you doing this to me now when we could have started softer earlier?”

“You weren’t talking to us when the dungeon closed,” Jackal replied as he swiped at the sorcerer.

Don stepped out of the way. “It’s more than none of you came looking.”

Another swipe. “We were respecting that Tibs was pissed at you. You could have come and spoken to more than Mez.”

“And have you punch me in the face?” another easy dodge. “No, thank you.”

“Then—” Punch, evade, “—you started training Tibs and I figure you two needed the time.” Punch, punch, punch.

Don blocked and was cursing again.

“And it’s been over a month since the dungeon closed its door. I figure we’re in the last weeks or days before we go in again.”

“So you’re going to main me.”

“So I’m going to make sure you don’t die. Tibs doesn’t like it when people on our team die.”

“The way you’re hurting me, I’m going to want to die.”

“Then you’re going to want to get over that. If you die, Tibs is going to kick you. I punch in the face.”

Jackal grinned. “He kicks lower.”

“And you can’t turn that to stone,” Tibs added. “Unlike him.”

Don looked from Jackal to Tibs. “I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

“Don’t die, and you won’t have to find out,” Tibs replied.

“I can easily not die if I’m not writhing in pain,” Don stated.

“That’s the problem. You have to not die even if you are in pain, Don. You can’t depend on us to keep you safe.”

“That’s your role as the fighter.”

“And I do my best, but there will be fights where we all end up taking hits, and right now, you’re too scared of being hurt to keep fighting. So I’m going to get you used to pain so that when we go back, a sword poking out of your side is going to feel like your girl scratching you where you like it.”

“I’m concerned that you think I’d ever equate getting stabbed to something pleasurable.”

“It’s all relative, Don. The more pain I inflict on you today, the less that sword is going to feel like pain tomorrow.”

“I think this is more about you getting back at me for what I did to your hand the first time we crossed path.”

The smile Jackal gave the sorcerer was feral. “Now, why does it have to be one *or* the other?”

Don glanced at Tibs. “Tell me you can revive the dead.”

“No, but I won’t have to.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Jackal knows what I’ll do to him if he kills you.”

“I’m still going to be dead.”

“He needs that part of his body more than he might want to kill you.”

Don shook his head. “I swear. You two as the strangest pair I’ve ever encountered.”

“He’s the little brother I never got the chance to have torture me,” Jackal said, then advanced on the sorcerer.

Planning-58

Tibs observed the crowd gathered at the foot of the steps. The Runners were in teams, with the nobles keeping their distances. Unlike the previous times, there were no new arrivals. The few who weren't Runners were townfolk.

It felt strange for the guild to be satisfied with the fewer teams at the reopening of the dungeon.

The woman who stood on the steps was a clerk of some sort; or at least, she wasn't a guard. Her pants looked to be a finer fabric than the rough type Tibs wore when he wasn't required to be on display. Her shirt was even more fine. It might be silk, but the sheen on it.

And she had an element; Water.

"Welcome back," she announced with a smile. "I'm glad to see we didn't lose anyone this time."

"Really?" Quigly mutters. "What happened? No one else wanted to deal with us this time?"

"As you can tell," she continued cheerfully, "the dungeon has reopened its door. This means the fourth floor is now accessible, for those of you strong enough to clear the third floor."

"Been there," Quigly's rogue said, "done that. Don't even have the scars to prove it."

"Now that the dungeon is Lambda, there will be some changes to how the runs proceed."

"No, really?" Don said. "How will we ever deal with it?"

"The first one is that clerics will be joining us. Any Rho and stronger teams will be allowed to switch out one of their two Runners occupying the same role. No team will be required to do so, but remember that the dungeon is only getting stronger and a healer at your side will make a difference, even if they won't be fighting."

Mutters spread.

The two archers on Quigly's team studied each other before looking at their team leader, who shook his head.

"If you chose not to take one on at this time, you will have to take one on when one of those two Runners dies."

"Not if," Mez said.

"The dungeon will be eating a lot of us on the fourth floor," Don said.

"Which makes me wonder why the guild didn't bring anyone new," Jackal replied, looking at the sorcerer.

"I never looked into guild procedures. Especially once I got stuck here. I didn't want to know the details of what waited for me."

"The second change is that going forward, you will have to decide which floor you run, and only run that one. The exception is if you clear it for the first time, you are welcome to attempt the next one. You can only request a floor for which you have unlocked the doorway."

"Is there anyone left at Omega?" Quigly asked Tibs, who shook his head. There were three Upsilon teams, the bulk was Rho, with seven teams who had enough members at Lambda to qualify, but if teams were classed by the floor they could access, then until one of them unlocked the fourth floor, no team was Lambda.

"So, no one's running the first floor anymore?"

"It may be possible they count on some of the Upsilon teams to not feel ready to brave the second floor," Khumdar said.

"The schedule will be divided by floors. With teams on the lower floors being accorded more time to clear it."

"If they give us less than half the day to clear the third floor," Jackal said, "you need to have a talk with the guild leader, Don."

"Why me? She likes Tibs better."

"You're less likely to kick her in the shins," the fighter replied.

"I'm not going to kick her," Tibs said. "I need her to like me."

"Which is why Don should be the one to speak with her," Mez said. "So she doesn't anger you enough, you will."

"I expect that after this announcement, you are wondering why there are so few of you here."

"I was wondering that before you spoke, bitch," Markel said. "He was Quigly's latest sorcerer. The previous one had gotten into an argument with his leader that had resulted in being kicked off the team."

"Going forward, the guild will accept anyone interested in running the dungeon."

"Who can pay for it," Don muttered.

"And right now, representatives are in many other cities, explaining the procedure for those who seek to improve their lives."

"A silver not one of them's going to mention how easily the dungeon's going to eat anyone new," Quigly said.

"That's a sucker's bet," Jackal replied. "Why do you think they kept going to the cells for Runners? No one in their right mind wants to run a dungeon."

"Please be considerate of those new Runners. They will be your compatriots until you reach Epsilon."

"You're going to have your hands full helping them, Tibs," Josaco said.

"That's why you're going to be helping," Tibs replied, and the archer's team chuckled.

"These civilian Runner teams will be added to the schedule after yours until that week is filled. You are the guild's Runners, so you have priority. You can also change which floor you intend to run at any time, and you will be placed after the last guild team in that week."

"Like anyone wants to do any other floor than the lowest one," Jackal said.

"Actually," Don mused, "depending how the scheduling is arranged, I can think of a few situations where it could be to a team's advantage to hope floors."

"Care to explain?" Jackal asked.

"Not until I see how they'll structure it. They might have thought about it and made arrangements to keep us from doing what I have in mind." He considered something. "And it might not be worthwhile until we have unlocked the fourth floor."

"That will be all," she announced. "Tell the representatives what floor your team wants to do and the schedule will be up tomorrow."

"We aren't going first?" Jackal asked, disappointed.

"It's not like it makes a difference," Quigly said. "My team's still going to be the first one on the fourth floor."

"Not if we go before you." The fighter grinned.

"There's no way you clear the third floor the first time you're back in."

"I have a gold that says we will."

"Jackal," Tibs warned.

"It's my gold, Tibs. I can double it any way I want."

"I'm with Tibs," Mez said.

"You should listen to you team, Jackal. I'd hate to take that kind of money from you."

"No, you wouldn't, and you don't have to worry about feeling bad, because it's not going to happen."

"Alright, whoever gets on the fourth floor first gets a gold from the other team's leader."

"And I'm so glad you changed the win conditions, because now there's no way I'm losing."

Quigly laughed. "We already cleared the floor. It's just going to be more of the same for us."

"Then, may the better team win."

* * * * *

Tibs's name was the first for the third floor on the schedule.

"Is anyone surprised?" Mez asked. "I wonder how pissed the nobles are."

"Tirania told them she didn't care how they felt the first time she did this," Tibs said. "We're going in three days." That was when the week began. Three teams went in per day, five for the second floor, and ten for the first. There were no names listed for the first floor. The teams for the third floor stretched to half of the next week.

"You think we get added right at the end once we're done?" Jackal asked.

"They're going to fill the week with those civilian teams," Don replied. "I think we'll go after them if they aren't enough to complete that week."

"Which there won't be," Mez said. "No one's Upsilon or above that isn't part of the guild."

"Kings' knights," Quigly said, joining them at the board. "Achieving knighthood is arduous enough. Some have been known to gain an element. The guild stopped trying to take them away from the kings a long time ago." He chuckled at the suspicious look Tibs gave him. "I planned on dethroning a king. I did my research. Fortunately for me, he didn't have any of those knights. It would have been a quick war if he'd had even one."

"But they're still Upsilon," Mez said, "and they are going to have to go through the first and second floor to unlock the third even if they higher."

"Some will be," Don said. "And it's possible the guild will assign those a guide who already knows how to unlock it. They'll learn and be able to go to a lower floor."

"That's cheating," Jackal said.

"It's the guild," Don said. "It's only cheating if it isn't them doing it, or they haven't been paid enough to ignore it."

"It doesn't matter," Tibs said. "We get to go first, so it's only going to be eight other teams before we're back on the schedule."

* * * * *

Kragle Rock felt like the Bazaar had just set up.

The merchants had put up booths around the transportation platform and were selling to the people who stepped off it. Some booths had merchants Tibs had never seen before. Even Darran had one where he displayed his wares and groups stopped by to look at the armor and knives and swords, and other things a Runner might need.

By the way so many groups had five people within them, Tibs couldn't believe so many of them had believed whatever lies they'd been told. Did they all think they could survive the first floor?

Should he tell them the danger they'd put themselves in? Would it do anything other than annoy Tirania? Would they believe him? Should he try to help them survive? What could he even do to help them?

"You look about to jump off the abyss."

Tibs jumped, and Cross raised an eyebrow.

"The day I sneak up on a rogue is a day he's in trouble." She considered. "What have you done?"

"Nothing. And I'm offended you think I did anything."

"I know you did something. You're Tibs Light Fingers. The bards are going to sing of how you were always up to something that baffled the guards."

"Bards aren't going to sing about me."

She shrugged. "You never know. You might turn out to be some famous adventurer when your time here's done. I'll be able to tell all my friends how I know the Light Fingers when he was a little boy just this tall." She placed a hand on his head.

He batted it away. "I'm always going to be just this tall. The denser our essence is, the less we grow up." And Tibs essence was quite dense. He figured that if the guild had a way of telling that, and went by that to assign ranks, he'd already be past Epsilon.

"So, what's got you contemplating finding out how long it takes to reach the bottom of the abyss?"

Tibs motions around them. "They're all going to die."

"Not all of them."

He glared at her. "What did the guild tell them to convince them to throw away their lives like that? They aren't Street. They aren't desperate. Why are they here?"

Cross put fingers to her mouth and whistled shrilly. Everyone looked in her direction had she pointed to a group of five who looked to be near Jackal's age. Three girls and two guys. She motioned for them to approach and the lead-girl said something Tibs didn't understand.

Cross spoke with them in the same language. Here and there words had light on them, usually accompanied by the girl snapping something, which made Cross smile. When they left, it was with a dismissive and rude gesture.

"They were told the usual," Cross said.

"What's that?" he asked when she didn't elaborate. "I was taken from a cell, remember? They didn't bother telling me anything other than to go in there and die."

“They were told that they could have adventures and wealth, if they were willing to work hard for it.”

“And they believed it?”

“Oh yeah. When I pointed out they might be getting conned, she got particularly snippy.” Her shake of the head was sad. “A lot of people want to think all it takes to get out of whatever’s wrong in their lives is a little adventure, some hard work. The bards don’t help all that much with how they’re always singing the good stories. Not the ones where everyone dies. Those who didn’t believe the guild recruiters went on with their lives.”

“But there are so many of them here!”

She studied him. “Tibs, these people, these would be Runners are from all over the lands. I can make out six different languages just standing here. Do you understand just how large the lands are, how many realms are in them? Those you see represent a number so small compared to those who didn’t come, I doubt their cities will even notice they left.”

Tibs tried to understand how anyplace could be so large that someone who wasn’t street leaving would go unnoticed. Jackal had mentioned it happened among the people who worked for his father, but he’d always said that they assumed they died. So in a way they’d noticed.

“You also need to understand that desperation doesn’t look the same for everyone. For some, it’s screaming and clawing at everything until they get what they need. For others, it’s dressing and acting normal as they crumble inside. I’m not saying they’re all desperate. I expect most of them are just gullible. But for some, this will be worth the danger to escape what they were in.”

“How can I tell who those are?”

Her laugh was bitter. “Magic? I don’t know Tibs. Some you’ll see it on their face. Others won’t admit to it even if you put a knife to their throat. People are strange that way. Claiming one thing, acting another.” She moved her hand off her stomach with a suddenness that made Tibs think she hadn’t meant to put it there. “Anyway. I have to go back to making sure no one tries anything.” She stepped away and looked over her shoulder. “That means you too, Tibs. I better not catch you trying anything.”

“Don’t worry,” he called back. “You won’t catch me.”

* * * * *

The group at the table by the door was loud, but jovial. By the way they dressed, Tibs wanted to call them nobles, but they had casualness in sitting among the townsfolk that kept him from doing so. One of them, a tall man in fine silk and a sword at his hip, stood and turned.

“A glass high!” he said, looked at the tankard in his hand and burst out laughing. Was he drunk? He, like those still seated, had metal as his element. The concentration put him around the start of Rho. He got his laughter under control. “A tankard high, for the Hero of Kragle Rock.”

Tibs looked around for Don, then realized he wasn’t there and everyone was looking at him.

“Age matters not to those of strong heart,” the man said. “Size means nothing to those of determination. A knight is in the doing and not the claiming.” He downed his tankard. “May the Light Fingers keep his city safe until the abyss claims the Lands.”

Tankards went up and were downed as cheers erupted, and Tibs wished he could disappear.

Planning-59

The designs on the steps had changed again; the last three showed Gnolls ripping Runners apart.

The cleric by the door looked them over and nodded. The guards hardly glanced at them as they entered.

Sto didn't greet them.

Jackal opened the doorway to the third floor before the others reached him. He was by the hallways, bouncing in place, when Tibs stepped through. "Come on, we need to hurry."

"We have half the day," Don said. "Now's not the time to rush and make mistakes."

"Sto," Tibs called, "You here?"

"Is this wise?" Khumdar asked as the other looked at him. Don with a perplexed expression.

"I told Don I'd explain the rest once we were here." He looked up. "Sto?" silence. "Ganny?" they might be focusing on the fourth floor, or the first two, since there were new Runners on them.

"Tibs? Who are you calling out to?"

"I'll explain when one of them answers."

The sorcerer looked at the others. "Do you have any idea what he's doing?"

"Yes," Mez answered cautiously. "But I don't think we can explain it. It's not exactly..."

"Believable," Khumdar finished.

Tibs headed for the hallway and crouched, studying the floor.

"Tibs?" Sto asked, "did you say something?"

He stood. "Hey Sto, you're back."

"Yeah, sorry, with Don there, I didn't think you'd be talking."

Tibs ignored the look the sorcerer gave him. "After that last run and him finding out I have multiple elements, we had a talk and agreed we were done holding anything back, you're the last one, and until we were here, I didn't know how I'd be able to explain you to him."

"Tibs," Don said cautiously, "what is going on?" he looked at the others, who, other than Jackal, looked concerned. The fighting only looked impatient.

"Don, I'd like you to meet Sto." Tibs motioned around them. "The dungeon."

"His he serious?" Don asked Mez, no nodded. "He believes the dungeon has a name?"

"It's more than that," Mez said.

"You realize he can't hear me, Tibs."

"I thought you could do like you did with Jackal. Have one of the Big Brutes come and interact with him."

"I don't have them nearby."

"What's a Big Brute?" Don asked.

"The big golems in the boss room on the third floor," Mez answered.

"Tibs names them?"

"Sto does," Tibs replied. "There has to be something you can do to convince him."

"Tibs, dungeons can't talk."

"According to who?"

"Everyone."

"No me."

"Everyone else." Don ran a hand over his face. "Is this because of all the elements he has?"

"Yes," Tibs said.

"They're affecting his mind? Should he be doing runs, then?"

"I have something," Sto said, "but you need to make sure Don's serious about learning I'm a person. And I need to check something with Ganny. Ganny!" he called, his voice fading.

"Sto can prove it, if you really want to know he's a person."

"This is a dungeon. They're not people, Tibs." Don looked at the others. "Shouldn't you have done something about this delusion?"

"Just say yes," Jackal snapped, "So we can move on. We need to clear the floor."

Don looked at Tibs. "I want your word Tibs, that once whatever you think the dungeon is going to do doesn't happen, you will come with me to see a cleric."

"After the run," Jackal said.

"Sure," Tibs said.

"Alright, have the dungeon do whatever it's going to do."

"Actually," Sto said, "I need you to make it to the first cache. You're going to need what's in it. Ganny agreed this is worth bending the rules."

"Okay." He went back to studying the floor. "It's going to be at the cache after the first fight."

"Yes," Don said, sounding amused. "Of course, it will."

* * * * *

"Cover your eyes!" Tibs yelled, waited a second, then released the compressed light essence. He followed it with rushing the group of Gnolls before him. He sliced the first one, flung a ball of Corruption at the next, leaped over another and stabbed its back as he landed, then grinned at the once in front of him and iced it.

He made a metal hammer, swung it as hard as he could, and it exploded into shards. He looked around. The others were finishing the Gnolls they'd taken on.

"We're going to have to rethink every fight," Ganny said. "If Tibs's not going to hide everything he can do anymore."

"Why didn't you use the lighting?" Sto asked.

"I haven't practiced it yet. Don won't let me."

"You're letting Don control your training?" Sto asked, surprised.

"He read about it and thinks his method will work better."

"He read about how to train people with more than one element? I thought you were the only one."

"He read about the things I told him I go through while learning to control myself, and has me practice something called Oneness. I don't think it's working, but he deserves a chance."

"Tibs," Don said. "The fight's over." There was challenge in the tone.

"Better get on with proving to him you're a person." Tibs located the cache, checked it for traps, and grinned as he found one. "You really thought I'd rush before of this?"

"This was setup before Sto made changes," Ganny replied, sounding insulted.

He opened it, checked the inside, then took the content out.

He looked the lasso over.

"Is a lasso supposed to prove the dungeon can think?"

"Even you know dungeon can think," Mez said.

"You know what I mean," Don replied.

"Sto, I'm with Don."

"It isn't *a* lasso, Tibs. It's *his* lasso."

"I still don't under..." Tibs didn't recognize it, but he had never looked at it up close. "Oh."

Sto spoke, And Tibs repeated what he said, as he handed it to Don.

"On your first run after the siege. When you made it to the Ratling camp. You sent everyone on your team to search the tents for the chests. When you were alone. You held the Radcliff's lasso to you and cried. When you were done. You put it in a tent and waited for your team to return."

"How?" Don asks, drying his eyes. "How do you know?" there was some anger in his tone.

"Sto can be anywhere, since he'd the dungeon. You'd never acted like anything other than an ass before that, so he was curious."

"Cliff was a pain in my ass," Don said with a laugh. "I don't think he ever took me seriously when I was

ordering him about. He'd do what I told him, but I could see him roll his eyes. He called me out of the stupid stuff I'd get hung up on. But fuck, was he brave. After all that, he'd get me a tankard and talk with me as I glared daggers at him. When I pushed the others too far, he was between us, talking sense in them, and me. Then, he died."

Don clutched the lasso. "I hadn't realized how much of a friend he'd become until you were screaming at him not to die."

"I tried to save him. I used as much purity as I could, but I didn't know what to do with it, and his essence just faded away."

"I couldn't let anyone see me cry. And while we fought during the siege, it was easy to turn that into anger and make anyone working for that man pay for Radcliff's death. Then... well, as a hero, being alone wasn't easy. And I had to rebuild my team. And be the Voice of the Guild." He spat. "If I hadn't been so full of myself, I'd have told Tirania to go fuck herself. In the encampment was the first time I managed to really be alone and say goodbye."

He dried his eyes and took a shuddering breath.

"You didn't have to go through that alone, you know?" Tibs said.

Don's laugh broke. "You have no idea how terrifying the idea I'd look weak in front of anyone was."

"Mourning's not weak," Jackal said. "It's normal."

"Caring made me weak. Leaders don't care. They send friends and family to their death and never shed a tear."

"Someone's been listening to the bards too much," Jackal said.

Don snorted. "I never had to. I looked at how nobles acted and created this image of what leaders were like. Then I promised myself that's who I'd be. That I'd never be weak again."

"If you're waiting for me to make a joke about that," Jackal said when the silence stretched. "We're going to have to miss the run entirely." Don rolled his eyes.

"So the dungeon's name is Sto."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Sto said.

"He's happy to meet you."

Don snorted. "He has seen me act, right? How happy can he be to meet me?"

"I was also happy to meet Jackal, even if he's always winning the fights, so you know, take it for what it's worth."

Tibs chuckled. "He's always happy to meet someone."

"Who's Ganny?"

"She's his helper and advisor. She tries to keep him from breaking the rules."

"The dungeon has a woman helping him?"

"She's not a person like you and me. Her voice sounds like that of a girl, which is why I think of her that way, just like Sto sounds like a guy, but they all refer to him as 'it' and he doesn't mind."

"And the dungeon needs to follow rules? Who came up with them? How do they enforce them?"

"Oh, not again," Jackal muttered. "We are in the middle of a run. Can we leave the questions of how the dungeon does everything it does to once we've reached the fourth floor?"

"Someone's a little sure of himself," Ganny said with a chuckle.

"He has a bet with Quigly that we'll reach the fourth floor before them."

"So," Don said, "you can talk to the dungeon, and they answer you." Tibs nodded. "Can you have them tell you how to beat the boss room?"

"No," Tibs said with a sigh. "That's one of those rules Ganny keeps Sto from breaking."

"Hey, I'd never tell you how to beat a room. Where's the fun in that?"

"I can think of a time or two where Tibs almost got you to reveal something."

"Almost doesn't count."

"It does when I had to stop you from talking."

Tibs smiled. He'd missed the banter.

Planning-60

"Tibs, three squares diagonally on your right," Don instructed, and Tibs moved.

"I think he's got you," Sto said.

Tibs didn't see it. It wasn't like he had a line on the Lord.

"It isn't over yet," he replied, sounding like she was gritting her teeth. Her sorcerer moved before the lord.

"Khumdar, forward, two. Feel free to blast the sorcerer out of the way and threaten the Lord."

The cleric spun his staff before him as he moved and darkness trailed the tips.

"Ah. Like you think I haven't—"

The tips scraped the floor in quick succession, sending a line of darkness with earth essence mixed in. The sorcerer's crystal shield deflected the darkness, but the shard of earth chipped at it until it broke, then the sorcerer was sliced until it fell back.

"Your Lord is now in danger of death," Don announced.

"That's new," Jackal stated.

"How did he get earth mixed in?" Ganny Demanded.

"How did you do that?" Tibs asked. "I thought only sorcerers could use more than one element, and only at higher ranks." He looked at Don, who nodded, but didn't seem surprised at what Khumdar has done.

"I shall point out that the guild is whom claims only sorcerers can do so," The cleric said. "I shall also point out that I am a cleric of darkness; as such, I have access to a wealth of secrets even said guild can only wish it knew. And finally, I will say that—"

"You're so full of it," Jackal finished, grinning. "What I want to know is how you knew he'd be able to surprise the dungeon. It adapts from what we did last time."

"Just because I kept my distances doesn't mean I didn't keep aware of how you've been training." He grinned to Khumdar, "or who you've been cajoling into revealing secrets."

"So that's where you've been vanishing to?" Mez smirked.

The cleric stiffened. "I am not required to answer that."

"So anyone can use more than one element?" Tibs asked.

"No," Don replied. "The training to achieve the proper state of mind isn't easy, and for those from other classes, is even harder. But that is something we should leave until we've won this game. It's the dungeon's turn, unless they are going to abdicate."

Tibs looked at the Lord. Ganny hadn't moved it, or either of her two pieces left. Then he understood. Neither of her two pieces could move to block Khumdar. The lord could only move one square. Two of those squares kept it within Khumdar's line of attack. As the Tower, Jackal was in position to attack it in three other locations. Mez covered one, as did Tibs and Don.

Ganny had to decide which of them her Lord could win against. Unless she'd held a surprise back, it didn't look good. She let out an exasperated huff, and the Lord crumbled.

"And that's a win for us," Don said.

"I really hate you," Ganny spat.

"You wanted a challenge," Sto said.

"He's not a challenge. He keeps outsmarting me! Him and Quigly are no fun."

"Quigly's good at this?" Tibs asked, heading to the chest.

"He did go to war with a king," Jackal said.

"Which he lost," Don said.

"But you don't piss someone like that to the point they won't kill you by just losing. You have to make them fight hard for it, and that takes a lot of strategy."

"You and him should have a game," Mez offered.

"I'm not sure that is a good idea," Don replied. "I have not made the greatest of impression on the man."

"Like that matters," Jackal says. "You made the worst impression on us, and look where you are. I'm sure that if he beats you, it'll make him feel better."

Don snorted. "Like that would happen unless I let him win." He paused. "You aren't suggesting I let him win, are you?"

"Not suggesting anything," Jackal joined Tibs as he opened the chest. "So, is this another chest to go down Don's memories, or are we getting anything good this time?"

Tibs reached in and pulled the sword out. "I don't know. I think enough people have wanted to plant a sword into him. This could be about that."

Jackal looked in. "But I don't think it would come with armor. Unless the dungeon's worried, we still want to stab him."

"Like you'd wait for me to give you tools if you felt like stabbing him," Sto said.

"He's going to need something if he wants to stab Don," Tibs replied, taking out the pieces of leather armor. "Otherwise he's just punching him."

"Before whatever this conversation's about goes any further," Don said. "Can we confirm this is theoretical? I thought we had moved beyond this need to hurt me."

Tibs grinned at the sorcerer. "Well, we're still at the stage where you need to be hurt, since you're still receiving training."

* * * * *

"I want you to channel Lightning," Don instructed, and Tibs froze.

"What?" he looked at the corridor. They'd just fought the group of Gnolls and people golems and there were no indications another fight was about to happen.

"You heard me."

"Don, there's nowhere for you to get out of range. Lightning travels far. This isn't the right place."

"This is the perfect place, Tibs. You can't destroy anything."

"You didn't tell him what you did to the Ratling camp, did you?" Sto asked.

"I can damage the walls, Don."

"But the dungeon can remake them. It's not that easy for the city folk."

"It's not that easy for me either, Don," Sto grumbled. "And it hurts."

"It hurts Sto."

"Then don't hurt him. And also don't hurt us."

Tibs looked at the others, who'd taken a step back, except for Jackal. He hadn't even stoned up.

"I trust Don," the fighter said. "Hey, this isn't the first time I've said it. I let him take the lead in the boar's room."

"Because he was the best chance we'd win," Mez said. "Here, it's just about Tibs training, and we know how that tends to go."

Jackal shrugged. "Tibs's not going to hurt us."

"Hurt you," Khumdar said. "We have yet to truly put to the test how much Tibs can resist the elements when it comes to our safety."

"That's what you've never understood," Don said. "Tibs has never gained control as a result of resisting the elements. Each time, it came because he reached an understanding of what they are, and that he isn't them. It's happened in confrontational ways because Tibs didn't have another method of keeping from being overwhelmed."

"And you gave him that method?" Mez said. "That Oneness thing?"

"Khumdar, care to help?" Don asked.

"How you think I can—"

The sorcerer glared.

The cleric sighed. "Very well. Oneness does promote a way of thinking and living that can lead to someone to being more aware of how they fell at anytime. But," he added, "I do not believe this has any bearing on what Tibs goes through. The Elements are not simply emotions, they are beings. We do not know the

entirety of how channeling them affects Tibs.”

“You could have suggested that as something to try,” Mez said.

“Having said I do not believe it will help, I will add that simply because I am aware of the existence of the philosophy does not mean I am also aware of how it is taught. And I will ask how it is you believed I would know of its existence.”

“That I’d know, you mean. You mentioned you traveled through Arkidian. From my reading, they adopted Oneness as their main philosophy a few hundred years ago, and they’re militant about it. It’d be impossible to be in that kingdom and not hear about it.”

“Where’s Arkidian?” Jackal asked. “I don’t remember Khumdar talking about it.”

“I did not,” the cleric stated.

“You said you’d been in the city of Joersalun,” Don said.

“There cannot be but one city by that name.”

“I read about three,” the sorcerer said, “but you talked about attending the rites of the Shalhumon. That’s exclusive to Arkidian.”

“I doubt I said much about it, and it was enough for you to determine where I had been?” The sorcerer’s tone was suspicious.

“He isn’t lying,” Tibs said.

“I have no doubt. What I question is the need he may have had to research anything I have spoken about.”

“I read about them years ago. I used to spend my days in the library when I—” he swallowed, then let out a breath. “When my family could afford the entry fee.”

“I think that’s something you two can discuss later,” Jackal said. “We have a run to do, and we’re ahead of schedule only enough I’m willing to let Tibs train, not hold a discussion on if Don’s researching everything you say in an attempt to find out your secrets.”

Don snorted. “I have much better things to do with my time.”

“Jackal, it’s not safe,” Tibs said.

“What is? Like Don said, this is safer than doing it in town.”

“But I can hurt you.”

“Then it’s an incentive to be careful, right?”

Tibs looked at the others. Even with them having put distance between him, he’d expect protest.

“It’ll be fine, Tibs,” Don reassured him.

Tibs doubted it. But that was his fear talking. It might have some basis in past experiences, but it also was disproportionate to what ended up happening.

He let go of Water, hesitated, then channeled Lightning.

There was so much to do! He had to reach the Lion room and the Dragon one. They had to clear the boss, and he had to figure out was way to get Tirania’s leader here so he could remove them and being the guild crumbling down. He had to look at the all those new runners the guild was sending to their death, and take care of—

Later.

He was being impatient.

No, Lightning needed to be everywhere at once. Do everything right now. It couldn’t stand still. He felt it through him, demanding that he move, that he run everywhere. He’d explode if he stayed still one second longer.

No, he wouldn’t.

That was Lightning.

He was Tibs.

Don was fucking right. He was going to be unbearable about it.

He had to tell him that. Make sure Don never found out. He should just explode to prove him wrong. Thank him for giving him control. He should... he should... he should...

He didn’t.

Tibs watched the needs and desires fly through him and around him. He plucked one—the Clerics were here. He had to find out if Clara was here, see how she was doing, had she been punished for helping him when Sebastian attacked and— he let it go.

Yeah, Don was never going to let him forget that this Oneness thing was his idea.

He opened his eyes.

His friend had stepped further away, even Jackal, and the floor was covered with a spiderweb of black lines with Tibs at its center. A new line appeared as lighting course from the floor to his body.

"Sorry about that." He pulled the essence within him.

"Are you okay?" Jackal asked.

A bolt escaped his attention as the question send his mind reeling with dozens of answers flooding it. He focussed on the now. On keeping the essence under his control, along with his emotions.

"It's not as easy as you said, Don."

"I didn't—"

"But it is easier than not understanding what's happening. It might be because Lightning is everything and everywhere at— no, that's not right. It isn't that, it wants to be that. And I'm doing it again. Letting it carry me away. But I can see it's what's happening. When Fire consumed me, I could only see it, not what I should do, or that there even was a me in there. Same with the other element. I want to more, to be there and there and there, right now. But I also know that it's not me who wants that, but the element. It's really weird, and it's distracting. I don't know how much help I'll be while I'm channeling Lightning. I mean, this is helpful, but it still needs me to focus on everything I'm thinking, and I'm thinking a lot right now."

"It's okay," Don said. "I'm not expecting you to do the rest of the run while channeling lightning. You can let go of it now."

"But this feels good. I'm able to think about so much. I could do so much if I had this under— no, I wouldn't. That's Lightning talking. But at least I can tell. Which means I should let go of it."

He did.

And immediately missed how much faster had been thinking.

Only he hadn't.

No, he had, but it had been so jumbled that he hadn't done any of what he'd thought.

"You were right," he told Don. "This Oneness is making it easier."

"I'm glad." The sorcerer's smile broadened. "How about we continue with the run?"

Tibs narrowed his eyes. "You want to brag, don't you?"

"You have no idea how badly I want do brag," Don admitted.

"Why don't you?"

"Because it wouldn't be right to brag about being right."

Tibs narrowed his eyes even more. "You have met Jackal, right?"

"I was right!" Don burst out and did a little dance. "You doubted me, and I was right!"

"He is going to be unbearable now," Jackal said.

Tibs shrugged. "No more than you are when you think you're right."

"I don't think I'm right," the fighter said with pride. "I know I'm right."

Planning-61

Jackal pushed the boss-room's door open with enough strength they slammed against the wall with an echoing 'boom' through the large room. Dusting off his hands, the fighter stepped in and waited.

"Same as last time?" He looked at the others. "Get rid of these, then you and Don figure out how to not trigger the next attack?"

"And if we can't, we blast those too," Tibs replied. "We know what to expect, and I don't have to hold back."

"Actually," Don said, "why are you holding back? You said that you can drain the life out of the creatures. Wouldn't that make all this fighting simpler?"

"More boring, you mean," Jackal said.

"Me and Sto have an arrangement. I don't use my element to win the fights, and he doesn't make things so hard no other team can survive."

"They can do that?"

"He's the dungeon. He can do anything."

"Don't the rules prevent them from it, though? The way you explained that part to me, dungeons don't exist to just kill everyone, but to force us to grow stronger."

"But he can use me as the level of power he needs to match, so if I have it too easy, he'll make it harder."

"Then how do they account for your multiple elements? That makes you the equivalent of multiple members on a team. If not multiple teams."

Tibs looked up.

"We're figuring that out," Ganny said. "This is the first time you've made constant use of multiple element while fighting."

"But," Sto said. "It isn't like you're good with most of them. Other than Water, you're basically Upsilon —"

"I say Rho," Ganny interrupted, "because of the raw volume of essence he can use."

"But you're going to be heading to the fourth floor soon, so I figure that's going to balance things."

"But if you overdue it on this floor, I will have to make adjustments to the creatures."

"They're working on it," He told Don after he'd pieced together what they meant. "But I'm not good enough with the other element for it to make much of a difference on the next floor."

"Which means this floor's fighting could be more difficult if we stay here while you master them."

"Two things," Jackal said. "I say bring on the hard fights so long as the loot matches it. And we're not staying here once we've cleared this room. I want fourth floor loot. And how about we get to clearing this room already?"

"That's three things," Mez pointed out.

Jackal counted on his fingers. "Two. Clearing this room isn't a thing. It's what's happening now." He stepped forward over the activation threshold, and the mass of creatures rushed them.

* * * * *

Tibs skewered golem person, a fighter also wielding water, and looked around. The last of the bodies crumbled to rubble and any not close to his friends melted into the floor, leaving silver behind.

"I want another one like this!" Jackal yelled at the ceiling. He was the only one on the team without serious injuries. Don was pale, leaning against the wall, and Khumdar hung close to him, limping. Mez's bow arm hung limp, and Tibs didn't know how he'd stayed in the fight if he'd been unable to fire it.

"No one moves any closer," he instructed. "If you do, Jackal, you're fighting them alone."

"I wasn't—" he raised his hands. "I promise, I wasn't thinking about it. I'm the new, smarter, Jackal, remember?"

"That was a rather low bar to clear," Don said, "and clearing it doesn't mean you're now that much smarter."

"He's smart enough to stay on Kroseph's good side," Mez said as Tibs went to him.

"Isn't that a given, seeing how they're special to one another?"

"You'd think so," the archer said, "but it took him a surprisingly long time to learn to stop trying to explain himself and make things so much worse in the process."

"Now I just nod and accept my punishment." The fighter grinned.

"We don't want to know," Tibs warned.

"Maybe you don't, but—"

"No," Khumdar said. "Tibs is correct. However your man goes about keeping you in line is for you and him to experience and then keep to yourself. I do not believe any of us had done anything to warrant the torture of you explaining it."

"You're just jealous of the love my man shows me," Jackal said dismissively.

"Isn't it fun how our leader's always talking about the love of his man like we don't have our own?" Mez said.

"I..." Don trailed off.

"Really?" Mez asked. Then Tibs had to hold him up as the relief of his healing arm weakened his knees.

"I'm actually surprised you feel you have love," the sorcerer replied. "The way you talked about that arrangement isn't... favorable to that."

With Mez steady again, Tibs moved to Don. He hadn't seen the sorcerer take the damage, but the way the essence was broken in his chest showed he'd been struck multiple times by a first or some other blunt weapon.

"I have accepted that my position is at her side, and I am trying to see the light through that stormy cloud."

"That is quite... honorable of you," Khumdar said.

Tibs formed the weave out of purity and applied it to Don's chest.

"I wish to be a man," the archer said, then sighed. "But there are times she makes me wish I could keep being a child."

"She's not the kind of noble you're looking to be?" Jackal asked as Tibs moved on to the cleric.

"She is... she tries."

Tibs saw the light on the words out of the corner of his eyes, but remained silent.

"I had Tibs's problem. But in the opposite direction. Where all he saw was the bad nobles did, and couldn't imagine they were able to do good. I was raised with the ideal of how good a noble is. Dealing with those I encountered here dampened my illusion, but I could still believe my kingdom wasn't like theirs. Only, it also is, if to a lesser degree."

"That sucks," Jackal said.

Khumdar nodded to Tibs once he'd healed him, and he moved on to the next problem.

The pattern on floor by the left column was the trigger that controlled the appearance of the next group of creatures. Interacting with it last time had triggered the attack. He couldn't know what had caused it in the interaction without interacting with it again, but once detail he'd remembered was how this floor was filled with interconnected triggers.

The problem was how to figure out if there were other triggers in the room that were linked.

"Khumdar, do you sense other secrets in the room?"

"Many."

"Are any of them connected?" He looked at the cleric when he didn't answer.

"I am uncertain what you mean."

"You sensed the trigger by the column. Are there other triggers like it?"

"I believe you misunderstand what I sense. I know there are secrets throughout this dungeon. There are some it is actively hiding, others that are hidden through circumstances. Some feel like they wish to be discovered, while other desire to remain hidden. I can point to more than a dozen in this room with ease, but I do not have a sense of them being triggers. Only of being secret."

Tibs nodded. "It's about mindset. You're not a rogue, so even if you are about secrets, you're not going

to think about them the way I do.” He looked at the room again. He could sense how the trigger by the column was a secret now that he knew it was there, but he wasn’t adept at using Darkness. Or it might be Khumdar’s status as a cleric of the element that granted him a greater awareness.

What Tibs had, were options.

He let go of Water and channeled Darkness.

The trigger was more noticeable, the surrounding shadows deeper. Looking at the room, he saw more pools of darkness on the floor, the ceiling and walls. Even the unmoving dragon at the end of the room was clothed in a shadowed shroud.

But he didn’t see enough.

He suffused himself with Darkness.

“Tibs?” Jackal called. The fighter was looking at him, but his gaze was searching.

“That’s... is that how you vanish, Khumdar?” Don asked.

“I suppose there is no point in keeping this hidden anymore. Yes. Tibs had filled himself with Darkness. He has made himself a secret you cannot easily perceive.”

“But you can?”

“I have more experience. And he is not seeking to hide. It is only a normal reaction of being engulfed by the element.”

Tibs crouched and studied the patches of shadows. There were connections there, he was certain of it. It felt right for the way Ganny did things. He just had to figure out how to see that.

“What are you seeking?” Khumdar whispered next to him, but when Tibs looked, he couldn’t see the cleric. He focussed and thought he felt a sense of a secret there, but he wasn’t sure it was more than his imagination.

“I’m trying to see how the secrets connect to each other. I thought that by suffusing myself with Darkness I’d sense more, and I do, but it’s either not enough, or just not something that Darkness does.”

“Darkness does what we will it to do. Some is about thinking in the proper way, other about weaving it or etching it, and yet more is about how much of the essence we can pour into what we want. Can you suffuse yourself with more Darkness than you are doing now?”

“No, there isn’t an amount of essence I’m using. It just fills me. Isn’t it like that for you?”

“It is, but you are different, so I do not desire to assume you can only do what I do.”

“What happens if I filled my channels with Darkness?”

“I do not—”

“I can sense your channels.”

“Now?”

“Before. You, Don and Jackal have them. Yours are... denser isn’t the right word. But I can tell you’ve been practicing with them longer than them.”

“And you have them too?”

“When I absorbed all that fire, there was so much of it I couldn’t put it all in my reserve, so I tried to push the extra in my body, the way I sort of discovered about suffusing. It didn’t add more to what I was suffused with. Instead, it pooled along the channels, filling it ever denser, and when I released it, the channels were still there. Don said they’re used to create specific effect, but he didn’t tell me why and I didn’t think to ask since he was already giving me the Oneness training to work on.”

“Can you tell where the channels go?”

“Everywhere?”

Khumdar chuckled. “If that is how it is for you, I suspect I will not be able to help.”

Tibs focused on them and separated the sense of the channels from the rest of his body. “They go from my head down to my chest, they split to my arms and legs. There’s sort of like a knot in my chest, my crotch, my arms, and my feet.”

“Your head?”

“No, it’s...” he frowned. “They’re smaller. Four of them, sort of floating in the middle of my head.”

“One is near your forehead?”

Tibs nodded.

“That is... I call it the node of sight. Don will have the correct term for it. When I guide Darkness to it, I see more of the secrets hidden around me. It is how I can see you now.”

“So all I need to do is—”

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“This is not something simple, or without risk. My initial attempt did not result in anything of use. It... did something to me. I do not understand what, but I advise against attempting it without the guild’s training.”

“So I need to take it slow.”

“Tibs,” Khumdar warned.

“I need to find out how the triggers are connected. It’s the only way we’re going to make it through without having to fight all the creatures Ganny has ready for us.”

“Alright, but you must use only the smallest amount of Darkness possible. It is too easy to fill it too much and...”

He nodded and pulled a filament of darkness from his reserve and guided it to the channel. It made contact, and Tibs nearly lost control as more of it than he’d guided was pulled within the channel. He fought to keep it from spreading in both directions along the channel, then wrenched it out.

“Are you well?” Khumdar asked.

“It was like the channel wanted to suck all of it.”

“That is why you require training. We can return when—”

“No, I know what to expect now. It just took me by surprise.” He took hold of a filament again and tightened his grip as he inserted it into the channel. The pull was strong, and in both directions, as if the channel didn’t want to remain empty now that it had a little essence in it. “What happens if I let the channel fill completely?”

“At this time, I do not believe it would be pleasant, or that you would survive it. If you do not believe you can maintain control of the essence and guide it, you must stop and accept that this will have to wait.”

“I have control.” He forced the essence up the channel to his head, then to the node behind his forehead. Again, there was a pull to fill it, and Tibs held the essence back.

He sensed the difference before he opened his eyes. The secrets were more defined, almost had a shape to them. Looking at them, he could almost make out forms within the shadows.

“I need to use more Darkness, I can just barely tell.”

“Be cautious, Tibs. It is easy to go too far, and this is not the place where you wish to do so.”

Tibs nodded and fed the node more essence. The forms became defined, but didn’t resolve into something he understood until he glanced at Mez. One shadow in his chest had the form of two people holding hands. He considered adding more essence until he could make out who they were, until the woman started to look familiar and he looked away.

He almost lost the grip on the essence as lines of darkness shot from one shadow in the room to the other, marking which ones were connected.

Planning-62

Tibs used Light to form the pattern. "Can you recreate this with your essence?" he asked the sorcerer.

Don studied it, then looked at the floor next to the column. "Within that mess of essence?"

"Yes, but when I tell you. This is a twin trigger. I'll be on the other side doing the same."

"And they have to be with the same element?"

Tibs nodded. "That's part of the mistake I made last time. I sent essence in here without care, so it triggered."

"What are odds a team has two Runners with the same elements?" Mez asked. "This feels like something the dungeon set up to make sure we can't win."

"One person can do it," Don said, looking around the column at the other one. "This is about strength and fineness. And focus. It'd be easy for one person to mess it up."

"Which is why we're going to cheat," Tibs said.

"Won't getting the timing right be impossible that way?" Jackal asked.

"We'll prepare the pattern first," Tibs answered, "then, on my signal, we'll move it into the lock."

"That seems on the simple side for this floor," Don said, and Tibs stared at him.

"Do you have any idea what it took for me to work that out?"

"No, since you two were shrouded while you were talking, but I can work out from this how I would have eventually worked out the pattern and the way the two triggers are connected. It's all about observation, being sensitive enough to make out the way my element's essence is woven through all the rest, and finding the same pattern on the other side. None of that is complicated. Even a Rho rogue can work out that much in time. This is the third floor. After everything we went through to get here, this feels... easy."

"I'll take easy," Mez said.

"Unless it's a fight," Jackal added. "I want to earn that win."

"I'll take an easy fight too," Mez replied.

"Wimp."

"We're not all as thick headed as you."

"You think I missed something?" Tibs sensed the weave again.

"I trust what you're figuring out. I'm simply saying we need to stay alert, because the dungeon's too smart not to have some trick ready."

Tibs nodded. "Then we go step by step." He moved to the other column. "Form the pattern." He wove it out of corruption and set it above the floor, lined up with its match. Each element had its own shape.

"It's in place," Don said.

"I'll count down from four. On zero, it needs to be in the weave."

"Got it."

"Four," a beat, "three," a beat, "two," a beat, "one," a beat, and he moved it, "zero"

"It's in," Don replied. "Something happening."

Abys. "You were right." The essences were moving around the pattern. Tibs couldn't tell what they were doing, but he could feel that letting go, or moving the pattern out, would trigger the trap and dump creatures on them.

"When I tell you," Don called, "Turn the pattern left-ward."

Tibs searched for what the sorcerer meant and noticed the way the corruption's alignment was

shifting within—

“Now.”

Tibs turned the pattern and stopped as it matched the new location, and Don called.

“Stop.”

“We’re not done.” The essence was still moving. “We need to...” he searched for the way to describe it.

“Rotate the pattern on an axis aligned with the floor and aimed toward the columns.”

Tibs didn’t understand all of that, but it meant Don had figured that part out. “We’re going to have to change the pattern as we turn it.”

“What do you... oh, I see it. That’s what the surrounding cloud of essence’s about. Clever dungeon, very clever. Doing this alone, I’d be so focused on one thing I’d miss the other. Of, and I apologize for not using names. There is something about knowing you have one that...”

“Makes it too much of a person?” Mez finished.

“Yeah. I can’t quite resolve that with what I’ve been told of dungeons.”

“It’s okay,” Sto replied. “Until Tibs, my opinion of Runners wasn’t particularly high.”

“He was complimenting me, you know,” Ganny said.

“Yes, but the name thing and them being more than things running inside me was never something you had a problem with.”

“That’s because—”

“Do you mind finishing this elsewhere?” Tibs asked. “We are working here, and I need to focus.” At least there were no set times in which they had to shift the pattern.

“Sorry,” Ganny and Sto said.

“Are you ready?” he asked Don, who was smiling at him.

The sorcerer nodded. “In four, three, two, one, now.”

Tibs rotated the pattern, shifting it until it matched the new shape and location. It pulsed, then the essence dispersed as if by a breeze.

“You think we’re done?” Don asked.

Tibs sensed for any essence that might be camouflaged. “We’re done with this one. Two others to go.”

“Should one of the others do them?” Don asked, “as practice.”

“I’d rather keep my energy for fighting the dragon,” Jackal said.

“And unless you’re tired, I’d rather we do them, since we know what to expect and deal with the changes Ganny will have made to them.”

“On the next run, then. One of you will be working with Tibs.”

Jackal snorted. “On the next run, we’re going to be on the fourth floor.”

Tibs and Don disarmed the two sets. The first had two extra steps, while the last didn’t give them time to pause, nearly causing them to trigger it.

They stood before the dragon between the columns, catching their breath. Tibs sensed the activation line beyond it.

“Is that really what a dragon looks like?” Mez asks.

It was a lizard, large enough for its back, as it lay on the floor, reached halfway to the high ceiling. Its scaled skin was green with a golden sheen to them. The forelegs were thin and ended in three fingers with claws long enough to slice through half a column. The rear legs were powerfully built and reminded Tibs of those on the rabbits.

“It doesn’t have the wings. The one on the crest did,” Jackal pointed out.

“The few mentions of them I came across in my reading didn’t give entirely matching descriptions. Lizard like in body, scales with a sheen to them. Can blow fire from their maw, and long claws, were the only common things. Like all monsters, dragon are dungeon creatures, so the fact they are even that similar is surprising.”

“Dungeons can talk to each other.”

“I can?” Sto asked. “Ganny?” his tone turned suspicious.

“Then maybe not as surprising.”

“I don’t know where Tibs got that from,” she said.

“The purity dungeon. Val and Kraven talked about her having a conversation with another one before they went wild.”

“Val’s old,” Ganny mused. “When they talked, did they say anything about the relationship between the two of them?”

Tibs thought back and pieced together the conversation he remembered through his muddled memory. "Not really, but I got a sense they were... familiar? Like a family."

"That would be it. Really old dungeons can send out a spark of themselves in the world, and if it ends up in a place that allows it, it will become a core. Because of the link, when that dungeon's strong enough, they can talk."

"Is that how I came about? Is there a dungeon out there I'll be able to talk with at some point?"

"No Sto," Ganny said, sounding amused. "You're one of the special dungeons who came to be all by themselves."

"Are those rare?" Tibs asked.

"Quite," Ganny replied. "But yes, Sto, you're going to have to rely on me for information from the others."

"Dungeons can only talk with their child."

"Dungeons have children?" Don asked, incredulous.

"That's how most dungeons come to be. Sto's different. He didn't need anyone."

"Oh, now he's going to be insufferable about that," Ganny said. "Wouldn't you?"

"Don't worry, I will always need you."

"Until I point out rules you are breaking."

"Bending."

"Breaking."

"I'm learning to be gentle about it."

"You do realize that it doesn't matter how gently you don't listen to my advice. Once the rule breaks, it is still broken."

"Unless you don't want us to get on with his fight," Tibs said and ignored the horrified look from Jackal. "I'm going to need you to take it elsewhere again."

"We'll pick this up later," Ganny said. "I want to watch this." Tibs heard glee in her tone and considered all the shadows clinging to the dragon.

"Ganny has tricks setup for this. We need to be careful."

"We just need to hit it hard and fast." Jackal ran to the dragon.

Tibs sighed as he followed the fighter.

Arrows flew over their heads. "One day, he'd going to get himself killed with that attitude."

"We tell Kroseph how he rushed a dragon," Don replied, "And it might be today." Balls of corruptions hit the scales and sent webs through them, only for the shimmering to push them back. "That shimmer's a form of protection against essence based attack."

"Then it is fortunate three of us are adept at using items that do not require enchantments to inflict damage." Khumdar swung his staff as he approached.

Jackal was half to it when the dragon blew in his direction. The cloud of essence ignited and the ball of fire crashed over him. Tibs took hold of the fire and absorbed enough to replenish his reserve, then diverted the rest to hit the wall.

"Did you think that would hurt me?" Jackal asked. "Tibs burned me with fire hotter than that." Jackal turned to face them, motioning to his intact clothing. "How great is this? I learned to give my clothing the—"

The large paw hit him leisurely, and the fighter hit the wall in the center of the burn the fireball had left. The dragon chuckled as it stood and stretched the way Tibs had seen cats do.

"Ow." Jackal picked himself up, and the dragon motioned him close with a clawed finger. "Oh, you're controlling that thing." Jackal rubbed his hands. "This is going to be so fun." He ran at it again.

"Controlling?" Don asks.

"Sto can enter his creatures and do the fighting. He's hoping to kill Jackal that way."

"Does that mean we should let the two of them go at it without interference?"

"No." Tibs ran and sliced at the paw as he slipped under the swipe. The cut was thinner than he'd hoped. The extra cold and metal damage had been mostly negated by the shimmering.

The dragon's legs were shorter than Tibs expected, only a little taller than Jackal, which allowed the fighter to land punches on the dragon's underbelly that it felt, judging by the anger in its golden eyes.

It stepped aside and around, then revealed a tail as it swept it across the floor, forcing Tibs and Khumdar back, although the cleric scored a hit that earned him a hiss.

Jackal ran under it, punching its underbelly and kicked a leg when it didn't move it out of the way quickly enough. When the dragon finally connected, the fighter was sent flying again, and Tibs caught him in

a wall of air, plopping him on the floor.

“How about we fight together this time?” Tibs glared.

“That works for—”

The roar made the walls shake and in its wake, Tibs felt the essence shift in the wall.

“Something’s about to happen!”

Doorways opened on each side, disgorging creatures of all kinds that ran at them. Tibs use water and air to deflect as many as he could away from him and his friends, but the number of them coming from both directions made it impossible to send all of them away. When a blow connected, Tibs was sent to the ground, his concentration broken, and his arm limp.

He bashed the within reach with an ice shield while wrapping his arm in an essence splint. He didn’t have the time to weave purity, and suffusing himself in it was out of the question right now.

He blasted those before him with an etched waved of water that left then pierced with shards of ice, but more crashed through them.

“We need to get out of this!” Jackal called, and Tibs looked for the dragon, then made his way back, blasting and bashing any creatures that followed.

“I’m glad to see you’re smart enough to know when you’re not going to win,” Mez said, covering them.

Jackal was in bad shape. The cracks in his stone body spread everywhere, and his essence was held in place by strands of stone. The fighter’s face had one large crack that gave it a crooked look.

The creatures didn’t follow them beyond a few steps away from the dragon, but glared. The dragon smirked and seated itself.

“Why aren’t they following you?” Mez asked.

“I am content with the fact they are not and will not question the reason,” Khumdar said. His robe was cut and bloody, and like Tibs, one of his arms was limp.

“Tibs?” Jackal pointed to his face.

Tibs suffused himself with purity, then made a large weave of it to apply against Jackal. While it worked, he made one for Khumdar, Mez, and Don.

“How did you get hurt?”

“They had a few archers of their own,” Mez said.

“As well as sorcerers.” Don looked thoughtful. “Their aim wasn’t great as they ran, but the numbers made it impossible to avoid everything.”

“So that horde took into account everyone,” Jackal said, working his arms and jaw while watching the horde protecting the dragon.

“It makes sense,” Don said. “We’re as much a danger to it as your three are.”

“Are we attacking again?” Tibs asked.

Jackal took his time replying. “No. Don’t be so shocked. They nearly broke me in half, and I don’t have enough left to hold myself together a second time. Mez, Don, how are your reserves?”

“I’m good,” Mez replied. “I was able to refill my bow from that fireball.”

“I am lower than I’d like for another attack. In fact, I’m not sure how useful I’ll be with the actual fighting against the dragon. Its resistance means I have to expend much more essence than I’m in a position to afford. I’d have to stay out of every other fight for even a chance of making an impact here.”

“You’ll have a way around that for the next run,” Tibs said.

“What do you mean?”

“Carina’s robe can hold a lot of essence.”

“Are you sure Tibs?” Jackal asked.

“It’s not helping anyone at the bottom of the chest. And she’d want our sorcerer to use it.” He paused. “Even Don.”

“How do you feel about grayish blue?” Mez asked.

“It’s not my preferred color, but if it comes with what it sounds like it does, I can see about getting it died.”

“That might be tough,” Jackal said. “It repairs itself, that might include things like dies.”

“Sto?”

“The enchantments I made it with cause it to return to the condition it was when I made it. But if you’re sure about letting him have it, changing its color to match him is something I can easily do.”

“Dyeing won’t work, but Sto can change the color for you.”

“Just like that?”

Tibs grinned. "He likes me."

"Then why are they so determined to kill you along with us? They were not going easy on you during that rush."

"I'm a Runner. If he doesn't push me as hard as you, I'm not going to get stronger. If that means I die because I'm not strong enough." He shrugged. "I'm a Runner."

"He's not going to die," Jackal said. "He can't. He's the one who set the no dying rule." He turned to the dragon. "Enjoy this victory. We will be back, and next time, you are getting broken."

Planning-63

“Sto said he can change the color,” Tibs said as Don held the blue-gray robes and frowned.

“It’s not bad.”

“You mean corruption sorcerers aren’t required to dress in that sick purple color?” Jackal asked.

“It’s traditional to wear our element’s color,” the sorcerer replied, opening the robe, “but not required. Especially not to wear only that color.”

“So you dressing always in that color was...?” the fighter asked, grinning.

Don fixed his gaze on him. “Me warning people how dangerous I am.”

Jackal lasted a few seconds, then had to look away, his skin slightly green. Don’s eyes still had the effect of making those looking into them queasy. Tibs forgot that, now that they no longer affected him like that.

“And is that no longer something you wish others to know?” Khumdar asked.

“I’ve...” he trailed off, still studying the robe, then looked at them. “I’ve realized that it doesn’t matter if anyone else knows how powerful I am. That it doesn’t matter what others think of me.”

“Glad we could help,” Jackal said.

Don snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself. My teacher has been on my back about my attitude.”

“So, you’re saying we had nothing to do with you becoming a better person?” Jackal asked. “I mean, didn’t you say something about how you arranged to be on our team because—”

“You’re really going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

Jackal grinned.

Don sighed. “Fine. Watching Tibs go about like he’s just some guy living in this place, like everyone else, when he’s got all that power to call on, did help show me that I don’t have to shove what I’m capable of in other’s face to be respected.” He considered something. “I don’t have to demand respect, to get it.” He grinned. “Happy, Jackal?”

“Of course. You think that was about getting you to say *I* played a part?” he snorted. “I’m the first one out there showing just how strong I am. What do you think all those fights I get in to are about?” He looked around when no one replied. “No smart comment?”

“We all know that’s why you do it,” Mez said.

Jackal looked disappointed.

“And yet,” Khumdar smiled. “You have yet to take on Cross.”

“I am not that stupid.”

Don sighed. “I so wish I could argue that point.”

“Just wait,” Tibs said. “He’s not *that* stupid, but he’ll do something stupid at some point.”

* * * * *

The air smelled better.

Tibs sniffed.

“You didn’t think we enjoy that smell anymore than you, did you?” Don asked, as they approached the pool of corruption. Scaffolding had been erected on all sides, doing up in an arch to meet over the pool, and large wooden beams were being set in the ground next to the scaffolding.

“How are they doing it?”

Don shrugged. “Essence work, obviously.”

A woman in gray work clothes with purple trim that match her eyes approached. "Acolyte Arabis, how can I assist you?" she looked him over.

"This was a dungeon find. I'm still considering how I'll accent it."

She nodded.

"I thought you couldn't be an acolyte until you reached Epsilon."

"The title has nothing to do with the acolyte's affiliation," she replied. "It's an acknowledgment of his contribution to the academy. Once he is free of the guild, then it will become a mark of his position within our organization."

"I'd like to use the recharging chamber, if it's available," Don said.

"It is." She motioned to the scaffolding. "The construction isn't yet advanced enough people trust it, despite our reassurances. You know the way."

Don thanked her, and they walked around the pool. Halfway to the other side, Tibs made out a structure among the scaffolding, held just above the corruption. A man stood from the table next to the entrance.

"You are?"

"Don Arabis, this is my friend, Tibs."

"Ah, yes, Acolyte. Here to meditate?"

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

"Recharging takes time, Tibs. Sitting with your thoughts is a good way to pass that time."

Tibs almost pointed out how he'd showed Don to pull it in and speed it up, but if the sorcerer wanted to go along the way the guild taught things, it was his decision.

When Tibs followed Don, the man who'd written Don's name in a ledger stopped him. "This isn't for you."

"He's a friend," Don said, his tone hardening.

"His element is water," the man replied. "This won't bring him anything."

"Tibs's curiosity is never ending. He doesn't have access to a pool of his element, so he asked to come so I can explain how it works."

"You can do that in a tavern, over a tankard of ale."

"I could, but as I told Tibs, recharging takes time. While I'll be happy to sit with my thoughts, I find a friend's company to be more enjoyable."

The man considered. "If he gets sick, you will clean it."

"Of course."

The bridge to the small structure wavered with their steps. "Is this solid?"

"Solid enough."

Ropes held it and the building to the scaffolding, and it too moved as they entered. It felt like what Tibs imagined standing on a large plank floating on water would be like.

The structure was a single circular room with a table and chairs in the center. An open chest by the door contained writing implements.

"I thought people came here to meditate."

"We come here to recharge our reserves. For most, it takes time. Experiments can deplete it, and sometimes they don't have the time to wait for it to happen naturally. Not everyone enjoys being alone with their thoughts for so long."

"So they have to travel here?"

"Or to one of the other academy build over a connection to our element. This one isn't unique, Tibs. But it is in a city. I think that's going to make it appealing once it's finished."

"The other aren't in cities?"

Don snorted. "Contrary to what you'd think. Corruption doesn't manifest itself in cities. The academies are all in the wilderness, with only three of them under a day's ride from a city. They each have towns that support them, but it's only the brave folks who settle that close to the influence of corruption. Help me move these."

"You aren't going to use them?" they moved the table and chairs to the side of the room.

"I need the space for the etching."

"What are you going to etch? Is it to help you recharge?"

Don chuckled. "Considering what you taught me, standing outside it all I have to do. This is so I can use the robes. All the reserved in it have air at the moment."

Tibs nodded, remembering Carina's joy at all the reserves the robe contained. One for each element, she'd said, but she'd set each for air, since it was the only element she could manipulate.

"The etching's going to do that? I thought the elements couldn't affect each other."

"Not directly. You couldn't use corruption to will air out of the reserve. You wouldn't even know air's the essence in them. I know, because I know the precious owner had air, and you didn't contradict me. But etchings can include Arcanus, and each letter alters its effect. The one we're going to etch here serves to drain reserves so they can be repurposed. We have a constant need for amulets, but few that are found have corruption in them. So we have to drain them to fill them with our element."

"Is it because people don't like corruption?"

Don paused in tracing lines of essence on the floor. "What?"

"That there aren't a lot of corruption amulets. Isn't there a corruption dungeon that will make them?"

Don chuckled. "Dungeons that fixate on one element are rare. There's the Purity one."

"Sto's stone. That's why he picked that name. It's what he is. Stone Mountain Crevasse," he said at the quizzical look Don gave him.

"He is named after where they are, what they are made of and... is there a crevasse?"

Tibs shrugged. "What is it?"

"You don't know what a crevasse is, but you didn't question why it's in their name?"

"It's a name. Why would I question it?"

"Good point. A crevasse is a break in the ground. I guess that with them being in a mountain, there is at least one. It's still funny they have that as their name. I thought Sto was just... Sto. Like you said. I didn't question it." He went back to tracing the etching. "But I wouldn't say they're fixated on earth as their element. I don't think they'd have the people golems if they were, or the Gnolls."

"The Ratlings and Bunnylings are made of stone."

"They're on the second floor. I think they're like that because that was what they had to most to work with. From what I read. Most dungeons do use more of whatever element is the most common where they form, but the later floors always diverge from that. So the fact there aren't a lot of amulets with corruption in them has more to do with the fact that there are many elements, and on the whole a smaller number of corruption users. Any amulet can be repurposed. The simplest way is to get someone with that element to drain it, then you recharge it with yours. Only a little will get it going, since they recharge naturally."

"So you could get someone with air to drain these, then put corruption in it."

"If I could convince them there is essence to be drained. Remember, only Carina could sense the reserves. I can't sense them. Hopefully, the dungeon can change that too, or at least once there is corruption in the reserve, I'll be able to tell how much they contain."

"I could drain them." Tibs had been surprised at how easily Don had accepted his word the robe had reserves. He'd forgotten how Sto had made it so it imprinted on Carina. Don had been curious at how it could be done, but he hadn't doubted Tibs.

"But this lets you practice."

Tibs narrowed his eyes. "This is training, for me?"

Don smiled. "How else are you going to learn anything about etching with corruption? No one will be able to tell what we're doing from outside the room. There's too much essence here for this to be distinctive."

"You're already doing the etching."

"I'm laying down the pattern. I always do that before I create the actual etching."

Tibs looked at the floor. "You can do that?" as far as he could tell, the essence was an etching. There were none of the letters there yet, but he sensed no difference to a simple etching he'd do that didn't contain them.

"How do you practice yours?"

"I... just etch them."

"And if you make a mistake?"

"I start small."

Don snorted.

"I clean up the mess."

"Your teacher never showed you how to lay down the pattern?"

Tibs shook his head. "I don't think it's something he does. He makes the motions, and it happens."

Don sat back on his haunches. "He must be good. My teacher still does this with anything but the simplest etching he knows." Don motioned to the space facing him on the other side of the etching. "Sit.

We're about ready to start."

Tibs grumbled as he sat, already feeling the headache forming.

* * * * *

The headache faded slowly as he sensed the essence draining out of the robe. He couldn't sense the reserves themselves, but Air dripped out and into the etching, then dispersed around them.

"Is it working?" Don asked.

"You said we didn't make mistakes."

"Yes, but this isn't simply an amulet, the dungeon added weaves upon weaves on the robe. I don't know if they'll interfere."

"It's working. I don't know how fast."

Don nodded. "We have hours before anyone checks in on us. I doubt there'll be someone else needing to use it." He stretched.

"Don? How do you think Khumdar did what he did?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. His element is Darkness. There is no way, based on what I know, that he should have been able to use it to pull along Earth. That's just..." he sighed. "It's got to be a cleric thing. If he was a sorcerer, I'd have theories. Mainly that he's much stronger than he claims to be."

Tibs shook his head. "He's Lambda at most. That's how dense his essence feels to me. It's not quite as dense as yours or Jackals. Denser than Mez."

"You?"

Tibs shrugged. "I don't think it matters how dense mine is, since I barely know how to do anything."

"Then he can't be a sorcerer. We're not taught how to pull essence from object until we've graduated to Zeta. Did he use Arcanus?"

"I don't know. I was too busy fighting to sense the details."

"You didn't ask him?"

Tibs shrugged. "Darkness is about secrets for him, so I let him have them."

"Considering he claims not to have received training—"

"He didn't lie. I'd have seen the light on the words."

"I'd be careful to rely too much on that. With Darkness as an element, I figure that if anyone could find a way to lie and keep it from you, it would be him. But he does go around finding out things. With the guild, and all the teachers here, it's reasonable he got someone to tell him about etching, as well as Arcanus." He hummed. "Actually, it's unreasonable to assume he is any lower in his training than we are. He isn't arbitrarily kept at a rank until he can do something that has little bearing on how strong we actually are."

"So he might be learning things above Lambda."

"Or Zeta, or even Epsilon. The teachers here are all Delta, at least."

"Not all of them."

"According to the guild, they are."

"Not according to how dense their essence is. You think the guild is lying?"

"Wouldn't you know?"

"I'd have to ask the questions or have one of them say it before me to see the light, or not."

"They might not be lying. Like I said, the tests are an accurate representation of how strong we are. Knowledge and skill can compensate for a lack of power. I think that Khumdar learned how to etch using Arcanus, and that's how he did his attack."

"But he isn't a sorcerer. Aren't they the only ones with the right mindset to learn how to do it?"

"Clerics like him aren't supposed to exist," Don whispered. "The ones from Purity go on and on about how clerics are something only their element produces. And they only train them to help and spread the belief Purity is at the core of everything, and corruption responsible for all that is wrong in the world. If Khumdar is proof they are wrong. And, if I'm going to be generous, they exterminate all who claim to be clerics of another element because they don't know any better. The result will be that there is no way to know what a cleric can and can't do. Maybe clerics come from a mindset that lets them pull essence out of objects like sorcerers can. The only way I'd have to know is to ask him, and I'm not sure I'd trust any answer he gave me."

"Don't ask him when I'm around."

Don chuckled. "I don't plan on asking him. Unlike you, I don't go looking to get headaches."

"I don't go looking for them. They just find me."

"Of course. That's why it's so easy for you to keep your mouth shut and not ask questions."

Planning-64

Tibs felt the change in the air well before he saw the lake. Not long after that, the buildings thinned until they gave way to grass and, around five and zero paces later, the lake itself. The closer he came, the more pronounced the change was, but he couldn't work out what it was.

Like most things dealing directly with the elements, he could only find a word that approximated what he was trying to express. The one for what he felt here was: wet. The air wasn't wet. The air had no more water essence in it than the rest of the town, but it was still the only word that came close to explaining how he felt.

He wasn't the only one on the shore, and not everyone there had an element, or water, as their element. But those with water were the only ones who were making use of the closeness to Water that was what Tibs felt. No matter how poorly the word described it.

One thing everyone on the shore had in common was a peaceful expression. Everyone was at ease. Water, soothing their worries away while they were under her influence.

He turned and looked at the buildings. They all kept their distances from the lake. Was that also Water's influence, or has someone noticed the lake wasn't ordinary and taken steps to protect it? Would it be the guild? They hadn't cared about the pool of corruption. Would they care about the lake?

Darran might find out if someone owned the lake, the surrounding land. Did Tibs care? He was curious, but did he need to do anything about it? What if it was some noble who planned on charging Runners to come close to the pool? He'd decide to deal with that, when, and if, he found out it was one of them.

He sat on the shore among the other Water Runners, and let her quiet his worries. He could do with peace for a while. Keeping Merchant Row and the surrounding building safe was more and more work, with the ever-increasing number of people visiting and Irdian getting in the way.

He grumbled and did his best to push his worries away. It seemed that he was more resistant to Water's influence than the others.

* * * * *

Tibs stared at the sword in his chest that pinned him to the wall, then the self-satisfied smirk on the woman's face who held it.

She'd come out of nowhere, pushed him into the alley before he'd realized what was happening and impaled him on the wall. Her aim was good, too. If metal could still hurt him,

the blade through his heart would have killed him.

“What is your problem?” he demanded. He didn’t recognize her. Brown hair shorn short, eyes an ordinary amber. Wearing clothing that would mark her as one of the town’s workers, if not for that sword in his chest. He could remove it easily, but her confusion was amusing.

She tried to twist it, but it was also in the wall. The hilt nearly touched Tibs’s vest. “I’m going to get the bounty,” she replied. She had an accent Tibs thought was familiar.

“What bounty? And stop that. You’re making the rip bigger. Do you know how time consuming it is to mend leather?”

“Someone is desperate for you to be dead,” she snarled. “I’m going to get the fortune.” He pulled a knife and Tibs caught her hand before she stabbed him with it.

“What fortune?” was there someone else paying to have him killed?

“The one that’s held for whoever brings your head back.” She tried to pull her hand out of his grip, but he had his hand coated in earth. “Why aren’t you dead?” she yelled. “I’ve spent months watching you, watching all the others try and fail. I let you grow lax at the lack of attacks. I didn’t give you time to defend yourself. You’re dead!”

Months meant before he’d burned the contracts. How would all the assassins learn they’d been destroyed? Archer has said there would be chaos as the Brokerage dealt with all of it, but Tibs hadn’t thought about what might happen with those who didn’t find out there was no money for them to be paid with. There hadn’t been an attempt since he’d returned, so he’d assumed it was all over.

He pushed her away. “I’m a Runner. The dungeon is always trying to kill me.” He pulled the sword out of his chest and considered turning it to essence so he could impress on her the futility of trying again. “We have ways to survive attacks.” He planted it into the ground. He didn’t want stories spreading of what he could do, even if it was among her kind of people.

And he also didn’t want to kill her, it seemed.

“Don’t,” he warned as she pulled another knife. “I’m just annoyed right now. Don’t get me angry.”

“I plan on getting you dead.”

“They won’t be able to pay you.” He bound her in place with ice.

She fought and screamed.

He waited until he stopped, panting.

“The bounty to kill me. Did you get it through the Brokerage?”

She glared at him. “No.” The word glowed.

“They were attacked. What I’m told is that the thief died, but not before destroying the contracts they held. He might also had stolen that fortune that is supposed to be yours. So you have a choice. Leave and find out if there’s still someone who can pay you for my head. Or stay and end up dead, like all the others who tried before you.”

“You’re lying,” she snarled. “You’re just trying to save your skin.”

“You’re frozen in front of me. If my skin is all I’m interested in saving, there’s a sword there I can shove through your chest. I don’t think you’ll survive that as easily as I did. The ice will take a while to melt. Use the time to consider what you’re going to do next.” He turned and left her there.

* * * * *

“Hello.” The voice was feminine, and Tibs reached for the dagger at his belt even if he was at his table in the inn. “Had a rough day?” Clara motioned to the vest Tibs was mending on the table.

“What are you doing here?” Tibs asked, letting go of the knife. “I mean. They let you come? After how you helped us with Sebastian against their orders, I didn’t think they’d let you leave.”

She sat. “It was agreed that I did what Purity demanded of me and nothing more but those who judged my actions once we were back. I would have visited sooner, but I have been busy settling in.”

“Do you have a team?”

“Welcome back Clara,” Kroseph greeted her as he placed a tankard before her. “Consider this a thank you from everyone you saved. If you’re hungry, I’ll bring you food.”

Her pale skin turned pink. “I could eat.” She stared at the tankard before taking a sip. “I have a team. We have our first run in three days.”

“Shouldn’t you be with them? Getting ready. Working out how to work with them?”

She nodded. “They’ve already explained what they expect from me.” She hesitated. “But I don’t want to stay at the back and wait for one of them to be hurt or near death before acting. I already saw too much death. I want...” she slid the tankard back and forth. “Could you introduce me to your... cleric?”

“You want to speak with Khumdar?” unlike most people, she had little darkness among her, but Tibs was wary of letting anyone from Purity get close to someone they considered a charlatan and killed.

She shook her head. “I want him to train me in the use of the staff.”

“You want to fight? Doesn’t that go against what clerics do?”

“Purity demands I work hard to save others. Devote myself to it. But what the siege showed me, and then Sebastian’s assault, is that preventing others from getting hurt can be more effective in ensuring they live.”

“Isn’t that going to get you into trouble with your superiors?”

Her smile was small. “I am a Runner now. I am no longer under the supervision of those who prefer being comfortable preaching how all should live. I am under Purity’s direct command now. And Purity doesn’t care how I apply my work, so long as I am diligent in applying it.”

“I can’t promise Khumdar will want to help you,” Tibs said as Kroseph placed a plate before each of them. “But I’ll explain what you want and vouch for you.”

* * * * *

“How is she?” Tibs asked as they walked up to the dungeon entrance.

“She is obstinate,” Khumdar replied darkly. “Nothing I do will cause her to change her mind. No matter how often I strike her down, she gets herself up. I utterly despise her.”

“Good to know someone can get under you skin,” Jackal said. “We’re good,” he told the cleric by the door before she could step forward to look them over. They were inside before the guard reacted.

“She was that cleric that stayed behind when Sebastian attacked, wasn’t she?” Don asked. “She was odd, even for a cleric.”

“And you have had the honor of interacting with many of them?” Khumdar asked.

“My family had money, at one time, so many is a strong word, but I did meet some when me or one of my relatives needed them.”

“All clerics are strange,” Jackal stated, and Tibs looked at Khumdar.

“He is not incorrect. The closeness one of us shares with our element affects us more than others. We all develop... oddities.”

Jackal opened the doorway and stepped through. “Alright Dungeon. This is it. We’re beating your boss room.” He motioned ahead. “Tibs, how about you make sure it’s playing fair and there’s still a way to reach the rooms?”

“Oh, like I’m the cheater here,” Ganny replied. “You’re the one always pulling one trick or another. You might as well be a rogue, for the way you’re always cheating.”

“You got Ganny angry,” Tibs said as he studied the tiles on the floor.

“Good.” Jackal rubbed his hands together. “I love going up against someone angry.”

Planning-65

“How is everyone’s reserves?” Jackal asked as Tibs healed him. The first boss room fight had taken its toll again, but they’d won it with only Jackal severely injured. The creatures had focussed their attention on him to the nearly exclusions of everyone else. The few who hadn’t attacked the fighter seemed there to prevent the others from coming to his rescue. When they were finally able to do so, Mez had trouble shooting them without Jackal being caught in blast. Don had been more successful, but not entirely so, and the injuries Tibs heals were almost equally caused by the creatures and his friends.

“Good,” Mez replied.

“It will last me this coming battle,” Khumdar said, “but I will have to be cautious if we expect there will be more beyond that rush.”

“There will be. You can bet on that.” Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged.

It would take more than these attacks for him to expend enough essence to feel it. Unlike his friend, his concern remained getting hurt faster than he could heal himself. And so long as he wasn’t the subject of the type of focused attack Jackal had been, he had enough time to suffuse himself with Purity while fighting.

“Don?” Jackal called. “Don!”

“What?” the sorcerer asked pulling his attention from the dragon.

“I asked how is your reserves.”

“Oh, they’re fine,” he said distractedly and looked at the dragon again.

“Fine enough you can space a couple of those essence potions for me and Khumdar?”

“He can have mine,” the archer said.

“Don,” Jackal called when the sorcerer remained silent. “Any chance you can rejoin the team from where ever your mind’s wandering to?”

“It isn’t wandering. The path it’s on is well marked.”

“Then you should be able to find your way back to us,” Jackal replied.

Annoyance flashed on the sorcerer’s face, but it vanished as he looked at the others. “I’m sorry, what are we discussing?”

“Can you spare some of those essence potions,” Mez said. “Khumdar’s getting mine. He and Jackal don’t have the kind of reserves we have.”

“Of course.” The sorcerer pulled three bottles of the yellow liquid from his satchel. “These robes have enough reserves to last me through a dozen of this floor.”

“Don’t give Ganny a challenge,” Tibs warned.

She snorted. “I don’t care about the sorcerer. It’s Jackal who is getting all of my attention this time.”

“I think we’ve noticed,” Tibs replied darkly.

“Don’s safe, isn’t he?” Jackal chuckled.

“Angering the dungeon might be among the least wise things you have ever done,” Khumdar stated.

“Hey, I’m not angry at him,” Sto replied. “Ganny is. Does Don sure he doesn’t want me to change the color of his robes? It’s not too late for him to put them in the cache by the entrance.”

“Sto wants to make sure you’re okay with the robes.”

Don chuckled. “I am fine. I’ll have the highlight added. I checked, and its healing magic doesn’t prevent a seamster from adding to it.”

Tibs nodded and sensed Jackal once more to make sure he was fully healed. “This is what you get for getting Ganny angry.”

The fighter grinned as he stood. “Yeah, it’s fun.”

“So we should put this on the list of things we can threaten to tell Kroseph when you annoy us?” Mez asked.

“How is there anything left on that list?” Don asked. “Doesn’t he annoy you daily to the point you have to tell his man?”

“It seems that we have grown accustomed to Jackal’s... eccentricities.”

“I have no idea how anyone can get used to that.”

“Give it a few months,” Jackal said, “and you’re going to love me just as much as they do.”

“We don’t love you,” Mez said. “We tolerate you.”

“How about we disarm the next two attacks?” Don asked Tibs. “Instead of getting drawn into what is sure to be a deep and philosophical discussion.”

“But you love me, right Tibs?” Jackal asked as Tibs walked away.

“Ask me again once you survived this room.” He took position by the pattern and checked with Don. On his signal, they started, remaining alert for changes.

With the second trigger disarmed, they stood paces away from the dragon.

“You run off to punch it alone,” Tibs warned, “and I’m letting you hit the wall.”

“I would never think to abandon the team just to get a few hits in on my own.”

Tibs glared.

“Well, not a second time.”

“We will—” Don fell silent, then shook his head when the others looked at him.

“Tibs, Khumdar and me rush it. You and Mez hit it with everything you have, and when the wave starts, try to thin it before it reaches us.” Once the others nodded, he faced the dragon. “Now.”

Tibs ran, sending a spear of ice ahead of him. It shattered on the scales, but left red scratched. He made a sword and shield once he was in range and struck and dodged the large paw swipes. Out the corner of his eye, Jackal and Khumdar were hitting it just as hard, and distracting him from—

“Retreat!” Don yelled.

Tibs threw himself back as the dragon roared. He was on his feet as the essence shifted in the walls. Jackal and Khumdar were hurrying back as creatures poured out of the doorways, rushing in a straight line to where Tibs, Khumdar, and Jackal had been fighting the dragon.

The line ran past each other, with only those with spears throwing them at the Runners in passing. Those were easily diverted or destroyed. Then all the creatures were gone through the opposing doorway.

“What was—”

“Attack!” Don ordered, cutting off Jackal.

Tibs spared the sorcerer a glance, then ran at the dragon, dodging and slashing at the underside. He got in one and one slash, barely avoiding getting crushed when the dragon stomped down, then—

“Retreat!”

Tibs was next to the sorcerer before the doorways were done forming, and the roar finished resounding.

“What is going on?” Jackal asked as the creatures again ran out from each side.

“Some form of automatic response,” Don replied, dissolving a spear with a wave of the hand. “I’m not sure what the trigger is yet, probably the damage we inflict, but at some point its eyes glow red, then it roars, the doorway opens and creatures pour out to attack any runner in their path.”

“But why aren’t they chasing us now?” Jackal motioned to the creatures entering the doorways.

“Get ready to attack,” Don said, paused until the last creature was gone. “Now.”

Tibs ran at the dragon, putting aside the whys and focusing on killing it. This time, he only got in nine hits, one of which was a stab that went deep enough he couldn’t pull the sword out, before Don called the retreat and they watched the creature perform their useless run in silence. Then they attacked again.

Tibs planted a sword in the softened underside and left it there for an ice shard to spread. He did the same with the next one and the next, putting enough essence into each he noticed the dip in his unending reserve. As he let go of the sixth sword, the dragon’s skin took on a red glow, just as essence shifted, but not within the walls, within the dragon itself.

“Retreat!” he yelled just before Don called the same. “This is going to be different!” He was out of the dragon’s reach with the others when the glow became a flash that forced the others to look away.

Tibs watched in awe and the dragon expanded, broke into nine balls of essence and reformed into eight smaller dragons, each without signs of injuries.

“Well, that’s just not fair,” Jackal said as the dragons shook themselves. “All that damage we inflicted is—”

With a unified roar, the dragons rushed the Runners.

Tibs sent a spear of ice as he moved away from the others, and the dragon launched itself in the air, its wings spreading. It weaved around a column, then opened its maw and it spat a ball of fire at him.

Tibs threw himself aside after trying, and failing, to take control of it. It splashed down and the fire spread on the floor as if it was water.

Light shot out of the mouth of the dragon Mez shot at, then Tibs had to dodge his own attacker as it flew by him.

He slammed it down with a column of air, then grew the ground over its wind to pin it in place. It spat balls of fire at him as he jumped ever closer, its long neck letting it continue to target Tibs until he was close enough to slash, and his ice blade cut through the scales as if they weren't there. The head fell to the ground, and the body grew limp, before breaking down into rubble.

"Tibs!" Don called. "I need your help!"

Tibs ran to the sorcerer. Six dragons remained, one of which spewed corruption at Khumdar, who raised a wall of darkness that survived only long enough for him to run out of the way.

Don cursed, and Tibs sensed him try to wrench the corruption away. He snarled and let go as Tibs reached him. He pointed to the dragon remaining airborne at the back and not attacking.

"We have to kill that one, it's—"

"Purity," Tibs said as it sent essence at an injured dragon and healed it.

"They're vulnerable to the opposite element, but that one," he pointed to the dragon that has spewed corruption, "keeps flying to intercept my attacks."

"And it's immune to its own element?"

"Just about. If we attack from different directions, one of use will get a hit through."

Tibs hurried to the other side of the room, blasting the dragon that breathed earth on Jackal apart with a tornado. Don was already throwing jets after jets of corruption at the purity dragon, with the corruption one nimbly flying to intercept them.

Tibs blasted it with corruption essence, counting on the how much he was throwing at it to make up for the lack form to it. The impact sent the dragon against the wall, then it melted away under the assault.

Tibs switch to purity and blasted the corruption dragon with it. It dodged, but lost part of its wing to the blast and crashed to the floor. Mez pelted it with arrows until there was nothing left.

The ground shook and Tibs turned to watch stone rip out of the floor to impact with, and rip apart, the dragon diving at Jackal. Light and darkness flashed, then the light was swallowed and silence fell in the room.

Jackal downed a healing potion before Tibs could go help him. "Is everyone alive?" the fighter asked.

"Only those on our team," Mez replied.

"Good enough for me." The fighter lied back. "I'm going to take a nap."

A click, then a rumble, and the fighter on his feet. The back wall opened and Tibs saw a chest, as well as top of a stairwell.

"Right," Jackal said, "we won."

"I'll take the fact he isn't jumping with joy as a victory," Ganny said.

Jackal looked around. "Okay, collect the coins and whatever that is. Tibs check the chest, then we head down the stairs. I want to see how that fourth floor starts before heading out."

"You okay?" Tibs asked.

“I’m fine. Really, I am. I’m just in a hurry to rub in Quigly’s face that we got to the fourth floor before him.”

Tibs didn’t believe him, but didn’t press.

The chest had no traps and contained a bow similar to Mez’s, but with metal as its essence, a sword with so much essence woven through it Tibs was reluctant to touch it, but it did nothing when he pulled it out.

“Don,” he called on seeing the book under the green sorcerer’s robe. It too had essence woven through it, and that he wasn’t risking touching.

The sorcerer reached in and pulled it out without hesitation, then looked through it. “It’s blank.”

“Why would Sto have a blank book woven with essence as loot?”

“More importantly,” Don mused, “why have such a book in a boss chest. Will they tell you what it is, or is this something else they can’t talk about.”

“The enchantment on it so it will record the knowledge that is focused on it,” Sto said.

“It records knowledge that is focused on it,” Tibs repeated, not understanding what it meant.

Don’s eyes grew, and he flipped through the pages. “How much can it hold?”

“I don’t know. Mind essence isn’t as straightforward as others to work with.”

“He doesn’t know. Is it important?”

Don looked at Tibs. “Do you know what is the most arduous thing a sorcerer, or a scholar, has to do?”

“Read?”

“The opposite. Writing. Taking our thoughts and finding a way to translate them into something clear enough for others to understand, or, more importantly, for us to be able to understand as we work through getting an experiment to completion. Academy have large archives of books no one can understand because the sorcerer couldn’t be bothered to properly document the steps they took along their research into this enchantment or that etching. With a book like this, I’d only have to pause long enough to think what I need to be on the page, and I’d be able to get back to my work.”

“So this is important to you?” Jackal asked.

“Of course, but—what are you doing?” Don asked as the fighter took it out of his hands.

“Making sure the guild doesn’t screw you over for this.” He slipped it into his pouch and Tibs looked away. The woven essence did something to the opening that gave him a headache if he watched too closely.

“Okay, that just doesn’t look right,” Don said, rubbing his temple.

“If that’s the last of it, we have a fourth floor to see.”

Tibs checked the chest to confirm it was empty, then they headed down the stair and stopped at the bottom.

“Wow,” Jackal whispered.

“That is an understatement,” Don said.

At first, Tibs didn’t understand what he was looking at. Instead of a room or a hall, after the stairs’ landing the space before them opened in all direction, with another stairwell

doing down before him for a long way. He couldn't see the ceiling, which felt wrong, considering the stairs he's walked down only had two and three steps, or the cavern's walls on each side. At the bottom of the stairs, dots of light were spread among square and rectangular shapes and they too vanished into the distance.

"That's a city," Mez said. With it named, the shapes became buildings, the lights marking the streets and entrances. "How can there be a city under a mountain?" he looked at Tibs.

"Sto?"

"Remember when I told you we'd found something while working on the fourth floor?" the dungeon asked. "It's when I was able to make all those items for your team."

Tibs nodded.

"Well, this is it. Once the stairwell went deep enough, this entire space came into my awareness, and... I don't know how to explain it. But imagine if suddenly you had a third arm attached to your back, but at the same time, you also know everything you can do with it. That's how it was with this. As soon as I was aware of it, I knew all there was in it and could draw on it. So not only didn't have I have to use essence to make this floor, but there were reserves throughout the buildings."

"You didn't make this?" Tibs had trouble understanding.

"No."

"Then who did?"

"No idea. There are no ways in or out except for these stairs."

"Ganny doesn't know?"

"Sorry Tibs. This isn't something anyone told me about."

"So that's the floor we need to clear?" how were they supposed to clear any entire city in the half day the guild gave them, or even full day, which some Runners had suspected would happen with this floor."

"Well, in this case, clearing the floor isn't going to mean doing every room and every hallways. Somewhere in there I put the boss room. Ganny set up clues to guide you, if you can find them and figure them out, but even without them, if you search every building, you'll eventually find that room. And, and this is where things get really interesting, there are rooms in there that I have no idea what they are."

"How can you not know what they are? This is all you, isn't it?"

"Again, I can't explain it. I tried to get into one of them, I was pretty sure I'd managed it too, but just as the weave aligned itself, the room just... wasn't there anymore. I mean, the structure is still there, but I wouldn't go inside if I were you, if you find it. It's... odd."

Tibs looked at his friends, and saw the alcove where the doorway waited for him to activate. "I'm going to tell you at the inn. I need a drink."

Planning-66

“Quigly!” Jackal called on entering the inn. “You are going to be amazed by the fourth floor!”

“You didn’t.” The warrior stood, and his team turned in their seat to look at Jackal. “You’re just making things up.”

The entire inn fell silent.

“Me? Make something up like that. I would never.”

“You would,” Mez said. “But he isn’t his time. It’s...” the archer trailed off.

“Impressive,” Khumdar finished, then headed for their table.

“If you want me to believe you,” Quigly said, “give me detail.”

“We can’t talk about the floors outside of the dungeon,” Tibs said as Jackal opened his mouth. He wasn’t about to let him break that one in such a public way.

Jackal shrugged and strutted the rest of the way under the warrior’s dark glare.

“Did you really clear the boss room?” Kroseph asked, bringing their tankards.

“Oh yeah,” Jackal said. “Don worked out the last of the puzzle to having an easier time beating it, then it was just about pounding the boss creatures into rubble.”

Kroseph kissed the top of Jackal’s head. “I knew you’d do it.” He returned with their meal, and Tibs quietly recounted what Sto and Ganny told while they ate.

“You believe them?” Don asked once he was done.

“They don’t lie. If they don’t want to tell me something. They’ll say that.”

“Don’t they try to trick you? They’re a dungeon. Maybe they aren’t there to kill us, but they still need to push us.”

“The dungeon likes Tibs too much,” Jackal said.

“Jackal managed to take advantage of it a time or two,” Mez added.

“We have all benefited from the dungeon’s affection for Tibs,” Khumdar said, “that it be our intent or not.”

Don nodded.

“What do you think it is?” Tibs asked.

“A city,” the sorcerer replied.

“Inside a mountain?”

“Why not?”

“The dungeon said there were no ways in or out until he made the stairwell,” Mez pointed out.

“But even they don’t know how old it is. Passage ways could have collapsed, then time sealed them so they were the same as the rest of the mountain.”

“That can happen?” Tibs asked.

Don considered something, then tapped a knuckle on the table. “While this is solid and fixed, the essence it is made of isn’t. You all know essence can be made to flow. But it also does it without help.”

“Like water?” Tibs asked.

“And air, and fire, and all the other elements.”

Jackal pressed a hand on the wooden table. “This doesn’t feel like it’s flowing.”

“Because it doesn’t happen at a speed we can comprehend. You, more than anyone else, should understand that. Earth is slow, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t move. It has cracked mountains and continents.”

“But there was no one in the world before the dungeons, right?” Mez asked. “Aren’t they like how everyone was created?”

Don shook his head. “That’s highly debated. I’ve read a few books that claim that, and seem to have evidence to support it, and others that claim we, as in people, made the first dungeons and that they went wild. They seem to have evidence to support their theories.”

“Purity cleric will tell all that Purity created everything,” Khumdar said flatly, “and people, so that we would stand between it and the other elements trying to destroy its creation.”

“Purity cleric will claim a lot of things,” Don replied dismissively, “and not offer any evidence to support them. There’s a reason there are no cleric academy. Or books written by clerics at any of the academies. Scholars want to establish what is, not what they dream things to be.”

“Can’t someone us void as an element find out?” Mez asked. “Carina mentioned that the element lets them know things out of order.”

They fell silent for a few seconds, and even Don waited.

“There have been experiments,” he finally said, once Tibs drank. “I only came across a few mentions of them, and not the results. I’ll see about locating books on that when we’re allowed to travel again.”

“That’s going to be awhile,” Jackal said. “A team’s going to have to clear the fourth floor first.”

“One thing I have read about that has an impact on your question, Mez, is that a problem with using Void to see something out of order is that the user has little to no frame of reference for what they end up knowing unless it’s included in that knowledge. Now, this is just a supposition on my part, but if one of them were to try to know what happened a long time ago, and they see a city with people going about their ordinary lives. How can they know that it is a long time ago, and not simply a city far from them, but right now? Or that it isn’t something that is to come?”

“But it’s essence,” Tibs said. “It can be etched and woven to do what they want.”

Don shrugged. “It seems that void isn’t a simple to work with as other essences. At least not when it comes to knowing. Like I said, I’ll do some reading on that when I can travel, and let you know what I find out.”

“What do you make of the dungeon saying there are rooms it can’t see in?” Jackal

asked.

“I don’t know. You need to remember that anything I read about dungeons is based on the premise that they are, at best, animals. I have never come across even the suggestion someone thinks they are more than that. So I don’t know. I thought that everything we went through was the dungeon’s body, so…” he tapped a finger on the table. “Actually, it can still be its body. It’s not like I know what goes on inside my body.”

“Tibs knows,” Jackal said.

“No, I don’t.”

“You have your essence that lets you see in our body.”

“That isn’t what it does.” Tibs said, offended. “I can sense how it is in you and work out things like you were injured because of how it reacts to that. But I don’t know what happens to the food we eat, or why it comes out looking like it does at the other end.” He raised a hand to stop Don. “I don’t want to know.”

Don chuckled. “No, I suppose you don’t.”

“Any idea on how to clear the floor?” Jackal asked the table.

“We’re going to have to go house by house,” Mez said. “Until Tibs and Don figure out the clues and lead us to the boss room.”

“You think each house is going to be like a dungeon room with something to beat so we can get the loot?” Jackal asked eagerly.

“Doubtful,” Don replied. “The city is too vast for the dungeon to make use of all of it directly. Floors increase in size based on how much essence a dungeon can get out of the previous floors. Once that expenditure is done for the creating of the floor, with enough left over to provide a challenge for the first few runs, that floor has to extract the essence needed to maintain it from the Runners who die on it. The largest increase I read about from one floor to the next is a doubling of the challenge.”

“The third floor is larger than that compared to the second floor, Mez said.

“No. It’s actually closer to a time and a half, if you look at the actual challenges. There’s four rooms, and maybe a dozen fights along the halls?”

“That’s more fights than on the third floor,” Jackal said.

“But are they comparable? Most at teams of five golem people, with the few larger fights here and there and—”

“You have it wrong,” Jackal said. “The number is smaller, but the fights are harder. Those golems have essence and something of tactics in how to attack. You can’t simply look at how many we have to fight and say it’s easier. Cross is one person, and she can kick all your asses if you try to take her on.”

“I’m not fighting her,” Tibs said.

“I am nowhere near that stupid,” Mez added.

“But you get my point. Just because there are fewer enemies doesn’t mean it’s ‘easier’.”

“That’s valid,” Don mused. “The books I read must have only focussed on the geography of the dungeon floors, because if you thought this up, people better than you must have done so before.”

“Thank you.” Jackal grinned.

Don looked at the others. “Didn’t I just insult him?”

“There have been times when our dear team leader takes delight in being insulted.”

“True,” Jackal said, “but that isn’t one of them.”

Khumdar shrugged. “Then I am as perplexed as you are.”

“What are you thanking me for, then?” Don asked cautiously.

“You said smarter people than me will have thought about that.”

Don nodded slowly.

Jackal grinned. “But you didn’t think about it.”

Tibs snorted his ale, then glared at the fighter.

Don simply stared, mouth agape.

Mez patted the sorcerer on the shoulder. “Don’t let it get to you. Just remember, he isn’t the idiot he wants you to think he is.”

“I should be offended by that,” Jackal said, raising the tankard to his lips. “But I just feel too good to let that insult bother me.”

Planning-67

There was something on the wind.

Tibs had heard the expression before. It came up often in stories bards sang. And townsfolk used it looking at the darkening clouds. It means there was change approaching.

Tibs felt something on the wind, but he couldn't figure out what it was. The sky was mostly clear, and the clouds thin. From the highest roofs, he saw nothing approaching in the distance, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed.

When he asked the others, no one sensed anything different, not even Khumdar, who was usually more aware of unexpected changes.

He did his best to put it out of his mind and continue with his work. It might be his imagination, or the lingering effects of his horrendous attempt at filling the node in his forehead with Darkness essence.[the scene will be after the run where Khumdar explains it. I need to come up with how it turned bad. I figure one of the lingering effect of it would be to imagine secrets everywhere for a time after he stopped]

The numbers wouldn't add up the way they should, as his attention kept being pulled to this... feeling. He triggered more test traps in the process of teaching than his students did as he kept looking to the street, trying to see... something.

Sucking on the finger that had been caught in the snapping trap, he frowned. He'd been distracted by motion in the crowd that didn't fit, but all that he saw of note was a woman people stepped around of as she had a coughing fit.

He focussed on the snickering rogues seated before him. "And that's why you have to focus. Being distracted here caused me pain and embarrassment. In the dungeon, it can cost you your life, or that of your teammates." That sobered them.

He looked at the crowd again. The woman was gone and everything looked fine again. He focused on showing how to jam the mechanism with a pick again, telling himself, again, that it had been his imagination.

* * * * *

"What do the channels do?" Tibs asked, quickly forming the etching, adding the Xy, Bor, and Sah letters in the positions Alistair had instructed him.

"Don't be distracted, Tibs," his teacher said, and Tibs snorted. His training was the first time the sense of something had left him be.

"I'm not distracted." He finished the etching and, as he'd been instructed, fed it a burst of water essence. The 'ball' exploded, sending a sheet of the etching in all directions and coating him and his teacher. "See? So what does this..." he trailed off as the coating on

Alistair shimmered. He looked at himself, but the coating did nothing.

Alistair walked around the room, and the shimmering trailed behind.

Tibs went over what he knew. “Bor is why nothing’s happening to me. In the configuration it was in, it causes the etching to ignore me.”

“The origin point,” Alistair corrected. His teacher kept insisting on that term, but Tibs didn’t understand why. The Runner making the etching was where it originated from, so they were the same and...

“The origin point.” It was easier to just go along with his teacher today. His mood was darker than usual. Tibs had asked, but Alistair had waved the question aside. “Sah is new. You said it’s generally about seeing things, so I’m guessing it’s the reason for the sparking. Xy... I don’t know in this case. It described it as influencing the effect of ‘being’, but what does that mean, here; in this configuration?”

“Think, Tibs.” Alistair rubbed his temple. “I apologize.”

“Kroseth is always saying that talking about what’s bothering you makes it better.”

“And do you find that it works?”

Tibs thought about all the times the server had helped him with what was going on. “Too often.”

Alistair chuckled. “In this case, I doubt it would. The situation is actually resolved, and I thought I had settled how I felt about it, but today it’s simply back and...” he shook his head. “You asked about channels.”

Tibs nodded, not questioning his good fortune in Alistair, not insisting he do the etching again to show he understood why it had worked. “Khumdar is training in them, and he tried to explain what they do, but I don’t get it. How is it different from suffusing myself?”

“Which one is he? Never mind.” Alistair rubbed his temple. “Suffusing is about taking on the general attribute of Water. You flow more easily, grasping you is more difficult. The channels allow you to focus and hold more essence. You saw that in the training to concentrate it in them. Once you’ll be more practice, you’ll be able to hold far more essence than with only your reserve.”

“But it’s not just that, is it?” he remembered how it had pulled along its length, then how he’d lost control of it and filled the node and... he shuddered. “He talked about how it all went to a node and it changed how he saw and...” he shuddered again.

Alistair grabbed him by the shoulder. “Tell me you have not tried that.” He searched Tibs’s face. “You are nowhere near ready. I’m surprised that friend of yours is still sane, the node of sight is the last one you’ll be trained to use because it is the most dangerous. Sight is linked to thought, and without proper control, the mind can easily come unraveled.”

“I didn’t, but it didn’t sound good the way he described it.”

Alistair looked at him a few more seconds, then let him go. “Power doesn’t always feel good.” He added in a mutter, “And that’s probably a good thing.” He settled himself. “Tibs, that is one of the reason the guild enforces a way things are done. Your friend took an incalculable risk in attempting this before reaching the appropriate rank.”

“He didn’t—”

“No Runner has reached Epsilon, Tibs. I’d have heard about that.”

“That’s when the guild starts training us on the channel and the nodes?”

“The node of sight, yes. It’s the last of the nodes you’ll be trained with. Once that is done, you’ll be ready for the world.” He chuckled. “Or as ready as any of us is when the guild sends us out in it. Did you think the guild would grant you your freedom without you being ready?”

“I won’t be free,” Tibs stated. “Not until the guild gets all its coins.”

“I wish you’d stop thinking of it as a bad thing, Tibs. The guild—”

“So why is using the nodes not the same thing as just filling the channels if it’s just using them to get the essence there?”

“There is no ‘just anything’ when dealing with essence. I’d think you’d understand that by now. The channels hold and move essence. That is why they are called channels. The nodes affect you on a deep level. They change how you interact with the world. That is not a simple thing.”

“Doesn’t everything I do change how I interact with what’s around me?” He looked for something to throw as a demonstration, but the guild kept the training rooms spartan.

Alistair sighed. “You’re thinking too small.”

“You’re the one telling me to stop asking questions all the time.”

“That isn’t what—” Alistair stopped. With a frown, he looked around them, then gestured, gathering essence and etching it into a complex arrangement of letters and lines. Tibs couldn’t follow. Then it stood between them and his teacher studied it. “How angry are you, Tibs?”

“I’m not—” he closed his mouth on the rest of his snapping reply. Why was he angry? “Is someone doing something to us? I thought the guild was protected against attacks.”

“There is no such thing as complete protection.” He looked at the etching, his frown deepening. “And if we had been targeted before entering, that protection might not do anything against it.”

“So, someone is affecting us? Why?”

With a huff, Alistair ran his hand through the etching, undoing it. “No one is. I didn’t see any disruption to the flow of essence around us, or within us.” He took a breath. “It seems this is simply us being tired or something.”

“You can use an etching to see how essence moves?”

“Tibs, how many times must I repeat this? You can use essence to do anything you want, so long as you have enough and are skilled.” He rubbed his face. “I think it might be best if we consider this done. Keeping from snapping is taking too much effort.”

“I’m still going to have to pay for it. Sorry,” he added before Alistair commented. “I know that’s not your fault.”

Alistair nodded. “We’ll both rest and I’ll be back in a few days.”

Tibs headed for the door. “Oh.” He turned. “What’s the point of the shimmering if it’s going to coat everyone around me? I can’t follow one person if everyone shimmers the same.”

The exasperation was loud in Alistair’s tone. “You use Bor for that, and I’ll explain it in detail next time, Tibs.”

“But—”

“Tibs,” his teacher warned, and Tibs’s mounting annoyance at being not getting an answer was enough to get him outside the room.

He was used to not getting answers, so why was he getting angry over it?

A shout had him looking up and two clerks glared at one another. Further down the hall, two adventurers were being pulled away, looking like they were ready to strike the other. He and Alistair weren't the only ones on edge today.

* * * * *

Tibs experiments with filling the head node with darkness, but he loses control, and the world turns into a nightmare version of darkness and a creature stalking the townsfolk.

* * * * *

The clattering of dishes had Jackal on his feet before Tibs saw it was Kroseph who'd staggered and dropped what he'd been carrying.

"I'm okay," the server said as Jackal held him. "Just tired I guess."

"Maybe the two of you need to slow down your bed activities," Kroseph's father said, picking up the broken dishes and motioning to Russel.

Jackal's lack of comment on a suggestion he and his man slow anything in bed down told Tibs how worried he was.

At his father's suggestion, Jackal leg Kroseph to the table and sat him in Don's unoccupied seat. "Tibs?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," Kroseph said defensively.

Tibs studies his essence, then nodded.

"Maybe your father's right," Mez said, "and you two need to take it easy in bed."

Jackal snorted. "If it's in bed, it shouldn't be easy. It should be exhausting."

"Not that we limit that to the bed," Kroseph added with a smirk.

"Not that we do," Jackal said with pride.

"And we will all hope for a lack of details," Khumdar said.

"I thought you were all about finding secrets?" Jackal said.

"Yes, secrets." The clerics leveled his gaze on the fighter. "Of which what you and your man get up to when you are alone really should be more of."

"Yeah," Tibs said, "you say too much about it for it to be a secret."

"I'm just making sure you understand what you're missing out on with this unreasonable idea of not getting with anyone."

Tibs looked from Jackal to Kroseph. "You can stop. You've made it clear what I'm missing out on, and I don't mind missing it." He did his best to put finality in his tone, but Jackal's smirk said it was simply another challenge he would prove himself better than.

* * * * *

The warrior fell back into the display of robes.

"I told you," Cross snarled, "Not to touch me." She shook her hand as if punching Quigly had hurt, which it had to. The warrior had metal, and like Jackal, he made himself harder as soon as he thought he'd be in a fight.

Quigly looked at Tibs, his split lip bleeding. "Will you tell—"

"I'm not getting involved." He turned and headed away. "You and your woman can fix whatever this is yourselves."

"I am not his woman!"

Tibs rolled his eyes. She'd have to hit Quigly harder for him to accept that.

* * * * *

Tibs sat on the roof, back against the chimney, legs crossed. It was dark, and the town was finally quiet. It seemed like tempers were frayed everywhere these last days. Which was probably why everyone was tired. Or maybe they were easy to anger because they were so tired.

Tibs focused on his breathing, letting his worries about the town, the guild, the coming run and the exploration of the fourth floor float away and simply—

Why were so many people tired and angry? How was he going to get Tirania's superior here so Tibs could destroy the guild? He'd have to lure them out of the building, or, if he could know when they were arriving, strike before they reached it and it would be done. No more guild. The town would be free of its oppression.

He sighed and focused on his breathing again. He had times when this Oneness thing was harder than others, but tonight was proving especially difficult. But As Don had taught him. It was all about recentering yourself, breathing, and trying again.

And again.

And again.

Tibs groaned as Kroseph came to his mind. The server looked better, but sometimes Tibs thought it was forced. His essence looked fine enough, maybe slightly thinner, not that he could tell that with people without an element. The essence was already so thin.

He stood.

Oneness wasn't happening tonight, so he might as well find a noble's house and practice his other skills.

Planning-68

Quigly pulled a chair and dropped in it at Tibs's table. "You weren't kidding."

"Am I ever?" Jackal grinned. "What am I not kidding about this time?" It was only him and Jackal. Mez was busy with his girl, Don was talking with the other corruption sorcerers, and Khumdar was... who knew?

"The fourth floor. What is that thing?"

Tibs looked around. The inn was quiet, less busy than usual. Which was good since Kroseph and the other servers weren't at their best today.

"What does it look like?" Jackal asked.

"But how's that possible? Aren't dungeons just series of passages with traps and monsters out to kill us?" The warrior motioned to their tankards and Kroseph pushed himself away from the counter.

"We're not the ones to ask about what dungeons do," Jackal said, smirking.

"But you've heard stories, what the bards say about them."

"I wouldn't believe bards," Tibs grumbled. The more he paid attention to what those that visited the town sang about, the more it sounded like they only sang about the good the guild did. Where were the stories of the adventurers who disobeyed the guild? Of those getting branded. Bards claimed they sang stories of the world, so how was it that none of them were about the dark things the guild did?

Quigly shrugged. "You're smart Tibs. What do you think it's about?"

"I don't know," he said defensively. He finished his tankard as Kroseph placed three on the table.

"You okay?" Quigly asked, then turned to Jackal. "Don't you ever let him rest?"

"Why are you looking at me like I'm pulling him to the bed all the time?" the fighter protested. "He's the insatiable one." He looked at his man worriedly. "When he's feeling better."

"It'll pass." Kroseph kissed the top of Jackal's head. "The last caravan must have brought more than their wares. Something's been spreading over the last few days."

"The caravan was here weeks ago," Quigly said.

Kroseph shrugged. "It's got to be them. The platform's supposed to have magic to make sure something like this doesn't happen."

"I didn't know that," Tibs said.

"It's not something they talk about. Dad asked because he was worried about

something like this when he was planning this inn.”

“I’m feeling fine,” Quigly said.

“You’re a Runner, you’re made of tougher stuff than the rest of us.”

“Metal,” Jackal pointed out.

“You guys want food? It’s not as good as usual. Milly’s at the fire today, but she’s good.”

“Russel?” Quigly asked.

“In bed. This hit him harder than the rest of us.”

“Did you ask Clara to look at him?” Tibs asked.

“She’s a cleric, we can’t afford—”

“She’s a Runner,” Tibs corrected. “And she’s a good person. Ask her the next time she comes in.”

“Alright, I will.” He headed back to the counter.

“I mean it,” Quigly told Jackal. “Let him rest.”

“I am.” The fighter looked at his man somberly. “I even had someone looked at him without his knowledge and they couldn’t find anything seriously wrong with him, so it’ll pass.”

Tibs wished there had been something in Kroseph’s essence he could fix, but other than being thin, which was normal for someone who wasn’t a Runner, it looked normal. He’d considered suffusing him with Purity, but when he’d asked Clara if it was something clerics did when they weren’t sure what was wrong with someone, she shook her head. Just filling someone with the essence didn’t act to cure them. Without the right guidance, the essence acted to purify, not heal.

Tibs hadn’t understood the difference, so she pointed to her eyes. Purity had done that to them. It made her usually green eye color so pure that there was nothing left of it. It would do the same to the person without the guidance of being woven or etched.

So Tibs was left with waiting, like everyone else.

“So, Tibs. What’s your thought on the fourth floor?” Quigly asked as he put his tankards down.

“Why would I know anything?”

“Because you have this habit of asking questions, and to get people to answer them. You have to have asked about it.”

“We’re not supposed to—”

“You’re a rogue, Tibs. Rules are something you only follow when it serves you.”

“He’s got you there.” Jackal grinned, and Tibs glared at him.

“I..” He trailed off under the expectant gazes. He was going to make Jackal pay, somehow, for going along with the warrior. “The world’s old, right?” everyone knew that. It was something bards always including when they sang about things before the guild. The world is so old we can’t know everything about what came before.

Quigly and Jackal nodded.

“And dungeons aren’t always there. I meant the dungeon was... born, I guess, not long before the guild found it. They have sorcerers and scholars always watching the mountains and stuff, right?”

Again, they nodded.

“And the guild doesn’t know everything about how dungeons do what they do.”

“They claim that they do,” Quigly said, and Tibs rolled his eyes.

“So, maybe there was a city there and the dungeon just found it.”

“A city under the mountain?” Jackal asked, laying on the disbelief thickly. “That can’t happen. How would anyone live without the sun?”

“Dwarves,” Quigly whispered, and Tibs straightened. He’d heard the name before, but he couldn’t remember where.

“Those aren’t real,” Jackal scoffed. “Bards made them up to make boring stories more interesting.”

“How do you know?” the warrior asked.

“Have you ever seen one?” Jackal countered.

“What are they?” Tibs asked.

“They aren’t real,” Jackal stated.

“Fine. What do the stories say they are?”

“Short,” Quigly said. “No taller than you. And stocky. The story I remember said that it was because the weight of the mountains rested on them. They lived under them, never seeing the sun.”

“Then how would bard know about them?” Jackal asked.

“Tibs said it, Jackal. The world’s old. Maybe some adventurers found a dungeon that went deep enough, like this one, and there was a city there too, and they found something that told them about the Dwarves.”

Jackal rolled his eyes. “Next you’re going to tell me the Elves are real.”

“They are.” The certainty in the words sobered the fighter.

“What are Elves?”

“Little things with pointed ears,” Jackal said dismissively.

“They aren’t little,” Quigly said.

“You’ve seen one?” Tibs asked, ignoring Jackal’s scoffs. There was no light on the words. At the very least, Quigly believed what he said.

“I... I think so.”

“So you don’t know,” Jackal said triumphantly.

“Can’t you tell me?” Tibs asked.

“It was in my third year as part of the king’s army,” the warrior said, even as he shook his head. “The kingdom abuts this forest, sunward. It marks the entirety of the border in that direction because any attempt to expand it has met with failure. It’s called the Damned’s Forest, because anyone sent into it is damned to never return. I was part of a regiment charged with protecting the wood cutters the king sent in yet another attempt to expand his lands. They fell one tree.

“You have to understand that those aren’t trees like you’ll find in most kingdoms. Sure there’re some like that, among them, but those trees, they touch the sky. Their trunks are so wide a hundred men couldn’t encircle it. They worked at it for four days to bring that one tree down. Six men died, unable to get far enough as it fell. My ears ran for hours afterward, and then with that stopped, this silence set in.

“It wasn’t the silence of the forest, with the leave rustling, birds and animals scurrying about. It was the silence of being in a cave after the entrance caves in. Just you,

the beating of your heart, and the knowledge that death waited for you.

“The woodcutters spend the rest of the day setting up to start on the second tree, but they never started. The next morning, half the people there were dead. Some with their throats cut, some strangled by vines, one had leaves pouring out of her mouth as if they’d grown inside her until they no longer fit. The scariest part was the none of the sentries were dead, and not one of them had seen any of it happened.

“The woodcutters left wanted out of there, but the unit captain was this hard ass woman scared of nothing except the king, so she had us for them to get back to work. Work would happen, until every tree that could be seen from a league away was felled, or the workers fell in their place. She assigned half the soldiers left to help them. We were too scared of her to protest.

“The first woodcutter put his saw to the trunk and dropped dead. The second didn’t even get to raise her saw. The captain sent us after the attackers, except there were none. We had no idea where to go, we were just dropping where we stood. Then someone pointed as a sentry was yanked into the undergrowth and we ran in that direction with all the fury terror will grant you.

“The only screams were ours.”

He fell silent, looking into his tankard.

Tibs had never seen the warrior like this, afraid.

“I slashed at every shadow, every leave that move felt my blade. I cut a path to nothing, hoping I’d end up with something for all my effort. Then I did.” His hands shook as he raised the tankard to his lips. “My sword hit something it didn’t cut through. Then I was sent to the ground and when I turned, my hand searching for where my sword vanished to, he... it looked at me. I don’t know about the ears, but it wasn’t small. Taller than I am, lanky. Skin of bark like the trees around us. Eyes... green like it shouldn’t be possible. It held a spear pointed at me, hate in those eyes so deep that I soiled myself.

“I ran. I screamed, and I ran.” He put the tankard down. “I didn’t care about being a deserter anymore. I just wanted to get out of there and live. I don’t know how I made it out. How I didn’t end up with a spear through my chest. I was just happen I did. When I made it back to the castle, I babbled what I remember to those there. I warned them to never even look in that direction. Of six hundred people, only four of us made it back.

“The king sent three regiments to get tools and weapons that were left behind. They returned empty-handed. There were no weapons to be found, no tools, no bodies. Not even a felled tree to prove we had ever been there.”

“It had essence,” Tibs whispered.

Quigly nodded. “I didn’t make the connection until much later. But it wasn’t an adventurer, it wasn’t someone like us. Maybe it wasn’t an Elf the way the bards sing about them, but it was something other than anything I had encountered before and since.”

“Did you ever go back?” Jackal asked, awe in his tone.

“Are you fucking insane?” Quigly looked around at the people staring at him and lowered his voice. “I never stepped within three leagues of that cursed place. I wended up in cells more than once for refusing to be on patrols that would take me closer than that. I will walk into the dungeon naked, before I even contemplate looking at that forest again.”

“But that thing might not have been an Elf,” Jackal said after a long silence.

“In a forest, protecting it from invaders, using the forests against attackers,” Quigly replied. “That sound a lot like what the bards sing of the Elves.”

“Yes, but you don’t know for sure that it was an Elf.”

Quigly shrugged. “You’re welcome to go there and find out for yourself.”

“I... I think I’m going to stick to running dungeon,” the fighter said. “That sounds safer.”

Planning-69

“Tibs,” Ganny whispered hurriedly as he approached the merchant’s stalls, and he froze. “You can’t talk to Sto, there’s... we’re not.... Just don’t talk to us.”

“Ganny, what are you talking about?” Sto’s reach was more than Tibs had realized.

“Is everything okay?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t know.” He waited, but she didn’t answer. He motioned for his team to follow him and went back the way they’d come. Had Ganny spoken to him at that moment because it was the earliest she could, or because it was when she’d noticed him. He stopped halfway to the town to be safe and stepped off the path.

“We are doing the run, right?” Jackal asked. “We can’t let Quigly be the first to explore it.” The warrior and his team were going in the next morning.

“Ganny warned me not to speak to Sto.”

“Why would they do that?” Don asked.

“I don’t know, but she sounded scared.”

We’re not... there’s...

How was he going to help if he couldn’t ask about what was going on? Alright, he had to trust Sto or Ganny would tell him when they had the chance. Until then, he had to make sure that no one on his team made things worse.

“We can’t talk to him,” he said, then looked at Don. “We can’t talk about him like we know he’s a person. Whatever’s going on, I think that giving the impression we know that will make things worse.”

“How would talking about it like that cause problem?” Mez asked. “It’s just the dungeon there, right?” He looked at Don.

“I don’t know. Nothing I’ve read mentions someone listening to a dungeon, but they also don’t mention anything about dungeons being able to talk. Tibs is the expert at this point, not me.”

“Until they tell me more, that’s all I have to go on,” Tibs said.

“So we do our run as usual,” Jackal said, “just without the talking.” He headed for the stairs. “Now come on before we’re late and they give our spot to Quig.”

* * * * *

Tibs fought the urge to look up as they walked toward the doorways, to give Sto a sign he was there and listening. To do something that would help his friend.

“Stop!” he ordered once Jackal opened the doorway to the fourth floor, then had to

work out why as the fighter looked at him questioningly.

He sensed around them, then the doorway. "There's something different about it."

"I did it the way I always do."

"Have you looked through it?" Don asked.

Instead of seeing the side of the stairs and the top of buildings, there was only darkness.

"You must have done something wrong," Mez pointed out.

"If our leader had, nothing would have happened," Khumdar replied. "We would be observing stone."

"It changed things?" Jackal asked, surprised.

"He wouldn't—"

"It is a dungeon," Don cut Tibs off. "Tricking us to our death is what they do." He fixed his gaze on Tibs, who nodded. He'd told them to be careful, and it had been him who'd almost said too much. "Mez, Khumdar, test the other doorways."

"Can you sense what that is?" Jackal asked.

Tibs shook his head.

"Where ever the other side of the doorway leads too, it isn't here. We can't sense what is on the other side until we are there."

"I'm not crossing it," Tibs said. The essence key was there, same as before, and Jackal had filled the conduit from one side to the other, so it should have...

"It's been changed." He focussed. Deeper, and fainter, there was a second set of conduits. "There's a new layer to it."

"The doorway to the second floor leads to something bright," Mez said. "There's no me mistaking that for the alcove."

"The third floor had a thick mist that cannot be seen through."

"The dungeon added complexity," Don said. "Anyone who takes how things have been done for granted will suffer for it."

"How many of the lower rank teams do you think fell for it?" Tibs asked. When had the change been made? He hadn't heard about this, but he'd stopped asking about the upper floors a while back. There had been faces he hadn't seen in a few days among the rogue he instructed, but he wasn't doing that regularly enough anymore to know if they'd died or graduated and no longer needed the training.

"I doubt anyone of the Upsilon did. It's too obviously different. Rho teams could assume the dungeon added fog to the start of the floor as a complication to the maze. We'll have to see how many made it out once we're done."

"That's two teams we could lose," Jackal said.

"Not counting those we've already lost," Mez said. "Three teams didn't make it back over the last four days."

"Did the others mention the change in doorways?" Don asked.

"I didn't ask. Everyone knows we're on the fourth now, so they don't tell me about the third unless I ask."

"How about Khumdar? Heard anything?"

"No. But I have no interest in who lives or dies as a result of the runs."

"Not enough secrets in that," Jackal stated.

The conduit to be filled was more complex, as well as harder to perceive behind the other one. Even forcing himself to only sense water essence, the overlap was such that he didn't always know he'd made a mistake until he finished filling it and nothing changed.

Finally, he filled the fainter conduit properly, and the darkness was replaced with the view of the stairs and the roofs.

"Is it safe?" Jackal asked, "or did it put another trick? You know dungeons are really crafty, they're like animals that will sneak around and—" Tibs glared him silent.

He took a knife out and lobbed it through. It clattered to the floor on the other side with a distorted sound.

"Looks safe enough." Jackal stepped through before Tibs could stop him.

"One more thing we can threaten to tell his man," Mez said, then walked through.

"I'd rather he think, instead." Tibs crossed the threshold, paying attention to the sense of the essence. The same tingling, the same shifting of essence, as if they were pushing each other without quite being able to touch.

Then he was looking at the city, dark, except for the lights lining the streets and in some of the windows. Except for the lack of stars, as well as Claria and Torus, this could be any city at night.

"Come on." Jackal rubbed his hands. "There's loot to be gained." He headed down the steps.

"Damn it, Jackal, stop! I have to check for traps."

"It's a city. They aren't going to be in the street."

Tibs winced.

Jackal made it to the street without anything happening.

"Maybe he's right and—"

"How about we don't ask for the dungeon to change things?" Tibs asked, stomping down the stairs. "I'm not saving you when you walk into a trap," he told the fighter as he reached him.

"Don't worry, I'm letting you go into the buildings first."

"How are we doing this?" Mez asked. "Do we split up and—"

"We're not splitting up," Don stated. "This isn't a city. It's a dungeon floor."

"We split up in the Ratling's camp," Mez said.

"This isn't that. At this point, we know the dungeon is able to make people golem who can wield essence, Gnolls, some of which also have essence. Golems that—"

"Those are easy," Jackal said. "They were on the second floor."

"With this open space, it could make one much larger. Then there's the dragon from the boss room. This will not be easier, so we can't take anything for granted."

"Including that the streets are safe," Jackal said. "I get it."

"That is highly doubtful," Khumdar said.

"The question I have is this," Mez said. "Will which building is a room change each time we do a run, or can we workout which they will be and save time that way?"

"We have all day," Jackal said. "I mean, if we stay here overnight, will anyone care?"

"Dungeons use the nights to..." Don trailed off.

"To what?"

The sorcerer shook himself. "According to what I read. Night is when dungeons make larger changes to the layout of the floors. There are records of people being sent in before the door closes, and not one of them has them returning once it opens."

"Where they sent in naked?" Mez asked. "We were threatened with that often enough in those first months."

"No, those I read about were adventurer expeditions. Fully equipped groups."

"We going to stand here all day, talking?" Jackal asked. "Or are we going to go look for loot?"

"We're not stopping you," Mez said.

"Have you seen the glare Tibs is giving me? If I walk off without his approval, he's going to do something nasty to me."

"He does know what to remove to make your life truly miserable," Khumdar said, and Jackal's hand went to this pouch.

"Not what he's talking about," Tibs said with a grin.

"See, I can't move until he'd okay with it. But seriously, we are here to run the floor, and I don't think the dungeon's going to send thing after us if we remain here."

"And you have a plan on how to proceed?" Mez asked.

"I do. We do thing the way my father had his thugs do it when there was someone trying to not be found. We go building by building, clear each, and hope they don't change each time we come back, so we can proceed ever further until we find the boss room."

"Do we want to take the chance the dungeon respected the importance of the buildings in a city and start with the city hall?" Don asked. "Then I think the barracks, if there is an office of law, the monetary exchange would also be important."

"Would it know how cities work?" Mez asked Tibs.

He shrugged.

"We start here," Jackal said, motioning to the houses along the street. "We go as far as we can today. When we come back, we check them enough to tell if they are the same or if we're going to have to this the same thing each run. Tibs?" he motioned to the closest house.

It had a lock and while it had thing magical about it, Tibs had trouble working out the mechanism of gears and levers that were connected to the large keyhole. When he finally worked out what parts were the tumblers, and how they worked, using ice to move them in position was simple.

The room was small, but luxurious. The chairs before the fireplace were metal, with plush velvet covering. The table was only large enough for two people, but the wood was carved with intricate patterns. Tibs found no traps as he headed for the other door. It had no lock and opened onto a bed and a wardrobe, both made of carved wood. His hand sunk into the covers to his elbow. He didn't sense anything magical about them, but he worried he'd vanished into the plushness of them.

"It's safe," he called. "There's nothing here."

"I wouldn't say nothing," Don said. He was looking over the table when Tibs exited the bedroom. "This is exquisite work. I wonder if they made it, or it was already here when they found the city." The sorcerer's mouth snapped shut, and he gave Tibs a worried look.

Tibs shrugged. Unless Sto screamed in terror or something happened when one of

them slipped, he couldn't know how much of a problem each time was.

"Considering how long it took you to get the lock open," Jackal said, "I'd expected some loot."

"The dungeon's tricky, you know that," Mez said.

"Not that tricky."

"If Tibs hadn't stopped you, you'd have walked through the doorway into whatever that darkness was."

Jackal shrugged and exited.

The house facing it was the same. A complicated lock, which Tibs opened faster, now that he understood how it worked, with an ordinary set of rooms, just as luxurious. The next four were much the same.

The fifth's door was already open, and something moved within. Jackal grinned, rubbing his hand in anticipation, and nodded for Tibs to open the door. As soon as it was, the fighter ran in, furniture broke, then something half as tall as Tibs ran out on all four and the only sound inside was Jackal's panting.

He looked in. The fighter was seated against the wall, stoned up and looking scared. Tibs looked back where the thing, he'd barely gotten enough of a look as it ran by to guess it was some animal, had vanished better two buildings. It hadn't seemed that scary. [in the dungeon, dogs will register to Tibs like normal dogs]

"A dog," Jackal said. "That was a fucking dog." He swallowed, looked up, and yelled. "Did my sister fucking put you up to this?"

Planning-70

“It wasn’t funny,” Jackal grumbled as they walked to the next house.

“It kind of was,” Don said, still chuckling. “You made to quiver by a dog. And not a big one at that.”

Jackal rounded on the sorcerer. “You have no idea what those things are capable of. I don’t care how small it was. There’s danger to anything decent.”

“You should be safe then,” Mez said, as Don raised his hands and stepped back, grinning.

“Those things aren’t normal.” Jackal looked up. “One of you made them! Come on, fess-up! Nothing that evil comes about naturally.”

“You have experienced little of the world,” Khumdar said. “If you had found yourself facing a badger, you would not think so.”

“I don’t know what that is, but it’s probably a dungeon creation, too.” The fighter shuddered and Tibs fought the smile.

He checked the door, another complex lock, although Tibs was starting to think they only felt complex because of how different they were from what he was used to. Now that he had a sense of how they worked, he could imagine the type of tools that would let a thief without an element get through them.

“I’ll stand guard,” Jackal said, “in case one of those things comes back.”

“You know, it’s unlikely there will be another one inside,” Don said.

“Then you should be fine, right?” the fighter countered.

The insider was much like the others. A living room and a place to prepare meals. In this one, they were smaller to make space for a third room. It reminded him of the room where Zackaria made their art. Bowls contained colors, with brush at their side.

“It’s going to take an eternity to go through every building,” Mez said. “Can’t you tell where the important stuff is, Tibs?”

“No,” he replied, turning over a fabric stretched between pieces of wood. “There isn’t anything that—” he frowned. He’d reflexively stretched his sense as he replied, and there was something at the edge. He couldn’t tell what it was, other than it wasn’t like anything else within. “There is something.”

“Loot?” Jackal asked from the doorway to the art room.

“What happened to standing guard?” Don asked, looking over a translucent container.

“Got bored.”

“I don’t know.” Tibs walked out. “I can’t tell what it is, just that it is. The essence doesn’t... I don’t have words to describe it. Flow is the best I can think of.”

“We shouldn’t simply wander there,” Don said. “One of these might have something.”

“We can come back after checking that one,” Jackal said.

The houses changed little as they headed for what Tibs sensed. A few had shelves by the door where wares to be sold could be displayed, but they didn’t feel like the shops in Kragle Rock. Looking inside one, it was still is home, and not a store.

What Tibs has sensed was another building, but this one was made of black... something. He thought it was stone. It had to rough look of it, but he couldn’t work out the essence within it. What he could identify didn’t... again, flow was the only word that came to him. It didn’t flow right.

“I wouldn’t touch it,” Don said as Mez reached for the wall. “This doesn’t...” he trailed off.

“You can sense it too?” Tibs asked.

“No, that’s what bothers me. I can’t sense anything.”

“It just means there isn’t any corruption in it,” Jackals said, joining Mez. “Or stone.”

“Or fire,” the archer said, touching it. “It’s cool to the touch.”

“That is the problem,” Don said, before Tibs pointed out he could sense those within the... weave? No, that still wasn’t the right word. “We should all be able to sense our element within it. They are present everywhere.”

“I don’t sense fire in houses,” Mez said.

“That’s because you aren’t paying attention,” the sorcerer replied. “There might not be a lot, but it is there. All you need to do is focus. Whatever this is, it’s like some... opposite of elements.”

“Is that a thing?” Jackal asked.

“Not that I’m aware of. I have no idea what this is. It’s like containers made to hold a concentrated element, but it holds everything back, which shouldn’t be possible. Multiple elements have to be part of the container so they will hold the one it has to hold.”

Tibs walked around, sensing for a difference in the wall. He found it, and wasn’t sure he liked it.

“There’s a door here,” he called. “It doesn’t have a lock.”

Don was the first to reach him. “Can you tell if there are triggers? Is it trapped?”

“There’s no essence triggers outside. And I can’t tell what the essence within the wall is supposed to do.”

“You can sense essence?”

Tibs nodded. “That’s what’s not... flowing right. Maybe that’s why you aren’t sensing it?”

“Or you’re simply able to sense deeper than I can.”

“I can’t sense through the wall.”

“That isn’t what I mean. Essence can be layers within the same space and—”

“Stop. I’m not dealing with that kind of headaches while on a run.”

Don nodded.

Jackal pushed the door in before Tibs could stop him.

Nothing happened.

“What?” the fighter asked at the glare.

“You do that again, and I’m telling Kroseph.”

“You said there aren’t any traps.”

“I said I can’t tell what the essence does.”

“It doesn’t explode,” Mez said.

“Or melt our esteemed leader’s hand off. Maybe it summons dogs?”

“Don’t even joke about that.” Jackal looked around.

Tibs focused and senses his essence moving about the city. They were close to the floor, so most likely dogs or other animals. A few were large enough to be big dogs. He wished he’d brought jerky. None came close to them.

Tibs made a ball of light and pushed it inside. As soon as it crossed the threshold, it intensified until he lost hold of it and the others backed off at the intense flash.

“What was that for?” Jackal asked, rubbed at his eyes.

“It wasn’t me. Something happened.” He tried to work out what it had been, but it had been too quick. “Cover your eyes.” He made another ball of light.

“I don’t think that’s...,” Don cursed as Tibs sent it in.

It started before the ball was fully in. As soon as a little of it was beyond the threshold, the essence increased, and then there was too much for him to hold.

He focused on sensing inside the building, but it was just more of that, not flowing whatever that was. There was light within that, but it didn’t seem to have change.

A hand pulled him back. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jackal said.

Tibs had stepped to the open door.

“It’d be interesting to find out if it reacts to something containing essence,” Don said, peering into the dark space, “or only to exposed essence.”

“You,” Jackal said, “are welcome to go in and find out.”

“You’re not supposed to send a team member to his death,” Mez said, forming a ball of fire.

“That is definitely a bad idea,” Don said.

Mez grinned. “I can’t let Tibs have all the fun.” He lobbed it inside and stepped to the side. The fire exploded and the heat that escaped the building hit Tibs hard enough he couldn’t breathe. For a second, he was back in the inferno, Fire consuming him. Then he was cold, staggering away.

“Why did you stay there?” Jackal demanded.

“I forgot how hot fire could be,” Tibs replied, catching his breath.

“This hurt you?” Don asked.

“It’s fire,” Jackal snapped.

“But it’s Tibs’s element,” the sorcerer replied. “It shouldn’t hurt him. He didn’t flinch at the light.”

“Well, fire does. That was stupid. Mez. Whatever’s inside is probably destroyed now.”

“Not that we were going in, right?”

“I’m okay.” Tibs stepped to the doorway and sensed inside. “Nothing’s changed in how it feels.” He made a ball of light.

“Tibs,” Jackal warned.

“I’m not sending it in.” He wove it until a beam of light shot into the room.

Everyone cursed and looked away.

Don was the first to look again when there was no explosion of light.

The building was a single room with benches set around a column of a dark material in the center. At the corners were small gray column with a crystal on top.

“Why isn’t it doing anything to the beam of essence?” Don mused.

“It is,” Tibs said. “This is more light than this etching normally makes.”

“How much more light?”

Tibs looked at the sorcerer. “How should I know?”

“The increase might be proportional to the concentration of the essence inside.” Don looked at the others. “Do you have an amulet I can borrow?”

“No.” Jackal stopped Mez from reaching into his pouch. “He want’s to throw it in and see what happens.”

“We should be safe,” the sorcerer, we’ll just stand on either side of the door. “The building seems to be made to prevent those outbursts of essence.”

“Should?” Mez asked.

Don shrugged. “Well, I can’t be certain without testing it, but I am confident. Whatever else this was for, there is no damage to the surrounding area. I’ll get you another one, if you’re concerned about not being able to retrieve it.”

“I’m more concerned about the possibility it will explode and we’ll end up hurt.”

“Tibs can heal us.”

“And if he’s the one who gets hurt?” Jackal asked.

Don looked at Tibs.

He was curious, and like Don, he figured the wall would contain whatever happened, but the worry was clear on Jackal’s face. “We should move on with the run,” Tibs said. “Once we have a better understanding of the floor, we come back and find out.”

“Are there other buildings like this one?” the sorcerer asked, and Tibs sensed as far as he could.

“Not that I can tell.” He went over what he could tell. “There are a few buildings that don’t feel like the others. But nothing like this.”

“You think those are dungeon rooms?”

“I’m too far to tell. The closest is in that direction, but it’s still a ways.” He looked at Jackal.

“If you can tell what is and isn’t a dungeon room, that’s going to speed things up.”

“But might it not result in us walking by potential loot?” Khumdar said. “The dungeon is clever enough to leave some in places that don’t attract attention. As it did in the Ratling camp and Bunnyling burrow.”

“You really want to make me sick, don’t you? It’s check everything in case there’s loot and miss out on whatever is in those special places, or do a lot of those, and miss out on loot.”

The cleric shrugged.

Jackal sighed. “Okay. We check the closest. If we get something good out of it, we do those and on the next run, we will check the houses on the way to them.”

Tibs led the way, not liking the silence. Sto should have commented on that. Would have. What could prevent him from watching their first run on this floor?

The attack came from a dark alley.

Tibs barely had the time to warn the others as he sensed the doorway form, that a group of thugs ran out of it. They looked like they'd come out of his Street, muscular, but wearing rags, using broken planks as weapons.

Tibs wasn't sure what Sto was trying with that, until he casually parried a swing with his arm and he was sent off his feet.

They looked like thugs from his Street, but they hit adventurers.

"Don't underestimate them!" Jackal called, getting back to his feet too. "We're in a dungeon, not the alleys of MountainSea."

Tibs would ask what Jackal had been up to in his last visit there later.

He made a sword of ice, added metal to it, and tested forming lines at the edge and etching Bor among them. When the struck thug, the edge bend under the impact causing the thug to smirk at him.

A quick etching of the 'x' attack sent him flying off.

He blocked the next one, a woman who looked underfed, but hit hard enough it reminded him of watching Cross punch overconfident fighters. He exploded a ball of fire etched with Kha in her face and cursed as the more intense than expected heat burned him too, before he absorbed that essence.

Maybe now was not the time to experiment with etching.

He dodged the returning thug, then stabbed him, which didn't keep the rusted knife out of Tibs's side. A kick and an angry swing had the head rolling to the ground, and Tibs hurried to set a weave of purity over the wound as he pulled the knife out to keep from bleeding, unconcerned about the corruption coating the blade.

Stabbing the woman through the chest didn't do much good, neither did a kick in the nether. She punched him and he staggered back, letting go of his sword.

"Fine," he grumbled, rubbing his jaw. If stabbing her through the heart didn't stop her, how about stabbing her through everywhere else? He sent essence to the sword, and it exploded into shards, taking pieces of her along with it.

As the pieces fell, Tibs realized that for as real as they looked, their insides weren't like his. It was flesh like, but they had no blood, and then dissolved into the floor. They did that no matter how close Tibs stood to them. There was no keeping it from happening, unlike with Runners.

The others were already done, and Tibs suffused himself with Purity, before going around healing them.

"The dungeon's going with a theme," Don said as Tibs healed the gash in his forearm. "But not respecting how weak back alley thugs should be."

"The quality of your back alleys leave something to be desired, then," Jackal commented, going through the pouch one of the thug had left behind when melting away.

"You ended up on your ass after that first punch. You weren't expecting them to be as tough as you are," the sorcerer replied.

"Yeah, but I never expect anyone to be as tough as I am. So that first hit often takes me by surprise."

“You’re saying I’m overconfident.”

“I said no such thing.” Jackal grinned.

Don sighed.

“You and him have that in common,” Tibs said. “Only he takes pride in it.”

“Are you saying I should take pride in it, or stop being overconfident?”

Tibs smiled. “Which one keeps you alive?”

“I’ll work on that.”

“They are also a more successful breed of thugs.” Jackal handed the pouch to Tibs. “A dozen silver coins. In the alleys back home, a group like this would barely have that in coppers.”

“Back in my home,” Tibs said, looking through in the pouch. “They’d be broken, and if one of them had two, he’d be rich.”

“I really want to see that street one day,” Jackal said.

“Nothing worth seeing,” Tibs replied, putting the pouch away. He healed the others, and they moved on.

“Let’s remain on our guard this time,” Jackal said, just as Tibs sensed the form running in their direction. He moved, forming a shield as the large dog jumped out of the alley.

Jackal let out a curse as it impacted against the shield, his mass pushing Tibs back.

“Stay!” He ordered it, remembering the command Serba used with her dog.

It lunged at him, foaming jaws snapping. He swung his sword and left shallow cuts. It looked like a dog, but it was definitely a dungeon made creature. Jerky might not do any good when he brought it.

A stone fist came down on its back, and it snapped at Jackal, who hurried back.

Tibs used its distraction to plant the sword through its chest, and have spikes of ice erupt from it. Its dying whine sounded too much like Thump when she wanted an extra piece of jerky.

“It hates me,” Jackal said with a shudder.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Tibs told him.

“I’m surprised you had to fight it,” Mez said. “They usually like you.”

“No jerky,” Tibs replied, and got a surprised look from the archer.

“Since when do you not carry jerky?”

“We’re going to be in here all day. I didn’t know S—there’s be dogs.”

“Dogs in a dungeon,” Jackal grumbled, looking around. “I hate my life.”

Planning-71

“Definitely a dungeon room,” Don said as they stood before the large building. “It has corruption woven through, like the walls on the upper floors.”

It was twice as large as the rooming house, but only two stories high. The double doors looked like wood, but had the same essence composition as the walls, which looked large slabs of uneven stone stacked one atop the other. It looked precarious, but they only looked like individual stones. Windows with open shuttered lined each floor, a dozen paces apart, and the feel of the essence there was different enough Tibs figured they would behave as the real thing.

That, or they were trapped.

“That’s one big room.” Jackal grinned. “There’s going to be lots of loot.”

“Why does it look like a building?” Mez asked.

“Because they all look like buildings?” Jackal countered.

“I saw that, but the other are there because it—”

“Dungeons,” Khumdar said, interrupting the archer, “will sometimes establish a theme.”

“More than sometimes,” Don said.

“Then they will follow said theme, no matter how unnatural it might be for the rest of the floor. You must remember that dungeons are nothing more than animals. They do not understand that some things might not feel appropriate to the people exploring them.”

“Like a city under the ground,” Tibs added.

“Right.” Mex mouth a silent ‘sorry’.

“Lets go get the loot.” Jackal headed for the door and Tibs ran to reach it first.

He glared at the fighter. “Let me check the door for traps.”

“This is clearly some sort of public building. Those don’t lock their doors.”

“And how would a dungeon know such a thing?” Khumdar asked.

“Because Runner can’t stop talking and it’ll...” He ran a hand down his face. “Right. It’s not like it understands people. Right?”

Tibs sighed. Jackal was a lost cause when it came to subtlety.

The door didn’t have a visible lock. Only one large handle on each door. He didn’t sense a difference in the weave, but he wasn’t taking that for granted. Once he was done, he stepped back, perplexed at not finding one. Sto would have heard Runners talking, as Jackal almost said, and he’d understand enough of how a public building worked to use that to trick them into a trap.

“No traps?” Jackal asked.

“No traps on the door,” Tibs replied.

Jackal grabbed the handles and pulled.

Tibs stepped in, intent on looking for more traps, but the scene stopped him. There were people, a lot of people, in a room that had to be half the length of the building. The door was in the center. They stood in lines before a counter running the length, divided in section by a small wooden board on each side of someone on the other side of the counter. They gestured to each other for a few seconds, then exchanged something and the person on this side stepped away to join another line, while the next person stepped to the counter and did a variation on what the previous one did.

They were speaking, Tibs realized. At least, mimicking speaking. The large room was silent except for the sound of footsteps.

Otherwise, this looked so normal it made Tibs uncomfortable.

What was the point of this room?

“What is this?” Jackal asked.

“It looks like some sort of permit office,” Mez answered, then elaborated. “My father has a second cousin who runs a tailor’s shop. I was sent to help him during a trade festival, and we spent hours the day before in a place like this so he could get the permit for the festival booth.”

“It feels unusual for a dungeon to make such a place,” Khumdar said.

“Just hope we aren’t supposed to stand in line until we get to the front. We’ll die of boredom before that happens.”

“There’s other doors.” Tibs pointed to each of the far walls, as well as behind the counter. “Maybe we have to make it to one of them without getting pulled into the lines?” He stepped forward, but Mez stopped him.

“Wait.” He searched the crowd, then pointed to a woman wearing a gray robe with a golden collar. He pointed to a man further away, and another on the other side. “If this is like the office I went to, they are agents of order. They’re like guards. They make sure everything proceeds in an orderly fashion.”

“They don’t look like guards,” Jackal said. “Other than how they’re dressed, they look like the clerks.”

“And that’s what they were, but this is a dungeon. If, like Tibs, thinks, the point is to make it to one of the doors, they will be one thing that gets in our way.”

“The others in line might also cause trouble,” Don said. “If they think we are trying to cut ahead of them.” He waved the looks aside. “I’ve heard stories of altercations from places like this. Too many people, in too small of a place, in too much of a hurry to get things done. I never had to accompany my father to such a place, but he and my sister always came back with a story of a fight that had to be broken up.”

“Then this is a maze.” Knowing who to look for, Tibs saw two more agents walking among the lines. They didn’t seem to have a path they followed, but it might require longer observations to figure it out.

“So, what happens if we step off the path?” Jackal asks. “I get to kick those agents’ asses?”

“That might start a riot,” Don pointed out.

“Can you think of a way the dungeon can force us to join the lines, Tibs?” Khumdar asked.

“There’s a lot that essence can do, but we’d be able to fight against it.”

“This doesn’t feel like something that can kill us,” Jackal said.

“You never stood in one of those lines,” Mez pointed out. “I was ready to kill for a chance to get out after an hour.”

“Why didn’t you just leave?” Don asked. “You couldn’t have been that old.”

“I was given the responsibility, and I wanted to prove I wasn’t a child.”

“There’s something to be said about being a kid,” Jackal said. “Tibs, how are we doing this?”

Tibs sensed the room, searching for a pattern that would indicate how the maze was built, but nothing felt out of place, or like a trigger line. He focused on air, sending essence over the floor, looking for hidden triggers.

“I think all we can do is try to avoid the agents and, in case Don’s right, try not to cut in front of anyone. The door on that far wall looks to be clear. There’s only two agents, and the lines seem to leave a clear path in the center.”

“That’s going to make it easy for the agents to notice us,” Mez said.

“I can deal with them,” Jackal replied.

Tibs nodded. “We stay on the central tiles. I’ll keep checking for triggers while we watch for the agent’s movement. There’s probably a pattern in them.” The tiles were square, and about the length of his foot and half that. Six of them made the width of the double doors. He stayed in the center, and the others lined up behind him.

He reached the middle of the room with no one reacting.

“There is...” Khumdar trailed off, looking around. Tibs waited. He felt the essence spread from the cleric in a cloud. It had an odd structure to it. Not quite a weave, but more than an etching. Tibs searched for a word to describe it, but the best that came to him, which, as was often the case with the elements, felt inadequate, was music.

“I am unsure how to describe this secret. We are being watched. Is a poor approximation for it.”

“It’s the dungeon,” Jackal said. “It’s always watching us.”

“No always,” Tibs said.

“This is not that. I have felt the secret of the dungeon’s observation and it is... less secret.” Khumdar

rubbed his temple. "I dislike having to express what I sense. It is so... clumsy."

"Tell me about it," Don grumbled, and everyone nodded.

"Is it linked to how we pass this test?" Tibs asked. He was tempted to fill the node with darkness, but he was worried of a repeat of his attempt on the roof. The dungeon was not the place for Darkness to cut him off from what was real.

Khumdar closed his eyes. "No. I do not believe so. There is a sense of distance. Of not being involved." He grumbled something under his breath.

"Then we continue." Tibs proceeded slowly, remaining alert for any changes in the floor he'd missed before.

Mez's curse, followed by Don and Jackal, made him spin. They fought two agents Tibs had somehow missed. Jackal shoved one into a line and they turned, their expression angry.

"How do we turn this trap off?" Mez demanded, swinging his bow like a staff.

"We don't," Jackal replied. "We fight them off." He broke the arm of one of the people in the line now joining the fight, and kicked him into another line.

"Then stop angering more of the customers!" Don yelled. "There are enough of them already." A quick motion made a line of corruption he grabbed with a hand and used to hit the people reaching for him.

Tibs cut a hand off someone grabbing Jackal, then a leg out from under someone on the other side. Fire erupted from Mez's bow. He pushed and nearly tripped against Tibs as he stepped back.

"We need more space!" The archer yelled.

"Don't!" Don yelled back, panic in his tone. "The sixth tile is the—"

Tibs watched in horror as something flowing over the sorcerer reached his face and he became still. At the same time, the customers, as Don had called them, settled back into their lines. Don's horrified expression turned calm as he joined the back of a line.

"Don," Mez reached for the sorcerer, but Tibs pulled him back.

"Stay in the center."

Sixth tile. What had he meant? He counted from the center line, but there were no differences in the essences beyond the sixth tile. No differences he could make out.

"Is he dead?" Jackal asked. "Tibs, can you do something?"

He wrenched his attention from the floor and the essence around them and sensed Don. "He's alive." His essence was still strong, but there were no indications the sorcerer was fighting what had been done to him. "But whatever that was, it's doing something other than making him act like them. I think it's doing something to his mind."

"Do you think any of the others are Runners?" Jackal asked, sounding scared.

Tibs sense them, as Khumdar said.

"We are the first to step onto this floor. Anyone who looks like someone we have known is nothing more than a golem the dungeon has given their form to."

Tibs shuddered at the memory of the people golem Sto had looking like her.

"Right. So, do we just pull him out of the line?"

The line Don was in moved forward and someone stepped behind him.

"Interacting with them caused them to attack," Mez said.

"Where did the agents come from?" Tibs asked, searched the essence for a way to help Don. "I didn't see them, and they seem to be gone now."

"They just appeared," Jackal said.

"That is incorrect. They were there, disguised as a person in line. I saw one change, but it happened faster than I could give warning."

"Which one?" Tibs asked, then sensed the one Khumdar pointed to. "She's no different than the others. However it happened, I can't sense it."

"Will it end once Don reaches the front of the line?" Jackal asked. "Maybe the trap is that it's going to kill him with boredom and if he makes it there, he'll just walk away?"

"Except they go to the back of another line," Mez pointed out.

"What happens in a place like this?" Tibs asked. This felt more like something Ganny did. And she'd stick to how things worked. Somewhere in the process would be the clue to breaking Don out of it.

"I told you. You get a permit."

"But what does that mean? How does it happen?"

Mez thought for a second. "Well, he had to present documents. I don't remember what they were,

probably something about his shop, or how he had a right to sell in the city. I remember he paid a fee, then he got a brass medallion that proved he'd been approved for a booth at the festival."

"How many coins did he have to pay?"

"I don't know, but I doubt it matters. The dungeon can't know what my city charges and every city will be different."

Tibs cursed. Even if he knew the amount, he couldn't get to the counter with crossing the sixth tile. "What if something's wrong? What if you don't like what happened? How do you put an end to it?"

"I don't know. I only went that one time and it we left once he had the medallion."

Tibs looked at Khumdar.

"I am afraid that in this, I am unable to help. I was never trusted by my family to assist in thing that would necessitate coming to such a place. Once I left, became what I am, I had no reasons to come."

"If you don't like what the clerk did," Jackal said, "you talk with their superior."

"Let me guess," Mez said, "you've been hiding that this is also something you have experience with."

Jackal scuffed. "I've never stepped within blocks of something like this. But you forget what my family did. Keeping the various organizations under control creates a lot of unhappiness, and anything that happens, someone demands to speak to one of the higher ups. Once in a while, they have enough clout that the higher-up was my father. It never went well for them if he had to deal with the problem."

"Where do we find that person?" Tibs asked.

"Not here," Jackal replied with a snort. "They're going to be somewhere back there. Putting as many thugs between themselves and the complaint. Maybe con someone else in dealing with it."

Back there, was the wall behind the counter with half a dozen doors. That meant stepping beyond the sixth tile and facing what Don was suffering from. Tibs might be able to deal with it, considering all the elements he had, but without being sure, he wasn't looking forward to testing it.

He looked at the door at the far end. If the building was designed like the guild, there were be corridors and hallways behind that door leading all over the place. He headed in that direction.

"Tibs?" Jackal called. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to lodge a complaint."

Planning-72

The door leading out of the large room proved a challenge. The lock was like those Tibs picked on the houses, but more so. It had an essence layer on top of the physical tumblers that needed to be manipulated at the same time. Each essence tumbler was made of all the essences, so any rogue could pick it, if they could be delicate enough.

Or, Tibs suspected, brutal enough. He saw a level of delicateness he suspected Ganny hadn't accounted for. At least one rogue would be able to force their way through.

Tibs was careful in manipulating the physical and elemental tumbler, and the door unlocked.

The corridor was larger than those in the Guild. There, two people could comfortably walk in them side by side. Here, four could do so. It headed left and right, with doors on the opposing wall, and a turn to the left further along the left direction.

"Which room is it?" Jackal asked.

Tibs sensed, but the walls were woven in such a way he only got a vague impression of what was on the other side. A room and golems people.

"It is my experience," Khumdar said, "that people in authority reside higher within their organization."

"We should still check the room, right?" Jackal ask. "Just in case?"

"Just in case there's loot, you mean?" Mez replied.

"This is a dungeon."

They looked at Tibs.

"He's the leader." He nodded to Jackal.

"But we're talking loot," Mez said, "so his judgment can't be trusted."

Tibs sighed. They had all day, but how much of that had passed? He hadn't seen any time shields. Could they spend the entire day exploring this building?

"Are you okay with going for the boss creature directly this time? When we come back we're going to have a better idea of how long we can spend here and—"

A door opened and a woman carrying papers stepped out. Tibs stared as she took them in impassively, then with a silent scream ran in their direction, papers flying out of her hands and fading away.

Jackal stepped forward, his skin turning the gray of stone, and punched her. She flew back, landed on her back, sliding for a few paces, then was still. A second later, she dissolved, leaving behind a silver coin and a piece of paper.

“This is going to be easy,” Jackal said, sounding disappointed.

“This is a dungeon,” Khumdar said, as Tibs cautiously approached the dropped loot. “I would be wary of making assumptions.”

The coin was a coin. It has a sun on one side, Claria and Torus on the other. The paper was.... He turned it over. Blank.

“Some prop in the play that is the theme of this building?” Khumdar asked.

“The papers she was carrying disappeared,” Mez pointed out. “This dropped after Jackal killed her.”

“It.” Tibs said. “But you’re right. Ga—the dungeon doesn’t leave things behind that don’t matter.”

“It leaves loot,” Jackal said and took the paper out of Tibs’s hand, looking at it this way and that. “Maybe this is a note of promises.”

“A what?”

Mez asked.

“A paper that says you get more coins than you can carry if you give it to the right person,” Tibs replied. He shrugged at the surprised look the archer gave him.

“There’s nothing written on it.”

“It could be some sort of magical paper,” Jackal said. “With how much coins it’s worth appearing once we leave.”

“That fells...” Mez shrugged.

“There’s essence in it,” Tibs said. “I mean, other than what’s there to make it. There isn’t a weave in it. It’s just dungeon made paper.”

“You sure? Seems to me it wouldn’t bother with that. It’s not like the food and herbs of the first two floors. We don’t need paper.”

Tibs shrugged. It was all he could do since he couldn’t ask Sto or Ganny.

“We could sell them,” Mez said. “Paper is expensive, and the guild isn’t going to care about that.”

Jackal shrugged. “We can see how much coin Darran will give us for this.”

They made it to the turn when a door opened behind them. Before they were ready, a people golem were on them. Khumdar struck one as Mez backed from them and Jackal moved forward. The golem barely reacted to the blow, reacting by shoving his hand at the cleric.

Tibs felt the air essence gather, but couldn’t react in time to stop it, only to etch a wall of air behind them adding kha using water. The detonation sent them all flying back, but instead of hitting the stone wall hard enough to break bones, Tibs and the other sank into the thick air.

He absorbed the essence as they began falling to the floor and was running as soon as he dropped, jagged sword in a hand, shield in the other. He coated the shield with air, etching it with Sah, and when he caught the blast of air with it, the addition of Sah ripped the essence around, causing Tibs to only slow, instead of flying back again.

His sword bit deep into the golem, but was wrenched out of his hand when it jumped back. He made another one as a volley of fire arrows flew over Tibs’s head, to be flung aside by a wave of the hand and the torrent of air that followed it.

Darkness hit it, and it staggered. Jackal followed, but each blow was diverted by an

air current. When the golem hit him, Tibs dropped, sending water along the floor as the fighter flew over his head.

He moved to a knee to the sound of stone impacting stone, and the water rose over the golems boots as it deflected arrows and even Khumdar's dark blast. Tibs turned the water to ice when it reached its knees, then exploded it.

The golem didn't react to the pain that losing both legs would cause, but it lost its concentration trying to maintain its balance and then exploded as a fire arrow hit it in the chest.

Tibs absorbed his sword and shield. "Is everyone okay?"

Jackal got to his feet. "I'm good." The wall had a crack going from the floor to the ceiling.

"Thanks for that save," Mez said, walking by.

"Was this difficult enough to satisfy your thirst for battle?" Khumdar asked.

"Wish I'd gotten to do more, but yeah."

"Another blank page," Mez said. Handing it and a silver coin to Tibs.

"You think we can get a silver for one of those?" Jackal asked.

Tibs shrugged. "Merchants ask for two silver for a page, but they won't give us that."

"Darran might give us a few copper per page," Mez said, "a few more if Tibs asks nicely."

Tibs shrugged at the chuckling.

They reached the end of this corridor with no doors opening, and no stairs to the second floor.

"Maybe they're outside?" Jackal said.

"Is that a thing where you're from?" Mez asked.

"I saw some in MountainSea. Stairs outside a building going up to a terrace or another part of the building."

"That feels like it is too simply a solution to a problem posed by a dungeon."

"It's in a room," Tibs said, trying to sense details behind the doors on each side. He grumbled when he got little of use. "There's two people golem in that one, one in there. I can't sense if there are stairs."

"Doesn't it seem strange to you that the dungeon can hide the stairs from Tibs, but not the golems?"

"The complexity of the golem's essence may make them harder to camouflage," Khumdar said. "Stairs are nothing more than stone, as are the walls. It would be simple to make one seem like the other."

"Then we go in," Jackal said, grinning, "hit them before they can react and, if there's no stairs, we collect the loot and move on to the next one."

"You are liking that we have to do this too much, Jackal." Mez pulled on the string and an arrow formed.

"It's going to be fun."

* * * * *

"So," the archer said, standing over Jackal as Tibs applied a weave of purity over the break in the stone arm. "Still fun?"

The first two rooms had been easy. Tibs and Jackal had rushed in, moving to the side

so Mez and Khumdar could attack at a distance until they reached the golems. In the first room, they hadn't gotten the time to stand from the desk they sat at before they were destroyed, leaving a silver piece and paper behind.

The third room proved harder. The lone occupant used crystal essence to fracture the fire and darkness around itself, redirecting some to Tibs and Jackal. The darkness that hit Tibs did nothing, but the fire hurt. Jackal had difficulty remaining standing after one strong blast of darkness hit him, but he'd made it to the golem, and one punch was all it took.

The problem came on the way to the fourth room. Those in it exited as they reached the door and Jackal took the brunt of all their attacks, leaving him on the ground, holding himself together through willing his Earth essence in place, while Tibs, Mez and Khumdar had trouble killing them.

"I've had worse days," Jackal said through gritted teeth, "in the pits."

"He's fine," Tibs commented darkly. He was fine now. Tibs had a wrap of his element around him to hold him together while he healed each break individually. He wanted to blame Jackal for being careless, but this one was the team. They'd been too sure of what they'd encounter. Hard fights, yes, but nothing that might kill one of them. If it had been anyone other than Jackal, Tibs wasn't sure they'd have survived.

"I will be fine," Jackal said, sounding better. "I'm not dying, Tibs."

"You could have."

"We'll be more careful."

"Not having Don is costing us," Mez said, and Jackal nodded.

"At least, the search is over," Khumdar said from inside the room, "Although I do not believe that having found the stairs will help us reach the next floor."

Tibs focused on Jackal's injuries to fight the urge to see what the cleric meant. Only once all the weaves were in place did he enter the room. Unlike the others, which had contained the table the golem sat at while they waited, as well as a cabinet that didn't always open. One had doubled as a cache where Tibs had found a set of supple leather shirt woven through with metal, air, and earth. This one had the stone stairs at the back, going up half the height to the room to a landing, and turn back to continue on. Next to it was a table, but no chairs. On it were two trays, one of which was piled high with papers.

Mez and Khumdar stood before the stairs.

Tibs found out why they weren't going up them, when he tried and encountered an unseen wall.

Planning-73

Tibs studied the room visually and through the essences.

The stairs, the table and its content, and them. That was all there was to see. He could sense the unseen wall, if he focused. Sto was finding ways to weave essence in such away that even to Tibs's broader sense, it was becoming difficult to notice them. He wanted to ask how, but held his tongue. Whenever Sto was done dealing with his problem, he'd let Tibs know.

He couldn't simply undo the wall. Even if it was within his capability, it wasn't the point. He needed to unlock it. What did that leave him to work with?

On the table were two trays. One had papers, the other didn't. He didn't sense a connection between them, but with how difficult the wall was to sense, he wasn't sure he could trust that.

He took a page from the pile, but couldn't pull it off. They weren't individual papers. Them, the tray, and the table were one item. Testing the empty tray showed him it, too, was part of the table.

"Why two of them?" Mez asked.

"Cause a place like this deals with so much paper one's not enough," Jackal replied.

That didn't seem right, but Tibs had to remember this wasn't an office in a city. It was one Sto had created based on what he heard Runners say. Tibs thought that any offices who dealt with so much paper would know how to properly arranged them so anyone who needed them could find them, but what had Sto heard?

What did Runners know about such places? Until recently, other than the nobles, most came from cells. How much would criminals care about what really happened here?

He took out a page the people golems dropped on dying and added it to the pile.

Nothing happened, and when he took it, it came away.

He placed it on the other tray, and there was a flash of essence. When he tried to take it again, it was part of it.

"I get to kill more of them, don't I?" Jackal grinned, handing him two pages he'd collected.

"If you are not careful, you are the one who might end up dead."

Jackal snorted. "I'm only caught unprepared once."

"Until the next time you do not expect the attack that takes you down." Khumdar shook his head. "You rely on your inherent stubbornness to allow you to survive attacks that

would kill anyone else.”

“And my toughness.”

“I question if that plays a part at all. You are simply too stubborn to know when you have been defeated.”

“How many pages do we need?” Mez asks. “If we need to kill everyone, we might be here all the time we have left.”

“Then the loot’s going to be great, right?” Jackal asked.

Tibs studied the trays again. The idea they were simply there to accept the papers they collected killing the creatures in the building just didn’t work. Loot was always collected in relation to the room they were in. Kill all the creatures there and you got the loot. This was the lock to access the next floor, so there had to be more to it than just it.

“We add the pages as we kill them,” Jackal said. “If it the wall goes away before we kill all of them, then we know we don’t have to kill all of them. Tibs?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have a better idea.”

“Is there not a danger the room will reset once we exit it?” Khumdar asked.

“The building’s the room,” Jackal said. “It’ll be fine.”

“I wish you hadn’t just said that,” Mez grumbled.

Tibs made a stone block to keep the door from closing.

“I don’t think that’s going to keep the dungeon from resetting it,” Mez said.

Tibs shrugged. “It can’t hurt.”

The next two rooms were simple. Mez shot inside blindly as soon as Jackal opened the door, then he and Tibs rushed in while the other two stayed by the door, adding support attacks when needed. The two rooms got them three pages and a chain mail shirt that was lighter than usual. Tibs figured it was all the air essence woven through it.

The door to the stair room remained open and unchanged. The pages added to the tray caused the same pulse of essence, but it didn’t change the wall. It felt too simple, but Tibs left the nagging in the room. Maybe Sto hadn’t thought of anything better, and he’d change it for the next time.

The following room was empty of clerks or loot.

The one after that almost killed Mez as ice exploded out of them as soon as the door opened. Only suffusing himself with fire kept it from ripping the archer apart, but it wasn’t enough to keep him from sustaining injuries Tibs had to spend a lot of essence healing.

He refilled his reserve, absorbing all the water woven through the room. It was all it contained. This had been a trap, and a simple one at that, and Tibs had fallen victim to the one thing that caused thieves to be caught and lose their hand. Complacency.

He checked each door before Jackal opened them, and they avoided another trap. This one metal spikes coated in corruption so thick they melted the opposite wall where they struck it.

Tibs was the only one to go in, immune to both, and returned with a bow woven through with corruption.

The next room contained three of the golem clerks, and they were ready for them. Before they were inside, one vanished, and Tibs felt the dagger in his side before he sensed her next to him. She was gone before his sword was in motion, then he barely moved his shield in time to take the next attack. She was gone, and Jackal stumbled, his punch carrying

him forward. She slammed her knife into his back, shattering the blade, and Tibs jumped over the fighter, cutting her as she backed away. When she vanished, Tibs kept moving, and sensed her where he'd stood. She vanished again, and now that no one was around him, and etched a cloud of metal needles around him.

She appeared among them, arm in the air, a new knife in hand, and froze. Tibs felt her dying, as her essence ebbed, but cut her head out of sheer anger. He grabbed the paper before it reached the floor and stomped to the others who'd dealt with the other two.

They did the facing room, which contained five of the golem clerks, but proved to be weaker than those before. Once they were done, the room gave Tibs pause, before searching it. It was arranged like a lounging room he'd seen in nobles' homes. Amelia had one where she and her friends relaxing it on hot days. She'd invited Tibs, but he'd passed.

He found a sweet smelling pastry in the chest, and couldn't keep Jackal from snatching and eating it, moaning in delight.

"There was essence in that!"

"Good essence." Jackal grinned.

"You don't know what it's going to do to you!"

The fighter patted his stomach. "Make it so I'm not so hungry."

Tibs glared at him.

"He does not seem to be dying," Khumdar commented.

"Because I'm not done with him," Tibs snapped.

"Just tell Kroseph and save yourself the trouble," Mez said.

Tibs forced his temper down and sensed Jackal. His essence wasn't weaker, so Khumdar was right. The essence from the pastry still spread, but he had no idea what it did, if anything.

"Don't do that again," Tibs threatened, then left the room.

He dumped the papers on the tray, and turned to leave, when the pulse spread and the unseen wall ceased to be.

"I guess that's all there was to it," Jackal said, starting up the stairs.

Tibs glared at the trays. It felt wrong for this to be nothing more than collecting a kill count.

"Maybe it's about showing we're strong enough," Mez commented as Tibs grumbled under his breath.

"We're alive," Tibs snapped. "That's proof enough."

The fight was underway before Tibs reached the top, and he ran to help, only to stop as Jackal glowed faintly and threw his attacker aside with more ease than even he usually showed.

Mez shot one of the further attackers, sending spikes of darkness at Jackal. But Tibs didn't think he needed the help; the glow disrupted them.

Six creatures ended up at the grinning fighter's feet, dissolving and leaving silver pieces behind.

"How did you do that?" Tibs asked.

"No idea. When I walked out of the stairs, they attacked. The glow appeared when one managed to hit me, and made me stronger, tougher, and their essence attack didn't do much."

“The pastry?” Khumdar asked.

Tibs shrugged. “The dungeon doesn’t usually help us.”

“It has been providing healing and essence potions.”

He shrugged again. They were in another corridor. This one went forward, as well as to their left and right. Doors lined the walls.

“Do we check each room?” Mez asked, “or look for one that’s clearly the boss room?”

“It’s going to be the last room on the floor,” Jackal said, looking his glowing self over.

“The last room we check?” Mez asked. “Or the room furthers from the entrance?”

Jackal glanced at Tibs.

“I don’t know,” Tibs replied, annoyed. “You’re the one saying where it’s going to be.”

“I’m sorry, Tibs,” Jackal said, then spread his arms. “But look, it was a good thing I ate it.”

“That’s not the point. You didn’t know it would be, just acted. Just did a Jackal thing. It could have been poison.”

“And you would have healed me.”

“How?”

“With purity, or you’d have removed the corruption, or done another—”

“Who on the team’s been poisoned before? I’ve never had to heal that. I can take out the corruption in poisons out there, but this is a dungeon, and he’s getting good enough I can’t always tell what he’s done with the essence, or that he’s even done something. You do stuff because you think you know what it is and that I’m going to just know how to help you. You have to stop!”

Jackal looked at his feet. “Sorry. I didn’t think—okay, that’s too normal for me to use it.”

“Just remember you promised Kroseph you’d stop doing Jackal stuff.”

“I don’t think he can—” Mez closed his mouth at Tibs’s glare.

“All right, Tibs. I’m going to be more careful.”

Tibs returned the glare to the fighter.

“I… promise?” Jackal added.

Tibs forced himself to breathe. It wasn’t like he could ask anymore than that from his friend. Short of giving up the runs, which they couldn’t do, Jackal would always be in a situation where he might be killed. And Tibs had been victim to overconfidence in the dungeon too. It had almost killed Mez this time.

He looked at the corridors. “I can’t sense any creatures in my range, but that doesn’t mean anything anymore. I say we check the floor in case the room we’re looking for has a sign on it. If it doesn’t, we go through the room one at a time and hope it doesn’t take too long to find the boss.”

Jackal headed to their right, and after six doors, they came to an intersection. Ahead, it continued for three doors on each side, then ended at a window looking outside. On the left and right, more doors with another intersection further down.

Tibs headed to the window and looked out at the surrounding houses, then up. There was more light, although he couldn’t tell where it came from.

“Looks like late morning,” Jackal said.

“Is that how we know how long we have?” Mez asked. “The light matches outside.”

“Maybe, unless the dungeon’s trying to trick up into staying too late.”

“You really think spending the night would be bad?” the archer asked.

“Unless Tibs ask—” Jackal closed his mouth. “No way to find out unless we stay. And I’m not doing that.”

“Worried of what might happen?” Mez smirked.

“A night with Kro outweighs any loot the dungeon can tempt me with.” He headed to the intersection.

“Until he gets better, you aren’t going to do much with your man during the night,” Mez said.

Jackal snorted. “It’s not the doing stuff that makes the nights great. It’s the being with him.”

Mez sighed, but said nothing.

Jackal turned left, and as they turn right at the next intersection, a group of four turned into the corridor from the other one.

“I’ve got this,” Jackal said, took three steps, then yelped as his feet flew out from under him on the icy floor and he landed on his back.

Tibs glared at him, standing over him. “What did you promise?”

“That I wouldn’t eat pastries from dungeon chests anymore?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes.

“I’ve got this.” He pointed to his glowing hand with the other glowing hand.

“Tibs,” Mez said, as he shot an arrow. “You’re going to want to let him get up. They’re coming.”

He glanced at the approaching clerks, then Jackal. “Think.” Then absorbed the ice and made a sword and shield. Jackal stood before him, looked over his shoulder, then back next to Tibs.

A clerk etched something Tibs barely sensed, and Jackal stepped forward to take the attack. Then he flew back as the glow vanished just before the attack impacted.

“I’m okay,” he wheezed.

Tibs etched the cloud of needles before him and added Eif within it. Instead of sending the cloud flying at the approaching clerks, since Eif added motion to the etching, it exploded in all directions. He absorbed those heading for him and his team. What had he told himself about experimenting with the Arcanus in the dungeon?

At least, one clerk was brought down by those that flew forward.

Khumdar was at his side when they arrived, mixing attacks with his staff with blasts. Tibs focused on sword and shield, his opponent using the same, but with strength, instead of agility. Tibs felt the impact in spite of his armor and the added earth and metal to his skin. And his own attacks only left shallow lines on the clerk.

“Tibs, down.”

He dropped, and the heat from the explosion warmed his back. He looked up to see the fire dying as the body vanished. The other two were also dead.

He stood and headed for Jackal, who sat against the wall, arms against his chest. Bones were broken, and the fighter’s essence did something inside that it usually didn’t, but

it wasn't fading, so Tibs wasn't worried, just annoyed.

"I thought—"

Tibs raised an eyebrow as he crouched next to him.

Jackal sighed. "I hoped it would last longer."

He wove purity and applied it. Jackal sighed and his breathing eased.

"What essence was that?"

"I don't know. I couldn't identify it."

Jackal nodded.

"Tibs," Khumdar called. "Once you are done with our leader, I believe I have located the room we have been looking for." The cleric was on the other side of the intersection, studying something next to a door.

He helped Jackal stand, and they joined Khumdar.

The door was the only one on this part of the wall, facing the center one of the three on the opposing one. It looked like them, but next to it was a large plaque of polished brass.

"What's it say?" Mez asked.

"This is the office of the official Paper Pusher," Khumdar said. "I believe this is the boss room."

Jackal snorted. "How tough—"

Tibs elbowed him in the stomach as hard as he could. It hurt, but at least he stopped the fighter. They might not be able to speak with Sto, but he had to be listening, and Tibs wasn't letting Jackal goad him into making this tougher than it was already going to be.

Planning-74

Tibs glared at the door.

“What’s wrong?” Jackal asked.

“There’s no lock.”

“The other doors didn’t have locks,” Mez pointed out.

“Those weren’t boss rooms.” Tibs grumbled. “Boss rooms have locks.”

“We may be ignoring the fact this is not the dungeon,” Khumdar said, “but simply one room within it. Its rules may not be identical.”

Tibs nodded, but didn’t feel better. He was worried the lock was something Sto had figured out how to hide from him and his team would pay for it.

“Why don’t I open it,” Jackal said. “The rest of you stand to the side. I can take whatever happens.”

“I can too,” Tibs replied, turning his skin to stone like the fighter.

Jackal smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s cute, but I’ve been working with Earth since the start. I know things to keep me in one piece you don’t. As I’ve showed before.”

“You’re teaching me when we’re done.” Tibs stepped aside with the others.

Jackal grabbed the handle, checked with Tibs, then pulled the door open. The only thing that happened was the fighter gasping in shock.

Tibs stepped next to him and looked into the room.

Papers filled it. The piles on the left and right of the entrance almost reached the ceiling. A few paces beyond them, the way was blocked by a wall of papers that looked precarious. Tibs thought the way turned to the right, but he wouldn’t be sure until he stepped into the room.

“You think it’s all papers?” Mez asked.

Tibs shrugged.

“The plaque said it’s the Paper Pusher’s room,” Jackal said. “Looks like it’s been pushing a lot of them.”

“Make space,” the archer said. “This is going to be easy to deal with.” He pulled the string of his bow as he raised it, and fire essence etched itself in place. An arrow with Jir, Ank, and Dhu between the lines.

He loosed the arrow, and it impacted wall of papers with a larger explosion than the arrows usually did. Jir and Ank feed the essence, while Dhu did something to it Tibs didn’t

quite understand.

The ball of fire died out, and the wall showed no marks of having been hit.

“Does the dungeon ever make things easy?” Jackal asked.

“Paper should burn,” Mez grumbled.

“And I should have all the loot in the dungeon,” Jackal said. “Got to learn to deal with disappointment. You think it’s safe to go in?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “No.”

Jackal nodded and grinned. “Should we go in anyway?”

“We’re not going to defeat this boss from out here.” Tibs stepped into the room and waited for something to happen. Jackal joined him, then Mez and Khumdar. When nothing happened, Tibs focused on the pile of papers, sensing for details he had trouble grasping. He pushed on it, and didn’t move.

“It’s a prop,” Mez said. “Something made to look like one thing out of other things. Theaters use them for the play they perform.”

“Then everything in the dungeon’s a prop,” Jackal said, walking along with Tibs. “Since it makes everything out of something else.”

“That isn’t what I…” Mez trailed off. “This just feels like it’s there to make the room look like it’s about paper. Everywhere else, the stuff there seemed to have a use that fit where it was.”

“The dungeon may have stretched its capability with this floor, and has to resort to tricks like this.”

The path did turn right at the wall, then left further in.

“A maze?” Jackal asked.

“Maybe. I can’t sense much, so I don’t know how it goes.”

“That’s really bothering you, doesn’t it?”

Tibs shrugged and studied the walls. There were so places a trap could hide among the edges of the pages. A sheet of water over the floor revealed no triggers, but he left it there, hardening it without making it slick. He sensed for essence triggers, but he was no longer sure that was enough. He had to come up with a way to interact with those triggers without triggering them. Until then, he moved cautiously, ready for anything that might jump out of the walls.

He turned left, and followed the path when it turned right, and left again, then left and right, his concern rising with each step without a trap.

When the path opened to a large room with piles of papers of various heights through it, Tibs wanted to scream at Sto. Whatever was in this room would be big.

“Relax, Tibs, we have this,” Jackal said, and Tibs glared at him.

“Whatever this is,” Mez added, flaming arrow at the ready.

Khumdar stepped to one side. “Whatever it will be, I believe the goal is there.” He pointed. From where the cleric stood, Tibs saw a table with a tray like the one that had given them access to the stairs.

“Do we have any pages left from the clerks we killed?” Jackal asked.

“They all went to unlock the stairs, and the ones on this floor didn’t drop any.”

“So, we have to find it among those piles?”

“Unless they’re props too.”

Tibs send a wave of air at the closest one, and papers went flying. “Not a prop.”

“So, is it any paper, or one specific one we need to put there?” Jackal asked.

“We try it and find out.” Tibs stepped forward and reached for the page that landed close. One of the pile shuddered.

“Tibs,” Jackal warned, then was at his side. A flame arrow impacted the pile as it slid in their direction, gaining speed, but only a few pages scattered as they burned. Tibs moved to one side and Jackal the other. The pile kept moving in a line, gaining ever more speed, and Tibs watched it pass. A creature that looked like an obese person made of pages was pushing it.

He hit the room’s wall and papers went flying everywhere. Tibs lost sight of the Paper Pusher among them and readied himself for a surprise attack, sword and shield at the ready.

“This looks like a snowstorm,” Tibs grumbled. “At least it isn’t cold.”

“Not being able to see is going to make—” Mez let out a pained expletive.

“What—” Jackal cursed.

Before Tibs could ask, something sliced his arm, and he swung, but hit nothing. Whatever it had been hadn’t made it through his armor, only leaving a thin line on it.

“Mez, are you—” Tibs cursed as something sliced at his back and his swing only cut papers. Another at his other arm and as he swung, something cut his cheek. He used his shield in that direction, but again, there was nothing as something sliced at his leg.

“It is the papers,” Khumdar announced calmly. “They are acting as thrown blades.”

Tibs exploded a ball of air over him, and most of the papers were sent away. Those that weren’t affected flew at them.

He blocked with his shield, and they embedded themselves in the ice. In the distance, pages were moving down behind a pile of papers more directly than Tibs felt papers should.

Mez shot down pages after pages as he moved closer. Khumdar swatted them with his staff.

“Incoming,” Jackal yelled as the pile behind which the pages had been falling started moving toward them. The fighter stepped in front and slammed his foot down. Cursed and did it again. “Abyss, it’s not stone!” he hunkered down, shoulder to take the impact, and the pile exploded, sending papers everywhere.

Tibs scattered them again with air, but this time, on top of those coming at them like flying knives, Jackal was covered in them. He ripped a handful, but more stuck to him, and he seemed to have trouble continuing to remove them.

“Tibs!” Jackal called as he turned to face him. “I’m not in—” papers covered his mouth, and he took a hesitating step forward. Tibs blasted the fighter with air, but while the pages fluttered in the wind, they remained stuck to him. He switched to fire and...

He couldn’t.

Then he had to fight off sharp flying pages. “Mez! Burn the pages off Jackal.” This time, the pages wove about, no longer as if they were thrown, but as if they were wielded. Unfortunately, without someone to hit as a way of making them stop, he had to hit them individually.

The grunting warned him of the attack the pages had distracted from, and Tibs threw himself to the side. “Mez!” He stood and faced the paper covered Jackal. All that was visible

of his friend were the eyes, and he was scared. Papers kept adding to his face, giving it a... was that a muzzle?

Hadn't Jackal said he'd taken his name from an animal? Or had that been someone else, trying to mock the fighter. He lifted his shield to take the punch, and it shattered under the impact.

"Mez!"

Only the archer was busy with his own fight as papers flew around him, dodging his arrows.

He channeled Fire. "Jackal, I—" he swallows, his friends scream echoing as he engulfed Market Place in fire, trying to kill Sebastian. As he burned, trying to keep him from killing Sto. His nightmares were filled with Tibs burning Jackal because he Fire craved so much.

What if now was when he lost control?

The staff intercepted the blow, then struck the fighter in the leg.

"Tibs, I recommend that you overcome whatever is troubling you," Khumdar said, blocking and striking back. "Your friend needs you to save him. I will not be able to hold him back or subdue him."

Tibs opened his mouth to tell the cleric he couldn't. There were so many reasons he couldn't do this.

He closed it and stood.

Fortunately, he didn't have to.

Well, he hoped this would work.

He channeled darkness and blasted the fighter with it. Khumdar was caught, but Tibs counted on him being immune to the effects. Jackal staggered, but remained standing. Tibs could see his essence fading, but only slightly. The fighter could take more.

Tibs etched darkness as he continued pouring essence at the fighter. The papers were fluttering, but not going anywhere. Jackal shoved Khumdar aside, and the cleric slid across the room even while trying to use his staff to stop himself.

Darkness with Fey within it. And Kha, to make it stick to him, maintain the effect without Tibs having to sustain it. It spread in a sheet as the fighter approached. What else could Tibs add that would—

He sent it at Jackal. He didn't have the time.

He wrapped itself around him like a blanket and pages fluttered off and to the ground. Tibs blasted each of them with an 'x' attack. Jackal dropped to his knees as papers slogged off him. His essence was thinning more than Tibs thought it should. Runners had a lot of it. More than normal people, more than the creatures Sto had... He shifted his focus to the pages, stopped sensing anything other than his element. They were making it worse. They were pulling the essence out of Jackal to fight the darkness caused weakness.

Tibs rushed to him and pulled the papers off.

"Fire would have been faster," Jackal panted once his mouth was free.

"I'm not burning you again," Tibs replied, glaring as he kept on pulling papers off.

Then Mez and Khumdar were helping. The archer was injured, so many cuts on his exposed skin, his dark tan was all red. Khumdar was in better condition, his robes covering more of his body, but he had a long gash on the side of his face.

Finally, Jackal was free of papers and wheezing. Tibs absorbed the darkness and etched purity to heal Mez and Khumdar.

“I’m going to need a minute,” Jackal wheezed. His essence was thin. Tibs wasn’t worried about his life, but he wondered how long Jackal would need for it to be back to full strength.

“I do not believe you will be accorded that chance,” Khumdar said, straightening. Another pile of papers was shuddering.

Planning-75

Jackal stood with a curse. They were out of the way of the pile, and before it impacted the wall, Tibs fired a jet of water at the paper creature pushing it. Water wasn't good for paper. He remembered Carina saying that after they'd been caught in the rain. Papers flew off it before the impact sent more papers into the air. Tibs thought he saw something on one, but then he was dealing with the pages' attacks.

'I've got Jackal,' Mez said, shooting fire arrow after fire arrow at the pages surrounding the fighter. 'I think Khumdar needs help.'

The cleric also had a large number of pages around him that he kept at bay with a bubble of darkness, but Tibs could sense how he was straining. He fired jets of water, but the pages were nimble. He let out his annoyance at paper in general, and all the learning they'd played part in and dropped a lake's worth of water over them.

And Khumdar.

The cleric sputtered, surrounded by pages flapping uselessly the way Tibs had seen fish do on the Docks of MountainSea. He cut them with his sword as he absorbed the water off Khumdar.

'Some warning will be appreciated the next time you attempt to drown me.'

Tibs shrugged, searching among the papers for one that was different. Had it taken off after, or fallen to the ground?

'Tibs,' Jackal called, 'you think this is what we need?' He held up a page with lines on it.

Tibs grabbed in passing. 'Keep the piles busy!' the lines meant nothing to Tibs, but that wasn't important. The page was different from the others, so it mattered. There was the tray, so that's where it went and while the others fought the Paper Pusher, he would—

He threw himself to the side, and the edge of the wave of papers shredded his arm's armor, and his arm. Purity dealt with one, the other. He had to hope it would be repaired before the next run.

He reformed the sword and brought up his shield, making it larger, as the Paper Pusher aimed both hands at him and papers flew in his direction. The shield kept this assault from touching him, but he had to pour water essence in order to repair the chunks each page took out on impact. Even with his vast reserve, he could notice the drop.

It stopped with a blossoming of heat.

'I've got it,' Mez said, firing again. 'You go finish this.'

Tibs noticed more pages with line flying off the boss monster as he ran for the table.

Maybe each successful attack gave them a change to win without having to take kill the boss. He slammed the page on the tray and it shimmered before melting into it.

With a sigh of relief, he turned and leaned against the table.

Piles of paper shuddered in the room.

“Tibs?” Jackal called, landing a punch that scattered most of the boss monster’s head in the air. “Is that what’s supposed to happen?”

Tibs looked at the tray. The page was gone, so that was what needed to be done, right?

The piles launched themselves and the others scattered. They impacted the Boss, and it grew to twice its previous size.

“I don’t think that was the right thing to do!” Mez yelled. His arrows had less effect on the larger monster.

Tibs joined the fight. He’d been sure that was it. What else would page made to look different be for? Other than to trick him into healing the boss monster.

It intercepted his jet of water with a shield of paper, and unlike other parts of itself, that didn’t lose any pages from the attack. Pages with marks on them littered the floor from the previous attacks, and Tibs barely got his shield up in time to blocks the large paper fist, distracted by them.

They didn’t all have the same patterns on them. A glance showed him three, then he was busy dodging and fighting. “Khumdar, how many different designs on the pages around you?” the cleric was attacking at range along with Mez.

Tibs sliced papers off the side of the boss, then the impact his shield took sent him into a pile of paper and he scrambled out of it before they engulfed him. He suffused himself with purity, then darkness, shrouding himself in it as he focused on Jackal.

“Five have different symbols on them,” the cleric called.

“What’s that mean?” Jackal asked.

“They might represent different effects on the boss creature,” Khumdar answered.

Tibs sliced the monster’s back and papers flew off. It turned, and he tightened the shroud as he stepped away. Jackal used the distraction and kicked its knee out, sending it toppling.

“Don’t use whichever one made it stronger,” the fighter called.

Tibs gathered those around him. “Keep it busy.” He had six designs. He searched them for clues as to what their effects might be, but the lines and curves seemed random. Would the clue be on the pages they used to unlock the stairs? There had been patterns on them, but Tibs hadn’t paid attention.

“I’m using one!” He placed it on the tray. It shimmered and was absorbed.

The boss roared as papers slosed off it, bringing it down in size.

“That’s the one,” Jackal called. “Do it again!”

Tibs ran, looking for another one with that pattern, found it and slammed it in the tray.

Nothing happened.

“It’s not working this time.” Why? “I’m trying a different one! Be ready.”

“For what?” Mez asked as Tibs placed it on the tray. It shimmered and vanished.

“Oh, Abyss. Tibs, that’s the wrong one!”

He turned and the boss monster’s pages glinted in the light, like they were made of

metal. With a sweep of the hand, it sent a volley. Cursing, Tibs grabbed another and slammed it down on the tray.

He didn't watch it shimmer. He looked at his friend as they were sliced—

The pages fluttered to the ground before hitting more than Jackal, who was still in one piece. The Boss monster ran at the fighter, losing more papers until he was at the size of when the fight started.

Tibs found the pages that had made papers slosh off and slammed it in the tray.

Nothing happened.

He cursed.

What wasn't he getting?

"Keep it busy!"

"Do we have a choice?" Mez yelled.

"Just down to that other one again," Jackal said. "That one hurt."

"Use a potion!"

"It isn't fixing everything," The fighter replied.

"Then I'll heal you."

He laid the pages on the table using the same one twice did nothing. Did they have to fight all versions?

That couldn't be. He wouldn't have been able to undo the change if the point was to defeat that form. But why had that worked? Why had he been able to undo some of the changes?

"Tibs!" Jackal called.

"Working on it!"

"Can you work faster? I don't think we're doing any damage. It's like what it's losing isn't really doing it any harm."

"Of course not!" Tibs replied before he thought about it. "That's to get us the pages!"

"Then hurry to figure them out, please. His attack still hit a lot!"

Tibs grabbed a paper and slammed it into the tray. Noticing something as it shimmered away. He turned to get another and stopped, as there were now three boss monsters in the room.

Cursing, he grabbed the one that had undone a change and slammed it in the tray, then was surprised as it shimmered and banished. The extra two monsters fell apart into piles.

"I think I have it!" He hurried through the papers, then was in the air, seeing stars from the hit. Jackal called his name, but Tibs couldn't find breath to answer. He had to have let the shroud drop in focusing on the pages and how they went. He rolled on his back. That had hurt.

"Tibs!" the fear in Jackal's voice got through the haze, and Tibs suffused himself with Purity.

"I'm okay!" Back to darkness, and he gathered the pages. Multiple copies. He didn't want to have to get close to the fight again if he was wrong.

He spread the pages on the table.

The design didn't seem to have any meaning, but that didn't mean they didn't have purpose. He lined them up, and the lines flowed from one to the other. The problem was there was no sign which one should be first. The first and last flowed into each other, too.

The one that made it small again had to be the last. Everything else made it more powerful. Then, in the end, it was weak, so they could end this.

“Okay, I’m trying something. It’s going to get hard before it gets easy! I’m going to go as fast as I can.” He grabbed the first one and put it on the tray. As soon as it vanished, he put the next one on and nothing.

He curse, and looked over his shoulder. Three of them now. The next one had them be metal and then grow and then slosh off and then... he didn’t know what that one did, and then back to small. He’d been sure that was it, but now—

The page shimmered and vanished.

“That’s not better!” Jackal yelled.

Tibs put the next page in the tray and suffused himself with metal and pulled all the essence to him.

It fought him. Sto had firm control of the essence in the dungeon even when he wasn’t paying attention, but while it did, the metal pages weren’t moving toward his friends. He couldn’t tell if he absorbed anything over the strain needed to wrestle with it.

Then the metal was gone and Tibs felt like falling over, but he turned, placed the next page, and looked over his shoulder. Instead of three large boss monsters, the three had combined into one. The page shimmered and Tibs placed the next one as paper sloshed off the boss.

Jackal kept taking the brunt of the attacks, but Mez’s bow was out of essence, and the arrows felt weak to Tibs. Khumdar kept throwing lances of darkness, but their effect seemed minimal.

The page shimmers and Tibs stared as the boss golem zoomed about the room, shredding papers, but landing strikes that sent his friends flying. He almost ran at them before putting the last page.

Then he ran at them.

He reached Mez first and wrapped him into a purity weave before moving on to Khumdar. Jackal was still standing, thick with stone, but his essence was growing thin. As Tibs finished wrapping the cleric, the golem slowed and shrunk.

Tibs sighed in relief.

Until it struck Jackal and sent him off his feet.

He wrapped Jackal in purity before he reached him. The boss was moving in their direction.

“Fire.” Jackal said, then caught blood. “Paper burns.”

“You burn too. You don’t have the essence to protect yourself, the others don’t either.”

“Then you protect us, Tibs.”

“I can’t. Fire’s just—”

“It’s your fire, Tibs. Your essence. You control it.”

“It’s too much. I can’t—”

“We’re going to die if you don’t.”

Tibs looked at his friends on the floor, healing.

He stood and suffused himself with Fire.

His anger flared. He was pissed at Sto for not being there. For not being present

when his creation was forcing Tibs to reach for something that terrified him. For something that wanted to consume him with everything.

“You aren’t going to watch?” he whispered. “Then you’re going to fucking feel this.” Tibs, and the world around him burned.

Planning-76

Tibs was cold.

Fire had consumed all the heat in him and left him on his knees, shivering. He'd felt like this before, in this dungeon, too. At least this time, pain wasn't on the hell of heat seeping back into him. But he felt nothing else.

But like the last time, he couldn't shake the sense there had been voices as Fire roared around him. Only this time, he was afraid of finding out who the voice had been, that they had called to him, yelled for him to stop hurting them, killing them.

And he wouldn't sense around him. He was terrified of the confirmation he hadn't kept the reign on Fire and his friends had paid the price.

"Tibs?"

A hand on his shoulder, someone crouched next to him. Jackal's skin was blistered, but whole.

"You were strong enough to survive." Tibs's voice was as hollow as he felt. Jackal had been the strongest of them. What had he done to Khumdar and Mez?

Jackal snorted, then grew serious. "No. You kept the fire from burning us. Although it got pretty hot." He looked at his blistered hand.

Tibs had tried to keep Fire from reaching his friends, but Fire needed to consume, and Tibs had lost track of who was in the room as Fire fueled his rage. He'd stopped thinking about his—

"Tibs."

The hand shook him.

Jackal was there, next to him. Focusing on him, let Tibs see Mez and Khumdar, worried expression on their blistered face.

Tibs grabbed on to the fighter and held on tight. "You're alive. I thought Fire had burned you along with the room."

"Got close," Mez said. "But it never quite reached us."

"I tried to keep you safe."

"You succeeded," Khumdar said. "My survival is not because I had essence to protect myself with. The fight took all but a sliver of my reserves. You, kept the fire at bay. You kept control of the—"

Tibs shook his head vehemently. Fire was beyond his control. All he could do was unleash it and hope.

The cleric was before him. "You controlled it, Tibs. Do not let your fear of what could have happened cloud your mind of what did happen. You are the one who protected us. No matter how large your fear of Fire is, you maintained control over it. You allowed it to consume all within this room, except us."

Tibs looked beyond the cleric.

The room was devoid of anything else. The walls were blackened and cracked. Pieces were missing, showing the deeper stone, but that stone wasn't on the floor. No ash remained of the papers he'd burned. Could Fire burn so hot even ash was consumed? He didn't know, but he realized this was more likely Sto absorbing the remnant, as he did with the dead creatures.

"Did we win?" Had they won? Hadn't the point to of the room to work out the puzzle? Now there was nothing left of it.

"You defeated the boss," Jackal said. "That's a win in my book. Although I think you destroyed the loot chest, too."

"Sorry."

Jackal squeezed his shoulder. "You kept us from dying. I'll take that instead."

"But did we free Don?"

They exchanged a worried look.

"We'll find out once we get back to that room," Jackal said.

The hallway felt cold. Even Jackal cursed, so it wasn't Tibs's imagination. Sensing in the room, there was a lot of fire essence left in it. He absorbed that, but he barely saw the difference it made in his nearly empty reserve.

The hallway was devoid of anyone in a way that felt odd. No one walked out of a room for them to fight. Looking into a room showed it to be empty of not only the people a building like this would employ, but of the props that had been in the previous ones.

Once they reach the bottom of the stairs, even Jackal was on edge.

"Where are all the creatures?" he grumbled as he looked down the hallway.

Mez raised his bow as Tibs heard the running in the distance. The arrows formed, but had little essence to it.

Tibs was distracted from offering essence for the bow by the essence he felt approaching.

"Tibs!" Jackal called as he ran, then the others were following.

He grabbed onto Don as the sorcerer rounded the corner. "You're okay!" He said as corruption accumulated in his hands, then was absorbed.

"Err, yes." Don sounded unsure. When Tibs let go, he looked uncomfortable.

"How did you get free?" Mez asked.

"I was just freed." Don looked at them. "There was a groaning throughout the building, then everything fell apart and I was free. Something tells me Tibs is responsible."

"I think I broke something," Tibs admitted.

"I'd say that's impossible, but it isn't the first such thing you've done. You haven't healed them."

"I don't have a lot of essence left."

Jackal got them moving. "We'll heal. But I want to get out of here first. Without those clerks jumping out of the room to attack, this doesn't feel right."

“Any idea how Tibs unleashing everything he has in one room can have caused this to the rest of the building?” Mez asked, and Don shook his head.

Outside, Tibs shielded his eyes from the sunlight as they adjusted.

“So this is how we’ll tell the time in here.” Mez pointed up. The light came from an orb a full hand span from zenith.

“Where was it when we can in?” Jackal asked, and the archer shrugged.

“What is our next destination?” Don asked Tibs.

“Somewhere we can rest,” Jackal replied.

“Is there such a place here?” Khumdar asked.

“There’s been plenty of plazas with nothing in them,” Don said. “A few even have tables we can sit at.”

“We’ll have to stay on our guards for those dogs,” Jackal said with a shudder. “But lead the way to the closest.”

Jackal dropped on the bench on reaching the plaza. “Did anyone bring something to eat?”

“You ate the pastry. How are you hungry already?” Mez replied.

“It stopped working a while back, and there was all that fighting afterward. Don’t you always have jerky, Tibs?”

Khumdar handed the fighter something.

Jackal turned the palm size square in his hand, then tapped a knuckle which resulted in a solid sounding ‘tock’. “What is this thing?”

“Travel bread.”

Jackal smelled it. “That’s nothing like bread. It doesn’t even look like it’s been in an oven.”

“It is made to survive journeys, not to appeal to your sense of what bread is. That and water will allow you to survive. It is made this way so many will fit in a pack.”

Jackal bit into a corner, then struggled to break it. “If I have to use earth to make myself strong enough to bite into that thing, how is any going to eat it?”

“You first soak it with water to soften it.”

“How about some water, then?”

“I... have to admit to not having considered a water skin before we set forth for this run. These have been in my pocket since...” He seemed to have trouble recalling. “The previous time the dungeon graduated. During the Siege.”

Jackal handed it back. “I’m going to wait for something not so old that it’s harder than stone.”

Don grabbed it out of the fighter’s hand. “It’s edible.”

“Food isn’t meant to last months,” the fighter countered.

“Properly prepared, some food are meant to last years.” Don studied the square.

“Good luck taking a bite out of it.” Jackal smirked.

Don sat at a table. He placed a cloth on it, then smoothed his robe over his thighs. He placed the square against the edge and hit it with his other palm. It shattered and fell on his lap. He gathered the pieces and put them on the cloth. When all that was left was dust, he wiped it off his robe.

“You don’t bite into this. He let your saliva soften it.” He popped a thumb size piece

in his mouth.

Tibs sat opposite the sorcerer and took a smaller piece. The first taste that registered was salt. A lot of it. Then was the texture, grainy, which turned mushy in an unpleasant way as it soaked in his saliva.

“Is it good?” Jackal asked.

“No,” Tibs and Don said at the same time.

“Any food made for traveling isn’t going to bother with taste,” the sorcerer added. “They aren’t even made to keep you health. Alive is the only goal of these kinds of foods.”

“I was not aware one with your background was familiar with these types of food,” Khumdar said, with a hint of mocking in his tone.

“Came across a book on it at the academy. I was curious, so I read it.”

“We’re going to want to plan better for the next run,” Mez said, sitting and taking a piece. “Since it’s just for the day, I’d like something I’m going to want to eat.”

“You think the dungeon is going to start having bags that keep food good now that we’re in here all day?” Jackal asked, sitting, but not touched the travel bread.

“There’s no telling how what is dungeon loot works,” Don said, and leveled a gaze on Jackal as he opened his mouth, as Tibs kicked the fighter’s shin.

“Right.”

“Such an item exists,” Khumdar said, “but only the wealthiest of travelers get to benefit from them.”

“You ate a lot of those?” Jackal asked.

“I…” The cleric thought about it. “Yes. I endeavored to travel with caravans whenever possible, and they will feed their guards as part of the payment, but there have been many times when that was not an option within my reach. There were more than one journey, early in my travels, when I found myself having to dig out worm to subsist on. When I became aware of travel bread, I never traveled without it.”

“I wish I had this on my street,” Tibs said. “It’s better than some of the things I had to eat.”

“I’ll talk with Russel,” Jackal said. “Find out what he can have for us for the next run.”

“You think there’s water somewhere in here?” Mez asked. “Every city I’ve traveled to has wells all over the place. But I haven’t seen anything resembling that here.”

“You are again forgetting,” Khumdar said, “that is not a city. It is the creation of a dungeon that is only made to resemble a city. How would a dungeon know to provide water to the creatures it puts in it? They do not need it, as they are not alive. They are constructions, no different from the city, other than they can move about and attack us.”

“It’s still inconsiderate of is not to think of us,” Jackal said.

“Tibs,” Don said, cutting off Mez’s comment to the fighter. “I don’t know if you want to talk about this here, among those who can hear us, but I have questions about something you said before.”

“Sure, I don’t have secrets from anyone here.”

Tibs ignored Khumdar’s raised eyebrow. Tibs wasn’t trying to keep secrets from his friends. If the cleric wanted to know something, all he had to do was ask. Don also raised an eyebrow, but then he looked up without moving his head. He meant Sto. Tibs shrugged.

“You mentioned how fire hurts you unless you use your essence to protect yourself.

As far as I know, having an element means you are unaffected by it. Corruption doesn't hurt you even when you aren't channeling it, so why does fire hurt you?"

Tibs shrugged again. "I don't know. The only thing I can think of is that when I had my audience with Fire, he said that I'd broken a rule in how I did it, and that there would be a consequence."

"How did you break a rule?" Don asked. "Nothing I've read mentions rules to getting an audience. Just conventions on how the guild does it."

"Like books can be trusted," Jackal said.

"I had it inside the dungeon," Tibs cut off Don's reply. "He made it happen."

Don looked surprised, then thought about it. "I don't see how that would break any rules, but I guess that's something no one could have researched, since everyone gains their elements outside of dungeons."

"Except for Purity," Khumdar said. "Purity has a dungeon where those chosen to serve gain their audience after an arduous trial."

"But those are clerics. Even what you told me about how you went about it shows they're different."

Khumdar shook his head. "Not everyone with purity as their elements is a cleric. Fighters, archers are also among them."

"Rogue's too," Tibs said. "They just don't talk about it."

"Except with you," Don said, "It seems."

"I'm a rogue. I think they expected me to have figured it out."

"So you had that audience in a dungeon," Don mused. "Did Purity warn you that you'd broken a rule?"

Tibs tried to remember the audience in detail, but it had been too long. "I don't think so."

"Then do you suffer when attack by..." Don trailed off. "Right. Purity isn't about hurting people."

Tibs kept his thought on that to himself. What Clara said, along with the existence of purity fighters and archers, made it clear to him Purity could hurt, just like every other element he knew of.

"I'd like to try some things, after the run, if you don't mind, Tibs."

"Will those involve using fire on me?"

Don open, then closed his mouth.

"I have enough of fire on my own," Tibs said. "I'm not interested in someone else adding to it."

"Aren't you interested in finding out your limits?" the sorcerer asked.

Tibs stared at him. "I broke part of the dungeon. I'm not interested in finding out if that's not the most dangerous I can be."

Planning-77

“Get it off!” Jackal yelled, his stone arm in the large dog's mouth. “Get it off me!”

“You know,” Mez said, pulling on the string of his bow, “you are strong enough to punch it off you.” He loosed the fire arrow, and it exploded in the dog's side, sending it tumbling off the fighter.

Jackal scrambled away as it got back on its feet.

“Bad dog,” Tibs said, stepping between it and the fighter, sword in hand. “No treat for you.”

It seemed to hesitate, then lunged. Tibs stepped aside and swung, the metal essence added to the edge of his ice sword sharper due to the letters he'd added. Part of its muzzle and head fell off as it landed. It turned to face him. A real dog would be dead, but the loss only diminished its essence slightly. Even its growling seemed unaffected.

Tibs smashed his shield into it as it attacked, then planted his sword in its chest and the ground. It didn't die, again, but pinned as it was, Tibs had the time to make a new sword and cut it apart until there was not enough essence left to sustain it.

“They're tougher,” he commented, absorbing the other sword.

“And bigger,” Don said.

“And sneakier,” Jackal snarled.

The one had jumped on the fighter's back from the roof of the house. The previous one had lunged out of an alley to attack the fighter, and before that, one had shattered a door to reach him.

“Is it me,” Mez said, “or has the dungeon picked up on Jackal's love for those animals?”

“I don't like them!” Jackal stood, looking at his arm. His armor, which was stone, like him right now, was missing pieces from the teeth. “This is going to take weeks to repair.”

Tibs snorted. That was nothing compared to the damage his armor has received since stepping onto this floor.

“It may be the dungeon's way of instructing you on not always throwing yourself at the opposition.”

“They've been throwing themselves at me,” Jackal complained. “Where's that next building, Tibs?”

“Over there.” He motioned in the direction he sensed the oddity. He didn't know if it was a room, it registered as nothing to him. A hole in the essence all around them.

He'd first noticed it at the edge of his sense not long after getting moving again. They'd checked half a dozen houses and two shops, fought a 'family' of citizens, which included a vicious child, and two 'guards'.

This had let his guard drop in surprise at the child-sized people golem, and he'd paid for it with the gasp it made in his side as its fingers elongated into sharp claws. He'd dispatched it easily afterward, but it served as a reminder that Sto could make any kind of golems, not only adults.

The 'sun' had climbed to its zenith as they walked and were attacked by dogs. Tibs got the sense those could show up anywhere, while the people golem were restricted to inside the buildings.

They checked the buildings they passed, Jackal no longer opening the doors, and fought a handful of people golems, and found enough loot they stopped to remove all the larger pieces of armor and store that in Jackal's bottomless pouch. The packs were filled with amulets, daggers, valuable jewelry. Those went there because Don pointed out that the guards all knew how greedy Jackal was and would have trouble believing he'd picked anything else over them.

Jackal tried to argue, but all it took to shut him up was Mez pointing out that the armors he was so intent on selling would hardly get him a silver piece, compared to the handful one mundane necklace would fetch. Jackal grumbled, “You can never have too many silver,” and walked off. Tibs pointed to the direction they

were heading into, and with another grumble and chuckles from the others, Jackal changed direction.

It was a room, or at least a building, in the center of a large courtyard. It looked much like the other one, but felt different. This one wasn't something he couldn't sense through it to what was inside. As far as his sense told him, there was nothing there. Not even essence.

"Are any of you creeped out by this?" Tibs asked, his voice shaking. There couldn't be something not made of essence. Essence was everything.

"Don, tell me this is some sort of enchantment," Jackal said, his hand not quite touching the structure. The sorcerer hesitated. "I've never read of something like this. Even that stone your father had felt like something... I mean, it pushed our essence away from it. So there was essence there to interact with ours. This... it's like essence just ends. The corruption I send to it just stops."

"You can't sense it past the surface of the wall?" Mez asked.

"No. Anything I send to it ceases to be. There's nothing that returns."

"If you can't sense it, you can't call it back," Jackal said.

"Yes, but I can etch it in a way that instructs it to return."

"You'll have to show me," Tibs said.

"But it doesn't come back. Tibs, what do you sense?"

"Nothing. If I close my eyes, this is a hole in the essence." He touched the wall. It felt like stone, was the gray of stone, and cool to the touch, but had no essence in it he could sense.

"There's a door over here," Mez called, and Jackal was the first to reach him.

"Open it," the fighter said.

"I'm not touching it," the archer replied. "If you want to see in, you open it."

"No," Tibs said. "I'll open it."

The door looked like wood, felt like it, down to it having splinters that caught on his glove. There was no lock, only a metal handle to pull the door shut once it was opened. Without being able to sense anything of the door or the wall, he had no way to tell if there were other kinds of traps. He couldn't convince himself there was no essence there, no matter what his sense told him.

The door resisted when he pushed, then opened a crack. He waited for the trap to trigger, but nothing happened. He moved to push it further, but stopped at the sensation over his hand as it crossed the threshold. He pulled it back and looked at it. It hadn't vanished to his sense, not quite. He put it back in. He could sense the essence coursing through his hand, but nothing of it spreading to his skin or the glove. This wasn't the push back of the green stone. That just kept him from pushing essence outside of himself. This seemed to reach in slightly. It didn't affect how his hand moved, but he didn't like it.

He pulled his hand out again as the bracer crossed the threshold, and he lost the sense of the amulet that contained air essence. The sense of the amulet returned, but not the essence; it was empty. He switched to air and added some, and he breathed easier. It wasn't broken.

"Amulets are emptied as soon as they go inside," he said.

"How quickly?" Don asked.

"Did you see how fast I pulled my hand out? That fast."

"So, whatever that is destroys essence items?" Mez asked, taking a step back.

"Anyone have an enchanted item they're willing to hand over for a test?" Don asked.

"No," Mez replied.

Tibs made his sword to use to push the door further open, but the moment it crossed the doorway, the tip ceased to be. He pulled it out, and it did not reform. The essence simply stopped.

"We're going to have to reach it to open it further," Don said. "Mez?"

"I'm not doing it," Mez said.

"Is your armor enchanted?" Don asked.

"No, but I'm not getting close to that."

Jackal reached past Tibs and pushed the door.

Tibs was distracted by his glove. It registered normally to his sense again.

"Hey, a chest," Jackal said, as Tibs opened his mouth. The fighter was in the structure before Tibs could change what he intended to say.

"It doesn't affect—get out of there!"

The fighter's skin was back to its usual tan color. "This is weird," Jackal said, turning his hand over. "I'm still suffused with Earth, but it's not doing its usual thing."

"Jackal, get out of there."

“It’s not doing anything else.” He looked around the room, and Tibs did the same. Screaming wouldn’t do any good.

Unlike the other one, this one only had a thing in the center, like a series of varied-sized rings stacked on top of one another going up to Jackal’s thigh. The top three tapered down to the size of the fighter’s stone-filled head. Beyond that was a large chest, positioned in such a way that whoever went for it would have to step close to the...ring column.

That was the trap.

“Jackal, don’t step—”

Jackal stepped toward the chest.

Tibs barely got the sigh out before the nothingness inside the room spread outside to encompass him, his friend, and stretch he had no idea how far since the abyss-cursed thing removed all essence.

Planning-78

The ground shook as walls grew around the plaza.

“Jackal!” Tibs snapped.

The fighter ran outside the room. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think—”

“That’s not new,” Mez said, pulling the string on his bow. When nothing happened, he took an arrow from his quiver. “I have a score of them. You better hope we don’t have too many enemies to deal with because I don’t think it’s going to regenerate them in here. Once I’m out, I’m going to be useless.”

“And I’m already useless,” Don snarled.

“Didn’t you learn to use your bow like a staff?” Jackal asked.

“Geof died like three runs after he started training me. I haven’t found anyone else to take over.”

“Maybe—” Jackal stopped as forms stepped out from the walls, the holes closing behind them.

“How is the dungeon making them if essence doesn’t work in here?” Mez asked.

“The same way we didn’t simply die when this extended,” Don said. “The essence that keeps them working is within them, protected from this by the dungeon equivalent of our life force.”

“Which should mean,” Khumdar said, “that they are as limited as we are.”

“Except that they’re golems,” Mez said as they stepped away from the wall. “Stone’s a lot tougher than us.”

“People golem.” Tibs made out the armor, leather, and two wore metal. “There’s still one and two of them.”

“I can take half,” Jackal said, you four deal with the others.

“Jackal, you don’t have your stone body,” Tibs warned.

The fighter shrugged, stepping away. “I didn’t have that for all my time in the pits. This isn’t all that different.”

“And how often did the people you fight in the pits wear armor?” Don asked. “Or use weapons?”

Jackal shrugged again. “So they aren’t fighting fair. I’m used to that too.”

“It’s not like we have options,” Mez said. “I’ll do my best to help him. Tibs, you and Khumdar will be okay?”

Tibs willed a knife to his hand. It didn’t appear. He tried again, cursed, then reached in

his pouch, and only felt coins. "I'm not—" he felt his bracer and pulled the knife from in the hidden sheath. "I'm good."

Not great, but at least it was a weapon.

"Don," Jackal called. "Don't be an idiot and stay with Mez."

Tibs looked at the sorcerer. "It's going to be okay."

Don nodded, but didn't look confident.

Tibs stepped away from the archer and sorcerer. He picked the smaller of the golem people. He'd be a rogue too, so a better match. He reminded himself this could be won. Sto wasn't about outright killing them. This was a test.

A test about fighting without his essence.

He swallowed his fear. He could do this.

The rogue picked up its pace, pulling a short sword. Tibs readied himself, reversing his grip on the knife at the last moment, and using it to block the blade. He shouldered his opponent, and it staggered away.

Good, they were made like actual people. Sto could have thrown in extra surprises, but he'd stuck to a number's advantage. Tibs dodged the next swing, only to be punched hard, and he was the one staggering away, his jaw hurting.

And skill. This one was definitely more skilled than some of the others Tibs had fought. Tibs stepped back as the rogue moved, slashing at him. Jackal was in the middle of a group, taking hits and giving them. Mez had an arrow notched, waiting, while Don paced behind him. Khumdar was... He'd be the reason for the fighting taking place behind Tibs.

He rushed in after the swing, slashed, cutting through the armor and into the golem's flesh. His grin was cut short as the rogue's short sword slammed into his chest, and...

Nothing.

Tibs stared down at the guard and pommel sticking out of his chest. Where was the pain, the blood? The rogue pulled the sword out, and Tibs felt it move, pull at his flesh, but once it was out, there was still no blood. His questions about it were short-lived as the rogue attacked again.

Tibs dodged, got in a punch, then stabbed the golem and back away, but not fast enough to avoid the slash that cut his armor and... didn't leave a bloody line on his flesh.

He slashed, but the golem was already stepping back.

This couldn't be an advantage Sto gave him. They'd had that discussion a while back, and the dungeon wasn't treating him differently than the other runners anymore. So, if it wasn't Sto's doing, how wasn't he getting cut by the sword?

He stopped backing away, and the rogue took advantage, lunging, his sword—his metal sword—plunging into Tibs's chest again.

It went through, and he felt nothing but the push of his armor as the sword moved through it and out the back.

He couldn't use essence, but he still had his elements.

Metal couldn't hurt him, even here, in this area that didn't let essence exist.

He grabbed the rogue's hand before he pulled the sword out, slammed the knife into the wrist, and wrenched the hand off the arm. He dodged the punch as he pulled the sword out and used it to slice the golem's head off his shoulder, and nearly lost hold of it, unaccustomed to the weight.

Right, no essence, meant the sword still had weight, although not as much as he seemed to remember them to have. Once the golem crumbled, Tibs turned and ran toward Khumdar and the golems he was fighting. A glance at Jackal showed the fighter was down to four enemies, and was grinning madly. Mez and Don had moved, but were without direct opponents.

Tibs slammed into the golems, but only pushed two away. The other three didn't seem to notice as they advanced on the cleric, who was blocking the sword with his staff.

"Tibs," Khumdar said, redirecting an attack and slamming the end of his staff into the fighter. "Should you not be more cautious?"

"It's fine," Tibs said, cutting a sword arm, as the point of a sword appeared in his chest. "They can't hurt—"

The punch sent him skidding on the floor, holding his stomach.

"It seems they can still— Tibs!"

He forced himself to look, then rolled away, sufficing himself with Purity before remembering where he was, then surprised the pain went away.

"We can suffuse ourselves!" he yelled, then scrambled to his feet and away from the muscular fighter in banded metal armor that strode toward him. Where had his sword gone to?

"I am well aware of that fact," Khumdar replied, bringing his staff down hard enough on an opponent they slammed to the floor and crumbled.

"I didn't know about it," Tibs said, forming an ice and metal sword, then cursing when it didn't happen.

He dodged a punch, and received a knee in the side that hurt as well as sent him crashing again, then the pain was gone, and he got to his—the kick sent him flying and this time, when his head hit the stone floor, it rang and the pain remained.

"Tibs!"

He shook himself, brought his arms up to block the foot, and that hurt. It pushed down and Tibs felt the pressure increase. He needed more strength, so he suffused himself with Earth and shoved the golem away. He suffused himself with Purity again and stood.

How quickly could he switch? He'd never tested that. Earth gave him strength, and it should come with some durability, but this fighter was stronger than a normal person. Was he suffused with Earth? Did Sto need to bother with that for the people golem?

"Tibs, catch."

The sword flew into the air.

How did Khumdar expect him to... he suffused himself with Air and moved under it, letting go as he caught it, then the weight of the long sword nearly wrenched it out of his grip. Earth took care of that. Then he swung it and missed. He blocked the punch with his arm, and the bone snapped, shattering his concentration and the sword was heavy again.

The punch had him on the floor, his head ringing. He had to... there was something he had to do to make it stop.

There was motion around him and he rolled onto his back. Black robes flew about, a staff struck armor.

"Tibs, I will need assistance if we are to be victorious."

Who was... he was Tibs, right. He was a Runner and he could...

He suffused himself with Purity, then Earth, and kicked the leg out from under the fighter. Khumdar staff sent him falling, and Tibs slammed a foot in his face with enough strength, the head bend back too far, and when it hit the floor, it crumbled.

Khumdar was already fighting the others three.

“It seems that you must still be cautious while fighting,” The cleric said.

Tibs grabbed the sword. “I think this is to teach us we’ve gotten too used to our essence.”

“I had gathered this as well.”

Tibs looked around and cursed. “I’ve got to go help Mez.” He took off without waiting for a replied.

The archer was down to a knee, bow taking hits after hits from a club. Don was on his side, curled into a ball. Tibs wasn’t going to be fast enough. He suffused himself with Air and covered the distance in a second, suffused himself with Earth and swung, only his hand was empty.

He cursed and slammed into the massive golem, only to be batted away. He got up and ran at the golem again. Mez was on his feet, using his bow as a club to hit the fighter.

Tibs suffused himself with Air and threw himself high, then with Earth as he came down. The impact staggered the fighter, but then swung at Tibs. He took the blow with his arms, suffused himself with Purity to heal them, then Earth again before he crashed to the ground and rolled to a stop. He saw the arrow as he stood and grabbed it before running back to the fight.

The archer was moving back, staying out of reach of the club.

Tibs suffused himself with water and slid by the fighter, kicking at the leg with little effect. On his feet, and suffused with Earth again, he handed the arrow to Mez.

“Hope this helps.” He threw himself at the fighter, punching and kicking, and staying out of the way of the club. It was the fist that got him. A hard impact on his shoulder that sent him down with so much pain he couldn’t think of anything else.

“Hey, tough guy,” Mex said, then let out a shrill whistle that had Tibs look up as see the foot, paused over his head, as the golem turned to look at Mez. Then the point of an arrow was out the back of its head, and it was topping toward Tibs.

The pain had him screaming as he rolled out of the way, but golem hit the floor, then crumbled.

Panting, Tibs suffused himself with Purity, and the relief nearly took away his consciousness. He pushed himself to his feet. There was still fighting to be—

Khumdar walking toward him and Mez, an arm limp to his side. Don was slowly uncurling himself. Jackal was walking in their direction, a wide grin on his face.

“That’s what I call a good...” he trailed off as his legs bucked as his foot hit the ground, and he went down after it.

“Jackal!” Tibs ran to his friend.

Planning-79

Tibs dropped to his knees next to the immobile Jackal. His chest moved, so there was still time. He wove Purity, only for it to not manifest. With a screamed curse, he put his hands on the fighter, and pushed Purity into him, and immediately pulled his hands away as, instead of healing, the essences that were part of his armor started fading.

He cursed again, Clara's explanation of how Purity didn't heal without being woven coming back to him.

The contact had let him sense Jackal's essence, and it was fading.

"Find me a way out of here!" He put his hands back on the fighter. Okay. He could do this. He let go of Purity and didn't channel any of the elements. His reserve went back to the 'white' of his essence.

He pushed it into Jackal carefully. This wasn't creating a splint to hold the essence in place. He needed to replenish his friend's essence without breaking anything in the process. The first push shoved Jackal's essence out of its channel, the red-brown spreading and fading quicker. Even once he pulled his essence out, the damage was done, and Jackal's earth-tinted essence continued to spill out.

A splint stopped that.

The problem was that he had to maintain it once he let go of his friend. And this place took away any essence that left them. One problem at a time. Make sure he didn't kill Jackal trying to save him. Then deal with ensuring he continued living.

He touched a new flow of essence to the splint. This time, he didn't push the essence in. He went back to how he'd explained something to Carina about speeding the recharge of his reserves. He gently tipped the imaginary 'table' and let his essence flow along the incline. He didn't question why the essence didn't spill over. It was and wasn't, so it didn't have to do what made sense.

A little made it through the splint, adding density to what moved through the channels. It wasn't much, but that he could notice the increase meant it was pouring in faster than Jackal lost it. He didn't know if the fighter would wake up once there was enough, or if the injuries would keep him unconscious until healed.

And how long could he keep this going until his reserve was empty?

"Where's my exit?" he yelled.

"We're working on it!" Mez snapped back, from further away.

"I don't see any opening," Don said. "Khumdar, can you sense any secrets telling you where they could be?"

“My ability to know where secrets are is dependent on essence being allowed to flow. This area does not allow that. We will be limited to searching vis—”

The ground shook, accompanied by grinding. Before Tibs could curse whatever else was about to happen, essence flooded back.

“The walls are coming down!” Mez yelled as Tibs looked up.

He hesitated. If he stopped adding his essence, did Jackal have enough to last until Purity did its work? If he didn’t heal him now, could he have enough essence left to keep adding essence until they brought him out and the cleric healed him?

He didn’t have a lot of essence left; he knew that for certain. What that meant, within the context of his giant reserve, he didn’t know.

Either was a risk.

But he thought that in the dungeon, which had all the essences in higher concentrations than outside, the advantage was here. He filled one of the reserve in his bracer with his essence and linked the splint to that. He stopped pouring essence into the channels, paying attention to how it now diminished as he channeled purity and made the weaves. He opted for small ones applied to the most broken areas, hoping that speed of application would be more effective.

He felt the others around him as he worked.

“Maybe we should get him outside,” Mez whispered. “The cleric could—”

“Moving him in his condition could aggravate his injuries,” Khumdar said.

“I’m healing him,” Tibs said. The weaves were repairing the damage, but not to the point where Jackal’s essence stopped seeping out. He cursed.

“What’s the problem?” Don asked, crouching.

“I don’t know what to heal. I’m fixing the biggest breaks, but he’s losing essence from everywhere.”

“Can you tell where he’s losing the most from?”

Tibs tried to focus on that, but it slowed his weaving, and if he didn’t heal Jackal, he would—no. He wasn’t thinking about that.

“Tibs, slow down. Breathe. You’re not going to help him if you spiral into panicking. Tell me how quickly he’s losing essence. How long does he have until...”

“I don’t know. I don’t know when there isn’t enough left to help. With Radkliff, it was so quick and I didn’t know how to do it. Sebastian put those green stones on Carina, so I couldn’t help her.”

“Breathe. If you stop helping, will it happen right now? Can you tell that?”

He focused on the concentration. It was higher than when he’d started, and the loss was slow. Maybe slower than it had been. “Not right now. A few minutes, maybe, until he reaches the point he was at when I started helping.”

“And when that happens, you can help him again.”

“But I’m low on my essence.”

“You are...” there was disbelief in Don’s tone that amused Tibs.

“I have limits.”

“How close are you to reaching it?” the sorcerer asked.

“I don’t know. Anytime I’ve used most of it, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“Okay, we’ll test that aspect later.”

Tibs sighed.

“You need to know how—”

“Yes, yes. I have to know all the things so I can be better at everything I can do. I just wish the list got shorter at some point.”

Don chuckled. “But to focus on this. You have time, so you need to apply it strategically. It’s not always the biggest injuries that are the most life threatening. The body is complex and sometimes a small injury internally will end up causing the most damage.”

“How do you know so much?” Tibs asked in exasperation.

“I read a lot. Now, you have the advantage that you can sense the flow of our life essence. So you can tell where the most of it is seeping away.” He hesitated. “That’s where you need to focus the healing.”

“When the guy who knows more than anyone else hesitates,” Mez said, “I think it’s time to proceed with a lot of caution.”

“Life essence isn’t something that’s known about,” Don replied. “I mean, so scholars have written about something they call the ‘life force’, and some of the texts I’ve come across are similar to what Tibs has described, but they don’t write it as something they know about. It’s all theories. But I do know that physicians always go for the most life-threatening injury they can identify.”

“Something else you read,” Mez said in annoyance.

“Talked with some of them, actually. Back home. The university also teaches physiology.”

The injury Tibs identified with the largest loss of essence was small. Looking only at the breaks in the essence, he couldn’t see it. The channel was right off the largest one, the one that flowed up and down in his chest, and passed through where Jackal’s heart was. That was fine. Tibs had checked that first. He knew how important someone’s heart was.

“I have one,” he said as he woven purity. “You need to read about purity and the best letters to use, so you can tell me,” he told Don.

The sorcerer chuckled. “I doubt those books will be easy to get. The Purity clerics are highly secretive about what they are able to do. That’d be more your area, Khumdar.”

“Why don’t you ask that cleric who helped you when Jackal’s father attacked,” Mez said. “She’s a runner now, and you’ve been teaching her, haven’t you, Khumdar?”

“We do not speak while training. It is something I enforce, as I do not care to listen to her thoughts on what I am.”

“She wouldn’t care,” Tibs said, applying the weave and sensing its effect. “She isn’t like the others. She wanted to learn to fight, for one thing.”

“She yet remained of Purity. Their stances, on what I am, are taught from the moment one can listen to the stories their parents will regale them with. It is not something one learns to unknown simply because one speaks to someone claiming they are wrong. And I know better than to waste my time making such a claim of her.”

“Then you can ask her, Tibs.”

The loss of essence at the injury slowed as it heals. “I’m going to have a tough time explaining why I want to learn. I’m lucky enough to have gotten her to speak about how she makes the weave so I can do it, too.” He didn’t notice an effect on the overall loss, but he went looking for the next one.

“You could explain what you...”

“I would advise against that,” Khumdar said. “I will not claim that she will be as prejudiced about what you are as she is about me—”

“As you think she is,” Mez said.

“But the purity clerics, as an organization, are no better than the guild. She will inform them, and then, they will either tell the guild, or find a way to take you for their own so they can... improve you.”

“You make them sound like hey’re going to... I don’t know. Try to fix Tibs.”

“That is exactly what I expect they will do. Purity is obsessed with—”

“The people with the essence,” Tibs corrected, as he applied another weave, this one on a small channel under Jackal’s left arm. “The element doesn’t care about who’s different.”

“I—” Khumdar stopped. “You are correct. I apologize. I, too, can fall within the belief that the element is the same as the people wielding its essence. The purity clerics only care about fixing everything that is different from them. If it was within their power, they would go to war against more than me and those like me. They would seek to wipe all who do not believe what they do from the world, leaving behind only them.”

“If even that,” Mez said. “Wars are costly to all sides involved.”

“I didn’t think you’d know about wars,” Don said. “Your people seem to value life over more power.”

“We’re told stories of wars to teach us they aren’t something we should want.”

The injury healed, and Tibs thought he could sense a reduction in the overall loss of essence. He found another small one that leaked more essence than elsewhere, in the belly’s area, and he healed that.

“It’s working,” Don said, And Tibs paused in applying the next weave to look at him. “Your breathing slowed.”

“You’re right, it’s working.” Three more, and he couldn’t tell if there was a loss anymore. He made a larger weave and applied it to the largest injured area, then sat back. “I think he’s going to be fine, now.”

“What is your reserve at?”

Tibs snorted. “I still have some, but I can’t tell how close to not having any left I am.”

“I’m... surprised you’re so low. You said you can absorb any essence you’re channeling, and it turned into life essence when you stop. That should make it easier for you to refill it.”

“I can refill it from any of them, yeah, but it’s much larger than yours. I used up a lot of it with the fire in the boss room, absorbing that afterward didn’t add nearly as much as I used. After that I have to purposely absorb essence to speed it up, and we’ve been busy.”

“With what?” Jackal croaked.

“You’re alive!” Tibs exclaimed, then felt silly.

“I’d like to debate that,” the fighter said. “At least tell me the loot in the chest was worth it.”

Mez snorted. “The chest was empty.”

Planning-80

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Mez asked Jackal.

“I’m fine,” the fighter replied, in that tone that was more about dealing with being asked questions than giving a true answer. “Tibs healed me.”

The archer looked at Tibs. “His body’s healed.”

“There isn’t much that can be done about his mind,” Don added.

“Ah, ah,” Jackal said.

“But without your essence, continuing is dangerous.” Mez looked up; the ‘sun’ was halfway down to the ‘horizon’. “Actually, shouldn’t we turn around? It’s going to take a while to get back to the doorway.”

Jackal looked up, then at Tibs. “Can we trust it?”

He shrugged. He thought so, Sto hadn’t tricked them when it came to the passage of time on the previous floor; there was no reason he’d start now.

Jackal wasn’t happy.

Tibs figured his friend would feel better if he asked Sto, regardless of the answer, but that wasn’t happening. Not until Tibs found out why Sto needed to be silent.

“Alright,” he turned. “But we’re taking a different route, and we’re checking those buildings for more loot.”

“Guarded by dogs,” Don whispered, then grinned as Jackal shuddered.

“You, are not funny.”

“He kind of is,” Mez said, then grinned at the glare.

* * * * *

“I.” Jackal kicked the dog, sending it through a door. “Am.” His fist crushed the back of the dog biting his other leg. “Not.” He grabbed the one that had jumped on his back. “Afraid!” and threw it at the wall, where it fell to the ground, then crumbled.

The fighter looked around, panting and eyes wide.

“I’m convinced,” Mez said.

“You could have helped!”

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself,” Don replied.

Jackal looked at Tibs.

“You didn’t let me check the door, or if there were traps inside.” These dogs had been in the building, waiting to pounce on anyone opening, or, in Jackal’s case, kicking it in.

“There haven’t been any traps along this road,” the fighter pointed out.

“Until now,” Mez said, before Tibs.

“And, hopefully, realizing you can beat them without help means you won’t be as scared of them,” Don said.

“I’m not scared of them. They’re dungeon creatures.”

Mez and Don exchanged a look, then grinned.

Tibs shook his head and entered the building. It was another home. One floor, a fire pit on the left, with chairs around a low table on the right. One door opened to a sleeping room, the other to a room with an easel, empty frames, and bowls. He thought they might have contained colors. The room reminded him of Zackaria’s studio.

The cabinet has something that didn’t belong, which made it a chest. Or maybe the sword belonged there, leaning against the back. The walls didn’t have the woven with essence feel to them Sto’s buildings had. Maybe a fighter has also lived here along with the artist.

The sword had essence woven through it. Metal, as most weapons had, along with fire, and others he couldn’t identify. He handed it to Jackal on exiting, adding, “magic.”

He tied the sword to Mez’s pack.

“I’ll let you check the doors,” Jackal said, and Tibs rolled his eyes.

* * * * *

“Tibs,” Don said, pointing to the large building further along the left road. “Can you tell anything from that?”

It was four stories tall and wide enough the road ended at it. It wasn’t quite as wide as the building with the clerks, but it was taller.

“We’re checking it out,” Don said.

“I’m the one who says that,” Jackal called after the sorcerer.

“No,” Mez said. “You say ‘I want all the loot’.”

They caught up to the sorcerer as he slowed.

The road didn’t stop at the building, but went around it on each side.

“It’s not a dungeon room,” Tibs announced.

“I don’t think we have the time to deal with it,” Mez said, looking up again. The orb was only a hand’s span over the ‘horizon’.

“Don, what’s got you excited about this building?” Jackal asked.

“I’ve seen it before!”

“How?” Jackal asked.

“In a book?” Tibs asked.

“Back home, the repository of ancient texts is housed in a building that is identical to this one.”

“How is that possible?” Mez asked, looked at Tibs, then Khumdar.

“I do not know,” the cleric said. “This is more Don’s area than mine.”

“I don’t know how it’s possible,” the sorcerer said excitedly. “How do dungeons know what they know? Maybe they learn stuff from the mind of the Runners they absorb. Maybe they just know stuff, but that’s the repository.”

“It can’t be the same building,” Tibs said. “The dungeon made this one.”

“But it’s that building. And that building is filled with books. I wasn’t allowed in, only

established university scholars could enter, so imagine what will be here.”

“Traps,” Tibs said.

“Dungeon creatures,” Mez added.

“Books,” Jackal said with disdain.

“Yes!”

“Okay,” Jackal said, and Don reached for the door. “Don, stop. Let me finish. Do you really want to go in there with as little time as we have? We still have to make it to the doorway, and there’s no way to know what’s going to attack us on the way there. And,” he added as Don opened his mouth, “with as little reserves as we have left?”

Don reigned in his excitement.

“It’s going to still be here when we come back,” Tibs said.

“And we’re going to have full reserves to deal with whatever is in there,” Jackal said.

Don looked at the door, then faced the fighter. “We come here directly.”

“Sure, we deal with this and then go back to looking for the boss room.”

“It could be this one,” Mez said.

Jackal rolled his eyes. “If Don’s right, it’s filled with books. That’s not where we’re going to find the floor boss.”

“The only aspect that could support your statement,” Khumdar said, “is that this building is someone close to the entrance.”

“Which would be a perfect place to put the boss room,” Don said, “since every Runner knows the dungeon would never put one this close, right?”

“We’ll find out whenever our turn comes again,” Jackal said. “Right now, we need to leave. I’m hungry.”

* * * * *

Tibs swung at the golem person in uniform as he backed up the steps. It took the blow on its shield, then thrust with its thin blade and Tibs gritted his teeth as it sliced through his armor and into his side.

He was pissed at himself.

He’d been thinking about the meal Russel would have for them once they reached the inn and not paying attention to their surroundings. The stairs leading up to the doorway were in sight, so what could happen between now and then?

They could walk into a guard patrol, that was what.

Seven of them in matching uniform. Loose fabric in blue and yellow that hardened when it took a blow. Jackal had discovered that when he threw himself in the middle of them, and then had to deal with swords that were able to cut his stone skin, so now, Don and Mez carried him while Tibs, with Khumdar’s assistance, kept the four remaining guards occupied.

The swords weren’t enchanted against stone, Tibs had decided, the first time one cut his armor. It had to be a combination of metal to sharpen the edge, and Jackal’s low essence, that had let them cut him so severely. His friend wasn’t in danger of dying, but he had to be in pain.

Tibs parried, then ducked the staff he sense coming in his direction from behind.

Khumdar’s staff impacted with the guard shield and spilled darkness over it and the arm. The guard didn’t react to it, but Tibs sense the essence within the darkness weaken, and

when the shield caught his swing, the blade sliced it and the arm. He parried the attack, then moved to the side to take on another guard as Khumdar struck the one in the head.

“We’re at the doorway!” Don yelled.

Tibs nodded to the cleric to go, then coated the stairs with ice. The guards slid down while he ran up and through the doorway.

“We need to better manage our essence,” Jackal said.

“You need to stop jumping into fights,” Don corrected.

“And going to rooms when you don’t know what the trap is,” Tibs added, panting.

“How about we get out, let the cleric heal us, and talk about everything we should have done with a tankard in our hand and a meal before us?” Mez asked.

“Best idea,” Jackal replied, pushed himself off the wall, and the archer barely caught him in time. “I’m going to need help making it to the exit.”

“I think he might have left some of his mind behind,” Don mused.

“That is what Jackal wishes you to believe,” Khumdar said. “He still has all the mind he started with.”

“Stop revealing my secrets,” Jackal called.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Don sighed.

Planning-81

Tibs sat on the shore of the lake, among the others. Nearly everyone there had water as their element. Those who didn't were people Tibs didn't know. A good number of Runners were present, chatting with those around them, reading, lying back or, like him, sitting. Only three of them were drawing the essence to them, the others simply letting the higher concentration increase the rate at which their reserves filled.

A group of sorcerers stood away from the runners, discussing. One of them was in the range of Gamma, and the other five Delta. Were they talking about buying the lake from the guild? Tibs had asked Darran to inquire about it, but this land wasn't being offered to the townsfolk yet. It was too far to be of interest yet. It could still be purchased, the merchant had explained, but the kind of money that would require was something a man such as him shouldn't be able to have access to.

Tibs had considered it. But what would he do with the lake? And he knew that once the guild was removed, it would take a lot of money to keep the town going until things settled. Darran had talked him through pages and pages of numbers and things the guild currently paid for. As soon as the guild was gone, Tibs was finding someone to handle that part. Kroseph, probably.

"... as it ever happened before?" one of the sorcerer asked, as they walked closer. They did something with essence that was too complex for Tibs to understand.

"For three nexus to the elements to be this close together?" the one next to her asked. "Not in this configuration."

"You mean the Berkion site?"

"Jusciten, actually, but Berkion is the same kind of situation. So old that the elements must have walked them. This place? There's nothing old about it other than what's now part of the dungeon."

"I wish someone had told us about that," the gamma sorcerer said.

"Like we could have done anything, anyway."

"We could have at least gone there, seen what it's like."

"You still can," Tibs said before he stopped himself. "There's only two teams on the schedule at this point. I'm sure the guild won't charge you too much to be added to it."

He felt their eyes on him and wondered if they were considering it.

Tibs didn't know what Quigly intended to do when he left the dungeon at the end of the day. Tibs's team wasn't going in until the next week's schedule, so every days were available since no one else was high enough level for the fourth floor among the runners,

and no one from outside had put their names for a run.

“Do a crawl?” the woman said disdainfully. “We are scholars, not crawlers.”

Tibs shrugged. “I guess you won’t get to know, then.”

She snorted. “We’ll simply asked those who survive it.”

Tibs snorted in reply. He’d have to talk with Quigly, make sure he knew about them so he could extort as many coins as he could. He doubted anyone on his team would be interested. He and Don no longer needed coins. Mez would respect the rules about not talking, Khumdar wouldn’t say anything, if they could even find him, and Jackal... No, Jackal care about winning the loot, not what the loot ultimately was.

They walked on, muttering something about ignorance and insolence.

Tibs focused back on pulling essence to him. Unlike the others, he needed a lot more if he wanted enough to deal with the next run.

* * * * *

Tibs slowed his pace and sensed around him. No one among the crowd in Market Place stood out to him. No essence was directed at him. But again, he couldn’t shake the feeling he was watched. A few guards looked at him, but that wasn’t it. They knew him, that he was a rogue, so there was always one of them anywhere there were merchants trying to catch him stealing something.

This was... different.

“Hey Serba.” He dropped his hand, and the black dog snatched the piece of jerky out of hit. “Who’s this?”

“Timber,” she replied, falling into step on his left. “Who is going to get a talking to. It’s your essence, isn’t it? You can do something that makes dogs like you.”

“You should try being nice to them.” He rubbed the dog’s head. “The dungeon has dogs now.”

“And are they eating out of your hands too?” she asked in derision.

“I didn’t have any jerky.” He glanced at her. “Has Irdian gotten sorcerers to keep track of me?”

“You’re not that important, Tibs. You and your racket are only one of the many things he needs to deal with. And considering the nobles are basically cutting off their part of the city off, that’s where his attention is. What made you think he might?”

“Just a feeling. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” she said sharply. Her essence didn’t seem as thin and some of the others, so she might not have caught whatever was going around.

“Do you know what’s making people sick?”

“No.” She hesitated. “Neither do the clerics.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

“Irdian called one over yesterday when a dozen of the men just dropped where they stood. The exhaustion just hit them all of a sudden. The cleric pronounced them overworked and ordered rest, but Irdian’s not that kind of boss. The schedules are written so we have ample time to rest.”

“But do they?”

She shrugged. “That’s not my problem. I’m just avoiding anyone who isn’t a Runner as much as I can. I need to get back to my watch. Just tell me one thing, Tibs. How is Jackie

dealing with the dogs in the dungeon?"

Tibs grinned. "Has hard as he can, but don't worry, they still like him."

She smiled. "I'm starting to like this dungeon."

Planning-82

Tibs crouched in the shadow of the chimney cast by Claria, shrouded in darkness essence. He'd picked this roof because of the vantage point over the others, and now he searched for whoever it was that followed him. Over the last four days, he'd sensed eyes on him. On and off during the day, but almost constantly at night when he ran the roofs.

He saw motion in the darkness, half a dozen roofs over. Another rogue, out for night time training.

Tibs worried who might be watching him because of how good they were. Other rogues tried to follow him every so often. Once, the guards had even talked one of the low rank adventurers into attempting it in the hopes Tibs would lead them to the new cache of armors and weapons he had for training omega Runners. He'd led the woman around the town's roofs, never managing to lose her, but always remaining aware she was there. He'd waved at her after returning to his room through the window.

The only person Tibs could think of who would hire someone so skill Tibs couldn't find them was Sebastian. With him dead, it would be the Brokerage who'd set that up, but Tibs had destroyed all the contracts as well as taken a lot of their funds. Had they rebuilt? Did they know Tibs was responsible? Was this how they reacted to it? Why only tracking him? Sebastian had wanted him dead, and if the Brokerage knew Tibs had ruined them, why didn't they want him dead too?

He wished he could find out if the Brokerage was functioning again, but the only person he knew with knowledge of how to find out was the Archer, and Tibs had no idea where the man was now. Jackal knew of the Brokerage, but not how to get information on them. Tibs had asked Serba, and she'd called him crazy for even mentioning them. Cross didn't know who they were, and when Tibs asked if she could inquire, she'd snapped at him about having other things to deal with, and walked off.

Banging pulled his attention, and he jumped the roofs, careful not to make his essence use obvious. He looked down and guards, accompanied by a cleric, were nailing a white plaque to the door of the house. Too many of the houses had those now. The mark that some of the residents were afflicted by the Weakness, and that others were to stay away in case they caught it.

Contagion was something Don had explained to him, how sickness could jump from one person to the other. How it happened, he didn't know. All the books he'd read had were theories. Clerics guarded that knowledge as if others knowing it would make them less effective.

Not that they were effective with this one at all.

The Weakness had led to an influx of alchemists, many of whom claimed to have a remedy. Except for two, none had an element. And those two were like the blacksmith and baker. It was faint and didn't show up in their eyes.

Don had answered his questions about them, too. About what alchemy was, how it could do what they claimed if they couldn't manipulate essence.

Don had been adamant those claiming they had a cure were lying. The lack of results supported him, even if each alchemist had reasons why the positive results weren't noticeable yet.

But alchemy was real. They used filtrations methods, boilings, soaking and many others to tease essence out of items, and then mixed those in ways that could help, or hurt. He compared it to how an assassin could coat his blade in rotten meat before stabbing a target so that the rot would then spread into the wound, but using method to refine the essence that caused the result they were after.

Alchemy, he'd said, was the domain of those who aspired to an element, but couldn't work up the courage to go through the steps of gaining one. There had been none of the mocking Tibs expected from the sorcerer. That most adventurers seemed to express when speaking of those who lack the fortitude to even try.

As far as Tibs was concerned, alchemy was the domain of the charlatan, taking coins from the desperate and giving nothing but false hope in return. He wanted to make them pay, but the only ones who settled into Kragle Rock were the ones not promising a cure, but they were trying to understand what was happening, and seeking to make a real cure. The others left with before the sun set, their pockets full of coins.

Tibs had set some of the rogues loose among the line of those waiting to leave, with instructions to lighten those alchemist's pockets as much as they could without getting caught, but the results weren't as good as he'd hoped. They kept a tight hand on their coin pouch.

The guards moved on to the house on the left and hammered another plaque, and one more across the road, before heading away.

Tibs did the same, his interest in finding out who was following him gone. All he wanted now was to sleep the mood away.

* * * * *

Tibs ran up the stairs and nearly barged into Kroseph's room. The server hadn't been on the floor when Tibs had walked into the inn. Neither had Jackal, but it was Russel's expression that told Tibs something was wrong. That fear barely kept under control for the sake of the customers.

He knocked. "It's Tibs." He could sense Jackal and Clara, and barely sense Kroseph.

"Come in," Jackal said, sounding exhausted. He sat by the bed, holding Kroseph's too pale hand. Clara sat on the other side, looking exasperated.

"How is he?" Tibs asked, hoping she'd know more than what he could sense.

"He's not dead," she said angrily.

"That's good," Tibs snapped.

"Of course it's good! It just makes no sense!" she ran a hand over her face, grumbling, "Nothing about this makes sense."

“How doesn’t it make sense?” Tibs looked at Jackal, but he didn’t seem to be aware of them.

She motioned to Kroseph. “His father asked for a cleric when he fainted last night. Of course, with all those suffering from the Weakness, it’s not like there’s one to spare for a lowly server. I came as soon as word reached me, and I’ve...” She sighed. “He was stronger when I arrived, but I couldn’t do anything for him. I’ve seen others in his condition; they don’t last a night.”

“Then,” Tibs hesitated. “Doesn’t it mean he’s going to be okay?”

“He’s not getting any stronger,” she replied. “As far as I can tell, there is nothing wrong with him. I can see there is. But none of the weaves or etching I know are giving me anything. Even the more experienced clerics aren’t finding anything. I’ve asked, and no one has ever heard of a sickness we couldn’t work on. There’s been plenty that were too strong for us to stop before many died, but we could tell it was there.” She motioned to Kroseph again. “There’s nothing there.”

Not yet, Tibs wanted to say. There was still some life there, as faint as it was.

“But somehow, he’s holding on. If I could work out how. I might be able to figure out what’s happening, use that and help the others, but it’s just like the sickness. There’s nothing there that explains why he’s not dead.”

Tibs sensed Kroseph. Felt the life essence there, barely moving. But it was moving.

In people who weren’t sick, even those without an element. The essence moved through them along their channels. When someone was sick, that slowed the flow where the sickness was. The Weakness brought it to a standstill as it slowly faded.

How was Kroseph’s essence still flowing, however slowly as it did?

“Is there anything you can do for him?” he asked her in as conciliatory a tone as he could.

She shook her head. “I’m trying to figure this out and—”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “You should go sleep. Your team will need you.”

“I can’t leave him if there’s—”

“If anything changes, I’ll send someone to get you, I promise.”

She looked like she’d protest, then deflated. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help,” she told Jackal as she left. The fighter didn’t respond.

Tibs waited until she left the inn completely.

“Okay, Kroseph. What is going on with you?” He sensed the flow, concentrated on working out how it moved.

Unlike with him, Jackal, and anyone in good health, Kroseph’s essence didn’t flow back and forth. There was a cycle to the flow, Tibs had noticed, not that he’d investigated it beyond that. It was faster in Runners and adventurers, being faster the stronger they were.

Kroseph’s flow was so faint, Tibs had trouble working it out. It drifted out of the server, but was replenished from somewhere. Any inattention, and he lost it. A sob from Jackal, a yell from downstairs. His own fear at not being able to figure this out. Each time, it felt like the essence blurred and he needed to restart.

When he did trace where the essence entered Kroseph, it perplexed Tibs. The hand was in Jackal’s, but the essence didn’t come from them.

“Jackal,” Tibs whispered. “I need you to let go of his hand.”

The fighter shook his head. When Tibs tried to pry the fingers open, the hands turned to stone.

“Jackal, something’s helping him, and I need to see what it is so I can figure out how to help him.” Another vehement shake of the head.

Tibs reached over and gently took Kroseph’s other hand. “Take this one,” he whispered.

Jackal looked at it for long enough, Tibs wasn’t sure he saw it, or heard what Tibs said. Then, slowly, he took it with one hand, and the other, pressing his lips to them.

Tibs stared at the ring on Kroseph’s index. It was so ordinary he’d forgotten all about it. The ring Jackal had given his man when he make the promise he’d be careful going forward, so they could have a long life together. The ring Sto had given Jackal, for Kroseph, because of how important the server was to not only the fighter, but all the runners.

The ring Sto enchanted so Kroseph could have a life as long as Jackal.

The life essence appeared there and spread into Kroseph. There was little of it, but it balanced what left. He couldn’t sense the weave in the ring, even when touching it. Sto had done that with all the items he’d given them that day, so no one could accidentally discover they were enchanted.

All Tibs could do was sense the effect of the weave. It pulled life essence from outside Kroseph and into him. Was the influx so thin because of how little of that essence there was in the air, or was it an aspect of the weave?

Tibs took the hand and pushed a little life essence in, mixing it with that of the ring. He sensed it spread, making the whole more visible to his sense.

“Hey,” Kroseph said sleepily, when the essence had spread everywhere. “Why aren’t you in bed with—” The kiss cut him off and Tibs looked away. “Not that I’m complaining, but you aren’t usually that—Jackal, what’s wrong?”

Tear fell from the fighter, and he pulled Kroseph to him. The server noticed Tibs and looked further puzzled.

“Jackal, let go and tell me what’s going on.”

“You have the Weakness,” Tibs said.

Kroseph frowned. “I’m fine. I mean, I’m tired, but I’ll just sleep some more when this oaf gets in bed.”

Tibs shook his head. “You feel fine because I added life essence to what the ring used to keep you from dying. But whatever’s causing it is still there. And no one knows what it is.”

Kroseph tapped Jackal’s back, then slapped it forcefully. “Jackal, let me go. I’m not going to die. Tibs said so.”

Jackal reluctantly released Kroseph, who moved to lean against the headboard.

“Okay. What can we do?”

“You’re staying in bed,” Jackal ordered.

Kroseph glared at him, “I’m not you. I don’t go running off to help when I’m hurt because I think I’m too tough to get even more injured. Yes, I’m staying here until we figure out what’s going on. Or at least what I need to do, so I’ll remain healthy.”

Tibs sensed the essence within Kroseph. It was growing fainter already. He could add essence, but that meant he had to stay around all the time. He was willing, but it wasn’t

practical. He had a lot of other things to do.

What did he need to know right now?

Why the ring didn't pull enough essence into Kroseph to maintain the level of essence Tibs had raised it too. It had managed it when he barely had any, so it should be able to now. Unless something in the weave made that happen only when the essence was too low, something to keep Kroseph from dying.

What he needed was someone used to—

Thinking of Don made Tibs realized he sensed the corruption downstairs.

"Don't move," he instructed Kroseph, then ran to get the sorcerer, pulling him away from his meal. As soon as they were on the stairs, he explained what had happened.

"How do I work out why the ring isn't keeping the essence at the level it is, if I can't tell how the weave works?"

Don looked at Kroseph. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired, like I've had to take over two of the other's work."

"Okay, Tibs. Why could the ring not pull the same amount of essence?"

"Other than the weave only doing it when he's near death, it might be because there isn't enough essence around."

"If that was strictly the case, it wouldn't have been able to keep him alive."

"Jackal was holding his hand. Maybe it can pull from other people. With a Runner, I doubt he'd notice it."

"Wouldn't you have sensed that?"

"I wasn't focusing on that, then. I was trying to workout where it was getting into Kroseph."

Don nodded and unpinned a small gem from his lapel. The corruption drained out of it as the sorcerer absorbed it. "Fill this with your essence. We can test if having more in proximity is enough for the ring."

Tibs did so. It was a small reserve, then placed it in Kroseph's hand.

Immediately, Tibs sense its effect as a flow went to the ring, then spread through the channels. Within a minute, Kroseph looked more alert.

Don smiled. "I think we have the answer."

Planning-83

Tibs watched Kroseph talk with his father at the bar. The server had been ready to get back to work, but his father didn't want him to have a relapse so soon after getting over his illness.

"Do you think the dungeon can make more of that ring?" Don asked. "If it works for him, the rest of the town would benefit."

"The way Tibs explained it is that it was hard for the dungeon to make it," Mez said.

"And do we want all those people not growing old?" Jackal added, also watching Kroseph.

"And we'd have to give everyone an amulet," Tibs said. "And I'd have to refill them when they run out."

Don nodded.

"Can you sense how long the amulet will last?" Khumdar asked.

Tibs shook his head. "I think it drains faster when Kroseph moves around, but it's too early to be sure."

"What we need," Don said, eyes closed. "Is a ring that only handles this one issue. The ideal version would include its own reserve, and a process by which it refills itself."

"Wouldn't that mean it's draining people?" Jackal asked. "That's just moving the problem around, not fixing it."

"I can't answer that. Tibs's essence is an unknown. But he can shift from it to others and back. Using water to fill his reserve, then make that life. The dungeon might have a way to do something similar."

"Or not."

"It seems that figure out the cause of the illness is the sole way this can be resolved," Khumdar said,

"Got any idea? Hoarder of secret?" Mez asked.

That the cleric didn't immediately answer caused Tibs to watching.

"I do not know if this is related," Khumdar said cautiously. "But there is something new. Something hiding. I do now know what it is, or if it is a person or some condition that camouflage itself as something else, but I first became aware of it shortly before the first person fell ill."

"Do you know where it is?"

The cleric shook his head. "It comes and goes. Or that is how it seems. Sometimes,

no matter how hard I try, I cannot sense that secret anywhere. Then, it will be so clear I will be incapable of not being aware of it. But that does not render it simple to locate it.” He closed his eyes. “I cannot sense it at this time.”

“You said shortly before this started,” Don said. “Any idea how early?”

The cleric shook his head. “Secrets are not like the light of the sun. They do not blind one with their arrival.”

“Tibs, how was the people’s essence before the sickness was made official?” Don asked.

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t pay attention to that, too many people, and it’s faint enough already.”

“What are you thinking?” Jackal asked.

“Not every sickness strikes hard. Most catalogued come one slowly. A person can be afflicted for days, if not weeks, before others can tell. It’s what makes the contagious sickness so dangerous. By the time the first person falls from it, whole neighborhoods can have caught it.”

“You’re thinking it’s what happened here?”

“There’s been a rise in fights, leading up to the first one. People have been more tired, which, considering what this sickness does, would indicate there’s a connection.”

“Okay, I follow with people being tired,” Jackal said, “but fights? Those always happen.”

“You’re right, and because they always happen, the guards track them. What neighborhood they are more prevalent, who tends to be at the center of them. Well, those they are aware of. You’ll be happy to know your pit fights are still unknown to them. But recently, ten days before the first person fell sick, areas that weren’t expected to have fights erupted with them over item so minors the people couldn’t understand why they’d started fighting when they were pulled apart. The reports say they just ‘lost it’.”

“People lose their temper all the time,” Mez said.

“Yes, but I read a few books that researched it, and they stipulated that a loss in vitality can lead to an increase in loss of temper. Next time we’re allowed to travel, I’ll look for more books on the subjects. Those never went through their methods or what the conclusions were.”

“You read the strangest things,” Mez said.

“It’s just strange that he reads,” Jackal replied. “And guards’ reports? If you are that bored, I’m sure Khumdar will be happy to include you in his staff training.”

“No,” the cleric replied.

Don shook his head. “While I see the use of knowing out to fight with a staff, after a few courses, I realized it isn’t for me. My time’s better spent working out how to turn my essence into a tool for attack, defense and support.”

“Never thought of corruption as something that would support fighters,” Jackal said.

Don smiled. “That’s because you have Tibs. Other teams have to rely on other means to heal, or prevent infection. Before the clerics arrived, I drained infections out of more than one Runner and townsfolk.”

Tibs and Jackal stared at him.

“You went about helping people?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“People who didn’t piss me off, yes.”

“There were some of those?”

Don chuckled. “Even back there, there were a lot of people here. It may seem unimaginable to you, considering the ease with which you irritated me, but yes, some did receive my good will.”

“How come we never heard about that?” Tibs asked.

Don sighed. “Because I was enough of an idiot, back then, that I believed words of my good actions would undercut the value of being feared. When I couldn’t act without being noticed, I swore them to secrecy.”

“You could be a nice guy back then,” Jackal mused. “I’d have never guessed it.”

“Good, I’d have felt the need to hurt you if you had.”

“As amusing as listening to both of you try to out badass the other—”

“That’s not what this is about,” Jackal said, cutting off Mez.

“Sure. But how about this sickness? Did any of this help find a way to fix it?”

“Unfortunately, no. If the dungeon can make rings, that will stench the damage, but Tibs’s right that it’s not feasible as a solution.”

“But you can ask the dungeon anyway, right?”

“If Sto will talk. I’ve walked in his range every day and even Ganny’s not saying anything.”

“What do you think could be happening that makes them not talk to you?” Don asked.

Tibs shrugged.

“Is it in danger?” Jackal asked.

“He’d call for help if he was,” Tibs said. “He did before.”

“Do you know when the dungeon is listening?” Don asked.

“Not unless he talks first. Why?”

“I’m thinking that the instructions to not talk with it don’t keep us from talking among ourselves about the problem. If it happens to listen in and hear us talk, it might decide to help.”

“He’d help,” Tibs stated. “Sto understands how important the town is to the Runners. It’s why he agreed to help with the food and the weapons during Sebastian’s attacks.”

“So we spend tomorrow’s run talking about the town and the problems, and how the ring and help,” Jackal said.

“Let’s be more discreet about how we go about it,” Don said, “but ultimately, something like that.”

* * * * *

Tibs looked up from the ledger. Clara had dropped into the seat opposite him and stared at him. He put the quill back in the pot and closed the book. She kept on staring.

“Yes?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What happened?”

He looked at the ledger, confident that wasn’t what she wanted to know about. “About what?”

She motioned to Kroseph, serving a table.

“He got better.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. He woke up and felt better. He’d taking it easy, in case he feels weak again.”

“You’re hiding something.”

“I’m a rogue. It’s kind of what we do.”

“Whatever this is, it’s not a rogue thing.”

“Clara, I don’t know what you mean. Kroseph can’t be the only one who’s feeling better.”

“He’s the only one where I was sure he’d caught the Weakness. But that’s not just what I’m talking about.”

“Okay, then. What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have a cleric.”

“Khumdar is—”

“He can’t heal.”

Tibs nodded, getting a sense of where this was going.

“If you don’t have a healer, how is it your team almost never needs healing going into and out of the dungeon? There’s a reason even now, the cleric assigned to the door will heal teams who have a healer. I’m usually drained well before we get to the boss room. I’ve lost teammates because I didn’t have the reserve to heal them. When’s the last time you lost a teammate in the dungeon?”

“We’ve been careful, keeping the healing potions we find until—”

She glared at him. “Unless the dungeon somehow treating you better than it’s been treating everyone else, there aren’t enough to ensure everyone walks out of the dungeon without help, or at all.”

“We’ve had to carry Jackal out a few times.”

She watched him. “Did you know Quigley lost people on the fourth floor on both of his runs?”

Tibs shook his head. The warrior was more pragmatic about his team than many of the Runners. He went in knowing he’d lose people, and didn’t dwell on it, or talk about it. With how busy Tibs was with everything, he hadn’t had the time—taken the time to speak with him.

“So how, exactly, is it that your team went in and didn’t lose anyone? You spent the whole day there, and I know you and Jackal well enough to know you didn’t sit on a bench and wait. How is it that Jackal’s man is the only one who seemed to have gotten over the Weakness? And why are you hiding how it happened when it could help the town, Tibs?”

“I don’t want to hide it,” he snapped, and she looked at him, surprised. “I don’t—” he closed his mouth. “If I—” He forced his emotions to settle down. “If I had a way to help everyone, I would.”

“You did cure him,” she said in surprise and he shook his head. Even using what he had in mind as how he’d put her off his trail had risks, but it was the only option he saw.

“We found an item in the dungeon. It’s letting him move about.”

“An item?” she didn’t sound convinced. “The guild takes all enchanted items. You’d have to pay more than you can find in the dungeon for something that would help cure the town.”

“It hasn’t cured him. It’s just countering the sickness. And we found something that lets us sneak items out without the guild knowing it.” He watched her. As far as he knew, she didn’t like the guild anymore than most Runners, but this was something she could cause him trouble with.

“If the guild had it, they could figure out how it works and help the town.”

He snorted. “It’s the guild. They’d take it and sell it. Even if they worked out how it works, they’d just make more to sell, and get more coins. They wouldn’t give any of them to the town. Only the nobles would have them, if they guild even makes it so they can afford it.”

Her nod was reluctant. “Would you let one of our sorcerers study it?”

Tibs considered it. She meant purity sorcerers. “Do you know any you’re sure would use what they find to help the town?”

She closed her mouth as soon as she opened it. He tried again, then shook her head. Even among purity, they had the same problem. Those with power weren’t willing to share it.

“Then I’m not risking Kroseph’s life on it. I’m hoping we’ll find more like it in the dungeon, and maybe others will do too.”

“But will they be able to get them past the guild?”

Tibs shrugged. “We’re not the only ones with ways to sneak them out.” He knew Quigly had sold Darran magical items, and a few of the Runners had some with enough weave to them the guild would never had let them keep them if they’d been aware of it. “When you reach the third floor, you’ll probably find something like that.”

She nodded and stood. “Tell me if you find another one. I want to see it.”

Tibs nodded. He wasn’t sure how he’d convince her when he didn’t have one, but he’d deal with that problem when it happened. For now, he had accounts to balance.

Planning-84

The merchants in the stalls spread on the field around the path leading to the stairs had no customers.

With the Weakness rampant, hardly anyone left their houses. Even the Runners, who seemed to resist it, weren't moving about the town needlessly. There had been a quiet to their walk through the streets that made Tibs uncomfortable.

A lack of life.

"Am I the only one," Mez said, "who feels like these are the last days of an empire?"

"Empires do not fall this quietly," Khumdar whispered.

"Empires don't fall," Jackal said, the tone forcefully jovial. "That's what makes them empires."

"You're wrong," Don said. "But I don't know if this feels like one of them ending. There's something too... unnatural to this."

"We're going to fix it," Tibs stated. They knew how to make it happen. They just had to find a way to tell Sto in spite of this strange lack of communication.

The cleric by the door looked them over, then nodded them in.

"The Library," Don says, as they stepped onto the fourth floor.

"We need to check the houses first," Jackal said. "We have all day."

"Then we can start with the Library. And check houses on the way to the next important building."

Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged. Sto still hadn't made himself heard.

The fighter turned to face them. "Okay." He said, sounding serious enough even Don closed his mouth. Tibs did his best not to roll his eyes. When Jackal had suggested this as a way to telling Sto what was happening, Tibs had told him not to go too far, but this was Jackal. "I know we're all affected by what's happening to the town. I nearly lost Kroseph, so I'm right there with you wanting to go back and look after your loved ones."

Don and Mez exchanged a look, while Khumdar struggled not to smile.

"But we are Runners first and foremost. It is our duty to explore this floor and bring back loot. I know they understand this, and all they want from us to come back safely to them."

"And," Khumdar said, "with a potential cure to this weakness that spreads over Kragle Rock, since the dungeon has granted such wondrous items as part of its rewards."

Jackal looked at the cleric in surprise. "Right, that. We have to find the most loot, so

there will be a chance one of them will contain a ring like the one that saved my man.”

“Nice...” Mez hesitated. “Speech.”

“Then the library makes the most sense,” the sorcerer said.

“Don, I just said that we need to find something that will help cure the town.”

“A library holds knowledge, Jackal. That knowledge could include records of this sickness happening before. I have not come across it in any of the books I have read. That doesn’t mean it never happened. A library in a dungeon might hold tomes no one has ever seen before.”

“Or might ever see at all,” Khumdar said. “Not everything within the dungeon is something real. They may be nothing more than props.”

“We still need to know.”

“You need to know,” Jackal said with a hint of disdain.

“Tibs, help me out here.”

“There are houses between here and the library we didn’t have the time to check last time. We can check those on the way.”

Don’s lips tightened, but he nodded. Jackal clapped his hands and headed down the stairs.

Tibs fell in step with the cleric. “You knew what Jackal wanted to say?”

Khumdar shrugged. “Our team leader is not the most complex person, so his secrets are, like him, simple to decipher. It took little on my part to make out the shape of what he intended to say, so when he wandered away, I could get him back on his intended path.”

“By filling that node with darkness.”

The cleric nodded. “Have you done it again?”

“I’m not doing that without help again. When I tried it alone,” he continued at the look Khumdar gave him, “it didn’t go well.”

“What happened?”

Tibs shuddered. He’d avoided thinking back on that night. “I got lost in them, I think. I’d just intended on testing it again, after the run. See if how the way secrets of the lock took shape would apply to the guild. But I lost hold of the essence and it poured in and everything was dark with shapes I couldn’t understand. There was something in there hunting me. Trying to take from me, and I ran. I don’t know how I didn’t run into buildings or people, because I didn’t see the town anymore, just this darkscape filled with things that pulled at me and everything around them, and that thing.”

“When was that?”

“The night after that run. Is that something you’ve felt?”

Khumdar chuckled. “My relationship to secrets is not as it is for you. But yes, I well understand that pull of them. And that first time going so deep within their realm can be unsettling.”

“That’s not the right word,” Tibs said, his voice shaking at the memory.

“I expect that for you, it is not. But that secret hounding you, do you remember anything of it?”

Tibs shook his head. He’d fought not to remember any of it and, gratefully, his mind had obliged.

“That is unfortunate. That is the secret that is hounding Kragle Rock. You sensed it

well before I did. It might not have been quite as guarded then.”

Tibs swallowed and forced himself to think back.

He’d sat on the roof, pulled darkness along the channel until it touched the node, then it slipped his control and the world went even darker than the night had been, and immediately, that sense of being chanced had manifested, and he’d ran, even as distracted by the other secrets latching into him, pulling, it had never stopped hunting him because—

“It wasn’t hunting me,” Tibs whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t hunting just me. Or maybe it wasn’t hunting at all.”

“It was spreading.”

Tibs nodded. “That feels like the right word, spreading in all the cracks, latching onto them.”

“Getting its claws into all of us,” Khumdar mused.

“Can secrets do that?”

“Spread? Most certainly. There is a saying, by anyone who commences in secrets, that secrets are like coins. It doesn’t matter how tightly you tie your pouch, they always seem to find a broken seam and leak out.”

“So that’s what I was sensing? That secret spreading?”

“I suspect so. What has me quizzical is how it spread so quickly, and so widely. Secrets are like pools of water in the ground after a day of rain. They move in specific directions dictated by what is around them. One can purposely alter the flow of that pool, but never to a point where it will travel back up the hill it started from.”

“Unless you use essence,” Tibs said. When Khumdar didn’t comment, Tibs realized the cleric had stopped walking.

Khumdar caught up to him, but remained silent.

“You two had a good time plotting?” Jackal asked when they caught up to the rest of the team.

“Indeed we did,” Khumdar replied.

“The guild?” The fighter asked, studying Tibs.

“No.” Tibs rolled his eyes. “We were just talking about secrets, and how they moved.”

“Alright.” Jackal didn’t sound convince. He motioned to the house’s door. “How about you get us inside before Don kicks in the door?”

“I don’t kick in doors,” the sorcerer protested. “I melt them.”

“Then do that before he does that,” Jackal said. “When he does it, it stinks.”

* * * * *

Tibs cut the guard’s hand off, then stabbed her through the chest, forgetting, again, that they weren’t people, and getting punched hard enough he staggered back, leaving his sword into the golem. He blocked the other guard’s sword with his shield and willed the sword to explode, sending shards at the two that were part of this unit.

The guards weren’t acting like those in Kragle Rock this time. More like the gangs from his Street and others he’d visited in his search. They attacked in large groups, forced the team to split up and then ganged up on each person.

Tibs switched to corruption, letting his bracer maintain his shield, and attempted a

sword with that essence. Flesh was particularly vulnerable to corruption. It was how Don had made himself so fears with just as little essence as all the Runners back then. A touch and he could bring down the strongest fighter.

When Tibs ended up with was something that looked like a sword, until he moved to strike, then it flowed as if he'd added Bor to Water, stretching as if he spilled a bowl of syrup. Instead of cutting into the guard's armor when it hit, it wrapped around as if it was a rope.

Not what he'd aimed for, but he could use that.

He had it spread over the armor, finding and making cracks until it touched flesh, then it spread. He made another corruption rope, and flung it at another guard, which dropped so it went over her head.

They were also quicker in learning how to adapt.

She threw knives at him. Metal knives without essence woven through them, so Tibs didn't pay attention to them. His armor would repair itself in time, and they weren't hurting him. He willed the essence to rain down on her and she let out a silent scream.

That was another change. None of the golems they'd come across since starting this run used essence, or had enchanted weapons. On their last run, there had been one sorcerer among them each time, and a few had weapons woven through with essence.

Did Sto think numbers made up for the lack? Was he running out of essence?

Tibs wove light into a bar, added Ank and Jir, and then was flung through a door as the weave exploded.

Why did he always do this? Fighting was not the time to trying new things.

He pushed himself to his feet.

He did it, because fighting was when he had the ideas.

He stepped out of the houses, shield and sword in hand, and looked at the result of his trial. The ground was caved in, two of the guards had hit walls and were struggling to stand. Another wall had cracks in the rough shape of a person. That there was no golem there meant they'd hit hard enough to die and crumble away.

Tibs cut the head off the last two, just as someone ran in his direction. He turned and watched Jackal come to a stop and look around.

"I thought that flash of light was you calling for help."

Tibs looked around, then motioned to the door he'd crashed through. "I could use help with the chest in that room?"

"Did you check it for traps?"

Tibs motioned around him. "Been kind of busy."

Jackal nodded. "I'll wait."

"Is everything okay?" Don asked as he arrived.

"Is there a way to get letters to act on the essence after I put them in the weave?" Tibs asked as he entered the house.

"What?"

"I like that explosion, but I'd like it to happen once I'm away from it." He crouched by the chest and ran his hands over it.

"Yeah, you can make a trigger, like with the etchings."

"I can add triggers to etching?" Tibs asked.

“Of course, hasn’t your teacher—never mind. That’s Lambda. Even my teacher hasn’t done more than mention we’ll be starting on that soon.”

“This is what comes of reading too much,” Jackal said. “You get mixed up in what you’re supposed to know, and soon enough, you act like you know more than your instructor and get in trouble and—”

“I’m a sorcerer, Jackal. No teacher of mine will ever complain I know more than I should.”

“No, they’re just going to charge you as if they had taught you,” Mez said, joining them, “and call it an end to the day’s training.”

“Can your injuries wait?” Tibs asked, manipulating the trap’s pin out. Mez’s leg was broken.

“Yeah, it can. How are you for your reserve? Was the week enough for you to fill it?”

“No.” The pin came out. “About half. So long as I don’t do anything like last time, it’ll be enough.” He carefully lifted the cover, reaching it to catch the vial before it fell, now that it was no longer held in place, waiting for the motion to break it. He raised his hand and offered it to Don. Then looked at the content.

No rings. A chain mail shirt, woven through with water and fire. Focusing, he could make out the letters, but didn’t know what they did in this configuration. They were loose enough he thought it wouldn’t be anything big.

“Did your fights seem... easy?” Mez asked.

“You ended up with a broken leg,” Don replied. “I am going to have a bruise the size of Russel’s ego. Tibs looks like he was thrown through that door.”

“That was my explosion.” He studied Don’s injuries. Bruising was still hard for him to identify. The damage wasn’t so severe any of the flow of essence broke. The best word he could think of was that there was a fuzziness to the flow where the bruise was.

“That would explain the question about delaying results. What element did you use?”

“Light, and I added Ank and Jir.”

“Why them?”

“Ank is fire, Jir air. I thought they would make the light harder, stronger. I was trying for a staff.”

“Ank and Jir feed off each other, just like air feed fire,” Don said. “I haven’t read anything about their interaction with light, but based on what I saw, they intensified the essence. You really should do this under supervision and in a controlled environment.”

“I don’t think of it then. And I don’t have a lot of time left when I’m not on a run.”

“You need to make the time, Tibs. One day, something like this could end up hurting one of us. It’s why I suggested training you and testing your capabilities. If you know how far you can push, you’ll know how to restrain yourself.”

Tibs wove purity and applied it to Mez’s leg. The essence and bone moved back in place, and the archer let out a sigh of relief.

“We good to go?” Jackal asked once Khumdar joined them. His robe had cuts, but the cleric seemed fine.

“Yes,” Don replied. “Onto the library.”

Planning-85

[note: the library is no longer a 'dungeon created building' it's part of the original city. Sto is simply making use of it.]

The building was large enough that three blocks of houses fit its width and two the depth, from the sense Tibs got of it. The walls were sand colored stones, with columns on each side of the double door, as well as between each window, and went up to the roofs, three stories higher.

Don vibrated with the kind of eagerness that matched Jackal's when loot was involved.

"Is it safe to go in?" the sorcerer asked before Tibs reached the door.

This close, he could tell there were no essence triggers, and a check of the lock, hinges and frame did not reveal traps. That didn't reassure him, but he pulled on the door before Don yanked them open.

The air that pushed out smelled dry and dusty. Unlike the other buildings, it made Tibs feel like this one had been unused for as long as the city had been buried.

Don hurried past him, ignoring Jackal's calls to wait.

Tibs didn't rush after the sorcerer. Don knew better, and if he got caught in a trap, he'd have to wait until Tibs made sure the floor was safe for the rest of the team.

The entryway was the size of the inn, with the floor in a polished version of the sandy stone that made out the outside. The walls were pale enough to be white, with golden frames with dark canvases where Tibs could barely make out hints of shoulders and head. Portraits of those who'd lived in this city?

Don let out a yell of joy.

"Why didn't any of the traps I walked in make me that happy?"

"Maybe the trap buried him in books," Mez said as Tibs continued checking the floor. Not one trigger.

He looked back in the entryway. This had better not be Sto just playing with his nerves.

The next room was larger, with intricately carved tables along the center and shelves of books on either side stretching back until they became lost in the distance, with two balconies over them hinting at even more books. Light came from globes floating over the tables and between the shelves.

"He's not buried," Jackal grumbled.

Don sat on a table, leafing through a large tome, with more stacked next to him. “How much can fit in your pouch?” he asked, looking up from the book.

“Why?” Jackal replied cautiously.

Don motioned around them. “I need to bring these back with me so I can study them.”

“What do they say?” Tibs asked, pulling on a heavy tome until it dropped from the stack, and looking at the page where it opened. Letters upon letters, only a few of them he recognized.

“I don’t know. That’s why I have to bring them back. The lettering is Arcanus, with some extra characters I’ve never seen before. I’m going to need time to work out the language. That’s why I have to bring as many of them back as I can. The more I have to work with, the faster I’ll be able to find out what they say.”

“If they say anything,” Mez said. “Can’t the dungeon have put them in just to mess with you? With sorcerers I mean.”

Don looked at Tibs, who shrugged. “They’re not woven through with essence, but he only does that with the walls and things he doesn’t want to be destroyed.”

“Other than by you,” Jackal said.

“He doesn’t want me to destroy them either,” Tibs replied.

Don dropped from the table and handed the tome to Jackal, who stepped back. “Put that in your pouch. We’re going to start with the front of each shelf. If they’re set up the same as the one back home, this will contain the primers for whatever the other books will be about.”

“You have a backpack,” the fighter said.

“There’s no way all the books I’ll need will fit in it,” Don replied. “Your pouch can hold everything here and—”

“No, it can’t. Someone argued for it to have a limit, so I wouldn’t leave the dungeon with everything not attached to the floors.”

“And walls,” Mez added.

“And ceiling,” Tibs added, distracted by something he couldn’t quite sense. He suffused himself with darkness and searched for secrets. There were a lot. Each book was dark with them, but that wasn’t what bothered him. He switched to light, and that didn’t do anything. Nothing here was a lie.

“Guys,” Mez called, and was ignored by Don and Jackal, who kept arguing over the books. Tibs continued sensing for what was bothering him. “Guys! Be quiet!” The archer motioned around them in the following silence. “I think I heard something.”

Without the arguing, and Tibs not paying attention only to the essence, he heard it. The shuffling of slow steps in the distance.

“Guards?” Jackal whispered.

“Those don’t sound like boots,” Mez said.

“Would a library have guards?” Tibs asked, joining them.

“Maybe passing by,” Don said. “Books aren’t something thieves usually go after. You’re thinking the dungeon is respecting the theme of the building? Like it did with the permit building?”

“Didn’t you say this wasn’t a dungeon created building?” Mez asked.

Tibs nodded.

“That is not to say that the dungeon is incapable of making use of the structure,” Khumdar said. “After all, essence works here.”

“So, these are just going to be scholars?” Jackal asked, sounding disappointed.

“Golem people,” Tibs said. “Made to look like scholars.” He made out forms in between the shelves, approaching.

“There’s still not going to be that dangerous,” Jackal said, as Tibs focused on one of them, trying to make their essence out of the essence fog Ganny had created. If he could learn to pick out the differences, he’d be better had knowing when attacks came.

“I mean, unless they start throwing books,” the fighter continued. “Then, this will be the worse room in the whole dungeon.”

“It could be worse than that,” Don said.

“I don’t think there is anything worse than books. And you said the dungeon’s respecting that this is all about books.”

Tibs had something. He could just make out the concentration of essence as well as the—

“Abyss.” He lost the sense in surprise, but it had been enough.

“There’re sorcerers, aren’t they?” Don asked.

“I... I think so. I could just make out a tint to their essence.”

“Oh,” Jackal said, turning to face the sounds. “How many of them?”

“Too many,” Mez replied. Tibs nodded. Simply going by the sounds, there might be a dozen of them.

“How strong are they?” Don asked.

“People golems don’t work the way we do. The essence in them doesn’t show how strong they are.”

“So they could be Upsilon?” Jackal asked.

“Not on the fourth floor of the dungeon,” Don replied, as one became visible on the second balcony. The woman was old, her white hair falling almost to the bottom of the guardrail as she leaned on it to look at them. Her skin was pale and wrinkled. Her robes the dray of dust. A man stepped into the light next to her, and his long beard hung on the guardrail as he looked down. His robes were the same dusk gray, as were those of the other sorcerers that came into view: four on the top balcony, six on the one below it, and seven by the shelves near them.

One and seven sorcerers.

“I really hope they’re Upsilon,” Mez whispered, raising his bow.

“Keep them from focusing,” Don instructed as he threw a mist of corruption at the three on his side of the table.

Tibs switched to lightning, since that was one that easily jumped between people and sent it unwoven as those on his side. He didn’t try to kill, not with the danger of it jumping to his friends, but even a little lightning hurt a lot.

He switched to fire as soon as he was done and pulled on the essence a sorcerer above them etched, undoing the attack, and adding the essence to his reserve.

“Don’t use the books!” Don yelled, and a Glance showed Jackal throwing the tomes from the table at the sorcerers. “They’re priceless.”

“The dungeon’s going to remake them overnight. Tibs. Can you do what you just did with all their attacks?”

“I can only channel one element at a time, and they aren’t taking turns.” He disrupted the lightning from one, which allowed ice and metal to rain down on them, and only a dome of darkness rendered them less than deadly.

“Might I recommend that we retreat,” Khumdar said. “We are ill-equipped to fight these many sorcerers.”

“I’m with the cleric,” Mez said through clenched teeth. He, Don, and Khumdar were cut and bleeding. Jackal’s armor, like Tibs’s was sliced in many places, but he too seemed uninjured.

“Out!” Jackal yelled, “and I hope to the abyss, they can’t follow us outside.”

Tibs threw a wall of ice to stop attacks as they retreated, then sent a cloud of corruption to slow the pursuit. He passed into the entryway and noticed the columns on each side reaching to the ceiling.

“Jackal, can you break that column?” Tibs switched to earth and headed for the other one. He punched it as hard as he could and made a small indentation. He hit it again, and again. “Jackal!” he called when he didn’t hear stone hitting stone from that side. A look showed him the fighter with both hands on the column, pushing essence into it.

Tibs cursed. Of course, he didn’t have to hit the column. There was more to Earth than making himself harder and stronger.

The snap of breaking stone came from Jackal’s side as Tibs pushed essence into his column, sensing for the places where the stone was already weaker and using the essence as a wedge there. The ground shook and stone rained around him as Jackal’s side of the entryway fell.

Tibs exploded the essence at the weak points, and the column shattered into pieces. Then he ran to avoid getting buried, making it outside just ahead of the cloud of stone dust, and kept running until he was on the other side of the road. When he turned to watch the result, and prepared himself for any of the sorcerers who made it out.

The door and wall around it were caved in all the way to the second story, completely blocking the way. He waited, lightning crackling between his fingers. He hadn’t noticed one of them using Earth, but there were other ways to move the debris aside. He’d shock the first to make it out, hope the lightning jumped back to the others and then... he’d figure it out then.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you’d just taken the books!”

“Of course it would have happened. They didn’t hear us argue. They were probably triggered the moment we entered, and took their time so we’d be deeper and couldn’t escape. My arguing with you kept us close to the door.”

“Like it had anything to do with that. You’re just an ignorant fighter, scared of anything that might show him better ways of thinking!”

“You say that like there’s something wrong with it!”

“Will you two stop?” Mez said, sounding weak enough Tibs had to look over his shoulder.

He cursed and ran to the archer. “Keep watch,” he told Jackal, then crouched. “Sorry, I should have checked on you first.”

“I’m not dying, Tibs.”

Tibs nodded. Mez had a lot of cuts, and some were deep, but none of the essence channels were broken in a way that worried Tibs. He sensed Don and Khumdar and while neither showed it, their injuries matched Mez’s.

A purity weave for the three of them, and Tibs joined Jackal keeping watch. Nothing moved in the library.

“This isn’t my fault,” Jackal said after a long silence.

“You could stop playing at hating books so hard.”

“I’m not playing. Books are bad.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “You don’t like books. That doesn’t make them bad.”

“I remember this friend of me who, not to look ago, would run away at the mere mention of learning his letters. Whatever happened to him?”

“He got over his fear because it was what was best for his team.”

“You—”

“I’m not saying you have to learn your letters, Jackal. But you can’t get in the way of Don getting books.”

“They’re probably not even real books.”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t matter. Don likes books. If he’d gotten just one out, he wouldn’t be angry right now.”

With a huff, Jackal turned and left.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “for being an ignorant fighter scared of books. If you want, I’ll go in there and get you one.”

Don looked around the fighter at Tibs, who shrugged. He hadn’t expected Jackal to do that, just been hoping he wouldn’t cause problem on their next run.

“It’s okay. I can wait until the next run, but I will be filling your pouch.”

Jackal grumbled a reply Tibs didn’t get.

“I think that if they were going to get out, they would have by now,” Jackal said after a few minutes. “You should sit and rest, too. They probably can’t leave the room.”

“But it’s not a dungeon room,” Mez said.

“I doubt that’s something defined by the rooms,” Don said, unwrapping cheese. “It makes more sense for it to be something the dungeon decided on as a way for us to know what to expect.”

“And on the previous floors, we had to either make it through a room to continue, or win it to open whatever the next part was,” Jackal added, slicing a chunk from the loaf of bread and handing that to Don.

Khumdar added sliced meats, and Mez pulled skins filled with ale. Tibs untied the bundle of dried fruits and set it on the floor between them, and they ate in silence.

Once they were done and rested, they headed deeper into the city, feeling like they were ready for whatever Sto threw at them.

Planning-86

Tibs slashed at the guard, and their shield shimmered as the enchantment deflected his blow. Tibs jumped back instead of trying to block the return swing. The guard's sword was also enchanted, and could cut through his shield's essence too easily. He lunged forward, sensing Khumdar behind him and heading away from that fight. His two guards had the same enchantment on their swords, as far as Tibs could tell, but the cleric was better at dealing with them.

He'd ask how afterward.

He cut past the attack and sliced into the armor and flesh. His sword left water essence behind, and Tibs wove it as he dodged the attacks. Ice formed into the wound and spread as it pulled essence out of the surrounding to extend its weave. The person golem didn't seem to be aware of it. Another reminder that no matter how much like people they looked now, they were nothing more than animated flesh.

Tibs scored another cut, on its leg, and another patch of ice spread. This one it noticed as the knee no longer bent, but instead of attempting to deal with it, it limped forward to continue fighting. The ice on its side spread to the elbow, and its sword arm stop responding.

Tibs didn't wait to find out if it would act to that the way a person would. He used the opening to stab it in the chest and slice up, cutting its head in two.

He turned as it crumbled and ran to help Khumdar. The cleric had managed to keep from getting cut down, but hadn't been able to land any blows of his own. Tibs suffused himself with earth and barreled into one of the guards, forcing it away. The sword bit into his side before he could distance himself and he hissed with pain.

The metal of the blade couldn't hurt him, but the enchantment did, acting like an edge of its own. Knowing what worked now, he attacked with quick slices, leaving shallow cuts that iced over and spread. Once the guard was sufficiently impeded, Tibs easily dispatched it.

He turned again and watched as Khumdar landed a series of blows with his staff that ended with the guard staggering, dropping to a knee and to his side as if it was falling asleep. Tibs watched Darkness spread through the guard, the life essence growing faint in its wake until it crumbled to pieces.

"Other than taking a bit too long," Jackal said, leaning against a building, "that was pretty good."

"The dungeon finds way to render my previous attacks less effective."

“I had to come up with a new way too,” Tibs said. “It’s probably not going to work on the next run.”

“This always works fine.” Jackal made a fist.

“We’re not all too thick-headed for our own good,” Don said.

“He’s thick everywhere,” Mez said. “It’s why nothing the dungeon throws at him works.”

“I’m just that awesome.”

“That isn’t the word I’d use,” Don said.

“Which is why I’m using it. There’s nothing the dungeon can do to—”

The growl reverberated around them.

“You do love to force the dungeon to prove you wrong, don’t you?” Don asked.

Jackal looked around fearfully.

Tibs focused. The sound bounced off the building, so he had to spread his sense until he made details within the essence fog. “It’s over there,” he pointed where he barely made out there stronger concentration of life essence, and stepped in its direction.

“Tibs, if that’s where it is, how about we head in the opposite direction?” Jackal asked.

He stopped two and zero paces from the alley the dog approached from. It was large.

“Abyss, Tibs, back off.” Jackal stepped forward.

The dog’s black fur shimmered copper as it stepped into the light. It was half Tibs’s height at its shoulders and easily massed as much as he did. It locked eyes with Tibs, and the growling intensified as it stepped forward.

“You hungry?” Tibs asked, pulling jerky from his pouch.

The growl broke with a whine as it tilted its head.

“Tibs...”

He went down to a knee and offered the piece of jerky to the dog. “I’m guess he doesn’t feed you all that much either. Here, take it.”

It sniffed the air, then took a hesitating step forward.

“Is that thing listening to him?” Mez asked in dismay.

“It’s okay,” Tibs said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I don’t think you can even if—” Jackal cursed as the dog raised its head and growled. “Okay, okay, I’m butting out!”

“So, all dogs hate Jackal and love Tibs?” Don mused.

It took another tentative step.

“Tibs, this is not a good idea,” Jackal whispered.

On the next step, its nose touched the jerky and it sneeze. It bit into it and pulled. Tibs kept hold of the piece. It looked at him, whining.

“Stay,” Tibs said, before letting go. The dog kept watching him, then bit and broke the jerky into pieces. Tibs gently touched the side of its head as it chewed. “You’re a good dog too, aren’t you?”

“What is he doing?” A deep voice demanded, sounding as if it came from all around them.

The dog whined as Tibs tightened his fingers in surprise.

“I think that’s petting,” Sto answered uncertainly.

“I know what it’s called,” the voice replied. “How is it that it’s not tearing him apart? Is this another of the ways you’re being soft on these people?”

“I’m not being soft in anyone. I don’t know why he’s able to do that. It’s not like I can ask him how he did it.”

“Sto,” Ganny said, “Where did you take the template for the dogs? It’s not something that died within your range.”

“That human who patrols the grounds has a bunch of them. So I built one using how they were. When I finally got it so it kept breathing, I played around with the exterior until I had a bunch of different looks.”

The dig whined again, and Tibs loosened his grip. He lowered its head to eat the pieces on the ground.

Someone else in the dungeon with Sto and Ganny explained why they didn’t want him to talk to them. Who was it? By the tone, they sounded angry with Sto. Because he was soft on them? If he wasn’t worried about the consequences, Tibs would tell them what he thought of Sto being soft.

He took another piece of jerky and offered it to the dog. “Do you guys think there’s going to be something that will help deal with the sickness in the town?” He rubbed the dog’s head, and it looked up at him while it ate.

“Does it even know what’s going on?” Jackal asked, and Tibs winced.

“What’s wrong with the town?” Sto asked.

“Why does that concern you?” the voice replied suspiciously.

“The Runners come from the town. If they’re going to be sick, I need to take that into account for—”

“No, you don’t.”

Tibs wished he could tell one of the discussion to wait so he could follow both, but he’d have to ask Don about theirs after.

“I’m not here to just kill them,” Sto snapped. “Ganny made that clear after I started doing that. You go to the town. Are they weak enough they’re just going to die?”

“You aren’t allowed to make a floor harder than what the appropriate strength Runner can handle. If they decide to brave you while not at their best, that’s not your responsibility. Your floors are perfectly adequate.”

They went to the town? How? Were they human? Wasn’t Tibs the only human who could hear a dungeon? Well, that Sto and Ganny knew of, as well as Kraren[need to confirm the name] and Val.

“Are you responsible?” Ganny asked cautiously.

Was she afraid of the reaction, or trying to get Tibs information and worried they’d realize it?

“Unlike you, I don’t have the luxury of feeding off their essence in here.”

“You’re making my town sick?” Sto yelled.

“Your town?” the threat in the voice was loud enough Tibs was afraid for Sto.

“The town,” Sto corrected. “You can’t expect me to change how I feel about it moments after you tell me it’s wrong. It’s going to be awhile before it happens.”

“It’s been weeks,” the voice said.

“Time is something Sto’s having a trouble understanding,” Ganny said. “It’s very much a them thing, and it’s never been overly important to him.”

“You have better learn to work it out, Stone Mountain Crevice. My patience is finite, and your continued existence depends on it.”

The words derailed Tibs’s attempt to decipher what Ganny had meant; at the same time as it answered the question of who the voice was.

Them. The them Ganny kept telling Sto might show up to punish him each time he broke the rules. The them Sto scoffed at, and that Ganny hadn’t sounded sure existed recently.

The them was here. They were judging Sto, and in the process, making Tibs’s town sick. He forced himself to continue looking at the dog to keep from getting up and screaming at them.

Was that what he and Khumdar had been sensing about town?

The dog whined.

“Sorry, boy. That’s all I brought.”

It canted its head as Tibs stood. “I guess this is where we get back to you being a dungeon creature, I guess.” He stepped back slowly, and it kept watching him. It didn’t look like it planned on attacking him. Tibs had seen Serba set her dogs on enough criminals in town to know what that looked like. But he also didn’t want to take for granted this one would behave completely like all her dogs.

“What is it waiting for?” they demanded.

“I don’t know,” Sto answered, sounding perplexed.

“Tell it to attack him.”

“That’s not how it works,” Sto snapped.

“Things work the way you want them to work. They work the way I tell you to make them work.”

“And you’re the one who ordered me to not have any creatures I could embody after you caught me in the third floor boss. Everyone of my creatures is now independent of me and Ganny. You forced that. If you hadn’t, I’d have a way to push it to attack, but that would break your precious rules, since they are in its vicinity, and I’m not allowed to act on anything around them. Or are the rules only there when you like them to be there.”

Tibs smiled. “So?” he asked the dog. “What’s it going to be? I promise to bring more jerky on my next run.”

“Is he... offering a bribe?” they demanded, although now they seemed confused too.

“Can it remember him?” Ganny asked.

“Does it understand him?” they demanded, this time angrily.

“You saw what happened just like I did,” Sto replied. “You tell me. I didn’t give it the ability to understand being spoken to, but clearly there’s something I don’t understand about the animal I based it on. And Ganny, I also don’t know that. I guess that if it survives until he comes back, there’s no reason it wouldn’t remember, but these dogs are clearly more than I thought.”

The dog canted its head, then looked next to Tibs and growled.

“Hey, I didn’t move,” Jackal protested.

It snorted, turned, and ran off.

“Okay, what the fuck was that?” the fighter asked.

“Maybe you’ll get your answers,” Sto said.

Tibs shrugged. Like he was going to say anything the them could use. “It’s a dog. I figured I didn’t have anything to lose trying to be nice to it.”

“You could have lost a hand, at the very least,” Don said. “That was... risky.”

“I was ready to suffuse myself with Earth. Its teeth wouldn’t go through that.”

“I’m not like Jackal,” Mez said, “but I’m thinking that was almost Jackal-stupid level.”

“Way more stupid than that,” the fighter said. “I know better than to go toward one of those things.”

“Are you sure there wasn’t more going on?” Don asked. “It looked like you weren’t even aware of us.”

Tibs smiled. “I guess you could say I was listening to the dog.”

“I knew it!” Jackal exclaimed. “It’s all those essences you have. They let you do essence stuff to them. That’s why they act like they like you. You’re making them.” He turned and headed in the opposite direction of where the dog went.

“I’m not making them do anything. What were you talking about?” he asked Don, following Jackal.

“The sickness,” the sorcerer replied. “Your question about the dungeon having a way to help in one of the loot chest made me theorize on what that could be, based on what we know of its effect.”

“And what would it be?”

“It’s just a theory, I have no way to know if it would work, since all I’ve seen of the sickness are its effect and even the cleric don’t know it’s cause, but it would have to be something that either prevented the drain of life, or somehow replenished it. You might not know it, but one of the servers in town has something that’s been keeping the sickness at bay. An heirloom,” Don added as Tibs’s eyes widened in fear. “I know about it, because I help adjust it so it would do more than simply slow the sickness. His ring lacks a way to efficiently pull in the essence he loses to the sickness. So it would have to be something that came with its own reserve of essence, as well as a way to recharge it faster than a normal reserve.” Don was quiet for a few seconds. “We’d have to be extremely lucky to find such a thing. And as you’re fond of reminding us, Tibs. Luck isn’t a thing.”

Planning-87

The guard fell, then crumbled, and Tibs looked around, panting.

“Is it just me,” Mez said, on guard, “or are there more guards patrolling the streets?”

“Maybe they’ve realized criminals have targeted the city,” Don said, examining a cut on his arm, “and are taking precautions. It’s just an idea,” he added at the look the archer gave him. “The dungeon went for a theme here, so that would explain the extra guards.”

“And we’re the criminals?” Mez asked unhappily.

“We’re breaking into houses, stealing anything of value. What would you call a gang of people doing that in your city?”

“Are they paying him protection money?” Jackal asked.

“That’s not how it works,” Mez protested.

“How else are you going to keep your city from devolving into criminal chaos?”

“Laws,” Mez replied, raising a finger, “Order, enforcement, sentencing for those who are caught.”

“You mean tyranny,” Jackal said.

“No. A fair and equitable system of laws and punishments will ensure people are motivated to stay away from criminal activities.”

Jackal snorted.

“Tibs, what are your thoughts on this?” Don asked.

Tibs shrugged. “My street was the criminal chaos type. I never got out of it to find out what the city was like.”

“Forget other cities,” Mez said in exasperation. “Just look at Kragle Rock, the laws are—”

“We’re slaves to the guild,” Jackal said. “Sent in the dungeon to either die or become stronger for them to use against whatever gets in their way once we reach Epsilon. I think you’re proving my point.”

“But for the rest of the people living there, they don’t—”

“The guards can’t keep the rogues from breaking into their houses.”

“But that’s training,” the archer said. “They don’t take anything.”

“Because I don’t let them,” Tibs said.

“The nobles have their own guards, and even they can’t keep the better rogues out,” Jackal said.

“Fine! You made your point. There’s nothing that can be done. The world’s a breath

away from falling into never ending chaos.”

“That isn’t what Jackal is saying,” Don said.

“It sort of is.”

“The world isn’t about to fall into chaos,” Don insisted. “But that isn’t because criminals are stamped out. They have their own ecosystems, with those strong enough ensuring no one goes so far as to bring down the might of the king on them. It’s disorganized in most city, so not particularly effective, unlike Jackal’s city, where his family has—”

“Had,” Jackal corrected.

“A firm hold over what the criminals will do.”

“Fine,” Mez said with the finality of someone who didn’t want to hear about it anymore.

“Don, where would the coffers be in a city like this?” Jackal asked.

“The banks,” the sorcerer replied.

“No, the city coffers.”

Don shrugs. “The banks would hold some of the city’s money, otherwise it would be in the city hall, I expect.”

“Why?” Tibs asked.

“Well, you and Don have been going on about how the dungeon’s made this floor an actual city. I figure that if the big loot’s going to be anywhere, it’s going to be where the coffers are.”

“That’s... not an unreasonable assumption,” Don said.

“I’m going to ignore the disbelief in your tone and stick with saying thanks.”

“But I don’t know where that would be,” the sorcerer replied.

“Don’t ask me,” Tibs said. “I don’t know what a city hall is, if it’s not just a hall in a city.”

“Wouldn’t it be at the end of the main road?” Mez asked, sounding annoyed.

“While that’s a popular layout for cities, it’s not the only one. And what might have been the main road to the city hall could have evolved into an indirect road as a city grows.”

“You read too much,” Mez grumbled.

“And that is if we ignore that this is a city create by a dungeon. While it might know there is such a thing as a city hall, I doubt it would know what it does and where it should be.”

“So we have to wander around and hope we find it?” Jackal asked dejectedly.

“Hope we recognize it as such,” Don corrected. “It might look like a copy of the permit office, or completely different. It should be a large building, if the dungeon somehow knows that much.”

“The permit office looked enough like one you recognized it,” Tibs said.

“But that’s a building I’d expect Runners to have mentioned while talking to each other, especially the nobles. The people who deal with city halls are not usually the type to then venture into a dungeon.”

“What would you believe such a structure hides?” Khumdar asked.

“Hide? City halls aren’t really about hiding anything. They’re where those wishing to do business in the city go to get rights to the land, the building rights would be handled by a

permit office unless there will be something special about it, then it might be dealt with there.”

“They’ll hide back-room deals,” Jackal said. “That an official was bribed, so a piece of land went to this merchant, instead of a competitor. If they’re shady enough, they could hide that they’ll take criminal’s money. Heard a story about a city that outlawed sorcerers, yet it was the place to go to for anything magical you needed.”

“Sebastian must have liked that city,” Tibs said.

Jackal chuckled. “He loved it. How about we get moving again? We aren’t going to find the city hall standing here.”

“I may... have an idea where it is,” Khumdar said.

“I thought you said there are secrets everywhere here,” Mez said.

“That is correct, but secrets have flavors. While what you described was irritably vague, I have been able to narrow what I searched for, and there is something in that direction that smells of not belonging, of being out of place in a way that remind me of the flavor of those who hide that they are breaking rules.”

“I think he’s smelling you—”

Sto shushed Ganny hard enough, Tibs wondered if the Them was nearby.

“Lead the way, Khumdar,” Jackal said, rubbing his hands eagerly.

* * * * *

The building was nowhere along the main road, but it did look important. It was at the end of a larger road that turned off another larger road, and another, from which Tibs thought he’d made out the main road that led to the floor’s entrance.

The building was the largest Tibs had seen in the city yet, even larger than the library, although not as tall, with only two floors. The stone that made up the wall varied in colors from light to dark gray in what seemed like random arrangements. The windows had lights behind the glass that shone with a steadiness that made Tibs think it was essence. Shadows occasionally crossed windows.

“I told you settling here wasn’t a good idea,” Ganny said.

“You said I shouldn’t pick the obvious. What’s obvious about some large building in a shadowed corner of this city? If not for Khumdar’s and that secret smelling of his, they’d never have come here. The king’s residence is where all the good stuff’s hidden.”

Tibs looked up in surprise and barely stopped himself from asking if he’d said that for his benefit.

“Yes,” Sto said in a whisper. “That’s for you. They’re gone to check on something outside, but don’t talk. I’ve no idea when they’ll be back. We don’t want to be deep in conversation if they manifest back here.”

“You should get your team there,” Ganny whispered, “so you can find what you’ll—”

“They’re back inside,” Sto hissed.

“Tibs?” Jackal motioned to the door. “How about you make sure opening that door doesn’t kill us?”

Tibs studied the building, tried to come up with a way to talk Jackal into going elsewhere, and gave up. The fighter wouldn’t budge on this.

Tibs extended his sense as he stepped to the door and froze.

He swallowed. Maybe he did have a way.

“There’s something wrong.” Whatever that was, one floor below, it certainly wasn’t right. Now that he felt it, Tibs couldn’t understand how he hadn’t before.

“Is the trap on the door too hard for you?” Jackal asked.

“I haven’t checked that, there’s a…” how was he supposed to come up with a word for that? “A hole inside the building.”

“You don’t mean something that we can use to get in, do you?” Don asked.

Tibs snorted nervously. “I don’t think anything good will happen if we get close to that.”

“And should I bother asking how it is he knows about that?” the Them asked.

“You’ve seen he had more than one element,” Sto replied. “It lets him do a lot of things none of the others can.”

“I’m surprised you never heard of someone like him,” Ganny said. “Those like you do travel to all the dungeons. He can’t be the only one.”

“Is it too dangerous to go in?” Jackal asked, and Tibs forced himself to ignore the dungeon’s discussion.

“I…” any thought of lying vanished at the disappointment on the fighter’s face. He couldn’t take this away without knowing what was in the king’s residence. He didn’t even know where it was since the them had returned before Ganny told him. “We have to stay away from the floor below us. That’s where the… hole is.” He looked at Khumdar, who shrugged. So, like Sto said, this was something having multiple elements let him sense.

“Then we stay away from that floor,” Jackal said.

“Wouldn’t that be the best place for them to keep their money?” Mez asked.

“Where is that secret?” Jackal asked Khumdar.

“It is… here. But I am unable to discern more. As we approached, the sense of it became diffused, instead of gaining definition.”

“It’s being hidden better?” Tibs asked. Maybe the Them was doing it?

“I do not know. As with you, I am discovering what I am capable in situations such as this, therefore I have no knowledge of if what I sense is how it should be, or something is countering me.”

“I’d help if I could,” Don said, and the cleric inclined his head.

“I can state that whatever it is I sense is still there, but that is the extent of what I know.”

“Maybe there’s a better place for loot elsewhere?” Tibs said, and it was Khumdar who replied.

“Are you not curious as to what is hidden here?”

“Yes, but if the loot’s on the same floor as that… thing, we’re not going to get anything for a lot of work dealing with whatever the traps will be. And will the loot be all that good in a building so far from anything…” he couldn’t think of a word.

“Tibs, the dungeon’s always putting loot in out of the way places,” Jackal said. “You taught me that with the Ratling’s encampment, and the hidden caches on the first and second floor. This has to have good loot because it’s hidden away like this.”

“It could be on the same from as that… thing.”

“But it might not,” Jackal said eagerly. “It’s a big building. There’s got to be something of worth in there.”

“I thought he was the stupid one,” the Them said.

“He’s thinking about loot,” Ganny replied. “He’s kind of stubborn about that.”

“Then I hope you are as well hidden as you think, Stone Mountain Crevice. All records of their kinds finding a dungeon core ends the same way. They destroy it.”

Planning-88

The doors had locks, but they weren't engaged. As with the permit building, this was a place people were allowed to go in during the day.

Again, that didn't make Tibs feel better. Sto was going to use that to trick them at some point.

Jackal pushed the doors, and they opened to a large room. The lobby, Don said.

"Where's everyone?" Mez asked.

Unlike the permit building, this room didn't have a counter with clerks behind it, or lines of people waiting their turns to do whatever it was real people would do once they reached it.

"I don't know," Don replied.

"At least there's no danger of you getting in line with the others," Jackal said.

"Which means there's a danger of something else," the sorcerer replied.

The room's floor was covered with ash gray tiles the size of his palm. Four columns supported a balcony that went around the three inside walls. Like the tiles, they had six sides. Around each side of the column were seats. Longer benches lined the walls, between doors, and had pots with plants in them. The only thing here that Tibs knew was created by Sto were the plants in the pots. A large stairway opposite them went up to the balcony.

He put his hand on the floor and noticed the dust; everything was covered by it, even the plants.

The dust was 'real', as far as Tibs could tell, which meant Sto could create that and not leave traces of essence through it the way the walls and dungeon rooms had them. It meant this might not be the only thing he could create and not leave a mark on it.

Could Sto leave a weave so imperceptible in the dust Tibs wouldn't be able to sense it? He rubbed the dust off his glove. The presence of the Them was throwing off how he thought about the run. He had a sense of how Sto did things, but now that he knew the them was supervising him, it explained why things felt harsher on this floor.

He'd have to ask the other Runners what the other floors were like.

He sent water over the floor, sensed for cracks and gaps. Ganny had become better at masking triggers from his senses, and this kind of check, but this still had one advantage she hadn't overcome.

He iced the water.

"The floor is safe. I don't sense and essence triggers, but keep away from the plants,

those are dungeon made.”

“Alive?” Don asked.

Tibs had to focus on one to sense anything beyond the weave that made it. “No more than real plants.” Even plants had his essence running through them, although it was so faint he had to pay attention to notice that among the other essence in the air.

“Why does this place feel like no one comes here?” Jackal asked.

“There are people here,” Tibs said. “Upstairs, I saw their shadows against the windows.”

Jackal headed for the stairs. “Then that’s where we’re starting with. People golems means they’re protecting loot.”

“Or they’re simply part of how the dungeon things this building works,” Don said, “and the fact we didn’t see any at the windows on this floor doesn’t mean there won’t be any.”

“Can you sense any of them, Tibs?” Jackal asked.

Tibs focused. He knew there were some above him, so he searched for his essence there. Once he found it through the haze of all the other essences, he studied its shape in the golem, how it interacted with the other essences in it.

Once he had that to search for, finding more upstairs was simpler. He lowered his focus to this floor, found more, then he notices something below him and—

“Tibs,” Jackal was next to him, sounding worried. “Tibs, talk to me.”

“I’m okay.” How had he ended up on his knees, and why did his head hurt?

“Are you sure?” Don asked. “He’s been calling your name for a few seconds.”

“It’s the thing under us. When I sensed for the people golem, I shifted my focus in its direction and...”

“You let out a pained scream,” Jackal said. “And you didn’t respond when I called.”

He got to his feet. “I think it’s best if I don’t spread my sense in this building. I can forget it’s there the rest of the time, but its... wrongness pulls at my senses.”

“At least that mistake of yours is good for something,” The Them said.

“If you’d tell me how to undo it, I would remove it,” Sto replied.

“And I have told you, I don’t know what it is. Everything here is older than what I know. How you don’t know how you made it happen, I don’t understand.”

“Sto doesn’t always pay attention to what he does when he’s testing essence mixes.”

“You weren’t paying anymore attention,” Stop protested.

“That’s not my job. You were the one determined to use void as part of a trap. I warned you not to try it here, so close to us. Inside a room we don’t understand. You didn’t listen. I’m with them. That’s on you.”

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, the worry back.

“Sorry.” He rubbed his temple. As much as he liked knowing what was happening, he had to focus on his team. “And Don’s right, there are people golems on the floor.”

Jackal looked around. “Six doors. It’s going to take a while to search the building. The boss creature will be above us.”

“We can’t be certain of that,” Don said.

“Tibs, can you—”

“No. I can’t tell boss creatures apart from the normal ones anymore. The dungeon’s

figured out how to mask them from me on the third floor.”

“Still, they have been—”

“The dungeon’s getting craftier by the run, Jackal. How many buildings have we been through without a boss?”

“The permit building had one.”

“The library probably does too,” Mez said.

“We can’t know that. Everything the dungeon does is to test us. If I were the dungeon, after all the times the boss was at the furthest point, I’d put it right by the entrance and laugh while the Runners waste time searching everywhere else.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Ganny said.

“I wouldn’t laugh,” Sto replied.

Please stop commenting, Tibs thought in their direction.

“Searching the whole building is going to take most of the day,” Jackal said.

“We have time. This isn’t the last time we come to this floor. We can continue searching it next time. And we don’t have to wait for a week if we don’t want to. There’s only four teams who can come to this floor.”

“Who’s the fourth?” Mez asked. “I only learned about Miranda’s team clearing the third floor.”

“I don’t know. They aren’t from Kragle Rock.”

“Mayhap we should focus on making a decision, instead of discussing who else will run this floor. It seems to me that if we have no way of knowing which method will produce the best result, it is irrelevant which one we pick.”

“That’s the closest door,” Don said, pointing. “Which means the closest to potential loot.”

“You’re just playing on my love of loot, Don.”

“Of course.” He paused. “Is it working?”

Jackal sighed and headed for the door.

“That’s a yes,” Tibs said, following the fighter.

Planning-89

The hall was had three doors on each side, facing each other, with another at the end, where it turned to the left. It was silent, and Tibs kept his sense as close to him as he could to avoid accidentally sensing the thing under them.

The first door to the right had a plaque next to it; polished metal with something written in Arcanus etched in it. Don shook his head when Tibs looked at him. The lock was simple and without essence traps. He didn't think it was to keep anyone out, and more to notify those who wanted to go it that now was not the time. A few seconds and it was open.

The room was small, a desk of pale polished wood, one chair behind, two before, and a cabinet against the left wall. The window looked out on the road leading to the building. Unlike the lobby, the floor was wooden slates in varying shades and the polish was gone from the door to the two chairs, as well as around the desk.

"So that's the path to take or avoid?" Jackal asked, looking in over Tibs's shoulder.

"It's to show where people have walked repeatedly," Don said over Tibs's other shoulder.

"Like the scooped floor going to the kitchen at the inn," Tibs added, studying the floor. He tentatively extended his sense and immediately pulled it back in as his attention shifted to the thing on the floor below as soon as he felt the edge of it. It was like even a hint of it called to his sense. "Stay outside. It's too small for all of us." He spread water and iced it. "And I can only sense triggers from up close with what's under us."

He moved slowly, but the smallness of the room let him make quick work of not finding triggers on his way to the desk. A stack of bound papers were to one side, with something that reminded him of a writing quill, but thicker, with the feather removed. There was no ink pot on the desk. The three drawers were locked, but like the door, they were easy to open. The top one had more bound papers along with those quills. The second was empty and the third nearly sliced his hand when he reached for the pouch in the middle of it.

Sto chuckled.

He deserved that.

The pouch contained seven silvers and a small brass key. Unlike all other coins they'd found until now, these had no markings on them. He lobbed the pouch at Don, but Jackal caught it.

"Do you think that they aren't marked means something?" he asked, stepping to the cabinet. He tried the key on it and was rewarded with a click and door opening to reveal three elegantly worked bottles. One contained a green liquid, one yellow, and the other blue.

[need to check that the colors for healing, stamina and essence, re consistent]

“It could be they are part of the theme,” Don offered as Tibs checked for traps. He wasn’t getting caught a second time.

“Wouldn’t every other coin we found on this floor be like those, then?” Mez asked.

Tibs found the trap, but it was deactivated.

“They hold a secret,” Khumdar said.

“Do you have a sense of what it is?” Don asked.

Tibs traced the triggering mechanism back to the lock. Using the key had deactivated it. Picking it might have missed the trigger, since its tumbler was opposite the others, and explained what he’d thought was a flaw in the key.

“It does not extend beyond this building, more than that I cannot tell.”

“Are you sensing as far as you can?” Tibs asked. With the trigger active, opening the door would have shattered the bottles.

“Of course.”

“You can’t sense what’s under us?” He took the bottles.

“I cannot.”

Did it mean that thing was targeted to him, in spite of being an accident, or was his that Tibs could sense so many elements that made him more sensitive to its presence?

“Who needs which?” He handed the blue one to Don without waiting. As a sorcerer, he went through his reserves faster than any of them. Khumdar took the healing, and Mez the stamina.

The room opposite was a mirror, minus the pouch and the cabinet. Instead, a small safe was in the corner, with its door open. The papers in it all had the same Arcanus letters on them. The way they were placed, with the decorations on the pages, reminded Tibs of the Promises he’d stolen from the Brokerage.

It stored them in his pouch. They might be worth something.

“If all the rooms are like this,” Jackal said as Tibs exited, “this is going to take too long.”

“You’re just annoyed there’s no one to fight,” Mez said.

“Oh, are they in for a surprise,” Ganny said.

“Well, yeah.”

“If each room requires us to fight,” Don said, “it will take even longer to find the boss room.”

“Which is on the floor above us.”

“We can’t know that for sure,” The sorcerer replied.

Tibs knew, but he didn’t have a way to tell the others that with the Them possibly listening. Just like all he could do at what Ganny let slip was be on his guard as he approached the next door. Jackal went on alert too, but the others weren’t paying attention to him that way.

As he reached for the door, a bong sounding through the halls, and before he could question what it was, the door opened and he stepped out of the way of the two golem people stepping out, and nearly bumped into the one exiting the facing room. He suffused himself with water so he wouldn’t collide with the fours now walking in their directions from the other two doors.

“Do not let them touch—” Khumdar started, just as Jackal bumped into one of them. The change was immediate. They were random clerks now; they were enraged fighters, pulling swords of various lengths and using wildness instead of skills in their attacks.

The hall forced Tibs and the others apart so they wouldn't hit each other.

“Khumdar,” Jackal called, “keep an eye on Don. This close works against him.”

Tibs blocked attack after attack, backing to gain maneuvering space, but they kept pressing. He felt the pressure of a blade at his back as it cut through his armor and cursed.

“Sorry,” Mez said, the words punctuated by his bow hitting someone. “Meant to keep that one focused on me.”

He suffused himself with earth and shouldered those before him aside, then turned. Instead of turning to attack, the two golem people stepped toward Mez, already dealing with wild swings.

Tibs sank his sword in a golem's back, leaving them with an etching to spread the ice. The other sword he made went into the second people golem's side and he shoved him back. Then he was blocking swing after swing again.

He slapped the attack aside with his shield, then etched air in his free hand, adding Ank in key places. When he pressed his hand against the golem's chest, the etching detonated, sending Tibs and it away from each other.

His head rang from the impact with the wall; the golem shattered. He had to account for the explosion affecting him.

He shook his head to clear it. And then the fighting was over. The only golem still standing was covered with a sheen of ice and had a sword in its back.

“Anyone needs healing?” Tibs called.

“Once the big wounds are dealt with,” Mez said, “I have a few cuts.”

“Same here,” Don said, fingering the cut in his robe.

“I am well,” Khumdar said.

“Good here. What do we do with that one? How come it's not dead?”

“The etching in the sword didn't spread ice destructively,” Tibs replies as he stepped to Mez. This close, he could sense the shallow injuries as well as see them.

“So I just punch it?”

“Don't you alway?” Mez asked as Tibs applied a weave of purity to the individual cuts.

“A fight isn't the place to test weaves,” Don said, stepping next to Tibs.

“I know.”

“And yet, you keep doing it.”

“It's when I think of it.” He applied weaves to Don.

“Then you keep them in mind for when you train after the run.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “What training? I have too much to do with everything else.”

“Your Oneness exercises?”

Tibs shrugged.

“These coins are stamped,” Jackal said.

“That reinforced that the ones Tibs found are part of something else in this building.”

Don looked at Tibs again. "You can't simply shrug it away. Getting control of your emotions is how you keep from losing control of yourself when you get a new element."

"You think they're to unlock the boss room?" Jackal asked.

"Possibly," Don said, still watching Tibs.

"Or to make the boss easier," Tibs added, thinking of the cabinet key.

"We won't know until we find where we have to use them."

"And what about this attack?" Mez asked. "Did we trigger something? Are there more like this?"

"All the doors in the next hall are also open," Khumdar said, rejoining them. "The first two rooms are emptied. They did not join the attack, which leads me to suspect we were not the trigger for them exiting. As I attempted to warn you, I believe making contact with one is what led to the attack."

"They made it pretty hard to avoid," Jackal said.

"That might be part of the method," Don said, "even if everyone leaving their room was in response to that gong."

"The arenas use one of those to make the start and end of a fight," Jackal said.

"It's kind of early for the end of the day," Mez pointed out.

"Only if the dungeon has its day the same as we do."

"The motion of the light along the walls a ceiling indicates it has some notion of our day," Don said.

"It's when we come in and leave," Tibs said.

"Except that we do that because it closes its door, and the guild warned us against being inside when that happens."

"Was it like that on the first days?" Tibs asked. "I don't remember if the warning came on the first day, or later." He looked at Don.

"I was not paying attention to that, and I don't remember anyone around me mentioning it. I remember someone talking about meeting another team, and the guards not being happy with them when they worked together, but it was a few weeks before I went on a run later in the day and the guard warned us to not waste time because of the closing door."

"If that's all he remembers," Mez said, "don't expect me to remember anything about that time. I was too busy trying to not let all this cause me to do something childish."

"Regardless of when it started or if that's why. The dungeon has acquired a sense of when we start and end."

"But does it know that merchants in the town also work with the sun?" Jackal asked.

"I do," Sto replied.

"Why do you respond?" the Them asked, annoyed.

"What else am I going to do with you around? Normally I'd go work on something else, but you demand I stay by you, and you barely leave long enough for me to do anything."

"That is because those experiments you are conducting are dangerous, as that thing shows, and the moment I'm outside, you go right back to trying something else that might result in half of you no longer being."

"It's one room," Sto replied, "and that was one time."

"How you became so wild in what you do with the essence you have, I do not understand." They were getting angry now.

Ganny chuckled and whispered. "Oh, I have a good idea where he got that from."

"And you," the Them snapped, "you are supposed to ensure things are done the way they have been established. How could you lose control like this?"

"Hey, don't talk to Ganny like that. You have no idea how hard I made things."

Tibs rubbed his temple when Don look at him, making a small motion up and hoping he'd understand.

"Oh, I can see the mess you have made of the rules. You are this close to me determining you're wild and ending you."

"And we're grateful for the opportunity to show that we can work within the rules," Ganny said in a placating tone. "But didn't you say you wanted to observe the run? Arguing like this is making you miss that the fighter and cleric went through the other two rooms."

Tibs watched Jackal exit, rubbing his wrist, while Khumdar handed Don an essence replenishing potion.

"What happened?" Tibs motioned to Jackal's wrist.

"When I reached in to the drawer to get the pouch there, a blade tried to cut my hand off. It broke, but it still stings. Three of those faceless coins."

"One it the desk I examined."

"Did it have a blade?" Jackal asked.

"Indeed, but it was secreted away, so plain for me to sense."

"I'll handle the other room," Tibs said. "Just to make sure you don't get hurt."

Planning-90

After the fifth room, which only got Tibs four more unstamped silver coins, as well as a ring with essence woven through it, from a locked box on a shelf of the second room, the gong sounded again.

“Don’t let them touch you,” Jackal called, as Tibs hurried out of the room to the sound of approaching steps. He suffused himself with water, while Khumdar seemed to darken. The two of them had the easiest time; the golem people who came too close to Tibs just slide off before touching him, while they seemed to pass through the edges of Khumdar. The others danced around the golems without touching any, until they were all in the rooms, with the doors closed.

Khumdar stumbled against the wall, and Tibs was there to support him. His essence was thinner than it should be. As if what he’d done had taken some of his life essence, too.

“I will be fine,” the cleric said. “I did not expect this to be quite this exhausting.”

“What did you do?”

“Pushed myself further than I should have.”

“I saw an arm pass through you.”

“Only the edge. I could not alter more than that, and even that has left me in the state you see me in.”

“But what did you do?”

Khumdar smiled and patted Tibs on the shoulder. “Considering your habit of trying everything you think you can manage with little care to the consequences to yourself, I believe it is best if I do not explain.”

“I saw you do it.”

“But you do not know what the it is.”

“I’ll figure it out. It’s probably safer for me if you tell me how.”

The cleric laughed. “No, it is not.”

Tibs gently pushed his essence into Khumdar to replenish what he’d lost.

“Thank you, but do not believe this will make me more inclined to tell you.”

“I just don’t want you to die. How’s your reserve?”

“Higher than I expected.”

Tibs nodded. “What you did used up your life essence. That’s why you felt bad.”

“I see. And as I have no way to judge how much of it I have, I could kill myself doing this for too long.”

Tibs nodded.

“Then I thank you for the warning.”

“If I know how to do it, I could work out how much it takes. I can sense my reserve, and I have a lot of essence.”

“While you are certainly right, I will not risk your life on you miscalculating what the experiment would cost you. Too many depend on you.”

“You two okay?” Jackal asked.

“We are,” the cleric replied, and moved away from the wall.

“How do we handle the other room?” the fighter asked. “With the golem people in there, will they attack as soon as you open the door, or is it still only if you touch them?”

“Only one way to know, right?” Mez indicated the next door, now closed.

“Did anyone time how long it took for the second gong?” Don asked.

“I thought you would,” Jackal said.

“I can’t keep time in my head.”

“Less than an hour,” Tibs said, going over how quickly he searched the five rooms.

“Is that important?” Mez asked.

“It could be a clue on how to be ready for the next time.”

“Maybe we can ask the dungeon to add those shields, like on the third floor, to make our life easier.” Jackal looked up. “You hear that, Dungeon? Stop making our lives so abyss hard.”

“He doesn’t know I can hear them,” Sto said, sounding defensive. “Other Runners do the same.”

“I am well aware of humans’ need to believe they can exert their will on thing they have no control over. You are not the first I have had to bring back in line.”

“If there are so many of us,” Sto grumbles, “maybe it’s because the rules are stupid.”

“Rules are there to protect you from yourself.”

“Sure.”

Tibs studied the door’s lock, waiting for more. When neither spoke, he tested the knob. It turned.

“So the door is only locked if they aren’t in the office?” Don mused.

“They were all opened just now,” Jackal said, and Don looked up and down the corridor.

“Right. Then, if that office isn’t going to have someone working in it for the day?”

“The locks aren’t there to stop anyone from getting it,” Tibs said. “Even you, with a pick and jiggling it in, could unlock them.”

“Is that something they do in a city hall?” Mez asked.

“Maybe?” the sorcerer replied. “A merchant will lock up when he’s not there.”

“But they have valuables to protect,” Jackal said, and added dismissively. “All they have here are papers.”

“And silver coins.”

“Those are part of the dungeon,” Don said, “of whatever puzzle we need to best. Rather than thinking of it as representing something real, we should remember to think of everything that happens as part of the test this building, this room, is about.”

“Do I open the door?” Tibs asked.

“We aren’t getting the loot otherwise,” Jackal said, and Mez readied his bow.

Tibs pushed the door open and remained crouched.

Inside, three people golem sat at the desk, unmoving.

“Why aren’t they doing anything?” Mez whispered.

“They’re just props,” Don replied at a normal volume. “They won’t do anything until they’re triggered. Usually it’s by entering a room.”

Tibs checked with Mez, then stepped in and waited.

“They still aren’t doing anything. Should I shoot them now?”

“Can that trigger all of them?” Jackal asked.

“Tibs, what would a thief do in a situation like this?” the sorcerer asked.

“Get out,” he replied. “The one behind the desk is basically looking at me. A real person would react to that.”

“Can you get the pouch without touching them?”

“So long as they don’t move.”

“And the cache?” Jackal asked.

No cabinet nor shelves. “The safe is behind the desk, against the wall, so yes, that one will be easy.”

“Okay, see about getting them,” the fighter said. “Mez, Don, be ready the instant they move.”

Tibs stayed against the wall, and he moved to the back of the room. He unlocked the safe first. More papers, one of the fat quills, a stack of copper coins. He almost left those there. Then was amused at his dismissing of any coins.

He turned to the desk and tried the first drawer. It could be any of the three that were locked. When he checked the golem person to make sure they didn’t react as he pulled, he noticed the pouch attached to their belt. It was identical to the ones that had been in the drawers.

He tried to remember if the people golem had them as they left and returned, as he opened the second drawer, but that wasn’t what he’d been paying attention to.

The third drawer opened and was empty.

“There’s a complication,” he said, watching for a reaction. “The pouch is on his belt.”

“Can you get it without touching it?” Jackal asked.

“It’s on its belt,” Tibs replied.

“Does it look to have coins in them?” Don asked. “Some have been empty,” he added, probably at Jackal’s incredulous expression.

Tibs studied it. He hadn’t paid that much attention to them in the drawers, but he’d felt the leather. It was supple. This one hung low and had shapes at the bottom that could be a few coins pressing against it.

“Looks like it does.”

“I can put an arrow into it,” Mez said.

“They crumble into rubble when they die,” Jackal replied, “and leave normal coins behind. If we need the blank one to clear the building, Tibs is going to have to do it.”

“On it,” he replied, and studied how the pouch was attached to the belt. It went under

it, and the strings looped around and tied back to the neck. Pulling on it would alert the golem. Unlike pouched people used in town, this one had no seams. It had been created as one piece, instead of sewed together from two or more. Could he slice a hole and catch the coins without the golem noticing?

He made a knife, entirely metal this time, with the edge as thin as he could and held the point close to the leather as what Jackal said came back to him.

“Mez, Don, be ready to shoot them.” He grabbed the pouch and cut it off the belt as the golem stood, pulling a sword from a too small scabbard on his other side. Tibs threw himself back as the top half exploded in fire.

Chairs screeched back, then the pungent smell of corruption filled the room.

“Tibs?” Jackal called, and he raised his hand to show the pouch. “What happened?”

“Like you said, when they die, the pouch was going to crumble with them, but only if it was on them. I cut it off before Mez destroyed it.”

“I’m pretty sure the point of the room is to test your skill at getting them without being noticed,” Don said.

“Rogue.” Tibs stood. “Cheat.” He emptied the pouch in his hand, and three coins fell out.

“It simplifies things,” Mez said. “He goes into the other room, gets the pouch and we kill them before they can do anything.”

“You kill them,” Jackal said, disappointed.

“You’ll get your fight,” the archer comforted him.

“Some might not react this way,” Don said.

“On the next run,” Tibs replied.

“How does he know that?” the Them demanded, as Don looked at him.

“The dungeon makes changes after we figure out a way around his tests,” Tibs explained.

“Quigly’s team might have gone through this building before us.”

“His Rogue’s Arbiele. I’ve watched her work. She’s good, but he doesn’t look for ways around the problem. If she was here. She saw the pouches and only thought of ways to getting the coins out without being noticed. She probably figured it out, too.” He smiled. “I’m not that patient.”

“Don’t take for granted,” Don warned him as he headed for the next room.

“I won’t.” He didn’t have to. The Them had confirmed he was right.

The next two rooms got them three coins this way. At the fourth, he looked at the clearly empty pouch, and moved to the other side of the person golem.

The sheath was no larger than one for a small knife. Even the handle looked the right size for one. If he was wrong, in spite of the essence he felt woven through it, Jackal was going to laugh at him. It was secured to the belt by loops at the back or, this being a dungeon made golem, it might be part of the belt, in which case Darran might not want it.

Still, he had to start by getting it.

“You ready?” he called.

“Been for a time,” Mez replied.

Tibs quickly slipped the knife under the belt, grabbing it with his other hand as the golem stood and pulled him up, then staggered. The wall behind them exploded fire licked at

Tibs's side.

The golem back handed him, and he flew against the wall, his head ringing from the impact. The golem exploded back as it stepped in his direction and crumbled.

"Tibs, what happened?" Jackal called.

He raised his hand to show the scabbard and belt, and noticed the pouch still attached to it. He grinned. This might just end up being the best way to do this.

"This looks more complicated for nothing," Jackal said as Tibs joined the others. He pulled the sheath off the belt, grabbed the pommel and pulled.

The pommel shifted and Tibs almost dropped it as it grew until he held a sword.

They stared at it.

"Extra loot," Tibs said with a grin.

"That is not something they are supposed to get," the Them said angrily.

"Rogue's cheat," Ganny said.

"And Ti—this one's cleverer than most," Sto added.

"We'll think of something and add that to the changes for tonight," Ganny added.

"It could be as simple as making sure the pouch isn't attached to the belt," Sto said. "Force them to choose between getting the sword and risk not having enough of the coins for unlock the boss room, or sacrifice some loot for the larger prize."

Tibs silently thanked Sto for the information.

"They all wear something like that," Mez said.

Tibs nodded. "If we talk one per room, that's a lot of them."

"And the next time, I'll know what you're planning, so I'll adjust my shot accordingly."

Jackal grinned. "Okay, let's get ourselves rich."

* * * * *

Tibs looked into the darkened space behind the door. Instead of an office, this door has stairs going down. There were halfway along the corridor, behind the stairwell in the lobby, Tibs figured. They'd gotten seven swords on the way, and avoided another exodus after the gong. This was the one door that hadn't opened.

Now he knew why.

"Do we wait until they come back?" Jackal asked. "If Tibs gets the pouches now, we won't get the—Tibs," Jackal called as he started down the stairs.

"I want to check something," he replied.

At the bottom, he had to pull in his senses more as the edges touched the thing further along the corridor.

"Why did you have a door there?" the Them demanded.

"I didn't put it there, it was already there," Sto replied tersely. "I wish I'd figured a way to alter these buildings now. I wish he wasn't down here."

"Why?" the Them asks suspiciously.

"Because this isn't part of the tests," Sto snapped. "If that thing kills them, what is it worth? It's not like I bested them."

"It would remove someone who is clearly too strong for you."

"It's not—" Sto shut up.

Tibs carefully summoned a ball of light. The walls were rough stone, unfinished. Whatever the plan had been for this floor, there had been a change of mind. He stepped forward and in the distant light, a door frame became visible on the right wall. As it became more defined, he made out intricate designs on it. Some were Arcanus, other might be decorations. He had to fight the urge to sense it, to confirm there was a weave in it. Even pulled in as tight as he could, Tibs now sense the wrongness on the other side of the door.

“We should leave,” Don said, and Tibs startled. Turning to glare at the sorcerer and finding his entire team a few steps behind him. They looked worried.

“Can you sense it?”

Jackal shuddered.

“I don’t know that I sense anything,” Don answered, “but there is something quite wrong here.”

“So much for that room just being gone,” Ganny said.

“I said I was sorry,” Sto replied.

“Sorry doesn’t undo what you did. What happens if they open the door?”

“They die,” the Them said with satisfaction.

“Sto is just down the corridor, and can’t move from there until the fifth floor is ready. What happens then, if they open the door?”

“Then, you had best hope they don’t,” the Them replied.

Tibs looked at the door, then backed away. His curiosity wasn’t worth putting any of his friends in danger.

Planning-91

Tibs grunted as the end of the staff slammed in his shoulder and sent him off balance. He batted the second strike aside with his shield as he regained his footing, and cursed himself, yet again, for his inattention. He parried, then etched a shard of ice and sent that at the golem, following it with a lunge and planted his sword in its chest, then sliced it apart.

This fight was his fault. He'd been distracted when the gong sounded, and hadn't thought to suffuse himself, so one of the people golem bumped into him. As much as he tried to put that thing out of his mind, it kept seeping back in. How could Sto have done something like that? And by accident? The world was made of the elements, so how could their essence be used to create something that felts so... not of the world?

Tibs staggered as he was shoved, and Jackal took the sword strike in his place. "Where ever your head is at, Tibs. Get it out of there." A punch and the golem staggered into others.

Tibs mumbled a 'sorry', and he planted himself to take on the approaching golems. Arrows, as well as jets of corruption and darkness, flew over and between him and Jackal, but these golems had protections against essence attacks. Which was why he'd followed his spike with his sword. He wasn't sure why a sword made of materialized water essence didn't count as an essence attack, but he took advantage of it.

He parry, deflected, planted his sword into an injury caused by corruption, the combination severing the arm, then the head. He moved on to the next, then to one after that, and another. When the last one crumbled, Tibs leaned against the wall, panting and holding his arm against his bruised side.

Too many hits by too many weapons what weren't metal. Sto was making it harder and harder on him.

"Tibs?" Jackal asked, worried. "What's wrong?"

"Catching my breath."

"You usually do your thing with purity for that."

Tibs chuckles. "I guess I do." He suffused himself, and his head cleared. "Just distracted," he said as the others kept watching him, and nodded the way they'd come, where the door to the floor below was.

"Is it doing something to you?" Don asked.

"It's making me ask questions," Tibs replied, then pushed himself away from the wall, and to the closed door. They'd caught the golems on their return, so the room should—the door opened to two people golems seated at the desk.

“That’s just not fair,” Mez said. “Not one of them got into these rooms.”

“Their break is over,” Don said, “so the dungeon puts them back where they belong. Them walking the corridor has nothing to do with it. It’s just another test for us.”

“And it means more things we can sell for us,” Jackal grinned. “Mez be ready.”

This room got them, along with one unstamped silver coin, and another essence potion, a staff in a sheath similar to the ones holding the swords. The next room didn’t have any coins, but had two potions and a sword. After that, it was one coin and a sword.

* * * * *

Tibs opened the door and stared, trying to understand what he was looking at. Instead of a small room with a desk and one to three people golem, along with sometimes a cabinet, others a safe, this room was large; it had to take half the building. How did it even fit? Benches along the walls, between other doors, and potted plants. On his right, in the middle of the wall, was the only set of doors. Two ornate ones. Opposite them, a large staircase going up to—

“Looks like we’re back where we started,” Jackal said, stepping past Tibs and heading for the closest door on the left.

“I need a break,” Tibs said, heading for the closest bench.

“Just do the purity thing again,” Jackal replied.

“I’m taking a break,” he replied, dropping on it. It had a cushion and was more comfortable than it had looked. “How long did that take, anyway?”

“Can’t see the sky,” Jackal replied, “so I have no idea.”

A door creaked and Tibs’s eyes snapped open.

Mez looked out the double doors. “A while. The ‘sun’ about a hand’s span past the zenith.”

“This building will be the only one we can explore unless we seek another one,” Khumdar said, sitting and taking out the wrapped cheeses. Tibs took out the meats.

“Unless we spend the night,” Jackal said, pulled a loaf of bread from his pouch.

“Oh yes,” The Them said, “please do.”

“They won’t,” Sto replied, as Jackal sliced the bread and Mez handed out ale skins. “It’s why I have the sun. They’re trained to leave before it goes down.”

“This team seems like the sort who would risk it, for the... right incentive.”

“I you telling me to cheat?” Sto asked, tone suspicious.

“No, but that one seems particularly greedy. It wouldn’t take much to get him to insist they stay just a little longer.”

“But you’re not telling me to cheat,” Sto repeated.

“I’m here to make sure you don’t cheat, so no. That isn’t what I am saying you do.”

“But I am allowed to adjust the loot distribution as their run progresses.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Sto,” Ganny warned. “Whatever you’re planning, don’t do it. They aren’t here to—”

“Think of this as a test,” The Them said. “What can you accomplish without breaking the rules?”

“They aren’t allowed to be in here when the doors are closed,” Ganny stated.

“That is not a rule we have implemented,” the Them replied, sounding smug.

“It’s okay, Ganny,” Sto said. “You know me. I like tests.”

Tibs paused his chewing, trying to figure out what Sto was talking about. Anytime they found ways around his tests on the first two floors, instead of besting them, he complained.

“I won’t be able to use coins,” Sto said, “I’d have to go for gold, and they’ll be suspicious of that. Listening to them talk, seems like none of the dungeons start dropping gold until the lare fifth floor.”

“That’s correct, it’s rare for a dungeon to have a windfall like this city to buildup their reserves.”

“Sto,” Ganny said, sounding exasperated.

“It’ll be rings,” Sto said, keeping her from continuing. “I’ll even make them out of that alloy, bronze, you called it. When it’s polished it looks valuable, and they aren’t going to know it’s not worth as much as silver coins. But that rogue... he can sense weaves, so I’ll put something simple on them. He can’t tell what they do, so he won’t know it’s basically nothing.”

“You mean that weave you had me work on?” Ganny said.

“Yes, that’s going to be great. What does it do? Like make them feel happier? You saw how they secret away all those woven items. They’re really greeting for them. It’s got something to do with that guild that controls who can come in, and when. They’re always taking those items from them when they leave.”

Tibs forced himself to eat again. Was Sto doing what it sounded like? And telling the Them he was doing it?

“I don’t know if just putting rings in the loot will be enough,” Ganny said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the goal is to make them stay past closing the door, right? Just adding a few, or even more than a few, isn’t going to work. We have to do it in a what they can expect the numbers to go ever higher, so that they’ll think they’ll get an even larger amount the longer they’ll stay. They’re going to stop thinking about how long they’ve been in here.”

“Then when they do find that bag filled with more rings than they can count, it’ll be too late,” Sto said gleefully.

“You’re going to give them the rings?” the Them asked.

“I have to, otherwise they’re going to realize something’s wrong. And it’s not like they’re going to be able to go anywhere, with the door closed. But,” he fell quiet. “Ganny, we can’t just put them in every room. That’s going to be too easy. They’re going to notice and then jump ahead and they might reach the boss room before the doors closed.”

“That’s easy,” She replied, chuckling. “We’re just going to skip rooms be between.”

“That’s too easy, Ganny. Every other room and they’ll have it worked out after four or five.”

“Set them randomly,” the Them offered.

“No,” Ganny stated. “There is to be a pattern. This is a dungeon. It’s got to look like a test. It’s just going to be a test they can’t best in time. We start with the next room they’ll open. You saw how they do all the doors, so they’re going to do the ones there before moving onto the second floor. After that room, you jump one and put the rings in the one after that. Then you jump two, and the rings. Then three, and the rings—”

“Then four, that’s too simple, Ganny.”

“Not four, five.”

“Why five?” Sto asked, as Tibs worked the problem. The Them chuckled.

“After that, you jump eight.”

“I don’t get it,” Sto said, as Tibs smiled. He did.

“Trust me,” Ganny said, “they will never get it either.”

Planning-92

Food eaten, Tibs opened the first door. Despite being larger and better appointed, it was another office. Did those accessed from the lobby represent more important offices? Were some offices more important than others in cities, or was this just Sto not understanding how things were done?

He almost headed for the side of the woman seated behind the desk the pouch would be, but he hadn't done that since realizing the pouch was attached to the belt and they got it when going after the sheath. He made the knife, dismissed adding Arcanus to it to see if he could make the edge sharper, and gently took hold of the belt.

It was yanked away from his fingers as the golem person stood, reaching for the hilt, then it staggered as burning arrows hit it. Cursing, he pounced as it fell, grabbed the belt, and cut it off just before the golem crumbled away.

"Tibs?" Jackal called, and he raised his hand to so the belt was visible above the desk. "That's good. Are you okay?"

"The sword crumbled with them." He stood.

"Isn't it the sheath that's enchanted?" Mez asked.

"The sword was too," Tibs replied, opening the pouch, one blank silver coin and a ring.

"I don't know," Don said, and Tibs glanced up. Mez was looking at the sorcerer quizzically. "It's possible the sheath only works with the appropriate sword. That would make the whole thing simpler to enchant."

"Can we use one of the other swords to test it?"

"They'll be enchanted the same way as this one was, so it won't tell us anything."

"That's new," Jackal said, pointing to the ring.

The weave through it was dense. Ganny was right, there were too many essences he couldn't tell apart to know what it did. The metal was slightly darker than gold, but there had been no gold coins in the dungeon, and the last time an item had been decorated with gold had been one of the pieces out of the boss room's loot on the third floor. None of them would know it wasn't gold without being told.

"It's gold," Tibs said eagerly.

"You sure?" Jackal asked, as he took it.

"It looks like gold," Tibs answered, wondering why the warrior was looking at it so closely. "Garran's going to give us much better coins for that and anything else."

Jackal frowned, running a finger over the smooth band. “I don’t know, I think this—”
“And it’s enchanted,” Tibs said, putting a hand on this friend’s arms so he’d look at him. “Trust me. I know what Garran looks for. This is going to help us make sure the guild doesn’t own us for long once we reach Epsilon.”

Jackal searched his face.

How well did the Them know people? Could they read Jackal’s surprise and uncertainty? Could they even see that? Sto saw them, but Tibs had never asked what that meant? Did they see everything in detail, or was he like people in that he had to focus on something to notice details?

Jackal shrugged and handed it back. “Okay, you’re the one who knows. So long as I get tons of coins out of it, I’m happy.”

“Did you trip or something?” Mez asked. “It still had the belt on when it stood.”

“It was more attentive,” Tibs said. “Are offices in the lobby more important?”

Don shrugged. “I don’t know. I’d expect anything this close to the entrance to be for the common people, but this isn’t a real city hall, so it might be set to be more difficult to match the opulence on display.”

The next door was locked. It was only slightly more complex than the ones in the corridor. Again, more to indicate there was no one there than to keep anyone determined from getting in. He looked around. Although, here a thief would have to worry about people passing by noticing what he did.

The office was unoccupied. The book shelf contained books. “I’ll check them for traps,” he said before Don could ask. The second drawer was locked and contained a pouch with only two rings. The safe had a better lock, but more papers and those quills, along with an intricately decorated knife. With a ruby in the end of the pommel and two opals in the guard. He didn’t pay attention to the gold filigree, concerned the difference would be too obvious next to the rings. It also had a weave of light and fire. Something they could let the guild have.

The books weren’t trapped, but Don was disappointed to find they didn’t open. Props Sto hadn’t bothered making even seem real.

The next office had two people golem, both of which reacted faster. Mez dealt with the customer, while Tibs didn’t let go of the belt this time, and took a painful quill to the shoulder in the process of cutting it off. He then planted the knife into the golem’s chest as corruption splashed on it.

This pouch had four rings.

The next office had two silver coins, and Tibs acted his disappointment at not getting more rings. The next office had one silver coin and eight rings.

“This isn’t going to work once they go up the stairs,” the Them said as Tibs started on the next office. “How are you going to know which direction they’ll go in? Or how they’ll go about checking the offices?”

“It doesn’t matter which direction they take,” Sto said, “I can change things to match that.”

“So,” Ganny added, “they’re going to do the doors on this side, then reach the corridor at the end and once inside, they’ll do like they did on the first floor. Check on office, then the one facing it, the one next to that, and then the one facing it. If they go left,

then they'll reach the boss room earlier, but there are still enough of them it's going to mean they won't make it to the door before it's closed."

They'd go right, Tibs decided. Let the Them think there was no way they could win. Then, it would just be a question of figuring out when it would make sense Tibs could work out the pattern and speed things up.

The eighth office got them a pouch heavy with rings. The way they were filling, soon enough, they'd be sacks instead of pouches. The ninth, as expected, only had silver coins, three of them.

"Wait," Don said, as Tibs stepped to the last door in the lobby. The sorcerer looked back at the other doors. "I want to test something." He motioned for the stairs and nearly stepped on them before Tibs stopped him.

"Let me check them first." The stairs were tiled, smaller versions of those on the floor. "What do you want to test?" Every other step, one tile had a trigger, starting with the first one on the left and moving right.

"I'll explain it afterward."

Tibs indicted the tiles to avoid as he moved up. At the top, he headed to the door on the right.

"Not that one," Don said, doing to the next door. There were more doors on this floor, eight on this side to the five below. "This one."

Tibs hesitated. He was confident the one after that was the one with the rings, but could he have worked it out already? And wouldn't getting it wrong help convince the Them they'd be stuck here all day?

The smaller office had three people in it.

"Just get the pouch," Don said.

"The sheath's good coin," Jackal said.

"Tibs says the rings are worth a lot, and with how many we're getting of those, if I'm right, it's not going to be worth it wasting time cutting the belt and starting a fight. We're going to want to get the pouch, the rings and move on to the next one with rings. Trust me."

Jackal looked at Tibs.

How was Don going to take it when he realized he was wrong about the pattern he'd worked out? And that Tibs would be the one to show that? He'd have to deal with that then.

Tibs snuck his way behind the desk and knew he was right. The pouch might have a couple of coins, but that was it. He sliced it open and caught the one coin that fell, then made his way back.

"That's all that was in it."

Don nodded, stepped past one door and indicated the one he stopped before.

No. Don had walked by the right door. He definitely had the wrong pattern.

"Don," Jackal said cautiously, "there weren't any rings. I think it's best if we just do every door."

"No, we're going to be at this all week that way. There are too many of them, and even with Tibs just taking the pouches, it takes too long."

"What if that one's got no rings, either?" Jackal asked.

"I need you to trust me. Just because you're not seeing the results you want to see doesn't mean the test isn't working."

Jackal looked at the others.

“Don’t look at me,” Mez replied. “I’m only ahead of you when it comes to smarts.”

As usual, Khumdar remained silent.

“Don’s smarter than I am,” Tibs said. Which was going to make it suck when Tibs was the one to point out the sorcerer was wrong. He’d explain once they were out about how he knew, but for the rest of the run, he had no idea how Don was going to be. The old Don would be unbearable, but Tibs wasn’t sure how well this one would take it.

He opened the door. Only one person in it.

“Get the sheath too,” Jackal said.

“That’s not needed,” Don replied.

“Don, we need something out of this in case you’re wrong again.”

“The cabinet’s better, then,” Tibs said, surprised Don didn’t protest. “It’s going to have potions, and we can use those against the boss. It also means we don’t have to fight.”

“Which you don’t get to take part in,” Mez pointed out, readying his bow.

“Okay, the cabinet, then the pouch.”

The cabinet got Tibs one of each potion. The pouch did not even have one coin.

Instead of disappointed, or annoyed, Don nodded, stepped back to the door he’d passed, and tapped it.

“Why didn’t you pick that one first?” Jackal asked, annoyed.

“Because I wanted to make sure I was right.”

“Which you weren’t. There weren’t any rings in those two offices. We might as well go back down in case that one has them.”

“Trust me.”

Jackal threw his hands up. “You know what. It’s not like you give a fuck what I think.”

Tibs studied Don, who looked back at him, hope and worry mixing. He was afraid Tibs would side with Jackal, as he had a habit of doing. Tibs knew Don was right about the office, but he didn’t understand why he’d bothered with the other two.

The door was locked. Once open, he cautiously headed for the desk. The second drawer was locked. The pouch in it was filled with something. He cut the trigger for the blade and took the pouch. He lobbed it at a triumphant Don before heading for the cabinet. Two potions for essence, and two for stamina this time.

“Why did you waste time with the other two?” Jackal demanded.

“Because, without checking, all I’d known is that there were rings in this office. There might have been some in the one before or after and what I thought the pattern is would have been wrong. If the next office I pick has rings, then I’ll be certain I’m right and we can get all the rings and leave without having to worry about getting stuck in here.”

“You said they wouldn’t be able to figure it out,” the Them said angrily.

“I didn’t think he’d work it out,” Ganny replied, mystified.

Tibs was happy and proud that Don had worked it out ahead of when Tibs figured he could justify doing it. He was happier when the door Don pointed to, the two and first one, had a pouch nearly bursting with rings.

Planning-93

Tibs felt the difference in the door as they approached it. Looking ahead, there were not enough doors left for another room with rings.

“This is the boss room,” he said.

“How?” The Them snapped.

“They can count,” Ganny said. She sounded annoyed, but Tibs thought he could hear mirth in the tone too.

“And the rogue can sense that the door isn’t the same,” Sto added matter-of-factly.

“And will that let them just walk in?” the Them demanded angrily.

“No, he can’t tell how the lock works, just that it’s there.” Sto didn’t elaborate.

Sto was right. Tibs felt the essence through the door. He could make out those he already had, but there were plenty of others. Maybe all of them. Tibs couldn’t tell them apart. Threads went to the lock, so he started there. They wove through and around the tumblers. Earth, metal, air and another thread. He figured that unlocking this lock triggered the puzzle.

Since Sto couldn’t make this specifically for him, this had to be doable without sensing the essences. He made picks out of ice and sensed how the essences reacted as he picked the lock. With each tumbler he moved into place, the threads aligned together. With the last one, they formed one thicker thread that shimmered as he turned the lock.

He was yanked back by Jackal as the front of the door shimmered, turning silver with slots into it.

“That’s the puzzle,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Eighty-one slots,” Don said, as Tibs counted. Nine rows of nine. Eight and one in total. “We’re clearly meant to insert the coins we found, but that seems too simple to be the end of it.”

“Do we have enough coins?” Jackal asked. “We passed a lot of the offices on this floor.”

Tibs took those he had and made stacks of nine. He had three. Don added his, which got them to seven plus six coins.

“I’ll get them,” Jackal said, rubbing his hands and heading to the closest door.

“I can get them faster,” Tibs called after him.

“You’ve had your fun. It’s my turn.”

“What’s your sense of the puzzle?” Don asked once Jackal vanished in the office.

Tibs studied the essence. “The slots are linked, but there are too many essences I don’t have to work out what they do. But it’s not going to open the door. You’re right, that’s too simple for the dungeon.”

The fight was over quickly, and Jackal dropped two coins among their stacks before heading for another closed door.

“We could speed this up if we each took a door,” Mez said.

“We’re not in that much of a hurry,” Don said. “He’s entitled to break golems after standing by and letting Tibs deal with each office.”

“None here.” Jackal went from that door to the one next to it.

Mez passed the ale skins. “Then we might as well enjoy what’s left of the food.”

They took the bread from Jackal when he dropped a handful of coins. On his return, Tibs handed him a sandwich, which the fighter took with him into the next office.

* * * * *

Tibs paused before inserting the last coin. He has one left over after it. The last office had given Jackal three silver coins. It was possible to end up with more than they needed. He’d check with Darran if it was worth something.

The essences hadn’t reacted as he and Don put the coins in the slots, so this one would activate the whole thing. The others had stepped well back.

He pushed the coin in and stepped back too as the threads glowed and shimmered and moved. He only backed enough so he could watch the entire door. Whatever else the weave did, it caused the door to glow a golden light that brightened until Tibs figured others had to look away.

The slots filled with silver liquid, then stretched until they were circles, and then the silver coins in round indentations. When the light went away, he looked at nine rows of nine coins.

“Okay,” Jackal asked. “Now what?”

“Now, we figure out what the next step is,” Don said. He stepped to the door. “Tibs, are there any indications something will happen if I take a coin out?”

“Nothing I can sense. The weave is different, but mostly still in the door.”

Don stopped as his fingers were close to a coin. “Mostly?”

Tibs joined the sorcerer and studied the coins.

“They have threads, but I don’t think they’re set in a weave, and...” he paused. Noticing a detail. “The threads don’t line up.” There were too many of them to sense if they were all like these. “I think the point is to put the coins in the hole so the threads will connect with those that touch it.”

“I thought you said they wouldn’t have it easy?” the Them said.

“Just wait,” Sto replied,

Don took the coin out and turned it in his hand. “The dungeon expects us to figure out where the coins go based on nothing more than your sense of the essence threads?” he put the coins back in and turned it. “Does the threads turn with the coin, or are they locked to the door?”

“They turn with the coin.”

Don looked at the door. “We’re missing something. The possibilities are basically unending the way this is currently set up. The positions of the coin affect the position of the

threads, so even if we get them to connect, it might not be in the way the puzzle needs.”

“Tibs can tell if the right threads are touching each other,” Jackal said.

“Only those I can identify.”

Don looked at Khumdar. “Can you sense anything about the secrets in the door?”

The cleric suffused himself with darkness, then focused it to the node above his eyes. Channels filled as he reached and placed a hand on the door, the node in it now also filled with darkness.

“There are too many of them,” He answered. “Far too many,” he added in a whisper.

“Not this time, Cleric,” Ganny said gleefully.

“I believe the dungeon has layered secrets over secrets specifically to prevent me from getting a sense of what they are aiming to hide.”

“You have cut through a few of their puzzles that way,” Mez said.

“So, we can’t win this?” Jackal asked. “Like this is something impossible to do?”

“No,” Tibs said. “He doesn’t make something we can’t work out. If this doesn’t make sense, it’s because we’re missing something.”

“I told you,” Sto said. “I know how Runners think. They’re all about the same thing, so they miss the rest.”

That was for him. Sto wanted Tibs to get through. He wanted him to get the rings that were the reward. They had a lot of them already, but nowhere near enough to help the town. What had he missed?

What had he been so focused on that caused him not to pay attention to the rest? He knelt and laid some of the other things he’d taken from the offices. Two pages written in Arcanus that reminded him of Promises, a thick quill, a knife sized sheath with a sword in it. They had paid attention to those, but only as a way to make coins, not as something that might help with the puzzle.

“What are these?” Don asked, moving the pages so they were side by side.

“I don’t know, they were in the safes. They might be props, but the way the letters are arranged, and the lines there and there, with how those letters are the same, but that’s different. It reminds me of the way the letters on Promises are arranged.”

“Stole many Promises, have you?” Don asked with a chuckle, and Tibs realized he might not be able to explain how he knew what they looked like. Don didn’t know about everything he’d taken from the Brokerage. “Why are you laying these out?” he tapped the quill. “I noticed those on the desks.”

“Some safes had them too. I want to ask Darran if they’re worth anything. I have them here because the dungeon doesn’t make impossible puzzles. If we’re missing something, it’s got to be from those offices.”

Jackal place one of each potion next to the items. “Those were in the offices, too.”

“But we know what those do,” Don said.

Jackal shrugged. “And the dungeon knows that. It’s crafty. What if those are different? I mean, where’s the ink pot for the quill?”

“I don’t think it needs it,” Tibs replied, turning the quill in his hand. “I think it’s thick because the ink goes in it.”

“Fine. I’m just saying the dungeon knows us, so it could trick us by using what we expect against us.”

"I think you're trying too hard," Don said, running a finger along a line of letters.

"Well, you two are the smart ones. I'm just saying the first thing that comes to my mind."

"As usual," Don mumbles at the same time Sto said it.

Tibs looked at the quill. Unlike Don and Sto, he didn't to dismiss the thought just because Jackal was the one who'd voiced it. Jackal wasn't an idiot, Tibs had known that well before he stopped acting like a careless buffoon. He thought differently, often more brutally, but sometimes he saw subtle things Tibs missed. Unlike what Don had said. Tibs was the one who had a habit of trying too hard. Looking too deep when the solution was simple.

This didn't look to have a solution as simply as dipping the quill in one of the potions to... he looked at the pages, with their lines of Arcanus, then the door with its blank silver coins.

"Can coins be blank?" He asked.

"No," Don said.

"Before they're stamped," Jackal said.

"They aren't coins then," Don replied. "They're blanks, like these. They have to be stamped to be called coins. Hence, coins can't be blank."

"You don't know my cousins," Jackal said. "Back before my father was taken down, they were in charge of procuring coins before they were stamped by the king's treasury, so we could stamp them however we wanted."

"Why not wait until after they're stamped?" Mez asked.

"Because coins are marked when they are stamped," Don replied. "Only the treasurer knows the code that marks them as authentic."

Jackal nodded. "So they have no way to know how coins from other kingdoms will be marked."

"So coins are stamped to show they're real?"

"More like to show where they come from," Jackal said. "Some kingdom won't accept coins from rivals, or will accept them at a lower value as a way to show their displeasure. King stuff and all that. But it was something my cousins had to keep track of."

"So, if your coin was stamped," Tibs mused, "you could know where it was from."

"Where it claimed to be from," Jackal replied, "but basically, yeah."

Except Tibs had no way to stamp the coins.

He had it wrong. He wasn't supposed to stamp them. If, like he thought, the coins were the guide to unlocking the door, what he needed to do was make the stamps Sto had put on them visible.

He stood. What he had to do was make their truth visible. He suffused himself with Light, and shone it on the door.

Sto chuckled as the weave reacted to the light, darkness growing tighter over everything. "I'm not letting you cut through this one, buddy."

With a huff, Tibs let go of Light and turned. His friends were rubbing their tearing eyes.

"Warn me next time," Jackal complained.

"Sorry. I thought I could get the light to show me the truth about the coins. But the dungeon's wise to that. It had a darkness weave set up."

“Mayhap together we can defeat it,” Khumdar offered.

“Oh, I’d love to see you try it,” Sto replied.

Tibs sensed the weave, then shook his head. “If I knew more about how to etch Light, maybe. All I can do is throw it at something, and that comes down to who has the largest reserve. I have a lot, but that’s nothing compared to a dungeon.” He dropped back to his knees. It was back to figuring things out.

He had a quill, a sense that making the coins reveal their stamp was the way to go, but nothing to use except potions of healing, stamina, and essence as ink.

Only, was he taking that for granted, too?

He searched in his pouch for a potion he was sure he’d found before reaching this building. He set the stamina potion next to the matching one and studied them.

They had essence, like everything, but it was tighter, more intentional, because they had a magical effect on the person who drank one. It interacted with their own essence and somehow replenished their energy, in this case, without taking anything Tibs could sense away.

As he expected, the two bottles felt the same, other than minuscule differences that were present in everything. He was putting the bottles away when he realized the mistake.

Everything outside the dungeon had small differences. The world was Chaotic, Carina had told him when he’d asked why. So even masters couldn’t replicate every detail of how they made something. So everything was a little different.

Only Sto wasn’t a master, he was a dungeon. He didn’t make the same way. He had models; he called them, and all he had to do was put the needed elements in the way the model required and he had the thing.

Everything was the same inside the dungeon.

Unless Sto didn’t want them to be the same.

“He’s got something,” Don said.

“That’s my line,” Jackal complained.

“You need to be faster,” the sorcerer replied.

Tibs tipped the bottle over and caught the liquid with water essence. Now, he needed to pull that extra whatever it was out. He removed the essences he could identify, except for water. Then he studied the rest. The difference was noticeable, but how did he go about taking it out?

“Tibs?” Jackal asked quietly. “You’ve been staring at that for too long without doing anything.”

“I’m trying to figure out how to pull the... whatever it is out, but while it’s woven to stand out, now that I know it’s there, it’s not elements I have. I know how to force one I don’t have away, or close or in a direction, but it’s not gentle, and this is fragile.”

“What’s your theory?” Don asked. “You idea,” he added.

“The coins, them being stamped. S—they dungeon purposely kept me and Khumdar from knowing the truth, so I think that’s the key. I have a quill, and I think that’s the ink, but I can’t pull it out of the rest of the liquid to use it on the coins.”

“I couldn’t do that,” Mez said.

“I know. That’s why I have to work it out.”

“That isn’t what he means,” Don said. “The dungeon doesn’t make puzzles for you to

best, Tibs. It makes puzzles for any of us to crack. Whatever this is, the solution is something Mez can work out.”

“And because I’m not as smart as you,” The archer said. “I’d go with the simple thing. A quill goes in the ink to soak it up.” He picked up the quill and touched the tip to the liquid Tibs had floating. The effect was immediate. That extra essence was absorbed by the quill, filling a small reserve.

“Again, I didn’t think he’d be the one solving it,” Ganny said.

“Runners are full of surprises,” Sto replied with a hint of pride.

Tibs sighed and put the rest of the liquid in the bottle. It was more gray than yellow.

“I think it worked,” Jackal said.

“It did,” Tibs said. “I think you should be the one to do it,” he added when Mez offered him the quill.

“I have no idea what comes next.”

Tibs thought it was obvious, but Mez insisted, so he took it after putting everything else away. The one thing Tibs didn’t know was if which coin he started with mattered. He’d find out, and now that he knew how to fill the quill, it didn’t matter how many tried it took.

He touched the quill to a coin, and the ink spread, revealing an anchor with a sun setting behind it. He didn’t remember who had told him, but a runner from that kingdom had said the sea was on the side of the setting sun.

Before he lifted the quill, a bird appeared on the coin next to it. He didn’t remember the name of the bird or that of the kingdom. The ink spread over all the coins, revealing more and more stamps. Some Tibs didn’t recognize, but enough he did he figured they were all coins from kingdoms he hadn’t seen before.

Except for one.

“That’s strange,” Don said, looking at it closer. “I thought I knew all the stamps.”

“I know it,” Tibs said, touching the coin with the stamp of a mountainside with a crack in it. “It’s our coin.” He thought he could even make out the path leading to the opening.

“The dungeon’s stamp,” Jackal whispered.

“I knew you’d work that out,” Sto said.

“If that’s us,” Mez said, stepping back. “Then I think I know how to solve this puzzle.”

Planning-94

The archer moved the coins about, and Tibs noticed something he'd missed. Many of the coins had the same weave of threads within them. Those shared the same kingdom's stamp. As he placed the coins, those that weren't exactly lined up to their matching threads snapped into place, with the stamps centered and straight.

"How do you know where they go?"

"I've been studying the world's geography," Mez answered. Placing a coin where Tibs knew was the wrong place by how the threads didn't align with those touching it. Mez rotated it, but it didn't snap like the others. "A proper noble must know all his neighbors," he recited in a high pitch voice with clear annoyance, then mumbled, as he moved to another coin. "Like she has any idea what it means to be a noble."

He shook his head. "This is the first time any of that comes in handy." He stepped back and Tibs joined him.

Their coin was lower on the map, surrounded by those with two crossed swords and a flower between them. Olvilon was the name of the kingdom. It was the one that controlled the land Kragle Rock was built on, technically. Because of Sto and the guild, the town was its own entity, governed by the guild. To the right, coins stamped with the anchor and setting sun filled the lower portion. A long band with the badger head separated Olvilon from coins with a forest and an anvil on them.

Above were a mix of stamps in small groups, then a swath of a hammer before a shield stamped coins with a variety of stamps above it.

"I don't think that's it," Jackal said, pushing on the door, then pulling. "It's still locked."

"The edges of the kingdoms need to be adjusted. Because all the coins are lined up, I had to guess where the kingdoms touched, but it's just a question of switching those around until they're in the right place."

"I can speed that up," Tibs said, moving the coins to their matching spot. With the last one in snapping in place, the door silently swung open.

The inside was larger than it should be. Just like the loot chests were. Glancing left and right, the wall went beyond the three doors on each side without indications of doors. He also knew there were offices on one side, since Jackal had gone in them to retrieve their missing coins.

The room was white and empty. That was the first thing that caught Tibs's attention. The white was almost painful in how stark it was. It and the emptiness were marred by the...

creatures standing, or maybe sitting, Tibs couldn't tell at this distance, at the back. He wasn't sure how he hadn't noticed it first. It was big, and there was nothing white about it. Its large body was covered with colors, circles, triangles, squares, each with a design he couldn't make out on them in shiny ink. They were linked by black lines, ribbon like, crisscrossing its body.

"There's a boss if I've ever seen one," Jackal said, cracking his fingers.

"Maybe we should see if there's a way to make this easier on us before you rush in to start fighting?" Don said.

"I'm not sure what kind of puzzle there's going to be," Mez said. "The room's basically empty."

"Tibs, Khumdar?" Jackal asked.

"I need to go in to find out," Tibs replied.

"There are no secrets in this room that appear to be any different from every other in the building."

"So, this is straight up a fight," Jackal said, too happy for Tibs's liking.

"I find that doubtful," the cleric replied, "but I do not know how the complications will present themselves."

"Hopefully there's going to be a pattern we can take advantage of here too," Don said.

"You guys think this is the floor boss?"

"You wish," Sto replied.

"I doubt it," Don said. "We've barely explored half the city, if even that. My guess is that the floor boss will be somewhere we wouldn't think of. Unlike the other floors, this isn't one with a start and an end. So the final room isn't going to be at the 'end' of anything."

"He almost got it," Ganny said. "You have to be impressed."

"No," The Them replied. "I am wondering if you aren't making things hard enough. They made their way to this room much faster than you expected. They even got through that door you thought would take them all day."

"How was I supposed to know one of them would know the layout of the realms?" Sto replied. "I didn't know about them until you showed up. I figured they'd work out how to group the coins, but after that, they'd have to go through trial and error. Even the rogue didn't work where the coins went until the end, in spite of how much he can sense."

"It would have been harder on them if you hadn't set the coins to adjust themselves."

"Fine, I'll grant you that," Sto admitted. "I'll change it overnight. But I'll have to add something so they can work it out."

"Maybe a faint etching on the coins that matches equivalent lines on the door?" Ganny offered.

The silence stretched, and Tibs stepped into the room, sensing for triggers.

"Well?" Sto asked.

"I'd rather you put nothing," the Them replied.

"Doesn't that make this a puzzle they can't solve?"

"Yes," the Them said with enough reluctance Tibs thought they wanted not just him to fail, but every Runner. For someone there to make sure Sto followed the rules, they didn't seem to care for them as much as Tibs thought they should.

He made it a third of the way without sensing triggers or out-of-place essence. “It’s clear to here,” he called. And the others joined him. The... Tibs had no idea what to call the creature, had yet to react to their presence.

“It’s going to be a threshold, or a rigged tile?” Jackal asked.

“For a boss,” Don replied, “I expect a threshold. Close enough to give us time to prepare, but not so much that we can take it too easy.”

“Then,” Jackal said, his impatience sounding, “is there a point in simply not going at it?”

“There’s always a point in preparing,” Don’t replied.

“The point is to not die,” Tibs stated as Jackal opened his mouth.

The fighter closed it and sighed.

“You just fought a bunch of golems,” Mez said. “Why are you in such a hurry to want to fight—” he stopped as everyone looked at him. “Right, never mind. Boss creature; Jackal fighting the dungeon. How could I ever think he might get enough of that?”

“But you’re going to fight it smartly,” Tibs stated. “You promised Kroseph.”

“I’m still standing here, aren’t I?” Jackal replied. “While you’re supposed to move ahead and make sure it’s safe.”

Tibs looked ahead and sensed. Sto and Ganny were tricky, but also predictable. If boss rooms had traps, they started early and were part of the whole floor; working around them became part of how the room worked.

“I think it’s best if we move together. I think Don’s right. It’s going to be a threshold; we should cross it together.”

“In case crossing it causes something that prevents anyone from joining the fight,” Don added, and Tibs glared at the sorcerer.

“Oh,” Ganny exclaimed. “Why didn’t we think of that before?”

Tibs had been trying not to give them ideas.

Then walked in step, and the creature stirred a few of them past the middle of the room, as the door closed with a loud snap.

“Would it have done any good to leave a block?” Mez asked.

“I doubt it,” Jackal replied, and Tibs put a hand on his arm to keep him from running ahead.

“Its fingers are dripping something,” Don said.

“Those look more like the thing Tibs used to make the stamps visible,” Mez said.

“It’s some kind of quill,” he said. “So it’s going to ink, drilling from them.”

“That is doubtful,” Khumdar said. “It will be something it can use against us.”

“A miasma of ink,” Don whispered.

“What?”

“Just something my father said one day when he came back from dealing with the city government. He’d had to fill so many forms it was like they were trying to drown him in a miasma of ink.”

Tibs looked at how it dripped. “That looks more like ribbons.”

“The inky ribbons of bureaucracies,” Mez said. “Maybe it’s going to use that to smother us.”

“So avoid them,” Jackal said. “Got it. Anything else you want to theorize about? Yes, I

know that word. Carina was using it before I hear you overuse it, Don.”

“I don’t—I’m a scholar. Theories are what we work with.”

“Then tell me what other you have so I can go and punch that thing and not have he reach us.” It was slowly lumbering in their direction.

“Bureaucracy is slow,” the sorcerer said. “It wraps itself in papers and ink. I don’t see papers, but those ribbons around it are much like what’s dripping from its fingers. It could be armor.”

“You think those are badges of office?” Mez asked.

“Or seals. So they could also be used to lock you in place. They are what is applied once everything is done and approved.”

“So if I stick to hitting its head?” Jackal asked impatiently.

“It’s pretty high,” Tibs said. The boss creature was at last twice Jackal’s height.

“That’s not going to be a problem.”

“Other than all those eyes,” Don said, “probably so it can read every detail of the contracts for ways to take advantage of them, I don’t see anything there I can think would act as protection, so—”

Jackal was running at it, his skin turning stone gray.

Tibs sighed.

“At least,” Mez said, “he’ll survived whatever surprise it’s going to come up with, right?”

“He’d better,” Tibs replied as Jackal threw himself in the air, much higher than it was tall, raising a fist. Tibs figures that he’d fall right at its head, adding to his strength, until he realized Jackal was slowing, instead of gaining speed on the way down.

“Guys?” the fighter called, worried.

Don sighed. “Right. Bureaucracy isn’t just slow, it slows everything around it.”

Planning-95

Fire arrows exploded on the inky filament that sprang from the pools that had formed from what dropped to the floor. The few arrows that made it past slowed as they entered the bureaucratic field around the creature. Jackal was now slowly flying away from it after a spindly limb slowly hit him. Two of Tibs's knives were caught in the same field, and he added air to them, trying to get them to move faster.

The area ten paces around the creature was filled with essence woven so tightly just that might explain why anything crossing into it slowed. He could nudge some of it, but the essence he didn't have brought the rest back into place the instant his attention slipped. He'd need to disrupt where the field originated from, the boss creature, to have any lasting effect, but short of draining it of his essence, there was nothing he could do. That same essence protected it from Tibs the same way the life essence in people kept Sto from just absorbing them.

Even if he hadn't agreed to not drain Sto's creatures; with the Them watching, Tibs was reluctant to show more of what he was capable of.

"You two planning on doing anything?" Jackal asked. The speech was slightly slurred from his mouth not quite moving at the same speed as he spoke, but only his outside was affected by the field. He could think normally, like Don had been able to when he'd been trapped in the lineup of people in the permit office building.

"Not getting caught the way you have," Don replied. He and Khumdar were the only ones not engaged in the fight.

"You have range attacks," the fighter said.

"Which do not appear to have an effect of significance," Khumdar said, just after one of Mez's arrow finally impacted the creature and bloomed into a bright, and fast, explosion. Then, as far as Tibs could see and sense, had no effect on the creature.

"Tibs, how about you do your thing?" Jackal asked.

"Let's keep burning everything down as a last resort," Don replied as Tibs tried to work out what Jackal meant. "If it's not enough to kill it, that's going to leave him defenseless."

Jackal exited the field and slammed into the wall, cracking it. "Finally." He got to his feet with a groan. "Being stuck in there hurt almost as much as that hit."

"It didn't hit you that hard," Mez said.

"Might not have looked like it, but there was a lot of strength in it."

"It's why he flew so fast once he was outside," Don said.

“Okay, so how are we doing this?” the archer asked. “The one advantage we have is that it’s also stuck in whatever slows what we throw at it, so we have the time to—”

Tibs ran for the Tendrils of ink shooting out of the pool that had been edging its way toward them. They wrapped themselves around Jackal’s waist and raised him in the air.

Tibs reached them as they started pulling the fighter toward the boss creature and swung his sword. They resisted—whatever they were, they only looked like ink—but one strand fell, dissolving before hitting the ground, then another, and a third. It let go of Jackal, who groaned as he landed, and the threads retreated into the pool, which flowed around the tip of Tibs’s sword as he ran it on the ground trying to hurt it some more. Now, it behaved like a liquid.

“Don’t let those things touch you,” Jackal said, pulling a bottle from his pouch. “They do something that weakens us.” He drank the entire bottle.

“It has been said that bureaucracy will drain the life out of anyone unfortunate enough to be forced to deal with it,” Khumdar said. Then added at the surprised look Don gave him. “I too have heard storied.”

“Okay,” Jackal said, back on his feet and sounding better. “With that ink able to fight us here, we can’t wait. I’m going back in. You guys figure something out.”

“Jackal!” Don called, but the fighter was already at a near standstill.

“Don’t worry,” the fighter replied. “I have this.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Don muttered.

Tibs jumped back as strands rose up. Then Khumdar was at his side, blocking them with his staff, and making darkness edges to cut them.

“Is Darkness effective against them?” Tibs asked, coating his sword in fire to little effect.

“No, the edge is what parts them.”

The ground exploded in fire, and the strands dissolved.

“Destroying the pool takes care of them,” Mez said.

“Unfortunately, there are more of them coming,” the cleric replied.

The floor between them and the creature was dark with spilled ink.

“What do you use to clean ink off paper?” Tibs asked, readying himself.

“You don’t.” Don stepped behind him and Khumdar. “Ink soaks into it. You either restart or you cut the section of paper out and glue a new one in.”

“Essence should be usable,” Mez said.

“Yes, but that makes the scribe who can do that someone only nobles can afford. The rest of us deal with the hassles.”

Inside the field, Jackal was within reach of the creature, dodging its limb.

“You said it’s all about the bureaucracy,” Tibs said, worried about Jackal. “Who do you fight that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You read books!” He glared at the sorcerer.

“Not about city government,” Don replied calmly. “The little I know comes from my father’s stories, and the rare comment recorded in a book. Scholars interested in writing down that they research are not the kind of people who interact with anything that goes into running a city.”

Jackal was now planting a fist into the large creature's crotch.

"I'm going to help him." Tibs stepped forward, but Don grabbed his arm.

"You aren't going to be helping him by going in there. We need to help him from out here."

"And we need to help ourselves." Mez fired arrows at the pools of ink gliding in their direction. They split apart, strands raising. The archer cursed as they kept dodging his arrows.

"Got let them touch you," Tibs instructed as he rushed for the closest, swinging his sword. He made a shield as a mass of them launched themselves at him. They hit it, then rolled over the top. With a curse, Tibs shook it, but the mass remained attached, oozing over the back. As he went to throw it away, a tendril touched his arm and sucked his life essence away.

The explosion pushed Tibs back as the mass and tendrils withered away.

"They can't dodge my arrows if they're focused on someone," Mez called.

Tibs replenished his essence from his reserve. "They steal life essence. The yellow potion helped Jackal, so keep one close in case they touch you." He headed for another pool. "Mez, how quickly can you get them? We can't find a way to help Jackal while we're busy here."

The creature was now in the air from the punch.

Tibs had no idea how Jackal managed to fight in that, but he was happy he seemed to be holding his own.

Also, the creature seemed happy to fight him directly, instead of using the pools of ink. Sto's desire to fight Jackal directly manifesting itself, or part of how the creature worked?

When another mass attach Tibs, he ignited his shield, adding more and more fire essence until, finally, the tendrils burned. But while he focused on that, one caught his leg and he landed on his back, life essence draining.

"Tibs!" Don called. "Use corruption on it."

Tibs suffused himself with the element. And as if that was fire, the tendrils let go and moved away. Getting to his feet, he looked at Don, who had ropes of corruption he used as whips. Anytime they touched the ink, it fizzed away.

"How is that working?" Mez demanded. "Corruption is integral to bureaucracy, everyone knows that!"

"Does the dungeon not know this?" Khumdar replied, spinning his staff into a shield that knocked tendrils aside. Tibs wove corruption within his sword and shield and went to the cleric's help.

"I think," Don said, "that it's more that we've gotten used to how much corruption is in any system. But if it wasn't there, how much more smoothly would it run?"

"Does that help me?" Jackal yelled. "I don't know if I'm hurting it in any way."

"Just don't die!" Tibs replied. "We'll figure something."

"That's not going to be hard; it's a bad fighter. But every time I hit it, those black stands covering it move to take the blow."

Tibs strode at another pool of ink, which moved away, split, then went around him.

"Do all the strands connect to those seals, or badge of offices?" Don asked. "And do

those move?”

Tibs jumped onto a pool, which bubbles and fizzled away around his feet.

“I think so,” Jackal replied, not sounding certain, “And they don’t seem to move”

“Hit those,” the sorcerer called. “Offices and seals are what hold the bureaucracy together. Break those and I think the strands won’t be effective anymore.”

“Tibs!” Mez called fearfully. The archer was backing away from a group of pools that moved out of his arrows’ way, tendrils extended.

Tibs ran, blasting two with raw corruption essence before the others spread apart and forced him to concentrate his attacks, which made it harder to hit those pools.

“Mez, get here. I want to try something!” Don called. “Jackal, don’t do any sudden movement.”

“Is that a joke?” the fighter called, unmoving under a dodged blow.

“Tibs, can you deal with these?”

“I’ll assist,” Khumdar answered, as Tibs managed to blast one pool. “Force them to attack me so he can destroy them.”

Tibs turned after destroying the last pool that had retreated in that direction. Khumdar was spinning his staff and turning so any tendrils getting close were knocked away, but there were enough tendrils Tibs barely saw the cleric’s nod.

Further back, Mez had a flaming arrow in his bow, and Don was adding corruption essence to it.

“I don’t know what good that’s going to do,” the archer said, while Tibs proceeded to cut tendrils with a corrupted sword, making his way to the cleric. “It’s going to get caught in that field like my others arrows.”

“I’m hoping,” Don replied, “that as hateful as corruption in city government is, another saying will play in our favor here.”

“Which is?” Mez asked.

“That nothing cuts through bureaucracy like a little corruption greasing its wheels.”

Tibs took position next to Khumdar, covering his left. Between cutting and dodging tendrils, he readied an etching. He added Kha, with some Bor, hoping for a similar effect to when he added Bor to a water based etching. To that he added Jir, spacing it because usually that spacing caused a delay in the reaction. He wanted that first, then the rest and...

He so needed to make time and try everything he thought could work, before he needed them in a fight.

He released the etching just as Mez fired his arrow. That had more visible results. It cut through the field without slowing, while the mist that spread before Tibs wasn’t visible. The arrow exploded on hitting the creature, leaving a spiderweb of purple fire spreading over the black stands, while his mist hardening through the tendrils, locking them in place as they fizzled from the corruption, instead of it turning into goo and falling over the pools.

“Do that again!” Jackal called.

When the tendrils were all gone, more spread from the pool to attack, avoiding the mass of misty corruption.

“Get behind me,” Tibs said, angling himself so his friends weren’t in the line of fire. This was going to do a lot of damage, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop it. This was going to be a, hopefully, more controlled and directed version of unleashing fire.

The ink seemed to understand he was planning something, because it spread faster than he expected and, in trying to keep it from escaping, Tibs altered his aim and only realized once the corruption was spreading away from him how bad that was going to be.

“Don!” he called at the sorcerer in to process of adding more corruption to a fire arrow.

“You can’t do that!” Sto yelled, and Tibs wished the surprise would break the attack, but this was feeding in on itself. Corruption relishing being set free.

“Or course I can,” the Them replied smugly.

Tibs had to hope Don would sense was what coming and get him and Mez out of the way while he struggled to bring the attack to an early end. Corruption wasn’t as hungry as fire, but it was slippery. Even as he absorbed some of it back, it pulled more out of the surroundings. And in filling the air with all the essence to make sensing more difficult, Ganny had given corruption a lot of itself to add to the attack.

“There are rules!” Sto snapped.

“Which you seem to only care about when it suits you,” the Them replied.

“I’m a dungeon. You’re supposed to be enforcing those rules, not breaking them!”

“I am here to bring you in line.” The anger was hot. “And I will do so however I please.”

Don grabbed Mez and shoved him away. “Jackal, I’m sorry in advanced, but this is going to hurt!”

“What are you going to do?”

“Minimize the damage,” the sorcerer replied.

And Tibs saw another mistake he’d made. His attack wasn’t only heading so the edge would have hit Don and Mez, it was spreading ever wider. A cone, instead of a jet; and it would spread to include Jackal and the creature.

“After this, Tibs. No more excuses. I’m taking you to someplace with no one around as we’re starting your training.”

Tibs felt Don wrench his control away and was thankful for it, dropping to a knee from the relief. The cone was narrowing, but not all the essence was doing what the sorcerer wanted. Too much for him to control, Tibs expected. He tried to help, but even what didn’t obey was under Don’s control, and Tibs couldn’t take it back. Jackal was in the air, the creature’s arm against his stomach and the two moving terrifyingly slow. The pain was clear on Jackal’s face and Tibs hated himself for creating the situation that had distracted his friend.

Then it was over. The redirected, narrower corruption hitting the creature, and Jackal suddenly moving at full speed, hitting the wall and sliding to the ground, his side emitting a sickly purple smoke.

Planning-96

Tibs dropped next to Jackal, already absorbing the corruption that turned his left side a sickly purple. "I'm sorry," He said over and over. Some of the corruption had already seeped into the fighter's essence, so no matter what he did now, Jackal was going to suffer for a while because of him.

"What about?" Jackal asked weakly.

"This. And if I hadn't messed this up, Don wouldn't have had to distract you and you wouldn't have gotten hit, and—"

Jackal laughed, then groaned.

"It's not funny," Tibs said. He applied a purity weave over the injuries.

"Kinda is," Jackal said, panting. "The way you think I didn't mean to get hit."

"You don't get hit," Tibs replied. "You're too good a fighter."

"I get hit plenty." He sounded stronger as the purity spread and repaired the damage. Tibs added his essence to replenish what Jackal lost. "And there was no faster way to get out of there."

"It's still my fault you got hit with corruption. I tried to help, and I screwed up and—"

"You won us the fight."

"Don did. If he hadn't taken control of the essence, I'd have killed them."

"I wouldn't have been able to throw that much corruption at it," the sorcerer said.

"And it took everything to destroy it. So you were vital to us winning. How are you feeling, Jackal?"

"I'm going to be sick for a while, aren't I?"

"Yeah, sorry. Once it mixes with your essence, I don't know how to—"

"I'll live. That's the important part. And we get a lot of loot out of it." He motioned to Mez, approaching with a large bulging sack.

"Like all the chest getting here, that's all that was in it," the archer said. "What's with the dungeon?"

"It's being generous," Jackal replied. "Those gold rings are worth a lot, right Tibs?"

"Those aren't—"

"Trust us," Jackal said, cutting off Mez. "We know our metals."

The archer exchanged a look with Don and Khumdar, then shrugged. "Okay, so now what? We have a couple of hours before we need to head out."

"That wasn't how this was supposed to go," the Them growled.

“Don’t come complaining after you cheated and they beat you too,” Sto replied. The Them grumbled something Tibs didn’t make out, sounding as they were moving away.

“I really hate to say this,” Jackal said, “but we’re going to end this run early. I’m not at my best anymore, and let’s be honest. Without me in top form, you guys don’t stand a chance.”

“I don’t know,” Don replied. “We don’t need you at your best for you to throw yourself at everything we come across and distract them while we take them down.”

“I take down more of them than you have,” Jackal countered.

“Than I have, yes. But that we have? Accept it, Jackal. You’re just the distraction in this team.”

“Then stop looking at me like that,” Jackal replied, grinning, as Don blushed. “Cause I’m taken.”

* * * * *

The trek to the floor’s exit was more arduous than they’d expected. It was like all the city’s guards and dogs descended on them. True to Don’s expectation, Jackal threw himself at all of them, even the dogs. And true to Jackal’s word, he took down more than they did, but at a cost. By the time they reached the stairs, Mez and Khumdar were helping him walk. The fighter refused to let Tibs spend more essence on him in case the dungeon dropped a pillar on them or something.

Sto yelled after the Them each time they were attacked. This told Tibs they were responsible and that they could control things here against Sto’s will. Tibs felt the Them watching as they exited the floor, and then the dungeon. The cleric healed Jackal, commenting on the corruption. Then they headed for the inn.

Each time Jackal opened his mouth, Tibs shook his head, still feeling the Them watching. This confirmed it was who Tibs had felt all those nights. Until they went away, Tibs wasn’t risking talking about what Sto had done for them.

Krosep was at their table before Jackal dropped into his chair. “You look like you’ve been mangled by Serba’s dogs,” he said, putting tankards down.

“He was,” Tibs said, taking a long swallow. “How’s Russel?”

“Under the weather. Silvie is in the kitchen today.”

“You think he’d like me to visit him?”

“I’m sure he’d like that,” the server said as Jackal raised an eyebrow.

Tibs nodded. “I’ll do that then.” He palmed the ring the fighter handed him as he left the table.

Tibs knocked at the door, then entered. Russel was stretched on one side of the large bed, his skin pale.

“You look like you had a rough run,” he said.

Tibs shrugged. “No more than the others. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” he said, sounding annoyed. “I was hoping not to get whatever Kro caught that’s been going around, but... it’s just no my luck.”

“That’s not a thing,” Tibs said reflexively.

Russel laughed, then coughed. Tibs helped him drink water.

“Maybe it’s not for you adventurer types. For the rest of us. We kind of rely on the

thing.”

“No, you don’t.” He pulled the chair next to the bed. “You prepare everything you need so your cooking will go smoothly. You make sure those who help know what your plans are for the day.”

“And then this happens.”

“Stuff happens,” Tibs said. “That doesn’t mean there’s an element making it happen.” Even if this time there was one, and he wished the Them would lose interest so he could put the ring on. He wasn’t sure if this one would act the same way giving Kroseph’s ring an essence reserve to pull from did, or if the effect would be pronounced and the Them might notice.

Tibs didn’t want to get Sto into anymore trouble than he was.

“Sometimes it feels like they do,” Russel said. “Hate us I mean.”

“They don’t. They don’t care about us one way or another.”

“You sure about that? Considering everything that’s happened to this city, it’s hard to feel like they aren’t making it happen.”

“People do horrible things without anything’s help. That’s what happened here. Sebastien wanted power, and he thought controlling Kragle Rock would give him that. The guild didn’t care about what he did to us. That’s people hurting us, not the elements.”

Finally, the sense he was watched ended.

“You think it’s over then? I mean, other than this sickness. That man’s dead, and from what Kro tells me, there’s no one in that family who’s going to be looking to avenge him.”

“I don’t know if it’s all over. The worlds a lot bigger than I thought, and there’s always people who want power.” It put the ring on the man’s finger, earning himself a frown. “And so long as the guild doesn’t care about us, someone might think they can take it, and we’re going to get hurt in the process, unless we’re ready to deal with them ourselves.”

“Which you’re taking cared of.”

Tibs shrugged.

“What’s this?” Russel turned the ring, which wants as loose as when Tibs slipped it on.

“I think the sickness is about to run its course,” Tibs replied.

Russel stared at him. “Shouldn’t someone else get this? Someone more important?”

“You make our food,” Tibs replied. “You’re about as important as it gets. And we have more. We just have to be careful about how we distribute it.”

“How, Tibs? Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful you’re doing this, but how? You saved the dungeon, the town, twice.”

“We all did that.”

Russel shook his head. “If you and Jackal hadn’t been there, the town would have fallen when that man first arrived.”

“Jackal held it. I wasn’t here when Sebastian got here.”

“Barely. Not to say something bad about Kro’s man, but Jackal might have kept that man from taking over, but he didn’t make a lot of friends in the process.”

“He was fighting for the town. He needed things to be done, not for people to argue with him.”

“And somehow, once you were here, things started happening a lot better.”

"I just helped," Tibs mumbled, and Russel laughed.

"Sure, you just hanged out in the back, helping here and there." He fell quiet, turning the ring. "And now, you're bringing us a cure. I'm not sure if you get how..." he wiped at his eyes.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to my town, Russel. That means the people in it too."

"But how?" Russel demanded, sounding almost angry. "You're just a kid, Tibs. How do you do all of it? What are you?"

"I..." Tibs started to answer but faltered. He wanted to tell him something. Explain how he could do more than other, how he knew about Sto and the dungeon had agreed to help. Russel deserved to know he wasn't alone. "I have allies," he finally said. "Kraggle Rock has allies. They can't always do it, but they always want to."

"And those allies, they made this?"

Tibs nodded.

"Enough for everyone?"

"Hopefully," Tibs replied.

"I thought I was going to die too, Tibs."

"What do you mean 'too'?"

"You didn't hear? The sickness took Miss Nourtamont this morning."

* * * * *

"We need to get the rings out now," Tibs said, sitting down.

"Then those are the rings?" Don asked.

"Of course," Jackal said. "Didn't you know?"

"I suspected," Don said.

"I had no clue," Mez said.

"We also have to let Quigly know," Tibs said, "and any of our teams who make it to the fourth floor. I have no idea how many rings we're going to need to protect the town."

"What about that thing you said is causing it?" Don said. "That's here for the dungeon."

"Sto's dealing with it, mostly. It can take some of the control away from him, the way Sto can let Ganny control parts of it. It's why everything was attacking us on the way out. It even cheated, hoping we'd die."

"I can talk with Quig," Jackal said. "Speaking of, any of you know what's up with him and his woman?"

"What woman?" Tibs asked.

"Cross."

"She's not his woman," he protested. "She doesn't have a man."

"Then that's the problem." Jackal nodded. "Quig's pretty sure she's his."

"I don't think Cross lets any man tell her whose she is," Mez said.

"I saw her punch him through a stand in Market Place," Tibs said, remembering the argument he'd hurried away from.

"As interesting as that is," Don said. "The rings? How do we go about distributing them? It's not something the five of us can handle in a timely manner, not if we want to

prevent any more deaths.”

“I can have the rogues go around,” Tibs said.

“They can’t just drop them in pockets. The people have to wear them if they’re going to work.”

“We go to the merchants,” Jackal said. “Tibs can talk with Darran. He can speak with the others. Everyone goes to them, and they can explain what they’re about.”

“What are the chances some of them will start selling them instead of giving them away?” Mez asked.

“High,” Tibs grumbled.

“Especially if we don’t have enough,” Don said. “I think the rogue is a better idea.”

“If we can trust them,” Jackal said.

“I know who I can trust,” Tibs replied.

“That is still not a lot of help,” Mez said in a tone Tibs knew.

“You want to involve Amelia.”

“She’s proven she can be trusted, Tibs.”

Tibs ground his teeth since he couldn’t object. It didn’t matter how often she helped. Under everything, the fact she was a noble scraped him the wrong way.

“She and her allies among the nobles already go around helping the townsfolk,” Don said. “I’ve interacted with them.”

“And that raises the point of, what are we doing about the nobles?” Jackal said.

They all looked at Tibs.

Let them feed the Them, was what he wanted to say. Let them build their wall, block all the access and then lock the Them in there.

“Don’t they have a team doing the fourth floor?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Mez replied. “Us and Quig’s are still the only local teams to do it. The others are paying for the privilege.”

“I thought that high-class team, lead by the woman...” Don searched for something. “Silver hair, gold hair pins encrusted with all sorts of gems.”

“Lady Mirabel,” Mez said.

“Yeah, her. I thought her team cleared the third floor a few days ago.”

“She lost her archer in the process. She plans going clearing the third floor again with her new one to be sure they’re ready. I don’t know when her run’s scheduled.”

“Then she can get them the rings when she does the fourth floor,” Tibs said petulantly. Then he crossed his arms over his chest at the look the others gave him. When they didn’t stop, he sighed. “We take care of the townsfolk first. The nobles can get the leftovers, for once.”

Planning-97

Tibs followed the guard, unsure why he'd been summoned. He'd just started working on the ledgers, which now included noting the rings were being distributed; who had how many, and how many they had left. There were already discrepancies after only one full day, and he wasn't sure how to ensure it stopped.

A few blocks from the guild, Don, accompanied by his own guard, joined them. He had no more idea what was going on than Tibs did.

As soon as they entered the guild, Tibs stopped feeling the Them's eyes on him.

Instead of Tirania's office, which is where Tibs expected they were going, the guards brought them to a larger room on the ground floor at the back of the building. Tibs had only been here once, because that one time, when he'd explained he'd gotten lost, the clerk had looked at him so strangely he'd attempted it again without the medallion, and the weave within the building made it impossible to reach this part of the building.

The room had a table in its center with pages and pages stacked on them. A table in a corner, with a chair behind it, had more stacks. Tirania stood next to a man peering through pages at the large table. He glanced in their direction and dismissed them.

"There they are," Tirania said, beaming.

"There who are?" the man asked, not looking up.

"The heroes of Kragle Rock."

Now the man straightened, putting a hand to his back and stretching before turning to face them. "So these are who you had leading the fight against that Wells criminal?"

Tibs fought not to glare at Tirania. He'd known she'd claim the credit. It's what she'd always done; made it seem like she had been part of whatever the town had to do to survive.

"And how many Runners did they cost you?" he asked, studying them.

"Only those who were too weak to continue. If we'd been able to have runs during that time, the dungeon would have eaten them."

"And been fed," he replied flatly. "Do you have any idea how behind this little incident put the time tables?" He motioned to the table. "How expensive your lack of decisiveness was? You should have fallen on that man with all the guards under your control and not cared about the cost. I certainly wouldn't have cared who died in that," he grumbled, looking through papers again.

Tibs couldn't keep from starting as he realized this was the guild leader. Here was the man behind all the problems. He even sounded like he cared less about what happened to the town than Tirania did. He ground his teeth and considered his reserve. It was somewhere

over half. Unleashing fire and feeding it all he had left would break through whatever protection the room had. Or Corruption was a better element. It ate through weaves faster. It would reduce this man to a puddle before anyone could react, and Tirania too.

And the guard, possibly Don. And the clerks and however Runners were in the building. Would he be able to contain it to the guild once he unleashed it? There were houses and shops all around it.

The size of collateral damage extinguished his anger.

He'd done this, the lashing out without care for who else paid for his revenge, and he never wanted to be that child again. He'd take down the entire building if he had to. Everyone who worked here had played a part in letting Kragle Rock suffer, but he could accomplish that by killing only one person.

He if killed the head of guild, it would all come crashing down. That was what had happened to Sebastian's organization. There would be reprisals here too, but this time he could do this without being caught, without being noticed.

"Well?" the man demanded, looking at them. At Tibs, he realized. He'd missed the question.

"The guild leader," Don said, "laid out her instructions clearly for what we were to do." The man snorted, but Don continued. "And we were able to handle both incursions, while she could ensure the dungeon was protected."

"You're the kid who brought down that house, right? Let us get our hands on those stones."

"Yes sir," Don replied.

"Gotta say that's impressive. From the reports I read—" he eyed Tirania. "—the enchantments on that house were significant."

"There were, sir. But corruption is particularly well suited to eroding essence weaves. It's why Tibs came up with the plan. The sorcerers who put them in place were sloppy. Once the weave started collapsing, nothing could stop it."

The man looked at Tibs. "You're a rogue, right?"

"Yes." After remembering who he was speaking to, he added. "Sir."

"Yeah, one of you would come up with something like that." He looked at Tirania and grabbed a page. "But of course, because you had kids dealing with that, how much was wasted? Then, there's that pool of corruption those sorcerers are building over? How is it they were able to buy that from some random merchant?"

"With everything else we were doing, the pool wasn't something that I felt was—"

"That merchant should never have gotten their hands on it!"

Tibs was happy no one looked in his direction, as he couldn't stop the eye roll. No, of course not. It should have been the guild how got all those coins, instead of people who would benefit from them. Nearly all the coins Tibs had gotten from that transaction had been discreetly put back in the town. He would have preferred just fixing everything, but that would have attracted the guild's attention.

"Then there the lake," the man grumbled.

"There's nothing I could have—" She stopped at his glare.

"Do you at least know how it is there are four of those in this place?" the man demanded.

Don glanced at Tibs, who shrugged. If he was asking about places where the connection to the elements were close, Tibs didn't know how there were four of them. There was the lake, the pool, and behind the archery field. He hadn't had audiences anywhere

—
Metal. That one had been in an alley, but then there would be a fifth. Light. Only that had been on the roofs, so maybe they weren't looking there?

"How would I know?" she demanded.

"If I may?" Don asked, and the guild leader raised an eyebrow. "I am to be a scholar, not an adventurer, so I've done a lot of reading about everything that has to do with the elements." The man motioned for him to continue. "While I haven't read everything there is, I've yet to come across any research that supports theories that there is a way to influence where thin places appear. They are linked to the element being in abundance, but beyond that, they appear at the whim of the elements, not at our will."

"And have you ever read anything about there being so many in one location?" the man asked, sounding intrigue.

"No, sir. But again, there are far more books I haven't read than those I have."

He chuckled. "You're going to lose this on the instant he's Epsilon. Mark my words. The Universities will be fighting to get a mind like his. Which is too bad." He looked at her again, and she stiffened. "Because we could use smart people managing guild houses." He raised a finger to them. "Don't defend her."

Don closed his mouth.

"You've lost us more people, Tirania, with his soft approach to just about everything involved in managing this place, than anyone I can think of, and we've had terrible managers before. You even lost us one of our best guardsman! Or are you going to tell me Harry Wells is off on some mission I haven't been told about?"

Her shake of her head was small, and Tibs thought it might have been more fear than her saying no. This man really had all the power.

"What about you?" the guild leader asked Tibs. "You know where he vanished to? The reports say you two had some sort of arrangement."

"No, sir. I was as surprised as everyone when I returned and found Irdian in his office."

"Irdian?" the man laughed. "Oh, he must be pissed that you use his name, considering the length he went to to shut you down. Don't worry. I don't care what you get up to so long as it doesn't get in the way of what the guild needs."

"Tibs only has the best interest of the guild in mind," Don said while Tibs fumed.

The man smiled. "Irdian doesn't think that, but then again, he dislikes rogues more than Harry ever did. Sort of come with the job, I guess." He turned to the table, looking through the papers. "Unless you have more tricks for them to perform, hoping to impress me, Tirania, you can dismiss them."

She glared at the man before dismissing Tibs and Don with a sharp wave, and the guards escorted them outside.

Tibs noted the Them's absence as he walked. Not that he cared if they listened in, if they could do that. They could see and drain people, but did that mean all other senses worked the same as they did for him? Could they touch? Could they do that in the dungeon?

Sto could only interact directly with people by inhabiting one of his golems. Maybe it was the same for the Them.

“That was interesting,” Don said. “I don’t think Tirania is going to be in charge for long anymore.”

Tibs nodded. Not that whoever the guild leader put in her place would be any better. The man’s comments made it clear he cared nothing for Tibs’s town and the people in it other than how they can serve his goals.

“How long until that happens?” How long until the man left and his chance to fix things vanished?

“It’s going to depend on how much evidence he needs to go through before a decision can be rendered. He’s clearly made up his mind, but replacing the person managing a guild house can’t be something that’s done just on that.”

“So a few days? Weeks? You think he’d staying here while doing that?” In the night, while he slept. Tibs could kill him then.

“I doubt it. A man like him won’t stay in a place like this. And it’s not like he’s got to wait in line at the platform. He’ll sleep in his home and come back in the morning.”

So no killing him in his sleep, and the only place Tibs knew the man would be was inside the guild building. If he knew how long he had, he might learn where he went during the day and find a better place, a back alley, maybe, that had worked on Tibs.

No, it would have to be inside the building, probably in that room. His weapon had to be corruption, but not on a large scale. He only wanted one death from this. The one person who truly deserved it. So he needed to come up with a way to concentrate as much essence on the edge of a blade as he could, of not make the whole blade from corruption, and he needed a way to get into the building and move about unnoticed. That one, he knew who could teach him, and Don could—

“What are you thinking about?” Don asked.

Don couldn’t be involved. He couldn’t even know what Tibs was planning. Otherwise, he might get caught in the fallout Tibs planned on avoiding. There was only one Runner with Corruption as his element, and as far as anyone in the guild knew, he was on Tirania’s side. When the guild leader died of Corruption, his supporters would want revenge.

None of his friends could know, because there would be some sorcerer from light or darkness, or some other element who could make people tell the truth. Tibs didn’t care if his involvement was eventually discovered, but he wouldn’t endanger his friends, or anyone in the town.

Except for one person, because he had no choice. But it wasn’t like Khumdar had any attachment to this place, and the guild didn’t own him. And Tibs was sure the Darkness cleric would love the kind of secrets pulling this off involved.

“Tibs?” Don asked again.

“Sorry, just thinking.”

“And about what?” Don’s tone turned suspicious.

“Nothing important.”

Planning-98

Khumdar couldn't hide from Tibs, not that Tibs thought the cleric was hiding from him specifically. Unless Khumdar had to interact with someone, he seemed to always be wrapped in darkness. And that was the skill Tibs needed.

Suffusing himself with the element made him difficult to notice, but that meant he had to rely on his bracers for anything else he'd have to do. And, if only for the kill, Tibs suspected he'd need more corruption than he could fill one of his reserves with. The guild leader had a lot of enchanted items on him, and Tibs couldn't tell how many were meant to protect him from what Tibs planned.

But no matter what Khumdar did, he had more Darkness than anyone else in town, so Tibs could pick him out easily when he was within his range. Which now stretched over half the town.

"I need your help," Tibs told the cleric as he stepped out of the alley. There were others there, moving away, once of which had Wood as their element. Green was coming enough as a tint to the essence Tibs knew it, even if didn't have that element.

"And what may I help you with?" the cleric replied, motioning for Tibs to walk with him.

"I need to know how you make people not notice you. I can't rely on suffusing myself for this."

"And will you tell me what this 'this' is?"

"Only if you make helping me dependent on it."

Khumdar nodded. "It is mainly about wrapping myself in my element." Around them, essence shifted, formed a sheath, and anyone who'd been stepping out of their way as they walked stopped doing so. "As you can see, it comes with a drawback."

This was different from when Tibs suffused himself with Darkness. Then, people stepped around him. They didn't notice him, but still sensed something there.

"But you do something to the essence. I can sense that, but I can't tell what it is; it's too complex." It felt like an etching, but had woven essence through it, and even letters. Although, as far as he knew, Khumdar hadn't taken training from any of the teachers who had Darkness.

The cleric gathered essence in his hand and manipulated it until it was like the sheath.

"What did you do? It was too fast."

"I..." the essence dissipated, and more took its place, loose at first, then shifting until it was like the weave. It dissipated again, and Khumdar did the same, frowning this

time. "I am uncertain."

"How can you not know what how you do it?"

"Do you know how you unleashed the corruption in the dungeon?"

"I gathered my essence, shaped it and sent it out, then lost control of it."

"Ah."

"You're saying you don't have to think about your essence when you use it?"

"I must think about it, but it is clear that I do so in a different way than you do. Than those who are not as bound to an element as I am do."

"But I have more Darkness than you do."

"Having more does not mean you are bound tightly to it."

"Okay. Then how about you do it again, but slower? Maybe I can sense enough of it to copy. Well, enough to do something similar. Each class thinking differently and all that."

"I shall try." The essence gathered in the cleric's hand, then shifted, and then was like the sheath.

"Can you go slower?" Tibs gathered essence of his own and tried to shape it the way he felts Khumdar's essence shift.

"I am trying, but once I will it to be a protective sheet, the changes happen much without my control."

"That's strange. We have to think about every step. Where each letter goes, how the strands are set, how much essence to put. We get better the more we practice, and some happen because of how we move. Something about how the motion triggers the knowledge, Alistair said. After I do it enough, and that's a lot, I sort of know how to make it happen instinctively. Stop it there."

The shift didn't stop.

"I seem to have the instinct with little of the time you spend in gaining it."

"Must be a cleric thing. Could be why the purity clerics manage to do healing as quickly as they do. I don't think Clara had any training for the weave she taught me. She didn't know she was teaching me," Tibs added at the raised eyebrow. "I just played curious Tibs and got her to talk about it, and she made one at the same time. I couldn't get her to repeat it, but it was much simpler than yours. Slow this part."

It didn't slow.

Tibs controlled his frustration. It wouldn't help figure this out, and Khumdar was doing this without probing. He also should stop talking. "So it's all you just want to do something, and it happens?"

"No. Anything that I wish to do that is not within Darkness's nature requires thought. The attacks with my staff forced me to consider what it meant for Darkness to be aggressive. Was it more like Fire that way, or like Metal? Was it unbending? Or more like Water and flowing."

"Is that how you work out which of the Arcanus goes into it?" Tibs had the start of it, finally. Or something that felt similar. There was a flow to it he couldn't match yet.

"I do not think of the Arcanus. While I have heard you and Don speak of it, I do not know it."

"But I can see them in what you're doing."

"Then it is something that also happens without me understanding it. I think of the

aspects the other elements represent when I train myself.”

“Is that something all the clerics do?”

“I do not know.”

Tibs almost turned to stare at the cleric at the faint light that came with the words. He did lose his concentration enough his weave fell apart. He’d figured Khumdar could lie to him. Darkness was about hiding things, and Tibs had no training with Light. But he’d never even gotten a hint it had happened until now. Was this because of how big the lie was, or because Khumdar wasn’t paying attention to what he said, being too focused on helping Tibs?

As interesting as it might be to probe how far Tibs could push this, he respected the cleric’s secrets, and Tibs had more important things to learn about.

* * * * *

Tibs leaned against the wall. The light hurt his eyes, sounds pounded his head hard enough he wanted to scream, and he was hungry. Had he ever trained so hard his whole body hurt? He suffused himself with Purity, and it all went away. The hunger returned as soon as he released it.

Khumdar watched him. “Would it not be more effective if you remained suffused?”

“You can tell I used Purity?”

“I have seen its effect on you often enough to recognize them.”

“I don’t want to depend on it. I might have to use something else.”

“I see.”

“I’ll tell you, if you want.” He at least owed the cleric that after... he looked for the sun. These hours helping him. No wonder he was hungry; it was well past zenith.

“You respect my secrets. I respect your desire to maintain yours.”

“I need to eat.” He headed for the tavern, seeing the tankard and not paying attention to the rest on the sign that would tell him which one this was. He just wanted food and drink.

As he waited for the server to return with his meal, Tibs formed the darkness sheath in his hand.

“It seems you have managed it,” Khumdar said.

“It’s not the same.”

The cleric forms is and placed it next to Tibs’s. “I do not notice a difference.”

“Maybe I see more details because of how I have to think about making mine. You don’t have to know so much about yours.”

“That is indeed a possibility. What do you expect the differences will cause?”

It was the overall shape of the essence that didn’t match. Tibs’s version was definitely an etching. It had nothing of the weave aspects Khumdar had in his. “It’ll need a constant flow of essence. That shouldn’t be a problem unless it needs more than my bracer gathers naturally. Then I’m going to have to shift element to refill it.”

“It will be best you ensure it is filled at the start of your endeavor, in that case.”

Tibs nodded. “I’ll spend the afternoon working with it.” The Arcanus were as close to Khumdar’s, but it only took a slight difference for the overall effect to be different.

The meal was good, and the server smiled at him each time she came by to inquire if he needed anything else.

* * * * *

People glanced in his direction. That was the first thing Tibs noticed as he walked among them sheathed in Darkness. They did so, looked around as if they couldn't figure out what had caught their attention and most went on their ways. The few, the more curious ones, headed for where he'd been to investigate. Tibs stepped around them easily, and they didn't notice him doing that. As far as he could tell, the effect only happened when someone wasn't looking in his direction. His sheath registered in the peripheral vision only, and only if they weren't focused on something else. Like where he'd been.

In the walk from the tavern to the guild building, Tibs could tell the sheath used up more essence than his bracer gathered, but it was faint enough he couldn't tell how long until the reserve would be depleted.

He joined the rear of a group of clerks heading for the building so that if the guards noticed his sheath, they'd dismissed that as one of the others catching their attention. About fifty paces from the entrance, the essence in the doorway did something Tibs had never felt it do before. It stretched out toward them.

Toward him.

He turned and walked away slowly. Each step he took caused it to recede. He estimated sixty paces to be as close as he could get before his sheath triggered the enchantment. But was it that? Or had his intense training caused a change in him the building's security sensed? Mind was an element. Could that be it? It knew his intent against someone inside it?

He only had one way to test that.

He stepped into an alley, let go of the sheath, and stepped out, heading for the entrance. He made it in without a reaction from the enchantment. So he could step in, but he'd be noticed. The guards had looked at him as he approached. Tibs wasn't the anonymous clerk or Runner the others were. They all knew him.

He'd need a way in without being detected.

But could he use the sheath inside the building? He walked the halls, letting the magic confuse him until he was somewhere and by himself. He kept his senses alert as he formed the sheath. From inside, he wouldn't have much time to react, and even if he dismissed it, the alarm might already be sounding.

Before he finished the thought, he was sheathed, and none of the weaves reacted.

Had the guild fallen victim to complacency? Or did they count on everyone working here having an element to pick up on things that were out of place? Even the lowliest clerk had been a Runner at some point.

Another thing he could only find out one way.

He took the medallion out of the pouch and headed for the entrance. More than one clerk glances up from the papers in their hands to look in his direction, but even the two with Darkness as their element kept going after looking around. Once he reached sixty paces to the entrance, he stopped. Did someone pay attention to the security magic? Would it pulling within the building immediately trigger an alarm?

Could he afford to find out?

He definitely couldn't afford to be discovered. However he made it in, he'd stay as far from the entrance as he could once sheathed. Fortunately, the room the guild leader used as his office was on the other side of the building, and there were training rooms he could

slip into to sheath himself.

He found such a room, dismissed the sheath, and left the building.

He knew how to reach the guild leader once he was inside.

The problem was how to get inside, and how to ensure the guild leader died.

How much of a disguise would he need to get by the guards? At the library, all he'd needed was to look like any of the other people going in, look like he had coins. Here, if he looked like a clerk, he might slip in, unless the guard recognized him in spite of that.

The downside of being one of the Heroes of Kragle Rock.

So he'd figure that part after he knew how to kill the guild leader.

And for that, he was going to need Don's help.

Planning-99

Don proved harder to find than Tibs expected.

It used to be all he had to do was sense for someone with corruption as their element, and it would be him. But with the corruption sorcerers working on building the over the pool, there were a lot of them in town, and they weren't all staying by the corruption pool. Tibs could dismiss many of them by how strong they were, but that left too many close enough to Don. Tibs had to run around Kragle Rock looking for his teammate.

And he so didn't have the time to waste.

He found Don at the Pool and Tibs cursed himself for not starting there. It didn't matter that with the concentration of people with that element there; it was impossible for him to tell anyone apart, or that he had no reason to think Don would be helping, or talking with them, or that they'd even acknowledge a Runner. He should have known to start there.

Now, most of the day was gone, and Tibs was hungry, and Don might not want to take to time to help him and... Could he ask another Corruption sorcerer to help him? They wouldn't know enough to question why he wanted to focus on making a weapon. But would they question that he had Corruption as an element? How widespread was the knowledge that Don was the only Runner with corruption as his element?

"Tibs?" Don called, approaching. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." He motioned for them to move away. It should be easier to convince Don, anyway. "You said you wanted to train me," he added once there was enough distance.

"And I figured you'd find more reasons to be too busy," the sorcerer replied casually.

"I never found reasons. I just was that busy."

"And you no longer are?" again far too casually.

"I'd like to not almost kill everyone the next time I have to use a lot of corruption."

Don nodded. "How about we eat? We can work on your control afterward."

Tibs bit back his reply. It was a sensible suggestion; how well would he focus while distracted by his hunger? It wasn't like he'd be able to suffuse himself with Purity the entire time.

"Alright," he replied, hoping he didn't sound as forlorn to Don as he did to himself.

* * * *

Quigly approached as Tibs finished his meal. It was only him and Don at their table. Mez was with his girl, as was becoming the norm. Khumdar was off in the town somewhere,

and Jackal was in bed getting over the corruption Tibs had infected him with. It was leaving his body quicker than the first time, but it would still be a day or two before the fighter could get out of bed.

“Tibs,” the warrior greeted them. “Don.” He looked around the inn. It was mostly Runners at the tables, with a few of the townsfolk. Guards were no longer welcome here. People also left as much of a space between Tibs’s table and the others as they could. He pulled a bag from a pouch that looked a lot like the one Jackal had, down to fitting items larger than it was. Tibs wanted to know how much they resembled each other, but he didn’t want to draw attention to Jackal’s. “It’s a good thing you told me about these. I don’t think we’d have bothered with them, considering how much there’s been in every chest.”

Tibs opened the bag filled with plain looking brass rings. He couldn’t tell if each had a weave, but he counted on Sto to continue until Tibs told him they no longer needed them.

“Should I ask how it is the dungeon knows we need these?” Quigly asked, eyes fixed on Tibs, who shrugged. It wasn’t like he could have an answer to that. He was just Runner, like the warrior.

“How did the dungeon know to start providing meats and other foods when we were having trouble getting it from outside?” Don asked. “Or weapons when we were getting ready for Sebastian’s attack? This is its town. It needs us to survive, so it must have ways to know our state and take actions. And if you think about it, it also serves as incentive to get Runners to go in, so it benefits too.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Quigly said, only glancing at the sorcerer before returning to Tibs.

He placed the bag on the floor and would store it before starting his training. In the morning, he’d distribute them. He couldn’t free his town only to have the people die from the sickness because he wasn’t prioritizing.

“Anyway,” the warrior finally said. “I’m glad me and my team could help. We kept a few to give to the people we care about.”

“Won’t Cross shove that down your throat when you try to give it to her?” Don asked, smiling over his tankard.

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

“Hasn’t she made it clear she doesn’t care about your heart at all?”

Quigly leaned on the table. “How about you keep that corrupt nose of yours out of other people’s business? Or do like that cleric of yours; keep the fact you think you know things to yourself?”

“Noted,” Don replied, grinning. “I will no longer comment on your impressive attempts at getting that woman to kill you.”

The warrior left, grumbling unflattering things 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 about that’s involved with someone else.”

“You really don’t like knowing about couples?” Don asked, wiping the sauce out of his plate with the last of his bread.

“I can’t not know about Jackal and Kroseph,” Tibs replied darkly. “That’s more than I

wanted to know about anyone, ever.”

“You only say that,” Kroseph said, taking his finished plate, “because you haven’t found that special someone for you.”

Tibs snorted.

“How about you, Don? Anyone you are chasing?”

“I’m not the chaser,” the sorcerer replied. “I’m one of the Heroes of Kragle Rock. I get chased. And there is this lady from a neighborhood not too far from here that has been dedicated in her attempts to get me to—”

“Can you just not.” Tibs glared at his teammates, who grinned. “Since you’re done, how about we get to training?”

“You are training?” Kroseph asked, surprised.

“I do train,” Tibs replied.

“When your teacher is here,” the server replied, “or when something happened that you hold yourself responsible for.”

Tibs pointed up and leveled his gaze on Kroseph.

The server rolled his eyes. “He’s not that badly off and you know it. He’s just using this as an excuse to have me tend to him.”

“Like you need an excuse to ‘tend to him’,” Don said, grinning.

“I’m a caring guy,” the server replied as Tibs put his head in hands and groaned. “I will tend to whatever my man needs.”

“Kro!” his father called. “If you’re going to spend so much time talking with them, how about you sign up to become a Runner?”

“Work calls.” The server left.

“Don’t even start on the everyone needs a special someone stuff,” Tibs said in his hands. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“It doesn’t have to be a special someone,” the sorcerer said, grinning when Tibs glared at him.

“Are we going to train or not?” Tibs saw the mirth in Don’s eyes and he raised a finger in warning.

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

* * * * *

“Are you going to get in trouble for this?” Tibs asked as they entered the incomplete building over the corruption pool.

“Not so long as you don’t destroy this. While it won’t be official until I’ve reached Epsilon, I am a member of the Academy.”

“You’re pretty close already,” Tibs said, looking around the large space. “I have a hard time sensing the difference between you and some of the sorcerers working on this.”

The building was as deep as six of the shops and three of them wide. It went beyond the pool in each direction and their place was to encase it, therefore keeping the smell from spreading and making this part of Merchant Row usable again. How those working in this building were going to stand the stench, Tibs wasn’t sure. No one was as immune to the smell as he was.

Don smiled. “Good to know, but until I’ve pass the examinations, I’m still just

Lambda. My instructor is only now explaining what the one to reach Zeta consists of.” He reached the center and faced Tibs. “Alright. I think we’re going to start by figuring out how much essence you can keep under control.”

“I’d rather find out how to make a weapon out of corruption.”

Don watched him. “What you made was a weapon, a massive one, which is what turned out to be the problem.”

“Which is why I want to learn to make something smaller instead. Something more concentrated, like sword.”

Don’s eyes narrowed. “You already know how to make swords.”

“Out of ice and metal, but those elements want to be solid. All I have to do is shape them and I barely have to think about them after that.” He pulled corruption essence to his hand and formed a knife out of it. It was more the impression of a knife, with the blade drooping down ever more. “This is what I get if I think about it as much as I need to for my ice sword.” He added metal, and the edge gained the gleam of sharpness, but it continued to droop. “Unlike with my ice sword, metals not doing much to make it a better weapon.”

“That would be because their natures are at different ends.”

“I figured that was something like that. And I need to use letters to make them work together, but everything Alistair taught me is in relation to water. Those that work with that element don’t do the same thing with corruption.”

“It’s going to be because while they both seem to be the same to you, as being fluid, they aren’t actually fluid in the same way. Corruption imparts a—” he sighed. “Tibs, I don’t think this is the time to indulge your curiosity. You have a habit of throwing everything you have at a problem, and that’s when you lose control. The best thing for now is to work on that. Find your limits and figure out how you can safely push beyond them.”

“I think...” he hoped this worked. “That the reason I go for throwing everything is that I don’t have another way to use that element. Something safer. I haven’t thrown so much fire I lost control of it since I work out the fire whip.”

“You drained yourself at the permit office, burning that boss down.”

Right. “I panicked. But I’ve been working with the whip since, so I won’t have to do that.”

“Which reinforces my point that you need to learn to control the use of large amount of essence before focusing on the precision.”

“But with something to use I can practice with without needing this—” he motioned around them “—I’ll be able to be more confident in what I can do.”

Don paced, and Tibs worked on more arguments. As tempting as it was to fill the guild building with corruption, too many others would be hurt. There had to be one and only one dead from this. He might have to hurt others when he ran afterward, but he’d be able to manage it without killing anyone.

“You’re reasoning doesn’t make sense, Tibs,” Don stated. “Over and over, you’ve demonstrated that you’re at your most dangerous when you are forced to use more essence than you can handle, and the dungeon knows that. It’s going to keep finding ways to push you, and you know that.” He looked at Tibs. “This has nothing to do with the dungeon, does it?”

“Of course, I’m trying to keep the team—”

“I’m not Jackal. And I don’t think even he’d believe that one.”

“I’m just—”

Don raised an eyebrow.

Tibs sighed.

“I’m going to make you a deal,” the sorcerer said, and Tibs readied himself to explain what he was planning. “I’m going to help with this today. I’m going to explain which if the Arcanus you need, where in the etching and how to maintain something like what you want.”

Tibs stared, waiting for the conditions.

“But this is the only time. When we meet again for training, and trust me, I will drag you to more of these because whatever this is about? I want to make sure you don’t end up hurting one of us again. When I train you again, it’s going to be about your control and you are not going to try to change things. Is that clear? This is your only chance to have me help with that corruption blade idea. You are on your own with that afterward.”

Tibs nodded, happy Don had talked him into eating first, because he had the feeling the sorcerer wouldn’t care if he’d been distracted or not. Tibs was about to experience Don in implacable instructor mode, and it was going to be up to him to keep up.

Planning-100

Tibs focused on the nearly black knife floating between his hands. He didn't need them there, encasing the etching, but it was comfortable to have a visual limitation to how the essence could move.

Don has spent all the afternoon explaining which letter to use, where they went and why their positions had to be different from when Tibs used Water essence, even if it and Corruption seemed to behave in the same way when enough of it was pooled together.

"Corruption doesn't flow the way Water does," Don had said, and silenced Tibs when he tried to correct him. Flowing wasn't the right word for what Water essence did. Not that he had a better one to describe it. And with how Don searched for one, and then seemed to give up, he might not have one for Corruption either. "It oozes."

Tibs had nodded, and Don had settled himself into a stance that reminded Tibs of Alistair as he set about explaining one of the deeper concept of working with essence. Unlike his teacher, Don had no patience for Tibs's curiosity. Anytime he had an idea about what he might be able to do to improve the knife, such as altering the etching so he could make the essence in it denser, Don glared at him, and went on with what he was explaining.

Don's explanations were clear, and if Tibs's question was about clarifying something he didn't understand, Don expanded on it. It was how Tibs had learned about enough of the Arcanus to do what he was doing now.

With Corruption, Ike needed to be placed further apart, instead of closer. That had been Tibs's first misunderstanding. More of a letter did not mean its effect would be more pronounced. The placement was what mattered. The placement within the etching or weave, as well as in relation to the other Arcanus that were used.

There were entire wings of universities with books dedicated to showing how the Arcanus needed to be positioned to get a specific effect. There were so many not only because each element needed a different arrangement, but mindset also affected the overall effect.

Don had gone on a tangent then, explaining that those mindsets were what had led the guild to establish the classes. Over decades and decades of research, it was noted that certain groups seemed to think in similar ways. It wasn't so much that they did things the same way that when they thought about how they'd do something, their minds approached the problem in ways that were close enough to be considered the same.

Hence the existence of the fighters, sorcerers, archers and rogues. Clerics were their own class by the effect of not allowing anyone to study them.

He'd then realized he'd diverged from the established teaching, had glared at Tibs as if he'd prompted, even if he'd been silent the whole time, and gone back to explaining the interaction of Ike, Bor, and Kha, in getting the knife to behave like a knife.

Once Tibs had been able to make the knife and hold it for longer than a few breaths, it had been dark for a while and Don called his work done. He'd stated that the next time he found Tibs, he'd pull him away from whatever he was doing, no matter how important Tibs claimed it was, and dragging to get him to learn proper control over the volume of essence he could unleash.

Tibs had intended to continue practicing once he was back in his room, but one look at his bed, and he'd been unconscious on it.

He'd washed once awake and sat at the table to work on adding the effect he needed for his knife to ensure it killed the guild leader.

He'd added Ool, which he'd gotten Don to explain, when he'd mentioned in passing how some assassins used that to make their attacks more effective. Tibs didn't remember how that had come up, but the answer would help him. Ool had something to do with helping essence spread within a person. So Tibs had added as much of that Arcanus to the tip of the knife as he could and still have it act as a point. It turned... mushy, was the best word for it, if there was too much of it in relation to Bor. It didn't seem to matter when it came to Ike. For a reason he hadn't been able to get Don to explain.

He'd also been able to incorporate Gur within the 'blade' because Alistair had mentioned at one point how that Arcanus allowed for more essence within an etching when properly balanced.

Tibs had almost found that balance after a few hours of work. The knife could now hold far more corruption essence than when he'd started, but the problem was that it kept leaking out until it settled close to how much there had been the first time. The leak wasn't fast, in that once set, he thought it would be a few hours before it was done, but Tibs had no idea how strong the guild leader's defenses were, so he couldn't afford for his knife to have anything other than the maximum amount of corruption it could hold.

The way it was now, he had to keep feeding it essence, to compensate for the loss. It meant that he'd have to focus on both maintaining his darkness sheath and the essence within the knife. He had trained on focusing on two etchings, but it meant that too many distractions could cause him to falter with either.

Which was why he was still working on it.

He gave himself until it was time for lunch, not when he was hungry, since he had access to purity, but the zenith. Then, he would practice maintaining both while walking through the town and try to come up with a way to get into the guild unnoticed.

* * * * *

"In a hurry?" Kroseph asked as he placed a new tankard before Tibs. He was almost done eating.

"Lots to do." He'd lessened the leak of essence in the knife, but not stop it. Putting Ike or Bor closer together didn't have the effect Tibs hoped, and any increase in Gur past where it was now just broke everything.

"And does one of those things include visiting Jackal?"

Tibs closed his mouth on his protest that he had too much to do. The reproach in the

server's eyes warned it wouldn't be taken well. He nodded and hurried to finish eating.

He knocked on the door, then cracked it open and peeked inside. Kroseph was still working, so he wouldn't walk in on anything he didn't want to see. Not that waiting to be told to come in hadn't led to him seeing far more of Jackal and Kroseph's them time than he wanted. Those two loved to tease him that way. And Jackal on his own didn't mean he wouldn't engage in private fun just to annoy Tibs.

Unlike the fighter, there were things Tibs didn't feel was appropriate doing when others were around. Especially someone who said, over and over, he didn't want to see that stuff. Jackal was reclined on the bed, lower half covered with a sheet, and hands over that.

Tibs walked in, and the fighter smiled.

"Come to see your dying leader?" he said, then forced a cough. "I thought you'd forgotten I existed already."

"Been busy," Tibs mumbled. He knew Jackal was jesting, but Tibs had forgotten about him in getting ready for what he had to do. "And you aren't dying."

Jackal forced another cough. "How can you say that? I've been wasting away in this bed. Soon there'll be nothing left of me."

Tibs sat. "I can sense how little corruption's left. There isn't enough left to keep you in this bed."

Jackal had a hand on Tibs' mouth, looking at the door in fear. "Don't say that," he whispered. "Kro might hear you, then he'd going to stop looking after me."

Tibs rolled his eyes and pulled the hand away. "Your man is never going to stop looking after you. No matter how healthy you are. And if you tell me what the special stuff he does to you when you're sick, I am going to fill you with so much corruption it's going to shrivel down to nothing."

"I don't know if there's enough corruption to make that happen."

Tibs snorted. "I've seen it, remember? I know exactly how much it'll take. If you if you didn't want me to know, you shouldn't keep arranging to have your fun when you knew I'd walk in."

"How was I to know you'd return to our room in the middle of it?" Jackal said, grinning.

"You have your ways," Tibs grumbled.

Jackal chuckled. "What's keeping you busy?"

Tibs shrugged, and the fighter frowned.

"If I threaten to tie you to that chair so you'll have to watch me and Kro have fun, will you tell me?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"That's usually how threats work."

Tibs glared at the fighter, who lost his humor. This wasn't why he hadn't visited. He had just forgotten. But it was the danger. Jackal knew him too well.

"If you don't want to tell me, Tibs, it means you probably shouldn't be doing this."

"I have to."

Jackal sighed. "I hate that when you say that. It probably means it's true. You're going to be careful?"

"As much as I can. It's why I forgot to visit. I'm working on making sure it goes

right.”

“Good. Because as soon as Kro works out I’m not sick enough to stay in his bed, I’m putting the team back on the schedule. And I’m going to need my rogue if we’re going to clear the fourth floor.”

Tibs nodded. They’d be able to do their run once he was done.

“Then I guess I should let you go,” Jackal said. “I’m supposed to be weak, after all. Any longer and Kro’s going to start suspecting I’m up to no good.”

“When are you ever not?”

Jackal stared at Tibs. “You mean he already knows?” Tibs shrugged, and Jackal’s expression turned suspicious. “Okay, now I’m wondering what exactly my man’s up to?”

“Enjoying not having you running around the town, getting into fights, staying out until the late hours, enjoying drinks with unmentionable people.”

“Hey, I mention them if I’m asked.” Jackal’s smile died. “Tibs, be careful.”

“I am.” He stood and felt without saying goodbye.

* * * * *

The problem wasn’t focusing on maintaining his darkness sheath and the corruption knife at the same time. The problem came from the one detail he’d forgotten in his hurry to train both.

People couldn’t see him.

He’d lost his focus more time than he could count because someone had almost walked into him and he only noticed them at the last moment. His sudden appearance had started the first few enough Tibs had focused on not losing the sheath in worry words would spread and the guild work out what Tibs was planning.

Now he was working on maintaining both while remaining aware of the people around him. It was a strain, but the upside was that it wouldn’t be as crowded within the building as it was here.

By the time the sun was approaching the top of the mountain, Tibs could navigate his way through all but the thickest crowd without bumping into anyone, or losing hold of either of his etching. The loss of essence from them had suffered from the split attention, but not so much he couldn’t do this.

If he could get in.

He’d approached the guild while sheathed, looking to get a sense of how the weave that reacted to him worked, but it was too complex.

And he needed a way in. His plan was to do this tomorrow as soon as the guild leader was back. He’d confirmed he wasn’t done from listening to the clerks walking along the road. It was the principal topic of conversation. No one knew how long the man would be around, or what the result of his investigation would lead to.

From the bits he pieced together. The possibilities seemed to go from removing Tirania to wiping out the town and restarting from the beginning with new everyone.

His need for urgency fought with his need to be careful. He didn’t intend to succeed, just to end up dead. He wasn’t abandoning his team like that.

He leaned against the wall, out of the flow of people to rest. He maintained the sheath and knife, as he had as soon as he’d exited the inn. Without the added distraction of the people, he barely had to think about either to keep adding the essence.

It was also why he noticed the dog sniffing the ground. It was heavier set than most of Serba's dog, but he recognized it. It sniffed past him, whined, sniffed in the opposite direction, whined again, and started sniffing in what felt like random to Tibs.

It stopped before him and looked around, sniffed and looked around again and he realized it was looking for him. He looked around. Serba should be... he found her in at the mouth of an alley. Tibs took the long way around to reach the other end of the alley, only to not find her there.

When he turned, the dog was there, sniffing his trail, and unable to locate him. His sheath worked even on animals. He located Serba approaching, and this time simply stepped back and let go of the sheath. The dog let out a startled whine, looked at him, then turned around until it was in entrance and sat.

Tibs let go of the knife. Then Serba was by the dog, looking at him.

"About time," she said. "If you'd made yourself any harder to find, it would have been too late for me to warn you. Irdian's setting up to raid your stock again."

Tibs sighed. That was one thing he didn't have the time to deal with right now. "Okay, thanks... I'll mangle something." Did it matter? It wasn't like there was going to be a guild by the end of tomorrow. Irdian wouldn't have the authority to keep Tibs from helping other Runners, or keeping the shops safe from thieves, or any of the other reasons the guard leader had decided were good enough to keep Tibs from doing what needed to be done for the good of the town.

Well, if he managed to get in. He had yet to come up with a way that meant the guard at the entrance didn't notice him, and without that—

"When?" He yelled at her retreating back. Why go through the front door?

She looked at him over her shoulder. "At this point. Just about now."

Tibs ran.

Planning-101

The crate jostled again and something pointed pressed far too close to Tibs's sensitive parts for his liking, but he had to keep his hands to the sides if he didn't want to be thrown around among the, he hoped, sheathed weapons.

He'd gotten to the hideout only minutes ahead of the guards. It took him three crates to find one with enough space for him to fit among the weapons stored in it. Since he couldn't hammer the cover shut again, he'd used Water, with Kha and Bor to make it thick and sticky.

"Take everything," a woman said, start with the closest and Brom, get more people. The information we got wasn't right about how many crates we'd find.

Once he was done dealing with the guild leader, Tibs had a squealer to find.

He got what was inching close between his legs out of there with a quick grab, only for the crate to tip and Tibs to have to stifle a yelp as his shoulder hit the side and something heavy stabbed him in the chest. Good thing that was sheathed. Suffusing himself with Purity took care of the pain, while the guards cursed the one who'd let his corner slip. Then they were moving again.

The sounds changed, echoing off close walls. The quieter ones of clerks discussing work as they walked the halls. The occasional order for someone inattentive to get out of the way. A shift back and more of the weapons piling onto him as they walked down stairs. The crate hit the floor as one guard spoke and the others complained. Tibs made out numbers, his name, letters. A woman replied in a bored tone with more numbers and letters as being where the crate went. Then they were on the move, and after a door opened, the sounds were even more muffled.

They were in the area where confiscated goods were stored.

They walked much longer than Tibs thought the space was, from his one time sneaking into it, then the crate was dropped and the complaints diminished in volume until he couldn't hear them anymore. He didn't sense anyone heading in this direction so he made a bubble of air, adding Jir and Dhu to prevent sounds from leaving it, and stepped out of the crate, wincing at the racket the weapons made as they tumbled off him. He stilled and sensed for anyone running in his direction. The bubble did its job, only he heard the noise.

His was one of a dozen crates in the open space between shelves. They were stacked four high at the back, and one less each row ahead. His was on the floor ahead of a stack of two. Soon it would be lost under more crates until... Tibs didn't know. Would they linger there forever? Would someone catalog the content and the guild use what it could?

It wouldn't matter. Soon there would be no guild anymore.

He sheathed himself in darkness and cautiously headed for the exit, and encountered a closed door. People on the other side talked. Enough to carry a crate, and while he couldn't make out the words, the tone and cadence sounded like what the guards who had brought him in had said. He sensed the nails that held the crate together, as well as metal in it, but only small bits, rivets that held the hardened leather pieces together.

The guards moved in place, and Tibs pressed himself against the wall. He didn't expect to have long between the last of the guard stepping in and the door closing.

It opened, and six guards walked in, three to the sides of the crate. As soon as the last one was out of the door, Tibs slipped out and headed for the stair without pausing to see the clerk's reaction. She was seated at the desk, writing in a thick ledger.

Another closed door at the top of the stairs. On the other side was a hall. He didn't sense many people within it, but he couldn't tell for sure what direction they looked. Those moving had to look ahead, but too many were standing. Would any of them pay attention to an opening door? Especially if there was no one on the other side?

What was more dangerous? Someone unusual being noticed, or him waiting until the next group of guard came and opened the door, running the risk the guild leader would have left for the day? From what Tibs had gathered, he stayed late, but that didn't guarantee today would be the same.

He waited until the gap was as wide as he thought it would get and hurried out, closing the door quietly. He froze as a clerk looked up from her papers in his direction, frowning. "You notice that?" she asked a passing adventurer, pointing to the door.

He looked over his shoulder. His element was metal.

"What am I looking for?"

"I thought I saw the door open and close."

"So, it's closed now."

"But I didn't see anyone there."

The adventurer looked at her. "Then it's a good thing you're not adventuring," he said with disdain, and resumed walking. She glared at his back, then returned to looking at her papers.

Tibs took the medallion out of his pouch and headed away from her. He made the next left, so he wouldn't have to get any closer to the entrance as he had to, then made his way deeper within the building, stopping anytime he sensed someone approaching. He attracted less attention when he was still.

He encountered fewer people the deeper he was, and quickly enough, he stood before the office the guild leader used, with only a closed door keeping him from accomplishing his goal. Inside, he sensed the guild leader, along with Tirania and someone with Wood as their element and another with Fire.

He glared at the door. It had no enchantment, keeping it from opening, and a look at the lock showed him it was on the simpler side for the guild. It would be simple for him to crack it, but he couldn't.

He leaned against the wall across from it and crossed his arm, wishing it could understand how pissed it was making him. His target was there, his guard down, probably telling Tirania how horribly she'd done her job. How he'd have reduced the townsfolk into

mindless husks by this point, if he'd been the one in charge. How every coin would come back to them, instead of the merchants and...

He wanted to scream. To kick the door in and throw himself at that man. Plant the knife in his head and, being this organization crumbling. He couldn't stand that a closed door was preventing him from freeing Kragle Rock from the guild's oppression. It didn't matter how good his Darkness sheath was. A door opening by itself would draw their attention, and he didn't think someone who ran an organization as large as the guild survived by dismissing oddities like that. Tirania wouldn't.

And he didn't sense anyone approaching.

He paced.

What else was he going to do? He wasn't losing this opportunity. He'd wait until they left, he if had to. Plant the knife in, then run and let the corruption do the work. He had enough in the knife to get through any protection.

He froze as someone turned into this corridor. He etched the knife, filled it, and... they entered another office before he was done with that.

With a silent curse, Tibs considered what to do with the knife. He hadn't had the time to check if he lost more essence holding it, then reabsorbing it each time he didn't need it. He hadn't thought to check that. It was the first time he had to consider long-term use of an etching, two of them. He absorbed it. This wasn't a combat situation. He could quickly switch and refill his bracers if he had to. So long as he didn't get too many of these false starts, he wouldn't even notice the dip in his reserve.

The main problem was that it took time for him to fill the knife with corruption. He couldn't start once the door was opened. He had no way of knowing how long he had until he was noticed. He needed to act the moment he was in the room. He had one shot at this; he was certain of that. That meant the knife had to be ready before the door opened.

There couldn't be that many clerks entering this corridor who'd go to one of the other offices at this hour, could there?

* * * * *

There were four of them.

Enough that when the fifth one turned into the corridor, Tibs nearly didn't bother making the knife, but he reminded himself he couldn't miss any of the chances. So he etched it, and started filling it, his trepidation mounting with each door the clerk passed without turning to. It meant nothing; there were other doors beyond this office. Tibs had almost yelled at the woman who'd walked by him, and the door, only to enter one further two down.

The knife was filled with corruption with the clerk still two doors away. One more door, and the man looked ahead, intent on...

Come on, Tibs willed, this door. This is the one you want.

The clerk turned to the guild leader's office and knocked. Tibs was sufficiently stunned he only reached the side of the door as the clerk pushed the door open, slipping in right after the clerk.

The adventurer, or maybe he was Tirania's replacement? Glanced in Tibs's direction, then focused back on the guild leader who was talking about productivity something or other, tapping papers each time he looked at Tirania. He took the papers the clerk handed

him and looked through them.

Tibs carefully stepped around the room until he was on the same side as the guild leader. While he couldn't tell what the enchantments on the man's armor did, he could tell where the weave was thinner. He moved to the other side. The weaker section covered the third and fourth ribs, roughly the size of his palm. Not large, but Tibs wasn't throwing this knife, and the guild leader wasn't on guard.

All he had to do was wait for him to raise the arm. Once the knife was in, the Ool that made out most of the forward third of the blade would ensure the corruption spread quickly.

"And you," the man said, pointing at Tirania, "managed to—" he turned as Tibs launched himself. Something in the overall weave had reacted just as he started moving. Tibs adjusted. The weak spot was still within reach.

The tip sunk in, the weave shriveling as purple spread from the edge. He'd been right. Already, the corruption spread into the man, and the knife wasn't even entirely—

"Tibs!"

The scream brought him down to a knee by its volume and the anguish in Sto's voice. The knife was already dispersing essence he struggled to pull back together. Whatever was wrong, he'd see to it once this was—

"Help!"

It felt like Sto had hit him. He'd never sounded this scared or in pain. Even Bardik hadn't made him sound like he was being tortured.

The table scrapping force his attention away from Sto. The guild leader held on to it for support. The corruption spread from his side, ever deeper.

The other four were staring at him.

His sheath had fallen away with his broken concentration.

"Please, Tibs!"

He cursed the timing.

"Tibs? What did you do?" Tirania asked, surprised.

What he had to.

He ran for the door. What he had to hope would be enough, because he wasn't sacrificing Sto for the satisfaction of watching the guild fall apart around their leader's death.

Planning-102

Tibs slipped by the stunned clerk and was out of the room, medallion in hand, and running for the exit. He had to make it before the alarm sounded. Clerks stared at him. One called after him. Even an adventurer watched him, looking more amused than anything else.

Good, he was outrunning the alarm.

“Stop him!” someone yelled as he turned a corner, using Earth to keep from sliding.

Okay, things were going to get interesting. An adventurer, with metal as her element, and an Earth instructor, turned and stepped into the center of the corridor. Metal essence shifted around the adventurer, an etching forming between them and Tibs that encompassed the corridor.

That he could deal with. Tibs just hoped they wouldn't notice his eyes.

He channeled Metal and ripped the etching apart. The adventurer had been too confident in his strength and wasn't 'holding on' to the essence. The net came undone as Tibs ran by them. He sensed the Earth essence amass over the instructor's arm, but could only ready himself for the impact by coating his back with ice. Adding Earth or Metal risk one of them noticing.

The fist connected, and the ice shattered, along with his shoulder blade. Tibs focused through the pain. First, his landing. Ice on the floor. His concentration broke as he landed badly, but he was sliding on the extremely slick surface. When he could think through the pain, he sufficed himself with Purity, then switch back to water. He got to his feet and realized he'd lost hold of the medallion.

He couldn't tell where the entrance to the building was, but he had been heading in its direction already, so forward was where he needed to go. At some point, he'd run outside of the enchantment that protected the back of the building.

He ran off the ice and shouldered the clerk with wood out of his way before they could make anything of the essence they were manipulating. They lost their concentration on hitting the wall.

More people ahead, since he was getting closer to the exit. And he knew where the exit was. Lots of Runners, a few guards, a handful of adventurers, and three instructors.

This was going to be—

Etching came undone as Runners ripped them apart.

—easier than Tibs expected.

A golden eyed adventurer appeared before Tibs, and he launched himself over her with an air disk. He sense essence accumulate before him, and sent himself to the side by

jumping off another disk. Then the wall, rolling on the floor and back to his feet.

When this was over, he'd come up with a way to thank them for the help.

"Close the doors!"

Not if Tibs could help it. He threw water at the feet of the guards grabbing the handles and turned that to ice. As they fell, he threw water under the still moving door and iced that so it would climb up and thicken.

The weave protecting the entrance was already chewing through it, using corruption. He tried to undo that, but he wasn't strong enough to overcome that part of the weave. He settled for adding more and more ice to slow the process and ensure he'd make it.

The Water essence was ripped out of his control and the ice disappeared. He cursed and switched to Earth, filling the gap under the door again. He didn't have the training to turn that into anything like stone, and adding Arcanus was out of the question under these conditions, so he just through more and more essence and hoped no one would react fast enough to—

That was ripped out of his control.

Metal then! Spikes before the door biting into the wood, and only then being affected by the protective enchantment.

"Who's helping him!"

That essence was ripped away, but it has done its job. He would—

Ice formed in the gap. Shimmering and so clear, he mostly knew it was there because he sensed it. He didn't bother trying to take control of it. Someone able to do that with ice was far more powerful than he was, and they would expect him to try.

So he suffused himself with Corruption and threw that at the ice. It didn't get through everything, but enough that when Tibs jumped into it, the ice shattered, slicing into him. Purity took care of that as he landed, then was running again.

Yells to stop him continued, but the outside guards had been too surprised, and today, they didn't have elements.

Tibs turned into the closest alley to both make it harder on the guards running after him to keep up and to be out of sight to make their work even harder. An air disk launched him up above the roofs, and with only a little use of air essence, he landed on one and continued running.

He started for the Dungeon and immediately realize he was going to need help. Sto's call had stopped mid scream, as if someone had muffled him. That probably meant Sto wouldn't be able to keep the creatures on the fourth floor from trying to kill him.

He could do little against the guards patrolling the dungeon's streets other than avoid them, but the dogs, on the other hand.

He didn't bother trying to sense Serba. Her essence wasn't distinctive among the mass of townsfolk. But while her dogs had no more essence than people, it didn't form the shape of a dog, not a person. He sensed the largest group of them and switched direction.

* * * * *

He'd picked up an escort.

Three other rogues running the roofs in parallel to him. There had been five, but two had jumped down and led guards away. He motioned ahead to the left and down, and another rogue dropped from her roof.

He saw the end of the roofs as a plaza opened. The dogs were there, as were a lot of people, and too many wore metal. Okay, it made sense she'd be with other guards. There might be an event in the plaza. Unless merchants were involved, Tibs rarely found out about those ahead of time.

He dropped from the roof, assessing before landing. He didn't see her, but the mass of dogs with children told him where to head. Guards moved among the townsfolk, looking relaxed. The air was relaxed and from what he gathered as he ran through them, this had been impromptu, to celebrate the breaking of the sickness.

Everyone there wore Sto's ring.

The guards who yelled after him did so in good humor, telling him to slow down and enjoy the day.

He'd do that after he'd saved Sto and confirmed the guild was done for. The last thing he wanted was for some power hungry adventure to think the death of their leader meant it was time for them to take over. He couldn't afford to just hope the infighting for power would deal with all of them. He was going to have to ensure it continued until there was no one left.

Where was she? Not with the crowds; she didn't like people enough to celebrate with them. But her dogs were here, so she would be—in that alley.

"Serba! I need your help!"

She stared at him. "What do you need me for? Get Jackie."

"I need you." He stopped. "And I don't have time to argue. Someone's life is in danger."

"Then get more of your—"

"You! You're the one I need. The others can't help with this."

"And I can?" she scoffed.

"Please, Serba. One of my friend is going to die if you don't help."

That sobered her. She let out a series of whistles, and the run ran after her and Tibs.

"Guards and adventurers are going to try to stop me," he said.

"Why?"

"I pissed off the guild." He figured keeping it simple was best. "Is it going to be a problem?"

She laughed. "Just tell me what to do. If Jackie can follow your lead, what else can I do?"

"He's the team leader."

"Sure, keep telling yourself that."

When guards stepped into their path, Serba let out another series of whistles and the dogs ran ahead of them, jumping on the surprised guards and bringing them down.

"Are they..." Tibs trailed off.

"They aren't trained to kill," she replied, disappointed. "So they're going to be fine."

The next person to try to stop them was an adventurer. Epsilon, since any lower and he'd be a Runner, but only barely that. Don's essence felt almost as dense. Metal, like a lot of the adventurers who also acted as guards.

"I've got this one," Tibs said as the man moved his hands to his sides and thin blades formed. "Keep running down this street. I'll catch up."

And air disk had Tibs in the air, his ice shield and sword forming. The adventurer watched with none of the surprise Tibs's use of other elements had caused today. This one might not know who he was, or what he shouldn't be able to do.

The man moved quickly and smoothly, deflecting Tibs's descent so he'd crash to the ground instead of on him.

Tibs didn't crash. His feet touched the packed dirt and Earth stopped him, then he propelled himself at the man, who now reacted with surprise, but parried with essence assisted ease.

Tibs was used to that trick. Too much, according to Jackal and Mez, but winning was more important than doing it the 'right way.'

He ducked under a swing and nudged the man's essence as he moved to parry Tibs's attack and the sword was too far to stop him. Tibs's blunted sword edge hit the man in the face and he staggered.

"Not looking to kill you," Tibs said, as the man looked the blood on his hand from running it over his face. The blood was mainly from the broken nose. "Just walk away."

"I don't let murderers live."

Tibs smiled. The guild was done for at least.

The adventurer came at Tibs fast, doing something with his essence Tibs couldn't quite understand as he fought to keep the far too fast attacks from slicing him. The man's swords had an edge to would cut anything not reinforced with essence.

While Tibs didn't understand how metal could be used to make someone faster, the solution to that was simple enough. He disrupted the essence again, and the man stumbled. His skin turned metallic as Tibs's pummel approached, so he added Earth to the strength of the blow, and when the impact sounded, the man dropped and didn't get up.

He wasn't losing life essence, so Tibs took off to rejoin Serba, who'd made good distance during his fight.

"You're not just a runner, are you?" she said as he fell into step with her among her did.

"I am."

"Then where did the item you used to jump like that come from?"

"The dungeon."

"Tibs, the guild takes everything that comes out of there, someone is—"

"They only take what they know we find. We've become good at sneaking the stuff we want to keep out."

"Irdian is going to have a fit if he finds out."

"You going to tell him?"

"I don't work for him anymore."

Tibs stared at her, but was kept from asking when that had happened as the edge of the town came into view. If the guards knew he was heading for Sto, they would be—

They made it out of the town proper with no one in their way.

Why? They had to want him at all costs, so why weren't they covering the obvious ways out of the town?

"Tibs? Please tell me your friend just got into a fight among the stalls."

Because as far as the guild was concerned, the dungeon wasn't a way out. The guards

would be at the Transportation platform and on the opposite side, guarding the road there.

“Inside,” Tibs replied.

“I’m not a Runner,” she replied.

“It’s okay. This doesn’t need a Runner.”

“It’s a Dungeon, Tibs. Runners are who go in them.”

“No, anyone who goes in them is called a Runner. But this isn’t a run, it’s a rescue.”

The guards who saw them only looked perplexed. One called after Serba, but she didn’t respond.

“You can’t go—”

One of the adventurer at the bottom of the steps started to say as Tibs and Serba ran past them, but only watched instead of trying to stop them. By the door, the two guards there watched, not overly interested, while the cleric stepped forward. They never let anyone pass until they’d assured themselves the Runners were in good condition, unless one of them had pissed them off. Tibs didn’t recognize this one, but he was strong. Past Epsilon. Tibs had no idea what he was doing on healing duty, but he wasn’t the first one strong enough to be in the field, the way the guild used to do things manning the door.

Tibs hoped this would work, because any slow down here might make the guards interested in stopping him too. He suffused himself with Purity and locked eyes with the cleric.

The man took a step back in surprise, then only stared in shock as Tibs and Serba ran by them and into the dungeon.

Tibs breathed easier when the guards didn’t follow them inside. They were Epsilon, and Tibs had noted a preference for not going in from all the guards unless ordered to do so.

“How are you not out of breath?” Serba asked, panting, as he opened the doorway.

“Essence.” He made a purity weave and applied it to her. She stared at him, at his eyes, as it spread and her breathing slowed back to normal. “I’ll explain later. We have someone to save first.” He motioned to the doorway showing the orange sky of a setting sun and the top of roofs if someone paid attention.

“Tibs, I know I said all you had to do was tell me what to do, but that’s...” she looked scared.

“Serba. I can’t save him without your help. Please help me save him.”

“What is it,” She grumbled under her breath, “about you that’s making us do stupid stuff like this?” She stepped through the doorway.

Planning-103

“How...”

Tibs turned to urge Serba, but stopped as the awe on her face registered.

“How is the possible?” she asked, breathless.

“The dungeon can change things inside himself.” He fought the urge to tell her about the city being there ahead of time. The Them could be listening.

“But... none of the stories talk about...,” she motioned ahead of them.

“We can’t talk about the runs.”

“Oh, I’ve heard Runners talk about the city,” she replied, her roll of the eyes breaking the stupefaction, “but not one of them ever gave the impression this was the size of a king’s city. I figured they meant something like Kragle Rock.”

“It’s way larger than that,” Tibs scoffed.

“I can see that.”

“Are you okay to go on? We have to hurry.”

“Of course. You should have ordered me to move.”

Tibs shrugged, running down the stairs. “Being yelled at never helps.”

“You have met my brother, right?” she kept up with him, her dogs spreading around them.

“He gives the orders. We only yell at him when he screws up.”

“Then how is it any of you have voices left to speak when he isn’t around?”

“He doesn’t screw up that often anymore.”

She snorted.

Ahead, Tibs saw the city guards massing at the bottom of the steps. Half a dozen of them, each with an element.

“Don’t step on the ice,” he told Serba as he stepped on the section forming before him and stretching to the bottom. He gained speed as he slid, added air to push himself along. Since he was going to explain everything to her once this was done, he didn’t bother hiding what he was capable of.

Fire, Metal, Earth, Light, Corruption, and one he couldn’t identify. Unlike with people, the live essence in golem people didn’t gain the tint of their element. The two remained separated.

He suffused himself with Earth and turned his body to stone. He added his ice armor, then his metal to that. It was the best protection he could get against his mix of elements.

The ball of fire he took by reinforcing his ice, and immediately knew it was a diversion as the unknown element formed an etching in his path. When he could see, the shimmering crystal he was hurtling toward told him what that unknown element was.

Crystal was more versatile than he'd expected. They could be made sharp as metal, hard as Earth and even slick. He'd watched a Crystal fighter redirect attacks from his light archer teammate in training.

The net of sharp points extended wide and high, telling Tibs someone was managing this fight. Since he knew Sto was in trouble, this had to be the Them's doing. They knew what he was capable of, so planned accordingly.

That was okay. All they had to go on was what Tibs had done before. Time to try something entirely new and hope it worked.

He etched air ahead of him in a wedge, added Ike to sharpen the edge, added Corruption on top of that to weaken the etching, linking the two with Ool—and that was the wrong thing to use. The Corruption leeches into the Air and weakens everything and—

He was out of time.

His etched folded under the impact, corruption weakening it, but the crystal shard still cut him up badly enough that he had trouble thinking by the time he was on the other side. Fortunately, suffusing himself with Purity was a reflex at this point.

Unfortunately, it meant he lost his stone body and the guard's stone fist cracked the ice and metal over his armor as it sent Tibs flying into a wall. Still being suffused with Purity was the only reason he remained standing as he pushed himself away from the cracked wall, his injuries healing as they appeared.

If not for having to deal with six of them on his own, keeping purity for the length of the fight would be his better option. He suffused himself with Darkness and etched the sheath, then ran at the guards.

They didn't react as they should. Sto made them to be as like people as he understood, so they would be unable to see him, but they adjusted as he moved left. The Them's doing again. They saw his essences, the way Tibs did, or the dungeon equivalent, and they were passing the information on to the guards. What they couldn't seem to do was control how the guard fought, because their strikes were miss aimed, targeting where he'd been a moment before, instead of where he was.

That let him block the Light guard, the only one whose attack had more accuracy to it, then cut it open, and plant his ice Sword into the Crystal guard, setting it to spread, and forming another one in time to parry the Light sword, which sliced through Tibs's sword even as it was deflected.

Okay, time to switch tactic. He suffused himself with light and released a flash. Then threw darkness in a rough person shape away from the guard, who responded the way a guard should, turning to follow the escaping felon, only to stop as Tibs made a new sword and jerkily turned to face him again. Only it was too late. He cut it through from torso to shoulder with one Earth powered swing.

Two down—

Fire erupted around him, and the pain was intense.

"Finally," the Them snarled. "Something you're feeble against."

Tibs threw himself out of the conflagration, pulling and absorbing some of it to

replenish his reserve. Raw Corruption hit as he stood, and staggered him, but this was simple to absorb, as he made a sword to parry the Metal guard's swing. That sword tarnishing as he passed through the corruption reminded Tibs that another way people golem were like people was that they weren't immune to their teammate's attacks. He redirected the corruption so it engulfed the Metal guard.

It kept trying to hit him as it melted.

Tibs jumps, adding air for height, before the jet of fire reached him. A burst of wind sent him to the side, and he suffused himself with Earth as he crashed down. He was going to need a lot for this. As well as the added defense, since he wouldn't be able to do anything more until he'd handled the fire guard.

He stayed on the ground on landing. Sending essence down and ripping control from the dungeon. From the Them. By the time they were attempting to retake it, it was too late. The ground opened under the Fire guard and slammed closed on it once they fell in.

He redirected the essence to take care of the corruption guard, but it hurriedly moved away. The Earth guard ignored the essence pooling under him to continue pounding on his back. When Tibs ripped the ground apart, an etching spread from the guard's feet over the gap and kept it from falling in.

Was this something Sto, Ganny, or the Them had come up with? Ganny, he decided, as he pushed himself to his feet. This was her kind of clever. The guard kept pounding on Tibs. Earth guards were a lot like Jackal. Direct. Not all those Sto made fought with their fist like this one, but they went for the attack and didn't adapt or did something sneaky, the way Jackal liked to do once you thought you know what he was capable of.

Tibs had too much earth essence for the punches to do much more than crack the surface of his skin. When Tibs punched the guard, he also did little more than crack the stone skin, but those cracks let the corruption he covered his fist with seep in, and the etching they form kept it growing.

He turned to face the Corruption guard in the process of forming an etching that was too large to be something it could do on its own.

"I'm done letting you win," the Them snarled. "I just want to see you deal with this."

Tibs smiled. "Well, since you say it so nicely. I've been meaning to try this one for a while now." He suffused himself with purity and threw as much as he could at the guard.

The purity slammed into the etching, shattering it and then leeching everything that made the guard something, until it couldn't exist anymore.

Tibs absorbed the purity that was left.

He looked up. "Nothing to say? Sto and Ganny usually have comments after I pull off something like this."

"What are you?"

Tibs turned, surprised by Serba asked the question. She stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking at the battlefield with a mix of awe and fear; her dogs seated around her. That told Tibs she'd watch a good deal of the fight.

"I'm a Runner."

"You took on..." he motioned around Tibs.

"What you are," the Them said, tone dark, "is an abomination."

"I can do more than most," Tibs answered. "Doesn't mean I'm anything other than a

Runner.”

She looked at him in disbelief.

He looked up again. “As for you. What have you done to Sto?”

“The dungeon broke the rules.”

“You’re breaking them right now,” Tibs replied.

“And now I think I understand why,” the Them continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “You made him do it.”

“Sto helped because Sto cares,” Tibs snapped. “We were in danger. You were threatening our town.”

“Dungeons don’t care,” it replied. “They exist to perform a function, nothing more.”

“Make us better, yeah, I know. We—”

“Keep you in check! You and your kind are a pest on the world. You will destroy everything unless your numbers are controlled. That is what dungeons are for.”

“I think you got something wrong, then. When we survive, we get stronger, we get loot from the dungeon.”

“You need something to entice you. The living are all the same kind of cowards. You’ll grow until you choke everything around you without doing more than the bare minimum. Only when your greed is fed do you take risks. So a few of you survive, get stronger. It’ll be too little when the day comes.”

“The day comes for what?” Tibs asked cautiously.

“Don’t worry. You won’t live to find out. I will see to that myself.”

“Then how about you tell me, anyway?”

When the Them didn’t reply, Tibs cursed. They’d left to do something. He doubted he was going to enjoy the result.

“Tibs?” Serba asked, more cautiously than he’d posed his question.

“It’s the Them,” he replied, waving to the ceiling. “They’re planning something.”

“Them?” she looked up, then at him, uncertainly. “Is that who you were talking with?”

Tibs nodded. “They’ve done something to Sto and they’ve taken control.”

“Who is Sto?”

Tibs motioned around them. “The dungeon. He’s who we need to save from the Them.”

“The dungeon.” Her voice shook. “You think the dungeon needs to be saved from them?”

He stepped toward her, and she stepped back. The dogs growled at him in response, then, as if realizing who he was, stopped and looked at Serba plaintively.

“I know it sounds like I’ve fallen into the abyss and left something down there,” Tibs said carefully. “But Dungeons are people in a way. But no one knows it.”

“Except you.”

“I’ll explain everything I promise, Serba. But we have to save him first. He made the rings that healed the town.” He motioned to the one she wore. “It’s not the first time he helped us, and now it’s our time to help him.”

“Why isn’t the entire guild here to help you?”

“Because if the guild knew, they’d look for a way to take even more advantage of

him.”

“Then the other Runners, your team.” She narrowed her eyes. “Does Jackal know?”

“Of course he does. He’s my team leader. And I didn’t have the time to get anyone else. You’re the one person I have to have helping me.”

She straightened and smiled. Tibs realized that she thought he’d placed her above Jackal. Which he had, for this one case. He didn’t point that out. He didn’t understand why those two didn’t get along, but for now, he’d make use of it.

Planning-104

They made it three blocks before encountering more guards. Four of them, which Tibs dealt with. They didn't target Serba or her dogs, even if she was barely outside the fight. Maybe the Them didn't consider her enough of a threat to bother with.

As with the previous fight, she picked the silver coins the guards left behind on crumbling away.

Four blocks with no attack. Then he stopped as he sensed them. They were too close for him to do anything other than—

"This is up to you," he told Serba, just as the first of the large dog stepped out of from between two houses. This one was mottled gray and brown and more massive than Crusher, Serba's largest dog.

"What do you mean, up to me?" she demanded, as another stepped out behind this one, slightly smaller, pure white, with curly fur. Another one was next to this one and Tibs sensed more behind. As well as behind the other dogs, stepping out from alleys and buildings surrounding them. "One of those things is going to rip my dogs apart."

"I don't want you to fight them. I want you to order them to stop, or maybe get them to fight for you."

"I can't do that! Tibs, do you know how long it takes to train a dog, and those things aren't—"

"They're your dogs, Serba."

"I'm pretty sure I'd know if I'd trained something like that."

Tibs suffused himself with Earth. "Serba. I need you to trust me. I'll explain after we're not in danger from them."

"Tibs, I can't just—"

"Now, Serba!" He moved and hit the dog that jumped at them.

"By the abyss," she muttered as another dog bit Tibs's arm. "No wonder you hang out with my brother. You're just as nuts."

He shook his arm until the dog lost its grip and flew into others. Before he could tell Serba to stop wasting time, she let out a shrill whistle that went up and down in burst. Every dog, hers and those around them, raised their head, ears straight.

"How?"

"No!" the Them said. "Attack!" A few dogs shook themselves and resumed growling.

"You need to tell them to stop," Tibs told her.

“I don’t know if—”

“Serba, please just do it. The Them’s trying to get them to attack, and I didn’t have the time to grab any jerky on the way here.”

“You can bribe them with jerky too?” she asked, offended.

Three dogs stepped forward.

“Sit!” She snapped at them, then looked at Tibs. “What is it—I said sit!” she yelled the one that took another step. It, and every other dog, sat.

“No!” the Them exclaimed in exasperation. “I told you to attack them.”

Tibs readied himself, but none of the dogs moves. They looked at Serba.

“Tibs, how is this possible?” she asked, slowing turning and watching them.

“Sto needs to start with something he’s encountered. It was rats and bunnies on the first floor. They’re things that found their way inside before the runs. As he grew, he’s influence stretched. Toward the town, he can reach halfway across the gathering grounds now.”

“Are you telling me the dungeon can have monsters just appear among the people there?”

“No, living things interfere, and he wouldn’t do that. He only makes creatures within himself. But he can sense everyone out there, listening in and watch. He wanted to add something new on this floor, so, when he sensed you and your dogs, he made a copy of them, then started altering them.”

“But they’re still my dogs,” she whispered. “Who you can bribe,” she added, annoyed.

“Only when I have jerky.”

She whistled, a different cadence from earlier, and as one, the dogs laid down.

The Them cursed Sto as its voice receded.

Tibs hoped that without them to fight for control, Serba would be able to use the dogs in the coming fights, because Tibs didn’t believe they were done trying to kill him.

“Do you think you can get them to follow us?”

She whistled, and they stood. A different one, and they walked closer. Tibs remained on his guard. The dogs who’d come in with them moved among the new ones, sniffing them, but the dog creatures only took positions.

When Serba stepped forward, the mass of dogs moved with her. She grinned at Tibs. “You have no idea what I’d give to keep them.”

“Maybe Sto can make some that can leave,” Tibs replied, taking the lead.

* * * * *

Serba knelt where the dog had crumbled away. It was the first casualty of a fight. The previous three and gone entirely in their favor. This group of guards had included one who’d had void, Tibs had realized after it had used essence to split this down into two and invert the part’s positions.

The other dogs tore it apart.

“What happens to them?” she asked, standing.

“I’m not sure. They’re made of the elements, so Sto can make more, but I don’t know if it’s going to be this one, or just another that looks like it.” He looked at her dogs. They remained closer. “Something like that will happen to those who die in here. Sto absorbs everything and makes use of it. It’s how he gets stronger. Is it going to be a problem? Them

dying.”

“I’m not going to break down,” she stated. “It’s why I train them. To do the brunt of the fighting. I’m just not as thoughtless with my troupes as some commanders are. How far to go?”

“A lot. Sto’s in the City Hall, and that’s almost on the other side of the city. It’s closer than the King’s house, I think. We haven’t reached that yet.”

“So, you know where you have to go during a run, and it’s just about surviving all the monsters?”

“And beating the puzzles. The permit office and the City Hall have them. The King’s house will too. Ganny likes to come up with puzzles.”

“Who’s that.”

“She helps Sto, guides him, tries to keep him from breaking the rules.”

“So, there’s a woman keeping this place in order?”

“I don’t know what she is. She isn’t living like we are, but she sounds like a girl to me, and Sto sounds like a guy. They don’t care if you call them it.”

“The dungeon’s a boy,” she said, in a tone that made it sound like it answered something.

“I don’t think Sto’s anything like we understand,” Tibs said. “He’s all this. When we break a wall, he feels it.”

“So you could kill—”

Tibs raised a hand as he sensed something at the limit of his range. For him to be able to tell a group was approaching meant they were strong, but before he worried about what that meant, he sensed the tint to their essence.

“Runners.” Tibs ran in their direction, ignoring Serba calling after him. He only sensed four of them, and one’s essence was fading.

“It’s Tibs!” he called before rounding the corner on them and still found himself almost colliding with the wall of blades that formed.

Quigly glared at him. “What are you doing in here? It’s our run.”

He pulled a healing potion. “I think she can use one. How come you don’t have any left?”

“Took all we had to get out of that palace alive,” the archer said. “Then this abyss cursed place went wild.”

“It’s like the dungeon’s feral again,” Quigly said.

“It’s not that,” Tibs said. “It’s being attacked.” He handed the potion to the rogue and as she drank it, he applied a weave of purity.

“Not again,” the sorceress said, sounding exhausted.

“They’re with me,” Tibs said. “Well, with her, and she’s with me.”

Serba maintained her distance from the group.

“Serb?” the archer called.

“Damon,” she replied.

“What is she doing here?” Quigly demanded. “Tibs, what the fuck is going on?” he motioned to the dogs around her.

“It’s complicated.”

“No shit. Whenever isn’t it when you’re involved?”

“I didn’t—”

“I so don’t want to know.” The warrior ran a hand over his face. “I have enough problems of my own.”

“I’ll explain everything after I’ve saved the dungeon.”

“I’ll help,” Quigly said.

“We’ll help,” the archer added.

“No. Jen’s tapped out, and unless you lied, you barely have anything left.”

“I’m fine,” the rogue said. “That was one strong potion.”

“Then you can escort them to—”

“You’re all leaving,” Tibs said.

“Tibs, you can’t do this alone.”

“I saved him once already on my own,” Tibs replied, “and this time I have help.”

“Does she even have an element?”

“No.”

“Then how much help is she going to be?” Quigly winced. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to —”

“My feeling are fine,” Serba said. “But if you want a demonstration of what we can do, I’ll be happy to set my dogs on you, metal man.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Quigly said. “But you can still use the help, Tibs.”

“No.”

“Tibs, you need to—”

“You need to go back to Cross.”

The warrior stared at him. “Are you fucking kidding me? That woman wants to rip my b—” he glanced at Serba.

“Balls is the word you’re looking for,” she replied. “And my understanding is that you deserve it.”

“Of course she told you,” the warrior grumbled.

“She’s going to be pissed at me if it’s my fault you die and she doesn’t get to punish you. I don’t want her angry at me.” He’d learned enough from Jackal and Kro to know that Quigly and Cross would work things out after a good amount of screaming, and then time afterward.

“Tibs,” Quigly said calmly. “I’m not going to tell Jackal I left you here to die.”

“Then don’t tell him you saw me.”

“Tibs, why are you looking to die?”

“I’m not, but—”

“He can take care of himself,” Serba said. “He took on half a dozen guards at one time, did stuff I didn’t know was possible. And now we can help.” She motioned to the dogs.

“You need to take your team out,” Tibs said. “It’s not going to get any easier to reach the stairs.”

“Tibs,” Quigly said in exasperation.

“I’m going to be fine. I know what I’m doing.” Mostly. There was still stuff he needed to work out.

“If you don’t walk out of this dungeon, Tibs, I’m—”

“Jackal will probably beat you to it,” Tibs said.

“Alright. You heard him. We’re heading out. Stay on your guard.” The warrior glared at Tibs, then walked away.

“You and Damon?” Tibs asked once they were out of his range.

“He’s just a guy I know.”

“So,” the Them said, as Tibs started to ask if all the guys she knew called her ‘Serb’.

“That’s why the dungeon takes it easy on your kind.”

“No,” Tibs said, looking up. “Sto doesn’t take it easy on us. He just knows the difference between Runners and townsfolk.”

“You’re all the same.” It snorted. “And I will see to it you don’t get to save this dungeon.”

“Why don’t you come here and stop me directly, then?”

The only answer was a retreating chuckle.

Tibs resumed walking.

“Is goading whatever you’re talking to a good idea?” Serba asked as she joined him and the dogs surrounded them.

“People say things they don’t want to when they get angry.”

“Only that’s not people, right?”

“It still makes mistakes.”

“And what mistakes has it made at this point?”

Tibs smiled at her. “It ignored you until it was too late.”

Planning-105

Serba had an army of dogs now.

Tibs figured they were still attacking because the Them couldn't entirely control what happened. Either the ways the dogs were created and moved about the city was automated, or Sto was interfering with the Them's influence over what happened.

The immediate effect was that Tibs had to expend less and less essence fighting the guards as Serba swarmed them with dogs.

He slowed when the city hall came into view at the end of the street.

No guards.

Even when they weren't expecting it, the guild always had guards at the entrance. The Them knew this was Tibs's destination, and it had demonstrated enough control over the guards to send more than there should be to attack him.

So why hadn't it set a gauntlet of them for Tibs to fight through? As much as he wanted to think this was Sto helping him. It didn't feel right.

This had the feel of a dungeon room. One bare of anything, but with the boss loot on the other end.

"Tibs?" Serba asked.

"This is a trap." What did the them have access to? They couldn't change the buildings, or the ground. They'd have done that if they could. They hadn't used the doorways to drop guards on him, but was that because it was holding on until the right moment, or because it couldn't?

Serba whistled and dogs ran ahead before Tibs stopped her.

They ran out of his range and vanished in the distance. They were all dungeon made, so was that why they weren't triggering anything? Or was this trap the kind someone, the Them, decided when to spring?

He advanced one block, sensing for any changes. Another one, then a third. Something approached from the city hall. The dogs. He readied himself.

"They're just returning," Serba said. "If any are missing, or injured, we'll know there's an ambush ahead."

"The Them might have taken control of them, or replaced them. I can't sense that far, and dungeon creatures all feel the same."

"You can sense us too?"

"Everyone has life essence in them. Townsfolk are hard to tell apart without an

element to distinguish them, but if I know them well enough, I can.”

Serba let out a shrill series of whistles and the dogs stopped moving. “I think they’re still my dogs.”

Or the Them was cunning.

He remained on his guard as they reached them. The dogs waited, watching Serba, as her dogs, the ones that had come into the dungeon with her, ran around, sniffing the dungeon dogs. Those still with them simply followed and waited for instructions.

Sto hadn’t given them the thing that made her dogs more than weapons, that made them... what was the equivalent of people for dogs? Once the chaos around the destroyed guild settled, he’d ask scholars. One of them had to have studied that. Don and Carina had said everything had been studied at one time or another.

“Tibs.”

The whisper stopped him.

“Ganny?”

Serba watched him.

“Tibs, you have to be careful. They’re waiting for you.”

“How’s Sto?”

“Sto is holding on. They cracked his core, but I think they wanted us to watch you die.”

“What can you tell me about them?”

“They aren’t like you, or Sto, or even me. They’re... I don’t know what they are. All I know about those like them is that those in charge make them when a dungeon needs to be brought back in line, or ended if it’s too far gone.”

“I thought adventurers did that.”

“Not if it can be avoided. I think they’re worried that if adventurers have to get involved too often, they’re going to realize dungeons aren’t what they think.”

Tibs didn’t think that would happen, not with the way the guild was set in its ways.

“They aren’t like Sto’s creatures. They aren’t essence made to be in the worlds, they’re... I don’t know.” She said in exasperation. “I’m not like you or Sto. I don’t sense the elements. I just see what they do, how they act. But they can be both, I think.”

“I can affect essence and what’s solid,” Tibs said, “so I can end them.”

“I hope so. I don’t think they’re going to be satisfied with only ending Sto if you can’t. They want Sto to suffer for protecting the town from them.”

“They aren’t going to win.”

Tibs marched on.

“Stay out of reach,” he told Serba. “I don’t know how much the ring is going to protect you if they attack you.”

“That them, it’s what’s been making the city sick?”

“Yes, they pull on the life essence of the people, weakening them. The ring prevents that, and it has a reserve that helps replenish what you’ve lost before. Sto made them, and they’re punishing him for that. I’m going to stop them.”

“And I’m going to help you. I don’t have to be in range to have my dogs attack. They’re smart enough to react to what it’s going to do.”

Tibs nodded.

He sensed them once he was close enough to make out the details on the doors.

He couldn't see them, but they were at the bottom of the steps. There was something... different about them. It felt to Tibs the way trying to explain what the elements were to someone went. He could never find the exact words, and had to settle for approximations, words that almost meant when he intended, but never quite went there.

They were made of essence. That he could sense. It was how that essence was put together that he couldn't quite explain. The word that came to him was a weave, but that wasn't right. It was an approximation of what he sensed. The threads were there, as were the Arcanus, but it was the way they were woven, no that also wasn't the right word. It was like the threads were made of the Arcanus themselves, instead of being used around the threads.

"I sense you there," he called.

Something happened to what Tibs sensed, and Serba gasped as they became visible. Her dogs growled, and she motioned them to silence.

They were... Tibs thought of a sheet hung between buildings to dry as a breeze blew it about. They were made of many of those floating around and through something that was... real was the approximation that came to him.

"You are an abomination," they stated, and Serba winces as her dogs whined.

"What was that?"

"Them talking."

"That wasn't talk, it was... it sounded horrible."

"You aren't made to understand any of this," they said, the hate dripping from the words. "You should never have been allowed to escape and spread."

"Escape what?" Tibs asked, then cursed himself for letting his curiosity get the better of him.

But the question seemed to give them pause. "The dungeon that made you, of course. Did you think you just came to be in the world?" it said mockingly. "That you are special? Everything that is came from a dungeon and should be returned there."

"I don't think that's true."

"What do you know of true? You are an aberration. You escaped and seemed too insignificant to be bothered with. You think yourself more than what you are, and I will reduce you to nothing."

It... moved. It wasn't the right word and in the time Tibs struggled with finding it, it was before him and he then he was in the air, suffusing himself with Earth and adding ice and metal to his armor. He crashed through two walls and bounced off the ground before coming to a stop.

He forced the pain away so he could suffuse himself with Purity.

He wanted to avoid another hit like that.

"How are you not dead?"

Tibs threw himself aside and its... arms? slammed the ground where he'd been, cracking it.

Close range combat was out of the question.

He etched his fire whip and flung it. It went through some of the essence that composed its body, then wrapped around something. It pulled, and Tibs was in the air, heading at it. He suffused himself with Air and its swing passed through him and he passed

through it.

He let go and rolled as he hit the floor, then was on his feet. Not attacking with anything that he had to hold on to, either. He really didn't want to have to start trying new things, but most of what wasn't just unleashing raw essence focused on close quarter fighting. He didn't raw essence would do much more against them than drain him.

He made ice knives and threw them, not bothering trying to be accurate.

Instead of deflecting them, it did...something, and the weave that made it changed. The knives passed through the way he had, but it wasn't suffused with air, or even mostly that. The composition of the weave hadn't changed that much. It was its structure that had.

He moved as he flung knife after knife, studying what he sensed. That element of real was still there, but it too was different, not less or more, just not the same.

Something happened.

The weave shifted, then one of the knife was flying back at him.

He absorbed the essence reflexively and was surprised at not feeling the resistance of someone else's control. Did that mean they couldn't use essence the way Tibs could? It was limited to what was within them? He couldn't tell what their reserve was like. There was one, but it registered as... solid.

Tibs was getting tired of almost right words that didn't help him.

Tibs made an alteration to a knife as he threw it, added corruption to its edge. When it passed through the Them, it hissed, so he threw another, and then each one had corruption.

It did...something, and the weave shifted. The next knife passed through without causing a reaction.

It could adjust to his attacks.

But what were those limits?

The next knife was etched exclusively with corruption. He hadn't thrown one before, but so long as he remained focused on it while it was in flight, it would be fine. He couldn't fill it as much as he wanted since that would delay the throw and he didn't want it to realize something was different until it was—

It...caught the knife. This time the word felt right, even if Tibs didn't see a hand holding the still essence item. That means contact, so Tibs focus on the etching to change how it—

It was gone.

He could see the knife, even sensed the essence that made it, but it was no longer his essence. That had been severed without him having a chance to fight.

It...looked at him. That was the sense he got from the malevolence he felt aimed in his direction. Then, the knife was flying at him.

He focused on it. It was still just essence, so he could—

The wrongness of the essence registered a second before the knife planted itself in his should and carried him to the wall, where he slammed into it hard enough to see stars.

Abyss that hurt. He wrested through whatever it had done to the essence, like an etching for also not—

He was so fucking tired of this. He just wanted to know so he could kill the thing and go save Sto. And while he tried to free himself, it was advancing. Tibs flung raw fire at it and screamed as the distraction let more of that etching push into him.

He was supposed to be immune to the corruption's effect!

"You are nothing," it said. "The mark you bear means nothing," it snarled. "I will remove you from—"

The rest was buried, with it, under the dogs.

Planning-106

His will slipped within the etching, now that the Them was busy fighting the dogs, and he noticed the odd way the Arcanus was assembled before he forced it apart. Instead of being spaced between and around the essence threads, some seemed to be forced together, as if—the etching came undone and he could breathe and absorb the corruption.

The etching, how the letters were shoved together, was why corruption had hurt him. Yet another thing to figure out, but later.

With a scream from the Them, the dogs flew in all directions. Some getting up on landing with varying degrees of steadiness, some crumbling apart and others remaining, unmoving. Tibs recognized Thumper among those.

“I will—” The Them’s threat was buried by Tibs’s scream and the torrent of fire. They staggered back, and Tibs noted through his anger they could be overwhelmed. Unfortunately, they found their footing and Tibs sense how they were taking hold of some of his essence.

Time to try something new.

He channeled water, continuing to pour the essence as it shifted and—

He had difficulty thinking through the specks of light as he fought not to fall unconscious. Around him the remnant of the wall the explosion had sent him through. Had the Them done something to his essence? How had he survived crashing through that wall?

He was suffused with Earth.

That explained how he survived.

He switched to Purity and his mind cleared as he healed.

It wasn’t the Them. It was Tibs’s essence. As it shifted from Fire to Water, somehow Jir and Ank had formed even if there were no threads for them to be connected to and...the heated water explosion had sent him flying.

He ran out of the building. Serba! If he’d been hit this hard, she wouldn’t survive—

She was pushing herself to her feet with the help of her dogs. Tibs didn’t think she’d moved from where she’d been standing at the mouth of the alley. So that had been far enough for the shock wave to dissipate. Short range explosions had their use, especially if

—

Tibs felt the roar, more than heard it, and turned in time to suffice himself with stone as the Them barreled at him. The impact was nothing like Jackal shoulder checking him, or even grabbing him as he ran. It was like the Them’s body was made of pillows that then hardened around Tibs to hold him as they both flew.

With a curse he suffused himself with Air as he noticed they were heading for

another building. One made of square stones stacked on each other. They looked solid and thick and Tibs didn't want to risk that impact even while stone.

The Them tried to hold on to him. Tibs senses their body shift as it struggled to grab him, shifting in shape as well as distribution of essence and—

The thing was made of Arcanus too?

It flew up just before colliding with the wall, and Tibs passed through it into a luxurious lounge, then dining area and then a kitchen, before exiting the building.

Why had it not gone through the building with him? It was all essence, so shouldn't that have been easier for them than it had been for Tibs?

He righted himself and flew to the roof. The Them watched from where it floated, high above him.

It could rip Tibs's attacks out of his control and change them so they'd hurt him. He doubted that was limited to Corruption. He could stagger it, as a cost of a lot of his reserve, so that wasn't something he could depend on, especially since they'd also been able to take his control away, but thus seemed to not want to collide with a wall. Was it that it was stone? Dungeon made stone? Wait, no, this building wasn't one Sto had made.

That left Tibs with little more than still more questions, and this was not the time to test theories. What he needed was a way to even the field. With how powerful the Them was, Tibs might as well be an Omega level Runner without access to essence. All he had left was his fighting skill, which it could easily deal with because it had so much—

What if it didn't have essence?

What if essence couldn't exist? Would it cease to be?

He located his destination before jumping off the side of the building, forming an air cushion to soften his landing.

Now for the first risk. If the Them placed Serba in danger to control the battle, Tibs was in trouble.

"Stay here," he ordered her. "I don't need you getting underfoot." He ignored her protests and ran. When the Them chased him, he breathed easier. Now to make sure they didn't kill him before—Doors exploded ahead of him and guards stepped out of the buildings.

Before he could decide how to deal with them, essence attacks came at him. At least half of them had range. He absorbed the essences he identified to replenish his bracers. After fighting for control with the Them, the hold these golem people had on their essence was rather weak.

He went the easy route, keeping his sense alert for anything the Them might do to interfere. Tibs etched threads of corruption in a wave ahead of him. Added Ike on the edges of the thread for hardness and sharpness, Kha for them to spread on contact and Xy for growth, not that he was sure about that one. He had had little time to find out if it was why the etching he'd watch a wood sorcerer use had spread.

On contact, the etching cut into the guards, the darkening of their body spreading for the contact point. They didn't feel pain the way people did, so they weren't stopped, but they were already crumbling as Tibs reached them, ending the more resistant ones with his ice sword.

Then it was him and the alleys and the Them above, which he had to glance up to

make sure they were still there, since they were outside his range in this soup of essence. He was tempted to ask Ganny to undo that, but if the Them could also control it and make it so thick, Tibs was blind...?

Better to work with what he had.

He sensed the essence accumulation ahead, within the walls of the buildings, with only enough time to suffuse himself with Earth. Then the walls exploded, sending shards of far too sharp stones across the alley and cutting him too easily, as if they had arranged the etching specifically to work against when he was suffused with Earth.

Was that even possible?

He wished he had time to sense the etching as it cut him nearly apart.

He leaned against the wall long enough to suffuse himself with Purity and then he was slammed on the ground, the Them on his back, their essence attempting to push between the strand of Tibs's life essence.

Tibs sent out a blast of Purity all around, and they were sent off. Panting, and his main reserve close to half full, Tibs ran again. The building caught in the blast partially gone, like when Don scratched a mis-written letter on a page. Before adding the correct one that obscured it, there was the hint of what that wrong letter had been.

A glance over his shoulder made Tibs run faster. The Them was catching up to him. Which might have been as a distraction as it caused him to sense the accumulation of essence ahead too late to turn.

He suffused himself with air for the extra speed, but the explosion still happened just as he reached the area. This time, the shards passed through him, hurting, but not leaving physical damage behind. It also let him get a sense of them, and there was that same mashing of Arcanus as with the Corruption knife the Them had thrown.

How far to go?

He launched himself up to see, then was sent back down as the Them collided with him. Their essence tried to push through his life essence again, and this time, it was pulling along some of his air essence as if they made it easier.

Tibs switched to Earth and dropped out of their grasp before they could adjust.

He hit the ground, bounced, then crashed against a building, but was on his feet, running. He'd caught sight of the plaza. Still further than he'd like, but getting closer.

So the Them could affect him no matter what element he channeled, but they needed to know and prepare for it. Rapid switches between them gave him an advantage, so long as they couldn't spread over multiple elements. How far was their range? Sto could sense anywhere within himself, no matter the essence mess Ganny had made of the air, but he was the dungeon. The Them could control some of it, but it couldn't be it the way Sto was, could it?

They couldn't, he decided. Otherwise, they'd be changing the landscape to their advantage instead of detonating buildings... which they hadn't done in a while. Confirmation they could only prepare for one element? Couldn't sense what element he was suffused with at the distance they were following him at?

Or they were planning something new.

The essence etching ahead was definitely that. And complex. He could tell that the moment he sensed it. The range of where they could make their etchings was somewhere

terrifying.

What were his options?

With a lack of knowledge?

His only option to increase his chances of surviving whatever that was Purity. Did it know? Was it part of its plan? Like Tibs had a choice at this point.

He suffused himself with Purity, coated himself with Ice, Earth, Metal, and Corruption, then added Darkness, Fire, and Light because they were in his bracers and he was becoming a believer in throwing more at a problem to increasing his chances of surviving.

This time, the walls did not explode, but stretched. Something happened to the way things worked around them that Tibs couldn't quite understand. It was as if here, how stone, wood, metal and whatever else made walls didn't have to exist the way they usually did. They weren't on each side of the alley, but within it, and as Tibs collided through the etching, it tried to grab him, force him to not be what he was.

There were a lot of those mashed up Letters in there. And some seemed to be more than two of them, the mashing seeming larger and it hurt, and Tibs had no idea what he was supposed to do against it other and keep running and—

He nearly fell in a stumble once it stopped and he could breathe again, knew that breathing was something he could and had to do.

He didn't want to have to go through that again.

When he tried to absorb the essence he'd coated himself with, he realized a lot of it was gone. He'd used half of the reserve in his bracers for each and the most he got back was a quarter of the Darkness.

Had he lost his focus? Or had the etching ripped at them as he ran? Were they why he'd made it through? He should refill his bracers, but that meant channeling those elements in turn and if the Them could sense that?

And he'd rather avoid what he'd gone through than try to survive it again, so he concentrated on sensing as far as he could, and anytime something felt odd, he changed direction. Hopefully, they had limits and any etching they had to absorb came at a loss.

Tibs knew he had the right strategy when he sensed them scream as he ran through a door and a house to get to a different alley. He kept going down the new alley until the next attempt to snare him, when he turned back toward the plaza.

He readies himself when he realized he was in a long alley without windows, and the doors were much thicker than the previous ones. The next intersection was too far. He'd put himself in the perfect place for a trap, and he sensed it coming.

He suffused himself with Air and launched himself over the buildings. As soon as he cleared the roofs, it was on him. Its essence grabbing and forcing itself into him. He switched to Earth, and it screamed in frustration as it tried and failed to hold him.

That confirmed they couldn't adapt quickly.

This crash resulted in the building falling over him, and he barely got out from under that in time to avoid the etching they dropped on the whole thing.

They also needed time to etch.

Tibs entered the plaza and rushed for the building. Had they been watching when his team had dealt with its problem? Had Quigly's team come across it and had they watched?

Did they know what the trap was and weren't worried about it?

Tibs was going to find out the answers to the important question the hard way.

He shouldered the door open. Ignoring how he couldn't sense what was inside the building.

"You cannot hide!"

Tibs paused, rounding the central structure. He hadn't considered they might think he was trying to avoid the confrontation.

"All you have done is ensure that I will make ripping you apart painful!"

The chest was ornate. Black wood with a finish that made the pale grain shimmer. The metal work was with something Tibs didn't recognize and incrustated with precious stones and gems. It looked like something out of a bard's story, the treasure chest that contained the quest's items.

It screamed 'trap' to Tibs. And he could understand how Jackal had been unable to resist opening it.

He yanked the lid open and ran out with the wave of essence negation that escaped from the chest.

His grin on leaving the building and seeing the wave hit the Them died as the walls rose around the plaza.

They were still there. The wave had ripped away the sheet like essence that formed their body and left behind something emaciated, but real and solid looking, and angry.

But it wasn't its scream, or the skin crawling insect-like appearance that chased his elation at a partial victory.

Behind it, just inside the plaza, Serba and her dogs watched the walls go up, imprisoning them with Tibs and the Them. Even without the use of essence, this was a fight Tibs knew could be deadly to anyone not used to running dungeons.

Planning-107

Steps behind Tibs caused him to look over his shoulder.

“Abyss.” A dozen guards were advancing, the opening in the walls they had entered through closing. He’d forgotten about that part of the trap. He looked back to the Them in time to throw himself to the side with a yelp as they landed from their leap where he’d been. He’d expected them to be too weak to do anything without essence.

He rolled to a crouch and formed his ice and metal sword, only for the essence to unravel as he left his hand.

Right. No essence within the plaza meant he also couldn’t use it. He called his knife from its hiding place and felt inadequate holding something so small against the Them, which still towered over him.

“You are nothing,” it screeched. Its voice had a hollowness to it, without the essence to carry it, and Tibs wondered how he could still understand it, without that, but it leaped high and Tibs hurried out of the way.

It landed and turned to face him, letting out an angry scream that made him shudder. He’d really hope it would be less scary without essence, not more so. It threw itself at him again, this time staying close to the ground, but Tibs moves faster.

It had been easy enough to avoid those attacks. Tibs wondered if it knew anything of fighting without essence. Both would have been deadly, if it had been able to adjust where it landed as Tibs moved. Something essence let it do.

Tibs circled it slowly, waiting for it to attack again. When it didn’t, he quickly reversed direction, stopping just as fast as it launched itself where he’d been heading. He dodged the sharp appendage it was using to walk on and slashed with his knife. The tip only scraped the surface of something that was much harder than he’d expected.

One of its leg lashed out and scraped him in turn, easily going through the leather and cutting him and pulling at his life essence in the process. The contact was too fleeting for him to feel the loss among everything he had. But it served as a reminder that direct contact allowed for essence use.

He just had to find a way to make that contact without having it skewer him at the same time. He rushed it, slipping under the strike, then over the other one. It hesitated, and Tibs used to moment to grab hold of it and pull at its life essence.

Immediately, his reserve was full, then he was in the air. The pain from the impact was so much he remembered to suffuse himself with stone a second before hitting the wall. Then it took him a few more to switch to purity.

“Are you okay?” Serba asked, dropping to a crouch next to him. “What happened to that thing?”

“It lost its essence.” He shook his head at her incomprehension. He didn’t have the time to explain. The guards were now close enough that they’d be a problem when he attacked it again.

He stood.

But would they be a problem for him only? Some of them were separating from the group and heading for the Them.

“Stay out of the fight.”

“Don’t you fucking tell me to stay here and watch you get killed.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“That thing has those people to help it now!”

“They aren’t people.”

“They look like people, okay? I’m not one of you Runners, who knows all the stuff about this place.”

“And that’s why you have to stay out of the fight. They’re creatures, and even without essence, they’re stronger than you are.” He grinned. “And don’t worry. I’m the one who set the no dying rule. I’m not going to be the one who breaks it.”

He ran to the guards, ignoring her exasperated cry.

Time to test theories.

He slipped under the first guard’s swing and slashed at it, his knife barely doing damage. He threw himself between the other’s legs and came to a stop much too fast with ice there to keep him sliding. The sword came down as he rolled and he winces as it cut him and heat spread from the wound. Not fire. And something with essence that purity only slowed. It wasn’t hurting him yet, so he’d deal with it later.

He kicked the guard between the legs. There was nothing there to increase the pain, but the earth he filled his leg with gave the blow enough strength the guard was sent back into the others. Tibs got to his feet and headed for the Them, these guards following.

It was ignoring the guards approaching it, focusing on him. Skittering left and right as if it expected Tibs to suddenly change direction. Which he’d done the previous time.

Not only wasn’t it used to fighting without essence. It wasn’t used to fighting at all.

Okay. He could use that.

He jerked left, and as it moved he stopped, and it immediately threw itself to the right. He continued left, and it screeched as it came to a stop and had to turn to face him, putting the guards who had been following Tibs at its back and those coming at it at its flank. If it kept its attention on him, then the guards would be able to—

The closest guard slashed at it, while the next two kept coming for Tibs. They knew how to fight, and Sto had made them to deal with teams, so they wouldn’t focus only on the closest opponent. The one thing Tibs had going for him was that this group didn’t have archers. Those had been rare among guards, he realized. Did Sto only think of archers as runners?

The Them turned to strike the guard and Tibs ran at it. He channeled corruption just before grabbing hold of a leg and pushed the essence inside it as hard as he could. He held on as the Them shook the leg, then slammed it down over and over until Tibs lost his grip.

He'd know if that had worked next time he grabbed it. He rolled out of the way of the sword, then had to dodge another attack, and a third. He'd dropped off amidst the guards and they had no problem changing target now that he was there.

He blocked on with his knife, and disarmed it, grabbing the sword and planting it into the closest guard before running out of the group and for the Them, as they angrily stabbed a downed guard.

He was well below half his reserve and hopefully, that was enough to end the Them; if what he planned was possible. He switched to life essence as he threw himself up at it, only for it to turn and stab him and then down.

"You are mine!" it said gleefully.

Tibs ignored the pain. Not how he'd planned it, but this was physical contact, and he sensed how the corruption tainted its life essence, the way his had been when he'd been doused with it. He felt it pull at his essence, but didn't allow it. He glared at it and, in turn, pulled at its life essence, and only that, leaving the corruption behind. There should be a point where it would start eating it from the inside.

"Leave him alone!" Serba's yells were followed by dogs jumping on the Them, and it batting them away easily.

Tibs cursed, but focused on pulling. It was fighting him now, but Tibs was gaining. Like with fighting, it was as if it didn't know how to defend itself against this. It knew a lot, but it seemed to using essence. Maybe it was so strong among those like it that it never had had to defend itself before.

"Yours," it hissed. "It's yours."

Tibs held on as it moved and swung the leg. He couldn't switch element, so the collision with Serba nearly broke his concentration, but he had to end this, and by how stronger the corruption felt inside them, he was getting there.

And it was realizing it.

The shaking grew violent. Then it used him to hit guards, but Tibs held on. He wasn't letting it win. He still had enough room within his reserve for more essence and so long as he had life essence, he would survive and that was all that—

The impact shattered his concentration, then he lost his sense of the Them as they retreated from him. Their body was now darker, purple, as corruption was most of what made it.

He sufficed himself with Purity and used the wall to get to his feet. It was over. Without access to essence, it couldn't pull in more to fight the corruption, and unlike him, it couldn't change element. Only use what was already there, and that had been mostly life. The rest had been spread around it to let it do everything it had been able to.

The guard swung at him, and Tibs moved with a curse. Four of them were left, and they weren't satisfied with the Them's coming defeat. They existed to kill Runners, and Tibs was still standing.

Well, he could deal with four of them even without essence.

He blocked one, used Earth to make himself stronger, and punched the head off another. He kicked the next one away and froze as Serba screamed in pain. The punch as he turned made it hard to be sure, but it looked like the Them stood over Serba, looking at him, smirking.

No.

Tibs blocked the guard's swing and took the sword from it, cutting its head off, then running for Serba and the Them. He'd forgotten there was one source of essence here it could easily get to. There couldn't be enough there to save it, but it would kill Serba in the process.

With a scream, he swung at the leg, and it shattered easily.

"You will not save it." It backed, and Tibs followed. "I will take it from you, and then I will take you and everything here. This dungeon will cease to be, and all those things you look after."

Tibs threw himself at it as it threatened the things he cared about. Fire burned inside him, his own anger that his inattention had put Serba in danger, that Sto was hurt because he had helped him and his town.

Tibs hadn't brought this thing on them, but he'd played a part in it being here, and he was pissed that something he'd done to help what he cared for was in danger because of that. So he swung and dodged and attacked and destroyed this thing, no longer gloating, but retreating in staggers as it lost another leg, then in incomprehension as it fell to the side, nothing left to move with.

Tibs glared at it, panting.

"Sto is my friend. Serba is my friend. Kragle Rock is my town. No one threatens them. Do you hear me? No one!"

He brought down the sword and cut what was left of it until he knew it was dead because the pieces lost their purple tint as the essence was wiped away by the trap. There were no guards left, and Tibs had a vague memory of one of them caught in the violence he'd unleashed.

He dropped the sword and ran to Serba's side. He pulled the end of the leg out of her stomach and she gasped in pain.

"Ganny! Drop the wall!" he had to get her out. He couldn't pour purity into her, he had to form the weave first, and he didn't know if that could be done inside her body, or his, or— "Ganny!"

"You're alive," Serba said, smiling.

"You too." He took her hand and touched the ring. It was working, adding life to her, but it didn't work fast enough for what she was losing. And it wasn't only the injury. There was something inside her leeching at her life.

Fragments left behind when he pulled the leg. And they were still doing what the Them had been.

"Gan—"

The rumble of the walls coming down stopped his call. He suffused himself with earth and picked Serba up, exiting the plaza as soon as the wall was gone. Essence filled him and he made a purity weave. He applied it to the wound and Serba looked in wonder at the healing wound.

"You're a cleric too."

"I'm a Rogue." Something was wrong. She healed, but she still lost life essence to those fragments. Were they growing? He put her down and dogs whined, pressing against them. A glance told Tibs only her dogs were left. The dungeon created ones had been

sacrificed trying to keep the Them from her.

He made a knife of metal and she looked at him, but not scared.

“What’s that for?”

“There are pieces of it in you. I need to take them out before they kill you.”

She chuckled. “Can’t you just magic them away?”

Could he? Purity might erase them, fire would burn them off, lightning destroy them.

“I don’t know how to do that without killing you at the same time.” He raised the blade. “This is the kind of magic I know how to use. Its edge is sharp and you—”

“Do it.”

Tibs stared at her in surprise.

“I know you’re not going to do anything more than you have to. You’re not going to try to hurt me.”

“You know I won’t do that?” He knew it, but from what Jackal said about his sister, she didn’t trust anyone.

“I haven’t...” She searched his face. “I haven’t trusted my leaders ever. From my father, to those I had to work under for him. Even my uncle or Irdian. They’ve always had their own agenda, and I was just a tool for them to make it happen. Only ever trusted my dogs. I trust you Tibs. I get it now, why Jackie was willing to lead the team you’re in. You got him to do the one thing he swore no one would ever get him to do. And you got me to trust you. You’re something Special.”

If that meant he got to save her life, he wasn’t arguing with her. “This is probably going to hurt a little.”

“Tibs?” Ganny said as he applied the blade to the just healed injury. He raised it. She sounded scared.

“Ganny?”

“Tibs, Sto needs help.”

“Can it—” he swallowed “—can it wait?” He sensed Serba’s essence. She didn’t have much left.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do to, Tibs.”

“What’s wrong?” Serba asked.

“Sto, the dungeon. They hurt him before coming after me, and Ganny doesn’t know how to save him, but if I go, you’ll—”

“Can you save him?”

“Yes.” Abyss, he hoped so.

“Go. He’s more important. I’m just a—”

“No. You’re not just anything. You’re my friend.”

“He’s your friend too, isn’t he? It’s better if he lives.”

Tibs wasn’t sacrificing one friend for another.

What was the problem?

She was losing essence to the fragment. He didn’t have the time to take them out. The ring was there to fight the drain, but this was a direct attack, and its reserve was nearly empty.

That one was easy. He refilled the reserve. But it didn’t work as fast as what she was

losing, and she had already lost a lot.

Okay, that one wasn't as easy, but it was basically the same, wasn't it? Her body was her reserve. All he needed to do was refill that. But he had to be careful. He knew from experience what happened if he only dumped life essence in without care, and she didn't have his training to survive it.

"I don't know how this is going to feel."

Gently, doing all he could not to let Sto's danger rush him, he pushed gossamer strands of essence life into her. Adding to what was already there. Matching how they felt until it seemed to be back to her usual faint level of essence. He wanted to add more, but he couldn't take anymore time. This had to be enough.

"Don't move. I'll be back as quickly as I can," he told her, then he was running.

Planning-108

Tibs ran along the corridor, ignoring the shiver that ran down his back as he passed the room that... he still had no idea what was with that room, and unless things had changed, neither did Sto.

"This way," Ganny said as Tibs skidded to a halt before running into the wall.

"Ganny?" He touched the wall. It was solid.

"Oh." She was silent. Then the wall rumbled as he parted. "I forget you can't just move about."

Tibs slipped in as soon as the gap was wide enough and stopped.

The room was... he couldn't quite find the words and didn't bother, instead looking for Sto and not finding him. There was no one there, among the stone and crystalline rubble on the floor. Someone, the Them, Tibs figured, had raked through the walls, tearing stone and those crystal... roots? Apart. The roots all seemed to emanate from the most damaged wall facing him. A hole the size of his head had been ripped out of it.

He curse. Of course, he couldn't find Sto. Sto wasn't a person the way Tibs was. There wasn't an injured body for him to see, or at least not one the way he thought about it.

"Ganny, where is he?" He searched for something that would feel different. He didn't expect a person, but Sto wouldn't be the same as everything here.

"Here," She answered, and he followed her voice.

The problem with sensing was that this room was saturated with essence. This was many times more intense than what Ganny had done to the third and fourth floor, so much so it hurt when Tibs to tried to sense through it.

"Under there."

Tibs moved the stones and crystal until he crouched next to... another crystal. Or at least that what the word his mind associated with what he saw. It was; Sto was ovoid, but faceted, like a precious gem that had been cut so the light broke apart through it. He was translucent, like milk mixed with water, and streaked with colors that pulsed faintly. Elements, Tibs realized. Sto was a gem with all the elements coursing through him.

What had Bardik said? The core of the dungeon was what he needed to destroy so the dungeon would die. Sto was that core. And he was looking at him, dying. The way he was cracked made it clear he was hurt.

"What do I do?"

"I... I don't know." She sounded like she was about to cry. "Tibs. I don't know what to do to help him. This isn't something I know. No one told me this could happen."

“When Bardik hurt him, what did you do?”

She was silent.

“Ganny. What did you—”

“Nothing! I didn’t know what to do then too. The way that man threw the corruption around hurt Sto differently. Everything hurt and was being consumed. Sto’s the who the dungeon, Tibs. Hurting any of that is hurting Sto, but the Them... they went for the core of who Sto is. They ripped the connections out before...”

Tibs looked to the hole in the wall. Before they’d ripped Sto out of where he belonged.

As carefully as he could, Tibs picked up Sto, and was surprised at how light he was. He was no heavier than a gem twice the size of Tibs’s fist, but he was an entire dungeon. There should be more weight to who he was.

With the contact, Tibs sensed more of the essence and elements that made Sto’s core. They weren’t mixed the way liquids when dumped in a barrel; they remained apart as they moved within him. With something he couldn’t quite make out as the center and life essence as the shell around him. That was what was cracked, how the essences leaked out ever so slowly.

“Tibs?” Sto said, sounding so far away it scared Tibs.

“I’m here. Everything’s going to be okay. I’m taking you back where you should be.”

“It’s wrong, you know.”

“About what?” so long as Sto talked, he was still there and Tibs should help.

“I didn’t do it for you.”

“Did what?” he looked at the gash. “Ganny, how do I...” he moved Sto within it, looking and sensing through the pain for a hint as to how the core fit.

“Help Kragle Rock. Help your town... help my town.”

“The...” she trailed off. “Cradle’s gone. They destroyed it, and Sto’s not strong enough to remake it.”

“You?”

“You told me they needed help,” Sto said, “so it’s your fault, in a way.” He chuckled, then fell silent.

“I can’t make anything, Tibs. I’m not Sto.”

“Sto, keep talking.” He’d ask about how she’d made the third floor when Sto was saved. “Ganny. What does the cradle do?”

“You told me.” Sto sounded as if he’d startled awake. “But I didn’t because someone told me they needed help. Not because it was you. You told me how I could help. The others... they just talked about the problems, and I didn’t understand what it meant for the people who helped my Runners until you explained it to me.”

“It’s Sto,” she said, sounding exasperated. “It’s the dungeon. It’s where Sto is. It’s how all this works.” She let out a cry of anguish.

“I don’t care about rules that say I have to let my people suffer,” Sto said sharply. “I’m going to break of them, if it means I get to help them. Do you hear me? Come back here and I’ll show you what I can do to someone who threatens my town!”

“So it lets him control things. That’s it? The Them destroyed it so he couldn’t keep them from taking control?”

“It’s more than that. It’s... Tibs, I don’t know how to explain it! All of it, the dungeon, it’s Sto the way your body’s you. The core, it’s Sto the way you...” she screamed.

“The way I’m me. The things that make me think me.” He didn’t think about it much. Carina had mentioned there was research into why people were people and not animals. But that was one thing he’d never been curious about. He was. What else was there to it?

“My body protects me.” He chuckled. “It cradles me.”

Could he cradle Sto? The outer shell was mostly life essence. If he wrapped Sto in it, that would help, wouldn’t it?

He held the core against his chest and wrapped it in life essence. Tibs was ready to give Sto everything he had if it—

Sto screamed in pain.

“Tibs?” Ganny called in panic. “What are you doing?”

He stopped, and Sto calmed.

“I’m trying to save him.” Were the cracks larger?

“That was too much.”

“Okay, then, how much is the right amount?”

“I don’t...”

“Ganny,” Tibs said, doing his best to not get angry, “I know you don’t know much about this, but I need you to do your best. You know Sto, you know more about all this than I do. What is your guess?”

“Less,” she said.

“That hurt,” Sto whined. “I shouldn’t be hurt for helping my friends.”

“How much less?”

“A lot... Tibs. I don’t think you can do this. You’re so filled with that element. It’s so dense in you.”

“I can control how much essence I use.” He extended the thinnest strand of life essence, a gossamer of it, and touched it to the outside of the core. When Sto didn’t protest, or react in any way other than the quiet sobbing that followed his statement, Tibs wrapped more of it around the core, trying to focus on the cracks, but as soon as he added a little more there, Sto whimpered.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Ganny whispered.

“I’m not letting him die,” he replied through clenched teeth.

“I don’t know if you can do this for long enough.”

He snorted. “I don’t have to stop. I have so much essence I can do this until I die.”

“When is that going to be? Don’t you have to eat?”

“Purity will take care of that.”

“I... don’t think that’s how that works. But won’t you have to stop what you’re doing to suffuse yourself?”

“What do you want from me, Ganny?” He yelled. “I’m doing the best I can. I don’t know everything. I’ll just use my bracers when I have to switch.” He could do that without too much of an interruption.

It’d be fine.

It had to be.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be enough, Tibs. I think... I think what you’re doing is helping. But... Tibs, I don’t think you understand how long it’s going to take if it is. Sto doesn’t... live the way you do. Time is—”

Tibs chuckled. “I know. Sto doesn’t get the concept.”

“It goes deeper than that. Dungeons like Sto, they exist for periods of time even I can’t imagine. If they lived with time the way you do, they would go mad. It’s just too much of it.”

“What do you want me to do, Ganny?” He asked softly, scared of what she’d say he had to do.

“I don’t know. This, but so you aren’t going to die of it.”

This.

Weaving strands of life essence he could barely perceive them among the miasma in this room. He doubted he’d be able to sense much more of them outside the dungeon, as thin as they had to be. Walking through a crowd and he’d lose them about all the—

His head snapped up, looking at where Ganny’s voice had come from.

“What?” she asked, alarmed.

This was no more than the townsfolk.

“Can I take him out of this room, Ganny? I think I know how to save him.” He couldn’t get to them, and even if he could, he wouldn’t sacrifice someone to save Sto.

“Yes,” she answered, hesitatingly.

He ran.

But there were dogs in the dungeon, and as far as the life essence in them, they were the same as people.

* * * * *

“Tibs,” Ganny called again. “What are you going to do?”

Again, he ignored her as Serba came into view, still on the ground, with her dogs lying around her. One raised its head, then was on its feet, the others following suits.

Okay, that could be a problem. He was without jerky.

Serba stirred, turned her head and let out a whistle that caused the dogs to settle down, but they kept watching Tibs.

“Did you save him?” she asked tiredly.

“It’s still in progress.” Her essence was faint, but only at what was usual for the townsfolk. “I need one of your dogs.” How was he going to do this?

“Why?” she demanded, and growling sounded from them.

“Maybe you can explain your plan to her,” Ganny said, annoyed, “if you aren’t going to explain it to me.”

“Sto’s body was broken by the Them. Don’t think too much about it,” he added as she frowned. “The words are never right when talking about this stuff. It’s like the elements never meant for us to talk about it. But because his body’s broken, the essences that make him are leaking out. I can help, but I have too much life essence and it’s like...” he cursed. Words, how was it going to—

“Like when you put a hand to the fire,” Serba said. “The comforting heat becomes too much, and it burns you.”

“Yes! So he needs something so soft I can’t do that for the kind of time he needs to

heal. But people and dogs barely have any, and that's exactly what Sto needs right now." He made a knife with Metal and looked the dogs over.

"No," Serba said, grabbing his wrist. "You aren't hurting one of my dogs."

"I have to. Sto's going to die otherwise."

"Then you use me."

"No," he said, staring at her in horror. "I can't do that."

"Last I check, I'm people, and you said I'm like my dogs that way." She smirked as if the comparison was a badge of honor.

"I'm going to have to put him inside." He showed her the large gem. "That's going to hurt. It might—" he looked around. "Ganny? What's that going to do to her?"

"I don't know, Tibs. If this has ever been done before, I've never heard about it."

"I'm not risking it." He pulled his arm out of her grip, but she grabbed it again.

"I want to help you save him, Tibs. But you're not doing it at the expense of one of my dogs. They've done nothing to deserve that."

"And you have?"

She laughed, then coughed. "Tibs. I'm a Wells. Do you have any idea what's the best thing I've ever done with my life? Other than look after my dogs?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"Decide you were a leader worth following. That's it, Tibs. My life is a waste of me hurting people because that's what I've been told to do by someone I followed. I wasn't even trying to find something better until you bribed your way into my dogs. They were all that mattered. The rest of the world I would happily burn otherwise."

"You might not survive, Serba. I mean. Sto's all this. And I don't know what that's going to do to the you that's you. You're dogs, they—"

"Matter a fucking lot more than I do, Tibs. The me you talk about? That you say might stop being me? Well, that's not someone the city's going to miss." She motioned around. "This? Without this dungeon, Kragle Rock dies. A dungeon city needs a dungeon, Tibs. It doesn't need a Wells."

"I—" he swallowed.

She moved his hand until the point of the knife was on her heart. "I'm asking you to let me do one thing that will matter to more than me or my dogs, Tibs. I've never been a good person. I want to be one and this is the only chance I get."

"Okay." He wiped at his eyes. "But I'm going to have to do some things first. Those shards of the Them are still in you and leeching the essence away. I have to remove them." He looked at Sto, considered the essence he was maintaining and the concentration that needed as well as he'd need to get the shards out without severely injuring her. "I'm not going to be able to do anything for the pain."

She chuckled. "Don't worry about that. Pain's something I'm used to."

He still hesitated, then told himself she'd decided, had made it clear, and proceeded to cut into her stomach.

She groaned and tensed as he worked. He went slow, but had the advantage of sensing where all the delicate areas were, so he but around those. When he found a fragment of the Them, he extracted and flung it to the side. He'd make sure it was destroyed once he was done.

Serba's clothing was wet with sweat by the time he took the last one out, but all she'd done was clutch her dogs until they whined and extricated themselves; for another to take their place.

He looked at the gaping wound he'd made and the blood he'd spilled. "Ganny, how..." "I have no idea," she said with a nervous laugh.

No, she wouldn't.

"What do you need?" Serba whispered.

"That the problem, we don't know."

"You said he's body's broken. Well, you've opened up mine. Might as well put him in and see what happens."

"Serba, are you—"

"You think I'm going to survive this?"

"I can heal you."

"Then heal him, Tibs. This is why you did it. Not to save me. I'm not—"

"Don't say you aren't worth saving."

"I'm a Wells, Tibs. We aren't good people."

"Jackal—"

She snorted. "He's got you."

"You have me too, I'm—"

With a scream, Serba sat, grabbed Sto from him, and showed the core inside her. "Don't worry about it anymore," she said, panting. Then tensed and screamed again.

"Ganny!" Tibs watched as Serba trashed. Essence was spreading through here. All the colors that had been in the core.

"Heal her!" Ganny yelled. "Before the core is pushed out."

With a curse, Tibs made a weave of purity and applied it to the wound, putting his hands over it to keep the core from coming out. Serba didn't make it easy on him, but when his hands slipped, there was no trace of the injury.

Then, Serba stilled, with only her breathing, and how the essence rearranged within her, telling him she was still alive.

"Did it work?"

"It did something," Ganny replied. Then Tibs sensed it. Essence in the ground moving closer. He stepped away and called for the dogs to do the same, but they weren't leaving Serba. He felt bad about not being as brave as they were, but unlike them, he sensed what was coming and had no idea what it would do.

What it did was enter Serba. Move within her, around and through the core, then still, not tainting the strands of her life essence, the way Corruption had done with Tibs, but weaving through and around them. Making each thicker.

"Tibs," Jackal yelled, out of breath, running. "Abyss, there you are! You have to hide. They're coming for you!"

He stopped and put his hands on his knees.

Before Tibs could ask what he was talking about, Serba sat up with a gasp and Jackal startled.

"Serba?" he demanded, only one noticing the dogs.

“Sto?” Tibs asked.

She looked at him with eyes of a myriad colors, then at Jackal.

“Yes,” she said, seemingly surprised by the word.

Planning-109

The dogs' growling as they turned to face Jackal made the fighter curse and step back.

Serba let out a series of whistles that had the dogs' ears straighten and a few stop growling.

"I said settle down!" she snapped.

All but three dogs sat and were quiet. The others whined as they looked at her and Tibs let out a bark of laughter at the disbelieving expression on their face, which mirrored the one on Jackal's.

"Serba?" the fighter asked cautiously. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said dismissively. "It's too tight, and too hot, and too..." she shook her head. "How do you deal with all this?"

"Sto?" Tibs asked.

"Of course," she replied. "Who else would I be?"

"Serba, what happened to you?" Jackal asked, motioning to the cut and bloody armor.

She looked down at herself and touched the healed injury tentatively, almost fearfully. "The hurt me," she said, her voice going distant. "I tried to fight them, but I couldn't bring anything to protect me. It hurt." She looked at Tibs. "It hurt so much, more than what Bardik did. It hurt me..." she search for words, then tapped her chest. "Here. I didn't know if you'd heard me. They broke me and I was losing..."

Jackal opened his mouth, then closed it as she continued.

"Then we were here, running, fighting." Her expression darkened. "You told me to stay out of the fight. I thought you were going to let them kill you. But it was you being clever, as usual. I'd never have thought to lure them where there was no essence. But I ran after you because I never let my leader go to his death. The walls came up, they noticed me and they..." she touched the healed injury, thoughtfully this time. "You helped, then you were gone. Then you were holding me and I knew I'd be okay. There was pain, then I was arguing against using my dogs to help me. I was already dying. This was my chance to do something good. I didn't care if I wasn't me anymore. Only I still am. How am I still me?"

"But you're Sto," Tibs said.

"Of course." She grinned. "Stone Mountain Crevice, that's me."

"So, you aren't Serba?" Jackal asked, eying the dogs.

"Don't be an idiot, Jackie. Of course I'm your sister." She paused. "Okay, that's odd."

“Both Sto and Serba are in you?” Tibs tried.

“Which one’s in control?” Jackal asked, hope and fear in his voice.

“That’s not how this works,” Serba said. Rolling her eyes. “Okay, why did I do that? How come I don’t have to think about everything I do. It just happens. Ganny, how does this work?”

“I have no idea,” she replied with a laugh.

Serba looked up, then around. “Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” Ganny replied, sounding worried. “Can’t you see me?”

Serba rubbed her face and Tibs sense the elements move within her. They continued moving as she stared at her hand in surprise, turning it over. When she looked away, she looked to her left. “There you are. This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” Jackal asked.

“I told you,” Serba said, “I was—”

“Tibs,” Jackal stated. “Tibs, you tell me what’s going on with my... sister. And keep it short, you don’t have much time. They were gathering when I got to the dungeon.”

“The Them attacked Sto because he helped us against Sebastian, and against the sickness the Them was causing. Dungeons aren’t supposed to help, there’s some people who —”

“Simple, Tibs. No time.”

Tibs nodded. “He called out for help and I came. Because of the dogs on this floor, I grabbed Serba and convinced her to help me by implying she was more important than you are. Sorry.”

Serba and Jackal rolled their eyes in almost the exact manner. Only she then seemed surprised by the action, again.

“We got in, fought guards. She took control of the dogs because Sto made them—right, no time. You’ll have to explain why. We made it to the city hall, but the Them was waiting. I tricked them into to trap that takes away essence and then used the guards there to help me fight them, since they go after anyone who isn’t dungeon made. But before I won, they realized Serba was there and attacked her to hurt me. I killed them, tried to heal her, but Sto was dying, so she told me to go help him. I did the best I could, but I have too much essence. So I thought one of the dogs could do it.”

Serba snorted.

“Only she wouldn’t let me. She told me a lot of bull about not being important and that was the only chance she had to be good. I wasn’t going to let her do—”

“I grab me and shoved me in to me... does that sound as odd to any of you too?”

“Yes,” Jackal and Ganny said.

“And where we are,” she continued with a grin. “Whatever I am.” She looked at Ganny.

“You’re alive,” Tibs said. “That’s the important thing. What about your core?”

She closed her eyes. “It’s still broken, but nothing’s escaping past...” she motioned to herself.

“Your body,” Tibs said.

She nodded. “And you really don’t have to do anything to make the sounds come out? I had all the parts in the golems there, but I could never get them to do anything. How do you

not have to control any of this?"

"Sto," Ganny asked. "How about the rest of you? Are you... is it still."

Something rumbled in the distance, and when it stopped, Serba was panting. "It's hard to feel the rest, but it's there."

"Maybe when you have rested?" Ganny offered.

"Okay, this is weird and all," Jackal said, "But Tibs needs to find a place to hide. The entire guild is on its way to wring his neck."

"What?" Serba said, pushing herself to her feet, then looked at her stance in surprise. Tibs saw the effort it took her not to comment on it. "Why?"

"They claim he tried to kill some important guy, the one checking if the guild leader was doing her job, or something like that."

"Tried to kill him?" Tibs asked.

"I know, I have no idea where they got that idea, but then this old cleric said you'd gone into the dungeon, so I took off as the guard leader was putting his people together. They were a lot more than the guards with him when I shove my way past the guard and in here. Hopefully, they don't know you like I do and they'll go through the other floors and you can—"

"They're on this floor," Serba said, alarmed. "I don't know if I can stop them. It's all so hard to feel right now."

"No," Tibs said, standing. He'd failed. He'd only hurt the guild leader, and there hadn't been enough corruption to finish the job. "You and Jackal, hide. I did this. I'll deal with them."

"You did this?" Jackal stared at him. "Abyss, that's what you were working on? Why didn't you tell me? Let me help?"

"I didn't tell you because you'd want to help. And this wasn't something kicking the door in would do any good against. I thought..." he let out a breath. "You aren't paying for me failing. Sto, you can hide him, right?"

"I can take him to my room," she said. "Then seal it from the rest. No one will find him there."

"Okay, you two go and I'll—"

"No," Jackal stated. "I am not letting you face them alone. We're a team Tibs. We work—"

"You have Kroseph."

"You think he isn't going to be hurt by you getting killed?"

"I'm not his man. You made him a promise."

"And you're my—"

Serba's shrill whistle silenced him. Then the dogs surrounded Jackal, growling.

"Tibs gave an order, Jackie."

"Don't call me that," Jackal said. "You know I hate it." Serba grinned. Jackal crossed his arms and turned to stone. "You really think you can force me to abandon Tibs?"

A series of whistles. Then she took a step back. The dogs moved, those further away approaching the Earth fighter.

"I'm made of stone," he told her. "You think your dogs can do anything to me?"

Another step back, and Jackal glanced over his shoulder.

“You’re wasting your time. They’re going to break their teeth.”

Another step, and then Jackal looked back. It was with a worried expression. “Tibs, tell my... sister to stop this.”

“You go do what you have to,” Serba said. “I’ll keep Jackal safe for you.”

“Tibs,” Jackal snapped. “Don’t you even think of leaving me here with them.” He motioned to the dogs.

Serba whistled, and a dog snapped at Jackal’s heel, who jumped forward, then glared at her as she took another step back.

Tibs took off, then ignored Jackal’s angry calls for him to return. He was doing this to protect him and Sto; or would it be Serba now? This was going to be confusing for a while, but they’d figure it out; once he handled Irdian and those he had with him.

Tibs almost ran at the group of adventurers, confusing them for Sto’s city guards until he was close enough to sense the essence coursing through them. By the time he turned for the alley, the archer had let loose an arrow that exploded just behind Tibs, and the weave of essence that extended from it snag his leg and brought him down.

A net, he realized as he used Corruption to break its hold and was running again. He jumped from wall to wall until he was on the roofs, his world, and headed directly for the stairs. They’d be focused on the street and wouldn’t realize he had—

People leaped over the roofs, then ran after him. One stayed in the air, catching up to him.

Tibs ground his teeth. That was his trick.

He nearly suffuse himself with Air to show them what he could do with it, but realized the world of trouble he’d get himself into doing that. He had no plans on getting caught; he was escaping so he could finish the job. But if he was caught, he couldn’t have the guild realize he had multiple elements.

He was going to have to escape all this adventurers while only openly using water. This should be interesting.

He grinned. Time to see what they’d forgotten about being a Runner.

He jumped chimneys, leaped over gaps between building, seeing people also running down there. A ball of fire erupted before him, and he coated himself in ice as he leaped through it. It was hot enough he had to suffuse himself with Purity once he landed on the other roof. They had strength, that was for sure. His best tactic was to avoid letting them land—

The roof exploded, sending him flying. He fought the urge to channel air, instead sending water ahead as soon as he saw where he was falling, forming a channel and icing it. He directed it to a room and—

It shattered, sending him down. It had been so abrupt the theft of his control registered after he was falling. He sent water ahead again, and immediately he was fighting for control as the adventurer pushed Arcanus in, and Tibs pushed it back.

He fell into the water, then was falling out on the other side. The street was approaching too fast for anything fancy. A snow bank cushioned his landing, and was running again, head still spinning until Purity dealt with that.

The world turned dark, and he staggered as exhaustion filled him. He channeled light and pushed back against the dark, but it couldn’t cut it apart. He tried to add Arcanus, Ike

would help, Rys might too, but pushing them in place took more strength than he had.

Voices approached, their volume taken away by the darkness, so they'd be much closed than they sounded. Tibs dropped to his knees. Trying to think of something to do, other than give into the exhaustion and sleep.

"I have him subdued," a woman said, her voice clear as the darkness vanished.

Purity.

He suffused himself with it, then switched to water and he planted the ice sword into the person before him before running again.

"Catch him!" someone yelled, then something fell on Tibs's back.

He reached behind him to throw it off, but his hand came away with something black like Darkness, but thick and sticky like when he added Bor and Kha to a water etching. He should his hand, but it remained there. He didn't know what essence that was, but as it oozed down his back and onto his leg, it made moving more difficult.

He made a lair of Corruption between it and him, but the essence flared and started melting his armor instead. What was this? Using metal caused it to expand almost beyond his control, slicing his armor and his back.

He was walking now, almost dragging himself forward.

Air, to push it away, got lost within the goo as it turned into a torrent and sent some all around him. Cries of surprise and anger erupted in surprise. But as his smile formed, his foot caught on something and he fell.

The impact didn't hurt. The street was earth, after all, but what was on his back spread over his shoulder, and where it touched the ground, it seemed to attach itself to it, making it hard to get to his knees.

"Got to admire his determination," a man said.

"I admire nothing from a would be assassin who uses what we taught him to hurt us," a woman replied.

He saw the kick as it was about to hit and suffused himself with Earth, then let it go as she cursed. Has his skin changed color? And anyone noticed?

Other laughed.

Earth.

That was what was under him. He could escape through it.

He sank in, then it hardened.

"Oh, I don't think so," a man said. "I have no idea how you're doing this, but Earth's mine, not yours. But now we're sure you aren't going anywhere."

Tibs's face was partially in the earth, and all he could do was watch feet move. As he tried to think of something to get him out of this.

"You going to take that off him?" an older sounding man said.

"After he stood and stabbed Kirian? He's staying like this until Irdian's here to take him."

"I say we save everyone the trouble and kill him."

"That's not how we do things," a woman said.

"He fucking tried to kill Marger!"

"Hey, I thought about doing it a time or two myself. He's too full of himself. Just last decade, he was nothing more than an Epsilon fresh out of a dungeon. Now he goes around

telling all the guild how to do things.”

“He earned the position.”

“I’m not saying he didn’t put in the work, but would it kill him to remember where he came from?”

“I’d say it almost did,” Irdian said. “And you are allowed to think of doing whatever you want to whomever you want, Seros. It’s once you act on it that you become my responsibility.”

Metal boots stopped before him, and the man crouched. “I knew you were trouble, Tibs. You and your machination of running this city, your rackets. You think you’re the first one we took from the cells, gave a chance to help the kingdoms, only to have them try to take advantage of us?”

Too much of Tibs’s mouth was within the street to reply.

“I don’t think anyone’s been brazen enough to try to kill a supervisor before, so you will be known for that. You can take comfort in that, I suppose, while you rot within Despair.” Metal essence wrapped around Tibs. “Release him. I have him.”

As soon as the Earth loosened, Tibs tried to move. The metal was a shell over him, holding him in place. Then it lifted him and the guard leader and him were eye to eye.

“Anything to say?” Irdian asked dispassionately. “To justify what you did?”

“I did what you forced me to do,” Tibs said through gritting teeth.

“It’s going to be interesting listening to you try to convince a magistrate of that. If you’re even given the chance.”

Tibs stayed silent. All he needed was one moment of inattention from the guard leader, and he’d slip away.

“What about that Runner the door guards mentioned, any sign of him?” Irdian asked.

“He must have gotten lost among the building. If his plan was to help his friend, it failed.”

Tibs cursed. Of course, the guards would have recognized Jackal, and everyone knew they were on the same team.

“Zuk, you and Ambry stay at the top of the stairs until the dungeon’s about to close its door. If he’s still alive, he’s going to try to leave before that. Arrest him. I have cell next to his and they can wallow in their defeat together.”

“And if he doesn’t show up?” a woman asked.

“Then the dungeon’s going to take care of his punishment for us,” Irdian replied.

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The cell wasn't as effective in keeping Tibs from using essence as the trapped plaza was. The weaves in the bars and the wall, floor, and ceiling pushed essence away, it didn't remove it entirely. He could pull enough Water essence from around him to make tools out of ice, but the four guards watching him meant they'd know even if none of them had Water as their element.

He'd been stripped of his armor and clothing, then given roughly woven pants and a shirt, before being shoved in the cell. The guards had let him approach the door and study the lock. It was complex, but without essence. If he had the time, he could open it. But the moment his hand had moved to touch the lock, he'd been ordered back.

He'd been brought food twice now, and he'd slept. He figured that soon, he'd be taken to whatever they'd used to punish him.

The door to the room opened and Alistair entered, stopping only once he reached the cell's door. Tibs couldn't sense his teacher, or anyone outside the cell from the bench he sat on. Only when he was against the bars could he push his sense beyond.

"Who paid you to assassinate Supervisor Marger?"

"No one."

"Tibs, we found so much in Promises hidden in your armor you could pay an army. Who gave that to you? Where did you get that armor?"

"I stole the Promises."

Alistair rolled his eyes. "No one here has that kind of money for you to steal."

Tibs smiled. "It's not like I've been here all the time."

The man studied him. Seemed to want to say something, sighed, then tried again. Then, all that he said was, "Why?"

"Because your way doesn't work," Tibs snapped.

"My way?"

"You became like them. You stopped caring about the people. All you care about is your guild and what it can take from everyone around you."

"That's not true. I tried to help you, hoped that you—"

"That your guild would be able to use me?" Tibs was at the bars. "That I'd be good enough to be made into something they could use to keep towns like Kragle Rock under their control? Let the town burn because being attacked by someone like Sebastian is too training for us? Where were you, when your guild decided the townsfolk weren't worth

protecting?”

“I didn’t know, Tibs, I was—”

“Off doing whatever your guild told you to do. You didn’t even look around when you were here, Alistair. You walked right by the wrong your guild was doing as you came and went to train me and saw nothing. Well, I saw everything, and I did something about it.”

“You failed Tibs.”

“So I failed.” He dropped on the bench. “At least I tried.” He glared at Alistair.

“Do you have any idea what they’ll do to you, Tibs?”

Tibs tapped his left wrist.

“That is the least of what will happen. Tibs, you tried to kill a high ranking Guild representative. They aren’t going to just brand you. The only reason they won’t execute you is that we can do worse to you.”

Tibs shrugged.

“You’re going to end up in Despair, Tibs.”

He’d worked out it was a place, and not what Irdian wanted him to wallow in. He shrugged. Where they sent him didn’t matter. He’d be alive, so he’d find a way to escape and finish what he’d started. Only this time, he’d find out who was actually in charge of the entire guild.

Alistair sighed. “Tibs, I had such high—”

Tibs snorted. “No, you didn’t. You didn’t hope anything for me. You hoped for whatever you planned on turning me into for your guild.”

“I’m sorry you saw what I did that way, Tibs. I wish...” he shrugged and turned.

* * * * *

It was another day, by Tibs’s estimation, before someone else entered. There had been the changing of the guards, but they were just part of the room as far as Tibs was concerned.

Irdian, on the other hand, meant things were changing.

Tibs kept from asking after Jackal. That he wasn’t in a cell next to Tibs should mean he’d escaped capture, but maybe they were holding him elsewhere. He had to hope Sto had kept him safe, as he’d promised.

“This is your last chance to convince us to lessen your sentence, Tibs,” the guard leader said. “Who paid you?”

“No one. I’m the one who saw the problem, I’m the one who set out to fix it. And I stole those promises the last time you let us leave the town.”

Irdian didn’t believe him.

The guard leader opened the cell and motioned for Tibs to exit. The guards formed around them, and now that Tibs was out of the cell, he sensed the four others outside the room. Eight guards, one for each of the core elements. Just like Sebastian had one sorcerer of each when he hurt Tibs. Maybe there was something to what he’d said about the core elements being enough to stop any of the others.

Or Irdian simply didn’t underestimate what Tibs could do with Water at this point.

They traveled through more hallways than Tibs thought were within the guild building until he remembered the enchantment protecting it. He didn’t have the medallion. He couldn’t trust what he saw or how far things seemed.

The room they entered was large, with a chair in the center with so much essence woven through Tibs wasn't certain it was made of anything else. It looked to be wood, with metal bars as reinforcement, and leather straps at the armrests and where his head would be.

He fought against balking. He wasn't giving them the satisfaction of knowing they'd scared him. They were going to take his essence from him. Bardik had been lowered to Epsilon from Gamma. So Tibs would be lowered to what? Omega?

The wall to the left had a table going the length, with crystals embedded into it. Two glowed faintly, among more than Tibs could count that didn't.

Irdian pushed Tibs into the chair and guards strapped him to it.

No one talked.

Tibs had expected gloating.

'He's secured,' a guard said.

Irdian opened the door. "You can come in now."

Tirania, Alistair and the man Tibs had tried to kill walked in. Marger didn't look well, and Tibs sensed the corruption still coursing through his essence. He didn't smile. That wasn't what he'd wanted. He'd heal from that. Not that it mattered. This hadn't been the right target.

He should have told Don his plan. The sorcerer would have told him who he should target.

Marger looked at him with satisfaction. "Do it."

Pain hit Tibs hard, and he gritted his teeth, glaring at them. He wasn't going to give them that satisfaction, either. He'd burned nearly to death, had been buried, drowned. He'd stepped into liquid corruption, been hit by lightning. He'd suffered enough pain throughout his life that this wouldn't break him.

Then the pain changed.

It was no longer something being forced onto him, but something being taken from him, his essence being leeched away. A reverse of when he'd taken in Bardik. Would he get white hair too? Would this make him old? Would he die before—

His scream wrenched thoughts away from him.

* * * * *

Light pierce him, and Tibs tried to greet the element, but his voice no longer worked.

"His eyes are still blue," someone said, then darkness returned.

But not unconsciousness.

"Of course they're still blue," Alistair said. "You can't take his element away."

"Is he totally drained?" someone not sounding well asked. "Some idiot forgot to make sure the crystals were all empty."

"No, sir. We cleared them all, other than the primers, as is procedure."

The man snorted. "Then explain to me how they're all full from some Rho rogue."

"I can't, sir. There shouldn't have been more than four filled from someone his rank."

"He was Rho, wasn't he, Alistair?"

"That was the last test he passed..." the man trailed off.

"But?" Marger demanded.

"Tibs is resourceful. He'd grown adept at pulling essence from around him. This room isn't shielded, so he might have done so while the enchantments worked."

“I find it more likely that someone forgot to do their job. But the brand’s there, so he’s drained. Get the wagon ready. I want him shipped to the Citadel immediately.”

“The Citadel?” Alistair asked.

“He’d going to Despair,” Irdian stated.

“You want to argue with the orders that come down from on high, you go talk to the man directly,” Marger replied. “I made my report, and those are the orders that came back. He’s to be shipped to the Citadel with all his possessions.”

“The contents shouldn’t—”

“Those are going to the coffers, but the armor is going with him. Don’t ask me why, but he wants to see him in them.”

“But why a wagon?” Alistair asked. “The platform would be more expedient.”

“I’m following orders,” Marger said in a tone that made it clear they should stop questioning them. “Pack him up.”

* * * * *

Tibs came awake on being pulled off the bench. He’d been dropped in his cell after being taken from the chair and had fallen asleep. He sensed around him and was relieved to still be able to do that. Eight guards again, along with the two carrying him.

What did he have to work with?

His vast reserve was still there, but without much left in it. His small reserves were there too, full of essence. He attempted to pull water essence in, and found he couldn’t, and, as he was about to panic, realized he sensed someone blocking him.

He could still do this. That wasn’t something that had been taken from him.

So what had?

He turned his sense inward, and immediately he felt the difference. His channels were barely there. Hardly more than one of the townsfolk. If not for the blue tint to them, he wouldn’t know them to be different.

Upsilon. That was where he’d been sent to.

But he still knew everything he’d learned. He’d have to see how much he could do despite his condition.

He was thrown on a wooden floor hard. A door closed, and a key turned.

“He’s in,” someone yelled. And then Tibs was thrown about as the wagon moved.

It was slightly smaller than his cell, with a bench on one side and a bucket under it. The walls were woven with essence, and he had trouble sensing on the other side. So something similar to what his cell had.

The lock was also enchanted, so picking it wasn’t happening.

He sat on the bench and channeled Air pulled the essence in to refill his reserve. The enchantment made it harder, but there was always a lot of air essence around. By the time they stopped for the night and brought him food, he’d be ready to take them on and escape.

* * * * *

The wagon tipped over and Tibs hit the wall before he switched to Earth. He cursed the pain, then suffused himself with—

Nothing happened.

He pushed Purity out of his reserve, and it didn’t move past the walls. They weren’t walls; he told himself. There was nothing there. It was simply a way for his mind to handle

concepts around essence that made no sense otherwise. All he needed to do was will it through his body and—

Nothing.

Fighting outside. Tibs made a Purity weave and applied it to his head, surprised after the fact that had worked.

Corruption ate away at the door and Tibs channeled water and made his ice sword. Trying to add metal to it only let to his reserve draining before there was more than a strand. Still, how hard his sword was depended on his will, not only the essences in it.

The wooden door darkened much slower than wood should.

“Almost there,” Someone said, and Tibs frowned. The voice was muffled, but had sounded familiar.

“The guards are unconscious,” an older sounding man said. Again, the voice sounded familiar, despite sounding like he heard it through a stone wall, instead of wood.

“Come on,” A third person said, “Why is it taking do long? I thought you were good at this.”

It was what and how this person spoke that had Tibs stand and stared as the door melted away to reveal Don grinning at him.

Jackal looked in. “Don’t just stand there, Tibs. We need to move.”

Tibs launched himself at the fighter and hugged him. “You’re okay.”

“Of course I am. How could I mount this rescue otherwise.”

“Right, because you’re doing this alone,” Don said.

“Mayhap this should be reserved for once we are away,” Khumdar said. “I do not know how long the guards will remain unconscious. They are adventurers so they may be able to—”

“They’re Epsilon,” Tibs said, sensing them. “Not much past their test, I think.”

“Then they should remain unconscious long enough for us to reach the forest that is toward the rising sun if we hurry.”

“Wait, stop!” Tibs pulled his arm out of Jackal’s grip as the fighter started pulling him along. “What are you doing?”

“Breaking you out,” the fighter said with a grin. “What does this look like?”

“It looks like the three of you are throwing your future away. Where’s Mez?”

They exchanged a look. “We didn’t tell him,” Jackal said. “I didn’t think he’d agree with it. You know, with his not being a child thing and that girl trying to be special to him and —”

“Good. Does anyone know you’re here?”

“Well, I told Kro,” Jackal said in his I’m not that much of an idiot voice.

“Okay, good. Then go back and no one will know you were involved.”

“Not happening,” Jackal said. “I’m not leaving you out here by yourself. You’re going to need—”

“You are going back to Kroseph,” Tibs told the fighter.

“Tibs, be serious.”

“I am serious. You have your man. You promised him you’d stop doing stupid stuff.”

“Rescuing you isn’t stupid, Tibs. You’re my brother. I’m not leaving you to them to do whatever it is they’re planning.”

“It is stupid when I have this.” He raised his arm and pulled down the rough fabric to expose the black band just above his wrist. Utterly black against his light brown skin.

“So you keep it covered.”

“That’s not how it works. They can follow it. Bardik said it leaves something wherever it goes. If you stay with me, they’ll find out and Kroseph is going to lose you. That isn’t happening!” Tibs yelled as Jackal opened his mouth.

“Is this truly what you want?” Khumdar asked.

“It’s what’s best.”

“No, it isn’t,” Jackal said. “I don’t abandon—”

“You’re going to pick Kroseph over me.”

“Tibs...” Jackal sounded hurt.

“He’s your man. I’m just your brother.”

“You’re not just...”

“He’s more important than I am.”

“Don, how about you help me here?”

Tibs looked at the sorcerer. “Are you going to sacrifice the academy for me?”

“Don, this is Tibs, you can’t—”

“Look, Jackal. I’m not an adventurer. I did this because I knew you wouldn’t manage it without me. But running away from the guild? They’re going to hunt us, and we’re going to have to live in wild, and there’s going to be—”

“You’re a Runner, how is any of that scary?”

“I’m a Runner because I wasn’t given a choice,” Don snapped. “I’m going to survive this because my future is with studying and figuring things out. Tibs doesn’t want us to leave. So I’m going to go back, reach Epsilon, then spend the rest of my life among books and experiments.”

“And you’re going to spend yours with Kroseph,” Tibs said.

“Khumdar, you aren’t bound to the guild. You can help him out there.”

“I cannot,” the cleric said, and Jackal glared at him. “While I am not bound to the guild, I shall remind you that I am not here of my own volition. If I wish to leave, I must accomplish them before I leave.”

“Tibs, I can’t let you do this alone,” Jackal pleaded.

“I’ll be okay. I’m a rogue, well, a thief now, but I’m still the best at not getting caught, and I have tricks, you know.”

“Do you still?” Don asked. “I thought that the process that put the brand on stripped away your strength.”

“I’m Upsilon now, but I still know everything I learned. And all I need to get stronger is training, and the world’s big. There’s a lot of big and dangerous animals in it for me to train against and get stronger.”

“But only if they don’t catch you,” the sorcerer said.

“I have an idea on how to make it harder to be found, even with this.” Tibs shook his head when Don opened his mouth. He wasn’t saying it out loud, not with the guard within earshot, even if they were unconscious.

“Tibs,” Jackal pleaded. “Don’t do this.”

Tibs hugged him. “It’s how it needs to be. You have to be there for your man. Tell him

I'll be okay."

Jackal hugged him tightly, then Tibs pushed him toward the town. Jackal took a step, looked over his shoulder at him, eyes wet, then squared his shoulders and walked away.

"Tibs," Don said, then hesitated.

"I'm the one who did this. I'm the only one who needs to deal with the consequences."

"You should have told me."

"I know. You'd at least have told me that guy was the wrong one for what I wanted."

"I'd have told you that you're an idiot for even thinking about it. The guild is... it's everything and everywhere, Tibs."

"If I remove the head, it will—"

"No. That's not how the guild works." Don shook his head. "Look, before you try something this stupid again, read up on the guild. It's history, how it's run. Then you'll understand how impossible what you want to do is."

"So I should just let them continue to abuse people like the folks in Kragle Rock? Those like us who just made a mistake, or had the world put us in the wrong place?"

"Tibs, it's impossible."

Tibs smiled. "When we got here, they told us our job was to die. We didn't. They told us it's impossible to have more than one element. That dungeons are just animals. The guild knows too much stuff that's not true. So I'm not going to let the fact they think they're too big to be taken down stop me. Sebastian thought that too."

"Just be careful." Don walked away without looking back.

Khumdar studied him. "I wish I could say that I will see you again one day, Tibs. But I suspect that this is the last time. What you wish to do will lead to your death."

"So I shouldn't do it?"

"So you should make sure to enjoy whatever you do until then."

"What are you doing in Kragle Rock?"

"I now believe I am doing the wrong thing. But I am bound to my word, and my course also cannot be changed."

"We can all change what we're doing."

"I believe that you know that isn't always possible. If you didn't, you would not remain on this course knowing where it leads." He pointed. "If you follow the zenith sun for three days, you will find yourself among a camp. They are brigands, but they are not bad people. They will help you as best they can."

He walked away, and Tibs was alone with the wagon, two unconscious guards, and the content of the chest that had been their seat.

First, he ensured they remained unconscious by channeling Darkness and draining their strength until their essences weren't as noticeable.

He considered draining them of their life essence and strengthening himself that way, but they weren't responsible for what the guild did. They were too new to be part of the decisions that kept it the way it was.

The lid wasn't latched or enchanted. From the chest, he took his armor and braces and put them on. Every hidden place had been emptied. It was in better shape than when it had been taken off him; the weave continuing to repair it. He filled the reserves in the

bracers, then looked over the wagon. The harness was empty, so the horses had fled. He hoped they'd be okay.

Tipped over wouldn't do. The guild would know someone had helped him. He stepped inside and channeled air. He made a ball of it between his hand, adding more and more, pushing it ever tighter. How essence flowed around him felt the same. So it seemed like the only thing he couldn't do anymore was suffuse himself with an element.

When the torrent between his hands became difficult to control, he let it go.

He saw stars from the impact through the wagon's floor, then coughed as dirt and wood pieces fell on him.

Another reflexive attempt at suffusing himself with Purity led to nothing, so he had to wait until his head cleared enough he could make the weave.

All that was left of the wagon was fragments of wood and metal. He looked himself over for new rips in his armor, but it seemed he'd miss the metal when he was thrown.

Was he still immune to it? That came with him having the element, didn't it? Not being able to suffuse himself. He'd have ample time to find out once he was away from here.

He studied the guards. They were already on the ground, so hadn't received any injuries from the flying wood or metal. Tibs was happy for that, but now he had to figure out what to do about them.

Would the guild believe he'd let them live?

Well, they'd have to believe what they wanted. He wasn't killing them.

Would they believe they hadn't helped him?

He looked at the remnant of the wagon. If they'd been at their post when it happened. They wouldn't be on the ground there. They'd be... Tibs looked around and winced. That looked to be a thick thicket.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be too injured in the process.

Tibs used air to lift one, then the other and fling them hard at the thicket. Then he checked on them. A broken arm on one, a badly broken leg on the other, but neither were losing essence, so they'd be fine.

He looked Zenith-ward and considered Khumdar's words. He could get help in that direction, but as a reward, he'd bring the guild down on them. He turned in the opposite direction and started walking, weaving Darkness over and within the brand.

Until he was sure this worked, it would be best if he avoided everyone.