

There was something on the wind.

Tibs had heard the expression before; it came up in stories bards sang. And he'd heard townsfolk use it when looking at darkening clouds. In both cases, it meant something was going to change.

Tibs felt something on the wind, but he couldn't figure out what it was. The sky was mostly clear, as it had been for days now. The clouds he saw were thin. Standing on the highest roofs, there was nothing in the distance that might indicate something approaching. He worried it was the fear returning, but the node had been free of essence for days now.

Still, the sense that something had changed wouldn't leave him.

When he asked the others, no one sensed anything different. Not even Khumdar, who tended to be more aware of unexpected changes.

He put it out of his mind as best as he could and continued with this work. Maybe even if the essence was gone from the node, his imagination was still feeding the fear that it had created.

He'd told himself that often, over the previous days. When his attention was pulled from the ledgers by that feeling and the numbers stopped adding up. When motion out the corner of his eye caused his fingers to snag on the trim of a pocket. But that has turned out to be only a woman having a coughing fit and people stepping around her.

The trap snapped on his finger and he let out curses as his students snickered. "And that's why," he told him, reining in his anger, "you have to stay focussed on what you are doing. A practice trap only snaps and causes pain. The ones the dungeon makes can cost your life, or that of your teammates."

That stopped the snickers.

"Alright, you've seen me do this incorrectly. Now try to do better." He passed the trap he'd used to the Omega rogue before him and stood. They were surprisingly eager. As if being here of their own volition meant going into the dungeon was a good thing for them, even after a few runs and losing teammates.

"You're good with them," Lamberto said.

Tibs shrugged. "I don't want them to die."

"My father would be all stern and promise punishment if we didn't do well enough."

"I don't have to promise that. They've seen what the dungeon does."

"I wouldn't know how to help them."

Tibs looked at the young noble. "Then why did you offer to help?"

"I had to bribe you somehow."

Tibs narrowed his eyes. That was typical noble behavior. And that wasn't like Lamberto. "Bribe me to do what?"

Lamberto had trouble keeping from smiling. "To tell me about the fourth floor. You and the other team, the one with that man calling himself a warrior instead of a fighter—"

"Quigly."

"Yes. Only your two teams have seen the fourth floor, but all everyone is saying is that you acted like it was amazing when speaking about it. What is it?"

Tibs shook his head. "We can't talk about it outside the dungeon. Guild rules."

"But we're rogues. We don't care about the rules."

"We care about rules a lot," Tibs countered. "You have to know what the rules are"

before you can go about breaking them.”

“Then break this one,” Lamberto pleaded and looked so much younger, Tibs tried not to laugh.

He shook his head. “Even if I tried to explain it, Lamberto, I couldn’t do it justice. It is amazing, but you need to experience it yourself.”

“But we can’t even finish the second floor yet,” the noble whined.

“Then think of it as incentive to keep your team, your family, alive until you reach it, so they can be as amazed at it as your will be.”

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“What do channels do?” Tibs asked, quickly forming the etching; adding Xy, Bor, and Sah in the positions Alistair instructed.

“Don’t get distracted, Tibs,” his teacher said and Tibs snorted, earning himself a glare.

This first training session in a while was the first time he wasn’t distracted. Whatever was causing the sense of something had finally left him now that he had something difficult to focus on.

“I’m not distracted.” He finished with the burst of essence into the water ‘ball’, and it exploded a sheet of essence in all directions, coating him and his teacher, but dissipating against the floor, walls, and ceiling. “So, what does this...”

Alistair shimmered. Tibs looked at his hand; it was normal.

Alistair walked around the room, the shimmering trailing behind.

“Bor is why I’m not doing that,” Tibs said, going over what Alistair had taught him. “The way you had me add it to the etching with Xy and Sah, causes it to ignore me.”

“The origin point,” Alistair corrected with an annoyed sigh. His teacher was more insistent on that term than he’d been on any other, and Tibs didn’t understand why. Whoever made the etching was where it originated from, so what did it...

“The origin point.” It was easier to simply go along with his teacher today. His mood was darker than usual. Tibs had asked what was wrong, but Alistair had waved the question aside and proceeded with the lesson. “Sah is a new one you said is usually about seeing things. I figure it’s the reason you’re sparkling. Xy...I don’t know what it does here. You described it as influencing the effect of being, but I don’t understand what that means in this configuration.”

“Abyss, Tibs, can’t you think?”

Tibs raised an eyebrow. He couldn’t recall his teacher ever having an outburst.

“I apologize.” Alistair rubbed his temple.

“Kroseph is always telling me that talking about what bothers me makes it better.”

“And does it?”

Tibs thought back to the times Jackal’s man had forced him to sit down and talk. “Too often,” he admitted.

Alistair chuckled. “In this case, it wouldn’t. The situation has been resolved for sometime. I thought I had settled how I felt about it, but today it’s been on my mind and...” He let out a breath. “You asked about channels.”

Tibs didn’t question the good fortune in Alistair changing his mind about answering his question. “Khumdar is training in them and he tried to explain what they do, but I don’t

get it. How is putting essence in the channels different from suffusing myself?"

"Which one is he? Never mind." Alistair rubbed his temple. "Suffusing is about taking on the general attribute of Water. Flowing easily, being difficult to grasp. The channels will allow you to hold more essence and focus the effects. You are already working toward that with the exercises to concentrate your essence within your reserve."

"But it's more than just holding more essence, isn't it? The way he spoke about it, when he sent essence in the channels it pulled on it, then when he lost control it filled a node and he saw..." He shuddered at the memory.

Alistair grabbed his shoulder. "Tell me you have not tried that." He searched Tibs's face. "You are nowhere near ready. I'm surprised that teammate of yours kept his sanity. The node of sight is the last one you'll be trained with because it is the most dangerous. Sight is linked to thoughts, and without proper control, the mind can easily come unraveled."

"I didn't." Was that what the other node was? The node of thought? If it was, then why hadn't Alistair referred to it directly? "The way he spoke about it didn't sound like it was a good thing."

Alistair let him go. "Power doesn't always feel good." He looked away and muttered. "And that a good thing." He settled himself. "Tibs. That is one of the many reasons the guild enforces how things are done. Your friend took an incalculable risk attempting this before being the proper rank."

"He wasn't—"

"No Runner here has reached Epsilon, Tibs. I would have heard."

"That's when the guild trains us on the channels and the nodes?"

"Your training will start before that, but it is when you will be trained with the node of sight. Once you pass that, you will be ready for the world." He chuckled bitterly. "Or as ready as any of us is when the guild sends us out in it." He looked at Tibs. "Did you think the guild would grant you your freedom without making sure you are ready?"

Tibs snorted. "I won't be free. Not until the guild gets all its precious coins."

"I so wish you'd stop thinking of that as a bad thing, Tibs. The guild is—"

"Why is using the nodes not the same thing as just filling the channels, if all it does is get the essence there?" Tibs had no interest in listening to his teacher's justifications.

"There is no 'just anything' when dealing with essence. I'd think you'd understand that by now," Alistair said in exasperation. "Channels hold and move essence. That's why they are called channels. The nodes have a deeper effect. They change how you interact with the world. That is not a simple thing."

"Everything I do changes how I interact with what's around me." He couldn't believe the man didn't get that simple fact about living. He looked for something to throw as a demonstration, but the training rooms were kept spartan.

"You think too small, Tibs."

"You're the one always telling me to stop asking questions."

"That isn't what I—" Alistair stopped, his voice rising into a shout. Frowning, he looked around. With gestures he formed a complex etching of delicate lines, waves, spirals, all connected with filigree of Arcanus. There was more there than Tibs could follow, but it was beautiful. When he was done, the etching stood between them, some parts still and others moving. Alistair studying all of it.

“How angry are you?” his teacher asked.

“I’m not—” Tibs closed his mouth on the rest of his snapping reply. Why was he angry? “Is someone doing this to us? I thought the guild was protected against attacks.”

“There is no such thing as complete protection,” Alistair replied, studying the etching. “It’s why there is always someone paying attention.” With a finger, he moved a spinning section, and it did something to the spirals now surrounding it. “And if this had been done to us before we entered, it might have slipped past that protection.”

“So, there is someone targeting us? Why?”

With a huff, Alistair passed a hand across the etching, undoing it. “No. There is nothing disrupting the flow of essence around or within us.” He took breaths. “It seems this is simply us being tired.”

“You can make an etching to see how essence moves?” He tried to recall the etching; it might let him learn more about the guild’s protection. But it had been too complex.

“Tibs, how many times must I repeat this? Essence is used to do anything you want. All you need is the skill and the will.” He rubbed his face. “It might be best if we consider this done. Keeping from snapping at you is growing more difficult.”

Tibs snorted. “Right, make this easy gold for you.” He startled at what he’d said. “Sorry,” he told his teacher before the darkening expression could be voiced. “I know that isn’t your fault.”

“We’ll both rest. I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Oh,” Tibs said, stopping halfway to the door. “What’s the point of the shimmering if it’s going to coat everyone around me? I won’t be able to follow anyone if everyone shimmers.”

“You use Bor, Tibs,” Alistair said with thick exasperation. “And I’ll explain how next time.”

“But, I want—”

“Next time!”

Tibs’s mounting anger at being denied the answer sent him out of the training room.

What was going on? He’d been denied answers often enough and he never go angry about it. It was always a possibility, even when people wanted to answer him.

A shout caused him to slow as he looked over his shoulder. Two clerks glared at one another. Further down the hall, guards pulled adventurers apart. One had a split lip and was yelling something that sounded insulting.

Whatever was going on, he and Alistair weren’t the only ones on edge today.

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Jackal jumped to his feet to the sound of the dishes Kroseph had been carrying hitting the floor. Then he was next to him, supporting the staggering man. Tibs stood to help, but the server waved him down.

“I’m okay. Just tired, I guess.”

“How about the two of you take it easy with the bed fun, then?” Kroseph’s father muttered, picking up the broken plates.

The dark tone, as well as Jackal’s lack of protest to slowing anything the two of them did in bed, told Tibs that whatever was affecting the town, Runners might not be resistant to it either.

With Russel mopping the mess, Kroseph's father pointed the two of them to the table and Jackal led his man to Don's unoccupied seat.

"Tibs?" Jackal asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Kroseph protested defensively, while Tibs sensed his essence. He nodded; there was nothing off with it.

"Maybe your father's right," Mez said. "You two need to take it easy in bed."

Jackal snorted. "If it's in bed, I don't want it easy. I want it exhausting."

"Not that we limit that to the bed," Kroseph added.

"Not that we do," Jackal agreed with pride.

"And we all hope for a substantial lack of details," Khumdar stated.

"I thought you were all about finding secrets?" Jackal asked, smirking.

"Secrets, yes." The cleric leveled his gaze at the fighter. "Of which, what you and your man get up to when alone, there should be so much more of."

"You say too much about it for it to be a secret," Tibs translated at his friend's frown.

"I'm just making sure you understand what you're missing out on with this unreasonable idea of not getting with anyone."

"You can stop," Tibs said, tone harsher than he'd intended. "I know what I'm missing out on, and I don't mind missing it." Jackal smirk told him that, intended or not, the harshness had no effect. He simply saw the statement as another challenge to overcome.

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Tibs stepped back as he sensed the motion. Then the warrior backpedaled out of the tavern and across the road into the display of robes.

"I told you," Cross snarled, stepping out. "To never touch me again." She shook her hand, knuckles bloody, as if punching Quigly had hurt. Which it might have. The warrior's metal essence was at the surface of his skin, which would have made it harder. Tibs had noticed how a lot of fighters with earth, metal and other hard elements gained the reflex of making their skin harder with it the instant they expected trouble.

Quigly looked at Tibs, wiping his bloody lip. "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 expected she'd have to hit Quigly much harder if she wanted him to ever accept that.

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Tibs sat on the roof, legs crossed, back against the chimney, letting the cool drizzle fall on him. It was dark, and Kragle Rock was finally quiet.

Tempers were frayed everywhere these last days; which could explain why everyone was exhausted. Or maybe they were easy to anger because they were so tired.

He focused on his breathing. He let the worries about the town, the guild, the coming run, the fourth floor, pass and simply floa—

Why were so many people tired and angry? It couldn't just be that there were so many more people in the town. It wasn't the first time it felt crowded. Soon there would be more buildings, or the visitors would get bored and go home.

He breathed and let—

How was he going to get Marger here? He needed the guild leader here if he was going to destroy him and the guild. And how was he going to lure him out of the building? Maybe if he arranged to know when Marger would be here, he could act before he reached it. Then it would be done. No more guild. Kragle Rock and so many other places would be free of its oppression.

He sighed.

He breathed again.

This Oneness thing wasn't always easy, but tonight it felt like everything was pushing against it. Don had warned him. Oneness wasn't a onetime solution. It was something the practitioners worked on for their entire lives.

Tibs didn't plan on doing this for that long.

But for now, he breathed and let the stress—

Who did Kroseph insist on acting like he was fine all the time? Yes, Tibs couldn't sense anything wrong with him. Maybe his essence was slightly thinner, but it was more likely it was his imagination, giving the server a reason for his tiredness and irritability. It was so thin already, Tibs couldn't really tell if it was different.

With a groan, Tibs gave up and stood.

Oneness wasn't happening tonight.

He will the drizzle away from him, then dried his clothing before running. There had to be a noble's house with good enough locks they would distract him from everything happening around him.