

Chapter 49

The two thieves broke into the store from a window in the darker part of the alley, where the pitiful light from the torch set to illuminate the street barely reached. Tibs needed to ask Sto about the light stones used at his entrance. If those could work without having essence pushed into them, it would make lighting the town easier and make such easy entry into buildings rarer.

The shop was a tailor's. The owner moved in when Sto was healed and catered to anyone who thought looking important was better than keeping their coins. Nobles were the majority of their customers, but Tibs had seen a handful of Runners shop there.

Don wasn't one of them. The sorcerer didn't dress the way his behavior said he should. He thought himself better than any Runner, but his robe was worn, just like the others. He kept it until he found one in the dungeon, then only spent the coins to have it dyed that dark purple that almost matched Corruption's color.

Tibs sneaked in through the small window a minute after the thieves. It was too small for them to take anything out, so this was sabotage. So, who would benefit?

There were two other tailors in the growing town, but they aimed their wares at the more common folks. They had received business from the nobles since, until this tailor, the nobles' only other option was to travel to another city, and even they found the cost of the transportation platform to be too much. Tibs would have to look into which of them paid Sebastian's people to do this.

The shop was on two floors. The ground one was divided into the storefront, with two wooden forms showing what the tailor was capable of, a smaller room for the tailor to take customer measurements and do fittings, and the storeroom at the back.

Tibs had explored the building when the tailor first moved in, as he did with all shops. The rolls of fabrics were stacked to the ceiling and only had enough space for the tailor to move and pull out what he needed. At the back, to his left, since he'd entered from the side, were the stairs leading up to the living quarters.

Tibs moved silently, listening to the two thieves grumble as they had to squeeze through tighter space caused by the uneven stacking. The tailor was thin and Tibs was small; the thieves were neither.

He saw the back of one of them. To him, it was as if Claria and Taurus were in the sky, providing enough light to make out shapes and larger details. Khumdar told him it was possible to see more by weaving the essence, but Tibs hadn't managed that in the last few days.

He maneuvered close without being noticed, had his hand in and out of the pocket without a reaction, then retreated to look at the item he'd taken. He'd aimed for that pocket because the thief had patted it before entering. It was a box, but he couldn't make out more of it. Inside, he felt his essence wriggle about. Whatever was in it was alive. He pocketed the box; Carina would know what was in it.

The thieves were further in when Tibs returned to them. The one he'd picked the pocket of was cursing softly, patting himself.

"What?" the other thief hissed. Tibs climbed the walls of fabric to ensure he was out of their way.

"I can't find the tin she gave me," his victim whispered back.

Tibs wondered how deep of a sleeper the tailor was.

"Did you at least take it before we left?" the other asked with derision.

"I did. I checked I had it before we entered."

"Then it's probably in here and it opened on falling through that hole in your pocket."

"There isn't a hole."

"I still have mine so, don't worry, even if you lost it outside, this is still going to happen."

"Don't we need both tins?"

"I hope not. I released my little buggers. So we can get out of here."

"Why is this so tight?" the victim complained and gave up trying to turn, moving sideways instead.

Tibs had planned to follow them to their hideout and make sure Harry found out about them, but he had to deal with what had been released. He didn't know what something so small many of them fit in the box he'd taken could do to the rolls of fabric, but it wouldn't be good.

Tibs filed the mention of a 'she' to look into later. He doubted it was the guard lieutenant he already knew worked for Sebastian. She had to be too busy handling the guards to deal with this. Could either of the two other tailors have arranged this directly? They were both men, but one was married. The few times he'd seen his wife, she was complaining about the town and the people.

Once the saboteurs were outside, Tibs lowered himself to the floor. He released light essence in his hand, and the soft glow blinded him, before letting him see more of the fabric he stood between. The rolls were in bright color, and there were more of them than he remembered. There might be enough to dress everyone Tibs had seen in the MountainSea marketplace or the bazaar.

He looked around, searching for anything small on the ground that wriggled, but there was nothing. He absorbed the light. He wouldn't need it for how he did the next part, and it was always simpler for him to work with one essence at a time, especially since he was sensing for something specific.

The essence in his pocket registered first as he expanded his sense. As with anything alive but without essence, it was faint. The next thing that registered was the man, sleeping in his bed.

How didn't he sense what the other saboteur had released?

He pulled his sense back in until the tailor no longer registered. He was roughly where they had stood, so it should be close by.

Searching for smaller groups of essence, he felt them, but under the floor. There were far too many for those to be what the thief had released, and what would they do from

under the building? As he tried to decide if he could bring in his sense more, he noticed how some groups dispersed, the individual essences nearly vanishing as they were so faint.

That had to be what had happened. There were many things in the box, and each went in different directions, making it difficult to sense each one.

He'd planned on picking them up and adding them to the box, but now, he didn't think that was possible. He didn't want to try the only alternative he had. They weren't dungeon creatures, so they deserved to live, but he couldn't let them be used to hurt his town.

He'd only done this once on purpose, against a Whipper, and Sto had warned him against doing it again. The other times, it had been a reflex, out of fear.

He sensed through the rolls until he found the faint essence. It was only a dot that barely registered, but it was his essence. Anything that moved had it, even flowers. He pulled on the essence, and he no longer sensed what had been there.

If it was like the Whipper, rat, or Ratling, it was now dead.

He sensed that same area, waiting for a change. For a sign it was regaining the essence. He didn't happen.

He sensed another one and absorbed that essence. It didn't register in his reserve for how faint it was. He did another, then another, and realized he would be at this all night. He didn't know how many had been released.

He extended his senses around him until he sensed the tailor, then pulled it back. He didn't want the man to be drained. Tibs didn't want to use this against a person, ever.

He swallowed. Ever again.

Knowing what he could do, he realized only his small reserve had saved Bardik, that, and how dense the man's essence had been. Would a normal person's essence register even more than that of the bugs he'd killed?

He shuddered and put that out of his mind.

He could sense what was under the ground, and he thought he sense the individual bugs among the rolls of fabric. He pulled on the essence of one of them, and they all winked out. There was nothing left with his essence within his sense.

He'd targeted one, when he did it in the dungeon, but he'd been touching the Whipper, and he had no idea how he'd done it when it was a reflex. He stepped among the fabric, and he felt more of his essence, in the ground and among the rolls.

He didn't want to kill what lived in the ground, but he couldn't sacrifice his town for them. He also couldn't spend the time locating each bug that had been released.

He walked through the fabric and absorbed all the essence he found.

He needed to add to his ever-growing list of things to train in, the ability to only affect one thing within his sense at a time.

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"Abyss!" Mez Exclaimed, knocking his chair over as he stood, backing from the table and against a Runner who shoved him back toward it. "We're eating."

Tibs had opened the box, which turned out to be tin, to show the content to Carina while he waited for Kroseph to bring his breakfast.

"I have to know what these are." The things in the tin were worms, and like everything

else that had been in his range as he absorbed his essence in the shop, they were dead.

“You should have done that in your room.” Mez sat down and moved away from Tibs until he was pressing against Khumdar.

Carina looked into the tin and poked at them. “I don’t know what they are.”

Jackal motioned for the tin as he ate and looked into it. “Thread Eaters. Where did you find this?”

“In the pocket of a pair of thieves who broke into tailor Murgandi’s shop.”

The fighter raised an eyebrow. “I hope the other one didn’t have one. A tin of those would eat through a storeroom full of fabric in a few months, and once they start breeding, burning the place down is the only way to get rid of them. There was a time, when I was a kid, that the entire artisan’s district was decimated by these. They didn’t stick to the tailors. They are anything that was fabric.”

“I made sure there aren’t any left,” Tibs said.

“Doesn’t that mean that if Tibs hadn’t stopped it,” Mez asked, “Those things would have spread to other shops? Everyone uses fabrics. What about the houses?”

“They don’t care whose fabric they eat,” Jackal said, going back to eating.

“And thieves were unleashing them?” Carina asked in dismay.

“At someone’s orders,” Tibs replied. “A woman. She probably works for Sebastian.” He looked at Jackal.

The fighter nodded. “My father’s like the guild leader, or Knuckles, when he controlled most of the guards. He gets people to carry out his orders. And he might not have given this order directly. He has people who handle the smaller stuff. Back home, there are a few thieves’ guilds who operated without supervision because they know what’s expected of them and stick to it. Kragle Rock’s too small for a full one of those, but that woman will have a crew.” Jackal grinned. “She might be the one behind all those thefts you aren’t doing.”

“You think some of the Runners work for her?” Tibs asked.

Jackal looked around grimly. “If coins are what they’re after, probably.”

“What are you doing, Tibs?” Mez asked. “You need to leave this to Harry and his guards.”

“You mean my father’s guards,” Jackal corrected. “I’ll be surprised if Knuckles has more than two handfuls of guards loyal to him left. He’s so sure everyone knows they can’t lie to him, he won’t bother checking. So even if they aren’t using whatever my father is making available, he might not realize he’s being lied to.”

“And how does that make it our responsibility?” Mez looked at them, and only Khumdar looked uninterested in the conversation, but Tibs was now sure it was an expression he had practiced so he could overhear secrets.

“If Harry can’t keep the town safe, who will?” Carina asked.

“The guild,” Mez stated. “Abyss, there’s only five of us. What can we even do?”

“Whatever we can,” Tibs said.

“This isn’t our responsibility,” Mez repeated.

Tibs fixed his gaze on the archer. “I won’t be a child.”

Mez’s face turned red before he looked away. “It’s got nothing to do with that. Being

a man means knowing what is and isn't your responsibility. We have to train and do the runs. We need to become stronger so we can reach Epsilon and leave this place."

"I think, Mez," Jackal said, "that you missed the point where Tibs decided he wasn't leaving."

"I never—" Tibs closed his mouth at the smirk and raised an eyebrow.

"Your town," Jackal said. "Your people. You've been calling it that for months now. You wouldn't be fighting so hard for it if you planned to leave the moment you could."

"The guild isn't going to let me go," Tibs protested.

"That doesn't mean you have to stay here, and you know that. The guild is everywhere."

Tibs didn't reply.

He hadn't thought about staying until now. He had been too busy surviving. Then his team had turned into his family without him realizing it, and now it seemed the same had happened to his town.

He found he was okay with that.

"It is a good place to stay," Carina said. "We get to help shape was Kragle Rock becomes. Not a lot of people get to say that, to do that."

Mez looked at them in disbelief. "This place is our cell. It doesn't matter that it's bigger than the room we were held in. It's nothing more than that."

"There are always limits on what someone is able to do," Khumdar said, "on where someone is able to go. What are limits today, may be opportunities tomorrow."

"That doesn't make sense," Mez snapped.

"Mez," Jackal said, "sit down. You want to know how this is different from a cell? I'm not about to die here like I was back there."

The archer dropped into his seat. "You might die anytime you go in the dungeon."

"I'll take might over will anytime." The fighter leaned in his chair. "Anytime I've walked into a pit, I might have died. That didn't stop me. I love the fight, and the dungeon's giving me fights I'd never have anywhere else." He became somber. "Back home, the penalty for killing someone is to be tied to a post and be beaten by anyone passing by until there's no life left." He took a long swallow from his tankard. "I'm not afraid of dying. But I don't want it to stretch on. In the dungeon, if it happens, it's going to be quick."

"It's not going to happen," Tibs stated as Mez let out a cry that was a mix of pain and anger and something else Tibs couldn't place. People at nearby tables looked their way as the archer stood and left.

"That sounded like something his girl would say," Carina said, "more than what Mez would."

"Has someone been spying on the enemy?" Khumdar asked.

"And how do you understand what she'd say?" Jackal asked.

"I'm from a big city," Carina answered, looking at Khumdar with defiance. "That means a lot of languages. Mez's girl speaks Karkaran, and I had to learn it growing up."

"And why would you be required to learn a language from so far away?" Khumdar asked.

Tibs opened his mouth to tell him to stop, but Carina's smile stopped him.

"You said you traveled a lot. Surely you know why someone would have to learn a language that isn't spoken anywhere near her city."

"So, have you been spying on her?" Jackal asked.

Carina shook her head. "She likes to read, so we end up being in the same places a lot. Not all books are written in the same language, and the magic of the platform that lets us understand each other doesn't extend to reading, so the merchants have many languages in the books they sell."

"Is she turning Mez against the town?" Tibs asked.

Carina shook her head. "She has nothing against Kragle Rock, other than it isn't her home; their home. They're betrothed, and she's afraid that means that she'll have to stay here if he does. From what I overheard her say, her family is trying to get the guild to release him."

Tibs looked at where his friend had disappeared into the crowd. "And he wants to do right by her." Was that how Mez saw being a man? Was it? He spent most of his time with his girl, but then so did Jackal, and he still made time for the team, the town.

But Kroseph wasn't expecting Jackal to take him away from the town. The two were happy here.

"He does, but I think there's more," she said. "That comment you made about not being a child sounds like a thing she said. I get the sense that his betrothal to her comes with responsibilities that conflict with what it means to be a Runner or an adventurer."

"How do we fix it?" Tibs asked.

Her smile was sad. "I don't think this is the kind of problem *we* can fix. Mez has to be the one to figure out how to make it work... or if he even wants to."

Tibs didn't like it. Mez was acting more and more like the other nobles of the town, instead of what the archer said nobles should act like, and it seemed to be because of his girl.

"He'll work it out, Tibs," Jackal said. "Want it or not, he's a Runner, so he has to stay here."

"You're a bad liar," Tibs replied.

"I lack Khumdar's practice at it," the fighter said with a smirk.

The cleric raised an eyebrow but didn't comment.

Tibs reminded himself he couldn't fix everything at the same time. He wanted to help Mez, but he needed to make sure his town was under control first. Once the thieves and the corrupt guards and saboteurs and everything else Sebastian was arranging were dealt with, maybe he could show Mez's girl Kragle Rock was a good place to live in, even if it wasn't the home she came from.

He sighed.

So, one problem at a time until they were all fixed.