

Tibs's stifled scream had him sitting up and looking around the room, searching for the...thing that had nearly reached him, already knowing it was not real; hadn't been real when he'd first seen it a few days before, had ran from it and the terror it inspired.

He'd been certain he'd been careful, let only the smallest strand reached the node of sight, and at first, things were as he'd expected. Secrets became more visible, unimpeded by walls and buildings. They gained definition, the shape of a person, surreptitiously taking coins from a box, someone in bed with someone else, moving in ways Tibs had wished he could stop seeing, at least there were no details to the shapes, and something else pulled his attention from all the other secrets by how much larger it was.

Tibs carefully made his way to the mouth of the alley. A secret this large might be dangerous, and it was right there, still indistinct among the townsfolk. A cloud of it spreading over everyone there, clinging to them as they exited it. He'd thought he could make out something within the secret, so, to pierce it, he allowed only a sliver more into the node.

He'd screamed at the sight, had turned and run. He'd cursed himself for not listening to Khumdar's warning as those lifeless eyes stayed with him even as he ran and fought to pull the darkness out, hoping he'd forget them and the rest of the thing darkness had created. It's multiple appendage piercing through the people around it. It's maw with too many, too long teeth.

Then had some the sense of it hounding his steps, hunting him, that had remained even after he'd finally freed the node of all darkness and suffused himself with purity. The sense that woke him multiple times a night since.

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Tibs nearly barged into Kroseph's room, barely regaining enough control to knock first.

That the server hadn't been in the inn when Tibs entered wasn't unexpected. With the sickness going around, there weren't as many customers, so not all the servers were needed. Even Jackal's absence could be explained. He was having them time with Kroseph, or he was out to the pit, or to train the Omega Runners, or at the merchants or... there could be so many reasons, but none of them would have explained the look of fear Russel had given him, before his eyes flicked to the door leading to the stairs.

"It's Tibs." He extended his sense until he made out Jackal and Clara and someone he could barely sense, who had to be Kroseph, lying on the bed.

He'd kept his sense tight to him since his last botched attempt at using darkness with his node of sight, because this time, it had also left him with this certainty that the delusion was lurking in all the places he couldn't see.

He was in before either said anything.

Jackal was seated on the far side of the bed, holding Kroseph's too pale hand, while Clara sat on the other side, tiredly glaring at the unmoving Kroseph.

"How is he?" Tibs whispered, hoping she'd know more than what his sense told him.

"He's not dead," she replied angrily.

Tibs stared at her in surprise. "Isn't that good?"

"Of course it's good. It just makes no sense!" She ran a hand over her face, grumbling. "Nothing about this makes any sense."

“How doesn’t it make sense?” Tibs looked at Jackal, but he was looking at his man, seemingly unaware of them.

She motioned to Kroseph. “His father asked for a cleric when he fainted during the night.”

Tibs’s chest tightened at his remembered nightmare and how his friends were falling in the wake of the thing hunting him. It took an effort to convince himself he hadn’t done this to Kroseph.

“...they didn’t.” Her expression soured. “There’s so many suffering that only those with money warrant it. When I heard about it, I rushed here, and...” She sighed. “He was stronger when I arrived, but nothing I did helped. He faded away until...” she motioned to the unconscious man on the bed. “They don’t usually last this long.”

Tibs hesitated. “Doesn’t that mean he’s going to be okay, then?”

“But he’s not getting any stronger,” she replied, slumping in the chair. “I can’t find anything wrong with him. Clearly there is, but none of the etching and weaves I’ve learned are telling me anything. Even the best clerics we have aren’t finding anything. No one here has ever seen, or even heard, of something like this,” she said in exasperation. “Even the best of us encounters a sickness that’s too strong for them, and the sick will die, but they will find out what the sickness is in the process.” She motioned to Kroseph again. “There’s nothing left there.”

Not yet, Tibs wanted to tell her. He still sensed some life in Kroseph, even if it was so very faint.

“And yet,” she said. “He’s holding on. If I could work out how, it would give me an idea of what’s happening to him. I could use that to help others. But the fact he isn’t dead yet is just like this sickness. There’s nothing to explain it.”

Tibs studied Kroseph’s essence. It moved, if barely so.

In people who weren’t sick, even those without an element, the essence moved through them along what Tibs now recognized were their channels. When someone fell sick or got hurt, the flow was affected. Injuries were easy for him to identify because he could see the problem, along with sensing how the flow responded to it. Sickness affected it in less clear ways, but even if it obstructed the flow, it only did so where the problem was.

The Weakness caused the essence to simply fade as it slowed until there was nothing there and they died. So Clara was right. How was it that Kroseph’s essence still flowed? As faint as it was, it should be still. He needed to try something.

“Is there anything you can do for him?” Tibs asked in as conciliatory a tone as he could.

She shook her head. “Until I figure out what is—”

He squeezed her shoulder. “Why don’t you go sleep. I’m sure Jackal is grateful for what you did, but you have a team to think about.”

“I can’t leave,” she protested. “If there’s—”

“If anything changes, I’ll send someone to get you, I promise.”

Her determination faltered, then she deflated. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help,” she told Jackal as she stood, but the fighter didn’t acknowledge her.

Tibs extended his sense to follow her until she left the inn, then hurried to pull it back in and reminding himself there was nothing in the shadows. It was only his imagination

and the lingering effect of darkness on the node.

He took Clara's seat and focused on Kroseph. "Okay, what is going on with you?"

In anyone, even those who were sick, there was a cycle to how the essence flowed in them. It was faster in Runners; and the stronger they were, the faster it flowed. He hadn't bothered investigating that once he'd noticed it, since the list of what he needed to do was already too long. In contrast, Kroseph's flow only went in one direction, drifting out of him as it moved.

So where did it originate?

He realized he didn't know the answer for any of them. Tibs absorbed it, but did others do the same? If so, how did townsfolk do it? Only runners were supposed to be able to interact with essence.

He pushed the question away. How townsfolk did it didn't matter. What did, was how could Kroseph be doing it now.

The essence was too faint for Tibs to make out detail unless he narrowed his focus, and then he had to move back along the barely noticeable flow. A sob from Jackal, and in looking up to see if his friend was okay, Tibs lost the sense of the flow. When his mind wandered, and he questioned his ability to do this, the flow was gone. Fighting the fear that his nightmare was making its way through the wall, and he had to start over again.

Each time, he had to first, breath the distraction away, then his frustration, and then start on the work again.

He lost track of how many times he'd restarted, when he followed the flow back within the hand Jackal held. He confirmed Jackal wasn't, somehow, pushing essence into his man, then was perplexed as to how it could come from there.

"Jackal," he whispered. "I need you to let go of his hand."

The fighter shook his head.

Tibs tried to pry the fingers open, but the hand turned to stone.

"Jackal, I need to see his hand. I need to see where the essence is coming from."

Another vehement shake of the head.

Tibs gently took the hand on his side and offered it to Jackal. "Take this one."

His friend looked at it for so long Tibs wasn't sure he saw it. Then, slowly, he took it in one hand, then the other, and pressed his lips to the fingers.

Tibs stared at the ring on Kroseph's index. It was so plain he'd forgotten about it. The ring Jackal had given his man when he'd promised to be careful from that point on. Promised they'd have a life together. The ring Sto had given Jackal, for Kroseph, because he considered the server important not only to Jackal, but all Runners.

The ring Sto enchanted so Kroseph would have a life as long as Jackal's.

It was where the flow began, faint, but noticeably stronger, slowly fading as it moved. Tibs touched to get a sense of the weave, but it didn't work. Sto had enchanted it and all the items he'd given them that day, so no one but the wearer could sense the weaves. He hadn't wanted them to be accidentally discovered.

All Tibs could do was sense the effects of the ring. How it pulled the essences from outside it, and push a little life essence into him. Was there so little because life essence was barely in the air around them? Or was it just how much the weave was made to send out?

Tibs took Kroseph's hand and, after hesitating, willed essence next to it and tilted the

'table' he envisioned it on. As it 'fell' through the server's hand, it added some to what the ring provided. It joined the flow, making it slightly more noticeable. He caught what fell through, and instead of absorbing it, made it a cloud around the hand, and the flow 'caught' more, strengthening it again.

"Hey," Kroseph said sleepily, when the flow felt close to what the townsfolk had, "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—Jackal, what's wrong?"

Tears fell as Jackal pulled Kroseph to him. The server noticed Tibs and looked further puzzled.

He put a hand between them. "Jackal, let go and tell me what's going on."

"You have the Weakness," Tibs said.

Kroseph frowned and stopped pushing. "I'm fine. I mean, I'm tired, but as soon as this oaf gets in bed, I'll sleep some more."

Tibs shook his head. "You feel that way because I added life essence to what the ring is giving you, but whatever is causing it is still there. And no one knows what that is."

Kroseph tapped Jackal's back, then slapped it forcefully. "Let go. I'm not dying. Tibs said so."

Reluctantly, Jackal released him and Kroseph moved until he was seated, his back against the headboard. "Okay. What can we do?"

"You're staying in bed," Jackal ordered.

His man 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 in here until we figure out what's going on." He looked at Tibs. "Or at least until I know what I need to do to remain healthy."

Tibs sensed Kroseph; the essence was already growing fainter. He could add to it again, but it meant he'd have to stay close by all the time. He'd do it, but it wasn't practical. He had a lot of other things to do.

What did he need to know right now so he could plan?

Why the ring only pushed a little essence into Kroseph. It had added enough to balance the loss before, so why wasn't it doing it anymore?

What he needed was someone who knew more than he did.

Where was Don?

He expanded his sense and pulled it back in as his imagination screamed the thing was there. He breathed the fear down. There was nothing in the shadows. He could see in them without help since he had Darkness. It was just his nightmare.

He expanded his sense, then was up.

"Don't move," he ordered Kroseph, then ran to get the sorcerer, pulling him away from his meal. Once 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?" he asked, closing the bedroom door behind them.

Don looked at Kroseph. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Like when I work through an entire day and night without stopping."

Don nodded. "It can't be what you thought. If it was because there's too little essence for the ring to draw in, Kroseph wouldn't have survived. This is some other mechanism." He

searched the pockets of his robes, then pulled an amulet. The corruption drained out, and he handed it to Tibs. "Fill this with your essence."

"Isn't this going to be just like it drawing it from the air?" he asked as he pushed essence into it.

"Enchanted items can function better with access to a concentrated form of the needed essence. It's why most of them used by non-sorcerers have their own reserves that will refill over time. If they don't have that, they either can only be powered by one element, and then only the appropriate adventurer can use it, or only sorcerers can power them."

Even before Tibs placed the amulet in Kroseph's hand, the ring pulled on the essence it contained. Now, more flowed out of it into the server, and as Kroseph closed his hand on the amulet, he already looked more awake.

Don smiled. "I think we know how to proceed."