

Chapter 33

Tibs ran to another shop, exclaiming at something red hanging from the window. He did not know what it was; he didn't care. Maintaining the excitement was becoming difficult, but there had to be a point where his friends would grow tired of this and he'd be able to get on with Bardik's task.

Unfortunately, Jackal seemed to have borrowed Kroseph's enthusiasm. Every shop they entered, he looked through everything there. He'd already spent coins on a small stone carving of a bull, and one of what he claimed was a jackal. Carina looked doubtful, but it was the first Tibs heard of it being an animal, so he took his friend at his word. Jackal was in the shop before Tibs, exclaiming something that was muffled by the closing door.

Carina followed Tibs in. She had little enthusiasm for it left. The little she'd had, had been spent in the shop that turned out of sell books. She'd gazed at them wistfully, gently running a hand over the leather covers. The colors varied, but all were rich. Browns, reds, even greens, and yellows. Some were plain, some had details etched into the leather. One was engraved with what looked like gold to Tibs, but Carina told him it was only a pigment that colored it like that. She still looked at that book like it would make her life better.

While the shopkeeper didn't speak a language any of them understood, he knew the word for gold in every language and conveyed that the book she'd looked at was twelve gold. The shopkeeper then offered one that was clearly old, with the cover scuffed and cracked. The blank pages were yellowed at the edges. That book was still one gold.

Tibs hadn't understood why it was so expensive. It was light, no larger than Jackal's outstretched hand. Carina explained that the process to make each page was arduous. Then came the binding, the leatherwork. Jackal had asked why they didn't use magic to make them, and she'd laughed. Hiring sorcerers was even more expensive.

Tibs figured she'd be the one to decide she was done, but she stuck with them.

"Tibs! Look at this." Jackal had a blue fabric draped over his arm. "It's silk! You should have a shirt make out of it!"

"Why?"

"Because silk can't be cut."

"That's a myth," Carina said. "It's just more difficult to pierce it. It's also very expensive."

"So my armor's better?" Tibs asked.

"Of course it's better," Jackal said, "but you can wear this underneath. Have an undershirt made of it."

"Is it better than my ice armor?"

The fighter looked at him. "Tibs, you don't have ice armor, yet. And more armor is always better."

"Buy?" the shopkeeper said as she joined them?

"How much?" Jackal asked and got a confused look.

"She doesn't understand you, Jackal," Carina said.

“Coins? Money?” the fighter asked and only received more confusion.

“How much is it?” Tibs asked.

“Cheap,” the woman answered.

“Copper? Silver? electrum?”

“Electrum,” she lifted both hands and Tibs counted the fingers.

“It’s eight electrum pieces.”

Jackal hurried to roll the fabric and put it back among the others. “A shirt isn’t worth that.”

Carina chuckled as she followed them outside. “You do understand that she sells entire rolls, right? She expected you to make shirts or anything else out of it and sell that.”

“Then what we need to a tailor,” Jackal said, looking around eagerly.

“I’m not buying another shirt,” Tibs protested.

“It’s not a shirt,” the fighter replied, indicating a shop with a thread and needle on the sign, “it’s another layer of armor.”

“I’m going that way.” Tibs pointed down the sloping road, he’d said he wanted to see the sea, so that still supported what he’d said. He started in that direction without listening to Jackal’s protests.

“Tibs,” the fighter called, catching up to him. “Be reasonable, I just want to make sure you survive. You’re kind of the center of this team.”

Tibs turned to face the fighter, frowning. “What does that mean?”

“Carina’s the brain, I’m the brawn, and you’re the heart.”

“You’re sounding like we’re some bard’s story,” Carina said.

“That’s how they start. A bunch of strangers thrown together in adversity—Tibs!” Jackal reached for him as someone ran into Tibs.

“Sorry!” the man called behind him as he kept running.

Tibs hurried to get back to his feet, checking himself to make sure nothing was missing. He glared toward the runner, glimpsing green as it vanished into an alley, with something strapped to the back.

Tibs let out a strangled cry as Jackal grabbed his collar and pulled him out of the way of a large man that ran through where Tibs had stood. Then two more followed after them, yelling obscenities.

“Well, someone’s having fun,” Jackal commented as they vanished down the same alley as the first man. He let go of Tibs, who could breathe again.

“Did you two notice the bracelets?” Carina asked.

“I was busy being run over and then strangled,” Tibs grumbled.

“You’re welcome,” Jackal replied. “I was making sure Tibs didn’t get trampled.”

She tapped her bracelet. “All four of them were like ours, I even saw the yellow gem on them.”

“Are they a team?” Tibs asked, rubbing his neck.

“If they are, the team dynamics need work,” Jackals said.

“I don’t know that dynamics word,” Tibs said absently.

“It means how they work together,” Carina answered.

“Three against one isn’t fair,” Tibs said. “Should we help?”

“We’re not anyone’s keeper,” Jackal replied.

“That first man did have a bow on his back,” Carina said. “We could use an archer.”

“If he’s being chased, I’m not sure he’s the kind of archer we want,” Jackal replied, his tone firm.

“He did say he was sorry,” Tibs pointed out, trying to think of one time when he’d bother apologizing to someone he’d shoulder aside while running for his life. He walked toward the alley.

“Tibs,” Jackal called, “it isn’t our—” the fighter cursed as Tibs began running.

If a Runner was in trouble, Tibs was going to help. Their lives were hard enough already. If it turned out he deserved to be chased.... Tibs would figure out what to do then.

Jackal caught up to him. “You know, for being as Street as you are, you care a lot more than I do.”

“I’m the hearth, aren’t I? And it if makes you feel better. I’ll tell you it’s a water thing.”

“It doesn’t,” the fighter said with a chuckle, then outpaced Tibs.

Carina caught up to Tibs just as he was about to run faster. She was panting, so he stuck by her. Jackal could hold his own until they reached him if he had to. And it would serve him right for showing off like that. Tibs was the runner, he was supposed to be faster. He cursed the fighter and his long legs.

They followed the sounds of running for a few turns, then a voice.

“Come on guys, you don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, that’s where your wrong, Mez,” another one answered, deeper, carrying meanness in the tone. “We’ve been waiting for a long time to teach you your place.”

“Yeah,” another, higher, voice said. “Don never asked us if we wanted you in the team. And right now, he’s not here to protect you.”

“But then again, we aren’t here either, are we?” a third voice said, smooth like that silk fabric Jackal had shown him. “We’re all enjoying the girls Don was nice enough to pay for us at that house, ain’t that right?”

“So you should think really hard about how badly we want this,” the mean one said.

“What’s the problem here?” Jackal demanded.

“Nothing that concerns you,” the mean one said as Tibs rounded the corner. “This is private business.”

He stopped next to Jackal. The man who’d spoken matched the voice. Bulky muscles under an expensive shirt, small mean eyes, a vicious smile among a patchy beard.

“I’m not talking to you,” Jackal said. “Mez, was it? Do you mind explaining what’s going on?”

“I appreciate the thought, fellow,” Mez replied. He was a man with a dark tan, wearing a green shirt and brown pants. They were nice, if a little worn. He held a bow in one hand, but no arrows. Tibs couldn’t see a quiver. The man’s eyes were bright red; his essence was fire. “Trust me, what you want to do right now, is walk back the way you came.”

“I would,” Jackal replied, “but my friend here figures us Runners need to stick together.” He raised his left hand, causing the sleeve to slide down and show his bracelet. “And I’ve learned to trust him on things like that. I’m the dumb one of the team.”

“Clearly,” the mean one said, which caused the two with him to snicker. One was wiry, with a knife’s sheath at his belt, and Tibs decided he was a Rogue. The other was also muscular, so another fighter. And Don would be the team’s sorcerer. Tibs was happy they’d said he wasn’t here. He didn’t want to have another run-in with that man.

“Don’t,” Carina said, panting. “Sell.” Panting some more, “Jackal short.” More panting. “Just because he isn’t the smart one.” She glared at the fighter. “I’m killing you for making me run like this once this is over.” She straightened. “He makes up for it with determination.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jackal told her, then looked at the mean one who seemed in charge in Don’s absence. “And as much as I appreciate the warning, we’re not going anywhere until this is resolved. I know cities. If they round up one of you with this bracelet, they’re going to start looking for everyone wearing it, and if we’re lucky, they’ll just kick us out of the city. If we’re not, it’s going to be a cell for the lot of us. Do you think they’re going to let us out, when this thing turns red, just because we tell them we have a dungeon to return to? You heard Hard Knuckle, if we don’t go back it turns black, and we’re dead. I’m not risking it because you three are being idiots. I want more loot.”

“Aren’t I the Rogue?” Tibs couldn’t help asking. “Why are you the one always bringing up loot?”

“I’m in the middle of this because of you, Tibs,” Jackal said, grinning, “Don’t interrupt my speech.”

Tibs noticed the Rogue’s eyes narrowing at the mention of his name.

“And now that I’ve met you, Mez, I think that if you could be a good addition to our team, we need an archer and fire would round us up nicely. So how about you let the three of us help you deal with them?”

Mez glanced at them. “Fine, so long as it’s clear your help doesn’t mean I’m joining your team. I’m not falling for it a second time.”

“Understood,” Jackal replied. “Let’s call this an introduction and our letter of reference, then?”

Mez stared at the fighter, then chuckled. “Sure, why not?”

The mean one looked from Mez to Jackal. “Are we done? Or do you two want a room?”

“Hey, I’m taken,” Jackal protested, “I don’t cheat on my man.”

“Like I care,” the mean one replied. “You two, deal with the idiot and the kid, I’m going to teach Mez what happens to holier than thou people.” He punched his palm and

the sound it created was not flesh on flesh.

Tibs stepped away from Jackal, taking out his knife. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Carina glaring at the mean one. At her feet, the dust was starting to dance. Jackal's skin thickened and gained the brown of earth.

"Do not treat me like I'm not here!" Carina snapped and wind whipped past Tibs to strike the man facing Mez.

He took a step forward from the impact and the wind cut his clothing apart, leaving shallow cuts over his skin.

Everyone paused to look at her.

"That's new," Jackal said.

She shook her head, hands on knees and panting again. "That's what my attack looks like when I'm fighting something not made from stone." She looked up. "Oh, come on, you should be writhing in pain."

The man smiled at her, showing broken teeth. "Missy, I am going to enjoy teaching you your place once I'm done with the archer."

Tibs ran for the rogue, taking his amulet in his free hand. He drew on it, and iced the ground before him, dropping on his knees and sliding. The other Rogue didn't stop in time and his foot slipped out from under him. Tibs sliced the knife, but only cut the shirt. He needed to practice this before the next time. He melted the ice as he put his foot down and drew the water back in, then stood.

The Rogue got to his feet. "Don's going to be really happy when I tell him about how I killed you." He took a short sword from the knife sized scabbard at his hip. Tibs frowns and focused. 'Scabbard of confusion, Quality good.' Sure, he thought sarcastically, it was confusing.

The Rogue's eyes were gray, so metal. He stepped toward Tibs, swinging his sword left and right. Tibs only knew the basics of what metal essence did. It let them keep their swords sharp, let them mold metal around themselves if they had any on their person. This one looked to only had the sword. He either hadn't prepared ahead or didn't consider that aspect important.

He swung, and Tibs dodged, swung again, and Tibs stepped back out of reach, forcing the man to move with him. He caught sight of Jackal punching one fighter and the mean one grabbing Mez by the throat and immediately put them out of his mind. Once he'd dealt with his opponent, he'd see about helping them.

He quickly stepped to the side and around the Rogue, who wasn't as quick, but still fast enough to block the knife slash. Tibs rolled back and to his feet before the counter swing came.

"Stop moving," the man growled.

"Who's been teaching you to fight?" Tibs asked. "We're Rogue, we don't stand still." He dodged another swing, then one more. He coated his forearm with ice and willed it as hard as he could, blocking the next strike as he stepped forward, slashed at the Rogue's stomach, and kept going past him. The block cost him essence from the ice chipping off, and he moved some from the amulet to his reserve.

The man cursed and glared at Tibs. “No wonder Don hates you so much.”

“What did I do?” Tibs asked, surprised at the vehemence in the words, then cursed himself as the sword sliced through the ice on his arm to leave a red line on his skin.

“Oh right, you like playing innocent,” the man replied, smirking.

Tibs forced the comments out of his mind. Bardik kept telling him a fight wasn't the time for his curiosity to get the better of him. Win, then ask questions. Tibs quickly sheathed his knife, stepping back.

The man grinned. “Finally realizing you can't win, can you? That's okay, run away like the coward you are.”

Tibs really hoped this was going to work. He steadying himself, pulled the water out of the amulet and to his wrist. Distance probably didn't matter, but why take a chance. This was just manipulating two parts of his reserve, he reminded himself as he drew the essence out and moved it through his arm to his hand. He grabbed the knife, pushing the essence in it, moving the water over it in the same motion, mixing the two.

He flicked the knife and released the essence.

The man was still smirking as the jet of water hit him and sent him flying back. Tibs's jaw dropped. He had no idea that could happen. Then he grinned as the rogue stayed on the ground. He couldn't wait to show this to Alistair.

Carina looked at him, eyes wide, and he smiled at her. He was out of essence too, but he wasn't exhausted. Jackal was now facing the mean one, the other fighter unconscious on the ground. Mez was sitting up, rubbing his throat.

Jackal squared his shoulders. “So, you want to do this essenced up, or are you a real man?”

The man snorted. Now that they were close, Tibs saw he was taller and more muscular than Jackal. Unlike Jackal's earth-brown skin, his was rocky gray. “You think I need essence to beat you to a pulp?” His skin regained a normal tone, “I've been breaking boys like you for years.”

Jackal's skin also regained its normal tan. He smiled. “Then come and teach me.” The man rushed Jackal, who quickly stepped left and right, dodging and blocking.

Jackal smiled. “I'm going to call this the Marin Special.” He quickly swung at the man's head, his entire arm thickening and turning deep brown. When it hit, the man fell sideways, crumbling to the ground as he tried to put a foot under him to steady himself. He attempted to push himself up, but his brown-red eyes rolled back and he slumped, unconscious.

“What was that?” Mez demanded.

“That was me winning,” Jackal answered, picking up the bow and turning it over. It looked fine to Tibs as he joined the fighter, other than the string being gone.

“You told him no essence,” the archer said, outraged, snatching the bow out of the hand.

“Street Rules,” Jackal replied, “never fight fair. And I told him that. Marin never said one true thing in her life. How is it my fault he didn't know that?” Jackal smiled.

“So, how’s that for our introduction?”

Mez pushed Jackal out of his way. “Fuck you.”

“What? Hey, we just saved your life, here,” Jackal replied. “I think—”

The archer rounded on him. “I wanted out of that team because they’re nothing more than a bunch of common thugs. You’re just more of the same.”

“Hey, I resent that,” Jackal said. “There’s nothing common about anyone on this team.”

“You cheat, you lie,” Mez snarled. “How’s that any different?”

“We don’t start fights,” Tibs said. He mentally marked Mez as city folk and didn’t point out surviving usually required cheating.

“I’m not sure if you caught his name before all this started,” Jackal said. “He’s Tibs, our Rogue, don’t let his size fool you, he’s smarter than I am.”

“What does his size—” Mez began asking.

“That’s Carina,” Jackal cut him off, “our sorceress. She’d smarter than the two of us put together. Me, I’m Jackal. What I do, is win. I will cheat and I will lie to win a fight, but what I will not do is take advantage of a fellow Runner.”

“And them?” The archer motioned to the unconscious men. “What do you call that?”

Jackal looked around, and Tibs saw the effort it took him not to show pride. “Tibs said it; we don’t start fights. They brought that on themselves. I was willing to talk it out. They weren’t. They were going to beat you, maybe even kill you; I don’t know them that well.” He added with a shrug.

Mez still didn’t look happy.

“It looked like they weren’t going to let you go,” Carina said.

Mez waved that aside. “I would have managed it.”

“I—” Jackal began, but stopped at Carina’s raised hand.

“Mez, I’m going to tell you what the dumb fighter told me when they offered me to join their team. I don’t know your story, and I’m not going to ask. But while our methods might be unorthodox, I think you’ll agree the dungeon forced that on us. We survived by adapting, and that means more often than not, not playing fair. I’ve seen enough of these two to tell you they’re so rough around the edges you could cut yourself on them, but they’re good people.”

“Who cheat and lie,” Mez said.

“Maybe you can try to teach them better,” Carina said. “I wouldn’t hold my breath, but you can certainly try.”

“Did she just insult us?” Jackals whispered to Tibs.

Tibs shrugged. “What do you care? She’s going to kill you, remember?”

“Right, Carina, that killing thing, how serious were you about it?”

“I don’t know,” she said, rolling her eyes at the fighter. “Do you have any plans on forcing me to run like that again?”

“I didn’t even have a plan to make you run that time,” Jackal replied. “You know me, I don’t plan anything.”

Mez looked from one to the other, a confused expression on his face. When he looked at Tibs, he shrugged.

“You get used to them.”

“How?” Mez asked and seemed surprised by his own question.

“With love and understanding,” Jackal replied.

“A lot of patience,” Carina added.

“I’m Street,” Tibs said. “They aren’t the worst I’ve had to deal with in my life.”

“There you go,” Jackal exclaimed, messing Tibs’s curtly black hair. “If that isn’t the epitome of approval, I don’t know what is.”

“I have no idea what that word means,” Tibs said.

“It means the very best,” Carina replies, eying Jackal suspiciously.

“You thr—” Mez eyed Carina, “you two are insane.”

“You did see what I did to that man who ignored my existence,” Carina warned, “didn’t you?”

The archer looked uncomfortable and mumbled something.

“Yes?” Carina demanded.

With a sigh, he looked at her. “I was raised to never say something bad about a lady.”

Jackal snorted. “What, you’re a Runner, not a lady.”

“This is how you get in trouble with Kroseph,” Tibs said.

“What did I do this time?”

Carina chuckled. “Mez, how about we go find an inn and—”

“Not Kro’s family inn,” Jackal said. “They are going to pester me with questions.”

“I thought you liked telling stories?” Tibs asked.

“Well, those about me and Kro are private.”

“Let’s go find a quiet inn,” Carina said, shaking her head in amusement, “and you can ask us any questions you want. I don’t promise we’ll answer everything, but if you decide we aren’t a good fit by the end, we’ll go our separate ways.”

Mez considered it, then nodded. “That’s fairer than what Don did.”

They headed out of the alleys. Once back on the street, Jackal pointed to a sign with a tankard over a door. The motion caused the sleeve to pull back, and Tibs stared at the red gem in the bracelet. He cursed, looking at his own bracelet.

Carina sighed. “I guess the vacation is coming to an end. Let’s go have that drink and — Tibs!”

He was running down the road. “I’m going to see the sea!” he called back. “I’ll hurry and go right back to the platform!” Carina yelled something, but he didn’t make it out over his breathing and the cursing of the people he had to push out of his way. It wasn’t how he’d wanted to do it, and certainly not under this kind of time crunch, but he was out of option.

He asked about the Cliffside General Gatherer anytime he found someone he understood and eventually made it to a large building made of polished stones. Further

down the road, he could make out some of the blue-green field glittering in the lowering sun, like gems scattering on the ground out of a cut coin pouch. He judged the height of the sun. Once he was done here, he'd run to the sea. Then he'd leave. It wouldn't take more than a few hours, and that should be fast enough.

He hoped so.

He entered and smells of wood, spices, and leather enveloped him. The large room was filled with counters within which were items he didn't recognize. On shelves were pieces of armors, leather, and metal and some out of things he didn't know. Boxes with writing on them. He approached the shelves, wondering what was within the boxes.

A woman said something, startling him as he reached for one. He stared at her, immediately considering how he'd escape. She was tall and lean, dressed in a light gray shirt and brown pants. Her hair was blond and short.

He'd run around the counters, forcing her to slow, so he could make it to the door before she reached—

“Can I help you?” she said, then said something else he didn't understand.

Right, he wasn't here stealing anything.

“Wait, I only understood what you said before.”

She smiled. “Pursatian, that is not a language I hear often in this city. How may I help you?”

Tibs studied her. There was something different, but he couldn't place it. Her eyes were green, but a normal pale version of it. Her face was lean, just like her. He stopped himself. Once he was done, he could try to figure it out.

“I'm looking for the owner.” He tried to remember the name Bardik had given him. Charles.

“Sir Cliff is home. I am in charge of the store today. I know everything here as well as he does.”

That wasn't the name, but she spoke of him as if he was the owner. Maybe Bardik hadn't wanted Old Walrus to know the name; which was why he'd pointed out he was the owner?

“I need to speak to him, to Sir Cliff.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “He does not do business from his home, but I am authorized to evaluate what it is you wish to sell.”

Tibs took a breath to calm himself. He couldn't remember how long he had, but it had to be at least until the end of the day. He fought the urge to look at the gem. “It's personal. I need to talk with Sir Cliff. Can you direct me to his home?”

She studied him, finally mumbling something to herself he couldn't understand. The tone made him happy he didn't. She let out a breath. “Sir Cliff's home is the Torban House. It is on Lavalane road, which is six roads further toward the sea. It is a turquoise house, you will know it.”

“Than you.” He repeated the word Lavalane quietly as he ran out. It sounded foreign. He counted six streets and stopped. Was it left or right? “Lavalane?” he asked of someone walking by and received a shake of the head. He asked three more times before

deciding to go left. He couldn't spend the rest of his time looking for someone who'd understand what he was asking about, not with the sun continuing to go down and his time running out.

At least he knew turquoise. He'd seen the stone before, he hadn't been able to get it, but it had captivated him until the owner noticed him looking and he chased him off.

He looked for a house that color, and made it to the cliff, without seeing one. He cursed. He'd picked the wrong direction. The shadows were long when he made it back to the main road. He didn't take the time to admire the glittering of the sea. He ran across and down the street, hoping that "toward the sea" hadn't been some local saying for something other than toward the sea.

If the house wasn't here, he didn't know how he'd find it, and he didn't think the shop would be open once the sun set. Maybe he should go back right now and asked for clearer directions?

As he considered doing that, he saw the house. The blue darker in the little light that was left. He considered looking it over, searching for the best entry point. Climb to the roof and look at the sea, since he was confident he wouldn't get to go closer to it now. He wasn't breaking into the house, he reminded himself, and banged on the door, catching his breath.

The door opened, and a woman looked down at him. She was tall, like the woman at the shop, but instead of lean, she was large, the kind of large the cooks in his town tended to be, and she smiled at him. She said something that also sounded kind, but he didn't understand it.

Tibs didn't voice his cursing. She didn't deserve even the tone. What if the man Bardik wanted him to see didn't understand him? "I need to speak to Sir Cliff," he said, speaking slowly.

"Cliff," she replied, smiling. She motioned for him to enter, and he hesitated. He reminded himself he wasn't on his Street, or even a street. He was dressed well. She wasn't trying to trick him, she was simply being nice. He stepped into the house, looking left and right for traps; Keeping his hand away from the pommel of his knife, but ready to reach for it.

"Cliff!" she called, then added more he didn't understand. A man answered, and she smiled at him, raising a finger before leaving him alone.

The entryway was comfortable with a chair and table. On the walls were three small paintings; one was of the woman, with a man, both young. The man matched the description Bardik gave him, if he removed a few decades. The other picture was that of a man who wasn't the one he was here to see but still seemed familiar. There was some resemblance between the two, but there was also a sense Tibs had met him before. The man had a boy a little taller than Tibs at his side. The third was that same man with a woman in his arms. Both smiling with an expression that reminded Tibs of Jackal and Kroseph.

A man said something and Tibs turned. They studied each other. He wore a work shirt that was stained and open at the front, showing an undershirt and under that muscle

with a layer of fat over them. His eyes were green, similar to the woman at the shop, Tibs realized, but that was all they had in common.

“I’m sorry,” Tibs said. “I’m not from around here. I really hope you can understand me.”

“A Pursatier, well, it’s been a long time since I’ve encountered someone from that kingdom.” The man’s voice was deep, rich. “What can I do for you, young man?”

“Are you Charles of Goodfroy?” he asked. Tibs would hate to have done all this running and not be at the right house.

The man glanced at the paintings. “I haven’t heard that name in a great many years.” He was looking at the picture of the man and child. Tibs saw the resemblance again. Although Tibs now noticed that the paint where the eyes had been had chipped off with time.

“I’ve been Cliff for most of my life,” the man said, looking away from the painting.

“I’m here for a Sea Drop,” Tibs said.

The man shook his head. “I don’t sell my candies here. Go to the store when it opens in the morning, I’ll be there, we can discuss it then.”

“No, Bardik told me to find you. He said that you’d give me one for free, to try it,” he added, making himself sound plaintive, instead of as if he was relaying a message.

The man’s face clouded over. “So he’s finally going through with it. I was really hoping he’d see reason. Follow me.”

“Cliff?” the woman asked as they crossed the kitchen. She was seated at the table, paper before her, and an inkpot and pen next to it. They spoke for a minute and in the end, she smiled approvingly.

“I told her you’re here for candy and that I’m too soft-hearted to turn you away without giving it to you.” He smiled at the woman.

Cliff led him up stairs, then into a room that looked like an alchemical laboratory from stories bards told. Tubes and vials, some clear, some opaque, some with colored liquids, and others Tibs couldn’t tell.

Tibs looked at the man’s eyes again to confirm they were a normal green, then sense the essence in the room, expecting some sign of manipulation, but it was all free floating. He realized he didn’t know if alchemy required essence or if it was something else. The stories never said, and Tibs hadn’t been able to go ask the bards for details. Not that essence would have been one of his questions.

“This is a Sea Drop,” the man said, and Tibs turned to find him holding a misshapen lump the size of his thumb. It was blue, green, and white. Layers that had been folded over each other and now looked like they bled together. “You let it dissolve in your mouth. Don’t bit it, you’re going to break a tooth.” The man offered it to Tibs. “It’s for you.”

Tibs took it carefully. He hadn’t expected to get something out of it. Not even the candy. He’d been certain it had been a code phrase so the man would know Bardik had sent him. Then he noticed the wooden box in the man’s other hand.

He hesitated before offering it to Tibs. He took it, but the man didn't let go of it. "Tell him." He stopped, closed his eyes. Said something in the language he'd spoken with the woman, then sighed. "What's the point. I couldn't change his mind when I was younger. He won't listen to this old either. Tell him to be careful." He let go of the box.

It was a little longer than his hand, the width and height of three fingers. It wasn't heavy. Tibs didn't shake it. With the door open, the man looked at the sky, which only had a sliver of pale red and blues over the buildings. "It's going to be full dark soon. Do you need me to accompany you to the platform?"

"I'm not afraid of what's in the dark," Tibs said.

The man looked at him. "No, I suspect you aren't." He sighed. And Tibs thought he'd say something, but he shook his head. "Just hurry, it's best not to tempt those who live in the darkness, even if you aren't afraid of them."

Tibs did run all the way to the transport platform.