

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?

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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.

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.