

# book 2 - Stepping up

## Stepping up-1

Tibs sensed the essence around him as the world materialized. He couldn't make out the details, as void wasn't one of his elements, but he could get a sense of how it moved. Of the stretch in it.

Dry heat slammed into him. He'd forgotten in the week in MountainSea, and then his stop in Kragle Rock, that it was high heat in the kingdom of Pursatia. The seasons changed too much from one city to the other when traveling via transport platform.

He stepped down and to the side, then paused, looking at the column that was an integral part of the platform, even if it was at the bottom of the stairs. Tibs could sense the weave of the essence in it that was connected to the platform. Even if he couldn't, after the half dozen platforms he'd seen, each with the identical columns around it, he'd suspect they played a role.

This one had a board with a grid with words at the top and side and numbers in each box. Tibs didn't want to read them, but he'd promised Carina that at each new city he'd learn one of the months. Right now, in Pursatia, it was the month of Burning Brush. It had been the same in the previous Pursatier city he'd visited. That city had been called Tameria, and like this one, was on the western side of the realm.

Tibs had been surprised to discover that not everyone from Pursatia spoke the same. Just like Carina had explained that people from one kingdom who learned the language of another spoke it with an accent as the two tongues mixed. Tibs had found out when speaking with merchants that different parts of a kingdom spoke the same language slightly differently, and one who was familiar with Pursatia had told Tibs he spoke it the way the westerners did.

This had given Tibs a place to start in looking for his home. The other thing he knew was that it had a transport platform. Speaking with the golden robes attendant, he'd learned that only the larger city had them since they were expensive. Unfortunately, those two pieces of information hadn't helped him narrow his home's location.

He was in Zaranka now, and it was the fourth western city Tibs visited, hoping to find where he'd been taken from.

He joined the people walking along the main road, leaving the platform. The pain he'd lived with once he'd woken after saving the dungeon had dulled into an ache, deep in himself, as his body had done what it could to deal with the corruption he was infected with. The tint in his essence was faint now, but still there. He could ignore it as long as he didn't make sudden moves.

After two sets of ten larger streets, he turned left. The area he wanted wouldn't be close to the platform, or to the major roads. He'd never learned where his Street was

located in the city, but it hadn't been surrounded by anything resembling wealth. The buildings that had made up his street had been in disrepair, and the neighboring streets only marginally better.

There also hadn't been a wall. So he turned around when he encountered it. Tibs hadn't known a city was surrounded by a wall. It was what differentiated towns from cities, Kroseph's mother had told him. When Tibs had pointed out that MountainSea didn't have walls, and was still a city, she'd laughed and said the mountain cliffs were wall enough for them.

He didn't head back to the main road, sticking to the smaller alleys, watching for urchins. The urchins of his street weren't the same as those of the main roads. The ones who begged the tourists and nobles only looked like urchins because the people there didn't know better. They were too healthy, too energetic. Those of his street hadn't had food in their bellies for days. They begged any who passed but didn't have the energy to chase them. If the misery on their small face wasn't enough to make someone drop a sliver of copper in their hands, survival depended on them being willing to do things that killed other parts of them.

The buildings were in worse shape here, but not as bad as he was looking for. He was in the right area, of that he was sure. Somewhere around here, he'd recognize an alley, the way planks were broken off a wall. He'd find where he'd curled up in the cold season, a small fire the only thing keeping death away. More than once he considered extinguishing it and joining Mama.

"Well, you look like those clothes don't belong to you," a woman said, stepping out of an alley in front of Tibs. "I'm thinking we should take them to someone who can make better use of them." She was tall but thin. The thin of the sick, of those who didn't eat as often as they wanted or needed. The thin of the Street.

"Once he's out of them," a man said, behind Tibs. "You think Grabby will pay to use him?" the man was also thin, and his dark skin had a sickly sheen to it. In this heat and dryness, it took a lot to get someone to sweat. Neither had an element, they hardly had any essence flowing through them.

Grabby wasn't a name Tibs was familiar with, but he was still outside the street proper. It could be someone he'd never had a reason to learn about since he'd stayed away from the actions they hinted at Grabby enjoying.

They had no weapons, but plenty of broken planks and rocks littered the ground. On the street, weapons were whatever was within reach. Tibs had two knives. The one at his belt, and the one in the bracer on his left forearm. The one of his right at his rogue tools. They were the only pieces of his armor Tibs had kept in his travels. The rest was stored in the room the guild had provided him in the guild building in Kragle Rock. And he wore what he'd considered his worse set of clothing to better fit in with his street.

Looking at the rags the two wore, Tibs realized he'd forgotten how little people wore on the Street. He'd been gone three seasons at most, and he'd forgotten what it was to wear rags. No wondered they wanted what he had.

"You don't want to do this," Tibs told them. He'd had said this even if he didn't think

he could beat them. You never showed fear on the street. Fear got you dead. Once you'd fled and hid, then you could be afraid.

"You hear the kid?" she asked. "We don't want to do this? Why? because his daddy gave him a pointy stick?" her face darkened. "This is our street. We do what we want here. If you didn't want to lose what you have, you shouldn't have come here."

Tibs turned to watch both of them. She was the more dangerous. The man's hand was shaking. The essence was frayed, being pulled apart by whatever sickness afflicted him.

"I'm a Dungeon Runner," Tibs said, "if you attack me, I'll kill you."

"Dungeon Runner?" she asked. "What's that? Some fancy term for bed wetter?" the man snorted. "Get out of those, and we won't hurt you too badly. Grabby pays more when the boys we bring him aren't damaged."

Tibs drew his knife.

"I think we're going to have to hurt him," the man said.

"Good," the woman replied, picking up a thick plank. "I'm looking forward to some fun."

Tibs ran for her, knife held underhanded. She grinned at him, raising the plank over her head. She wasn't even trying to protect herself. Tibs would cut her open and it would be over.

His leg buckled under him as blinding pain flared. It was as if the bone had snapped under his weight. No matter how often it had happened these last months, he never got used to it. He raised his hand over himself and coated it in earth and water, icing that for the extra protection.

The plank connected, and he dropped to a knee. He slashed blindly; the pain keeping him from sensing their essence. Her curse, more than the slight resistance, told him he cut her.

"Oh, I don't think Grabby's going to pay a lot by the time I'm done with him," She said.

Tibs forced the pain down enough to sense and pivoted in her direction. His leg wasn't broken. As real as the pain was, there was no damage there. It was his essence bunching up because of the corruption in it. And just like the flow broke when someone was injured. His body thought he'd suffered an injury in response to the essence.

He almost missed the man running at him because of how faint his essence was, not entirely deflecting the kick, but it had little strength behind it. The pain in his shoulder was nothing compared to that of his leg.

The man staggered back, panting.

"Is that supposed to be funny?" she asked. "You fighting on one knee?"

Before he considered replying, she was swinging at him again. He deflected the blow with a blast of air, then stabbed her in the side. She cried out and fell back.

The pain diminished enough he pushed himself to his feet. He was sweating too now, but he could feel the heat wicking it away. He let it. He wanted to keep his fire in case he needed to scare them further. Stopping the strike had cost him all his air reserve, the coating of earth and water a little. Fire was the one essence he had that could scare anyone who

didn't understand the elements.

She was writhing on the ground, holding her bleeding side and crying. The man looked at him in fear before running off. Tibs leaned against the building, talking the weight of his leg and forcing the essence into the proper flow. The corruption fought him, like it always did, but the pain went back to its usual dull throbbing.

"I thought I'd heard someone scream." A man said, followed by the sound of an impact and the woman screaming louder.

Tibs opened his eyes and readied himself. The man was older than the one who fled. His face scarred, his hair thin and dirty. The clothing he wore was a patchwork of rags making a shirt, pants, and shoes. He was one of the leaders.

He kicked her in the injured side again before looking at Tibs. "I'm guessing you did this?"

"She attacked me."

"Where's her boytoy?"

Tibs nodded in the direction the man had fled.

"Isn't love grand?"

"That wasn't love."

The man shrugged. "They thought it was. Now. As a thank you for dealing with this bothersome bitch. I'm not going to kill you. You're going to put the knife and pouch down and you're going to walk down that lane. It's going to take you to the places where your kind is welcome."

Tibs shook his head.

"Don't be stupid, kid. I'm being generous. I'd rather kill you and sell your insides to people with coppers."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"You're not?" the man looked around, then let out a sharp whistle. People appeared out of alleys. Men and women, younger and older. Tibs stopped counting after ten. Some had clubs, others knives. One even had a rusty sword. "How about now?"

Tibs was terrified, but he didn't let it show.

"That's too bad. If you'd been scared, you would have done the smart thing and given me everything. Now you're going to try to be brave, fight us, and end up dead. One of them will probably end up killing you too. Do you know how boring that's going to be?"

"Then why don't you try it yourself?"

The man laughed. "Kid, I didn't stay alive by accepting stupid challenges like that." He stepped back. "Kill him, but don't—"

"Guards!" someone in the distance yelled, and the call was taken up.

"Really?" the man asked. "I get handed this once-in-a-year opportunity and the guards show up? Is it the Rafians trying to scare me off again?"

"It's the guards," a man said, running into the alley.

"Why?"

"I just heard something about one of the noble's kid being missing."

The man looked at Tibs, who shook his head.

“Scatter!” the man yelled. “Anyone caught is on their own.”

They vanished down multiple alleys, and Tibs picked one no one had gone in. He had no intention of encountering the guards himself. So he cursed when he heard the steps coming in his direction. He squeezed himself under a half-fallen building and watched the feet run by, then gave them a minute before crawling out and running toward the main road. Once there, it would be simple to lose himself in the crowd and try again lat—

“I saw someone!” a woman yelled, and Tibs looked over his shoulder.

A guard was pointing in his direction.

He cursed and turn in the alley. He wouldn’t lose anyone if they followed him to the road.

“There!”

“Stop running!”

Why did they always yell that? Tibs couldn’t think of one time when someone obeyed. He had no plans to now.

The corruption coursing through his essence had other plans.

He put his foot down, and the pain flowed up to his head. The fall barely registered. Then he was fighting to stand, his arms unable to support his weight. He heard yells approaching, then voices.

When the hands grabbed him, he yelled in pain and was let go.

“What did you do to him?” a woman asked.

“Nothing, I was just going to get him to his feet.”

“How often do I have to tell you, you can’t rough up the streetfolks?”

“He’s not one of them,” the man replied.

“Then you really can’t—”

Tibs crawled away, pushing through the fading pain.

“Kid, don’t do that,” the woman said. She grabbed him and sat him against a broken carriage. He reached for the knife at his hip, and she closed her hand on his. “You’re safe. Whatever they might have done, they can’t hurt you anymore.”

He stared at her. She was telling him he was safe? A guard was trying to convince him they didn’t mean him harm? The ones Harry had brought to Kragle Rock hadn’t been as bad as the guards Tibs had known before, but Harry didn’t let anyone break his rules, not even the guards. Other cities didn’t bother doing that.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

He considered not answering, but it was four of them, in leather armor and with swords against one of him. “Tibs.”

She nodded. “What are you doing here? Did you get separated from your parents? Are you lost?”

He hadn’t been until he had to flee from them. Why was she being nice? “I’m looking for the Street.”

She stared at him. “Why would you want to go there?”

“That’s my business.” He pushed himself to his feet.

“He’s not the noble’s kid.” One of the men said.

“The others will find him and bring him back to his father,” she said, not taking her eyes off Tibs. “This one is still our responsibility.” She indicated the way Tibs had come. “The street is in that direction. Maybe a dozen blocks from here. If you’re serious about going there, I’ll escort you. You don’t want to run into the people who live there on your own.”

Tibs shook his head. Twelve blocks made it roughly where he’d been attacked. It hadn’t looked right for his street. He didn’t think she was lying to him. The guards knew where the street was since it’s where they went when they wanted to have their fun, or a noble asked one of them where they could do whatever they wanted. The city didn’t care what happened to streetfolks.

He had the wrong city again. He sighed and headed for the road, ignoring her calls. He had no reason to stay here anymore. Maybe the next city would be the right one.

## Stepping up-2

Tibs paid attention to how the essence stretched, but again he got no details from it, and then he was gone.

He opened his eyes to the late afternoon sky over his town. Nothing had changed, as far as he could tell, since the town had closed with the dungeon. Unlike the previous time, when Sto had graduated, no construction happened, no expansion. No one but him knew Sto was still alive and healing. The guild suspected he was, but they didn’t have his ability to talk with him, so it was more hope, something that few people in the town had shared.

The bored guard leaning against a pillar watched him step down but didn’t stop him. He also didn’t ask for the bracelet on Tibs left wrist, and Tibs didn’t offer it. It told Tibs a few things. Sto hadn’t changed enough to indicate when he’d reopen and the guild was still giving him special treatment. As far as he’d been able to determine, only he had been allowed back without hassles.

The dog fell into step as he started down Dungeon Road, and Tibs looked around for its owner before taking the chunk of dried meat out of a pocket.

“You know Serba hates it when I give you these, right?” he told Thump, who licked its chops. Tibs broke the jerky into two and threw one toward the dog, who jumped to catch it, then chewed happily. “Where is she? Usually, she doesn’t let you wander this far.” For an answer, the dog eyed the other piece pitifully. Tibs threw it too.

They walked a few deserted blocks. Without access to the dungeon, the nobles had left. There was no other appeal for them, and Tibs was happy about it. As far as he was concerned, they could remain away once Sto reopened. He saw a man working a loom and waved at him. The man waved back. A few of the townsfolk had had to remain, not having anywhere to go.

They’d either been brought here by the guild to help build the town or had paid for

the privilege. Either way, they have nothing but this, and some were afraid the town would die and take them along.

A whistle sounded, and Thump turn and ran to answer the call.

Not long after that, Tibs left the town proper to step onto what had been dubbed the gathering field. It was where the Runners assembled before entering the dungeon. At first in mass, because the town had only been tents and too small for anything else, and the field much larger. Then, because being on the field meant higher odds one of the adventurers who guarded them initially would assign them to a team and they'd have a chance at a few coppers.

Tibs still remembered seeing his first whole copper coin, the awe at it being unbroken. Or when he'd received the first one he could keep, although that memory was tainted by who had given it to him. Bardik, standing behind the table, smiles and nicknames at the ready. Bardik who taught Tibs how to fight with knives, who got Tibs involved in a plot to kill the dungeon without his knowledge. Who tried to kill the dungeon, nearly succeeded, was responsible for the constant ache Tibs felt.

Tibs had tried to see the adventurer rogue between his trips to locate his home, but no one would tell him where the prison he was kept in was. Only that it was the most terrible place the guild had. Tirania had listened to Tibs explanation. To how he needed to ask Bardik why he wanted to kill the dungeon, why betray him like this when Tibs thought they were friends.

She nodded in understanding and told him what Harry had said, what Alistair told him. Bardik would never get out. He would never see the outside or people from the outside. She'd gone on to explain how some people were never satisfied unless they destroyed things, and Tibs had stopped listening. He knew why Bardik had done what he'd done. He'd known they had never been friends in the other rogue's eyes. Bardik couldn't be friends with someone who had secrets.

What Tibs wanted to know was why the adventurer hadn't told anyone how Tibs had drained his essence until he looked older than Alistair. Everyone thought the dungeon had done it. That it had been its attempt at stopping Bardik. But the adventurer could have enacted his revenge by revealing Tibs secret, or one of them.

He paused at the bottom of the steps and studied them. They were different. Polished and with designs, instead of the rough stone from after Sto graduated, or from Tibs's last visit.

"Do you like them?" Sto asked.

Tibs looked up at them, then turned and took in the town, confirming he was alone, before looking at the stairs again.

"Did you have to draw rats on them?" Tibs asked. That he had meant to or no, Sto had given him a hatred of all rat-related things. "And you sound better." He walked up the steps. There were too many rats drawn on them.

"I think it's good the new Runners know what to expect."

Tibs stopped on the fifth step. The rats were ratlings now, Sto's humanoid rat creations, and they were killing people. Tibs shuddered.

“How’s Gany?”

“Not well. She didn’t take almost losing me well. She tried to explain why, but I don’t understand most of it. It seems pretty simple to me. If I die, she’ll go help another dungeon. It’s what her people do.”

Tibs started up again. “Losing someone isn’t that simple, especially if they care about you. You understood how losing Walter hurt me. It’s why you gave me the pouch and the belt.”

“But you’re human. She isn’t. I’m not. I don’t mean to say that to be mean Tibs, but when you die, I’ll go on.”

Tibs nodded. It was the reason dungeons existed, after all. To push the people exploring them to become stronger, if they survived. Tibs didn’t want to die, but he had no illusions about his chances. With his weak essences, the fact he couldn’t ask for help in training any but water, since no one was supposed to have more than one. Or that his one strong essence, he still knew nothing about other than it let him sense other people even when they hid, or that he could heal injuries after a fashion, or, like Jackal liked to call it, splint them.

“Maybe she’s more like humans than like a dungeon.” The slab of stone was as featureless as always. But the columns on each side had new carvings, each section depicting something taking place in the rooms. On one, a fighter was skewered by spears coming from the wall. The one above showed boulders with someone fallen between them and rat—

“Is that me?” Tibs demanded as he noticed the form was small and thin and held a knife.

“No,” Sto replied, sounded offended. “It’s just a random rogue. They’re the ones who usually panic among the boulders the first time the rats start showing up.”

“I did not panic,” Tibs stated, trying to stop the shudder.

The next one was of the warren room, with bunnies launching out of the hidden warrens and the rat distracting the team of adventurers. After that the boss room, with the golem, whipping an archer into two.

The column on the other side of the door had the same rooms, but different scenes. A rogue on all four, pierced through the side by a spear. An archer being mobbed by rats in the boulder room, a fighter with a bunny bursting through her chest in the warren room, and the boss golem holding a fighter by the neck while a sorcerer had the whip through his chest.

“You made this?”

“Of course. I don’t think there’s another dungeon in here hiding and adding pictures when I’m not looking.”

“You’re good.” Tibs studied the details of the trap room. The floor tiles had marks on them.

“Thanks.”

Tibs sat, his back against the slab of stone. “Do you know when you’ll be opening up? The townsfolk are getting worried.”



“Soon,” Sto replied after a long silence. “Everything looks right, but the corruption seeped in deep. I’m not finished cleaning it out.”

Tibs raised his arm, feeling the ache. “How are you removing it? I thought corruption just destroyed.”

“It can be contained. And I can control anything that isn’t alive within me. If I’d known to expect an attack like that, I would have been ready, but I thought nothing could hurt me. The stone I make is supposed to be impervious to anything.”

Tibs chuckled. “The creatures aren’t all that hard.”

“That’s because I make them that way. Just hard enough to be a challenge, tough enough to kill you if you aren’t paying attention.”

Tibs nodded. It didn’t make the loss he’d experience go away, but knowing it hadn’t been just about feeding the dungeon, like the guild had told them back then, made it easier to accept. Did the guild know the dungeons didn’t just want to eat the Runners? Maybe with the older dungeons, the guild was willing to believe that. The ones the guild thought were wily enough to think beyond eating. After all, they only thought of dungeons as animals.

“So, soon.”

“I can’t give you anything better, Tibs. You know time isn’t something that I can keep track of.”

“I should tell them to set up the schedule here, instead of in the town. That way you’d be able to figure out the nine days of the week, the five weeks of the month. The seasons. It’s how I sort of figured it out, with my team’s help.”

“How are they? They haven’t visited.” Sto sounded disappointed.

“Jackal is with Kroseph in MountainSea. Carina travels, but she stops by to see them every so often. Mez visited them, but he’s spending the time with his family. It sounds like his mother is trying to convince the guild that he doesn’t deserve to be a Runner, that his crime wasn’t that bad.” Tibs rubbed his hand. As if picking a pocket was bad too. Unfortunately, those who made the laws didn’t care why he’d had to do it. He’d been caught, and if not for Sto, Tibs would have lost a hand.

“And the cleric?”

Tibs shook his head. “No one’s seen Khumdar since Harry kicked all the runners out. Alistair said he tried to stay, so he could look after me, but he got in an argument with the lead cleric and after that, he was banned from the guild house, which is where I was healing.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

Tibs looked at the bracelet, the yellow gem in it. “If he wants to live, he’ll have to.” If he was still alive. Khumdar had told him he’d been forced to become a runner by people who weren’t guards. Would they appreciate that he was free? The bracelet gave the Runners free access to the transport platforms, but it only took one enemy to find out you were around for them to warn everyone. And if they had enough resources, they could follow you across platforms.

It was one thing Tibs had learned from talking with the attendants. The one who took you places could get back there, even if they weren’t the ones to set the destination, like when Alistair had been the one to set the cavern of Water for Tibs’s first audience. That

attendant could return there because while they didn't know how Alistair's mind had shaped the path, they remembered the path.

When Tibs had asked how Alistair could shape how their void essence worked, the attendant had motioned to the platform and the pillars. They all worked together with the attendants to allow travel.

"Also, they aren't allowed back until the gem turns red," Tibs said. "That's why they haven't visited. I get special treatment because I saved you."

"Your team helped. Jackal took on one of those adventurers that tried to chase you. He was taken down quickly, but it let you get further. Mez let out a bunch of fire arrows. He really likes his bow."

Tibs chuckled. "It was lucky one of the chests had something so well suited to him."

"It was, wasn't." Sto lowered his voice. "I don't think Gany's going to buy it if it happens again."

Tibs nodded. "Tell her I'm looking forward to seeing what she did with the third level." He stood.

"Maybe you should get through the second floor, first," Sto replied.

"I will. I don't intend on letting you eat me."

"I'm glad, Tibs," Sto replied as Tibs walked down the stairs.

Back in town, the man at the loom waved again. "Gone to see the dungeon again," he said.

"I figure he can use the company," Tibs replied. He didn't mind hinting at Sto being more than a beast, because the townsfolk didn't have their head full of ideas as to what a dungeon should be. And because Tibs was much younger than all the other Runners. He was allowed his fantasies.

"I hope this isn't going to last long," the man said. "If I don't have Runners to buy my clothes soon, I'm not going to be able to pay my rent to the guild anymore."

Tibs nodded. That was another reason for the townsfolk's ever falling spirits. The guild cared about them as much as they cared for the people they sent into the dungeon to be eaten. It didn't care that with the dungeon closed and the people sent away. Those who couldn't leave had no way to earn a living.

"Soon," Tibs said. "We're going to come back soon, I promise."

## Stepping up-3

The humid heat broke his concentration, causing him to gasp and only afterward cover his eyes against the bright light. He needed to travel to MountainSea in the evenings, this constant blinding light as he arrived was tiresome.

He stepped down the stairs and to the side with the others, giving their eyes time to adjust. The sounds of the market outside the pillars invited him to hurry there, with their distinct sounds, and promises of pocket filled with coins. As much as he'd like to dip his

fingers in those pockets, he couldn't trust them yet. All it took was one corruption caused spasm, and he'd lose a hand.

He'd be back to himself soon, he reminded himself again, opening and closing a hand, forcing himself to feel the ache. To judge if it had gone down since yesterday. Maybe it had. Or he was just telling himself it had, trying to convince himself.

He joined the people leaving the transport platform and walked down MountainSea Road, which cut the city in the center, going from the mountain to the sea. At Carlisle Way, he made a left and followed it until it widened and intersected Stone Drop, where shops and Kroseph's family inn were located.

He stepped in and was blind as the light vanished.

"It is little man!" a woman yelled in heavily accented Pursatian, and Tibs readied himself. His sight adjusted to the lower light in time to see the woman grab him and lift him off the floor. "Little man return!"

"Hi Jesbel," Tibs said.

"How trip?" she asked, carrying him to the back of the inn's eating room. She was one of Kroseph's older sisters, Tibs thought, or a sister of one of his parents. The explanations had come too quickly each time Tibs had asked and was broken by language and people speaking over one another.

Jackal had once said that enthusiasm was one of Kroseph's defining traits. With visiting the family multiple times now, Tibs had decided it was shared by every member of Kroseph's family.

"Tibs," the older man behind the counter greeted him when Jesbel sat him on it.

"Mister Fernan," Tibs replied, moving himself to the stool. Kroseph's father and Jesbel exchanged words he didn't understand, and she ruffled Tibs's hair before disappearing into the back.

"How were your travels this time?" the man asked, placing a tankard before Tibs.

"I didn't find it," Tibs answered, placing a copper coin down on the counter.

"You will," the man answered, glaring at the coin before raising his gaze to Tibs. They locked eyes and after a few seconds, the man sighed, took the coin, and put it in a box under the counter. Each time they had the same contest of will, and each time Tibs couldn't explain why he insisted on paying, on why he wanted to be treated as a customer, rather than the extended family they kept trying to.

The closest Tibs came to explaining it to himself was that he already had his family, his team, and that he didn't want to be part of a second one that would compete against them. He liked Kroseph's family, but as friends, not as his own family.

"Where's Kroseph?"

"Off with bad fighter," Jesbel replied, returning and carrying a barrel of ale over her shoulder.

Kroseph's father said something sharp, and she snorted. She didn't like Jackal. She thought he was no good for Sweet Kroseph. She was one of the rare person the fighter couldn't seem to charm.

"Where are they?"

“The arena,” the innkeeper answered, shaking his head. So Jackal was fighting again. “At least that way he isn’t going to end in a cell.”

Jackal had no problem calling himself a thug, and without the dungeon to direct his energy toward, or the training to survive it, he’d gotten in several brawls in his few weeks in MountainSea. Tibs had returned from his first trip to learn the fighter had had to pay most of his coins as part of his sentence after a fight had destroyed the inside of a tavern.

Jackal had spent the days afterward apologizing to Kroseph for it. Explaining he hadn’t intended to fight, he’d just gone in for a tankard because of the heat, but someone there had known he was friends with his family and had insulted them. Jackal had had to defend them. He’d then promised he wouldn’t fight again the entire time he was here.

Three days later he was in another brawl. Tibs had realized fighting was for Jackal what picking pockets was to him, and that Tibs had more self-control.

After that, Kroseph had suggested the arena, and Jackal had fought against it, somehow seeing that as a punishment, rather than a way to get the fighting out of his system. Even knowing he could win coins didn’t make the endeavor more appealing.

Tibs had tried to explain to Kroseph why Jackal was against it. How he saw stepping into the arena was willingly risking leaving Kroseph alone, while the dungeon and even the brawls were out of his control, things that were forced on him.

Kroseph had yelled at Jackal for being stupid, then they’d made up, then Tibs had left because they’d forgotten they were in an inn with customers and he wasn’t watching them have ‘them’ time.

“When did they leave?” Tibs asked.

“Just before you arrived. I’m surprised you didn’t see them.”

“All the light blinded me.”

The innkeeper chuckled. “If you hurry, you might be able to watch Jackal’s fight. They don’t plan ahead, so it takes a while before they can put him against someone who matched him.”

“They have Runners?” Tibs asked, surprised. It’s who it would take to match Jackal. Even the strongest fighter wouldn’t be able to win if they didn’t have an element.

“They have rules. No essence enhanced abilities unless both of the fighters have them.”

Tibs snorted. “Jackal cheats.”

“I’ve seen. But they also have a sensitive, so they know if one of the fighters cheats.”

“What’s that? No one’s ever told me about a sensitive before.”

“It’s someone who’s sensitive to essence. That’s about all I know. They aren’t common, and those who can prove they are can demand a lot of money for their services.”

“Can I talk with them?” Tibs asked.

The innkeeper laughed. “Ever curious, Tibs? I suspect they’ll be at the arena watching Jackal’s fight in case he cheats.”

Tibs took a quick swallow of the ale and ran out of the inn, ignoring Jesbel’s call to return.

\* \* \* \* \*

The arena was packed, as usual, which made resisting the pockets tougher. His hand cramping as he reached for one served as the reminder he needed, then he was focusing on getting as close to the pit so he could see the fight and look around for anyone else watching attentively.

He could find Jackal, if that was what he wanted, his earth-tinted essence would stand out among the crowd of normal people, if he was within the range of Tibs's senses. But the fighter would be under the seating, in the area for them to get ready for their fight. People complained about him standing against the stone rail, looking over it, searching where someone making sure no cheating happened might be. If their range was like Tibs, they'd have to be close to the fight.

He saw guards lining the pit, there more in case someone jumped in than to keep the fighters from leaving, Tibs had been told. With rare exceptions, every fight was voluntary and could be forfeited if desired. With them were official-looking men and women. Judges to decide fights where the end wasn't decisive. No fight was to the death, but as with the dungeon, deaths happened.

Two fighters in a mishmash of armor that made no sense to Tibs stepped onto the pit and were guided to a circle in the dirt. The crowd erupted in cheers as the fighting started, and coins were exchanged.

The judges, Tibs decided, would be the best place for someone sensitive to be. It put them close enough to sense the fighters and intervene if needed. Tibs didn't hear the swords clash against the shields among the people yelling, and he expected the distance would have muffled the sounds too.

A man fell to the ground, the other raised his sword. More cheers, exchanging of coins. Mostly coppers with a few silvers. The more valuable coins would be higher, where the seating was more comfortable, and Tibs suspected essence was used to let the nobles see better than anyone this close.

Two other fighters came onto the field as the previous ones left. A man and a woman. No armor, no weapons. Dressed in short pants for the man, the same for the woman, along with her breasts being wrapped tightly against her chest. The wrestling match was quick, with the woman the clear victor.

Jackal stepped onto the field as the two wrestlers left. He wore pants and nothing more. An older and more muscular man, also only in pants, accompanied him. When they reached the circle, the judge, a woman, spoke with them, waited, spoke again, and on the third time got both to break their glaring to nod at her. As soon as she was out of the circle, Jackal struck the other man in the face, and he hardly reacted.

Tibs pushed his sense as the two exchanged blows. Maybe they both had essence. He couldn't make out their eyes from where he was. And his sense didn't reach that far. Could he train it or was it never going to change?

Jackal took a blow that lifted him off the ground, then rolled out of the way of the foot coming down where his head had been. The crowd cheered, but Tibs didn't. If Jackal hadn't moved fast enough, that might have killed him.

Jackal stood and kicked the other man's knee, with no visible results. The man

responded with a backhand that sent Jackal flying out of the circle. The man followed and had to be restrained by two guards when he tried to kick Jackal, who was trying to get back to his feet.

The crowd was screaming something, but Tibs didn't care what. He was running, looking for how to get under the seating area. He wished he had something like the normal amount of essence for at least earth. The arena was made of stone, so that would have let him figure out where the passages were. It was something Jackal could do now, so Tibs would be able to if he had enough essence. He couldn't wait for the dungeon to open again so he could get more amulets to store essence. He needed one for each of them, that way he'd be able to do what the others could with their essence.

He found stairs going down into the dark, and only slowed to give his eyes time to adjust, avoiding people by the sense of the faint essence flowing through them. When he could see, he noticed the illumination was from mirrors reflecting the outside light. Fighters called after him, some laughing, others seriously. A few tried to catch him, but the corruption remained quiet and he could evade them.

Until the woman.

She stopped him with a stare, and she said something as he backed away. She raised her voice, and he bolted. Fighters looked out of rooms and the corruption chose then to act up, locking up his left leg and sending him crashing to the floor. Among the laughter, someone grabbed him and sat him on a bench. Tibs was too busy fighting back the scream to care who.

He hated corruption.

When he opened an eye, the woman was standing before him, studying him, studying his leg. She said something.

"I don't understand," Tibs replied through gritted teeth.

"Pursantier," she said. "Who are you, child?"

"No one important," he replied.

She reached for him and he tried to slide aside, but the shifting leg caused the pain to spike. She pulled up his left sleeve. "Children who are not important, do not benefit from this." She ran a finger along the bracelet. "Sealed. Enforced. You do not run dungeon by choice."

"What do you care?" he snapped.

"There is another with such a bracelet. One who does not shine as brightly as you."

"You're the sensitive." Of course she was. He should have realized it when Mister Fernan had said that sensitive could demand lots of coins that she'd be a noble.

"You seem to have a dislike of me, and yet we have not met before."

"I've met enough of your kind." If not for the pain he was in, he'd have better self-control than to annoy a noble. You never let a noble know you didn't like them because they were going to remove you.

"My kind? What kind is that?"

"Nobles," Tibs said, then sighed as the pain ebbed.

"It seems your leg is better. What afflicts you?"

“Can’t you tell?”

“I am sensitive, not all-knowing. I see you have the essence, but not the eyes. I have never known of such a condition.”

“I’m too young.” He massaged his leg. It didn’t help but made him feel like he was doing something.

“You are indeed young. Can you walk?”

“Why? Can’t you get one of them to throw me out?”

“If that is your desire. You were looking at the other runner’s fight. I expected it is who you were running to see. I can take you to him.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Why would I not?”

“Just tell me where he is.”

She motioned along the corridor. “Ask for the infirmary.” She said a word Tibs didn’t understand, then looked at him expectantly. He repeated it. She said it again, and he listened better. After his fourth attempt, she nodded. “It is the way they say it here. I wish you well, child, even if you do not the same for me.” She left, and he stared after her, trying to understand what she was up to.

When he could put weight on his leg, he followed her direction and asked for the infirmary until he found it. And there a Kroseph who’d cried recently, seated next to Jackal, with more wraps on him than exposed skin.

“Tibs,” Kroseph said on seeing him, “tell this idiot he’s not supposed to get himself killed in the arena.”

Tibs looked at the fighter’s injuries. Broken leg, arm. There was something wrong with the essence in his head, but Tibs didn’t know what that meant. He had bruises under the wraps and other things wrong Tibs couldn’t read from the way the essence was acting.

“Did you anger him?” Tibs asked Jackal.

The fighter looked at Kroseph. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. I never do this right, do I?”

“I mean the other fighter,” Tibs said. While Kroseph squeezed Jackal’s hand.

“Who?” He turned to look at Tibs. “Hey, Tibs. Did you see me fight?” there was something wrong with the way Jackal looked at him.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He has suffered a concussion,” a thin man said. He carried wraps under an arm, had a thin knife at his belt, and otherwise looked no different from the people watching. “You should take him to a cleric if you want to be certain he will be fine. Otherwise, he needs rest and food.”

“Tibs will take care of it,” Jackal said. “He’s my best friend.”

The man looked Tibs up and down. “Clerics are not cheap.” He left.

“Can you fix him?” Kroseph asked in a whisper.

The leg and arm weren’t a problem. Jackal’s head. Tibs didn’t know. He didn’t know what a concussion was, or what trying to encase the essence there would do to the fighter. He looked around. Then there was the noble. If she was close enough and could sense what

he did, who would she tell?

Let her, he decided. If she wanted to cause him and his team trouble, Tibs would deal with it. “Cover his mouth.” He encased the broken essence in the leg and tightened it back into place. Some of the corruption went with the essence he used, and it began spreading into Jackal. Tibs cursed and tried to pull it back, but it fought him. Later, he decided.

“We should be okay to take him back to the inn,” Tibs said. “But I might have made things a bit worse. It shouldn’t be too bad,” he added at the fear in Kroseph’s eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs stood before the shop and hesitated. He’d rather be at the inn, but there was nothing he could do for Jackal. A medic was looking after him and treating him for the fever Tibs was sure he’d given the fighter.

Tibs entered the Cliffside General Gatherer and had to step aside to avoid colliding with a man carrying packages. Tibs headed for the counter where the heavy-set man was. The tall and thin woman was speaking with a group of nobles by a display case.

“Hi,” Tibs greeted the shop owner. “I don’t know if you remember me. I came to your house and asked for a Sea Drop.”

The confusion on the man’s face was replaced with worry as he looked around the shop. “Why are you here?” there were hints of fear in the tone. Tibs knew the man had played a part in what had happened to Sto. The box he’d handed Tibs had contained it. But what he remembered of him was the worry and concern about what Bardik was planning.

“Bardik failed. He was captured. They sent him to a prison.”

“Oh.” The man’s tanned complexion paled. “No.” He grabbed onto the counter, his arms shaking. “Tari—” he whispered, then fell, knocking something over behind the counter.

“Chuck!” the woman yelled, and before Tibs could react, she jumped over the counter. Tibs looked around. Chuck was on the floor, shaking. Eyes wide with fear. She raised his head and placed a small bottle to his lips, whispering something. She noticed Tibs there, and the concern turned into anger. “Leave!” the rest was in a language Tibs didn’t understand, but even the lyricalness of the words didn’t cover up the hate in them.

Tibs ran.

## Stepping up-4

“Everyone grab your crate,” Kroseph’s father called to the assembled people on the side of the transport platform.

Tibs hadn’t realized the work needed to move this many crates of foodstuff between cities. He’d thought merchant simply came and went to get what they needed, or sent the order for a messenger to bring it to them, and he realized that if all the merchant needed was a handful of items, that would work, but Kroseph’s family was bringing everything needed to get the inn in Kragle Rock running again, and that was more crates than Tibs could count.

They also didn’t want to do multiple trips since they had to pay for each one. There was a charge for each person and crates moved, but even filling the platform with people



was less than adding another trip.

Then had been coordinating the platforms. As quickly as everyone stepped on it, it was still ten minutes before they were ready. That was ten minutes during which no one could leave or arrive here, and once they were in Kragle Rock, it would be the same for as long as it took to step off. Then the two platforms had to coordinate the time, which Tibs had no idea how that worked, since it was mid-day here, and it would be full dark when they'd arrive in Kragle Rock.

"How are you feeling?" he asked Jackal. The fighter held three crates stacked and tied together, while Tibs only had a backpack. He'd asked for more but was told he was too young, that he wasn't part of the family, that it wasn't his responsibility. It had felt like he was back in Kragle Rock at the start of it all. When all the Runners had to work for their right to a place to sleep, but he kept being confused for one of the workers' children and wouldn't be given work as much as he tried to get some.

Kroseph had handed him the heavy pack, and Tibs had felt better.

"I'm good," the fighter replied, in spite of his pale color. The fever had passed the day before the message came for Kroseph's father, informing him the dungeon would reopen soon so he could be set up before the Runners and other residents returned. Just this morning, Jackal had had trouble standing for more than a few minutes, and Tibs could feel the way the fighter used his essence to anchor himself to the ground.

"For those who didn't do this last time," Kroseph's father spoke up, "If you're going to be sick on arriving, hold it until you're off the platform. They charge for the cleanup."

"And something else the guild gets money out of," Jackal grumbled.

"The guild doesn't run the platforms," Tibs said. Another thing he'd learned, speaking with the attendants in the cities he'd traveled to. The process had been discovered a long time ago by adventurers with the void essence, and with the help of sorcerers and sages, the possibilities had been expanded. Because adventurers came up through the guild, there was an alliance between the two, but the transporters were independent of the guild.

"I'm sure they still get a cut," the fighter replied as the essence around them shifted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs fought to steady Jackal once Kragle Rock materialized, doing his best to still his own protesting stomach. This had been rougher than any before, except for the first time, and Tibs wondered if the number of people and things being moved was the reason, rather than because he hadn't been used to it. Jackal pushed his essence back into the stone and could stand on his own.

Tibs felt for how the essence in his body had been disrupted and forced it back into place, immediately feeling better.

"Off the platform everyone," Kroseph's father yelled, "before we get charged extra."

The mass moved, and Tibs followed, keeping an eye on Jackal. When he was in good health, the fighter had no problem shifting his essence as he walked to maintain the connection, but because he was sick, he was leaving some behind with each step. Hopefully, his reserve was large enough he'd make it to the inn and he could rest.

The procession stretched as they moved, becoming a thick line rather than a mass.

Tibs saw guards watching them, looking bored, and other people moving into shops and houses. Soon the town would be alive again.

“Put it down here,” Kroseph told Jackal.

“I’m fine,” the fighter replied.

“I know, but this is where those crates go. We can’t get everything in the inn right now. Dad needs to make sure everything is fine first.”

“Shouldn’t he have done that before getting everyone here?” Jackal asked.

“More coins,” Tibs said.

“And the longer we took to book our time, the harder it would have been,” Kroseph said. “It’s not even going to be an hour for him to make sure everything’s okay. Not worth the risk of not being here when the runners return. Do you know when that’ll be?”

Tibs looked at his bracelet. The gem was still yellow. “When this is red is when we have to come back.” He placed the pack down. “I’m going to go make sure we have our room. Make sure he rests,” he told Kroseph.

“I’m fine,” Jackal replied.

“I’ll make sure my man has no reason to want to go do anything too strenuous,” Kroseph said, taking the fighter’s arm and leaning against him.

“I can do strenuous stuff,” Jackal complained.

“And you will,” Kroseph whispered.

Tibs hurried away. He was fairly confident they wouldn’t do anything outside, but not certain, and walking in on them doing ‘them’ stuff once had been more than enough for Tibs.

He found the rooming house locked, and considered unlocking the door after no one answered his banging, but it had the same magical locks the rooms inside had. None of the shops had such locks, which gave Tibs a sense of what the guild considered theirs. The shops and their contents were the responsibility of the shopkeepers. The rooming house that of the guild, because Runners stayed there, and the Runners belonged to the guild.

He wondered if Darran had a pick that could open such a lock. He headed for Merchant Row.

\* \* \* \* \*

The building was deserted.

It hadn’t even been locked. The sign was also gone. Tibs didn’t know if it had been there when he’d finally been able to step out of the guild because he hadn’t thought to come check. Not all the merchants had left by then, but many were planning to.

He hoped Darran came back. He liked the crafty merchant.

He stepped out to a gray dog growling at him. Tibs took a piece of jerky and crouched, offering it to the dog. The growling stopped, and it canted its head.

“Go ahead,” Tibs said. “You must be new. You’re too healthy to be one of the roaming dogs here, but I know you like jerky, so just come take it.”

The dog took a step forward.

“No!” Serba yelled. “Sato, Sit!” the dog sat, eyeing the jerky.

“Hello Serba,” Tibs greeted the guard, standing. “Sato’s new.”

She stepped around the side of the shop. “How do you do that? I train them not to obey anyone but me.”

Tibs shrugged. “Maybe you’re too mean to them and they like someone who’s nice.”

She snorted. “You’re a thief, not—”

“I’m a rogue,” he corrected.

She snorted again. “One of those wouldn’t have anything to do with my brother. He’s dirt, that makes you no better than he is.”

Tibs studied her. “You know, if you’re angry at Harry for keeping you here, be angry at him, not at Jackal or me.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Kid, don’t tell me what to do.”

Tibs shrugged. “Then don’t act like you need to be told.”

She let out a series of whistles and growling came from the alleys.

Tibs crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m way more Street than you are. You can’t scare me with your attack dogs.”

“They are going to rip you apart, kid.”

“Good luck explaining to Harry how you aren’t behind my death.”

“How are you not scared I could have them kill you?”

“I’m a Dungeon Runner, Serba. I already know I’m going to die. But I’m not going to die because of your dogs. Anyway, you’re too afraid of Harry to risk getting him angry.”

“I’m not—” she snapped her mouth shut.

Tibs threw the piece of jerky at the dog. “Enjoy Sato, don’t let her be mean to you. Thump can find me if you want someone to be nice.” He walked around the guard.

“I swear, Tibs,” she called. “You’re just asking for one of them to bite your hand off.”

He coated it in earth, then water, which he iced. They were welcome to try it.

Reaching Transport Road, he kept going on Merchant Row. He hadn’t checked it in any of his previous visits, the silence of the town having been too oppressive. He nodded to the merchants who were moving things into their shops. A few waved and nodded back. Most, he didn’t recognize, and they looked at him warily. Merchants could often spot a rogue.

The stench started four buildings before the pool. It was as bad as he remembered it being. The buildings were empty, had been since days after the destruction of the Caravan Garden by the pool of corruption. Since Bardik had killed everyone in the building. By accident or not, it didn’t matter. The adventurer was behind the corruption making it into the town. Had used Tibs for it. With those message opals he had him drop in pockets, or coin boxes.

It took time, but he remembered seeing the bottles containing the corruption Bardik had thrown in the dungeon. A messenger had delivered one at the Caravan Garden, something the shopkeeper’s daughter had ordered, according to the man. A young woman with a creepy interest in Tibs, who was called Carolina, who Bardik knew.

She’d been part of it.

The wooden spikes and ropes that had been put up to keep people from venturing too close had been replaced by a stone wall going to Tibs chest. On the other side of it was the

pool of corruption. He couldn't see any change to it, which meant the Purity Clerics hadn't sent anyone to do anything about it. Who had told him that would happen, Harry? Khumdar?

Could anything be done, or was this part of the town condemned to always be abandoned? He hated the blight on his town, the reminder he'd been used to hurt the dungeon, the people who lived here.

He turned and headed back to the inn.

He'd make it up to the town for his part in what had happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tibs!" Carina called as she wrapped him in her arms. "How are you? Did you grow?"

"No," he replied indignantly.

She looked at the sleeves of his shirt. "Then did you buy short shirts?"

Tibs tried to pull them down. He hadn't realized he'd put on one of his old shirts until after he'd been down.

She hugged him again. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"What about me?" Jackal asked.

She looked at him, frowning. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"He's Kroseph's special guy," Tibs said.

"Oh, Kroseph found someone?" she looked around. "Where is he? I have to tell him I'm back."

"Will it help if I tell you I was hurt pretty bad?" Jackal said.

"What happened?" She demanded.

"He fought in the arena," Tibs said, "and pissed off someone bigger and stronger and a better fighter than he is."

"I didn't mean to piss him off," Jackal replied. "He commented about how Kro was good-looking, and I agreed, then I said I was really lucky he was my guy, and somehow that pissed him off." He thought something over. "I'm pretty sure I didn't insult him or anything in the process."

"The guy would have killed Jackal if the guards hadn't stopped him. Jackal was hurt really bad."

Carina sighed. "Sounds like he wanted to remove you so he could get Kroseph."

"So, I really didn't do this?" Jackal asked, surprised.

"Unless you're lying about what you said, I'd say you didn't," She replied.

"Carina, how's my favorite Sorceress?" Kroseph said, placing the tankards on the table then hugging her.

"Glad to be home."

Jackal stopped with the tankard at his lip. "Did you call this place home?"

"It is home," Tibs replied, glaring at the fighter.

"For you and me, sure, but she has a home. Don't you?" He looked at the sorceress.

She took a long drag of her tankard. "I do. Here."

"Carina, you're not Street," Jackal said, "That means you have people out there who

—”

“You have family, Jackal,” she replied. “A sister and an uncle, if I remember right, in this very town. Doesn’t that mean you aren’t street either? Who else out there cares for you?” she asked, her tone frosty.

“You do remember how Serba acted toward me, right? That Knuckles hates me?”

“He might hate you less if you stopped calling him that,” Tibs said. “How did you know to come back? The gem’s still yellow.”

“I was visiting with Morishita when she was informed she could return. She’s one of the merchants,” she added. “She sells pigments for art and has books.” She considered something, then took a book from a satchel and opened it to a blank page. She placed an inkpot and pen next to it. “Now, why don’t you write the names of the months you came across in your travels.”

“No!” Tibs replied, horrified, as he looked at the book.

“Tibs, you agreed that you would—”

“Give me a slate,” he replied. “I’m not wasting your paper on my letters.”

“It isn’t going to be a waste, Tibs. It’s going to be a record of how you progress.”

“It’s not worth the gold you paid for it.”

“I didn’t pay for this, it was a gift.”

“Then shouldn’t you use it for the thing whoever gave it to you meant it for?” Jackal said.

She closed the book and ran a hand over the leather cover. “He said to use it to do something that makes me happy.”

“And torturing Tibs is what you picked?” Jackal said.

“The other choice was torturing you,” she replied, “but hitting you over the head with it would damage it.”

Tibs smiled. It was good to have his family back.

\* \* \* \* \*

His left wrist itched.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Jackal said, rubbing his left wrist. “The brand wearing those things put on us, or what having them removed means.”

“I’m going to miss the freedom to travel,” Carina said, running a finger over where the bracelet had been only moments before.

“The dungeon’s going to graduate at some point, right Tibs?” Jackal asked.

“But it won’t be closed for months.”

“So long as no one attacks him again,” Tibs grumbled, giving in to the need and scratching at his wrist.

“How long until everyone’s back, do you think?” Carina asked.

“Two days,” Jackal replied.

The gem had turned red this morning, which meant anyone wearing the bracelet had two days to return. Once it turned black, their lives were forfeit.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Jackal,” Mez said, stepping to the table, “Carina, Tibs.”

Tibs stared at the archer. Instead of the guild armor and good, but worn clothing, he’d last seen the man in, he had good quality leathers, better than Tib’s armor, in a dark brown, and clothing that if Tibs hadn’t known him before, would mark him as a noble.

Mez stepped aside and motioned to a woman slightly shorter than he was with copper hair and the same dark tanned complexion as the archer. She wore clothing of the same quality as Mez, and in the same color scheme.

“May I introduce you to Amanda Dhadly, my betrothed.”

“You got married?” Jackal asked, dropping the fork load of meat on his lap and then cursing.

“What about Tandy?” Tibs asked.

The woman with him said something.

“It’s nothing,” Mez told her. “Someone from the past.” He looked at Tibs. “I’ll explain things to her. I’m certain she’ll understand.”

“Mez,” Carina said. “I hope you can run really fast.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs paced in front of the transport platform. He reached the pillar with the box of bracelets in it, the gems were still red. He looked at the guard sitting on the ground next to it. “How much longer?”

The man shrugged. “A few minutes, I’m guessing.”

Guessing wasn’t good enough. Tibs did another circuit and looked in the box again. Still red.

“A few more—”

Tibs turned and snarled.

Where was he?

Tibs didn’t believe Khumdar would choose to die rather than return here. The darkness cleric was aloof, but Tibs thought he considered the team his friends, if not his family. If he wasn’t back, it meant—Tibs didn’t want to think about it. He’d deal with it when he had no more choice.

He reached the box. Still red. He turned for another circuit as the gems darkened and he stared at them.

No, it couldn’t be, Khumdar hadn’t—

The essence on the platform shifted, and a golden light appeared. An attendant fell to the floor, along with someone else. Tibs ran up the stairs as attendants came from the side. Both men were in terrible shape, their clothing cut, ripped, and bloodied, although Tibs didn’t discover that of the man in the black robes until he turned him on his back and it left his hands stained red.

“Khumdar, are you alright?”

The cleric laughed, then coughed. “I have been better Tibs. I have been so much better.” Then he fell unconscious.

## Stepping up-5

“You’re all here,” the man standing on one of the steps leading to the dungeon’s door so he was high enough even the people at the back could see him. “Because you think you can survive the dungeon.” The man wore a tarnished and dented metal armor, and today he wasn’t wearing the sword at his hip he often wore while walking around the town. “My name is Harry. I’m in charge of maintaining order.” He scanned the crowd, his glowing eyes becoming brighter. “Get on my bad side, and you’re going to find out why I’m called Hard Knuckles.”

“Get on with it, Knuckles,” Jackal grumbled, and Tibs looked at him. The fighter fidgeted. They were there, with Mez, Carina, Khumdar, in a crowd that reminded Tibs of that first day, both in its size and because many of the people standing around were dressed in almost rags and looked around confused; as if they didn’t understand why they were there. More than one looked at the pockets around them and physically held themselves back from picking them.

“Those of who you’ve survived from the start will notice a difference from the last time you came back from a vacation,” Harry continued, “with the dungeon having been injured, we decided to bring in some of society’s rejects to help it regain its strength. Those of you here instead of on a chopping block, you’re going to have the chance to salvage what you’ve called your life until now. Shut up!” Harry yelled as someone raised their voice. “I don’t care. I don’t care if you didn’t belong in that cell. I don’t care if someone was going to pay whatever fine your city charges for you to get out. You were in a cell when the guild asked the kingdoms for volunteers, now you’re here. If you survive your runs, the next time the dungeon graduates you can take a trip to your city, if you know what it is, and demand an explanation from them. You’re going to be in a better position to do that then than you are now.”

Protests erupted, and Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

“That reminds me of my arrival,” Mez said. He wasn’t in his armor, but he still wore the clothing Tibs associated with nobles. Too clean. Too colorful. Too expensive. In contrast to how perfectly dressed he was, his face was a mess of bruises. The talk with Tandy hadn’t gone as well as the archer had expected. And as he’d returned, bruised and limping, Carina had rushed out. She’d returned a few hours later and had screamed at Mez for what he’d done to her friend, and while she hadn’t touched the archer, or used her essence. When she’d walked away, he’d looked like someone had taken the whip to his back.

“Do they really need all of them to feed the dungeon?” Carina asked Tibs, and he waited for Sto to comment. They were close enough he should hear them, and usually, questions about him asked of Tibs would have him answer so Tibs could repeat it.

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t think so. If he was too weak, he wouldn’t have opened the door.”

“Is the dungeon not...” Khumdar trailed off and looked around. He looked to be in better shape than Mez, but only because his injuries were covered up by his black robes. The cleric hadn’t told them what he had been up to while Sto healed, and Tibs kept himself from

asking. Khumdar would tell them when he was ready.

Tibs lowered his voice, not that anyone was paying attention to them, now that Harry was talking again, going on about how the mornings would be for the new recruits and how that would work. “He’s probably busy with something else and not paying attention to this.”

Khumdar nodded.

“For the rest of you,” Harry said, “the veterans of the dungeon, those who have paid to be here. The process is the same as before. The order the teams will go in will be posted on the board. Only full teams will be allowed in. For those who have paid, you’re free to rearrange your teams as you like between runs. For the veterans, you only get to replace members who have died, but you get to pick among the new recruits if one of them meets your exacting requirements.”

“What does that ‘ex’ word mean?” Tibs asked Jackal, who opened his mouth to answer before closing it.

He narrowed his eyes at the shorter rogue. “Why do you think I know what it means?” Tibs smiled innocently.

“It means the requirements are difficult to meet,” Carina answered.

Jackal pointed to the sorceress. “She’s the one who knows all that, not me.”

Carina snorted and Tibs kept looking at the fighter, smiling.

“I believe,” Khumdar said, “that is one secret that is no longer worth hiding.”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Jackal yelled, then shrunk in on himself as he realized his exclamation came while Harry was silent and people turned to look at him, including the guard leader, who glared, his eyes brighter. “You did this on purpose,” Jackal growled in the cleric’s direction.

“The training grounds will be on the east side of the town. The recruits will have priority use of them, but if anyone else feels like they need more training, the trainers will avail themselves to you also.”

“Like any of them can teach us anything anymore,” Jackal said.

“You’re forgetting they’re higher ranked than any of us,” Mez said. “They might have acted like this was the last place in the world they wanted to be, but they will have things to teach us if we ask.”

“And the guild’s going to charge you for it,” Tibs replied.

“It might still be worth—” Mez closed his mouth at the glare Tibs gave him. The archer was his friend, but Tibs didn’t like the way he was taking for granted that coin wasn’t something all of them had. He preferred the Mez of before. The one who didn’t act like a noble. Who claimed being a noble was about helping others. Tibs wasn’t seeing any of that in his friend right now.

Harry yelled something, and the crowd dispersed, starting with the recruits, who ran as if they’d been threatened with the chopping block. Tibs watched them, looked for... he didn’t know what. Someone familiar? Someone from his street, who might tell him the name of their city? As if anyone from his street would know that.

A girl was left behind, a little older than he was, but looking young as she fought not to cry. Her clothing was better than what Tibs had arrived in, but not by much. She hugged



herself, looking around.

“Tibs,” Jackal called as he walked toward her.

“Leave him,” Carina answered for him.

Tibs stepped into her line of sight and stopped out of reach. “Hi.”

She startled and quickly wiped at her eyes, stepping back. “Don’t try anything,” she warned.

Tibs fought the smile and reminded himself of his own misplaced bravado in those early days. “It’s going to be okay, I’m Tibs.”

She glared at him. “You think I care what you think it’s going to be, Tibs?” she said, pronouncing his name with derision.

“I was where you are when the dungeon first opened. I was going to have my hand cut off, but I was brought here instead.”

She moved her hands behind her back. “Well, good for you. I’m not a crook.”

“No, you’re a Runner now.”

“I’m not doing this. My parents are going to come get me.”

Tibs shook his head. “You won’t see them until the dungeon closes his doors to graduate. We get to travel then.” Then Tibs realized that unlike with him, the transport platform was open to anyone from outside the town who could afford it. “Actually, if they can afford to pay to come here, you might see them before that, but—”

Her face fell, and she looked about to cry again.

“It’s going to be okay,” Tibs repeated. “The dungeon’s hard but fair. If you train and pay attention and work with your team, you’ll get through it. You’ll get stronger and eventually, you’ll graduate too.” He smiled and raised his hand, coating it with water and moving it over, finishing with making a spike and icing it. “Graduating comes with some nice bonus.” He melted and reabsorbed it.

She stopped backing up. “I thought the eyes were supposed to show who could do magic. That’s what the stories say.”

Tibs sighed. “I’m too young, or at least that what my teacher says. I’m the youngest Runner to have survived until graduation to Upsilon, You’re Omega right now.”

“And when I graduate, I’ll be able to do that?” she indicated his hand.

“If you chose water as your element. There are a lot of others to pick from.” He noticed the guards approaching. “But you should go to the training grounds, they don’t like it when you just wander around.” He pointed in the direction the other recruits had gone into. “There’s going to be signs showing which one is your group. Just follow the ones with the hand in the pouch.”

“I’m not a crook,” she bristled.

Tibs smiled. “You’re a rogue, that’s something to be proud of.” He turned and headed back to the town.

“I’m Fedora,” she called.

“I’m glad to have met you, Fedora. Good luck.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“How did you score the first place?” Don demanded, getting into Tibs’s space. Tibs

had to step back to keep the corruption sorcerer from touching him. He knew better than to let him do that. While the man wasn't responsible for what was coursing through Tibs's essence, it was still a constant reminder of the damage corruption could do. That and the pool of it at one end of Merchant Row.

"How about getting out of our way, Don?" Jackal said as Tibs backed into him.

"You," the sorcerer snarled. "It's because Hard Knuckles is your family. No wonder you tried so hard to make us think he hated you. That way you were able to hide how he fixed things for you."

Jackal sighed. "Don, Tibs says you're smart. How about you stop saying stupid things? Knuckles wouldn't get me a tankard of water if I was on fire."

"He'd put you out," Carina said. "Harry wouldn't let one of the Runners burn to death and not be around to feed the dungeon, even you."

"Carina, I love you like a sister, but do I'm trying to make a point with Don here."

"Make a better one?" Mez said, which earned him a glare from the sorceress. The archer sighed.

"You can't fool me," Don said. "I'm going to bring that up to the guild leader right now." He stormed off.

"Do any of you know what he was talking about?" Khumdar asked, using his staff to support his weight.

"Something about us being first," Jackal said. "He's probably just pissed that he didn't have coins to put in so he could go in before the rest of us. Come on, let's go see how many of the noble teams there are this time around."

The board had come up in the morning, which had given the rest of the previous day for anyone who wanted to pay coins to get in ahead of the other teams. It was another way the guild took their well-earned coins, on top of secretly charging them for the training they received. Tibs had been told that once they reached the rank of Epsilon, they would be free to leave the dungeon and the guild. Only he'd then found out that before they could do that, he'd have to repay what he owed. At three gold for each day of training with his teacher, it would take a long time after he reached that rank before he could be free of the guild, and he suspected they'd find other ways to ensure he had to work for them.

His team no longer gave them coins to adjust their ranking on the boards, and other than Don, no other veteran team did so either, as far as he knew. So if they were first this time, it was just the result of randomness.

Tibs searched for his name among the veteran teams and frowned when he didn't find it, not even under the last name he didn't recognize, which marked it as one of the noble teams. Tibs knew all the veteran teams.

"Okay," Jackal said, "this could be a problem."

Tibs looked at the fighter, who was looking at the board, but at the top of it. Tibs looked there and finally found his name. Ahead of every other team, including the noble ones.

"Tibs did save the dungeon," Khumdar said, "some form of recompense does make sense."

“Sure,” the fighter replied, “but that’s going to get him killed. You think the nobles are going to appreciate having us go in ahead of them?” Jackal looked at them. “Tibs, you have to go talk to the guild and tell them to remove us from that spot. Don’s going to be the least of your troubles otherwise.”

Tibs sighed. “I will after we—”

“I think you should go now,” Carina said, looking around. Nobles were approaching, and they didn’t look happy.

Cursing, Tibs ran off. He’d wanted breakfast before having to deal with problems.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Am I supposed to care what you want?” a woman’s raised voice came from the open door, making Tibs slow. When he’d been directed to Tirania’s office, he’d expected to find her alone, doing whatever a guild leader did. But by the angry tone, she was with someone, probably Don, since he’d said he’d be complaining.

“I was promised that if I paid, I’d go before those nothings,” a man replied in a clipped tone. Tibs peeked in. Three nobles stood in the office, with Don pushed to the side, glaring at them.

“The system is that whoever pays the highest goes in first,” Tirania replied, her color-shifting eyes flicking in Tibs’s direction before focusing on the noble.

“And you expect me to believe one of those nothings had the gold to match mine?” He wore a gray cloak trimmed in gold and Tibs could see black pant going into black boots and when the man’s hand were visible as he gestured, he wore black gloves.

“Master Kilian, I don’t care what you believe,” Tirania answered. “You placed your bid, and it got you second position. If you aren’t happy, feel free to go home. I’m certain one of these fine people will be happy to take your team’s place.”

The man turned to glare at the woman and the other man on his left. His gaze gliding over Don as if he wasn’t there. He paused, then looked over his shoulder, fixing Tibs with his ash gray eyes, and Tibs stepped back.

“Tibs,” Tirania called, “why don’t you come in?”

Sighing, he stepped into the crowded office.

“He’s the one who stole your spot,” Don said. “He’s a thief.”

“I’m a rogue,” Tibs replied, fixing his gaze on the sorcerer’s sickly purple eyes. He forced himself to maintain the lock until Don looked away. Having an empty stomach might have been a good thing after all.

“And Tibs stole nothing,” Tirania said. “He earned the position.”

“How?” Tibs asked, causing the guild leader to raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t put coins in. My team didn’t put coins in.”

“Tibs,” she said, warning in her tone. “Do you really want to question how you deserve the position in front of these gentle people?”

“The guild is supposed to be fair,” Tibs said, knowing it was nothing like that, but he figured the guild leader wanted to give the impression for the nobles. “I don’t want to be treated special.”

Don snorted, and everyone ignored him.

“You are not being treated special, Tibs,” she said.

“He has just admitted to not bidding,” the noble replied. “How do you justify him being ahead of me?”

Tirania sighed. “Tibs is the reason there is a dungeon for you to go into. Him and his team were instrumental in stopping the people who came far too close to destroying it. Going in first is their reward for the work they did.”

The nobles looked at Tibs again in disbelief. “You expect me to believe this nothing was part of a team of nothing who was able to stop a group of corrupt adventurers? Do you take me for a fool?”

Don kept watching Tibs while the nobles were looking at Tirania again.

“I don’t care what you believe,” she said. “I’m in charge here, not you. If you want to continue to argue, I can sit here and not care all day long, while I believe you should be using the time to prepare for your run tomorrow, after Tibs’s team had gone through.”

The man leaned on the desk. “Do not take for granted that your position as leader of this little dungeon outpost gives you the power to order me around. I’m not one of the convicts you get shipped in. I am the brothers to—”

“No one I care about,” she cut him off, leaning back in her seat. “And yes, being the leader of this little dungeon outpost does give me the power to order you around. For example, I could tell Harry to throw you onto the transport platform and send you away and forbid you from ever returning. That is within my power. And if your brother, the king of whatever kingdom he rules, wants to make a bid deal of it, I’ll be happy to forbid his knights from training here when the dungeon is strong enough to handle them. That’s the kind of power this little outpost has, Master Kilian. You would do well to remember that.”

The noble stiffened, and the woman next to him covered her mouth in what Tibs thought was an attempt not to laugh.

“Very well,” the noble said, “You have made your point.” He gave a small bow. “I will retire, if you will permit me.”

Tirania nodded, and he turned, stepping toward the open door, but he stopped before Tibs, looking down on him.

“You, little nothing, would do well to watch what you think of yourself. Little nothing saviors will still end up under my boot if they aren’t careful.” He left as Tibs shrugged, followed by the other two nobles.

He’d have to find out what house was that noble’s and visit it in the night.

“Is there anything else you want to add, Don?” Tirania asked, startling the sorcerer who had been glaring at Tibs.

“No,” he replied. “You’ve made your position quite clear.” He too stopped before Tibs. “This isn’t over,” he whispered and left.

Tirania sighed and rubbed her face. “You do realize that you’ve made sure I can’t put you at the top of the list after this, correct?”

“Why is my team at the top?” He asked, stepping forward.

“I told them, it’s your reward for saving the dungeon for us. I’m not blind to what you did, to what it cost you. You don’t limb as badly, but the corruption hasn’t entirely cleared

your body, has it?"

Tibs shook his head. He could ignore it, but the ache was constant.

"I wish I knew what had been special about the corruption they used," she mused. "Unfortunately, the dungeon locked down before we could retrieve any of the bottles inside and those outside were just normal condensed corruption." She studied Tibs. "Why did you do it, Tibs? I know what you told the others. You wanted to protect the town, the dungeon, but Harry knows something he isn't telling me. I'd like you to tell me the truth."

Tibs shrugged. "That's why. I never had a place of my own, like Kragle Rock is. If the dungeon dies, the town's going to die too. I don't want to lose my home."

She nodded. "Well, I suppose that telling the same story every time means you won't make a mistake in the telling. Still, you did act, whatever the reason, and for that I am grateful. You probably don't realize how important this dungeon is."

"It is?"

She nodded, then pulled a gem from a drawer. It was cloudy with a rose tint to it. "Alistair," she said into it, "this is truly not urgent, but your student is up and about. You might want to consider resuming your duties to him." She put it away.

"Where is he?" Tibs asked, curious where his teacher had gone to.

"I don't know. While not teaching you, his duties are to the guild as a whole, not just me."

"The guild is more than you?"

Tirania laughed. It was a sound that reminded Tibs of crystal gently clinking together. "Ah, the innocence of youth. Yes Tibs, the guild is much more than me. I'm only the leader of this town and this dungeon. Every dungeon had a guild leader, and we all report to a central leader who oversees all our operations. It's—"

Tibs raised a hand to stop it, knowing a headache would result from her continuing. "I don't need to know more. I'm just a kid and Runner. All that's beyond me."

She nodded. "And you are a wise one to recognize that. But to answer your initial question, Tibs, yes, the dungeon is important. Every dungeon is, we need them to train the people we'll need when the time comes."

"The time?" Tibs leaned forward.

Tirania smiled. "I think that if I try to explain that, you'll end up with a headache."

"Oh, okay."

She sighed. "Are you going to squander every reward I give you?"

"I don't want any reward, not if it's going to make the nobles angry at me. You don't know what they can do."

"Harry can keep them in their place."

Tibs snorted. It wasn't like they needed to move to cause Tibs problems. They had so much coin they could pay people to do that for them. Tibs didn't think any of the veteran Runners would take their coins, except for Don and whoever he bullied into being on his team, but the recruits wouldn't know the danger they were in if they broke Harry's rules, or they would be easily convinced by coins that Harry wasn't serious about it.

"I'm just a Runner," he repeated. "I don't want to be treated as anything else."

She nodded. "Alright, then I suggest you rejoin your team and get ready for tomorrow. I can't change the position you're in for this schedule."

She could, Tibs knew, but she was making a point in not doing it. To him, to the nobles, to the other teams. She was in charge, not any of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

He paused in front of the shop, looking at the wooden board swaying in the breeze. On it was depicted a shield, a knife, and rope. He ran in and nearly tripped over a box, jumping over it at the last moment.

A man wrapped in layers and layers of clothes stood, and Tibs ran at him. "You came back!" He hugged the merchant tightly, and couldn't keep his fingers from slipping under the folds of the cloths

"Of course, I came back," Darran said, stepping away. "How else would I get to see my favorite little rogue?" He gestured with a hand. "Now, hand it back."

Tibs looked at the merchant innocently, trying to determine what he held by the shape of it.

"Come on, I know you took something."

Sighing, Tibs placed a small sheath and handle. He quickly sensed for essence as the merchant placed it back where Tibs had taken it, and it had none, but quite a few other things on Darran's person had essence woven into them.

"How did you know I took it?"

The merchant smiled. "Because I know you, Tibs. These fingers of yours have a mind of their own and any pocket or hidden slit is fair game."

"No," Tibs protested, placing his hands behind his back. "I have the mind. They do what I tell them."

Darran laughed. "Oh, Tibs. You wouldn't be the accomplished picker of pockets you are if that were true. All the best pickpockets end up with items they have no idea how they got because the habit is so ingrained in them it just happens with them thinking. Which reminds me." Darran handed Tibs his knife back and Tibs's hand went to his hip, to the empty sheath.

He put it back where it belonged, and looked around, to distract from the annoyance he felt at not having noticed the merchant taking it. He knew Darran was a rogue, well, a thief, since he wasn't affiliated with the guild, but he hadn't expected him to be this good. After all, he *was* a merchant. They were more conmen than pickpockets.

"This is a larger building."

"Yes, with a larger back room where I can make needed alterations. Which I expect I'll need to make to your armor before you go into the dungeon."

Tibs shook his head. "It's still comfortable."

Darran narrowed his eyes. "Are you eating properly? But boys your age should be growing faster than bamboo." Tibs shrugged. "Still, come see me with it and I'll make sure it fits you properly." He looked around at the boxes and crates. "Well, in a few days once I'm fully set up."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs looked at the lake from the limit of the town. It was almost within reach. He couldn't wait to touch it. He'd touched the ocean, but as amazing as that had been, it wasn't his lake. The place he'd first seen from a roof, the largest body of water he'd seen at the time. The wonder of how it would feel.

"Hey, you!" a man called. "You can't—oh, it's you." The guard slowed and smoothed the green and black shirt he wore over the leather armor.

"Me?" Tibs frowned. He looked around in case anyone else was there. He wasn't worried or afraid of the guard. He had done nothing wrong they could prove, and he wasn't doing anything wrong now.

"You're Tibs, right?"

"Yes," he answered cautiously. There was no way the noble could have found a guard to bribe this quickly. It had only been a few hours since they'd been in Tirania's office.

"Then you're fine." The guard indicated the spike in the ground that marked the city limit.

"Do you know how long until the lake is inside the limit?" Tibs asked. "I've been wanting to touch it for a long time."

The guard chuckled, but it didn't sound mocking. "Why don't you go touch it now?"

Tibs indicated the spike. "That's the town limit. I'm not allowed beyond it."

"The other Runners aren't allowed. You're Tibs. You saved the dungeon and the town. Our instructions are that you can go pretty much anywhere you want since you'll come back."

"How do you know I'll come back?" he asked defiantly.

The guard shrugged. "I don't, but those are my instructions." He turned. "And those are all I care about." And walked away.

Tibs looked at the lake, then the spike. It could be a trick, but he had saved the dungeon. Tirania had put his team at the top of the list because of it, implied she would have kept doing it if Tibs hadn't intervened. And if this was a trick, all he needed to do was speak with Harry and the guard leader would know he told the truth when he explained a guard said it was okay.

He stepped over the spike and waited. When nothing happened after a few seconds, he walked to the lake, counting his steps. Five-three. A building and road, and the lake would be in the town. What would they do with it? One of the cities he'd visited while looking for his city had a river cutting it into two and it had been dirty from everyone throwing their garbage in it. He hoped that didn't happen here.

He crouched and touched the water. It was cooler than he'd expected. The air was warm, and even the largest puddle got warm under those conditions. He felt for the essence and there was a lot of water, as he'd expected, some air, earth, and even hints of fire. Where did the fire come from?

He pushed some of his essence in and kept control of it to keep it from flowing away with the currents. His range was much wider now. A result of how dense the essence coursing through his body was, he suspected. He'd thought the density reflected how advanced in their training the adventurers were since Harry and Tirania had the densest

essence and Bardik had been close behind them, but Tibs was now denser than every other Runner, and yet, he could still barely do anything.

It meant he was wrong about what the density represented, or at least his understanding of it was incomplete, which he found easy to believe. The one thing that kept becoming clear the more he learned was that everything was more complex than he first believed.

He pulled his essence back to him and frowned as he pulled his hand out of the lake. And it was still coated with water. Not much, but just like when he'd used it to ice the water pool in the dungeon, somehow, after letting his essence mix with more water essence, it returned with more.

His amulet was full, as was his reserve, so he let it go and it dripped into the lake. Had he done something? He felt the essence in the lake and called some of his reserve to his hand. He calmed his breathing. And focused, feeling the essence. He started shaping the water and immediately his sense of the lake faded until he stopped manipulating his essence.

He cursed.

He put his hand in the water and let his essence flow out, mix with the lake. He tried to feel what happened as the essence moved about, but there was nothing there. His essence moved among the water of the lake and if he shaped it, he could use it to shape the water, turn it into ice, move that about until halfway to the center of the lake, at which point his control became more difficult because of the distance.

He melted it, recalled the essence, and again ended up more than he'd started. Which, as far as Tibs was concerned, should be impossible.

He chuckled. Impossible wasn't the word it had been before he became a Runner.

Then how? How had essence that hadn't been his become his? How had it happened without him feeling it? How was it different and the same at the same time?

A shiver ran down his back.

Essence was and wasn't.

He groaned. It was so simple. How had he not understood that sooner?

He stood and looked at the lake. Expanded his awareness of it. Of the essence there. He turned off his sense of fire, air, and earth. He felt for water in the lake and realized he sensed it all around him. The air, the ground.

There was no "his" and "not-his".

There was only essence. He took hold of the essence in the lake and a quarter of it stilled, turning into a reflection of the sky. He took out his knife. Focused on the essence in the air around him without letting for of the lake. He pulled the essence in the air closer without losing control of the lake.

He pulled from his reserve, sending it to his knife while controlling the lake and refilling his reserve. He couldn't do it quickly, but he could do it. He took his time tracing the 'X' before him, pulling only from his reserve, which he refilled as he pulled on it. If he wanted to match how quickly Alistair had done it, he was going to have to practice, but, He stabbed the center of the 'X' and gasped as his reserve emptied almost faster than he could



refill it.

Then the center of the lake exploded into a geyser that went high enough that when it came down, it doused Tibs in water.

## Stepping up-6

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Going forward (I will go back and change that in book 1 too) I will not be using the "name of magical items is visible" thing.

"You're the first ones!" Sto exclaimed as Tibs and his team walked up the steps. "I am so glad for that, I can't wait for you to see what I've done."

The cleric by the door with the two guards was a woman, older than those who had had that duty before Sto was attacked, and older than most who Tibs had seen in town. He'd expected that only the young ones had healing duties, while the olders were watching over them. Sort of like the adventurers had done when he'd first arrived, if he'd thought the young clerics would consider trying to run. They all believed in purity in a way that made Tibs avoid talking with them.

She looked them over, then settled her gaze on Khumdar, her so pale eyes narrowing. With a resigned sigh, she placed a hand on him and immediately the darkness cleric straightened, no longer needing his staff to support his weight.

"I thank you, My Lady of the Light," Khumdar told her and she narrowed her eyes further, which only seemed to amuse him.

"If you give me a nickname," Tibs warned, once they were inside the dungeon, "I am stabbing you." He was done letting someone give him one that would somehow spread through the entire town.

"That is the name of her family," Khumdar replied. "The of the Light family is one of the families who are duty-bound to come to dungeons and heal."

"How do you know that?" Tibs asked, looking around. The hall leading to the first room was different, somehow, but he couldn't place how. The lights were in the same place, the walls the same smooth earth-red stone shifting to gray.

"Oh, Tibs, I know a great many things."

"Secrets you accumulate." Maybe it was simply how long it had been. Or his expectations Sto would make obvious changes each time he reopened.

"That too," the cleric said, smiling.

"That's been improved," Jackal said as they arrived at the trap room. "Looking nice, Dungeon."

It was now a room and not a smoothed-out cave. The walls were interlocking flat stones, like the floor tiles, going up a dozen feet. Tibs wondered where the holes the shaft came out of when a trigger was activated were until he noticed many of the places where

stones abutted one another had gaps the diameter of the shafts. Once he realized that, he also realized the number of holes had increased.

“There’s more triggers now,” he said.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Carina asked.

Tibs shook his head and took the amulet out of his pouch. He extended his senses. He could now reach to the other side of the room, nearly double what he’d been able to sense before. He didn’t know if it was because of the density of his essence, or because of the practice he’d gotten as he traveled. He hadn’t paid attention until now.

He sighed. He needed to start thinking of everything as training again.

The air felt dry, but he found the water essence in it. More than he’d expected. Alistair had said essence and the world didn’t always match. He closed his eyes and spread his reserve through the room, actively controlling how it thinned while sensing the room and calling that essence to it.

He extended his hand and snapped his fingers as he brought everything down to the floor, causing a splash he kept contained in the room.

Jackal groaned. “Tibs’s becoming a showman.”

He opened his eyes. The coating of water was thinner than he’d expected.

“Don’t listen to him,” Sto said, “I like the showmanship.”

“Is that all that was in the amulet?” Carina asked, sounding concerned.

“I didn’t use the amulet,” Tibs answered, crouching.

“You figured it out!” Carina exclaimed, then she pulled him up, breaking his concentration, and hugged him tightly.

“I did.” He patted her back. “But not enough I can keep hold of the essence through this.”

“Sorry,” she said, grinning.

“I’m missing something,” Jackal said, then raised his hand. “I know, not surprising. How about we skip the digs and just explain things?”

Tibs untangled himself from Carina’s arms. “I couldn’t sense and manipulate at the same time. Even though Carina, Mez, and you figured it out. It was annoying. But I worked it out now. I can’t believe it was so simple I didn’t do it sooner.” He took hold of the water again and brought it over to the floor.

“I am amused that you did not mention me,” Khumdar said.

“How could he?” Mez replied, “you’re always all mysterious and stuff about what you know.”

“I believe you are mistaking not bragging about what I can do with being mysterious.”

“No,” Tibs replied, “you’re mysterious and stuff. You can’t help it.” Not enough water, so he pulled from the amulet, then iced that, keeping the rippling as small as he could while giving them traction.

Khumdar laughed. “You have seen through my deepest secret.”

“I doubt that,” Mez grumbled.

Tibs walked along the wall, looking for the cache. With the stone flat and walls even it no longer jumped out at him from the entrance, but... he crouched, and ran a hand over it.

The space between it and the stones around it was a little wider, so it could be removed. He pressed, and it clicked. It pushed against his hand as he moved back, and he felt along the edge for other traps. He would not be killed in the first room because he was overconfident. He removed the cover stone and smiled at what was inside.

A pair of shoes.

He studied the walls before taking them and sensing for essence in them. He recognized the way it was woven through them. His Silent Shoes. He held them against his chest. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed them. His first magical item; found the first time he'd discovered the cache. Lost when he'd walked in a room filled with fire. Found again.

"I'm keeping them," he told the others as he joined them, and then nodded.

The boulder room gave them no problems, even if the number of rats in it had increased. As had the rats and bunnies in the warren room.

"This is going to give the Omega teams more trouble," Jackals said, grunting as he pulled the door to the boss room open.

"Only if they don't work together," Mez replied. "That's the secret to those two rooms, really."

The fighter looked at the archer. "Right, and how many teams were you on, back then, where working together was such a simple thing?"

"Not many, I know. Maybe this group will be different."

"A bunch criminals thrown together against their wills," Carina said, thoughtfully, "no, I don't see that leading to cooperation very quickly."

"I expect you are speaking from experience?" Khumdar said, as the light in the room slowly came on and the golem, Whipper, turned to face them. "After all, you were criminals thrown together against your will at one time also."

She sighed. "Yeah, I am."

"I tried to work with the teams I was on," Mez said, "but egos kept getting in the way."

"Says the noble," Tibs grumbled and hated himself for the thought. Mez was a friend. His status didn't matter. Shouldn't matter. He felt the archer's eyes on his back.

"How about we use that building aggression and anger against that thing," Jackal said, then added, "it's better than using it against each other, and that was not appropriate Tibs."

"I know. I'm sorry," Tibs said, taking out his knives. He looked at them, then at the golem. He recalled how close the rats and bunnies had to get to him before he could kill them, and couldn't stop the shudder. A sword. He was learning how to use a sword after this run. Better yet, he was learning how to use the fire and air essence as attacks.

He let out his breath and Jackal gave the signal. Moments later the golem was rubble.

"No comments?" Tibs asked, looking up as the back wall lowered to reveal the stairwell to the next level and chest with the boss loot.

"You mean other than how long it took you all to get here?" Sto replied with a chuckle. "This is the first floor. I don't expect it to give you trouble. The next floor, on the other hand..."

“Tibs,” Jackal called, lobbing something at him. He caught the amulet, an identical version of his other one. “If there’s two more, you might get a full set out of this run.”

Tibs nodded. “If there’s enough loot no one else wants to cover their cost.”

“I think it’s more important you get the amulets,” Mez said, “the more of your essences you can use fully, the better our odds of beating the dungeon.”

Tibs sighed. “I am sorry for what I said. You’re not like them, I know that.”

The archer nodded. “And I understand why it’s difficult for you to accept it. You’ve only experienced the bad side of what nobility is.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m starting to think there’s so few of us you might well be justified in hating every noble, but give me and the others like me time, we’ll show you that nobility doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“Hug already,” Jackal said in irritation. “We have a second floor to clear, and loot to claim.”

Tibs and Mez looked at one another, then at Jackal. “No.” They said in unison, then grinned. Jackal rolled his eyes and started down the stairs.

At the bottom, Tibs frowned and turned away from the room to look at the wall beside the stairs. There was something about it.

“That’s interesting,” Ganymede said, and Tibs smiled on hearing her.

“Tibs?” Carina called.

“Give me a minute, there’s something here.” He ran a hand over the wall. The composition of the essence was different. He tried to figure out how. There were no essence triggers, no actual shape to it that would indicate a weave, but—

“Minute’s up, Tibs,” Jackal called. “Unless you’ve found loot, there’s some on the other side of this room that we need you to get us across.”

“I’m going to figure this out,” Tibs told Sto.

“I know.”

“I’m surprised you could tell there was even something there,” Ganny said. “Sto was really careful.”

“The way the essence is in the stone is different from the rest.” He joined his friends.

“You need me to lower you to the water?” Jackal asked, acting too innocent for Tibs’s liking.

“You dropped me the last time.”

“After you iced the water.” The fighter couldn’t stop the smile.

Tibs narrowed his eyes and sent the water essence out into the water. He shaped stairs going down to the surface out of it, then raised his hand. Jackal took a worried step back. “No, I don’t need your help.” He snapped his fingers, and the ice formed so fast throughout the pool that it cracked and snapped as it expanded.

“I wouldn’t have dropped you,” Jackal said defensively.

Mez patted the fighter’s shoulder. “Give it up, your face is betraying you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a maniacal grin before.” He walked down the ice steps.

“I’m not—” Jackal touched his face and cursed, trying to stop grinning. “How can I betray myself? I’m supposed to be on my side.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Carina said, stepping by him. “It’s endearing how you get so excited about your evil plans you can contain yourself.”

“I would simply make sure you do not do so before someone who would truly be angered at your plans,” Khumdar said, joining the others on the pool of ice.

“It is kind of amusing watching you try,” Tibs said, then walked down the stair.

“But I’m Jackal,” the fighter said, joining him, “I’m supposed to be able to be evil without anyone knowing.”

“No, you can’t,” Tibs said. “You’re too nice.”

“I am not nice,” Jackal replied, pouting, then grinned.

Tibs rolled his eyes just before the ice shook.

“Did you do that?” Jackal asked, standing still in the following quiet.

“No.” Tibs sensed through the ice. He couldn’t feel the entire pool, but he could sense to the floor, and— “Run!” he motioned to the other end of the pool as he started running.

The ice shook again and Tibs felt a section of the floor rise, pushing the ice, cracking it. He felt the earth essence in that section, felt it compress as it built strength. “Hurry!” he yelled as he felt the section next to it do the same, if slower.

Behind them, the ice erupted as a pillar of stone burst through. Tibs cursed as he sensed the section ahead of him and Jackal about to shatter the ice. “Earth up! This isn’t going to be fun!” he wished he had put earth in his amulet instead of water. He couldn’t think of how he was going to get out of this one without breaking anything.

The ice cracked under them, and he thought he’d make it. Then the corruption in his essence reminded him it was there by cramping his leg and sending him sprawling on the ice. The pain kept him from getting up as the explosion of ice sent him flying to yells of horror from his friend and Sto.

He fought through the pain, cursed Bardik for being the cause, and looked around. He was in the air, falling. He caught sight of his friends as Carina leaped up out of the pool and onto the stone ledge. Mez and Khumdar were behind her.

Tibs was falling toward jagged ice.

He reached his hand forward and melted the ice. He fell in cold water and didn’t wait. He propelled himself out of it. He could feel the stone ahead tensing, almost at the point where it would erupt.

Jackal jumped out of the pool and crashed into the wall. Tibs snorted and almost lost his footing.

“Come on Tibs,” Sto encouraged him. “You can make it.”

No, he couldn’t. The next section would burst instant after this one. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn’t clear both.

So he slowed, then stopped.

“Tibs?” Sto yelled. “You can’t give up!”

Tibs called essence to him. He really hoped this worked. He crouched and readied himself, shifting the composition to the ice under him.

The stone broke through, sending him up, but the ice angled because of the staggered

durability he'd given it, instead of erupting in everywhere. He sent part of his essence in it as he felt himself start to fall, and it erupted under his control, sending him flying toward the shelf.

The next section broke and frying ice slammed into him, sending him tumbling. He thought he was still heading toward the shelf, but couldn't be sure. Regardless, he pulled as much of the essence from the flying ice as he could and wrapped himself in water. He was still considering if he should ice it up for extra hardness or use the softness of it to absorb the impact when that impact occurred.

"Yes!" Sto yelled as Tibs slide down a wall, the water sloshing off him as his head rang. "You made it!"

"Tibs!" Carina was next to him. "Are you alright?"

"Oh yeah," he replied, sighing, "he made changes to the room."

## Stepping up-7

Tibs pushed the little fire essence he had to the surface of his body to dry himself and his clothes, then walked to the pool of broken ice, looking it over before pulling essence back into his reserve and channeling that into the amulet until it was full.

"I guess that means there's no safe way across anymore," Jackal said.

Tibs motioned to the wall. "Unless I deactivate the traps." He could barely make out the maze of essence channels at the edge of his senses.

"Is it worth it?" Mez asked. "We crossed the ice because it was simple, but the bridge isn't that difficult to cross."

"Unless the dungeon has changed that, too," Khumdar said, stepping onto it, then pausing. "This set of triggers feels like the last time we used it."

"He isn't talking," Tibs told Jackal at the quizzical expression from the fighter. "Other than to encourage us, or mock us, he doesn't talk about the rooms and what he did in them."

"I don't—" Sto started then stopped. "Hmm, right, I do mock you once in a while. But there are times your team deserves it."

"You're just evil," Tibs replied with a smile. "I'm not being serious," he hurried to add to the worried looks the others gave him. "We have more rooms to clear." He looked up. "Did you change the layout of this floor since I ran after B—" Tibs's throat constricted. "When he tried to kill you?"

The memory of the pain crawled through him, being eaten alive by the corruption, his own essence turning against him, defeating attempts to heal him from the clerics.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump. "Tibs?" Carina asked gently.

"I'm okay," he hurried to reply.

She searched his face. "Are you? If this is too hard."

"I'm okay," he said, an edge to his voice.

She nodded, and he followed her to the other room.

“No obvious changes here,” Jackal said. Five whippers, a dozen stone rats. “Let’s stay on our guard for surprises, but we know how to deal with them.”

They took longer than the first-floor boss, but they ended up as rubble too, with only a few cuts and bruises on Tibs’s and his teammates. Nothing any of them felt needed to be healed, and he was happy about it. He didn’t want to risk it while his essence was infected.

“Tibs,” Jackal called, lobbing something at him, an amulet.

“You’re in luck,” Mez said, lobbing another one after searching the rubble. “I think that makes a full set.”

“Sto,” Ganny said, an edge to her voice while Tibs looked at the amulet. Three of them in one run. They’d never found that before.

“Hey Ganny, I didn’t know you were back up here. How’s the work going?”

“It’s going—don’t try to change the subject. We need to have a talk.”

“But they’re heading for the ratling camp.”

“If they survive this run, you’ll get to watch them do it next time.”

“But.”

“Now, Sto.”

Tibs wondered what the coming scolding would be about.

“The dungeon’s going to be busy for a while,” Tibs announced.

“Meaning?” Carina replied.

Tibs looked at Jackal. “Pleading with him for more loot isn’t going to do anything.”

“Has it ever?” Mez asked.

“I don’t plead,” Jackal said. “I ask.”

“You may wish to work on the tone you use if that is the case,” Khumdar said, using the end of his staff to shift the rubble, still searching. “I do believe there has been an edge of pleading to the previous times.”

“I don’t—you know what, I’m not falling for this. Unless you’ve found something else, we have a village to clear and chests to open.” He rubbed his hands. “Loot.”

The changes to the villages were small. The number of tents around each campfire was no longer the same, ranging from three to seven. They were also less uniformly set, feeling more like groups of people had put them up, rather than one person putting them down.

Had the ratlings put the tents up themselves, or was Sto being more random?

Clearing it went as it did the previous times. He and Carina took the edges and moved inward while Jackal, Khumdar, and Mez headed for the center, killing any they encountered and getting the bulk of the attention.

Mez had the only major injury in a broken arm. After Tibs explained the way the corruption in his essence made Jackal sick after he healed him. The archer told Tibs to do it anyway, since the cleric would heal him once they left.

Tibs didn’t know if that would work, since the clerics hadn’t been able to heal the corruption out of him, but did as Mez asked.

“That was fun,” Sto grumbled as they separated to look for the chests.

“What did Ganny want?”

“To complain that I’m ‘breaking the rule again’.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you change the list of drops from the grouped whippers,” she scolded.

Sto sighed. “Of course I made changes. I’m also making adjustments. Why is this time different from the others?”

“Because it just happened to be what Tibs received.”

“It’s random,” Sto replied in exasperation.

“Is it?” She asked.

Had it been? Tibs knew Sto could affect what dropped. He couldn’t while they were in the room, but he could set things up ahead of time. He’d arranged for Mez to get his bow after Tibs suggested it on a previous run.

“She’s impossible,” Sto grumbled.

“I take it she left.” Tibs didn’t know what Ganymede was. She seemed to act as Sto’s guardian and assistant. She knew more than he did, and she reminded him of all the rules the dungeon had to follow. There had been a hint that she could leave, but didn’t because Sto couldn’t be left unattended.

“Yeah, she’s gone back to work on the third floor.”

“So, did you?”

“Did I what?” Sto demanded, a hint of anger in his voice.

“Affect the loot.”

“No,” the dungeon replied in an offended tone. “Why did the others make it sound like you needed more amulets?”

“For each of my essences. My reserves are small, so I can use amulets as extra reserves, sort of like sorcerers do.”

“Why aren’t you filling the other than?”

He ran a finger over them in his pouch. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep them. We need to buy them from the guild and after not having runs and traveling, I’m low on coins. It’ll depend on the loot we find and if the others need something from it.”

“Oh. I thought you got to keep the loot.”

Tibs shook his head, opening a chest. A set of leather boots was in it. Normal ones, if well made. “Everything in here is the property of the guild.”

Sto snorted. “It’s my loot. I make it. I say who gets it. And I say you get it.”

Tibs smiled. “The guild isn’t going to believe me if I tell them that. And if they somehow believe me.” He thought of Harry and how he knew when someone lied to him. “Then I’m going to have to explain how it is you can talk to me. Neither one of us wants that.”

“So you could really use the pouch of hiding.”

Tibs shrugged. “Yeah, but you said it was too costly to make.”

“You did save my life.”

“Will Ganny let you make it?”



“She can’t stop me,” Sto replied angrily, then sighed. “But she can yell at me. And be angry.” He sighed again. “I don’t like making her angry.”

Tibs rejoined the others and placed the boots with the rest. Nothing enchanted this time. A normal bow, boots, well-made clothing, a short sword. Tibs picked that up. It was heavy. He used the earth essence to strengthen his arm, and it became easier to wield.

“Planning on switching weapons?” Mez asked, chuckling.

“Yes. I’m not good enough at throwing my knives, and I’m getting tired of how close those rats get to me before I can kill them.”

“Will the teachers train you?” Carina asked, and Tibs shrugged. He could find someone else to train him if they wouldn’t.

“Is this a good quality sword?” he asked.

“Not really,” Sto answered, as Jackal shrugged.

“I don’t know much about swords.” The fighter closed his fists. “Those are what I use.”

Tibs nodded. “Those mean the rats would get even closer to me.” He shuddered, putting the sword back with the rest.

“Is the dungeon back?” Jackal asked. Tibs nodded, and the fighter looked up, indicating the loot items. “What’s the big idea, an entire village of ratling and we get junk?”

“That isn’t junk,” Sto replied, offended.

“He’s just pleading for better stuff,” Tibs replied.

“I am not pleading,” Jackal said.

“There’s definitely some whining in there,” Carina said, chuckling. “That makes it pleading.”

“Don’t you want better stuff?” Jackal asked.

“Of course I do, but it’s all worth something. I can use the money to buy what I need if I don’t find it in the loot.”

“What do you need?” Tibs asked, relaying Sto’s question before wondering why the dungeon was interested.

Carina fingered the cut in her robe. “I’m going to have to look into a better one. This isn’t going to hold up against stronger monsters. I’m going to ask Darran if he can get me something like what you had, Khumdar. The armored robes.”

The cleric nodded, putting the items in Jackal’s backpack. “He should manage to get you a set. I purchased mine from a store in Virdan, but I have seen them in more stores who cater to sorcerers.”

“Those were sorcerer’s robes?” Mez asked.

“Of course. Cleric’s robes only come in white.”

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The bunnyling room was the same as the last time, down to the twitching nose poking out of one of the swiveling stones on the floor where they were hiding.

“Okay,” Jackal said. “Last time we made the mistake of underestimating them. Little fluffing stone things that shouldn’t be able to hurt anything. Let’s not do that this time.”

Tibs sensed the bunnylings moving under the floor. Running from one cover stone to the other. The fundamental problem for him and Carina was that the room was bare of anything to use as cover. Stealth was impossible, which turned him into a simple fighter and made it difficult for her to take the time to focus on the stronger spells, since they took longer to prepare. Unlike the ratlings, the bunnylings seemed to know the threat she represented and targeted her accordingly.

She touched her amulet and didn't look happy.

"I will protect Carina," Khumdar said, slowly spinning his staff before him. Whatever else he had done while away from Kragle Rock, Khumdar had become proficient in using it.

"Mez stay close to them," Jackal said. "You and Carina are more effective at range. Tibs and me will do our best to keep them busy."

Tibs nodded and drew his knives. He sensed over a dozen moving, but the room was large enough he couldn't sense all of it and he hadn't kept track of the numbers the last time.

He and Jackal stepped into the room together, and the head poking out of the floor stilled. Tibs readied himself while Jackal kept walking. It's screeched and every bunnyling under the floor far from a cover stone ran for one and jumped out.

They were smaller than the ratlings. Humanoid stone bunnies with thick legs and scrawny arms with long claws. What made them dangerous was how weak they seemed. It was easy to underestimate them after defeating the ratlings. But they were fast and strong, and, on top of that, they were coordinated. Four headed for Jackal, while three for Tibs, and the rest spread around.

Tibs coated his body in a thin layer of ice for extra armor. He remembered the ease with which those claws had sliced through his leather armor. He threw a knife at one as he dodged another and was thrown off balance as claws dug into his armor. He slashed as he rolled back to his feet and the bunnylings stepped away from him, circling.

That was another thing that made them tougher. They didn't attack mindlessly. They weaved in and out, making it difficult to keep track of one specific bunnyling. They came at him together, and Tibs coated his knife in fire, turning at the last moment to slash at the already injured bunny. The action cost him, as another dug their claws in his side, but the one Tibs slashed broke into pieces, and Tibs was able to cut another of his attacker as he dropped under the jumper.

Not this time.

He got back to his feet and shifted his essence to stop the bleeding. It did nothing for the pain.

The bunnylings circled him, one on each side. Tibs moved with them, making sure neither ended at his back. It let him take in the fights. Jackal had six now, but looked like he was handling them. Rubble was strewn around him, so he'd already killed a few. Mez was firing arrows after arrows, but the bunnylings were dodging them and moving in such a way that the archer almost hit Khumdar a few times as the cleric struck those who came close to him with his staff which was trailing darkness as it moved.

Tibs threw himself to the side, his slash missing the bunnyling that jumped at him, but claws dug into his leg and when he stood, Tibs nearly fell as the essence wrap he put

around the injury shattered as corruption pooled in it. A bunnyling used the opportunity to dig its claws into Tibs' shoulder, but before it could bite down, he had his knife into its head and it crumbled before him, revealing the third bunnyling running at him.

Tibs didn't think. He reached into it and pulled its essence out, and the bunnyling shattered into pieces as it impacted with him. Tibs cursed as he fell back. He wasn't supposed to do that.

He pushed himself to his feet. Khumdar was keeping the bunnylings away from Mez and Carina, who were slowly whittling them away. Jackal was still fighting six or seven of them, but one was moving away, eyes fixed on the fighter.

"Jackal!" Tibs yelled, pointing to the bunnyling, but the fighter was too busy to respond. They were keeping him occupied while the other prepared for its attack.

Tibs pulled water essence to him as he made the 'x' with his knife, then stabbed its center and the essence was ripped out nearly faster than he could replenish it. He dropped to a knee as the water attack flew, and as the bunnyling shattered from the impact, Tibs dropped on all four. He should have pulled from the amulet.

He raised his head as he caught his breath and tried to scramble away from the running bunny. His body locked-up in fear. Where had it come from? Behind it he saw the closing floor tile, the answer not helping him in the slightest.

It exploded and Tibs covered his face to keep the hot stones from burning him.

He forced himself to his feet. Checking the essence wrap on his leg before putting weight on it.

"Jackal," Carina yelled, stepping toward the fighter and his opponents now that the bunnylings that had been attacking her and Mez had been dealt with, "Shove one away way from you."

The fighter kicked one, and with a gesture, the sorceress sent wind blades to cut it apart. Jackal kicked another, and this time Mez exploded it with a flame arrow. Jackal punched the head off another as Khumdar joined him. By the time Tibs joined them, all the bunnylings were rubble.

"Are there any more?" Jackal asked, holding his side. Tibs sensed and walked around the room until he'd covered it all.

"They're all dead."

"Thank the abyss," Jackal said, dropping to his knees. "I don't want to ever have to fight those things again."

"He's going to be disappointed," Sto commented. "I'm glad you survived, Tibs."

"Thanks. Sorry about draining one of them. I just reacted."

"Don't worry about it. You haven't had a lot of chances to practice I'm guessing."

Tibs nodded, but was still surprised at how unbothered Sto was. The last time, he'd sounded like he'd have no choice but to take action if Tibs did it again.

"Do you need me to heal you?" Tibs asked Jackal.

"No," the fighter replied harshly. "Sorry, but I'm going to pass. I can deal with this, and I'd rather not get that fever again."

"But the cleric will heal us when we leave," Mez said, sounding worried. "Right?"

“And if that clears the corruption that came with Tibs’s healing, I’ll let him do it on the next run, but they haven’t been able to fully heal it out of him.” Jackal smiled at the fearful archer. “Don’t worry, if you get the fever, I’ll take good care of you.”

“I warned you,” Tibs said when Mez looked at him.

“I thought...” he trailed off and swallowed. “Are we continuing?”

“We are searching this room,” Jackal ordered. “We’re not leaving without the loot.”

Tibs looked around. “That means looking into the warren.”

“You said they’re all dead, right?” Carina asked.

Tibs nodded, toeing the closest tile. He still didn’t look forward to going in there.

The warren was a series of dark connected tunnels which Tibs lit by keeping a flame over his hand. They were small enough he needed to bend down, so he expected the others would be crouched or, in the case of Khumdar, the tallest of them, on all four.

Instead of chests, Tibs found small bags, each containing coins and gems. He had three when he exited and looked around for the others. Carina was seated with Mez, holding a vial with a greenish liquid in it.

“What is it?” Tibs asked.

“I think it’s one of the healing potions they used at the training ground.”

“It’s a healing potion,” Sto said.

“How did you make it?” Tibs asked. “I mean, how did you know to make it. You said you have to get one before you can make more, right?”

“I need to get a basic form of it, then I can make changes and see what happens, but yes, a runner brought one in and they died before they could use it.”

They were the first, so this dated back to before. “Who were they?” how had a runner stolen one?

“One of the nobles. They got separated in the ratling camp so no one was there to keep me from absorbing them.”

It surprised Tibs that a noble would have one of the horrible tasting versions, but then he remembered Tirania mentioning the better ones were extremely expensive. Expensive enough, even the nobles had to be happy with the bad ones.

“There’s five vials,” Carina said.

“Once for each of us,” Tibs replied. He wanted to ask Sto if he’d cheated again, but he needed to know if Ganny was around first. But asking about her would tell Carina.

“Should we keep them?” She asked. “We can get good money for them.”

“I don’t think the guild will give us much,” Tibs replied.

“Much what?” Jackal asked, sitting with them. “Is that a healing potion?”

“There’s one for each of us,” Carina replied.

“Drink one,” Jackal said, “you too Tibs, and give me one.”

“Shouldn’t we consider selling them?” Tibs asked.

“Are we allowed to use them?” Carina asked.

Jackal took the one she held and drank it. He made a face, then sighed in relief. “I’m not going to tell the guild those were here. If we don’t bring something out, how are they

going to know?"

Carina handed Tibs one, which he drank. It tasted as bad as before, but it didn't last long.

"If it is not too much trouble," Khumdar said, straightening once out of the warren, "I will pass on crawling through this the next time." He placed two backs with the others. Carina handed him a vial, which he sniffed and moved away from his face. "If you are planning on poisoning me, Carina, you will need to be more subtle."

Mez took the vial out of the cleric's hand and drank it in one swallow. Like the others, he made a face, then relaxed.

Khumdar raised an eyebrow and when Carina offered him the last vial, he took it.

"You've never had healing potions in your travels?" Jackal asked.

"I have heard of them, but they are prohibitively expensive. Not so much as a Purity Cleric, but not something a common traveler can afford."

"Not like you're exactly common," Mez commented.

"Thank you. Should we not keep it to hand to the guild, the money will be needed to pay for the amulets."

"Drink it," Jackal ordered.

Khumdar eyed him, then drank it and gagged. "This is horrib—" His face brightened. "Alright, this is not so bad, since the taste does not remain. Something better-tasting would still be appreciated."

"I'll get right on that," Sto replied sarcastically.

"Dungeon," Jackal said. "This is so we're going to be ready for what's in the other rooms, isn't it?"

"I like him," Sto said. "Very perceptive."

Tibs tried to stop the snicker, which caused Jackal to look at him. "He said you're right."

Jackal stood. "Makes sense. After the beating we get making it this far. It's the only way it's going to get us to keep going. I was going to send us back out. We weren't in any condition to risk it."

"Not even for whatever loot's there?" Carina asked innocently.

"It would still be there the next on the next run," Jackal replied.

Mez let the others move ahead, keeping Tibs back. "Did it heal the corruption?"

Tibs sensed the essence wrap he'd placed around the archer's broken arm, undoing it since it was healed. He couldn't sense any corruption there, but he knew it meant nothing.

"I don't know. The corruption in my essence doesn't stay there when I heal you. It leeches into your body and I can't see it once that happens. Just like I can't see your essence. Just the way it tints the essence coursing through your body, which tells me the kind of essence you have if I can't see your eyes first."

"I have your essence in me?"

Tibs nodded. "Everyone does. Even ordinary people, although there it's so faint I have to focus to sense it."

"Does theirs have a tint to it?"

“No,” Tibs said, choosing not to mention the two who did. It wasn’t his place, and he had no idea what it meant. “Only runners or adventurers have essences.”

Mez nodded, and they rejoined the others.

A comment from Ganny came back to him, from back when Tibs had asked how Sto had caused him to have an audience with Fire.

The element and intense emotions, Ganny had said, were what she knew of what was required to have an audience.

He’d almost died each time, and Tibs couldn’t think of anything more intense than that. But didn’t that mean having an audience wasn’t limited to runners?

Did the guild know that?

Did anyone else?

## Stepping up-8

Beyond the room was the long corridor where Bardik had covered the walls with corruption essence. Tibs counted his paces as he stepped into it, sensing ahead. He felt the lines of essences crisscrossing the space and stopped one pace before the closest one. It had taken him the same number of paces as it did to walk from one room to the other.

That part of the corridor was actually a room. One filled with trigger lines.

Jackal stepped next to him and frowned, running a hand before one line, then another.

“What are you doing?” Tibs asked as the fighter stepped around him, following a line from one side to the other.

“Unlike you, I can’t feel those things unless I’m almost touching them.”

Tibs stared at Jackal. “Really?” he looked at the others.

Mez and Khumdar nodded.

“I can feel essence when projects mine ahead,” Carina said. “It interacts with the essences and I get a sense of what’s there. And there’s a lot. Is this supposed to kill us? I thought there was always a way to get through the traps.”

“There is,” Sto said.

Tibs quickly passed a hand through a line and almost immediately spears traversed the corridor, almost forming a wall that moved from their side to the other. It happened so quickly that by the time the first set of spears registered, the fourth or fifth one was activated.

“Yeah,” Jackal said, “that’s designed to kill us.” Tibs tried not to feel as defeated as the fighter.

“What is that?” Khumdar pointed down the corridor once the last of the spears retracted. At the other end was a pedestal, with the top part angled so Tibs could see what looked like a plaque.

“I think,” Carina said, “that it’s the way to turn the trap off.”

“Why put the trigger all the way on the other side?” Jackal asked. “By the time we can turn it off we’ve already crossed it.”

“Maybe it’s for when we come back?” Tibs said, trying to map out the lines and see a way through.

“If one of us who happens to be small and agile goes through it,” Carina said, “he can then turn it off for the rest of us.”

“Oh,” Jackal replied.

Tibs thought he’d worked out a path through the first ten layers, which was as far as he could sense. It wouldn’t be easy, but she was right. He could make it, and he trusted Sto for there to be a path beyond—

Tibs ducked and turned as something twanged, so focused on looking for the trigger and trap in what should have been a safe section. He barely registered something flying by his head. Not finding anything, he looked for anyone hurt, and only then noticed Mez lowering his bow.

“What did you do?” Tibs asked.

The archer shrugged. “Turned off the traps.”

Tibs focused on the corridor, and the lines were gone. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t, but I figured wasting one arrow on the chance it worked was worthwhile.”

“It was,” Jackal said, moving his hand ahead of him as he stepped into the corridor.

“Okay,” Sto said, “that wasn’t how I’d expected you to beat this trap.”

“You expected me to step around, under and over the lines, didn’t you?” Tibs joined Jackal and kept pace with him, sensing ahead of them, in case the traps reactivated.

“Yeah, I designed this as a test of agility.” He fell silent. “Although, I guess it works too, as one of cunning. Not every team is as smart as yours.”

Some were a lot smarter, Tibs thought.

Then they were on the other side, and Tibs studied the pedestal. Like everything in the dungeon, it was stone, and the plaque could be pushed in easily. It was why the arrow had been enough. Tibs expected that on their next run, it wouldn’t be this easy. Sto had said he works for cunning, but he had made it for agility, so he’d try to ensure that was how it was beaten.

He joined the others at the entrance to the other room and swallowed hard. It was large, bigger than the village rooms, with columns holding the ceiling up. In the distance were three golems, three BBs, one Bigger Brute, with a Big Brute on each side, but they weren’t what made it hard for Tibs to breathe. Or the Ratlings and Bunnylings around them.

This was where he’d almost died.

The room shifted, covered with corruption eating at the walls. The BBs broken by Bardik. Bardik, who Tibs had known didn’t view him as a friend, but still had hoped they could be, had been willing to kill him in the end, rather than fail at his plan of destroying Sto.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, and someone kept him from stepping into the room.

“Are you alright?” Khumdar asked gently. “Do you prefer we not do this today?”

Tibs looked at the room again. The walls were immaculate, polished pale gray stone with abstract designs carved into them. The floor was tiled, hexagonal ones in varying

shades of gray. The damage was only in his memory, as was the worse of the pain.

“I’m good.” Sto had survived. Tibs owed it to him to see this through. To beat this room with his team.

“So, we have Ratlings, bunnylings, and two types of golems,” Jackal said, looking at Tibs.

“Big Brute and Bigger Brute.”

The fighter rolled his eyes but didn’t comment. “At least there are none of those Whippers. We can handle the rats and bunnies, but they’re going to give the brutes time to get shots in. Any ideas?”

“When we encountered the smaller of the Brutes,” Khumdar said, “we barely did it any damage. They will be the larger threats.”

“No,” Mez replied. “If we start on them, the rats and bunnies are going to tear us apart. We can deal with them if we’re not distracted. We need to thin them out and then focus on the Brutes. They aren’t exactly fast, the room is large.”

“We’re stronger than we were when Tibs walked into the fire,” Jackal said. “We can take on the Brutes.”

“Not at the same time as the rest.” Carina glared at the fighter. “I agree with Mez. It doesn’t matter how strong we are. They have numbers with which they can overwhelm us. Me and Mez have area attacks now, but even that’s not going to work if they’re all on you. I haven’t found a way to make my attacks only hurt those creatures.”

“Can that be done?” Jackal asked, and she glared at him harder.

“And there could be traps,” Khumdar said. “The tiles do lend themselves to that.”

“No,” Tibs replied, then hesitated. “I don’t think that’s how it works. A room either has traps or monsters. There might be a warren system under the floor, with the tiles flipping for more bunnylings to jump out of, but I don’t think we have to worry about traps.” Not this time, Tibs was confident, although the discussion might give Sto ideas.

“Can you sense bunnies under the floor?” Carina asked.

Tibs shook his head. “But that just means they’re staying away. The dungeon knows I can sense them and at this point, he probably has an idea what my range is.”

Sto remained silent.

“Then can you tell if some of the tiles can flip?” she asked.

Tibs crouched and studied the floor. The varying colors made it difficult. And Sto could have learned from the previous warren rooms and made the weight system less visible.

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything. So we’re going to have to pay attention to where we step. Keep an eye out for where they jump out of. I’ll try to look for a pattern, but it’s not going to help us this time.”

“I count at least thirty, of the rats and bunnies,” Jackal said.

“Thirty-six,” Khumdar said.

“How can you count them so quickly?” Jackal demanded, “and with them moving about?”

“Twelve seems to be a significant number for the dungeon. I don’t know why, but



there are twelve light stones between the entrance and the first room. Twenty-four rats in the boulder room, twenty-four rabbit in the warren room.”

“One Whipper,” Jackal replied grinning.

“A boss monster.”

“Five Whipper on the second floor.”

“And nineteen rats.”

Jackal frowned and counted on his fingers. “That’s twenty-four.” Khumdar nodded. “The other rooms?”

“I haven’t been able to count them, but I expect it will thirty-six or forty-eight.”

“He’s right,” Sto said, sounding surprised. “I didn’t notice I did all of them in twelves.”

Tibs kept that information to himself. It wouldn’t help, and by the time they were back, Sto would change things now that he knew about them.

Jackal studied the room. “Alright. The three of us engage and keep the small ones busy. We have lots of room so we make use of it. Carina, Mez, we’re going to try and give you shots into groups, but it’s going to be on your judgment which to take because we’re not going to have much control over how close to them we’ll be. If you can’t get a shot in, weaken the Brutes.”

Tibs took his knives out, looked at them, at the creatures, and sighed. Swords, he was definitely learning how to handle a sword after this.

He ran into the room with Jackal and Khumdar, and split away a third of the way in, as the ratlings and bunnylings ran at them. Instead of splitting into three, they split into four, with one group running past them.

“Carina, Mez!” Jackal yelled, but an explosion informed them the two were aware of the danger they posed.

Tibs ducked, blocked, and parried, covering himself in ice after the first set of claws cut him. Too damned close to them. He sliced and stabbed, adding fire to the blades, and cursing himself for not thinking of starting the attack at a distance. He had range now, even if he could only target one opponent at a time.

“Tibs, back up!” Mez yelled. As Carina yelled Khumdar’s name.

Tibs retreated quickly, and before the group caught back up to him, a burning arrow hit the ground in the middle of them and exploded. The creatures that were sent flying picked themselves up as soon as they landed and ran at Tibs again. But that had taken care of half of his opponents.

Tibs threw himself into the fray and regretted it immediately, as his ice armor was chipped away and he received more injuries. Again, he’d forgotten to attack at a distance.

When the last bunnyling fell, Tibs put his hand on his knees and caught his breath. He wanted to go help his friends. At least one of them was still fighting. But his amulet was out of essence, and he needed a few seconds to refill it. When he straightened, only Jackal was fighting.

He had a handful of opponents, and one shattered under a kick from the fighter. Another from a punch, then another as Jackal used one to bash the other with, then broke the

one he held over his knee. The last fell from a fist through the chest.

If the creatures had had any survival instincts, Tibs expected they would have all run off the moment Jackal joined the fight. The strength he gained when rocked-up as he was, was scary.

Tibs opened his mouth to congratulate the fighter, but the ground shook. It shook again as Tibs looked to the Brutes. Bigger Brute was taking heaving steps in their direction, the other two trailing behind him.

“Does anyone need Tibs to heal them?” Jackal called, “we don’t have long.”

Tibs did an inventory of his injuries. Mostly cuts and bruises. Fatigue was the problem, and he couldn’t do anything about that. Khumdar was fine, and Jackal seemed to be nearly impervious in his form. Mez and Carina joined them.

“How are you two on essence?”

Mez patted his bow. “I’m good.”

“I’m running a little low,” Carina said. “I need to either get a second amulet or be more careful with how much I use.”

Tibs opened his mouth—

“Then stay behind,” Jackal ordered. “If you run out, stay by the exit because if we need to run, I want you to be the first out. No arguing,” Jackal snapped. “I’m not losing the team’s sorcerer to stubbornness.” He grumbled something Tibs barely made out about the only sorcerer he was willing to sacrifice being Don.

Tibs smiled as he sheathed his knives. Mez had the time to raise an eyebrow at the action before Tibs pulled the knife out and flicked it at the Brute. The jet of water splashed over it without visible effect, but Tibs was proud to have thought of it this time.

Mez fired fire arrows after fire arrows, leaving scorch marks as the Brute walked, the floor shaking with each step. Flecks of stones flew off with each arrow, but they didn’t slow the golem’s steady approach. Tibs flicked water at it along with the arrows, then tried to do it with both knives, but it threw off his focus.

A blade of air hit the Brute’s face and sheared off part of it, but that also didn’t affect its speed.

“Our turn!” Jackal said. “Khumdar, take the left. I have the right. Just bash at it, the moment it focuses on either of us, we back and draw it while you three go back to hitting it.”

Jackal stepped to the right with a deliberateness that made Tibs feel he should feel the ground shake with the fighter’s steps, too. Tibs got in a last jet of water before Jackal and the clerics were close enough to strike. Instead of trailing darkness as it had before, Khumdar’s staff sported a dark pointed end and he used it to stab and cut the golem. The point went in easily, even cutting the Brute’s arm at the elbow when it swung at him.

Khumdar backed up as the golem fixed angry eyes on him.

“Your turn again!” Jackal called as Bigger Brute followed the cleric’s quick retreat. Tibs noticed one of the Big Brutes pick up speed as he flung water, and Jackal’s cursing said the fighter noticed it too.

Before Jackal could join Khumdar to cover his flank, the Big Brute broke into rubble

as it impacted the Bigger Brute. Tibs felt the essence transfer from one to the other as part of the stones reassembled to fix the cut arm and injuries.

Tibs stood frozen.

“What?” Jackal demanded.

“Oh fuck,” Carina said.

“Keep it busy!” Mez yelled as the Bigger Brute took advantage of their distraction and slammed its arm into Jackal, sending the fighter flying across the room. “Carina, whatever you have left, you and me have to take down the other small one. We can’t let them pull this trick a second time.”

Khumdar was using his staff to block the golem’s blows, the darkness over it seeming to keep the fists from touching the wood. Tibs ran to help the cleric, grumbling about Sto being a cheater. Fortunately, the dungeon remained quiet. Now was not the time to get into an argument, and Tibs didn’t think he could stop himself.

Jackal was back on his feet and running to join them when Tibs used water to slide between the golem’s legs, cutting at the ankles. The knives bit deep, but unlike with people, it didn’t prevent it from continuing to step with Khumdar’s retreat.

The cleric strained, and a block wasn’t correct. Instead of deflecting strike away, it resulting in a glancing blow on his shoulder. Tibs saw the essence break, even if Khumdar didn’t react to the injury.

With a scream, Jackal jumped over them and landed on the golem with punches to the face that sent stone flying. But Tibs couldn’t tell whose it was. He ran to Khumdar, who tried to shake him away as he placed a hand on his shoulder.

“We don’t—” the cleric began.

“Shut up.” Tibs poured his essence and shaped it around the injury. “You can’t fight with only one arm.” He tightened and hardened the essence and turned to the fight. Jackal flew over them. But the golem’s face was a mess of broken stones, with only one eye remaining.

Tibs flicked a water jet at it. If he could blind it, they’d have the advantage, but he missed. The water splashing on the side of its head. His aim with the jet was no better than with throwing his knives. The only advantage was that he lost nothing this way, not even essence. He could refill his reserve as fast as the ability used it.

“Tibs,” Khumdar said, the staff coming down before him to deflect the arm aimed for his head. “Move.”

Tibs did as told, slicing at a leg at the same time. He glanced at the other golem. Mez was the only one still firing at it, each arrow exploding and taking chunks of rocks out, but not slowing it as he walked toward the Bigger Brute.

With a cry Khumdar fell to a knee, staff over his head, holding the stone arm away. Jackal slammed into the golem and staggered it. His essence was broken in multiple places, but his stone body seemed to keep everything in place despite that.

Tibs stepped away as stone flew off the golem with each punch from the angry fighter. His fist was covered with spiked that left gouges into the golem’s stone. The Big Brute was still advancing. And it still had a lot of essence, even with its mounting injuries.

Unlike with his friends, the essence didn't break when it was injured. It flew off with the broken stones, reducing the total. He hadn't kept track of how much Bigger Brute had lost, but he was damaged enough it had to be significant.

And it meant nothing of Big Brute reached him.

Tibs stepped aside to give himself a clear view of Big Brute. He took out his knife, channels water essence to the point while pulling from his amulet, and refilling it. He cleared his mind as he traced the 'x', sensing the essence left in the wake of his knife's point.

He readied himself for the drain as he stabbed the center, and a watery jet materialized and stuck Big Brute, pushing it back and blowing stone off it. Unlike his previous attempt, exhaustion didn't hit as hard, and the jet continued. The surprise broke Tibs's focus and the amulet, along with his reserve, emptied and he dropped to all fours, panting.

He tries to pull essence into his reserve, but he can't focus. All he can do he breathe. Try to slow his pounding heart.

When he could finally hear something other than it. Once his mind was clear enough, he refilled his essence and looked around. All that was left was his panting friends. Jackal the only one not panting, still standing. But Tibs didn't know how he managed it.

He ran to his friend. "Jackal, are you okay?"

"No," the fighter said through grinding teeth.

"How are you?" Tibs couldn't finish.

Jackal snorted. "Will. I am not dying here. I am not putting Kro through losing me."

Tibs sensed the essence in Jackal. Tried to find something that wasn't broken. "I don't know if I have enough essence to heal you."

"Don't."

"Jackal, I can't—"

"Your essence stops me from using earth essence there." He stopped and Tibs felt him pull earth essence from the floor. "I can't survive without filling myself with earth. The cleric will fix me." He paused and let out a sigh. "I hope. Because I'm not sure how Kro's going to feel about his special guy being made of stone all the time." He smiled. "Course I would be hard all the—"

Tibs gagged, and Jackal laughed, then groaned.

"You cheated!" he yelled at the dungeon.

"No, I didn't."

Tibs pointed to the rubble. "You healed Bigger Brute! You can't—"

"I just did for them what you do for your friends," Sto said calmly.

Tibs opened his mouth to contradict him, but he couldn't. It was what Tibs did, and Sto hadn't prevented him from doing it. He didn't consider it Tibs cheating.

He looked at his friends, tired, injured, but alive. They'd survived and based on the chest at the back of the room, Bigger Brute had been the boss monster.

"Someone go check on the loot," Jackal said. "I'd like to do it, but I'm worried if I move more than I have to, I might fall apart." He looked at himself, the breaks in his stone

body. "Quite literally."

## Stepping up-9

Tibs joined Mez at the chest as he pulled out an amulet and grinned. "Another one for you," the archer said. "I think that covers them all."

"It's just three," Tibs answered, distracted by the wall behind the chest. "We only found two this run." He took it and put it in his pouch, then stepped to the wall, studying it. Mez said something, but he wasn't paying attention. He ran a hand over it.

Sto had done something to the wall. Tibs felt the way essence was woven in a space the size of a door, but he couldn't tell what it was supposed to be, nor how to activate it.

Carina exclaimed something, and he spun, reaching for a knife.

"This is beautiful!" She held a silvery robe over an arm, running a hand over the material.

"If she doesn't like the color," Sto said, "I can change it."

"What?" Tibs asks. He shook his head to clear it.

"I've noticed sorcerers like to use colors that represent their elements. I can't take that into account in the loot rotation, so like the rest the color's randomized. But if she put it back in the chest, I can alter the color to something she prefers."

"Are you allowed?"

The others glanced at him. And he raised a finger to have them wait.

"Probably not," Sto sighed, "feels like I'm not allowed to do anything, but it's just a color, so I doubt Gany's going to complain too loud about it."

Tibs nodded and looked at Carina. "The dungeon says that if you prefer another color, just put it back in the chest and tell him which one you want."

"No!" she held it against her. "It's perfect!"

"Can you change the sword into healing potions?" Jackal asked. Tibs looked down. And there was a too-long sword next to the chest.

"Sorry," Sto answered. "That I'm not risking her anger on."

Tibs shook his head. "Maybe you can include some next time, so those who win can heal." What could anyone do with a sword that big? It was longer than Jackal was tall. There were no essences woven through it, so just a normal way-too-big sword.

"Sorry, I want people in good shape for this fight. How they leave it is entirely up to them. It isn't like there are any real challenges on the way back, right?"

Tibs glared at the ceiling. "What have you done?"

"Me?" Sto replied, sounding far too innocent. "Nothing."

"We need to be on our guard on the way back," Tibs warned the others. "The dungeon did something."

Sto didn't protest, but the damage was already done, and Tibs wondered if he'd done it to make him paranoid.

They walked slowly, more to keep pace with Jackal, who had to ensure he was always in contact with the stone floor so he could draw in essence to keep himself together, than for any danger.

Mez slapped a hand on the plate, on their side of the long corridor to deactivate the trap, and Tibs stayed by it. Sto couldn't change rooms while they were in them, but that didn't mean he couldn't set up something so the trap would rearm itself after time passed. In his current state, Jackal took much longer to cross the corridor than they had on the way in.

"Sto," Tibs whispered. Voices carried in the stone corridor. "Why aren't you using the mind essence to talk with other people?"

"I can't, you know that. Gany doesn't even know why I can talk with you."

"I know that, but mind essence should let you just talk to any mind, right? You do have mind essence, don't you?" Tibs tried to remember if Sto had said anything about what essence he had.

"I do. I have all the essence. But I have no idea what to do with the mind essence, that one and a few others."

"Really?" The surprise took Tibs's attention away from the corridor for a second and he hurried to return it there. "If you have it, shouldn't you just be able to do something with it?"

Sto was quiet for a few seconds. "Not really. Is that something you can do?"

It was Tibs's turn to be silent as he considered it. "Well, I try stuff, ways to arrange the essence to see what it'll do. Most of the time nothing happens, but I've been able to use some of the things with my water essence with air."

Sto was quiet again. "That doesn't seem to work for me."

"Then how did you manage to do all this essence stuff?"

"By watching you and all the other Runners, also by absorbing those who died. I gain some of their knowledge when I do. But there haven't been any Runners with Mind essence yet. Once I have a base to start with, I can play with it, but without it, I can't seem to do anything."

That was strange. "I'd have thought there would be every essence." Immediately, he realized he was wrong. Tirania had stirred him toward the four basic ones. Even when he'd asked about others and she'd answered him, she'd dismissed them. He couldn't remember the details of what she'd said, but the sense they didn't matter had been there. If everyone explaining essence to the newly graduated Upsilon had the same mindset, it would explain why so many people were water, air, fire, and earth.

"But, when it comes to items with essence woven through them, you could do that before anyone had essences."

"Yes, but only because the people with those items had been thrown into me. With a few of them, I was able to experiment, weave other essences through and get more effect, but except for your pouch, which took a lot of work, everything else was simple stuff."

Tibs nodded. "Then can't you do that with mind essence?"

"I've played with it, but nothing's worked."

"Tibs!" Carina called. Everyone had crossed the corridor. He pressed the plate and

ran to join them.

The village rooms were the same, minus the dead creatures. Sto had reabsorbed the rubble. The trap room had also not changed, except for the ice being fully melted.

“I can’t cross the iced-over pool,” Jackal said, his voice strained. “Even if I could move fast enough to avoid the rising floors, I can’t reach the earth essence at the bottom of the pool.”

“If you stay by the side,” Mez said, “you’d be able to draw it from there, right?”

“Only,” Khumdar answered before Jackal could, “that would extend his travel time, and it does not resolve the issue of avoiding the rising floor.” The cleric looked at Tibs.

He sighed. “I’ll deactivate the room.” He wasn’t looking forward to the headache-inducing essence maze, but at least he wasn’t exhausted this time.

This time, he was halfway to the maze with a ledge stone broke, and the next one after that also broke, forcing him to stretch his leg precariously to get over the gap, but he made it.

“You’re making it harder on purpose,” he grumbled.

“No,” Sto chuckled. “Which ones will break is random, as is the level of weight they’ll support.” Which meant there was a possibility deactivating the room would be impossible for some people. Tibs didn’t think that was fair.

He reached the maze, and the complexity of the essence channels amazed him. He hadn’t been in a state to take in how they moved over, under, behind, and in front of each other. None of them crossed, forming a large and deep pattern that was beautiful in itself but didn’t take away from how difficult this was.

This time, his starting point was at the top. He focused on keeping the line tight from the start, figuring it would be easier in the long run than having to tighten it all as he had the last time. He lost his concentration a few times, but then fell into an odd mindset where he could think clearly about what he did, looking ahead a few turns to work out the correct one, while not losing track of the flow of his essence through the maze or its state.

What he lost track of was the state of his body, which is yanked back to itself as pain surged through his left arms, making him lose his grip on the wall. It only intensified as he tried to reach for it with both hands as he fell back off the ledge.

His friend’s scream vanished as he fell into the water, submerged by it.

Once he was down cursing the corruption in his body and the laughing Sto, Tibs pulled air essence out of the water to breathe as he drifted under the water.

“You should see your face,” Sto said between laughs. “It’s hilarious.”

This wasn’t funny, Tibs thought as hard as he could at the dungeon, wishing he could hear his mind.

“It is so funny.” The dungeon’s words fell apart in laughter again.

Tibs rolled his eyes, unable to stop himself from imagining Sto falling off a chair from laughter. He sighed. Okay, maybe, from the outside, it was funny. But Sto was supposed to be his friend. Friends didn’t laugh at one another. Tibs purposely didn’t think of the times He’d laughed at Jackal after one of the stupid things he’d done had come back to smack him in the face, sometimes literally.

Tibs closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet. He knew his friends were worried, but after the fighting, the yelling, the stress of the run, this was nice. He extended his senses and tried to reach his friends, but they were too far. What wasn't that far was the essence form approaching him through the water.

With a start, Tibs realized there was a creature in the water. His concentration broken, he choked on water and paddled to get himself to the surface, away from whatever that was.

Sto laughed harder.

Tibs took control of himself hard. Water was his essence. He wove a funnel around himself and used it to propel himself up and out. Just like when he'd used the ice to send himself to the ledge, he flew out. Unlike the last time, he expected it and with a fling of the hand, he sent water ahead of him to cushion his landing.

He ended up sprawled in the water, but at least it was a soft sprawl this time.

"There's a creature in the water!" he yelled at Sto once he was out of the water and dry.

"More than one," the dungeon replied, bursting out laughing again.

"That's against the rules!"

"Says who?"

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it. "This is a trap room, there's aren't any creatures in trap rooms."

"Again, says who?" Sto's laughter was quieting.

"There haven't been any before," Tibs replied, and knew that meant nothing.

"Because the first floor is tough enough as it is for new Runners, and you didn't fall in the water until now."

Tibs nodded and sighed. "So, going forward, we can't take for granted what we'll find in any of the rooms."

"I believe we can never take anything for granted in a dungeon," Khumdar said.

Tibs nodded again. He'd gotten complacent. At least this reminder of the dangers he lived with hadn't cost him any of his friends.

"Sorry for yelling at you," he told Sto.

"It's okay. I do aim to create strong reactions, so I expect screaming. You should hear with some of the other teams have called me. It's a good thing they don't know I hear them. We good?"

Tibs rolled his eyes. "We're good."

He tried to move his left arm, but this time the corruption was taking longer to dissipate back through the rest of his essence. He couldn't navigate the ledge like this.

"Carina, can you reach where I was when I fell with your wind?"

She looked at the wall. "I think so, but I can't feel the essence there. Maintaining the airflow isn't the same as reaching into what you described the last time."

Tibs looked at her. He hadn't even considered one of the other classes might try to solve the maze. He'd only thought of the other rogues he knew and had seen. There were a lot of smaller and lighter people in the other classes, even among the fighters. They weren't



all big thugs like Jackal or Pyan.

“That’s not what I have in mind.” He winced as he tried to move his left arm. “That’s going to get in the way. I need you to support me, hold me against the wall as I get there, and work on the maze. It’s going to take a while.”

“Time isn’t an issue. Once I have my essence out, I can hold it as long as I want or,” she looked at Jackal, “until someone breaks my concentration.”

“Sorry,” the fighter replied, “too busy holding myself together right now to be the annoying little brother.”

Tibs chuckled. At least Jackal wasn’t in too bad a state. He stepped to the ledge again and felt the wind gently pressing him to the wall. Carina sat, leaning against it, and nodded to him.

This way, reached the maze was easier, and without having to divide his attention between making sure he kept a good grip on the cracks in the wall and moving the essence through the maze, his focus was easier to maintain. Even without reaching the strange mental state he had before falling, he thought he solved it faster.

He heard the rumble of stone grinding against stone, of water rushing out of the way, and looked at the pool. Vents had opened in the side for the water to flow out of as the floor rose. Wherever the creatures were, he didn’t see them.

At some point, while he worked, his arm unbunched and was fine when he stepped onto the wet stone floor.

The first floor was easy, if slow, because of Jackal. In the hall leading out there was something in the wall he wanted to check, but Jackal needed healing, so he stayed with him.

The cleric was a man, and he took one look at Jackal and pull his hood down in shock. His eyes were the same pale, almost color of all purity clerics. Tibs thought they might have been green before. He was older than most he’d come across, but much younger than their leader, that intolerant man Tibs grouped in with all the nobles in the town.

“Sit,” the man said, taking Jackal’s arm, then letting go as small stones fell out of the cracks. He looked at one of the guards. “Send for Maria and Louis.”

“I can’t leave my post,” the guard replied. A man, much older than any of them, with a stern face and angry gray eyes.

The cleric got in his face. “We are here to ensure any Runner who steps out of that door will live. I cannot heal him by myself. I don’t even understand how he’s still alive. You are going to go and get Maria and Louis, or I will show you just how hard your life can be when you piss off a cleric.”

The man only narrowed his eyes and put a hand on the sword at his hip.

The cleric noticed the gesture, raised an eyebrow, and his hand, which began to glow. “Please, do test me. There are things we are not allowed to practice as part of our regular training.”

The guard’s resolve broke. He stepped away, then was hurrying down the steps. The other guard also stepped away from them.

“I was not aware purity clerics at the ability to inflict harm,” Khumdar said, his tone cautious.

“We don’t,” the cleric replied, kneeling next to Jackal, “but we’re surrounded by so much exaggeration and outright lies about what we can do, what we are, that it’s easy to fool most people at least once.” He grinned at Jackal. “Just count yourself lucky no one pulled that trick on him before now.”

Carina patted Jackal on the shoulder. “I think you can take for granted no other Runner has Jackal’s knack for getting himself into the kind of trouble that requires this level of healing.”

“Noted,” Jackal said. “Next time I’m letting you take the brunt of the bosses’ attacks.”

“I recommend that you stay quiet,” the cleric said. “I have no idea how this will feel.”

Tibs winced at Jackal’s expression as the cleric began working. By it, it didn’t feel nice at all.

## Stepping up-10

Carina twirled in place, then ran a hand down her robe, smoothing it down.

Tibs looked up from the slate on his lap and chuckled. She’d written words in neat curved letters and he was trying to figure them out. It didn’t give him the headache from months ago when he started learning, but he still didn’t enjoy it, so watching his friend enjoy her loot from the run was a nice distraction.

The robe had cost him the amulets, and Carina had to hand over coins. Tibs, Jackal, and the others had offered to help, but she’d refused. She had the coin, so she would handle it. Other than the amulets, there had been few enchanted items, and the guild didn’t care about normal ones; those they sold to Darran.

The robe moved as if the thick wool it was made of was thinner and lighter. There was essence woven through it, earth and air, and others. Tibs figured earth meant it was tougher, air accounted for the way it moved. What the other essence did Tibs couldn’t think of. What else could a robe benefit from other than being tougher and lighter?

She smiled at him. “Sorry.”

“Why?” Tibs asked, chucking again. He took out his air knife and made it float over his hand. “I still enjoy doing this.”

“I should be helping you learn your letters, not parading.”

“Sitting next to me frowning isn’t going to make me learn faster.” He sheathed the knife and rested his head against the wall. “I don’t think anything will.”

“You’ll get it. It isn’t something easy, but don’t get discouraged.” She touched the amulet at her neck as she sat on the chair next to Tibs’s bed.

It reminded Tibs he’d wanted to address this when they left the dungeon the day before, but he’d forgotten, with watching Jackal be healed, then dealing with the loot.

“It’s not full yet?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s going to be a few days before it is. I don’t feel like spending hours focusing on speeding it up.” He indicated the slate on his lap. “You might find this

boring, but it's nothing compared to staring at an amulet and pulling essence out of the air into it. *That's boring.*" She frowned. "But you know that, right?"

Tibs nodded. He remembered the hours holding his first amulet, eyes fixed on it. Pushing water essence from around him into it as hard as he could and only a trickle making it in. He didn't miss doing it that way.

"How do you draw essence out of it?" he asked.

"I just do," she answered.

Tibs shook his head. "We don't just do something with essence. We have to know what we're doing. We learned the," he searched for a word, "shape of our essence?" he shrugged, but she nodded her understanding of his meaning. "It's the same with interacting with the amulet. We are doing something when drawing from it, it doesn't just happen."

"I hadn't thought about it, but I guess you had to."

"I keep draining my reserve." He made a puddle of water in his hand. "That's about all my reserve. If I spill it, I feel it. I make it a little larger and I'd find out what happens if someone drains their reserve entirely."

"I've read that you can sever your link to your essence doing that," she said, biting her lower lip.

"I didn't know that." He was happy he never tried it. "But because of it, I learned to quickly pull from my amulet into my reserve. I don't really think about it anymore." He absorbed the water.

She looked at the hand he kept extended before him. She was smart, she'd figured it out. Not that Tibs minded explaining things, but Carina enjoyed thinking.

"So, when you make the puddle, you refilled your reserve."

Tibs nodded.

"Then where did the water you just absorb go?"

"Back in my reserve," He said.

Her frowning deepened. "But it was full, right?"

He nodded again.

"Did you figure out a way to overfill your reserve?"

"Alistair said it's dangerous."

"But you've done it before, when you fought Bardik."

Tibs had told her and Jackal the details of the fight. Mez and Khumdar hadn't been present, and neither had expressed curiosity about it when they'd returned.

"That wasn't by choice, and it's my core essence, it was able to overflow through my body. I don't think I can do that with the other essences. So no, I can't overfill it."

She nodded slowly. "Then, how can you reabsorb the water?"

"By first emptying my reserve."

She looked at the bed, around him.

"I don't think trickery would be useful here," Tibs said, chuckling. "I'm not trying to show I'm better than you. I'm trying to teach you something."

"Then I don't understand how you did it. The only way to lower your reserve to make

the space for the essence you absorbed is to take out essence, but if you didn't make water elsewhere, there's nowhere for it to go." She trailed off, and Tibs waited. She was realizing she'd made a mistake in what she said, but she wasn't sure what it was.

She took her amulet and looked at it. "You draw from the amulet into your reserve, whereas I pull directly from it into whatever I want to do."

"I used to do that. I'd pull the water over my body to my hand for whatever I needed to do with it."

"Used to," she mused. "But now you pull directly to your reserve."

"It feels faster. Like I said, I barely have to think about it anymore."

"So the question is, why would it only work in one direction?"

Tibs smiled.

"And it refills faster that way?"

He nodded. "Almost as fast as I can refill my own reserve."

She nodded. "It takes me a few minutes if I'm drained, and the amulet has a larger reservoir, but even if it's ten times larger, I'd still fill it under an hour, instead of the hours of intense concentration it takes me right now." She looked at him. "How do you do it?"

"I treat the amulet as just another part of my reserve. I realized that when I had to draw quickly from it to ice the floor the first time we took down the first-floor boss. My teacher was amused he'd never noticed that when I explained it to him."

She nodded slowly. "Right. It is a reserve, and because it's air essence, it's like my reserve, so..." she trailed off into an extended silence. When she let the amulet drop to her neck, she looked disappointed. "I'm going to have to work on that some more before I can do it, I think. So let's get you back to your letters."

Tibs stifled an inward groan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs walked onto the fighter's training field, where two dozen of boys and girls fought with swords. Most were dressed in shabby clothes that marked them as Street, or close to it, while a handful had clothing that looked more like fighting uniforms. Staying tight to their bodies to avoid impeding their motion. He was surprised to recognize one girl in shabby clothing, other than the pants, which looked new. He didn't know her, but she was part of the group his team had run into when they'd exited Sto's second floor that first time. Or was it the second? Those pants were probably from the trap-room's cache.

"Can I help you?" a muscular woman said, with metal gray eyes. She didn't have a sword at her hip, but the belt had wear where the scabbard would be attached.

"I want to learn how to use a sword. A short one would probably be best, I think."

She looked him over. He'd worn his armor since he figured training would involve getting hit. Jackal had come back from his training with bruises before he'd learned to use earth to harden his skin.

"You're Light Fingers, aren't you?"

Tibs ground his teeth. "It's Tibs."

She nodded. "You're a rogue. If you want to learn something, go to that field."

"All they teach there is the knife. I want more reach, but I don't think I'm strong

enough for that longer sword.” He indicated the one a better-dressed woman was using.

“You should have thought about that before,” she said dismissively. “You’re a rogue. Rogues use knives. If you wanted a sword, you should have joined the fighters.”

“Not every rogue uses a knife. Just like not every fighter uses a sword. My team leader doesn’t use any weapons.”

She shrugged. “What did do when I’m done teaching them is their business. You’re not Omega anymore, so get yourself a teacher if you want to learn the sword. The guild had plenty of sword wielders who could use something to occupy their time.” She walked away to deal with one of the fighters. Tibs watched as she adjusted his footing.

Could he learn on his own? He wasn’t asking a quick fighter to teach him, they’d just add gold to what he’d have to repay for all the teaching he already had no choice in taking once he reached Epsilon.

He could grab one now. Everyone was distracted and they wouldn’t notice one less sword from the pile of them. But then what? He knew from Bardik’s and Tandy’s teaching with the knife that it wasn’t as simple as swinging it around. There were proper stances, a right way of moving.

What he needed was someone he knew, a friend, willing to teach him. Maybe Jackal remembered enough of his early days when he had to fight with a sword to teach him? Or, Tibs realized, he could ask someone who still used a sword. She wasn’t exactly a friend, but their teams were friendly enough to train as a group together.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Okay,” Pyan said, hand on Tibs’s head, with him, arm extended, knife in hand not even reaching her stomach. “I get your point.” She chuckled. “But aren’t you rogue all about sneaking and catching me unaware? Carrying a sword at your hip is going to get in the way of that.”

Tibs stepped back and sheathed the knife. At least Pyan hadn’t dismissed him outright when he’d asked her to teach him sword fighting, even if she hadn’t understood why he wanted to before the demonstration. And she still didn’t, it seemed.

“In a town, I can sneak around and surprise you, but the dungeon isn’t giving me a lot of that. Except for two rooms, the creatures are waiting for us. It’s hard to sneak when they’re looking at you the whole time. I can throw my knives, but I’m not very good at it.”

“You’ll get better the more you practice.”

“But I have to survive for that to happen.”

She nodded. “I don’t know if you’re strong enough to wield a sword, Tibs. It’s not—”

Tibs quickly grabbed the sword out of the scabbard at her hip, using earth essence to strengthen his arm as he raised it to her chest. He opened his mouth to brag, but pain lanced through his arm, making him drop the sword as it cramped, and he cursed, cradling it.

“Tibs?” She hesitated.

“I’m okay,” he said between breaths. So long as he didn’t jostle it, the pain was tolerable. “It’s that damned corruption.” It would pass, in time. The question was, would it take minutes or hours?

“From when you saved the dungeon,” she said, a bit of awe in her voice, and he glared

at her. He endured it from strangers, people who weren't Runners, but she'd have done the same thing if she'd been the one Sto had called. He was not different from any of them. He was just another Runner.

"I thought the clerics had healed you," she said.

"They couldn't clear the corruption, they figure there was just too much of it in my body." They weren't wrong. There had been so much it had seeped into his essence, tainting it. "A lot of it cleared out over time, but what's left doesn't seem to want to go away and every so often." He indicated his arm. "That happens."

She picked up her sword and studied the edge.

"Sorry, I wasn't planning on dropping it."

"It's okay." She ran a finger along the edge and Tibs felt her use essence. "But if your arm seizes up like this, I'm not sure trying to learn sword fighting is going to help you." She sheathed it. "Does it happen when you strain?"

"Not always. Sometimes it just happens."

"And the clerics can't do anything for it?"

Tibs shook his head.

"I'm surprised, they're purity, you'd think they could remove corruption out of someone."

They couldn't even tell he had corruption in him anymore. How were they going to remove it? He didn't like it, but she might be right. What was the point of learning the sword if all he'd end up doing was dropping it? Or falling when his leg cramped.

"Hey Py," Geoff greeted the fighter before kissing her cheek. "Hey Tibs, what's taking you to our little training ground." The archer indicated the little field they stood in. They were at the edge of the town, between houses and the spikes marking the perimeter limiting where they could go. On one side, a new house was under construction.

"Tibs wants me to teach him sword fighting," Pyan said, "but he isn't fully healed from his battle, so I'm not sure it's the right time."

Geoff watched Tibs's cradled arm. "She right, you need to make sure you're healthy before you can properly learn a new skill. It's going to take a lot out of you."

Tibs nodded. "I just want to be more useful to my team in the dungeon."

"Says the person who took on an adventurer by himself," Geoff replied, "and won." He looked at Tibs seriously. "Tibs, I don't think anyone of us would even have dared try it, let alone manage to win. Don't undervalue yourself."

"You'd have done it," Tibs said. "The dungeon is our life. If you'd known what was happening, you would have done everything you could to protect it."

Pyan and Geoff exchanged a look. "I'd like to think you're right, Tibs," she said. "But you're the one who did it. Geoff's right, you showed how valuable you are when you did that, even if we ignore all the ways you've been helpful to your team before that. You were the first ones to open the first-floor boss room."

"But I probably wasn't the first one to notice it. I just happened to have water as my element, which let me pick the lock without tools. Of someone else—"

"Tibs, the facts someone else could have done it doesn't make what you did less

valuable,” Geoff said. “I did a run with you, remember? I know you’re smart, capable, and eager to help. That makes you a great teammate. Once you’re fully healed, you’ll be even greater, but now, that’s what you should focus on. Take it easy, rest, let that resolve itself, then see about learning skills that will make you an even greater rogue.”

Tibs nodded. The pain his in arm lessened, but he knew better than to try to move his arm. It would loosen on its own. Forcing it would just make this take longer.

“Now,” Pyan said, with the tone of voice Jackal used when he was about to hint at something he and Krosel were going to do, “if you don’t mind; me and my man have some things to take care of.”

Geoff grinned and winked at Tibs. Yep, they were off to do them things. He waved at them before leaving them. He hoped they weren’t planning on doing that there. Even Jackal wasn’t such an idiot as to do stuff like that where others could see.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jackal sat on his bed when Tibs entered their room. His shoulders were slumped, his head down. He was looking at his hands like he didn’t know whose they were. Carina and Khumdar were there too, standing away and watching the fighter warily.

“What happened?” Tibs demanded. Mez wasn’t there, but as far as he knew, he was with his special girl, being looked after. Tibs’s healing had left him with a mild fever.

“I’m Lambda,” Jackal said, sounding like that was the worse thing to happen to him.

“How?” Carina asked.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Khumdar said.

“Something about having to hold myself together when I was stone pushed my essence throughout my body, which is what’s needed to graduate from Rho to Lambda.”

“Were you even Rho?” Carina asked.

Jackal shook his head. “They were testing me to see if I’d graduated to Rho, that was easy, Tibs showed us how to stop thinking of our essence as the element, I did it so easily they figured they’d see where I stand on the next test and I passed that too.”

“What was the test?” Tibs asked.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s an element thing. You won’t get the same one.”

“I still do not understand why you are acting as if you had learned your father was ill,” Khumdar said

Jackal snorted. “Trust me, this isn’t the face I’m going to make if someone tells me my dad’s sick.” He rubbed his face. “The problem is that I’m too strong for this level of dungeon. The dungeon is upsilon. The guild only allows one teammate to be Rho, and I’m Lambda.”

“They can’t kick you off our team,” Tibs stated, tone hard. He wouldn’t let them do that.

“They considered it,” Jackal replied. “From what my teacher said, there was serious talk about sending me to a different dungeon, one with a floor for Lambda adventurers.”

“But you’re not an adventurer, you’re a Runner,” Tibs said.

Jackal nodded. “Got that right, but Hard Knuckles, of all people, convinced them I needed to stay here.”

“Would he not want you away from his town?” Khumdar asked. “He has made it clear he does not like you. This would have been a perfect opportunity.”

“Yeah,” Jackal said bitterly. “Which makes me wonder what that guy’s planning.”

Tibs had a vague memory of his time while being sick with corruption. He wasn’t sure if the guard leader had been there or if he’d dreamed it, or exactly what he’d said, but Tibs had been left with the sense the animosity Harry felt toward Jackal wasn’t as strong as he acted as it was, and that it had something to do with Tibs being there.

“Okay, so you’re staying. That’s good, right?” Tibs asked.

“Yeah,” Jackal said bitterly. “You’re even still the team that’s stuck with me.”

“Alright,” Carina, “that explains the long face. We all know you can’t stand us.”

Jackal smiled, but it faltered. “The problem is that rule about only one Rho in a team. How close are any of you to being Rho?”

They looked at each other. Tibs knew what his test was, and he knew he could pass it now.

“I am afraid I am not familiar with that rule,” Khumdar said, “nor do I expect the guild to be able to rate my level, as they do not normally train clerics.”

“When the dungeon graduated,” Carina said, “Harry explained to the nobles that the reason the guild didn’t allow them to have Lambda or above on their team was that the dungeon is too low to allow it and that because of that, they also only allowed one Rho level member on any team.”

“Can they enforce that?” Khumdar asked, and raised his hand as Tibs and the others glared at him. “I do not ask if they are allowed. I mean, how long until so many Runners are Rho that it is no longer possible to have five people teams with more than one person who is of that level?”

“He’s right,” Tibs said. “So long as we wait until it’s like that to reveal we can graduate, they won’t be able to break up the team.”

“Are we going to have control over it, though?” Carina asked. “My instructor wants me to be tested each time I come back from a run. The only reason I wasn’t tested this time is that he didn’t realize we were going first. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to fail the test without him realizing I’m doing it on purpose.”

“Would Tibs not be able to talk with the guild leader and convince her to not disband our team, even if there is more than one member who is Rho?” Khumdar asked.

Jackal and Carina looked at Tibs.

He sighed. “Isn’t that going to be like us going before everyone else? If we’re the only ones who aren’t broken up, people aren’t going to be happy.”

“Can anyone tell what rank we are?” Carina asked. “You might not be able to hide it, once the story of how you survived spreads.”

Jackal snorted. “It’s already spreading. Clerics are gossips, it turns out.”

“Still, for the rest of us. Unless we do anything in public that draws attention to how strong we’ve gotten, who will know?”

“You mean like a certain someone running roofs and leaping further than should be possible?” Jackal asked, looking at Tibs.



“What? I can’t do that.”

“You mean you aren’t running around testing how to use the other essences you have?” the fighter asked, smiling.

“I have, but I don’t have enough air essence to manage it.”

“Are you saying there’s another one out there running the roofs?”

Tibs shrugged. “You’re the one who said it. But I doubt I’m the only rogue who runs the roofs anymore. Not that I’ve done it since coming back. With the corruption in me, it’s too risky. If my leg cramps when I’m landing, I’m going to fall along the slope of a roof and break my neck when I hit the ground.”

“Then it’s definitely someone else,” Jackal said. “The stories I’ve heard has it happening over the last week.”

“I’ve been here every night,” Tibs pointed out, then sighed. “I hope it’s going to go away because if there hadn’t been water in the pool when my arm cramped in the dungeon, that would have killed me. I was nearly killed when my leg buckled under me in a fight already.” Maybe he should remove himself from the team so they wouldn’t suffer from his problem. With the guild breaking teams who had more than one member at Rho, that would be a way to do it without having to die.

Tibs’s head snapped up. “What did you say?” he’d been so lost in his head he’d barely heard Jackal, but there had been ‘ask’ and ‘corruption’ he was sure, even if he couldn’t see how that was possible.

“I said that considering you can do the audience thing with other elements, maybe you should just jump in the corruption pool and go ask it to remove it.”

Tibs stared at Jackal. “That has to be the stupidest…” he trailed off. Yeah, it was stupid.

But...

## Stepping up-11

“I’m going to the lake,” Tibs told the guard as he approached the town’s perimeter. The guards were watching it more intently since they had forced recruits again.

“You can’t—oh, it’s you,” she said, her lantern light shining on him. She studied him. “It’s fine.” She didn’t sound happy about it and turned to continue her patrol.

Tibs walked through the field in the dark, Claria the only moon visible through the cloud cover, and emptying. In a few weeks it would be Torus’s twin, before starting her voyage toward becoming herself again. He’d heard bards’ stories of the two lovers, cursed with being apart, Claria always trailing Torus, slowing turning into a copy of him, before the curse forces her back. He’d thought it a silly story, but now he knew about Sto. He’d seen the way Jackal looked at Kroseph, Pyan and Geoff, and others. He could believe stories of magic now, of transforming beings. Of people being so in love, they’d do stupid things for one another.

Tibs used the sense of the essence to guide him until his foot stepped into the water.

Jackal had suggested Tibs talk to corruption. It had been a Jackal thing, the same way wanting to fight in the arena had been. Or saying the wrong thing when talking to Kroseph. It was well-intentioned, wrong, but had something smart mixed in.

There was no way Tibs was stepping close to the corruption pool, corruption was bad. Everyone knew that. And based on Don, he could just imagine how the element would be. He wanted nothing to do with it.

But he could talk with Water. She would understand his plight. Water was about comfort, understanding, support, helping people get better. She'd help him.

So long as he could get an audience with her.

He stepped into the water, letting out his breath slowly. The water was icy. Much colder than he expected. His clothing didn't offer protection as it seeped through and around them. He'd worn an older set, along with only a knife, a normal one. One he didn't mind losing. He didn't expect this audience to cost him his equipment, but the one with Fire, which had left him burnt so bad only draining a golem's life essence had kept him from dying and had destroyed everything he'd worn, had taught him to be cautious.

Water could destroy. Not as quickly or as eagerly as fire, but Tibs had realized that no element was benign. Air could shred skin, earth to pound bones into dust, fire liked to consume everything and water could cut as well as a knife. It was what his graduating test showed him.

He gasped as the water reached his waist. It was freezing. He chuckled as he waited to adjust. Maybe this would calm Jackal's ardor for Kroseph. Wasn't there a story about cold water calming lustful beasts? Tibs could understand how it had come about now. Even if he was interested in doing that with someone right now, with that part of him freezing, he wouldn't be thinking about it.

He stepped further into the lake, figuring he'd stop once the water was at his elbows and ready himself. As he considered how he'd do that, the ground vanished from beneath his feet and the water was over his head.

He panicked, fought to regain the surface. Only once he was breathing again did he remember he wanted to be submerged and stopped fighting. He hadn't expected the bottom of the lake to drop off that suddenly. It had looked like a smooth angle as far as he'd been able to see when he'd come in the daytime.

Then he was surprised his body didn't immediately sink. Once he was still, his feet started moving up, tilting him, and he had to pedal and wave his hands about to keep them pointed down.

He was curious why that was, but he didn't have the time to investigate. He released his water essence, spread it around him, grabbed more of it in the lake, and used it to pull himself down until his feet touched the bottom again.

The silence was different under the water. He hadn't noticed that when in the water pool in the dungeon, with Sto laughing and mocking him. It was heavier, pressing down on him, instead of being fleeting. This silence had a solidity to it that was comforting. This, he decided, was the feeling of being utterly alone with yourself, but being at peace with it. The solitude of self-reflection.

Then his lungs began burning.

He had to open his mouth, take in the water. Ganny had said that intense emotions were needed to have an audience, and Tibs figured being about to die was as intense as it got. Surprisingly, knowing it wouldn't actually kill him didn't make breathing water any easier.

Or maybe it was because he wasn't entirely certain this would work. Alistair had warned him he could only have one audience. Getting audiences with other elements had been a way around it, technically—Tibs groaned at his own use of the word—but they had still been first audiences.

Now he was attempting to have a second one with an element. If it didn't work, like Alistair warned, he would die, and Tibs didn't want to die, not now that he had a family, a town.

He still had to do this, and he believed he wouldn't die. Alistair's certainty about what he knew no longer had the same effect on Tibs, now that he'd done so many things his teacher had said couldn't be done. He had more than one element, for one thing.

He forced his mouth open, then sucked in water.

He coughed, trashed, stopped himself as he was about to propel to the surface. Fear clamored he needed to go up, to reach air, otherwise he—

Tibs frowned, took a breath, felt his lungs inflate. His body no longer acted like he was drowning. He looked around. The water was still dark. He was still in the lake, so why was he no longer drowning. It had happened once he'd been in Water's presence the last time. Once he'd found himself wherever Water existed.

He felt his reserves and groaned, sensing that air was lower than it should be. In his panic, he'd found a way to breathe underwater. There was air essence around him, and he was calling to it to fill his lungs.

He huffed in annoyance, bubbles rising before him, and clamped down on his reserves. Why was it so hard not to use them when he'd had so much difficulty learning to access his first one? It was like air knew what he was trying to do and was being difficult. Which, having met Air, he wouldn't put past them.

But this wasn't the element, it was essence, his essence, and he could control what it did. That had been Alistair's first lesson. His essence wasn't the same as that which was outside it, and with enough will, he could make the essence around him his too.

Now he had to use that will to ensure he didn't use any of it. He didn't want to find out how he'd use earth to keep from drowning, or fire.

Could he start a fire under the lake? How much essence would that require? There wasn't much fire essence here, but it was there.

He was distracting himself, he realized, as he took a breath of water and air filled his lungs.

He cursed loudly, hearing only the sound of air bubbles escaping his mouth. That wasn't as satisfying.

He retook control of his essence and locked each of his reserves, hardened what he thought of as the walls around them. He made them thick enough that he barely felt his reserves through them, and when he breathed in water again, this time only water filled his

lungs and his body reacted to the wrongness.

He focused on keeping himself from accessing his reserves. He couldn't breathe for this to work. He had to let himself drown.

Fuck! He was drowning.

He opened his eyes, looked for a sign of where the surface was. Remembered he had essence, nearly used it. No! He couldn't. He had to. He was going to die! He tried to kick off the lake's floor but found only water under his feet. He'd drifted while he was distracted. He swam for the surface as hard and as fast as he could. His lungs hurt. He needed air, and he was being an idiot for not using his essence to get some. Even Jackal wasn't that much of an idiot, and the man had gone up against better fighters without using his essence just for the fun of it.

His hand dug into mud, and before he understood it, his face was in it too. He took a breath, a part of his mind screaming that anything that wasn't water that to be better, and he now had earth in his lungs.

He should panic, but he was out of strength. He hated himself for making such a stupid mistake. Alistair had told him he couldn't have a second audience. Tibs had known better. His teacher knew everything. He should have listened. Now he was going to—

He eagerly sucked in water, felt so much relief at no longer feeling the burn in his lungs that he missed how bright the water was, how clear.

"Welcome back, child of humans," a soothing voice said, and immediately Tibs calmed. "It has been a long time since one of you came a second time." The suggestion of a form moved before him. Hints of a woman, nurturing, reassuring.

Tibs smiled. "Hello." She smiled back, and he felt better. She would help him. "I need your help."

She floated before him, considering him. "I see you have talked with Earth, Fire, and Air." She frowned. "There is something in you." She approached.

"That's what I need your help with. I was soaked in corruption, and I can't get rid of it all. I need you to remove it."

She touched his chest with a finger and the coolness soothed him. "I cannot. Such is not mine."

"But, I need it out of me. It keeps getting in the way, it's going to get me killed, eventually. How am I going to do what you want me to do if that happens?"

She tilted her head. "I? I have no want for you to accomplish."

"But you said, that it had been a long time since someone had tried to get this element, that you hoped I'd do a better job of it."

"It has. But my hope that you will be better than they were does not mean I have wants for you to accomplish." She tapped the spot on his chest where he felt his reserve to be. "This is for you to decide how to use. It is for your wants and needs. It will burn as hot as you want, be as solid as you need, as flighty as it can, and as comforting as you desire. All those of wants for you to decide on."

"What if I do it wrong?"

"Then you do so." There was no judgment in her voice. "What you have is powerful,

and your kind is not always good at holding power. You will not be alone if you also do so.”

Tibs remembered why he’d wanted it, and he was there again, a child listening to his mother crying as men who should protect her used her in the way nobles who came to his street used people, and left only husks or corpses.

And he was back in the water. “Am I wrong to want revenge?”

“You are human,” was her answer.

He nodded when she didn’t add anything else. Maybe the element didn’t see right and wrong the way people did. Alistair had said they weren’t like him. The elements were different, not human.

“What can I do to remove the corruption? The clerics removed a lot of it, and more left in time, but this seems to want to stay.”

“Talk with Corruption.”

“I can’t.”

“You must.”

“But it’s wrong.”

She considered him. “It is what you must do if you want to continue on the path of your choosing.”

His choosing? “You mean my element? I thought all I had to do was get an audience with you, Air, Fire, and Earth. I did unlock it when I did that.”

“Oh, child of human, that was but the first step on the path you chose. If you want more, you need to speak with Purity, Light, Darkness, and Corruption. You need their part of this.” She tapped his chest again.

“What will happen once I’ve done that?”

She smiled. “You will discover it when it is done.”

“And is that going to be the end of it?”

She looked at him; her smile turning sad, but said nothing.

No, it wouldn’t. Or course it wouldn’t be it. She’d told him he was embarking on a hard path, and he’d thought nearly dying had been as hard as it would get. Now that she’d set him on the next step, he had a sense of what the others would be.

How much power would he gain when he’d gotten these audiences? What would he gain afterward? When would he have too much of it?

“Can I stop?” he asked. “If I have enough, can I decide not to go any further?”

“It is your path, child of human. You get to decide how far you go on it.”

The confirmation made him feel better.

“I guess I should go,” he said reluctantly. He’d be back in the lake, drowning. The mud had to be because he’d swam down instead of up. But had his body moved while he was here? Had his body left the lake?

He hadn’t asked Alistair what had happened in the cavern, once his teacher let go of him and Tibs found himself in Water’s realm. Jackal had started above the ground and ended up under it. But was that because his teacher had buried him, or he’d moved there as part of his audience with Earth?

“I suppose you must,” Water replied. “Do keep your wits about you, child of human. You will need them.” She placed a hand on his chest and pushed him away.

He was in darkness again. His lungs hurt. He didn’t know where the surface was. He trashed and nearly opened his mouth, but her warning came to him. He had to think, stay calm. If he swam blindly, he could hit the bottom again. He extended his senses and felt earth to his left, close enough he could touch it. This meant the surface was to his right. He turned and kicked off. Swam hard, telling his lungs that any moments now they would get air, but that didn’t diminish the burning or kept his arms and legs from getting heavier.

He broke the surface and took a deep breath, then coughed and hacked out water. In the distance he saw the town’s lights and swam towards them, soon finding mud under him, and walked the rest of the way, lying down and looking at the sky.

Torus was the one visible through the clouds now. Its perpetual crescent pointing to where the sun would rise. It had been something odd, the first time he’d watched the sunrise from one of the roofs. Back on his street, Torus didn’t point to the sunrise; he pointed a little off from it. The sun coming from the left horn, instead of between them, like it did here.

Tibs didn’t know what it meant. It was one of the world’s mysteries leaving his street had revealed, such as the seasons being different. Or how it could be late evening when he left Kragle Rock, but midday when he arrived in MountainSea, or early morning in another city, or also evening in yet another one. It was like each city had its own rules for how time passed.

He stood and shivered at the wind cut through his wet clothes. He reached for the water essence coating him and pushed it off him, only to find his mental fingers slipping through it without effect. As panic set in, he felt from his reserves and sighed in relief on finding each of them. What he’d done hadn’t cost him what he had, at least.

He reached for his water essence and found it resisted moving out of his reserve. He fought the panic and felt for it and around it. The walls were thick. Very thick. He’d visualized that so he would think of something other than drawing on his essence to keep from drowning, but he hadn’t expected it to affect the way his reserve behaved. After all, this was just a mental representation of it. How he saw it, not how it was.

Wasn’t it?

It was how Alistair had explained it to him. Essence wasn’t what he envisioned it to be, that was just how his mind dealt with it. The way he could deal with the abstraction of essence being and not being at the same time.

He concentrated on thinning the walls, then drew water essence from his reserve, wrapped it around himself, mixed it with the water soaking his clothing, then pulled it away and off him, creating a ball of it floating in the air before him, the town’s light shimmering through the water.

He pulled enough of the essence back to refill his reserve and studied the ball. The essence hung there, mixed in with the more abundant air essence. Even though he could sense the weight of the ball of water, that was enough to hold it there, floating. Like a lot of things relating to essence, that made no sense.

Heavy things fell. Air could support some weight, but as wind, and the heavier something was, the more wind it needed. There was wind, but not enough, and it was sideways to how the ball floated. It needed to be underneath to keep it from falling.

Tibs moved the water over the lake, and he didn't touch his air essence to do it. If he'd needed to, then Alistair wouldn't be able to make water float in the air, like he'd demonstrated as part of Tibs's training.

He turned it to ice, and it remained floating. That seemed more wrong, somehow, as if a stone could float on the air.

Which, now that he thought about it, he should be able to make happen. It was the same principle, just a different essence. He found a stone, picked it up and wrapped it in earth essence, let it flow through it, then willed it to rise.

It didn't.

He focused harder, and still the stone refused to move. With an annoyed sigh, he pulled the essence out of it and moved it around freely. This made no more sense than anything else involving essence, but that was how essence was.

He pulled the essence back into his reserve, and as with water and air, was left with an excess. Not as much as with either, but it could be because the stone was smaller. There had been less of it.

Was it even less in the stone now that he had some outside of it? It felt as heavy on his hand. He might not be able to tell the difference with the little essence he'd taken out of it. How long did he have to mingle his essence in for all of the stone to be composed of his essence? Would he be able to make it float, then? When he pulled it out, would there be a stone left?

He dropped it, and let the ball of ice fall in the lake. He hated not being able to ask someone. He had so many questions, but he couldn't get the answers because to ask Alistair would reveal everything he could do, and as much as he wanted to believe his teacher would do all he could to help him, the man worked for the guild, had kept working for them even after discovering how crooked it was.

He couldn't trust him with this secret.

So Tibs had to figure things out on his own. He rubbed his temple. Like he didn't already have enough headache-inducing things to deal with already.

He headed for the town. He might as well go to bed. Roof walking wasn't something he could indulge in until all the corruption was out of his essence. He'd been lucky the first time it had cramped his leg, he'd only been three floors up. He'd fallen from much higher, but it had served as a reminder that it could happen when he was climbing a taller building.

He missed roof walking.

"Hey, you!" a guard called, lantern light shining in Tibs's direction. "What are you doing out of—" the man stopped close enough Tibs had to put a hand up to block the light. "Oh, it's you, Light Fingers. Sorry, I thought you were one of the convicts."

"It's Tibs," he replied, too tired to put his usual annoyance in it. How was it his nickname survived Bardik's removal when none of the others had even been used by anyone *but* Bardik?

“Of course, again, I’m sorry, but the way you’re dressed, you also look like one of them.” He lowered the lantern.

Tibs nodded and started walking again. He missed the adventurers who’d guarded them. They’d had little respect for any of the Runners, but at least they disrespected all of them equally.

No, what he didn’t like was that he was being treated differently.

Only when it didn’t serve his purpose, a voice at the back of his mind whispered.

He hated that the voice sounded like Bardik.

## Stepping up-12

(add finger cramps while working with the puzzle)

Tibs looked up from his plate as Mez dropped in his chair. The archer was dressed in red and gray clothes that accentuated his sickly complexion.

“Someone should have stayed in bed this morning,” Jackal said.

Mez grumbled something unflattering in return.

“I meant Tibs.”

Tibs looked at the grinning fighter. “What?”

Jackal pointed to the plate before Tibs. “You haven’t eaten anything, which means you’re courting one of Kro’s brother’s anger, so you haven’t slept long enough.”

Tibs looked at the plate, with the scrambled eggs, the ham, sausages, roasted vegetables. He picked at it. Contemplating what Water told him to do was killing his appetite.

“Are you feeling better?” Carina asked Mez.

“The fever broke last night.” Mez forced a smile. “Which is how I am out of bed.”

“I’m sorry,” Tibs whispered.

“You’re not responsible,” Mez replied. “I mean, you warned me. And we wouldn’t have been able to finish the run if you hadn’t healed me. It was a worthwhile trade-off.” He thanked the server who brought his plate and tankard. Breakfast was too busy a time for Kroseph to be able to always be the one who served them. “Why aren’t you eating? You’re usually the one with the biggest appetite.”

Tibs shrugged. He wasn’t sure how to tell them, or if he should. How would they react to him having corruption as an element? Jackal hadn’t been thinking when he’d suggested. With the others watching him, Tibs forced himself to eat.

“I’m fine, I didn’t sleep well, that’s all.”

Khumdar looked at him in that way Tibs had learned meant he knew Tibs was holding something back. Having someone who could tell he was keeping secrets was almost as annoying as someone who could outright tell he was lying. At least the cleric kept his word and didn’t pry. With the town still growing, Tibs expected Khumdar would never run out of other people’s secrets, so his were safe.



Not that this would remain a secret. Once Tibs had the essence, he'd have to tell them and deal with the consequences. He just didn't want to see their disapproval beforehand, or worse, have Jackal offer to help.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sounds and commotion pulled Tibs out of the room. Looking out the window, all he'd been able to make out was a mass of people heading to the east side of the town. He'd been there, practicing his letters to avoid thinking of what he had to do.

He pushed through the people, eliciting curses, until he was at the front and could see the wagons approaching. People rejoiced, and Tibs looked around. A lot of the merchants were there, some arguing with the guards who were holding the town limit. They weren't letting anyone through to ensure none of the Runners here by force could escape.

Tibs didn't understand the excitement. What could be on those wagons that engendered these reactions? He tried to think of something that would excite him like the others. At one time, unguarded food would. Now, it would be a high window with a challenging wall. A lock he hadn't picked before. Unguarded coins would make him wary, not excited.

What could merchants want this badly?

A woman on horseback reached the town limit first and spoke with one of the guards. Tibs was surprised not to see Harry here. This seemed major enough he'd supervise. Instead, it was one of the men who answered to the guard leader directly. He and the woman conversed, then pointed to an area, and he ordered guards, who vanished and returned a few minutes later and began adding spike in the ground, delineating an expansion to what was considered the town.

Unable to figure out why, and the wagons still being too far to investigate, Tibs turned back. With everyone here, he could use the time to deal with something else.

\* \* \* \* \*

He knocked on the door and looked around warily. The last time he'd been here, his annoyance at the special treatment he and his team had received had propelled him. Now, and with the corridors nearly deserted, he was unsure if he should be here.

"Enter," Tirania called, and Tibs opened the door.

She smiled at him. "Mister Light Fingers, this is a surprise. I'd expected you to be watching the caravan, planning how you'd liberate them of their valuables."

"No," he stated, his mood darkening, "not you." She raised an eyebrow. "My name's Tibs. I don't know why everyone's calling me that."

Her smile broadened. "You're somewhat famous, Tibs. And you do have a renown for picking locks and pockets."

He narrowed his eyes. "I've never been caught." Denying he did it wouldn't do any good. Tirania was a rogue, like him. She knew what they got up to.

"Ah, but not getting caught doesn't mean people don't know you're doing it."

"Shouldn't Harry be asking me then?"

She chuckled. "If Harry questioned every rogue about pocking pockets, there would be no one left to run the dungeon. How can I help you?"

Tibs bit his lower lip, unsure how to proceed now that his reason for being here was addressed directly. “Jackal’s Lambda.”

She didn’t react to that statement, and Tibs realized she might not know who Jackal was.

“He’s my team’s leader.”

She still didn’t react, and Tibs hesitated again.

“Tibs, you need to say what brought you here,” she said, slightly irritated. “I have things to do while no one’s around to bother me.”

He nodded. Of course, the guild leader had to have a lot of work to do. “Harry said that a team can only have one Lambda member, but the dungeon’s been pushing us hard. We’re going to have more than one soon.” He looked at her expectantly.

“Then you’ll have to replace one of them with someone who is still Rho or Upsilon.”

“But I don’t want to change my team, they’re my team.”

“That’s how things are done, Tibs. We can’t have a team so more powerful than the dungeon that it can’t gain anything out of it.”

Tibs wanted to tell her it didn’t matter, Sto still fed just by them going through it, and he’d adapt to their increased strength, but he couldn’t explain how he knew that. How he knew things no one else did. His ability to speak with the dungeon made things difficult at times.

“What if we don’t do runs until the dungeon graduates?” He asks.

She rubbed her temple. “That isn’t how things are done, Tibs.” She sighed and reached into a drawer, taking out the communication gem she’d shown him months ago.

“Alistair,” she said, looking at it, “I believe it’s time you return. Your student is in need of answers and I am not the place for him to get them.”

Tibs watched it, sensed the essences packed into it. They were so tight he had trouble making out even the essences he could identify: earth, air, water, and fire. They were there, along with many others, at least one of which would be mind, he realized.

“I wouldn’t think about taking it,” she said, smiling.

Tibs shook his head. “I’m not,” he lied, “I was trying to work out how it works.” He sensed the weave of essence through the room. He couldn’t tell what most did, but some had the feel of triggers, even if he couldn’t tell what the essence used was. There would have to be a lot of them since with so many rogues who had an element, it would be difficult to ensure any one element couldn’t be manipulated and undo the security.

She looked at the gem and hummed. “I think about who I was to talk with,” she said. “And they hear me.”

Tibs startled. She hadn’t moved her mouth, and other than her voice coming from all around him, it had sounded exactly like her. Just like when she’d used it with him and Alistair when they were training that first time.

“Why doesn’t everyone have one? Wouldn’t it make it easier to talk?”

She chuckled. “Why would I want to make it easier to talk? It’s already difficult enough to keep you lot from talking about the dungeon when you’re not supposed to. And you couldn’t afford this. Even the guild can barely afford it. Only the newest dungeons get

one because of how quickly things change. By the time it graduates to Zeta, I expect I'll have to contend with messages sent by courier again."

Tibs nodded. "Why is it so expensive?"

She rubbed her temple. "You can ask your teacher, Tibs. Now, is there anything else I can help you with? That no one else can," she added as Tibs opened his mouth.

He closed it. Asking why they didn't put one with the dungeon for it to be added to the loot rotation might not be a good idea, considering what he was thinking of doing.

"Thank you for answering my questions." Tibs left her office. He paused outside, sensing the essence on and around the door. The weave was tight and complex. He had no idea how he'd get through it. There were no windows, so that was out. And he hadn't been able to figure out the layout of the guild building. Anytime he came in and counted his steps, he ended up with different numbers.

At first, he thought it was because he miscounted, but now, he thought it was another security measure. Some of the weave throughout the building could alter its dimensions, or maybe make him think they changed. Knowing mind was an element increased the ways a rogue could be tricked.

He needed to get Sto something with mind as an essence, if only so he could try to convince him to make him something that would let Tibs find out the kind of security the building had.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs walked through the stalls, finally understanding part of what the excitement had been about. The extended area had been turned into a marketplace. The wagons were stations outside of it, and tents and wooden stalls had been built, and now all sorts of items were for sale. It didn't explain the merchant's excitement, since these competed with them. But Tibs enjoyed himself too much to let that bother him.

He paid a copper for a steaming drink that tasted spicy and sweet. Another copper got him a small loaf of bread that was almost as good as the ones he got from the baker in town, but this was filled with a savory meaty paste.

He made back the coppers from pockets. He didn't consider the caravan's merchants, their helpers, or guards, to be part of his town, so they were fair game, sticking to his rule of only taking a copper each time.

He nearly got in trouble once, when his fingers cramped as he was about to slip them into the pocket, but the crowd had been tight, and the jostling he'd been using as the distraction also kept his target from realizing what had pulled at the fabric when Tibs's fingers locked and they caught as he pulled his hand away.

He cursed. He'd forgotten about the corruption by then. It was like it did it on purpose, giving him days of peace, then acting up at the most inconvenient time.

"Darran?" Tibs asked, seeing the burly, fabric-wrapped form of the merchant haggling at a stall setting hardened leather. The man glanced at him, smiled, and went back to haggling. By the time he was done, neither merchants looked happy, but they'd agreed on something. Tibs couldn't decide what that had been.

"Tibs, what is my favorite customer doing walking among all these competing

ruffians?” Darran asked, smiling.

“What are you doing here?” Tibs replied, making his tone accusatory. “Don’t you have all the things you need?”

The man laughed. “Oh, Tibs, your youth is so refreshing. Of course, I don’t have everything I need. Where do you think I get what I sell?”

“From other cities.”

“So you are not so naïve,” Darran said, putting an arm over Tibs’s shoulder and guiding him through the stalls. “It always surprises me the number of people who think the things in my story just appear there conjured out of essence.”

Tibs shook his head. “I’ve watched the transport platform, some of the crates were delivered to your shop.”

Darran nodded. “And I do get some that way, but it’s expensive. A caravan like this is a much more affordable method of getting supplies.”

Tibs looked around at the stalls and caught, out of the corner of his eye, Darran’s hand pull out of a passing pocket with a coin that was pale enough to be silver or electrum. He sometimes forgot the merchant was also a thief.

“If they bring supplies for you and the other merchants, why are they selling things here? Isn’t all this for them?”

“This is a way they can make more money,” the merchant answered. “They know what we ordered, so they can take a chance on selling something no one else sells here. If it’s popular, they can make an arrangement with a shop and they have something new to supply, or maybe they’ll keep it for themselves and only sell it when they come back. Good coins can be made that way. Although this caravan is in an unusual situation.”

Darran used the coin, which turned out to be silver, to buy the two of them a tankard of watered ale, then led Tibs through more stalls until they reached one with boxes of candies displayed on the counter.

“This was ordered by Olander, who owned the Caravan Garden,” Darran said somberly.

“Why?” Tibs asks cautiously, not wanting to make light of what had happened to that shop. “It’s no longer here.” He looked at the offered candies and paused on a box with a handful of small misshapen lumps in layers of blues and greens. He read the words on the front, twice to be sure. He didn’t understand why a word with ‘e’ and ‘a’ in it sounded the same as one with ‘ee’. Carina could only explain it as being the result of so many languages coming together, but that wasn’t much of an explanation.

“How much for the Sea Drops?” he asked the woman behind the counter.

“A copper each,” she replied flatly.

Tibs raised an eyebrow. “I can get a full meal for a copper.”

“These are Sea Drops,” she replied, “not a meal. They’re made in only one city, by one—”

“By Chuck.”

She stared at him, mouth opened.

“In MountainSea,” he added, and she closed her mouth. “I’ve had some from him, and

what he sells is three times the size of these. So I'll give you a copper for six of them."

She snorted. "Do you have any idea how much I had to pay for them? And I was promised a copper for two, by the shop who ordered them. So I'm not taking less than that."

Tibs shrugged. "Okay." He turned to walk away. "Considering no one knows what they are, I'll come back when you're going to leave and see how many you have left then."

"Three for a copper," she said through gritted teeth, "thief."

Tibs smiled as he handed her four coppers. "It's rogue, actually. I'm a Runner." She rolled her eyes as she took the coppers, looked them over suspiciously, then handed him the candies. He counted them with the same level of scrutiny she'd looked over his coins. He offered Darran one once he confirmed the count was right.

"You could have gotten more," the man said before popping the candy in his mouth. "You were right when you implied she wouldn't be able to sell many. These are specialty items."

"Then I'll come back before they leave and take the rest. So why did she come if the Caravan Garden isn't here anymore?" he enjoyed the sweet and salty taste of the candy dissolving on his tongue.

"Because she didn't know."

"How couldn't she know? It's been months since the shop was destroyed."

"And that happened after they left the city."

Tibs frowned. "How far is the city?"

"The closest city is about four months of travel by caravan."

Tibs stifled the sigh, which earned him a chuckle from Darran. A month was five weeks, a week was nine days. So, two and zero weeks. He set the zero aside, nine twice was one and eight. "One, eight, and zero days."

Darran nodded. "A hundred and eighty."

Tibs sighed. "I wish everyone used the same way with numbers and letters."

"You and a lot of people," Darran said with a chuckle. "Unfortunately, not enough to make it happen."

"Why is the city so far?"

"Because dungeons have no common sense. If they did, they'd appear in the middle of a city, that way they'd have all the food they need."

"I wonder how they decide where they appear?" Tibs would have to ask Sto.

"Universities dedicate entire wings to that question."

"I still don't understand why supplies come this way. You said it cost less than with the platform, but now at least one of them is stuck with what they brought because the shop was destroyed while they traveled."

"And other shops closed in the time the dungeon healed and couldn't reopen. There's always a trade-off. You can get something now, without risk, but it's more expensive, so you have to sell them at a high price and risk not finding people to buy them. Or you go the slow route, have it at a lower cost, which makes it easier to sell them, but you run the risk of the caravan being attacked by bandits. It's why there are so many guards with it, but even that isn't always enough. There's always a trade-off." Darran smiled. "It's why thievery is so

popular.” He rubbed the gold coin he hadn’t been holding a second before.

Tibs reflexively put a hand over his coin pouch, even if he knew he had no gold in it. It only carried coppers because he knew how easy it was for a hand to slip in a pocket or coin pouch.

“There’s a risk with that too,” Tibs pointed out.

Darran smiled. “True, but nothing a good set of legs can’t help resolve.”

Tibs looked the man up and down and couldn’t imagine him running.

Darran grinned. “Don’t fall in the trap of letting appearances deceive you, Tibs. You should know better.” Tibs nodded, and now wondered how much of the merchant’s bulk was fabric.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs stared at the woman seated at his table, feet on the table, playing with something he couldn’t see from this angle. Her boots were mainly what he noticed. They were thick leather, scuffed and dented, but with bands of dark metal held to them with leather strips. A set of gloves on the table had the same arrangement, with the metal on top of the glove and fingers.

The table wasn’t his, or his team. Technically, no one could claim tables at the Inn, even if their leader was with a server, who was family with the owner. If a table was available, someone, like this woman, could sit at it, but Runners understood that with so much being out of their control, knowing your table would always be available was comforting.

She looked up, noticed him, looked back at what she held, then looked up again. “You Light Fingers?” she asked, dropping her boots to the floor. They landed with a thud that resonated with their weight. She wore the same thick leather armor over her chest and shoulders, with bands of the same metal strapped to it. Her bare arms were muscular and lightly tanned.

“It’s Tibs,” he answered with annoyance. Even strangers were calling him that. Her eyes were dark brown, and he sensed her essence, expecting a corresponding color, but was surprised at only sensing the wisp of someone without essence. All that metal had to be heavy.

She nodded and offered her hand. “I’m Cross.” She had black hair, straight and cut short.

Tibs looked at the hand, thick and callused. Her knuckles were scarred. “Okay.”

She leaned back in the chair and lobbed something at him. “Got something for you.”

He caught it, a wooden cylinder the diameter of his fist and twice as long. “Why do you think I’m who you’re looking for?” He turned it over in his hand.

“A few things. I’m told that Light Finger’s the youngest Runner around, and you look young. Also, he still has normal eyes, in spite of having an element.”

“How do you know I have an element?”

She shrugged. “But mainly because you were looking at me like I’d stolen your seat and that friendly server warned me this table was used by the team Light Finger is on.”

“Kroseph told you my name is Light Fingers?” Tibs asked, eyes narrowing.

She looked around and pointed at one. "Is that him?"

Tibs looked at the server. He was one of those who'd come back from MountainSea with them when Sto was done healing. He shook his head.

"Then it's not that Kroseph. What do you think?" she nodded to the cylinder.

It wasn't one piece of wood but made of wooden squares the size of the nail on his thumb. It flattened each side, sixteen of them, which were sixteen squares long. Each end was capped by an intricately carved piece of wood. The Row had a slight play, hinting at the possibility of motion. The rings also had play, so movement was possible in the direction too.

He pulled a chair and sat. If everything could move but wasn't, that meant he needed to first unlock it. The question was how. He tested for any of the squares that could be removed. They were all fixed to the cylinder.

He studied the caps. The carving had to be there to camouflage the mechanism. A strip the width of the squares slip enough to free the side of the cap, and Tibs tried to move the square. When it didn't, he rotated the ring. After a full rotation, none had moved up, but one of them had more play than the others.

He felt her eyes on him and looked up. She was watching him intently. He put the cylinder down as if it burned him. "What's in there?"

She shrugged. "Nothing as far as I know."

"Then why give it to me?"

"I heard you like puzzles."

"From who?" he asked. He couldn't imagine who would think that. He didn't have any and didn't spend time looking for them. The only time he'd opened one, he hadn't even planned on it.

Remembering the crowd that had amassed without him realizing, he wasn't surprised when she gave another shrug. "Just something I heard around town, how Light Finger's good with them." She smiled. "I enjoy them myself, so I thought I'd seek him out, well you out." She nodded to it. "You figure out the system?"

"Tumblers." She raised an eyebrow. "It's a lock. I uncapped the key row, but I have to find the correct arrangement on the rings so it unlocks." The smile she gave him told him he'd gotten it partially right.

"Are you going to try it?"

"Why?"

She grinned. "I want to see you do it. You clearly enjoy it."

Tibs looked around. No one was paying attention to him. Unlike at the shop, people minded their business in the inn. He picked it up and applied pressure to the row as he turned each ring. It took him four circuits before the row clicked up one ring. Instead of trying to open it, he looked for the next step.

Now the opposite cap rotated, and on the fourth turn, the center strip moved, freeing another row. This one took three circuits before the row moved. Now, Tibs tried to open the cylinder. It would be one of the caps, only neither moved. Her chuckle told him he had more to do.

Another strip from the first side moved, and he was back to feeling the squares as he turned the rings for the one that fit this lock. Unlike the box, this was a simple mechanism. Each row was about finding the right square until it unlocked, then locating the next row to work with, using the same system.

When the twelfth row slipped up, the bottom cap dropped off. The free space inside was small, and as Cross had said, empty. Most of the cylinder was taken up by the mechanism.

“That’s pretty good,” she said.

“Was that about getting me to unlock it because you can’t?”

She motioned for a server. “No, I can do it in about half the time it took you. I told you, I heard you like puzzles, so I brought you one.” The girl placed a tankard before each of them. “You earned it.”

He sipped it before putting the cap back on the cylinder. “Are there a lot of them? Puzzles like this?” the first row slipped back into position easily, then he had to find the right alignment on the rings for the next one.

“Depends on your definition of ‘a lot’. This is among the simplest ones. Most of the portable puzzles are on the simple size.”

“So there are larger ones?”

She chuckled. “Oh yeah. Some are the size of people, I heard a story about a castle, in the Ylmiyan low lands that’s reputed to be a puzzle.”

“The entire castle?” Tibs asked, looking away from the cylinder. Like the box, it was all about the feel of it. He didn’t have to look at what he was doing.

“So the story goes. I’ve never been to Ylmiyan, so I can’t tell you if it’s true.”

“Why haven’t you gone?”

“I’ve yet to find a caravan willing to go there.”

“Can’t you use a platform?”

She shook her head. “No platform in Ylmiyan. No dungeons there, so no reason for the guild to invest in one. No one else has been interested in doing it either.”

“If there are no caravans going there, and no platform, how did you hear about it?”

She smiled. “Because some people are stupid enough to be willing to travel without protection. And some are strong enough to survive their stupidity.”

Tibs handed her the locked cylinder.

“That’s actually impressive. I have to look at it to make sure they’re properly aligned when I close it.”

Tibs shrugged.

She stood. “I guess I’ll bring you another one if I come back this way.”

“Isn’t the caravan going to be back?”

“Of course, but I might not be guarding that one.” She shrugged. “It’s boring to always do the same trail. Trouble learns it can’t get away with it and stops trying.”

Tibs chuckled. “If you want trouble, you should stay here. Seems there’s always some happening.”



She looked at him. “Really? And are you causing most of it?”

Tibs looked at her and smiled. “Not as far as anyone knows.”

She grinned, picked up her gloves, and ruffled his hair as she walked back. “I’ll see you later, Light Fingers.”

“It’s Tibs,” he growled at her back, but couldn’t help smiling.

## Stepping up-13

A new group of conscripts stepped off the platform, looking confused and scared. Tibs was surprised. This was the third group to arrive since Sto had reopened his doors. They were led toward the clearing, where Tibs expected they would get the speech about their lack of worth as anything other than dungeon food.

A man broke from the crowd and ran past the guards, only to be brought down by a large gray dog jumping on his back. Serba joined it, petted its head, and grabbed the man by the collar, dragging him back to the group and shoving him among the others.

Tibs wondered why they were here. The guild had brought more when Sto reopened because they believe he needed more food, but there had been a lot of them on that first day. They couldn’t be needing more already.

Tibs looked around as he walked to the inn, searching for the other conscripts, and saw fewer than he expected. When he’d started, they were crowding the street; there were so many of them.

He had to remind himself that back then, the town was only made of tents and didn’t have a dozen streets. Maybe he couldn’t see them because the town was large enough they could lose themselves in it now. If nothing else, the perimeter was much larger.

The inn was busy, as it usually was. Instead of heading to his table, he looked at the people seated there. Two tables had nobles at them. Kroseph’s father didn’t prevent them from sitting, but he didn’t give them the deference nobles seem to request of everyone, so his inn wasn’t popular with that crowd.

The others were Runners, most dressed in worn and scuffed armor or good and functional clothing they’d either found in the dungeon or had bought with their loot. Among them, a few were still in rags, so there were conscripts left.

A table had seven of them, and Tibs recognized one. He headed for them. One noticed him, the oldest of the group. He was tall and lean. He could be a fighter or an archer, but Tibs couldn’t be sure. He seemed familiar, but wasn’t the one Tibs recognized. By the time he reached the table, they were all aware of him, and most did their best not to look in his direction, hunching in on themselves.

On, a muscular boy with awe on his face stood. “You’re Light Fingers!” Tibs groaned. “Guys, that’s Light Fingers.”

“My name is Tibs,” he introduced himself.

“You’re the ones who opened up the second floor!” the boy said in excitement. “He used to be like us.”

“I still am,” Tibs said, which caused the other to look at him, look him over and look away. The girl he recognized smirked. And mumbled something Tibs couldn’t make out. He ignored what had to be an insult.

“Is it true that you discovered the door?” the boy asked. He had to be a fighter.

“I don’t know. We can’t talk about what we do in the dungeon, so it’s possible someone else found it before I did.”

The boy frowned. “I heard that you did that, and you killed the floor boss by yourself.”

“No, I didn’t. It was me and my entire team.” Now he understood the looks. If someone was telling stories about him being some bard song hero, of course, they’d be wondering what he wanted with them.

“What do you want?” the tall one demanded.

“I wanted to see how you were doing.”

The rogue he recognized snorted.

“I’m glad to see you’re still alive,” he told her, and her eyes went wide.

“You know him?” the boy asked her in amazement. She shook her head vehemently.

“We met,” Tibs said, “on your first day here.”

Now it was the tall one’s turn to snort. “And did you ‘save her life too’?” he said in a mocking tone.

Tibs studied him. His rags had been of better quality at one time. Not something from the dungeon, Tibs thought, and not noble clothing either, but better than what conscripts usually arrived in. Which meant he wasn’t a conscript? That and the tone made Tibs remember an incident.

“You were part of the team mine ran into when we exited the dungeon, before he was attacked.”

The guy straightened and puffed his chest out. “Yeah, and you stole our kills.”

“I seem to remember your team not faring well when we arrived.”

“We’d have been fine,” he snapped.

Tibs nodded. “I’m glad to see you’re alive. I thought you were going back home after that.”

The man deflated only long enough to notice the suspicious look the other gave him, then straightened. “You thought wrong. I’m not allowed to leave.”

Tibs didn’t call him out on the lie. “Then I apologize.” He caught Kroseph’s attention and motioned to the table. The server nodded. “Let me buy you a tankard.” He pulled an unused chair from the table next to theirs and sat. “How are you finding the dungeon?”

He didn’t ask how they were enjoying it. His time as an Omega was still fresh enough to remember the despair, the constant loss of friends. It wasn’t until Jackal that he’d started seeing the dungeon as a challenge to overcome, not just something to live through.

“We’re alive,” the rogue said in an accusatory tone.

“It’s harder.” The tall one said, sitting down. Tibs thought he remembered him being an archer.

“The dungeon grew since then,” Tibs said.

“It’s not that,” the man said, but closed his mouth as Kroseph delivered the tankard. The server gave Tibs an approving nod before leaving.

“I wish we were allowed to talk about it,” the man said, eyeing the tankard.

The boy next to him was already halfway through drinking his. “What?” he asked when the other eyes him. “He got them for us. It’d be disrespectful not to drink it.”

The rogue pushed hers away. “I’m not touching this.” She looked at Tibs. “You told me we could survive that thing.” So she did remember him.

“And here you are.”

She was on her feet, anger in her eyes. “Do you have any idea what that thing did to us? It—”

The girl next to her put a hand on her arm. “Tara, you can’t talk about it, you know that.”

“What are they going to do to me? Throw me in that dungeon?”

“Probably,” one man at the table said.

Tibs realized he didn’t know what the punishment was to talk about the dungeon outside of it. When he was a conscript, the threat of being thrown in was real. The adventurers who guarded them had no love for them, and the man who led them seemed not to care what they did, but Harry wasn’t like that.

“I’ve been through the dungeon,” Tibs said, and they glared at him.

“Sure, with good armor and weapons,” someone grumbled in his tankard.

“No, I started as a conscript, just like you. I was caught for having my hand in a pocket. I was going to lose it, but the dungeon opened and I was sent here. I lost a lot of friends.” He paused. “Good friends.” He could look back on it and be amazed at how quickly he’d become attached to the people on the teams he’d been part of. “But those of us who survived,” he motioned to them, “grew stronger, made it further. Eventually, we got strong enough to get an element, and it helped.”

Runners still died. That was the reality of being a Runner. Death waited for them. Sto had said he’d miss Tibs when he died, but there had been no promises to keep that from him. Sto was a dungeon, and the dangers were real, otherwise the Runners wouldn’t grow.

“Maybe the dungeon was weak enough when you started,” a scarred boy said. How was Tibs thinking of them as boys when they looked older than he did? Did surviving the dungeon to be more powerful make him grow older faster, or did he simply feel older because of everyone he lost? “Now it’s not giving us any mercy. The only reason I survived my run, is because the rest decided to run through the trap room and got moving before I was ready.” He shuddered.

Tibs watched him, wanting to ask for details. He’d figured out that running through that room would be a way to avoid the spears, and Sto could have adjusted that since he’d gone through the room, but the reaction spoke to something else. Had Sto added something?

“Yeah,” Tara whispered. “One false step and it’s over.” She shuddered too. The others had a similar reaction to the statement.

“How far did you make it?” Tibs asked, curious.

“This time around?” the archer said. “Just the boulder room. We lost our sorcerer to the trap room, but I figured four of us could deal with the rats in the boulder room, anyway.” He shuddered. “Me and Tara were the only ones to make it out.”

“I hate rats,” she grumbled, and Tibs smiled at the shared sentiment, then he sobered. Was the boulder room that hard? He and his team were stronger now. But it hadn’t seemed different when they’d crossed it. Even with the ban on talking about it, like the stories about him finding the door to the boss room and his team defeating it, there were stories about each room, with enough details to help the new Runners get through them.

“Look,” Tibs said, “I can’t tell you anything about the dungeon. But what I can do, is offer my team’s help if you want to train. If we don’t have the exact skill you’re using, talk with one of the other teams. There are enough of us someone will know what you need.”

“And you think one of them, is going to want to help us?” Tara demanded, eyes burning with anger.

“I can think of one of them who won’t,” Tibs replied. He couldn’t see Don lowering himself to helping anyone, but Tibs didn’t expect anyone to pick corruption as an element, so he wouldn’t be needed. “But other than the nobles who chose to be here, we all started where you are. We know how hard it is. And we want you to survive the dungeon. So I can promise you’ll find someone who will be willing to help.” Tibs would pass the word around too. If the others had forgotten where they’d started from, they could use the reminder. They were all Runners, and it was their job to bend the rules as far as they could to ensure they survived.

He stood. “I hope I get to meet you again.”

Tara stood a second later, after a slight hesitation, and he watched her step around the table.

“I’m sorry for how I behaved,” she said. “I know you’re trying to help us.” Before he could say anything, she hugged him.

Tibs hugged her back and felt her fingers make their way in his pockets. He wanted to roll his eyes at how clumsy she was. He felt her pull a coin out.

He leaned in and whispered, “you can keep the coin, but if you try it with anyone else, you might lose your hand.” He let go of her as she stared at him, stunned. Clearly, picking pocket wasn’t what she’d been caught for.

He nodded to the archer and the others, then went to his table for a meal.

## Stepping up-14

Tibs looked at the crystal ball on the pedestal. The room was thirty paces long, but the exercise, the test he was practicing for, wasn’t about the distance. From the practices over the previous days, this ability unerringly hit where it was aimed, and aiming under ideal conditions was simple.

He took out his knife, channel essence to the point, and readied himself. For him,

this was about getting the surrounding essence to flow through his reserve to continue feeding the attack.

He moved the knife, traced the 'x', and as he stabbed its center, pulled the essence to him as his reserve drained into the forming attack.

Tibs had no easy way to describe how it felt, even to himself. Like trying to describe what Water was like, he suspected the words didn't exist, so he fell back onto approximations.

The wind flowing around him as he ran fast, but through him instead. The pressure of the water around him, when he'd submerged in the lake to have a second audience with Water, but again, inside him, instead of outside. A burning, tracing a line from his reserve through the path his essence made from there to his hand, but wet, not hot.

He gritted his teeth as essence flowed. However he described it, it was a strain on him. He couldn't keep track of how long the essence flowed, but it stopped, and he fought to remain standing as the 'x' flew at the crystal sphere, impacted, and the two exploded.

"You may have put too much essence in it," Alistair said, and Tibs only stiffened. He didn't have the strength to jump, although his heart was beating faster now in surprise. He should have sensed his teacher enter the room.

"I'm still getting used to the essence flowing," He replied, giving up and bending to put his hand on his knees. He didn't understand why, but this always made the strain pass quicker.

"Is your reserve not refilling?"

Tibs chuckled. "It's full," thinking of all of them. "It's the flow that leaves me like this. When you didn't arrive within minutes of Tirania calling you, I spent the days practicing, trying to make the strain less." He straightened and took a few deep breaths.

Then he turned and hugged his teacher, cutting off his comment. "I missed you."

After a few seconds, Alistair placed his arms around Tibs. "I missed your inquisitiveness, Tibs. I hadn't realized how accepting of everything we've become until you." He let go of Tibs. "Now, explain how you working out your method to sense and manipulate, then we'll see about understanding why it is such a strain on you."

"Like with settling my reserve, it was about how I felt about the essence. About how there is my water essence, then that which is outside me." He formed a puddle of his water essence in his hand, barely covering his palm with the totality of it. "I can add to that what's in the amulet, but that's also mine, although, I didn't understand how that wasn't actually true before, or how true it was. It's two things that are and can't be at the same time, again."

Tibs waited for a response from his teacher, but he only motioned for him to continue.

"I don't know if it was intentional, but you gave me a hint it's what it was even before you told me to practice it. When you told me how I could disrupt someone else's essence. How could I do that, if I wasn't connected to it in some way? But I realized that afterward, again. Carina set me on the right path, but by accident. She told me how when she controls the wind, it's not all her essence. She uses hers to pull along the rest. So I started doing that with my water essence."

Tibs smiled broadly. “I froze an entire pool of water in the dungeon that way to avoid a trapped bridge. And afterward, when I recalled my essence to my reserve and the amulet, I had essence leftover. Things got too hectic to think about it after that, but it stayed on my mind. At first, I thought it was contagious, like a sickness that spreads along a street, but sickness is something people get. Essence isn’t people, so it couldn’t be that. I figured that maybe because I’d spread my essence so wide, I’d lost track of which part was mine and which wasn’t, but that didn’t work either because essence doesn’t ‘know’ that it’s mine, or isn’t. It just is.”

Tibs sighed. “I felt kind of stupid for taking so long to understand that. I was the one telling the essence it wasn’t mine. The essence didn’t know, didn’t care. It doesn’t have a preference. Once I understood that.” He pulled essence in to refill his reserve, then used that to add to the water in his palm. “I was trying too hard.” He refilled his reserve and added that to his palm.

Alistair smiled. “If you can remember that, you’ll find that many of the exercises in the future will come easier to you. People get used to one way of thinking. When you arrived here. You thought the world around you was all about what you could touch, smell, feel with your outside senses. It made you think of it in a certain way. Getting your element forced a change of perspective on you. That means you had to look at it differently,” his teacher added before Tibs voiced the question. “And that is not easy to do, especially when you can’t get a direct result, or have a specific method to use.”

“But why can’t there be a specific method to understand essence and how to manipulate it? Couldn’t you have explained how it’s all about how I understand it to be?”

“Didn’t you already know that?” Alistair asked. “Isn’t that how you turned your reserve from the lake you imagined it, into that box containing your reserve?”

Tibs nodded.

“If I’d told you it’s all like that, do you think it would have made it any easier to achieve more?”

Tibs shrugged. He’d like to think it would have, but he couldn’t know.

Alistair smiled. “Sorcerers have tried to find ways to simplify the progression. They’ve experimented, that was a very long time ago, and figured out exercises, classifications, tests. It’s how we get the classes and ranks. Rogues think a certain way, we’re about sneaking around, not being noticed, being subtle. It’s why you’ll find most with flowing and subtle elements. Water, air, darkness. We’re not limited to that, but because of how we think, we tend to gravitate toward them. Fighters tend to punch their way through everything. So they go for harder elements, earth, metal, and the like.”

“But if that’s for helping learn how to use essence, why is what I can use as a rogue preset?”

“What do you mean?”

Tibs took out his knife. “This is the weapon I was told to use because it’s what a rogue uses.” He indicated the knife at Alistair’s belt. “Only do you have any idea how useless this is for me? Unless I’m any good at throwing it, I have to get so close to the monsters I want to use it on it can hit me back. I’m not a fighter, I can’t take that many hits.

With the golems in the dungeon, a solid blow could kill me.” He considered how strong he was. “Could have killed me the first time we encountered it. When I asked to learn to use a sword, Bardik told me it was a stupid idea.”

Alistair raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, I know that considering what he did, I shouldn’t take what he said seriously.” And now that he thought back on it, the short sword Bardik had handed him to demonstrate his point had been much heavier than the one Pyan had him hold. “But the trainer for the fighters told me the same thing when I asked for his help. I had to go to a Runner for someone who would consider it.”

“How did that go?” Alistair asked, his tone a mix of curiosity and expectant. Like he already knew the answer, but wanted to see if he was correct.

“It didn’t. The corruption that’s in my body caused my hand to cramp and she said I should wait until that’s healed before trying it.” And knowing that, he should jump into the pool of corruption to have that audience, but just getting close enough to smell it caused him to turn around.

Alistair’s nod was more contemplative than decisive. “Do you think you learning the sword would affect how you learn to use your essence?”

Tibs stopped himself from rolling his eyes. As annoying as he felt having his teacher constantly force him to think about the situation instead of answering him, he knew there was a reason behind the method. Although, considering Tibs forced Alistair outside of what he knew more often than not, that might just be a justification so his teacher wouldn’t have to figure out the answers by himself.

“First,” Tibs said, “a rogue can use a sword. One of Don’s lackeys did. I don’t know how it affected his essence training, but he was metal.”

Alistair nodded. “It’s possible the reason you have to use a knife is that it’s always been how it was. My early days in the dungeon were different from yours, but I wasn’t conscripted. My family paid for me to go to a dungeon. The tests had shown I had an aptitude for rogue and that’s what I trained for. My team protected me and I disarmed the traps, searched the rooms for secrets. The dungeon was also an established one, so it might not have been as aggressive as this one.”

Alistair tapped a finger on his thigh, which Tibs had realized meant he was thinking, so he waited.

“Once the corruption has healed out of your system, I’ll see about finding a trainer willing to teach you how to wield a sword. It could be interesting to see how, or if, it will affect your training for essence.”

Tibs shook his head. “I have someone willing to do it.”

“A guild trainer would be better,” Alistair said.

“And the guild would charge me for them,” Tibs replied, instead of voicing his doubt that with more years of experience doing things the way the guild wanted it done, came the mindset that cause even his teacher to look doubtful as to the wisdom of trying it.

“Alright, it is your decision, and I understand your reluctance to give the guild more to hold over you.” He motioned toward the pedestal where the crystal sphere had reformed.

It did so within a few minutes of breaking. The essence woven into the pedestal, Tibs expected it was mainly crystal essence, caused it to happen. “Now, how about we get back to your practice? The sooner we find out how to let you control the flow, the quicker you can officially graduate to Rho.”

Tibs looked at his knife. The mention of graduating reminded him of the problem his team was facing. “Do I have to?”

“You have to practice if you’re going to improve, Tibs,” Alistair replied, sounding perplexed.

Tibs shook his head. “Do the exam, graduate to Rho. I can already do a lot of what they learn, so why can’t you continue teaching me more without having me graduate?”

“Because.” His teacher stopped, tapped a finger on his jaw, then motioned and two ice chairs formed. Tibs sat in one, sensing the weave of the essence forming it. It was too complex for him to figure it all out. It wasn’t just water essence packed into the shape, there were differences. It was what accounted for the softness of the seat compared to the hard legs and armrest, Tibs expected.

“My reflex is to tell you it’s because that is how things are done,” Alistair admitted, “but we’ve already established your opinion of that.” He gave Tibs a small smile. “So while, in the end, that is the reason, let me explain it this way. There is only so much I can get away with when it comes to diverging from the established methods of training. So long as I can explain it as getting you to a specific goal within the accepted methods, Tirania will let me do it. In this case, it’s passing your exam.”

He motioned to the crystal sphere.

“As I said, sorcerers did a lot of experiments to determine the best way to train adventurers, and while you are demonstrating we may be too adamant about following them, on top of them keeping you safe, we know they work. We know that by the time a water rogue can take control of the water storm his essence is to perform the sphere test, they have progressed to the point where they can learn about that being a mental construct, and set them on the path of changing how they see it, and therefore, letting them move toward Lambda, where they will pass another test that will show us they are ready for the next stage and so on.”

“But doesn’t that mean the ranks don’t mean much? What about—” Tibs closed his mouth on asking about those who gained essence outside of the dungeon, outside of the guild. He couldn’t know if they progressed at all beyond having an element. The blacksmith and baker didn’t even know they had an element.

“What about Tirania,” he said, hoping the shift would still make sense. “Is she really Beta, or is it that she hasn’t passed the test to the guild’s satisfaction?”

It was Alistair’s turn to close his mouth upon opening it. “That is is a good question. One I don’t have the answer to, although at that stage, what a rank means is even murkier than it is for you. Harry is Gamma, but it could be argued he is more powerful than Tirania since he’s a fighter and “hits harder”. As I said, it gets murky. It’s in part primarily a title that denotes where within the guild hierarchy someone stands at that point. I expect that if Harry ever decided to become a guild leader, he would be made Beta regardless of what the test



said.” Alistair’s finger tapped on the armrest. “I’m actually not sure what the test for becoming Beta is.”

“Haven’t you taken it?”

Alistair smiled. “I’m Delta, I have ways to go before that test; if I was even interested. I’m comfortable where I am. But to bring this back to you, despite your incessant detours,” he grinned, “even if you were content remaining where you are, with no longer being trained, which I expect you aren’t. The guild wouldn’t let you. The guild is investing in you for a reason and it isn’t interested in allowing you to stagnate. It will demand that you take the test. Even without training, with only going through the dungeon as it gets every stronger and you surviving it, you would work out how to do the things the guild wants you to. It would just take longer.”

“But…” Tibs trailed off. He didn’t want to voice the problem again, but Alistair motioned for him to continue, and Tibs sighed. “Jackal is Lambda now. I’m the only one who isn’t officially Rho.”

“That will change rather soon I expect.”

Tibs eyed his teacher angrily.

“You will have to explain things, Tibs. Mind isn’t my element.”

He sighed again. “We can only have one person who is above the rank of the dungeon. It’s Rho. That means that if anyone else on my team graduates, someone will have to leave it.”

Alistair nodded, then stopped. “Ah. Right. Your team is your family. I’d…” now he trailed off, smiling wistfully. “I’d forgotten that aspect.” He became serious again. “They aren’t going to be dead, they’ll just be on a different—”

“No! I’m not losing my team!” Tibs was out of his chair, pacing. “I lost too many people already.”

“Again, Tibs, they won’t—”

“I have no idea how good that other team’s going to be. How do I know their rogue’s going to do everything they can to protect my friend? That they aren’t going to hate them for taking the place of one of their friends. Why does my team have to be broken up?” he demanded.

Alistair remained silent, and Tibs couldn’t maintain his anger face with that calm expression. He sat.

“If one team outpaced the dungeon, it can destroy it. They can cause more damage than it can sustain from everyone else going through it and those who die to feed it. It does have limits, Tibs, as difficult as it might be for you to believe, having only been the subject of what it can do. It has happened.”

Tibs wondered if his disbelief looked anything like dismay. It would explain his teacher’s reaction; because the man had it so wrong. Maybe a too powerful team could kill a dungeon. Bardik had come close enough by himself, with the help of plenty of corruption. But one team of Lambda in a Rho dungeon?

Sto had explained it to Tibs when he’d told him not to use his essence to just drain the monsters. Sto would have to change things to take him into account, which would make

things too difficult for everyone else and they wouldn't improve, they'd just get killed.

And he was reminded of the primary flaw in everything the guild did here. They thought the dungeon wanted to be fed when Sto wanted to help them get stronger. He wanted to tell Alistair that, the guild. He hated that to protect himself, other Runners ended up suffering. He sighed. Could hint at things without revealing his truth?

"You said the sorcerers are always performing experiments, right?"

Alistair nodded.

"Have they done any on the dungeons?"

"Why would they do that?" Alistair asked, chuckling.

"I don't know," Tibs replied, annoyed. "Maybe to see if the guild got yet another thing wrong?"

His teacher studied him, finger tapping. "Tibs, it isn't because the guild isn't doing things the way you want them to, that it's doing it the wrong way."

Tibs narrowed his eyes. "You're saying that because you're part of it."

Alistair sighed. "I'm saying it because there is at least a thousand years of history that tells us this method works. If it was the wrong one, it wouldn't have survived to today."

And yet, Tibs thought angrily, not one of you has realized a dungeon can think like a person in all that time.

"I'm not taking the test," he said with as much finality as he could muster.

"You will have to, Tibs."

"Then I'm going to take it once the dungeon graduates again."

Alistair nodded. "Do you think the rest of your team will agree to the same? There's no telling when the dungeon will graduate again, especially not after nearly dying. You already have one member at Lambda."

"Then we won't go on runs until he graduates."

"Can you convince your team of that?"

"Yes," he answered through gritted teeth, but he didn't need Alistair's raised eyebrow to doubt his answer. Jackal would agree, despite his love of loot. Carina would stay by him, and Tibs was confident Khumdar wouldn't mind waiting.

Mez, on the other hand. The archer and his cursed sense of honor. He was a Runner and his duty was to run the dungeon. Would he be willing not to progress just to stay with the team? Tibs thought of him as family, despite his inclinations toward nobleship, but he wasn't sure how Mez thought of them.

"I understand this is difficult, Tibs. Life, the world, is difficult. This is only the start of the situations that will push you in directions you'd rather not go into. Of hard decisions you will have to make, or be on the receiving end of. I won't insult you by claiming your life was easy until now, but while the hard decision will come every so rarely as you grow in power, they will become ever so harder. That is a truth of being an adventurer. Those stories bard like to sing about, they don't talk about the times when we have to make a hard choice between saving a caravan full of people, versus letting one child be taken by slavers."

"You had that?" Tibs asked hesitantly.

Alistair nodded. "My first mission for the guild when I reach Epsilon. One of the

other broke and when after the child, so I justified it as being taken care of, even if neither ever returned, but it was a long time before I made peace with that justification.” He motioned to the sphere. “How about we work on something we can affect for a time, instead of pondering things out of our control?”

Tibs nodded and stood.

He did his best. He answered Alistair’s questions, followed his directions, but his heart wasn’t in it. The few cramps the corruption caused were part of it, but the main reason was that all he could think about was his family being broken apart. Of being alone with strangers again.

## Stepping up-15

Tibs stood by the pool of corruption, fighting the urge to throw up. It was night, and he was dressed in rags. His audience with fire had taught him not to bring anything valuable to audiences if he could avoid it. He’d tried to come via the roofs, but his leg had cramped at the idea of climbing a wall, so he used the alleys.

He missed the roofs. If only for that, he needed to get this done with. He stepped to the fence keeping people from getting close, and kicked a stone as he placed a hand on it to climb over. It plopped into the corruption and in the Claria’s light, Tibs stared as it bubbled and dissolved.

Stone dissolved into nothing, and that was supposed to be a basic element. Shouldn’t that be safe from corruption? His hands shook and his mouth was dry. Ganny said that all he needed was strong emotion when with the element. He was next to the corruption, and he was terrified. Why wasn’t he having his audience?

He told himself to climb the fence, but his body didn’t obey. What would that do to him? The fire had nearly killed him, and there was nothing here to draw essence from to keep himself alive. Or a cleric who would heal him.

He let go of the fence. He’d try another day. That was it. He wasn’t ready today. He hadn’t prepared properly. Tomorrow night, or the next one.

He’d do it then.

\* \* \* \* \*

The guard escorted Tibs through the guild building. He hadn’t told him why he’d been summoned, and Tibs had expected Tirania, Alistair wouldn’t have sent for him.

He hadn’t expected Harry to be the one to summon him. They hadn’t interacted since the last time.

“Leave us,” the guard leader told the man, and it was only the two of them.

“I didn’t do it,” Tibs said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Not that you’d tell me if you had.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Am I lying?”

Harry smiled slightly. “You did something, but I know you didn’t do this.”

“Then I’m going back. I have to train.”

Harry sighed. “Tibs, I need your help.”

That gave him pause. “I’m a rogue. Why do you want my help?”

“Someone’s stealing from the nobles.”

Tibs smiled. “Good for them.”

“No, not good for them. Not good for anyone.” Harry rubbed his face. “The nobles aren’t going to take it for long. If it doesn’t stop, they’re going to take matters into their own hands, and they aren’t going to care who else gets hurt in the process.”

“You’re in charge here. Tell them to let you deal with it.”

Harry’s expression darkened. “Don’t be any more difficult than you already are, Tibs. You know how nobles are. There are only two families here to do more than pay lip service to my authority. This needs to stop.”

“Then find the thief.”

“I need your help.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You want me to betray another rogue?”

“I want you to help keep this town safe. That thief is endangering everyone. They aren’t like you, who just breaks in and leaves. They aren’t like that Ania, who leaves poems praising the house’s resident.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t heard of that one. The name was familiar, air rogue, he thought. “What is this rogue—”

“A Thief, Tibs, whoever they are, they’ve broken my rules. That makes them a thief.”

“Every rogue here has broken your rules,” Tibs pointed out.

“But you’re being careful and discrete. I know about it primarily because I know you, and the other rogue. Or, like Ania, I’ve read her poems. Those the ‘victims’ aren’t particularly angry about.” He snorted. “Some actually consider it a mark of pride to have on. They’ve been visited by a Dungeon Runner.” He shook his head in amusement, then sobered. “This thief takes valuables from the house they break-in. The nobles are complaining. And I need this to stop before they escalate it.”

“And you think I can do that?”

“Tibs, you can talk to them. Find out which one does it. If you don’t want to hand them over to me, get them to stop.”

Tibs wanted to tell the guard to go do something obscene with his request. He didn’t work for the guards. He was a Runner and a rogue. But Harry cared about the town, about keeping everyone safe, and he didn’t lie. If he said this could escalate, Tibs believed him, and he couldn’t just let that happen to his town.

“I hate that you know me this good,” he said.

Harry smiled. “You’re the one who kept poking into my business, Tibs. You make it hard for me not to get to know you.”

“I’m not handing them over to you,” He said. “But I’ll get them to stop.”

“Thank you, Tibs.”

Tibs left with a sigh. He was going to have to be careful and make sure he did this for the town, and not Harry. He was not doing this to help Harry. The man was a guard, and

rogues didn't help the guards.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs had gone around the bazaar, talking with every merchant he'd worked out would buy something without asking questions. There was more than he'd expected, until he remembered Sto. All a thief had to say was that the item was loot and the merchant would have a justification to take it. Not all merchants did, though. And of those he talked with, none admitted to any recent buys, and Tibs believed them.

He was on his way to Merchant Row, to check in with those merchants, he became aware people were excited, and heading for the training fields.

He tried to ignore them; he knew which merchant would take stolen goods and which wouldn't and he figured he needed to talk with them before the thief became aware he was looking for them, but someone mentioned a fight in the process of happening, and Tibs sighed. He knew who would be involved.

He hurried through the crowd, and when he made it to the front, he stared as Cross struck a fighter across the jaw and sent them to the ground, where they stayed. The Fighter was one with Metal as his element. Karl, or Clark, Tibs didn't remember his name.

"Who's next!" she yelled. Slowly turning in place, arms extended as if she was taking in applause. She wasn't getting any.

The fighter struggled to his feet, then was pulled out of the cleared space the crowd left. He fought to return to the fight, but he was still too injured and his teammates led him into the crowd, where they disappeared.

"Come on, there had to be someone here who can beat me. I thought you Runners were all-powerful and some such."

A woman stepped forward. She wore leather armor that had seen better days. Tibs saw her eyes as she ran at Cross and only made out a shimmering. Crystal. She swung, the light glimmering off the crystals forming over her first and forearms, then Tibs saw Jackal and he headed for the man.

"I expected you to have fought her already," he said once he was next to him.

Jackal shook his head. "When a stranger jumps in the pit demanding to fight everyone, you hold back until you know what's going on." He lowered his voice. "What's her element?"

"She doesn't have one," Tibs replied as softly.

Jackal looked back at the fight, pensive. "She just took down Karry. I don't think Lidia will hold out long. Before him was Brent and Asmial and she took both of them down."

"She came with the caravan," Tibs said. "As one of the guards for it."

Jackal looked at him. "You know her?"

"We talked. She's the one who had the puzzle box." He'd told his team about the encounter, but other than the box, he hadn't given details. They hadn't been curious about it.

"I thought she was metal, considering everything added to her armor," Jackal mused. "But it might just be for extra weight." He winced as Cross landed a punch in Lidia's stomach hard enough the fighter was lifted off her feet. "And for added impact."

“Does it help?” Tibs asked. “Wouldn’t all that extra weight slow her down?”

“Only if she added it recently. Carrying weight is a way fighters in the pits get stronger. By always carrying them like that on her armor, she’d get stronger and used to moving with them. I don’t know how effective it would be against someone who uses their element properly.”

“Like you?”

Jackal grinned. “Come on, Tibs, don’t insult me. I’m just the stone up and punch type.”

Tibs snorted.

“Do you want me to fight her?”

Tibs looked at his friend. “Isn’t that your decision?”

Jackal watched the fight. “Do you think I can beat her?” he asked as Lidia crumpled to the ground.

Tibs shrugged. “Only if you fight smart.”

Jackal grinned. “Well then. I think I’m do for getting my ass handed to me.” He stepped into the ring and Cross turned to face him. She noticed Tibs and gave him a wave before focusing back on Jackal.

She grinned. “Big and strong. Just as I like them.”

“Seems like those you like end up bruised and broken,” Jackal said. “So how about you stick mildly tolerating me, like everyone else in town?”

“I’m not going to go easy on you, no matter how little I like you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Jackal rushed her, then stepped to the side to avoid her punch. Then again, and again.

Tibs watched, concerned. Jackal hadn’t tapped into his essence yet. He stepped back, and she stepped forward. He either dodged or deflected her strikes. The few that got through, he endured.

“You planning on at least trying to hit me?” she demanded, her breathing ragged.

“Can’t. My man doesn’t appreciate it when I hit on anyone else.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

Jackal shook his head. “I’m a one-man kind of guy. He still wants me, so I’m afraid you’ll have to contend with doing all the hitting.”

“Then why did you step forward if you aren’t going to fight?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going to fight you,” Jackal said. “I said I wasn’t going to hit you.” He pulled a coin from his coin pouch. “How about we make it worthwhile?” Tibs couldn’t tell what it was from where he stood. It was pale enough to be silver or electrum. Tibs didn’t recall his friend having any gold.

“Isn’t a fight worthwhile in and of itself?” Cross asked.

“You’re thinking of a bar fight.” Jackal motioned around them. “This is a match. The winner should be properly rewarded. What do you say?”

She pulled a coin from a pouch. “It’s your money.”

“It is, and I do love myself some coins. Tibs!” Jackal threw the coin at him. Electrum.

“Hold them for us.” He caught Cross’s coin, then the fighters were facing each other again.

“Are you going to do whatever it is you do with your element?” She asked.

Jackal shook his head, circling her. “I like my matches to be fair. You don’t have an element, so I’m not going to use mine.”

She narrowed her eyes, mirroring his movements. “What makes you think I don’t have one?” he hit her fists together, making the metal on the glove clang. “I’d think it’s pretty obvious what it is.”

Jackal smiled. “First time around anyone with essence, then?”

“I’ve been in town for a while now.”

“But you haven’t been paying that much attention if you don’t know the eyes give the element away.”

“My eyes are gray,” she replied, feinting.

“Wrong gray for metal,” Jackal replied, blocking the actual attack.

“Then aren’t you going to mock me for pretending?”

“Not after you took down four fighters with elements.” He lunged at her, but instead of hitting her, he stepped aside as she tried to hit him. He grinned at her and she threw herself in a series of attacks.

He got in enough hits that Jackal stopped grinning, but he didn’t hit back. Simply stepping around the open space, forcing her to follow him, and he blocked and deflects her punches.

Tibs noticed her breathing was coming harder, and he had an idea what Jackal was doing. He was forcing her to tire herself out instead of trying to overwhelm her. He shook his head. Jackal wasn’t going to be able to play the stupid fighter long if he did this too often.

Under a minute, she was noticeably slowing. Jackal caught the next punch and pulled her off balance, tripping her and then placing a foot on her back.

“I believe I win.”

She looked at him. “I don’t know. This feels like you cheated. Fighting involves throwing punches.”

“If you can get up, I’ll consider the match is still going.” His skin turned gray. And Tibs sensed Jackal pull from the ground. He wouldn’t move from there, no matter how strong she was.

She made two attempts, then gave up. “You’re smarter than you look,” she finally said.

Jackal snorted. “Just smarter than those you fought at this point, which really isn’t saying much for me.” He offered her his hand and pulled her to her feet. “I was a pit fighter before landing her. I’ve learned how to win, instead of fight.”

Tibs joined them now that the fighting was over. “And I keep him from getting into too much trouble.” He handed the coins to Jackal, who grinned at them.

She looked at them. “He’s on your team?”

“He’s my team leader.”

“Against my will,” Jackal added. “I wanted Tibs to be it, but he refused.”

“Carina could have done it,” Tibs said.

“She wanted it too much.” He grinned at Cross. “Never hand over power to someone who wants it.”

“I never hand power to anyone,” she replied. “You want it from me, you’re going to have to take it by force.”

“I’m good.” Jackal grinned. “But unless you want to keep fighting, I’ll buy you a tankard with that coin I won.”

“You’re buying me more than one,” Cross said, “unless it’s filled with something really good.”

Jackal smiled. “The ale here *is* really good.”

Tibs followed them as the crowd dispersed.

## Stepping up-16

Jackal looked at the assembled people Tibs brought to the training field. “I thought you said they were a team. I count eight of them.”

“They’re Omega,” Tibs replied. “Team’s a loose term at that stage.”

“And you want us to train them,” he stated. He didn’t sound for or against it. When Tibs had explained what he wanted, Jackals and Carina had exchanged a look, then agreed. Khumdar and Mez had come with them, although Tibs wasn’t sure if either were interested in helping.

“Are we even allowed to do that?” Mez asked.

“The rule says we can’t talk about the dungeon,” Carina said. “Nothing in it about helping teach the new arrivals.”

“I believe,” Khumdar said, “that is because there are not usually new conscripts after the initial group, and those who pay to come, will have received the needed training before.”

“If it ain’t in the rules,” Jackal said, grinning, “We ain’t breaking them. We might have to stop, once Knuckles decides we can’t do this anymore, but until then, let’s take advantage of this and make it as hard as possible for the dungeon to eat one of you.” He looked them over. “Which of you are fighters?”

Three raised their hands, two girls and a guy. The guy looked so excited he was bouncing in place.

“Get a sword and join me.” He walked away. The girls hesitated, but the guy ran to the box with the sword, grabbed one, and was next to Jackal, talking and motioning, nearly stabbing the fighter in the process.

Mez watched them, then sighed. “Archers?” a guy and girl raised their hands. He studied them. “Come with me, we need to go to the archery field.”

Carina looked at the three left over. “You, and you?” she pointed to the two guys left. “You’re sorcerers.” Surprised, they nodded. “I don’t know what I’m going to be able to teach you without you having the starter amulet. I can’t lend you mine since you don’t have an element yet.”



Tibs produced two plain-looking amulets and handed them to the two sorcerers. “These will help.”

Carina narrowed her eyes. “Where did you get them?”

“Darran lent them to me. I have three more since I didn’t know how many would come.”

“Do I want to know where *he* got them?” she asked, taking one and studying it.

Tibs shrugged. “He’s a merchant. I expect he bought it off someone.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “I’ll take two more then. These don’t have much in the way of reserves and I can’t recharge them.”

Tibs handed her two more. Then it was only him and Tara, who didn’t look happy. “Are you going to teach me to pick a pocket?” she demanded, “since you’re so much better?”

Tibs shook his head, taking a knife out. “Picking pockets if for out here. I’m going to help you survive in the dungeon.” He looked at it. “The first advice I’ll give you is to learn to use a sword, even if the teachers say you can’t. These aren’t useful unless you’re good at—”

She snatched the knife out of his hand faster than he expected and with a flick sent it at the box containing the sword. It hit in what Tibs thought was the middle of it. At this distance, he wasn’t sure he’d even get close to that. She eyed him defiantly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“How good are out at locks and traps?”

“Get me one and I’ll show you.”

Tibs nodded and led her to the rogue’s training field, where far fewer people were being instructed by a younger teacher than the one Tibs had had, but who showed the same level of disinterest in the instruction he gave. He didn’t even look in their direction when Tibs took traps and locks out of the box, along with a set of lockpicks for Tara to use. Apart from the others, he set them on the ground and motioned for her to proceed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I am a horrible teacher,” Jackal said before digging into his meal.

“Maybe you should teach them to fight with their fist,” Khumdar commented.

“Can’t, without an element to use as protection, they need the reach, even if all they’re doing is swinging it wildly, it’s an improvement.”

“How are the archers?” Tibs asked Mez.

“Horrible,” he said flatly. “I have no idea why they picked the bow, neither has experience with it.”

“Range,” Jackal said. “Anyone smart stays as far from their enemy as they can.” Tibs joined the others at the table in eying the fighter. “What?” Jackal replied, grinning. “You guys know I’m not smart.”

“How was your student?” Carina asked Tibs.

“She doesn’t like me.”

“Really?” Jackal asked. “How can she not like you?”

Tibs shrugged. “But it makes her work hard. She wants to prove she’d better than I am. That she doesn’t need anything I can show her.”

Mez snorted. “She had a long way to do then. You’re the best rogue I know of.”

“How many do you know?” Jackal asked.

Mez considered it. “Four. Tibs, Tandy, Arnel, and Findley.”

“Arnel didn’t make it out of his last run,” Carina said, and they were silent.

“Khumdar,” Mez said, “you’ve seen other dungeons. Are they all as deadly as this one?”

“I have seen dungeon towns,” the cleric corrected. “But I have never investigated the level of deadliness of a dungeon.” He paused. “I was mainly attempting to remain inconspicuous while attempting to find a way in so I could train and grow.”

“Didn’t you just walk into this one?” Carina asked. “I mean, walk into the town.”

“My passage was paid, as was my admission. I didn’t have the money needed to do it on my own.”

“It was that or else...” Jackal trailed off.

Khumdar nodded, but again, he didn’t expand on why someone would give him a choice between running a dungeon or being killed. To Tibs, it made little sense. If someone wanted him dead, getting the dungeon to do it was a risk, since if it failed, Khumdar would come out of the experience stronger, possibly strong enough to go back and make them pay.

“How are the sorcerers?” The cleric asked.

“Chom Sang has the knack for it. He can use whatever’s in the amulet more efficiently.”

“Does that translate into being a better sorcerer down the line?” Mez asked.

“I don’t know. It does increase his chance of surviving his time as Omega, but beyond that... I never read anything about comparative use of essence in relation to the omega stage.”

“Is that a thing sorcerers do?” Jackal asked. “Compare stuff?”

She chuckled. “All the time. It’s the only way to figure stuff out. After all, how are they going to know what mix of essence works well together if they don’t compare everything?”

“I’d think which ever one survives the longest had the best ones,” Jackal said.

She grinned at him. “And that’s why you’re the fighter and I’m the sorcerer.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs sat Pyan at her table, head down, looking at her tankard, and he hurried there. He wanted to talk with her before the rest of her team arrived. “Pyan,” he called, “I need your help. We’ve been helping train some of the Omegas, and Jackal is horrible with the sword, so I thought that...” he trailed off. She hadn’t looked up from her tankard. “Pyan?” He put a hand on her arm.

“Go away,” she said.

“Pyan? What’s wrong?”

“I said.” She glared at him. “Go the fuck away.”

“No, what’s wrong?” Tibs looked around for the rest of her team. He’d expected they were at the bar getting drinks or just late arriving. It was near mealtime, and like his team, Pyan liked hers to eat together when they weren’t busy with training. It was rare any of them ate alone.

“Did someone fucking cut your ears off? Leave me alone!”

Tibs took a step back under the anger directed at him, right into someone who placed a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s enough Pyan,” Kroseph said. “Tibs doesn’t deserve to be treated that way.”

She turned her glare on the server. “And I deserve what happened? He meant everything to me! You can talk, your man’s made of stone, nothing hurts him. Mine wasn’t. He...” She turned pale, looked sick.

Tibs broke out of Kroseph’s loose grip and hugged her as tightly as he could. She stiffened, and he tightened his hold in preparation for her pushing him away. He wasn’t letting her do that. He wasn’t letting her suffer alone. He was going to have words with the rest of her team for deserting her now.

“Let go of me,” she said, her tone hard.

“No,” he replied.

“Tibs,” she growled the warning.

He looked up at her. “I lost too many people I cared about to let you feel that pain alone. You can hit me if you want, but I’m staying.”

Her expression turned from angry to puzzled. Tibs understood her tone now. She was really scary when she was angry, but that wasn’t a reason to leave her alone. Then the puzzled expression broke and tears began falling. She held on to him hard enough he winced.

He said nothing. He just held her and let her cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs ate alone. Jackal was busy with Kroseph, Carina was working with the sorcerer, Khumdar was where ever he disappeared to when not with the team. Tibs didn’t know if he’d found someone to train with, or it was off unearthing secrets. Mez was... not with Tandy, who was seated with Pyan at their table. Pyan could barely get herself to stand and go to their room without help.

Looking at her, at her pain, reinforced Tibs’s decision not to get involved with anyone. He didn’t want to do that to someone else. He focused on his food. The steak was very good. He didn’t know which of Kroseph’s brothers was cooking today, but he knew how to cook meat.

“Excuse me,” a man said, and Tibs looked up.

On the other side of the table, an older man stood, watching him, hands resting on the top of a cane. Tibs controlled his reaction at the wealth on the man. The clothing was fine, noble fine, and the gems on the rings, the amulet, and those decorating the coat he wore had to be worth more than the entire town, not including the nobles. Tibs never included them.

It wasn’t the wealth that kept him from sneering. It was the essence woven into everything the man wore. There was so much Tibs checked for what was his element and was surprised to find he didn’t have one. He looked the man over again, more carefully.

His gray hair was short, his beard was darker, and hugged his jaw. His eyes were blue, the normal kind. His face was wrinkled.

“Are you all there?” the man asked.

Tibs looked down at himself. “As far as I know.” He looked at the man again, who

now wore an annoyed expression. He sighed, and with that, Tibs knew the man wasn't a noble. No matter how noble-like he dressed, the sigh instead of a sneer marked him as not noble, not that Tibs thought much of him for attempting to look like one of them. He had to be one of the merchants from the bazaar, although he'd expect word of one dressed like this one to have spread through the town within hours of his arrival.

"Do you know a man who goes by the name of Jackal? I'm told this is the table he eats at."

Now, Tibs was suspicious, and he hid that too. What would a merchant want with Jackal? His friend wasn't the kind to do more than buy from them or sell off the dungeon loot. If he had done business with someone like this, Jackal would have talked about it.

Someone looking to have Jackal fight for him? There weren't any fighting pits in the town, not officially. Harry didn't allow them, but Tibs knew not every bar fight was a bar fight.

The man sighed again. "Clearly you aren't all there."

"I am," Tibs replied.

"Then maybe you can answer me?" the man's voice gained an edge. Not the threat of a noble who could have him arrested with a word, but the edge of a knife in the shadows.

"I know him," Tibs said.

"And where is he?"

"Busy with his man."

"Man?" the man asked, disdain on his face. "Of course he'd do that to me."

Tibs raised an eyebrow. He knew Jackal well enough to know the man was too old for him. Although, before Kroseph, Jackal had had a habit of not caring about which man he brought to his bed. Maybe this was someone from before the dungeon. But how would Jackal end up in a cell if a man like that had been interested in him?

"Get your mind out of there," the man ordered, which caused Tibs to raise his eyebrow higher. "That is not what I'm here for. What are you that you'd even think that?"

Tibs shrugged.

"When will he be done?"

Tibs grinned. "It's going to be awhile. He and his man have a lot of energy." Not that Tibs knew that, but the two of them tended to disappear for hours when they were together.

The man's disgust was more pronounced. He looked around, and his expression didn't improve. "When he's done, tell him I'm looking for him."

"Okay." Tibs went back to eating.

"Aren't you going to ask for my name?" the man demanded.

Tibs shook his head. "I'll just tell them the guy trying too hard to pass off as a noble is looking for him."

The man's face turned crimson, and he slammed his cane on the table as he rested his hand on it and leaned forward. "I would watch my tongue, if I were you, boy."

Tibs shrugged and ate a piece of the steak without looking away from the man. He had to fight not to grin at him.

Not getting the reaction he wanted didn't make the man any happier. "You will tell

Jackal—” the word sounded like a curse. “—that Sebastien Wells is demanding to see him.”

“Okay,” Tibs replied dismissively.

The man leaned forward more. “Do not think to play with me, boy. I will see my son.” Tibs only froze for a second, but the man’s smile told him he’d noticed it. “Good, at least he told you who he is.” The man straightened and placed the cane back before him. “Therefore, you know what I’m capable of. Consider that, before you decided to show me disrespect again.” The man turned and walked out, everyone in the inn watching him.

Tibs wondered if Jackal’s father being in town was enough to interrupt what he and Kroseph were up to. He let them have their time. Jackal deserved some good times before things became complicated for him.

## Stepping up-17

“Did you know?” Jackal yelled at Harry as they entered his office.

Tibs didn’t want to be there, but Jackal had insisted. Other than being dragged before the guard leader for breaking one of his big rules, Tibs was the only way Jackal would be allowed into the upper floors of the guild building where the office was.

Harry looked at the fighter, a dark expression darkening. “Of course I do.” He turned his gaze to Tibs, who did his best to shrink in on himself. This might have cost him the goodwill looking for the thief had gained him.

“And why haven’t you thrown his ass out of here?”

Tibs told Jackal of his father’s presence as soon as he and Kroseph were back. He hated doing it while they still looked so happy, but Jackal needed to know. The change had been immediate. Disbelief, fear, and then anger.

“Because my brother hasn’t broken any of the rules.”

“You know why he’s here.”

“To see you.”

“Bullshit,” Jackal spat, “he wants the guild, just like the stories that got you here.”

“No, he has no interest in the guild or the dungeon,” Harry stated. “I asked him.”

“And you believe him?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“Be careful what you’re implying, Jackie-boy.”

“I’m not implying anything,” Jackal replied. “I’m saying you’re an idiot if you believe anything my father said.”

“I am light,” Harry growled, standing and glaring at the fighter. “No one gets away with lying to me.”

“If one person can manage it, it’s him,” Jackal snapped.

“No one,” Harry repeated.

“Jackal,” Tibs said, grabbing his friend’s arm. “Maybe we should let Harry—”

Jackal pulled his arm away. “How does he even know I’m here, then? Serba told him, didn’t she?”

“I didn’t,” Jackal sister said, stepping into the office. Tibs looked around, reaching in his pocket for the dried meat he kept, but none of her dogs were present.

“You’re lying,” Jackal said without turning.

“She isn’t,” Harry replied, then narrowed his eyes at Jackal’s roll of his. “I haven’t let her leave for a reason.”

“And have you prevented her from sending out any messages?” Jackal countered.

Serba sighed. “Your paranoia is amusing at times, Jackie, but come on, I’m no happier with Dad being here than you are.”

Jackal glared at her. “Really? Little Miss wanna been Daddy’s pet isn’t happy to see him?”

She took a step toward him, hands closing into fists, and Tibs positioned himself between them.

“Enough!” Harry yelled, and the words slammed into Tibs with what felt like a physical force. Tibs stared at the guard leader, trying to understand how he’d done that. Light couldn’t be solid, could it?

Jackal and Serba kept glaring at each other, silently.

“Serba, are you here to report something?” Harry demanded.

“I saw my brother storm through the town, so I followed to find out what he was up to. And just to clarify something,” he told Jackal. “I didn’t know dad was here until I heard you yell it through the walls. Unlike you, he didn’t bother seeing me.”

Jackal rolled his eyes.

“Then, you can go back to your station, I’ll deal with Jackie-boy.”

“Uncle,” she said, then corrected herself, “Sir. I hate to say it, but if my dad’s here, it can’t be a good thing. Jackie’s is right about that.”

Harry looked from one to the other. “Why is it you don’t seem to think I know my brother?”

“When’s the last time you saw him?” Jackal asked, eyeing his sister suspiciously.

“Hours ago, when I watched him arrive on the platform and demanded to know why he was here.”

“Before that,” Jackal said, “obviously. I certainly never say visit while I was home. And my father complained about you often enough I know you didn’t visit since becoming comfortable in your position as part of the guild. So he was what, the last time you saw him, fifteen, sixteen?”

Harry kept glaring.

“Do you really think you know the kind of man he became?” Jackal asked.

“I know the kind of men who grow up to rule our family,” Harry replied.

“And yet, you let him into our town.”

“He hasn’t broken any rules,” Harry said through clenched teeth.

“You really think you’re going to know if he does?” Jackal asked, sounding tired.

“I have guards watching him.”

Jackal shook his head in disbelief. “You have people watching him. Like the nobility

doesn't have hundreds doing just that back home. And the people they use were never loyal to him. Unlike the bunch you brought here. And don't tell me they aren't loyal to him anymore. You aren't that stupid."

"Jackie-boy," Harry growled.

"What? My father's in town," Jackal snapped. "You think you can scare me?" Jackal rested his hands on the desk and leaned close to his uncle. "Harry, you need to get my father out of here before things turn bad."

Harry frowned at Jackal's use of his name. "He has not broken any rules."

Jackal cursed. "Of course he has. He's here, my father has never followed any rules but his own, and those only benefit him." He turned to Serba. "Talk sense into him, will you?" He pointed to Harry.

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking me for help?"

"You work for him, maybe he'll respect your opinion at least."

"Out!" Harry snapped. "All of you."

"Sir," Serba said, only to snap her mouth closed.

"That's an order," Harry growled.

She hesitated, then left. Harry turned his glare on Jackal, who returned in. Tibs grabbed his arm and pulled him to the door. This time his friend let him lead him outside.

Jackal was quiet while walking to their room, looking around furtively.

"Stop it," Tibs said and raised an eyebrow when Jackal glared at him. "You're telling anyone looking that you're searching for someone. I know what your father looks like, I'll tell you if I see him."

Jackal let out a breath. "He isn't who I'm looking for. I know of six people supposedly working for Knuckles who are loyal to my father, no matter what he thinks. One of them would be who's keeping an eye on me for him."

"The guard who made your life difficult when we first went to the dungeon after he graduated?"

Jackal shook his head. "No, it's would who told him to make my life difficult. Most of the guards had to be low enough my father wouldn't have cared about them. But those six... I don't know how they did it, but they lied to Knuckles."

"Maybe he didn't ask?"

Jackal looked at Tibs, eyes wide. "If he didn't, then he's an even bigger idiot."

"Does he know them? You said your father was your age the last time they saw each other. Would he know who works for him now?"

Jackal shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Knuckles should have questioned each of them personally to find out if they were still loyal." He sighed. "Why did he even do that? Hire people who'd worked for my father?"

"You said because they're easy to control."

Jackal nodded. "Exactly. Easy to control isn't always a good thing."

Tibs tried to understand what Jackal meant, but he wasn't sure his friend was even trying to make sense. "The archer," Tibs said. "The one who shot that Runner who tried to use the platform to escape when he went to MountainSea."

Jackal stared at Tibs.

“He’s one of the men loyal to your father, right? He recognized you, and you recognized him.”

The fighter shook his head. “Not him. He... He isn’t here for my father.”

“Jackal,” Tibs said when his friend didn’t continue speaking. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the important stuff.”

Jackal let out a breath. “He was a spy for the king, put into my father’s men to keep an eye on what he was doing. I don’t know why he’s here, but it isn’t on my father’s orders, if anyone. He wouldn’t tell me when I asked. And unlike a lot of these guards, punching him wouldn’t help get him to talk.”

“Have you asked Khumdar if he knows anything about him?”

Jackal frowned. “Why would Khumdar know anything?”

“Darkness likes secrets,” Tibs said, figuring that as their teammate he wasn’t revealing anything Jackal wouldn’t know if he paid more attention. “He’s looking into the people in the towns instead of ours. It’s a deal we reached when I got tired of him trying to get you and Carina to make something slip,” he added at Jackal’s quizzical expression.

“I’ll check with him then.” Jackal grabbed Tibs’s arm and pulled him into an alley so suddenly he had to bite back a yelp.

He glared at the fighter. “I need to teach you to be more subtle. Whoever you tried to avoid, you just told them you know they’re there.”

Jackal snorted. “Look at me Tibs. You can’t make this subtle.”

Tibs rolled his eyes and sighed. “Only because you do everything you can to be noticed.”

Jackal grinned so broadly Tibs had to laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jackal stiffened and Tibs raised a hand to get Kroseph’s attention, indicating the table when he had it. In the process, he glanced around the inn and saw Jackal’s father at the door, looking the room over. His gaze slowed twice, and Tibs saw the guards seated at those two tables.

Khumdar watched Jackal intently. Mez and Carina continued eating, unaware something was wrong.

Tibs wasn’t surprised. Although he’d hope for his friend’s sake they’d have longer before his father tracked them down. Not that they were making it difficult, sitting at their usual table, eating dinner.

Kroseph placed tankards on the table, causing Jackal to startle. The server looked in the direction the fighter had been looking, but he couldn’t work out what was stressing him. Hadn’t Jackal told his man? Kroseph looked at Tibs, eyebrow raised, and Tibs bit his lower lip, then shook his head. It wasn’t his place, but he was going to kick Jackal’s shin for keeping this from Kroseph when they were in their room.

Jackal’s demeanor shifted as his father approached. He smiled and appeared to relax, but Tibs knew him well enough to see it as an act. This time Carina noticed something off and looked at Jackal.



“I guess it was too much to expect for your...” he indicated Tibs with a wave of the hand. “Whatever he is, to have told you I was looking for you.”

“Oh he did,” Jackal replied, “I just figured that since you’d come all this way, why make things any easier.” He raised his tankard at the man. “You look like shit. The king making your life hard again?”

Now everyone was looking at Sebastian, including the tables close enough to hear Jackal.

“You’d know what’s going on at home, if you’d stayed,” Sebastian said.

Jackal chuckled. “That was never going to happen.” He motioned around them. “This was just a happy accident. Of course, ending up dead in one of the pits would have ensured you never bothered me again, but, got to make the best of what’s handed to you, right?”

“Who is this?” Carina asked.

Mez’s stood straighter, and Tibs figured he was responding to the way Sebastian was dressed, all noble-like.

“This,” Jackal said in a dismissive tone, “is the man behind all the problems back home. Would-be noble, master of crime, the silver-tongued Sebastian Wells.” He paused, and as if it was an afterthought added. “My father.”

Sebastian’s face darkened, and Tibs thought he resembled Harry for a second. “You will speak of me with respect, boy.”

Jackals snorted in his tankard. “Never gonna happen.” He sighed and put it down again. “What do you want?”

The question seemed to startle the man. “What do you mean? You vanish years ago, I thought you’d been stolen from me, I waited for someone to make demands in exchange for your return, then I thought they’d just killed you and let me suffer. What did you think I’d do when I found out you were alive, but a prisoner of the adventurer’s guild? Did you think I’d just let them use you as feed for their dungeon?”

Tibs almost bought it. The man was good, but Tibs had talked with him before, and he’d seen the anger in the man’s eyes when talking about Jackal. This wasn’t about rescuing him.

“You really expect me to believe that you’re here to what? Bring me home?”

“Of course. They had no right to take you from me, I’m sure—”

“Cut it out, father. You know damned well I wasn’t taken. I ran away twice before I managed to lose myself in the city to the point no one could find me.”

“Jack—”

“Don’t finish that,” Jackal snarled. “I hate that name. It’s Jackal.”

Sebastian snorted, and the act broke for an instant, the disdain visible, then he was back to being the concerned father.

“I’m hurt that you think so little of me.”

Jackal rolled his eyes. “I hadn’t even thought of you until I found out you were here. So please, be even more hurt. Enough, that you’d rather never see me again.”

“Now, why would you want me to feel that way toward you?”

Jackal’s smile was nasty. “Because I know how to deal with the people you send to

kill those you never want to see again.” The smile turned pleasant. “Father.”

Sebastian stiffened. The inn was silent, except for their conversation, and he’d just noticed.

“Son, I am sorry you ever felt I mistreated you. I was only doing all I could to prepare you for your future.”

“My future’s here. With my team, my town.”

“Yes, your team, the one you... lead.” The tone was pleasant, but the smile was malicious.

Jackal froze, and Carina tried to help.

“He’s a great leader.”

“You don’t say,” Sebastian replied, and she looked puzzled.

“He—”

Jackal placed a hand on her arm and shook his head.

“You’ve had your fun, father. We both know the guild doesn’t let go of what it owns. No matter the threats. So why don’t you go back home and rule those miscreants you enjoy so much?”

Sebastian looked at Jackal, surprised. “Leave? I wouldn’t think of it. Not when I’ve just found you again.” He smiled. “I just bought a nice little place, to ensure I stay close to my favorite son.”

“No,” Jackal whispered, his bravado breaking. “No,” he repeated. “You can’t.” His hand shook as it reached for the tankard.

Sebastian sighed. “You, Jackal, should know better than anyone, that I definitely can.”

Mez stood, smoothed his clothes. “Sir,” he said, his tone filled with respect. “I think it’s best if you leave.”

Sebastian looked at Mez as if he only now realized the archer was there, looked him over, the quality of his clothing so different from everyone else at the table it made him pause.

At their table, Pyan stood too. And another fighter at another table. In response, the two guards also stood, hand on their sword.

Kroseph’s father stepped to the table. “Sir,” he said, but not with quite the respect Mez had. “You’re disrupting my customers. I’d appreciate it if you left. I’m sure that whatever you and Jackal have to discuss can be resolved at a later time, and elsewhere.”

Sebastian looked the innkeeper over and smiled. “Of course, my good man. I would never think of disrupting such a vital business. You have my apologies. Jackal, I will seek you out at a later time.” Sebastian pulled a coin and handed it to Kroseph’s father. “For the disruption I caused.” Tibs saw it was gold as it changed hands.

Jackal opened his mouth, but the two men were leaving in their respective directions. Kroseph joined them.

“Are you okay?” He asked. “Is that really your father?”

Jackal nodded and looked from one departing man to the other. “Kro, I really wish your dad hadn’t stepped in.”

“It’s what he does, we can’t let things like this happen, it’s not good for business.”

Jackal looked at his man. “He has no idea how vindictive my father is, Kro. No one does.”

## Stepping up-18

“We’re the third to last team,” Tibs said before Carina could direct him to read their position off the board.

“Where you belong,” Don sneered, leaving. Like previous times, he was the first Runner team to go in the dungeon. Before him were the nobles. The corruption sorcerer might be the reason other Runner teams finally gave coins to the guild for a higher position on the board, just to shut him up.

“That gives us more time to train,” Jackal said, ignoring the sorcerer. “Pyan’s not on the board.”

Tibs bit his lower lip, looking it over again. “DO you think she joined another team?” He looked at Mez, who shrugged, then Carina.

“I haven’t spoken with Tandy. She’s been avoiding me.” She glanced at Mez. “I’m guessing she associates painful memories with us.”

Mez sighed. “I—”

“Explained things,” Carina replied, “I know. Unfortunately, words don’t do much for a broken heart.”

Pain crossed Mez’s face. Then the expression hardened, but he remained silent.

“Alright,” Jackal said. “Let’s go check on Pyan, if nothing else, dragging her to the training field and letting her punch me for a while will make her feel better.”

“Could we make that offer to Tandy?” Khumdar asked.

“I don’t think punching me is going to help her,” Jackal replied.

“I meant Mez.”

“Tandy uses a knife,” Tibs pointed out.

“That would be cathartic,” Carina said, smiling at Mez.

“I don’t know that word,” Tibs said, frowning. It didn’t even sound like any of the ones he knew.

“It means that someone improves through a painful experience,” Khumdar said.

“But, wouldn’t Mez be the one feeling the pain?” Tibs asked. “How will Tandy improve that way?”

“The word doesn’t state who needs to feel the pain for one to improve,” the cleric said.

“Or,” Carina said, eyeing the archer. “You know, maybe Mez is the one who needs to improve?”

“That’s enough,” Jackal said as Mez’s expression darkened. “Mez has duties, and he’s holding to them. I might think he’s doing a shitty job, but I’m going to respect his decision.”

“That not as helpful as you think,” Mez said through gritted teeth.

Jackal smiled. "It's exactly as helpful as I want it to be."

\* \* \* \* \*

Smoke rising in the air was a common thing, but not such a thick column of it. Tibs ran toward it. Fire wasn't a good thing. Fire was hungry and most buildings in the town were made of wood.

Tibs pushed his way through the crowd, watching it, and pocketed a handful of copper in the process. Guards were keeping people from stepping closer as a shop burned, the fire getting close to the ones on either side. Tibs didn't know which one it was, only relived it wasn't Darran's shop.

"Where's the water brigade?" a man asked, nearly in tears.

"They're coming," the guard replied, tone hard.

"I heard the wagon's broken," someone else said, and the man, the shop owner, Tibs suspected, nearly crumbled.

"Do something," the man demanded of the guard.

"Not my job," he replied.

Tibs looked around. Why wasn't anyone doing anything? Even if the brigade was on its way, the fire would spread too much. Tibs slipped by the guard.

"Hey, you can't go there." The man tried to grab him, but Tibs avoided the hand. Stepping closer. There was too much fire for him to take hold of it, not to say it would reveal to the guild he controlled more than one element, but if he thought he was strong enough, he'd do it anyway.

He took his knife out. All he had were two attacks, but they were water. So maybe they could do something? His water fling wouldn't help, but the water cross could charge and get stronger, so maybe?

He started tracing the 'X', and the guard grabbed him, pulling him away. With a curse, Tibs coated his arm with water, causing the grip to slip.

"Get back with the others," the guard ordered.

Tibs looked behind the man. "Someone keep him away from me. I'm going to try to put the fire out!"

The guard reached for Tibs again, for a Runner grabbed the man. She nodded at Tibs.

"Go, I'm going to keep him from you."

Tibs turned his back on them. Took a step toward the fire and began tracing the 'X' again, the amulet in one hand and pulling essence to him at the same time. His attack had shattered the sphere, but that was crystal, and the fire was already doing enough damage by itself. Hopefully, he'd do more damage to it, rather than the building.

He stabbed the center and essence pulled through him and into the attack. He forced himself to maintain the connection, instead of breaking it early as Alistair had him practice. Less water wouldn't be a good thing here.

When it flew out of his control and at the burning building, Tibs dropped to a knee, panting. He forced himself to watch as the attack splashed through the fire. Unlike with the sphere, the 'X' broke apart, maybe due to the heat, or maybe it was responding to what Tibs wanted?

The curtain of water fell on the water and cheers rose behind as the fire died, then turned to horror as steam rose and it came back to life. Tibs cursed and pulled water back into his reserve and amulet. He needed to do it again.

“Leon, make me an Air sphere,” Someone said, and Tibs looked. A dozen steps away, Don pulled another sorcerer with him past the guard who was trying to keep them back. Two fighters were interposing themselves.

“But, Don, air feed fire and—”

“Do what I tell you,” Don snapped.

Tibs ground his teeth. What was Don up to? He couldn’t want to help destroy the building. As self-centered as the sorcerer was, the town was vital to the Runners, and the shops were vital to the town.

“Bigger,” Don ordered as a ball of air formed between the two men. “Leon, I swear, if you don’t try harder, I’m going to feed you to the dungeon.”

Tibs saw sweat form on the air sorcerer’s forehead as he focused. He didn’t know the man, and by the level of concentration he needed to just form a larger ball of air, he might be someone who only recently graduated to Upsilon.

It would be just like Don to grab someone without the experience to know better than to join his team.

“I can’t make it bigger,” the sorcerer finally said, looking as if he was about to drop. All his attention would be needed to keep control of the air now, which was near twice their height.

“Fine, I’ll work with this,” Don said, annoyed. He placed a hand before the ball and did something. Tibs ‘saw’ the man’s essence flow into the ball, and he smelled the effect, a fetid smell very much like the one of the corruption pool, if not as intense.

Tibs couldn’t work out what Don was up to do, and because of that, he let him proceed.

“Okay,” Don said to the other man. “When I say so, we throw it into the fire.”

“Don,” the man protested.

“Don’t argue, Leon.”

Resigned, the man nodded.

“Now!”

They both motioned the ball into the fire, and Tibs felt the ball explode on contact with the rebuilding fire. Somehow, as the corrupted air spread, the fires turned sickly yellow and diminished to the point where only a few flames were left.

Don saw Tibs looking in his direction and smirked. The air sorcerer looked as baffled as Tibs felt. The cheer dropped and Don’s triumphant expression darkened as he looked at the building, and the fire growing again.

“Leon, I swear if—”

“Okay,” a woman said, stepping forward and slapping her hands together. “This I can deal with.” The guards were too busy watching to stop her.

She spread her arms, let out a breath, then inhaled. As he did so, what was left of the fire flew away from the building and into her. Tibs saw the fire break into essence at the last

moment, and then he was only the three of them and a smoking building.

“Wo!” she exclaimed. “That’s rush!” She chuckled. Tibs watched as her red-tinted essence became denser, brighter, before settling.

“You’re Rho?” Tibs asked. Trying to compare the essence in her with what he’d seen in others, but the varying colors made it difficult.

“Just graduated,” she replied. “How did you know?”

Tibs was saved from having to make something up by a guard stepping forward. “What did you do?” she demanded angrily.

“They saved my store,” the shop owner said, awe in his voice.

“They probably destroyed some of your stuff with this stunt,” she replied.

“Some, probably,” the owner said, saddened, but the fire would have destroyed everything and spread to the other buildings.

“It’s the water brigade’s job to deal with fire, not them.”

“And where are they?” the shop owner demanded. “I don’t see them. Would you have let my shop burn while we waited?”

“There are rules,” she replied.

Don snorted. “Rules are for those who can’t act.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow at the sorcerer.

“Don’t look at me that way. You’re a rogue, you break rules all the time.”

Tibs shrugged and did his best not to smile.

“And what if they’re made things worse?” the guard demanded.

“At least they would be able to say they attempted something,” Tirania said, stepping out of the crowd. “Unlike you.” She looked at Tibs and smile. “Why isn’t it a surprise that you’re part of this Tibs?”

Tibs shrugged. “I couldn’t let the fire continue.”

“Not that you stopped it,” Don said.

“Neither did you,” Tibs snapped.

“Enough,” Tirania said. “I’m not interested in who won. This wasn’t a contest. The three of you saved the building, along with those around it. You should be proud of that.”

“I am,” Don hurried to say, then looked as pious as Tibs had ever seen the man. He wondered how painful that was.

“Thank you,” the woman who’d eaten the rest of the fire said.

Tirania nodded, then turned to the crowd. “Alright, go back to your business. Harry will make sure this is properly investigated.”

The crowd dispersed.

Tibs headed for his room, but stopped as Tirania called to him. “That was indeed impressive,” she said once he was next to her. “Enough that I think it’s time for you to take your test.”

Tibs opened his mouth to protest, but her expression silenced him. She knew he’d been purposely avoiding it, he realized. And she’d let him get away with it until now, probably because she couldn’t watch him practice and Alistair wouldn’t tell her how well he

was doing.

But now she knew, and she wasn't giving him a choice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rho.

Tibs sighed, looking out the window of his room. He was officially Rho. Now the entire team was, except for Jackal, who was Lambda. He wouldn't be able to argue that with him being Upsilon, if one of the others graduated to Lambda they were still technically not higher than one teammate above the dungeon.

He didn't mind that word so much when he was the one using it.

But now, there was no technicality for him to use.

He was about to turn away and join the others who were celebrating his graduation, and he caught motion on a roof. Another rogue training, he thought, then watched closer. There was a confidence in the motion he hadn't seen among the roof traveling rogue in the town.

He'd decided he was the only one who had been roof walking before reaching the dungeon, so every other rogue was only now learning, and mostly stumbling, but this one knew what they were doing.

Harry's thief.

He reached up and grabbed the window frame, pulling himself out. He needed to go after them, get them to stop. He reached for the next handhold—Tibs knew this wall—and pulled again when his hand cramped and he lost his grip.

With a yelp he fell back, his weight pulling his other hand out of the crack. Without Carina in the street to cushion his fall, or hay to land into, this was going to hurt.

His breath left in a huff as his back hit the wall. He opened an eye and looked at the upside-down building on the other side of the street. He looked at his feet, and Jackal holding his ankle.

"You know, you have to be the only person I know who considers falling out of a window a proper way to celebrate."

Tibs showed him his cramped hand.

"That doesn't explain why you were fleeing your celebration."

"I thought I'd seen the thief Harry wants me to stop."

Jackal sighed as he pulled Tibs up and back in the room. "It isn't your job to run Knuckle's errand for him. He had guards to catch thieves."

Tibs shrugged. "They aren't good enough, and that thief is stealing from the nobles, stuff they miss."

"And nobles cause trouble when they get pissed," Jackal finished. "It's still not your job."

"It's my town," Tibs said. "I'm not going to let someone ruin things for the rest of us."

"You're still injured, Tibs," Carina said. "Getting yourself killed trying to save the town isn't going to help anyone."

"Especially not me," Jackal said. "I need you around to stop me from doing stupid

stuff.”

“I haven’t exactly managed that,” Tibs pointed out.

Jackal thought about it. “Stupider stuff.”

“Like keeping him alive,” Mez said.

“Exactly,” Jackal said. “If you die, Tibs. I’m the next one to go. You don’t want that, do you?”

Tibs eyed the fighter. “I’m going to be dead, I don’t think I’m going to be in a position to care.”

“You might return as a ghost and haunt Jackal,” Khumdar said.

“Ghosts aren’t real,” Carina said.

“Are they not?” Khumdar replied, sounding surprised, and Carina frowned. She opened her mouth, then closed it, brows furrowing. The cleric smiled.

“Are you making that up?” Tibs asked, trying to tell if Khumdar was lying.

The man gave Tibs an innocent smile. “Why would I do that?” Unlike Jackal, Khumdar knew the right level to reach, and Tibs couldn’t tell, but he had one clue this could be a ruse.

He pointed to Carina. “To annoy her?”

Khumdar’s smile broadened. “It would certainly be good, if both things were true, would it not?”

Tibs rolled his eyes and grabbed his tankard and took a long drink, then coughed. He’d forgotten that for the celebration Jackal had gotten them potent drinks instead of the usual ale.

“To Tibs,” Jackal said. “Newest member of the Rho graduation.”

Tibs raised his tankard and took a more tentative sip. One step closer to getting his team broken up.

He needed to speak with Sto.

## Stepping up-19

“Tibs’s you’re back!” Sto exclaimed as Tibs was a few feet away from the steps leading to the dungeon’s door. “Where’s the rest of you team? I have something to show you!”

“I’m not going in today,” Tibs whispered, but not low enough. The Runner next to him eyed him, and then stepped away. He looked around, there were a lot of Omega Runners, and by their nearly terrified behavior, they were new again.

“Really? You have to hurry, I can’t wait to show you.”

Tibs looked around before replying, wishing there was somewhere within Sto’s range that wasn’t populated by people, but on top of the Runners, some of the Bazaar’s merchants had setup booths to sell items before they went in.

He’d come back in the night.



\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs wouldn't get used to walking the street in the dark. He missed his roofs. He opened and closed his hands, enduring the pain. As he'd opened the door to his room his hand had cramped into a fist and only had only opened a few blocks away.

He couldn't wait to be done with that. Once he'd talked with Sto, he was going to the pool. He was ending this tonight.

The plain leading to the mountain was deserted, the ground more bare earth than grass now, due to all the Runners trampling it. The guards stood at the bottom of the stairs instead of the door, a lantern planted in the ground next to them, on a staff, and the half dozen stalls illuminated by lanterns hanging from their facades were unoccupied.

No, he realized as someone detached themselves from them and walked on his direction.

"Evening, Light Fingers," Cross called as she met him halfway between the steps and the stalls. "I hope you're not thinking of 'visiting' the stalls." She had a slightly glowing object in her hand, a cube, Tibs thought.

"Their's not one to sell me anything there, why would I go there?"

"For exactly that reason," She replied, then lobbed the object at him.

"Stealing's not allowed," he said, catching it. Each face was divided into nine squares etched with symbols. "What is it?"

"Rule aren't known to stop your type, are they?"

"My type?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Rogues, thieves, miscreants."

"I don't steal from the town."

Cross smiled. "We're not in the town."

"I'm not here to steal," he replied. The cube could rotate in sections. The six faces could be turned when they were aligned, and, paying attention, he noticed there were only six symbols in total. He couldn't tell what essence was woven within the wooden cube, but there was only one type, he figured it was light because of the glow.

"Don't force the turns," Cross said, "just make sure the squares are aligned and they'd turn easily."

"What's in it?" Tibs had the nine symbols on one of the face. The cube couldn't contain much once open. Was the way to unlock it to get all the faces to match, or did he have to make a specific pattern with the symbols? It would be an impressive lock, since not only would a rogue need to figure out how the cube worked, but then they'd have to either know what the pattern was, or figure it out through trial and errors.

"There's nothing in it," Cross said and Tibs nodded. She chuckled. "I mean it's not a box. It's just a puzzle."

Tibs frowned. "What's the point then? Locks are to keep people from getting your stuff."

"Why did you keep working on the puzzle I gave you the other day after I told you there was nothing in it?"

Tibs shrugged. "I wanted to figure the lock out."

“But why, you wouldn’t get anything out of it.”

“I just like it, I guess.”

She nodded. “So do I. And that’s why I picked this up in Kartrage, I wanted to figure it out, now I like to see if I can get patterns.”

Tibs nodded. He had the crown around the face matching.

“So, why are you here, Tibs?”

“Why are you?”

“I’m doing my job.” She pointed to the stalls. “We can’t leave those unattended, considering some of the people in the town.”

“I’m just walking,” he replied, frowning, as he’d thought he had the ring set, but trying to put the last square in place had undone the face.

“I’ve never known a t—rogue, to just walk at night.”

“You know a lot of rogues?”

“Thieves are more the people I know.” He glanced at her and she smiled. “I’m a guard, I come across a lot of thieves.”

“You’re not a guard,” Tibs said, he had the face back in place, but now the crown was screwup. “That’s just your job.”

“So what do you figure I am?”

“A fighter. You’re like Jackal. You like to fight, and I guess being a guard gives you plenty of chances.” The crown was back in place. So what had he done while setting the ring that had undone the rest. There was a set of notion there, he just needed to figure them out.

“I guess challenging the Runners to fight me was telling,” She said.

“Jackal was the one who beat you,” Tibs said.

“I know, I heard his name. And let’s be fair here, he didn’t so much beat me as trick me into losing.”

Tibs shrugged. “If you lost, he won. Jackal doesn’t care how he wins.” He had a set of turns for the cube, it had undone the face, but instead of trying to fix it, he studied how the squares had moved. He could almost see the sequences now.

“Hey, pit fighters aren’t big on the fighting fair part.”

Tibs snorted. “The dungeon doesn’t fight fair. You should Runner it. I think you’d be good.”

She snorted in return. “Dungeons aren’t for me. I intend to live a long time.”

Tibs paused in turning the cube and thought about Harry, Alistair, Bardik. They were all older than they looked. “If you survive, you can get an element, and with that you can live longer.”

“It’s that ‘if’ I’m not comfortable with. I like problems I’m sure I can beat. It’s why I like puzzles. No matter how hard they are, there is a solution, I just have to figure it out.”

Tibs nodded. “I like opening locks.” He went back to spinning the faces and after the fourth try, he knew he had the sequence. He put the face back together, then the crown and carefully ran through the sequence, and the ring came together. That left him the bottom crown and face, although he saw that solving the crown, would automatically resolve the face.

“I guess that’s what makes you a good rogue,” Cross said, watching him.

He shrugged.

“Tibs?” Sto asked, and he looked up before he could stop himself. Cross tensed and looked around. He hadn’t noticed that they’d walked close to the stairs. He’d been aiming away from them, but he’d been so focused on the cube he’d let Cross guide him and she’d kept them close to the other guards and the stalls.

“What is it?” She asked, her voice soft. The guards at the stairs eyed them, bored.

Tibs shook his head. “I thought I’d heard something, but it’s only us, so if I had you would have too.”

“What are you holding?” Sto asked. The dungeon could see what took place within his range, but he couldn’t sense people and things they held. Something about life forced or auras, or the power of their mind. Tibs hadn’t been able to get a firm answer from Alistair or anyone else he’d asked. Because they couldn’t talk with a dungeon, those who theorized about how things worked couldn’t get confirmation.

“Sneaky types tend to have better ears,” Cross said.

“Not every rogue depends on their ears. A lot of them depends on bodyguards.”

“I don’t think of those as sneaky types,” she answered.

Tibs paused in spinning the cube, trying to figure out what the sequence for the bottom crown might be. He’d never thought about it, but were there different types of rogues? There had to be. Thieves guild had a variety of thieves, pick pockets, roof walkers, cut throats. That had to translate within the guild’s rogue.

“I haven’t been at this long enough to work those things out,” He finally said. Yet another thing to ask Alistair about. He had so many now, that he kept forgetting which one he wanted to bring up anytime he met his teacher.

“I expect they work themselves out without help,” Cross said.

“Tibs,” Sto said, “bring it in with you when you come in.”

“Can I keep this?” Tibs asked. “I don’t think I’m going to figure it out tonight.”

She took it from him. “Sorry, I don’t let this out of my reach. Night guard duties are too boring without something to distract me.”

“You have to cylinder.”

She took that from a pouch and handed it to him. “That I can lend you. Just don’t break it.”

“That isn’t the same thing,” Sto said, disappointed.

Tibs nodded. “Thanks.” He waited for her to put the cube in a pouch or do something else with it. Knowing how she stored it would—

“You realize I know what you’re waiting on, right?”

“Sorry?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been around thieves, Light Fingers. I don’t make a habit of showing them where I put things I care about away, and anyway, where would I put this? I can’t afford the kind of pouches that let me put items larger than they are in it. This would bulge out visibly. Unlike that cylinder.”

“So you just hold it?”

“Until I get to my tent.” She narrowed her eyes. “I have a warded chest there. Light fingers. Don’t think about stealing from me.”

“My name is Tibs. I hate being called Light Fingers. The man who gave that tried to kill the dungeon.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That can be done?”

“Seems like it. Dungeons are alive. My teacher said it’s possible to starve a dungeon by sending Runners who are much more stronger than he is, then he keeps having to spend his energy making the loot and the monsters but doesn’t get enough in return to feed himself. It’s why they control the ranks of the people going in,” he grumbled.

“Huh. I had no idea there was so much thought put into who went in a dungeon. I thought they just gathered people and threw them in.”

“At the Omega level, that’s when the Runners don’t have an element,” he added, “it’s kind of what they do. They just make sure there’s one of each class in the team. But once we get an element and become stronger they pay more attentions.” He was silent. “It might break up my team.”

“What?” Sto asked.

“How so?” Cross asked.

Tibs sighed. “Jackal is Lambda, which puts him one level above the dungeon. The last time we went in, the dungeon nearly killed him and he had to push himself hard, that caused him to become stronger, and then the guild tested him, and they decided he’d gone up in rank. They only allow one teammates to be above the dungeon. Otherwise the guild’s afraid we might be too strong for him.”

“And you could end up causing it to starve,” Cross said. Tibs nodded.

“But they’re sending in all those weaklings,” Sto said. I can easily feed on them.”

Tibs worked out how to say the next part without giving too much away. “I don’t think the guild knows how dungeons really work.”

“I thought they made the dungeons,” Cross said.

Tibs shook his head. “They find them. They have a way to know what a new dungeon appears and they come to guard him.” He indicated the town. “And get Runners to feed him.”

“More like decide how little I get fed,” Sto grumbled.

“How do you know so much about dungeons?” Cross asked. “I’ve never heard any of that before.”

Tibs smiled. “I ask questions.”

“And you get answers?” she sounded surprised.

“Most of the time. My teacher likes my curiosity, and the guild leader will answer me sometimes, others she sends me to Alistair, that’s my teacher.”

“Hmm. Never actually thought to do that.”

Tibs chuckled. “I noticed not a lot of people ask questions. Even my teacher is surprised that I got answers he never thought to ask. A lot of people just don’t seem to want to know, I guess.”

She chuckled. “We don’t all need to know stuff outside what we do. That’s a sorcerer’s job. To figure things out. Maybe that’s what you should be.”

Tibs shook his head. "I'm a rogue."

"But you don't have to be one, right?"

Tibs grinned. "But I like being a rogue." With a wave he headed to the town. Any conversations with Sto would have to wait until his next run.

## Stepping up-20

The laughter was mocking.

Don started it, and Tims wanted to get up and punch him for it, but the pain in his leg spiked with the slightest jostling.

"So this is the great savior of the dungeon?" the sorcerer said, pointing at Tibs sprawled on the ground. The laughter increased and Tibs considered throwing his knife, but if he missed, it would only feed Don's mocking.

Tibs had been on his way to Darran's shop wearing his armor, so the merchant could make sure it didn't need repairs. Tibs hadn't worn it since his last run. He'd still been on Transport Way when pain exploded in his leg and he'd sprawled.

He might have cried. The pain was intense. Then Don had laughed and everyone had joined in.

Not everyone, he told himself, as Don said something else to mock him. The laughter was mostly the sorcerer, his team, and the closest people, possibly more of Don's hangers-on. But the others did smile at Tibs's pain, him being insulted and unable to do anything.

He'd saved Sto, the town, and they were laughing at him.

He tried to stand, only to cry out. The laughter increased, and when he looked, more people were laughing.

"Have you no shame?" A voice came, a woman. Someone took his arm and help steady him as he pushed himself to his feet, the pain nearly causing him to black out. "Is he not Light Fingers? The one responsible for the dungeon still living? This town continuing to exist, you still being out of prison?" she said the last part as if they should still be there.

Tibs forced his eyes to focus on her through the pain, planning on telling her it was fine. They were idiots, especially Don. But he saw how she was dressed.

The dress wasn't the giant thing some of the noble women wore, but it was silk so fine it shimmered in the sunlight, the green seeming gold. It had frills at the bottom, somehow still blindingly white despite being close to the ground, the dirt. The shirt was yellow, nearly orange, going to her elbow, leaving her pale and delicate skin exposed from there to her gloved hands, white again, delicate lace. She wasn't a woman; much closer to Carina's age than an adult. Her smile held amusement, even as she chastised the other for mocking him.

Tibs wrenched his arm out of her hand and clamped down on the pain as he struggled to stay standing. "I don't need your help," he said through gritted teeth. He didn't need any noble's help. She wasn't even helping, just making things worse. Now Don was going to go

on about how nobles were his friends or some such.

Her amusement faltered. "I am simply looking to help."

"Well don't," Tibs snapped. "You've never helped before, I don't need you to start now."

She stiffened. "Is this how you wish to proceed?" she asked, her tone turning haughty. "I was simply seeing to help, possibly propose an arrangement. Do you truly wish me as an enemy?"

Tibs looked her up and down, smile turning into a sneer. "You don't scare me, noble. Your kind's nothing but words and threats. Have fun playing your noble games."

She inclined her head and raised a small frilly umbrella over her head. "Then be this as you wish, Light Finger. Simply remember, I approached in good will." Her face hardened. "You sent me away." She turned her back to him as Tibs rolled his eyes and she walked off, head held high.

The crowd was silent, then Don spoke, breaking into laughter halfway through again. "Did you have a fight with your woman?" the crowd joined in, all of them. Mocking him.

"She isn't my woman! I don't know her. I'd never have a noble as my special someone!" the few nobles in the crowd stopped laughing, so that was good at least. The others seemed to find it funnier.

"Oh sure," Don said, "because I'd get angry if a stranger helped me." That made the crowd laugh even harder, and only the pain flaring as Tibs shifted his weight as he prepared to take a step kept him in place. If he fell again, there would be no shutting Don up.

He had to settle for glaring at the sorcerer, which only made the man laugh harder.

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He hated the sorcerer.

Tibs paced the length of the room, his leg still painful hours later. The corruption in his essence hadn't been this painful or long-lasting since the early days out of his sickbed. It flared here and there at inconvenient times, but it didn't last.

And that noble. She'd only made things worse but 'helping' him. Nobles always made things worse.

"Settled down, Tibs, you're not—"

Tibs glared at the fighter, who raised his hands in defeat.

"Alright, keep pacing. Stay angry. I'm just saying you should just do something about it." Jackal stretched on his bed. "Break into Don's room, steal his coins. Put dung in his bed. You'll feel better."

"Do something?" Tibs snapped. "And have the corruption hurt me at the worse moment? He probably did this to me," Tibs grumbled. "He's corruption after all."

"Did he?" Jackal asked, tone serious, laced with threat.

If Tibs said he had, Jackal would beat the sorcerer up for it. He wouldn't care about Harry throwing him in a cell afterward.

"No," Tibs said with a sigh. "I'd have felt essence come at me if he had." There had been no essence moving about when it had happened. "But everyone laughed at me."

"They're idiots," Jackal said. "Next time the dungeon's about to die, let it happen,

that'll teach them a lesson." He frowned. "Wait, never mind, I don't want the dungeon to die."

"You'd miss the loot?" Tibs asked, tone harsher than Jackal deserved.

"Well, yeah, but the dungeon's your friend. You don't let friends die if you can help it."

Tibs rested his hands on the window sill and looked out at the darkening clouds. The sun would set soon, if not for the corruption in him, he'd go run the roofs. "I'm just fucking tired of it. Of not knowing when my hand or leg will cramp and I'll fall or drop something."

"I know," Jackal said.

"I'm sorry for dumping this on you, I'm just..." He clenched his teeth together in frustration. So, for something other to do than complain, he peeled off his armor, stopping anytime he heard laughter in the streets. Were they laughing at him still? Don would make sure no one forgot what had happened, and Tibs could do nothing to stop him.

He glared at the darkening skies, at the corruption in him, out there, everywhere. He looked in his chest for clothing and his black set was on top, clean and folded.

He should do something about it, Jackal said.

Tibs put the dark clothes on.

He was right. It was time Tibs did something.

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Tibs used the alleys instead of the roofs. He couldn't just walk straight there, guards would stop him, ask what he was doing. He'd lie, but they might not believe him. They might force him to turn back, anyway. He preferred the roofs. The guards never looked up, but the cursed corruption could make him falter, fall, and break his neck. So he used the alleys.

When the smell hit him, he almost turned back. He had the previous times, but now he understood, and it made him angry. The corruption was keeping him away so it could continue hurting him, causing him to falter and be mocked.

Well, Tibs was done with it. He was going to give it a piece of his mind, and if it didn't leave him alone, he was going to kick Corruption in the balls.

The stench was almost too much to endure when the alley became a straight line to the street and on the other side the pool of the vile stuff. Again, he almost turned back. He knew it wouldn't be pleasant and a part of him wasn't sure it was worth it.

Why hadn't he tried to have audiences with the other elements? Maybe it should—

With a silent snarl, he ran toward to street. He was done getting distracted by other things. He crossed it, jumped to clear the fence, then he was looking at the dark purple liquid, black Claria's faint light.

Of fuck. What had he been thinking? This was the stupidest of ideas in a sea of stupid ones. Even Jackal wouldn't do something this stupid. He only had time to take a breath of the fetid air and turn so his back hit the liquid. He didn't splash. The liquid corruption was viscous, clung to him, burned him with cold fire that made him want to scream, open his mouth to let more corruption pour into him.

Would the pain ever end? Or would it keep clinging to him even once he was dead?

\* \* \* \* \*

“Welcome!” the voice said, and Tibs fought the urge to open his eyes, his mouth. Any motion would just let more of the corruption eat at him. Except...

There was no pain.

He opened an eye, just a crack. Opposite him, seated on the other side of a dark purple table, was someone with features were so fine Tibs couldn't tell if they were a man or a woman. Their smile was radiant.

“I'm sorry for the pain you felt getting here.” They rolled their eyes. “Rules and all that. I never got the need for them. If you want to meet with me, you should just be able to, right?” They place their elbows on the table and rested their head on their hands. “It's a delight to finally meet you, Tibs.”

Tibs startled. None of the Elements had addressed him by his name before.

“I hope you don't mind me using your name,” they said, looking like they were worried they'd offended him. “I'm not big on formalities. I mean, we're going to be working together, right? That is why you're here.” They produced the shadow of an element and offered it to Tibs.

“Just like that?” Tibs asked, eyeing the shadow suspiciously.

“Of course, why would I... oh, right. Let me guess. The others made you work for it. Earth would be all ‘you don't deserve it’ and—sorry if I don't do the slow and tedious speech, it's well, tedious—you had to find a way to push through to get it. Air would run off laughing, and you'd have to chase after what you want. Fire would get you all angry and roar.” They shuddered. “I just don't get that. Someone like you comes around once in... how many of your lifetimes has it been?”

Tibs shrugged, still trying to figure out what the game was. It couldn't be this simple.

“Yeah, sorry. Time is a human thing, well, an out-there thing, everything there feels it. We... we have the rules and that's about it.”

Tibs nodded. “Don't the rules say you have to make me earn it?” he pointed to the shadow in their hands.

They leaned forward and lowered their voice as if someone could overhear them. Maybe there was? If there were rules, wouldn't there be someone to enforce them?

“I'm going to let you in on a little secret,” they whispered. “I'm like you. Something of a rule breaker. Why make this so hard, when everything else already is. Unlike the others, I don't need you to prove yourself. You've already done that, getting here. It's redundant for me to put you through that again.”

“I don't know that word.”

“What word?” they asked, surprised.

“Redundant,” Tibs said carefully.

“Are you sure?” they asked, and he nodded. “Huh, that's interesting. I plucked it out of there.” They tapped his forehead. “I'm plucking all the words I'm using from there. Only way we can communicate, although I guess that technically—” they grinned “—you have so many of them in there you might not realize what they all are.”

Tibs rubbed his temples. “You're starting to sound like Alistair when he wants me to realize something.”



“Sorry, having you do lessons is definitely not what I’m here for. I leave that to the others. I’m just here to offer you what you want and ask that in return you remember that I didn’t make it work for it. I’m here to make things easier for you, that’s all. Working together, everything can be so much easier, do you get me?” They smiled at him.

Tibs didn’t take his eyes off their face as he reached for the shadow. He’d finally realized what they reminded him of. The conmen and women of his street. Thew sweet talkers who could make you believe anything and get you to give them your last crumbs of bread while you thought you’d someone get a whole loaf out of the meeting.

Their expression didn’t change, they didn’t pull their hand away at the last moment, and when Tibs touched the shadow, it melded into him. The core of his essence expanded, making space for another element.

They smiled. “See, not everything needs to be a chore. Now you know that there’s at least one of us who is here to make things easier for you.”

Tibs nodded, studying the feel of the essence he could now sense. Like the others, he couldn’t find words to describe it. The closest approximation that came to him was sticky.

“What happens now?” he asked.

“Now you go back,” they answered. “As much as I enjoy your company, you belong out there.”

Tibs swallowed. “When I get there, will the corruption in the pool still eat at me? It...” his voice faltered. “It hurt.”

They shook their head. “No, Tibs, it won’t. You’re special. I’ll never hurt you again.”

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Tibs broke the surface with a gasp and scrambled not to get pulled back under by the heavy, viscous liquid, only to find his hand hit bottom. When he put his feet down and stood, the liquid corruption only went up to his thighs. He looked around; he was a dozen steps from the fence. He remembered watching a man get pulled under as if the pool was bottomless. It had felt so when he’d fallen into it.

He looked down to confirm it wasn’t his imagination. The corruption did only go to his thigh; it stopped just before his—

Fuck, he was naked. He dropped so the liquid hid his private parts and looked around. If Don saw this, Tibs would never live it down.

Tibs realized he was kneeling in the corruption. Maybe he should want Don to see him, maybe he should see if the sorcerer would feel so superior now.

Tibs shook himself. Now wasn’t the time to gloat. It was time to get back to his room without anyone seeing him. He looked up at the closet roof and smiled. Without the corruption hurting him, he had the perfect way to moving unnoticed.

## Stepping up-21

“You can’t seriously be doing that,” Jackal told Pyan as Tibs approached them. She was sitting at her usual table at the inn, Jackal standing next to her, looking exasperated.

“You’re a team leader, you can’t just join another team.”

She looked up at him. “And what has being a leader gotten me? Geoff’s dead.” She took a long swig of her tankard; there were three more on the table. “Everybody’s going to die. I might as well just be one of them. And Tihomil’s a good team leader.”

As Tibs reached the table, Jackal took one tankard and sniffled it, making a face. “Who’s Tihomil?”

“You shouldn’t be drinking this stuff, Pyan,” Jackal said as placed the tankard down.

“Oh, you’re one to speak.” She glared at him, lifting the tankard to her lips. “You’re always drinking.”

“Ale, not this strong stuff.”

“Who’s Tihomil?” Tibs asked again, more forcefully, forcing them to break the glares and look at him.

Kroseph was the one who answered, stepping next to Tibs. “He’s one of the most recent Upsilon.”

“Another,” Pyan said. Motioning to the tankard on the table.

Kroseph pursed his lips. “I agree with Jackal, you shouldn’t have more.”

“I have the coin, server.” She glared at him. “So get me my drinks.” She threw a silver coin at him.

Kroseph caught it with the ease of someone who was catching coins often. He shook his head, looking at it, but took the empties and headed for the bar. Tibs saw Carina at their table, looking over papers.

“Wait, how is one of the Omegas Upsilon already?” he asked Jackal and Pyan. “It’s only been two runs, hasn’t it?”

“You’re forgetting how it was when we were Omega,” Jackal said. “We’d get added to any team missing a member.”

“And the dungeon’s way harder on them than it was on us,” Pyan said bitterly. “So the survivors have to get stronger a lot faster.”

Tibs tried to judge if their last run of the first floor had been that hard. There had been more rats and bunnies, but it hadn’t felt that difficult. Nothing like when he’d been Omega. Which could be it. He was a lot stronger now.

Kroseph placed four tankards on the table. “Please take your time with them, Pyan. Itricion isn’t meant to be downed. You aren’t going to help your new team by being drunk out of your mind.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business, Server?” she replied hatefully.

“You are my business, Pyan. Not just as a customer, but as my friend.”

She snorted. “The only thing you care about is my coins.”

Kroseph opened his mouth, but Jackal placed a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

“Pyan?” Tibs asked as she drank from a new tankard. “How about we go to the training fields and you teach me how to wield a sword? My sickness is gone.”

Jackal looked at him, surprised. As with most nights now, he’d spent it with Kroseph, so he hadn’t been in their room when Tibs returned. For which he’d been grateful. Of his

team, the fighter would have been the one to wake up and see him without clothes on. It wouldn't be the first time, but it would be a first for Tibs coming into the room from the window and Jackal would not miss that opportunity to quip at Tibs's expense.

"What's the point," she replied, putting the tankard down. "It's not like it's going to keep you alive."

"It can't hurt, can it?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, then looked at the tankards on the table.

"I'm sure Kro's can keep them for you," Jackal said.

"Kroseth!" the innkeeper called from the bar.

"I'm taking five, Dad," Kroseth replied over his shoulder.

"Sorry, but this can't wait. I need you to go to Gulmer and see if he has any salt. We're almost out."

Kroseth frowned. "That can't be." He turned and headed for the bar. "There four bags in the cellar."

"Rats got into them and spilled the content on the floor, and somehow water got in too, and there's barely enough to last us the day." Then they were close enough to lower their voice and Tibs couldn't make the words out.

He refocused on Pyan, who downed another tankard, then smirked at him. "Come on," she said, standing. "Let's go waste your time." She headed for the door.

"Try to keep her busy as long as you can," Jackal said. "I'm going to try to convince Kro's dad to stop serving her this stuff."

Tibs nodded and hurried after her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pyan worked him hard for the next five days, and he had to use his earth essence to strengthen himself and keep his endurance up during the training. She made no secret that she considered it Tibs's fault she couldn't get drunk anymore, even if Jackal was the one who'd spoken with the innkeeper.

"Everyone knows, you're the brains of the team," she snarled, walking around him as he held a long sword before him, his arm shaking. "He doesn't do anything you haven't told him to."

Tibs had pointed out he only wanted to use a short sword, and she'd yelled at him that if he wanted her to train him, he was going to do things her way. So he endured it. Using only enough essence to keep his arm from failing entirely.

On the sixth day, she had a run with her new team, so Tibs used that time to look at the new arrivals. The guild was bringing in yet more convicts to replace all those who'd died.

On the next day, Pyan didn't show up to the training field, and when Tibs went to the inn, expecting to find her at her table, empty tankards before her, he found Tandy, Karl, and Amid, solemn and silent.

He turned around, his eyes stinging. He climbed to the inn's roof and then ran his pain away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house wasn't what Tibs expected.

Sebastian had bought a house that had been built on what was then the outskirts of the town, but it had remained unoccupied while the town grew around it, and now it was surrounded by houses owned by nobles. It was two levels, the ground floor being twice as large. It had a yard delineated by the surrounding buildings, which had no yards.

It was a noble thing, Tibs decided, to have houses that took the entire ground allocated to them. The townsfolk who had houses all had yards.

He walked the roofs around it, looking the building over. The windows, the roof, before jumping to it, and lowering himself to a second-story window. Only to stop before reaching to check if it was locked.

Essence was woven through it. It was woven through every window and door in the building. He retreated to the roof and considered the situation. The weave on the window was complex, not the triggers Sto used. They felt more like what made the magical items like his shoes, Tirania's communication crystal, the armors, although the complexity was closer to the crystal than anything else. Could essence be used to make a lock?

He needed to ask Alistair.

But right now he wanted to get in. See what Jackal's father had. Maybe figure out what he was up to, which, he groaned, would mean reading. But he needed to get in first. He looked up, watching the smoke drift up. Then he was standing and looking into the chimney.

There was a fire. He could see its light, but that was no longer a problem for him. The fit would be tight, but the nice thing about being small was that tight could still be done.

Feet on one side and back on the other, he lowered himself until he approached the first fireplace and heard a voice above the crackling.

"This isn't much," Sebastian said.

"Yes, sir," a man answered. "We have to be careful not to alert the others."

"I understand. How is that coming along? Any luck reminding them where their allegiances are?"

The other man hesitated. "The problem is more how to make sure they won't be detected. Until we have a way to shield them, there's—"

Sebastian's sigh was annoyed. "Fine. I have the craftsman working on making more, but it's going to take time. How about the project I gave you?"

"That's coming along. Again, I have to be careful, but they'll learn the error of their way."

"Good. And finally, my son?"

"He won't listen. As you requested, I explained it's best he returns home, takes up the studies you've prepared for him, but he considers himself a Runner, not your son. When I insist, he brings up the guild, and he's right in that they won't let him go, at least not until he's Epsilon."

Another annoyed sigh.

"If I may, sir?" a pause. "Why your insistence on him? You have other children, some much better qualified, Serba could—"

"No. Jackie will take over for me. It's his duty. He'll see it in time."

“If you say so, sir.”

“I know so. You’re dismissed.” Steps walked away. A door opened and closed, then silence. Movement, crystal clinking, liquid pouring out. A sigh. “Why, Jackie. Why are you fighting your destiny so hard? I explained it to you. She read it on your birth. No one but you can ensure our family’s survival.”

Crystal clinking again, steps. The door opening and closing.

Tibs lowered himself until he could look through the fire. The fireplace had a grate. He pulled his sleeve up to keep it out of the fire and pushed on it. It didn’t move. Locked in place. Sebastian was more careful than the nobles. Which made sense. The man was in charge of the criminals in his city. He knew what they were capable of.

He’d report what he heard to Jackal and his friend would know what to do with it.

## Stepping up-22

“You should have told us,” Carina said.

Jackals shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do about my father trying to get me to leave. The guild won’t allow it.”

Tibs had told Jackal what he’d heard when they’d met for breakfast, which had meant Carina, Khumdar, and Mez were there too. Khumdar looked interested, but Mez was distracted.

“What do you make of him claiming it is your destiny?” the cleric asked.

Jackal rolled his eyes. “It’s just a story he’s used my entire life to force me to do what he wants. Supposedly, he brought a seer when I was born and she claimed I would one day rule the family. He claims to have done it with all my siblings. Which is why he insists I’m the only one suited to take over after him.” He took a long swallow and made a face, looking in the tankard. “Which is awfully convenient, seeing as I am the last child my mother gave him.”

“Is that a thing?” Mez asked. “I thought seers were just in stories.”

Carina and Khumdar exchanged a look.

“It’s been documented,” Carina said reluctantly. “Some of the adventurers with void as an element have been shown to be able to predict the results of games of chances under controlled conditions, but…” she trailed off.

“But what?” Mez asked, sounding interested.

“But,” Khumdar continued in her place, “if the stories I have heard are to be believed, none of them live for a long time once this happens to them.”

“But if they can predict what’s going to happen,” Tibs asked, “shouldn’t they know what’s going to put them in danger?”

“The stories say they go insane,” the cleric said. “Raving lunatic, more precisely.”

Carina nodded. “The more accurate the adventurer was at predicting the results, the quicker their minds deteriorated. It’s like they can’t ‘see’ the real world anymore, just their visions.”

“So my father could have said the truth,” Jackal mused, sounding surprised. “That would be a first.” He put the tankard to his lips, then made a face again and put it down.

“I doubt it,” Carina said. “Any adventurer who shows signs of it is carefully watched. The universities have an arrangement with the guild to study them. The goal is to work out why they go insane so they can prevent it, but there hasn’t been any success.”

“As if those would be written about,” Khumdar mumbled before drinking and nearly spitting his ale out. “What is wrong with the ale?”

“Bad barrel, I expect,” Jackal said, getting Kroseph’s attention. When the server was at their table, he indicated the tankard. “Bad ale.”

Kroseph’s lips became a tight line. “Again. I’m starting to think all the barrels are bad.”

Jackal frowned. “How many barrels?”

“This will make the seventh.”

“Out of how many?” the fighter asked, his expression darkening.

“Twenty.” He looked over his shoulder as his father had a barrel removed. “Make that eight.”

Jackal cursed. “Did you warn your father about mine?”

“I told him what you told me, but those are kept in the cellar. I don’t see how your father could get in there and do something to them. None of them have been tampered with.”

Jackal looked at Tibs.

“I... I don’t know.” Tibs looked at the back of the room, the door to the kitchen. The cellar would be accessed from there. “I could sneak in, but I’ve never tried to open an ale barrel and then close it without leaving any indications of it.”

Mex chuckled. “You’d leave ale all over the floor, they’re stored on their side like you see them there. I don’t know if you could hold it back even with your essence.” He looked at the stare they gave him. “I worked at an ale-house in my youth.”

“Aren’t you from a noble family?” Jackal asked.

“No, I will be a noble,” Mez replied with determination. “And even a noble needs to know what work is or they won’t appreciate what those they protect contribute.”

“Where you’re from,” Jackal said, “has to have the strangest nobles I have ever heard of.” He raised the tankard and Kroseph stopped him.

“I’ll bring you all one from the next barrel. Hopefully, that one’s got good ale.”

It did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs studied the barrels lined against the wall. Like Mez had said, they were on their sides, held in place by wooden blocks then stacked three high. Each barrel went to his chest.

Jackal’s question had made Tibs curious. As he’d expected, getting into the cellar had been simple. Only one of Kroseph’s brothers was in the inn at night, and he had to deal with the food and serving. All Tibs had had to do was remain inconspicuous and slip into the kitchen when the man left it. Then find the cellar door and come down.

The barrels were proving to be the problem. They were wooden, but made of slats

going from one end to the other. With metal rings holding them in place. He couldn't remove one and then replace it—someone with wood as their element might—without it being noticed. Sensing the liquid within the barrel, he thought he could hold it in place, but even the end of the barrel were wooden slats.

He could only think of one way he could ruin the ale, and it was with his corruption essence. But only he and Don had that element, and as much screaming as Don did to the inn's staff, he always ate here with his team.

Did Sebastian have something with corruption? He hadn't been able to tell that element apart from the others when Jackal's father had come to their table. There might be something among all the woven essence the man had on him. He'd have to see about finding that out now that he could.

Tibs left the cellar without attracting attention and went roof running, looking for a noble's house to get into.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can essence make a lock?" Tibs asked Alistair.

His teacher sighed. "Please focus, Tibs."

"I am, I'm feeling my reserve, I'm pushing the essence against the 'edges' of it, but I don't know what's supposed to happen, so I'm asking you a question."

"What is supposed to happen," Alistair said, tone straining, "is that you need to work out how to get your essence to seep through the border and into your body. One of the aspects of being Rho, on your way to Lambda, is to get your essence to suffuse your body."

"Wouldn't it be easier to do by overfilling my reserve?" Tibs asked, thinking back to what had happened when he'd absorbed the essence in Bardik.

"Yes, if that could be done, I expect it would make it easier, but remember what I told you before, overfilling your reserve is dangerous."

It had been painful, but Tibs couldn't think of anything bad that had happened because of it. Other than being drenched in corruption; but that was Bardik's fault.

"Does moving my essence to my body let me have more of it? It would have been nice to work on that earlier if it does."

Alistair chuckled. "No. What it does is reinforce your body, gets it ready for the next stage."

"I thought Rho was about learning how to use essence, instead of just repeating what we are told to do."

"You already know that part, Tibs."

"So, can essence be made into a lock?"

Alistair sighed. "Why do you want to know?"

"There's a house with essence woven through the windows and doors."

"I think you've just answered the question of if it can be done."

Tibs opened his eyes. "So how do I get through one?"

"You get the key."

"I can't get the key."

"Then you can't get through it."

“So, they’re the perfect lock?”

Alistair opened his eyes and glared at Tibs. “That is not what we are working on today.”

“It’s what’s on my mind.” He smiled. “I’m not going to be able to focus on anything else.”

“Tibs, there are times when I seriously believe you do not wish to improve your element.”

Tibs shrugged. “I’m inquisitive.” Alistair raised an eyebrow. “Carina’s having me read books. The word was in one of them.”

“Maybe I should get you one of the principles of essence etching versus weaving.”

“I’d rather you tell me, it hurts less.”

“That aspect will hurt when you get to it. Understanding the differences is complicated, but needed to proceed higher.”

“Okay, so the essence lock, it’s perfect?”

Alistair closed his eyes and rubbed his temple. “As perfect as a lock can be. They always have a weakness, the question is what will it be.”

“The key, so the person holding it.”

Alistair nodded.

“If a lock like that is so good, why aren’t more houses using them? Other than that one house, the others have latches on their windows and regular locks on their doors. Even their safe only rely on complicated mechanical locks instead of essence.”

“Setting aside arrogance as a reason. That window with woven essence in it is basically a magical item. And as I’ve explained, those are difficult and expensive to make. The more essences used, the more difficult, and therefore, more expensive. I’m surprised one of the nobles here went to this level of expenses. Could you tell how many essences were used in the lock?”

Tibs gave Alistair his ‘are you really asking that question’, then frowned. “Is there a way to tell the other essences apart?” He could sense the weave, but unless he had the essence, he couldn’t tell them from each other.

Alistair nodded. “With training, it’s possible to pick up minute differences in them. If you can have someone let you practice sensing their essence, it’s even possible to tell what essence is being used in a weave, but the more complex a weave the more difficult it becomes.”

“It’s all the mixing together of the essences, isn’t it?”

“A complex weave will be denser, making telling each strand apart more difficult. And something the noble needs to keep in mind are the odds a rogue will be who attempts it, instead of simply a thief. In most cities, a simple weave will be enough, since rogues don’t make a habit of breaking into houses at that point.”

“It was complex, dense, I could tell that,” he added, as a justification.

Alistair nodded. “It makes sense. Here, rogues like you are practicing, so even if they go with one of the less common elements, crystal, for example. There is a chance one of the rogues here has that as an element, and then it’s simple for them to get in. So they use



more than one element, but they have to consider that rogues can work together, so two elements could be bypassed with only a little cooperation, three and four become more difficult because they need to find the rogue with the correct elements, and the more people who work together, the more chances are that argument will ensue. Internal conflicts have brought down many teams.”

“How would they know what essence each member of the team needs to have? I can sense my essence, not the others.”

“Speaking from my experience, the one planning the break-in will find a rogue with experience telling essence apart. Once they know the essences involved, they will find people to fill in those roles.”

“All rogues?”

“Ideally, but since everyone coming through the guild has worked with rogues, they’ll have picked up enough to be able to help. Every essence lock I’ve come across amounts to teasing the strands apart. There is skill required, but not the kind of skill that takes a lifetime to acquire.”

Tibs nodded. That made Sebastian’s house off-limit for the time being. He needed to learn to identify essences first, then see about assembling the team.

“Is that enough of an answer for now?”

Tibs nodded.

“Good, now go back to focusing. You won’t be able to reach Lambda without that.”

“How will you tell when I’ve managed it?”

“Tibs,” Alistair warned, then sighed. “Once you have suffused your body with water essence, you will take on some of its characteristics. Motion will be easier, smoother.”

“Oh, okay.” Tibs closed his eyes. He wasn’t reaching Lambda at all then. His body was already filled with his essence, he couldn’t push water essence into that.

At least he didn’t have to worry about being the one to break the team apart.

## Stepping up-23

“Yes!” Sto exclaimed as Tibs and his team walked up the steps. “Now you’re back. Oh, this is new,” added, less enthusiastically.

The cleric by the entrance looked them over, asked if one of them needed healing. He looked bored.

Inside the dungeon, Tibs scanned the walls; there had been something.

“So,” Sto said. “Corruption?”

Tibs looked over his shoulder. “I need to get the other four, and this let me get rid of the corruption that was causing me problems.”

“Aren’t you worried? You saw the damage it caused.”

Tibs searched for a way to explain how the element wasn’t the same as how people made use of it, but stopped as he felt the essence in the wall. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“No, why?”

“You put something in the hall, and your question almost made me forget I wanted to check it.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to; you haven’t missed it yet. I’ll be quiet.”

His friends froze.

“I thought the hall was supposed to be safe,” Mez said.

“You want us to stay behind?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t think it’s dangerous,” Tibs answered. “It was there when we exited. Carina, did anyone mention something in the entrance hall?” With the sorcerers the most likely to know their letters, the papers documenting what they experienced in the dungeon were circulating between them. They’d even figured out ways to write the information down so guards who knew their letters couldn’t understand it.

“Because,” Carina had said when Tibs had asked why the guards didn’t just take the papers, anyway. “Everyone knows that sorcerers have code so others can’t steal their research.” She’d grinned. “We are a very secretive bunch, when you utterly ignore the universities.”

“No,” she answered. “There’s been no information about anything in the hall.”

Tibs turned to face his friends. “Can’t any of you sense it?”

“I will need more information as to what this ‘it’ is,” Khumdar said, “so I can know what to search for.”

“Don’t look at me,” Jackal said, as Tibs looked each of them over. “You know that until it hits me. I don’t know anything.” He grinned.

“But you can all sense your essence around you. You should be able to sense what’s part of the bundle.” He couldn’t identify all of them, as usual, but the five he had were there, and he expected they all were. Everything that interacted with Runners had to include every essence, or at least all those Sto knew the Runners had.

Jackal closed his eyes and his entire face creased in concentration.

Khumdar got a far-away look, and Carina tilted her head. Mez just looked at Tibs.

“Got nothing,” Jackal said.

“Then you aren’t doing it right,” Carina replied. “There’s stone all around us, and that’s earth.”

“Yeah, I got that,” the fighter replied. “It’s everywhere. That’s all I got.”

The other shook their heads.

“You haven’t been taught about etching and weaving yet, have you?” Tibs asked, figuring he now understood a reason he might sense this and not them.

Carina chuckled. “I’m not even close to that yet. I’ve asked about enchanting, and my teacher said I need to learn patience first.”

“I have not even heard the terms,” Mez said.

Khumdar shrugged. “Even if there was a teacher for me out there, clerics do not learn to enchant. That is the sorcerer’s purview, even among purity.”

“I thought purity only had clerics,” Mez said.

“No, they cover every class,” Carina replied, “but they only train in the purity dungeon.”

Tibs left them to the conversation and headed for what he sensed in the wall. It was in the shape of a doorway. Maybe Sto had hidden a room here to test how observant people were? The bundle of essence had the sense of a trigger to it, rather than the locks on Sebastian’s house. It was in the simplicity of it. The essences didn’t interact with one another.

He picked water and noticed there was a void that matched it. So he pushed the thread there. The section of the wall shimmered, and Tibs stepped back. When it stopped, he was looking at the bridge going over the pool of water on the second level.

“It was Mez’s idea,” Sto said proudly. “It took me a while to work it out. Connection to locations isn’t particularly easy.”

“And who explained the calculations behind it?” Ganny said.

Tibs smiled and whispered. “Hi, Ganny.”

“Hello Tibs,” she answered.

“You did,” Sto said. “I never claimed I’d done everything.”

“You just like to conveniently forget to mention my contributions.”

“It’s not convenient, it’s just forgetting.”

“Is that the second floor?” Mez asked.

“The dungeon says it was your idea?”

“I never talked with it,” the archer replied defensively.

“It hears everything we say,” Carina said, reaching for the opening. “You mentioned this would be easier if there was a way to go directly to the second level after our first run. Maybe it was the second.”

“Should you be touching this?” Khumdar asked. “It could be dangerous.”

“It isn’t,” Sto said.

“The calculations all line-up,” Ganny added, although Tibs heard a slight hesitation. It served as a reminder that Sto and Ganny, like him and his team, were learning as they went.

“I had a BB go through,” Sto said, “nothing happened to it.”

“There is nothing to touch,” Carina answered the cleric.

“That’s pretty neat,” Jackal said. “I guess we can come out a lot faster this way. How about we keep going? We don’t want to spend the whole run watching this.”

“Why don’t we go through it?” Tibs asked. He wanted to see what it would be like to cross all that space in one step.

“Yes, that way we can start the second floor faster,” Mez said.

“But there’s loot to collect on this floor,” Jackal countered.

“It’s not like there’s a lot of it,” Carina said, studying the edges.

“Yes, I would prefer going directly to the more rewarding tests,” Khumdar said.

“Loot,” Jackal repeated, pointing to the trap room.

“Only a handful of silver,” Carina said.

“Loot!”

Tibs sighed. This could go on for a while.

“Tibs!” Jackal and Carina called at the same time as he stepped through the opening. He felt an odd tingle, then he was on the other side, and his friends’ worried calls were distorted.

“Are you okay?” Carina said, her voice lower than usual.

“I’m fine,” he answered, and they all looked at one another. “Can you hear me?”

“We can,” Jackal said, chuckling, “but you sound like a morning songbird.” His voice was higher, vibrating.

“I don’t know what those sound like.”

“You need to stop sleeping through the mornings,” the fighter said, “your voice is really hi, and it has a song-like quality to it. It’s funny. But now you can come back so we can do this floor.”

“Or you can come through and we can start with the second floor.”

“Loot, Tibs, loot!”

Tibs grinned. “Just a few silver’s worths.”

“How can you say no to loot? You’re a rogue.”

“I have enough coins to get anything I want.”

The fighter looked at him in horror. “You can never have enough coins.”

Tibs moved to the side as he noticed motion behind Jackal, Mez and Khumdar were at his back, pushing. Pretty hard by the strain he could see.

Jackal looked over his shoulder as if only noticing they were there. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to get you to go through,” Mez said through gritted teeth.

“I’m a Lambda Earth Fighter. I’m not moving until I decide to.”

“Then be reasonable and step through,” Carina said. “I’ll give the few silver clearing the first floor would have gotten you.”

Jackal stared at her, then stepped forward. By the time Mez and Khumdar crashed to the floor, the fighter was on Tibs’s side. “That felt weird.” He turned. “Well, what are you all waiting for? We have a floor to clear.”

Mez glared murder at Jackal as he stood, then looked at the opening, uncertainty on his face. While he hesitated, Carina and Khumdar stepped through.

“It has to be made using void essence,” she murmured. “It’s some variation on the transportation platform. I wonder why this isn’t how those work?”

“I really wish you could get me one of those,” Sto said. “A lot of Runners talk about it.”

It reminded Tibs of something, and he took the puzzle cylinder out of his pouch. “Mez, you need to come through.” Tibs passed his hand through the doorway and placed it on the ground. “He can’t take this until you’re out of the room.”

“Actually,” Sto said, “I can absorb items when you’re a dozen paces away.”

“Then why can’t you make changes to a room from the same distance?” Tibs looked at the archer. When the man didn’t move, he grabbed his arm and gently pulled. Mez resisted

for a moment, then stepped through.

“A room’s more complex. I can’t change only part of it. It’s in the way I make them.” The cylinder melted into the floor. “I really wish you’d been able to get me that cube.”

“Cross wasn’t willing to lend it to me.”

“She’s who gave you that?” Carina asked. “I thought she was a fighter.”

“Don’t use me as an example of what fighters are like,” Jackal said.

“I’m not,” she replied. “I knew Pyan too, remember.”

They fell silent.

“I’m sorry,” Sto said in the silence. Tibs nodded. Understanding the danger they all faced didn’t make losing a friend easier. But he didn’t hold Sto responsible. It was just their lives.

“You can recreate it now, right?” He asked. And on the other side of the doorway, the cylinder reformed.

“It’s an interesting mechanism. Rather simple for what it does.”

“Makes you wonder why you didn’t think of it before, doesn’t it?” Ganny asked with a hint of snarkiness in her tone. Had the two of them been in a fight?

“Alright,” Jackal said. “Let’s get this going. Carina, what’s the consensus on crossing the pool?”

Tibs watched the cylinder melt away and followed his friends. Extending his sense ahead.

“It’s getting complicated,” she replied, looking over the papers. “The essence triggers on the bridge are fast enough it’s almost impossible not to trigger them, there’s now something in the water, so swimming isn’t a good choice.”

“Still don’t know how,” Mez said.

“We’ve seen what happens when Tibs ices the pool over, although no one’s recreated it, so there’s no telling if that’s more difficult now. That leaves the ledge as the easiest, but the breakable sections change from one time to the next so whoever goes first is at risk of falling in the water.”

“I nominate Tibs,” Jackal said.

“Just because he’s the rogue?” Carina asked.

“He loves to climb walls, this is basically the same, but with something underfoot, and now that the corruption is out of his system, he won’t cramp up and fall.”

“Carina,” Tibs called, stepping onto the bridge. “How fast do they say the triggers are moving?” He felt the line move up and down.

“Fast enough it’s hard to time the crossing, especially the last one. The opening doesn’t remain wide very long.”

He frowned. “This doesn’t feel that much faster to me.” He waited until it was above him and stepped forward. “Considering we can all sense the line, I think this is the easiest way now.”

Jackal stepped forward and extended his hand close to where the line moved. Tibs knew when his friend felt it, because he moved his hand to follow it.

Tibs canted his head. “Can’t you just feel it?”

The fighter shrugged. "It's easier this way. I'm with Tibs, this is slow enough I can step through." He did that to demonstrate.

Carina was looking over the pages. "I don't understand. I have multiple comments about how the bridge killed a lot of people."

Tibs frowned. This was usually where Sto comment on the previous Runners. How they'd made mistakes. He looked at the next trigger on the bridge. Sto was silent when he wanted Tibs not to be distracted. Maybe the triggers were variable?

He felt for it, and the sideways motion was comparable to the up-down of the first one. "Let's use the bridge, but stay alert for changes. Maybe they don't always go the same speed and we're just here at the right time."

He stepped around the trigger and reached the third one. He passed it without difficulties. He stepped off the bridge and turned. Carina was the only one not on it yet. Still looking through the papers.

"Carina, hurry up, you can do that on this side!" he called.

She put them away and started on the bridge as Khumdar stepped off. Tibs fought the urge to go to her and help. She could sense the essence as well as any of his friends.

She ducked under the first, stepped around the second. Started on the third, crouching, then stopped.

"Is something wrong?" Jackals asked, and Tibs's breath caught.

"Almost mistimed it," she answered. Her head moved up and down in time with that trigger, and when it was up, she hurried through, jumping right before the sideways one crossed the path. She stood and took the papers out. "Definitely not as fast as they said."

"Tibs may be right that the speed varies over time," Khumdar said.

"If that was the case I'd expect someone to have made a note."

"That's only if they aren't keeping secrets," Jackals said.

She glared at him and shook the papers. "This is research. Nothing gets accomplished if someone on the team hides something."

Jackal nodded. "And sorcerers always share everything, even with other sorcerers, right?"

"Yes," Carina said.

"Then make your notes and tell us what to expect in the next room."

"Carnage," she said before taking a sharpened stick of charcoal out.

## Stepping up-24

The room looked no different, five Whippers and a dozen rats. Papers rustled, and Tibs looked at Carina, who was looking through the papers, shaking her head. "This says there're eight golems, or maybe seven. We need new papers. This is getting to smudges. Maybe it's a five?" He mumbled. "I think they look like that in Kartian, and Olive is from there."

“Maybe you should stop referring to them,” Mez said, “or just rewrite the whole thing?”

“These were supposed to help,” she said in exasperation.

“Pounding on those Whippers will make you feel better,” Jackal said, grinning.

“Pounding on things is a ‘you’ thing,” Carina said, folding the papers and placing them in a pocket on her robe. She smiled and raised a hand, a small whirlwind forming in it. “I prefer blasting things apart.”

Tibs watched the essence move, then tried to replicate it.

Jackal gave Carina a bow. “Then, my lady is welcome to strike first.” He motioned toward the room.

Carina stepped in, causing the Whippers to activate. It wasn’t as dramatic as the first-floor boss with the light already at full strength as they turned. She rolled her hand, gathering the essence around her, ripping Tibs’s poor excuse for a whirlwind apart, and pushed her hand at the center Whipper. The air funnel hit it, and it flew across the room to hit the wall.

“Wow,” Tibs said at the same time as Sto.

“Someone’s been training,” Jackal said with a grin.

“I don’t think the dungeon’s seen anyone do this before.”

“I certainly haven’t,” Sto confirmed.

“Rho’s all about coming up with our own ways to manipulate our essence,” Carina said.

“Why are they not attacking?” Khumdar asked, “Carina is in the room.”

“I’m appreciating the moment,” Sto said. “And realizing I might have to raise the difficulty. You guys have gotten getting better since like time.”

“The dungeon’s impressed.”

Jackal ran into the room. “Good to know!” His last step reverberated as right before it his body turned the gray of stone. The punch staggered the Whipper.

“Sto, what are you doing?” Ganny said. “They’re going to just walk through it.”

The rats ran up Jackal’s legs. “Mez, shoot them.”

“I’m going to hit you too,” the archer replied as Tibs stepped in the room, knife in hand. He made the ‘X’ and only put a small amount of essence in it. It was enough to blast a chunk of stone off the Whipper.

“Don’t make them explosive and I’ll be fine,” Jackal said, kicking the rats out of his way to follow the stunned golem and punch it again. Flashes of light followed his words as Mez unleashed fire arrows one after the other.

Tibs continues blasting the Whipper with his water attack, pulling in essence between each to replenish the amulet and his reserve. Khumdar stepped around him, staff whirling in his hands, darkness trailing it and him.

The motions for the ‘X’ were natural enough Tibs could watch the cleric fight, moving to avoid the whip, except once, and Tibs lost his focus as Khumdar staggered under the impact on his shoulder, the darkness surrounding him flying back.

Pain in Tibs’s side forced him to focus. The one disrupted attack had allowed his

golem to go on the offensive and Tibs needed most of his essence to form an ice armor to reinforce his leather one. When he tried to make another 'X', the golem immediately whipped him, forcing him to jump out of the way.

Range was out of the question now. He grinned. That was okay—he ran at the Whipper—he had plenty of experience in close-quarter fighting at this point. He threw water at the golem's feet. And he still had tricks.

The golem jumped sideways as Tibs iced it, and he was so surprised at the action he stepped on the ice and nearly slid off balance, mentally latching into the essence under his feet. The stop was so sudden he tripped.

Cursing, Tibs rolled out of the way of the descending foot, absorbing the water in the process. He slashed at the leg, only to realize he was no longer holding his knife.

He pulled one of his air knives with another curse. If he wasn't going to throw them, he needed to make sure he didn't drop them.

A blast of air shoved him away as he slashed again, causing him to miss the leg, but putting him out of reach of the golem's stomping.

"Thanks!" He yelled, getting up and gathering essence. He started etching the 'X' and had to jump out of the way. He glared at the golem. "Okay, this is getting tiresome." He threw the knife, using the little air essence he had to keep it on target as he pulled the other one out and flicked a water jet.

Neither attacks were enough to cause serious damage, but the golem focused on it, and let Tibs etch the 'X' in the air and pour essence in it. When the golem looked at him, Tibs released it, and the powerful jet shattered it.

Tibs placed his hands on his knees. Controlling how much of his essence the attack used still took too much out of him. The guild evaluators who had supervised his test had commented on it, but decided, like everyone did, that it was a side effect of his young age.

As useful as the excuse was, Tibs was getting tired of it.

"This was fun," Jackal said.

Tibs grinned at the fighter who stood at the center of rubble, shifting it with a foot, looking at the floor, searching for his well-earned loot, Tibs figured.

He straightened and pulled essence to him, refilling his reserve and transferring that to the amulet. He was getting faster, refilling it under five minutes.

"We have two amulets," Carina said. "You think we can keep them for Tibs this time?"

"Won't that depend on if there's something one of us needs more?" Mez answered.

"I think, Tibs deserves to take priority," Jackal replied. "He can't fight at full efficiency without proper reserves of his essences, and he's up to needing five amulets in total."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Sto said and Tibs frowned, but he didn't relay the message.

"Let's see what other loot there is first," he said. "Amulets are common enough there's always some. Stuff specific to you is a lot more rare."

"A lack of essence is more of a shackle for you than a precious item will be for us," Khumdar said.



“We can still wait until we’ve cleared the floor to decide,” Tibs replied. “Unless you leave the amulets behind, they’re still going to be there once we have everything.”

“Someone’s getting cocky,” Sto said with a chuckle.

“Khumdar,” Carina called, “that dark aura, it’s new. I didn’t know a cleric could do that.”

The cleric inclined his head. “Not having someone to guide my training means I am not limited by their preconceptions. I have been studying the two fighters who have darkness as their element. They create a shell as protection. I can’t seem to manage to make it as tight and solid as they, but it still offers protection.”

“Mindset,” Tibs said, flicking water at his feet and icing it. “Alistair says that how we think affects what we can do.” He placed a foot on it and it slid around. “Fighter are all about being hard, their attacks their defenses, so it makes sense any use of their essence will also be solid.” He latched onto the essence, but that wasn’t enough. “As a cleric, you don’t think that way, so your adaptation of it will be different.”

What had he done? It had been reflex, and in the middle of a fight, so he hadn’t been able to pay attention.

“That is astute,” Khumdar said.

Tibs gave up on the ice patch and absorbed the water. He’d figure it out later. He smiled at the cleric. “I ask a lot of questions.”

Carina sighed. “I wish my teacher was as forthcoming with answers as yours is. Mine always goes on about how figuring out the answer is as important as the answer itself.”

“He is not wrong,” Khumdar said.

“And sorcerers are all about the research, right?” Jackal added. “Onto the next room,” he said before Carina could do more than glare at him.

“Anyone needs healing?” Tibs asked.

“I’m good,” Jackals replied. “I love my stone body.”

“I have bruises,” Khumdar said, “but nothing that will impede my fighting.”

Carina and Mez were uninjured, having stayed out of range for the entire fight.

The rattling village looked no different from the entrance.

“This might not be accurate,” Carina said, “but the notes from the other team claim the population has close to doubled.”

“So we’ll be ready for a big loot reward,” Jackal said, grinning. “Same as usual? You and Tibs clear the tents while the three of us take on the bulk?”

“Go left,” Sto said.

“No,” Ganny contradicted him.

“Yes, go left Tibs.”

“We talked about this, Sto,” she snapped.

“You talked, I listened. You were wrong, I am right.”

“You go right and I take the left?” Tibs asked Carina. She nodded. He wasn’t sure what this was about, but Sto hadn’t led him into traps yet, so while he and Ganny resolved their argument, he’d do his part to clear the room.

The first three tents were empty, the fourth and fifth had ratlings, and he easily dispatched them, collecting the silver.

“Ninth tent,” Sto said. Ganny had fallen mostly silent, grumbling her protest indistinctly. He was getting the sense that ultimately, Sto had the power here. She advised him, and if Sto let her, she could affect the dungeon, but in the end, what he wanted was what happened.

He cleared the tents, ignoring Sto’s insistence he hurry. There was a group of five ratlings in one tent, a repeat of the cooking scene from his first time in the village, but this time, he ended the fight quickly.

The ninth tent was empty, except for a chest in the middle. He crouched before him and looked it over for traps.

“It’s safe,” Sto said in exasperation.

Tibs believed him, but he still only opened it once he confirmed there were none. The inside was the right size for the chest this time and contained a set of leather bracers. Tibs frowned. They were plain, no essence weave on them, they were even scuffed. They felt too ordinary for a second-floor loot.

He picked one up and nearly dropped it as he felt the essence in it on contact.

“You like?” Sto said with pride.

He placed it down again, and it was a regular bracer. “This is like the pouch that kept Walter’s amulet hidden.”

“The hiding part of it, yes, the rest of all for you.”

He picked them up. He couldn’t work out the weave, it was too tight, but he could make out there were a lot of different essences involved. One thing he understood, once he stopped focusing on the weave and felt for what it was hiding, was the reserves in it.

He turned the bracers over, then felt inside. “Where are the amulets? I can feel the reserves but this is just leather.” He frowned. “Can you turn leather into essence reserves?”

“No, that can’t be done as far as Ganny knows,” Sto said. “Just like I did for the bow, it needs to be gems.”

“Tibs,” she said, “put them back, please.”

“It’s his loot,” Sto replied, tone hard.

“Okay, what’s going on?” he asked.

“Sto is breaking the rules again.” Instead of the usual annoyance, there was worry in her voice.

“Who cares,” Sto said in exasperation.

“They’re going to notice.”

“Well, I don’t care. Tibs saved my life. He deserves a reward.”

“I think you’ve done enough already,” she said.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” Tibs said, sensing the reserves. They were big, each much larger than his current amulet. Five out of the eight were filled, and he couldn’t tell what the other three would contain, but he could guess.

“You won’t. Ganny’s just trying to scare me into staying on the ‘straight and narrow’, whatever that means. She’s never seen those ‘them’ so I doubt they’re real.”

“They are,” she stated.

Tibs shook his head. Dungeon stuff was beyond him, but it was Sto’s decision as to what happened here, so Tibs was going with his wishes. He placed a bracer next to the one he wore. Other than the scratches on it, they were identical, down to the knife sheath on the left one. No, the new ones were a little thicker.

“How did you copy my bracers?”

Sto snorted. “I didn’t copy your bracers. I copied that from one of the other Runners. A lot of them wear the same kind of armor as you.”

The Runners he’d sent to Darran.

“How did you hide the amulets in this? Is it like with the chest that and they are larger on the inside?” He didn’t want to think about everyone who’d died. Or that it had been someone he’d known who had provided Sto with the model to make these.

“That’s an idea,” Sto said, “but no. The amulet in your pouch is large because it’s pretty bad quality. It can’t hold much essence for the volume it contains. The ones in your bracers, on top of being shaped to fit without being visually noticeable, are much purer.”

“And there’s eight of them. Four on each.”

“You said you are going to get more elements, so I planned ahead.”

“I said that when I was here, Sto. You didn’t have that much time to make this.”

“Tibs, you saw how quickly I reformed the puzzle. Coming up with how to make the bracers to me a while, but now that I do, it’s just a question of having the essence.”

And a lot of Runners had died.

“Tibs, please,” Ganny said. “I know you like having loot and I know this is going to help you, but...”

“I’m sorry, Ganny, I can’t give them back.” People he’d known had provided the essence to make them. He’d honor them by making use of it. By using the reserves they contained to get stronger. To beat Sto by staying alive.

The sigh she gave was tired more than angry.

“Why make them looking already used?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sto asked. “So you can keep them without having to pay the guild for them.”

“But they’d think they are ordinary leathers.” Unless the person looking over their loot picked them up.

“You really want to give the guild even one copper you don’t have to? I’d make all your loot like this, but the cost in essence is high.”

“And it would look suspicious if we always came out of normal gear.”

“Huh, I guess that’s true. So you can put them on now, and not have to tell anyone about them, not even your team.”

## Stepping up-25

“How did you make out?” Jackal asked Tibs as he joined them, carrying a sword in

one hand, and the bracers in his other. The sword had been in the only other chest Tibs had come across. It was enchanted with a single essence he couldn't identify, but he suspected it was metal. He also had a dozen more silvers from the ratlings he'd killed.

"I," he hesitated, "I made out okay. How about you?" There were a few bodies around Jackal, Mez, and Khumdar, but there had to have been more. The cleric leaned on his staff.

"Close to three golds worth in silver from the bodies," Jackal said, smiling.

"Carina isn't back?" Tibs looked at the tents. He saw no indications of fighting. He looked Khumdar over. "Do you need me to heal you?"

The cleric smiled. "I will be all right. Despite the training I have done, I forget that actual fighting takes more out of me."

Carina stepped out from among the tents, carrying a staff over of shoulder, with armor pieces attached to them.

"Good haul," Jackal called, smiling.

"Why are there so many armor parts?" she demanded. "Why can't you all just wear robes? They're a lot easier to carry."

"Jackal could manage with robe now," Mez said, "being stone means he doesn't need armor anymore."

"I always need armor," the fighter said.

"Take your pick," Carina replied, dumping the staff and armor on the ground before them. An epaulet and a pair of boots were metal. "This stuff's heavy."

The staff was identical to Khumdar's, except for the essence woven into it. This one was fire. The armor also had essence woven into them. He couldn't guess what, since unlike the sword, he could think of a variety of uses for essence on them.

"I also found this." Tibs handed the bracers to Jackal, who looked them over.

"Off one of the ratlings? Yours are in better condition."

"It worked!" Sto exclaimed.

"What worked?" Tibs asked, and Jackal raised an eyebrow. "It's got amulets in it for essence. I expected you to be able to sense them when you hold the bracers. Like with the pouch."

"They're attuned to you," Sto said.

"What does attuned mean?"

"Well..." Sto trailed off. "It means only you can use them."

"It means that the essence in the item is set to only be able to respond to you," Carina answered. "It's something about how everyone has a specific 'weave' within them. A combination of your essence, your life force, your thought patterns." He frowned. "It's more complicated than that, but it's all I remember from what I read." She took one bracer.

"Like that," Sto said.

"So you know what makes me..." Tibs looked for the right word. "Me?" he settled on.

Jackal smiled and Carina glared him silent before he could say whatever had just crossed his mind.

"Well..." now Sto hesitated. "Not the way Carina described it. I figured out how to

make a weave in such a way that it's... imprints if the best way I can describe it. On the first person to touch them. A noble had a sword that was like that and Ganny helped me work out how it was made."

"I should be able to sense something," Carina said, frowning.

"If it's like the pouch," Tibs said, "Bardik said that it takes a specific mindset, along with essence to understand what it is. Do you want to try it?" He asked Khumdar, figuring the cleric was the one with the best chance of sensing it. To Tibs's surprise, he shook his head.

"No one's going to know this is enchanted," Mez mused. "That makes it powerful just with that." He looked at the others. "Am I the only one who feels it's too powerful?"

"The dungeon has a soft spot for Tibs," Jackal said. "Going all the way back to when we started."

"I do not," Sto stated.

Tibs smiled. "He made me these because I saved his life. It can store eight different essences."

Carina whistled. "How much?"

Tibs shrugged. "More than my current amulet in each." He tried to work out a sense of how much more. "Three times? I don't know how to measure it."

Carina nodded. "I guess we'd have to run tests to figure out exactly how much they contain. I'll try to get books on how to do that."

"I'm not reading them," Tibs replied, and she smiled.

"It's for me." She handed it back to him. "But eight reserves means the dungeon knows what you're doing."

Tibs nodded. "He heard me talk about it when we entered."

"Put them on," Jackal said. "If the dungeon went to this extent to reward you, no need to tempt the guild with them."

Tibs nodded and replaced the bracers.

"Should we bring the old ones?" Khumdar asked.

"No point," Jackal replied. "It might make them suspicious since they look worn. Why would we bother overloading ourselves with worn stuff when the dungeon provides us with so much brand new ones?"

Tibs closed his eyes and got used to the sense of having so much essence within reach. He chuckled.

"Oh-oh," Jackal said, grinning. "I think someone's getting drunk on all that power."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I don't know what to do with all it."

"You use it," Jackal stated.

"How? I tried a few things with air, and I can harden myself with earth, but I never even tried anything with fire before because of how little I had. I have no idea if I even want to try something with corruption."

At that, the other nodded. With only Don as a reference for what corruption could do, Tibs didn't want to even think of what emulating him would cause.

"Alright, let's pack up and move on," Jackal said. "We have bunny people to kill."

“Bunnylings,” Tibs corrected and Jackal rolled his eyes.

“Maybe we should wear the armor,” Mez commented as he tried to fit the piece into Khumdar’s pack.

“We’d have to leave our pieces behind,” Jackals answered, “so you’d either have to buy those from the guild or new armor. And the guild might not give you a choice. If you scoff it, they might consider you bought it.”

“Then we need to come up with a different system, maybe ropes.”

“We can cut the tent’s canvas into that,” Carina offered.

They spent half an hour tying the armor to the packs, Jackal complaining the entire time.

“It’s a good thing stealth isn’t needed in the rest of the dungeon,” Tibs commented at the clanging sound the pieces made as they walked to the bunnyling room.

“We can wrap them in canvas,” Carina said, stopping and looking back.

“Next time,” Jackals said, keeping her from returning to the ratling village. “Like Tibs said, no need for stealth from this point forward.”

“You realize you’ve just given the dungeon ideas, right?” Mez commented, which made Sto chuckle.

“I doubt we’re the first ones to mention it,” Tibs replied, looking over the empty room. “This feels so wrong. There should be tents.” He focused on the essence moving under the floor, then focused only on the earth essence in an attempt to work out the layout of the tunnels. His range wasn’t wide enough.

He frowned.

He’d frozen the entire pool, which had been around the length of this room. If he’d done that, he should be able to extend his sense to encompass this one. Except he’d had an amulet’s worth of water essence and... he smiled. He now had more earth essence at his disposal.

He placed a hand on the floor and pushed earth essence into it. He whistled as the warren complex lit up.

“What is it?” Carina asked.

“I can see the warren. It’s more than just going from one trap door to the other. It goes up and under. We missed doors when we looked into them the previous times. There are other rooms.”

“Any loot in them?” Jackal asked.

“I can’t sense that. Just the shape of the warren. If we take the time to explore it, there might be. There should be, really. It’s the equivalent of the ratling village.”

“Do we fit in those tunnels?” Mez asked.

“I do,” Tibs replied without thinking about it, then. “I might be the only one. If fighting’s involved, the rest of you would have to be on your knees and bent over.”

“Didn’t all the bunnies come out the last times?” Mez asked.

“Yes,” Tibs answered, “but he’s listening in, he might change things.”

“I can’t if you step in the room,” Sto replied.

“Which starts the fight,” Tibs said. Then decided they had more to gain with

preventing Sto from altering how the room worked than continuing to gather information. He stepped in and pulled his knives.

Time to put his extended water reserves to the test.

## Stepping up-26

A flick of the knife sent a ball of water at the bunnyling, knocking it off its feet before it could jump. Tibs dodged another, flicking another ball of water, but at the floor where it would land, icing it and turning to throw his air knife. The bunnyling jumped to avoid it, but Tibs flicked a finger, and the knife responded to the essence he'd added to it, suddenly changing direction and embedding itself in the bunnyling's chest.

He grinned as he concentrated on calling the knife back, then was sliding on the ground, pain exploding in his shoulder. He wrapped his fist with fire and punched the bunnyling off him. A quick look as he got to his feet showed him his team fighting, with Jackal and Khumdar in the middle of it and Carina keeping bunnylings afloat for Mez to shoot at.

He needed to learn how to do that.

He wrapped his shoulder in his essence and tightened it. Wincing at the sharp pain, but Tibs was ready for the bunnyling running in his direction, armed with a short sword. He coated his arm with earth and blocked the strike, slashing with his knife in return, then kicking away. An arrow exploded the bunnyling and Tibs nodded a thank you to Mez before running toward his knife, sliding over ice as he grabbed it and turning to throw it at a bunnyling heading for Khumdar's back and hitting it.

Tibs stared. He's hit it. He'd actually—

He was sliding back. "Focus!" Jackal yelled, releasing him and planting a fist in the bunnyling who'd landed where Tibs had been standing. "On the monsters," he added as an afterthought.

Tibs stood, aimed an open palm at a bunnyling in the middle of a jump, and formed the whirlwind pattern Carina had used. The result wasn't as impressive, but the bunnyling crashed in a heap, instead of on its feet.

He redid the whirlwind, narrowing it, keeping the bunnyling from advancing toward him, until Tibs thought to add water essence to create ice shrapnel and ended up disrupting his air attack instead. The bunnyling careened at him, his running out of control, and Tibs jumped out of the way. He pulled a knife, threw it at the back, and cursed as the adjustment he attempted didn't work. He'd taken the wrong knife.

Khumdar's staff slammed at the back of the bunnyling as it turned and it went down, head rolling away.

Tibs turned, searching for another attacker, a small whirlwind in his hand in preparation, but the only sound was his team's breathing, each looking around, ready to attack.

"Tibs?" Jackal called. "Do you sense anymore?"

Tibs released the air essence and focused on his essence. His team; Khumdar had a break in his forearm. The others had minor injuries. No creatures under them. He did a slow circuit around the room to cover it all, then. “We’re good.”

“That we are,” Jackal said with a grin, his skin regaining a normal color.

Tibs felt his reserves. The fight had barely cost him a fraction of what he had access to from his bracers.

“You got distracted,” Carina said.

Tibs grins and made a whirlwind in one hand, and a flame in the other. “I have a lot to distract me now.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “A fight isn’t the time to experiment.”

He shrugged, snuffing both out. “I just got the bracers. This was the best time to—”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said. “You lost that whirlwind, why?”

He frowned. He hadn’t realized she’d seen that. She’d probably felt it. “I tried to add water, but instead of creating ice shards, it broke apart.” He looked at her expectantly.

She shook her head. “I’m nowhere close to working with multiple essences. You’ll probably figure that stuff before I do, but don’t try it in the middle of a fight. Getting yourself killed to appease your curiosity isn’t going to help you.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “You do the warrens, we’ll go through the remains.”

He sighed. “You need to get yourself smaller so I don’t have to do that by myself.”

“I don’t think earth lets me do that,” the fighter replied, smiling. He slammed a foot down on a warren door, breaking it.

“I could have lifted it,” Tibs said as he moved the broken pieces out of his way.

“But this looks cooler.”

“Not particularly,” Sto commented, and Tibs chuckled.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“The dungeon doesn’t agree.”

“Well, until it comes down here and fights me, I think I’m the better authority on what looks cool.”

Tibs froze as Sto let out a thoughtful hum. “Oh, you now have him thinking.”

Jackal’s grin broadened, and Tibs grumbled as he crouched through the tunnel, using his earth essence to feel for hidden doors. When he found the first one, he wasn’t surprised he missed it the previous time. With the tunnel being uneven, it was unnoticeable and needed a good amount of force to make it swivel. The bunnylings loved their swiveling doors. This tunnel went down to a series of rooms with pallets for bunnylings to sleep on. He found bags with coins, a knife that had fire essence woven through it. Vials of healing potions, cloth with more essence woven in them.

He surfaced, dropped them, and went back to search the warren. At the other level, it was extensive, with almost as many rooms as there had been tents in the ratling’s room.

They had four gold worth of coins and a few silver by the time he was done, the knife, the cloth, which was one large sheet. Eighteen vials of healing potions, one that was bluish instead, this Carina thought was to wash away their exhaustion, but even Jackal wasn’t willing to try it.



They each drank a healing potion and stored the rest.

“Onto the hall?” Mez asked, notching an arrow in his bow.

“I don’t think the dungeon will let you deactivate the traps that way again,” Carina said.

Tibs stepped to the edge of the hall, feeling the trigger lines. He thought they were closer together. He broke one with a hand and spears came out of the wall in rapid succession, but randomly instead of as a wall that moved away.

“Another team figured they could cross the hall by staying between the spears,” Sto said. At the other end, the pedestal still stood, waiting for someone to press it.

“It can’t be that simple,” Carina said. “Tibs?”

He shook his head. “I can’t sense that far.”

Mez shrugged and raised his bow. “Only one way to find out.” He released the arrow, and it hit something they couldn’t see before the pedestal.

“Figured,” Jackal said. “Tibs?”

“Give another a minute,” Mez said, notching another arrow. He fired it at the wall, and it bounced off it, passing behind the pedestal.

“I didn’t think you could do that with an arrow,” Tibs said.

“The angle has to be shallow enough the impact won’t break the shaft.” He notched another arrow. “If this is going to be standard, I’m going to have to invest in hardened arrows.”

“Or Tibs would get metal as an element and do it for you.”

“Metal isn’t an element I need,” Tibs answered.

“Metal is going to make the arrow too heavy,” Mez said. Releasing it. It bounced off the wall and hit whatever was before the pedestal.

“I do not believe metal essence would add any weight to an arrow. Essence does not weigh anything. Carina?”

“I haven’t read about that.”

“However they’re made, hardened arrows are expensive.” This one hit the pedestal on the side and broke. “At least this confirms the obstruction doesn’t go around the pedestal.”

“Getting it right is going to take you a while,” Jackal said.

“It’s going to be faster than me crossing it,” Tibs replied. The way the space between triggers was set up, he’d have little maneuvering room. He would have to think multiple steps ahead to ensure his body was positioned so he could bend as required when he got there.

“You only have five arrows left,” Carina said. “Maybe you should switch to fire arrows?”

Mez shook his head. “I’m worried that a fire arrow will destroy the plate instead of pressing it. That could make it impossible to deactivate the traps.” He released another arrow and again it hit the side of the pedestal, but close enough Tibs thought he’d hit the plate. “A last one, then I’m leaving it to you, Tibs.”

Alistair said that suffusing his body with water would make him more agile, more flexible. It might be the way to make it through the hall. At least make crossing it easier.

With a distant thunk, the trigger lines disappeared.

“Did that work?” Mez asked.

“This isn’t supposed to be an archery contest,” Sto grumbled.

“It did,” Tibs said. “But it’s probably the last time. This isn’t how we’re supposed to be doing it.”

“The dungeon doesn’t like being outsmarted?” Jackal asked, grinning.

“This isn’t outsmarting me,” Sto huffed as a reply.

“No, he doesn’t,” Tibs translated.

“You think it’s going to make us pay for it by making the boss-room harder?” Carina asked.

Jackal started down the hall. “Of, I certainly hope so.” He rubbed his stony hands together. “I want to have to work for my loot.”

“You really like giving him ideas, don’t you?” Tibs sighed.

“So long as the loot is correspondingly better,” the fighter replied, “I am all for it.”

## Stepping up-27

Tibs looked the room over. The colored hexagonal tiles were mostly hidden by rats, ratlings, bunnies, and bunnylings. At the back, between two columns, were the two Big Brutes flanking Bigger Brute.

“The dungeon added rats and bunnies,” Mez said.

“We have to clear them,” Jackal said, tone grave.

“You can kick them on your way to the golems,” Mez replied.

“Are you okay?” Tibs asked the fighter. For all his bravado, Jackal and nearly died here during their last run.

Jackal smiled. “I’m fine. I just don’t want the golems to be healed this time. That’s too unfair.”

“Right,” Carina replied with a chuckle, “because you are all about the fair fight.”

“Tilting the odds in my favor is how a fair fight goes,” Jackal said, grinning. The smile faded almost immediately.

“We don’t have to fight them,” Tibs said, squeezing Jackal’s arm.

“There’s loot to get,” the fighter said, his features hardening.

“Tibs,” Carina called him before he could object to Jackal. She formed a whirlwind in her hand. “This is what the essence should be like.”

Tibs looked at Jackal before focusing on the whirlwind. “We’re going to have to watch Jackal,” he said. “Or he’s going to do something stupid.”

Carina smiled. “That’s our team leader. Don’t worry, we won’t let him die. Now pay attention.”

He felt now how the essence wasn’t just moving in the whirlwind, it interlocked in patterns.

“It’s an etching,” he whispered. “Can you stop it, so I can study it?”

“What’s an etching?” she asked.

Tibs sighed. “For all the claims the guild makes about everything being the same, they really aren’t all doing the same thing. What do you call this?” he indicated the etching spinning within the whirlwind.

“A spell.”

Which showed that he’d been right; etching didn’t need a knife to happen. The wind stopped. And he studied how the essence was etched, then recreated it, finding that it didn’t want to stay still something about the etching put the air in motion.

“I hate to interrupt the lesson,” Jackal said, “but we have a room to clear.”

“I’ll practice it later,” Tibs said, then went back to the threshold, both of his air knives in hand.

“We clear as many of the rats and bunnies as we can before going after the ‘lings,” Jackal said. “Then the ‘lings, and after that, the golems. We’re leaving the bigger one for last if we can.”

“That sounds a lot like strategy, Jackal,” Mez said. “Be careful you don’t turn into a competent leader.”

A smile cracked Jackal’s stern expression, then was gone. “Are we ready?” The others nodded, and Jackal stepped into the room.

Tibs threw his knives as soon as he stepped across the threshold. Focusing on the air essence, he had them wrapped in, guiding them to cut rats and bunnies. When one knife embedded itself in a bunny, Tibs tried to pull it out, but the essence unraveled under the strain. His second knife got stuck in another one not long after that and he switched to water blast and coating his knife in fire when a ratling got within range.

Around him fire and air exploded, taking out rats and bunnies and ‘lings. As large as the room was, Tibs was still surprised to only feel slight heat of air movement. Mez and Carina had more precision than he could manage.

A dozen ‘lings had retreated to the golems and Tibs looked around. The rest were being finished. He tried to wrap air around one of his knife to bring it back, but it was too far, or there was something else about it he hadn’t understood yet and he had to walk to them to retrieve his knives.

Not being able to ask questions about them sucked.

“Looks like we don’t get a choice in the matter,” Jackals growled.

“Is there another threshold we have to cross before they will activate?” Khumdar asked as the two Big Brutes took a step in their direction. “That will be a no, then.”

“Tibs, you and Khumdar do your best to thin the ‘lings. We don’t want them healing the brutes.” Jackal stepped toward the golems as Carina called for him to hang back. There was no keeping Jackal from this fight. Only helping him survive it.

Tibs threw his knives and sacrificed them to kill two bunnylings. Then he was flinging water and sliding around on it, just barely controlling his movement.

He was getting the hang of this.

And lost his footing.

He planted a knife in the ratling's foot coming down on him before rolling away, his next knife when in the side of a bunnyling, then the next was thrown at one heading for Khumdar, who was sending more 'lings flying with sweeps of his staff.

As he stood and searched his body for another knife, two 'lings approached him. Grinning and he stopped backing up, hands empty. Tibs returned the grin and water flowed over his hands until they formed into jagged weapons nearly the length of a short sword. They crinkled as he iced them.

Tibs was disappointed not to see them hesitate. Then he was on them, slashing and stabbing and being cut and stabbed in return as he realized he was getting in too close for the length of the blade he gave himself.

Training. He needed training in fighting with swords. He shortened them and dispatched the 'lings with ease. Then moved on to the next one.

He and Khumdar rejoined as the last of the 'lings died. Jackal was fighting one brute while the other was kept from joining by Carina and Mez, who unleashed all they had.

"They have been made stronger," the cleric said.

Tibs nodded. It was what Sto did, and he expected they'd were stronger than average because of Jackal being Lambda now. Did Sto know bout the ranks?

Tibs sensed the golems, but unlike with people, the essence flowing through them didn't match their bones and he couldn't tell how injured they were. Only that the one Jackal was fighting had much less than the other.

Tibs felt the change in the essence an instant before the golem taking the barrage from Carina and Mez stepped in the other's direction. Most of it shifted to the hand.

Tibs took out his knife and etched the 'X', then pours all the water essence he had left in it. When he released it, Khumdar caught him, and the brute shattered under the impact. Tibs pulled essence back so he could stand and watched as Jackal punched the other into pieces.

As they regrouped, Tibs felt Jackal's essence. It was cracked in places, but with his body stone, the fighter didn't seem to notice it.

"It was coming to heal?" Jackal asked.

"I figured so," Tibs replied. "Why else move toward it?" He didn't want to voice what he'd felt. Sto already had too many advantages already.

"Not that I'm complaining," Mez said, "but is anyone worried that the big one didn't join in the fight?"

Tibs looked at Bigger Brute, which was still.

"Did Jackal catch the dungeon by surprise with his strategy?" Mez asked.

"I doubt it," Tibs replied. That Sto was silent worried him more. It meant he was busy with something else, or he was planning something.

Bigger Brute raised a hand and pointed at Jackal.

"You," Sto said in Tibs's mind. "Damn it, why can't I get it to talk." He sighed. "Tibs?"

Tibs snorted, and his team stared at him.

"Come on, Tibs, take this seriously," Sto said.

"I think you're getting your wish," he told Jackal. "That's the dungeon calling you

out.”

“You mean I get a one-on-one fight with the dungeon?” Jackal asked, gleefully.

“Unless we join in,” Carina said, “I don’t see it bringing anything else. We’ve killed all the monsters it had here.”

Tibs dropped to his knees and placed a hand on the floor. He sighed in relief once he confirmed there were no tunnels under the floor.

“Yeah,” he said, “no other monsters.”

“How are we doing this, Jackal?” Khumdar asked.

“I’m fighting it.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if we just blasted it?” Mez asked. “Get the loot and leave? You’re hurt.”

Jackal looked down at himself. Cracks were visible on his exposed skin.

Carina handed him a vial.

“How about it, dungeon? Is me healing considered fair?”

“Just take the thing and drink it,” Carina ordered. “I thought you never fought fair.”

“I’m not going to tell the dungeon that,” Jackal protested.

“I believe it is too late,” Khumdar said. “You have recounted many stories of your times in the pits while we were in the dungeon. It knows you cheat.”

“I don’t care about that,” Sto said, sounding smug.

Jackal toasted the dungeon and drank the potion.

Tibs watched Jackal, sensing the cracks in his essence close as they did on his stone body. He couldn’t sense how the potion worked. Something else for later.

Jackal stepped toward the golem. “No hold barred,” he stated. “This ends when one of us is in pieces.”

“Of course,” Sto said.

“If it looks like you’re about to lose,” Mez said, raising his bow as flaming arrow formed, “I am blasting it.”

“No,” Jackal stated.

“Yes,” Tibs and Carina replied.

Tibs looked up. “I’m sorry, but I’m not letting you kill him just because of his ego.”

“I understand,” Sto replied, still smug. “If you have to rescue him, it means I won.”

“Tibs, I have to do this,” Jackal said.

Tibs eyes him. “You are not dying.”

“I’m going to beat it.”

“Then you don’t have to worry about us.”

The fighter sighed and stepped up to the golem.

“Okay,” Sto said, “Tibs when you say so we start—”

Jackal struck the golem in the featureless face, then the chest, then the shoulders. On the fourth punch, it raised its arms but was too slow to block it and this punch staggered it back, cracking the chest.

The golem swung at Jackal but missed. Jackal watched the fist, then struck the arm,

cracking it. A foot in the golem's chest and it was stumbling back.

"Is that all you have?" Jackal taunted.

Sto sighed. "This is a lot harder than you all make it look."

The golem rolled out of the way and Jackal landed on the floor, his feet cracking the tile. The golem swept a leg, and Jackal jumped out of the way. The golem was up before the fighter would strike again. The golem's motions were still slow, but they were precise now.

"You're not controlling it anymore," Tibs said.

"I thought I'd know how to move it, but instructing it on how to behave isn't the same as controlling it myself. Next time I'll give him a proper challenge."

Jackal grabbed the punch, twisted until the golem's arm broke and he used it to strike it in the head, shattering the arm. Then he kicked it in the knee, shattering it and he ripped its head off once it was on the ground.

He turned his back to it, dusting his hands as it finished crumbling to rubble.

"Okay, dungeon, why did you leave?"

"You could tell?" Tibs asked, as Sto stammered in surprise.

"I know how my opponents fight. It nearly killed me the last time. It started barely knowing how to move then it was back to being a decent fighter."

"He underestimated how difficult fighting was," Tibs said.

Jackal nodded. "So, you're going to give me a better fight next time?"

"I really like him," Sto said.

"Yes, he will."

"Good. Now, onto the loot."

Tibs looked at the cracks in Jackal's essence. The golem had gotten in a few hits and those had left their marks, but Jackal acted like they didn't affect him. They were done fighting, so Tibs didn't worry.

"Really?" Ganny said, and Tibs looked around. She sounded angry again. Mez had pulled a black robe from the chest. "I leave for a few minutes and you pull this again?"

"You went pouting," Sto replied. "And I didn't do anything."

"Really? So a black robe with metal and darkness essence woven through it is what?"

"Random."

"You expect me to believe that after everything you've done for them?"

"I really don't care what you believe, Ganny," Sto replied, sounding annoyed. "This is me! I get to decide what happens. You're only here to help. You bossing me around is really getting old. And yes, this is just random. It's not my fault the cleric can also wear a sorcerer's robe. It's not like I've even had cleric's robes at this point. None of them have stepped inside except for Tibs's friend."

She didn't reply.

Sto sighed. "Yeah, go sulk again."

"What have you been doing for us?" Tibs asked.

"Nothing, she's exaggerating. I reward you for saving my life and now anytime something plays in your team's favor, she goes on and on about how I can't play favorites,

about how those ‘they’ will not let me get away with it. I’m not seeing any mysterious ‘they’ show up. I think she’s just annoyed that she doesn’t have as much to contribute as when I was younger.”

“Maybe you could let her help more?”

“She designed the entire third floor,” he said, sounding exasperated. “How much more help do I have to let give me? How is it my fault if I’m learning what she taught me?”

Tibs remained silent. Sto was too angry. He didn’t want advice. Hopefully, he’d be calmer during the next run and they could talk about it.

Tibs walked around the chest and studied the wall. He could feel the same type of pattern as in the entry hall. Activating it was the same thing, and with a shimmer, the section of the wall vanished.

“Well, now that’s useful,” Jackal said. A metal chest section of armor over his shoulder. “We don’t have to worry about that puzzle to deactivate the triggers on the bridge anymore.”

With a curse, Tibs looked back the way they’d come.

“What?” Jackal asked, looking back too. “Did we miss something?”

Tibs shook his head. If he mentioned the cache he was confident was under the water, Jackal would insist they went back for the loot, but Tibs had enough of the dungeon right now.

“Okay, then, let’s go hand the loot over to the guild and buy the pieces we want.”

His friends stepped through and Tibs looked around. The room was clear of the rubble now.

“Tibs?” Carina called, her voice distorted.

He looked up and whispered. “Talk with her. You said she’s there to help, so there has to be a reason why she’s scared and angry. She’s your friend. Don’t let a bad mood ruin that.”

He stepped through the doorway and headed for the exit.

## Stepping up-28

Tibs stared at the schedule.

“How are there so few teams left?” Don said, sounding baffled.

There were two and eight teams left, eight of which were noble teams. And three he didn’t recognize the names of. Tibs had noticed there were fewer people at the inn, but he thought it was because of the problems Kroseph’s family had with their supplies. Another shipment hadn’t made it intact, crates had broken as they were carried. Kroseph’s father was in MountainSea to find out what was going on with their providers.

Don look in Tibs’s direction, but instead of his usual sneer, he waved at the schedule. “I get only the best survive, but…” he looked at the list. “If you managed it, how did so many die?”

“Did you lose anyone on your team?” Tibs asked.

“No.” Don straightened. “Why? You think I should have?” he demanded.

Tibs rolled his eyes. Apparently, there was only so much respect the sorcerer could have for everyone they'd lost.

"No conscript," Jackal mused.

"There's got to be a limit to how many the kingdoms can send," Mez said.

Jackal nodded.

"I believe the need for so many runners taken from cells is not a common occurrence," Khumdar said. "From what I have learned, it is normally only when a new dungeon is born that it is required."

"I guess this is what happens when someone tries to kill a dungeon," Don commented, "and someone else goes in a messed that up."

"Don't tell me you were actually part of those idiots," Carina replied while Tibs glared at the sorcerer.

"If they'd killed it, we wouldn't still be here," Don replied. "They wouldn't need us anymore."

Jackal snorted. "You're were wrong, Tibs. He is an idiot."

"Watch your tongue." Don reached for Jackal and Tibs saw the essence surrounding his hand.

He caught the hand. "Don't." Tibs fixed his gaze on the sorcerer and wasn't surprised at the nasty smile that formed on his lips. Don was predictable.

"Well, if you want to suffer in his place, I'm more than happy to make it happen."

Tibs studied the cloud of essence as it shifted, solidified, and linked into strands that then latched onto his arm, pumping corruption into his body.

He kept looking into Don's eyes, not reacting, not feeling any pain. He felt the essence seep into his arm, and he remembered how Jackal had reacted to Don doing this to his hand.

The sorcerer's eyes widened in surprise, then dismay, and immediately turned speculative and Tibs realized he might give away too much.

"I was doused in corruption," he said, to misdirect Don's suspicions. "This is nothing compared with how much I suffered then."

Don pulled his hand away, worry on his face. His corruption was his principal weapon to keep people in their place. If Tibs, of all people, could resist him. Would others stop fearing the sorcerer?

Tibs tightened his hand in the cramped claw he'd suffered so he wouldn't give too much away. It was one thing for him to stand the pain, but corruption affected what it touched and Don wasn't an idiot. If Tibs didn't react at all, the sorcerer would suspect something other than having gotten used to the pain.

Don sneered. "You aren't even worth my essence." He turned and stormed off, his team training after him. Radkliff last and giving Tibs a powerless shrug.

"Are you okay?" Carina asked.

Tibs nodded, keeping his hand in a claw. He'd taken hold of Don's corruption and had moved it to the reserve in his bracer. It had been easier than he'd expected. Did something happen once it was in him? Did Don lose control of it? Was it like with Sto, where he



couldn't affect people directly because of their life force?

Yet another question he wouldn't be able to ask.

"What do you think will happen if too many of the teams die?" Mez asked.

Tibs looked at the schedule. At all the names that were no longer there.

"So long as our name stays on it," Jackal said, "I don't care." His gaze lingered on the list long enough, Tibs knew it was a lie. There had been a lot of fighters, and Jackal had known most, if not all of them. He'd said he was used to losing people he knew, but Tibs suspected it had never happened to this level before.

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Tibs opened and closed his hand. They were at their tables at the inn, and only three other tables were occupied, none by runners.

"And the best we have for my favorite runner." Kroseph placed bowls of stew before them, along with tankards of ale, then sat down.

"Stew's the best you have?" Jackals asked before digging in.

Kroseph sighed. "There's only so much we can do with low-quality meats. Dad had to send my brothers after the caravan to even get that. We were lucky they ride slow, otherwise, broth is all we'd be able to offer. And no, Hun, this isn't happening only to us. Only a handful of taverns have anything fresh left."

"Is it not suspicious," Khumdar said, "that taverns who get their supplies from a multitude of different places all end up with spoiled food nearly at the same time?"

"Your dad?" Carina asked.

Jackal looked pensive. "It's the kind of thing he'd do, yeah. But I can't find out. With him in the town, no one's speaking to me. Turns out they're afraid of him way more than of Knuckles."

"But they don't work for him anymore," Mez said.

Jackal made a face. "When you've suffered at the hand of the man who paid you coin for your work. You know how much more likely it's to happen when he's no longer paying you. My dad is very good at causing pain." He looked around the nearly empty inn. "A lot of the time, he doesn't even have to lay a hand on you to do it, too."

Kroseph placed a hand on Jackal's arm. "This isn't your fault."

"No, it's my dad's."

"I expect this will not be what you wish to hear," Khumdar said, "but would it not be worth submitting to him to alleviate the trouble he is causing? It would allow you to plan without him constantly watching."

"He's spying on you?" Kroseph asked, surprised.

Jackal shrugged.

"I feel the eyes of the people he pays," the cleric said, flicking his eyes toward the occupied table to their left.

Jackal glared at them, and one of the men grinned in return. They didn't care if Jackal knew, might even want him to know.

"Well, you don't know my dad. He wouldn't stop hurting people I care about just because I submit to him. He'd keep it going to ensure I understood the error of my ways."

“Killing him?” Carina asked, and Tibs stared at her. That was drastic.

“Even if an assassin could get close to him and make it happen, he has orders in place to destroy everything he considers his if his death is by any cause other than old age.”

“This isn’t his town,” Tibs stated.

Jackal looked at him. “He settled here, Tibs. He considers it his and I can’t think of any way we can get him to leave.”

“It’s not his town,” Tibs said again, more forcefully, and studied the people at the table out the corner of his eyes. He couldn’t see anything giving them away, so Khumdar knew because of his connection to darkness. His need to know secrets. He’d said he could feel when people had secrets.

Tibs needed that. He finished his stew and his ale. He hadn’t seen those people before, so hopefully, they didn’t know his tell well yet.

He stood. “Khumdar, I think it’s time for my next lesson.”

Jackal opened his mouth, but Kroseph tightened his hand on his arm. Tibs liked the server more and more. He had the making of a rogue.

“I suppose it is time,” Khumdar said, standing. “We shall be in our room if you need us.”

“We’re training later,” Jackal said, confusion still on his face.

“We’ll be there,” Tibs said, heading for the exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

He closed the windows in their room. He hadn’t felt essence in the man who’d followed them, but it didn’t mean he couldn’t pay someone. Runners needed the coins and Tibs didn’t have anyone he trusted on the other teams anymore. He wished he remembered how Alistair had created the bubble to block others from listening in on them. Tibs couldn’t think of how to get water to do that.

That question, he might be able to ask the next time he saw his teacher at least.

“And which lesson would I be teaching you?” Khumdar asked, sitting on his bed.

“How did you get your audience?” Tibs pulled the chair away from the table and sat.

“I do not know that how I went through it will apply to you. Clerics must show their devotion to the element they chose. It is not simply a question of being taken there by a teacher.”

Tibs chuckled. “I fell off a cliff, got buried, threw myself in a fire and then in a pool of corruption. I think I fall outside the way others go about getting their audience.”

Khumdar nodded. “I expect you are correct. And you mentioned the elements seem to be expecting you. That would imply lenience is being made on your account.”

“Yeah,” Tibs said dejectedly. “I’m special.”

“Being special is not a bad thing. You can heal us.”

Tibs nodded. “I don’t mind that part. It’s the guild treating me like I’m special that’s annoying.”

The cleric smiled. “I believe the fault for that falls on you, not the elements you have. After all, they are not what compelled you to go save the dungeon. Although they may have played a part in how you survived being doused by corruption.”

“You think so?”

Khumdar nodded. “When I reached you, there was so much of it that you should already have been turned into a puddle. I am not sure even Don could have survived that. There is a limit to how much protection having the essence that is attacking your offers.”

“Okay, so, how did you get an audience?”

“I stole the technique the purity clerics use and modified it for my purpose.”

“So I’ll be able to use it for the other essences too?”

Khumdar thought in silence. “I expect you will be able to, yes. The issue will be finding the location where you can perform it. I can guide you to the one for my element, and there is only one location for purity, but I do not know where you could go for light.”

“Okay, so I’ll learn the method, then I’ll worry about figuring out the locations. Maybe I can figure out a way to ask Harry.”

Khumdar smiled. “Please allow me to be there when you do. I believe watching you try to lie to a man so in touch with Light will be quite entertaining.” He fell silent. “There is much of the clerics in him.” He shook himself. “But he is not what we need to discuss.”

Tibs nodded and settled back. If he could get the rest of the elements with this one method, he needed to pay attention.

“For a cleric to get their audience, they must first show their devotion. They must meditate on themselves and their element for seven days in solitude with nothing more than the robe identifying them and water for company. Once their meditation is done, they must travel to the location of their element, and again show their devotion. Genuflecting and explaining to the element why they show accept you. You must be pure in your words and—” he paused, then chuckled. “That part may be unneeded, I am realizing, it may be something only needed for the purity clerics, but you must be truthful. The elements know your heart.”

“Your thoughts,” Tibs said, and Khumdar looked at him curiously. “They take the word they use from our minds when they talk with us, so they have to be able to see the rest.”

The cleric nodded. “I suppose that is true. If you are true in showing your devotion, they will grant you the audience, and then you must convince them again. Or I had to. As they seem to be waiting on you, your presence might be enough for them to accept you.” Even before Tibs shook his head, Khumdar had a knowing smile.

“They don’t just give the part of my essence. Even Corruption, who made it as easy as he could, only offered it to me. I had to take it. With Earth, I had to find a way to move through the earth encasing me to reach it. Air had me chase it. Fire... gave it to me too, but I was dying, and I still had to reach for it, which was hard with being burned all over. There’s going to be something I have to do.”

Khumdar nodded. “Darkness is about secrets and weakness. So I expect what you want will be hidden.” He closed his eyes. “But I cannot envision how it will do so. When I glimpsed it, it was quite noticeable.” He sighed. “I wish there were others I could ask, to understand how it is that you and I saw it, while Jackal, Carina, and Mezano did not.”

Tibs shrugged. He didn’t care so much about that part. “So, how do I meditate?”

Khumdar opened his mouth, then closed it. He chuckled. “It is something I learned

so young, I no longer even think about it.” He closed his eyes again. “Meditation is thinking on nothing while thinking on everything.”

Tibs groaned, and the cleric smiled.

“You must remember, clerics are who are taught that. There is a certain level of embellishment added to the procedure to make it worthy of what they are seeking to accomplish. It should not be something the common folk can do.”

“You were supposed to be a purity cleric,” Tibs said, the realization hitting hard.

“What?” Khumdar stared at him, worry and fear in his eyes.

“You said you were taught young. That means you were raised to be a cleric, but there’s only purity clerics. And…” he closed his mouth with a snap, remembering how offended Carina had been by Khumdar claiming to be of the Temerity family. The amused expression on the cleric’s face when Mez had explained how having the name didn’t mean he was from *that* family.

“You are from *that* Temerity family. That’s how you were able to take the methods they use. They taught them to you.”

The cleric’s face fell, then he forced a smile. “I believe Darkness will welcome you. You can tease apart secrets from mistakes people make.” He rubbed his face. “I would ask that you not speak of this with anyone, especially not Carina.”

“Why? She’s our friend and teammate.”

“The answer to that is complicated and would reveal things that aren’t for me to say.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You were working hard to get her to say something when you first joined. I’m guessing it’s whatever you don’t want to tell me now.”

Khumdar nodded. “It is. Back then, she was not a friend. Getting her to reveal her secret would have been amusing. Now… No, even then. Tibs, there is a difference between knowing a secret and revealing it. It is not that I cannot reveal a secret. Darkness only demands that I find them. What I do with them is up to me, but if a secret is known, how is it a secret anymore? I do not know how to explain it any better, but there is a delight in knowing something others don’t. I am not entirely certain that is something Darkness did to me. I was searching for secrets before I was drawn to it. It is how I discovered Purity was not the only possibility for a cleric. I enjoy knowing more than you.”

Tibs nodded. “I get it. It’s like knowing how to break into a house. If other rogues know it too, they could get in before you.”

“No.” Khumdar shook his head. “It is nothing like that, Tibs. I do not care to use the secrets I know. I am not holding them until I can gain something from them. The simple act of holding a secret is enough. I will use one if it is helpful to me and my friends, but it is not why I accumulate them.”

“I don’t get it. What’s the point of having something you aren’t going to use?”

Khumdar spread his hands helplessly, then smiled. “Have you heard stories of dragons?”

Tibs shook his head. He had heard the word, but he couldn’t think of anything that went with it.

“In the bard’s tales, they are great beasts who decimated the land seeking riches and

once they had them, they would hoard them, killing anyone who came to take it back. They would do nothing with it other than hold it. Know they had it.” He chuckled. “I am a dragon of secrets.”

“But those are stories. People use what they have. They use it to get something. Even the nobles use their coins to give themselves power.”

“Maybe it is because I am a cleric. I do not know if I would be this way had I not taken Darkness into me. But it is who I am.”

Tibs nodded. “I won’t tell anyone. You’re my friend.”

“I thank you.”

“So, meditating is what? Sitting around not doing anything?”

“No, it is thinking about as little as possible, so that you can understand as much as possible. I know, it still sounds as something a purity cleric would spout, but it is the best explanation I know to give you. When I thought as little as I could, some thoughts would push through, and in them I found understanding. Again, I do not know if this is because I sought to be a cleric. But that part is something purity clerics go through, as well.”

“Seven days of that, not eating anything, only water. Water is going to be easy for me.” He coated his hand in it and reabsorbed it. “But I don’t know if I can go seven days without eating.”

“It is difficult. It is part of the purification you must put yourself through to achieve the state that will bring you to the attention of the Element.”

“Except it’s something purity clerics are taught,” Tibs said, looking it over.

“It worked for me, therefore there is truth in it.”

Tibs nodded. He recalled what Ganny had said. “The way to get an audience is strong emotions while surrounded by the element. Fear is the one used when we get our audience. I was drowning, Jackal was buried alive, Carina falling endlessly. Not eating for seven days had to be painful.”

“If you are correct, then you should be able to arrange it in such a way that you can get the fear without the danger?”

“No. We tried it when I was trying to get the audience with Air. I’d fall from higher and higher places, with Carina ready to catch me. Knowing she was there meant I wasn’t as afraid. There was fear as I fell, doubt, but I trusted her to catch me. It’s when I slipped and fell off the cliff with no one to catch me that I had my audience.”

“Then it is possible the meditation is added by the purity clerics to make it seem special?”

Tibs shrugged. “Maybe. You’d know more about that than I would.”

Khumdar chuckled. “I am no longer certain I know as much as I believe I do. I suppose that making each step seem more meaningful than they are is a way for those in power to maintain control. If I had believed all I needed to do was starve myself on the Black Night, I might have attempted it sooner, rather than spending years preparing myself in secret.” He smiled. “I supposed you will be a demonstration of if they are right or not.”

Tibs shrugged. “Except that I’m special, like you said, the Elements are waiting for me.”

Khumdar nodded. “And yet, you have had to go through the same process as someone seeking an audience for the other elements. I expect that their willingness to grant you an audience does not extend to easing your way.”

“I guess. So, when’s the Dark Night?”

“That,” Khumdar said, “I do not know.”

## Stepping up-29

The Dark Night, Khumdar explained, was the night when both Claria and Torus vanished from the night sky together to get away from their children for a few hours. Tibs had experienced such nights. They were the one night where running the roofs was dangerous because the stars alone didn’t provide enough light for him to see by. He didn’t know it had been called that, or when the last one had been.

Carina hadn’t known; that night had no significance for her. Mez knew of it, but had never kept track, and Jackal wasn’t around to ask. He asked Darran, as well as a few of the merchants, but Darran hadn’t known, and the others had been in a dark mood and not particularly willing to talk with him.

So, he had to go to the guild and seek the one other person Tibs expected to know, Alistair. He only hoped his teacher was still around after their morning training.

“Do you have any idea what the plan is if they can’t get any conscript to run the dungeon?” a guild worker said to the other walking with him as Tibs passed them, and he turned around to follow them and listen in. It was rare for anyone to talk about the dungeon in town; since the Runners weren’t allowed to do it. And the people working at the guild rarely discussed it outside the building.

“Can we ever run out of conscripts?” the woman asked. “They’re criminals, after all, there are a lot of kingdoms out there.”

“Criminals who were caught,” the man said. “And we brought in nearly five thousand when the dungeon was found, then another three so it would rebuild its strength, not to say of the roughly two thousand since then, because it’s going through Runners like it’s famished. That’s ten thousand in only over six months. Joffrey said there’s never been that high of a demand for conscript before.”

“Do you think there’s something wrong with it? I heard that even the Runners who survived the first rank are having trouble making it through since the attack. We’re losing what, half the experienced Runners each cycle?”

“Something like that. I heard someone say it might be turning feral.”

“That’s not a thing,” she scoffed. “Just bard stories.”

“Really? Then how do you explain the number of Runners it’s eating? Normally, after this amount, a dungeon would be at least Lambda. I get it almost died, but still, why isn’t it graduating? Where’s it all going?”

“You think they’re going to abandon it?”

Now he scoffed. “And allow one of the kings to grab it? Not a chance. But there’s got

to be a point where the guild decides it's no longer worth investing in it. Dungeons are supposed to be training grounds, not places where we send people to just die."

"Yeah, I've got to tell you I'm happy not to be at the level where I have to deal with those decisions." She indicated the approaching intersection. "Anyway, I have to head to my office and inventory the latest equipment find, as measly as they are."

"Have fun with that. I'm off to look into finding a kingdom with criminals they can send us."

Tibs continued along the corridor until another intersection and he turned, walking aimlessly while going over what they'd said. Could Sto be sick? Would Sto know if he was? Tibs could, but he didn't know if a dungeon was like a person in that regard.

What he didn't entirely understand was how so many died. Their last run hadn't felt that difficult.

"Are you lost?" someone asked. And Tibs stopped to look up and around. He was in a large room. "Oh, you're Light Fingers," the man said. He had essence, wood, but he didn't look like a Runner or an adventurer, and Tibs guessed the man was no more powerful than Jackal was, Zeta at most. "Do you have a meeting?"

"I'm looking for Alistair, my teacher," Tibs replied, no bothering pointing out that his name was *not* Light Fingers. What was the point, it wasn't like he'd see this clerk again.

"I'm afraid I don't know him, but I doubt you'll find him here."

Tibs noticed the multitude of desks had papers and the men, and women, were writing. Most also had wood as their essence. Did wood help with writing, he wondered absently before deciding he didn't want to know. If Carina found out it did, she might demand he gain that essence as part of her teaching him his letters.

Could he get wood essence? It wasn't part of the four core essences water had told him about, but then she hadn't said anything about the four he had to get now when she told him about the first ones. Maybe there was an order to it?

"Mister Light Fingers?" the man asked, still smiling. "I really have to ask that you leave."

"Sorry, yeah." He turned and stepped out. He needed to be more careful when walking. It wasn't good for him to get so deep in his thoughts he lost track of where he went.

He made his way back to where the training rooms were and found Alistair in an argument with Harry. He resisted the temptation to get close enough to hear them. Harry might ask why Tibs was there, and he'd have to answer and Tibs couldn't think of a way to give a satisfactory answer without lying.

The guard leader noticed him and used his presence to end the discussion. Alistair didn't seem pleased, but he'd put a smile on by the time he reached Tibs. "This is a surprise. When we ended the training this morning, you didn't seem interested in continuing."

Tibs shrugged. "What was that about?" in pointed to Harry's retreating back.

Alistair sighed. "Just Harry being Harry. Crime grows as a town grows and he isn't happy about it. He seems to think it's part of my responsibilities to keep the thieves that managed to sneak in from causing trouble."

"The roof runner," Tibs said. "He asked me to stop them too."

“I thought that was you,” he said with a chuckle.

“There’s another one now.”

Alistair sobered. “You don’t have to do it. You aren’t part of the guard.”

“But I’m a rogue, so I’m better than they are at finding a thief. And the roofs *are* mine,” he added. “I’m not going to let someone use them to cause trouble.”

Alistair shook his head and chuckled. “This need you have to look after the town isn’t very rogue-like. We’re supposed to only think about ourselves, you know.”

Tibs shrugged. “I had to do that all my life until I came here. My Street was filled with trouble, everyone there suffered. I don’t want that for my town.”

“Just remember that you are a Runner, not a guard. When the night comes, it isn’t your responsibility to keep the town safe. Now, what brought you to me? Your curiosity, or a desire for more training?”

“Do you know when the Dark Night’s going to be?”

“Why do you want to know that?” his teacher asked, surprised.

“Just curious.”

Alistair let out a breath while looking up. “Let’s see, this is the twentieth of Sarbon, Claira will wink in three days, but Torus isn’t due for to ensconced himself until eighth of Marmel, and... huh, yeah, that’s going to be the night. The eighth of Marmel, I can’t tell you the exact time, but there should be someone here more used to local time.” He grinned. “I travel too much to bother keeping track of that.”

Sarbon and Marmel were months, and each was four and five days long. “Is Marmel next month?” He still had difficulties keeping track. Alistair nodded.

So, there was—he counted on his fingers—two and five days until Marmel started, then it was eight days so. He so needed more fingers for those large numbers. Three and three days.

“You are working at it quite hard for something that’s merely curiosity.”

“I have to practice my numbers too,” Tibs said, not having to act the annoyance. “That means I have to figure out how to add and remove numbers.”

“And what have you come up with?”

“Three and three days.”

“Thirty-three, that’s right.”

“Thanks.” At nine days in a week... could he borrow Alistair’s hands? Three weeks and six days. Hopefully, that was enough time for him to practice not eating. “When is the next Dark Night?”

Alistair stared at him. “I am not an astrologer. I can tell you that Claria winks every thirtieth day, and that Torus ensconces himself every fiftieth.” He smiled, “why don’t you use it as an exercise to practice your numbers. You know the eighth of Marmel they will leave together, you can figure out when it will happen again.”

Tibs looked at his hands. How in the abyss was anyone supposed to do that?

Three and three. He had to get it right, or it wasn’t happening at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs stood on the roof, looking at the sky. Claria was in the process of closing. Three



nights, Alistair said, and it would be fully closed. And the next time would be the Dark Night. He'd start paying more attention to it and Torus from now on. Learn how they lived.

But tonight it was about something else.

He brought his attention to the roofs. He wouldn't find his thief here, not enough wealth. He shook his head in amusement. When had a pouch full of silver become 'not a lot of wealth' for him? Not so long ago, he'd have taken risks that could have gotten him killed for the chance to touch a whole copper. Now, he didn't even count them anymore.

Life was strange at times.

He ran. He ran hard. He jumped from roof to roof, knowing which to take to reach the noble area of the town. Those roofs took more skills to jump because the houses were further apart, but they still had that one shorter space. It was simply a question of finding it, making sure he had the proper running start, and didn't hesitate.

He stopped on a high roof and crouch to reduce the chances he'd be seen. With as many Runners as they'd lost to the dungeon, Tibs didn't think there were any roof runners left other than him and the thief, but why risk it. If someone saw him on a noble's roof and there was trouble in this area, Harry would come asking questions. He'd tell the truth about why he was here, but all it would take is for the guard to ask about something else, and Tibs might be in trouble, so he did all he could to avoid Harry.

Motion attracted his attention. A moving shadow. Too small. One of the cats that now called the town their home. He had no idea how they'd made it here, just like the dogs that roamed the alleys. Had they sneaked in through the platform? Would the attendants let that happen? Or had they been in the wild and joined the town when they found it?

Was there someone out there like Serba, but who tamed cats?

Another shadow, another cat who—no, someone trying to appear as the shadow of a cat. Their round head broke the roofline and lacked the ears. Tibs Watched them, jumping to a closer roof as they moved.

They paused, looking over the peak of the house they were on and Tibs moved to see them and the house they were studying.

Sebastian's house.

Should he let them attempt to break in so he could see what the defenses were like? Were they targeting the house because of who lived there, or because it was a noble's house? Well, a house in the noble section of the town. Sebastian was a pretender to the position. Tibs expected every noble living here could tell that at a glance.

He jumped onto their roof. If they tried to break in, Sebastian would redouble the security, and Tibs doubted he could work out how to get through those any easier than the ones currently on.

He landed and froze. The thief had noticed something; their posture shifted. They looked around and stopped when they were looking in his direction. Well, it wasn't like he needed to remain hidden from them. If he could convince them to stop with a discussion, he'd do that.

He waved and approached. Sensing for their essence once he was close enough. They had none, but what they wore had plenty.

“You—” he started, and they were running away. Tibs sighed. There wouldn’t be any talking. He ran after them.

They were good jumpers, maybe better than he was as they made it to a roof he didn’t think he’d managed. But he was running on the one alongside theirs. He was a faster runner, and he suspected the essence on their boots might be how they were so sure-footed, rather than his years of practice.

They suddenly turned and jumped to another roof, becoming harder to see. Cursing, Tibs looked for the shortest path to reach them and it was far too long. They were still among the nobles’ roofs. If he let them get out of the area first, he would lose them.

“Oh well,” he whispered. “I’d been wanting to try this now that I have more air essence.” He turned and ran down the slope of the roof, gaining speed. He jumped as he reached the end and threw air where he’d reached the height of his leap. He threw a lot of air there. Now was not the time to be short. And he tightened the etching as much as he could.

He felt it give as soon as his weight landed on it, but it lasted long enough he could propel himself the rest of the way.

He grinned. He could air jump!

He drew air back in to refill his reserves as he ran; he was catching up. Now that they couldn’t outdistance him by jumping, he just had to work out how to catch them.

They crossed into a normal neighborhood, and Tibs closed the distance faster. He considered throwing water at their feet, but he didn’t want them to fall off the roof and break their neck.

He realized he had no idea how to stop them. On the ground, he’d simply tackle them, but up here, it would cause them to fall. Tibs had survived a five-story fall. It had hurt, and he’d broken an arm—that hadn’t been fun. But that was before he had so much earth essence to harden his body with.

But that still left them to fall. He didn’t know how experienced with falls they were.

Still, if he timed it right. He could take them off the roof and stop both their fall... how would they react to falling on him while he was hardened?

He cursed. He was overthinking this. He tackled them, and as they reached the end of the sloped roof, he grabbed onto their collar hard and locked his hand in position with earth. Then, as they were tipping off the roof, he grabbed onto the edge, locking his hand in that position too.

He groaned in pain as they came to a stop, but stop they did.

He smiled down at them. “How about we have a talk?” He noticed their face was covered by a black cloth, which made sense since, unlike him, if someone could identify them, it would land them in a heap of trouble, not to say a cell. He also realized that instead of grabbing their collar, they were holding them by the black jacket they wore. Essence woven through it stretched. He made out water, which would be how it stayed supple, he guessed. Metal was probably part of it, considering it hadn’t ripped as they stopped.

They pulled a knife and Tibs hardened his arm to his elbow, then realized they could stab his chest and hardened that. He still had essence left, so he hardened his whole body. Why take chances?

“Look, believe it or not,” he said, “I’m not interested in forcing you to stop. I’m a rogue myself, so I get the appeal of breaking into buildings, and you’ve been picking on nobles, which I’m all for. We just have to talk about how much you’re taking. They’ve been complaining to Harry, and there’s going to be a point where he’s either going to have to round up all of us, which includes me, or the nobles are going to take matters into their own hands and bring in people to capture you. I don’t think those people are going to care who else gets hurt in the process.”

They hadn’t used the knife on him yet, so Tibs took it as a good sign. Maybe they’d run because they hadn’t realized all he wanted was to talk.

“My only interest is keeping the town safe. That means no noble mercenaries here to kill you and anyone else who gets in their way. So, how about we go down, find a tavern with drinkable ale, and talk over your options?”

They slashed.

Instead of feeling the blade slide against his hardened skin, it cut through the fabric of the jacket and they fell. Before Tibs would register the act, they kick off the wall and tumbled up, kicked off the other wall, and went up again and they landed on the roof he was holding on.

All Tibs could do was watch in amazement, then look up as they looked down on him. He expected gloating, which, after this performance, they were entitled to, but all they did was shake their head, then run off.

Tibs pulled himself up enough to watch them run up the roof and vanish on the other side. This chase was lost.

He looked down; he was four stories up, and at the piece of fabric in his hand. The weave was coming undone. The knife slash had cut it as it cut the cloth. But there was more essence there. Looking over what he held, he realized it was a pocket, and there was something magical in it.

## Stepping up-30

Tibs turned on Merchant Row and a commotion caught his attention. Two of the merchant being pulled apart by guards. The row had been more tense recently, but he never expected them to need guards to end an argument.

He put his hand on his pouch. These were the types of distraction pickpockets took advantage and the roof running thief would want what Tibs had back. Whatever it was.

Tibs had taken the crystal lens out of the pocket once he was on his bed and studied it. It had a band of metal, not iron, around it, and the essence was woven so tightly through it Tibs had trouble making out those he could recognize in it.

Because of the essence, a sorcerer was who he should ask, but he didn’t know any he trusted. Because he’d gotten this off a thief, Alistair might know what it is, but his teacher wasn’t here today and he might take it. It wasn’t dungeon loot, but Tibs suspected the guild wouldn’t care. It was magic; it was worth coins. Probably gold or whatever was worth more

than that.

It only left him one person he could ask with hopes of answers.

He entered the Shield and Rope and was greeted by angry words.

“I told you I’m not interested in what you’re offering!” the voice came from behind the counter, but Darran wasn’t visible. Before Tibs could call out, the merchant stood and turned to face him. His glare melted away and he smiled. “Tibs! How is my favorite rogue?”

Tibs studied the merchant. He had dark pouches under his eyes. He hadn’t been spared the troubles that seemed to affect every business in town. “What’s going on?”

Darran waved Tibs’s concern away. “Nothing that isn’t normal for a shop. There’s always someone thinking they can squeeze a copper or two out of us.”

“Two merchants were fighting on my way here.”

Darran’s lips drew into a line. “Ever since the bazaar left, there’s been a rash of theft and sabotage.”

“What’s that second word? And do you think they did something?”

“Sabotage is the act of breaking something someone else has so that it will benefit you.” He rested his elbows on the counter. “As for the bazaar, I doubt they did something. Maybe some of them stayed behind, but if we don’t make money, we can’t buy from them when they’ll be back.”

“They’re coming back?” Tibs hadn’t known that. He’d watched them pack the wagons, but had had to go train. Cross had stayed, had anyone else? Someone who thought they could cause his merchants trouble?

Darran smiled. “Of course. There’s always money to be made in a dungeon town. Good honest money, and—” His expression darkened “—not to honest one. But you didn’t come here to listen to me complain. How can I help you? I see the dungeon made better pieces of armor.” He pointed to the bracers Tibs wore.

“Yeah, sorry.” He ran a hand over it in embarrassment. He hadn’t considered Darran could tell they weren’t the one he’d sold him with his armor.

The merchant laughed. “That’s the benefit of being a Runner. You get to find gear none of us can sell. Magical? You didn’t wear the set that came with your armor all the time.”

Tibs hesitated, then nodded. Darran couldn’t sense essence, so he couldn’t tell anything about them.

“Good for you. When the dungeon gives you something better, remember to come see me first and I’ll give you good coins. Now, you still haven’t told me why you’re coming by.”

Tibs took the crystal out of his pouch and handed it to the merchant.

Darran looked it over. “Did you find this in the dungeon?” he asked, frowning. He took a monocle out of a pocket and placed it over an eye, and looked at the crystal again.

“No, I took it from the other roof running thief. I caught them and tried to talk them into stopping before they anger the nobles to the point they bring in thugs.”

“Not enjoying the competition for the roofs?” Darran asked with a smile, tuning the crystal over in his fingers.

“I don’t like they’re angering the nobles enough they’re complaining to Harry.”

The merchant nodded. “This is a Temocles Eye. Not one of the best I’ve seen. The band should be gold, not bronze. But I expect it still gets the job done. Do you have the hand?”

“I didn’t get the thief’s hand, no,” Tibs said cautiously.

Darran smiled. “No, the Temocles Hand. They are a set. I can’t give you much just for the eye.”

Tibs shook his head. “I’m not selling it.” He took the crystal back. “I need to know what it is. What the magic does.”

Darran nodded. “Ah. Normally I’d charge a silver for the information.” Tibs narrowed his eyes at the merchant. “But seeing as you are such a good customer and your team has brought me plenty of good dungeon made items, I’ll do this to maintain our business relationship.”

Which meant Darran expected more loot as payment. Tibs could arrange that.

The merchant took the crystal and placed it over his eye the way he’d done with the monocle, but it was too large for it to stay, so he held it. “This lets the wearer see magic.” He looked around the shop. “The previous owner would have had something to hold it over their eye.” When he looked at Tibs, he hurried to put his arms behind his back. He’d said the bracers were magic. If he didn’t see it, Darran would—

“Unfortunately, without the hand, it doesn’t work.” He handed the crystal back to Tibs. “They’re made at the same time. Temocles was a Sorcerer who was also a Thief King, back in the age of King Dramon. I expect that means nothing to you. It was very long time ago. He’d gotten there because as a sorcerer he saw magic, but his underlings couldn’t, so they were holding his thieving empire back. This let them see magic, and the hand let them move the threads around so they can step around magical warning and triggers.” He considered something. “These aren’t cheap. Whoever your thief is, they have been successful enough to be able to afford it.”

Tibs looked at the crystal with the bronze band around it. “If they’re rich, why are they here? Shouldn’t they be in a big city?”

Darran nodded. “I can think of two reasons a successful thief would be in a small town like this; three actually. The least likely one is that they are hiding out. If they were, they wouldn’t go around stealing. Kragle Rock is still too small for them to hope they’ll remain hidden if they do that. The second reason, more likely, but not the one I expect is the true one, is that they were forced to come here by someone else. It could explain how they got this. It’s a loan to let them do whatever they are here to do and their patron will expect it back.”

Tibs put it in his pouch and placed a hand over it.

Darran smiled. “Lastly, they’re here of their own volition. They came here because they are after something specific and it is here.”

Tibs considered how the thief had been watching Sebastian’s house. “If they’re after one thing, why are they breaking into so many houses?”

“Why do you do it?” Darran asked.

“I need the practice,” he answered. “They clearly don’t.”

The merchant raised an eyebrow. “Really? Why do you say that? Are they so much better than you?” While Tibs considered that, Darran continued. “Do you foresee a time when you’ll be so good as to not need, or want, to do some roof running and high window insertion?”

Tibs nodded and bit his lower lip. He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but Darran was right: he enjoyed running the roofs and breaking into houses. Maybe there would be a time when he didn’t need to do it anymore. But it didn’t mean he’d stop.

“Then why won’t they listen to me? If it’s just practice, they don’t need to take so much. A copper as proof will do it. That way no one bothers Harry.”

Darran shrugged. “This isn’t their town, Tibs. For that matter, even if it was. Not all thieves are as considerate as you. If they are good enough to stay out of the guards’ reach, they don’t have a reason to care about the trouble they are causing others.”

“But we all have to live here,” Tibs complained.

“Maybe they don’t. If they’re here for one specific thing, they’ll leave once they have it and things can go back to normal for the rest of you.”

“Not if the nobles have their thugs here by then. Harry isn’t going to be able to get rid of them.” Nobles were tests that infested everything.

Another thought occurred to Tibs. “Could they be here to cause the rest of us trouble?”

Darran considered it. “I suppose they could, but why? It isn’t like they gain much, if anything, from disrupting the dungeon runs. The dungeon does that by eating as many runners as it can.”

Tibs started to protest, but the conversation between the guild clerks came back to him. Sto was decimating the runners so fast they were getting worried.

“What is someone wants to set up a thief’s guild here?” Jackal said his father ran one in their city and his family had tried to take over the adventurer’s guild once. Maybe this was a second attempt?

“That’s definitely going to happen,” Darran said, “but a thief causing enough trouble the guard leader needs to bring an expert in to stop them runs counter to a thieves’ guild desire.”

Tibs stared at the merchant. “Who did Harry bring?” He didn’t need someone else in his town causing trouble.

Darran straightened in surprise, then he laughed. “Why, he brought you in to stop the thief, Mister Light Fingers.”

“Oh,” Tibs said as he realized Darran was right. “Right. And don’t call me that.” At least he didn’t have to worry about competition in stopping them until the Nobles brought in thugs. “So, without this eye, they’re not going to be able to break into houses?”

“Not if they have magical protection.”

Tibs nodded. It meant they’d need to get it back or find another one. “Is this something you could get?”

Darran considered it. “Possibly. But it would be expensive. There aren’t that many of

them in circulation. No one knows how to make them anymore.”

“If someone asks you to get one, will you tell me?”

Darran shook his head. “I’m sorry Tibs, but if I tell even one person what my customers want. I’m setting up a precedent where no one will be able to trust me. My business runs as much on trust as it does on coins.”

Tibs nodded. He’d come to Darran because he trusted him not to tell others what they talked about. As much as he’d like to insist, he benefited from this as much as the other rogues and thieves.

There were other merchants in town who bought and sold goods a thief would use and who weren’t as tight lips, but just like Tibs hadn’t gone to them because enough coins, or ale, would get them to talk, the thief wouldn’t go to them.

And with this being as expensive as Darran said, they would want it back. So he had to use it to draw them to him.

“Thank you for the information.”

Darran smiled. “I’m always happy to help out a good customer.”

Tibs left, trying to come up with a way he could trick the thief.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs found Cross at the fighter’s training field, beating up three fighters, at the same time. She noticed him and smiled. “Be there in a minute,” she called, then with three punches, had the three of them on their back.

“And that is why ganging up on me isn’t going to help you,” she said, dusting off her hands and stepping away without looking back. The trainer stepped to the downed fighters and offered them healing potions.

“Are you done playing with the puzzle, Mister Light Fingers?” she asked.

Tibs cursed, he’d forgotten about that. “No, I’m still enjoying it.” Where was it? Right... Sto. He’d forgotten to ask for it back after the dungeon had eaten it.

“When you’re don’t with it, I have a different kind for you to play with.”

“Can i—”

“Once I get the cylinder back,” she said. “Finding good puzzles is hard enough as it is. I don’t give them away. Now why are you visiting, if not to return it?” She looked around. “Let’s go to the Crawling Craven. Last I heard, they still have drinkable ale.”

“That’s in part what I want to talk to you about.”

“Ale?”

“The lack of it. All the shortages the merchants and taverns seem to have. You didn’t leave with the bazaar. Could someone else have stayed behind to cause my town trouble?”

“Your town?” She smiled. “I’ve never known a thief to be so possessive.”

Tibs shrugged. He wasn’t going over this with her.

“Is it possible someone came with the caravan to cause you trouble? Yes. Is it likely?” She thought about that one long enough they reached the tavern, which was loud and busy. “I don’t think so. Not that it doesn’t happen, but this place isn’t exactly flowing with wealth yet. If the shortage is organized, it seems counter to someone making coins on it.”

Tibs noticed the green and black uniform as Cross pushed her way through the crowd

to reach the bar. The ale was expensive, at a copper a tankard, but it was good. Better than what the inn has, Tibs was sorry to think.

He indicated all the guards. "But wouldn't it make sense if the tavern with all the guards is the only one left with good ale? No thief would target it and risk angering all of them."

She looked around. "Where are you from?" she asked him, and Tibs shrugged again. "Small or large city?"

"Street."

It took her the time needed to make it to a table with a lone occupant on it, who vacated his seat as she sat at the table. "You don't look it," she told him once he sat opposite her.

"I'm a Runner now." Tibs wasn't sure how he felt about her not being able to tell he was Street. "But I'm still Street."

She shrugged. "Thing is. A Street isn't a city, or even a town. It's its own environment. You see all the guards here and you think, not touching this. I see them and I think, this is a market to exploit."

Tibs looked around again. "How? You can't pick their pockets."

"Oh, I can't, but she can." She nodded to the woman behind the bar.

Tibs frowned. "She doesn't get close to their coin pouch." He looked around, finding the servers and studying them. "The servers aren't doing it either."

"She's a merchant, she's going to pick pockets differently than you do."

Tibs ran a hand over his face. "Why is it that it seems like everyone's giving me lessons?"

"Maybe if you didn't ask so many questions you wouldn't get so many lessons."

Tibs sighed and took a swallow from his ale. "So it's my fault."

"We do tend to cause our own pain," she agreed. "But think about this. If everyone had good ale. Would you have paid a copper for this?"

Tibs looked at the tankard, tipped it. The ale was better than what'd he gotten at the inn, but was it worth a copper? Even before Kroseph and his family had adopted Tibs and his team, he could have gotten enough for the team to drink with one copper and it would have been at least this good.

He shook his head. "So, she's causing the other taverns not to have good ale so she can charge more?"

"I don't think she's causing this," Cross said, playing with the puzzle cube, "but she's benefiting from it. Anytime there's trouble, someone benefits. The kind of trouble that comes with bad times will lead to an odd mix of who benefits. Usually the scrappers among people. Those of can make more from little. This doesn't feel like that. For one thing, bad times don't attract the kind of caravans I traveled with. And for another, this is a dungeon town. It takes the death of a dungeon to cause those bad times."

"The dungeon nearly died," Tibs said.

She nodded. "And if we hadn't already been on route when the news reached us. We wouldn't have come. But your dungeon didn't die. So this isn't caused by that."



“Then what?”

She shrugged. “No idea. But I doubt it’s a ‘what’ and more of a ‘whom’.”

Tibs nodded. So he had a thief causing problems which might eventually get the nobles to bring thugs, and now someone was disrupting the merchants for some unknown reason.

He really hoped the two were connected, because Tibs was just a Runner. He hadn’t signed up to be Kragle Rock’s unnamed protector.

He grinned as he took a sip of his ale. It wasn’t like he had signed up to be a Runner to.

“What’s funny?” Cross asked.

“Just thinking about how I seem to be annoyed at whoever made me protector of the town, and that person is me.”

“Then stop,” she said matter-of-factly. Tibs watched her and realized she could do it. She could simply stop caring about the town. She hadn’t been here when it was just tents. Maybe she had a city somewhere to go back to.

But Tibs hadn’t had a city, or a town, not even his Street had really been his own. He’d just survived there. This was his town.

So, yeah. Him stopping wasn’t going to happen.

## Stepping up-31

“I don’t know,” Carina said, eyeing Khumdar, “that sounds dangerous.”

The cleric raised an eyebrow.

“Khumdar did it,” Tibs said. He’d just explained his plan for the Dark Night to the rest of his team.

“But he’s a cleric,” she countered. “They go through training to—” She stopped and looked annoyed.

Khumdar smiled.

“Except he didn’t train to be a cleric,” Mez pointed out. “He just did the same thing clerics do.” He paused and frowned. “How did you find out how clerics get their audience? I didn’t think it was something they talked about.”

“They don’t,” the cleric answered.

Carina rubbed her face, then let out a breath. “I don’t question that Tibs can get an audience. My problem is that clerics spend a year leading up to their audience getting used to going without food. You only have twenty-three days. That isn’t enough time to work up to it, and you have other things to do in the meantime. Not eating and meditating isn’t the same thing as doing that while carrying on with your regular days.”

“Why the training?” Jackal asked. “The point is for Tibs to feel like he’s dying. Getting used to it isn’t going to help that.”

“He isn’t going to feel like he’s dying,” Carina said. “He *is* going to be dying. Going hungry is a shock to the system, without getting it used to functioning with less and less

food. He could cause himself problem before the audience happens, and he isn't going to suddenly be better after the audience. I don't think you understand the number of clerics who don't exit the dungeon after their audience. Not all of them die before the audience."

Jackal nodded. "That's a fair point, but I think you're forgetting one detail."

"And it is?" she asked when the fighter didn't immediately say it.

"Tibs is used to going hungry."

"Don't be silly," she replied. "I've seen him eat."

"And you never wondered why he ate like it was his last meal?"

Tibs frowned. He didn't eat that much anymore, did he? He remembered his early days here, when even the slop the food tent served tasted, to him, like something a noble would eat.

Carina looked at Tibs, expression turning to surprise.

Tibs shrugged. "Food isn't as common on the Street as it is here."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What for?" he asked, surprised.

"You shouldn't have..." she trailed off.

"Maybe not," Khumdar said, "but he did. And it makes him well suited for this method."

"Only he isn't a cleric," she replied. "The meditation, the hunger, they're about preparing him for a life of devotion, to give himself over to Purity. Which isn't what he'd trying to do."

"Indeed, he will have an audience with Darkness."

She glared at the cleric. "That isn't what I mean, and you know it."

"Does that mean Tibs can use this method to get an audience with Light and the other elements?" Mez asked.

"After Light and Darkness, there's only Purity left," Tibs said. "That's what Water told me."

"Yeah, but does that mean you can't get the other elements?" the archer asked.

"Seems to me it would make sense to get as many of them as you can, since each audience lets you feel another element."

Tibs hadn't thought about that.

"Let's focus on the current problem before we start adding more to Tibs's schedule," Carina said. "We know when the Dark Night is, but how do we manage it with Light? I've never heard of something like a bright day."

"Knuckles would know," Jackal said.

"Harry's going to ask why I want to know," Tibs said. "I won't be able to lie to him."

Jackal nodded. "You can't trust him to keep that to himself."

"Can the dungeon help?" Mez asked. "Like it did with the fire."

"We have not seen it do anything with light," Khumdar said. "It may not be able to."

"He has all the elements," Tibs said, thinking back on what Sto had said. "It's just that unless he sees us use them, or someone with the element dies, he doesn't know how to use

them. If he absorbs something with the weave on it, it probably helps him figure it out too.” His concern was with how Fire said he’d broken a rule. The only difference between that audience and the others had been that it took place in the dungeon. But purity clerics had theirs in a dungeon, too. He wished Water had explained how this worked.

“Then maybe Tibs should prepare for the dungeon to do light the next time we do in,” Mez said.

“I definitely don’t like that,” Carina said. “We need Tibs at his best if we’re going to make a run. Not dying of hunger.”

“He can tell the dungeon what he needs,” Jackal said. “I’m sure it’ll be happy to accommodate him again.”

Again.

Why did that bother Tibs? Why did everything he’d heard since their last run make him so uneasy?

“Tibs?” Carina called.

He looked at her.

“I asked how you wanted to do this? I don’t like the risks, but it’s your decision. You’re the one taking them.”

Tibs nodded. “I think it’s worth it. I can’t think of another way to get an audience with Darkness. As for Light...” He’d almost died with Fire, while with Corruption he’d walked out of the pool uninjured. Was that the consequences of breaking the rule? How much danger would Light put him in?

“I think.” Tibs stopped. He didn’t know what Light could do. See lies was one thing, and Harry and made it so he couldn’t be seen. There had been that noble he’d thrown out of town. He’d done something to her with light, but Tibs didn’t know what.

He couldn’t remember if any of the Runners had had light at their element, and considering how few were left, if one of them had it, Tibs would know.

“I think it’s worth asking the dungeon during our next run,” He said. If Light ended up hurting him like fire had, Sto could keep a Brute nearby for Tibs to heal himself with.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs forced his hand to stop shaking and his stomach to stop complaining. He couldn’t remember hunger being that difficult to control after only four days. He’d gone much longer back on his street with barely eating anything.

Once his hand steadied, he looked down at the window. Closed, but no magic protecting it. He lowered himself, let go of the roof and caught the windowsill, then pulled himself until he had an elbow on it. He locked it in place with earth and felt inside using air for the latch. Top of the window. Water between the panes let him undo it, then pushed it open and pulled himself inside.

He sat under the window, panting.

This had been harder than usual. He hadn’t believed Carina about working while hungry being harder, he’d done that all his life. But either eating well since becoming a Runner had made him soft, or there was something else at play.

He looked about the room. He made out the form of a bed, dresser, wardrobe. No

one in it. The noble who lived here only had a few servants, and they didn't sleep in his home. One man, living in a house with space for a large family.

Just like a noble to take what other could make better use of.

He stood. His target wasn't in this room. Taking from an unoccupied room was like taking from an abandoned house, meaningless.

He cracked the door opened and listened. Conversation from down the hall, where the noble had his office. Tibs had expected him to be sleeping. Conversation meant more than one person. If not the office, then the man's bedroom. There would be coins there, too. Nobles always kept coins within reach. It was as if, for as much of them as they had, they couldn't bear not to have them close by at all times.

He stepped to the next door without noise due to his shoes and when the door creaked as he pushed it open, the conversation didn't pause.

This bedroom had a larger bed, a dressed and wardrobe, as well as clothing strewn everywhere. Tibs felt for pockets on the pants and shirts, and for coins in them. Nobles had fancier clothing, which meant they didn't need a coin pouch.

Not finding any coins, he turned to the dresser and searched through the garment there. He found a fancy knife at the bottom, but that would be missed, and he didn't need another knife. He moved to the bed and found another knife under the pillow.

Someone worried for his life.

His hand felt the pouch between the mattress and the bed frame as the motion of shadows from the window and he froze. When he didn't move again, he carefully peeked over the bed. Leaning against the frame of the now open window was the silhouette of someone. When that person silently waved at Tibs, he knew how it was.

While watching them, Tibs opened the pouch and took a coin from it. He wasn't going to let them distract him from what he'd set to do.

They made a 'give me' motion and Tibs considered it. They weren't after his coin. Tibs could faintly hear the voices through the wall, so they'd hear him if he spoke.

He motioned to the window. They could talk outside.

The thief shook their head. And made the motion again.

Or not.

Tibs shook his head. If they weren't willing to talk, he wasn't willing to give the eye back to them. He motioned to the window again. He had what they wanted. It wasn't like they had a choice.

The thief grabbed a vase off the dresser and looked at Tibs.

So maybe they had choices.

They made the motion again, returning to the window.

Tibs shook his head. He could be out before anyone reacted to the noise.

They threw the vase against the wall closest to the voices and fell back out the window as Tibs ran for it. They grabbed the bottom of it and slammed it closed as they fell. That noise was almost louder than the crashing vase.

Cursing silently, Tibs grab to open it when he heard the approaching steps. Far too close.

He jumped to the corner behind the door as it opened and used air to make steps to climb until he was in the corner where the walls and ceiling met.

The man in a pale yellow dress shirt and pants ran to the window, lamp in hand. He opened it and looked outside. He closed it and latched it. He went to the dresser where the vase had been and opened the drawer where Tibs found the knife. The man took it and relaxed.

Tibs was surprised at the reaction. It was just a knife, even if it was pretty, but he had to focus on staying in his dark corner as his arm shook. He had earth coursing through them, but it didn't seem to help as much as before. He wished for the man to hurry to leave since he'd checked in on his precious knife, but the man looked around, going to where the pieces of the vase were.

He opened the drawer on the small bedside table and looked in, before closing it. He raised the lamp and looked around the room.

Tibs cursed. He didn't believe he'd gotten here before the thief had taken something and now he was double checking everything. Tibs ground his teeth to keep from crying out as the ache in his arms and legs turned into pain. He needed to get the man to leave.

The lamp was something fancy, an oil reservoir with glass surrounding the flame to protect it from errand breeze, but the top was open. The wick was wide, so it would take more than a breeze to snuff it, and the man might feel that, but Tibs was running out of time.

He sent air into the opening, and made it a small whirlwind inside the lamp, causing the flame to increase in brightness and the man to stare at it before going out and bathing the room in comfortable darkness.

Instead of leaving, the man placed the lamp on the dresser and removed the glass cover. Tibs cursed as the man took a fire starter from a pocket. He ground his teeth and disrupted the fire as the man struck the sides, and the sparks died before they reached the wick.

The man struck it again, and again, and Tibs's vision swam from strain. How long was he doing to try to light it with a clearly defective fire starter? Tibs started considering his alternative. He didn't cover his face because he trusted his ability to be unseen, but now, if he fell, he'd have to run out the bedroom and there was enough light coming in from the open door the man would catch sight of his head. It wouldn't take many details for Harry to come asking.

They were too close to the run for him to spend time in a cell, and Tibs didn't think his status as the dungeon's savior was going to keep Harry from throwing him in there.

The man put the starter on the dresser and headed for the door. He paused, looked back, then left and closed it.

Tibs stifled a scream as he let himself down and silently fell on his back. As much as he wanted to remain there to rest, he pushed himself to his feet. The man would be back.

Tibs unlatched the window, climbed out, then down. He staggered away from the house. He needed to eat.

## Stepping up-32

The guard stepped before the dungeon's entrance as Tibs and his team approached. He placed a hand on his sword once they reached the last step.

"You aren't going in," he told Jackal.

"What are you doing?" the cleric asked, but the other guard placed a hand on his shoulder.

"This is our scheduled run," Jackal replied.

"I don't care. I'm not letting you go in that death trap."

"There's loot in there," the fighter said. "Loot that me and my team are going to get. So get out of our way."

Tibs studied the guards. They were determined.

"Has the dungeon been closed?" Mez asked.

"Yeah," the guard said, "it has"

"No, I'm not," Sto said as Jackal snorted.

"This isn't official," the fighter said. "It's my father."

"Then you know I can't let you in."

"Maybe no one informed you, but I don't care what the man wants. So move out of my way, or be moved."

"No."

Jackal shook his head and stepped forward, his skin turning the gray of stone. When they nearly touched, the guard took a step back, and another, glancing behind him and getting out of the way before his next step took him inside the doorway.

Jackal grinned and continued, his skin regaining its usual tanned color.

"Why didn't you stand your ground?" the woman demanded in a hiss.

"He wasn't going to stop," the man replied, "I would have ended up in there."

"Better that, than summoned by Wells," she said. "You're on your own when that happens."

The man protested, but Tibs was too far to hear the words. His concern of Sebastian holding more sway over the guards faded over his mulling at yet more implication what was going on in the dungeon was out of the ordinary.

"Tibs?" Jackal said, indicating the section of the wall where the doorway to the second level was hidden. That Jackal knew where it was meant the fighter was getting better at sensing his essence. He hadn't had his hand against the wall while he walked.

"Why don't you see if you can open it," Tibs replied, fighting the urge to look in the direction of the trap room. Should he check it? He didn't want to believe what everything he heard pointed to, but if Jackal's father feared what happened to him, knowing how good of a fighter he was...

"Tibs's right," Carina said. "We shouldn't be relying on him all the time. We also need the practice interacting with essence triggers."

"I'd like to avoid interacting with triggers, since it means they'll unleash spears in all

directions,” Mez said.

“But practicing with this means we’ll be better at—Tibs!” Carina yelled as he took off running. He needed to be in the room before Sto could react.

“Tibs?” Sto asked. His friends were calling after him now. “What are you doing?”

Tibs ignored him. How long did it take the dungeon to make changes? And was the fact he couldn’t make changes when someone was in a room a rule, or an impossibility? If it was just some rule set by the ‘them’ Ganny often referred to, Tibs wouldn’t be able to find out.

“Tibs?” Sto asked again, sounding worried. “Tibs, Jackal has the door open, your friends are going to continue without you.”

Nice try. If Sto was this worried, there was something to this. Tibs stopped once he stood on the first row of tiles.

“Tibs, what are you doing?”

The room looked the same, misshapen stone tiles on the floor, uneven walls with barely camouflaged holes from which spear would come out if someone stepped on a trigger tiles. There seemed to be more holes than he remembered.

“I don’t know what you’re doing Tibs,” Sto said. “You’ve been through this floor before, nothing’s changed.” Then why did he sound so casual he was covering up how he really felt?

Tibs spread air over the floor and let it flow under the tiles, telling fake triggers from the real ones. He picked one four steps ahead and formed a staff of water, then iced it. Standing in the doorway, there were no matching holes for the spears, so this was the one place he was safe. He looked above the doorway. Holes there too, so he crouched to be safe, then extended the ice staff to the trigger and pressed on it.

“Tibs,” Carina called, “what are you—” Her voice was cut off by the spears quickly filling the room, then retracting. So many Tibs couldn’t count on them.

“What was that?” Mez asked.

Tibs tapped the trigger again and studied how the spear covered every angle in the room except the one he stood in. All it would take was one mistake on the part of the rogue searching for the triggers, and everyone in the room would be dead.

This wasn’t a trap room anymore.

“That’s a kill room,” Jackal said, awe and fear in his voice.

“What is going on?” Tibs demanded.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Sto replied.

“Bullshit!” he motioned to the room. “You’re supposed to test us. How is anyone supposed to survive this?”

“I’ve had to make it tougher as you get stronger.”

“Omegas aren’t stronger! They can’t sense the triggers like we can.”

“I’m just forcing them to be more clever,” Sto said, so casually Tibs ground his teeth. What was going on?

“You’re lying.”

“Come on Tibs, you have a run to do. I finally got the controlling Bigger Brute down,

get there so Jackal can have his fight.”

“Not before you explain yourself.”

“Tibs,” Sto warned.

“What? What Sto? Come on, out with it. If I go to the boulder room, am I going to find an impossible number of rats there?” there had been more the last time his team had gone through. He hadn’t thought much of it, because they had been easy to deal with, but for Omegas? Tibs had nearly died multiple time when there were only a dozen rats there, even when the team reached that room without losing anyone to the traps.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m the dungeon, I do things the way I want.”

“I thought there were rules! You’re testing us! Everything is about forcing us to get stronger, smarter! If no one survives, how is that supposed to happen?”

“Some survive,” Sto scoffed.

Tibs had trouble finding his voice at the casual way Sto talked about people dying here. He’d never been this uncaring before. He looked at his friends for help, but they stood outside the room, silent and confused. They only heard his side of the conversation. And the only thing keeping them from thinking he was insane was that he’d demonstrated he could hear the dungeon.

“Come on, Sto.” Tibs fought to keep his voice calm. Screaming wouldn’t help. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand,” the dungeon replied. “I’m just doing what I’m supposed to.”

“No!” Tibs snapped. “You’re not supposed to make it impossible for us to get through a room.”

“It’s not impossible. You can get through it fine.”

“This floor isn’t for me anymore! Abyss, Sto, why are you killing everyone? Why...” Tibs trailed off as he remembered the argument Carina had gotten into with another sorcerer over lying on the information the map of the second floor contained. How Carina kept being surprised with how easily they were getting through them.

His blood turned cold.

“You’re making it easier for me.”

Sto said nothing.

Tibs swallowed. Thought of Pyan, Geoffrey, the others.

“Why?” he asked. Then louder. “Why?”

Sto remained silent.

“What made you into a murderer, Sto,” Tibs demanded.

“They did!” the dungeon yelled back so loud Tibs nearly dropped to a knee. “They hurt me! Nearly killed me! Tibs, did you think I’d just let them try it again? Never! They’re never going to hurt me again! I’m not going to let them get stronger so they can then come in here and try to kill me!”

“They?” Tibs had to swallow as he understood. “Sto. It was only Bardik.”

“No! You saw the others. You didn’t hear them talk. Laugh at me, at what they were



going to do to me.”

“They were captured, Sto. Harry threw them all in cells, far away from here.”

“There are others! People who want me dead! Want all my kind dead! I’m not going to let that happen!”

“So you’re just going to murder innocent Runners?”

“They aren’t innocent!”

“Bullshit! My friends came to help, other Runners did too.”

“You’re different,” Sto said, his tone gentle.

“No, I’m not. You think the others wouldn’t have come to help they’d been able to hear you? They’re just like me, Runners.”

“No.” The certainty in Sto’s voice scared Tibs. He’d thought Ganny had been exaggerating when she said Sto played favorite. That it only felt that way to him because he could hear the conversation, knew to mention something his team could use. But if Sto treated him differently...

Tibs sensed the triggers’ locations and walked deeper into the room.

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t step in the room,” he ordered. “Me and the dungeon have to settle something.”

“Tibs,” Carina said worryingly. “I don’t think putting your life in danger like that is the way to resolve anything.”

It was the only way. He stood before the trigger and looked around to make sure the spears wouldn’t miss him.

“Tibs,” Sto said. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish?”

“I’m like them,” he replied. “If you’re going to murder them, I don’t deserve anything else.”

“Come on, be reasonable, Tibs.”

Tibs raised his foot over the trigger. He considered using earth to steady himself. Losing his balance and falling on the trigger would be a stupid way to die, but Sto could sense the essence and Tibs needed him to know he was serious.

“I’m not the unreasonable one, Sto. I was okay with my friends dying when I thought it was because they hadn’t been good enough to survive. But you murdered them. You’re nothing more than a thug now.”

Sto sighed. “Think of your team, Tibs. Without you, they aren’t going to be able to make it through.”

“Why, because you’re going to make it impossible for them too? Is that what you’re reduced to? Making threats? Do what I say or else? I’m Street Sto, that’s been my entire life until I came here, people threatening me. I didn’t give in to them then, I’m not going to do it now.”

“No, Tibs, you can’t do this. I’m not going to let you.” The floor shook slightly, then again. Heavy steps approaching.

The Whipper from the boss room, or had Sto made a Brute in another room? How long did it take the dungeon to make a creature? Tibs filed the question away for later. For if

he survived this.

“You really think it’s going to be here before I put my foot down?”

“You’re not going to do it,” Sto said. “You don’t want to die. No dying. remember? That’s what you always tell your team. No dying.”

“I think you’ve made it clear that’s not possible.”

“Damn it Sto. Stop this, you’re being silly. I have to eat to get stronger so I can make things more difficult for everyone. That’s how this works.”

Tibs decided to play along. He had time and Sto seemed to have forgotten what he could do to his monster. “Really? Get stronger? Then why didn’t you graduate already? With the number of Runners you’ve eaten, the third floor should be open. Why isn’t it? What have you been doing with all that essence you’ve been gathering?”

Sto didn’t answer, and Tibs smirked. Then it fell, and he looked at his bracers, feeling sick.

“No.” He barely heard himself. He ground his teeth, fought the urge to slam his foot down on the trigger just to piss Sto off.

This was bigger than him, he told himself. This was about his team and the Runners that had survived.

“You have to be stronger, Tibs,” Sto said softly. “I need you to be stronger for the next time they try to kill me.”

“Not at my friends’ expense.”

“They aren’t your friends,” Sto scoffed.

“Pyan was my friend, Geoffrey. I’m going to be friends with other Runners. That’s how it works. We help one another. We become friends. Some become family.”

Tibs looked at the trigger. He could feel the Whipper at the edge of his sense. It was having difficulty crossing the boulder room.

He took a breath. “You need to decide, Sto. Either the Runners are your enemies, and so am I. Or I’m your ally and so are they. They are not different than I am.”

“Sure,” Sto scoffed. “I never hear you say that about Don.”

“Don’s an asshole,” Tibs said. “But he’s a Runner. He’ll protect you if he knows you’re in trouble. He’ll do everything he can to make it about him, but he will protect you. They all will.”

“What if one of them betrays you? Betrays me? Tibs, I don’t want to die.”

Tibs moved his foot off the trigger and placed it down. “No one wants to die. Runners take that risk anytime they come on a run. But it needs to be a risk, not a certainty.” He paused. “Ganny, you there?”

“I’m here,” she answered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the questioning look his friends gave one another.

“I’m guessing you tried to explain things to Sto.” He began removing the bracers.

“He isn’t been listening to me recently.”

“What are you doing?” Sto asked.

“My friend died so you could make these.” He almost made it an accusation. “I’m not going to just wear them.”

“Tibs, you need them. You’re too weak without proper reserves,” Sto said.

“I’ll manage.”

“It’s not going to bring them back.”

Tibs stopped and fought the tears.

“I’m sorry, Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m sorry for being scared, for not wanting to die, for—”

“Stop!” Tibs cursed. “You can be scared. I get being scared. But lashing out at everyone isn’t going to help. Did you know the guild thinks you’re going feral, whatever that means?”

“It’s when a dungeon loses its faculties,” Ganny said. “It’s rare, but it’s happened. No one knows why.”

“What happens then?” Sto asked.

“A feral dungeon’s a danger to everyone,” she said. “They create monsters and send them out to bring back food. If the adventurers don’t stop them. *They* will.”

“Them again,” Sto said, but there was no mocking in the tone this time.

“We’re going to leave, Sto. You need to decide where you stand. What me and the Runners are to you.”

“But your run, the loot I prepared for you.”

“I think you need to think about that, too. If I deserve special treatment, every Runner does.” He pulled a bracer off his arm.

“I couldn’t survive if I did that for everyone.”

“Then you have an answer, don’t you?”

“Tibs, keep the bracers, please.”

“Sto, I can’t.”

The dungeon was long in replying. “I killed your friends, and I’m sorry for that. Don’t make it be for nothing?”

Tibs closed his eyes, felt the tears run down his cheeks. “Alright.” Maybe he was using the excuse. Maybe he saw it as a way to honor his friends.

He walked out of the trap room as the Whipper appeared in the other entrance.

“We’re leaving?” Jackal asked.

“He needs to think on things,” Tibs answered, and paused. “Sto, can you make the rats and bunnies out of flesh? Like real ones?”

“Sure, but stone’s kind of my thing.”

“What are you thinking?” Carina asked.

He wasn’t certain, the question had just popped in his head. Now he thought he knew where he was going with it. “The town’s having problem with food. Supplies have been going bad before they reach us. If the monsters here were real animals and you let us bring them back, we could supply the town with it.”

“We’d have to eat rat?” Mez asked,

“It’s better than what Kro’s family has had to work with,” Jackal said.

“That would be costly,” Sto said. “I reabsorb the bodies so I can make more, if I have to let that go...”

“How about replacing the copper with meat drops?” Ganny offered. “Meat’s actually easier on you, and you have a lot of essences to make that you haven’t been doing much with, and you get to keep the stone motif you’re so enamored with.”

“Meat drops,” Tibs said. “We could sell that, and it’s probably worth more than a copper at the moment.”

“Okay, I’ll see about that.”

Tibs smiled and started walking again.

“So, we’re really not doing this run?” Jackal asked.

Tibs paused again. “Sto, the puzzle I left you, I needed back. I have to give it back to Cross.” A dozen paces toward the trap room, the cylinder waited on the floor. “Thanks.” He put it in his pouch and headed for the exit.

“Are you sure you don’t want to do the run, Tibs?” Sto asked. “Jackal was really looking forward to the fight.”

“He’ll survive until the next one,” Tibs said. “And we’ll find out then where we stand.”

## Stepping up-33

“You seem rather unimpressed by what happened,” Carina told Khumdar, as they sat on their bed.

The cleric sat on his, back against the wall. “I realized that if I were always impressed by Tibs and the things he is capable of, I would never stop. It seemed more productive to simply accept that so long as I am Tibs friend, such things will happen.

Jackal chuckled.

“I wish I knew how to do that,” Mez said. “So, exactly what happened? Who’s Sto, and that other name you used.”

“Ganny,” Carina said.

“Ganymede,” Tibs said. “That her full name. Sto is the dungeon. Stone Mountain Crevice. Sto for short.”

“That is a mouth full,” Jackal said.

“Okay, you are joking, right? That isn’t a name,” Mez said.

“It’s the name he picked.” Tibs rested his head against the wall. “I get the sense he isn’t all that much older than we are, when it comes to dungeons. He got to pick his name, so he went with something he thought would be interesting.”

“So there are two of them?” Carina asked.

“There’s only one dungeon,” Tibs answered. “She’s there to help. Like I said, I think he’s young, and she was sent to help him learn how to do dungeon things. But he’s the one who does everything. The dungeon is him. If he doesn’t want to do what she says, there isn’t much she can do about it.”

“Sent by whom?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know. She regularly refers to a nebulous ‘them’ when she feels Sto is going too far.” He tapped his bracers. “Mez’s bow. I think your staff too,

Khumdar, although Sto denied doing it on purpose. But I don't think they who sent her."

"The robes?" the cleric asked.

Tibs shook his head. "He says that was random, and I'm inclined to believe him."

"Alright," Jackal said, tone firm, "As interesting as this is. Does it mean anything for us and our runs?"

"I wish I could speak to this Ganymede," Carina said. "She must know so much about dungeons if she's there to help."

Tibs smiled. "Maybe not as much as you think."

"Still, she—"

"Let's focus," Jackal said, and was stared at. He ignored them. "Does knowing what Tibs told us, change anything. I get the sense the dungeon's going to go back to normal, right?"

"I don't know," Tibs said. "He treated us the same, it's with everyone else he became murderous. I think he's coming to his senses, but like Ganny, I can't force him to do anything."

"And if he decides to continue killing everyone," Mez said, "that is going to include us."

Tibs ran a hand over the bracers. "I don't know if he'll be able to bring himself to do that. He's grown attached to me."

"You did save his life," Jackal said.

"You are the only person he can talk with," Carina added.

Tibs shrugged. "We should get a sense of what he decided by the time our next run happens." He looked at his friends. "If nothing changed, I'm not going in."

"If you're not going in," Jackal said, "it means we aren't either."

"We can get a different rogue," Mez offered.

"We can only replace a team member if someone dies," Khumdar said. "I will not be the one attempting to kill Tibs. Will you?"

Tibs looked at Jackal instead.

"Don't look at me," the fighter replied.

"You're the one who'll miss the loot and fighting if I keep you from going in."

"I'm not killing you. Abyss, you'd think I'm unreasonable or something."

Tibs chuckled.

"Then it is settled," Khumdar said. "We hope that by our next run, the dungeon has come to its senses."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the end of the following day, Tibs knew Sto had decided to be reasonable. While the Runners couldn't talk about what they'd experienced, everyone still around had survived the murderous version of the dungeon, so the awe and confusion at the comparatively easier version was difficult to mask.

"There you are, Mister Light fingers," Cross said, approaching their table. Carina and Mez were eating with him and looked at her curiously. They were enjoying the first of the

new meat drops. The guild hadn't seen them as important, so the runners could keep them, and as most runners ate at the inn, it was the first place they came to sell it, and Kroseph's father had been happy to pay coppers for them, depending on the size. They all seem to be good quality meat, according to Kroseph.

"Carina, Mez, that's Cross, she's the one who gave me the cylinder puzzle."

"Lent," the fighter corrected. Extending her hand. "Unless you aren't done with it still?"

Tibs gave it to her, and she studied it before putting it away and unhooking a cloth pouch and handing that Tibs.

"You're the fighter that's been going around beating up the others," Mez said and Carina looked at him curiously. "What's the point of all the metal you have attached to your armor?"

"Making it heavier," Cross answered, watching Tibs empty the bag next to his plate. "Giving me something to parry and block swords with. Making my punch and kicks hit harder." She smiled at him. "You interested in giving it a try?"

Mez shook his head. "I'm an archer. My survival depends on making sure no one gets close enough to me so they can use their fists."

Tibs looked at the pieces of wood that spilled out. "I don't fix broken... whatever this is."

"It isn't broken," Cross said. "It's a different kind of puzzle. You have to reassemble it. It's cube when it's put together."

Tibs took a piece and looked it over. As long as his palm was wide, a finger thick, with a square notch in it. He laid the pieces side by side. All the same length and thickness, but the notches weren't all in the same place and one was without any.

"What's the point of something like that?" Carina asked, a mix of bafflement and curiosity in her voice. Tibs looked at her. Out of anyone he knew, he'd expected her to appreciate puzzles.

Cross chuckled. "Keeps the fingers busy, the mind sharp."

"But it doesn't do anything," she said.

"It's fun," Tibs said. "I like figuring it out. It's like working out the lock of a door, or a trigger on a trap."

Carina nodded and addressed Cross. "So you think yourself a rogue and a fighter?"

Cross laughed. "I live the lock and traps to the people like you who go in dungeons. I'm a caravan guard. That means walking for month between cities with nothing happening. These keep me occupied. That and the other guards who think that I'm putting on air with all the metal on my leathers. I get to beat them up for coppers. That's good practice too."

"Then why are you still here?" Mez asked. "The caravan left a while ago."

"I needed a break. They'll be back, or another will. Caravans always need guards. In the meantime, I get to guard the merchants' wares. Seems they need it. The guards here aren't doing a great job of protecting them."

Tibs looked up from the pieces he'd been trying to assemble. "They aren't?"

"They can't be. Stuff has been going missing for weeks now and they haven't caught

the thieves. I figured it's some of the Runners. They're the one who would be so much better than guards."

Tibs shook his head. "We know better than to cause trouble to the merchant we do business with."

"You know better," Mez said. "I doubt everyone thinks like you."

He stared at the archer. It wasn't the first time someone had mentioned Runners could be part of the problem. "But, this is our town. Why would any of them want to cause trouble? It's just going to hurt all of us. If the merchants don't have wares to sell, they don't have the coins to buy our loot, we don't get coins to spend on our gear from them."

Carina and Mez stared at him.

"What?" Tibs asked.

"Where on your street did you get to learn about the ebb and flow of goods?" Carina asked.

"Here," Tibs said. "All I had to do was watch the merchant, and ask Darran. It's pretty easy to figure out."

Cross chuckled. "Well, even some merchants don't understand that like you do."

"And not all Runners are attached to the town," Mez said. "A lot of them, in fact, just see this as another cell, so they don't care about the trouble they're causing. Harry's the biggest deterrent, but if the guards are slacking off, I have no problem seeing a lot of the Runners who've survived this long think they can take what they want and not get caught."

Tibs thought about that. How would the guards get away without doing their jobs? Harry was fair, but hard. If he caught anyone not working as hard as they should, he would punish them.

He filed this as something to look into when he had the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs watched the men and women being escorted off the platform and had a bad feeling. They all wore a hard, vicious expression.

"I think the dungeon might have planted the sword in its own foot," Jackal said. "Do dungeons have feet? Anyway, those aren't from cells. The kings went to their prisons for this batch of conscript."

"And you think it's because of what Sto did?" It had only been a few days since Sto had become reasonable again. Tomorrow the schedule for the next runs would go up, so the arrival of conscript wasn't unexpected.

"It's been devouring the young Omegas like they were sweet meats. It makes sense the guild asked for a tougher cut this time around."

"Why are you talking about meat?" Tibs asked, his stomach rumbling.

"Haven't had breakfast today," Jackal replied. "I guess I'm sort of hungry."

"You should try going four days," Tibs grumbled.

The fighter patted his shoulder. "You're the one needing the practice. You should have had some of that meat the dungeon's providing now."

"I'd just be hungrier."

"But yeah, the timing of the dungeon going nice again might work against it. These

people are not going to go easy. If there's a batch that's going to try to destroy it, hoping it's going to set them free, it's them."

"They won't be able to do it," Tibs said. "It took Bardik getting concentrated corruption to do it, and Sto has defenses against that now. They don't have elements, so as rough as they are, they're still just Omegas."

Tibs watched them being led toward the field facing the dungeon and was about to follow them when someone appeared on the platform.

The woman was regal, in a white and yellow robe and yellow eyes. An adventurer Tibs thought, only her demeanor was more that of a noble. Back straight, looking around like she was searching for something, but with that slight sneer that said she couldn't imagine how she'd even thought it could be here.

The other things that stopped him were the number of gems on her and the essence they all radiated. She flicked her hand as she stepped down from the platform and an etching formed before her. Once composed of a multitude of essences, including water, air and earth.

Tibs swallowed. Was she like him?

He sensed her essence and he couldn't identify it. He sensed it as having a yellow color to it and was strong enough she had to be Delta. Whatever her essence was, it wasn't the same as his. So what was she?

She panned around, the disk of etched essences floating over her hand. Minute streams of essences flowing from the gems to it. Feeding it, maintaining it.

Something Darran mentioned early when Tibs met him came back to him. Sorcerer's robes with pockets for them to put ingredients to draw elements from. Carina saying how she wasn't near being able to use multiple essences yet.

The woman was a sorceress.

She panned over him and Jackal, came back to them, and frowned.

"I think you have another admirer," Jackal said.

Tibs rolled his eyes. If she was looking at them, it was the fighter that would attract her attention. Tibs only looked like a kid, and people who didn't know him dismissed him quickly, which was how he liked it now.

She went back to panning and walked away, deeper into the town.

"I guess we aren't that interesting," Jackal said. "Come on, I want to hear what Knuckles has to say to this new batch."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've been given a reprieve you don't deserve," the guard leader said, standing on the wooden platform. "So consider yourself lucky." He didn't look pleased as he looked them over. Tibs headed for the mountain side. He wanted to speak with Sto and this was the best time, with Harry's voice booming and everyone focused on him.

"You've already been assembled into teams of five. You can bitch all you want. Those are your teammates for the runs. They'll be replaced as they die, and we're going to assign the replacements. Learn to live with it."

"Sto?" Tibs said. He wasn't certain where the dungeon's influence started.



“Hi Tibs,” the answer was cautious. “I’ve been treating the others better.”

Tibs smiled. “I noticed. Those who had runs were amazed no one dies.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tibs nodded. “It’s...” he found he couldn’t say it was okay, because it wasn’t. What Sto had done wasn’t fair, but it was done and over with. “Can you see any of the new recruits?”

“The first row, Harry’s also really bright. I’d love for him to...” Sto fell silent.

Tibs didn’t think too hard on what he’d been about to say. “They might be tougher than you expect. They aren’t people who’ve been caught picking pockets or getting into fights at a bar. Those are criminals who’ve been at it for longer.”

“I’m not sensing any element from those in front.”

“They’ll be more experienced doing what they do. I thought you should know about that.”

Sto was silent for a few seconds. “What do you want me to do?”

Tibs looked the crowd over. “I trust your judgment,” he finally said. It wasn’t his place to dictate how Sto should behave beyond treating them fairly. What that would mean for this batch, Tibs wasn’t sure. At least most of the survivors were Upsilon now, so if he had to increase the difficulty for these people, those who hadn’t figured out the shortcut to the second floor would survive the first.

“I won’t let you down, I promise. You are going to do the next run, right?”

“I will. I’m going to find out when it is tomorrow. Can I ask a favor?”

“I thought you didn’t want me to treat you differently,” Sto replied, tone cautious.

“I know, and I’ve been trying to figure out a way to do this without asking you, but... I need to have an audience with Light, and I can’t figure out how to make it happen out here.”

“Harry would know.”

“And he’d ask why. I can’t lie to him. It’s one thing light does. He calls it shining on lies.”

“And you don’t want him to know about everything you can do.”

“Yeah, if I tell him the guild will know and... well, you’re going to come up in that conversation no matter how I try not to mention you.”

“I understand.”

“If you don’t want to,” Tibs said, “I’ll understand. I screamed at you for the way you treated me and now I’m—”

“No, I’m going to help you, Tibs. I can make a room and fill it with light, but I’m not sure about the high emotion part of it, though.”

“I have that part handled. Thank you. If you need me to do something to pay you back, just say it.”

“If you have a way to get me more light essence, I’d appreciate it. This is going to use a lot of my current reserve, and absorbing light from the little of the outside I see is slow.”

Tibs couldn’t think of anyway, but he owed it to Sto. “I’ll see what I can do. Thanks.”

“It’s not a problem,” Sto answered. “It’s what friends are for, right?”

Tibs smiled. “Yeah, it is.”

He headed back to the assembly just as a man broke from it. He was surprisingly fast for his bulk, dressed in ripped gray clothes that seemed to be the norm for these conscripts. He noticed Tibs and altered his direction to run toward him.

Tibs understood what the man was doing, but he didn’t get how he thought going through Tibs would make his escape easier. Guards were detaching from the platform to chase the man, while Harry kept talking.

Tibs stepped out of the way. Harry didn’t want him to get involved in guard stuff—although he had asked him to catch the thief—so he figured he should try not to be part of this, but the man turned to keep running his in direction.

Since Tibs didn’t have a choice. He readied himself. He bought water to his hand, and when the man was twenty paces away, he flung it at the ground before him, wetting it and then iced it. The man fell on his back the moment a foot landed on it and he slid another ten paces before regaining his footing and getting off the ice.

“They’re going to kill you if you run,” Tibs told him.

The man’s smile was vicious. “Not if I have you protecting me.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m just a Runner.”

“You can do magic. That means you’re important.”

Tibs snorted. “Not really.”

The man lunged at Tibs, who stepped out of the way, but the man surprised him with his speed again, Twisting, grabbing Tibs’s arm and pulling him down as he fell and then got back to his feet, one arm around Tibs’s chest and a hand closed around his throat.

“Stop right there,” he ordered the guards, “or I’m going to rip out his throat.”

“They aren’t going to listen to you,” Tibs said, as the guards stopped where they were. He eyed them. Harry was going to have words with them once this was over.

The man’s hand tightened on Tibs’s throat and he decided he couldn’t count on the guards. He pushed corruption into the man’s hand. Not the lashing out Don was so fond of, just a trickle. The hand jerked on contact, but the man didn’t seem to realize what was happening.

Tibs guided it through the arm and realized he didn’t know what to do with it. His healing while his essence was corrupted had given people fevers, but he didn’t know how that had happened. If he tried anything now, would he end up making the man so sick he would kill him?

Using what Don did with the fire, Tibs sent a trickle to the lungs to corrupt the air the man breathed.

Immediately, the man began panting, then coughing. When the hand and arms loosened, Tibs turned and pushed him away, pulling the essence back so the man was breathing normally by the time the guards were on him.

“Thanks, Light Fingers,” one of them said.

“That’s not my name,” Tibs replied, then shook his head. Why did he even bother anymore? Strangers knew him by that name. The guards certainly wouldn’t stop.

“You’ve been given a chance at a life,” Tibs told the convict. “You should appreciate

that.” He paused and because there was a chance he could make sure one person called him by his name. “My name’s Tibs. If you need help figuring things out. You can usually find me at this inn.”

The man stared at him, confused, before being dragged back to the assembly.

## Stepping up-34

“This isn’t good,” Carina said, tapping the name of their team on their schedule. She hadn’t even asked Tibs to locate it.

“I don’t see the problem,” Jackal replied. “Nine days is plenty of time for Tibs to get ready.”

With the conscripts, the schedule now stretched to close to a month. Tibs hoped that with Sto back to his old self and the survival rate now reasonable, more potential adventurers would come. He wanted more ordinary people to take part. Even if they had to pay the guild for the privilege, Tibs wanted people who were neither criminals nor nobles involved.

“Our run is on the sixth of Marmel,” Carina said. Tibs frowned, trying to remember why the month was important.

“Yes,” Khumdar said, “that will cause some difficulties.”

“The eighth,” Tibs said, remembering. The Dark Night was on the eight.

“I still don’t see the problem, so Tibs is going to have two—” Jackal stopped and looked around. They’d waited until the crowd thinned before approaching, but there were people within earshot.

Tibs’s gaze stopped on the sorceress who was standing at the edge of the square, looking the crowd over. She didn’t have an etching this time and her expression was borderline bored.

“Tibs?” Mez called.

“Sorry, what?”

“We’re going to our room to continue the conversation in private,” Jackal said.

“Good idea.” Tibs followed them, watched to see if the sorceress noticed them. She’d shown an interest in Jackal that first day maybe she worked for his father? He had the coins to afford a sorceress.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So,” Jackal said, dropping onto his bed. “What is the problem with the run?”

“It isn’t with the run,” Carina said, taking the chair and sitting to face the beds. “It’s with how close the two audience will be. I should have thought about that. This is one time when paying to be earlier would have been a good thing.”

“Possibly not,” Khumdar said, “but this is certainly complication.”

“You two are agreeing about this,” Mez said, “so I know it’s serious, but I don’t see how either.”

“I’m with them,” Tibs said. “I’ll just continue not eating after the run.”

Carina shook her head. "It's not that simple. You're going to be near death from hunger before the run; you have to be for this to work. You can't then go two more days without eating." She shook her head harder. "We need to change one. We'll focus on Darkness this time, and on the following run, Tibs can have the audience with Light."

"I'd rather not risk it," Tibs said. "Sto is going to graduate, eventually." He ran a hand over the bracer. "Possibly soon. Even with making these, he must be close. I want to use the time we'll have to travel to find a way to the Purity dungeon and find a way to have the audience. I want Purity to be the last, because there's no way to know what Sto's going to be like after graduating. He might not have the strength to set things up for me."

"Can Tibs live off his essence?" Mez asked.

"Oh I hope not," Tibs replied.

"I doubt it," Carina said at the same time.

"Why do you hope you can't survive off it?" Mez asked. "It would solve the problem of you nearly dying."

"I have to be afraid I'll die for this to work," Tibs answered. "If I can survive with my essence, that isn't going to happen."

"You can stave off thirst with your water," Khumdar said, "but I am not aware of any element that can replace eating."

"So we can't do this," Carina stated.

"We have to," Tibs said. He wasn't missing this opportunity. Too many things could go wrong trying for it later.

"You could die, Tibs."

"I can die anytime I go on a run."

"How about we do this," Jackal said. "We get ready for the run and Tibs's audience with Light. Then, we watch him until the Dark Night. If you or Khumdar decide he's in too bad a shape, we feed him and wait for the next one, or have the dungeon give him a dark room, that's going to work, right?"

"I'd rather not ask Sto for another favor," Tibs said.

"But it is an alternative we can work with, right?" Jackal looked at them, focusing on Carina and Khumdar.

"It is a valid alternative," the cleric said.

Carina sighed. "I guess it is. I still don't like that it's putting Tibs at risk."

"Risk is an adventurer's life," Mez said, as if he was repeating something he'd said multiple times before.

"And with risk, comes rewards," Jackal added, grinning.

"Yeah, rewards." Carina didn't sound as enthusiastic.

"Tibs, what had you distracted in the square?" Khumdar asked.

"That sorceress was there, watching us."

"You mean you," Jackal said. "She showed an interest in our little Light Fingers when she arrived."

"She was looking at you," Tibs replied, "and don't call me that."

Carina looked from one to the other. "Why would a sorcerer be interested in either of you? And how did you know she was one?"

"She had the robe," Jackal said.

"You wouldn't have known if I hadn't told you," Tibs said.

"I would have," the fighter protested. "They were distinctive, white and yellow and with lots of gems on her. She's probably rich to afford all of those. Maybe you can do your finger magic on one of them, Tibs?"

"I'm not picking a sorceress's pockets, and those aren't just gems, they're amulets."

"Are you sure?" Carina asked.

"She made an etching while she studied the area and I could see the essence flow from them to it."

"How many?" Carina asked, turning pensive.

Tibs shrugged. "Lots, why?"

"Maybe she has someone charge them."

"What difference would that make?" Mez asked.

She looked at them, hesitated, then answered. "Sorcerers have their own ranking system beyond the guild's. It's based on the number of elements we can interact with. I only have my element right now, but somewhere between Lambda and Zeta, I'll start training to interact with another element. Then I'll gain more as I grow in power. The more elements I can interact with, the higher I am within the sorcerer's hierarchy."

"You are going to have audiences?" Jackal asked, frowning.

"No, it isn't like Tibs. It's just intense training to be able to tell the minute differences between essences, and learning to apply our will to them. It's hard work. I don't think anyone can interact with more than a dozen elements." She smiled. "Well, for now. I don't intend to stop at twelve. I am going to master all of them."

"I have no doubt you'll be the greatest of them," Jackal said.

"What would a sorceress powerful enough to have 'lots' of elements be doing here," Khumdar asked. "Let alone be paying attention to Tibs."

"She was looking at Jackal," Tibs stated. "Look at him. Why would anyone pay me any attention next to him?"

"Because there's a dozen of Jackals in town," Mez said, "but only one Tibs."

"Hey now," Jackal replied. "There aren't a dozen of me. I'll grant four or five, but there's no way I've left a dozen hang around without pounding them into place."

"Are you counting Cross in there?" Tibs asked.

"Fine, six," the fighter conceded. "But she doesn't really count, she's a late arrival. She might leave any day now."

"The point is that Jackal isn't that unusual," Carina said. "I doubt she'd be interested in him simply because he was the first to reach Lambda."

"Not that I tried," Jackal said.

"I didn't want to graduate to Rho," Tibs said. "I just wasn't careful enough in hiding what I can do."

“And Jackal had to either do what he did or die,” Carina said. “I’m happy he chose to live.”

“So is Kro,” Jackal replied.

“But we are straying off the important matter,” Khumdar said. “Why is a powerful sorceress here, and why did she pay attention to Tibs? Is he why she is here?”

“She didn’t do anything odd after studying him,” Jackal said. “She kept scanning the crowd as she walked off.”

“She could be hiding her interest.”

“Shouldn’t you be the one to know, Khumdar,” Carina asked. “Secrets are your thing, after all.”

“Knowing someone has a secret and uncovering what it is are not the same things,” the cleric replied. “And like Tibs, I am wary of attracting the attention of a sorceress seemingly as powerful as she is. You may be the better person to find out what she is doing.”

“Or Tibs could simply ask her,” Jackal said. “She’s staying at the inn after all.”

“She is?”

“Where else is a powerful sorceress going to stay? In a room like this? She’s paying for a room with only one bed in it. That tells you she has money.”

“Are there poor sorcerers?” Mez asked.

“No,” Jackal answered.

“Sometimes,” Carina said and drew stares. “Not every sorcerer is interested in selling their skills. Some spend their time in research. That gets expensive, but we’re getting sidetracked again. Her reason for being here might have nothing to do with Tibs. I say we wait until she does something to indicate what she’s here for.”

“So long as she doesn’t cause trouble,” Tibs said, “I don’t mind her being around.”

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“You have to explain something to me,” the woman said, plopping herself in the seat across Tibs. Tibs didn’t think he’d ever seen a noble plop on a chair, let alone a sorceress. Carina never plopped, she sat.

He paused, meat dripping with spicy sauce nearly to his mouth, and stared at her. This was his last meal before he prepared himself for his audience with Light. He hadn’t planned on having it interrupted by who had to be the most powerful sorceress in town, short of whoever the guild had training Carina and the other Runners.

He considered ignoring her. He could easily ignore nobles, especially nosy ones, but a sorceress was another level of danger he didn’t think he was equipped to deal with. He put the meat back on his plate next to the larger chunk of it and vegetables. He’d wanted more, but Carina had told Kroseph what Tibs would be doing, and the server wouldn’t let Tibs gorge himself.

“Explain what?” he answered, surreptitiously counting the amulets. Twenty-two.

“Two things, really. How is someone as young as you is here, and how is it that your eyes are brown?”

Tibs sighed. It had been a while since anyone had asked about his eyes and he’d forgotten how tiresome that got. “My teacher says that my eyes are because I’m so young.

I'm the youngest surviving Runner. He thinks that as I get older, the color will come in." He risked a question of his own. "Why do you care?"

"I'll answer that after you tell me how you got to be here."

Tibs rolled his eyes and her frown said that might have been a mistake. He didn't hurry his answer. "I picked the wrong pocket."

"A thief then?"

"Rogue," he corrected. Definitely a noble under that sorcerer's robe.

"It doesn't explain what you are doing here."

"Surviving. You've been through this, you know how it goes."

"What makes you think I put myself through this?" she motioned around them.

"There's only one dungeon not controlled by the guild, and you don't look like a cleric."

"Still, I could—"

"No, you couldn't. You wouldn't get this powerful without a dungeon."

Her smile was coy, but knowing, and Tibs wondered what he'd given away.

"Astute observation."

Tibs shrugged.

"I'll answer your question and in return you'll explain yourself without the word gymnastics."

"I don't know what that last word means."

"You'll explain yourself clearly," she clarifies, annoyed. "I'm curious about you because I'm curious about the unusual. Anytime there is something unusual happening, there is something to learn. I love learning new things."

"Is that what you were doing when you were going?" Tibs placed his hand before him, palm up, and moved it left and right.

She tapped a finger on the table, considering him. "Yes. The most common unusual thing that reaches me is someone more powerful than they should be, so I was scanning people."

Tibs nodded. "Jackal's the first to reach Lambda, he nearly died reaching it, that's how he got powerful."

She tapped the finger again. "I can't decide if you very skilled at evading questions or just dense."

Tibs shrugged. "I just think you should ask him your question if you're interested in whoever is more powerful."

"He's the man who was with you? Well, boy really, it feels like new adventurers get younger with every new dungeon, but no, he isn't who interests me. You are the curiosity here. I've never encountered someone so young with such concentrated essence. What are you classified as, Lambda too? Zeta?"

"I'm Rho," Tibs answered.

"Really?" she flicked her hand, and an etching formed. Tibs figured it was the same as before, but he couldn't tell enough of the essences apart to be sure. "Why are they

quantifying you so low? This is definitely Lambda level concentration, at least.”

“So you can see my essence with that?” Tibs was confident he knew the answer, otherwise she’d have reported him to the guild, or stolen him away to study.

“Only the concentration. I can’t tell what your element is without your eyes telling me. Unless you had lightning. I’d be able to tell that since it’s my element. She indicated her yellow eyes.”

“What does lightning let you do?”

“It—” she closed her mouth. “No, you haven’t answered my question. That was the deal.”

“I’m here because I was caught picking a pocket. Instead of getting my hand cut off, I was sent here with everyone who’d been in the cell with me. Conscript, that’s what they said I was, before I was a Runner.”

“Then how did you survive your crawls, being as young as you are?”

Tibs shrugged. “I’m good. I made friends to help me.” He paused. “A lot of them died, some to protect me. I got stronger.”

“And somehow the guild is only quantifying you as Rho?”

“I don’t have a large reserve.” He concentrated water on his palm. “Without having an amulet, that’s all I can do.”

She looked at the etching. “That can’t be right. What I’m seeing here shows you should be able to fill the inn with water.”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re seeing. My teacher says I’ll get a larger reserve once my eyes turn blue.”

She closed her hand and the etching dissolve. “Who is your teacher? I’d love to know what they think of your situation. Who is the sorcerer assigned to watch you?”

“There isn’t a sorcerer watching me.”

“Why not? There’s never been a case like you. We should be studying you. Figure out why you aren’t reacting to your element as others do. What it is about being younger— what is your age?— that causes it. Was there any problem with your audience? Did water comment on your age? Did she say when your eyes would turn blue?”

Having someone other than Alistair around when he trained could be a problem. How many misconceptions he’d let his teacher keep would an experienced sorcerer see through? If she talked with Tirania, the guild leader might get it in her head to have Tibs studied herself. Still, there was one roll of the die he could try. He was confident the guild would do it, and even nobles were reluctant to spend coins.

“You can ask the guild,” Tibs said, “I’m sure they won’t charge you too much for the privilege of studying me.”

She groaned. “Them and their coin grabbing. I certainly don’t miss that aspect. Research shouldn’t be charged. Understanding what is happening with you could help everyone.”

“Only those who survive to get an element,” Tibs pointed out. “I’m the first in a long time. What are the odds they’ll be another one? The guild leader doesn’t seem like someone who cares for things that might never happen.”



The sorceress sighed. "Maybe I can talk with the leader at another dungeon. One who isn't so shortsighted. It should be easy enough to arrange experiments. There are plenty of urchins in every city. How old did you say you were?"

"I don't know. I was too busy surviving to count."

She nodded. "It doesn't matter. Take a selection, test them before and after. Bring you over as a benchmark when one of them gets an element. Is it only something with Water, or will any other element cause the lack of eye change?" she asked him.

"I don't know." He hoped it wouldn't be fast. What were the odds any of those people picked the shadow of the element? What would she do if, no matter how young they were when they had their audience, their eye changed color?

"No, of course you don't. Something else to test. Light Fingers, that's your name, right?"

"It's Tibs," he answered with a groan. "What is yours?"

She stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"I gave you my name. You give me yours."

"I'm Nora," she answered, straightening more and then recited. "Nora Asterope, wielder of ten."

He guessed the ten referred to the elements she should interact with. Carina said twelve were the most sorcerers managed, so that made her powerful.

"How long do you think it's going to take until you need me at that other dungeon?" a time frame would let him plan. If he could reach Epsilon before that, he'd have some freedom to evade her.

"There's no telling, that's the great thing about research. You never know how long until you get a conclusion."

"How do I let you know where I'll be, then? Once I reach Epsilon, I don't know where I'll go."

She smiled. "That's one thing you don't have to worry about. By the time I need you, I'll have enough to convince the guild to give me access to you. And if there is one thing the guild knows is where its members have gone to. The guild never loses track of an adventurer for long."

That didn't sound good at all. Tibs watched her leave before looking at his plate. His appetite was gone, and the food was cold, but this was his last meal until after his audience with Darkness. He wasn't letting it go to waste.

## Stepping up-35

Tibs walked as confidently as he could considering his legs trembled, his vision went in and out and the world threatened to spin out of control. His stomach had stopped bothering a week ago, which Carina said wasn't a good sign. He'd spent the last week in bed, only standing to use the chamberpot, and he'd needed help doing that for the last few days.

He needed to seem healthy, otherwise the cleric would heal him, and they didn't

know if that would undo his hunger.

“Just up the steps,” Carina whispered, and Tibs looked up. He nearly lost his balance, only the hand at his back keeping him upright.

“This isn’t going to work,” Mez said, looking at the guards and cleric by the entrance. “She’s going to know something’s off. She had to go through this, right? She knows the signs.”

“Clerics take years to train themselves to the point they will try for their audience.” Khumdar said. “I doubt she will recognize this as an attempt to have an audience, or that it would even be possible for someone who isn’t at the Purity Dungeon to do this.”

Carina sighed. “He’s right. Clerics tend to be narrow-minded in their views of who can and can’t become one of them.”

Tibs did his best to keep up with his friend as they walked up the steps, but again, only the hand at his back kept him standing.

“We still need to be careful,” Jackal said. “One healing touch from her and this might be for nothing.”

“Please don’t let this be for nothing,” Tibs whispered. “I don’t want to have to do this again.”

“One step in front of the other,” Khumdar said. “And everything will go according to the plan.”

“Please don’t say that,” Tibs replied, barely able to manage a groan. “It never goes according to the plan.”

“That is true, but you have the dungeon on your side. I am certain this will go well.”

“Does he need healing?” a woman asked and Tibs’s head snapped up, and he had to pull on earth to remain standing. They’d reached the top already?

“He’s fine,” Jackal said in a surprisingly casual tone. “He spent the night running the roofs and forgot we had a run this morning.”

She stepped forward. “I can remove the effect of lack of sleep.”

Tibs stepped back as she reached for him and nearly feel as his foot slip off the edge of the step. He had a flash of slipping off the edge of the mountain top, the dread of hitting the ledge, then he was held in place by Khumdar, the guards laughing.

“Let them in,” the massive warrior said, “it’s their decision if they want to feed their thief to the dungeon.”

“He’s a rogue,” Jackal replied, tone harsh.

The guard scoffed. “Sure, like polishing a title changes what he is.”

“Just like putting you in leathers makes anything more than a thug, Murgen.”

“Watch your mouth, Jack.” Tibs caught motion, but before he could come to his friend’s help, the guard was flying back against the rock wall.

“You should watch where you step, Murg,” Jackal replied. “You need to stop throwing yourself against my fist; it isn’t healthy. Lady Cleric,” he continued, “while I am certain my friend would appreciate the assistance, he is due for a lesson. The run comes first, his pleasure seconds.”

Tibs snorted. “Says the fighter who jumps Kroseph any—” Carina put a hand over his

mouth.

“We’ll make sure he survives,” Jackal said, “but a few close calls will to him good.”

“I am expected to heal anyone who goes in the dungeon,” she said.

“We’ll all vouch that you healed him,” Jackal said. “Isn’t that right, Murg? Allan?”

“Whatever you say,” the other guard said. Tibs couldn’t make out what Murgen grumbled.

“See, you as far as anyone who matters knows, you have healed him.”

She made a displeased sound, then sighed. “If asked, I’ll say he needed to earn this one due to taking what we clerics do for granted.”

“Whatever tale you want to sing, I’ll be happy to repeat.” Jackal stepped into the dungeon and Tibs was urged forward.

When they stopped again, Tibs looked around, trying to understand why. They were in a hall lit by glowing stones. He stared at them; they were pretty.

“Tibs?” Carina stopped him from reaching for one.

“I want one,” he said.

“I’m sure the dungeon will give you one, if you ask. Has he said how he’s going to arrange you audience?”

“No, he’s staying quiet. I might not have noticed we’re here.” Tibs took a deep breath. “Sto!”

“Does yelling make a difference?” Mez asked. “Doesn’t it know everything that happens inside, well, its body?” He sighed. “I liked this a lot more before I knew it was a person. This is feeling really weird.”

“You should imagine how it felt the first time I had people walking inside me,” Sto said.

“Hey, you’re here.”

“Are you okay?” Sto asked. “Don’t they have a cleric to heal you?”

“You weren’t watching me enter?” Tibs asked, surprisingly hurt.

“Okay, there is definitely something wrong with you. Get one of them tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can tell you,” Tibs said.

“I think the dungeon’s here,” Jackal said.

“Of course he is,” Tibs replied. “He’s all around us. By the way, where did you learn to lie so well? You are horrible at lying.”

“Did you give him ale instead of water?” Carina demanded. “I went to the expense of getting him cleaned water, and you went and got him drunk?”

“I didn’t give him anything!”

“I believe the hunger is affecting his thinking,” Khumdar. “We should hurry this along. It cannot be a good sign.”

“I’m fine,” Tibs said.

“Why are you hungry?” Ganymede asked.

“Hey Ganny! You’re here too. I haven’t eaten in a long time.”

“Why?”

“It’s what clerics do,” Tibs answered.

“Alright,” she said cautiously. “But I don’t see how that means you should be doing it too. You’re a rogue.”

Tibs lowered his voice. “It’s a secret, but it’s not just the clerics who can do it. Khumdar did it too.”

“I am a cleric.”

“That’s right!” Tibs lowered his voice again. “But the best way to be all emotional is to feel like you’re dying. And I am dying!” He said proudly.

“Ohhh, that could be a problem,” she said.

“No, no, it’s how we do it. I’m almost dying, I see Light, then we go back to our room and in two days I go see Darkness. It’s going to be the Dark Night then.”

“When did you eat last, Tibs?” Ganny asked.

He shrugged. “A while back.”

“How long is a while?” Sto demanded. “How long can people live without eating?”

“I don’t know,” Ganny said, “but not for much longer if Tibs is anything to guess by.”

“Okay, I know it’s against the rules, but I’m making him something to eat. He can’t go through the second floor in this state.”

“No, I can’t eat!”

“Tibs! You can’t fight anything in your state.”

“I’m not fighting,” Tibs replied. “I’m going to have an audience.”

“You have to go through the second floor to get that Tibs!” Sto said, exasperated. “I put the room in the same place I put the fire room.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” Tibs said. He snorted, then he chuckled, then he laughed. Hands held him up.

“Did the dungeon say something funny?” Mez asked in a worried tone.

“It’s not going according to the plan!” Tibs exploded in more laughter.

“I think the hunger may just be too much,” Khumdar said.

“Okay, that’s it. I’m putting food on the other side of the doorway,” Sto said. Tibs tried to protest, but he was too busy laughing.

“I don’t think it’s going to help,” Ganny said.

“Look at him!”

“He isn’t like you, Sto. He can’t just absorb it and be better. He has to eat it and his body had to process it. You saw it when you experimented with making one of them. Even if he eats now, he’d not going to be better for a while.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“Get me the audience,” Tibs said between laughs, then quieted, panting.

“I can’t turn to room off, Tibs. You’re going to have to go through the traps, the creatures. There’s no way you can survive in your state.”

“My friends will help me.”

“We will,” Jackal said.

“Can we know what we’re agreeing to first?” Mez asked.

“Are you saying you won’t help Tibs?” Sto demanded. Then let out an exasperated cry when Mez didn’t answer. “Why didn’t your mysterious ‘them’ make it so I could talk to people?”

“I’ve got a plan for that,” Tibs said. “Might take a while though.”

“Are you feeling better?” Carina asked. “For a moment there, I wasn’t sure you were going to stop.”

“It wasn’t that funny,” Tibs said with a disappointed sigh. “I really don’t like this anymore.”

She helped him up. “Then how about you tell us how Sto is going to help you get your audience, then we can get you back to your bed and hope you survive for the next audience.”

“Survive?” Sto demanded, and Tibs groaned at the volume.

“We need to go to the trap hall. He turned it back into the one where I had my audience with Fire.”

“The one that nearly killed you,” Jackal said.

“It was the fire, not Sto. I don’t think Light’s going to hurt me, otherwise I wouldn’t have to go hungry.”

“But there’s four rooms between here and there,” Mez said. “You’re in no shape to get us through trap room, let alone fight in the others.”

“I can slow the triggers’ movement back to the first time you were in the room,” Sto said.

“Sto,” Ganny warned.

“Oh, come on, Ganny. Look at him. I’m supposed to help him, not get him killed.”

She took a long time replying, then sighed. “Fine, but you have to stop after this, Sto. I’m telling you, they are going to notice.”

“Whatever. How about I don’t do anything to the other rooms? Will that keep those ‘them’ happy?”

“That’s not how this work, Sto.”

“You don’t even know how any of this works.”

“Hey!” Tibs exclaimed. “That’s not fair! She’s doing the best she can.”

“It’s okay Tibs,” Ganny said. “He’s just scare for you. Dungeons don’t usually get attached to anyone coming through them. This is new for both of us.”

“I’m not—” Sto began.

“You *like* me!” Tibs yelled and started laughing, then stopped himself. “Okay. I shouldn’t do that again.”

“Has anyone worked out anything useful from this?” Khumdar asked.

“Not a thing,” Jackal replied.

“Sto is going to make the trap room easy, but he’s not doing anything to the monster rooms. He likes me, but Ganny wants him to avoid attracting the attention of them as much as possible. Sto doesn’t actually believe they exist.”

“Tibs can’t fight,” Carina said.

“I told you, this isn’t going to work,” Mez added.

“Tibs, are the rooms where we need to fight going to be harder than the last time we went through?”

“Sto?” Tibs asked when the dungeon didn’t immediately answer.

“Go ahead,” Ganny said resignedly.

“No, I’ll set them to the last time.”

“They’re going to be the same,” Tibs told Jackal, who nodded.

“Carina, activate the doorway.” He picked up Tibs.

“Hey, I can walk!”

“I’m not risking you with the trap room. Easy or not, you are in no condition to attempt it.”

“We can’t go,” Mez insisted. “Tibs can’t fight.”

“We leave him in the hall before the rooms,” Jackal said. “We can take the monsters without him.”

“Don’t we need him to find all the loot?” Mez asked.

“Fuck the loot,” Jackal replied and Tibs slapped him, “Ow! What was that for?”

“You love the loot! You love it almost more than Kroseph. I’m going to help find it. Except the one in the pool. There’s something big and scary in there now.”

“Have you heard anything about that Carina?”

“No. But as far as I know, no one’s swam across. They either take the bridge or the ledge. I’ll mention it to the next team and they can investigate it.”

“I wanted to be the first to find it,” Tibs said, pouting.

“Does hunger really make someone more childish?” Mez asked.

“The only thing I know of going hungry is that many would be cleric die of it,” Khumdar said.

“I’m fine,” Tibs replied, then rested his head on Jackal’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

## Stepping up-36

“Up you go.”

Tibs came awake as someone picked him up. He looked around as Jackal carried him through an empty room. He had trouble remembering why there was an empty room until he noticed the broken trap door.

“Did you get the loot?” he asked.

“Of course we did, and before you ask again. No one’s seriously hurt.”

“Again?”

Jackal looked at him, worried.

“What?”

“You asked me that not five minutes ago.”

“No, I just woke up when you picked me up.”

“Carina!”

Carina was next to them.

“Tibs says he just woke up.”

She looked at him. “You’ve been commenting on the fight since you could see this one.”

He shook his head.

“She’s right,” Sto said. “You had trouble forming words, but it didn’t stop you.”

Tibs tried to remember, but the last thing he recalled clearly was Jackal picking up before crossing onto the second floor. He vaguely recalled being deposited down, but not where. He couldn’t remember talking at all.

“I don’t like that you can’t tell remember you were talking.”

“I’m just tired.”

“You’ve been sleeping for days, Tibs,” she replied.

“Guys,” Mez called, “it’s here.”

He and Khumdar were in a long hallway, the cleric studying the wall.

“I am afraid Tibs will have to unlock it. I cannot make out the essences in this lock.”

“Can’t the dungeon do it?” Jackal asked.

“Sorry,” Sto replied. “I can’t just give it to you. It’s as simple as I can make it, although I guess I should have made it so your team could open it.”

“S’okay,” Tibs replied. “I can do it. I did the maze while tired and hurt. This is going to be easy.”

“I can sense air,” Carina said, “no, wait, it’s a conduit made of air essence. I guess the two others are the same, but out of different essences?”

Jackal placed him down, keeping an arm around Tibs’s waist to steady him. “I get what you mean.” He had a hand on the wall. “I think we need to fill it. There’s a third one.”

“Water,” Tibs said. “Air, earth, water. It’s the lock that opened it when I had my audience with fire. It’s easy; just fill the tube with the essence. It’ll contain it. It’s not like the maze.”

“Then we each handle ours,” Carina said.

Tibs chuckled. “They’re all mine.”

“Then share with the rest of us,” Jackal replied.

Essence moves within the air and earth tubes without Tibs willing it, and he was momentarily confused. He decided not to question it and filled the water one.

With a grinding sound, the stone lowered into the floor.

“Didn’t it go up last time?” Mez asked.

Tibs didn’t answer, mesmerized by the light that spilled out of the ever widening, glowing, gap.

Carina cursed and covered her eyes, quickly joined by the others. Then a hand was over Tibs’s eyes. “Don’t stare into it.”

“But it’s beautiful.”

“It’s the kind of beauty that’ll claw your eyes out,” Mez said.

“More like take a burning stick out of the fire and shove it into them,” Jackal replied. “I didn’t know light could be that bright.”

“This is not only light,” Khumdar said, “but the pure essence of it. It is not something that occurs naturally. I have to wonder at how large a dungeon’s reserves are for it to do this.”

“They’re big,” Sto said, “but they do have a limit. Tibs, you need to get in there if you’re going to do this.”

“Right.” He stepped forward, only for Jackal to hold him back, hand over his eyes.

“Is this safe?”

Tibs shrugged. “It’s got to be safer than fire.” He moved the hand off and stepped forward again. He wobbled, and reached for the wall to steady himself, only it wasn’t there and he lost his balance. The floor hit him hard and Tibs cursed.

“What did I do to you?” He demanded as he pushed himself to his knees.

“That is not how I am usually greeted,” a deep voice answered him.

“Harry?” Tibs asked, looking around.

“No, I am not Harry.”

“You’re Light?” He thought he could make out a form, some denser light.

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

“But...” he trailed off. “I didn’t feel like I was dying?”

The form, Light, crouched before him. “I think suffering qualifies. I am impressed, child of humans. It has been a long time since anyone used this method to reach me.”

“Why do you sound like Harry?”

“You would be the one able to answer that question. The voice is the one you associate with me for some reason.”

“He had light as his element. He’s the leader of the guard in town.”

Light nodded. His form becoming more distinct as Tibs got used to the surroundings. “A righteous human, strong in light and truth.”

“You must like him.”

“That is not how I am. To use terms from your own understanding, I am like the guild you work for. And this Harry is simply one of many. He had his audience and survived it. What he does with the light I grant him is up to him.”

“But you affect how he thinks. My teacher said that our element influences who we become in small ways.”

Light took his time answering. “If that is the case, it is not because I impose my will on you.”

“If you aren’t doing it, then who is?”

“Maybe he is. Maybe the belief I am forcing him to behave the way he does, because it is what I am, brings him comfort. Humans can be... interesting. Just like you. Putting yourself through so much, and for what?”

“Water said I need to do it.”



“No, Water did not say that, child of humans. You cannot let falsehood cloud you if you wish to have me in your arsenal. I do not impose my will once you leave, but I do have rules as to how I expect you to behave in my presence.”

What had Water said? “I need to get the audiences if I want the rest.” It reminded him he had to find the shadow. Light wouldn’t give it to him. But how could he find something when the light blinded him?

“Then why do you want it?”

“To—” the words wouldn’t come out.

“No lies, child of humans.”

He wasn’t going to lie; he wanted to say, but again, the word wouldn’t come out. Light watched him in what Tibs thought was amusement.

“I want the power to avenge my mother,” he said. “But not just that,” he added defiantly. “Also to protect my friends.”

“Yes. As with most humans, your motivations are complex. It’s what makes you interesting.”

“So you don’t mind that I’m going to hurt someone?”

“I told you, what humans do with what I grant them is up to you. You are the ones who have to endure the consequences of your actions. But you, child of humans, must remember that you are taking on a far greater responsibility and most. You will not be the bearer of my essence only, but of all of us. That will exact a price on you. Multiple, in fact.”

Tibs nodded. Water had implied as much. “I’m okay with that.”

The chuckles resounded around him. “Only because you do not know what it is.”

“Will you tell me?”

“No. It is not our place to tell you that. It is something you will discover in time, should you survive that long.” Light fell silent.

Tibs waited, searching the form for the shadow. Focusing hard enough, spots appeared at the periphery of his vision.

“Is that it?” Tibs asked.

“Obviously not,” Light replied with another chuckle. “If it was, you would have left.”

“Can you give it to me?”

“No, it isn’t how I work. It isn’t how any of us should work, but we each have our reasons to do what we do. We are like the being outside of us in that way.”

Tibs rubbed his face. “This is going to take a while, then. I can’t see anything. How am I going to find it?”

“You can see. You simply refuse to look,” Light said. “You believe you know the truth of what I am, and you are limiting yourself to that.”

“It would really help if you told me where I’m wrong then.”

“It does. If only you understand it.”

Tibs glared at the form. “Is being obtuse normal with you all?” He was surprised to realize he even knew the word. Had Alistair explained it, or was it from what Carina had him read?

“It sounds confusing only because you are limiting your understanding.”

“The shadow is in you,” Tibs stated.

“That is correct.”

Tibs pointed to the form. “But I can’t see it, you’re so cursed bright it’s causing spots.” He pointed to the side.

Light watched him silently.

Tibs reigned in his anger. What did he get wrong? He’d tricked the others, well more like took advantage of the situation and grabbed the shadow. Except with Fire and Corruption, who had offered theirs to him, Fire because Tibs was dying and he wanted to see what Tibs would do, and Corruption for... he still hadn’t worked out why corruption had done it. But those two were the only ones who’d behaved differently.

No. Air. Tibs hadn’t tricked Air, he’d given chase. Played her game, controlled his fall until he’d surprised her and...

Air had said something. Something about her and where Tibs was.

Tibs looked around and groaned at himself when all but one spot moved with the motion.

“All of this is you,” he said, and he took hold of the shadow. It melted into his hand and a new reserve pushed itself between air and corruption.

“Well done.”

He blinked in the darkness and doubled over as pangs of hunger hit him.

“Okay, how did that happen?” Sto asked.

“Tibs?” Jackal was next to him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m hungry,” he said.

“You’re alive,” Carina said, “and the light’s gone, so I take it that it went well?”

“How is the light gone?” Sto asked. “Tibs, did you do this?”

“Light showed me I’m not always as smart as I think I am,” Tibs answered her. “And no, I didn’t do it.”

“Sto,” Ganny said, “look at your reserves.”

“Can I eat now?” Tibs asked.

“I would advise against it,” Khumdar said, “unless you are no longer planning on attempting an audience with Darkness in two days.”

“How is it not empty?” Sto asked. “I had to use everything I had, just like with Fire and I had nothing left after that.”

“Sto?” Tibs called, ignoring his friends. “Can you and Ganny take that elsewhere? I can’t keep track of who’s saying what, and it sounds like what’s going on with you doesn’t really affect me right now.”

“Right, I guess it isn’t easy for you to follow multiple conversations. We’ll leave you, but it does mean I won’t be able to answer you.”

“We can talk on the next run,” Tibs replied. He sighed in the following silence.

“Can you hear yourself think now?” Mez asked.

“Barely. I’m tired again. I wasn’t in the audience.”

Jackal helped him to his feet. “Then we can keep going. There’s still the boss to take down.”

“Should we?” Mez asked.

“It’s the only way we get their loot,” Jackal replied.

“Okay, but we have to think about Tibs. We’re all in decent shape right now, so the bridge will be simple to pass. If we get hurt fighting the boss, we might have to try to turn the trigger on the bridge off to cross it, and I don’t trust myself to manage it at the best of time.”

“You are forgetting the doorway from the boss’ chamber to the entrance,” Khumdar said. “We have made it this far without Tibs to cover our back, and we have the healing potions from the bunnylings. I believe it will be easier to let Jackal get his loot than convince him to turn around now.”

“You know me so well.” Jackal grinned.

“You are rather simple to get to know,” the cleric replied.

“I keep telling you all that I’m simple.”

Carina patted his shoulder. “That you are. Come on. Let’s do this, and also figure out how we’re going to get back to our room without the cleric forcing a healing on Tibs once we get out.”

## Stepping up-37

Leave the dungeon proved easy, or so Tibs was told when he woke up in his bed, in that Jackal threatened the cleric’s life if she even thought of laying her hand on Tibs. Harry had been called, and there was an argument about the stupidity of not healing a party member when given the chance. How Jackal had a conversation about Tibs with Harry and not lie, Tibs had no idea; and other than grinning, Jackal didn’t say anything. The others just shook their head with a baffled or amazed expression.

Tibs decided he’d asked once he felt better.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs curled in on himself. His stomach hurt. His body was sore. He wanted it to end. His friends were arguing about him, about what they should do. Someone proposed a healing potion, Carina suggested putting an end to it and waiting for the next time, or the next run.

Tibs wanted to agree with her, but he didn’t have the strength to speak.

Jackal came to his defense, shutting down any idea of not doing this as they’d agreed to. Something about ending it only if it looked like Tibs had death over his shoulder would Jackal agree to end it.

Tibs agreed with Khumdar that Jackal wouldn’t recognize death’s arrival if it showed up holding a torch and screaming Tibs name as loud as it could. Tibs didn’t hear all of Jackal’s reply as unconsciousness claimed it again, but it sounded like Jackal would take down death if it thought it could touch Tibs.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Careful,” someone whispered.

“They don’t stand so close,” Carina replied.

Tibs was wobbling. No, he was in someone’s arms and they were moving.

“I would, but it’s this or be seen,” Jackal replied.

“Being heard,” Khumdar hissed a whisper, “will also bring this to an end. I can hide us from sight, but darkness does little for sound.”

“I can’t keep it from moving away,” Carina whispered after a moment of silence. Tibs suspected Jackal had looked at her expectantly. Air could do stuff with sounds, Tibs was sure of it.

“Khumdar,” Jackal whispered. “How much further?”

“Not too much, I believe. Torus has nearly left. If we are by the woods, we should be far enough for the town’s torches and lamps to no longer be visible.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tibs.”

“I’m okay,” he mumbled.

“Tibs, wake up.”

He sat on something cool. The ground, he realized.

“I’m awake,” he mumbled.

“I think it might be too far gone to answer,” Carina said.

“I have answered,” Tibs mumbled again. Why weren’t they listening to him?

“Does he need to be awake for this?” Jackal asked.

“I do not know,” Khumdar replied, “but I am confident that for him to feel like he is near death, he must be alive.”

Was he dead? He couldn’t be dead. He was hearing his friends.

But they weren’t responding to him.

Was this was being dead felt like?

No, no, he couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t leave his friends behind, they needed him. He wasn’t done. He hadn’t avenged Mama. No, this couldn’t have gone bad this quickly. He had been fine. Hungry, but fine!

He needed to move, to get up, get his friends to take him back before it was too late, give him food. He’d wait until another time.

His body didn’t respond to his command to move. It sat there, on the cool ground, back against what had to be the trunk of a tree if they were at what was left of the woods.

He’d failed.

He was dead.

No. He wouldn’t accept that. He would move. He was going to move. He put all his will behind the command and launched himself forward.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You should be more careful,” a deep, soothing voice said, strong hands stopping his motion forward.

“Where am I?” Tibs looked around, but there was nothing to see. “Is this death?” he

asked, his determination failing him.

“No, you are quite alive, for a short while longer, at least. I will say, I did not think you would come this soon, and with your body in such poor condition. Did you believe I could fix it?”

Come this soon? “You’re Darkness,” Tibs realized and focused in front of him, trying to make him out.

“I am, but unlike what many of your kind, and others, believe, I hold no sway over death. That is quite beyond everyone and everything. So, you cannot rely on me to save you.”

“That’s not why I’m here,” Tibs said. Why couldn’t he see Darkness? With the others, there had always been a concentration of what they were among the rest. Indistinct in cases, but visible.

“Good. Then I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Child of Humans. What do you seek to hide?”

“I’m not hiding anything,” Tibs replied, and grew worried. If he couldn’t make out the form of Darkness, how was he going to see the shadow of the element within them?

The chuckle spread around him. “Oh, you do. It is in the nature of your kind to hide so much. It is why I enjoy them. Very few in your realm are as fond of their secrets as humans. Share one with me.”

“A secret?” Tibs relaxed. Maybe he was trying too hard, getting in his own way. “Is that the price I have to pay?”

“No, I do not believe you are seeking that kind of connection with me. Consider it a courtesy, from one... friend to another.”

“I don’t have secrets,” Tibs answered.

“Now, there is no need to lie. You are keeping what you can do a secret from the people you work for, the guild, are you not?”

“But you know about it. I didn’t think it counted.” Even if he didn’t focus, he couldn’t make out Darkness’s form or the shadow within it.

“You are correct, but there must be others.”

“Nothing I wouldn’t answer. Just ask me a question.”

“That... is not how I am. I do not interrogate, I accept. People of all kinds come into me to tell their deepest secrets and fears. I do not need to seek them out. I open my arms and welcome them.”

Arms. Darkness still held him. “I don’t know how to tell what’s a secret then, at least one you don’t already know.” He looked where he felt the hands on his arms. He thought he could just make out the form of them.

“Then think of it this way. Is there something you have never volunteered, and that no one has asked you about?”

Tibs looked up, his search for the form of Darkness derailed. The question brought up an answer which had him swallow hard. He hadn’t even realized the something he didn’t think about, avoided thinking about, was a secret.

Tibs was surprised that the lack of glee in the waiting silence. Bards always spoke of people who sought secrets as rejoicing upon discovering that one long sought for, and Tibs

had expected Darkness, the collector of all secrets, to be the same. But there was only patience.

Tibs swallowed as the words fought him. “I— I.” He closed his eyes so tightly he saw spots of light. Maybe this was something he wouldn’t have answered if asked. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to answer, he realized. It was how it made him feel.

“I don’t remember Mama.” He remembered lying next to her. Her comforting voice, the coldness of her dead body. But he didn’t remember her.

“Thank you.”

Tibs opened his eyes, and the spots took seconds to vanish, then all was Darkness again. “That’s not enough, is it?”

“What you seek, Child of Humans, is not something I can give freely, but it is within your reach, should you but find it.”

“Why are each of you different?”

“Because we are.”

“But people are different because we’re born to different mothers. Were you born?”

“We... came to be. So long ago, I doubt any of us remember the exact moment, or how it happened. We are older than any of you, humans and otherwise, can comprehend. We were old when the first of your realm figured out how to contact us. And we were different then. Some of those who have sought me, and think themselves wise, tell me that I came to be when their kind reached for me. That I am the result of their desires. They are wrong. We are independent of your realm as it is of us.”

“But your essence is in my world.”

“Yes, but is it not something I willed. I could not remove it if humans upset me. It is not how things happen. If there is a method to it, it is beyond me as well. So, I do not know why my brethren differ from me, or I from them. It simply is.”

Tibs groans. “Why do I keep doing this?”

“Doing what?” Darkness asked, sounding more curious than it had before.

“Thinking you’re all the same. I keep forgetting small details. Like how Khumdar said he didn’t see it as a shadow, but as a brighter spot.” And there it was. In its faint light, Tibs could make out the form of Darkness. A man, tall, imposing. Not at all like what he imagined a seeker of secrets would look like, small with a crooked nose. But then, Darkness didn’t seek secrets, it gathered them.

“Understanding doesn’t always come quickly,” Darkness said. “Often, it is like a secret you do not realize you were given until much later. Sometimes too late to be of use, but not always.”

Tibs took the mildly glowing shape, and it disappeared with him. Making a space between fire and earth. His reserve growing to allow it. His surroundings didn’t change, and it disappointed Tibs, until he remembered Darkness wasn’t hiding anything; he was within them.

“You said that you don’t go looking for secrets. Then why is Khumdar so set on finding them?”

“I shall keep this secret. If you are determined to find it, I believe you will be able to.

You have shown yourself to be quite capable. I have high hopes for you. We all do. Now, ready yourself.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs curled in on himself as pain hit him hard. How had he forgotten how hungry he was? “Food.”

“Tibs!” Carina said, and he opened an eye to see her next to him. “You’re alive!”

“Unfortunately,” he grumbled.

She pressed something to his lips. “It’s not food, but it should help. Mez paid for it from our loot. He figured it would help.”

He sipped, and immediately the pain receded until he could stand it. “I’m still hungry.”

“I guess healing potions don’t replace food,” Jackal said. “Good to know.”

Tibs struggled to his feet. “You know,” he told Khumdar, “I don’t think all this running around looking for secrets is something Darkness is making you do, he’s happy waiting for them to come to him.”

“That sounds like it worked,” Carina said.

“Did I not say secrets are what brought me to Darkness in the first place?” Khumdar said innocently. “I suppose it must have slipped my mind.”

## Stepping up-38

The inn had inherited more Runners, Tibs saw as he made his way to his table. The inn smelled amazing, spices and meats and sweet and oils. His stomach growled and Carina chuckled.

“Don’t overdo it; It’s your first meal. You’ll make yourself sick.”

“I’ll take sick over being hungry again,” Tibs replied. Jackal was off talking with Kroseph. Probably giving him instructions to keep his servings small. The healing potion had made his hunger bearable long enough for him to sleep until light, but now he was ready to devour whatever was put before him, no matter how bland the food.

While waiting, he looked around, taking in the rougher crowd. They were loud, unlike the previous batch, who had to endure deaths after deaths. Tibs wished these people had been brought when Sto was set on killing everyone who entered. He didn’t like them. They acted like the town was theirs to do as they pleased and, with a few exceptions, the guards seem content to let them get away with it.

One guard who had no patience for them was sitting in a corner, her dogs at her feet. She was up to seven now. The latest was still scrawny, like the ones roaming the darker alleys between buildings.

She was dark.

Everyone had some degree of darkness to them unless Tibs purposely stopped... he didn’t know how to call it. He wasn’t using the darkness essence, it was just there, but if he

distanced his thoughts from it, people brightened back to how he'd seen them before. This, he suspected, represented how many secrets people held. And Serba had a lot of them, more than anyone in the room. To his surprise, the latest conscripts didn't have many secrets.

Even Kroseph and his family had some, and Tibs ideally wondered what the innkeepers might be keeping to themselves. Unlike Khumdar, he didn't feel a need to find out. People had secrets; it was how the world was.

Kroseph placed a tankard and bowl before him and Tibs stared at it.

"What is this?" he searched in it for meats or even vegetables.

"Meat broth, to ease you back after so long without eating."

Tibs looked at the server. "But I'm hungry."

"Trust him," Jackal said, placing plates full of meats and vegetables before Carina and himself before sitting down. "Innkeepers might not be clerics, but they see enough injured people to have a sense of how to deal with those who've been without food for a while."

Tibs nodded. "Okay." He smiled at the server.

"Watch your plates," Kroseph said. "He had that 'I'm planning something look'."

"This is what happens when you don't feed me," Tibs grumbled. "I can't hide my intentions anymore." He looked at his friends. "What are you going to do when I give away which pocket I'm planning on picking? You need me to do the runs."

"You start by enjoying your broth," Carina said, "then we'll see about letting you steal from our plates."

Jackal moved his away from Tibs. "Her plate. I'm not sharing mine."

Tibs eyed the fighter's food. He seemed to have more on his plate, and it looked juicier than Carina's. The distance was a problem. He'd have to stand, and Jackal wasn't the fool he liked to pretend he was, he'd realized why Tibs was getting out of—

"Eat, Tibs," Carina coaxed him.

"It needs something to chew, for it to be eating," Tibs pointed out.

She smiled. "Then drink."

He pointedly took a long swallow of his tankard. Even the ale tasted better now. Although it had to be his imagination if the face Jackal made as he drank his was anything to go by.

Shouting rose about the din of conversation, a table overturned and before Tibs stood, Serba's dogs were there, growling and forcing the Runners back. Tibs was surprised not one of them attacked the dogs. They were large dogs, but those Runners had been long-time criminals before being sent here. They couldn't be scared of dogs.

He looked to Jackal as Serba stood, an annoyed expression on her face, and went to deal with the Runners.

"Half a dozen of them have been sent to the clerics by her dogs," the fighter said. "She made sure word spread and now they are wisely wary of them." Jackal shuddered. "I told you they were monsters."

"I think they're nice," Tibs said just before he felt something nuzzle his leg. Thump sat next to him, looking up balefully. "Sorry, you're going to have to go hungry, too. They



took my jerky away.”

“Don’t tell me one of them’s at our table,” Jackal said, an edge to his voice.

“Thump,” Tibs replied, petting it on the head.

“Don’t touch it,” the fighter warned.

“His name,” Serba said, warning in her tone, “is Thumper.” The dog looked at her at the mention of his name, tongue lolling out between its teeth.

“He likes Thump better,” Tibs said, regaining the dog’s attention.

“How are you that bad of an influence on him? On any of them?”

“It’s a gift,” Carina said and motioned to one of the empty chairs. “Do you want to sit?”

“Don’t invite her,” Jackal protested. “She’s going to bring the rest of her animals here.”

“Thanks for the offer. I’d do it, just to watch Jackie squirm, but I don’t want them closer to Tibs anymore than I can avoid. If they spend too much time with him, the next thing I’ll know is that they are going to start nuzzling my brother.”

Jackal made a terrified croak and looked around his chair.

Kroseh appeared behind the fighter, rubbing his back. “It’s okay, I’ll protect you.” He nodded to the now seated, and better behaved Runners, their table surrounded by dogs. “Thanks for keeping them from fighting. We don’t need blood on the floor again.”

“It’s my job.” She looked around, her expression turning displeased. “Seems like I’m the only one still doing it.”

“Why are the others not doing it?” Tibs asked.

Serba looked at Jackal before answering. “I don’t know.”

Tibs figured she was lying, but nothing happened. She didn’t shine or get darker. However Harry used light to tell when someone lied, Tibs couldn’t do it. It might be a more advanced skill, instead of something automatic with how he saw the density of secrets people held.

“Dear old Dad’s getting them to slack off, isn’t that right, Serba?”

“How would I know?”

Jackal rolled his eyes. “The way you did everything he told you to? Come on, it’s not like you have to pretend anymore. I’m out of the way since the guild owns me. Who else but you is he going to pick.”

She shook her head. “You’ve been gone for years, Jackie. Things changed in that time. Unlike what you believe, I didn’t come here to carry out Dad’s instruction.”

Jackal snorted and opened his mouth.

“Don’t fight, okay?” Tibs said. “You’re family.”

“No Tibs,” Jackal said. “We’re family. She’s just someone I’m related to, like my father.”

She shook her head before turning. “Come on Thumper. We have rounds to make.”

The dog looked at Tibs and gave a soft whine before heading to join her and the other dogs as she left.

“She does seem like she isn’t working for him,” Carina said. “Wouldn’t she have let the fight go on if she was? That is what your father wants, right, to disrupt the town.”

“She liked this place,” Jackals said, looking up and smiling at Kroseph, still behind him. “Everyone does. But she’s a Wells. We’re all thugs obeying someone else.”

“You don’t obey anyone,” Tibs said, and was stared at.

“Tibs, I do everything you tell me.” He looked up at the server and his smile became goody.

Tibs looked away, wishing it had been enough to kill his appetite.

“Drink your broth, Tibs,” Carina said. “Before it gets cold.”

With a sigh, he dipped it, then drank all of it. It might just be a drink instead of a meal, but it was tasty. He had two more before Kroseph brought him one with ripped meat and a few vegetables.

“Where did you get the vegetables?” Tibs asked. “I thought all you’d managed to have sent was rotten when it arrived.”

“Runners,” Kroseph said. “They started bringing in fresh vegetables from the dungeon yesterday.”

Jackal and Carina looked at Tibs.

“Don’t look at me. You were there for the last run. I wasn’t in a state to hold that kind of conversation with him.”

“With whom?” Mez asked, taking a seat. Kroseph headed for the kitchen.

“Sto,” Tibs said. “He started providing vegetables.”

The archer nodded. “Yeah. As part of the loot drops. There was grumbling about it meaning even fewer coins, but just like the meat, the guild isn’t interested in it, and the inn paid well for them.”

Jackal looked at Tibs. “If you didn’t tell the dungeon, who did? Is there someone else who can talk with it?”

Tibs wondered about the sorceress, Nora, but dismissed her. If she could talk with Sto because of how many essences she could use, others would be able to, and Carina would have read about it.

Mez chuckled. “We don’t have to be able to talk with the dungeon for it to listen to what we say. With it giving meat as part of the loot, someone must have mentioned vegetables and it made those.”

“I wonder how,” Carina mused. “Meat I get. Animals wander in. The rats and bunnies at least.”

“People,” Jackal said.

“Please don’t say that,” she said. “I’m making sure to think the meat we’re getting is only animal meat. But where would it get vegetables to absorb?”

“He can sense outside the mountain,” Tibs said. “To about where Harry was addressing the last batch. Maybe someone brought food there?”

She shook her head. “That would have been prepared vegetables. Mez said there’s fresh. There might be some growing wild near the mountain.”

Kroseph placed new tankards on the table along with Mez’s plate. Before anyone

could react, or Tibs think better of it, he had a chunk of meat in his mouth and was panting, trying to cool it.

“I think that’s punishment enough,” the server said with a chuckle.

“Kro, what kind of vegetables have Runners brought in?” Jackal asked.

“Something resembling potatoes and carrots, smaller, and the carrots are more red than orange, but it’s all good.”

“When we get our next run, see if you can find nice vegetables your brothers would like to cook with.”

“What are you planing?” Carina said as Tibs could finally chew on the meat.

“Unlike everyone here, we know how the dungeon does it.”

“It’s not a secret that dungeons absorb what’s in them and recreate them.”

“Okay, it might not be a secret to sorceress and people who actually like to read, but in this bunch, I figure we’re the only ones who know because of Tibs. So why not take advantage of it and bring things we want the dungeon to make, instead of waiting for it to figure it out on its own?”

“Like the cylinder he wanted.” Tibs eyes Mez’s plate and the archer moved it away protectively.

“Yeah, but with things everyone will want.” Jackal smiled. “We could supply the town with everything my father’s been ruining.”

Tibs shook his head. “Not everything. Sto wouldn’t have the reserves for stuff like metals and more than the occasional armor piece.”

“And the guild will take those,” Mez said.

“Right.” Jackal deflated. “And it isn’t going to fix the rest of the problems he’s causing.”

“Like what?” Tibs asked. If Jackal knew what his father was doing, that meant they could stop it.

“The unrest among the merchants, for one thing, that’s him.”

“But that’s theft,” Carina pointed out. “It always happens.”

“It didn’t happen to this level before he came here,” Jackal said.

“The Runners?” Tibs asked, looking around.

“I don’t think so.” Jackal looked thoughtful. “There aren’t many left of the original groups, and I think that while they might not have your level of respect for the town’s merchants, they understand that if they’re in disarray, we don’t get the things we need.”

“There have been a lot of people coming in since the dungeon graduated,” Mez said. “Not all of them have been nobles or new Runners.”

“But the guards...” Tibs trailed off. “They used to work for your father. So maybe they’re letting it happen.”

“They could also be encouraging the problems,” Jackal said. “Guards are in a good position to spread lies about who might have paid a thief to steal from someone else. And that’s if some of those new people aren’t simply putting on guard uniforms and giving the impression they aren’t doing their jobs. That’s the problem with a uniform, anyone can wear it.”

“But they can’t lie if Harry asks about it,” Carina said. “Wouldn’t that risk make trying it too dangerous? Harry isn’t gentle with anyone who breaks his rules.”

“You should know better than anyone it’s possible not to lie, and still not tell the truth,” Jackal said.

Mez looked at Tibs. “Please tell me this isn’t going to turn into us trying to stop your father by ourselves. We’re not the guard. And I am not wearing that black and green you are so fond of.”

“Trust me, I’m not saying we have to do it, just that I’m confident it’s what’s happening. It was how things happened back home anytime someone got in my father’s way. Things started to go wrong, shipments were misplaced, not well protected, arrived damaged. Then small accidents happened. Theft and fights with other people that person had problems with would escalate out of control. Even without controlling much of the guards there, he could usually get them to do his work just by making sure things appeared the way that forced them to get involved. Eventually, they either left, got dead, or caved in and agreed to what my father wants.”

“What happens if the merchants work for you father?” Tibs asked, remembering the way Darran had greeted him; as if someone with an offer he didn’t want to listen to again was back.

“Nothing good,” Jackal answered. “Nothing good at all.”

## Stepping up-39

Tibs watched the two thieves break into the store. They were okay at it, choosing a window between two shops, away from the light generated by the torches planted by the side of the street. He added asking Sto about the light stones he used in the entrance. If those could be made to work without the dungeon powering them, lighting the town at night would be easier.

Tibs expected those two were safe from discovery by anyone other than him. Darkness wasn’t the impediment it had been only days before. It was more like dusk for him now, with the sun just about to set. Once they were inside, Tibs climbed down from the roof and silently went in after them.

The shop belonged to a tailor. It was new, catering to the nobles and Runners who didn’t mind spending their coins on looking good. The window was small enough he couldn’t imagine them taking anything out through it, which meant they were probably here to ruin the stock of fabric.

There were two other tailors in the growing town, both catering to the more common folks, but because they’d been the only ones, they also had business with the nobles. They lost that to this tailor and hadn’t been happy about it. This would look like it had been ordered by one or both of them if Tibs let it happen.

The shop was two floors, with the ground one divided into three. The storefront with two wooden forms stood showing the work in progress to any who entered, a smaller room

where the tailor would take a customer for measurements and fittings. The larger space, at the back, contained the fabrics the tailor used. They were stacked floor to ceiling, with only enough space between them to move. At the back of that were the stairs leading to the second floor where the tailor lived.

Tibs had explored the shop in the first days it opened; like he'd done for every shop in town. Part of his training and simply to see what shops carried. He heard cursing from the storage and smiled. The tailor was thin, the thieves not so much. What Tibs thought of as enough space to move might feel cramped to them.

He saw the back of a thief as he squeezed through the fabrics so tightly packed it didn't move as he pushed. Tibs stepped close and quickly dipped his fingers in the pocket and out, then stepped back with a small tin box in hand.

Away he opened it, but even in the dusk darkness he couldn't make out details, only wriggling. Sensing his essence, it was contained in the tin, so whatever these were, they were alive in a fashion. He closed the tin and pocketed it. Carina would know what they were.

He made his way back to the thief, who was deeper in, cursing and searching his pockets, as well as the tight space let him.

"What?" came a whispered hiss from the other thief, and Tibs climbed the fabric to ensure they didn't notice him against the faint light coming in from the window.

"I can't find the tin she gave me," his victim whispered back. Tibs tried to remember how deep of a sleeper the tailor was, but Tibs had been too quiet to be noticed in his exploration.

"Did you at least take it before we left?"

"Yes, I know I did. I put it in my pocket, but it's gone now. And no, there isn't a hole in it."

"Then it's a good thing we each had one, isn't it? I released the worms from mine, so we should be fine."

"I thought we needed to release both sets."

"They would have worked faster, I'm guessing, but it isn't like she cares how fast they eat through all of this."

"So we're done?"

"Unless you feel the need to rest, yes. Back yourself to the window and let's get out of here."

Tibs let them go. He'd first intended to follow them back to where they were staying and getting them captured by the guards, but if what they're set loose in here would eat through the fabrics, he needed to deal with that.

The mention of a 'she' caught Tibs by surprise. He'd expected Sebastian to be behind every disruption among the merchants, just like Jackal said. Had this been ordered by one of the two other tailors? They were both men, but one was married, and his wife wasn't the nicest person. Anytime Tibs heard her speak was to complain about the town and the people living here. What Tibs had gathered she'd only agreed to come because her husband had promised her quick wealth as the town grew. Only it wasn't happening fast enough for her.

Once alone, Tibs dropped to the floor and walked deeper in. He couldn't make out anything, but the worms were small. Unless he made more light, he wouldn't. He concentrated light essence in his hand, and the glow chased the dusk away. He could now make out the fabric's colors. There was a lot. Enough, he suspected, the tailor could dress everyone Tibs had seen that first time in MountainSea's marketplace. The first time he'd seen so many colors.

He made it to the stairs, noticing nothing wriggling, so he turned around. He stopped where he thought the thief had stood before returning to Tibs's victim and sensed around him.

The essence in the tin in his pocket registered first, being so close to him, then the tailor, upstairs, stretched out, being so bright in comparison. He purposely dimmed it, then that in the tin. Spread around what he was searching for would be much fainter.

When he felt it around him, he also felt it under him and was surprised at how many living things lived in the ground. He shortened his range until he only felt the essence close to him, on top of the fabrics, or in the folds.

He hadn't attempted this since destroying the Whipper in the dungeon and being reprimanded by Sto. He didn't want to risk the tailor's life if he made a mistake.

He started by isolating one flicker of essence among the fabrics. Other than how faint it was, it was the same as the essence in his reserve, or what coursed through everyone, even the dogs and cats and rats of the town. If it breathed and moved, it seemed to have it. He absorbed it and if it was like the Whipper, would be dead. It didn't seem to regain it.

Dead was dead, after all.

He found the next one and did it again. He didn't feel the difference to his reserve, but it too flickered out. He couldn't do this one at a time; it would take all night, and if they lived and ate, they reproduced. He couldn't risk them doing that faster than he could kill them.

He extended his senses again until he felt them all, and that included what was under the ground. He tried to not absorb their essence since they were probably only going about whatever business small creatures in the ground attend to, but as the essence of the worms flickered into him, so did that of the underground creatures.

He felt bad about it, as he retraced his steps to the window. They'd been innocent in this, but better whatever lived under the ground than him accidentally killing someone trying this. He could absorb one individual's essence or that of everything within the range he sensed.

He would have to practice until he could target specific groups within his range.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Abyss!" Mez exclaimed, knocking his chair over as he stood and stepped away from the table. "Why did you bring this here? We're eating."

Tibs had just opened the tin to show the content to Carina.

His exclamation barely caused a handful of heads to lift from their meals.

"I need to know what they are," Tibs replied, now noticing the worms were dead.

"Do that in our room, not here." Mez sat again, away from Tibs.

"I don't know what they are," Carina said, poking into them. "I've never seen worms like these." In the full light, they were tiny and light gray.

Jackal motioned for the tin and studied the contents. "Thread Eaters," he said. "They breed among fabric if they aren't stored carefully. Where did you find them?"

"In the pocket of a pair of thieves breaking into tailor Murgandi's shop."

Jackal nodded. "A tin full of those would do it. A few months and his fabrics would be ruined, and they're nearly impossible to get rid of once an infestation starts. They can burrow into the ground and wait there until more fabric is brought. I've heard of whole towns' clothing artisans being decimated by these."

"And thieves were going to unleash that here?" Carina exclaimed.

"They did it at some woman's orders," Tibs said. "I thought it would be Sebastian who did something like this."

"It probably still is," Jackal said. "My father works like the guild leader or Knuckles. He has people working for him who carry out his orders. This woman will be one of his underlings. She probably runs a whole crew of thieves. She might be the one responsible for all the thefts that aren't caused by you." He grinned.

"There's the other roof runner," Tibs said. "I don't think they work for anyone but themselves."

"Have they taken anything now that you have their monocle?" Mez asked.

"Nothing I've heard about, but I was dying of hunger for a while and now I'm focusing on stopping the town's disruption. I'm not sure the nobles can bring in more trouble right now, so I'll get to stopping them once this is over."

"This isn't your responsibility, Tibs," Mez said. "Let the guards deal with it. Tell their leader."

"The guards are part of the problem," Jackal said. "Knuckles's so sure they can't lie to him he expects them to not even try. I don't know if he needs to will his ability to know lies like I do my stone body, but I've skirted the truth with him enough I know some of the guards can do it too."

"And that makes it our responsibility?" Mez asked, looking at them. The cleric was the only one absent. Khumdar spent most of his time on his own. Even meals weren't something he did with him often.

"Who else is going to do something?" Carina asked.

"We're Runners," Mez countered. "And there's only five of us. Four these days, with Khumdar wandering about. What can we do?"

"Whatever we can," Tibs said.

"This isn't our responsibility," Mez repeated.

"I'm not a child," Tibs countered, and the archer's face turned red before looking away.

"That's got nothing to do with it," Mez replied. "We have to focus on what we can do. And that's the runs, train, get more powerful so we can reach Epsilon and leave this place."

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

Tibs's head snapped to the fighter in surprise. "I didn't—"

The raised eyebrow stopped him. "Your town, Tibs. Your people. You've been calling it that for months now. If you weren't planning on staying, or at least making it your base of operation once you're free to leave is as you want, I don't think you'd be fighting this hard for it, would you?"

Tibs didn't have a protest for the fighter. He hadn't thought about staying. He'd only focused on surviving. Just like making this team his own family without entirely realizing it, he'd made the town his family too.

He was okay with that.

"It's a good place to stay," Carina said. "We get to be here to help shape what it becomes. Not a lot of people get to say that, to do that."

Mez looked at them. "This is our cell. It's bigger than the room we were held in, but it's no different."

"I'm not about to die," Jackal said. "That's different enough for me."

"You could die anytime you go in the dungeon, Jackal," Mez replied, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"Could is better than will," the fighter replied. "Anytime I walked into a pit, I could die. I still did it because I love the fight. I never had the kind of fights the dungeon's given me before, and I love it. The penalty for being caught killing someone back where I lived before was to be tied to a post and beaten by passersby until there was no life left in me." He took a long swallow from his tankard. "I'll take dying in the dungeon over that anytime."

The sound that came out of the archer's mouth was pain and anger, and something else Tibs couldn't place. When it ended, he got up and left. Tibs looked at Carina and Jackal. The fighter shrugged; he didn't know what that was about any more than Tibs did.

Carina looked at the leaving archer. "That sounded a lot more like what his girl says than what Mez would."

"How do you know what she says?" Jackal asked. "I can only understand his side of the conversation."

Carina smiled. "I'm from a big city. That means a lot of people and a lot of different languages. I had to learn a few of them as part of my expected duties. Turns out Mez is from a place where they speak Karkaran, and it's one of the languages I had to learn."

"You never said before that you knew it."

She shrugged. "I didn't know until he introduced her. Remember, because of the platform's magic, we all understand each other in our own language. She didn't get the benefit of that. And as part of going against my family's wishes, I learned the wisdom of not revealing everything I know."

"So she's turning him against the town?" Tibs asked.

Carina took her time answering. "She isn't doing that. She has nothing against Kragle Rock, except that it's not her home, Mez's home. He's betrothed to her, so she expects him to return there with her. It sounds like her family tried to get the guild to release him."

"And he wants to go with her." Tibs looked at the door his friends had left by. He knew that he'd prefer being with his special girl, instead of the team, but Jackal made it



work. He'd thought Mez would do too.

"It's more complicated than that," she said. "I think it's related to that comment you made about not being a child. I haven't picked up on the details, but he had a responsibility to her as part of being betrothed, and it conflicts with him being a Runner."

"So we fix that and it's going to be okay again."

She smiled at him. "Tibs, I don't think this is the kind of problem *we* can fix. Mez is going to have to be the one to figure out how to make it work; if that's what he wants to do."

Tibs didn't like it. The more Mez was with his special girl, the more he was acting like one of the nobles in the town, instead of what he'd said the nobles of his home were like.

"He'll work it out, Tibs," Jackal said. "Want it or not, he's a Runner, and that means he's got to stay here."

"You're a bad liar," Tibs replied, and Jackal grinned.

"I lack Khumdar's practice at it."

One problem at a time, Tibs reminded himself. He'd figure out what to do about Mez and his girl after he had the situation with the merchant under control. Maybe once the town was at peace again, he could convince her this place was a good place to live in, even if it wasn't the home she came from.

He sighed.

One problem at a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

He felt the eyes on him as soon as the fighter started to trail Tibs.

He'd been walking through Merchant's Row, listening to the complaints, the arguments. He'd stopped three more sabotage attempts since the thieves with the worms, but it didn't seem to make much of an impact.

Just now, a man and woman dressed in the guard's green and black were hassling the leatherworker. He couldn't hear the words, but Tibs had seen this happen often enough on his Street, although not by guards. They were demanding payment for the protection they were forcing on the merchant.

He noted their faces and manners. He'd try to find them later and make them pay for this, somehow.

The fighter stepped faster, moving closer, and Tibs decided he had enough. He stopped and spun, glaring at the tall, muscular man who stopped in one step. Tibs was impressed. He'd seen Runners not have these kinds of reflexes after surviving what Sto threw at them.

Tibs didn't know the man, but he recognized the body language from the most recent conscripts. Hard, ready for a fight, not willing to take any perceived slights. His body was darker, covered by the large number of secrets he kept.

"Well?" Tibs demanded. The people walking the street gave them space, and at least one guard watched them, ready to intervene. Tibs made note of him, too. If he could identify the real guards from those working for Sebastian, it would make this easier, he was sure of it.

“We need to talk.” The man’s voice was deep, growling. Tibs decided that if Sto got Big Brute to talk, it would sound like this man.

“Then talk.”

“Not here.” The man didn’t bother looking around. His eyes were a normal pale brown with flecks of gold. Not in public meant trouble.

Tibs didn’t have the time for this. “You want a dark alley or a tavern?”

The man narrowed his eyes; as if Tibs reaction didn’t match his expectations. He’d lost count of the people accosting him for the first time who had this kind of reaction.

“A tavern,” the man said.

So this wasn’t about trying to stab him.

The man nodded to the one between the cookware shop and cobbler. Tibs only moved once the man did. Staying out of easy reach.

The tavern was busy. People pausing between their shopping, shop workers needing a respite.

The man pointed to an empty table at the back before heading to the bar. Tibs scanned the room for anyone waiting, but the only other one Tibs thought was a Runner was alone at a table on the other side of the room, mournfully looking in his tankard.

Tibs sat, back against the wall, and the man returned with two tankards and placed one before Tibs as he sat. Tibs eyes it, felt the essences in the liquid. There was corruption, which he’d found out from looking at Darran’s offering of that time was part of all poisons, but it was also in ales, and the quantity in this was more consistent with ale than poisons, so he took a swallow.

“I’m told you’re the one to talk with about surviving the dungeon.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow as he placed the tankard down. “We can’t talk about the dungeon outside of it.”

The man leaned forward. “Do I look like I give a fuck what the people running this place want? I’d be gone if a bunch hadn’t tried it before I came up with a plan and were dumped in the dungeon with us watching.” He took a long swallow. “So now I’m going to survive this thing until I can make them pay for dragging me here. And you’re going to tell me how.”

Tibs chuckled. “You think you can force me?”

The man opened his mouth, then closed it. “You can’t be working with them. I heard that you saved the dungeon, but I’m not sure I believe that. What I confirmed is that you got dragged here too with the first group. There’s no way you want to stay here any more than I do.”

“You’re wrong. This is my town.”

“You don’t run it, there’s some guy setting himself up to do that.”

“Are you going to work for him?” Tibs tried to keep the question casual, but the man’s expression turned guarded.

“What’s it to you?”

“This is my town,” he repeated. “The guild built it. They brought me here, but I didn’t have a place before. I’m not going to let Sebastian ruin it. If you plan on working for him, I’d

rather you die in the dungeon.”

“How old are you?” the man asked, disbelief seeping into his tone.

“Old enough to have survived my Street and now be someone you’re seeking for help surviving the dungeon.”

“He’s going to crush you, you know.”

Tibs shrugged. “He’s already tried. I’m still here.” Lies and exaggerations were his friends in this situation. Not that he was afraid of Sebastian. By now Tibs was confident the man had worked out he was behind the failed attempts behind some of the sabotage, so the attacks would come.

The fighter before him studied him while he finished his tankard, then motioned to a server for another one.

“How did you do it? Survive the dungeon those early days?”

Tibs shook his head. “Are you, or are you not, planning on working for Sebastian. I’m not wasting my time with someone I’m going to have to get rid of later.”

The tankard arrived, and the man handed the copper over, looking at it the way Tibs used to look at letting go of his last sliver of a coin. The man was paying dearly for this conversation unless he had another run lined up soon.

“I’m not,” he finally said, and Tibs was a flicker of something there, a parting among the shadows covering the man and then gone. Was that a truth, or something else? “I like my autonomy. I decide what I do, not someone else.”

Tibs decided to believe him. “Find a team, protect them, have them protect you.”

The man snorted his ale. “That’s not how the world works, kid.”

“This isn’t the world, it’s the dungeon. If you want to survive it, you need a team, people you trust to keep you safe. You need a rogue to tell you where to step. Your job as a fighter will be to keep them safe in fights until they can hold their own, too. Your sorcerer and archer will pick off what monsters they can so there’s less for the two of you to deal with.”

“What about the fifth member of the team?”

“Clerics will start coming at some point. I figure you’ll get to pick one then if you’re still alive.”

“You’re crazy, kid. I let a thief at my back, and I’m going to get a sword in it, well knife here, since they don’t trust them with anything bigger. Or it’s edge across my throat.”

“You asked how I’m still alive. That’s how. Ask any team from back then, or from before you, and they’ll tell you the same thing. Without a team you trust, you’re dead.” Tibs snorted. “Even Don’s managed to build himself one, and he’s enough of an asshole I can’t figure out why anyone would want to protect him.”

“Who’s that?”

“A sorcerer with corruption as his element. Thinks he’s better than everyone, even nobles. Was probably one before ending up here.”

“And you say he has a team he can control even though everyone hates him?” The man had a thoughtful expression.

Tibs shook his head. “Don’t even think about it. Don’s going to have you begging to

stop.”

“Kid, I don’t beg.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The man fell onto the free chair next to Tibs, shattering it and curling in pain. Tibs glanced at him and then up to the glowering Don, looking back. Next to him, Jackal leaned back to look at the broken chair and hook his head.

“Here’s your man back, Light Fingers,” Don snarled, turning the nickname into a curse. “Did you really think he could get rid of me for you? I didn’t even have to let one of the other finish him.”

Tibs looked at the man on the floor. “I told you not to think about it.” To Don, he said. “I didn’t send him. I told him you were good enough to keep your team in check, and he must have decided that was the kind of team he wanted for himself.” He grinned as Don glared back at him.

“You’re lying. I know you’re jealous of my team and this was your attempt at breaking us apart.”

“Come on Don,” Jackal said, getting the sorcerer’s attention while Kroseph approached behind Don. “Tibs doesn’t care about you or your team. He’s got me. Whatever else could he want?”

The sorcerer snorted. “You think you compare to me? I seem to recall having you on your knees crying.”

“Pain’ll do that to me,” Jackal replied. “Meet me in the training field if you ever want to have another go at it.”

“You aren’t worth my time. Neither of you is.” Don spun and screamed in fright as he nearly stepped into an angry Kroseph.

“The chair, Don,” the server said through clenched teeth. “You’re paying for it.” He pointed to the bar where his father was waiting. And with a defeated look Don headed there, Kroseph at his back.

Tibs looked at the man on the floor, then crouched next to him. Don had done a number on him, the corruption was deep in his body. He could leave him like that; the man had brought this on himself. If he could get himself to the dungeon at his next run, the clerics should be able to take care of it. Don might even get in trouble over this.

No. This was Don defending himself, and he hadn’t killed the man. Harry wouldn’t be happy, but Don hadn’t broken a rule. This man might be the one to end up in a cell for it.

Tibs took the man by the shoulder, absorbing the essence in the process. It fought him, Don’s will was still on it. But Tibs had more of whatever meant he could do this and he pulled it into him and then the gem hidden in his bracer. He left some, not wanting to give himself away.

“It’ll pass,” Tibs said as he sat the man in a chair. “Once he’s no longer focusing on you, it goes away quickly.”

Jackal chuckled. “I’m happy he wasn’t this strong when I pissed him off. What’s your name?”

“What’d you care?” the man snarled back.

Jackal took Tibs's tankard and placed it before the man. "I'm Jackal, you've ready met Tibs. And as we're all on Don's bad side, I think it might be good we get to know each other."

The man glared at the sorcerer's back, who was in a losing haggling battle with Kroseph's father. "Does he have a good side?"

Jackal chuckled. "Not that anyone in this town knows."

The man looked at the tankard. "I'm Quigly. Quigly Marshall." He drained it and when Kroseph look in their direction as Don handed a silver to his father, Tibs motioned for more ale.

"And tell me, Quigly Marshall, what did you do to get yourself sent here?"

The man smiled through the visible pain and attempted to straighten. "I killed a full regiment of King Barnacle the Just."

## Stepping up-40

"Have you ever heard of a King Barnacle the Just?" Tibs ask Alistair, who was seated in front of him, on the floor, legs crossed over each of them in what looked to be a painful way, but his teacher didn't seem to mind. Tibs was similarly seated on the floor of the training room, but cross-legged in the normal way. He was supposed to focus on overfilling his reserve to get the essence to fill his body, but that had happened when he'd absorbed part of Bardik's. If only he could tell his teacher, they could move on to whatever came next.

"I can't say that the name is familiar, but it's a large world, with many kings. Now focus, Tibs." They were silent for a few seconds, then Alistair sighed. "Why do you ask?"

Tibs cracked an eye open. Alistair still had his closed, although his brow was creased.

"One of the conscripts claims to have killed one of his regiments."

Alistair opened an eye. "Did he?"

"Is he lying?"

"Do you know how large a regiment is?"

Tibs shook his head. He hadn't known what a regiment was, but Jackal had explained it was a group of army people that worked for a king.

"The smallest regiment I know of is two hundred and fifty soldiers. King Julius Of Bastalon keeps his at one thousand."

Tibs didn't try to work out the sizes of the numbers. He hadn't even heard of thousands before. He simply went with big and bigger. "So he's lying?"

"At the very least, exaggerating. Did he say if he was alone when he did it?"

Tibs shook his head. "Sort of. *I killed a regiment*, is what he said. He could have been trying to impress us."

Alistair chuckled. "I haven't interacted with hardened criminals like the ones they brought before, but I expect they don't feel a need to impress anyone. Unlike you, and those who were brought here when the dungeon appeared, who mainly committed crimes to survive, these will have grown comfortable breaking laws. Those are—"

"Rules, like the one Harry set for the town," Tibs replied. "I know what laws are. So,

they're all bad people?"

Alistair started responding and stopped. He frowned. "I can't say. The only thing I know is that they broke laws. But not all laws are just. If this King Barnacle feels the need to proclaim himself Just, I doubt he is. That doesn't mean this conscript you speak of was justified in what he did, but he may have felt he had good reasons."

Tibs thought of Bardik, who'd wanted to kill Sto so he could stop the guild from exploiting people like him. "What happened to Bardik?"

"Who?" Alistair looked at him.

"He was the leader of the group that tried to kill the dungeon. An adventurer with darkness as his element."

"Right, you knew him. As he was here already because he'd broken guild rules, and the severity of attempting to destroy a dungeon, he would have been sent to Castle Despair."

"I thought he was sent to a prison."

"The castle is a prison. Or rather, the catacomb, which is where the guild houses the prisoners who are too powerful to allow elsewhere. I'd advise you don't think about him anymore, Tibs. No one sent to Castle Despair leaves it."

Tibs nodded and closed his eyes. It seemed to him they should just kill someone if they were going to send him to a place like that. "So, could he have killed a regiment?"

"Bardik?" Alistair asked, surprised.

"No, Quigly, that's his name. The conscript's name."

"Could one man have killed a full regiment?" his teacher mused. "If it's a smaller one, and if the man was skilled and had time to prepare the terrain, I suppose it would be possible. But for such a man to then be captured." He fell silent. "That man would not have ended up here, Tibs. A man who does that is beheaded in front of a crowd as a show of force by the king." He fell silent again, and this time Tibs opened his eyes. Alistair looked at him curiously. "Unless he was caught for something else. If the king didn't know he was the man behind the killing, he couldn't act in reprisal."

"Alright," Tibs said tentatively. "Then why are you looking at me like this is my fault?"

Alistair chuckled. "That isn't why I'm looking at you. If anyone else had told me this story, I'd tell them the man they spoke with was outright lying. But you, Tibs... you have a habit of attracting the oddest people to yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at your team. The son of a master criminal. A man claiming to be a cleric of the dark when no such thing should be possible. You, a rogue, has made friend with Harry Hard Knuckles, whose dislike for us is so intense, that if not for his orders, we'd all be in cells this right now."

"Harry isn't my friend," Tibs said. "He doesn't like me very much."

"But he respects you, which is an even harder feat to accomplish."

Tibs studied his teacher, trying to understand how he could think that. Harry wanted to throw Tibs in a cell; he just didn't have a reason since Tibs was careful not to give him one.

“I’m not special,” Tibs stated. Doing his best to sound convinced of it.

Alistair smiled, and Tibs nearly groaned in defeat. “Your eyes contradict you, Tibs. You are special. The way you think, what you accomplish. You, I suspect, will be someone who accomplishes great things, given time.”

Tibs did groan now. He didn’t want to accomplish great things. All he wanted to do was survive his runs, reach Epsilon, and then...

Then what? Would he abandon the town? Could he leave the guild and not leave the town behind? He’d been so set on cutting ties with the guild the instant he had repaid what he owed, but now?

He closed his eyes. “I think I’m going to start by just reaching Lambda,” he said and did his best to appear as if he was pushing more essence into his reserve.

\* \* \* \* \*

The thief moved cautiously. She’d looked over her shoulders a few times, which made Tibs suspect she was aware she was being followed, so he’d let her get further ahead. He had her in his essence sense, so he could afford to let her get out of sight.

She’d snuck into a tavern’s stockroom and had poured something in the ale barrels. There had been corruption in it, and it had altered the ale on contact, but Tibs hadn’t been able to do anything to stop it. The alterations extended to more than just the concentration of corruption in the ale. He also couldn’t say anything to the owner. He wasn’t even sure about telling Harry, since while the guard leader would know Tibs wasn’t lying, this wasn’t something Harry had asked him to do, and he had broken into the storeroom just as much as the thief had.

So, following her back to whoever was behind this and handed them to Harry would be how Tibs fix it.

She exited the row between the houses as Tibs entered it. She seemed confident as she walked in the dark, so he thought they were getting close to where she would meet the person who gave her orders. Hopefully, it would be that woman he’d heard referred to by some of the other thieves.

He was halfway in the lane when something creaked loudly over him and he jumped out of the way before the bales of something fell on him. He looked up as he got to his feet and made out the shape of someone.

He cursed and ran for the other end of the lane before his quarry got out of range. A knife flew by him and he reflexively threw himself to the side as it planted in the ground. He cursed his reflex. It hadn’t been aimed at him; he could have kept running. He started for the end of the lane again, and this time the knife would have planted into his shoulder if he hadn’t jumped out of the way.

“They’re getting away,” he growled at the figure.

“You have something of mine,” they growled back.

“And once you’re willing to sit down and talk. You can have it back.”

“You’re going to give it to me now,” they replied, “or I’m going to continue getting in your way.”

A door creaked open and Tibs moved into the shadows as someone exited the house

whose balcony the bales had fallen off. They exclaimed something in a language Tibs didn't understand, but the tone was pained more than angry. The form was gone, as was the thief he'd been following. She was out of range now.

This wasn't working as well as he'd hoped, and his shadow, his opponent, said they'd continue to get in his way. With a glance at the man calling out to others from the house, Tibs walked away to search for another thief in the act of sabotaging the merchant's business.

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"I'm going to kill them," Tibs snarled as he devoured the plate of succulent meats and sauce with less impressive vegetables, but still quite good.

"I don't think Knuckles's going to let you get away with that one," Jackal said. Carina and Khumdar were seated at the table with him, eating their midday meal. Mez hadn't eaten with them since the meal where he'd walked out on them.

Tibs had just woken up after falling into his bed so exhausted he hadn't removed his bracers and they'd rubbed badly against his wrists as he tossed and turned in his sleep.

"He's going to have to find what's left of them first. I can use corruption to get rid of the body. I don't even have to bother with throwing it into the pool. I have my own supply."

"I'm afraid I may have missed details," Khumdar said.

"You wouldn't if you ate with us more often," Tibs snapped and immediately felt bad for it, but it was true, so he didn't apologize. He continued eating.

"The other roof runner," Carina said. "The one Tibs stole the lens from—"

"I didn't steal it, it was the loot for winning that fight."

"They've decided that until Tibs gives it back," she continued, "they are going to make his life difficult. And right now that means thwarting his attempts at finding out who is giving the orders leading to the disruption of the merchants' business."

"Three times," Tibs snarled between bites. "It's been three times now when I know I was close and I lost my target because of them."

"Did you find out anything about that?" Jackal asked the cleric. "You've been poking your nose in a lot of things since you got here."

"I know that chaos is coordinated," Khumdar answered. "I did not look into that, yet, as stepping into the way of criminals is how I ended up here. I have learned to be selective of the secrets I investigate."

"Well, you should help me with this," Tibs said. His plate was empty, and he looked at Carina, hoping she'd let him have a second one. She'd let him move on to actual food a few days ago, but she was still controlling how much he ate.

She shook her head.

That meant he'd have to get something at one of the taverns later.

"I am not sure how I can. I certainly cannot help with this other roof runner as I have never encountered them."

"You have," Tibs said. "They've been around me a few times, trying to pick my pocket."

"You never said anything before," Carina said.



“How didn’t you catch them?” Jackal asked.

Tibs sighed. “They’re not so good at it they were able to pick it, but they are good enough to know to do it in crowds, so I couldn’t grab them or chase them. I maybe caught a glimpse of a sleeve a few times, but that isn’t enough to find them.”

“If you can rip a piece off,” Carina said, “and are willing to spend the money, there might be a way. Sorcery,” she added at Tibs’s look.

“Do we have sorcerers for hire now?” Jackal asked.

Tibs thought of Nora. She was strong, and maybe she’d be willing to help, but the cost would be letting her study him. That wasn’t happening.

“No here,” Carina said, “but I can send words out, and I’m sure someone will be willing to help.”

“For the right number of coins,” Jackal said. “Of which we don’t have an unending number of.”

“Would the dungeon help?” Khumdar asked.

Tibs shook his head. “He can’t give more than he already has, and we need to earn that as part of the loot.”

“So we need to assume coins aren’t going to be something we can use to convince a sorcerer to help.”

“The guild then?” Khumdar asked. “This must be disrupting them too.”

Jackal sighed. “Knuckles has increased the number of guards, but he doesn’t believe they’re part of the problem, or at least not helping to solve it. He believes too much that no one can lie to him.”

“Maybe you need to do it,” Carina said, “and show him his ability can be countered.”

“I’d end up in a cell, possibly until I died of old age, for that. Knuckles can be vindictive. He is a Wells after all.”

“I thought Wells were smart,” Tibs said.

Jackal narrowed his eyes at him. “You have met me, right?”

“You really think that act fools us anymore, Jackal?” Carina asked.

“It’s not an act,” the fighter protested. “I’m as thick as the stone I’m made of.”

She patted his hand. “If it makes you feel better, I believe you.”

He smiled. “It does.”

“My dumb and loving man,” Kroseph said, depositing full tankards on the table and taking the empty ones. “I wouldn’t have him any other way.”

“I thought you’d have me any way you could—”

Tibs gagged. “I’m eating here.”

The server smiled. “Unless you plan on eating the plate, I think you’re done.”

“That’s still not things you talk about at the table. Keep it for your special times.”

“And how special they are,” Kroseph said, grinning before walking away. Jackal kept looking at him longingly.

“You can go with him,” Tibs said.

Jackal shook his head. “After the last time I took him away while he worked, his

father made it very clear what he'd do to me if I did it again." He smiled at Tibs. "And I need that part so I can—"

Tibs groaned as loudly as he could, and Jackal laughed.

"If you cannot stop the sabotaging at the source," Khumdar said once the fighter was down to snickering, "and the guards can't be relied upon to provide adequate security. Have you considered arranging it yourself?"

"There's only three of us," Carina said. "Four if you're including yourself."

The cleric looked at the empty seat.

"Mez made it clear this isn't part of his duties as a runner," Tibs said, unable to hide his growing disdain.

"I would help," Khumdar said, "although my skills may not be well suited for such an endeavor. But I believe you are missing a rather obvious, to me, group who can help accomplish this."

"Who?" Tibs asked, trying to think of anyone who could help.

The cleric stared at him. "Look around, Tibs."

He did, at the inn, the people eating, Kroseph and one of his sisters serving them. His father was behind the bar, laughing at something he heard.

"I don't think Kroseph's family can really do anything to help us."

Carina chuckled. "I don't think that's who Khumdar means."

Tibs looked around again, at the Runners eating, talking, arguing. Making plans for their next run. He shook his head. "They're not going to want to help," he stated. "All they want to do is get out of here."

## Stepping up-41

"Absolutely not!" the Runner exclaimed. He was one of the survivors of Sto's 'rampage'. Tibs only knew him by sight. The arrivals once the dungeon reopened had resented the Runners already there, and the few Tibs had gotten to know hadn't survived. "I'm not putting my team at risk for a bunch of merchants."

Tibs had gathered as many as the team leaders as he'd been able to, which had included all the original teams that had survived, one a few from the reopening, most of the most recent groups of conscripts, although they seemed mainly amused at the young people arguing, and a surprisingly large number of leaders from the noble teams, considering Tibs hadn't invited them.

"I'm with Learbel," Johanson said, leaning against the wall of the inn. Kroseph's father had let him use it for the evening, and the servers were bringing tankards of ale and taking the empty ones away. "I'm not sure getting in the way of what's happening is a good idea. I get you feel the need to help, Tibs, but why would the rest of us make an enemy of who's going to end up running this town?"

"The guild runs the town," Tibs pointed out, and she smirked. So they didn't actively

run anything; they still needed it to be a calm place for the Runners to live in. At least Tibs repeated that to himself anytime he got frustrated at Harry's lack of action against Sebastian who, the guard leader snapped at Tibs anytime he brought it up, hadn't broken any of his precious rules.

"Aren't our lives hard enough already?" a girl asked. Tibs had noticed her entering, the forgot she was there, the way she faded into the background. He'd be impressed, but she was an archer, not a rogue. "For all we know, we'll be dead by the next run. Why add to that?" She looked around as if she wanted someone to pick up her comment and continue in her place. Tibs wondered how she'd made it to team leader.

Instead of someone helping her, she got Rorgar, who snorted. "Yeah, why don't you go back to your room and let the adults handle this?"

She glared at the fighter and Tibs saw a hint of the fierceness that had to have helped make her team leader. The conscripts snicker as a group and it didn't diminish when Rorgar glared at them. The nobles watched the interaction silently, which did more to worry Tibs than the derision.

Finally, the fighter nodded to Tibs. "I'm in. Been around enough rackets to know I'm the one who's going to end up paying for the merchant's troubles." He looked at the nobles. "The dungeon's not making me rich enough I can afford not to care."

One team, it was a start.

"My team's in," Don said, and Tibs stared at the sorcerer. "Loosen your belt," he said with a roll of the eyes. "I was already working on a way to stop the harassment the merchants have been suffering. Your meeting just came before I started sending word out."

Tibs didn't comment, but the disbelief was not kept quiet by the others.

Two teams... probably. If Don tried to take over, this would be more problems than help.

"I," one of the conscripts started, then stopped, looking the room over. She sat on the edge of a table and crossed her arms over her chest. "I could be convinced to help."

Rogue. Tibs decided to be generous and not go with thief. She ran the dungeon, after all.

"I don't have coins to pay you," Tibs said.

"That's not what I hear," she replied. "Word is you're tight with the people in charge of this place, for now anyway. I'm sure you can convince them our help with worth at least silver, and probably gold."

"Don't include me in your racket, Embun," another of the conscript said, "this is about stopping a protection racket, not switching to a different one."

"It wouldn't be the merchant paying for this one," she replied, "but the assholes who got us in this mess."

"You got yourself in this mess," another woman commented. "They just took advantage of the situation we were all in."

"I'm not complaining," a man said. "This is better than the mine I was stuck working. But I don't see why I should be putting my neck on the line for some coin grabbers. Merchants aren't here to make my life easier, just lighten my purse."

“If I may.” A tall and thin man in a sorcerer’s robe made of a thin fabric that should be too flimsy for a run, but was woven through with essence. Tibs fought the urge to tell him to leave. He couldn’t see what a noble had to add to their meeting. It wasn’t like they cared about how much merchants charged. “I understand that what is happening may be somewhat beyond your comprehension. After all, you are criminals, no matter how you may be helping all of us by feeding the dungeon, this town and it, are an ecosystem. One that corruption, no matter how inevitable it may seem, will not help.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” the rogue, Embun, sneered. “You talking of how corruption doesn’t help when what you nobles do is corrupt everything you touch.”

“I beg to differ. I do not go around robbing law-abiding citizenry.” The sorcerer replied, barely masking the contempt. “Unlike you, I have chosen to come here, because I know that putting my life at risk is good for society and the potential benefits are—”

“Yeah, you’re a credit to all nobles out there,” Freya said before letting out a yawn. “I’m sure all your noble buddies pat you on the back any time you open your mouth, but they’re over there,” she pointed to the dozen others men and women on that side of the inn, “and we’re over here, so if you’re looking for us to be impressed, you’re going to have to say more than just how awesome you are.”

The man harrumphed. “What I am looking to establish is that no matter what you think, corruption has no place in the world.”

“That’s a load of shit,” Don said, stepping toward the noble. “Corruption is an element of the world. Not only that; but it’s considered one of the core elements. It’s my element, so if you want to insult it, you’re insulting me. Ask these people, I don’t take kindly to being insulted.”

The noble sighed. “Child, do not presume to—”

Tibs was between Don and the noble before he considered what he was doing, or the noble’s guard, who was by the wall, reacted.

“No, Don.”

The sorcerer lowered his gaze on Tibs, and Tibs saw the essence around the hand almost at his face. There was anger there, suspicion. Don’s lips formed a tight line, then he spun on his heels.

“You’re right,” he said through gritted teeth, “they aren’t worth my time.”

Tibs relaxed. One disaster avoided.

“Thank you, young Light Fingers, it is good to see that—”

Tibs faced the man and glared at him. “I didn’t do it for you. Say what you’ve got to say to we can go on with protecting the town.”

The man’s narrowing eyes swirled with shades of gray, and Tibs wondered what element he had. He took a slow breath, let it out, and looked the room over. “I, my team, and my guards will help.” Disbelief and laughter answered the statement, and the man bristled.

Tibs studied him. Was this some ploy? Did it matter? “That’s enough,” he told the room. “We need all the help we can get.”

The door opened and everyone turned to glare at the late arrival.

“Way to make a girl feel welcome,” Cross replied, closing the door. “You could have

invited me, you know. I didn't have to find out about this when I started asking around about where everyone in charge of a team had vanished to. If your goal was to not be noticed doing this. You have successfully failed at it."

"What are you doing here?" one of the conscripts demanded. A muscular man in a sorcerer's robe, which was fine enough to be something he'd gotten from the dungeon. His element was fire, and it flickered over his hands.

"The first thing I'm doing here is getting something to drink." She looked at the bar. "Mister Fernan, can I trouble you for a tankard of cold ale? Extinguish those," she told the sorcerer, "before you burn down the inn. The way the fire's flickering, you're bound to have some of it drip to the floor and then where will you all be?"

"Cross, why are you here?" Tibs asked.

"Because, I'm paid by the merchants to watch over their stalls by the dungeon, and while those have been left alone, it's not going to last, so helping you falls under what I have to do. But," she continued before Tibs could thank her, "I'm hurt you didn't ask for my help."

"This is a town problem," he replied defensively.

"I'm in town, so I'm going to help." She accepted the tankard. "And with me to speak with the merchant for you, it's going to go a lot easier."

"Until someone pays you more, right?" Embun said. "It is what you sell-swords do."

"Girl, you don't want to get into this with me."

"Enough," Tibs said, moving to stop the rogue.

"Move, kid, before I move you."

"You touch him," a man said, "and I will rip that hand off." Quigly stood. "This is about protecting people. I won't have it turn into a sword measuring contest. I can't speak for my team, but I'm in. And before anyone else comments. Yes, we might be here against our will, but some of us were heading for the noose, others were doing hard labor. For those of you who managed to not get caught for the worse stuff you've done, remember that a chance at some sort of life is better than the certainty of death or imprisonment. If you missed the speech when we got here. When we get good enough, we will be allowed some level of freedom. We need the dungeon for that, and the merchants are where we'll get our gear from. Like the noble said, this all works together. If we want the best chance, we need to make sure every part goes well."

The following silence was broken by discussion.

"Who's the hunk?" Cross asked Tibs. He looked at her questioningly and she pointed to Quigly. "You know if he's taken?"

"I don't. And if you're going to go make him your special guy, do it when I'm not there."

"A guy doesn't have to be special for me to be interested in him," she said, looking the fighter over appreciatively. "Just good enough for me to drag him—"

"I don't wanna know," Tibs said. What was it with everyone talking about who they wanted around him?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Isn't this just exchanging one set of problems for another?" the woman demanded,

looking Tibs, Cross, and Darran over. She seemed to include the merchant in the ‘set of problems’.

“I’d think that working with the people who benefit from our continues prosperity wouldn’t be a problem,” Darran said. “Not to mention that I can vouch for Tibs Light Fingers’ intention. He has been a loyal customer since he started having the coins to buy from me.”

“They’re not better than the crooks who are swindling us,” a man said, his voice rising as he spoke. “Right now they’re happy to do it for free, but you see, the moment they’ve removed the competition, they’re going to turn around and demand we pay them if we don’t want trouble to fall on us. I came here to escape that kind of stuff. I thought the guild would protect us.”

They were in the Long in the Tooth tavern, Old man Walrus’s old tavern. He’d been arrested for his part in Bardik’s attack on the dungeon. Tibs hadn’t gotten the details, only that he’d been an integral link in the chain. His daughter took it over. The old tavern owner vouched that she’d had nothing to do with it, and Harry had questioned her intensively before allowing her to reopen it. She’d been among those the hardest hit by the sabotage, as she wasn’t set up to make her own ale yet and couldn’t afford to get it shipped in as regularly as she needed now.

“The adventurer’s guild only looks out after their own.” A man said; a tailor who, for now, hadn’t suffered too badly. “If you believed otherwise, it’s on you. My question is how adding more guards will help. From what I hear, the man behind all of this has a vault filled with platinum. He just has to pay these questionable folks enough and they’ll do his work for him. He doesn’t care which criminal he pays. No offense meant Mister Light Fingers to you or your compatriots.”

“He’s taking offense anyway,” Cross said, “because he had to put a lot of work in convincing the other Runners you lot were worth their help, considering most of what you do is fleece them.”

“Johanna,” a woman said. She had one of the other taverns, and she had avoided all problems by being among the first to pay Sebastian’s protection fee. “Do watch your language. You work for us, not them.”

“I work for whoever I decide I work for, that’s the nice thing about not being indentured to anyone. The only thing it costs me to change who I work for is money. Money you aren’t paying me, by the way, since you haven’t needed my service, so you can keep your opinions to yourself. We’re here to help you. If you don’t want it, then the door’s over there. Of course, you leave now and you won’t be able to report what we decide on in hopes of getting the protection fee reduced.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tibs said as the protests erupted. Cross had known a lot more about what was going on than Tibs had expected. She was more in touch with what was going on in the town and among the merchants than Jackal, now that Sebastian gave orders for his people to prevent his friend from learning anything. “I don’t care if Sebastian Wells knows what we’re doing. He already knows I’ve been stopping some of the sabotages. The only way this town gets rid of him is if we all help each other against him. That means even those of

you paying him right now.”

“I think your status as the dungeon’s savior’s gone to your head, kid.” The gristle old leather worker said. “Do you have any idea what groups like this one do to people get in their way?” He sighed. “I’m with Randolph. I came here hoping a small town like this wouldn’t have these kinds of problems. But they’re here and the only way to survive them is to pay them.”

“It helps that in the process they destroyed Alan’s leather, right?” Darran said. “You’re now the only leatherworker in the town. How long until they start charging you more? You know their kind. You know that greed will make them demand more and more of you until you barely have enough left to survive. Then what? It’s going to be too late to stand up to them.”

“I had nothing to do with what they did to him,” the old man said. “If he’d paid them, he would have been left alone. And you can speak Darran, everyone knows you have the Runners on your side, starting with that one. Thieves cling together.”

“And shouldn’t we merchant cling together as well?” Darran replied. “Are we now all driven by the acquisition of money? Is that not what binds us?” He looked around. “And now, this man, Sebastian Wells, comes into our town and demands we pay him for the simple privileged of doing our trades. I say that we stand with the Runners and oust him.”

Rolls of the eyes and jeers answered him, and as he opened his mouth, Tibs placed a hand on his arm to silence him.

“We’re going to protect you,” he said when the room was quiet. “I’m not here to pick which ones we’ll be protecting. We’re going to protect all of you. This is our town. I’m not going to let that man take it from me.” He turned to the leatherworker. “What’s he going to do that’s worse than what the dungeon does each time I go in? He’s already threatening the people I care about, the people in this town. I won’t stand for that. If you aren’t going to let us help you, that’s fine. That’s something you can do, but I’m still going to do it, because this is my town, and I’m going to protect it and everyone in it.”

“Kids,” someone muttered. “They think they can do anything.”

“Well,” someone replied, “this one’s already proven he’s capable of doing something. I’m not going to stand in his way on this.”

Slowly, the merchants became agreeing to Tibs’s help. Not all of them did, and to his surprise, not all of those who refused paid protection to Sebastian. In the end, of the sixty or so merchants gathered here, forty-seven agreed.

Tibs smiled. The rest could simply complain until Sebastian had been kicked out. They didn’t even have to thank him after the fact

## Stepping up-42

The guards at the dungeon door eyed Tibs more than Jackal this time, but remained silent. The cleric looked them over. This time, she was a woman of Carina’s age, with an

extremely pale complexion.

“Do any of you need healing before you enter?”

“You’re not doing anything for them,” the smaller of the two guards said.

“It is my duty as—”

“Unless you want to have to heal yourself, you’re not doing anything to them.”

“I will report you to the head cleric,” she said, and looked at the group apologetically.

“We’re fine,” Jackal said. “We like to take it easy when we’re not on a run.” He grinned at the surprise his comment caused the two guards.

For the last week, Tibs and his team, as well as those who had agreed to help, had been guarding the shops and the shopkeepers. Serba had been instrumental in identifying who were guards and who were only posing as them. The guards on Sebastian’s employ had only been prevented from intimidating the merchants. Anyone else received a serious beating.

The nights were active with rogues patrolling the alleys and roof against the thieves. Those altercations were nastier in Tibs’s experience than those the daytime protections had, if not at deadly. Thieves and rogues were adept at getting out of fights.

Tibs’s luck with taking down the thieves he chased off wasn’t great because of a certain roof runner constantly interfering and causing his quarry to escape. He hadn’t shifted his focus to them, yet, because they at least waited until he’d ensure the thieves were prevented from getting into the buildings they targeted. That small show of respect for what Tibs did gave them the leeway to then become a nuisance.

The daytime attacks on Tibs had become more frequent, but they couldn’t be obvious about it or they would draw the attention of Harry’s guards. That, and Tibs’s senses, gave him enough of an advantage he had given his attackers the slip more often than not.

“Hey, Dungeon,” Jackal called as they entered. “I hope you’re ready for a fight, because this time, we’re all here and functional.”

The taller guard gave Jackal a look that made Tibs chuckle. From the interactions Jackal had with Sebastian’s people, he had the sense they thought there was something wrong with him for not working with his father, and now this man was doubting Jackal’s sanity entirely.

“Oh, I am ready,” Sto said, sounding smug. “You’re not going to break my avatar as easily this time.” Tibs felt Sto’s impatience mount as he walked in silence. Finally, the dungeon let out a huff. “Tibs, tell him. How am I supposed to gloat when he can’t hear me?”

Tibs looked behind him to confirm he was far enough from the entrance. “Sto says he’d going to kick your ass.”

“Good enough,” Sto said as Jackal snorted.

By the doorway to the second floor, the fighter took his pack off and pulled cloth-covered items out, and placed them on the floor. “These are the best vegetables Kro’s family could get. They’re really appreciative of those you’ve been providing, but variety was lacking.”

“I would complain about how the town seems to be treating me like some general



store,” Sto said, “but this is a lot more efficient than me dropping copper and silver coins. I’ll add them to the list.”

“It’s also better for the runners who bring them,” Tibs said. “The inn and taverns pay them more than the coins you used to give.”

“That won’t last once we’ve dealt with Sebastian,” Carina said. “Once the normal supply lines are opened, the only advantage Sto will have will be the freshness of what he’s providing. That’ll be good, but it will lower how much we’re being paid for them.”

“Then I’ll have to see about making sure what I provide is the very best,” Sto said as Mez opened the doorway.

Tibs stepped onto the second floor and felt the essence trigger move on the bride. They were back to the high speed they had been before his last run.

“So,” Jackal said. “How are we crossing this time?”

“You take the bridge,” Tibs said. “I’m going for the cache this time.” He walked toward the pool.

“Is that wise?” Khumdar asked. “There is something in the water, is there not?”

“Let him do what he wants,” Mez said, “like he always does.”

“Mez,” Carina said in a chastising tone as Tibs plunged into the water.

He propelled himself along the wall, looking for the color variation that marked the cache. He found it on the other side, by the bridge, and set to work on it. He smiled as he opened a smaller panel in it and found a cylinder with spinning rings. It only had four, and they didn’t slide up or down, so what he needed to do was different, but it was clearly inspired by Cross’s puzzle.

He spun the rings and realized he had an unplanned advantage. The water within the mechanism let him feel the gears more and where the gates were. As he was lining them, he felt a presence at the edge of his senses and smiled. He had had time to consider how to deal with it this time.

Now that he wasn’t surprised by it and fleeing, he could better feel it. It was twice as long as Tibs was tall, thin for the length, and moving by undulating its body. He couldn’t feel arms or legs as other than the size, it reminded him of the worms that came out of the ground after a rainfall.

He released all the water essence he had in his reserve and let it propagate, pulling it and the water close to him when the creature was halfway to reaching him. He kept pulling it tighter and tighter, making it denser until he thought it could stop the creature, if that was his plan, but it only covered the area before him. It was unwieldy so he couldn’t move it around if the creature went around it.

But that wasn’t his plan.

He let go of his hold on the essence and it returned to its previous volume with enough force Tibs was sent back against the stone wall and lost his concentration, choking on the water and having to fight to access his air essence to pull enough around him so he could breathe.

He smiled as the creature was not only nearly at the edge of his sense now, but fleeing as fast as it could undulate.

He returned to the puzzle turned lock, and rotated the rings until it clicked, the sound muffled in the water. He checked inside for another trap and grinned as he noticed the nearly invisible wire over the bundle in the center of the space.

Back to physical triggers on a floor with only essence one. Many rogues would get taken in by it. He traced the wire to the wall, found the gap in the cache's ceiling where he suspected the blade would come across to cut his hand off, and carefully moved the bundle to him without changing the tension on the wire.

With it in his hand, he used water to hold the wire in place and took his other hand out. He let go of the wire and the blade sliced down. He would have lost his hand.

Could clerics regrow hands? Could they reattach one if he brought it to them?

He swam up, then had the water push him to the edge where his friends grabbed and hugged him.

"I'm fine," Tibs protested.

"What happened?" Carina asked. "The water bowed up near the edge and then nothing."

"I thought you were hurt," Jackal said. "Mez nearly jumped in the water."

Tibs looked at the archer in surprise and Mez glowered at him.

"We need you to do the run," he said.

"I chased the creature away by exploding the water between us. I got pushed into the wall." He rubbed the sore spot at the back of his head.

"You chased it away?" Jackal asked. "I didn't think any of the creatures in here did that."

"I'm experimenting with autonomy," Sto said.

"He's experimenting with autonomy," Tibs repeated. "I don't know that last word."

"It means letting it do what it wants," Carina provided.

"I'm not sure letting it run off like it did is what I want, but you're the first one to manage it. The others have been distracting it while the rogue gets the cache open."

"What did you get?" Jackal asked, visibly fighting the urge to take it from him.

Tibs undid the oilskin and exposed a shirt in vibrant green. With it were pants of the same color and a set of supple leather boots. Tibs was disappointed.

"May I?" Khumdar asked, and Tibs handed him the bundle. Considering the lock and the creature guarding it, he'd expected something with essence, at least. Those were just normal clothing.

"This is impressive quality," the cleric said, holding the shirt in a hand. "Definitely silk, the gold embroidery is reminiscent of Paltanian's work."

"You know your shirts," Jackal said in a slightly mocking tone.

"I have..." the cleric's pause was purposeful. "Traveled."

"Oh sure, that explains it," Carina replied with a roll of the eyes.

"So it's worth coins?" Tibs asked. He knew well-made clothes cost more. He had a set of good clothes Carina had forced him to get that had cost him nearly all the coppers held made on the first floor at one time. Those he got when she wasn't there only cost a few coppers.

“Tibs, this is something a noble will be willing to pay silver for,” the cleric said, folding the shirt. “A handful of them for the whole set.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “How about the rest of the town? Nobles spend coins just to show they have it.”

“I expect no one else here would be interested in something like this. This is not clothing you wear when you are behind your shop’s counter. This is made to impress. And in the right crowd, it will indeed impress.”

“And it’s something the guild isn’t interested in,” Jackal said. “That means all the coins go to us. And it means less coins for the noble who buys it, Tibs. We get richer while they get poorer. A definite win.”

“Nobles don’t notice silvers,” Tibs grumbled.

“But I do.” Jackal grinned, putting the bundle in his pack. “Onward,” he proclaimed as he shouldered it. “We have Whippers to whip.”

Sto groaned as they left the bridge room.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You can’t do it,” Tibs said, and Mez glared at him, notching an arrow. He wasn’t being insulting. The button that turned off the triggers covering the hall had a crystal wall before it and to the side, angled so it refracted the light. Mez was a great archer, but this was beyond getting his arrow to bounce off the wall to go around an obstruction. He’d have to get it to bounce off something behind the pedestal, and then the crystal wall.

Even with his control over air, Tibs didn’t think he could make that happen, and not at this distance.

With a growl, the archer lowered his bow.

“This was never meant for you, Mez,” Khumdar said, “that you outsmarted the dungeon this many times is something to be proud of.”

The archer closed his eyes and let out a breath. “You’re right.” He glanced at Tibs. “I’m sorry, you... I...” he sighed and finally shook his head. Whatever he was trying to say would be said this time.

“Are you going to be insulted if I’m happy you’re finally forced to do this?” Sto asked.

“No. This is a rogue room more than the bridge.”

“Exactly!”

“How many others have tricked you?” Tibs asked.

“Tricked me?”

“You know, been smarter than you and didn’t have to cross this maze?”

“Only Mez.”

Tibs looked at the archer. “You’re the only one who thought to trick Sto. You should be proud.”

Mez nodded and Tibs looked at the hall. The setup was the standard essence triggers, with each line using all of them so anyone who sensed essence could make their way through. What made it a rogue room was how narrow the area they had to move between each trigger line was. Some would require contorting his body in ways that would not be

comfortable. The advantage he had was how far ahead he could sense. Some areas would be even more difficult if he didn't approach them correctly.

Even if Jackal was a rogue, with his ability to sense essence only in front of his hands, when he reached them, he'd have to break himself in half to fit that angled passage.

Tibs broke the first line and three spears traversed where he'd be if he had entered the maze and ignored the others. He studied the holes in the walls and ceiling and floor. It was possible to be in the right place to survive breaking a line, but the maneuvering room to do so was minimal.

"We don't have to do this," Carina said, and Tibs looked at Jackal, waiting for the protest. The fighter couldn't get his fight against Sto if Tibs didn't do this.

"Tell me you can do this, Tibs. Otherwise, we're turning around."

"Is he joking?" Sto asked.

"I don't think he is," Ganny answered. "Looks like you come seconds to Tibs."

"Third," Sto said with a grumble. "Loot comes before me."

Tibs smiled. "I can do this, but it's going to be slow." He was happy he wore nothing over his armor. Loose clothing would be a hazard here.

"Then go for it," Jackal said. "Show the dungeon you're better than it is."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I'm not showing up anyone. I'm just surviving this."

The fighter grinned. "And that's going to show it, isn't it?"

Instead of answering, Tibs stepped into the hall, between the lines of essence that were close enough to be a wall on each side. This was sort of like the maze to turn the triggers off on the bridge, only instead of having to keep the essence within the lines, he had to keep his body. He bent forward as he turned sideways, the passage narrowing as it angled. As it turned again, he crouched, having the room to do it here. While it disappeared when he'd reach where the height came down.

He lowered himself to the floor, and only the sound of stone on stone warned him.

Jackal yelled his name as Tibs fought the pain as the spear pierced his leg. He wrapped essence around the wound once the spear retracted.

"I'm okay," he yelled back. He studied the space before rolling on his back. He tightened the essence until his leg was straight. This was going to make the rest more difficult, but he was halfway there, and he could see a path that would take him nearly all the way without having to stand.

He crawled, paying extra attention to where his leg dragged. He'd already had three close calls, and he was nearly out. He was against the wall now, but the next passage required him to climb part of the way to get through. The wall had good handholds, but his injured leg...

He considered simply running across, trying to outrun the spears, but Sto didn't want anyone to run this maze. The final set of spears didn't have any gaps in them. Even without his injury, he couldn't make it through, and he couldn't see the holes in the walls and ceiling to work out where the safe spots were there.

But he could here; not that there was one. Sto had covered this well enough to ensure the rogue needed to climb.

Unless they were willing to take a risk.

Right now, that risk seemed like better odds than climbing with an injured leg. He looked at the ceiling, plotted the angles. There were no safe spots, but there were less damaging ones. If he was quick enough.

He let out a breath and rolled.

He stopped on his side as he coated his upper body in ice. The spear pushed him as it slid against it, ripping a line through the ice and slicing his back. He bit back the pain. Mostly cut skin, by the way his essence reacted, but the ice added to the pain.

“I’m okay,” he said, once he had that wrapped in essence. But his friends kept yelling his name. “I’m okay!”

He used the wall to push himself to his feet. He had to be standing for the rest. Three turns and he was out. Only one of which was going to be a problem.

He carefully hobbled through the first turn, then tried to work out how to bend and not lose his balance for the next one. He was nearly there. Could he run it?

No, not in his condition.

So he bent, and leaned forward to match the angle, and nearly ran a hand through a line trying to maintain it. Stopping himself at the last moment and dragging his injured leg forward instead, which caused him to wobble as pain lanced up.

Once he could breathe, he tried again, this time using water to create an ice pillar for him to use as support as he crept into the angled turn. Then it was another normal turn, and he was standing next to the pillar with the button.

He slammed his hand down on it before letting himself fall against the pillar and to the floor.

“I almost thought you wouldn’t make there for a moment,” Sto said.

Tibs looked up. “Yeah. Me too.” He closed his eyes and decided unconsciousness would be nice for a while.

## Stepping up-43

Tibs forced an eye open as someone shook him.

“You okay?” Jackal asked, crouched next to him, holding a healing potion. Tibs tried to snort, but it came out as a pained groan. The fighter smiled. “Drink this, you’ll feel better.” He pressed the bottle to Tibs’s lips, and he drank deeply.

The pain vanished instantly, then he felt the bone in his leg knit back together, the muscles wriggle as it healed, the flesh closed. It was an odd sensation, but it passed quickly.

“Next time, you do it.” Tibs offered his hand to Jackal, who laughed as he pulled him to his feet.

“No problem, then you’ll take over fighting the boss?”

“Even half-dead, you wouldn’t let anyone else have that fight,” Tibs replied, stretching. The potion worked, but it always left the healed muscles stiff.

“See, this is why we get along so well. I know you, you know me. It’s like we are

meant for one another.”

“I’m telling Kroseph you’re putting the move on another guy,” Mez said as he walked by them.

Jackal opened his mouth, then closed it. “Did he just make a joke?” he asked Tibs.

“I don’t know. Are you putting the move on me?”

Jackal made a face. “You’re like my brother, Tibs. That’d be just weird.”

“Then he’s making a joke,” Tibs said.

“I didn’t think he knew how. He’s always so serious since coming back.”

Tibs headed for the last room. “He has serious stuff to think about now.”

“That’s no way to live.”

“Some people don’t get to choose how they live.”

Jackal patted the archer’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you remember to have fun in life.”

Mez closed his eyes and let out a pained breath. “I have a bow. I can shoot you before you’re close enough to do that.”

“There you go, you’re already remembering to make funny quips at me.”

“He’s not joking,” Carina said.

“That’s what makes it so funny,” Jackal replied.

“I believe we have more important matters to deal with.” Khumdar pointed to the Bigger Brute with the two Big Brutes on each side and the sea of rats and bunnies, as well as the handful of Ratlings and Bunnylings.

“That is a lot of monsters,” Carina said.

“We can handle those,” Mez replied. “It’s the boss that worries me.”

“This is going to be fun,” Jackal said, grinning.

Bigger Brute no longer looked like a mass of stone stuck together in the vague shape of a person. He looked like a person, with defined muscles on his limbs, and even clothing as an armless armor and skirt Tibs had seen some fighters wear, except theirs were in leather and BB’s was made of stone like the rest of its body.

“Before you comment,” Ganny said, “Sto hadn’t dressed the previous one, and we got stranger reactions from the Runners about fighting someone naked.”

Tibs chuckled. “Jackal wouldn’t have minded, but Kroseph might have.”

The fighter looked at him and Tibs shook his head. There was no point in distracting Jackal with what might have been. Or get it in his head to demand such a fight next time.

“Me, Tibs, and Khumdar rush in,” Jackal said. “We start by clearing the room until all that’s left are the brutes. If they join the fight, we deal with them, but the last times they let the horde soften us up. There’s a circle a dozen paces around them. If we don’t cross it, they don’t get involved.”

“Unless the dungeon changed things up,” Mez said.

“That’s why we stay aware of them. Mez, Carina, go for area-of-effect when we’re not there. The more you can take out, the better shape we’ll be to deal with the boss.”

“Don’t you mean you’ll be in?” she asked.

“I’ll need the rest of you to keep the two other busy so they can’t come and heal the boss.” He looked up. “Yes, I remember that trick.”

“He has you,” Sto said, “I have my brutes.”

Tibs took out his knives and looked at them. He was tiring of having to go in so close to kill the monsters. He sheathed one and called water to his hand, then formed it into a short sword before turning it into ice. It ended up with a ragged edge, almost looking like teeth, and he wasn’t sure how solid it was, so he wove earth through it, dirtying the clear weapon.

“That looks vicious,” Jackal said, smiling. “Are you doing anything else to it?”

Tibs considered adding corruption, but he didn’t know if he could keep it from affecting the essence his weapon was made of. “I’m done.”

Jackal looked at the others, who nodded. “Then let’s fill this room with rubble.” He stepped into the large room and it came alive.

Tibs ran past the fighter, throwing his air imbued knife ahead of him and controlling it so it cut through two of the jumping bunnies before getting stuck in the third. He sliced his sword in the rats swarming at his feet and grinned in satisfaction as it easily separated them into two.

Wind buffeted him as it detonated on the other side, and it was followed by small pieces of stone raining over him. A louder explosion heated the room and the stone that rained down afterward was hot enough to be painful when bounced off his cheeks.

A Ratling jumped at him with a screech and Tibs quickly iced his arm to bat it aside, then turned and threw a knife at it, and missed.

Maybe he should just give up throwing normal throwing knives and spend the coins on air imbued ones. He located the one he’d thrown on the floor next to a wrapped bundle and recalled it, turning to face the Ratling who was hissing at him. Tibs caught the knife without looking and ran, sword held high.

The Ratling dodged and swiped, its claws leaving scratches on the leather armor. Tibs threw the knife at a Bunnyling, who attempted to use the fight to sneak closer. It jumped out of the way as Tibs blocked another swipe with an ice-covered arm, but he had both the Bunnyling and his knife in his sense, so even without looking, he had it turn and slam in the Bunnyling’s back. He cut the arm off the Ratling when it attack again, then cut its head off.

He caught his returning knife as he quickly assessed the battlefield. Like Jackal said, the Brutes remained in place. The fighter was smashing creatures left and right, while Khumdar’s staff only seemed to smack them away with minor damage. Tibs ran to help, slashing rats and bunnies on the way.

“I have your back,” he said, shouldering the Ratling that had been approaching from that direction.

“It is appreciated,” the cleric said.

Tibs swung at the returning Ratling, who jumped out of the way to expose a Bunnyling in mid-leap, arms extended in Tibs’s direction, claws out, fangs bared. Tibs only had the time to raise an ice-covered arm and the Bunnyling bit into it, through the leather, and into his arm.

Tibs felt the corruption seep in as he noticed this monster's eyes were the purple of the element. He stopped its progress as he stabbed through its chest, cleaving it in two.

"Watch for the eyes," he told the clerics. "Some have a corruption-based poison with their bites."

"Which creature?" Khumdar's staff swung by Tibs's side to smack the Ratling under the muzzle and send it flying.

"The Bunnyling had it, but it's probably not limited to only them."

"Is it possible for you to target them specifically? The dungeon has made them tougher against blunt attacks. There is only so much damage my robes can absorb before a bite or claws will make it through."

Tibs tried to feel for the difference, but he had to focus on a group of bunnies rushing him. Three made it through his defense and while the impact did little damage, they pushed him against the cleric who nearly fell.

"Too many of them," Tibs said. "The eyes give them away."

"I have had enough of this," Khumdar growled. Tibs felt, instead of heard the impact of the staff's tip against the ground, then a wave of darkness rushed past him and he dropped to a knee, barely able to breathe. There was air, he could feel it all around him, but pulling it into his lungs was like trying to lift one of the giant swords some fighters used. How was he so tired? Where had his strength gone to?

He forced his head up and before him, the rats and bunnies were dissolving while Ratlings and Bunnylings struggled to get to their feet. Khumdar stepped around Tibs and swung at them hard, and they dropped back to the ground before dissolving and leaving a silver coin in their place.

He looked around, and within a dozen paces, only Ratlings and Bunnylings were still alive, until the cleric reached them to end it with his staff.

Khumdar's wave of dark had weakened them, and him. Tibs tried to counter it with his own darkness, but it did nothing. He felt it now, seeping into his body. It reminded him of when the corruption that had incapacitated him for so many weeks and lingered for much longer. He used his essence and pushed against the darkness, and it made slow progress until it suddenly was all that was there and Tibs could breathe again.

"I am sorry," Khumdar said, hand on Tibs's shoulder. "But these tougher creatures were simply more than I was able to handle in the normal way."

"It's okay," he answered, enjoying the feel of the air filling his lungs. "I didn't know you could do that." He stood, and Khumdar had to steady him. Not all the strength the cleric's darkness had taken had returned.

Khumdar smiled. "It's in the nature of my element not to reveal everything."

Tibs rolled his eyes.

"Are you two okay?" Carina called. With a gesture, she sent an air slice to one of the few groups of rats left and they died. Mez fired arrows at Bunnylings and Jackal kicked anything that approached him hard enough they shattered.

"I'm good," Tibs said. "Just getting over what Khumdar did."

"You should have protected him from the effect," she chastised.



“Not all of us have the luxury of being able to—”

Jackal let out a loud whistle. “We’re not done. Assign blame later.” He pointed to the three brutes waiting.

“Shouldn’t we rest, since they aren’t going to attack?” Mez said.

“I’m fine,” Tibs stated. Now that he didn’t have to push against Khumdar’s darkness, his essence was filling his body again, and with it, his strength returned.

“I’m not waiting to find out the dungeon had a surprise in store for anyone who thinks this is a rest time,” Jackal said. “We’re still in the middle of a boss fight.”

Sto’s chuckle made Tibs sense as far as he could. “There’s a warren system under the floor,” he called. “I’m not sensing any monsters in it, but it reaches beyond what I can feel.”

“None of the Bunnylings jumped out of trap doors,” Carina said.

“Which means they’re for reinforcement,” Mez said, then cursed. “I hate it when Jackal’s right. I can take it from the rest of you, but he’s Jackal! I’m smarter than he is!”

“Now you get it,” the fighter replied, and the archer simply shook his head in confusion before looking at Tibs.

“He’s Jackal,” he said. “Trying to understand him is a waste of time.”

“Krosephe seems to manage it,” Carina said.

“People, I have a boss to fight. I’m doing it with or without you!” Jackal yelled.

“You think he can win against all three of them?” Mez asked as Tibs headed for the fighter. He wasn’t finding out.

“I wish you guys didn’t have to deal with the smaller brutes,” Jackal said when Tibs reached him.

“You’re not fighting all three.”

“I know, but you’re going to be too busy to watch me fight. Who’s going to recount it afterward.”

“One,” Carina said, “we can’t talk about our run outside the dungeon. Two, you’re going to be telling everyone about it, regardless.”

Jackal smiled. “But it would sound so much more awesome if it was someone else saying how awesome I was.”

“Let’s get this done,” Mez said, raising his bow. “You said you didn’t want to wait.”

Jackal reached Bigger Brute before Mez released the fire arrow at the Brute to the left. Tibs ran for the one on the right and saw BB block Jackal’s punch, then deflect the fighter’s momentum to the side.

Sto let out a whoop!

And Tibs was busy fighting his own Brute.

He used his old trick of icing the ground under the golem’s feet, but even if it weren’t directly controlled by Sto, it was more agile than before. It leaped aside before Tibs iced it, then threw a punch in his direction. Khumdar staff intercepted it and turned it aside as Tibs slid on the ice. He slashed at its back, the edge of the sword breaking on the stone and barely leaving a mark.

He absorbed it and used his knives instead. They survived the slashing, but barely left more cuts than the sword had. On the other side, Khumdar held his own, stopping the

attacks, but couldn't get blows in.

On the other side, Mez and Carina seemed to have as much difficulty. These Brutes were much tougher, just like BB was an all-around better fighter. Jackal dodged a punch, only to get a kick in the side.

Tibs contemplated absorbing the essence out of the golem, even if Sto considered that cheating. They could argue about how unfair this fight was after.

But as with previous times he thought about doing it, Sto's warning and threat that he'd have to increase the difficulty to compensate gave him pause, and it was enough for him to realize he didn't have to take anything from the golem to help this fighter. He could push something in.

Not Corruption. With what had been done to Sto with it, he'd have protected his creations, but Tibs had felt the impact of darkness, he's seen the result and while he doubted he was anywhere near as strong as the cleric, he had a full reserve and his bracer.

He coated his knife in darkness and planted it in the golem's back. It sunk in to the hilt, to Tibs's surprise, and he pushed more of it in, guiding it towards the brightest concentration of the essence it shared with Tibs, what gave it life.

It staggered and Khumdar took a step back and to the side. He smiled at Tibs. "You are a surprisingly fast learner."

"I see more than everyone. I'm targeting its strength, instead of having to overwhelm it, but it's resisting, so I'd really love it if you stopped standing there and hit it as hard as you can."

"It will be my pleasure." The cleric slowly spun his staff and as it moved faster, darkness started trailing it. He raised it and spun as he brought it down sideways against the golem's neck. The staff stopped without even chipping stone, but the trailing darkness caught up to it and went through the neck and chest. The stone slid against itself as the golem fell into two pieces.

Tibs turned to see how Mez and Carina were faring, in time to see BB catch Jackal's punch in a fist and spin, slamming the fighter into the wall, then reading to punch him.

"Sto, stop!"

BB froze in mid-swing. The fist was aimed at Jackal's head and the fighter looked too stunned to react.

"My fight," Jackal slurred.

"He's going."

"My fight." Jackal's tone was hard.

Tibs wanted to protest. He couldn't lose Jackal, Kroseph couldn't lose him.

"This is how things have to be," Khumdar said. "We get stronger, or we fall."

"We die," Tibs said. "I hate it when you use some other word like it makes it better. Jackal's going to die if I don't stop it."

"Jackal's never going to forgive you," Carina said, putting a hand on Tibs's shoulder.

BB kept looking at him. The silent request for permission to continue. Tibs wanted Sto to say something, to justify his actions, instead of having Khumdar do it. He swallowed and nodded.

The fist was in motion as if it had never stopped.

Jackal caught it in a hand. "Here's the thing," he said, no trace of slurring, and a grin on his face, "that you didn't think about." BB tried to pull the fist, but neither it, nor Jackal's hand, moved.

"How?" Sto asked, confused.

"You're stone, I'm earth, which stone is part of. We've been fighting like this and it's been fun, but I was never going to lose. Want to know why?"

"Why?" Sto asked.

"I'm going to act like you just asked because otherwise, I can't gloat. I wasn't going to lose, because I cheat." Jackal twisted his hand and BB's fist broke off at the wrist. "Stone on stone, I can absorb it, which means you aren't that tough." He pulled the other hand and the fingers holding it in place shattered. "Better luck next time." Jackal planted his fist through BB's head and the golem fell to rubble.

Jackal grinned at Tibs, who stomped toward the fighter. "See, I—"

Tibs kicked him in the shin. "I thought you were going to die!"

"Come on, Tibs, I'm—"

Tibs kicked him again.

"I'm stone, Tibs. I'm not even feeling them."

Tibs glared at the fighter and coated his hand in darkness. "I learned a new trick today. Do you want to see what happened with I fill you with darkness? How tough you're going to be then? I'm also going to kick high enough Kroseph's not going to be able to enjoy special time with you."

"I would advise against antagonizing him further," Khumdar said. "Darkness steals strength. And Tibs learns quickly."

Tibs gave the fighter the nastiest smile he could and moved his hand close to his chest.

"I'm sorry, Tibs. I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to surprise the dungeon."

"He did," Sto said. "That was well played. I should have known you'd do something. I've listened to you talk often enough of fights you've been in."

"He can't hear you," Tibs snapped. "And I'm not repeating it. I don't need you encouraging him with compliments."

Jackal beamed and immediately made his face neutral as Tibs narrowed his eyes at him. Tibs sighed and hugged the fighter.

Jackal wrapped his arms around him. "I am sorry."

"You should have told me what you were going to do. I wouldn't have said anything."

"I know, but I wanted the fight to be awesome. It wouldn't have been as awesome if you'd known what I was doing."

Tibs kicked him in the shin again.

"I said I'm—" Jackal closed his mouth as Tibs readied for another kick. "I will warn you the next time I'm going to do something awesome."

"You better."

“It was awesome,” Carina said.

“Don’t encourage him,” Tibs warned. “You’re not stone. So you’re going to feel the kick.”

She smiled. “That’s only if you connect Tibs.”

“Do you want me to test it?” he asked.

“That is enough,” Khumdar said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Your anger at Jackal is justified, but Carina did nothing to deserve it. We are all well. It’s time to let the anger go.”

“I’m telling Kroseph what you did!” Tibs yelled and smiled at the cleric. “Now I can let it go.”

“I think that’s called torture in some kingdoms,” Mez commented.

“I deserve it,” Jackal said with a sigh. “Let’s collect the loot deal with the guild so I can get my punishment and start telling everyone how awesome I was.”

“If you’re not careful Tibs,” Sto said. “I’m going to start liking him more than you.”

“You’re welcome to him,” Tibs replied, and gave Jackal an innocent look when the fighter raised an eyebrow.

## Stepping up-44

The woman behind the table looked at the items Tibs’s team placed on it with bored disinterest, setting the items with an essence weave to one side, the rest to the other. Her element was fire, but Tibs couldn’t tell what kind of adventurer she was by the way she dressed. Many of the people who sat where she did today looked like sorcerers, but she reminded Tibs more of an office worker from the guild building than anyone interested in adventuring.

The items she set aside were pieces of armor, the usual amulet, which was the most common element-related loot now, a sword, a quiver that Mez had studied before deciding he wasn’t interested in. They’d reached the point where nothing with essence Sto had as loot helped them. From that. Each got four silver and six copper coins.

In the normal category were the set of clothing, a lot of meat and vegetables. Sto had already incorporated the ones Jackal brought him. Those were destined for the inn. Even if Kroseph’s father couldn’t afford all of it, it was home for them. The few pieces of armor that weren’t woven with essence were destined for Darran, even if the merchant with stalls next to the dungeon tried to convince them to unburden themselves by selling them immediately.

Jackal asked about prices and walked away. They weren’t significant enough to bother with the chance of antagonizing their primary provider. Darran gave them good coins for them, although he had no interest in the set of clothing. Nobles didn’t frequent his shop. That went to a tailor. The one who had refused their protection tried to get them to sell the set to her, but she couldn’t match the coins the other tailor had available.

After that, they went to the inn where, as part of paying for the ingredients they brought, Kroseph's family cooked them the best meal Tibs had eaten in his life.

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"I know you're responsible for this," Harry growled, waving papers with words on them too fast for Tibs to even attempt to decipher them. "All this fighting my guards have been reporting, you are arranging it."

"You told me to stop the thieves," Tibs replied.

"You're lying. I told you to stop one thief, which you haven't done."

"I've forced them to slow down. They're good." Not only couldn't they get into as many nobles' houses without the eye that let them see the essence, but since they were determined to make Tibs's life more difficult, they had even less time for easier targets.

"If you weren't wasting your time with these fights, you'd be able to stop them."

Tibs picked his words carefully. Not because he was lying, but because Harry's temper was hot enough he didn't need to end up in a cell just for angering him.

"Those new thieves have been able to work around the guards in the city, Harry. A lot of the merchants have suffered, so I asked other Runners to help protect them. We can't throw them in cells, and if we try to hand them over to guards, they just want to arrest us too for the fight."

"Fighting isn't allowed off the training field," the guard leader said through gritted teeth.

"Are you now allowing robbery in the town?"

Harry glared at Tibs.

"Then I think the fighting is the lesser of two wrong things."

"Rogue," Harry cursed.

"When you told me I could train, you said not to get caught. I'm applying that to this too."

"It doesn't make it better," Harry growled.

"I'm not trying to make you feel better, Harry," Tibs snapped. "I'm trying to make it better for the merchants, because I, and all Runners in town, need them for supplies and Sebastian knows that."

"My brother has nothing to do with what's going on," Harry replied in a tone that sounded like he wished he did. "I've questioned him about it."

"He's lying to you!"

"He can't!"

Tibs bit back his own snarl. There was so much he knew to differ from what the guild believed to be true it was infuriating not being able to tell them.

He let out a breath. "Harry. We haven't started any of those fights."

The guard leader rolled his eyes.

"I'm not lying."

"But you're not asking your Runners if they did start them, are you?"

Tibs smiled. "I find it wise not to peer too closely into what other people do. I leave

that to the Darkness and Light users.”

“Light preserve me if you were a darkness rogue.”

Tibs kept his face impassive. This was one situation where he counted on Harry being set in his belief. Tibs had water as his element. It had been established with his audience. No one in the guild would think to question that, since it was unheard of for anyone to have more than one element.

“I’m going to tell them not to start any fights, Harry. But until your guards can stop the assaults on the merchants, I’m not going to have the Runners stop. If you catch some when those fights are happening, you’re welcome to put them in a cell.”

“I will,” Harry stated. “And the instant they tell me you ordered them to fight, I’m throwing you in there along with them.”

Tibs wasn’t worried. He’d never said that. He’d always worded everything in terms of protecting the merchants, not fighting the thieves and saboteurs, because he knew how Harry’s detection of lies worked.

“Get out of here,” the guard leader said in disgust.

Outside the building, Jackal fell into step with him. “I’m not noticing any missing pieces.”

“Harry wouldn’t do that.”

“I hear light essence can burn stuff, so you never know.”

“That’s fire,” Tibs replied. “Did you know Harry has no secrets?”

The fighter shrugged. “I didn’t meet him until I was here. All I ever had were stories of how he betrayed my family in favor of the guild. But with light being his essence, I’d think it’d be hard for him to keep secrets.”

“Maybe I’m just not strong enough to see them. I’ll ask Khumdar.”

“You think it’s a good idea to have him get closed to Knuckles?”

“He already has, I’m sure of it.” He paused. “Two alleys ahead, on the left.”

“Saw them. You think they’ll try something?”

The man and woman leaning at the entrance and who did everything but look in Tibs and Jackal’s direction wore worn leathers, the kind runners did after a few runs without upgrades. Tibs lot like that now, so they could pass as Runners, especially with the rougher convicts, but Tibs knew they weren’t. Since the attacks on the merchant escalated, he met with all of them so he would recognize them.

“This is more public than any of the other attacks.” Tibs pushed his sense as far as he could, but he couldn’t reach them yet. They wouldn’t have essence, but he wanted to be sure. At the same time, he studied his surroundings. “They’re alone.”

“My father’s going to reach a point where he isn’t going to care how visual things are, so long as they aren’t connected to him. If he can have you killed, the Runners are going to be at a serious disadvantage.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “You can give them instructions better than I can. You should be the one doing it.”

Jackal shook his head. “Tibs, this isn’t about who gives the orders. If that was it, Don would have taken over by now. Without you, the others are going to stop. Seeing you

standing up to my father and his people is why they're all with you."

"I'm not doing anything special."

Jackal chuckles. "I would love for Knuckles to be here and find out if you realize you're lying."

"I'm not. Anyone who can see and who cares about this town would do something about what Sebastian is doing."

"Knuckles isn't."

Tibs sighed in exasperation. "Harry's blinded by his light."

The two thugs watched them pass by, this time not bothering to hide their glaring.

"I should go around and take them by surprise," Jackal said.

"No. We don't start any fights. That's how we keep out of the cells."

"That is just no fun," Jackal sighed. "Let's go eat."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Don first again," Mez commented as they looked at the posted schedule.

"His coin to waste," Jackal replied.

"We're low on the list again," Carina said and looked at Tibs. "You think it's still because of you?"

He shook his head. "Tirania isn't like that. The first time was to tell me she understood. Now it's just randomness."

"It's more time to train," Jackal said.

"But who do we train with?" Carina asked. "You might have noticed that when we lost Pyan and her team, it became tough to get people to train with us."

"Could we not ask some of the conscripts?" Khumdar asked. "Many of them are eager for fights."

"And at this point," Jackal said, "I'd like to put myself up against one of them."

"You're still going to be stronger," Mez said. "I don't know if any of them have risked the second floor yet."

"But as hardened criminals, they are more vicious fighters."

"Do you think Quigly would like to train with us?" Carina asked. "We could use that to give him and his team pointers on how to handle the second floor when they get to it."

"How about you ask him, Tibs?" Jackal said.

"He's a fighter like you," Tibs replied.

"But you already helped him with Don."

"Doing one nice thing doesn't mean someone's going to like me," Tibs said.

"Why isn't Knuckles ever around when I need him to catch you lying?" Jackal asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Quigly's team looked menacing, standing before Tibs and his friend on the training field. Quigly had quickly accepted the help, but the rest looked like they weren't happy to be here.

"I want to make sure of one thing," Quigly said. "This is about helping us, not some need for you to prove you're so much tougher than we are."

“With all due respect to you and your team, Quig,” Jackals said.

“Call me that again and this is going to turn nasty.”

Jackal grinned and opened his mouth.

“Do I need to kick you again?” Tibs asked, and Jackal closed it, taking a step away.

“Jackal like nasty fights, but he isn’t always smart in how he gets them.”

“Hey,” Jackal protested. “I’m never smart.”

“Is he for real?” the woman to Quigly’s left asked. She had leather armor on her left arm and right calf, pieces she’d found in the dungeon. The rest were a mix of clothing of good enough quality Tibs thought they were also from the dungeon.

He looked over everyone three men and two women, and they each had something that could have come from the dungeon. Tibs would have to ask if Sto was giving out more clothing on the first floor. They couldn’t all have done that many runs since they’d arrived.

“He is,” Carina answered. “Every team needs an idiot, and no one else wanted the role.”

“And he’s your team leader.” The woman asked suspiciously.

“Not willingly,” Jackal said. “I was tortured into the position.”

“How the—”

“Enough,” Quigly said. “It’s something of an act with him and his team. The goofy idiot everyone underestimates. The team that doesn’t quite take anything seriously enough.”

“Okay,” Jackal said, “That’s just hurtful. No one underestimates me. Do they Tibs?”

Tibs didn’t answer, watching the fighter before him. The man was observing them, but not letting the antics distract him. Not enough to say he hadn’t lied with he told them why he was here, but enough for Tibs to decide not to underestimate him.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, sounding worried. “I need my confidence boosted here.”

Tibs shook his head.

“Okay then, onto the main event,” Jackal said, the switch causing the woman and a man Tibs thought was the sorcerer, even if he had leather armor over his left arm, to stare at him. “I’m Jackal. You all know Tibs. If you don’t, shame on you. That’s Khumdar, Mez, and Carina. Quigly, if you’d make the introductions.”

“I’m Quigly, warrior.”

“The guild,” Mez began.

“I really don’t care what those people want to call us,” the warrior replied. “I’ve fought a king. I get to decide what I am.” The confidence with which Quigly said it and the faint glow that accompanied the words led Tibs to think he was saying the truth. “That is Ma-Nim,” he indicated the woman who had questions Jackal’s leadership, “another fighter. Next to her is Stabby, archer.”

“Stabby?” Jackal asked, barely containing a grin. The archer nodded but said nothing. “Who names their son Stabby? My father hates me and he saddled me with something better than that.” He looked at the archer expectantly.

“Stabs doesn’t say much, so don’t bother waiting for an explanation.” Quigly pointed to the woman to his right. “Jabba is an assassin, and on her right is Ren, War Mage. Don’t ask, as far as I know, he didn’t even know magic was a thing until he had to pick one of the



classes the guild wants to force us into.”

The man grins. “If I’m going to kill people. I want to be it as easily as I can.”

“You’re not going to get to kill anyone here,” Mez said, tone hard.

“That’s okay. I’m a patient man,” Ren replied with a smile Tibs didn’t like.

“Ground rules,” Quigly began.

“I think you don’t know how this goes,” Jackal said.

“Ground rules,” the warrior replied, eyes fixed on the fighter. Jackal’s hands slowly closed into fists, but he nodded. “Any of you do something that normal people can do, and this is going to end badly. Light Fingers said training for the dungeon, not getting our asses handed to us. We’re not here for your entertainment. Is that clear?”

“Is it,” Jackal said, words clipped. “No essence except for the sorcerers. Yours tries anything untoward, and Carina will do more than hand what’s left of his ass to you. Is *that* clear?”

“It is,” Quigly replied with a chuckle. “How about you and me take this training to the side, so no other than you gets hurt?”

“Pair up,” Jackal said. “Don’t let the Omegas try to intimidate you.”

“Lady Ma-Nim,” Khumdar bowed to her. “If you would do me the honor of sparing with me.” She eyed him and his staff, then nodded.

Jabba stepped before Tibs, looking down at him while the archers moved to the area with targets and Carina escorted the war mage to an open space.

“So you’re Light Fingers.”

“And you’re Jabba.”

The woman reached for Tibs and he stepped out of the way, then under the next attempt at grabbing him. When Tibs stopped moving, he was close to her, knife pressed where a man’s most precious part would be.

Jabba smiled. “I don’t have a weapon, yet.”

“So?” Tibs asked.

“Wouldn’t it be more fair of you to fight without one?”

“If I cared about fair, I wouldn’t be a rogue.” Tibs stepped away, watching for sudden movement.

“Too small for real weapons?” the woman asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I haven’t gotten much training with a sword yet and Quigly said no essence.”

She raised an eyebrow. So, after looking to make sure the warrior was busy, Tibs made a sword out of ice. Again, it had a jagged edge.

“That’s...” Jabba trailed off. “I didn’t know magic let you make things.”

“This is essence; not magic.”

The woman rolled his eyes. “What’s the difference?”

Tibs went to answer and stopped. “I don’t know.” He frowned. Had he never asked that question? “My teacher always calls this using essence, and the few times he referred to magic, it was in relation to what sorcerers did.”

“Ice isn’t that hard. It’s not going to be a good weapon.”

“It’s not ice, it’s essence. It’s as hard as I want it to be. I cut through rat, Ratlings, Bunnylings, and golems with it.”

“Ratlings?”

“They’re like the rats, but bigger, stand on two feet and use weapons. They’re on the second floor.”

“So the Bunnylings are like that, but for the rabbits. Still made of stone?”

Tibs nodded. “Everything’s made of stone. I don’t think the dungeon can do anything else.” Something else he realized he never asked.

“Alright. That’s good to know. Thanks for the information. Now, how about you put the sword away, or however you get rid of it and lend me a knife so we can have a proper fight?”

Tibs absorbed the essence, and the sword melted back into his hand. “I’m going to keep the knives.” He stepped back and crouched.

Jabba crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t you want this to be a fair fight?”

Tibs smiled. “You’re a lot bigger than I am. I think that makes it fair enough. Don’t you?”

She smiled and crouched, too. “I like you, Light Fingers. But I’m not going to be any easier on you.”

“My name is Tibs,” he replied, “and until you start calling me that, you can expect to get cut.”

Jabba’s smile turned into a feral grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs limped into Tirania’s office, and she raised an eyebrow at his state. He had a black eye, his lip was cut, and had only stopped bleeding as the guard had escorted him into the guild house. On top of the limp, of the injuries she couldn’t see, he had a sprained wrist, sore shoulder from having been dislocated, and at least three cracked ribs.

“Training,” he told her, motioning for a seat.

She nodded, and he carefully sat. He didn’t dare wrap his injuries in his essence while a cleric could pass him. He didn’t know if they could sense how it accelerated his healing.

“Do you want me to call you a cleric?”

“No, I’ll rest and one of them can heal me if I’m not done before I go in the dungeon.”

She smiled. “Then you might want to let me get you a cleric. The dungeon closed its door a few minutes ago. It’s going to graduate.”

Tibs nodded. If Sto was graduating, it meant it was time for him to prepare for his trip to the purity dungeon. Being in top form would be to his advantage. Tirania took the messaging crystal from her desk and Tibs sense it and the room. There were a lot of essences in the walls. The seven he had, as well as many others. He was confident some were nothing more than triggers, probably to alarms, but others were too complex for that. The desk itself had so many essences in such tight concentration Tibs thought it might be a construct of some sort.

As she placed the crystal back in, the door opened and a young cleric entered. The man placed a hand on Tibs's shoulder and at once, all pain vanished. When the cleric left, Tibs felt as if he'd just gotten out of bed.

Tirania took a bracelet with a yellow gem on it out of a different drawer. "I know you don't like having your status acknowledged, which is why I'm doing this here."

"That's the bracelet we get so we can leave the town."

"Yes. And when the dungeon is ready for Runners again, it will turn red. But unlike those that will be assigned to anyone else how has earned the right to leave, this one will not turn black. It will turn green."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that instead of the guild paying a reward for your body, we will only do so for your safe and unarmed return."

Tibs wanted to protest, but he needed to keep in mind he was heading to a dungeon. How long would it take him to go through all that was needed to get his audience? Carina said she had a way to get him into the dungeon, but she didn't know what would happen then.

"Understand Tibs that this is a show of trust I've never given any Runner," she said. "But you have demonstrated you want to protect the dungeon, beyond anything a guild member would be willing to sacrifice. And because Harry is often complaining to me about your actions in the city, I know that you also care for it and the people here. I see a great future for you as an adventurer Tibs, but I also understand the temptation freedom represents. If you run, you will be punished. I will see to it myself, and you can expect that this trust I am showing you will never be shown again, not even if you nearly kill yourself for the dungeon again. So treat this with the care it deserves."

Tibs nodded and took it. He placed it around his wrist and didn't hesitate to close it. This time the pain was immediate as he resized itself until it was tight against his skin.

She smiled. "Now, keep it covered for a few more hours and stay at the back with the gathering is called, then you'll be able to travel as you want until you are recalled."

## Stepping up-45

The sky was gray when the world came into focus again. Carina pulled him off the platform; he'd been distracted trying to tease apart how traveling this way felt. Now that he had more elements than the last time, there was a tingling to arriving, but he couldn't figure out the source.

The cold water forced him to pay attention to what was happening; it was raining. With a thought, he kept it from falling on him and Carina.

"Thanks," she said. "Welcome to the city of Kadalisan, where I promise, the sun will shine, eventually."

"It rains a lot here?"

"Yes. The ocean is a few leagues that way. The mountain is here, causing the humidity

to accumulate until it falls.” She looked up. “I’d forgotten how comforting the sound of falling rain was.”

“The sounds of home,” he said.

She smiled and nodded. “What are the sounds of your home?”

Tibs remembered the screams, the fights. The yelling guards. “Nothing worth talking about.” Like almost every other platform he’d stepped off, the steps lead to a marketplace filled with colors and a variety of language. The rain didn’t keep the merchants from yelling about what they sold. They simply stayed under the awnings the side of the tents turned into.

One he understood sold bowls to boil water for tea, along with a selection of teas to go with them. He kept himself from asking what tea was. They were here for one task, getting him his last element, not for him to ask about merchant’s wares.

\* \* \* \* \*

The announcement of the dungeon closing went much like the previous one, except that instead of guards walking through the Runners with boxes and handing the bracelets, the Runners then lined up at multiple tables and had their names checked against a list. Everyone still alive from the previous group got one, but only a handful of the most recent conscript received theirs. Arguments happened among them, even a few fights as some tried to take them by force, but by then, the bracelets were already closed and couldn’t be removed. All it did was send some conscripts to the cells.

Like the previous time, no one knew how long the dungeon would be closed. No dungeon was alike, the man providing the information told them. Harry stood to the side, there to ensure peace this time, instead of instructions. Two weeks was the expected time, but the bracelet would turn orange when the dungeon was ready, and they’d have two days to return.

Were two weeks enough for what Tibs needed to do? He’d need to prepare himself, starve himself before heading into the purity dungeon, but Carina didn’t know how long getting him would take. Or if he’d need to go through the usual purifying rituals as part of going in. She couldn’t contact the person who would help them early in case they changed their mind and told the guards about Tibs. Returning late because he’d been arrested might cause Tirania to not be angry at him, but he didn’t want to risk it.

So that night he snuck close to the mountain until Sto could hear him and asked for a month before he reopened. Explaining what a month was proved interesting to a dungeon who wasn’t aware of the sun moving in the sky or Torus or Claria. When Tibs asked how Sto knew to close his door every night, the dungeon replied he didn’t know it was night. Just that it was time to close himself off for a while, go through what had happened during the runs, make changes if he needed and simply rest.

So Tibs said five-zero of those, since Sto still knew when he should close the door even if it was already closed while he build the third floor. Numbers were easier for Sto since he already dealt with them, and it was simply about explaining how Tibs counted.

He had to hope that a little more than a month would be enough time.

Jackal hadn’t come, deciding to stay in Kragle Rock, both to be with Kroseph and to keep an eye on his father. With most of the Runners away, the opportunity was perfect for

him to reinforce his hold over the merchant.

Mez needed to go to his home with his betrothed. And Khumdar smiled and said he was never setting foot in that city again unless it was to watch it burn to the ground. Carina had glared, but hadn't commented.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs looked around, surprised at how not white everything was. MountainSea was more white than this city. The colors were drab, not all of them. But enough were faded that he searched for a reason. This was a city next to the only purity dungeon, after all.

"What's wrong?" Catrina asked, following his gaze down an alley where filth had accumulated to the point it was a mound.

He pointed. "How come it's so dirty?"

"It's a city, dirt happens."

"But it's a purity city," he said. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

She chuckled. "It means everyone here is helping the dungeon, either directly or indirectly, just like in Kragle Rock."

"But purity," Tibs said and imagined he sounded like Jackal when he went 'but we won' as an excuse for the stupid thing he'd done.

She smiled. "The dungeon's power doesn't extend over the city, you know that."

"I thought it would, as they get more powerful. Sto couldn't hear what happened at the bottom of the steps when we started going in. Now he can."

"Yes, a dungeon influence does grow, but fortunately, not far outside the mountain they live in. You don't want it to reach the city. It would get to create creatures in your house when you were away. It would turn the buildings into rooms in the dungeon. It would be deadly for everyone." She paused. "Even knowing that dungeons don't exist to eat us, they still do, and no one here would be prepared for that. Most people aren't ready to fight dungeon creatures. I don't think most people in the world are ready for it."

He gestured around them. "So this is just a normal city like the one where my Street is?"

"Yes." She smiled. "You really thought it was different?"

"The way you talk about dungeon cities, the way Khumdar hates it. I thought purity was more of a thing."

"Khumdar's problem is like mine, I think; if exacerbated by what he is. I'm an aberration in my family. The entire purity community will consider him an aberration. If I had seen the error of my ways and did what my family expected of me, instead of sneaking in ever deeper into the library, I would have been welcomed back. He never will. If his family even acknowledges his existence on seeing him, it would be to hand him over to the fighters."

"Couldn't he explain things? It's not like what he does goes against the clerics here."

"You're wrong, it does. We are taught from the moment we are old enough to understand the stories that before purity made the clerics, madness covered the world. That the other elements used their agents to sow chaos, dissension, outright madness. That it, through us, brought peace to the world."

“What I’ve seen of the world isn’t particularly peaceful.”

“And the stories tell us it’s because there are still agents of the other element out in it working against us. That we have to remain vigilant, or one day the age of chaos and horror will be back on us.”

“Do you believe those stories?”

She didn’t answer, and Tibs looked around again to keep from pressing her about it. They’d walked long enough that Tibs expected the buildings to change more than they had. There weren’t identical, some were three stories, some, mostly shops, were two. But there was a lack of refinement to all of them that felt unusual.

Plain buildings were things he’d associated with his Street and places like that now that he had visited other cities. Places where coins were rare, so buildings didn’t improve. Anyone with just a few coins would spend some on making their home look better, feel more comfortable, all the way to the nobles who wasted coins on grandiose homes they didn’t even live in. Here, he hadn’t seen one house in disrepair yet, but also no houses with more than the essentials.

“I question them,” she finally said. “Even before meeting Khumdar. I didn’t understand why my family was against me reading from the library, but there are books there that contradict the story I grew up on. The sorcerers of purity don’t interact much with the clerics because they know things that would challenge the beliefs needed for the clerics to be effective. Because the fighters interact so much with them, they can’t know too much either.”

“How about the archers and rogues?”

She chuckled. “We don’t have much of the one, and none of the other. Or so we’re told,” she added. “I don’t doubt we have few archers, and those we have fall in with the fighters, there mainly to protect the clerics and the city.”

“And the rogues?” Tibs asked, distracted by a man dressed in a uniform that screamed guard to the part of Tibs had survived by identifying them had was talking to a woman looking penitent before him. The tone had the sound of a lecture to it.

“Tibs?”

“What is he doing?”

She listened for a few seconds. “He’s chastising her for sitting there when there’s work to do.”

“Isn’t it her decision if she’s going to work? Her coins to make or not?”

“Have you listened to the clerics in Kragle Rock?” she asked after a pause.

“The ones who heal us before and after the dungeon. There was that old guy when the corruption pool appeared. He wanted to have Khumdar thrown in a cell for trying to help. They keep to themselves the rest of the time. Although there was one. She was young, and she was trying to get rid of the corruption.” He tried to remember more. Other than she’d seemed odd, there wasn’t much, except. “She seemed determined to clean it all by herself, even if it killed her.”

Carina nodded. “Hard work is one of the core tenets of purity, and clerics are determined to adhere to it.” She nodded to the woman who went inside the home, now that

the guard was no longer reprimanding her. “Everyone here lives under those tenets. You’re more likely to be stopped for vagrancy than you are for larceny. At least with theft, you are working toward something. You’ll still be arrested if you caught,” she said as Tibs looked at the higher windows.

They lacked the refinement that often added purchase, but also didn’t have extra work done on them to make reaching them more difficult.

“I’m not going to walk the roofs here,” Tibs said, bringing his gaze back to the road. “This is too important. If I don’t do this now, I’ll have to wait until the next time Sto graduates, and I don’t know when that will be.”

She nodded. “Then also keep your fingers out of other’s pockets and purses. They aren’t any kinder here to pickpockets than elsewhere.”

“But kinder than vagrant?” Tibs asked with a grin.

She chuckled. “Barely.” He motioned ahead. “We’re nearly here.”

If Tibs had to point out one difference from the other part of the city they’d walk through, it was that the houses here seem larger. Maybe. By a few hands span. Carina stopped in front of a door and smoothed her robes down. She looked Tibs over as if he could have gotten out of the set of good clothes she’d forced him to put on before they left, and knocked on the door.

There was motion. Something fell, someone cursed. Tibs thought he heard a laugh.

The door opened and a man with eyes without color scowled at them, then immediately smiled. “Carina!” he hugged her, transferring the wet clay that was on his shirt, pants, and hands onto her robes. “And you are the young man who fell off a mountain.”

“Tibs, this is...” she trailed off, and he realized she was trying to remember the name the cleric had told him.

“Paul,” Tibs said. “That’s the name he said to use.”

“Right, Paul.” She blushed.

“If you’re bringing him to my home, I think we’ve moved beyond aliases, Carina. Anyway, I doubt Zakaria would be able to stick to calling me that. I am Peolo Whiteblood, Cleric of Purity, purveyor of her word, protector of her honor.” He gave Tibs a slight bow of the head.

“I’m Tibs,” he replied, hesitated, “rogue.”

Peolo smiled. “Simplicity does have its place. Please come in.” He motioned them in. On the other side of the room that made up the floor, someone was picking up lumps of clay off the floor next to an overturned table. “Forgive the mess. You knock while I was turning clay and startled me.”

“When did you start working with clay?” Carina asked. “Hi, Zack! It’s good to see you again.”

The man, no woman, Tibs could decide. They had the square shoulders and hips of a man, under the clothes, but also breasts. When they answered Carina, their voice was deep but carried a lightness Tibs associated with women.

Peolo crossed the room and pulled them to their feet with an amused giggle, then kissed their temple.

“Stop it,” they said. “We have guests.”

“And now our visitor can understand you,” Peolo replied.

“Oh?” they smiled and curtsied. “I am Zackaria. It is a pleasure to meet you. Did you say your name is Tibs?”

“Yes.”

They smiled. “It’s a lovely name.”

Tibs found he was blushing. “Thank you.”

People straightened the table and Tibs focused on the top of it, which was spinning. He didn’t understand what about that person made him uncomfortable? No, he wasn’t uncomfortable. The opposite. They put him at ease in a way he’d only felt when he had been in Water’s presence. Only they had no element. Their eyes were green like the grass with flecks of gold that seemed to light up when they smiled.

“It’s rather early for you to have reached Epsilon,” Peolo said, then looked at Zackaria who was still fussing with the clay on the floor. “Leave it. Carina never cared and her friend is a Runner like her. A messy floor isn’t going to bother him.”

They hesitated before standing. “Should I get us wine?” they asked, and Peolo looked at Carina and Tibs.

“I haven’t had wine in ages,” she answered hopefully.

Tibs shrugged. He’d tasted wine in a tavern, and it had been fine, even if he still preferred ale.

They left and Peolo motioned to low stools. “Now, what brings you to our humble home, Carina and Tibs?”

“Tibs needs your help,” she said. “He has to get into the dungeon. He wants purity as his element.”

## Stepping up-46

Stepping up-46

Zackaria returned with the wine in a crystal container along with crystal goblets they set on a low table while Peolo studied Tibs. They filled them with red wine before handing each over, then smiled appreciatively; as if the three of them goblet of wine in hand was a painting they had worked on.

Peolo looked pained. “I’m afraid we’re going to need privacy, Dear.” He smiled at Zackaria. “I’ll make sure we all get to spend time together after, but right now, you can’t stay. This is going to be... Order business.”

“Of course.” They kissed the top of Peolo’s head. “I’ll go work in my studio. I look forward to hearing about your adventures in the dungeon, Tibs, Carina,” they said before leaving them alone.

“Carina,” the cleric said, “you know there are rules.”

“I do. But who was it that told me that rules obeyed without questions lead to chaos?”



“That was when you were a child, never questioning what you were told.”

She smiled. “Was I supposed to go back to not questioning when I grew older? Because you never mentioned that part.”

“No, and I knew telling you that would be a waste of time the day you stole your first book. I doubt my words set you on the path of questioning everything, but I know I couldn’t ask you to stop. Not when everyone else demanded that of you with so much success.” He smiled and looked at her fondly.

“Alright, Tibs,” Peolo said, looking at him again. “This isn’t me agreeing to help, but tell me why you want Purity when you have so many other elements who would be more appropriate for you.”

“Because I have to.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Never lie,” old Grangston had said, his voice shaking from age and pain and probably tainted ale. “Especially when you lie to a mark.”

He wasn’t talking to Tibs when he’d given that advice. He hadn’t known Tibs was there. If he had, he would have sent his three apprentices to beat him. Tibs had snuck at the back of the shake the old man claimed as his home and pried aside enough planks to slip in close enough to listen. There was only one person on the street who could twist a noble around with his tongue, and Tibs intended to learn from him, that the old man like it or not.

“The truth is the best lie to tell. You twist it, you bent it. You mold it until it suits your need exactly, but you never, ever, break it.”

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“That is a rather bold claim to make,” Peolo replied. His tone didn’t hold accusation, but there was an expectation of hearing more in it.

Tibs nodded. “Maybe I don’t have to,” he admitted, “but I’ve watched the others with their element. Watch what they do, and I came to the conclusion that Purity was who I wanted to go with now.”

“Conclusion?”

“Carina taught me the word,” Tibs said. “It means that I think over what I want, what’s available, and what I can do, then pick something.”

Peolo smiled slightly. “And Carina explained about Purity?”

Tibs shook his head. “Well, a little, but after I spoke to one of the clerics that came to Kragle Rock when the dungeon graduated. There was an... accident that created a pool of corruption and she was trying to remove it by herself. It seemed strange she’d do that. There was so much of it. When I asked her, she said that even if she couldn’t, it was the work she put into it that matter. That she worked hard at it. That was what was important.”

He paused and thought back over his life. “I’ve had to work hard to stay alive. On my street, then in the dungeon. The guild didn’t give me a chance to take it easier just because of my eyes. I had to continue to go in, even when everyone else had an element. It’s been hard work surviving.”

“How many times have you gone into the dungeon?”

Tibs shrugged. “A lot.”

Peolo looked at Carina.

"It's hard to say," she answered. "In the early days, they just grabbed us off the street if our role needed to be filled on a team and we went in. We didn't get to argue or tell them we were tired. We went it with strangers and did our best. We'd go in every few days at least. When it graduated, they set up a schedule, because at that point nobles were participating. I think that since then we've done it as a team a dozen times. Maybe a little less."

"And what is your role, Tibs?"

"I'm the rogue," he answered proudly.

Peolo nodded thoughtfully. "Those are not known to have the best survival rate. There's a lot of distrust of rogues, them being thieves just with a more official-sounding title."

Tibs nodded. "I was a thief. That's how I ended up in the cell that had me sent to the dungeon. I picked the wrong pocket. But I'm a Runner now. I'm a rogue and a Runner, and I want to continue. It's what's right for me. When I'm Epsilon, I'll become an adventurer and I'll work for the guild."

"You sound very confident about your chances."

"I have to. If I don't, what am I going to do, die? Go back to my street? I can't do that." He looked at his hands. "I have to make it." Lowered his voice. "For Mama."

"Does your mother know what happened to you?" Peolo asked.

Tibs shook his head. "She died. In the cold. I don't want that to happen to me. She wouldn't want it to happen to me. The dungeon isn't easy, but it took me out of the street. I have to continue to survive, for her. I need an element to do that. The dungeon's getting too hard for me to just find the traps. It's getting sneakier. I'm going to continue even if I can't get an element. I'll never stop working hard." He shrugged. "Maybe I'll be the first adventurer to not have an element. But my chances of surviving are higher if I do."

"So you'd rather not have an element if you can't have purity?" there was a forced neutrality to the tone that made Tibs cautious of his answer.

He sighed. "I'll take something else if it's that or dying. It's just that none of the others I've spoken with have sounded right for me. Fire's all about heat and energy. Air's about playing around. Earth is all grumpy. Water's calm and waiting. Darkness is all mysterious."

"Wouldn't darkness be good for you? Rogues and mystery go well together."

"I'll probably go with that if I can't get purity. But the one darkness rogue I knew was all alone because he could tell how devious everyone is. I know people are devious. But I don't want to be alone. I'd rather believe some can be my friends. My family." He wiped at his eyes. He hadn't intended to let Bardik's memory get to him.

"Uncle, I know there are no purity rogues. And I know Tibs won't reveal it to anyone. It's his one chance to continue advancing with us. I don't think he can survive what's coming without an element."

"He said he'd take darkness," Peolo replied.

"Do you really think he can survive his audience if his heart isn't really in it?"

“There is no guarantee he’ll survive an audience with Purity either. You understand Tibs that there are no guarantees either way.”

Tibs snorted. “I’ve known that my whole life. Anytime I got a little, it was taken from me by someone bigger and tougher. But I didn’t let that stop me. If I’m going to die because an essence refuses me, I’d rather it be the one I want to be with than some second choice.”

“I can’t even promise you’ll make it to have the audience.”

Tibs looked up in surprise.

Peolo smiled. “Did you think we had it any easier just because we have a dungeon dedicated to our element? It is still a dungeon. It still wants to kill you. We’ve simply found ways to incorporate that aspect into the ritual that leads to the audience to ensure only those who truly work hard make it.”

Tibs nodded. “Okay. That’s fine. I’d still rather have a chance at the audience rather than just settle for another element.”

Peolo nodded. “Alright.” He nodded to the bracelet on Tibs’s arm. “How long do you have until you have to go back?”

He reflexively covered it. It still served as a reminder of the servitude he was under, even if his wouldn’t kill him.

“There’s no way to know for sure,” Carina answered for him. “A few weeks at least is what we were told.”

“That might not be enough. Unlike with the other elements, there is no speeding through the process to have your audience. It will take as long as it needs to. I can’t simply go in with you and let you go into Purity’s embrace. Like everything else, you will have to work for it. What will you do if the gem turns while you’re still working toward your audience?”

“I’ll accept whatever comes. If it’s my death, at least I’ll have gotten there aiming for what I wanted.”

Peolo didn’t look happy. “I’d rather you live unhappily than die fulfilled.”

Tibs smiled. “I’d rather live happy and fulfilled.”

The cleric chuckled. “Oh, I hope I was never this refreshingly naïve, otherwise, what a grump did I turn into in my old age.”

“You’re not old.”

Peolo rolled his eyes. “I am three times your father’s age and remind me again what you said when you found out how old he is?”

She straightened. “I will not. We have company.”

Tibs looked at her curiously.

“You know that as you get more powerful with your essence, it changes your body, correct?” Peolo asked.

Tibs nodded. “I got that from talking with the adventurers in the town. They don’t all call it running the dungeon. Some use crawling, some diving. When I asked, they said because, in their days, it’s what it was called. They looked no older than the town’s folk, so I figured out it did something.”

The cleric nodded. “The more powerful you are, the slower you age. I don’t know

how it is for adventurers, but here we have our family since we are all dedicated to purity.” He glanced at Carina and smile. “Mostly. So we all live longer and don’t have to fear outgrowing the children we’ve come to grow fond of.”

“Do you have many?” he asked.

Peolo shook his head. “My love is Purity. I don’t have any left to dedicate to a family.”

“Then Zackaria is...” Tibs trailed off. All he had for reference were the other Runners and while they didn’t all have a special someone. What he’s seen here resembled Jackal and Kroseph, or Pyan and Geoff.... He swallowed.

“What Zackaria and I have is comfortable. I like them, enjoy their company. But eventually, they’ll grow bored with me not giving them what they want. I explained it to them when they courted me. They think they can change me. When they realize they can’t, it’ll be painful. They might be angry at me, lash out. Then go to someone else who can give them the happiness they deserve. Until then, we enjoy each other’s company.”

“You make it sound easy, them leaving you.”

“It is, now. The first few were hard. I didn’t become a cleric knowing where my devotion would be. Like Carina’s parents, I married too.” He smiled. “She was a lovely woman. A fighter.” His smile fell. “My duties to Purity got in the way. Fortunately, we didn’t have children. Then there was a man, outside the order because I thought his shorter life would make it easier to not be as involved. Instead, it made him ask more. We argued, fought. Not being of the order, he couldn’t understand what Purity means to us. There were a few more, but eventually, I understood how much I could give, and I accepted the consequences.”

“Wouldn’t it be better not to be with anyone then?”

“Tibs,” Carina exclaimed.

Peolo chuckled. “Possibly. But Purity doesn’t warm a bed. Hug me when I’ve had a hard day. Devotion and hard work don’t mean you don’t have a right to comfort when the day is over.”

Tibs felt the cleric’s eyes on him as he looked at the floor, seeing the similarity between him and Jackal. “I’m a Runner. I don’t want to die, but I will. I can’t put someone through the kind of pain that causes.”

“Then take your pleasure where you can. There plenty of men and women out there willing to offer it without attachment.” He drained his goblet. “But now that I’ve talked about myself far more than I’m accustomed to, there’s one last thing I need to warn you about. I can get you into the dungeon along with the next group of acolytes in three days. But there is nothing I can do for how you get out, should you survive your audience. Every acolyte who exits is immediately carted to start their training.”

Tibs nodded. “I’ll find a way. What do I need to do to get ready?”

“The only thing you need to do now is to have your hair shorn. On the morning, I’ll take you in, you’ll need to take a proper bath, and I’ll have the acolyte robes ready for you.”

“I don’t need to starve myself?” Tibs asked, surprised.

Peolo chuckled. “No. The dungeon will take care of that part itself. In fact, I’d

recommend you eat well until then. It will be the last food you will have until you exit it.” He smiled. “Actually, you should accompany Carina when she goes visit her family. They are great cooks.”

“What?” Carina was on her feet. “I am not going there. There’s nothing you can say that will make me want to ever see them again after the way they treated me.”

Peolo smiled. “It’s the price of my help to get Tibs into the dungeon.”

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Carina dragged her feet.

“Are they that bad?” Tibs asked. His clothing had been cleaned by Zackaria, who had also shorn his hair down to the thickness of a finger. They had hummed through the process and had asked Tibs about the dungeon. He’d been careful to keep his stories to the first floor and the less depressing runs. They were too nice to have to hear about all the people Tibs had lost to the dungeon.

“They’re a bunch of self-centered, narrow-minded, no imagination, Puritans.”

“Isn’t the last part like everyone in the city?”

She glared at him. “That doesn’t make it better.”

She was in her sorcerer’s robes. The ones Sto had made for her. With essence woven through it to make it more resilient and provide her with better defense. Peolo had offered her one of Zackaria’s dresses and she had glared at him. Tibs was sure the only reason she hadn’t shredded the dress was that it hadn’t been bought for her.

“Will it be better if you tell them I’m your special guy?”

She glanced at him, an eyebrow raised. He shrugged.

“No, but thank you for offering. They aren’t going to have a problem with you. You aren’t part of the family. They don’t have expectations for who you’ll turn out to be.”

The neighborhood they were in consisted of larger houses, but no more luxurious than any other. By the sounds of people coming from them, they were that size to accommodate large families.

She stopped and Tibs did so too. Little set this house apart from the others. It was made of rough stones and wooden beams. It had a porch. On it were a set of three rocking chairs and a bench; all looking well used. The shutters were open, a black wood instead of brown or blond like one on the houses on either side.

A lot of voices came from inside.

“How maybe people in your family?” Tibs asked.

“It depends who in the city. By the sound of it, I’d say we’re dealing with thirty of them.”

“I didn’t bring my knives, but I’m sure I can find something to lower the number if that’s going to make you more comfortable.”

She smiled. “No killing my family, Tibs. I don’t care for them, not want them dead.”

He nodded. “I can pick pockets badly and have them kick us out.”

“No picking pockets. You can’t go in the dungeon if you’re in a cell.”

“Actually, it’s kind of how—”

“No picking pockets, Tibs,” she ordered, and he nodded. She sighed. “I guess I just

have to go through with this and hope it's worth it."

"It will be."

She glanced at him. "For you. You're the one getting an element out of this. All I'm getting is..." she motioned to the house.

"A family?"

"I have a family," she said resolutely. "It's next to me right now and back in Kragle Rock, having too much fun with his special guy. I should have forced him here so he could suffer with me."

"Yes, Jackal, among a lot of people he can tell stories to. So much suffering he'd feel."

"Right. You can tell him all the chances he missed to impress people when we get back. That's going to serve him right for not being here to offer support." She stepped onto the porch and entered the house.

"Carina's home!" a man yelled as he placed polished stone plates on a table. Unlike in Kragle Rock, when speaking with other Runners, Tibs could tell it was a language he didn't understand. Peolo's way of getting him to understand language, the cleric had explained, was to weave essence in his mind that purified the words to their meanings so that his mind could understand them.

The words were foreign, but their meaning wasn't.

"You're looking good," a woman said as she walked by, stone goblets in hand. "Who's your friend?" She was gone before Tibs could introduce himself.

A child poked their head around the edge of a doorway, eyeing them suspiciously. Men and women came in and went, offering greetings faster than Tibs could react to. When he glanced at Carina, her eyes were closed and she had a small smile. She seemed to sense his eyes on her and open them. She shrugged, but the smile remained.

The people moving about didn't ignore them, but seemed too busy setting the table to stop when they greeted them. It was a chaos that reminded Tibs of Kroseph's family at the MountainSea inn. Only here, there was no stopping to chat with someone at a table after serving them. Or leaning against the bar, taking in the room. Everyone worked, except the children, but they remained out from underfoot. At the edge of the room, in the doorways.

"Are you going to stand there watching?" a woman asked as she walked by carrying a basket of bread. "There's more food in the kitchen that needs moving."

Tibs couldn't read Carina's expression as he flashed on her face. He thought it was relief, but it made little sense with the instructions to get to work she'd been given.

"Yes, mother," she answered and hurried to the other room.

Tibs started to follow.

"There's no need," the woman said, then smiled at the doorway, "guests don't have to do the work."

"What if I want to help?" Tibs asked, unsure what to do with himself.

"Then you will be most welcome to the family. In that room you'll find the chairs. Please help bring some to the table."

Tibs set to work, and he was immediately one of them. First chairs, then candelabras

and the candles. Then he helped turning the spit over the fire in the open back of the house. The conversations never stopped, but no important questions were asked. No one demanded to know who he was, what he was going there.

They asked where he was from, how he'd met Carina. One teasing asked if they were engaged and, because of what Peolo did, he understood it was how they referred to the special person in their lives. He answered the questions he could and no, Carina wasn't his special girl. They were just friends and teammates.

He stopped himself from saying they were family. Here, among her family, and watching her work with the others, contentment on her face, it didn't feel right to make that claim.

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They sat as a man lit the candles on the table. He seemed no older than the others, but there was a sense of authority about him and of ceremony as he lit the candles. The energy that had filled the house quieted until it was an undercurrent to the peace.

There were three and six people at the table, including him and Carina, but not the children sitting on an adult's lap. Tibs had never seen so many people at one table, or a table large enough to fit them all. How was he going to reach the meat he wanted to put on his plate?

"You did good work, Carina," the man said, sitting between the woman who was her mother and a man a little older than Carina and shared the same brown hand with hints of red. "As did your friend. Welcome to our family, Tibs."

Tibs whispered a thank you, unsure if he'd been greeted as Carina's special guy or if it was how well he'd worked that earned him a place, or what exactly it meant to be part of their family.

"The meal had been made with care and attention," the man intoned. "The table set with determination and effort. Fire has been brought to assist in purifying this room. Live pure, work hard, and always keep wary of corruption."

Chaos erupted as soon as the last word was said. People reaching for bowls or bottles, wine and ale being poured among laughter and talk and some arguing. The question of how he'd reached the food he wanted was answered as the bowls, bottles, and plates moved about the table with a lack of order that astonished Tibs. Some moved around, some across, so were slid to someone demanding to have it as others went from person to person. Everyone served themselves heartily when the food of their choice reach them, and Tibs did the same.

The food was delicious.

He would never tell Kroseph, but it was even better than what the inn served.

## Stepping up-47

Stepping up-47

Tibs stood among the other supplicants—Peolo had called them—in the

uncomfortable clothing that had been provided. A shirt and pants in rough fabric, hard leather sandals that did nothing to protect him. When he pointed that out, the cleric smiled and said fighting was not what that section of the dungeon was about.

No one looked at him, or each other, as they were led to the dungeon entrance. Unlike the one in his town, this entrance was level with the ground leading to the mountain it was in.

“Oh,” a female voice said once Tibs was within knife-throwing range of the opening, “the next groups here! Craren, you have to come see...” she trailed off. “Craren, get here. What’s with that one?”

Tibs fought the urge to look around at the unseen voice. He hadn’t thought he’d hear the dungeon here. He and Sto were close friends. Had been so even before Tibs could hear him, so he’d expected that was the reason he heard him and Ganny. If he could also hear this dungeon, did it mean he could hear all of them?

“Huh?” another unseen voice said, sounding like she was approaching. “What is it? A rogue? We don’t see a lot of those.”

“Not that. Look,” the dungeon said.

“I am looking, Val.”

“You’re looking. I need you to Look.”

“What is that—what in Purity’s light is that?”

“I was wondering the same thing. Have you ever seen someone with more than one element? Did we ever have one come in? Your memory’s better than mine.”

“No, we haven’t, and I’ve never seen one. That’s not possible. Why is he here?” Craren asked.

“How would I know?” Val replied.

“I think we could keep him from getting in. That can’t be a good thing.”

“Sure, how do I do that? If I stop all of them from entering, it’s going to raise questions. He’s in the middle of the pack. I can’t just close my door as he’s about to enter. I’m going to crush whoever in front of him.”

Tibs forced himself to ignore the dungeon, and her assistant, as a man stepped before the open door. He wished that, like his ability to sense the surrounding essence, this was something he could stop doing.

“Welcome supplicants,” the man said, his voice carrying over the crowd of five and zero people—Peolo had told him that was always the number of supplicants who entered the dungeon for the audience.

“He’s after Purity,” Craren said. “Look, he doesn’t have it.”

“I’m not giving it to him!”

Tibs closed his eyes and wished those two would be quiet. He needed to hear the instructions the man gave.

“Today, you are embarking on a journey that will last you a lifetime. Those of you who return with your element will become the guardians of our world. Through your swords, your bows, your halberds, and your shields, you will keep corruption and chaos from gaining a foothold. You will fight them back where they try to enter. You will protect



your brothers and sisters in your element as they go about healing the damage they have caused, and when you fall, even if it is today, you will do so knowing your hard work has made the words safer for the others who don't have the privilege of serving Purity."

"To serve is to be Pure!" the crowd replied. Tibs did so. Although enough out of step, the girl on his left glanced at him before looking ahead again. Peolo had taught him the response but didn't have the years of experience giving it.

"Your devotion began years ago, but your test starts today. The dungeon will test your dedication to Purity through hard work. Through testing your willingness to endure hardship and resist temptation. The fifty of you will enter, and at each junction, you will split away from the person in front of you. You will repeat this until you are walking alone, as we all do in this life, other than with Purity. That is when the dungeon will begin testing you, putting obstacles in your way. You can turn back at any time. There is no shame in finding your limit and realizing you are not yet worthy of your audience. You will be welcomed and returned to your study and meditations."

"To know is to be Pure!" This time Tibs was in step.

"We are not like the others, who throw anyone in their dungeon simply to make it grow stronger. Our dungeon is here to help us along in our fight against the enemies of the world. Some of you will fall, today, tomorrow, as part of your training, or against the enemies, but it will not be because you were unprepared. We are the world's army, and we will be ready!"

"To fight is to be Pure!" Tibs said with the others and realized the dungeon was quiet. He couldn't decide if her no longer commenting on him was a good or bad thing.

The man stepped aside, and the crowd entered the dungeon. Unlike Sto, the entrance was undecorated. Plain gray stone formed an archway wide enough for two people, but the supplicants lined up one by one as they entered. The entrance hall was shorter than the one Sto made, and the illumination came from the walls themselves instead of the light stones he had at regular intervals.

Instead of ending at a room, the hall split into two, and the man before Tibs took the left branch, so he took the right one. When the next branch occurred, he took the left, to the right the woman before him took, then another left and two rights. After the next left, he couldn't see the person in front of him, but he heard their footsteps. At the junction, he needed to listen to figure out they'd gone right, so he went left.

He thought he was alone now, but he came across another fork. Listening as hard as he could, he heard nothing.

"I'll give him that," Val said. "He takes this seriously."

"If he's hunting all the essences, he'd have to," Craren replied.

"How do you think he does it? Doesn't the element just kill anyone trying to have more than one?"

"As far as I know. You think he can make out the one who went left?"

"The sound doesn't travel this far."

Tibs entered the right branch.

"Lucky," Val said. "You think that him being a rogue has something to do with his

ability to survive the audiences? The few rogues we've seen come through were tricky.”

“Then he's out of luck,” Craren said mockingly. “You don't trick Purity.”

“I don't think we should risk it.”

“Are you saying you don't have faith in your main essence?”

“Our job is to make sure only the worthy have their audience, isn't it?”

“Well, yes.”

“He isn't worthy, so he's not getting an audience.”

Tibs smiled to himself. He was going to prove to them who was the most determined of the three of them. Of course, being able to listen in on their conversation gave him an edge. Not that it told him what he was supposed to do with the stone wall blocking his path when he encountered it.

“Turn around, essence boy,” Val said. “This is the end of your quest.”

Unlikely, Tibs thought. The requirements to have an audience were only a heightened emotional state while in the presence of a high concentration of the essence of the element he wanted the audience with. While the walls, ceiling, and floor looked like stone, the essence there wasn't primarily stone, but one of those he couldn't identify. Since this was used to get an audience with Purity, it had to be that essence.

He ran a hand over the wall, felt the essence in it. The stone was woven through the other essence. It reminded him of what Sto did with his walls, only he used corruption, water, fires, and a few other essences Tibs couldn't identify. This was neater, purer. Which made sense for a purity dungeon.

Since the dungeon knew he had multiple essences, he had no problem reaching for the earth essence in the stone block before him and pulling it out of the weave.

“What's he doing?” the dungeon demanded.

“You said it, Val. Rogues are sneaky. He's undoing the weave that makes out the door.”

“He can't do that!” Val replied, offended.

“Of course I can,” Tibs whispered, smiling, and immediately cursed himself as silence fell. He kept working on pulling the essence out, not going faster or slower, and hoped they'd think it was only a coincidence he'd replied to her. He knew better. Sto heard anything within himself he focused on, and those two were definitely focusing on him.

“Did he just reply to me?” the dungeon asked, uncertainly making her sound fearful.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Craren answered. “They can't hear us. He's talking to himself. You know how they get when they're removed from the people they keep around them. Talk talk talk. Humans just don't appreciate the silence like we do.”

Tibs would appreciate silence right now. Undoing the weave wasn't difficult, but he was so used to conversing with Sto he had to fight the urge to do that here. As he removed the last of a patch on the side of his hand, the other essence unraveled and the stone faded. Through it, he was in another hallway. Was this dungeon all hallways and no room?

“Why did that just fall apart?” Val asked.

“Because purity isn't solid,” Craren replied. “You know that.”

“Are telling me I'm going to have to redesign everything?”

“Only if you expect to have another like him. They’re not supposed to be able to manipulate essence when they do this floor, cheater. That’s what he. He’s a cheater.”

“He’s a rogue,” Val said. “It’s kind of what they do.”

Tibs smiled. For someone who’d admitted didn’t get many visits from rogues, they had left quite an impression. When he had enough of the block removed, he slipped through.

“I hate that I can’t just encase him in there. How bad would it be if I just crushed him? I mean, who’d know?”

Tibs forced himself to continue walking. Could she do that? Just change things while he was there? He tried to remember what Sto had said, but he could only remember having to exit a room for him to make changes.

“You’d know,” Craren replied. “How comfortable are you with breaking the rules? It isn’t like anyone is looking over your work after a few millennia without causing problems.”

“Why do I have to be so cursed by the book?”

Tibs relaxed.

“I’m making changes ahead,” the dungeon said. “Let him get through that.”

Ahead proved to be far enough, Tibs stopped counting. He knew higher than nine and nine, but it became a hassle to do it in his head. The hall widened into a semblance of a room, blocked in the middle by stalagmites and stalactites that had grown until they almost touched. It reminded him of a dog’s or cat’s mouth, with sharp teeth.

He snorted. “Come on, you think that’s going to stop me?” He stepped forward and stopped. “Yeah, this is too easy.”

The dungeon chuckled.

Tibs studied the floor, visually and with sensing the essences. Like the walks and the door that had blocked his way. It was mainly earth woven through the other essence. No traps. Not dealing with many rogues seemed to mean Val didn’t have rogue-centered rooms.

Purity was about hard work, and climbing to the gaps, and then finding one he could slip through wouldn’t be easy, but it wouldn’t stop him. The stalagmites didn’t have purposely made handholds, but they were also not so smooth Tibs couldn’t find cracks and gaps to grab on and pull himself up with.

He made it to the gap in a few minutes and grabbed into the opening to study it. Pain lanced through his hand, making him let go, then lose his balance. He landed on his back hard enough he had trouble breathing as the dungeon laughed.

“Oh, I bet you think this is funny,” Tibs groaned, and she fell silent. Tibs cursed as he looked at his hand. The palm and fingers were cut open in multiple places. He felt for the state of the rest of his body before stopping the blood flow with a wrap of his essence around his hand.

“Craren,” Val called, worried. “He’s got life!”

“That’s impossible,” the assistant replied. “Only dungeon have that essence.”

“Then tell me what he just did!”

“How did I miss it?” Craren mused.

The same way most people missed important details, Tibs mentally answered as he forced himself to his feet. By getting distracted by the not important ones. Like how he’d

let the ease of the climb distract him from sensing ahead. He flexed his fingers of his injured hand to ensure the essence wrap moved with them. It was the first time he'd used it in a nimble part. Legs, arms, chests were the usual injuries.

This time, the climb took nearly ten minutes. His hand slowed him as pain lanced each time he put the weight needed to pull himself upon it, but he also took the time to sense ahead. He didn't put it past Val to change his handholds.

As he moved, Val and Craren talked over what his ability to use life's essence meant. Val suggested Tibs was a dungeon creation that had gotten out and now was... she couldn't figure out why a creation would be here. Craren pointed out that creations couldn't manipulate essence. Only living creatures could do that. Was he a dungeon that has somehow figured out how to step outside? Wouldn't that explain how he's seemed to respond to her comments a few times?

That, Craven had replied, was patently impossible. The core of a dungeon was locked to the dungeon. If one had figured out how to leave, the dungeon itself would have fallen apart afterward and that would have become known.

As Tibs reached the open between the teeth, they decided that he'd stolen that essence, just like he'd clearly stolen every other of the essence he had, and planned on doing with Purity, if he was allowed to have an audience.

Tibs felt the essence on the other side of the peak. It wasn't what he thought of as purity. The way it was in narrow lines side by side made him think of blades, so he decided metal. He coated his hand with water and earth—without his bracers, that's all he could do—and hardened them before reaching for purchase.

"Cheater," Craren said as he pulled himself enough to look. Metal blades lined that side of the stalagmites' peaks. Thin and close together. He couldn't look down to determine how far they went.

He moved sideways until he could fit. The blades only went down one arm's length. Looking up, the stalactites didn't have them, so he reached there, found handholds, gritted his teeth, and pulled himself through and over the blades. With a swing, he dropped beyond them and slid down to the floor.

"You have to give him that," Val said, "he's resourceful."

"We don't have to give him anything, do we?" Craven replied.

"No, we certainly don't. Especially not light."

It was dark. The kind of dark that made a shiver run down Tibs's back. He saw nothing.

He'd worked at night long enough that even before gaining darkness as an element, he always saw well in the dark. He suspected that if he'd been in a better state to appreciate it, the Dark Night would have felt like this. This was the darkness of bards' stories when the truly evil things came out. The kind of creatures Tibs didn't need to be told existed. He just knew they were there. That any steps he made could cause him to step into one of them and suffering a fate that would be worse than death.

He didn't call forth the light. It was a reaction born of the fear that in darkness lay only bad things.

His breathing slower as the glow around his hand intensified until he made out the floor for a few paces around him.

“That is such a cheat!” Craren said.

“He has light as an element, we should have expected it.”

“Okay,” Tibs told the darkness beyond his light. “That was well played.”

“And it looks like he can appreciate a cunning plan,” Val said.

“That he beat,” Craren replied bitterly. Tibs preferred Ganny. She was more fun, less interested in winning. Maybe it was because both were so young. Craren had spoken of millennia. Tibs didn’t know how many years that was, but there was a sense of a long time to the word.

Getting himself to step forward was harder than it should be. He could see where he stepped, but a scared voice at the back of his mind clamored that something would leap at him out of that darkness at any moment now. That only by remaining in place would he be safe.

And it wasn’t like he needed to move, another part, not as afraid, but willing to side with his fear, point out. He’d done hunger to reach two audiences. He could do it again.

He could, he agreed with it, but to give in to his fear was letting Val and Craren win. It was their plan, and Tibs wouldn’t go along with it.

He placed a foot down, then another, and another. He walked slower than he’d prefer, but he walked forward. Once he was out of the room, that he reached whatever constituted the next room in this dungeon, he’d deal with the next challenge, and that one wouldn’t be in the dark.

Oh, abyss. He hoped there was light for the next challenge.

## Stepping up-48

Tibs rested his head back against the stone and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. There had been the climb up the stalagmites, the walk in the dark, the hammering through a series of blocks blocking his path. He’d wanted to break those down the way he had the first door, but the dungeon had made sure there were no essences he could manipulate in them.

He could hear the dungeon, which gave him an advantage, but she knew the elements he had, and that efficiently countered it.

The next challenge had felt aimed at rogues more than anyone else. A large pit with light shining on some things sharp at the bottom and columns ending at floor height spaced too far to jump and at various distances. On the side of the entrance platforms. A stack of beams of various lengths.

A puzzle, because there weren’t enough of the longest beams to cover the entire length, and he needed to carry the beams across the one he’d set down so it would go from that new platform to the next one. If he didn’t estimate the distance correctly, he had to bring it back and carry another one. None of the beams were too heavy to be carried, but they were all a strain, from the longest to the shortest.

Tibs wondered if this was something Val had set in place specifically for him, or if every Runner looking to have an audience with Purity needed to complete their version of it.

He had one advantage in that he could take the earth essence from the floor and used it to hold each beam in place, keeping them from wobbling as he walked across them. That hadn't saved him from losing two of the beams, and he'd worried that he had made it impossible to cross, but while he'd blocked off the path he had planned on making, there were others, longer, that took him to the other side.

That had left him barely conscious, and he'd slept, if barely. Val and Craren kept talking. It would be one thing if they talked about him, their plans to keep him from gaining his audience, their guesses why he was after another element, other than greed. But they talked about nothing meaningful to him.

Hadn't it been funny when that supplicant had run out crying after breaking a hand trying to get through the crystal blocks? What about that fighter? Who thought that just because she was strong, climbing the wall would be easy? Hadn't it been sad that cleric died because he thought his devotion to Purity would protect him from the monsters on the deeper floors?

On and on it went. One of them waking as they excitedly talked about something that had happened and then went on reminiscing in more details Tibs needed about the event.

The next day, Tibs was guessing since he had no way to tell if a full day had passed, how long he'd slept, how long it took for him to get through the obstacles. Had been more obstacles. None of them particularly difficult, but each requiring a lot of work. From the other room of blocks, but this one without a hammer to break them. Tibs had resorted to hammering at one corner with his fist covered in ice and earth until it broke off, then using that to break a larger piece, and so on until he had something resembling a hammerhead that fit in his hand comfortably.

There had been a wall he needed to traverse along the side of and because he was already tired, he nearly fell when one of the handholds had blades in it. A reminder not to let his focus falter. The disappointment in Craren's voice when he didn't fall made him feel better.

The cuts from the stalagmites healed nicely, until he added more to them. He didn't know if it resulted from the wrap he places over them or something about how concentrated his essence was. Having the clerics heal everyone when they left the dungeon made it impossible to figure out how much healing he cause or if the wraps and splints only acted as stopgaps until the actual healing.

He'd fallen asleep somewhere along that chain of thoughts and was woken when Val exclaimed how the first to have an audience was back from it.

Tibs knew that he only heard the dungeon if their focus was close enough to him. Sto and Ganny could be silent for entire runs as they worked on something else, in another part. So why couldn't those two just go away to do their talking?

Halfway through the next room, another puzzle. This one, tiles on the floor he needed to slide around until they were in the right pattern. When his stomach gave him the

first reminder he hadn't eaten anything in a while.

"I guess it's time to feed him," Val had said, and Tibs barely stopped himself from sighing in relief.

"You can't do that," Craren replied. "It's going to keep him from having his..." she'd trailed off. "Oh, sneaky." The joy in the assistant's voice put him on guard. Would Val poison him? Then he realized it was easier. Maybe Tibs could reach the point through exhaustion where he'd have an audience, but how long would that take? Thirst and hunger were the quicker route, and if she fed him, she made his goal that much harder to attain.

So he'd put them out of his mind and went back to working on the puzzle. He'd figure out that the simple drawing on them only mattered because of how many items were depicted in each scene. This was about arranging the one and five tiles in an order based on the numbers. The progression wasn't by one, or by two, or three.

He was down to moving them randomly when he noticed that the characters on the right were always depicted pointed toward the center of the tile, and those on the left looked at the edge. Adding and removing numbers weren't easy. He needed his fingers, but the first few tiles, with the smaller numbers worked; so he continued. When the numbers grew beyond his fingers, he made lines on the ground with earth essence. He thought that being tired made this more difficult, but he still promised himself that once he was done here. He was leaving numbers to Carina, Mez, and Khumdar. He didn't care how nice and gentle about it, she and Darran were about teaching him more of them. He was done.

The last tile went in place and the door opened and the smells assaulted him. Spicy stews, sweet cakes, freshly baked bread, roasted vegetables of a variety Tibs had never seen before. If Sto ever managed to make food like this, instead of basic uncooked meats and vegetables, he would put the inn out of business.

He cursed the dungeon under his breath when he walked by the ale and his thirst constricted his throat. His finger was around the handle before he could stop himself.

This, this was cruelty to put nobles to shame.

How could the dungeon claim to be pure and do this to him?

He forced himself forward and onto the next challenge. This one lifting beams to various heights so he could move under them and over the uneven floor.

Every hall after this offered him food. Ever better-smelling foods. From simple plates of breads, sweet, savory, spicy. To complicated affairs, he would expect to see on the table of a noble looking to impress. Even the ales smelled better, some fruitier, some spicier. Curiosity became the more difficult thing to fight as he didn't know ales to more than what his town served.

Now, he'd lost track of how many times he slept, since sometimes he couldn't be sure if he'd woken or dreamed the next set of obstacles.

The constant yammering about from the dungeon couldn't be to keep him from sleeping well, since they didn't know he heard them. But whatever the reason; it made every new day ever harder. He closed his eyes and did his best to ignore the smell of the food surrounding him. He couldn't tell if it grew cold, but the smells never stopped being appetizing.

“Then you remember what she did?” Craren said excitedly.

“She threw herself off the ledge!” Val replied, as if it was a new discovery.

“Yes! She was almost there. I could tell. If she’d just hung on and made her way across, Purity would have been waiting.”

“Purity was still waiting,” Val said, her tone somber. “But there is no returning from that embrace.”

“Then there was that sorcerer!”

And on they went, as if each new story was unheard of before, even if they were repeating events that had happened in the dungeon. All the while keeping him from sleeping.

He banged his head against the wall, hoping the pain would cover up their voice. He did it again and again, stopping only when he felt liquid down the back of his neck. Paying attention, he sensed the break in the skin and cursed as he wrapped essence over it. He snorted as the two voices didn’t even comment on how he’d injured himself.

They were talking about another sorcerer. One who’d made it to the seventh floor and opened a book, moving through the room according to what it said, instead of what each room contained. He died in the third one. When Val absorbed the book and studied it, it was all something she called mathematical equations. No information about the rooms themselves.

The two laughed, concluding that sorcerers were crazy.

“Will you two shut up!” Tibs yelled at the ceiling.

Silence fell, and Tibs sighed in relief.

Finally.

He closed his eyes.

“He can’t have said that,” Craren said fearfully.

Tibs groaned.

“Maybe he’s insane and imagining voices,” Val offered doubtfully.

“I wish,” Tibs grumbled.

He enjoyed the ensuing silence, but prepared for it to break. Those two just couldn’t stop yammering.

“Hello?” Val said tentatively.

“Isn’t it late for that?” Tibs growled. “I’ve been here for a while now. Hello is what you say when someone arrives, and other than gawking at me and my essences, you said nothing when I got here. Now shut up and let me sleep.”

“Aren’t you bossy for a human trapped in a dungeon?” Craren said haughtily.

“I’m fucking tired. You two never shut up. What is it with the recounting of what happened here before? Go watch the other people trying to get through your traps. Leave me alone.”

“You can’t hear us,” Val said with determination.

“You have no idea how much I wished that was true right now. Sto never yammers about like you two do.”

“Who’s Sto?” Craren asked.



“Don’t encourage him,” Val chastised her.

“He’s my dungeon.”

“Your dungeon?” Val demanded. “No one owns us.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Tibs replied, waving a hand to get her to quiet down. “He’s my friend. And he happens to be a dungeon, like you. I saved his life.”

Craren snorted. “Oh right. A human saving a dungeon. Like that ever happened.”

Tibs shrugged. “Look, is it too much to ask for some silence? I just want to sleep, get through whatever else you have planned, and be done.”

“Why are you here?” Val asked.

“You know why. You two worked it out quickly. You see the elements I have, the one I’m missing.”

“Why do you want an audience with Purity? What are you after? You greedy rogue,” she added, and Tibs snickered. “You think it’s funny? How about I send a bunch of creatures after you in the next room and see how funny you find that?”

Tibs looked at the ceiling. “Can you take creatures from lower floors and move them up?”

“Why do you want to know?” Val asked.

“Don’t you have a dungeon you can ask?” Craren demanded mockingly.

“Sto’s working on his third floor right now. And it never came up. Unlike you, he’s never threatened to change the floor I was on to kill me.” He chuckled. “Then again, his first floor is tougher than yours, if not as large.”

“My first floor isn’t about killing supplicant,” Val replied, offended.

“It’s about testing them. Making sure they have what it takes to be worthy of an audience with Purity.”

“Hard work,” Tibs said, “determination, resisting temptation. How do I rate?”

“Too well,” Val reluctantly answered, and Tibs smiled.

“Look. I’m not asking that you make it easier on me. I understand what you’re about. Ganny explained it to me. Dungeons push us to be better. Like you said, they test us. If we fail, we can die.”

“Except you’re cheating,” Craren said.

“I was. You’ve made sure I don’t have much to work with.”

“I can’t let you have the audience,” Val stated. “Not without knowing what you are after. Do you think you’re the first to come here and try to lie your way into an audience?”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re a rogue. All you do is lie.”

“I’m a roof runner more than a liar, that a picking pockets. I did lie to get in, but everything else I did according to the rules.”

“The rules say you can’t use essence,” Craren replied.

“I don’t think so,” Tibs said, smiling. “Sto never complained when I used essence on the first floor. A lot of us got our element before his second floor was ready. It didn’t ensure we all survived.” He wiped at his cheek, surprised his finger came away wet. “I lost a

lot of people to him.”

“And you still claim to be his friend?” Craren asked, demanded. She really didn’t like the idea he and Sto were friends.

“I was angry at him when I thought all he wanted was to eat us. That was before I hear him.”

“So you couldn’t always hear us?”

Tibs smiled. “I didn’t know I could hear another dungeon until I came here. You’re just the second dungeon I’ve been into... that I’ve met.”

“What happened to make you hear him?”

Sto considered it. Dismissed not saying anything as being too tired, lying as being too hard in his current state, and decided that it wasn’t like Val and Craren could tell anyone. “When I got my first four audiences. Water, Earth, Fire, and Air. That’s when I got my element, and the next time I went into the dungeon, I could hear them talk. I had before, but I was burned and probably dying, so I wasn’t certain it had been real.”

“And you decided that if four could let you hear us what, more would let you control us?”

Tibs shook his head. “Water said I needed to get the next four.”

“Water told you to get more audience?” Craren snorted.

“The second time I had an audience with her. I wanted to know how to get rid of the corruption that had seeped into my essence as a result of protecting Sto. She said to speak to corruption on the way to getting his element and the four others. Light, Darkness, Corruption and Purity.”

“And you went to Corruption before us?” Craren demanded.

“I can’t travel unless Sto is closed for graduating. There’s a pool of corruption in my town, so it made that audience easy to have. Light and darkness took more work, but I could arrange it. Purity can only be reached here. So I had to wait.”

“So you aren’t looking to control us?” Val asked.

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Power, what else? You’re corrupt, so that’s what you’re after.”

Tibs shook his head. “Wouldn’t you two know better? The elements aren’t what we make them out to be. Corruption is needed. I don’t know why, not really, but if he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be one of the elements, right?”

They didn’t say anything, and Tibs closed his eyes. Maybe—

“Fine,” Val said. “So you know more than the usual supplicant.”

“Thank you. Does that mean you’ll let me sleep?”

“No. I don’t trust you, rogue. So turn around. I’m going to let you leave. If you push ahead, I will do what I can to make sure you fail.”

Tibs sighed. Would keeping him exhausted speed the process along or just cause him to make a fatal mistake? At least Carina wouldn’t wait for him indefinitely. She’d returned to Kragle Rock when her bracelet changed. By then, he’d probably be dead. He had to hope it wouldn’t come to that.

“Alright. We all have to do what we feel is right.”

“No more using your essences,” Val said.

Tibs shook his head. “That isn’t how this works. I’m going to use every tool I have to survive. You’re going to do what you can to ensure I don’t. Enemies don’t make deals.”

“Is that what we are?”

“I’m too tired to think of a better word. But I don’t want you dead. I just don’t plan on letting you kill me.”

“You can’t stop us,” Craren said.

“I don’t aim to kill anyone,” Val said. “That isn’t what I’m about. That doesn’t mean my challenges can’t kill you.”

“I know.” Tibs yawned. “No, if you don’t mind, go back to talking among yourselves while I try to sleep.” He closed his eyes and thought the few seconds of silence that followed had an offended feel to it.

Then Craren and Val started talking.

Loudly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs stared at the column blocking his way.

“I think we finally broke him,” Craren said.

It was in the doorway. Fit it tightly, and it was divided into twelve slices. Each circular except for a part that was taken out, like some stone-eating creature, had taken a large bite out of each one and put it back, but without lining up the bites.

He continued to stare at it.

“I’m thinking you’re right,” Val replied.

There was something he should do to it, but he couldn’t think of what; so he stared. His hunger had become a pit he didn’t even want to fill a few sleeps ago. His thirst had decided that if he wasn’t going to drink anything, he didn’t need his throat and had closed that to the point trying to talk was painful.

He knew he could do something about that with one of his elements. But he couldn’t think of which one, or how it would help.

There was a column in his way, and he needed to remove it.

It finally came to him, the how to accomplish it, and he stepped forward. His steps were slow, a mix of care and exhaustion. Like the hunger and thirst, exhaustion was a constant companion. No matter how many times he sat to close his eyes, how many times he thought he slept, when he stood, he was just as exhausted as when he sat. Even his two constant companion’s voices barely registered as they kept talking.

He reached the column and put his shoulder against it. All he needed to do was push it out of the way and he could cross the doorway and find out what was on the other side.

“Is he...” Craren began, then seemed unable to continue. Maybe she was impressed Tibs had figured it out so quickly.

He was careful as he pushed; it was round and it would be easy to slip and hurt himself on the bitten parts. He pushed, and pushed harder, but the column wouldn’t move. Maybe he was too weak. He should have eaten something.

The thought of food made what was left of his stomach turn. No, he was beyond food

now.

What he needed to do was remain determined. He should push through this. He smiled at his joke and his lips cracked. He pushed again. Shifted to adjust his foot and then he was slipping along the side of the column, his hand catching in one of the bites for support, but it moved with a click and he landed on the ground, his hand bleeding.

Again.

How often had he cut his hand in one fashion or another? It had happened so much he hardly bled anymore.

He looked at the bite. It had moved. If it hadn't, he could have stayed standing, and not bled.

But it had moved.

He got to his feet and stared at it. He pushed on the bite. It didn't move. He pulled, and it moved with a click.

That was interesting.

He tried the one above, but it wouldn't move.

"You think—"

Val shushed Craren. "He can hear you, remember?"

Tibs ignored them. He tried another bite, and he could move it forward two clicks. Were the clicks important? Something about the slices and how some of the moves felt familiar, but it was too far to work out why. Another one moved a click, and he noticed it was on the close to the side of the doorway. He could almost get his arm through.

Maybe if he got it to move a few more clicks, he could slip through?

He pushed on it, but it didn't move. He could pull, but that took it out and closed the gap.

He wanted to scream in frustration, but this throat hurt before a sound make it out. He knew he had it. He just had to make the slice move more. Expect how it moved depended on the other slices.

It what?

Where had the idea come from? Was it right? He found another slice that moved, then tried the one he wanted. It didn't move. Annoyed, he searched for a new one and found that one which hadn't moved before now did. So the idea was right. What he needed to do was figure out which slice unlocked this one.

He found another one, then another and after the next, the slice moved enough its center was lined up with the opening's edge, maximizing the space. He pushed his arm through, then his elbow got stuck, and no matter how hard he pushed, it couldn't fit.

He needed to get a second slice to line up.

He worked on the one below, and encountered a crisis when the only move he could make was pulling the slice already in place back. If he did that, the other would move one click closer, but then the slice he'd pull wouldn't push back into place.

He hit his head against the column. Why did this have to be so hard?

Because he was looking too closely.

He stopped.

Maybe he should hit his head more often.

There had been something in the how he'd gotten the pieces to move. Something familiar. A rhythm to it, no that wasn't right, it was almost that, but it was the wrong word. What was it?

Because it had worked before, he hit his head against the column again.

A pattern.

This was a neat trick.

A pattern. There had been a series of moves that had repeated. He didn't remember what it was, but it had been there. And if it had been there. He could figure it out again.

He took his time, had to restart as his focus slipped. But each time he found the pattern, it was easier to remember it.

And then he had two slices in place.

He tried to fit his shoulder, but now his head was in the way. So he needed another slice.

It took two more before he could fit his head, but now his second shoulder was in the way.

He broke down. Why was it so damned hard? He pounded the floor until the pain made him stop.

He'd done four slices. A few more and he would fit.

He moved the slices. Forward and back, and the whole thing became disorderly, but he didn't let that stop him. It had done it before, but so long as he stuck with the pattern, it would all come back into order.

It did, but five slices still weren't enough for his shoulders. So he went back to it.

Exhaustion clawed at him, but this time he didn't listen. Anytime he did, he forgot stuff, and he didn't want to forget the pattern. He didn't think he could survive losing it now that he had found it.

Click the slices went as he pushed and pull. The sound covering that of his two companions until, as the slices fell into places, he realized they were actually silent.

He pulled himself into the space and froze when Craren spoke.

"Is he really going to do it that way?"

Was he doing it wrong? The point was to get through, wasn't it? He decided he was too tired to care and pulled himself all the way through, then let out a croak of a scream when he fell off the side of the opening for far longer than he felt he should have before the impact occurred.

## Stepping up-49

"That might be the least dignified arrival I have witnessed," a woman said.

Tibs untangled himself and groaned, opening an eye. How wasn't he dead? That fall had been—

The form looking down on him straightened. "Good, you are all here. You had me

concerned for an instant.”

Tibs sat up. Of course, his audience. He looked around and was surprised at the banality of the space. A stone room, with a wooden table and two chairs.

Shouldn't Purity be more....

“Yes?” she asked.

Tibs stood. “I'm sorry, I was just expecting...”

“More what?” she asked. She didn't sound offended or amused, or anything. If Tibs had to name it, he would say she seemed bored.

She shrugged. As with the voice, there was femininity to the form, but also a plainness that matched the room. There had been a sense of vastness to the other element. He had been in their presence, but they hadn't been limited to.... Anything.

“Your mind seems to have trouble staying still,” she said as she motioned for the chair opposite hers. “Sit.” Tibs did as instructed. “Now, please find that thought again and complete it. More what?”

“I'm not sure.” He tried to sound confident, but she could see his thoughts, so she knew the truth. “The plainness, I guess that makes sense now that I think about it. Everything in the city is plain.”

“And you believe they are such because I am such.”

Tibs nodded. “It's just that the other elements were more... had stronger personality, I guess.”

“And you believe that makes them more themselves?”

“I don't know,” he answered. “I don't know a lot.”

“Few of your kind do, as much as they delude themselves otherwise.”

“There was also more of them, if that makes sense.” He shook his head. “That's not right. More to them. Like they concentrated only a small part to talk with me.” He motioned to the room. “It feels like this is all there is to you.” He hesitated. “Shouldn't there be more?”

She shrugged. “We are what we are, and what we are is not a responsibility of yours, despite what it may seem like. What to have undertaken. You need not concern yourself with my state.”

Tibs nodded. “You know who I am.”

She nodded. “You are a child of humans. One who has set himself on a journey that will most likely see you dead before it can end. You should not have done this. Your kind is too fragile.” She paused. “And yet. You do not fear that outcome. Interesting.”

“I was going to die before I came to the dungeon. No one lives long on my street unless they're willing to kill with thinking about it. I can't do that. Then the dungeon was going to eat me. I know that's not true, but I didn't know that then and...”

“You should say it.”

He nodded. “Making the men who hurt Mama pay is important. I have put a lot of thoughts into what I will do to them, and this can help me.” He motioned to her. Unlike the other element, the shadow was right there, within her torso. There was nothing hiding it. The moment he thought to look for it, there it was.

“Not if you are dead.”

He shrugged. “Then at least I’ll die trying. And you are the last element I need.”

She studied him. “I did not think you would come. The places where my connection to your world exists have grown few, and they are guarded with strength, but not all with cunning. I am impressed with how hard you worked to reach me.”

“But not pleased?” Somehow, that disappointed him.

“I am not someone who is pleased. Being pleased means you are done. I do not believe in such. Work always continues. It is better to appreciate what is being done than be happy with what has been done.”

Tibs nodded. “What do I need to do to get the shadow?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You simply have to take it, as with each of us. But I leave obfuscation to the others. Light and I have this in common. We prefer being straightforward.”

Tibs stood and walked around the table. She turned in her chair to continue facing him, expression impassive. He reached for her and stopped.

“Will this hurt you?” He’d been so preoccupied with figuring out how to get the shadow from the others, he hadn’t considered what it did to them. They hadn’t acted like it hurt afterward, but how would he know how an element expressed pain?

“No, this is not I that it will hurt.”

He nodded. Of course, she might be straightforward, but it wouldn’t be as simple as closing his hand over it. Even with Fire and Corruption, the ease of obtaining it had come with hints of a cost, or, with Fire, the burning immediacy of it.

He touched her and immediately pulled his hand away. The pain had been intense. Not like the fire. Heat, but not a burning of his flesh. That memory was still clear, even after months.

He touched her again, and the pain returned. A deep burning that reminded him of when he’d been doused with corruption, but only in how profound it was. This burning reached into his essence. He pushed and ground his teeth. When he opened his eyes, he saw that he only had his fingers in her to the first knuckle.

There was nothing left of them inside her.

He pulled his hand away and stared at his whole fingers.

Was this an illusion? A trick to make him think he couldn’t do this. He search her face for hints of duplicity, but there was only mild curiosity.

She was purity. Hard work was what she appreciated. This would be something he needed to work at.

He touched her again, and this time he forced his eyes to stay open as he pushed. He watched as his finger broke her ‘skin’ and imagined the pain was more intense as he saw them dissolve.

It wasn’t like with the man melting in the pool of corruption. His fingers seemed to explode like ambers from a kicked burning log, and left nothing behind. He pulled his hand out, his blood running cold.

She was purity... wouldn’t that mean that reaching into her only left what was pure?

He saw nothing left there.

“Am I not...” he searched for the words. “Pure enough? Worthy?”

“Are you not?”

If there was nothing left of what he pushed inside her. How would he grasp the shadow?

She was purity.

He would grasp it through hard work.

He slammed his hand into her chest before he could think better of it and screamed as pain coursed up his arm. It was in to his wrist, then halfway to his forearm. He fumbled about, trying to grasp the shadow, but he couldn't feel, then he realized he'd closed his eyes.

Opening them offered little help. He saw the shadow, but there was nothing left of his hand to close around it. Despair clawed at him, and he pushed it away. Maybe more of his arms would cause something to be left that he could use.

He kept his eyes fixed on where his arm went into her despite the increasing pain as he pushed in to his elbow. Would he have to go in completely? Would he be able to come back out?

He noticed the essence accumulating where his arm met her body. It was white, so pure he wondered why that didn't go in. She was purity. If that was pure, it should—

It wasn't pure. White wasn't the color of purity, it was the color of his element. He searched the line for indication of the other colors. Blue, red, brown, purple, black, storming blue-gray even the brightness of Light was missing. Only the white of his essence was pushed back.

He stopped pushing. His arm was in her a little past his elbow. In a living body, it would be out the other side—that was an image he would have preferred not having—so there was enough there. Now, why wasn't any part of himself left in her? If the other elements weren't stopped, they should be there, giving his arm form, solidity. Shouldn't they?

Except they weren't his elements. His element was white. Life. It was him, the pure him.

Okay, then why wasn't it inside her?

Because she was going to make him work for it.

Pushing physically didn't do it, so he relaxed his body. The pain didn't diminish, but now that he was no longer tensing against it, he could push it to the side, like he had his despair. His essence was his to control. He could move it within him and into others.

He tried to push all of it through, but the resistance was intense. He closed his eyes and felt instead of looked. Everywhere he pushed, Purity pushed back. She was matching him. He tried to focus everything on one point, hoping to overwhelm her, but that was impossible. She was an element. He was only human. She would always have more to give than he did.

He was also a rogue.

She'd said cunning. Had that been a clue, or had she just pointed out what had happened? He'd used cunning to get in, and the people guarding her dungeon hadn't been



ready for that.

He kept the assault, but took one strand of his essence and moved it away, then he pushed with less strength. It wouldn't work. It couldn't work. She was an element. Moving the strand to the other side of his 'arm' pushing 'less' wouldn't mean she wouldn't notice it. Her body wasn't what he was fighting against, she was the entire space he was in.

He could have cursed.

He stopped pushing against her 'skin' and let his essence explode around him.

He felt her smile as he dispersed; as he spread through her. Maybe the vastness of the other element was the illusion. Maybe she was 'less', because soon he felt the limits. He was everywhere and with only a shift in focus, he felt the shadow of the element. He 'grasped' it and felt it meld into him. Purity made a space between light and darkness. The reserve of his element grew and...

Nothing.

He was seated opposite her, wondering why nothing happened. He had all eight elements. Getting the first four had unlocked his element. Shouldn't getting the others Water had told him to get do... something?

"Sometimes," she said. "Working hard doesn't always mean using brute force."

He nodded and set aside why this hadn't accomplished anything. "I need to remember I'm a rogue."

She shook her head. "Be careful not to let this—" she tapped her forehead "—get in your way."

"What happens now?"

"Now, you go on your way. You have a long journey ahead of you, should you survive the next few steps."

He opened his mouth—

\* \* \* \* \*

And croaked as his throat clamped shut painfully.

"He's back," Craren said, disappointed.

"Do you think they'll mind if I just crush him?"

Tibs almost wished she did. He'd forgotten how much pain his body was in while dealing with the pain of getting the last of the elements. He opened an eye and looked up at the opening he's fallen from.

He snorted. How had he been terrified of that fall? It was barely twice his height. He'd thrown himself out of windows much higher than that while trying to have his audience with Air.

He struggled to his feet. Used the uneven wall to climb until he had a hand on the edge of the opening, then caught his breath.

"What do you think you're doing?" Craren demanded.

His first attempt at an answer was only a hiss of air. He swallowed the water he formed in his mouth and momentarily felt calmer.

"Leaving." It hadn't sounded like more than a croak, but his throat hurt less. He considered making more water, but he didn't have much in his reserve, and in his state, he

couldn't get more there.

He pulled himself to the opening, then crawled through and fell on the other side. More bruising for his overly abused body.

"Are you going to let him leave?" Craren asked. "I thought you wanted to crush him."

"You know it was wishful thinking. He passed. He's entitled to leave. He worked hard. Purity took him in and returned him. Who I am to pass judgment now?"

"The dungeon he's in. It isn't like anyone will know."

"You can't be sure of that, Craren. I doubt Rangar thought anyone would mind what he did; until they came and killed him."

Tibs wanted to ask who the 'they' were, since they seemed to know more about them than Ganny did, but his throat hurt again.

"He was out of control," Craren finally said as Tibs forced himself to his feet. "And he wouldn't listen to you. If they hadn't stopped him, he would have unleashed creatures all over the world."

"But he hadn't yet. So how did they find out? We didn't tell them. I know his assistant didn't. Do you think he was talking with anyone else?"

"No. He only talked with you because of the bond you shared. He wouldn't have trusted anyone else."

Tibs kept walking as their voices faded into the distance. He didn't encounter any rooms, any obstacles, and when he finally saw daylight, he thought it was too soon. He had walked for days and days, probably weeks, so he couldn't be out already... not that he remembered how long he'd walked since his audience.

As the light blinded him, arms closed around him. He was too exhausted to react.

"I've got you," a man said softly as Tibs imagine landing in a cell. So long as the cot was straight and he got food, he didn't care. "Show me your eyes," the man said as he maneuvered Tibs. Not understanding why the man was interested in his eyes, Tibs looked at him as he was seated. The expression turned sad.

"You might be the longest one to stay before accepting you aren't ready for your audience, but that you turned back shows great wisdom. Don't worry, you will continue to work hard, and next time, I'm sure Purity will grant it to you."

Something was placed in Tibs's hands.

"Slowly drink this. It'll help you recuperate. It'll be sometime before we have an escort for you. We weren't expecting anyone to exist at this point."

The small cup contained a thick liquid devoid of scent or taste. After the first sip didn't kill him, he had another one, then another. By the time it was empty, he felt better. He was still hungry and thirsty, but it was more like he's gone a few days without either, instead of however long he was inside. He was still tired, but again, it was more like a few days, and he could function on that little sleep.

Function enough to realize what had caused the man's reaction. His eyes were still brown, so they'd think he hadn't succeeded. Tibs had been ready to slip away while being escorted to wherever they took the newly graduated. He looked around at the empty benches, the man at a desk by the dungeon's entrance. He was writing. There were no guards

at the gate. Tibs stood and while his legs shook, they supported him. Remaining at the man's back, he made his way to the exit, then out.

No guards there either to stop him.

He walked away from the dungeon, and the final gate was guarded, but they looked out, alert for anyone trying to enter without authorization. They glanced at Tibs, took his in dirty clothing, and went back to watching the road. He wasn't the first to leave after a run without having washed.

By the time he made it to the market square, that was his first marker. He was getting tired again. Either what he had been given was wearing off, or he wasn't expected to walk after his ordeal. He headed toward the sunset, crossed three named roads, then turned left. Six more named roads, and it was a right, the fourth house, he hoped had remembered right and he pounded on the door.

It opened and Zackaria looked at him in surprise.

Tibs sighed in relief and opened his mouth to ask where Carina was, but darkness engulfed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke in a bed that wasn't his, much too fancy for anything Tibs would sleep in. And Carina, smiling at him. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I fell off a mountain."

She frowned, and he smiled.

"I'm okay. Sore, thirsty, and hungry, but I'm okay."

Her eyes flicked to the door, and Tibs turned his head. Peolo stood there, looking grave.

"You came back," he said as if accusing him. "You understand that I won't be able to get you in a second time."

Right, his eyes.

"I doubt we'd have time, even if you could," Carina said. "We're probably going to be recalled soon." She raised her hand and her robe slipped down, revealing the bracelet. The gem was still yellow.

Peolo nodded. "I know you thought Purity was for you, Tibs. But sometimes, we need to accept that what we think isn't what is."

Tibs nodded and the cleric left. When he couldn't hear his steps, he spoke in a low voice. "Did he want me to die there? They don't have any problems with the others turning around and leaving."

"You aren't from here. From them, Peolo would see it as having tried hard, and be ready to work harder for their next attempt."

"He thinks I just gave up."

She nodded, looked at the opened door and him again. "Did it work?" Tibs nodded. "And?"

He shrugged. "Nothing like last time. No new element, no changes I can feel."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged again. "Water said I needed to do it, so there will be something. Maybe

it just takes time.” He looked at the sun coming in through the window, late afternoon. He had no idea what time of the day he’d left the dungeon. “How long was I inside?”

“Twenty-four days.”

He stared at her. Nearly three weeks. He had trouble believing it. It didn’t feel like he’d been in there that long, or maybe it felt like longer. He couldn’t tell.

“Can I have something to eat? And drink? I haven’t had anything since eating at your family.” She left and returned with a tray with a slice of bread, cheese, and a tankard of water. “I was hoping for ale and stew. A lot of them.”

“You need to take it slowly. Peolo healed the damage, but he can’t undo weeks without eating.”

“What did you do while I was inside?” He placed the slice on the bread and bit into it. Carina’s answer was lost to the moan the taste of the simple food caused.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever reacted that way to bread and cheese.”

“Anyone who’s gone in that dungeon has. Of course, they might not have been tortured as hard as I was.” He shook his head. “Tell me about what you did.”

“I spent time with my family.” She beamed. “My mother’s still disappointed I chose sorcery and that my element isn’t purity, but her real fear was that I’d become lazy. That I’m Rho in only a few months made her so proud.”

“Do they use the levels here?”

Carina shook her head. “But they know them. The clerics continue their training with the guild after all.”

“I’m glad it isn’t bad.”

“I’m glad Peolo forced me to go. I wouldn’t have otherwise. It was easier believing things couldn’t be fixed than trying and failing.”

“It’s always better to try to fix things when we can. We’re runners, we might not have another chance. Do you want to stay?”

“I can’t. When the dungeon reopened, I have to go.”

“I mean until then. I’m going to go back tomorrow.”

“Don’t you want to enjoy more time here, resting?”

He leaned close and lowered his voice. “I’d rather be at the inn, where I can talk one of Kroseph’s brothers into giving me more food.”

“I’m going to have to threaten them properly, then. I don’t want you getting sick eating too much.”

“So you’re not staying?”

“I’ll use the day to say my goodbyes. My family will understand.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything special,” Zackaria said, entering the room with a tray. “I thought Tibs would use something to eat.”

“He—” Carina began.

“I can eat,” Tibs cut her off, moving the tray that was on his lap away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs’s stomach hurt.

“I warned you,” Carina said.

“It’ll pass.” Tibs winces and slowed his walk.

“If you’re going to be sick, let’s to in a tavern.”

He shook his head. “It’s just the motion pushing the food around.”

“Zack’s too soft.”

“They’re a good cook,” Tibs said with a grin.

“It doesn’t mean you had to eat all of it.”

“I was being respectful of the work they put into it.”

“And how does that respect feel now?”

Tibs held his stomach. “I’m happy we’re leaving. I couldn’t resist more of their food, and that might kill me.”

“It might be the first time I’ve heard someone being afraid of dying because of good cooking.”

“I’m not afraid,” Tibs protested, “just acknowledging the danger.” He started walking again, keeping his distance from anyone selling food.

The wait to get onto the platform let his stomach settle more, but he still readied himself for the shift to Kragle Rock’s platform as the attendant made the gestures.

The transition to Kragle Rock didn’t cause him any pain, which surprised Tibs, considering his stomach.

It was the arrow that embedded itself in his shoulder and sent him to the ground that wrangled a scream from him.

## Stepping up-50

Tibs forced himself to look up. The archer was on the roof of the house facing the transport platform.

“What happened?” Carina crouched next to him, eyes wide at the arrow in his shoulder. He grabbed her arm and pulled her over him. “What?” the arrow hit the stone pillar behind where she’d been.

“Archer,” he said, and she looked up. Air essence accumulated around her hand, and with a flinging gesture, she sent it at the archer who was notching another arrow. As it flew away, Tibs felt it move into a structured form, but it was out of his range before it was done. The archer flew out of sight a few seconds later.

They hadn’t worn the green and black Harry used for his guards, and which was the colors Sebastian used for his group in his home city. Jackal had already given the guard leader a piece of his mind about using the same colors. Who the archer worked for didn’t matter, what did was that he didn’t have an element. Even at Upsilon, any element would have made the arrow deadlier.

“We need better cover,” Tibs said, and pointed to one of the pillars at the front. None of the attendants were visible. They’d run off as soon as Tibs had been shot. He screamed as she pulled him to it. At least now they were hidden from the street side. When he could see

again, he scanned the back. The platform was in the center of the city, but unlike the others he'd been to, the area around wasn't a market. The houses on that side were all one floor. A few taverns and shops. The houses further back were two stories, but the ground sloped down as it headed for the mountain.

"We can't stay here," Carina said, studying the wound. Gingerly, she pried it open and Tibs gritted his teeth. "Sorry. It looks like a normal arrowhead. It's going to hurt when I pull it out, but it's not going to do too much damage."

"Do it." He bit back the scream and once he could think, he wrapped his essence around the injury. The wound closed, and the bleeding stopped, but as with other injuries, it didn't heal. "I'm a lousy healer."

"You have purity now."

"Do you know how I use it to heal? With hardly any essence?" he added. "I don't have my bracers."

"We should have brought them."

He shook his head. "Too risky. There's no telling if someone like Peolo could have felt something about them. I haven't let any powerful adventurer touch them for that reason. Sto's still young. What if he can't hide it from anyone too powerful?"

"So, our room?"

Tibs desperately wanted to get his bracers. Without it, he didn't even have enough water to make a sword. "The inn first. If they're shooting anyone who arrives, Sebastian wants this contained."

"You think it's him?"

Tibs stood. "He's the only one who's been causing trouble. I should have thought that he'd do that with most of us away."

"The conscripts were still here."

He looked around the pillar, carefully moving his shoulder. So long as he didn't do any sudden moves, it wasn't painful. "Not a lot of them were happy to act as protectors." The street was clear, of anyone. Not even one person walking around. Back on his Street, he'd think word of a guard raid had been sent.

Or that one was in progress.

"This had been going on a while," He said. "We're running for that alley. I can't see anyone, but stay alert."

"Treat this as a run."

He smiled. "Yeah. I guess we are. Except we aren't stopping for loot."

"Jackal is going to be so disappointed if we don't bring him anything."

"He can live with it." Tibs ran, staying low. When he reached the alley, he paused, panting. The running wasn't kind to his shoulder.

Carina stopped by the entrance and looked the way they came. "I'm not seeing anyone."

"Hopefully, the archer was the only one. How hard did you hit him?"

"Enough to send him off the roof. He might have landed on the other one."

The roofs here were slanted. "Let's go see if he's around. That's some loot I don't

mind grabbing. Appease Jackal when he sees I've been hurt."

"We're going to the inn. Kroseph is who will be worried when he sees you."

He smiled at her. "Then maybe the archer died and left meat behind?" He stopped at the back of the building listened. "Do you hear that?" in the distance, someone was fighting.

"Yes, in that direction. Are we going to help?"

Tibs shook his head. "The inn is in that direction." Away from the fighting. "I'm not in armor. I have no weapons and barely any essence I can use offensively. I'd get in the way."

She nodded and Tibs headed to the back of the house where the archer had been. They found him on the ground, his bow a few paces away, the arrows spilled out of his quiver, his neck bent unnaturally.

"He fell badly," Tibs said as he searched the man. A few coppers, a knife, a medallion with a rearing horse on it. He showed it to Carina.

"Some sort of protective charm," she said. "I remember coming across them in a few books, but never read up."

"There's no essence in it." He pocketed it. It would be worth a copper or two to the right merchant. He found paper and unfolded it. He sighed and showed it to Carina.

"That's you," she said in surprise. The charcoal drawing was that good.

"Then it's definitely Sebastian."

"It could be Don."

Tibs laughed. "He doesn't have those kinds of friends." He grabbed the bow and quivers. He didn't bother with the arrows that had fallen out. "Now we have loot." He walked toward the inn.

"This isn't even first-floor stuff," Carina commented.

"So the town is floor zero?"

"Don't joke about that. Remember what Peolo said about a dungeon extending to a town?"

Tibs nodded. "Every house a room." He shuddered at the idea Sto would turn his town into part of himself. He'd have to talk with him about that.

He stopped at the street and confirmed there was no one before hurrying to the other side.

"Hey, you!" someone yelled. A look over his shoulder without slowing showed him a thug in leathers with a dirty shirt over it. He had blood on his hands and a chest under an arm. "Stop!"

Tibs didn't.

"Get him!"

He cursed, not words he wanted to hear, but it told him they hadn't seen Carina.

He made it to the other side of the alley and came to a skidding stop as four rough-looking thugs turn from the beating they were administering to three other thugs. Behind him, his pursuers were catching up.

"Down, Tibs!" one of the thugs before him yelled, pulling out a knife.

He was on the ground, his shoulder protesting. A woman behind him screamed in pain

and the Runners stopped.

“Finish those three,” the man who’d warned Tibs said. Then he and the woman at his side walked around him and into the alley. They had essence, so Runners, and more than a match for his pursuers.

Once on his feet, Tibs watched as the man who’d stayed behind slit the throat of the last of the thugs there. He looked at Tibs grimly and Tibs nodded. He didn’t feel like being kind to the people who were attacking his town.

The screams behind him stopped with a gust of wind pushing by him. He turned to see the two thugs step aside to let Carina through.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She had a cut on her forehead that bleed heavily.

“One of them got in a lucky punch. I’ll be fine.”

Tibs watched the man and the woman. They were older, so part of the conscripts. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m Garrett,” the man answered. “That’s Kaylie, and over there is Arny.”

“Arnstein,” the man corrected. “You call me Arny one more time, and I will pull your tongue out.”

“Later,” Tibs said, cutting off Garrett’s reply. By the man’s smirk, it wouldn’t be helpful. “How long has the fighting been going on?”

“I’d say it started a day after the last of you bunch left us to protect this place. There was an influx of people, then archers were set up around the platform and started taking out anyone arriving. We’ve removed most of them, but there’s always at least one new one each time.”

“We killed the one that was there, after he tried to kill us,” Carina said.

“There’s going to be another one soon enough,” Arnstein said. “Them and the looters are the one thing we can trust to be around the town these days.”

“They’re stealing from the townsfolk?” Tibs asked. Having it confirmed did not make him happier.

“From any unprotected building. They don’t care who lives there. If they can get it, they do and take what they want.”

“Where’s everyone?” Carina asked.

Kaylie snorted. “If you mean right now? All around. If you mean when we’re not patrolling, then the Fernan Inn is where we regroup. We took over the building around it and have as many people sheltered there as we can. We’ve tried to expand, but there’s still a lot more of them than us, and we have no idea when the dungeon’s going to recall everyone.”

“We’re going to the inn,” Tibs said. “Is Jackal there?”

Garrett shrugged. “Him? He’s probably out there, kicking ass. The few times I’ve seen him, he was having a great time of all of this.”

“What about the guards?” Carina asked. “Where are they?”

Arnstein rolled his eyes. “Protecting the guild building.”

“Just that?” Tibs asked, walking. He couldn’t believe Harry would let Sebastian attack the town without fighting back.

“When this started,” Kaylie said, “half the guards turned on the others. I can’t tell you



who came out on top, but the only time we've seen one since was when our patrol took us by the guild building.”

“And the adventurers there aren't helping?” Carina asked.

Garrett hurried ahead of them, checking the alleys.

“Them, I haven't even seen a strand of hair,” Arnstein said in disgust.

“Has there been any attempt on the dungeon?”

“Why would these people want to get into the dungeon?” Kaylie asked. “It would eat them up.”

Tibs didn't know if that would happen. Could Tibs do anything while he was working on his floors? Was he still working on them, or was he just waiting like Tibs asked? Once he knew the situation the town was in, he could go ask. Maybe there was something Sto could do to help. Val and Craren had mentioned that other dungeon would have sent creatures out to attack. Maybe Sto could do that too.

They were attacked once, as they were close to the inn, and Tibs hated feeling useless. It was too much like how he'd felt on his Street and in the early days of the dungeon runs. He was never taking his bracers off after this.

As soon as one attacker fell, the other ran off. Garrett was the only one injured since he'd been ahead of them. The next street over they were joined by other Runners, and they finished the trek under a large escort.

“Injury!” Kaylie yelled as they entered the inn. And the crowd parted around a table. Garreth was laid on it and a cleric stepped to him. She was tiny, pale and her skin sunk in. Suddenly, Tibs realized he knew her. She was the cleric by the pool of corruption, the one trying to clear it by herself.

Arms wrapped around Tibs. “You're back!” Jackal yelled as Tibs screamed in pain from his shoulder being squeezed so tightly. Then he was on the floor, Jackal talking a step back, hands in the air. “I didn't do it!”

Tibs let out a chuckle, then groaned in pain. He'd missed the fighter. “I'll be fine.” He struggled to his feet and people moved again. A man in cleric's robes approached him.

“Can I heal you?” Tibs nodded, and the cleric pulled the ripped cloth away from the wound. He frowned as he looked at it. “How did it stay closed?” he mused, then Tibs sighed as the pain disappeared. Along with it, his wariness, and the worry that he'd done the wrong thing by leaving for the purity dungeon. Carina's and his presence here wouldn't have changed things all that much, and now he had eight elements to use.

The clarity wouldn't last, but it was a side effect of the healing he appreciated.

He moved his shoulder once the cleric was done. “How many clerics are here?”

“Six, including me,” the man replied.

Tibs frowned. “Only six? Where are the others? Or did most of them go home since they weren't needed?”

“We are always needed,” the man said, “but yes, many did like the Runners and took the time for themselves.” His face darkened. “But too many of us took refuge in the guild house when the chaos started.” He shook his head. “Some of how have forgotten that work means being where there is trouble and danger, not comfort.”

“I’m glad you and your groups are here.” He looked at Jackal, who was looking at him warily. Tibs pulled the coppers he’d taken off the man and lobbed them at the fighter. “Loot from our run to the inn.”

Jackal caught some, then picked the rest of the floor. “You thought of me, I’m touched.”

Tibs pushed his way through the crowd and headed for the bar. “What happened?”

As soon as he reached it, a tankard was placed before him. The ale was watered, but Tibs appreciated it anyway.

“Just my father doing his run to take over the city while its strongest protectors are off resting.”

“I should have thought about that and gotten the others to stay.”

“I should have thought about it,” Jackal said. “I grew up under him. I should have known all this quiet was just him waiting for the right moment.” He let out a breath. “I’ve gotten too comfortable in this town, Tibs. I actually counted on Knuckles to deal with my father.”

“Harry’s a good man.”

“He’s a guard,” Jackal snapped. “Never trust a guard.”

Tibs nodded. Never trust a guard. Don’t trust the guild. Don’t trust nobles. Only the last one he hadn’t forgotten in his time here. “Where are the nobles?”

Jackal snorted. “Those who didn’t pay for my father to leave alone have guards making sure no one can get close to their home. And I mean, no one. A few of our people were shot before we figured out they didn’t want our help. There’s four nobles who’ve been helping.”

Tibs eyed Jackal. “What are they after?”

“Best as I figure, nothing.” He raised a hand. “I know, they’re nobles, but one of them is that archer friend of Mez. The other is her brother. She vouched for the other two. They’ve been taking orders without arguments, offering suggestions. One of her friends, I don’t remember her name. Opened her home to the townsfolk who can’t go to theirs.” He paused. “I know how you feel about them, Tibs, but if they’re after something, they are being really sneaky about it.”

Tibs bit back his reply. He’d avoided Mez’s friend after meeting her and Mez asking he give her a chance. He’d figured the only way she’d ever seem decent was if Tibs didn’t look too closely at her. So he had no reason to have her kicked out.

He hoped that wasn’t going to come back to stab him in the back.

“The team?”

“You and Carina are the only ones back. I don’t expect Mez or Khumdar to be back before the recall. Now that you’re back, do you think you can get the dungeon to open up?”

“Only if he’s done with his changes. But I can’t go there until I have my bracers. My armor would be nice, too. Do you have them?”

Jackal shook his head. “The first thing my father did was put people around the rooming houses. And until now, there hadn’t been much of a need to go in for our stuff. I’ve been staying here.”

Tibs nodded. "Where's Kroseph? I expected him to be scolding me for getting hurt."

Jackal was quiet, then hurried to say. "He's alive."

Tibs could breathe again.

"My father tried to set fire to the inn this morning. Before the sun was up. A lot of people are staying here, so it would have been a killing blow just for morale. Kro was up early, you know him. He was making sure everything was ready for the day when he smelled the smoke. He ran out, the idiot, and caught three of my father's men who'd managed to slip through our patrols at the back. He yelled as loudly as he could. But before any of us could get there, he'd received a solid beating. There's nothing left of those three Tibs. I made sure of it."

"Good."

"One of the clerics healed him, but Kro's never been beaten up before. He's never been in a fight that didn't involve someone being unruly in the inn. It's taken something from him."

"Will he be okay?"

Jackal hesitated. "I hope so. I've seen it happen to others. But it's never the same. And it's never happened to someone..." He let out a breath. "I really hope he's going to be okay." He smiled. "I know seeing you will make him feel better." He stepped away from the bar and Tibs followed him to the back.

The stairs led up to the floor with the common sleeping room, and every bed had people on them. Seven to a bed in places. Even the floor was occupied. The next floor had Kroseph's family's rooms, as well as a few rooms for those who had the coins to have a bed to themselves.

He knocked on a door. "Kro? It's me."

"Come in," came the reply.

Tibs was inside before the door was fully open. Kroseph was seated on the bed, and Tibs hugged him before the server even realized he was there.

"Are you okay?" Tibs asked.

"I'm fine," Kroseph said, hugging him back. "I'm just tired. Did you just come back?"

"Yes. And Jackal nearly ripped my shoulder out when he hugged me."

"You did what?" The server demanded, standing.

"I didn't do that!" Jackal backed against the door. "Kro, I swear, he's just saying that because when I hugged him I hurt his injured shoulder."

"Why would you hug him if he's hurt?" Kroseph stepped to the fighter, who had his hands between them; as if they would stop anything.

"I didn't know he was hurt. I was—"

"He came from out there! Of course, he was going to be hurt! You could have waited for a few minutes and let the clerics heal him."

"Tibs?" Jackal pleaded.

Tibs grinned at the fighter and considered letting this go one longer, but he'd accomplished what he set out to. Kroseph was up and about. "I'm alright, and even if he'd have waited, I wouldn't have thought to get a healer for it."

The server looked at Tibs. “are you sure?” Tibs nodded. Kroseph looked at Jackal. “You are not out of trouble yet.”

The fighter nodded eagerly. “I’ll make it up to you when we get back.”

“Back? From where?” The server demanded, his fear rising.

“Tibs?” Jackal looked at him, pleading again.

“We need to go to our rooming house so I can get my equipment. I’m useless as it is.”

The server rounded on Tibs. “Do not ever say something like that! You are not useless, ever. This town would have already fallen to this one’s father, if not for you.”

“I wasn’t even here,” Tibs answered cautiously.

“Exactly!”

## Stepping up-51

“How is the defense going?” Tibs asked as he, Jackal, and Carina edged along the building. “Really.” He’d hurried to leave Kroseph’s room after the server had exploded on him. It was being hurt that had made him say what he’d said.

“It’s going well,” Jackal answered as he looked around the corner, “in that we haven’t lost any of the runners. But badly in that my father’s taken over more than half the town. It’s mostly housing, so that’s good, but that means we need to house those people. And feed them.” He looked at Tibs. “We’re going to be out of food soon. Even if you can get the dungeon to open so we can get food that way, my father’s going to make that nearly impossible.”

They hurried to the next intersection.

“How does he have so many people?” Carina asked. “Shouldn’t you have been able to wipe them all out by now? They can’t be any tougher than anything in the dungeon.”

Jackal looked at her. “Nearly everyone who is Rho or above isn’t here. The conscripts are skilled, and deadly if they can get the advantage, but they’re Upsilon at best. My father’s people have been holding our town under control for him for years. I won’t say they’re better than a king’s army, but we aren’t anything like that.”

Tibs nodded. “We need to take him out.”

“Good luck with that.” Jackal pointed to the alley on the other side of the street. “We’re leaving the part of town we control. Be ready for anything beyond here.”

They ran, staying low to the ground, and Tibs was surprised not to be shot at. Once they were in the alley paid more attention to what he sensed around them. There was the usual live under the ground, but nothing above it other than them. They had a good deal to traverse before they’d reach the rooming house.

“Why do you sound like we can’t win?” Carina asked.

“Because I don’t know if we can without the guild getting involved and those bastards are comfortable in their building.”

“Stop,” Tibs said, sensing people ahead. At this distance, it was only a mass, but too

much life essence to be animals. He lowered his voice. "People, six or seven buildings ahead, two to the right. I need to be closer to tell how many."

Jackal nodded, and they moved in that direction.

"Five of them," Tibs said once he could make the essence apart. "No element."

"Then we rush them and we don't let any runoff."

Three buildings away, Tibs pointed to each side of the alley. Two on one, three on the other. Knowing where to look, he could make out the shifting shadows on the ground. He held the knife Kroseph's brother had given him for this. He wanted a sword, but he'd gotten used to making his own and hadn't practiced lifting a metal one.

Once the town was theirs again. He was getting Carina to write him up a schedule so everything he needed would be trained.

Jackal indicated himself and pointed to the side with three. Tibs to the other and Carina at range.

Tibs went around the other side of the building and peeked around the corner. The two were looking at the road. A few blocks away was Merchant's Row, so they were hoping to catch anyone heading there?

Jackal yelled, and their attention was in that direction. Before they could go help their allies, Tibs was behind one and had his knife planted in his spine. Out and in the other's chest as he turned to see what was happening. Tibs missed the heart and got stabbed in his side before wind blades cut the man's other arm to ribbon. He planted the knife in the man's throat, cutting off the scream, before wrapping his essence around his injury.

"Thanks," he told Carina. On the other side of the alley, Jackal was taking coin pouches off the men. Tibs did the same once his side no longer hurt as badly.

"Anyone coming to their help?" Jackal asked.

Tibs shook his head. "If anyone heard, they're staying away."

"Is there a reason they're watching away from the inn?" Carina asked.

"Merchant Row's that way." Tibs pointed.

Jackal nodded. "Quigly is planning on sending people there today. This was the route he was going to take." He motioned to the road. "Go away to Merrygold, come across Tallan, and follow this road because our information was my father had his people watching a different route."

"Someone told him?" Tibs asked. He didn't want to believe anyone would betray the town, but some merchants had preferred paying Sebastian over standing up to him, and many conscripts had had no problem stating they didn't care for Kragle Rock.

"Or he'd found out who in his camp is passing information to us." Jackal watched the street.

"Who is it?" Carina asked.

"Is the other side safe?" the fighter asked, and Tibs nodded. "My sister's one," he answered flatly.

"You trust her?" Carina asked.

Jackal snorted. "She wishes. But all the information she's been providing has been accurate, and we've saved a lot of people because of the warning she gave us." He ran to the

other side.

“Do you think Sebastian realized she’s helping you?” Tibs stopped next to Jackal and pushed his sense as far as he could.

“Maybe. I’m going to have to check where the information came from. She isn’t the only one helping us.”

“Some of the guards?” Carina asked.

Jackal nodded. “As well as a few of my father’s servants who haven’t experienced the horror he causes before this.” He grinned. “Working for my father isn’t easy for those who have a shred of morality left.”

They made it to the other side of the alley when Tibs motioned for them to stop. He pointed in the group’s direction he felt and—A scream came from there, pained and sounding young.

Ignoring Jackal telling him to stop, Tibs ran toward them. The cursing fighter caught up to him. “It’s a trap!”

Tibs didn’t care. He wouldn’t let one of his people be hurt. He was going to make Sebastian pay for this.

He ran through the alleys, noting he was among the lower quality houses where the folks who worked for the merchants or the guild lived.

The scene as he entered the courtyard stopped him. Half-dressed men held two naked women and a boy on the ground, next to two decapitated bodies. Adult men in ordinary clothing. The man forcing himself on the boy didn’t even stop at the intrusion.

With a scream of rage, Tibs ran for him, knife high. When another man stepped between them, Tibs coated his blade in fire. He didn’t have much, but it was—

The knife exploded with heat as he slashed, and a tongue of fire followed the motion, slamming into the other standing man, then the houses further back.

Tibs didn’t care. He took hold of the fire the man before him tried to put out and fed it more essence. He didn’t care what else burned. He was going to burn these people slowly for hurting his people, his town.

The man screamed as fire move up his arms to his head. His hair erupted in a flash of fire. His features were melting from the heat Tibs applied. He was—

On the ground. Someone holding him down, screaming something, but Tibs didn’t hear over the fire raging inside him. The man raised a fist, issuing a warning Tibs didn’t make out.

Fire wouldn’t help him stop that.

He caught the fist in his hand, earth making it immovable. “Why?” he asked Jackal. “I. Was. Helping.” But why had he been so rushed? Was so angry? Rushing into anything only made things worse. He had to take his time, consider the implication of what he was going to do.

“Tibs?” Jackal sounded unsure.

“Who. Else. Would. I be?”

The fighter tried to pull his fist out of Tibs’s grip. And he smiled. It wasn’t going anywhere until Jackal explained himself. They were supposed to be friends.

“Tibs, let go. Now that you’re not burning everything down, I have to go help Carina put out the fires.”

Tibs looked around. Houses were burning. That was what haste caused. He sighed. That was why he couldn’t just act. He needed to think before he acted. He let go of the fighter and sat. Air and earth weren’t what was needed.

Water was best against fire.

He raised a hand and water essence slammed into the buildings. The fire fought. He had put a lot of that essence into them, but he wasn’t feeding it anymore, so water won. He stood. The buildings were smoking. He doused one of the still burning men and wished he hadn’t had to hurt him.

One of the women held the boy in her arms, wailing.

Tibs went to her, crouched. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish I’d been here sooner. That I had done a better job protecting you, all of you.” He pressed a hand to her brow and let water cool her. “I will do better.”

She looked at him, confused and lost. Maybe she couldn’t see him in her grief, hear him. It didn’t matter. He’d said it. He would hold himself to it. He would find a way to bring comfort to the town and its people. For them to be safe and never have to worry again. It was the least he could do after failing them so miserably.

“Tibs?” Carina called to him tentatively.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

“For what?” she still sounded on sure.

“For letting this happen. For letting this pain happen. I should have worked harder at stopping Sebastian.”

“Jackal,” she called, “Have you seen his eyes?”

“Yes.” The fighter walked toward a burned man crawling away.

“What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to finish this guy, then we can—”

Tibs raised a wall of water between them. “No. I won’t let you hurt him.”

“Tibs, he hurt these people,” she said. “You burned him.”

“I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry for that. He made a mistake. That doesn’t mean we should make one too.”

“Tibs. I need you to let go of the essence.”

“No.”

“Tibs. It’s affecting you. How you think.”

Did it? Thinking back, he had been rash while wielding fire and then intolerably slow was using earth to keep Jackal from hurting him. But he was fine now. Carina had to see that. Still, if it would make her feel better, he could oblige her.

“Once Jackal promises not to hurt that man.”

“Tibs,” Jackal complained.

“Jackal, come over here,” Carina instructed.

“But he’s trying to get away.”

She looked in his direction. “He’s trying to get away from you. He’s too hurt to go far. Come here so Tibs will be sure you aren’t going to hurt him.” She thought something over. “We can talk about how to handle him.” She smiled at Tibs. “Will that be okay?”

Tibs smiled back and nodded. He knew Carina would see the good in making sure no more pain was inflicted.

Jackal grumbled as he joined them. “I’m not happy about this.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll do what I can to fix it,” Tibs replied. “But causing pain isn’t the answer.”

Jackal opened his mouth, but Carina spoke first. “He’s here. The man isn’t going to be hurt. Now I need you to let go of the essence.”

Tibs let go of it as he breathed out.

He sucked in air and looked around. What had just happened?

“His eyes are back to normal,” Carina said, smiling.

“What?” Tibs asked, trying to make sense of his actions. There had been so much anger, then nothing, then this need to make everyone feel better, even the monsters who’d hurt these people. He glared past Jackal and moved to stand.

Carina caught him. “Don’t.”

“He isn’t getting away with this,” Tibs snarled.

“Can I go finish him now?” Jackal asked hopefully.

Tibs wanted to be the one to do it. But he wasn’t sure why he wanted it, not after the way his thinking had shifted. He nodded and Jackal merrily returned to the burned man.

“Make it quick,” Carina instructed. “We have something more important to deal with.”

“We need to make Sebastian pay,” Tibs snarled. That he was sure of.

“He will, but we need to figure out what happened here first.”

“They were—”

“That’s not what I mean.”

The burned man’s protest turned into a scream that came to an abrupt end.

“You don’t have your bracers, Tibs, and yet you pulled enough essence to nearly take down all the buildings here and then put that out with even more water. You told me your reserves hadn’t changed.”

Tibs felt them. They were the same, each a minuscule amount compared to—but that was lower than it should be. All he’d done was wrap his side. Considering how vast that reserve was, he shouldn’t even be able to tell he’d used some. Instead, he’d used enough he could feel the gap.

“I think I used my essence to do this.”

“Well, yeah,” Jackal replied, next to them again. “You did all this, not us.”

“That’s not what he means,” Carina said. “Only that shouldn’t be possible, right?”

Tibs stared at her. “How should I know? You’re the one who reads a lot.”

She chuckled. “I think this is one time where your comments about what you do not being in any books are valid. We need to try something. You need to use an essence without



being distracted by a fight. Feel what happens.”

“Can we make it something safe?” Jackal asked. “Like earth or water?”

“No element is safe,” Carina replied.

“Yeah, well, Tibs seemed less inclined in burning the whole town down when his eyes were earth brown or blue.”

“My eyes changed color?” Tibs asked jubilantly. Then his mood crashed. “Each time I used an element?”

Carina nodded.

He could do so much now, but if he wasn’t careful, anyone watching would be able to tell it was him. “That sucks.”

“Let’s focus on one thing at a time,” she said. “Jackal is right, for once.”

“Hey! I have been right before... right?”

She smirked. “And since water is the element you’re known to have. Let’s use that one. Just a little of it.”

Tibs nodded and turned his hand up. He formed a puddle in it and looked at Jackal. “Why?”

The fighter took a step back. “Carina?”

“Tibs, look at me.”

He did. “Why did I let Jackal do that? What is it going to solve?”

“What is your reserve like Tibs?”

It was why they were doing this, but it was so discouraging to realize that even he was willing to let pain continue. He knew better. He should soothe, take away pain—

“Tibs, I need you to focus. What is your reserve like?”

He turned his attention inward, away from the misery he had taken part in. As expected, his reserve hadn’t changed. It was minuscule, except. The reserve for his essence wasn’t that anymore. It was water. He had so much that he could make a wall around the town, maybe the entire mountain, but he didn’t know how large that was. The one in MountainSea had been enormous, so maybe he couldn’t do that.

“Tibs?”

He looked at her and smiled. “It’s all water.”

She nodded. “Now I need you to let go of it.”

“No.”

“Tibs, we need to know what will happen.”

He would go back to being willing to cause pain if he did. He knew it. That wasn’t his role. Others could cause pain, but he needed to soothe it away.

“Tibs. You aren’t your element,” she said. “Do you remember when you explained that to Jackal and me?”

“I didn’t.”

She smiled. “Not in those words, but it was what it meant. When I understood that, I gained a lot. Now you need to remember that, so that you’ll regain yourself.”

“I am myself.”

She shook her head. "Right now, you're different."

"Water," Jackal said, crouching next to them.

"I am water," Tibs agreed.

"No, you're not. You're Tibs. Water is an element. When you told me about her, you said she was caring, she understood you, your pain, accepted it even as she encourages you to let her soothe it away."

"Isn't that better than wanting to inflict pain?" he asked.

"You don't want to inflict pain, Tibs. If every Runner here, of anyone related to the guild, you're probably the only one I know who would rather we all have a nice peaceful life doing our runs and coming back."

Tibs looked around. "But I have inflicted pain."

"You did, but being willing doesn't mean you want to. You've had to make decisions you haven't liked. You'll have to again. This isn't the world of the elements. It's our world. And you have to be yourself to survive in it." He hesitated. "You have to do it for Mama."

Tibs closed his eyes as he remembered her. He could let go if he wanted, of the pain, the loss. He could wash it out of himself.

He could even forget about her if he wanted to.

He gasped, and Carina caught him. How? How could even contemplate forgetting Mama? What those men had done to her?

"You okay?" Jackal asked.

Tibs nodded. "Thanks for pulling me out."

"After how you got Kro angry at me, you deserved me poking at your sensitive spots."

"Your reserve?" Carina asked.

"Back to normal."

"Can you use any essence without triggering your eyes to change color?"

Tibs looked at the two women who'd were holding each other. In their focus to understand what had happened, they'd forgotten about them. And that made him angry. They had been through too much right now to be ignored.

He stood. "I don't know, and it can wait. We need to take them to the inn." Went to them and they recoiled. "You're safe now. We're going to take you to a safe place. No one is going to hurt you again."

With Carina helping, they got them standing and walking. They were attacked twice on the way to the inn, and each time Tibs stayed back with the women. Once they were at the inn, they handed them over to the clerics and Jackal arranged for a group to go retrieve the boy and two men.

Then he joined Tibs at their table.

"I'm going to burn Sebastian's house with him in it," Tibs said.

Jackal raised his tankard. "I'll help. But first, how about we make sure you don't take the whole town along in the process?"

## Stepping up-52

Tibs looked at them, Jackal, Carina, and Kroseph. He wanted to wash the worry off their face; offer them comfort. But he was the cause. He was who they worried about, why they had taken him to Kroseph's room and try to resolve what they considered the problem to be. He wished telling them not to worry about him was enough.

"We should be out there," he told them instead. "Helping them."

"That doesn't sound so different from the Tibs I know," Kroseph said. He's known about Tibs's access to multiple essences, but it was the first he saw of the change the others said happened now when he used them.

"Tibs," Jackal said. "How about we go out and kill the people who are threatening your town?"

He shook his head. "They need help as much as the other. We need to soothe their pain so they will understand there is a better way." Tibs wanted to go out there right now, but he'd agreed to stay here until his friends, his family, were satisfied with his condition.

"Okay," the server said, "that's a little too friendly for Tibs. And every element is different?"

Carina nodded. "We've only seen water, earth, and fire, but he was ready to burn the entire town down to get make those men pay for what they'd done. It was like anger was all he was."

"No, that's not right," Jackal said. "I asked a few of the Runners how their audience went since Tibs started accumulating them. Fire isn't anger. One of them described it as 'it runs hot'. It's more emotional across all of them. Tibs was just understandably pissed at seeing those women and that boy being raped."

"And that triggered the fire?"

"No," Tibs said. "I called on the fire essence because all I had was a knife and they were armored. I needed something that would hurt them." He paused. "I shouldn't have wanted that. Causing pain only makes the situation worse. Once I called on fire, that is when I lost control."

"Okay." Kroseph looked at the others hesitantly. "Why are you in my room, then?"

"We need to figure out a way to get Tibs to use the essence without having his personality changed."

"Tibs, back to yourself," Jackal ordered.

"Why?" Tibs asked. "I can do much more good using my essence."

"I'd settle for him being himself enough to let go of the essence when needed," the fighter said. "We can't have him lose control like he did with the fire. Just being able to stop using essence will help."

"It'll be more helpful if he can be himself while using essence," Carina said.

"I know, but do you think that's going to be easier than getting him to just stop?" Jackal snapped. "Maybe you weren't paying attention, but we're in the middle of a war here. I would love to have some extraordinary weapon to use against my father to protect the

town, but I don't see that happening safely right now. Do you?"

"Tibs isn't a weapon," Carina replied, stepping up to the fighter. "He's our friend, and he needs help getting this under control."

"Hey Tibs," Kroseph said, crouching before him, taking his attention away from his arguing friends. "They're just scared, that's why they're snapping. They'll get over it." Tibs nodded, comforted with that knowledge. "Tell me, why do you think you can help more with your essence than just being yourself?"

"Because I can soothe their pain away with it." Tibs pressed a finger to Kroseph's temple and let essence flow over him.

The server smiled. "I appreciate the effort, but I think you might need more training to do anything other than getting me wet."

Tibs nodded. "I'm sorry. I have all this power, but I forget I don't know what to do with it."

"That's come in time. But you don't need it."

"I need it to survive. To help the town."

Kroseph shook his head. "The most helpful things you've done for the town, Tibs, you didn't use essence for them. You convince Don to speak to Harry, which prevented needless death. You talked the merchants into accepting your help against Jackal's father's harassment. You've helped keep the Runners from only thinking about themselves, you help get them to train together, help one another, against guild rules too." The server smiled. "You've talked sense into that thick skull my man calls his head. Your essence, it's important, but it's not why you're strong. You were that before you got your first audience. You need to remember that. You make the essence stronger, not the reverse."

Tibs was slow in nodding. "Thank you."

"Now, let go of it."

Tibs did, and his perception of his surroundings shifted. He hugged Kroseph, taking the man by surprise. "I'm glad you're okay," Tibs whispered, his eyes getting wet.

"I..." Kroseph chuckled, hugging him back. "Well, I'm glad too, but this is more about helping you."

"You did." He let go. "But I don't know how easy it's going to be with the other essence. With fire, I couldn't think. Just act. And with earth, it was so comfortable. I didn't have to worry about anything. I knew that I just had to take my time and everything could be resolved." He frowned. "But that's not true. Just like I can't protect the town by trying to help everyone, include Sebastian's people."

Jackal was with them. Squeezing Kroseph's shoulder. "The elements seem to be a representation of part of us as well as the world, but each is too limited so they can't work properly among us."

"I don't think that's right," Carina said. "The element existed before us, so we—"

"I don't think now is the time for a lesson," Tibs said.

She raised an eyebrow. "You're usually the one asking questions regardless of the situation we were in."

He nodded. "But I've never been at war before. We need to save the town, then we

can learn about what the change in how I see things means.” He looked at Kroseph. “And that means getting me to switch back and forth between my element at my will.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs roared as he unleashed fire on the thugs trying to escape.

“Tibs, stop!” Jackal ordered, and Tibs let the fire go.

He looked around. “I’m calling on water to put the fires out.” He didn’t wait for the reply. He couldn’t let the fires spread. He wondered why he kept resorting to violence as he moved the water over the buildings. He knew there were better ways. That he could reason with them, soothe them with words until he found out how to do it with his essence.

He resisted letting go of the essence, wanting to do so much good. And he had to remember Kroseph’s words. He had done good without it. He could do good without it.

“You okay?” Jackal asked, looking into his eyes.

Tibs nodded. It was strange that water was harder to let go of than fire. He’d expected that because his emotions were so strong, he’d resist getting out of them, but it was so easy to go from rage to being ecstatic to being sorrowful that letting for was just another change in his mood.

Earth was the toughest, so he avoided using it at all. With earth, he craved the comfortable slowness; the lack of change it brought. Everything would always be the same, so why try to change it. And when it did change, it would do so on its own time.

He hadn’t attempted the other essences yet. He and Jackal were needed to patrol, just like the others. As soon as Tibs had shown he could switch between water and fire with sufficient ease, they’d set out. Once they were back, Tibs would see what air was like.

They’re drawn looks, going out only the two of them, but there were too few Runners available to anyone to object.

“You know,” Jackal said, going through the pockets of the burned corpse. “The one down side with fire like you use it is that we don’t get any equipment out of it.”

“I can try to soothe them into not running away next time if you think that will get you more loot.”

“I can live with less loot if it means my father doesn’t learn what you can do.”

“I don’t think it’s going to change anything. He already wants me dead.”

“If he finds out about your elements, he’s not going to want you dead anymore. He’s going to want you collared like an animal.”

Tibs shuddered. And extended his senses. “There’s a group huddled inside that house. No essence. It seems like they’re scared...”

“But my father’s people are cunning enough to make themselves look like ordinary townfolk.” Jackal finished. “Let’s be careful.”

Tibs picked up the short sword he’d taken after the first fight. Swinging it a few times was all he could do, and he rarely hit, but he was done waiting for the right time to train. He’d get stronger as he used it. And he had fire to end a fight with until then.

Looking through the house’s windows only showed him empty rooms. The people had been smart and moved to a central one, with only an open door to see in, and they were huddled away so he’d have to be inside to see them. The windows and the one door leading

into the house were latched, and Tibs didn't have tools. He'd gotten too dependent on his water essence to make them. Something else he'd need to take care of.

He stopped Jackal from kicking the door in and pointed to the open window one floor up. The fighter nodded, grabbed Tibs by the collar, and threw him through the opening. Once Tibs got over the surprise and then off the floor, he stepped to the window and glared at the grinning fighter who made a shooing motion.

Silently fuming, Tibs step to the stairs and down them. The room the family was hiding in was a pantry, with the lower shelves ripped out to make space for them. A man, a woman, three children. All in simple clothing.

"Are you hurt?" Tibs asked, and they huddled tighter together, away from him. "I'm Tibs, a Runner. I'm with the town. Jackal is waiting outside. We'll take you somewhere safe." He didn't want to think how they'd survived undetected. It was too easy for him to imagine. The town was starting to feel like his Street, with the constant fighting, the uncertainty.

He led them to the door, where Jackal waited, alone. "That was not nice," Tibs told him, then lead the family to the inn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs didn't think having fun had ever resulted in this much chaos.

He looked at the room, the way the furniture was strewed about, how Kroseph was in Jackal's arms, pressed against the wall, Carina next to him. The three of them looking scared.

"Sorry," Tibs said, his face hot. Air hadn't been easy to let go of. After a day of running after Sebastian's thugs or rescuing people and getting his bracers, armor, and knives. Just letting go of the worry and enjoying himself had been so good. Of course, with that had come a lack of care for the consequences of the wind storm he'd caused in the room. Carina was the only reason his friends hadn't been pulled into it and hurt by the flying furniture.

"I think any more training needs to take place elsewhere," Kroseph said. "My father is going to kill me for this."

"I'll replace everything," Jackal said.

"I'm the one who destroyed it," Tibs countered.

"Then you steal it, and I carry it here. How does that sound?" the fighter asked happily.

"It sounds like I'm going to have people demanding what I'm doing with their furniture," Kroseph replied.

"Only if you let them in your room," Jackal said. "Any if you let those people in here, you and I will have to have a talk."

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"There's four of them," the woman said. She was older, a rogue with silvery eyes. She wouldn't say what her element was, but she was only Upsilon. "On rooftops, looking at the platform."

"Where does your father keep getting them?" Carina asked.

"Archers are easy to find," the fighter replied. "The king's always training them, but

he isn't good at paying them. A handful full of silver and my father has himself a regiment of them."

"I mean like now. This started weeks ago," she said, "and every day you've been removing the archers he has watching the platform. How hasn't he run out of them yet?"

"My father knew he'd have to keep it under siege, and he isn't one to underestimate his opponents." Jackal looked at Tibs and grinned, "well, usually. He brought enough archer to last a long while."

"How did Harry not notice?" Tibs asked.

"That is something you're going to have to ask him when he gets out of that building."

"I don't understand why he isn't helping," Tibs said. "It's his job to protect the town. He always did his job right. Did Sebastian convince him to stop?"

Jackal shook his head.

"Tibs," Carina said. "Harry's job isn't protecting the town. It's maintaining order."

"It's not even that," Jackal said. "His job is doing what the guild tells him. And let's be honest here. The guild doesn't care what happens to the town. They are only going to get involved if the dungeon is under threat, and my father doesn't have any interest in that at the moment. Speaking of which, Tibs?"

"The door is still closed." Tibs has snuck out in the night and gone to Sto and tried to talk with him, but there at been no response. It could only mean he was still busy working on the third floor.

"Look," the woman said. "Do we have the time for all these questions and discussions?"

"I'm a kid," Tibs replied, grinning. "Asking questions is how I learn stuff."

"Don't," Jackal warned as her expression darkened. "Unless you know that someone's about to arrive, there is no rush here."

"Maybe you're slowing us down because you want your father to take over," the accused Jackal.

The fighter burst out laughing. "Mayra, it's Mayra right? I know no one's been keeping track, and I really wish we had because I'm willing to bet a silver that I have killed more of my father's thugs than anyone here since this started, not to say anything of those I killed went I first ran off. I will see that man out of here, if not outright dead, before I side with him."

"Four archers," Tibs said. "Where are they?"

The rogue and Jackal glared at one another for a few seconds, then the tension eased and they made plans.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you sure?" Carina asked.

"No, but there are people there, there, and there." He pointed to other roofs, further away from the platform, hidden from their sight, but not his senses. "They can't see the street, so they have to be looking at the roof and walls leading to it to keep anyone from attacking the archer."

“Okay, hopefully, that means he is running low on them if he can’t let them be taken out. But you weren’t exactly controlled when you use air. How can you be sure you’re going to go for him?”

“Air’s about having fun, letting go. Not caring anymore. There’s nothing more fun than running roofs, so getting up there is going to be easy. Once I’m there letting wind roar will throw him off. And there’s nothing more fun than the roaring wind. We found that out last night.”

“I’m still amazed no one questions it when Jackal said it was just him and Kroseph in the room.”

“Do we really want the detail of what they do during their ‘them’ time?” Tibs asked.

“No, no, we don’t.” She looked up. “Okay, everyone else should be far enough away. They won’t tell it’s you doing it and not me.” She grinned. “You’re about to give me quite the reputation as a destructive force.”

Tibs looked at her. “You don’t need me for that. How many of the training free-for-all have you won?”

She blushed. “That’s... that’s not the same.”

He snorted and readied himself to call on air.

Essence shifted the edge of his senses. “Fuck.” He forgot the plan and ran. “Take him out,” he told Carina. The shifting was on the platform. Someone was arriving and they would have no idea the danger they were in.

The essence condensed in the center of the platform, and two people become visible. One in the golden robes of the attendants and one in a dark purple sorcerer’s robe.

No. That couldn’t be who he was about to save. He would never hear the end of this.

Someone from a small building to the side of the platform yelled something that drew the attendant’s attention. Tibs saw the archer stand. Don just looked at the attendant, annoyed. He saw Tibs and his face became angry, but before he could do or say anything, Tibs collided with him as the attendant screamed in pain.

“Get off of me!” Don ordered, trying to push Tibs.

“There’s an archer shooting anyone who arrives,” Tibs replied, move so the sorcerer couldn’t get a hold of him while keeping him down with his weight.

“Do you think I—”

Tibs looked up. Don was looking toward where the archer was, eyes wide. He raised a hand, then something splashed on Tibs’s back. Don smirked, looked at Tibs, then frown.

“I did not just save your life,” he cursed.

“I guess that makes us even. We need to get to safety, her too.” Tibs didn’t wait. He rushed to the attendant. The arrow was in her side. He wrapped his essence around the injury. “This is going to hurt, I’m sorry.” He dragged her, and she screamed. Something splashed on the platform. Rotting wood.

“I’m not saving you,” Don said. “I’m protecting her.”

Tibs nodded.

Once by the building, two attendants took her and hurried inside.

“Why Are you still here?” Tibs demanded of the four attendants. He looked at Don,



who was by the door, keeping guard. “Don’t you realize how dangerous it is?”

“Someone has to be here to make sure arriving attendants aren’t killed.” One pulled the arrow out and another brought a bottle. Tibs removed his essence from the injury. The potion would take care of the injury.

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about the passenger?” Don demanded. “We’re the ones paying you after all.”

“You’re not paying us anything. And if we die, then our organization becomes weaker. So we rotate who waits to ensure there’s always someone fresh ready to act.”

“I didn’t see much action,” Don commented. “If not for me, she’d be dead.”

“What do you mean rotate?” Tibs asked.

“Do you think we all spend our time here?” the man asked. “We have houses, like the rest of you.”

“How do you move without being caught?” Tibs asked.

The man stared at him. “Do you think the only way we can travel is through the platform?”

“Then why is it there?” Don asked, rolling his eyes.

“Because that’s how it links us to the rest of the world. Moving about something the side of this town is just a question of thinking about it.”

“So, you go from here to your house the same way you take someone to another city?” Tibs asked. He didn’t like that no one had known about this, because it meant the attendants had done nothing to help, but he wasn’t surprised. The guild and anyone relating to them seemed to only think about themselves.

“Didn’t you listen? We don’t need the platform to—”

“Yes, I heard. What I want to know is if you can take someone with you when you do that, the same way you do it when you take us to another city?”

“Of course, you aren’t listening. The platform is — why are you grinning like that?”

“Because you’ve just saved my town,” Tibs replied.

## Stepping up-53

Don preened under the congratulations of how he’d convinced the attendants to help move the people in danger to safe places. He’d proclaimed it the instant they had entered the tavern and smiled at Tibs, defying to call him out on it.

He hadn’t. He’d already suspected Don would do it and had considered the ramifications. The only downside he saw was that he’d have to remain close to the sorcerer to advise him, in case he couldn’t live up to the claims he was now making.

Convincing the attendants to help save the town hadn’t been easy. Like the guild people, they were primarily self-centered. Their safety came first. Individually, some wanted to help, but they needed to do what their leader said. And said leader, a man with a hard face and demanding golden eyes, had no interest in “Playing Hero” to a bunch of people who couldn’t even afford to pay them.

And Don had come to Tibs's rescue there; he had been the one to point out how losing this town would affect the attendant's reputation. After all, wasn't it obvious the people now attacking had used the platform to arrive? That the attendants had never bothered checking the intention of the people they moved. Would they also help the next town be taken over? Had they been complicit in this attack?

Whatever the complicit word meant—Tibs hadn't had a chance to ask Carina yet—the leader of the attendant had given it after hearing it.

The return to the inn had been uneventful. The archers had been dealt with by then, and Tibs had led them to a group of Runners to use as an escort. The biggest issue had been convincing those Runners to help despite Don being with them.

The sorcerer was good at making people hate him.

But now, if the man could be smart about it, he might finally make himself a few allies among the Runners.

Carina returned with Jackal, who looked ready to rip the sorcerer apart, but turned his glare on Tibs instead. "How can you let him take the credit?" Tibs had had time while they walked back to explain what had happened, and she'd now told the fighter.

Fortunately, Don was loud enough, and they were far enough that no one heard. Tibs motioned for Jackal to lower his voice.

"We need him—"

"No, we don't," Jackal countered. "He's going to start acting like he's in charge, ordering us about into getting everyone killed."

"Then we stick close to make sure he doesn't do that," Tibs said. Jackal stared at him in horror, then left. He returned with two tankards and two bottles of something strong. He pours a bottle in the two tankards and drank out of the other.

"You better have a really good reason to have us stay within touching distance of that man."

Tibs nodded. "Sebastian's house is protected by a lot of essences."

"Yes," Jackal said, "my father has reason to be paranoid about his safety. How does that make *him* acceptable?" He took a long swallow from the bottle.

"Corruption can affect other essences. It ate through Sto's stone. Stone the guild told us couldn't be dug through with anything."

"That could simply have been so we wouldn't try it," Carina said, taking a sip from her tankard and then choking on it.

Tibs nodded. "Maybe, but the way Sto and Ganny reacted, the fear in their voices. Neither of them expected it to happen. Sto has corruption in the essences he can use and he's seen Don use it. So if he didn't work out that it could, and the guild said that it can't. Would Sebastian think of protecting his house against it?"

"You want Don to attack the house," Jackal said, a smile forming.

"There's a problem," Carina said, "other than Don will never put himself in that kind of danger. Your father isn't going to have been careless about his safety. That means that the enchantments on his house will be strong. I don't know if Don had enough of a reserve to do any serious damage."

“He doesn’t have to,” Tibs said. “He just needs to be there so he can take the credit for what I’ll do.”

Jackal’s smile vanished. “You want to channel corruption.”

Tibs nodded.

“We haven’t seen you under the influence of that element,” Carina pointed out.

“We have time. This isn’t something that’s going to happen tonight,” Tibs said. “Even with the attendants, we’re not going to be able to just go to his house. There’s too many people guarding it.”

“And there’s a lot of townsfolk still living in that area,” Jackal said. “My father’s made sure we can’t rescue them. It gives him a way to threaten innocent lives if he thinks we’re about to try something.”

“Having Don lead will make it tough to keep anything we do discreet,” Carina said. “He’d rather blatant in his intentions, for all that he thinks he’s subtle.”

Tibs nodded. “Then we guide him away from a direct attack until it’s time. Rescuing people will make more of them like him, so it should be easy to convince him to do that. And I can work on getting control of myself while channeling corruption.”

“Do we have a place where you can do that safely?” Carina asked.

“I don’t know if anywhere is safe when it comes to corruption,” Jackal said.

“Air’s the only element I’ve been prone to unleash for the fun of it,” Tibs said.

“Out of the four you’ve tried,” Jackal replied. “And it doesn’t take much to get you angry when you have fire.”

“We can do it by the pool,” Tibs suggested.

Jackal shook his head. “We might control Merchant’s Row, but my father has people watching it for any opportunity to take it from us. Someone will see what we’re doing and report it. Even if they don’t understand what it means. It’s information we can’t allow my father to get.”

Tibs nodded. “So one of the unoccupied houses away from everything.”

“I wish we could bring a cleric,” Carina said, “in case you lose control.”

“Tibs can change elements and deal with whatever damage he does,” Jackal pointed out.

“Do we want to deal with two unknown elements?” Carina asked.

“Maybe we start with purity then?” Tibs suggested. “It can’t be as destructive.”

“All the elements are destructive,” Carina said, “especially when you don’t know how to handle them. And with how they affect how you think, it’s even more dangerous.”

“How was corruption?” Jackal asked. “Seems to me that gives us a sense of what Tibs will act like.”

Tibs thought back to his audience. “He was friendly. More than the other elements. Talking with him felt more like talking with one of us than an element.”

Jackal looked in Don’s direction. “Friendly? Well, that definitely didn’t stick with that one.”

“It seems safe enough,” Carina said. “But then again, we thought the same of Air, after all, how much damage could wanting to have a fun time cause, right?” she eyed them.

Tibs nodded.

“Okay, so we can’t just go by how the audience went,” Jackal said. “More reason to have a safe place to meet that version of Tibs. If you turn into an asshole like Don, I am smacking you.”

“I don’t know if that is possible,” Carina said.

“I could start acting like a noble.” Tibs shuddered at that idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs looked at the cellar before looking at his friends. Why had they done through such length? They could have talked at the inn.

“I hope you aren’t going to be offended if I don’t look you in the eyes,” Jackal said, looking sick. “Those eyes aren’t any easier to look at on you than on the asshole.”

“It’s all right,” Tibs said. He remembered the effect Don’s eyes had on him. He looked at Carina and Kroseph.

“It’s unsettling,” the server said. “The way the color changes. It’s like it’s being pulled inside you and replaced with this new one. Although I have no idea what color that’s supposed to be.” He only glanced at Tibs’s eyes before looking away.

“When I sense Don’s essence, it registered as purple, like his robe, but it’s also different. I can’t explain it.” He thought about it. Sensed his reserve. It had that same color, but the wrongness of it wasn’t there.

“How do you feel?” Jackal asked.

“I feel fine. I don’t think Corruption has an effect on me.” He thought about it. “Maybe it’s more like us than the other elements?”

“I don’t think ‘more like us’ means much to an element,” Carina said.

“But you don’t feel like melting the wall or anything?” Jackal asked.

Tibs laughed. “Of course not. This isn’t our house.”

“So, if it was your house, you’d be okay with doing it?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs frowned. “Well, it depends. If there’s a reason to do it, I wouldn’t have to worry about someone else complaining.”

“Is being too friendly going to be a problem?” Jackal asked.

“Water’s too compassionate,” Carina pointed out, “and you wouldn’t think that could be a problem.”

“Until Tibs starts helping the enemy.” Jackal nodded.

“Is that it, though?” Kroseph asked. “Do you want to be friends with the people who are attacking the town?”

Tibs shook his head. They were his enemy. He had no interest in being their friends. His shaking slowed. Although, if they thought he was their friend, he would make it easier to stab them in the back.

“What are you thinking?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs hesitated. Like him, his friends wanted their enemy dead, but Kroseph wasn’t a Runner. He wasn’t hardened to the reality of what the dungeon required them to do. What life required of them. He might object to his idea; then they’d have to convince him it was the best one.

“I thought that maybe I could pretend to be their friends, but that wouldn’t be right.”

“Wait, what?” Jackal asked. “What does Corruption care about things being right?”

“You’re confusing how you think it should act with the reality,” Carina said, but she too was studying Tibs. He only looked at them out of the corner of his eyes. He didn’t want his eyes to make them uneasy. “But you’re right that it sounds like a strange thing for Tibs to say, so the element is affecting him.”

“You think so?” Tibs asked, trying to figure out how it might be. He wasn’t seeing it. He didn’t think he’d have outright said he wanted to convince Sebastian he was on his side so he could betray him. Not with Kroseph there. It would waste too much time getting him to understand how practical the idea was. Like he had with Don. It’d do it and once it had happened, it would be easier to get the server to see it was the best way.

“Why not do that?” Jackals asked, pensive. “Everyone’s always underestimating you.”

“The archer watching the platform had a drawing of Tibs,” Carina said.

“Because he’d want him taken out before he got off it,” Jackal replied. “I doubt he was able to give such a picture to everyone who works for him. With his eyes being normal brown, he could pass himself as someone wanting to join the winning side, and take out the teams before they realized it.”

Tibs watched Kroseph as he nodded along. The server stopped as he noticed the attention. “What?”

“You’re okay with me doing that?”

Kroseph frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re not a Runner,” Tibs answered. “You haven’t seen how hard things can be, and the kind of stuff surviving requires.”

“You’re wrong, but why would that make me not want you to do it?”

“You don’t think it’s wrong that I plan on lying just so It’ll be easier for me to kill them?”

Kroseph looked pensive. “Yes, I think you shouldn’t have to do it. But among the list of things I’ve seen happen since Jackal’s father started this attack, it’s rather low on the scale of ‘wrong things’.”

“Oh,” Tibs chuckled in embarrassment. “I’d decided to lie about what I was going to do because I thought it was going to be too much work convincing you it was what he had to do.”

“Alright,” the server said, hesitatingly. “I can understand why you’d think that.” He looked at the other two. “Have you worked out how it’s affecting him?”

Jackal shook his head. “You might as well let go of it, Tibs. We’ll try—”

“Just wait,” Carina said. “Tibs, to do this, pretend to switch sides so you can get close to Jackal’s father and take him out. I think you’re going to have to learn how to do more with your essence.”

“You’re going to want me to read, aren’t you?” Tibs asked, unable to stop the shudder. She shook her head, and he relaxed.

“I’m thinking the best way is to get Don to train you.”

Tibs started to protest. That still sounded like he’d have to do work, but he realized

she was right. Don was the only expert he had access to. Getting into the guild to ask for one would mean waiting for them to call him. Unless Don's teacher was still here. Would he, with the dungeon being closed? Don would know that and if his teacher was here. Tibs would go to him.

He noticed the way they looked at him. "What?"

"You're thinking about it?" Jackal asked, dismayed.

"Carina suggested it, and it's a good idea if his teacher isn't here. His teacher would be the better person to train me."

"But that would mean telling the guild you have more than one element."

Tibs nodded. "They'll understand why I didn't tell them. It's not like they tell us everything either." He smiled.

"Okay, there is something definitely wrong here if you're willing to not only tell Don about this, but the guild. Tibs, let go of the essence," Jackal ordered.

He did and frowned.

"Welcome back," Kroseph said, smiling.

"I wasn't gone," Tibs replied.

"Can you tell me why you were willing to tell the guild?" Carina asked.

He went over what he'd said and thought. "It was the quickest way, the simplest one to get what I wanted."

"But they wouldn't have let you do it," She pointed out. "The moment they found out you have more than one element, they would have captured you."

"I wasn't thinking about that. The only thing I was focusing on was right now. I have a sense that I thought they'd see how good it would be for them too, but that's vague. What mattered was that I'd get what I wanted without a lot of work. Just like lying to you about betraying people, Kroseph. I didn't think you'd be okay with it, so I made the decision to say I'd considered it and dismissed it. That way you'd even respect me a little more."

"Taking the easy way," Jackal said, "lying to get what you want. Letting people believe you're better than you are." He smiled grimly. "Now that's Don."

"Does that mean you can't use corruption?" Kroseph asked.

"I can still use it," Tibs said. "But it's going to be like Air and Fire. I'm going to have to be careful the situation doesn't change what I want to do once I'm channeling the essence."

"You mean like when you left me to go rescue Don?" Carina asked, with only a hint of bitterness in her tone.

"I wasn't rescuing him," Tibs said. "I was rescuing a Runner who was arriving without knowing what was going on. I could feel the essence condensing."

"Could you tell it was void essence?" she asked, her tone turning curious. They hadn't had the chance to talk about it until now, with Don around and then focusing on locating a place for this exercise.

"No, but what else would it be on the platform?"

"So Corruption looks for the easy way," Jackal said. "That's going to be a problem because nothing of what we're going to have to do to get my father out of here is going to

be easy.”

Carina nodded. “Getting to be himself while channeling essence would be the simplest way.”

“How about your bracers?” Kroseph asked. “Can’t you limit yourself to using that?”

Tibs shook his head. “I don’t know how. I’ve had to use amulets at the same time as my reserve since the start, so I don’t know how to not do it.” He sighed. “Yet more things to practice.”

Kroseph patted his leg. “You can worry about that later. Let’s go back to the inn and see what’s available to eat.”

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“No,” Don said. Looking at the rough sketch of the town drawn on papers. He placed a finger on the building Jackal as suggested as the place to assemble the people the attendants took out of the building near his father’s home. “That’s barely two blocks away from the Crawling Worm. Someone going or coming from there is going to notice a preciously empty building being occupied.”

Jackal’s effort to keep his temper under control was visible. “I didn’t know they’d taken over the Worm,” he said through clenched teeth.

Don looked at a woman opposite the table. She was a Rogue, one of the conscripts.

“They moved in last night.”

Tibs elbowed Jackal in the side as he started to speak. They were here to support Don. Not take over the planning. The fighter glared at Tibs but closed his mouth. Don’s smirk nearly ended the meeting.

“What’s the alternative?” Carina asked, louder than she had to and drawing the attention away from Jackal. “We still need to house a dozen families. That’s the largest home we have access to. Everything larger is in the noble’s neighborhood. I hope you’re not thinking of putting them there.”

Don rolled his head. “Like they’d be allowed to stay. The nobles would just hand them to our enemy, to put themselves in his good graces. We’re lucky there’s more of us with an element than them. Otherwise, they’d been on his side already.” He tapped a group of homes. “That’s where we’re putting them. It’s away from the fighting, and territory either group holds. It means the odds of a patrol finding them by accident are lower. There’s also a courtyard enclosed by the buildings. So the kids aren’t going to be stuck inside all the time.”

Jackal frowned and studied the map. “The houses aren’t connected.”

“Then maybe if you’d taken the time to walk about this town of ours,” Don replied with a roll of the eyes, “you’d know that whoever drew that part got it wrong.”

Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged. He didn’t remember every building in the down.

“Even if you’re right,” Jackal said, “we’re going to have to allocate people to watch over them. Low odds of a patrol isn’t no chances.”

“Less, or more than if we house them where you wanted?” Don asked with a smirk.

Jackal ground his teeth again, then nodded. “Considering the Worn’s now my father’s property. We’d have to put a lot more there to ensure they’re safe.” The next words visibly hurt the fighter. “Your idea is the better one.”

“Thank you.” How Don could put so much superiority in those two words, Tibs didn’t know, and he was too focussed on making sure Jackal didn’t give in to his anger to investigate it.

## Stepping up-54

“I don’t like this,” Don said as he, his team, Tibs, and Jackal stayed close to the alley’s wall. “I shouldn’t be putting myself at risk like this. I’m the leader of this whole thing” Tibs preemptively glared Jackal silent. He’d agreed to let Tibs do the talking when it came to placating the sorcerer, but the man’s cowardliness rubbed the fighter raw.

Radkliff was the one who spoke. “They need to see you take part in this, Don.” He ignored the glare the sorcerer gave him. “You said it, you came up with the plan, but you think the others are going to have the guts to do anything without you showing them how it’s done?”

Don nodded and straightened. The rogue looked at Tibs and winked. Radkliff had been indispensable in keeping the sorcerer on point. He’d picked up early in the planning that Tibs and Jackal were the ones behind the ideas, while Don came up with the execution of them. All the while thinking he was the mastermind. It had gone well; until Tibs mentioned the need for Don to be on the front line.

It was then that Radkliff joined in the manipulation of his team leader, coaxing every one of Tibs’s or Jackal’s points in one demonstrating Don’s leadership abilities, his prowess with his essence, his talent at positioning their forces—that one wasn’t a lie. Don was skilled at putting the people they had where they would be the most useful, so long as it wasn’t himself.

The plan to destroy Sebastian’s home had been easy to push. Destroying the enemy’s base of operation made sense. That it meant getting close to it, instead of throwing essence from a distance, hadn’t pleased Don, but enough people had already tried it to point out how well protected against that it was. When Tibs explained his reasoning for using Corruption, Don wasn’t happy. He’d taken Tibs aside after the meeting and screamed it was a ploy to get him killed. He’d then swore he wouldn’t let that happen and stormed off.

“There’s a group just beyond the intersection,” Sawat said, returning to them. She was Don’s latest archer. Had graduated to Upsilon just before Sto closed. Her element was air. “I counted six.”

Tibs sensed seven, but he couldn’t correct her. And without elements, one extra person on their side wouldn’t change how this battle went.

“Jackal,” Don said. “You and Raonull rush them. Radkliff and Tibs. Use to roofs to get behind. Sawat, you and Omer take shots at them. Don’t worry about making them kill shots. Your job is to keep them distracted. If someone runs, then you take them down.”

Tibs was climbing, then across the roof. To the other house. He was aiming for the one after that, as the road narrowed there, but he realized Radkliff had gone the opposite way, and with no one watching him, he could cut this short. He ran for the edge, channeled



air, and kept his glee to a chuckle as he threw himself off. He flung essence ahead of him, stepped, and jumped. He did a pirouette and then landed, extending his arm in victory.

Which his momentum cut short as he lost his balance and slid down the roof and into the alley. This was fun.

He let air go and used earth to harden himself before impact, then stayed there. The ground was so comfortable. He had something to do, but he didn't have to hurry.

The sound of fighting made him sigh. Reluctantly, he let earth go. Then he was scrambling to his feet and running for the battle.

He threw a knife at the back of a woman fighting with Rao, and the pommel hit instead of the blade. Tibs really hated how bad he was at throwing.

The hit had the effect of causing the fighter to look over her shoulder, which Rao took full advantage of by planting his sword into her stomach.

Tibs had his short sword in hand and cut the back of one of the four men against Jackal. Then he was on his back as that backhand hit hard.

"Tibs," Radkliff called as he got to his feet. Tibs watched the rope go over his head, the loop slip over a fighter's sword and come down on the wrist before the rogue pulled. The loop closed, and the fighter staggered back toward Tibs, nearly falling. Tibs planted his sword in the side as deep as he could. When that wasn't enough to make the man stop breathing, he twisted it, wrenched it out, then planted it in the same hole.

The man fell, taking Tibs's sword with him. He pulled a knife and spun, prepared to attack whoever was closest, but the enemies were all down. Jackal landed a foot on the neck of the one at his feet.

"Injuries?" the fighter asked.

"The bastard sliced my armor!" Rao complained. "I just got the thing too." He was looking at his bleeding side.

"Good here," Radkliff said.

"Me too." Tibs picked up his knife.

"You still need work with those," the rogue commented.

"It's why I'm using that now." Tibs raised the sword before sheathing it.

"We should have brought a cleric," Jackal said as he motioned for the other to join him.

"I'm fine," Rao said.

"You're injured. That's not being fine."

"It's a scratch."

It looked to be more than that, but as Tibs sense the way the fighter's essence behaved around the wound, that wasn't reacting as strongly as expected, it was forming around the cut, instead of being dispersed by it. Rao had metal as his element, so that wasn't it. And—Tibs stopped himself. Was that even worth trying to understand while on their way to take down Sebastian?

Was it worth worrying about at all?

"Good fighting," Don said. He handed a clean cloth to the fighter. "Plug that. I don't want you bleeding out before we're done. I wish we could have brought one of those

cowards to heal us as we went. Or used an attendant to just get to the house, melt it down and leave.”

Tibs nodded.

That had been his idea, but Sebastian had something in place that kept the attendants from reaching the house. The closest one had made it was three full blocks, and he’d returned gravely injured. Sebastian had that line well guarded. It had been decided that if they couldn’t appear when they needed to be, attacking on as many fronts as possible was the best way.

Once Rao had stuffed the cloth in the cut in his armor, they were moving. After another battle, Tibs felt... something. He couldn’t work out what it was, but essence was different past that point.

“Can you feel that?” Radcliff asked. They were stopped on the other side of the street, where the essence changed.

“I think it’s what’s stopping the attendant from going in,” Sawat said.

“Then why am I feeling it?” the rogue asked. “I’m fire, not void.”

“I’m air.” The archer said.

“Water,” Tibs added.

“I can’t feel something that far,” Jackal said.

Don looked at Tibs. “You can sense that? I thought you couldn’t do anything?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “I don’t have a lot of reserve. The rest of my abilities are fine.” Better than fine, he wanted to add as the sorcerer smirked.

“If it’s going to affect all our elements, I think it’s best we head back and come up with a different strategy,” Don said.

“We can’t,” Jackals replied.

“I’m—”

“Come off it, Don, you know as well as—”

“Everyone’s committed,” Radcliff said, cutting the fighter off. “If we don’t do this now, we aren’t going to be in any shape to deal with the counter-attack. Don, do you really want to be known as the guy who bailed on his town?”

Tibs worried Radcliff had gone too far as he felt the essence coalesce around the sorcerer. He hadn’t seen Don fight with Corruption. He had no idea what he could do with it, but on the little he saw and experienced, none of it would be pleasant.

Don made fists, and the essence accumulated there. Tibs readied himself to disrupt it, but the sorcerer absorbed it, instead of unleashing it. When he opened his hands, Radcliff relaxed.

“I am not a coward,” Don stated.

“Never said you were,” Jackal said.

“Jackal, stop talking,” Tibs ordered as Don rounded on the fighter.

“I—”

“Stop talking.”

Jackal closed his mouth and Don turned the glare on Tibs. “You better keep him

under control, or I'm going to turn him into a puddle."

Tibs nodded.

"If this affects all the elements," Don said, looking ahead determinedly, "I'm going to need you to protect me. Since I'm the only one who can take down the house," he added forcefully, as if he expected someone to call him out on it. That he didn't specifically look at Tibs or Jackal told him Don knew what his teammates thought of him. "Since the protection on the house is essence based, whatever is disrupting it is going to have to stop before we reach it."

Tibs hoped so, because as deep as his reserve was, if using his essence was hard, once he channeled Corruption, he would start looking for something else to do, and he couldn't guess what he'd think was an easy thing under those circumstances.

"Me and Rao in the front," Jackal said. "Tibs and Radcliff on each side of Don, behind us. Omer and Sawat far enough behind us, you can shoot anyone we miss. How are you for normal arrows?"

"I still have my quiver," Omer said.

Sawat counted hers. "Half of mine. There hasn't been a lot of archers on the way here."

"That might change. If my father can send word to the archers he has at the platform, expect them to shoot us in the back. So stay alert." He looked at Don. "It's the best protection I can offer with who we have here. Does that work?"

The sorcerer nodded curtly after thinking, and they took positions.

"Our goal is to get to the house," Don said. "Once one of them is down, move on. It doesn't matter if they live or die, so long as we destroy their leader."

"That means no stopping to collect the loot," Tibs told Jackal.

The fighter's eyes went wide. "I'm hurt. You know the loot collecting takes place after the fighting's done, not on the way to it." He looked forward. "Anyway. I'm looking forward to taking the loot of my father's body. You guys can have the rest." He checked the street, then motioned, and they ran.

They staggered as they crossed the strange line. Tibs's senses stopped making sense. There was essence around him, but it was shaking. When he tried to mentally grab some, it flew away from him.

"Tibs," Jackal called, "Later." The others had gotten over the strange sensation quickly and were moving again. He stopped sensing essence, and he felt better.

The next fight was harder.

They hit the thugs, nine of them, and as one, Tibs's allies reached for their essence. Jackal was the only one to accomplish anything with it, hardening himself and taking the brunt of the blows. Rao regained his footing and joined in the assault. When he broke his sword, he used the pommel to bludgeon the next thug. Then he had another sword in hand.

Tibs and Radcliff took on the one that made it around the two fighters, and both suffered injuries before finally bringing her down. Wrapping his essence around his injury was easy, but the part that was at the surface of his skin flew apart.

"Looks like our body offered the same kind of protection against this as it does in

the dungeon,” Jackal said.

“Not the same,” Don corrected. “In the dungeon, our presence will prevent our equipment from melting a few paces away. Raonull would have been able to use essence on his sword.”

They moved ahead. In the distance, they heard more fighting.

The next fight was won because of their archers. They reduced the assault down to six before they reached them. Tibs took a sword to the side for Don, and the sorcerer grabbed his attacker’s sword arm and withered it into a gray mass before Radkliff cut the thug’s throat.

“I’ll be fine,” Tibs said as the sorcerer helped him to his feet. He couldn’t stop the bleeding, but he had his essence wrapped around his insides.

“Don’t bleed to death,” Don said, handing him a clean cloth. “We can move essence through touch.”

“So a cleric would have been useful.” Tibs winced as he wedged the cloth under his armor and over his injury.

“I doubt that. They’re all cowards. Would have left us to run back to the guild for protection.”

They moved again. Slowed by their injuries.

The next fight nearly saw them ended, even if there were only five thugs before them. Two focused on Jackal, their only uninjured fighter while one kept Rao busy. The archers could do little from the back and with the few arrows they had left, so it came down to Tibs and Radkliff. Tibs avoided major injuries, but Radkliff got a sword in the gut in the process of killing the thug.

Cursing, Tibs was next to him, hand on the wound, pushing his essence through the contact. “Give me a cloth,” he ordered Don and used it to slow the blood.

“Fuck,” Radkliff said with a chuckle, then groaned. “I really thought it was the dungeon that was going to be the death of me.”

“You’re not dying,” Tibs said as the cloth became wet with blood.

“You better pull this off,” the rogue said. “I’m going to be pissed if I died for nothing.”

“I will,” Don said resolutely.

Radkliff grinned. “You better help him,” he told Tibs.

“There’s no dying,” Tibs said through clenched teeth. “Not outside the dungeon.”

“I guess you’re right,” Radkliff said, closing his eyes. “I’m just going to take a nap then. Come wake me when...”

They were Runners. The dungeon was where they were supposed to die. They tried to beat Sto and if they failed, then they died. The town was supposed to be safe. Fighting wasn’t allowed.

Where was Harry? Why were they letting this happen?

He stood, looked at Jackal. “I’m going to kill him.” And started walking toward Sebastian’s house.

## Stepping up-55

They had to leave behind Omer after he lost an arm, then Sawat, when she got an arrow through the calf. Don became vicious when he was able to get a hand on their attackers after that. Tibs suspected that once he was done, once he could think about what they'd done to these people, sleeping might not come easy for a while.

Unlike what they'd expected, whatever interfered with the use of their essence didn't vanish when they reached Sebastian's house. Jackal and Rao did a circuit around it to confirm there was no one guarding it.

"Would your father leave himself unguarded like this?" Don asked.

Jackal shook his head. "If he's running low on people, he pulled them inside. With whatever this is," he motioned around them, "he probably thinks there's nothing we can do to him unless we make it inside."

"He's right," the sorcerer replied. "I can't do anything to the house with this stuff getting in the way."

"You're going to have to try," Jackal said, "we need to force him out."

Tibs ignored the angry retort and looked at the house. He couldn't sense the state of the essence woven through it, but...

"Don, could Sebastian protect his house from the effect of the disruption?"

The sorcerer cut off his rant about Jackal and his ancestry to glare at Tibs. He kept looking at Don, not reacting to it. After a few seconds, the sorcerer took a breath, glared at Jackal, then looked at Tibs again.

"Yes, he could." He thought about something. "But if he did, it's easy to find out. Raonull, stay with me. You two, keep an eye out for anyone trying to take me out."

"Sure," Jackal said, rolling his eyes, but Don was already moving. "What did you want to talk about?" he asked Tibs, who looked back, unsure what his friend meant. "You sent him away so we could plan, right?"

"I just asked a question. I didn't know Don would leave us alone." He looked along the alley and the roofs. This wasn't a good spot to see if archers had moved to them, but they no longer had anyone to spare to go up. "What I'm thinking is that if the house isn't protected against it, that means the enchantments will be ineffective too."

The sorcerer returned. "The outside of the house isn't protected."

"How—" Jackal asked.

"Do you think," Tibs cut him off; they didn't have the time to argue, "that whatever is causing this is inside the house?"

"How do you expect me to know that?" the sorcerer demanded. "Unlike him, I don't have any link to that man."

"You're the smartest of us, Don," Tibs replied. "You're a sorcerer. If there's one person here who can figure out how this item might work, it's you."

Don ground his teeth and looked at the house, then around them. "If what is creating this could be anything other than a radius of influence, I don't see why he wouldn't use

something that kept his house unaffected. He might not have any essence users working for him, but I've seen what he wears. I've felt the essence woven through it all. That's going to be rendered ineffective while inside the influence."

Tibs nodded. "I can get in the house. The only defenses I couldn't handle were the enchantments, and those aren't working anymore. Locks are going to be easy. How do I stop the item causing this?"

"How would I know?" Don demanded. "I didn't even know this was possible." He stopped. "I mean, I knew it was possible in the sense that with enough essence, anything is possible, but who would want to make it?"

"Smash it," Jackal offered.

"Are you insane?" The sorcerer glared. "Do you have any idea the amount of work that had to go into something like this? You don't smash something priceless."

"Would it stop it from working?" Tibs asked.

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, but he's the greedy one." He pointed to Jackal. "And he already said to smash it. Will it work? Will it stop the interference and let you rot the house?"

Don looked about to protest, then reconsidered it. "It depends what it's made of." He thought for a few seconds. "Crystals are the best at taking large amounts of weaves, so it's most likely that, but it doesn't mean it's going to be easy to break. Some crystals are extremely durable."

"How large will it be?"

Don glared at Tibs, exasperation on his face, but he took another breath. "I don't know. The skill of the sorcerers who made it will be what determines the size. The better they are, the tighter the weave will be."

"Would Sebastian hire anyone other than the best?" Tibs asked Jackal.

"You're assuming he paid for it, rather than having it stolen. But yes, my father would want the best." He looked at the house. "But I need to remember there are limits to what anyone can do. He wouldn't ruin himself for this. Not unless there's a lot more going on here than I figured out. So I doubt he got the very best version of this thing. It still doesn't tell us how big it is."

"Can it fit in his pocket?"

"No," Don said. "For something that small, you'd need an Alpha grade sorcerer of each element required to make it, and since I suspect it's affecting all of them. You're talking twenty-four Alpha sorcerers. Even if there were that many, they wouldn't work on something like this, not all of them." He looked at his hand, considered something. Added his second one three-hand span away. "This is probably the smallest it would be."

"Then it's going to be in a safe," Tibs said. He looked at the house.

"Of under guard," Don said. "I said the smallest we can expect, not the most likely." He looked at Jackal. "Did your father bring anything unusually large with him?"

"How?" Jackal raised a hand. "Sorry. I'm on edge. Nothing in the unusual size," he said in a calmer tone, "but it's a house. When he moved in, he brought furniture and a lot of that was in crates. This item could have been in one of them easy."

“So, if it’s too big for a safe,” Tibs said. “It’s in a guarded room.”

“Those are the most likely assumptions, yes,” Don said.

Tibs looked at the window on the third floor. That was how he got in. After that, he’d have to see.

Jackal took his shoulder. “Tibs, this isn’t like the dungeon. My father doesn’t fight by any kind of rules. The only thing he cares about is getting his way.”

Tibs nodded and smiled. “I’m a rogue. I know about cheating.”

“But my father is a master at it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The house was further than Tibs would like. Without his air essence, making the jump would be risky, but climbing Sebastian’s house directly was too dangerous. He could have someone hiding in a house looking in on it. There were too many of those to check out. So a jump to the roof, close to the window, and in as quickly as possible.

If he missed it, he’d have to hope the fall didn’t hurt too much. Three stories without Carina to soften the landing could be a problem.

He ran down the roof’s incline, gaining as much speed as he could, jumped, and sailed over the large alley. He made it to the other roof but immediately slid down. He cursed in pain as he grabbed onto the dormer, and hurried to use his other hand as he started slipping, to climb into his laid on his stomach across it.

He rubbed his fingers together.

Oil. Sebastian had impregnated the roof tiles with oil. Jackal was right. His father cheated. He slid to the end of the dormer and studied the window. The lock was set, and with his hands slick and no essence to make tools with. He had to go back to when he lived on the Street.

He placed the shim he’d made of what he’d found in the alley and carefully maneuvered himself down the dormer. He scraped his foot on the siding to remove as much of the oil, then carefully placed it on the windowsill, adding weight only once he was confident it wouldn’t slip. Then his other foot.

His hands he wiped on his pants, the back of which was still dry. A pouch with fine sand was his next purchase.

The angle wasn’t great, but it wasn’t the first time he worked in less than ideal circumstances. The shim went in, and after nearly losing his footing to give himself the leverage, the window was unlocked. He pulled it open and was inside.

He took a few seconds to catch his breath, then gave Jackal the thumbs up, before closing the window. The room contained boxes of weapons. Half of them opened and with missing content. Sebastian had come ready for this fight. Or, considering the number of untouched boxes, ready to take on the guild.

When he tried the door, it didn’t open. It was locked but didn’t have a latch. He needed a key to unlock it, even from the inside. Sebastian didn’t depend entirely on the enchantments to protect his house.

Tibs found a tool in the third box. A slim assassin’s blade; smaller than his little finger and ending in a tip that fit in the lock. He couldn’t manipulate the tumbles with it, but

that wasn't the goal.

An ear to the door to confirm no one was moving, and he turned the knife. When it stopped without having forced the lock open, he channeled earth. The lock snapped, and he rested his head against the door. Hurrying was pointless. He needed to listen in case the sound had brought someone.

When he confirmed it, Tibs remained there. Stillness was comfortable. Everything resolved itself when given enough time.

Radcliff wouldn't be back, he reminded himself. No matter how long he waited. That was one thing that wouldn't be resolved. And if he waited too long, Sebastian might not pay for it.

Reluctantly, Tibs let the essence go and opened the door enough to look. At one end were stairs going down. At the other, a guarded door on the opposite wall. The guard was a woman on a chair, seemingly asleep. Tibs was careful exiting the room and walking to her, holding the assassin's blade ready to throw if she moved.

He made it past her without a reaction. He had his hand over her mouth and the blade in her side, between her ribs and in her heart before her eyes fully opened. He left the blade in place to keep the blood from gushing out as she slumped back in the chair.

A quick search didn't produce keys but gave him a good set of lock picks and seven silvers, which he got to use on the door, also locked. More boxes, those unopened, as well as a safe with a rotary lock. Tibs resisted the temptation and exited the room.

At the stairs, he heard conversations faint enough to come from the ground floor, or a nearby room with a closed door. Looking in the hall as soon as he could showed him two doors on one wall, two on the other, and a thug walking the length. The hall was long enough it took the guard a dozen seconds to walk from one end to the other. Not enough for Tibs to pick a lock. But...

He slipped to the closest door as soon as the guard walked away from it and tried the latch. It was unlocked, and he slipped in.

The room had been remade into a barrack, with six bunks best on the opposing wall and fave on this one. Four of the two and two beds were occupied. Piled on a chest was clothing. Tibs grabbed a set and put it on. He had to roll the sleeves and pant legs, but they covered his armor. If he could avoid being looked at too closely, no one should notice how bulky he was.

He waited for the guard to walk away, then exited and confidently walked to the stairs. Hopefully, this floor was all sleeping rooms. On the ground floor, voices came from in the distance, along with the sounds of people eating. Tibs's stomach rumbled. He'd eaten only a few hours ago, but the memory of starving was still too fresh.

He should be used to that sensation, he told himself. He'd grown up with it.

"We're running low on people," a woman said.

"They'll be fine," Sebastian replied.

"Sir, they have magic."

"They're children. They barely have any, and they can't get close to us. They aren't that strong if the guild isn't bothering to come to their rescue."



“They’ve still taken out half of the people we brought.”

“Then we send for more. They’re running out of food, and the people living here are going to turn on them, eventually.”

Tibs moved away from there and walked by a seating area. A guard stood at each window, looking outside. Three more sat around a table, playing a dice game. Another room with guards looking out the windows. The door, guarded by two men. If every window was occupied, then they were inattentive with boredom not to have noticed Tibs and his friends by one of the alleys.

He turned and headed to the kitchen. None of the rooms had something resembling an enchanted crystal.

“Archers,” the woman said. “We’re running short on them to watch the platform. Now, as they’re trying to reach us. Would be the best time for them to have reinforcement arrive.”

“And if they had someone to send out messages with, I’d be worried,” Sebastian replied, “but they don’t. They might have convinced those attendants to help with moving people about, but without the platform, they can’t go anywhere useful, and I control that.”

Another room with guards at the windows and waiting. At the end was the other door, also guarded, both men looking out.

“All it takes is for them to remove the handful of archers we left there and they’ll be able to take it.”

“Only long enough to send someone out,” Sebastian countered. Tibs walked by the kitchen. “They’re going to realize this assault is useless, then we’ll be able to put my people back in place. Even if they call for reinforcement. Will pick them out as they arrive. Eventually, the attendants will just stop coming here.”

Sebastian was standing by the table with a woman, they were looking at papers. Tibs walked past. The last room was another sitting room, it too with guards looking out. Nothing looked like it was made of crystal and of a size to be what he was looking for.

Maybe he should have opened the safe.

He turned to walk back the way he came as part of the wall connecting to the other room opened and someone stepped out.

Only the other room didn’t have a door. In fact, it also didn’t have windows, which Tibs was certain were on the outer wall. The open panel was also the height of the wall and twice as wide as a door, and the space beyond it seemed the same. He entered the sitting room and headed for the closing panel. The exiting guard caught it and held it open for him. Tibs gave a nod and went down the stairs.

The cellar was a hurried construction. The walls were rough, packed dirt with boards across them. Beams kept the ceiling from crashing down. And in the middle of the dug-out space was a rough-hewed block of crystal approximately the size of the opening he’d stepped through, slowly pulsating with a greenish glow.

Around it, eight muscular men in armor stood and turned to face him.

“Who the fuck are you?”

## Stepping up-56

Tibs didn't wait for the swords to come out. He rushed the closest guard, drawing his short sword. He slashed but missed as they moved away. Tibs used the opportunity to slam the pommel of his sword on the block of crystal, but to no visible effect. As Don said, crystal didn't have to mean fragile.

He dodged a sword strike, and it bounced off the block, chipping some of it off. So strength was the way to do this.

"Careful, idiot!" someone yelled. "If you break it, the boss is going to snap your neck."

Pain along his arm due to the missed parry forced his attention back on the fight. They were over his surprise and only the block kept them from easily surrounding him. A dodge gave him momentary distance, and he considered his situation.

His horrible situation.

The only element that gave him strength was earth, which also made him slow to react. Jackal knew how to become nearly indestructible, but Tibs wasn't there. Standing still would mean his death.

He scored a shallow cut on a guard's chest, then felt someone behind him, the air moving, and Tibs threw himself to the side and avoided being caught, but was now against the packed dirt wall with four of the men around him.

"Well, looks like our intruder's taken on more than he can handle." The two before Tibs parted to let the speaker through. It was the one who'd called the warning. He was dressed in the same armor as the others and looked as nasty. "Anyone here thinks the boss will care if we hand him a corpse instead of someone to question?" the man approached and easily disarmed Tibs as he tried to menace him with his short sword.

Tibs tried to duck around the man, and nearly skewered himself on a sword. Before he took a step back, a hand grabbed his collar and pulled him back against the wall. The hand was around his neck before he reacted.

The man smiled and leaned in. "They've got to be desperate if they're sending a kid to try to stop us." Tibs reached for a knife, but a hand caught his wrist as the other one tightened around his neck. "Now now. No need for that. I'm going to make this as quick as I can. Someone use their sword on him."

Fuck that. Tibs placed a hand on the man's face and pulled the essence into him. The man staggered back in shock, but his skin was already pale, tight over his face, slightly gaunt.

"What did you do?"

The others took a step back from Tibs and the man. "They can't use magic," one of them said and glanced at the crystal block in worry.

Tibs snorted. "Who told you that?" He picked up his sword and sheathed it. "You really think something like that's going to stop us? We're Runners. The dungeon tries to eat us. You have nothing on him."

They took another step back.

“Stop. He’s lying,” another one said. “If they could use magic, they’d have destroyed this place already.” He took a step forward, sword at the ready.

Tibs ran at him, taking a cut along the shoulder as he dodged and then jumped on the man, hand on his face. Pulled at the essence. Not letting him pushed him away as he weakly struggled. Tibs didn’t let go until the man fell, an unmoving gaunt version of who he had been.

“Right,” Tibs said, turning to face the others. “I’m definitely not able to do this.” He gave them his most maniacal smile. “Anyone else wants to test what I can’t do?” He took a step toward them, and as one they ran off, screaming. The one he’d partially drained the slowest.

He let them go. He didn’t have long before others came in. He faced the block and channeled earth.

All urgency left him as he raised his fist. He moved essence along his arm, hardening it. Infusing his essence with it until instead of white, it was the red-brown of earth essence. His fist moved down slowly, but speed didn’t matter. It never did. How many times had Tibs made mistakes trying to hurry?

The fist connected with the crystal block and a crack spread along the narrow length while his fist went in past two fingers. He smiled and raised it again. The block was broken into two, each half pulsating separately, out of sync. He felt nothing different in the surrounding essence, but breaking it further could only help him.

Pain erupted in his side, and he sent essence to it as he turned. His flesh hardening and preventing the guard from pulling it out. He struck the guard and his skull shattered under the impact. He looked up and the four other guards back away.

“Fuck, they’re right, he’s doing magic,” the woman in the lead said. “Look at his skin.”

Tibs didn’t wonder what they meant. His curiosity was as slow to react as the rest of him and his arm was already moving him. They looked at the body at his feet with the crushed head and didn’t move from where they stood. Tibs brought his fist down on the block, breaking that part into two also, each pulsating in its own time.

And now, he thought he felt something in the essence. A rising and lowering of its intensity. He tried to send essence into the ground to immobilize his enemies, but even at its weakest, the disruption still ripped his control away from it as soon as it left his body. His arm was rising.

“Attack! Don’t let him break it further!” she yelled.

He filled himself with earth essence, but the first one collided with him before he was done, forcing Tibs to take a single step back to maintain his balance. The man, easily three times as massive as Tibs, stared at him in surprise as Tibs grabbed him by the neck, raised him, and slammed him onto the block. The impact didn’t have the focus to break it into two again, but a spiderweb of cracks spread over it.

Tibs smiled as he flicked the body away and it hit the opposing wall with the breaking of bones. The three remaining guards hit him with their sword, and while his armor was

getting sliced to pieces under the blades, they only registered as a contact against his skin, and the sound they made was that of metal striking stone.

He reached for one, but she stepped away.

They were annoyingly fast. But it didn't mean they were a problem. He faced the block and raised his arm.

"Stop him!"

Someone jumped and grabbed onto Tibs's arm, but the weight barely registered. He brought it down at the center of the spiderweb and his fist went through to his elbow. The crystal cut the man holding his arm when he didn't let go in time.

That section shattered into pieces, each still pulsating at a different speed. Around him, the intensity of the disruption fluctuated more. He sent essence out, and wrapped the closest fighter's foot with it, immobilizing him long enough to grab him.

More came down the stairs. And over the sound of the boots on the wood, he heard Sebastian giving orders to kill him at all costs.

The man came down on the largest block with as much strength as Tibs could manage, and the torso exploded as the impact shattered it into pieces.

The disruption shattered with it. Each small piece still pulsed with green light, but they no longer had an effect Tibs noticed. Outside, he sensed Don run toward the house.

He considered taunting Sebastian, but what was the point? Tibs swept an arm and there were enough people in the room they weren't all able to get out of the way of his slow arc. Bones shattered, people were forced back against the others.

In the aftermath, and under more of Sebastian's screamed orders, people piled onto Tibs. They didn't bring him down, or keep him from moving his limbs, but the number of people holding on to him made moving difficult.

Corruption pushed into the outside wall, but the house's enchantment fought back. Don was strong, but the sorcerers who had made them were more advanced. He would need help. Which meant Tibs needed to switch to a new element.

"Sebastian!" he called in a teasing tone as the people holding on to him screamed in pain as their armor and flesh blackened and melted away. "I'm coming for you!" he smiled at one of the fighters a few steps away as they locked eyes, and the man doubled over, emptying his stomach. His essence was now that deep purple that made everything so much simpler.

With bother with exerting himself, fighting everyone here when all he had to do was... corruption rolled off him and bodies melted.

"Sebastian! Where are you?" Tibs stepped toward the stairs. He noticed his armor rotting and stopped it. He didn't need it anymore, but it had sentimental value. He'd survived many runs wearing it.

He reached the steps and chuckled. "Well, that's inconvenient." The wood had rotten away to nothingness. He looked at the door. Heard the fear and commotions coming from it. A woman looked in and her face turned sickly green before moving away. Tibs had never noticed before just how pretty that color was.

He looked at the gap to reach the door. He could switch to earth, but that would mean

going slow. Air would cause him to waste time, and he might not even go after Sebastian. The man had to pay. Light? No, Purity? Definitely not, Darkness? Nope. Fire? Well, he could always burn down the house. Water?

He looked at the still melting bodies. No, that one was the worst of the deal right now.

“See, this is always the best element to use,” he said out loud in case someone could learn something. He gathered the corruption in the room and concentrated it until it was liquid. He snorted. “And Harry said this was hard.”

He shaped it until he has stairs and tentatively put his weight on the first one. When it supported him, he stepped up to the door.

The room on the other side was empty. People were running away. Now, Tibs couldn't have that. He called the stairs to him, absorbed the essence, and placed his hand on the wall. It was time to show Don what an expert could do.

He overwhelmed the enchantment by pouring half his reserve into the wall, then guided it around the house. The walls darkened and began buckling as they weakened. The ceiling creaked and groaned, and Tibs looked up as it began falling.

“Well, this could be a problem.” He said as it fell on him.

Tibs sighed. This was what hurrying caused. He slowly pushed through the rubble until he was outside.

“Tibs!” Jackal called, and he turned, smiling at his friend. “Not time!” He yelled as Tibs began opening his mouth. “My Father's getting away.”

“Jackal. How?”

“I said no time.” The fighter grabbed his arm as he ran by and nearly fell when Tibs didn't move. He looked at him, eyes growing wide. “Abyss, you can do that already?”

“What. Do. You.”

“Let go of it, Tibs. Now.” Jackal looked beyond and Tibs heard running in their direction. He didn't want to let go, letting go mean he'd rush and make mistakes again, but the pleading in Jackal's eyes made him nod.

He was sore, as Don caught up to them.

“See, that's what someone with power can do,” the sorcerer said proudly.

“Never doubted you,” Jackal replied. “We need to go. My father got out of the house before it fell in. He'd headed for the platform.” This time, when he pulled on Tibs, he followed.

“He doesn't have an Attendant,” Don said. “What does he think he'd going to do?”

“I don't know, but knowing my father, he has a plan.” Jackal glanced at Tibs. “Don, I think you need to go back to the inn.”

“And let you claim you did everything? Not a chance.”

“We won't claim it,” Jackal snapped as they came around the house's rubble. A mass of Sebastian's people were heading in the platform's direction.

“Right, like you haven't spent your entire time since our first encounter planning out to undermine me,” the sorcerer replied.

“I'm taking the roofs,” Tibs said and didn't wait for an answer. He ran to the closest

house and climbed. There were no direct roads to the platform from this location. Even with the alleys, it was a series of turns. While using the roofs, Tibs could go in a straight line.

So long as he could keep himself from getting distracted.

He ran the length of the roof and jumped. He laughed as he let himself fall further than he'd planned before sending air before him and forming a platform to land on and jump. He looked behind him, pouting. He'd expected it to be more fun. He ran the length of the roof and threw himself in the air.

This time, he wrapped air around him like he'd seen Carina do and tried to get him to carry him further up.

"Oops." He shucked and tucked into a ball before crashing onto the roof. He got to his feet and ran down the incline, then threw himself into the air. He really should pay attention to what he was doing. He made a disk, jumped off it, and landed on the other roof.

That was the way to do it.

But, if he fell because he was too heavy, and when he filled himself with earth he was so heavy he couldn't be moved, what would... He threw himself in the air and pushed that essence throughout his body.

He watched in amazement as his hand became translucent. He could see the roof he was about to crash into through it.

"Oops." He giggled and had a gust of wind push him up. He was surprised his armor was still on him and laughed. Now, wouldn't that be fun, flying around stark naked? He could just imagine what Jackal would say. He grabbed at the strap keeping the arm armor on. No better time than now to do it.

Motion in the corner of his eyes made him stop. Fighting. They were really far.

Tibs looked down.

No, he was really up. The wind was still pushing him up.

Laughing, he had it stop, and he continued in the same direction.

How fast could he go on the way down? He let go of the air essence.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Tibs was falling from higher than he'd ever been. Options, what were his options? He cursed. Only one, really. Hopefully, he would be focused enough to keep from crashing.

Tibs laughed as the houses approach. This was a lot more fun than he'd expected. A yell made him look up. A group had pushed through the attack and Tibs made out Sebastian. For a second, he considered letting him go and enjoying his fall, but the man was responsible for a lot of people in his town dying and being unhappy. He couldn't let him get away with that.

And really, how much fun would it be to make the man pay for all the unhappiness he'd caused?

Translucent again, Tibs altered his fall to match Sebastian's run. He only had a dozen with him now. The others remaining behind to prevent pursuers. Tibs laughed. No one ever looked up.

An arrow hit his armor and sent Tibs careening aside. He bounced off a roof, then another one before landing between two houses.

He pulled on the arrow, but his translucent fingers slid along in instead of grabbing onto it.

Well, that was no fun. If he let go of the essence to pull it out, he'd be ripping it out of his flesh too. He should have remained in the sky. Coming low had been a bad idea. He jumped to the roof, and the platform was only a few blocks away. He couldn't see Sebastian from this angle, but he had to be ahead of the man.

Tibs was going to have some fun. He jumped the roofs, aiming for ever higher without help from the wind. He missed one and hit the wall on the opposite house, groaning as he slid down. The sound was a formality as filled with air as he was. He'd barely felt the impact.

How high of a fall could he survive this way?

Back on the roof, he saw the platform and Sebastian running toward it. How had the man gotten ahead of him? Tibs pouted. That was so unfair. He only had legs to run with and Tibs had had the sky. He jumped to the other roof, then down.

He knew how to make Sebastian pay for cheating like that. He let go of air and channeled—

Tibs screamed in pain and grabbed onto his shoulder, hand around the shaft of the arrow, and barely kept from falling.

Sebastian turned to look at him. The man next to him had golden eyes.

"This isn't over," Sebastian snarled before the essence around him and the man with golden eyes shifted.

"No!" Tibs yelled, channeling fire to keep Sebastian from escaping.

## Stepping up-57

Tibs groaned as he came awake, which was cut short as pain erupted from his jaw.

"Yeah," a man said. "Sorry about that."

Tibs sighed and opened his eyes. Jackal was seated facing the bed, his feet propped up on the end. This was Kroseph's room. Tibs carefully rubbed his jaw.

"Do I have to point out how utterly stupid what you did was?" Jackal asked.

"I had to keep your father from escaping!" Tibs cursed his painful jaw.

"Oh, now he's my father and not Sebastian?" Jackal asked mockingly. "Well, he did escape. I got to see him vanish before the fire engulfed the platform and everything around it. You're lucky no one was close enough to see you. What were you thinking, Channeling fire? You know what it does to you."

"I was angry."

"And fire just made it worse, Tibs. You knew it would." Jackal sighed. "Fuck. I think you caused more destruction with that than my father managed during this little war of his."

"Did..." realization slammed into Tibs. "Did I kill any of the townsfolk? The Runners?"

Jackal leveled his gaze on him, and Tibs readied himself for the worse. Then it

softened. “There weren’t any townsfolk around. The Runners were far enough they only caught the edge of the blast, and the Attendant’s building had protections on it that kept them safe. I was the most hurt by it since I had to reach you in the middle of that conflagration. You owe me a set of armor.”

Tibs nodded, looking his friend over. “Are you hurt?”

Jackal shook his head. “Stone doesn’t burn as easily as leather. Hitting you across the jaw was the only way I could think of stopping you since you were beyond listening to anyone. I’m glad you didn’t pull with fire what you did with earth. If you’d made yourself all fire, I don’t know what I could have done.”

“If no one saw me, what does the guild think happened?”

Jackal snorted. “Abyss if I know that. But I told everyone my father had an enchanted thing to cover his escape. Which I know he does, and I doubt he’s going to come back to claim I’m lying. I also told everyone you were unconscious, just beyond the fire, when I carried you back. How did you keep your stuff from burning up?”

Tibs shrugged. “the clerics?” he asked, wincing as he touched his jaw again. His shoulder was hurting too.

“Gone. The moment Don told them we’d destroyed my father’s house, they ran to the guild. From what I heard, as soon as someone put out the fires around the platform, they were on it and back to that city of theirs. I doubt we’re going to see them before the dungeon opens again.”

“So they’d left by the time we were back.” It would explain why no one had healed him.

“Oh no,” Jackal said, then let out a bark of laughter. “This girl was still here. She even offered to heal you, but I said no. Then she left.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Jackal dropped his feet to the floor. “You destroyed at least two dozen houses, Tibs. I think you deserve some pain for being that kind of idiot.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, but that’s not going to fix the houses. I want your word that from now on, when you’re outside the dungeon, you’re only channeling water.”

“It’s not like I can do much anymore. I barely have any essence left and without draining Sto’s creatures, it’s going to take a long time for it to replenish.”

“Your word, Tibs. No dodging or misdirecting. The only reason the guild isn’t going to come down on you like one of the dungeon’s ceiling pillars is that my father made for an easy culprit this time. He won’t be around if it happens again, and I’m not sure you’ll deserve our protection at that point.”

Tibs swallowed hard. He tried to look Jackal in the eyes, but the anger there was too much. “Just water, I promise.”

As the silence stretched, Tibs forced himself to look up. Jackal was studying him. Was there anything he could say to show he was being truthful? Right, because Tibs hadn’t lied before when it served him.

Jackal stood. “Come on, Kro made sure there’d be stew left for you. It’s going to be



awhile until the inn is back to its normal self again.”

Tibs was dressed in a rough gray shirt and pants. They weren't his.

“I tried to tell Kro you didn't care if you slept in your skin, but my man has ideas of what can and can't be done in the skin.”

“Not sleep I take it?”

“Not sleep alone.”

Tibs chuckled. “So people sleeping in the common room in their skin's fine?”

“Only sleeping with your special person is fine to do in the skin,” Jackal said. “Easier to have fun that way when—”

“I really don't want to know.”

Jackal ruffled Tibs's hair. “One day Tibs. And on that day, feel free to come ask me for all the good tricks.”

Tibs shoved the fighter's hand away and shuddered.

The eating room was loud with celebration. Tibs was amazed how are quiet the third floor was since no essence was used in the inn's construction.

“And I poured everything I had,” Don said, standing on a table. “And it felt like it wouldn't be enough. Me and my amulets against that house's enchantments, and for an instant, I thought I'd be letting the town down. Then I found more, and those enchantments melted away. And with the protection gone, the entire house came crashing down.”

Cheers erupted.

“He's been telling that over and over,” Jackal said, heading for their table. “He's soaking in the adoration. The hero of Kragle Rock they're calling him.”

As soon as Tibs sat, Kroseph was at their table, a bowl and two tankards in hand. “How are you feeling?” He placed the bowl before Tibs. The stew looked watery.

“I hurt,” he replied. “Jackal wouldn't let the cleric heal me before she left.”

Kroseph looked at Jackal, expression serious, then at Tibs again. “I think this is one of those times my man did the right thing. He told me what you did.”

Tibs looked away. “I didn't mean to,” he whispered.

“Maybe not, but you know how dangerous that element is. A lasting reminder will do you some good.” The server nodded to Don, who was now recounting one of the fights to make it to Sebastian's house. “Did you know he'd turn into suck a show boaster?”

Tibs listened to Don. His description wasn't too far off. Don's role was slightly exaggerated, and Jackal's diminished, but Don didn't outright lie about who had done what. Tibs was surprised.

“Being the best if what he thinks of himself,” Tibs said, eating. “Now he gets to be it.”

“Only you're the one who did it,” Kroseph whispered.

“It doesn't matter to me. Sebastian's gone. That's what I wanted. And if that means the guild's attention is going to be on Don rather than me, that's useful too.”

“How long do you think until Don does something to shatter the illusion you've let him create?” Jackal asked.

“Longer than you think,” Tibs replied. “Don’s smart.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs was on the third tankard after his stew. He was relaxing. Don had stopped recounting stories, and he was seated at a table, talking with whoever stopped by. Tibs didn’t think he’d ever seen the sorcerer smile before now.

He straightened as he felt the people approaching. So many essences he couldn’t tell them apart, but as a group, they were powerful.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“The guild’s coming,” Tibs whispered, then the door opened and adventurers entered.

Silence fell in the room, but it was tense. The only ones looking at the arrival impartially were Kro’s family, and Tibs figured that was because, as innkeepers, they couldn’t show how they felt.

The Runners, on the other hand, had no trouble showing their dislike for the guild, even if none voiced it. Tibs recognized Tirania’s essence and, behind her, Harry. The adventurers parted, and the two stepped forward. Tirania walked to Don’s table. The sorcerer stood and smoothed his robe. He looked apprehensive.

“I am here,” she said, tone firm, “to carry the guild and the town’s thanks to you, Don Arabis, for saving so many people and chasing the troubles away.” She inclined her head.

Tibs couldn’t tell if she was happy about what had happened or not. As with any times she spoke, she gave nothing away.

“Thank you,” Don stuttered, then straightened. “I only did what was called of me. What honor required I do for the people who took me in and gave me a home. I couldn’t let what was happening to them continue. I came as quickly as I could once I learned of the town’s plight.”

Too much. Tibs thought. Don wasn’t talking to one of his goons, or even another Runner. Someone like Tirania would see through the bluster. She might even call him out on it and—

She inclined her head again and started turning away.

“But,” Don hurried to say. “This victory isn’t mine.” Maybe he’d realized he’d gone too far? “I was just one person. Everyone here, everyone in this town played theirs, and that’s what allowed us to defeat the monster who would have destroyed us.”

She studied him. “That may be so, but a crowd can do nothing without a leader. You were that leader; you guided and shaped the people of Kragle Rock into a force that defeated that criminal. Accept the praise for them, because without you, this town would have been destroyed.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Jackal whispered before drinking.

Don glowed under her praise.

“Thank you, Guild leader.”

The man was going to be impossible to deal with for a while. Tibs sipped from his tankard. Was Tirania that blind to how the town worked? Did she care so little? *Noble* popped into his mind and he silenced that anger. Not everyone who had power was a noble, and not only nobles were assholes.

She looked the room over, her gaze passing over Tibs as it did everyone else. “You all have my thanks.” She turned and headed for the door.

“I—” Jackal started, but Tibs shook his head, nodding to Harry, who was approaching.

“If it isn’t the guild high and mighty leader of the guard.” Jackal raised his tankard to the man. “Feeling mighty proud of yourself, I take it?”

“I’m not here to get into an argument,” Harry replied. “I’m here to say thank you. I know the two of you had more to do in saving the town than he did.”

“We wouldn’t have had to do anything,” Jackal snarled. “If you hadn’t made it easy for my father to get his people in here. How many of the guards were his, Knuckles?”

“I didn’t know,” Harry replied through clenched teeth.

“You should have.”

“Jackal, drop it,” Tibs said. Harry’s fists were clenched tight enough they shook.

Jackal stood. “No. I’m not dropping this. I told you this was going to happen. You know him, you know how he works. The only way you didn’t know what was happening was because you never bothered to look.”

Harry stepped forward and knocked the table into Jackal. He seemed surprised it was there and looked around. “I questioned them all. I asked them if they were loyal to my brother. They all told the truth when they said no.”

“Are you really that dumb, Knuckles?” Jackal demanded. “Loyalty’s not needed when there’s coin involved. Did you even ask if they’d taken my father’s coin? Or did you just assume that because you thought of one question, you got all the answers?”

“Watch your tone, Jackie-boy,” Harry threatened.

“Or what? You’re going to do to me what you should have done to my father the moment he appeared on that platform?”

“I am the authority here, Not you.”

“Then fucking act like it. Where were you when we were under attack? Where were your precious guards, those that didn’t turn out to be working for my father? I didn’t see you come to our rescue. Isn’t that your job? Protecting this town? Oh no, how idiotic of me. The only thing the guild cares about is the dungeon. This measly little town can be rebuilt after my father destroyed it.” Jackal stopped to catch his breath and the two of them glared at each other.

Harry opened his mouth,

“Or were you going to be the one destroying it?” Jackal demanded. “If we didn’t stop him?”

The guard’s mouth closed audibly.

“You wouldn’t have,” Tibs said. He couldn’t. Harry might not have been able to act to protect the town, but he wouldn’t have acted against it. He was its guard. The glance the man gave Tibs, the pain in it, was answer enough.

Harry turned and left before Tibs got over his shock and ordered him out of the inn, out of his town.

“How did you think he’d do that?” Tibs asked quietly. He wanted to scream at Jackal, make him responsible for shattering Tibs’s hope in a man, but Jackal had just done what

Harry's element did. He'd shone a light on a lie.

Jackal sighed as he sat. "When a house is infested with rot beetles, you burn it down, with everything and everyone on it, because if only one of those things survives, they're going to spread to the next house, and the next and before you know it, the whole neighborhood is rotting and taking the city with it." He looked through the tankard on the table and found one with some ale left in it. "Of course, my father would have escaped, so ultimately, it would have been for nothing. But the guild would have clean land let people rebuild on." He snorted. "More coins they could demand for the privileged." He downs what was in the tankard.

"What is Sebastian going to do now?"

Jackal considered it. "This is going to have cost him. That house, the enchantments, that thing which made using essence difficult. None of that is cheap. We have awhile to regroup, but he's going to be back. My father doesn't take defeat well. He's won too often for that. That you are responsible is going to anger him even more. A kid beat him. If we could spread that story, no one would take him seriously."

"The whole town beat him," Tibs said.

"You got the town to resist him. My father knows the difference between the hammer and who's wielding it. I'm not saying someone else wouldn't have done it, but you did it first." He chuckled. "Fuck, you disrespected him from the moment you first met him. You weren't scared of him, Tibs. That might worry him more and everything else. So yeah, he's going to come back. But more than that, he's going to come back to hurt you, specifically."

Tibs sighed. "So we have to put people on the platform. We need to find a way to keep order in the town, and we have to survive the dungeon."

"You can always put the hero of Kragle Rock in charge," Jackal said with a smirk.

Tibs watch Don with the people at his table. He was reluctant to admit it, even to himself, but he had more respect for the man. He'd been competent in most of the plans he made. Hadn't run away at the first sign of trouble. Fuck, he'd wanted to chase Sebastian. Tibs wouldn't have expected that from the sorcerer he'd known before.

"I think it's best if we let him be the guild's focus. With their attention on him, it's going to be easier to arrange things without being noticed."

Jackal smiled. "You have a plan?"

Tibs sighed. "I have Runners. I'm hoping that enough to keep the town standing until we have a plan."

\* \* \* \* \*

Guards surrounded the rubble that was Sebastian's house. They weren't in green and black, only leathers, with an insignia painted on the front. A white shield with two crossed swords. It had been hurriedly painted. A way to tell them about from everyone else in leathers.

Jackal had suggested painting some of their armors with it so they could pass themselves as guards, but Tibs didn't want that. He wanted the town to know who protected them. Who they could trust when it came down to it.

And he didn't care if Harry knew it.

“Move on, kid,” the guard said. “This isn’t a place for you.”

People were working among the rubble. Adventurers with the corruption as their element had arrived the day after Tirania’s visit to the inn, and they were moving the corruption away into barrels especially treated to contain it.

One day. Tibs ground his teeth. One day was all it took for her to bring them in. And she hadn’t done anything about the pool that was where the Caravan Garden had used to be. Even now. Not one of them had gone there.

They were only here because the guild was after the same thing Tibs had hoped to get. The crystal that had been under the house.

There were still pieces. Tibs could feel it, this close to them. A change in the essence, a drop and raise in the ease it could be manipulated. It meant multiple pieces.

He walked away. He’d come back at night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The guards were still there. The rubble was lower, workers carrying them away under globes of elemental light.

The only Tibs would get closer was to channel darkness, but he’d promised he wouldn’t. If he knew what to expect from it, he might do it anyway. It wasn’t like Jackal would know.

Unless he destroyed something or was caught.

He didn’t think Darkness would make him destructive, but getting caught was a possibility.

He walked away along the roof. Maybe stealing a piece from the guild would be simpler.

Right, like that building would ever be a place he could break into.

He smiled.

Now, why did it have to be him that broke into it?

He needed to make plans.

More plans.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How much?” Tibs asked the man seated at the table, feet on it, balancing on the back legs of his chair. He was dressed in old leathers was had so much essence woven through it Tibs wasn’t sure there was actual leather. His hair was the color of sand, his eyes the purple that used to make Tibs sick, and his skin was a deep tan. The concentration of his essence placed him around the Delta level.

The man looked at the tankard in his hand. “One of these is a copper, but you’ll want something weaker. Don’t start on the hard stuff if you can avoid it. The good one’s going to ruin you.”

“How much to buy you services.”

“You’re way too young to be needing my services, kid. Run along and go play at being an adventurer.”

“I’m a Runner,” Tibs said through greeted teeth. “I don’t fucking care what you think of my eyes,” he continues at the raised eyebrow. “Go ask the guild. I want to know how

many coins it's going to take to get you to remove the corruption that's in my town."

The man dropped his feet. "You aren't talking about the house, are you?"

"Merchant Row. Corruption got there and ate a building. It's not growing anymore, but the guild's done nothing to remove it. So I want to hire you to do it."

"Can't be done."

Tibs leaned forward. "I can get the coins. The dungeon's going to open soon. He has a third floor now. The loot's going to be better."

"You're doing a third floor?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Tibs growled. He so wanted to channel water and show him, but he needed to stay angry at this man for not wanting to help.

The man sighed. "It's not going to help." He raised a hand as Tibs started protesting again. "It's not the money. I already looked it over. I was planning on talking with the guild, offering them a cut-rate to remove it. That thing's a danger to people. But it can't be removed."

"It's your element. You just need to be strong enough, right?"

The man smiled. "You know your stuff; good on you. Only you're wrong in this case. That pool's different. Something happened there. You'd be in a better position to know what, since you live here, but that pool got connected to the element."

"What? What does that mean?"

"You're doing a third floor, so I'm going to take a guess that you had your audience, no matter your eyes show."

Tibs nodded.

"That place you were taken for it, it's one with a direct connection to your element. It makes things like getting an audience easier. It also makes the essence there more powerful. You'll replenish your reserves as fast as you use them even without training."

"Alright." Tibs hesitated. "Doesn't that mean you wouldn't run out of essence to remove the pool?"

"No. It means the pool will never run out of essence."

"Because something happened there." Tibs was getting a bad feeling.

The man nodded. "Something the caused the element to be connected to the pool."

"What could make that happen?"

The man shrugged. "No idea. The ones we use are so old no one knows how they were made. This is the first one to ever appear, as far as I know." Eh chuckled. "If you want my advice, find out who owns that land and buy it from them for cheap. Because it's only a question of time before one of the corruption sorcerers realizes what it is and they're going to want to set research there."

"You realized what it is."

"Yeah, but I don't stay in one place. I'm the wandering kind of adventurer. Not the stay in place and study things."

"You said you don't know what happened. But what do you think could have happened?"

The man shrugged again. "No idea. But whatever it was, it caused corruption to take

an interest in that place specifically, because I can't see how that kind of connection happens with it deciding it will."

Tibs nodded and left.

The pool of corruption couldn't be removed because of him. He'd been in it when he had his audience.

Did that mean somewhere behind the archery field there was a connection to the earth? At the mountain near MountainSea for air. In Sto for fire. No, that was couldn't be since the fire was gone. Maybe that was how Sto had broken the rules? Again, no. Tibs had his audience with Light there, too.

He cursed. He didn't care about the other places. All he wanted was to get the corruption out of his town. If the guild had acted before he had his audience, this wouldn't be a problem anymore.

Something else the guild had failed his town on.

The list was getting way too long.

## Stepping up-58

The street was busy with people, even if it was mostly dark. Lanterns were hung on temporary poles for light as they work on clearing out the burned husks of the buildings surrounding the transport platform. Here and there, families looked through what was left of their home for anything meaningful that might have survived.

Tibs took a step toward one family. He'd done this to them. The least he could do was go and offer comfort, explain he hadn't—

"Where are you going?" Kroseph asked.

"To explain to them I didn't mean for this to happen."

"You can't do that." The statement was firm. The server had spent the previous evening on a similar walk, cuddling and explaining the reasons, but in his current state, Tibs didn't reason well.

"But their suffering is my fault." Tibs understood the reasons. How taking responsibility for the fire would bring him to the attention of the guild for having multiple elements; would make them hold him and never let him go. But what did that matter when someone suffered from his actions?

"So? Think Tibs. Use that mind of yours. Don't let your emotions govern you."

"I am using my mind," he replied petulantly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have used that tone. You're trying to help me."

Kroseph chuckled. "And I can't tell if that was you apologizing, or the water, which I suppose is an improvement."

Jackal had wanted to be part of these walks, as had Carina, but Kroseph had pointed out this was a 'dealing with people' problem, not a 'dealing with monsters'. Of the three of them, he was the most qualified.

Tibs looked at the family, the father, mother, and four children. The oldest girl

probably already worked with whichever parent had a shop or a craft. The boy, a little younger than her, kept the two youngest by him as they cried, and Tibs's heart broke.

But he didn't go to them. Kroseph was right, taking responsibility wouldn't help them, it wouldn't help him and it wouldn't help the town. He had to remember that his decisions couldn't be about this very moment, this one pain he saw. As difficult as it was to look past the now, he had to think about the days and weeks to come.

But it was hard.

Constantly having to remind himself consequences mattered was exhausting, but he needed the training. It was the only way he'd get better at it, and as Kroseph pointed out, he was improving.

"How do you do it?" Tibs asked. "See the pain and not act to comfort it?" he remembered doing the same, but right now, thinking about anything not in the now was difficult.

"I act on it when I can," the server replied, "but I'm not an adventurer. I don't have an element I can channel and fix everything. And sometimes it's not about fixing something." He looked at Tibs. "It's also not always about telling people you did it. Giving them a target for their anger rarely helps, in the long run. It just makes them angry. Sometimes it's just holding them and listening to their problems. Sometimes, it's giving them an ale and not charging for it so they can numb themselves for a little while."

"There are different ways to comfort someone," Tibs said. "That's what I have to remember." He still wanted to go to them. He wanted to undo the damage he'd done. Not have channeled fire. Not have been angry. "I wish Sebastian had never come," He said through gritted teeth.

"Is that anger?" Kroseph asked, surprised.

Tibs frowned. Was it? Could he be angry when channeling water? "I'm sorry," he mumbled, ashamed.

"And now shame?"

Tibs looked at the server. Why did he sound so happy? Somehow Tibs was losing some of what it meant to be water. That wasn't a cause for happiness.

Tibs kicked a stone away and pouted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, explain to me again why I'm doing this?" Quigly asked, sword in hand, looking at Tibs.

"Tibs needs the practice with his sword," Carina said, "and you're the only one Jackal trusts with helping him."

"He's got his element," the fighter said, "what's he need knowing how to fight with a sword?"

"Are you scared?" Tibs asked.

"Scared of hurting you," Quigly replied. "You know what Jackal's going to do to me if I cut you?"

"Tell you to be more careful," Jackal said from the crate he lounged on. Because they didn't want too many people to see Tibs's eyes yet, they'd elected to train in one of the



unused construction zone instead of on the training fields.

Tibs made the water flow to his hand and shaped it into a sword.

Quigly stared. "Your eyes, they're blue now."

"He can't control it," Carina said. "It comes and goes."

"That's a thing? Mine didn't do that."

"It's his age," she said.

Tibs looked at the blade he held. How jagged it was. He didn't want this. This was something that inflicted pain. It was wrong to use water to make it.

He fought the instinct to melt it, and this time, won. Over the last three days, Jackal had forced him to make the sword. The first day Tibs had denied him. He didn't care what explanations the fighter gave, he would never wield something designed to inflict pain.

The previous morning, Jackal had convinced him to make the blade, and one look at it had made Tibs sick. The rest of the day had been spent getting used to seeing it, holding it. Contemplating the pain it could do.

Tibs had wrapped himself into the comfort water provided when it had been time to sleep. He'd needed it, knowing what today brought.

"Tibs?" Quigly asked, and Tibs nearly flung the blade away in surprise.

"I'm okay," he said, calming his breathing.

"You don't look okay."

*I'm about to learn how to inflict untold pain. How can I be okay?* "Maintaining the sword isn't easy." He'd practiced the lie, both with water and without. Lying while channeling water was tricking, because lies that hurt tended to stick in his throat, while the innocent ones came out as easily as normal.

He'd learned that it didn't matter what he told himself about how innocent a lie might be. The water knew the truth. So he was practicing that too now.

Lies were tools of the rogue, and Tibs would remain a rogue, no matter what he might feel about it when channeling water.

"Alright. What kind of training have you had?"

"Some with a metal sword, but those are heavy."

"That isn't?" Quigly asked.

"It's water," Tibs replied. "It's my essence. It's part of me."

The fighter contemplated something. "How's the balance?" Tibs looked at him uncomprehendingly. The fighter tapped the hilt of the sword he held. "This is for more than protecting your hand. It's balancing the weight of the blade so you can make easy movements. On a well-made blade, it should be about here." He placed the flat of his blade on his index a little more than a hand-span of the guard. The sword tipped up, and he caught the hilt. "This isn't a well-made sword."

Jackal snorted. "You're going to have to ask a merchant if that's what you want, and you're going to need coins. Lots of them."

Quigly looked at Tibs's blade. "I took metal as my element, so I'm hoping I'll be able to do what Tibs did. Make my own. Easier to carry and I never have to worry about not being armed." He smiled. "Although I'll make mine not quite as dangerous looking. I'm good

enough I don't need to scare my opponent."

"I don't have the practice yet to make a better one."

"Okay. So about the balance on it?"

Tibs took the blade and placed the flat a hand-span away from the guard on his finger. The sword was perfectly still.

Quigly approached and looked at it. "Okay, on this length, it should be closer. Can I touch it?" Tibs nodded. "It's not as cold as I expected." He positioned it a finger closer to the guard, and the sword remained still. The fighter frowned. "Did you change anything to how it's balanced?"

Tibs shook his head. "I'm holding it the same way I was before."

Quigly looked at the sword again. "You're not talking about how it's on your finger, are you?"

"It's my essence, that's what's holding it."

Quigly stepped away and raised his sword before him. He stared at it. Looked disappointed and lowered it. "Is that a water thing, or will I be able to do it too?"

"When you're at a higher rank," Carina said. "You're going to learn to do more than use the essence you have in your reserve. I expect that's one of them."

"What rank are you?" He asked Tibs.

"I'm Rho," he answered, "but because of my age, I've had to learn differently, so it might take you a higher rank."

"And metal isn't an element known for being malleable," Carina added. "So that could mean it'll take you even longer."

He nodded, "but I'll be able to do it."

"There's no reason you won't be able to," She said. "Essence isn't limited to what we think of the element. It's purer than that. Once you understand—"

Jackal groaned. "No teaching, please. This is about Tibs learning swordplay."

Carina blushed. "I can tell you more later."

"I'd like that." Quigly looked at Tibs. "How long can you make the blade?"

Tibs frowned. "Why would I want to make it longer? I want to learn how to use a short sword."

"No, you don't. You want to use the longest sword you can manage. The longer the reach, the safer you are. You were limited to a short one until now because of your shorter size and lower strength. At your height, you'd have to wear anything longer than a short sword on your back and that's not useful if you need to draw it quickly. Carrying isn't a problem anymore since you can just absorb it in your reserve. It's weight... well, that's what's going to govern the length you can manage."

Tibs felt the sword in his hand. "It doesn't have any weight." He extended the blade until the point pierced the wall next to the crate Jackal lounged on. He took a step back, and pulled the tip out, and nearly scalped Jackal as he maneuvered it. "Sorry." He shortened it back to short sword length. How could he have been so thoughtless?

He glared at the sword. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

"Well, something that long certainly isn't a good idea for precision," Quigly said

pensively, “but being able to change the length like that. That’s quite an advantage, and with training, it’ll let you adapt to your opponent.” He grinned. “I hope that’s something I can do too.”

Tibs felt sick. He’d have an advantage when it came to hurting people? People trying to hurt him, he forced the thought. He wouldn’t initiate a fight, but Sebastian had shown him that there were people with whom offering comfort wouldn’t help. Then, what Tibs needed to do was keep them from hurting others. And that could require taking up arms and hurting them.

Tibs hated the idea.

He straightened and raised his blade. “How do we start?”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I hate this,” He grumbled.

“Come on,” Jackal said before cheering at the man and woman fighting in the middle of the crowd. “Enjoy the show.”

“This isn’t a show, it’s two people needlessly hurting each other.” He hadn’t known the town had a fighting circle. It was clear Harry didn’t either, with his stance on fighting outside the training fields. If Tibs had known about it, he would have put a stop to it. He didn’t want his town to be a place where people hurt one another. The dungeon was hard enough on all of them. As soon as this exercise was over, he was putting a stop to it.

“There’s nothing needless about it, Tibs. That’s why I bought you here. It’s not pretty, but this is vital to our town’s survival, especially if you want to keep violent crimes to a minimum.”

“Don’t they get enough of fighting in the dungeon?” he demanded.

“What did I do when the dungeon was healing, Tibs?”

“You visited Kroseph’s family in MountainSea.” It was getting easier to move out of the now. And he wasn’t sure he liked it. There was a comfort in not worrying about what was coming, or what had happened before.

“And?”

Tibs sighed. “You nearly got yourself killed in the arena.”

“I wasn’t going to die. It doesn’t look good if a fighter dies outside of a deathmatch.”

“You weren’t in good shape when I reached you.”

Jackal smiled. “But I wasn’t dead, was I?”

“What’s your point?” He demanded in exasperation.

“I’m a violent man, Tibs. I’m not like you. I don’t accept that violence is something I need to do. I crave it. I rejoice in it. Yeah, the dungeon gives me an outlet for it, and it’s better than any of the fights I’ve been in, but I don’t get to visit it all that often.”

“You’ve fought here?”

Jackal nodded. “Who do you think started this?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Tibs was loud enough silence fell. Even the fighting stopped and Tibs looked around, a mixture of embarrassment and anger at them. “How can you do this to one another? Didn’t Sebastian kill enough of us? Are you looking to do his work for him?”

“I’ve got this,” Jackal said as looks turned angry. “No one’s killing anyone here, Tibs.”

Tibs pointed to a man lying on a bench. His face bloody, an arm at an unnatural angle, his chest cut and bruised. “What do you call that?”

“Alive and in a fucking lot of pain.” He grinned. “But alive. He’ll get healed when it’s his team’s turn to go in the dungeon. Until then, he’s gotten the fight out of his system.”

“When Harry finds out, he’s—”

“Knuckles isn’t finding out, Tibs,” Jackal said, all levity gone. “We’re making damned sure of it.”

“But—” Tibs couldn’t find the words. How could Jackal think this was anything like a good idea? How could his friend set something up that hurt his town?

“Tibs, the guild pulled us out of cells. Every Runner here was a criminal of one sort or another. Us fighters? We were all in a cell because we hurt someone, and only a few of us did it because we didn’t have another choice. This last batch? You should hear what some of them did. If we don’t have something like this. We’re going to find other places to fight. This place has other fighters supervising the fights, our strongest ones, making sure no one goes too far. Only fists are allowed, no element. We settle scores, get the fight out of our systems, and have a good time.”

Tibs shook his head. “I can’t—” He turned and walked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thump fell into steps with him and whined.

“You know,” Serba said. “I swear he’s more loyal to you than to me. Anytime he catches your scent, it’s all I can do to keep him at my side.”

“Go away.” He should have climbed a roof.

“My brother does mean well, you know?”

“He’s encouraging them to beat on each other. We’re supposed to help one another, not hurt.”

“He’s giving them an outlet.”

“We have the dungeon for that!”

“Not unless you can go in anytime you need to get your fists in someone’s face.”

He glared at her. “You fight in there?”

She shook her head. “I work off my frustration in other ways.” The smile she gave him told him how.

“I want the town to be a safe place.”

“The ring is part of that. My dogs need to be able to run and snap at one another, the thugs need to hit people.”

He sighed and looked at the sky. Torus was alone there at the moment. Maybe he felt as lonely as Tibs did. Or maybe he had the world to look down on. “I hate that I’m getting used to the fact that I have to let people be hurt.”

“You’re only getting used to that now? I thought you were street.”

He closed his eyes. A mix of frustration and sorrow. Normal reactions that felt so out of place in him at the moment. At least he didn’t need to lie to answer her. “I thought this

place was going to be different.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “It’s one of the lessons this world teaches us. Doesn’t matter where you are. It sucks anyway.”

He nodded.

“You good?”

He snorted. “No. But that’s getting to be normal too.”

## Stepping up-59

Tibs walked up to the mountain, away from the closed door. Even if there was no one guarding it, or no one anywhere along the plain between the town and the mountain. Harry didn’t have enough guards right now to watch the work taking place around the remains of Sebastian’s house and the dungeon. And with recuperating from defending the town, the Runners weren’t interested in ‘guarding’ anything.

Not that Sto needed the protection. He had been nearly impenetrable before Bardik used corruption to break through the door, and Sto had incorporated that element in his walls to make it even harder to do.

Tibs sat and leaned against the rock. Giving Jackal and Carina the slip had been harder than it should have been. He was a rogue, after all, and they weren’t. But they knew him, so they had people watching his usual escape routes. Another problem was that he knew vanishing like this would cause them to worry, and while channeling water as he always did now, even causing them simple worry irked him.

He hadn’t expected dealing with how water affected him when he channeled the essence to be this exhausting. He always needed to be on his guard not to give in to this need to comfort and protect, regardless of the long-term consequences.

He could let go of the element, not worry about being affected, but Carina and Jackal had reminded him that now that his eyes changed color with every element he channeled, he would give himself away the moment he trained with his teacher, and if he couldn’t control how he behaved, he, and the guild, would realize there was more to Tibs’s new status than something having aged enough for his eyes to turn blue.

“I see your trip was successful,” Sto said, and Tibs smiled.

“Yeah. I take it the work’s all done?”

“Yes, Ganny’s finally happy with the third floor. Where is everyone? There’s usually guards at the door, and people milling about.”

“They’re busy with fixing the town; Sebastian tried to take it over while the Runners were away. We only defeated him recently. He escaped.”

“Oh. Does that mean there’s going to be less Runner to explore the third floor?” Sto asked, sounding worried.

“Yes, Sto,” Tibs replied in annoyance, “Runners died defending the town, so there’s going to be less of us.”

“What did I say?”

Tibs sighed and shook his head. “I’m just tired.” He’d forgotten Sto wasn’t human. He didn’t see things the way they did. His concern was that there would be people exploring him, testing themselves on his traps and creatures, and yes, dying in the process. He experienced little of what took place outside of him, so the town didn’t mean as much.

“Then I hope you’ll rest before your run. Do you know when that’s going to be?”

“Once you open your door, the guild will get things started. I won’t know until then.” Grinding sounded, it was loud and the stone against his back vibrated. He craned his neck, but he couldn’t see the door from where he sat. “Is that the door?”

“Yes, since no one’s here, I want to make sure the guild knows I’m ready. I so can’t wait for Runners to come in.”

Tibs chuckled at Sto’s excitement.

“Err, Tibs?” he hesitated. “Can I ask a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t ask the other teams for information on the third floor. I want you to experience it without information. It’s going to be worth it, I promise.”

Tibs closed his eyes as thinking about the information sharing brought thoughts of Pyan and Geoff. Of the people he’d lost. Tandy was the only survivor of that team. He had no idea who she was going to team with once she was recalled.

“I won’t,” he answered. Was there anyone left to get the information sharing going again? With Sto knowing they did it, was there a point?

“Good. You are going to have so much fun!”

That didn’t bode well.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tibs!” the merchant called as he approached the table.

“Darran, how are you doing?” Jackal replied. The others nodded their greetings. Mez and Khumdar had returned that morning, recalled now that the dungeon was ready, and they were enjoying their first meal as a team again.

“I am well, I thank you. My shop suffered minimal damage due to how you protected Merchant Row, and I will be fully restocked before the first run, so please come by for supplies. I will give you a special discount on account of how you lead the defense of the town.”

“Didn’t Don do that?” Mez asked.

Jackal smiled. “We’re happy to let him think that. Makes our lives easier.”

“But we of Merchant Row know who the true heroes of Kragle Rock are.”

“Please don’t start telling people,” Tibs pleaded. “I like not having the guild constantly looked at me for helping with the town.”

“Ah yes, helping the town,” Darran said, and Tibs got a bad feeling. “Jackal, do you mind if I borrow Tibs? I need to discuss something with him on behalf of all merchants.”

“Whatever’s going on,” the fighter said, “Tibs didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Darran nodded. “This isn’t about assigning blame, I promise.”

Tibs stood. "I'll talk, and I'll do what I can to help."

"Tibs," Carina warned, "remember there are more important things than helping."

"Darran wouldn't have come to us if it wasn't important. Do you want to talk at another table, or elsewhere?"

The merchant looked around uncomfortably. "Without wanting to insult our hosts, I'd prefer a tavern. This is something I'd like to ensure doesn't get back to any of the Runners until we're reached an agreement."

Tibs nodded and followed Darran. They finally entered the Drunk Sow. A tavern near the worker's neighborhood. The merchant got them each a tankard, then they sat.

"There's been a rash of robbery," Darran stated. "Nothing too valuable's been taken from any of the shops, mostly supplies for runs, but if they continue, it's going to hurt our ability and willingness to provide for the Runners. We are supposed to have a mutually beneficial relationship, you Runners and us merchants. Having some in your group consider us fair game endangers that relationship."

"Have you told Harry?" Tibs asked.

Darran shook his head. "After how the guards harassed us, we are reluctant to turn to them again."

"They worked for Sebastian. They've been caught, killed, or chased out of town."

"Have they? The guild promised us protection when we settled our shops here. That was in part why it was expensive, but being protected by adventurers does have benefits, but the guild replaced them within a few months with ordinary guards, corrupt guards at that. Guards who the new guard leader brought in himself. That man is still in charge. That man did nothing to protect the town when we were attacked. The guild ignored our complaints, wouldn't even talk to us after the initial ones. We paid for protection we never got. I'm reluctant to turn to them again."

Tibs nodded. Would explaining how Harry had been fooled help? Would that explain the guild not protecting the town? "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"We discussed it. Jackal spearheaded the protection of the Merchant Row and the town, but even before that, you were arranging to protect us from the corrupt guards. We, all merchants, want to restart that arrangement, but make it official. We want to hire you to provide security for Merchant Row."

Tibs tightened his mouth on the ready agreement. Of course, he wanted to help keep them safe. But was that him, or water? Was it the wise thing to do for him, the Runners, or the town?

It would put him against Harry. Who had been willing to let the town be destroyed by Sebastian rather than stop his brother. Okay, he couldn't trust Harry to have the best interest of the town in mind. The guild was what he cared about.

Could he trust the Runners to do it? It would depend on what was in it for them. That would be the hard part, Tibs figured, because if he did this, wanted it to help every Runner, especially the new ones. Those who didn't know what they were getting thrown into. Could he convince any of the Runners to sacrifice what they could get out of this for others? Selflessness wasn't what they were known for.

Could Tibs do this? He wanted to, but what did he know about protecting people?

He knew to get qualified people to help. Jackal, Quigly, Maybe Don? He shuddered at the thought of bringing the sorcerer into this, but the man was smart. As a last resort, if he couldn't find anyone else.

"I'm willing to do it," He finally answered, "but it depends on being able to find people to do this with. I don't think I can get all the Runners to agree. Helping people only happens when it's immediately worthwhile for many of them, and I'm not sure they'll be interested."

"I understand," Darran said. "But there is money in it for all of you."

"First rule is going to be no one talks about the coins with the other Runners."

Darran smiled. "Planning on keeping most for yourself?"

Tibs glared at the man. He couldn't know him that poorly.

The merchant raised a hand. "No talking money with the other Runners."

"You have to be certain none of the merchants will take Harry's protection. We can't be split."

"Of that, you don't have to worry. The few who weren't certain only had to be reminded of what happened to those who sought those corrupt guards' protection to agree not to speak with the new guards."

Tibs nodded. "This isn't me saying yes, but I'll see what I can arrange and we can talk again afterward."

Darran smiled. "Just knowing you are willing to take it on makes me feel safer."

"You realize you're asking a rogue to look after the safety of valuables."

Darran shook his head. "I'm not asking a rogue, Tibs. I'm asking you."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the table were Jackal, Carina, Quigly, an archer names Samuel, a sorcerer names Josaca, and another rogue who only answered to Sticks. Tibs knew Samuel, as he was one original. Carina had suggested Josaca, and Quigly had brought in Sticks after Tibs ran the idea by the three of them.

"Let me get this straight," Stick said. He was thin. So much so that on first seeing him, Carina had asked if he was sick. Sticks had rolled his eyes. "You want us to take on the guards, the guild-backed guards, and give our pay to those good-for-nothing Omegas?"

"We're not taking on the guards," Tibs replied.

Sticks scoffed. "Keep telling yourself that until Knuckles throws you in a cell, with us along for helping you."

"Knuckles isn't going to do that," Jackal said.

"I'm with Sticks," Josaca replied. "The guild has an interest in making sure they are in control."

"Of the dungeon," Jackal said. "I think they've demonstrated how little they care about the town with how they responded to my father's attacks."

"Barricading themselves into their guild building with all the magical protection," Quigly replied. "Unless the merchants are going to withhold the taxes, they have to pay the guild. I don't think we have to worry about it."



Everyone looked at Tibs. "I don't know. I didn't ask Darran that."

"You should have," Josaca replied.

"Joss, lay off him," Carina snapped. "Tibs's done enough already."

The sorceress rolled her eyes. "He got himself in over his head. He just said he didn't think to ask—"

"He asked us to help." Carina glared at the other sorceress. "Would you have?"

"Of course I'd have asked you."

Carina motioned to the others, and Josaca's expression darkened.

"Tibs isn't smart the way you and I are, or the way Jackal and Quigly and Sticks are, but he's smart enough to ask everyone for help. And he didn't say he was doing this; he said he'd see if he could. That's what we're trying to work out. All of us. What is your objection to using the funds to help the Omegas, Sticks?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to be doing the work, not them. Why should they benefit?"

"So they survive," Tibs said.

"What do I care if a bunch of good-for-nothings feed the dungeon?" the rogue replied.

"Because each one who survives due to our help," Quigly said, "is someone willing to share the burden once they're able to. Our biggest problem right now is numbers. If Harry objects to what we're doing, we can't prevent him from shutting us down. How final that is will depend on how generous the guild is. The more Runners survive, the larger our numbers get. I don't think we'll ever have enough people to take on the guild, but we should be able to make them reconsider them using a preemptive attack."

"And do you really need the coins," Jackal said, "with the dungeon providing loot?"

"Of course I need coins," Sticks replied. "You know how much the guild is asking for the training they're forcing on us? I'm not going to be a slave to them for the rest of my life."

Josaca and Quigly exchanged a look.

"I'll give you the details later," Carina told them.

"What the merchants will be paying us isn't going to make a difference for paying that," Tibs said. He didn't know how much the merchants were planning on offering, but once split among everyone taking part, it would be nothing compared to all the gold they'll owe.

"It will be if we make sure we charge enough," Sticks said with a grin. "After all, if they don't pay us, who's going to keep them safe from all the bad people in this town?"

"Sticks," Quigly warned as Tibs stood, water pouring over his hand and shaping into a jagged blade.

"I will," he said through gritted teeth. The sword crackled as it iced over, the jaggedness becoming sharp. "This is my town. I'm not going to let anyone hurt it again. If you're here hoping to coerce the merchant into ruining themselves for you, I'm going to stop you." He looked around. "This is about helping the people in the town. Not making your pouch heave with coins. Get that in your head or get out." He fixed his gaze on Sticks again.

The rogue raised his hand defensively. “Hey, I was just joking. Quig told me you were a fun guy to be around, I thought—”

“I never said that,” Quigly cut him off hurriedly. “I’m going to back Tibs if you plan on causing problems. You’re here because I thought you understood that our future is linked with this town.”

“The dungeon,” the rogue said.

“The town, Sticks. The dungeon’s where we work for our living. The town is where we live. You saw what it turned into when we were at war. I thought you wanted to avoid another one.”

“Fine, Fine.” Sticks raised his hands. “I’m on board and I’m not going to argue about the money, but I’m the example of what you’re going to be dealing with when it comes to the others. You bunch as the exception. What kind of criminals were you?”

“The kinds determined to survive,” Jackal said. Tibs fought the urge to look at his friend and question the statement. “We’re a lot younger than you. Life was hard, and we did what we had to. Maybe if we hadn’t been thrown here, some of us would have changed their ways. Maybe we’d have turned into you. We can’t know, and it no longer matters. We’re here, in this town, and we’re the people who can ensure the next batch doesn’t have to die needlessly.”

“I was told you were stupid,” Josaca said.

“I am the stupid one,” Jackal replied with a grin. “So maybe you need to pay attention to what these two say.” He motioned to Carina and Tibs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Don preened next to the schedule. His name wasn’t on it, because he was going in first, before even the nobles.

Tibs had been surprised to learn the schedule was up, since there hadn’t been a gathering before the dungeon where Harry told the new arrivals how things would be for them.

As the Hero of Kragle Rock, Don had easily rebuilt his team. People had flocked to be on it, and the sorcerer had smiled as he decided who would have that privilege.

“There are more teams,” Carina said.

“Only five among the nobles,” Mez pointed out.

“If there wasn’t a gathering, does that mean there aren’t any new convicts?” Tibs asked.

“Maybe not,” Carina said. “I don’t think using so many convicts is normal. The dungeon nearly died. Then it turned deadlier than expected. Now that everything’s back to normal, we’re probably only getting people paying for the chance to become Runners.”

“Will that affect the plan?” Tibs asked, causing Mez to look at him curiously. Khumdar only had a small smile.

“We’ll have to see,” Jackal replied. “We have two weeks before it’s our turn. Any idea what this third floor is going to be like?”

Tibs shook his head.

“Okay, then we go back to training.”

“Wouldn’t this war we miss count as intensive training?” Khumdar asked.

“You said it,” Jackal said, grinning. “You two missed it, so you need the training.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Alistair smiled on seeing him. “Tibs, your eyes are blue,” he said proudly.

Tibs forced the smile. He was uncomfortable facing his teacher. Did he have enough practice at keeping the caring impulse in check to fool him? Would he be able to limit himself to what someone with only one element had for a reserve?

“They changed at the end of the fight for the town.” Carina had suggested it. No one during the battles had paid him much attention, and they’d taken steps to limit who saw his eyes. She also felt that the stress of war caused people to age, so it would work as a justification.

“I heard about what took place,” Alistair said, taking Tibs’s chin and lifting his head to look into his eyes. “Nasty business. I’m glad you came out of it better.”

“Would you have come help?” Tibs asked before he stopped himself.

“Of course. If I’d been called on, I would have come.”

He believed his teacher, but what he wanted to know was if he would have gone against the guild’s orders if it meant staying out of the fight. He knew what Harry had done, and he’d thought the guard leader more determined to protect the town than his teacher, who had no link to it, other than Tibs.

Maybe it was better that he couldn’t ask that question. He could imagine that Alistair would have come to their help.

“Now that you are fulling Rho, we can move on to the good stuff,” Alistair said and guided Tibs toward a training room.

## Stepping up-60

The stairs leading up to the door had changed. Tibs hadn’t noticed that when he’d spoken with Sto. The stone was polished, with a border of gold with black designs of rats and bunnies and they were shaped to match the curse as they went up the hill, instead of being random flat stones set in the slope.

The two guards by the door didn’t look at them as they approached, only the cleric stepped forward, blocking their way; an older man with a hard expression. He looked at them and placed a hand on Mez without asking, then stepped away.

Tibs studied the way the essence moved. He’d decided purity was the next element he’d work with, both because he felt a ‘work hard’ mindset would be the least destructive of the possibility and because being able to properly heal his friends would benefit them.

“Was it my imagination,” Khumdar said, once they were inside and out of earshot from the entrance, “or were the guards wary of us?”

“I don’t think they know what to make of the job they have to do,” Carina said, “keeping adventurers in the making under control probably isn’t something any of the kingdoms ever trained anyone for.”

“You’d think the guild would take care of that,” Mez commented.

“You’d think,” Jackal said. “But we had adventurer rejects first, then drafted thugs, and now men and women utterly out of their depth. I think no one knows how to handle a new dungeon and the Runners they send into them.”

“Why didn’t they just get people from other dungeons?” Tibs asked. “They’d know.”

“Maybe not,” Carina said. “It’s been a long time since there’s been in a new dungeon. The others have cities around them, with a proper militia. And this dungeon had a tumultuous start. They’re going to write books about it.”

“Is that good?” Sto asked, and Tibs relayed the question.

Carina shrugged. “It might mean the next dungeon to appear will be treated differently, especially if there are still people left of that group who tried to kill you by then. But ultimately, until the guild knows what dungeons really are, I don’t think they’ll ever be able to prepare properly. You don’t handle an animal the same way you handle a thinking being.”

“Ganny doesn’t think it’s a good idea we tell them I can think,” Sto said.

“I agree,” Tibs replied, then shook his head at Carina. “What happened to clerics being part of the teams once Sto was Rho? I didn’t see any teams with one.”

“Maybe they meant Lambda?” Mez said.

“Who knows,” Jackal replied.

“Jackal,” Carina called as she stopped, “the doorway’s here.”

“I thought we’d go through the first floor this time. You know, to see what changed.” Tibs looked up.

“I can force you to use the doorway,” Sto replied. “But I didn’t make any significant changes. This floor is for Omegas, after all. Untrained Omegas,” he added with a miffed tone.

Tibs smiled. It was still early, but they’d gotten enough coin from the merchant as payment for the security the Runners now provided, they’d bought simple cloth armor for two full teams as well as low-quality weapons and provide them with better training. They weren’t told what they would face, but they knew how to handle swords, bows, and the strange essence that was in the amulets the child provided—that was one thing they couldn’t provide since only the guild had them.

There had been no fallout yet, but Tibs expected it was coming.

“Sto doesn’t mind,” he answered Carina’s questioning look.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Can we agree that was a waste of time?” Mez asked as they walked down the stairs. “Sorry dungeon, I mean no offense.”

Sto chuckled. “I can’t be offended that you guys barely had to do anything to wipe the floor. Although watching the stone spear break on Jackal in the first room was a surprise.”

“No one else has done the first floor while stronger?” Tibs asked.

“Sure, but no one’s been brave enough to just step on a trigger and take the spear in the chest.”

Tibs chuckled. “Yeah, brave, that’s how I’d describe it.”

“Idiotic,” Carina said.

“Ah, talking about me behind my back?” Jackal asked.

“Where else are we going to talk about you?” Carina replied. “You’re way ahead of us.”

“I’m excited to face this upgraded second floor.”

“You just want the better loot,” Mez replied.

“Why is it you always sound surprised when you say that?” the fighter asked.

“Because I keep thinking you’ll have enough money, eventually.”

“That is blasphemy!” Jackal was facing them, arms crossed over his chest. “Even without the guild holding debt over our head, there is no such thing as having enough money.”

“Now that’s a noble way of thinking,” Carina said, stepping past the fighter.

Jackal sputtered, trying to reply, while Tibs walked to the back of the alcove. As he expected, next to the doorway from the first floor, there was another etched essence in the stone. Tibs used water to activate it, but every channel rejected the essence.

“Sorry, Tibs. You have to unlock it from the other side.”

Tibs studied the pattern closer. Unlocking it from the other side only meant he’d have to be more clever about how he did it here. Unfortunately, there were too many essences he couldn’t tell apart to work out the mechanism.

“You guy think I can get other elements?” He asked, joining his friends.

“Don’t you have enough?” Mez demanded.

Tibs shrugged. “I can’t do much with essences I don’t have.”

“What do you mean, much?” the archer asked. “What can you do to other essences that we can’t?”

Tibs looked around and sighed. He kept forgetting his training had been different. “At some point, you’ll be taught how to sense there’re other essences. You won’t be able to identify them, but with practice, you’ll be able to defend against them.”

“That isn’t something you do because of your element?” Carina asked.

“My teacher told me about it early, when he showed me he could disrupt my weaves. It’s just easier now that I have my element.”

“How about you use that element to get us across?” Jackal asked.

“My element can’t do that. I need water.”

Jackal smiled. “Well, your eyes are blue.”

Tibs rolled them. “So you know, Sto will have something new ready.”

“Are you going to just walk across the bridge?” Carina asked. “You seemed idiotic enough to take the spears.”

Jackal smiled at her. “I guess I’m not any more of an idiot than that.”

Tibs sent the essence ahead of him as he stepped off the edge and the water was solid by the time he landed, wobbling on the water as it expanded. He kept his footing as it expanded, and he controlled how deep it went.

“Someone’s trying to out-think me,” Sto said, amused.

He didn't have to make it thick, his will determine how solid it was.

Something impacted the ice next to him and broke through. Jackal yelled in surprise and Tibs solidified the water under his feet before he was more than chest-deep.

"I'm not ready," he told the fighter as he raised him even with the surface. He considered leaving him dripping, but was nice and pulled the water off him.

Jackal indicated the ice, wide enough to take a dozen people. "It looked ready."

"If you're in that much of a hurry, you want to run the bridge. I'm trying to make sure Sto can't use the stone pillars on us like he did that last time."

Jackal grinned. "That was fun."

Tibs shook his head and went back to working.

"How is this going to be different? It can simply turn them on as we cross."

Tibs shook his head, spreading the ice over the surface slowly. "He can't make changes while we're in the room. So those pillars are on a trigger. When I iced the pool last time, I did the entire water, and it somehow got bigger, so I figure he's using pressure, either the pool's floor or the walls. So I'm making something that won't press against any of it." With the ice wide enough for six abreast, he expanded it forward. "You can come down now. It'll take the weight."

"Why isn't it slick?" Mez asked as he walked around.

"My essence, I control what it does." He started for the other side and made it to the center when he felt movement under them. "Oh, come on!" He's forgotten about that thing. "This is a trap room! Run!" he added and did so himself. Ahead, he made steps to take them to the other platform. He couldn't afford to be— He skidded to a halt as the creature sped up before him and reinforced the ice around him and his friend.

Ice exploded before them and the ripping water caused the unreinforced ice behind to shatter as his platform bucked.

"Tibs!" Carina yelled, and wind buffeted him.

A glance over his shoulder had him cursing. He was the only one keeping his footing, and she barely kept the others from falling off using air. He hurried to make a waist-high wall around his platform as the creature crashed back into the water.

"What was that?" Jackal demand as the water calmed.

Heat bloomed behind Tibs. "Dead is what it is," Mez replied. Tibs pushed more essence into the platform to combat the fire.

"Should you not hurry us to the other side?" Khumdar asked.

"It's ahead of us," he replied, sensing it go in and out of the edge of his range. "It's waiting." Did it know where they were? Could it sense him? Them? The platform? Or has Sto set it to attack anything moving? It wasn't entirely mindless. He'd scared it off with a blow the last time. "There aren't supposed to be any creatures in trap rooms," Tibs grumbled.

"We can't stay here," Carina said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I know, but if I move, it's going to attack again. I don't know if my ice can take a direct impact. Sto knows what I can do, it'll have kept that in mind when making it."

"If you can get it out of the water, I can shoot it," Mez said. "I'd like to see that water

jumper take my exploding arrow.”

Okay, he might be able to make that happen. He iced the surface ahead as fast as he could. Maybe it had broken it ahead of them because he’d stopped his friends in time, or it had wanted them to have to jump in. He didn’t know how crafty Sto could make the creatures.

As the ice bridge touched the pool’s wall, the creature swam in their direction fast. “It’s coming,” Tibs yelled as it angled up. “It’s going to be close to us!”

It broke the surface and Tibs nearly forgot to steady the platform as he watched it sail through the air. It was translucent blue, the shape of an ale barrel with fins around it and a snout with sharp teeth.

Then it exploded as an arrow of fire impacted it and water and shards of ice rained down on them. Tibs hurried to get them to the other side in case there was another in the water.

Once there were on the stone platform, Tibs looked at the ceiling. “This is a trap room!”

“And?” Sto asked, sounding amused.

“There can’t be creatures in trap rooms!”

“According to whom?” Sto asked smugly.

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at Carina, who shrugged, then Jackal. He was the one with the friend whose father had researched dungeons. The fighter gave a matching shrug. Who had told him that then? Someone had to have told him about that rule.

“Did I just assume there couldn’t be creatures?” he asked.

“Seems that way,” Sto replied.

“Then why didn’t you put any before?”

“Because until you came up with freezing the water, I didn’t think I’d need it. And the rest of the floor is tough enough as it is.”

“Alright. So no taking for granted what we can find in a room based on there being creatures or traps once we’re on the third floor.”

The other nodded, and they moved on to the next room.

The Whippers were the same; as were the rats. Tibs doubt Sto had left the room unchanged, but he couldn’t tell that anyone was different.

“You guys mind if I take this one on by myself?” Jackal asked.

“Yes,” Tibs replied, and glared at the fighter.

“The rats can’t hurt me,” Jackal said, “and I’m pretty sure I can take on five Whippers without trouble. You guys can jump in if you decide I’m in over my head.”

“So we might as well walk in with you then,” Mez said. “Since you’re already in over your head.”

“I believe it would be good for him to test his limits here, rather than against the boss,” the cleric said.

“I’m with Khumdar,” Carina said.

Jackal looked at Tibs.

“Fine,” he replied with a sigh, “but if you die here, I am going to hurt you.”

## Stepping up-61

“I think,” Sto said, “that I need to find a way to keep anyone as strong as Jackal off this floor.”

Jackal moved rubble with a foot, bent down, and picked up the silver coin. The fighter had turned to stone as he walked toward the five Whippers and ignored the rats biting at his ankles and legs. When a whip hit him, Jackal caught it and pulled the Whipper off its feet. With a few punches and kicks, there was only broken stone left of it. The other four went as easily, then stepping on the rats took care of that.

A dozen coppers, four silvers, and one amulet. The guild gave them twenty for it. Was that a fair haul for Jackal barely being challenged? Tibs didn't know. The silvers took care of their lodging and repairs of their equipment. The other rooms would give enough for food and upgrading some things. The rest Tibs accumulated so he could pay as much of his debt to the guild as possible when the time came.

Jackal's disappointment was no more than him always wanting more, although Tibs knew it for the act it was now. Because of his element. Jackal no longer needed armor, and that was the largest expense. What the fighter did with his coins Tibs didn't know, but he had to have a lot at this point.

Once Jackal was satisfied he'd found all the coins he motioned them to the next room, the Ratling encampment.

“How do we want to do this?” Mez asked. “Tibs on one side, Carina on the other, and us distracting everyone? They never seem to learn, so it'll still work.”

“Do you mind if I try something?” Tibs asked. The only things that could burn in the room were the tents, and as hot as he suspected he could make his fire, the cavern's wall would survive it. His main worry was not letting his anger surface. He wasn't angry right now, but when Channeling fire, it took little for his emotions to get out of control.

“Sure,” Jackal said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Something to impress Sto,” Tibs replied. He looked at his friends. “You should step back. It's about to get really hot in here.”

He coated his hand with fire essence and it ignited.

“Tibs, are you sure this is a good idea?” Carina asked.

“I'm not angry,” he said, smiling. In fact, he felt really good. His smile broadened and he faced the cavern.

“That not—”

The rest of her words disappeared under the eruption of fire in the cavern as Tibs send more and more essence into it. This was raw essence, raw fire. No finesse to it. No explosion on contact. Only heat and flames, and he loved it.

He laughed with joy.

He felt the new fires, the tents burning. He made out the screams of the Ratlings and



it sounded wonderful. He poured more essence. There couldn't be enough. This was so fun. Now it was their time to suffer. Their time to feel the fear they'd inflicted on him.

His laughter no longer contained joy. Now they would know what it was like to be at someone else's mercy. To stifle a scream as you woke from a nightmare so your friends wouldn't worry. Wouldn't think you were weak.

Tibs wasn't weak.

Someone screamed his name, but he ignored it.

He would never be weak again. He had power. He had strength. No one would ever die around him except for those who threatened his friends, his family, his team. He would burn this mountain down if—

Stars erupted around him along with pain at the back of his head. He spun, ready to incinerate his attacker, and frowned as a smoking Jackal looked at him. The surprise lessened his glee, and he noticed the others, in the other room, surrounded by darkness. He looked around. The walls in the hall were glowing from the heat.

With a curse, he pulled the essence back into himself, all of it.

"That is it," Jackal said, just as the wall on their left cracked.

"Ganny!" Sto yelled.

"I saw," she replied.

Tibs swallowed. Had he cracked Sto's wall?

Jackal looked away from the crack. "I don't care what the situation is, Tibs. No fire, ever."

Tibs nodded. He looked at his friends approaching, looking at him warily. "But I wasn't angry." He'd been having fun. Although... his emotions had turned dark at the end.

Carina hugged herself as she shivered. "You were something, Tibs."

"Out of control," Mez said.

"I disagree," Khumdar said. "Tibs was most certainly in control of the fire, the question is what was he trying to do."

"Punish them," he answered weakly.

"For what?" Jackal asked. His clothing had burned off, but the armor underneath has somehow survived, getting only signed. There was earth essence woven through it. That hadn't been there when they entered the dungeon.

"Hurting me, scaring me." He recalled some of what it's thought as he pushed more and more essence. "For making you think I was weak."

"We don't think that, Tibs."

"Don't you?" He asked, fearfully. "I couldn't do anything, and now I hurt you, I could have killed you if Jackal hadn't stopped me, again." What had happened?

"I believe it is safe to assume that fire isn't only about anger," the cleric said. "He raises any of your emotions."

"And I don't think they're limited to one at a time. You sounded happy, then your laughter turned really scary. That's when we had to start backing off."

"No more fire," Tibs agreed.

“At least not until you have more experience controlling yourself under the other element’s influence,” Khumdar said.

“Are you going to look at the carnage you caused?” Jackal asked.

“Do I have to?” Tibs answered weakly.

“Yes.” Jackal’s tone was flat. “You need to see what you caused Tibs. I thought seeing the result around the platform would give you a sense of how dangerous you are, but I don’t think it worked. This might be better.”

Tibs glanced at the cracked wall. The wall Sto thought nothing could damage now that he’d woven corruption into it. He turned and looked at the encampment.

The cavern was empty.

The floor was covered with ash and cooling stones. Nothing else. Tibs had reduced everything and everyone in it to ash. He turned and held onto the wall as he threw up. He only mildly registered that it was much colder than the air.

“They weren’t alive,” Sto said, sounding puzzled.

It had been so easy, so fun, then so needed. He hadn’t cared they were creatures. He would have done this to anyone. He’d wanted to do it to Sto.

He wiped his mouth and stepped into the cavern. The smell of ash was thick. There was nothing recognizable in the room. He had no idea how he’d burned stuff on the other side. That was way beyond his reach. Then he remembered the pool and how the ice had propagated to all of it.

The lack of structure made him realize something. “I’m sorry for destroying the loot.”

“If you stick to your promise not to use fire again, I’ll consider it fine,” Jackal said somberly.

“I won’t.” He headed for the exit, forcing himself to look at the destruction.

“Tibs?” Sto called.

“Yeah?” He readied himself to be chastised.

“Consider me impressed.”

Tibs would have preferred being chastised.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Bunnyling room became Mez’s show of power. He stepped into the room before any of them could strategize and proceeded to shoot the Bunnylings as they came out of the warrens. Even when it looked like there were too many for him to take out, he kept firing. Some arrows exploded, taking out multiple Bunnylings; others burned through their targets to strike those behind. Most were simply brought down by an arrow through an eye.

When there were none left, the closest one had gotten to Mez was seven paces.

Tibs crawled through the warrens and found three chests. Armor pieces and one staff woven through with an essence Tibs couldn’t identify.

Now they stood in the corridor with the essence maze. Resigned, Tibs stepped forward, but Carina placed a hand on his shoulder. “I think I have this,” she said, then looked to Khumdar. “Unless you’d like to do the honor?”

The cleric smiled. “I do not feel a need to impress anyone with my prowesses.”

The sorceress nodded, then pulled the amulet from under the robe, kissed it, and extended a hand forward. Tibs felt the ribbon of essence stretch away from her and beyond what he could sense. Her smile dropped away as she focused harder.

“Almost there,” she said through grinding teeth. “Come on.” He took a step forward, then another.

Tibs stepped in front of her and placed a hand on her chest to stop her. “You’re about to break one of the triggers.”

“But I’m almost there,” She hissed, eyes closed.

“If you can’t reach it, it’s fine,” Jackal said.

“I can,” she snapped. “I just have to pull more essence into it.”

“I thought you could do—”

“I’m busy,” She said.

Tibs nodded. Whatever the reason, she was at her limit and she couldn’t draw more of the essence to her. He looked at the amulet. It was the same as she’d first found on this floor, still wrapped in leather strips. The crystal itself looked like any of the others Sto gave out, cloudy, the size of his thumb. Putting them aside, there would be no way to tell which contained what essence without sensing for it. This one was drained. It would take any of the essences now.

Could he?

“Jackal?”

“Oh ho,” Mez said.

“Yes, Tibs?” the fighter answered cautiously.

“I’m about to try something with air. Make sure I don’t fly into the maze.”

“At least it isn’t fire,” Mez commented and Tibs glared at him before looking at the amulet. Jackal took hold of his shoulder and Tibs channeled air.

The maze.

He pulled on the shoulder. “Come on, I can fly through it before anything catches me.”

“Focus Tibs,” Jackal said and nodded to the amulet. “You want to do something here.”

“But refilling Carina’s amulet’s boring.”

“You can fly after,” Jackal said.

Tibs smiled at him. “You promise?”

“I do.”

“What are you going to do?” Khumdar asked.

“Refill it, what else?” Tibs touched the amulet with his finger.

“You cannot refill someone’s amulet.”

Tibs snorted. “Of course I can. It’s just essence and an amulet is made to absorb it.” He pushed the essence in. There was resistance, his essence wasn’t Carina’s, but that was just about wanting it more, and Tibs wanted it badly, so he could fly. Refilling it barely registered into his vast reserve, but he still pulled air from outside and refilled that.

“Thank you,” Carina said, grinning.

Tibs looked at Jackal. "Can I fly now?"

"I don't—"

"It's okay," Carina said.

"Yes!" Tibs pulled out of Jackal's grip, turned and stepped into the corridor, and stopped. "That's not fair. Sto! Bring the maze back."

"I can't do that," the dungeon replied. "Once it's beaten it's done until the next team comes."

"But I wanted to fly through it." He glared at Jackal. "You knew that was going to happen. You're no fun." He let go of the air, what was the point if he wasn't going to get to outfly the spears. He looked at Jackal. "Did you know, she'd be done that fast?"

The fighter raised an eyebrow. "Do I look that smart? I figure I'd hold on to you as long as needed. You were only going to hate me until you let go of the essence."

"Exactly what just happened, Tibs?" Ganny asked.

"I refilled Carina's amulet."

"That I know, but you weren't acting like yourself. Just like when you used your fire essence."

Tibs nodded and followed his friends. "When I channel an essence, my reserve turned into that one, but at the same time, I start thinking like the element. Air's all about having fun. Fire's..." he trailed off. "Makes my emotions stronger, I guess."

"And water doesn't affect you?" Sto asked. "You seemed like yourself with the pool."

"It does. I've just trained myself not to respond to it over the last few weeks. I'm going to do that with the other elements, but it's going to take time."

"You aren't fighting them alone," Carina told Jackal.

"Just the boss—"

"No," he stated. "You've shown us how great you are. We all had our turn. Now—"

"Khumdar didn't," Tibs said.

"As I stated, I do not have a need to impress anyone."

"You sure?" Mez asked. "Taken all that down with darkness would certainly impress me."

"Then I fear you will not be impressed. That is something I could not do even if I desired it."

"Alright," Jackal said. "Then you guys deal with the—"

"What did I just say?" Carina said.

"I'm not going to take on the boss alone," Jackal objected. "You'll be there to deal with the rest." He looked up. "Dun—Sto, help me out here."

"What exactly is he expecting from me?" Sto asked.

"Oh, he wants you to say that you want your revenge for how he tricked you last time or something like that."

Jackal nodded.

"Ah. No, that's okay. Like Khumdar, I have nothing to prove here."

"He's not helping, Jackal."

“Really? You don’t want a chance to kill me?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Sto replied and Tibs glared at the ceiling.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“I have a bad feeling about the third floor.”

“You can always turn around now,” Ganny said. “If you don’t think you’re ready for my floor.”

“I’m not talking Jackal out of this fight,” Tibs replied. “And I want to see your floor.”

“Now that’s settled,” Carina said. “We clear the rats, Ratlings, bunnies, and Bunnylings, and then deal with the Big Brutes.”

“Fine,” Jackal said. “Tibs?”

“No fire.”

“That too, but stick with water if you can. Air was a reminder they’re all unpredictable in different ways.”

Tibs nodded and formed a sword. He was looking forward to putting to use what Quigly had him practice. Jackal looked at Carina pleadingly, and when she shook her head he motioned them to move in.

As with the other rooms, the moment they stepped into the room, the creatures came to life, rushing them. Tibs jumped over the rats and bunnies slashing as he passed. He wanted real opponents, armed ones. He cut a Ratling, then faced a Bunnyling armed with a spear. He parried its thrust, then slashed. He cut it, but another took its place, the spear catching Tibs on his side and cutting through the armor and his skin.

With a snarl, he pulled his essence to cover the wound, only to realize it was all water. With a quiet curse, he filled the cut and iced it to keep himself from bleeding, then went on the offensive.

This Bunnyling was more skilled, deflecting, and blocking Tibs’s strike, which only made him smile. On the slash down, Tibs elongated his blade so that by the time the spear caught it, he’d sliced through its head.

He cut the two Ratling that tried to sneak up to him, then sent three more flying back with a jet of water. Sheer volume was so easier to handle than a fine jet, he decided. He cut another Ratling, then fought two Bunnylings, taking one down when he made a second sword and impaled it, then cut the other one.

He turned, looking for more, but the fighting was over. With only the three Brutes at the back of the room waiting for them.

“So,” Jackals said. “Do we collect the coins before or after we’ve turned those three into rubble?”

## Stepping up-62

Tibs raised his arm. The shield of ice took the fist and cracked, but remained whole. “You okay?” he asked Khumdar as the cleric slowly got to his feet.

He nodded. “The blow took me unawares, it will not happen again.”

A series of small explosions caused the Brute to stagger back.

“Get moving,” Mez called, “I can’t send anything larger with you two so close.”

Carina kept the other Brute busy. She couldn’t lift it, and her air slices weren’t as effective, but anytime it raised a foot to move, she unbalanced it, effectively making it impossible for it to approach her.

Keeping his shield between them and the closest Brute, Tibs followed Khumdar as they stepped away. The explosions slowed, but became larger; only they didn’t have as much effect as hoped for.

Jackal yelled happily as he pounded away on the Bigger Brute. Two rock-beings smacking each other to little visible effect. Tibs wasn’t sure Jackal was even trying to destroy it.

The explosion was large enough Tibs felt it around his shield.

“Finally,” Mez said.

Tibs turned and ran for Carina’s Brute. While their need to get close to cause damage was a flaw in their creation, the Brute didn’t run out of strength, unlike the Runners, who depended on their reserves to power their abilities.

“Give me room!” He yelled to Carina as he felt the air buffer him. He absorbed the shield and made a sword. The wind died, and he sliced at the Brute’s legs. The cut wasn’t as deep as before; Sto had increased their resistance to all the elements. He rolled out of the way of the coming fist and coated the ground under the Brute’s feet with ice, but it didn’t move to come after him.

Sto had changed how they fought.

That was the biggest problem with this fight for Tibs. He’d expected it to go as the previous ones. Distract the Brute, then get it to slip and end up on its back, giving them time to bash it with minimal risk.

Sto said they weren’t alive in the same sense as Tibs and his friends, but they could clearly think.

“Stay down,” Khumdar said, then he swung his staff. He was too far to connect, but a wave of darkness left it and impacted the Brute, causing it to stagger and step on the slick ice.

Once it was on its back, Tibs was slicing at it as it maneuvered to get to its feet. It didn’t protect itself and Tibs added many cuts and Khumdar got in a few piercings before stepping on a patch of ice and nearly losing his footing.

“Step away,” Carina called.

Tibs did as instructed. Carina had a ball of air between her hands so tightly packed with essence, it was visible as a swirling mass. Once he and Khumdar were away, she shoved it at the Brute and it exploded on contact; the air ripping into the cuts and breaks the two of them had caused, and it flew apart.

The sorceress was panting, hands on her knees.

Mez wasn’t out of breath, but the reserve in his bow was nearly depleted.

“Jackal,” the archer called. “Are you planning on ending your fight? We can’t get to the third floor until you do.”

“You guys done?” the fighter answered back.

“Yes,” Mez replied, then lowered his voice. “He’s just showing off, isn’t he?”

A fist through the Bigger Brute’s head and a grinning Jackal was the answer.

“I was waiting for you to be done,” he said.

“Of course you were,” Carins said, still panting slightly. “That’s why you waited until Mez called to you. You didn’t even notice we were done, did you?”

Jackal grinned. “I was kind of busy.” The grinding of stone against stone kept anyone from answering. “And that’s our stairwell to the third floor.” He rubbed his hands together and headed for it.

Just inside the opening, on their left, was an ornate chest.

“Stop,” Tibs said as Jackal reached for it. “Let me look it over.”

“But we won,” the fighter protested.

“And it is this kind of thinking that has led to many great warriors’ death,” Khumdar said.

“What he said,” Mez added.

Tibs first looked for a lock; there wasn’t one. Then checked for traps. He found something. He wasn’t sure what it was. He hadn’t seen something like this before, either from the teachers or in his own training. The left hinge had a pin attached to it that went into the chest. The way it was attached, as the cover was lifted, the pin would push in and... He wouldn’t know until he opened it. But not with the pin in place. He made a small pick and pulled it out of the hinge, then took it out.

He showed it to the others before opening the chest.

Attached to the back wall of the chest was a crystal vial with a dark green mist inside.

“There’s a lot of air packed in there,” Carina said. “It wouldn’t take much for it to explode.”

“There’s corruption too,” Tibs added. He sensed more carefully. “Earth and more I can’t tell apart. Whatever the result is, it can’t be good. This would have cracked the crystal and the air would have sent all of it into the face of whoever opened the chest.”

“How did you know it’d be trapped?” Mez asked.

“I didn’t.” Tibs used water to feel around the crystal container. “But the Sto’s comments in the pool room reminded him there aren’t any rules about how this works. It isn’t because we defeated the boss that he can’t then add a trap.” He found the ties holding it. “I should have been checking every boss chest we found, but either Sto didn’t think of it until now, or he didn’t want to overdo it on the first floor.”

“A bit of both,” Sto said.

“Jackal, I’m going to try something with earth.”

“Tibs, I don’t think now’s the time to channel an element you haven’t practiced with.”

He shook his head and raised his arm. “I want to try to use the reserves in my armband without letting go of water.”

“Haven’t you tried that?” Jackal asked.

“I didn’t bother wearing them since any attempt to only use my element’s reserve led to me channeling it entirely. If I can make this work, I’ll have more versatility, but just in

case, be ready to talk me out of staying with earth.”

He placed a finger on the crystal container and carefully pulled earth essence out of the armband’s reserve. Training with sensing and manipulating gave him the experience with splitting his attention, but this was slightly more difficult since he could feel himself also reaching for his personal reserve. He never had to worry about it before.

He coated the container with earth and sighed when he stopped.

“Still you?” Jackal asked.

“I’m always me,” Tibs replied. Using water to break the ties and taking the now rock-covered crystal container. He couldn’t tell if it broke, but it didn’t matter. The stone would keep the gas from spreading.

“Tibs,” Sto said as he pocketed it and stepped away from the chest.

“Yes?”

“That’s mine.”

Tibs smiled. “Not anymore. Think of it as another reward from the chest.”

“No, No, maybe,” Jackal said as he pulled out items. Two sets of clothing. Nice enough, but not enchanted. The maybe was a set of boots with air woven through it. “Anyone needs amulets?” He took out two, then set a crystal bottle with a yellow liquid in it. “This is new.” Then he took a set of two leather bands out. “Now this is interesting.” He slipped them over each hand and they covered his knuckles.

“Oh, I really wish that hadn’t made it into this chest,” Sto said as Tibs picked up the bottle.

“Any idea what it is?” Mez asked.

There was.... “No. This is nothing I’ve felt before. I think it’s essence, but I’m not sure.”

“The guild is sure to know what it is,” Khumdar said as he added it to Mez’s pack.

A boom had them look at Jackal who’d punched the wall. The fighter grinned. “You guys mind if I keep these?”

“Didn’t you just use them?” Mez replied. “Which means we kind of don’t have a choice?”

“Right, sorry. I just wanted to test if they did anything more than protect my knuckles.”

“They go boom,” Carina said. “That was air detonating on impact.”

“Like he’s not already strong enough,” Ganny commented.

“You’re the one who said it’s all got to be random,” Sto replied.

“I prefer this to you giving them whatever Tibs asks for.”

“Down we go, then?” Mez asked, then headed for the stairs.

“Anything else on them?” Jackal asked Tibs.

“Yes, but I can’t tell what.”

“Metal would make them harder,” Khumdar said.

“You’ll have to get someone at the guild to tell you more about them,” Carina said.

“I’m not giving them more coins,” Jackal replied. “If they go boom, then I’m happy



with that.”

They caught up to Mez, and at the bottom of the stairs, Tibs sensed the doorway at the back. Activating it, he looked at the bridge. “We can come down to the third floor directly,” He announced.

“That’s a lot of loot we’d be missing out on,” Jackal said.

“This floor will have better loot,” Carina said. “Although I’m not sure how this will work.”

Tibs joined them. Instead of the usual room, the space ended with three halls, each going in different directions. “Are we supposed to split up?” he asked. His friends looked at him. “I was asking you. Sto doesn’t give that kind of help, anymore.”

Ganny let out a bark of laughter.

“He was tricking me,” Sto replied, and Tibs smiled.

“If this is about splitting us up,” Carina said, “I feel there should be five tunnels, not just three.”

“Then is this about picking the right one?” Mez asked.

Tibs studied each entrance. “There are no hidden doors that slide down. So we can come back and try another one if one doesn’t have anything.”

“Can’t the dungeon just close it behind us, anyway?”

“He can’t make changes in a room while we’re in it,” Mez pointed out.

“But is this a room?” Khumdar asked. “And would the same rules apply to a hall or tunnel? As Tibs mentioned, the rules are not necessarily what we think.”

“The dungeon said we it can’t make changes,” Jackal said.

“But was it being honest?”

“Yes,” Sto replied.

“He’s got no reason to lie,” Tibs said. “The rules are there for everyone, and I’m the only one who hears him. I think we’d be able to notice if he lied.”

“Remember, the dungeon is about making us stronger,” Carina said. “There have to be rules for Runners to work out. But I think Khumdar’s right. Here the challenges might be working out what’s a room and what isn’t, so we can figure out what rule we’re working with.”

“Whatever it is,” Jackal said, “We aren’t going to figure it out standing here. I say we pick one and start walking. We’ll see what happens.” Before anyone could comment, the fighter walked into the central opening.

Tibs followed.

“Jackal,” Carina called in exasperation, but was quickly next to them, the two others in tow.

The hall was more reminiscent of the way the entrance was the first time Tibs went in. Uneven stone walls with rough floors, although those were even, and the light came from everywhere instead of torches or the light stones that were still used there. The width varied, from being able to fit four abreast to going down to two, and it turned left and right with no sense Tibs could make.

After a few minutes of uneventful walking, they came to an intersection. With one

junction on their left, and the other more of a bend aiming to go right.

“Is the goal to have us die of boredom?” Jackal asked.

“Or hunger?” Mez added. “If we get lost, that will be a problem.”

Jackal placed a hand on the wall. “We won’t get lost. It’s all stone essence, so I can remember the way we take.”

“Tibs, what can you tell us about what’s ahead?” Carina asked.

Tibs extended his sense. “Little. Ganny knows I can do this, so going forward, there’s essence everywhere. Some places it’s denser, so that might be a creature, but I can’t tell from here.”

“So we need to pick again,” she said. “I’m thinking Mez’s right. This will be a maze.”

“Then we go that way,” Jackal said, making the right and freezing as something clicked under his foot. He was stone as everyone else moved away. “I think we’ve been taking something else for granted,” he said when nothing else happened. “If there are no rooms, then traps can be anywhere.”

Tibs looked around the fighter’s foot. The roughness of the floor made noticing this was a tile harder, but Jackal was right. Tibs hadn’t been looking. Locking it in place was simple. He poured water in and iced it. He studied the walls and ceiling, but saw nothing resembling the other end of a trap.

“Is it just a decoy?” Tibs wondered.

“Maybe it sends a signal to some creature?” Mez offered.

Tibs sense, but got nothing useful. Even the denser spots hadn’t moved. Maybe those were decoys, too.

“I guess that means Tibs had to take the lead,” Jackal said.

Looking for taps everywhere would slow them down. He studied the tile, then looked down the length of the hallway. If Sto had made it, there would be a pattern, but he didn’t know how Ganny worked.

He advanced slowly, looking for more tiles. When he found one, he covered it with water. There was no point in wasting time figuring out how they worked. He wanted to get them through to the end. On the next run, when they didn’t bother with the second floor, he’d take the time to study them.

They reached another branch, this one resembling a ‘y’, and he could see trap tiles along both of them. So the branching didn’t represent a change in the traps. The essence was also the same as far as he could sense.

“We’re going to die of hunger,” Mez said.

“We can go back,” Tibs replied. “The doorway leads to the second floor.”

“Unless that trigger closed a door behind us,” the archer replied.

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it with a shrug. That was a possibility. Maybe he’d missed whatever system Ganny had set up to lock them in. “It doesn’t feel right,” he said. “Preventing us from leaving feels more like looking to kill us instead of challenging us.”

“I’m not sure how having us walk around with only traps is a challenge.”

“There will be more,” Khumdar said, “of that, I have no doubt. Mayhap this is about maintaining our alertness.”

“Hey dungeon,” Jackal told the ceiling.

“Ganny,” Tibs corrected him. “This is her floor, so she’s the one making the decision.”

“But this is still the dungeon, so it’s the one doing all this,” the fighter replied.

“Jackal,” Carina said, “when you want something at the inn, do you ask Kroseph or his father for it?”

Jackal considered it. “Good point. Ganny, just a reminder that fighting is part of how we’re supposed to be tested.” He then looked at Tibs.

“Okay,” She said, “I will answer this one. There will be fighting. And I don’t want to hear any complaining by the time it’s all done.”

“You’re going to get your fighting,” Tibs translated. “Possibly more than you want even.”

Jackal shook his head. “I will never get enough of fighting.”

“Is it too early to point out that this is the type of saying that has doomed entire adventuring parties?” Khumdar asked.

## Stepping up-63

The attack came out of nowhere.

The tunnel had widened until they could all stand side by side, and Tibs had wondered if this would be a room when he felt the essence above them shift and creatures dropped on them.

They were fast and numerous; wielding swords and shields. Carina and Mez were the most disadvantaged, and the others did their best to create distance for them, but the creatures swarmed on all sides, forcing Tibs, Khumdar, and Jackal to surround them.

Tibs got a sense of lean creatures slightly taller than he was, with dog-like faces as he slashed at them and blocked too few of the attacks. He iced the floor, but they didn’t fall because of the claws on their toes.

Mez got in a few shots, but most missed as one of them jostled him as they deal with the.... would Sto call them Doglings?

When finally the fight was over, Tibs panted. He let go of water and used his essence to stop the bleeding, then looked to the others. Jackal’s body had cuts and scratches, but the stone went all the way through.

“I need to practice purity,” he said, wrapping the cleric’s injuries. “And work out how to heal.” He stepped away and channeled water again. The wrap on Khumdar’s injuries remained.

“You’re starting to bleed again,” Mez pointed out. The wraps around Tibs’s cuts were gone. They’d changed to water.

“This is why,” he said. “What I use on you stays because I don’t keep a connection to it, but I don’t know how to break it on mine.”

“Switch to your essence,” Jackal said. “You have your bracers for when you need

another element. We need you in one piece.”

“Can’t you just heal yourself now?” Mez asked. “It’s the first thing clerics learn, right?”

“Only, it isn’t as simple as pushing the essence into someone,” Carina said. “I grew up around clerics. I’ve seen them work at getting it right.”

“Unfortunately, watching others struggle to achieve a result does not impart knowledge of how they succeeded.”

Carina nodded.

“I studied the clerics when they healed, but all my time’s been taken getting a handle on water, so I haven’t tried what they did.”

“Now seems like the right time,” the archer said.

“No,” Jackal replied, “if something goes wrong and Tibs injures himself worse in the process, it puts everyone at risk. We stick with what we know works. Now, anyone knows what happened?”

“I think the dungeon’s using the same kind of doorways it made for us to jump floors to keep the creatures out of Tibs’s sensing range,” Carina said.

“Smart woman,” Ganny commented.

Tibs studied the reserves on his bracers while the others debated. They weren’t assigned to a specific element. Sto had set eight because those were how many he knew Tibs would be able to wield, and like him, Sto hadn’t known getting all eight would let him change his vast reserve from his element to the one he channeled.

Could he make use of that?

He emptied water out of the bracer and into his reserve. Switched to his element and moved some into the vacated reserve. He smiled as that part worked. Now to test the next one. He channeled water again and used the reserve to wrap one of his cuts. That one injury used most of it—he’d forgotten how costly it was with how vast his reserve was; but while it took more concentration, it showed him this was possible. Could he take this one step further?

He let go of water, refilled the reserve with his element, then wrapped all his injuries. He attempted to switch to water slowly, but there was no transition. It was one or the other. He lost control of his element for an instant, but once his core was all water, he didn’t need focus for it, so regained it. In that moment, the wraps had deteriorated, but not fallen apart. Fixing them took most of the reserve, but then he stood and smiled.

The others watched him.

“You did something,” Carina said.

“I found a way around the problem.” Tibs pointed to his not bleeding injuries and his eyes. “I don’t need the reserve for water, so that’s in there and it lets me keep hold. There isn’t enough left to make a wrap in a hurry, but that hasn’t been something we’ve needed often.”

“You’re sure you don’t risk losing the wraps?” Jackal asked.

“I can’t be certain until it’s put to the test, but maintaining them takes less concentration than actively using another of the essences from the bracer.”

“Alright, I’m good with that. Carina is confident the dungeon can drop creatures on us anytime it wants, so—”

Stone grinding against stone sounded ahead. It sounded again and again.

“That isn’t a door,” Carina said.

“It sounds like someone shuffling, or injured.”

“One of the Dogling?”

“Gnoll,” Ganny said as the others looked at him.

“They’re called Gnoll,” Tibs corrected himself.

“The dungeon needs to get better at naming things,” Carina sighed.

“I didn’t come up with the name,” Sto said.

“That sounds too heavy to be one of those,” Jackal replied.

“I didn’t either,” Ganny said. “This is something another dungeon came up with.”

Tibs closed his eyes and rubbed his temple. Having two sets of people who couldn’t tell when the other was talking was a pain.

“Tibs?” Khumdar asked.

“Sorry, too many conversations.” He looked at them. “That sounds like one creature. Are we checking it out?”

“Oh definitely,” Jackal said, grinning. “If it’s big and lumbering, I want a go at it.”

“Let’s not get overconfident. It could be a decoy,” Carina said. “The dungeon had plenty of creatures that can move silently, or it can simply drop them on you while you’re fighting.”

“How many coins did we get?” Tibs asked.

“Thirty-six,” Mez replied.

“Along with a rapier,” Jackal added, then walked toward the sound.

The others kept their distance, and Tibs remained aware for any of the shift in essence that could warn him a doorway was opening. Around a bend, they stopped as the creature came into view. It was tall, taller than Bigger Brute, but not as massive. It was still blocky, like the Brutes and Whippers but leaner, and without a whip or weapons.

“What does the dungeon call this one?” Mez asked. “The not Big Brute?”

Khumdar chuckled.

Tibs looked up at the lack of response. “He isn’t saying. He must have gotten busy with something.”

“Hey dungeon,” Jackal called. “Are you going to miss another time I win a fight against one of your creatures?” He grinned at Tibs. “I think it’s too embarrassed to watch.”

“Or it’s busy getting more creature ready,” Carina pointed out. “If you’re going to take it on alone, get to it.”

Jackal didn’t hesitate. He ran at the golem and punched it in the head once, twice, and a third time before it reacted to the first impact. It was slow. Too slow, Tibs thought, to have any chance. When he was stone, Jackal was slower, but not that much.

“I think this is a failed attempt,” Jackal called over his shoulder.

“Pay attention!” Mez yelled, but the golem’s fist connected and, while slow, the

force was enough to push the fighter a few steps back.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Carina mused as Jackal threw himself at the creature. “Tibs, what can you sense?”

He focused, then shook his head. “There’s too much essence in the air for me to get much. Earth essence, my essence, others.” He shrugged. “Maybe Jackal’s right.”

“It can take a pounding,” Mez said.

“The dungeon is aware of how much Jackal enjoys hitting its creature,” Khumdar said. “It would create some with that in mind.”

“Okay, but how long are we letting this go on?” the archer asked. “He might be having fun but I’m—”

“Don’t finish that,” Carina warned. “We’re given the dungeon enough ideas already.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” Ganny said. “You aren’t going to be bored for long.”

“Finally!” Jackal yelled and a chunk of stone landed close enough Tibs made out it was part of the golem’s face, but the other side was smooth, instead of jagged, as if that side was hollow.

“Abyss!” Jackal exclaimed and stepped back.

Where the stone was missing, a face was revealed. A human face with pale blue eyes and brown hair. Only half was visible, but Tibs recognized her.

“Pyan?” Jackal asked, shocked.

“You have no idea,” a male voice said out of her voice, “how happy I am you’re reacting that way. It makes carrying this weight around worthwhile.”

“Who?” Jackal stammered.

“Come on Jackal, where did you think I’d be if I wasn’t watching you fight?”

“Sto?” Tibs called, his voice breaking.

“Yes.” Pyan’s face smiled in a way he’d never seen her do. “Now, hit me again so I can get out of this. I didn’t realize it would be impossible to break it from the inside.”

“Oh. I am going to be happy to pound you into dust for doing this,” Jackal replied angrily, then he on it, hitting hard enough pieces of stone flew off with each strike.

Tibs wanted to look away, but he kept staring as Jackal attacked their old friend. He knew she was dead, that this was just another creature Sto made, but each time Jackal hit the stone body, it hurt Tibs. Jackal had never been this vicious with her. Their fights had always been filled with joy.

Now, Jackal was out to kill her—him, Sto.

“Shouldn’t we stop him?” Mez asked.

“That is not our friend,” Khumdar stated.

“Then how come it looked like her?” he demanded. “Everything in here’s made of stone! Maybe the dungeon never killed her and it’s just using essence to... I don’t know, control her. Jackal’s going to kill her!”

Something shattered, and as the dust fell, Tibs saw Pyan roll back to her feet. She stretched. “Finally. Now we can get this fight going.” She wore the same leather armor as she had the last time Tibs had seen her, when she still mourned Geoff. If Mez was right and that was her, did it mean Geoff wasn’t dead either? How about the other people the dungeon

had eaten?

“That’s not Pyan,” Carina said, her voice cracking. “It’s just a copy the dungeon made.”

“How do you know?” Mez demanded.

Jackal threw himself at the other fighter, but she easily stepped out of the way and struck him and he staggered.

“Pyan couldn’t hit Jackal hard enough he’d feel it in his stone form,” Tibs said.

“But…” Mez trailed off. “It’s all stone.” He sounded like he’d lost hope. Was there someone else the dungeon had eaten the archer had cared for?

“It’s all we’ve fought,” Carina said. “But we’re the ones who assumed that’s all there would be. No one said it’s a rule. We should have known better,” she retorted.

Jackal was trying to strike her—no, Sto. But Sto was too agile in that body. He moved like he’d trained in it. Or had lived in it.

“Fuck this,” Mez snarled, and the arrow hit with an explosion that sent Jackal flying back.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Sto said, now in his normal voice, the one only Tibs heard. Pyan’s body dissolved where it landed, leaving behind the full set of her armor. “Tibs, tell Mez he had no business getting involved.”

“I had it!” Jackal yelled, storming in their direction. “You had no business shooting!”

“See,” Sto explained. “Jackal feels the same.”

“Business?” Mez replied. “That was my friend it used. My friend you were happily pounding on.”

“Happy? Did I fucking look happy? I was going to make this fucking dungeon pay for using her face like that. I was going to break each and every bone in that flesh sack it made and make him feel it all!”

“Okay, that’s excessive,” Sto said.

“Jackal,” Carina said.

“No! I was going to make it suffer and Mez here just went and killed it.”

“Tibs? What’s going on?” Sto asked.

Tibs looked at the empty armor. It felt like she’d just died.

“I couldn’t stand watching you hit her!” the archer yelled.

“That is enough,” Khumdar said as Jackal raised a fist over his head. With the words came lethargy and Tibs fought to remain standing, to counter the essence, but it took too much energy. He sat down. “I do not know if turning us against each other was the dungeon’s place, but regardless, we cannot allow this to happen.”

“I think we made a mistake,” Ganny said.

“I don’t understand,” Sto replied.

“I’m not sure I do either, but this isn’t what we thought would happen.”

“What did you think was going to happen?” Tibs demanded, although he couldn’t tell if the anger he felt carried through the exhaustion.

“I thought you’d enjoy watching a good fight,” Sto replied. “I thought Jackal would

like fighting Pyan again. She always talked about how good their fights were. I don't understand why everyone got so angry."

"She was our friend!" Tibs snarled.

"And you got to see her again."

"No, we didn't." Tibs got to his feet, energy returning. The others were doing the same, watching him. "I got to watch you in a creature that looked like her. I just to watch Jackal try to kill her! I got to watch her die again!" He wiped at his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Tibs," Ganny said, "I didn't realize it would affect you like that."

"Didn't any of the others react like this?"

"We didn't do this with the other teams," she said, "this was a special treat for you and your friends."

"Well, thanks a lot," he snarled back. The others were looking at him. "Sto and Ganny didn't realize this would hurt us," he said with a dismissing wave.

"Tibs," Sto began.

"No! You don't do this to me and expect me to be okay with it. You know how it hurt."

"When they die, but—"

"It still hurts!"

"But I—"

"Leave it, Sto," Ganny said softly. "I don't think this is something we can just fix."

"We're leaving," Tibs said and headed away.

"But the rest of the floor?" Sto demanded. "There's so much more."

"No one touches the armor," Jackal said. "I don't want that floating around the world."

"Wait, why are you giving up loot? Jackal, it's great loot, there's more. Why can they hear me? Tibs, tell him there's more loot. Please."

Tibs didn't respond. This was the best way he knew to hurt Sto, and he wanted him to suffer.

## Stepping up-64

Tibs kept busy.

He practiced swordplay with Quigly, helped the Omega rogues they'd selected with their trap and lock skills. Under supervision, he got used to keeping the effects of purity under control. The trouble with it came from how much sense working hard made, even when he didn't channel it. Only it was taken to such an extreme that Tibs wouldn't consider taking a tankard of ale if he didn't have to work for it.

A lot of his time was taken with learning his letters and getting better with the numbers. Anytime a merchant needed him to do something about the protection, or a theft that had happened, it reached him writing. And he needed to keep count of the coins they were paid for it and that they spent for the Omega's equipment and repairs. The only people he trusted to handle it, were his friends, and Jackal had looked terrified at the idea, Mez had



simply declined, Khumdar was busy with projects of his own, and Carina had smiled and said she'd help by teaching him how to handle all of it by himself.

Some days, Tibs hated his friends.

But it kept him busy over the following weeks, so he didn't have to think about Sto. He didn't have the time to be tempted to go talk with him. Explain why what he'd done hurt so much. To soothe the pain Tibs inflicted by not talking with him.

He sensed Harry approach the inn, and Tibs assembled the papers on his table into distinct piles before putting them away in the satchel Darran had provided him for them. The papers were provided by the other merchants since they never needed them back when they set requests. Rubbing the charcoal off the page left them darkened, but not so much he couldn't read what he carefully wrote.

The guard didn't look happy as he stepped before the table as looked at the charcoal dust on it. "This needs to stop, Tibs."

"Why?" He didn't bother denying anything. There was no point with a man who knew when he was lying.

"Because you aren't in charge of protecting this town. I am."

"You can't be in charge of protecting something you're willing to be let destroyed, Harry." He's intended to stay calm, but his anger build and he decided he was entitled to be angry. If the man had done his job, Tibs wouldn't have had to take over.

"You don't understand," Harry said. "Protecting the guild's assets isn't as simple as deciding one is better than the other. There are consequences that have to be kept in mind."

Harry wasn't lying and that annoyed Tibs. He doubted he was anywhere near the guard skill when it came to seeing people lie, but he had enough practice with it to notice the way someone radiated light anytime they said something not true. He didn't have to channel light to see it; it was simply something he could do since his audience, like corruption not hurting him anymore.

"Then you should be happy I'm taking care of the town, Harry. It's one less consequence for you to worry about."

Harry planted his hands on the table. "This isn't how it works, Tibs. You're Runner. You do what the guild tells you. And I am telling you to stop this."

"I'm a rogue," Tibs replied with a smile. "Doing what I'm told isn't all that interesting."

Harry ground his teeth. "This will not make you friends among the guild."

"I don't need the kind of friends who will let me, my friend, and my town be killed, Harry. And if I stop, the merchants will get someone else to take over, because they're another group who don't trust you or the guild anymore. Something about how they were promised protection when they paid to buy the plot of land their shops on. Yet, they were left to fend for themselves when Sebastian tried to take over the town."

"I will throw all of you in a cell, Tibs," Harry threatened, and Tibs smiled.

"Do it. Throw every Runner protecting the town in the cells, see who's left to do the runs for the guild. I doubt there's enough noble teams to satisfy the dungeon. What happens if a dungeon doesn't eat? Does he become harder so more people die? Can the guild

convince people to pay for the privilege of only feeding the dungeon? Will anyone want to come when the merchants tell them what the guild's protection is worth? Can you silence them?"

Harry sighed. "You are playing a dangerous game Tibs."

"I'm not playing a game, Harry. I'm making sure this town survives without you."

"This town can't survive without the guild, Tibs."

"Then you can go somewhere else. Go bother another dungeon."

The guard stared at Tibs. "You think you can tell the guild where to go?"

"I think you know what to do to get rid of me," Tibs replied. "I'm not going anywhere otherwise. Since you don't have as many responsibilities, with me handling the town, maybe you can find out what Sebastian's up to. Jackal tells me he's still a threat to us."

The pained expression didn't last long before being covered up by anger. Had Harry tried and not found out anything? Had he been prevented from trying? Did he know something was coming?

Harry straightened. "Don't complain I didn't try to help you, Tibs, when all this comes tumbling around you."

"Tell Tirania that the next time she wants to threaten my town, she can come do it herself."

Harry shook his head sadly. "This is why you need to stop this, Tibs. This wasn't a threat. I am doing what I can to help you."

"You should have tried earlier, Harry. I might believe you now if you had."

Harry hadn't lied, but Tibs didn't have to care about that. A second person he'd hurt in only a few weeks, but at least, this one he wouldn't have to smooth things over with.

No, he didn't want to smooth things over with Harry. He wanted it with Sto. Just, not right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found the cleric in one of the worker's barracks, healing a woman whose skin was covered with rashes. He watched and sensed. He had a good enough handle on purity's influence he felt ready to channel it and figure out how to heal. He wished he could simply ask her how she went about it, but even if she went out to places no other cleric did and healed without demanding payment, Tibs didn't trust her with his secret.

So he sensed how she moved the essence through the woman's wound, the shape of it, the rate, how she focused the essence in places where the woman's own essence was obstructed. Could she sense that, or did she rely entirely on the position of the rashes to tell her where the blockage was? Was the way she shaped the essence to deal with a rash the same as she would for other kinds of injuries?

"Hello," she greeted him, then looked at the woman on the cot. "You will be fine, but next time, avoid working with lye without the right protection."

The woman's skin wasn't fully healed, but the cleric was nearly entirely drained. Tibs could sense the remnant of injuries around the room. The woman wasn't the first person she'd healed.

She staggered as she stood and Tibs caught her.

“Thank you.”

“You look exhausted.”

Her smile was strained. “Exhaustion is the price of hard work. It is a price I gladly pay to help these people.”

Exhaustion could kill. He only thought it. He had a better sense of the demands purity put on her clerics, and unlike him, they didn’t seem to have the ability to fight the influence. Although some—he remembered Hightower—seemed to have found ways around the worse of it.

“Then let me treat you to food and drink as repayment.”

“It isn’t required.”

“I know, but I still want to do it. If you want, you can consider it payment for answering some questions.”

“Very well.”

The tavern was busy, but a group of workers cleared a small table for the two of them before they could leave to look for another one. They thanked her profusely before moving to stand away.

“I was surprised you were there to help during the fight for the town,” Tibs said.

She smiled. “In the initial confusion, I was separated from my group. It made it easier not to hear the order to retreat to the guild house. Then, it was simply not possible for me to do so without endangering myself, so I remained at the inn, and I couldn’t simply stand aside and do nothing while there was work to do, that this work involved healing the injured...” she thanked the harried server as she brought each a bowl of stew, bread, and a tankard of ale. “Sometimes, having purity urge us to work is a good way to placate those above us.”

Tibs nodded and tasted the stew. It was watery and the meat stringy. For a moment he considered complaining, but stopped himself. He was getting spoiled by the food the inn served. If he wasn’t careful, soon he’d be demanding that any place he went to meet his exacting standards, just like nobles did.

“I’m glad you did, but I was surprised because I thought you were going to kill yourself trying to purify the pool of corruption.”

She looked up from her bowl in surprise, then studied his face. “You were the boy. The one who spoke with me. The one who is Street.” She smiled. “I found out what that meant.” The smile fell. “I’m sorry you had such a rough life. Hard work is one thing, but to be in a situation where it takes being sent to a dungeon to have a chance at life... I’m glad you are still among us. And your eyes are blue now.”

“I grew into it. Why did you stop?”

“I was forbidden from returning to that place.” She ate a few spoonfuls with clear delight and Tibs considered asking more about that, but it didn’t matter. It was his curiosity sidetracking him.

“What is it like to heal someone? How do you do it?”

She sighed in pleasure as she took a swallow of the watery ale. “To help those in need is a pleasure beyond any. One I don’t get enough chances to feel. As for how, I’m afraid that without purity as your element, that without being its cleric, you wouldn’t understand.” She

eyed him with a mix of amusement and suspicion.

He shrugged. "I'm curious about a lot of things. My teacher says it's a good thing, others..." he smiled. "Don't always agree." He raised his hand and filled his palm with water. "All I have to do for this is gather essence. Even creating a flow of water is more about moving the essence than shaping it." The water raised in his hand, and he held the blade-shape by will. "This is simply about holding the essence. Preventing it from dispersing."

He noticed the silence and looked around. The workers were watching them with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

"Adventurers are something most of them only hear of in stories. Magic isn't something any of them expected to ever see this close."

"But the town's full of Runners."

She smiled. "How many of them come into these parts? Or when they do, show what they can do?"

Tibs looked around at the faces. Was he creating a Street, a place where those were thought of as less simply for being there? What could he do to make sure that didn't happen here? The server who'd brought their meal stood, staring at the water.

"Am I breaking a rule?" he asked. The first thing he could do was make sure he followed the rules.

"I—" she looked worried.

"There ain't no rules," a man said. "Just never see water do that before." Tibs couldn't identify the speaker.

"Ask the owner," Tibs told the server. "If they say I have to stop, I will."

She nodded and stepped away.

Tibs iced the blade, focusing on keeping it smooth, and it ended with fewer jagged ends, but the gasps from those watching could have been as much fear as surprise. It still looked like a nasty weapon. "Getting it to do that requires that I force the essence into a structure. It's not complex, more like just interlocking them, but I still can't get it to be exactly what I want."

"So a sword to terrify anyone who looks at it wasn't what you were aiming for?" she asked with a smile.

"It is the least threatening I can manage."

Her smile vanished. "A sword will always look threatening to someone facing it."

"Right. That's not what I meant. I mean I—" her expression did not become understanding. "I guess being a Runner makes me feel differently about what I have to use to survive."

She nodded. "But helping them understand that you aren't some all-powerful adventurer, here to rule of them, means you need to remember that this," she pointed to the ice sword, "is not something they have experience with."

Tibs nodded and absorbed the essence, causing the sword to melt away to nothing and the people watching to gasp.

"What I do," she said, "and I am not particularly skilled yet. Is much the same. I link it

into a... fabric I suppose is a good analogy, and apply it on the wound.”

“So that’s it?” Tibs asked, trying to figure out how to get her to say more. He’d felt the essence move into the body, reach the woman’s blocked essence. “I thought there would be more. The way some of the clerics act when healing us at the dungeon makes it seem it’s more involved.”

“It can be,” she replied. “There, Runners suffer graver injuries than most people. But with what I did, once I apply the patch on the injury, the essence is drawn in deeper, healing all that is needed, then spreading through the body.”

“That’s why you’re tired. Unlike me, you weren’t able to draw it back into you.”

She nodded, and a man in a grease-covered apron approached, looking nervous. “My Lidi, said you needed to talk to me?”

“I’d just asked her to find out if you had any rules against using essence in your tavern. I was giving...” he hesitated, realizing he hadn’t asked the cleric’s name. “My friend a demonstration to explain how I use essence, and I cause more of a reaction than I expected.”

“Oh no,” the man hurried to say. “I’d never think to keep one of your adventurers from doing anything.”

“I’m a Runner,” Tibs corrected. But that didn’t seem to calm the man. “Has anyone with essence, magic, come here and cause anyone problems?”

“Oh no, not since the new guards came.”

The cleric looked at Tibs inquisitively. She hadn’t been there before Harry. “When I arrived, we were the first Runners to be brought to the dungeon. The guild used adventurers as guards. They’d broken rules, and this was part of their punishment. Most of them didn’t particularly care for it; or care to do a good job. They were sent away after... after the dungeon was attacked.”

She nodded. “I remember that.”

Tibs looked at the man, around at the workers. “Can you do something for me?”

The man looked scared, but nodded.

“Pass the word around to the other businesses in this part of the town. If anyone with magic, or anyone you know is a Runner, causes trouble, have word sent to me. I’m at—”

“Oh, I know who you are. You’re Tibs Light Fingers, you saved the dungeon. You helped Don protect the town. Everyone knows where to find you.”

Tibs stifled the sigh. At least they thought of him as second to Don. He didn’t have to worry about the sorcerer coming after him again. The cleric raised an eyebrow at him. He was going to have to explain what had happened with Sto.

He sighed. Yet someone else who would know of his heroics and fewer chances to just have everyone forget about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jackal said, as Carina and Kroseph helped him to the bed. The fighter had won that pit fight, but not without paying for it. His leg was broken, with the bone poking out of the calf. How he wasn’t screaming with pain, Tibs wasn’t sure, but it afforded him the perfect opportunity to test his healing.

“I told you this would happen,” Kroseph said, “if you went out and fought again.”

“Isn’t it obvious he’d get hurt in one of those fights?” Carina asked.

“Oh, not that.” Kroseph patted Jackal’s arm. “Him getting hurt is just something I get to use to cuddle him.”

“Kro,” Jackal whined, blushing.

“Oh, you love it.”

“I’m the tough fighter, I’m not even screaming in pain right now, they don’t need to know how much I love it when you cuddle me.”

“No, what I told him was that the next time he was seriously injured, Tibs got to practice on him. And here we are. Afterward, I’ll cuddle you and do all the—”

“Can you not talk about that while I’m focusing?” Tibs asked. “I don’t need to feel like I’m gagging.”

“One day, Tibs,” Jackal said.

“You really want me to screw this up, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. But—”

“I think this is where the shut up, Jackal,” Kroseph said. “And let Tibs do his thing.”

Tibs had the weave formed. Since he could only look at fabric and ask about how it was made, he couldn’t be sure this was right. He smiled at Jackal. But that was the point of this, wasn’t it? And who better than to practice it on the big, tough fighter. At least he wasn’t going to scream in pain if he got this wrong.

“Tibs,” Jackal said. “I really don’t like that look on your face.”

## Stepping up-65

Tibs ran through the crowd with glee. Most of the town was here, perusing the booths the caravan merchants had set up. The chaos made practicing his pickpocket easier and avoiding the guards fun. Harry had a handful of his, but most worked for the caravan, like Cross had when she’d arrived. They did their best, but they weren’t up to noticing what Tibs did.

It was his monthly game. On the first day the caravan arrived, once they were done setting up. Run through it, pick pockets, then try foods and drinks from places he’d never heard of.

Unlike the previous times, where they set up at the edge of the town, now they were in the middle of it, around the transportation platform. Filling the space the fire had cleared; his fire. He did his best not to let the memory of his loss of control dampen his enjoyment. No townsfolk had died from it.

The crowd was thick with visitors coming from the platform. From the snippets he overheard, traveling to Kragle Rock wasn’t as expensive in the five days of the caravan fair. Not only the caravan merchants benefited from it, but the taverns were also packed, and Kroseph had them eat on his family’s floor since they couldn’t reserve their usual table with the number of people packing the common room.

Tibs saw Cross and changed direction. She wouldn’t see him pick pockets. She wasn’t

that good, but she knew him well enough to come to find it afterward and loom over him. She hadn't appreciated that he'd returned the last puzzle she'd left him by slipping it into her carry pouch without her noticing it.

The cube had been a challenge. Even once he realized it was about lining the notches so other parts could be slipped in, finding the right ones had been challenging. Doing it once only made the second time simpler because he knew to identify the blocks. Unlike the previous puzzles, there wasn't a pattern he could memorize, and losing track of one of the pieces made finishing it impossible.

His pouch full of candies, he located Carina, who was talking with a book merchant. He slipped a few into her pouch without her noticing and moved on to his next friends. Mez was with his girl, and he seemed happy. Whatever differences seemed so often got between them; they weren't paying attention as they walked through the booths. It was one of the rare times Tibs thought they were special to each other.

Khumdar vanished almost as soon as Tibs located him, taking a step to the side and shadows swallowing him completely. The woman he'd been talking with seemed surprised by the action and furtively looked around. Tibs debated following her when she walked away, but gave his friend his privacy.

Jackal saw him coming and eyes him suspiciously. His leg was healed, and it had only taken eight tries to get it right, and Jackal hadn't screamed at any points, but he'd given Tibs a wide berth for the following days. Tibs raised his hand and offered candies.

"Take one," Kroseph said, picking a bright pink one and popping it in his mouth. Tibs grinned at the reach as the spices hit Jackal's man and made his eyes water. "On second thought," he wheezed, "I think he's aiming to practice on you some more."

"The yellow ones are safe," Tibs said. "They'd called sunbeams, but they're cool instead of being hot."

Jackal took one, but watched Tibs as he placed it on his tongue. Tibs's expression didn't change and Jackal closed his mouth and after a few seconds smiled. "This is cool." He turned and Tibs left before the two men kissed.

"Enjoying yourself?"

Tibs startled and put his hands behind his back before remembering he wasn't doing anything wrong, at this particular moment, so he offered candies to the leader of the guard.

Harry eyed them. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"No."

The fighter nodded and took a gray one. This was one mostly sweet with a bit of sourness to it. It wasn't one of Tibs's favorite.

"If I were to ask you if you've been up to any thievery, what would you tell me?"

Tibs smiled. "Ask and find out." There would be no point in lying, yet, but he knew Harry well enough to know he didn't want to know the truth. This was too minor, but he'd have to act on the pickpocketing, and despite their current tension. He had better things to do than throw Tibs in a cell that would be crowded by the end of the day.

Not all visitors who came to the bazaar were here for the booths.

"Rogues," he grumbled, popped the candy in his mouth, and walked away.

“You know,” Alistair said, behind him, “one day, you will push him to ask and he will put you in a cell.”

Tibs turned and his teacher popped a blue candy with green swirls in his mouth. Tibs checked his secret pockets. Sea Drops were his favorite and—he was short one. “I should call Harry on you.”

Alistair smiled. “Think of it as the price to pay for failing a test. No matter how good you are, don’t take for granted someone can’t get into your pockets.”

“You’re like Delta, there’s no way I could stop you.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be aware something happened.”

He was aware, Tibs wanted to tell his teacher. More than the man would imagine, but in a crowd like this, that meant nothing. So many essences around him basically camouflaged what was going on. Just like Ganny had done in the maze. He couldn’t block only specific elements. What he could do was block all except for one, which meant he needed to know which one to expect.

Which was probably what Alistair meant, even if not about how he sensed the elements. He should always expect something from someone.

“Does this mean this is teaching time?”

“It’s always teaching time,” Alistair began walking. “Someone as curious as you should understand that.”

“When I do it, it happens when I want to.”

“Of course,” his teacher replied, smiling. “You always carefully plan those times when you derail my training with your questions. Quite the strategist, aren’t you?” He looked at him expectantly.

“I know what strategy is,” he said. “I heard it and we had to do it to defend the town.”

Alistair nodded. “Today’s going to be about focus. How are you coming along with suffusing your body with water essence?”

“I manage it,” he answered with a shrug. He could do it with a thought, but unlike with earth, he couldn’t tell what it does. He’d expected his body to turn into water the first time, so he’d done it in the inn’s tub. After all, with earth, his body turned to stone. But nothing had happened.

“I want you to do it and maintain it while we walk around the bazaar.”

“That’s going to be hard, isn’t it?” Tibs asked after considering it. It wasn’t for him, but he needed a way to gauge how it would be for a normal student.

“It depends. Most Runners only start to train on maintaining focus while doing multiple things once they’re Rho. You started earlier, so it could help here. Also, some people have an affinity for focus. For them, these exercises are simple, while other aspects will be more difficult.”

Tibs nodded. So he shouldn’t act like it was easy, but if he slipped, it wouldn’t be too suspicious. “What does it do?” He spread the element through his body as he sensed his teacher do the same. Unlike Tibs, who pushed it out of his core, Alistair’s radiated out of the channels of the essence running through his body.

“Why should it do anything?”



Could his teacher tell how his essence flowed inside his body? “When Jackal does it, his body turned into stone.” Alistair didn’t give any indication he’d known before, but Tibs know better than to assume it meant he couldn’t.

“He told you?”

Tibs shrugged. “He’s on my team and he’s my friend.”

“Earth isn’t subtle, so you can expect that most of what they do will have a clear and noticeable result. Turn their bodies into stone, encase you into it. Walk through the earth and stone. Most of the solid elements tend to be that way. It’s in their nature, you could say. Water is more subtle.”

“Isn’t subtlety something darkness does?”

“It is, but that doesn’t mean it’s the only element which does it. It’s simply at the center of most it does and stretches outward from there. Remember Tibs, the element doesn’t define what you can do. Every element can accomplish nearly everything the other element can do, but how they make it happen will be easier or harder depending more many factors. The main one will be training.”

Tibs thought back to something his teacher had done in one of their sessions. “So when you made it so no one could listen to what we were talking. You were copying something darkness does?”

“No. I didn’t copy darkness, and while you’re right, darkness can do it, it isn’t how I realized it either, and I’m not going to let you side-track us today. To get back to your initial question, the one that’s relevant to our exercise.” He paused. “Are you maintaining your essence?”

“I am,” Tibs said.

“Good. There are many stages of making use of the essence within you. What I’m having you practice is the weakest of them, and yes, that also applies to earth, so as impressive as your friend turning into stone is, it is the least of what he will be capable of.”

Tibs nodded and pulled his essence back to his core and waited for his teacher’s reaction.

“When inside you, you have less control over what you can have the essence do. There, it’s more about taking on aspects of water rather than forcing a result. And you’ll want to focus, you’ve let your essence retreat into your reserve.”

“You can tell?” Tibs asked, stepping around someone and nearly bumping into someone else. He didn’t, but he wondered where everyone came from.

Alistair smiled. “I can see it. See the result of you no longer being suffused by water.”

Tibs pushed the essence through his body. “So you can’t sense it? Like we sense the essence around us?”

Alistair shook his head. “Sensing within a body is difficult, there are multiple theories as to why, but the one with the most acceptance is the same reason why a dungeon can’t simply eat you when you enter it. The simple fact that we are alive protects us, but also blocks the ability to sense what another adventurer does with their essence within themselves.”

Tibs nodded and was distracted by the realization people had stopped nearly bumping into him all the time. The crowd hadn't thinned, but moving through it felt easier, as if people parted away ever so slightly.

"I see you're noticing the effect."

He pulled the essence back into his core and, while he could tell nothing about the crowd changed, he had to be more careful to avoid the people. He suffused himself and walking became simpler.

"Why are we always doing this?" he asked.

"A few reasons, the main one being that after a while, people will notice there's something odd about you. They won't be able to explain it, but this slipperiness water gives us when in tight crowds will put them on edge. Most people aren't comfortable with the things they can't easily explain. And adventurers aren't so common everyone thinks of them when confronted with something odd."

Tibs tried to imagine what someone slipping in and out of a crowd while barely disturbing it would look like. A spirit maybe? Something out to steal their life force?

"As for another," Alistair continued. "Try to pick a pocket."

Tibs looked around for guards before slipping his fingers in—next to the closest pockets. He tried again, and the man moved and he missed the pocket. Again with a woman, then another man. None of them noticed what he was going they just moved enough to make him miss without realizing it.

"As you can see, what's an advantage in one moment can be a disadvantage in the next."

"But all I have to do is pull the essence away from my hand and—" He frowned as he couldn't do it. He focused harder and, despite the water suffusing him, he walked into someone.

"Watch it," the woman said.

"There are limits to what you can do," Alistair said with a smile, while Tibs apologized to her.

"Why couldn't I do it? I let the essence out, and I can pull it in, so why can't I pull in just my hand?"

"Right now, the reason is your lack of training. But even with training, it's still difficult. Suffusing is more of an all-or-nothing proposition than one that acts in part. As I said, when it comes to the essence within our body, we're more taking on aspects rather than directing them."

Tibs nodded. Was it worth finding time for that, on top of everything else he was training? "Other than walking in a crowd without being noticed, does it do more?"

"Once you can maintain it while performing more strenuous actions than walking, we'll address the next stage."

Tibs smiled. "Oh, this is going to be great in fighting."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alistair stepped aside from Tibs's slash. He'd been impressed with Tibs's ice sword, although he'd pointed out one flaw with it by placing a finger on the jagged blade and

shattering it with a thought. Tibs had felt the will rip his control of the ice away, but he'd been unable to do anything against it. Only another water adventurer could disrupt his control, but it was a weakness he'd need to account for.

Tibs slashed again, and he almost connected.

Alistair wasn't trying hard. He didn't have to; he had decades of experience over Tibs, but that wasn't the point. The point was for Tibs to keep his body suffused. And as simple as it had been while walking. Fighting was different. He hadn't realized that suffusing his body took some focus. Not much, but enough that what he needed to fight took away from that and his essence retreated into his core, leaving him vulnerable.

"I think this is enough," Alistair said, and Tibs's blade dipped to the ground. Tibs panted heavily while his teacher hadn't broken a sweat. "How are you feeling?"

Tibs glared at his teacher. He wanted to switch element, see if suffusing his body with purity would take all the aches away.

"Were you able to keep your body suffused?"

Tibs shook his head.

"You're fighting form's good. How did you convince one of the fighting teachers to train you?"

"Another Runner," Tibs panted. "One of the convicts. He has experience fighting with swords."

"True, they're much older." He looked at Tibs's blade. "Raise it please." Tibs did so, his hand shaking despite it not weighing anything. "The jaggedness of it concerns me, Tibs. The fact you can't seem to smooth it tells me you're deeply angry about something."

Tibs snorted and let the blade melt away and drip to the ground. "I think the guild's given me plenty to be angry with."

"Anger and water—"

"That's bullshit, Alistair. Water doesn't care what I feel. Water's about soothing and making nice. I'm me. I'm a kid who got pulled here instead of losing hand, and that I'm grateful with, but everything else since? Being treated like food for the dungeon, like some commodity the guild's already planning to use when I'm strong enough. And that was before realizing the guild doesn't care enough about me or the town to do what it told people moving here it would do. It left us to die!"

He waited for Alistair to offer a defense, but the man remained silent, his expression morose. "You need to let go of it, Tibs," he finally said. "Anger at something you can't do anything against will only lead you to make mistakes you'll regret." Alistair rubbed his left wrist. It had been a while since Tibs had seen the motion and didn't immediately remember it. The black band the adventurers who broke the guild's rules got.

"I'm not going to do anything, Alistair. I want to, but I know my limitations. I'm just a kid. I'm getting back at the guild by taking charge of the town's survival."

Alistair smiled. "Harry told me to get you to stop."

"I'm not going to listen to you any more than I did him."

His teacher nodded. "Just be careful that protecting the town doesn't become turning it against the guild. You saw what it does when it doesn't care about something. So think on

what it can do if it wants it removed.”

Tibs nodded. “This is just about protecting the people here.”

Alistair looked at Tibs, then the wet grass where his sword melted, and at Tibs again. Whatever he thought, he kept to himself.

## Stepping up-66

Tibs stopped as he and his friends stepped into the clearing, well outside of where Sto could talk to him. This might be the first time he wasn’t sure he wanted to go in, and it had nothing to do with the creatures he’d have to fight.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, and the others stopped too.

He’d been a jerk to the dungeon. Sto wasn’t human. He didn’t think like them. He’d thought he was doing something nice at the same time as having fun. Tibs felt justified in walking out, but he should have come by before now when he was forced to do it. How would Sto react?

He stepped forward. He couldn’t deny his friends their chance at the run. Maybe Sto simply wouldn’t talk to him, and that would put his team on the same footing as the others.

The problem was, Tibs wanted to talk. He had no idea what to say. In part, he wanted to make it up for the silence, but he also felt Sto needed to be the one to apologize. He was the one who’d hurt him, that the dungeon understand it or not.

And that was the worse of it. This lack of understanding. Carina had told Jackal to give Kroseph leeway on account of one being Street and the other a city folk. Now Tibs got a sense that wasn’t easy to do. He didn’t want to give Sto leeway. He just wanted him to already know he’d done something wrong.

The cleric stopped Tibs, and he realized they were at the entrance. This one was an older man, which surprise him. He thought only Omegas and Rhos got dungeon healing duties. The man studied Tibs, frowning.

Tibs had suffused his body when he’d woken. It helped him feel more alert for the rest of the day. As if it repaired whatever his short sleep damaged. Carina didn’t know if that was a thing, but having less sleep caused problems, so Tibs figured that was how it worked.

Could the man see that?

“Is there a problem?” the woman guard asked. There was no anger or annoyance in her tone. This batch of guards didn’t seem to care as much about who everyone in the town was, and Tibs thought that was an improvement.

The cleric shook his head. “No, no problem, just...” He trailed off and stepped back to the side. Tibs felt the man’s eyes on him as he entered the dungeon.

“Are we going directly to the third floor?” Mez asked.

As the silence stretched, Tibs looked up. His friends were glancing at him, and it annoyed him. They didn’t need him to decide for them. He wasn’t the leader. He fixed his gaze on Jackal when the fighter glanced at him.

“Tibs—”

“Maybe we should go to the third floor,” Carina said. “Get this out of the way.” She placed a hand on the doorway and it shimmered, then showed the second floor. She stepped through before anyone replied, and she had the one to the third floor open by the time Tibs stepped through.

“Why does this feel more ominous than the last time?” Mez asked.

Again his friends glanced at Tibs. “What?” he demanded.

“You’re quiet,” Jackal replied.

“I believe the word you want to use is brooding,” Khumdar said.

“I’m not—” Tibs closed his mouth. “Sto isn’t saying anything, so what do you want me to talk about?” The following silence felt heavy and Tibs had to stop himself from calling out to the dungeon. Sto really should be the one to say something first.

“Which passages are we taking?”

“Same as last time,” Jackal said, after waiting a few seconds for Tibs. “If we’re ‘dealing with it’, as Carina said, that’s the way to go. Tibs?” he indicated the floor and Tibs stepped in the lead.

He considered sending out a wave of essence and using that to tell him where the traps were. The saturation was only of his essence, so he could still use water to feel out the walls, floor, and ceiling. But it felt... wrong to rush through this time. Ganny would appreciate watching him beat her traps the same way the other teams did.

At least that’s what he told himself.

“Tibs,” Jackal said as he crouched and studied the floor.

“Let him do this as he wants,” Carina replied.

The floor was tiled, each an identical square a little more than his foot on the sides. Finding a trigger was simply a matter of testing them to find which had wiggle room. This was much like the first-floor trap room in the early days, before Sto had perfected it.

That Ganny had gone back to that here simply told him the triggers weren’t the only way she intended to trick them. Or rather, not the only way she could overwhelm him with possibilities.

He counted the tiles. Each row was two and four tiles wide. They’d narrow further in, but not for a while. That was a lot of tiles to check for them to move forward. He considered coating the floor with water and icing that. With how vast his reserve was, he could probably reach where the battle with—he stopped thinking about that. He also didn’t coat the floor.

The first row had three triggers. None for the next two, then four, the next three didn’t have any, then five. Slowly they reached the first intersection, and Tibs turned into the narrower corridor they’d used the last time.

“Wasn’t there a third branch?” Jackal asked, and Tibs looked around. They had one going to the left and one to the right, with a flat expanse between them.

“Yeah,” Mez said. “Right there.” He pointed to the expanse and Tibs moved to study it. He first looked, then sensed, starting with earth since stone was what the wall was made of, and he felt it. The wall was woven earth. It was complex, but that was all it used. Tibs sensed, and it was still going where his range ended. Maybe he could undo it, but it would be

costly and there might not be anything there.

And this was the dungeon, so there was another way. Easier, but trickier. And because this was Ganny's floor, Tibs had an idea what it was. He looked back to the corridor they'd walked through, all the triggers he'd made sure they didn't step on, and smiled.

Ganny was quite clever.

"Is that the 'we need to worry' smile?" Mez asked.

"No," Carina replied. "It's the 'Tibs has figured something out' one."

"I don't have different smiles," he said.

"You definitely have a 'I'm going to enjoy this a lot more than you do' one," Jackal replied.

"So what is it?" Mez asked before Tibs could protest.

"The triggers I had us avoid. They're not all traps to kill us. Remember how that first one you stepped on didn't seem to do anything last time?" He pointed to the closed-off wall. "I think it opened this."

"So we have to activate all the triggered to find all the passages?" Carina asked.

"That seems excessively dangerous," Khumdar said.

"There's going to be a pattern," Tibs said and stepped back the way they came, only for Jackal to place a hand on his shoulder.

"Next time. Right now we're going that way."

"But maybe there's a room we missed. There could be loot."

"We'll get it next time."

"Maybe the way isn't going to be open and I need to figure it out—"

"Tibs, I didn't step on any other triggers after that one." Jackal held his shoulders and lowered his voice. "It's going to be okay. I'm sure Sto isn't going to have—isn't going to do that again."

Tibs bit his lower lip. He'd be more confident about it if Sto would talk to him. Say something. He nodded and went back to the tunnel, and relatively quickly, they were where Sto had brought her out. Where Jackal had fought what they thought was a golem, only it was

---

They waited in silence.

Nothing broke that silence.

"Are we in the right place?" Carina asked.

"Yeah," Jackal replied. "Tibs?"

Tibs stepped forward until the bend and looked around. Nothing waited to surprise them. He should his head as he returned.

"Okay, is anyone else getting creeped out?" Mez asked,

"Tibs, what's going on?" Carina asked.

How was he supposed to know? He nearly snapped. That wasn't what she meant. He was the only one who could find out.

He let out a breath. "Sto."

Silence.

“Sto,” he demanded. “Come on,” he said, getting angry. “Don’t be a child here. Talk to me.”

“I think you’re the one who should be saying something,” Ganny replied.

“What are you talking about?” He demanded and immediately regretted it, but instead of apologizing for the tone, he continued. “He’s the one who started it when he brought—”  
Fuck, it was getting hard to breathe. Was Sto doing something to the air?

“But you’re the one who walked out, Tibs,” she replied, her tone gentle. Why couldn’t she be angry at him? He didn’t want to be the angry one. “You stayed away.”

“I’m here now,” snapped.

“Because it’s your run. You didn’t even—”

“I’m sorry, okay?” he yelled. “I’m sorry I just left. I’m sorry I didn’t come to talk. It hurt too much. Then I didn’t know how you’d react and I was worried you wouldn’t want to talk to me, and then I was angry again because I didn’t want this to be my fault, and...” he trailed off, the words getting lost in how he felt.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” Sto said softly, and Tibs found he breathed easier. “I thought you would—”

Tibs tried to say something.

Sto sighed. “I don’t understand people very well.”

“I know. I should have given you leeway because you’re a dungeon, not a human. But seeing—seeing Pyan again, it hurt so much. People aren’t like your creatures, Sto. They don’t exist to just do one thing. We have lives outside of you. We have connections with the other people around us. And then they die and that connection is broken. It stays with us. The pain diminishes over time, but it never goes entirely away.” He thought of Mama and the occasions when he missed her so much. “Seeing her reminded me of what I lost. It reminds us of what we lost. She was a good friend. Someone I wish hadn’t died... but after Geoff, I guess I should have expected it.” He looked over his shoulder at Jackal. “That’s why I’ll never have a special someone. No one will ever feel that kind of pain because I died.”

“Are we good?” Mez asked in the following silence. “I mean, is the dungeon—fuck, this is so weird. I don’t think we’re supposed to have conversations with a dungeon, but only having one side of it really feels weird.”

“I don’t know how to go from here, Tibs,” Sto said. “If making one of the other Runners is going to hurt you each time...”

There were plenty of Runners Sto could use that Tibs wouldn’t care about, but what about Carina and Jackal? They had had more friends than he had among those who’d died. What about Mez, who’d lost entire teams to the dungeon? Or Khumdar? He had to have had friends who’d died too.

“He doesn’t know what to do if he can’t create more of the Runners,” Tibs told them.

“Can’t he just have more creatures?” Mez asked. “Those worked out fine until now.”

“I haven’t cracked how to improve them beyond what they are,” Sto replied. “And we’ve seen how little of a challenge they’re proving to be for you. Using people as creatures is... I don’t know how to explain it. Their bodies are made for this. They move easier. they’re...”

“Yes?” Tibs asked when the silence stretched.

“I don’t want to hurt you again Tibs.”

“Okay, just say it.”

“They’re more fun. I can talk when I use one. And it’s easier to move. To fight. I didn’t realize how lumbering the Brutes are; even the streamlined one I used to fight Jackal. I really think I could win against him if I’m using a person.” He paused. “But not if it means causing you pain.”

Tibs chuckled. The idea Sto didn’t want to inflict pain when he lived to test them to the point they’d die was so much the dungeon it could be funny.

He explained things to the others.

Jackal stepped forward. “Dun—Sto. First off, I don’t care who you use, you aren’t beating me. I am the best fighter you’ll ever meet.” He paused and looked at Tibs.

“He’s waiting for whatever else you have to say.”

“Second,” Jackal sounded miffed at not getting a comeback. “I demand payment for the help I’m about to give you.”

“Jackal,” Carina snapped. “You don’t make demands of the dungeon.”

The fighter shrugged. “Already have. So?”

“I will... consider it,” Sto replied. “Based on the kind of help he offers.”

“He’ll think about it,” Tibs said.

Jackal looked annoyed. “Guess I’ve got to take what I get. You can have them wearing armor and helmets, so we don’t see what they look like. You do have helmets that cover the whole head, right?”

“Face covering?” Sto asked. “No one’s come in with those.”

“But it should be easy enough to make changes,” Ganny said. “And you don’t need them to see through the helmet. That can be part of them, so you can have them see through that easily enough.”

“They like the idea,” Tibs said, and Jackal rubbed his hands together.

“Can I offer an alternative?” Carina asked. “Without payment required.” She glared at the fighter.

Sto chuckled. “I’ll listen and decide on payment afterward.”

“You are going to enjoy pitting them against each other, aren’t you?” Ganny said.

“Yes, but this would be more fun if they knew that.”

Tibs sighed. “I am getting tired of being stuck in the middle of these.”

“The price of being special,” Ganny replied.

Tibs wished he had someone to glare at. He sighed again. “Whichever one of you has the better idea wins.”

“Then it’s easy,” Jackal said. “I always win.”

“Shall I blast you all the way to the entrance?” Carina asked, and Jackal winced.

“I believe you don’t yet possess the level of control over your air that will let you navigate him around the bends between here and there.”

She grinned at the cleric. “Jackal’s stubborn enough. I think his head can survive a



direct like through the rock.”

“It’s the rest of him that’ll need the cleric when he lands outside,” Mez said, chuckling.

“I hear a lot of boasting,” Jackal commented, “and no actual idea.”

Carina stepped forward. “Do you have to make them identical to who they were?” She smiled as Jackal gave her a worried look.

“What does she mean?” Sto asked, and Tibs replayed.

“I’ve noticed that all your creatures are the same. All the Ratlings and Bunnyling look the same and wear the same thing. The only difference is they’ll use different weapons. It’s the same thing with the golems. You have three variations, but within that, they are identical, except got the one you fought Jackal with. Is that a choice, or a limitation you need to work with?”

“I.. I don’t know. I just made them and they worked fine for what I needed them to do. Ganny? Can I change them?”

“I don’t know. I mean, everything here’s part of you, so I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to, but it never occurred to me to suggest it. Like you said, it all worked fine until now.”

“Can’t you try it now?” Tibs offered.

“This is going to take all my concentration, I expect,” Sto replied. “I’ll get to it once you leave, but Tibs, will every team react the way you did if they confront other Runners? Having people as creatures is kind of the thing on this floor. If I can’t do that at all, it’s going to diminish the whole thing.”

Tibs felt sick at the idea others would have to go through what he had, and he wanted to outright tell him not to do it, no matter the result. But Sto was a dungeon, not a person. He needed to test people, have them die. What would the guild do if they thought he wasn’t doing what he should? What did people do with sick animals?

Instead of saying it was okay, he told his team about it.

“What about my reward?” Jackal asked.

“He didn’t pick your idea,” Carina replied.

“He didn’t pick yours, so clearly mine was the better one.”

Sto and Ganny chuckled.

“We can deal with that afterward,” Tibs said. “Should Sto bring the people creatures with the other teams even if they’re dead Runners?”

“Why does he care?” Mez asked, then raised a hand as Tibs opened his mouth to protest. “I understand why what happened with us was a problem. He likes you and hurting you hurt him. But unless he likes someone on another time. Why does he care what they think?”

“It isn’t what they think that worries it, isn’t it?” Khumdar asked.

“Who else would it be...” Mez looked at Tibs. “Oh.”

And Tibs was stuck in the middle again. All of Sto’s protestations when Ganny claimed he was sweet on Tibs were starting to sound false. Tibs sighed as everyone looked at him.

“Alright,” He said. “I don’t like it, but,” he hurried to continue. “You have to do what a dungeon does. It’s what you are. And,” he added because if he only put this on the other teams, it wouldn’t be fair, “if you can’t use either of Jackal’s or Carina’s ideas, you can do it with us too.”

“Are you sure?” Sto asked. “I don’t want to hurt you like that again.”

“You test us. This is just another one. Who knows, maybe I can finally learn to stop caring that way.”

“Don’t say that Tibs,” Jackal ordered.

“Fuck off, Jackal. You don’t know how much caring about all this hurts.” He rubbed his face. “Sorry, you didn’t deserve this. I’m just...”

“You’re you,” Ganny said. “I’m pretty sure that’s part of what makes you so special.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “So this is resolved. Can we go on with this run?”

“Before you do,” Sto said in a serious tone. “I have to render my verdict as to who gets the reward.”

“Stone Mountain Crevice,” Ganny warned, “Don’t you even think about it.”

## Stepping up-67

A slash up, then across and the Gnoll fell. Tibs raised his arm, shield over his head to block the mace another brought down on him, turning and slashing again. It fell back and Tibs slowly turned, ice shield up and sword ready.

The tunnel had widened into something resembling an irregular room, and everyone had been on guard. Ganny only got the drop on them once, and this time, they were ready when the Gnolls dropped from the ceiling and walked through doorways in the wall.

“Did anything drop?” Jackal asked.

“Silvers,” Mez replied.

The fighter cursed. “Is Sto getting greedy?”

“That’s your job,” Carina said.

“Thank you,” Sto commented.

“There is... something here.” Khumdar’s eyes were closed. “A secret, but one we are meant to discover.” He frowned. “This...” he sighed. “It’s new. I’ve never felt this kind of secret before. Normally secrets aren’t intended to be found out.”

“So a cache?” Jackal asked, rubbing his hands. “Tibs?”

“Looking.”

“I would have thought I’d have felt it before if that were the case,” Khumdar said. “There is a cache in the trap room, in the pool, and where the key to the first-floor boss room is hidden would also be a cache.”

“You’re getting stronger,” Carina said. “Maybe for you that means being able to discern subtle details you couldn’t before. The room’s sealed. I mean, other than the entrance and exit, there are no hidden panels.”

“This is going to be essence again,” Tibs said.

“A puzzle?” Mez asked.

He shrugged, walking along the wall, sensing. They were stone and corruption and little else. They didn’t have to be more. Ganny had the doorways to bring in the Gnolls, and those disappeared afterward. Unlike the ones to bypass a floor, these weren’t locked in the walls so—

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “There’s something here.” The fighter was looking at a section of the wall on the other side. Tibs felt what he meant as he approached. It was still stone and corruption, but the structure was different. It wasn’t like that of the hidden corridor. Tibs could tell they were meant to interact with this. He could even yell how he could change the structure so it would go away and started doing it, then stopped.

Maybe this was a chance to let someone else learn.

“Hey, Khumdar,” Jackal called, “is this what you felt?”

The cleric looked in their direction. “I do not know. There is no direction to the sense. Only a sense of here in this... space.”

The fighter nodded. “Tibs?”

“You can open it,” He replied.

Jackal looked at him. “I’m not a rogue.”

“No, but you have earth as your essence, so this is something you can handle.”

“There’s air half a dozen paces in,” Carina said, joining them, “but nothing else.”

“Does that mean you can do something about it?” Jackal asked.

“This one’s yours,” Tibs said before Carina opened her mouth.

“I’m a dumb fighter, Tibs. If it can’t be done by hitting it, it’s not my thing.”

Tibs shrugged. “So try that.”

With a roll of the eyes, Jackal tapped the stone, then punched it. He made his arm stone and stuck it hard to no noticeable result. “Not doing anything.”

Tibs leaned in and lowered his voice. “You don’t always have to be the dumb one on the team, Jackal.”

The fighter looked offended, then resigned.

Carina chuckled.

“I hate you two sometimes,” Jackal said, placing his hand on the wall and closing his eyes.

“You realize that anyone who knows you knows the dumb fighter’s an act, right?” Carina asked.

“Not next to you two, now quiet, I’m focusing and that’s hard.”

Tibs sensed Jackal’s work. The way he pushed his essence into the wall, around what was there, pushed and pulled on it. Then moved it between the essence already there and forced the structure to change. It wasn’t big. It wasn’t what Tibs would have done, but that was the point. Jackal wasn’t him. The fighter moved his hand away, made a fist, turned his arm to stone, and struck the wall.

Where nothing happened before, the time the stone cracked. Jackal smiled and struck it again. The crack widened. A third time and chunks of the wall fell.

“I’m not feeling any fire there,” Mez said, watching Jackal work. “Does that mean only someone with earth as their element can open it?”

“And corruption,” Tibs replied. “After Bardik’s attack, Stop added corruption to his walls so it couldn’t be used against him.”

“Doesn’t that go against the rule that anyone on a team can get through something?” the archer asked.

Tibs considered it, then the source. “That’s something my teacher told me. He believes it, but he also believes Sto is a mindless creature.”

“Which you know I’m not.”

“But if that’s a rule, I think it’s about traps we have to survive. Sto’s testing us then, and that’s one set of rules. This is about getting loot, so it doesn’t have to follow those rules. Maybe there are other caches that can only be accessed by someone with a different element. Also, Ganny is who made this floor, and she isn’t as straightforward as Sto is.”

“Got that right,” She commented.

“Why do I feel that’s a dig on how I designed the first two floors?”

“It’s not,” she said, “you have your set of strength, I have mine. That’s why we’re supposed to work together.”

“Okay, that’s a dig,” Sto replied.

“Are they talking to you?” Mez asked.

“Each other.” Ribs frowned. “How did you know?”

“You get a distracted look when you’re listening to them.” The pounding stopped and Tibs looked at Jackal, who was looking at him.

“You realize that if you’re right. It means we can get a lot more loot than anyone else. You can open all the caches.” His grin was broad.

“Not all of them. And Don can open as many since corruption is mixed in.”

“Ohhh,” Sto said. “You missed something.”

“Yeah, I did. Of course, that’s not really a problem unless you only want Tibs to have an unfair advantage.”

“I don’t—you made this floor.”

Tibs smiles.

“Don’t you float away with that grin on your face, Ganny. You’re the one who—” Sto’s voice cut off as if a door had closed.

Tibs frowned. He’d always assumed that when Sto said he was busy elsewhere, he meant his focus was there, but this had sounded like they could both move around. Was there a place in the dungeon where he and Ganny lived? Were there corridors behind the walls hidden from his senses and that was where they were when they watched the teams?

Had Bardik been after something more specific than simply melting the dungeon with that corruption?

He looked at the others, who were silently watching him. “Later,” he said. “Do you want that loot or are we moving on?”

Jackal went back to punching his way to the cache.

“Have you guys given anything thought as to what you’re going to ask the dungeon?” Mez asked as he watched Jackal work.

Tibs shook his head.

“I am uncertain I should take the dungeon up on his offer,” Khumdar said. “I understand this staff is supposed to have been a random item, but it is still more than I could have asked for. And I was not one of those who provided a suggestion.”

“I wasn’t either,” Mez said, “But Tibs said we all get to pick one thing and if the dungeon can make it, we can have it, right?”

Tibs nodded. Instead of rewarding Jackal or Carina, and in the process telling them which idea Sto had picked. He offered the entire team each one item that he could make. It would be theirs alone, locked to them, the way Tibs’s bracers were essence locked to him. Sto had been surprised when none of them had jumped on the offer. And it was Jackal who had explained how they all felt.

“It’s too much to just tell you something right now. I need to think about it, figure out what’s going to really be useful to me.”

Tibs felt the way Khumdar did. He had the bracers and Sto had helped him get his audience with Fire. Asking for more felt like taking advantage of him.

“I’m through!” Jackal yelled. The passage he’d punched was narrow, barely wide enough for the fighter to fit through, but the room it opened to was wide enough they all stood in it.

“Okay,” Carina said, looking at the five pedestals. “Maybe this is worth locking it behind a specific element.” Each pedestal had an item on it. The one of the left had a quiver; next to it was a book, next to that a leather roll that reminded Tibs of the one Darran had shown him that first day, the one with all the lock picking tool in it. A shield was on the next one and an amulet on the last one.

“That’s mine,” Mez said, reaching for the quiver.

“Don’t touch it,” Carina called.

Mez stopped and looked at her. “That’s clearly for an archer.”

“That will have lock picks,” Tibs said of the leather roll.

“The shield is clearly for a fighter, and the book for a sorcerer,” she said, “which leaves the amulet for the clerics.”

“One item for each class,” Jackal mused. “No fighting over who gets what.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little excessive?” she asked. “For the fight we had?”

“No,” Jackal replied.

“Khumdar, tell me there isn’t a secret to this room,” he demanded.

The cleric opened his mouth, then closed it. “You are correct. There is something hidden. No, not something.” He closed his eyes and frowned. “A thought or an idea.” He shook his head. “Had gaining strength in your element been this confusing for you also?”

“Mine been mainly about making myself tougher and punching harder,” Jackal said.

“Shooting bigger exploding arrows.”

“Yes, it’s confusing for me too,” Tibs said.

Carina chuckled. “You two as the only ones without an established system. The rest

of us are simply doing what we're told when we're told, as we get stronger." She paused and smiled at Tibs. "With a few exceptions."

"So there's a trap in here?" Jackal asked, annoyed. "It's a cache, it should just be about rewards."

"How did you know?" Mez asked Carina.

"Something Tibs said in combination with having too many items as rewards. Ganny isn't straightforward, and she made this floor. We've seen how she takes what we expect and tricks us. We expect a cache, so she added something. Tibs, what can you sense?"

"Essences," he replied immediately. Then focused on trying to tell them apart. "The eight I can sense, mine, and others. I don't know enough about weaving them together to tell what they might do."

"So this might be a death trap," Mez said. "That's just great. Maybe we should just leave it be. It's not like we're going to keep any of it, right? I don't need a quiver. Tibs doesn't need picks, Jackal doesn't use shields. What do you think the book's about? The amulet has to be a reserve, right?"

"The book will be about learning something," Carina said. "That's what books do. Amulets have been reserves until then, but is that all they can be?"

"So, you're all agreed on not taking anything?" Jackal asked.

Carina nodded. "I think Mez is right. Until we figure out what it does, we shouldn't risk it."

Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged, then at Khumdar.

"There is nothing of obvious use to me, so it is not something that matters."

"Good." The fighter turned and grabbed the shield off the pedestal before Carina had time to object.

"Jackal!" she yelled, but Tibs sensed the shift in the essence. Around the four other items, the air shimmered multicolored, and they vanished. "What kind of stupid move was that?"

"Tibs said I don't always have to be the idiot."

"And you do that?" she demanded.

"The dungeon wasn't going to kill us," Jackal said. "This is a cache. Not a death trap. Since you all decided you didn't want yours, I took mine."

"And the rest disappeared," Tibs said. "That's the secret Khumdar felt. We only get one, but we get to pick it."

Jackal looked at the pedestals. "Unless we are fast enough to take them before they vanish."

"I'm not trying that," Mez said. "What if your hand's on it and it vanishes with it?"

"It's not a death trap," Jackal repeated.

"Maybe," Carina replied angrily, "but that doesn't mean the dungeon isn't going to stop you from doing something stupid and lose a hand." She took a breath. "You were right, but pushing more is being an idiot. You don't put your greed ahead of our safety."

"Okay. I won't." Jackal motioned toward the exit. "Let's move on to the next one and see if Tibs can find us another cache." He stopped Khumdar and attached the shield to the

pack.

“You are agreeing too easily,” Carina stated.

“I know when I’ve lost a fight,” Jackal replied cheerily.

“No, Jackal, you usually don’t,” Mez said. “At least not until you’re unconscious on the ground.”

Tibs started at the archer. Did he go to the fighting club too?

\* \* \* \* \*

Another fight with Gnolls, this one along a narrow passage that made it difficult to move out of each other’s way, and resulted in some of the injuries Tibs healed to be administered by his teammates. The cache’s entrance was hidden with light essence woven through the earth and corruption. When Tibs added some of his light to it and expanded it. He could step through the wall as if it wasn’t there.

Behind it was another set of pedestals, an arrow on one, a knife on the other, a helmet, another book, and another amulet. The helmet was the one with the clearer value, so they took it. After that were a handful of intersections, then they reached a dead end with a door in it.

The door looked to be made of dark wood, set in a golden frame. Only the essence didn’t match how they looked. It was mainly light, with stone and corruption and other essences. Unlike the caches, Tibs couldn’t affect the essences he could identify. The weave was tight.

The door had no handle or keyholes. Only three shields on them, each with a different design. The one at the top was like a bird, its wings spread, but they didn’t seem to be made of feathers.

“That’s a dragon,” Carina said. “I’ve seen paintings of them.”

“The way it’s posed makes me think it’s a crest,” Mez added. “Same with the boar, and whatever that is.” He pointed at the bottom one, the animal face with a dark mane around it.

“A lion,” Jackal said. “The arena in MountainSea had them every so often. They’ll set them up against some of the stronger fighters. They’re deadly.”

“Alright,” Carina said. “But what do they mean?” she ran a hand over them. “They’re painted on the door, so they aren’t hiding keyholes or a puzzle. Tibs, any idea how we open it?”

“Maybe it’s a distraction,” he said, although he didn’t believe it. “I don’t know. There’s more of the floor we haven’t seen.”

“We’re going to have to make maps,” Carina said, “otherwise we’re going to be lost in here forever.”

“No,” Jackal said.

“I can get us back,” Tibs said.

They looked at each other, and Tibs motioned for the fighter to continue.

“I can sense the way we came in the stone. It’s not the dungeon doing it. I just remember the stone around me.”

“Alright then, how long do we keep going?”

“Until we’ve cleared the floor,” Jackal replied.

“I don’t know if we have that kind of time,” Mez replied.

“We did not bring provisions,” Khumdar pointed out.

“What happens if two teams are on the same floor at the same time?” Carina asked.

“No idea,” Sto replied. “But there are no rules against it. I wouldn’t want you working together since the floor’s designed for one team. But I guess that if you’re willing to share the loot, I couldn’t do much to stop you.”

Tibs grinned. “If we don’t mind sharing the loot, we can have a second-team here.”

“Nope,” Jackal said. “No sharing of our loot. Can you tell us when a team’s heading this way?”

“Actually,” Ganny said, “maybe we should have a countdown based on when they’ve sent in each floor’s team. It’s always been more or less the same time frame.”

“It has?” Sto asked.

“Yes. Maybe the countdown will help you learn how people count time, too. You’ve been in about half the time it takes for another team to come in for this floor.”

How long had they been in here? “We have as much time as we’ve been in already. Sto and Ganny aren’t clear on how we keep track of time, and I don’t know how long we’ve been in.”

“I sort of lost track myself,” Jackal said.

“Same,” Mez said.

“A few hours, at least,” Carina said, hand on her amulet. “I know how fast it recharges, but with the constant use of my essence, it’s not exact.”

“Then we go on for more loot,” Jackal said, and walked the way they came until the previous intersection.

## Stepping up-68

Tibs ducked under the Gnoll’s swing and Khumdar sent it flying against the wall with a well-placed staff strike, where it melted away, leaving a silver piece behind.

“Anyone knows how we’re doing for time?” Mez asked.

“No,” Carina replied.

“We could keep going,” Jackal said, picking up silvers. “It’s not like another team in here will be a problem. This floor’s big.”

“Can the dungeon reset the floor until we leave?” Mez asked Tibs.

“It sort of depends,” Sto said, “on if Ganny wants to break a rule or not. We’re not supposed to do it, but it isn’t like there’s anyone here to stop us, is there?”

“There’s a reason for the rules,” Ganny replied unhappily.

“They haven’t worked it out,” Tibs told the archer. “But I’m tired. I think that’s something we need to keep in mind. How good are we going to be against the next group if we’re all exhausted?”

“Can’t you heal the tired away?” Jackal asked.



“I can do it for myself. But all I know how to do to you is heal your injuries. That makes you feel better, but it doesn’t last, does it?” Tibs grinned. “I guess I could practice on you until I get that right.”

“Okay, we’re heading out,” Jackal hurried to say.

“I didn’t think he could get scared of something Tibs did,” Carina said.

“You weren’t there when Kroseph took Jackal to Tibs after he got hurt in a pit match,” Mez replied. “Jackal was healed in the end, but it was a slow and indirect way to get there. It sounded very unpleasant.”

“Maybe he’ll learn to stop with those fights then,” Carina said, starting after the fighter.

“That’s not the lesson he learned,” Tibs said, watching his friend’s back.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I thought you’d left,” Tibs told Cross as he stepped next to her among the bazaar. Another caravan had arrived this morning, and the town was busy again. Busier. Only a few months after, Sebastian and Tibs almost believe it had never happened. If he didn’t look at how the town had changed and how he was now busy with managing the safety of the town. There were fewer conflicts with Harry’s guard now that clearer lines divided the town.

The nobles wouldn’t have anything to do with Runner security, even after the guild had let Sebastian take over, and Tibs was happy to leave those to Harry. Other than the Gold Neighborhood, where merchants catering to the nobles were set up, all merchants were under Tibs’s care.

The bazaar was Harry’s, but Tibs still made sure Runners patrolled it and interfered with any theft a visitor might attempt on the merchants. Merchants were off-limits without exceptions. Pickpockets and conman Tibs was still figuring out. Runners had to practice, so he couldn’t outlaw it, and his fingers hadn’t gotten any less light, so he’d be a hypocrite to tell others not to do it when he couldn’t stop himself. He encouraged the rogues to stick to one copper, since the excuse he used was that this was training, not about getting rich, but he wouldn’t start demanding they show him what they took. That would make him a thief boss, and he wasn’t going there.

“Just because you’re too busy looking at papers and counting numbers,” she replied with a grin, “doesn’t mean the rest of us have left. Don’t I remember a certain rogue complaining about his sorceress friend forcing him to learn letters and numbers?”

“Just letters,” Tibs grumbled. “Numbers are something the merchants forced on me.” Managing the town had made it so he could count to the hundreds without needing to use purity to remove the headaches, and he could divide by fifteen mostly in his head. He had a deal with Darran for the man to convert the coppers all the way to electrum, but he required Tibs to keep the tally.

“Well, I’m still around. Are you looking to be rid of me?”

Tibs shook his head and handed him the cube. “This one’s interesting, but it’s about memorizing the pieces and how they fit.”

She smiled as she took it. “Not all puzzles are about patterns.”

Tibs looked around. “Sometimes they’re about how people think.”

She chuckled. “The greatest puzzle of them all. Society.”

Tibs rubbed his temple. “That one I don’t want to work on.”

She patted his shoulder. “Then you shouldn’t have agreed to running this town.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs entered the house through the second-story window. Khumdar’s message had been clear about not being seen coming in. He quietly walked through the unoccupied bedroom, wondering what the cleric was doing here, and why the secrecy.

No, that one was probably a darkness thing. Tibs had experienced it getting used to channeling darkness. This almost need to keep everything he knew to himself, even when it put others in danger. Fire, Light, and Corruption were the only elements he couldn’t channel without consequences yet, and Corruption was getting easier—he chuckled—to handle.

He was terrified of trying Fire.

He sensed two people on the ground floor. One with darkness as his element and the other had no elements. He made an ice knife and kept him behind his back as he descended the steps. The forms were seated, but Tibs couldn’t tell the situation, and until he confirmed it was Khumdar, he didn’t want to risk a Runner seeing him without blue eyes.

“It’s safe,” the cleric said, but Tibs didn’t drop his guard until he saw them. Khumdar was seated in a shadowed corner, nearly unseeable in his black robes. The other was a woman, seated in the light of the room’s lamps, tied to the chair. He didn’t recognize her, so he couldn’t work out why Khumdar had her tied. Staying in the shadows himself, he channeled darkness and sensed she had secrets. He tried to discern the kind she had, the way Khumdar could now, but neither of them knew how the cleric did it. He switched back to water and stepped into the light.

Her expression turned worried on seeing him.

“Maybe you should tell him,” Khumdar said. “You will feel better for it.”

There was a directness to the cleric’s words Tibs wasn’t used to. He sounded angry.

She glowered at him.

“This is what’s been keeping you busy?” Tibs asked, talking the third seat. The room felt lived in, with the crooked painting of an older man and woman on the wall, the dirty place on a side table, but it felt recent. There weren’t much of the small things people accumulated.

“One of them,” Khumdar replied, then smiled. “Kragle Rock has been growing ever larger, and so have the secrets contained within. I believe I will never get to our team’s secrets.”

“Do we have any left?” Tibs asked, watching her. The casual conversation wasn’t making her relax.

“It is a sad fact of this world we live in that we always keep secrets.” Khumdar was silent for a few seconds, and she grew more worried. “Often, even from ourselves.”

“And what are her secrets?” Tibs asked, and her eyes went wide with fear.

“I have only worked out two of them,” the cleric replied, “but they are enough that I thought you should meet her. The first one is that she works for Sebastian.”

“I don’t know who that is,” she stated.

Tibs sighed. It made sense. She probably wasn't the only one. Even if he knew how to identify them, would it be possible to keep anyone who worked for Sebastian from coming here? And that was without considering the loyalty coins bought.

"Everyone knows who Sebastian is," Tibs said. "You can't be in this town without hearing his name and how he tried to take it from us."

"Well, yes, of course, I know that," she replied, still looking worried. "But I don't know him the way he's saying it. I work at the Tipped Tankard, I'm a server and I do some of the cooking. I don't know what he's talking about."

The Tankard was a tavern only a couple of streets from the inn. Tibs had visited it when it had opened. The ale hadn't been memorable.

"She does work there," Khumdar said.

Tibs wished he could switch to light and know if she was lying, but he hadn't trained with that element, and seeing his eyes go from blue to bright would give her too much information. Maybe he could stand behind her? Be mysterious and threatening? Would light let him do that? Did he even want to?

No. Tibs liked puzzles, but not playing games. "What's the second secret you figured out?"

"She is here to watch you, specifically," The cleric answered.

"That's ridiculous," she replied as Tibs sighed louder. "Why would I watch him? Whoever he is."

Tibs should have expected it. Sebastian had told him it wasn't over. Jackal said he'd want to hurt him specifically whenever he managed to come back. He rubbed his face.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Not long," she replied.

"She came within days of the attendants reestablishing transport," Khumdar said. She glared at him. She wasn't a good liar.

"Alright, what did she find out?"

"Nothing," she said. "I'm too busy working."

"She spends a few hours every day at the inn," Khumdar said. "She doesn't approach you, but she has watched you work on your ledgers."

Then she didn't know the details of how many Runners he had doing security, but someone else could be working on that from a different angle. Sebastian had put one person in his town, he wouldn't have stopped there.

"Can you sense anything specific of the secrets she has?" he asked. "I don't know how to go about questioning someone."

Khumdar shook his head. "Unfortunately, that is not how darkness works. Or at least not at this time. Maybe one day I will get stronger and I will be able to tease about one's secret." He smiled at Tibs. "But I believe that will take away the enjoyment of having to work for it."

Tibs nodded. "What did you tell Sebastian?"

"I don't know him," she repeated.

"I know three of the convicts who would have no compulsions with forcing her to

give you the answers you seek,” the cleric said, and she was scared again.

Tibs shook his head. “I’m not going to have someone tortured. I know she spied on me, which means there are others. That’s enough for now. What can we do about her thought?”

“I suspect the dungeon would not find it amiss to have someone step in during the night. I am certain that between the two of us, we could accomplish it.”

“You can’t do that!” she yelled. “It’s murder. I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“We’re not feeding her to the dungeon,” Tibs stated. Maybe he’d have considered it back when he thought Sto only existed to eat them. But he wasn’t going to turn his friend into a murderer just because he didn’t see it the same as Tibs would.

“Then I am uncertain what we can do.”

Tibs only saw one option, and he didn’t like it. “We send her back and make sure she can’t come back. We’ll do that with everyone you uncover. Maybe you can arrange for someone at the platform to be on the lookout for how the secrets of the people who work for Sebastian feel so they can be sent right back before they find out anything.”

The cleric nodded. “I can have people in place within the hour.”

Tibs didn’t care if she believed them or not. She wouldn’t know the extent of what essence did, so what couldn’t be done. All he needed from her was that she’d tell Sebastian so he’d have something to make him hesitate in sending someone to replace her.

“I’ll escort you back to where you came in,” Khumdar said, standing. Tibs followed him up the stairs and indicated the room he’d entered. There, the cleric closed the door and lowered his voice. “Can you afford to pay the attendant’s rates simply to send her away?”

“Jackal can put me in contact with one of them. I’m hoping we’ll be able to work something out.” He didn’t want to owe anyone linked to the guild favors, but he didn’t have a choice. “It’s not like we’re set up to hold prisoners, and Harry isn’t going to do it for us. He’d probably use this as an excuse to force his guards back into the town.”

“I do not believe Sebastian will believe anything about us being able to stop him from sending in spies. From what I have learned of speaking with those who fought his forced, he is knowledgeable about essence.”

Tibs shrugged. “He can’t know everything. Can you find the other spies he has in the city with how you can feel secrets now?”

Khumdar considered it, then shook his head. “I was capable of sensing her because of how focused she was, how much she wanted to remain unseen by you, and because of the proximity within the inn, ensured I noticed her. If he sends someone to replace her, I expect he will ensure they are more careful. That is why you should not send her back.”

“I can’t keep her either, and I’m not going to murder her just for working for Sebastian. I’m pretty sure that’s something he’d do.” He studied the cleric. The man was older, more aware of the world. Maybe.... “Do you want to handle sending her back? That way...”

The cleric shook his head. “I will not kill her behind your back, Tibs. You would sense my secret anytime you channeled Darkness. You would grow to mistrust me anytime I said I would do something to keep you and this town safe. I will advise you on how I believe you

should proceed, but I will follow your instructions.”

Tibs nodded. “Then keep working on finding more spies. I’ll have something worked out for sending them back soon, hopefully.”

## Stepping up-69

The man with the golden eyes had an... oddness to him. It was the best way Tibs could describe it. When he looked at Tibs, he seemed to be looking further away, as if he saw... something different. Sensing the strength of the man’s essence, Tibs guessed him to be Epsilon, which meant that while he looked to be no older than Khumdar, he could be a lot older. Tibs hadn’t worked out how it happened, but he’d at least figured that out. The stronger someone was in their element, the less they were affected by the passage of time.

Tibs wondered how long he’d look like a kid, and if that was a good or bad thing.

“Free transportation?” the man asked distractedly. “For people you want.”

“Not free,” Jackal corrected. “We’ll owe you favors. And not for coming and going, just to send them away and maybe pass the word they aren’t to be allowed back. You know I’m good for it.”

“The extent of your influence hasn’t been the same since your father tried to take over this town,” the man said, still sort of looking at Tibs.

“So I’ll have to work harder, I’m still good for it.”

“Are you?” the man asked, then raised a hand to silence Jackal as the fighter opened his mouth.

“I don’t know what you’ll ask,” Tibs replied, “so I don’t know how hard it’ll be to do. But Jackal is going to help me with it, so I’m sure we’ll make it happen.”

The man’s smile was small. “I appreciate honesty over false promises, no matter how well-meant they are. One owed favor per person you have me send away. Where should they go?”

“Can you send them back where they came from?” Tibs asked.

“Doubtful. We don’t keep track of those things here, and to send a request for the information from the scribes who do would cause delays and complications I don’t think you want.”

“They probably come from Ardiel,” Jackal said. “It’s where my father’s based out of.”

Jackal’s home then. “If you don’t know where they came from, send them wherever they want to go, so long as it’s not going to make it more difficult for you.”

The man nodded, turned, and disappeared partially through the step in a shimmer of colors.

Tibs leaned back in the chair and relaxed. He’d had no idea this would have been so stressful. But part of him had been afraid Harry would appear in the middle of the discussion and throw him in a cell. Tibs didn’t know if this broke any rules, but Harry wouldn’t like it.

“Congratulation on your first successful deal,” Jackal said, grinning. “No, there was

the one with the merchants, then bringing in the conscripts. You're turning out to be an expert at this."

"The others weren't this stressful."

Jackal nodded. "Working with someone you don't know causes stress. But Yarton is a good sort, and we did save his group from my father, so he didn't press as hard as he could have."

"So long as this is the worse I have to deal with. This isn't going to be too bad."

\* \* \* \* \*

Quigly pushed the Runner to the center of the room. They were in the warehouse Tibs was using to train himself in controlling how the elements affected him, so the walls were cut, scratched, rotted and all that was left of the initial furniture was the debris piled in a corner. He sighed.

The Runner was young, one of the rogues recently graduated to Upsilon, with their help. Tibs hadn't worked with any of them directly. As much as he wanted to help train them, he was too busy with his own training and running things.

Not to mention fighting with his letters and the ever-growing numbers.

Any time he told Jackal to take over things, the fighter laughed to the point he fell to the floor.

With the rogue, Quigly, and Tibs, were a handful of other Runners, and a merchant. The woman who the rogue had stolen from. The first time this had happened since Tibs took over protecting them. Jackal said he should be happy it had taken someone this long to break the rules.

Tibs was just annoyed it had happened at all.

"Why?" he asked.

"What d'ya mean, why?" the rogue asked. "It's what I do. I'm a rogue." Whoever he'd gotten to weave the magic that let the Runners understand each other had done a poor job. If the sorcerer who could do this didn't demand so much coins, Tibs would pay to have every Runner they trained to speak properly.

"You don't have to steal."

"Ya kidding?" He was older than Tibs, as was everyone in the room, but the contempt was only of this Runner's face.

"Mind your—" Quigly started, hand going up.

"Don't," Tibs ordered. "I'm not going to have someone hit just because he doesn't know me."

"I know ya," the man said. "Ya the Hero of the Dungeon," he said, mockingly. "Like ya could save anything."

"He saved the town," Quigly stated.

"Don did that," the Runner replied. "He helped."

"I'm still in charge of protecting the merchants," Tibs said. "And you've been told they're off-limit. We need them for our supplies, just like they need us to bring them the loot the guild doesn't take from us. If we don't work together, it's just going to cause problems, and that's going to make each run tougher."

The Runner snorted. “Ah don’t need you or this. I can do the run on my own.”

Tibs studied him. He didn’t think Don had put him up to this. The two of them had an uneasy alliance. He was the Hero of Kragle Rock, the one the guild liked and pointed to when speaking of what Runners could become under their teaching. Don loved being the center of attention, even if he often complained of the pressure his teacher put on him to show that corruption was one of the good elements.

It meant that other than Harry and Alistair, the guild was forgetting about Tibs’s existence.

“If you could do this without our help?” Tibs asked. “Why did you accept it?”

The Runner beamed. “Ah never turn my back on something that’s given to me.”

Tibs shook his head. “It wasn’t a gift. There is a price for the help we give. That’s the rules.”

“How am mah to practice?” the Runner demanded. “Ah don’t wanna just pick pockets. I want stuff!”

“Then you buy it,” Tibs said. “The dungeon gives you plenty.” The Runner rolled his eyes. “Have you started the second floor?” a shake of the head. “Then you’ll see he gives plenty there. As for training. Break into a noble’s house.”

“Ya crazy? They beat ya if they catch ya.”

Tibs looked at Quigly, who nodded.

“We’ve had to tap the few clerics who are willing to heal outside of the runs.”

“You should have told me.”

The fighter shrugged. “You’ve been busy.”

“I’m never too busy to know about problems the Runners have. Maybe this wouldn’t have happened if I’d been told.” Not that he knew what he would have done about it, or would do about this now. How could he have the newer Runners train up to the point they could handle noble houses and not get caught?

He looked at the Runner again. “Alright. The training is a different problem. You still broke rules you’ve been told about. So you need to be punished.”

“Ah gave it back,” the Runner complained, then gave Quigly a side glare.

“Then I don’t have to worry about getting you to pay for what you took, but you still need to pay something. I’m not handing you of Harry because that’s going to mean you and your team miss your run.” What could he do, though? It wasn’t like he had cells of his own to use. Or that he thought they did any good. He’d seen plenty of people on his Street and here return from cells only to go back to what got them in, only working harder at not getting caught. Not that many from his Street ever returned from the cells.

Incentive to not get caught was good, but he wanted the townsfolk to trust the Runners, now worry about them.

He looked at the merchant. She was well dressed in a dress of light purple and blue fabric. Without the context, he’d think she was one of the poorer nobles. Which meant she was a successful merchant.

“What’s your name?” he asked, then blushed. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had time to get to know all the merchants beyond walking in the shops when they first open.” Or used to.

When was the last time he walked through Merchant Row? Or the shops setting up at the periphery of what people were now calling the Platform Market. He had to find a way to make more time.

Was time an element?

“My name is Roseylia of the Stone Carvers,” her voice had a severity to it that reminded Tibs of some teachers, but her expression was kind. “I own Carver’s shop, on Merchant Row. I sell statuettes.”

Small statues? That’s what the Runner took? Why? Not the problem he needed to address. Her tone and expression gave him an idea.

“Do you need help in your shop?”

She chuckled. “There’s always a need for that. People come here for the excitement of the dungeon, not the tediousness of working in the shops.”

Tibs nodded. “Then an extra set of hand for...” he considered. This was the Runner’s first time at breaking the rules... no at being caught breaking them. No other merchants had reported anything missing, but would they? He needed to make sure they knew he took their protection seriously, even from the Runners. But he couldn’t be so harsh that the Runners would band against him.

He rubbed his temple. He was starting to understand why Jackal laughed at him when he offered him to do this job.

“Two weeks,” he said. “For half the day, except if his team has a run. He’ll get that day and the day after off.”

She looked at the Runner, who stared at Tibs in disbelief.

“Ya can’t do that,” he stated.

“Your alternative is Harry’s cell, and your team pays for what you did along with you. I’ll also arrange for you to get supervised training when you aren’t working at the shop. That way, when you break into a noble’s home to continue practicing, you won’t have to worry about getting caught.”

“I’ll pay you a copper a day for the work,” Roseylia offered, and the Runner looked at her suspiciously.

“Why d’ya do that? He said Ah’m being punished.”

“The work will be arduous enough to qualify, but I think you’ll be less likely to try to steal from me while you’re doing it if you get something out of it.”

“Eighteen coppers.”

She nodded.

“Make it a statue of the rearing horse instead, and we gotta deal. The small ones, with the black hooves.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That’s a rather specific request.”

The Runner shrugged. “That was the one I was after, but ya caught me before ah reached it. The rest was just... they were there.”

She nodded. “All right. After two weeks of work for me, you get one of the small statues of Stident Rearing.”

Statues were named? “So you’re satisfied with this?” Tibs asked her. She nodded.



“How about you?” he asked the Runner.

“Me? Why d’ya care?”

“Because if you’re angry about this, all you’re going to do is try to get back at me, and I don’t have the time for that.”

The Runner considered it. “Ah guess it’s fair. I’d get worse back home.”

“Good, then tomorrow be as Carver’s shop when it opens. Someone will meet you there for your training once you’re done.”

They left, and it was only him and Quigly.

“Training?” the fighter asked.

“Rogues need more than just knowing how to bash each other on the head or hit targets or... waive our hands about?” He rubbed his face. “We need to know locks, traps, pockets, windows, and doors. We need to see details. Roof running’s good too.”

“If you think hitting someone on the head is all there to being a fighter, I am not teaching you swords play properly.”

“It’s not play,” Tibs replied. He had the memory of bruises to show for that, which reminded him. “What are the clerics helping asking for?”

“Nothing.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the fighter.

“I swear, one’s doing it because Purity demands it, another because he needs the training and he doesn’t want to wait for his turn at the door. One uses it as an excuse to get away from ‘the old crystals’, her words. I think we’re getting the rebels of the clerics; if there is such a thing.”

So that was one less thing he needed to worry about. Although he wished he knew why the teams weren’t getting clerics yet. It should have happened once Sto graduated, but they had yet to be offered. Not that he had any idea how that would happen. Would the teams be forced to break up to accommodate the cleric? Would they even get to pick or would the guild assign them?

“Do you have any idea how we can make breaking into the nobles’ houses safer for our rogues?”

“You’re asking a fighter about rogue stuff?”

“I’m asking someone older than I am, who’s seen more than I have.”

“I’ve seen war, Tibs, not housebreaking. But use that, I’d say that having lookouts, someone to help them escape if needed, would make them safer.”

“That sounds a lot like the gangs on my Street,” Tibs grumbled.

“If it works, a lot of people will use it. The only other thing I can think of is if you could get the noble in question to agree to be broken into, but who’d ever agree to that?”

Tibs looked at the fighter.

The idea that was forming was such a bad one.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I can’t believe you talked me into doing this,” Mez complained as he led Tibs through streets that were evenly flat, and houses that were taller and colored with vibrancy. The people who noticed them stared as they walk.

Noticed Tibs.

Even dressed in the best set of clothing he owned, he should out as not belonging here. Mez, in his armor emblazoned with red gems and cape, looked as regal as one of them.

Tibs wanted to climb a building and get to the roofs. That was how he preferred being in this part of his town. Where he wasn't looked at like he didn't belong. Where he wasn't told, with a look, he needed to go back to the Street he'd escaped from.

"Please, be courteous with her, Tibs. I know your experience with nobles isn't great, but she isn't like them."

Tibs wanted to argue. Nobles were nobles. No matter how nice they acted, but this one hadn't done one thing since arriving in his town that marked her as a noble, other than living in the nobles' part of the town. Tibs had told Mez he wouldn't cause her problem unless she caused them, so he'd kept an eye on her every time she went around the town helping with various construction projects.

Well, he had, before he was too busy for it.

Mez knock on the door and a tall woman with long brown hair opened it. She wore a white shirt and pants with red trim and a necklace around her neck made of gold with a sparkling red gem in the center.

"Mezano," she exclaimed, hugging him. "It's such a pleasure to see you again. I hear you've become the accomplished archer. I'm glad."

"Thank you. Your assistance was invaluable."

"I doubt I did much that lead to your understanding Fire."

"You were part of it," Tibs grumbled.

"That's Tibs," Mez said, his tone casual, but glare hard. Tibs would apologize later.

"Tibs Light-Fingers," she said with a smile. "I hear we have you to thank for having a town to return to. Please come in. Andia!" she called. "Please pour four crystals of wine, we have guests."

"I don't think we'll be here long enough to warrant that," Mez objected.

"None sense, Mezano. It isn't often enough I get to enjoy another Runner's company. Now, what brings you both to our home?" She asked, leading them past a sitting room with paintings trimmed in gold and silver on the wall. Further in the house, Tibs heard a woman signing softly as crystals tinkled together.

"I want to get your house broken into," Tibs stated. That should get her to turn them back on the street.

She stopped and stiffened, but when she turned, her expression was quizzical instead of angry or offended. "You want to rob my house." She smiled. "Please tell me more."

## Stepping up-70

Tibs dropped onto the balcony of Amelia's house. The noble had a three-story one, and the view from this balcony on the top floor was nearly as good as that from the roof.

The door was locked, but the balcony meant the rogues coming in this way wouldn't have to worry about foot and handholds while trying to get in. Those who wanted that challenge had plenty of windows to pick from.

He used picks to unlock the door.

As strange as it felt, this wasn't about breaking into the house to steal from a noble. It was about testing the kind of difficulties it gave Omega Runners, so he had to work with what they had access to.

The lock yielded to him quickly and he cracked it open. Sound of snoring. This Amelia's house regent's room. The man was aware of what the noble had volunteered the house for but had stated that he wouldn't give anyone breaking into his room a chance. He would not turn them over to the guard, but he would make them regret being caught.

Nothing more than bruises, Amelia had instructed and the regent hadn't been pleased.

Tibs smiled at the wicker cane next to the bed, well within reach of the man.

Some rogues would have an easier time than others with this route. Sto still occasionally gave the silent shoes in the trap room's cache.

Tibs didn't need them anymore. He didn't even need any essence to silently reach the door and—

It was locked.

He smirked at the sleeping man. Like that would be any more difficult.

For him, maybe, but for an Omega, this would definitely cause a problem. Good. A rogue needed to know if giving up the loot now so they could return later was the right decision. Tibs silently unlocked it and cracked it open. Lamplight slipped in and he used his body to block it. He didn't know how sensitive to it the regent was. He had no essence, but even ordinary people had varying degrees of sensitivity to light.

A woman walked by the door but didn't notice it was cracked open. The clothing she wore was light but woven through with essence. She looked like a servant, but Amelia was not a fool. She had guards inside her house. They too were in on the help she was providing, but only Amelia would know when they were sending a Runner to break in.

She figured it help keep her security on alert. That was one of the reasons she'd agreed to Tibs's proposal. The other was that it has sounded fun.

The guard posing as a servant reached the stairs and moved down them. Tibs exited the room and closed the door. The challenge with this entry point was that his target was one floor below and the only way there was the stairwell the guard had taken. There were two rooms by it, one on each side, but the guard would turn around as soon as they reached the bottom and start back up. The rogue planning on hiding in one of them would have to be quick and hope they didn't wake the person in the room. The one on the left was Amelia, the one on the right was Andia's.

Tibs was confused by the arrangement. From watching the two women, he had been certain they were together the way Jackal and Kroseph were, so why separate sleeping rooms?

Tibs wouldn't pry. He also wouldn't use either. He wanted a sense of how observant the guard was. He leaped to one wall, then the other, and pushed himself in the corner, using

strength to hold himself up. This was getting easier with the sword training. His ice sword might not have weight, but wielding it about and blocking strikes was making him stronger.

The guard walked up the stairs and Tibs fought the urge to switch to darkness to hide. Not every Runner had darkness. The guard walk under him without looking up. Once they reached the regent's door, Tibs silently dropped and quietly went down the stairs, stepping over the fourth step. He'd noticed it creaked when Amelia had given him a tour of the house.

Conversation stopped him at the landing. Laughter at the bottom of the stairs, deeper in. A glance didn't show him anyone, so they were further. He walked around the landing and crouch. Three steps down he saw the back of a man and a woman. He was rotund, she was muscular. Tibs didn't understand what they said.

He glanced up, tried to hear the guard's steps but she was too far. Her steps were also light enough he might not hear her in time to move. The two in the hall still had their back to him, but weren't moving. There was a door on the right at the bottom of the stairs, but he didn't know if it was locked.

Still, the only thing staying here would get him was caught. He moved, taking picks from the bracer. He picked those he'd need by sight when the lock was visible and went to work.

This would cause more than one rogue to be caught. The stress of being detected while trying to pick a lock. He had his open and was in the room. it was one of the servant's rooms. It was silent. Maybe that of the man talking with the woman?

Tibs looked around for places to hide if he came this way. He rolled his eyes when he concluded under the bed was the best place. As if he wouldn't look there as soon as he was in the room.

The guard reached the bottom of the stairs and said a few words. The woman replied, tone jovial, and the guard went back up. Tibs peers out, the man patted the woman's shoulder and went into a room, while she came Tibs's way.

He cursed, was this her room? He'd expected the guards to have a common room on the ground floor, or in a building at the back. Maybe Amelia treated her guards better and gave each their room?

He stepped away from the opening so the guard wouldn't see him if she looked this way, and watched her pass and then go down the stairs.

Tibs waited, then peered out, stepped out, closed the door, and proceeded to the far door on the left. His target. This lock was better made and required a delicate touch. Tibs had it open as he saw the top of a head coming up and was inside, door closed and listening for an alarm. The window would be easy to open from the inside and jump out if the alarm sounded.

Everything remained quiet.

He scanned the dark room, again resisting the urge to use darkness to see. This was Amelia's office, one of the servant's rooms she had converted, the desk was in the corner, so she looked at the door. Tibs hadn't liked having his back to it while they talked. Two chairs were before it, a small table behind them with two more chairs. She could turn the space into a cozy speaking room if she wanted, but those were obstacles that needed to be

maneuvered around.

When he was after was on her desk. A stone carving of a tree.

The rogue sent to break into the house wouldn't be ordered to do so. They wouldn't be told this was a test of their skills. Darran would hint at a buyer willing to pay good coin for the carving and that he would be whoever brought it to him proportionally well. The rogue would be led to believe they were competing against others, so they'd have to hurry.

Rushed work led to mistakes. And under these conditions, mistakes led to learning.

He stepped around the chairs and avoided the cabinet with the decanters on them. It took little to shake it and have the crystal glassed hanging upside down gently knock against each other. It shouldn't be a problem for the others, but in his case, it would bring this to an early end.

He reached the desk and clunked a copper piece on it before sitting.

Amelia lit the lamp with a stone woven through with fire essence. "I saw the door open," she stated.

"That's why I said that didn't count. If the rogue comes in while you're working, they deserve to be caught."

"And what do you think of my security?"

Tibs smiled. "They didn't see me."

She nodded. "Which means I need to have a talk with them. What should I bring up?"

He didn't like helping a noble make their house more secure, but that had also been part of the agreement.

"They don't look up. I was holding myself in a corner in the hallway as they walked under me. They also don't pay attention to details. I had a door cracked open twice while one of them walk by."

"The danger of a quiet life."

Tibs shrugged.

"So any rogue caught is returned to you, any who manage to take this," she pointed to the carving. A piece of stone with parts at the top jutting out randomly in something that Tibs could imagine was tree branches; if he tried hard. "Gets..."

Tibs chuckled. "Told they're good rogues, and can probably try one of the other houses and not expect to be caught."

"How long until they spread the word among themselves it's just a test?"

"I'm hoping I can convince them it's best if they down, but I should be able to send this batch through before they get annoyed at me and tell the newcomers."

"If you let me tell—"

"No. Mez vouches for you and I trust him, but you're a noble. And even you've said most nobles here aren't good people."

She nodded. "Then, once I have earned your trust, we can revisit this discussion." She stood. "I'll escort you out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs looked at the warehouse. It was only him and his team in it. He felt no different.

“Okay, that is almost stranger than where you channel corruption,” Mez said.

“What?” he asked.

“Your eyes glow, but they aren’t producing light,” Carina answered, “which is odd, seeing as you’re channeling light.”

“The essence,” he corrected.

“How do you feel?” Jackal asked.

“Lonely. Stressed. Wishing I’d never taken any of this on. What?” he asked at his friends’ troubled expressions.

“You never told us that,” Jackal replied

“This isn’t your burden, why would I tell you?”

“We’re your friends,” Carina said.

“Which is why I can’t burden any of you with this. It’s my job to make sure you can have your lives.”

“I believe this is Light’s influence,” Khumdar said. “Overabundant honesty.”

“It’s better than overabundant secrecy,” Tibs said. “You should try being honest for once, Khumdar.”

The cleric stiffened. “What would you mean by that?”

Tibs stepped toward the man, seeing the spiked of light his darkness fought to hid. There was so much Khumdar hid, and Tibs had a sense it wasn’t all the secrets he had uncovered about the people in the town.

“What are you hiding from yourself, cleric?”

Khumdar jerked away from Tibs’s poking finger as if it would burn him, and Tibs wondered if he could burn that darkness away. Reveal what was hiding underneath. It would do the man good to be honest.

“Tibs, that’s enough,” Carina said.

They could all use a good dose of honesty. “Really? Why? Because the idea you don’t need your family scares you, Carina? You do see that clinging to them will only hold you back. They’ll never understand what you want and what you can do. Mez, you’re still in love with Tandy, so why are you even—”

“Tibs,” Jackal called, “that’s enough.”

“And you—”

The fighter grabbed Tibs by the shoulders. “You can tell everyone what you’ve worked out about me Tibs, but two things. One, you do not, speak to your team this way. People have secrets and they keep them for their own reasons, you more than anyone else, knows that.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. He was planning on dealing with that once he was done with the fighter. Once the guild knew what he could do, they would be able to help him. There would be a cost, but they wanted power and that was what Tibs was.

“What’s the second thing?” he demanded impatiently.

Jackal grinned. “You’re going to lie to me.”

Tibs stared at him. “What?”

“One lie. It doesn’t even have to be a big one. Tell me that you’re fine Khumdar keeping things to himself. Or that there’s nothing wrong with Mez choosing to honor his family’s wishes over his hearth’s.”

“There *is* nothing wrong with that!” the archer stated.

“Tell me that my family will understand me,” Carina said, then swallowed.

Why was she in pain? She knew the truth, she just lied to herself about it. It was plain to see. The truth was better. Truth was freedom. Lying shackled people down. Didn’t any of them understand that? He was doing them a kindness in telling them how things were.

He wasn’t doing this to hurt them!

The pain brought him to his knees.

Lies!

No! They needed to know the truth! They had to!

He screamed.

Lies!

Fine! He was angry. He wanted to hurt someone. Didn’t have the right, after the pain that had been inflicted on him?

He was hands on the ground, panting. Was this what Harry dealt with? No, it wasn’t. Harry wasn’t affected by his element. His need for honesty was something Harry had decided.

“Tibs?”

That was who he was. Tibs. A man—a boy. He wasn’t Light. He didn’t exist in a place where things were clear-cut. Lies were needed.

He readied himself for pain that didn’t come.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked again.

The world existed because people lied to each other and themselves. Carina told herself her family would understand because her family was important to her. Yes clinging to them probably would hold her back, but she was Runner, she would be an Adventurer. Had had years ahead of her to come to terms with it. Let them go, or let her dreams go, in her own time.

Khumdar probably didn’t have a choice in the secrets he kept. Unlike Tibs, the cleric was directly connected to his element. Unlike Harry, he was affected by it deeply and Tibs had to option of stopping. Khumdar didn’t.

“You’re an asshole,” he told Jackal.

“I know, now lie to me.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “You’re an idiot.”

“I said lie, Tibs,” the fighter said severely. “Everyone knows that one to be true.”

If only Tibs could show him how brightly that lie shown. How he didn’t have to play the idiot, the jester. The light in him wanted him to spew out the truth, but he didn’t. Jackal felt safe as the idiot. As the man no one would ever look to for serious, life-threatening decisions. Tibs patted his cheek and let him have that.

His body protested as he stood, then he hugged Carina. “I’m sorry for what I said. They love you.”

She hugged him back. “Liar,” she whispered and they both smiled.

“That’s it?” Mez asked. He looked around. “Usually you cause a lot more damage before you get the element under control.”

Tibs looked at the cleric who eyes him warily. “I think I cause enough damage as it is.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We’re lost,” Jackal said, looking around the hallway.

“You can get us back to the entrance, can’t you?” Carina asked.

“Yes.”

“Then we aren’t lost.”

“But I have no idea where we’re going. There should be a passage there.” He pointed at the wall. “Tibs, help me out here.”

Tibs had no idea what Jackal wanted. He couldn’t just force Sto to remove the wall. Ganny had set up the rules for the floor and they had to succeed by those rules. That meant Tibs had to figure out the tiles and the triggers. He’d thought that avoiding them was the way, but now there were stuck halfway to where they had been the last time and a wall blocked their way. So they needed to activate some of the triggers. The question was which ones?

“At least this walking about means we’ll encounter creatures,” Mez said.

“But the real loot is at the end.” Jackal pointed to the closed-off passage.

“That was not the end,” Khumdar said. The cleric was away from them, from Tibs. After the event in the warehouse, Khumdar vanished. Tibs had worried the cleric had left because of him, of the thing he’d said when channeling light. He’d confirmed he hadn’t left via the platform, but the cleric wasn’t a convict. He could simply walk out of the town, never to return. Even Jackal hadn’t know where he was.

Khumdar reappeared the day before their run, but only to let them know he’d be at the entrance on time, then vanished again. He’d fought when they were attacked and carried the loot that kit in his backpack, but otherwise, didn’t interact with them.

“Sto?” Carina called, then looked at Tibs.

“I’m here,” Sto answered and Tibs nodded.

“I know what I want.”

“Oh good. What is it?” Tibs chuckled at the excitement in Sto’s voice. He nodded again.

“I’d like wizard’s robes, the same gray-blue as these. Actually, I’d like it to look exactly like what I’m wearing, down to some of the damage. But I want to be armored. It doesn’t have to be able to withstand everything, but I’m tired of the pain so some protection is needed, but what I really need to have is hidden reserves like Sto’s bracers, but for every element.”

“Do you not have more ranks before you are taught how to extract the essence from objects?” Khumdar asked.

She nodded. “But if there’s one thing Tibs has shown me is that I’m not gaining anything by just waiting for the guild to teach me.” She smiled. “They’re holding me back. So a set of robes like that, especially if no one can tell it’s enchanted, is exactly what I need



to start figuring things out on my own.”

“The guild’s going to be pissed if they find out,” Jackal said.

“They aren’t going to find out,” she replied.

“Is that it?” Tibs asked and she nodded.

“I can do that,” Sto replied. “I’ll have it by your next run.”

“Next run,” Tibs said and she beamed.

“Okay,” Jackal said, “then I guess I should go next. I want a pouch like the one you gave Tibs after Walter died. The one where no one can tell what’s in it, and I want to be like those chests that was larger inside than outside, and that the stuff I put in it doesn’t weigh anything.” The fighter smiled proudly.

“No,” Tibs said.

“The dungeon said he could—”

“You’re going to use that to hide all the loot we find!”

Jackal’s grin was answer enough.

“The guild’s going to know you’re scamming them. We always come out with loot.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Jackal stated, still grinning.

“What about the second or third?” Mez asked. “You aren’t going to be able to stop, Jackal.”

“I will,” Jackal insisted. “Look we’re going to do it once, then I’ll only hide one or two things from each run, I swear.”

“Sto,” Carina said, “don’t make it so the weight’s removed.”

“Carina!” Jackal called. “It’s my reward.”

“And your greed is going to get us thrown in a cell and get Tibs in even worse trouble. How are we going to explain it when the guild finds the pouch on you, with all the things hidden in it? You think they’re going to stop with you? Sto, how many people have items no one can detect even when touching them?”

“One,” the dungeon answered.

“Just me,” Tibs said.

“But they can’t tell he had it,” Jackal said in exasperation.

“Until they cut them open and find the gems Sto used, then they’re going to look at the rest of us, which means they’re going to find my robes and whatever Mez and Khumdar ask for.”

“I don’t know that I’ll ask for anything,” Mez replied.

“Even if it’s only the three of us, that’s going to be very suspicious. How long until they bring in someone with mind as their essence and question us? Questions Tibs?”

Jackal looked at Tibs, finally worried. “I…” his shoulder slumped. “Okay, the stuff weighs what it should.”

“You’re strong,” Tibs said, “you’ll still be able to take a lot.”

“But it won’t be everything,” Jackal forced a smile. “Which is for the best, I guess. It’s not like I’d be able to sell it all anyway.”

“I will also not be asking for a reward,” Khumdar said. “This staff has been enough of

a boon and if it were to suddenly change, that would draw attention as well.” He took a breath. “Jackal, if you do not object, I would like to speak with Tibs in private.”

Jackal looked at Tibs who nodded and followed the cleric away from the group.

## Stepping up-71

Tibs followed Khumdar back the way they came, far enough they were at the sight of a previous battle, not that any sign of it remained. When the cleric turned, he looked uncomfortable; which was odd for the man. He usually had a detachment to what happened around him that gave the impression nothing could unsettle him.

“I have not entirely been honest,” Khumdar said, then faltered.

“About how you came to the town,” Tibs said.

“That too, but it is not what I wish to discuss right now. When you accused me of lying, even to myself, I was defensive and I did not understand why. I am a cleric of darkness. It should be obvious that I have and keep secrets. I took time and explored how I felt about the accusation and realized that you are correct. I have been deceiving myself about certain facets of my life, or rather, how I came to seek out Darkness as my element.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Tibs offered, although his curiosity wanted to know more.

“I do.” Khumdar looked around, then settled for leaning against the wall. “I believe a little truth will be good for me in this case. It will keep me from believing the story I tell to others.” He took a breath. “As you may have gathered, from Carina’s reactions to me and my own inability to not hint some of my secrets to you, I have the patronym “of Temerity” not because I wish to appropriate it...” He faltered.

“You’re from the actual family,” Tibs finished. “Like Carina, you’re from a family of Purity Clerics.”

Khumdar shook his head. “Warriors. The Temerity are among the strongest Purity Warriors Purity has. They are proud, they are strong, they are unbendable. They will never be anything but warriors with the Temerity.” He rested his head against the wall. “I have the family pride. I have the will. I lacked the physical strength. I am told I nearly died on birth. That the clerics refused to heal me, because if I couldn’t conquer my sickness from the start, what use was I to Purity?”

He closed his eyes. “Being told the story when I was older did not particularly hurt. By then I was used to the ridicule as I tried to lift a sword or a halberd. To have brothers, sisters, and relatives point to me as what a failure was. The story did not hurt. It was the pride in my father’s voice as he told me that the cleric never gave into pity. That he never allowed my cries to make him waver.” The tone turned angry. “That is when I despised him, my family, Purity.”

Tibs let him calm.

“I told all of you that I sought Darkness because I was drawn to it. I nearly believe

that lie now. Darkness is not the felt element I considered. Corruption is who I wanted at first. If Purity hated me so much, I would ally myself with its opposite. But I have been raised to do my studies. And so I did. And what I found of Corruption sickened me. It may be core to the elements, but the people who chose it as their elements do not give it a good name, so I went to Darkness. I do not know why it accepted me. I did not go to it seeking to be a cleric. Maybe the lies I told it, told myself then, were an indication I was right for the role. I did not understand what I was until later, when I interacted with a group of adventurers, one of whom, their fighter, also had darkness as her element. It is when I understood my connection to Darkness was so much deeper. Something like what you feel, I believe.” He smiled. “Now, I wish I had taken that other option when I saw it. I could have shown my family, Purity, the mistake they made when they did not recognize the hard work I put into wanting to be its fighter.”

“Burt Purity wants people to work hard,” Tibs said. “That’s the core of what it is.”

Khumdar nodded. “But people are not the element. They say hard work is good, but then only consider specific kinds of hard work, and only when it is done by the right people. When confronted with their hypocrisy, they fall back on Purity having made that demand of them. Purity does not care with is done in its name. Nor does Darkness.”

“They don’t think like we do. They don’t see consequences. Just what they are. That’s become clear as I channeled them and saw the result of not controlling how they affect me.”

The cleric nodded. “I created the story of how I sought Darkness out because of my affinity. And there may be truth in it, but I created it as a lie so I would not have to confront the pain that drove me there.”

“But I don’t get it. You’re a good fighter. I mean, you aren’t Jackal good, but you’ve killed your share of Ratlings and Bunnylings, not to mention those Gnolls. You could have done that for your family if they’d let you.”

Khumdar shrugged. “I will not try to explain their behavior. I did so for years, hoping I would find a way to use that knowledge so they would accept me. They are flawed. As we all are. I have accepted that, and it is enough for me.”

“Why don’t you want the others to know?”

“In part because I like my secrets, also because Carina would enjoy having been right about me too much. I am happy to let her believe it is mere coincidence I share the name with that family. I am telling you because I had started to believe myself perfect. You reminded me that I too am flawed. I should not let the pride my family demonstrates become too rooted in myself.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Tibs hugged the cleric, who stiffened slightly before hugging him back. “We should get back to the others or Jackal’s going to clear everything and not leave any for us.”

“Our esteemed team leader does enjoy his fights.”

“And it’s our job to make sure he’s able to get back to Kroseph after a run.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hasn’t it been quiet for too long?” Carina asked as they cautiously moved through yet another hallway. Tibs was almost sure the red tiles were the only ones trapped to hurt

them, but Ganny was sneaky, so he didn't want to take it for granted. He also thought he understood what the green, blue, and gold tiles were for, but that left a lot of colored tiles without a seeming use and Tibs didn't like that.

Which he didn't put beyond Ganny to have done all of this specifically to kill him from nerves. Carina was right. Normally Ganny dropped a group of Gnolls on them after each intersection, and this was now the third without a fight.

"Maybe we're just too good and the dungeon decided to not bother?" Mez asked, and the team looked at him incredulously.

"Oh," Ganny said, and Tibs shuddered at the smirk he could hear in the tone. "Just for that, I am—"

"That's cheating," Sto cut her off. "You can't change how things are set to happen."

"You, are going to call me out on bending the rules?" she asked.

Now it was his tone that carried the smirk. "Well, considering the number of times you came down on me for not following the rules, I think I'm entitled."

"I supposed you are right," she replied with a put-upon sigh.

"Something's coming!" Jackal called, gleeful.

"But since you aren't in the habit of listening to me," she said, "why should I?" she cackled.

Tibs shook his head. Ganny was enjoying herself too much for his liking. He listened and heard the steps, still distant. Boots on stones, he thought.

"I think we're about to find out what the dungeon settled on," Mez said, sounding worried as he took his bowstring in hand.

"We know they aren't really our dead friends," Carina said, "so it's going to be fine." She didn't sound convinced by her words.

Tibs didn't comment, but he wasn't worried. Whatever Sto and Ganny had settled on, it wouldn't resemble people they knew. Sto had been too regretful to risk hurting Tibs again. He was certain of that.

"Is it wise to simply remain here?" Khumdar asked.

"The options are to rush to meet them," Jackal said, then glanced at Tibs, "or wait here and ready our defense. I'm all for rushing if that's what you want."

Tibs glared a warning at the cleric.

"No, I believe this is a sound strategy."

"He has quite the glare, doesn't he?" Jackal asked without looking behind at them.

"And you know he did this how?" Khumdar asked.

"I've been on the receiving end of it often enough I can feel him level it on other people now."

Tibs glared at the fighter's back.

"Or me."

Before Tibs could comment, Jackal raised a hand. The steps were approaching the intersection ahead.

Five... people came into view. They were shaped like people, and wore armor, with

one a robe, and one holding a bow, with a quiver of arrows at... its hip. They were easily identifiable as the representation of Runners. One sorcerer, one archer, a fighter, a rogue and the fifth could be a fighter or a rogue. But they had no features. Their heads were featureless.

"I think this—" Mez started, but the faceless archer raised its bow and let loose the notched arrow at him. Jackal caught in a stone hand and immediately cursed and dropped it.

"He's a corruption archer."

Before Tibs could go to his friend to heal him, knives were flying at him and he used air to deflect them.

"Behind me," Khumdar called, as another arrow flew, then a fire one responded, only to fizzle away before reaching the opposing team.

"They have a fire sorcerer!"

The sorcerer motioned and Tibs felt the essence take form. He wished he had the time to pay attention. "Carina, down!" he channeled water and had the 'x' attack active with barely a thought, the knife in his hand moving quickly. The jet caught the sorcerer in the chest and slammed it into the wall, where it slid down and dissolved.

"I didn't take into account how quickly Tibs can switch between elements," Ganny said.

It wasn't like Tibs could do much with Purity to counter the corruption archer. He cursed as a knife sank into his shoulder. The opposing rogue flung them rapidly as he approached. And Tibs made a shield of ice to stop them. He bit back the pain as he moved his arm and reach to pull the knife out, only now realizing it was made of wood. Instead of coming out when he pulled, pain flared all the way to his elbow.

He glared at the rogue and made his sword. If that was what it wanted, Tibs was going to show it how a knife wasn't the right weapon for a rogue. He rushed it, using the shield to block the barrage of knives, then slashed at the rogue, only for it to jump over it and slash at Tibs's arm. The wooden blade left a line in his armor.

Tibs turned to face it and it came at him, much faster than Tibs expected, parrying and dodging the nearly too fast to perceive slashes. Maybe that was why Bardik felt the knives were better. The only thing that allowed Tibs to keep up was the lack of weight from his sword.

He blocked a strike with his shield and slammed it into the rogue, sending him staggering back. Tibs grinned at it. Knives still meant it had to get in too close.

It looked at him, then shook its head. It raised its hand and casually brought it down.

Tibs started lowering his shield, noticed what he was doing, and fought to keep it up. The pain flared from his shoulder to his wrist. He cursed.

Wood essence, plants, roots. The knife had put down roots in his arm and it let the rogue wrestle control of it from Tibs. Could they spread further and take more of his body away? He needed to change element, water wouldn't help.

He reabsorbed the shield first, since he couldn't count on it, and parried the attacks. At least the rogue wasn't throwing the knives anymore. A kick after it too easily dodged a swing gave Tibs enough distance for the next part. He reabsorbed the sword and—

The cry of pain escaped his lips as his shield arm twisted in a way it was never meant to. Tibs swore the rogue was smirking at him. The pain increased and Tibs dropped to a knee. He needed to focus, and standing only meant he was going to fall, anyway. He knew what it was doing.

He glared at it through the pain.

It was breaking his concentration. Keeping him from switching elements. Tibs grinned. Too bad for it; he'd had to fight his elements from the last few months to gain control of them. Pain was just one other thing he needed to fight through. It wasn't any easier, but knowing that he could fix whatever damage it caused him. Helped.

He didn't look at the twisted mess of his arm.

He reached for the one element he had that could deal with wood.

Fire.

The heat felt good as it spread through his body, at first only enough for him to feel, but he added essence, suffused his body with it, and added more. The desire to unleash everything he had on that wood rogue pushed at him, and his smile broadened. He was going to make it pay for the pain. Make Sto pay for ever thinking Tibs was okay with feeling pain.

The punch staggered him and he glared, focused fire on his hand, and readied himself

—  
“You fucking promised!” Jackal yelled. “No matter what, no fire!”

“It hurts!” Tibs replied.

“Fucking deal with it!”

“I am,” Tibs said through gritted teeth. “I am going to burn this place down. I am going to end the pain forever!”

“Sto!” Ganny yelled. “Tell me you can deal with this!”

“You saw what he did the last time he channeled fire,” Sto replied.

“Then you're burning me down too,” Jackal replied.

“I as well,” Khumdar said, stepping next to the fighter. Carina joined him silently, but the disapproval was plain on her face.

Mez stepped before the others, placing his bow on his back. “How about we find out if the size of your reserve means more than my training?”

“Don't stand against me,” Tibs warned.

“You aren't the element, Tibs,” Mez replied. “Just like that isn't fire.” He motioned to the large ball of fire in Tibs's hand.

“You think this is fire?” Tibs replied. “This is me. This is me having fucking enough of being hurt, or this place hurting me, hurting you.”

“You're the one hurting us, Tibs,” Mez said. “With breaking your word, with using the essence to try to burn us.”

“Not you! Get out and you'll be fine!”

“No. I'm not getting out. I'm not going to be a child again. I let pain and misery happen too often already. I will not let you be the one to do it this time.”

“I—”

“You’re being a child!” Mez yelled. “Pain happens. Only children lash out at it without caring who else gets hurt in their childish anger. Don’t be a child, Tibs.”

Tibs felt around the essence Mez had between them. It was intricate but delicate. He could overpower it. Rip it apart, bath them in fire, make them pay for standing in his way. He was going to make them suffer for not being on his side.

He staggered as the implications hit him, but it burned away and he glared at the archer.

“Do you really want to hurt us, Tibs?” Mez asked, searching his face.

Tibs readied to snarl his answer, but the fear on his friends’ faces registered. They knew what he could do, were terrified of it, but they didn’t move. And he was ready to burn them for that offense.

No.

Yes!

“No,” he growled. He nearly let go of fire but stopped himself. He couldn’t take control by running away from this. He’d mastered seven elements already. He could master how this one affected him.

He fought his rage at the injustices he had to endure. Recent and old.

He wasn’t the element.

He didn’t have to be angry to keep from feeling pain, but he needed to accept that pain was something he would feel. The only way to ensure there was no one to hurt him was to burn down everything.

It was tempting. Unleash fire on the world until he was the only one left. No one could hurt him then. No one would be left to comfort him, either. To speak with.

Some people deserved to be burned away.

But not at the cost of those who didn’t.

Kroseth had done nothing but be a friend to Tibs. His team had been there to help him with everything.

Sto had caused him so much pain. But he’d tried to make it right. He didn’t want to cause pain, but they were different kinds of beings.

He let out a breath and pulled the essence back into him. The fire burned close to the surface. He suspected it would always be the element he needed to be cautious of. It was easy for fire to get out of control. But for now, it was under his control.

Mez smiled.

Tibs considered wiping the smile by shattering the barrier the archer erected, but that was the fire speaking.

“That was dangerous,” Tibs told him.

Mez shrugged. “I’m a Runner, danger is sort of our thing. Your eyes are still fire.”

Tibs nodded. “I’m not letting go of it right now. I need to get used to how it makes me feel.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” the archer asked.

Tibs grinned. “I’m a Runner, it’s kind of our thing. I’m sorry for breaking my word,” he told Jackal.

The fighter shrugged. "Hey, it led to you getting control and if you had lost it, at least the town would have been safe."

"Kind of casual about how I would have been damaged," Sto commented dryly.

"Sorry for scaring you and Ganny."

"I wasn't scared," Sto replied. "Not too much anyway."

"Well, I was," Ganny replied. "You shouldn't be able to hurt Sto the way you did Tibs. I'm not saying you're too good of a person. I'm saying that by everything I have been taught, it should be impossible for any one person to cause the kind of damage you did the other time, and almost did now. I felt that heat all the way here. You're an impossibility, Tibs. And a dangerous one. I don't want to think what might have happened if someone else had gotten this ability."

"I'm just sorry I waited until I didn't have a choice before dealing with it. After the others, I should have known I couldn't just wait for the right time."

"Now that this is done," Jackal said, "how about we collect the loot and move on to the next one?"

"Shouldn't we head out?" Mez asked. "Tibs should rest after this." He pointed to the mess that was Tibs's arm.

The knife was gone, burned away, as was whatever roots had spread, but fire hadn't fixed the damage. He'd simply been too consumed by it to notice the pain.

He switched to Purity and suffused himself with it. He felt good. Not the good of too much ale, but the good of a good night of sleep after a satisfying night of running the roofs. The good of knowing things were going to go well.

The sounds his arm made as purity repaired it, along with his friends' reactions, indicated he shouldn't feel this good, but Purity didn't care. He knew his arm was fixed, but the temptation to continue feeling this way remained. How much easier would his days be if he felt this way all the time? It was an off sensation for an element that wanted hard work out of people.

He let go, and after hesitating, channeled fire again.

Anger surfaced immediately, but he pushed it down below the surface.

"You thinking of burning me down again?" Sto asked casually.

"No. I'm not burning anything down."

Not even the guild? He'd wanted to do that for a while and now he thought he had the power to burn through all the defenses they had. If not with fire, corruption would do the trick.

But who else would pay? How far would the damage spread if he let loose like that?

So no, he wouldn't burn anything down. He'd do what he had to protect his town and the people in it, but no more.

He smiled. "Let's go see what else Ganny's got in store for us."

## Stepping up-72



The Gnoll fell from the slash Tibs administered and dissolved, leaving behind two silver coins. He spun, searching for the next enemy, but they were all gone. He melted the sword and absorbed it.

“Tibs!” Mez yelled, and he was next to him, next to Carina, lying on the ground, bleeding from her side.

He channeled Purity and placed his hands on the wound. He pushed it in, weaved it around the less pure areas, and the wound closed. He left the essence in her. He’d noticed that his friends healed faster when they had some.

“Tibs,” Jackal called, “when you’re done, I think this one’s yours.”

A glance showed a large shield on the wall at the end of the hall. A blue shield was on it with pieces of gold and brown. He focused on Carina again until she smiled and nodded. Then he joined the fighter, who had a hand next to the shield, eyes closed.

“There’s a room behind this,” Jackal said. “Straight walls, not the caverns of the previous floors. About thirty-two paces wide, but I can’t tell how deep.”

“You’re getting better.” Tibs studied the crest and noticed the square piece missing at the bottom. The piece above it easily slid into the spot, and Tibs smiled.

“You’re making it too easy on him,” Sto commented as Tibs slid squares around, using the one available spot to shift them into the picture of the lion.

Ganny sighed. “He’s too good at puzzles. I was hoping he hadn’t come across this one.”

“I haven’t,” Tibs replied, “but how it works is simple enough.” He frowned as he ended up with another reversed set of tiles. He’d gotten it trying to fix another one. He was down to a handful of them, and the lack of places he could move the empty square to without ruining the image was making this harder than he’d expected.

“Seems like you’re stumped,” Sto said.

Tibs shook his head. He almost had it, he could feel it. He just had to work out the pattern, but he needed more space to work with. Those seven tiles weren’t enough. Anytime he put two of them in the right place, two others became reversed. He considered pulling a tile off but figured that would be cheating, and Ganny had to have considered that. So he needed to think beyond these tiles and use some already in place.

Once he allowed himself to do that, the pattern was easy to see. Create a chain of tiles that let him move two in place, then use the space to move the others back where they should be.

The design ended with the empty square in the top corner of the shield, the lion standing on two legs and roaring and a click, then the wall slid into the side, revealing the room Jackal sensed.

It was square, with large tiles on the floor alternating between silver and ebony. Tibs counted eight on one side and the same deep. On the other side stood five constructed people, but instead of being groups, they were spread among the two back rows, each standing on a different square, two on ebony ones, three on silver.

Tibs moved to step into the room, ready to look for the traps, but Jackal placed a hand before him, looking unhappy.

“Unless you know the game,” the fighter said, “this one isn’t for you.”

“Game?” Tibs looked at the room again. He didn’t know any games like this.

“Strategion,” Khumdar said.

“We call it Conquest,” Jackal replied.

“I am surprised you know of the game. It is used to teach commanders about the difficulties of battle.”

“My father had big plans for me,” Jackal said. “Prophesy big,” he added unhappily. “He brought in teachers for the game, but I wasn’t very good. The first thing we need to work out is if the point is to get to the other side, or beat the pieces.”

“That is the Lord,” Khumdar pointed to a woman in armor standing tall, featureless, face looking ahead, large sword point down, grasping it with both hands.

“Don’t you mean the Lady?” Carina asked. “It’s a popular game among Purity fighters. I’ve watched a lot of them.”

“You can’t have a game without the Lord on the board,” Jackal said. “It’s the one piece you can’t afford to lose. No other pieces fit the role, so she’s it. That’s the sorcerer.” He pointed to the man in the robe on the silver tile. “The archer, clearly, which means those two are the Infantry.”

“Rogues,” Tibs said, by their half crouched position.

“The dungeon is replacing some of the pieces with Runner roles,” Khumdar said. “And to answer your question, I believe this is about beating the board. Strategion is always about complete victory.”

“And taking out that Lord lady is the way we win?” Mez asked.

“Yeah,” Jackal said, studying the opponents.

The arrow exploded over the tile before the Lord. And she didn’t react.

“I don’t believe the dungeon will allow us to play by any other rules than those of the game.”

“So we walk up to them and kill them one by one?” Tibs asked. He figured that the point of the square was to control the movements.

“It’s not that simple,” Jackal said. “Each piece moves in a specific way. The Lord can go anywhere, but only one square at a time. It can also attack in any direction, but one square. The archer also only moves one square, but it can attack along any straight line. Normally any attack automatically takes the target piece out, but I think Sto isn’t going to make it that easy on us.”

“The sorcerer can move along any straight line,” Carina said, “but it can’t attack any pieces one square away from it. And, if it has a line of sight to the Lord, it can switch place with it, but then, it can’t attack.”

Tibs rubbed his temple. “Why is it so complicated if it’s just a game?”

“Because is it not only a game,” Khumdar said. “It is a tool of war.”

“Which is why back home it’s called Conquest.”

“So are we the pieces we represent?” Mez asked. “Or does this work another way?”

“Unless the dungeon tells us, I believe working that out is part of how we beat this room.”

“I’m leaving this to you,” Jackal said. “I always lost.”

“I do not believe that,” Khumdar replied, stepping to the edge of the room. “You enjoy the act of the idiot, but that is all it is.”

“You willing to bet your life on it?” Jackal grinned. “Because I’m pretty sure here, if one of us gets taken out, we aren’t simply going to be put on the side until the game’s over.”

“How far can you jump?” Khumdar asked Jackal.

“Far, why?”

“Fourth row, second from the left.”

“That puts me next to the sorcerer, I’m clearly the Lord, so I’m not going to be able to do much once it moves.”

“I know, I am keeping that in mind.”

“Okay, I’m going to need running space.” They moved and Jackal backed away, then ran and leaped the distance, landing in the middle of the square.

When nothing else happened, Khumdar nodded. “The game does not start until all the pieces are on the board.” He smiled. “Mez, on this one.” He pointed to the silver square by the entrance.

“I can’t shoot anything from there.”

“You will have a target. Carina, can you get yourself to the fifth row, third from the right?”

Wind picked up around them, and Carina leaped and was carried to the square in question.

“Mine was more impressive,” Jackal said, “since I didn’t have anything helping me.”

“I think all the hot air in that head of yours helped keep you aloft,” She replied.

“I thought my skull was all iron,” the fighter replied.

“Which should impress on everyone just how full of yourself you are.”

Khumdar used his staff to jump to the third row, two squares away from the archer.

“Doesn’t that make you a sacrificial piece?” Jackal asked, looking at their positions.

“Only if Tibs cannot reach the position I need him in.”

“Isn’t that putting a lot on him?” Carina asked.

“Tibs, can you go stand one square away from the Lord, in front of her.”

“Oh, you sneak,” Jackal said, grinning.

“Can he even make it?” Mez asked. “I doubt Carina could even with her air.”

“I’m not Carina,” Tibs said, channeling air and pushing it before him. Once it was in the shape he wanted it, he locked it, adding essence to it until he knew it would do. Then he stepped up the air steps onto the path he’d created and walked to the designated square.

“How did you do that?” Carina asked.

Tibs pulled the essence back into his reserve, then switched to water, making a sword and shield. “I poured a lot of essence into making the air hard. It took nearly half my entire reserve. I understand now why Adventurers don’t seem to worry about the early stuff we’re learning. There is a lot you can do if you have a large enough reserve that needs precise skill otherwise.”

“Okay, is anyone else annoyed that Tibs, yet again, can do something the rest of us can’t?” Mez asked.

“Only if he doesn’t grow to depend on that instead of studying,” Carina said. “If you lose access to it, you’re back to the low reserves and your bracers. Remember that when you start feeling too sure of yourself.”

Tibs nodded.

“If you’re done talking,” Ganny said, sounding annoyed, “it’s my turn. I didn’t count on the level of mobility you all have.”

“Does that mean we win?” Tibs asked.

“No, because you actually have to win the fight.”

The Lord stepped forward.

“What kind of move is that?” Jackal asked. “All Tibs has to do is take the Lord.”

Khumdar glared at the Lord.

“Khumdar?” Tibs asked.

“Can you beat it?”

Tibs sensed the fighter’s essence. “Metal, not as strong as Jackal, but I don’t know how good she is with that sword.”

“She’ll be good,” Jackal said. “You didn’t take into account we’d have to actually fight them, did you?”

The cleric shook his head. “I let the challenge of the strategy blind me to the reality of our situation.”

“Carina, I need you to switch with me.”

“No,” Khumdar said. “That will leave Tibs vulnerable.”

“I’m lined up with Tibs,” Jackal replied, “but I can’t attack that far; she can. I don’t care what else it wants; unless the dungeon specifically wants to kill Tibs, it can’t sacrifice its Lord. That gives us the victory.”

The cleric looked at the pieces.

“Khumdar?” Carina asked.

The cleric shrugged. “Tibs, you are the one at risk, and you are the one who knows the dungeon better.”

Tibs nodded. “I trust Jackal.”

“And scarier words were never uttered,” Mez said.

“If you keep doing stuff like this,” Carina said, “we’re going to have a hard time believing the idiot act.”

“So long as it never leaves this room, I’m fine with it. How do we do this? Do we have to jump the distance at the same time?”

“They can walk,” Ganny said.

“Walk,” Tibs said.

Jackal took a step, but couldn’t move out of his square. Same with Carina. “What’s going on?” the fighter asked, pushing against the unseen wall. “Is the dungeon cheating?”

“No,” Tibs answered. Ganny wouldn’t.

“Then why can’t I pull the rescue move with Carina?”

“Jackal,” Mez said hesitantly. “That’s a move only the Lord can pull, right?”

“Yes.”

“And the Lord is the most important piece on the board, right?”

“Yeah. We lose that, the game’s lost.”

Mez looked at the fighter. “Okay, then why did you say you were the Lord?”

“Because I’m the figh...” Jackal turned pale.

“What?” Tibs asked, as they all looked at him.

“You’re the most important piece,” Carina said. “You’re our Lord.”

“I thought I was the Infantry.”

“I was using you as such,” Khumdar said, “but you didn’t move, and even if you had, other than being fixed with moving forward, you and the Lord can only move one square.”

“Then shouldn’t I switch with him?” Carina asked.

“Can you take on that fighter?” Jackal asked.

“I’ve beaten you before,” She replied.

“Once, and that was a while ago, and that’s a dungeon creature, not a Runner.”

“But we have to keep Tibs safe.”

“Not if it means you die,” Tibs replied.

“Jackal, you can take on that sorcerer, correct?” Khumdar asked.

Jackal scoffed. “Of course.”

“Mez, two squares ahead of you,” the cleric instructed.

“Why?” the archer asked.

“It gives the cover Tibs needs.”

Mez nodded and moved.

The opposing sorcerer moved and ended two squares behind Tibs.

“That’s two ways it has to take out Tibs,” Jackal said angrily.

“And one for me to take out a piece,” Khumdar said, spinning his staff, then leveling it at the sorcerer. Darkness built up at the end and blasted the sorcerer in the back, sending it crashing at Tibs’s feet.

“How?” Ganny demanded.

“Shouldn’t that have not worked?” Mez asked. “Like my arrow?”

“What you did was an unallowed move,” the cleric replied. “A sorcerer can attack in any line-of-sight direction except the squares surrounding me.”

“Carina’s the sorcerer,” Tibs said.

“Each side had two of them,” Jackal replied. “That was quite a risk.”

“A calculated one. We made Tibs our Lord by how we act toward him. I counted on not having down anything, and on my appearance matching that of the sorcerer to let me do it.”

“So now it’s the dungeon’s turn,” Jackal said, smiling, “And it’s got one less piece to defend its Lord with.”

The archer moved to threaten Tibs, but that put it in Mez’s line of fire and an

explosive arrow removed it. Carina blasted one of the Infantry as it moved in her line. Then Khumdar had Jackal and her play a game of chase as the Lord moved to avoid being cornered until it was over and it had to fight Jackal.

The fight left the fighter injured, but smiling. When Tibs was done healing him, he noticed Khumdar was missing. He found him in the hall, on the floor, knees to himself and hugging them.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I nearly got you killed.”

“But you didn’t. You were able to out-think Ganny, you and Jackal.”

The cleric shook his head. “We didn’t win. The dungeon lost and the only reason it did is that it cares about you. The proper move to make, both as a strategy for the game and for the dungeon to win, was to attack you with its Lord. You couldn’t win that fight.”

“And you knew Ganny wouldn’t. You could sense it.”

“I cannot tell what secrets are, Tibs. Only that they are. I hoped. I asked Darkness to protect you, but I did not know what this Ganny would do. I did not know, for certain, it cared enough about you to not take advantage of the situation. We got lucky.”

“That’s not a thing.”

The cleric shrugged. “It’s still what happened.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called, “we’re going to need you here.”

“Go, I need more time to settle myself.”

“Don’t think too much about what might have happened. That’s one thing Jackal taught me.”

“That is easier to do when one does not spend much time thinking.”

Tibs nodded and rejoined the others.

Over the chest at the back of the room was another shield with the same lion. He sensed it and there were filaments of essences connected to it and vanishing into the distance. He couldn’t sense any traps or triggers, only them, waiting for someone’s essence.

“What do you need me for?” he asked the fighter.

“There’s a lot more than earth there.”

“So?”

“You’re our expert when it comes to this,” Carina said.

Tibs looked at her. “Didn’t you tell me not to grow dependent? Did you try to determine what it does?”

She blushed.

Jackal raised his hands when Tibs turned his gaze on him. “Hey, I’m the idiot here. Of course, I didn’t think to check. If I don’t know something, the smart thing is to call you.”

“You aren’t that stupid,” Tibs replied, and pointed to the shield.

With a sigh, Jackal places his hand on it and closed his eyes. “What am I sensing for?”

“How complex it is?”

Jackal shrugged. “There’s a lot of essence, I’m guessing all of them, but earth is just this thread going from here to somewhere too far for me to sense.”

“Triggers have to be complex, don’t they?” Carina asked.

“No, but the simple ones have to be broken. Anything that will do something will be complex, and if it did something here, which, it shouldn’t, since that was the problem the room posed us.” He pointed to the floor. “If it goes into the distance, whatever it does isn’t going to be here.”

Jackal sighed. “So this could be locking up another hall.”

“Or opening one,” Carina said. “We did beat this room.”

Jackal pushed essence to the thread and Tibs felt it brighten. After a few seconds, he heard a distant rumble.

“Any idea what that was?” Jackal asked.

“The crest does match one of the three we found the other time,” Carina replied.

“Which would mean there will be two other rooms like this,” Khumdar said.

“So long as it’s not another game of Conquest,” Jackal replied, “I’m fine with it.”

“This floor does seem to demand more of our minds than our bodies.”

“I’m the thinker in this dungeon,” Ganny said.

“You do know I’m the dungeon, right?” Sto said.

“You’re the body, I’m the mind.”

“That is not how it works, Ganny.”

“How would you know?” she replied, chuckling, “you’re just a body.”

## Stepping up-73

Tibs slipped in through the window and two of the rogues already there had knives out before turning to look at him. They sheathed them and went back to looking at the papers on the floor.

“There’s a passage here,” Gerald said, tracing a line with his finger.

“No,” the woman next to him said, “that’s a turn left.”

“So we mark this as another passage that’s triggered,” Armania stated and she wrote letters on that part of the paper.

Eight rogues were crouched on knelt around the papers with what they could work out of the third floor drawn on it. The start, to the first intersection they all agreed on, but after that, the only passage they were all sure of was the one when all triggers were avoided, which lead to the crest with the lion.

The one sure thing.

Tibs had decided it was Ganny’s way of showing them there was something to be reached since any rogue’s reaction on figuring out there were triggers on the floor was to

avoid all of them. Because they hadn't known that on the first run, most teams had triggered at least one, which had changed the layout enough it was agreed one trigger affected more than one wall.

The idea to meet and discuss the third floor hadn't been Tibs. He was busy enough managing the security of the town and the training of the Omegas he had no time left to think of new things. Armania was who had approached him with it. And after Tibs's last run, he'd eagerly agreed.

The large room was the attic in an unoccupied house at the edge of the noble's neighborhood. The papers had been procured from a variety of places that, since no one had come to Tibs complaining they were missing them, Tibs didn't care about.

"The from the bottom of the stairs to the first intersection," Tandy said, "is sixteen paces."

"Twenty-three," corrected Bronze.

"Nineteen," said Armania at the same time. They looked at one another and shook their heads. "If we can't agree on that, this is going to be a lot harder."

"How many tiles are there?" Tandy asked.

"Seventeen from where they start to the entrance of the intersection," Tibs answered. "And eight across."

Armania looked at the others, and ever so slowly they nodded. "Okay, and the tiles don't change from one run to the other, right?"

"They haven't yet," Bronze said. "We know that doesn't mean they won't tomorrow."

"I don't know," Tandy said. "This entire floor seems predicated on us working out how to get the walls to open so we can reach the three rooms that will unlock the final one. Tibs and your team, Bronze had come across the door with the three crests."

The room was on a page to the left and away from where Tibs was crouched, but they hadn't marked how to get there. Tibs and Bronze couldn't agree on the way. It seemed there was more than one way to reach that one at least.

"My team found the door with the dragon crest here." Tandy tapped the drawn crest on the right of the papers. The way there was drawn too, but no one had been able to confirm it since she didn't remember the series of triggers that had opened the way. "I couldn't open it, it's seven locks that have to be picked, but even after doing each, the door still wouldn't unlock. The locks are mechanical, but there is also essence at play. I can't tell you which, or what it does, although I didn't get the sense they interfered with the locks themselves. More that they reacted to what I did to the locks."

"Could you see what's in the room?" Armania asked.

"No, the dungeon's learned I can look through doors with my essence and it's found a way to counter it."

"Same with me," Bronze said. "I can't set up a resonance on that floor so see what's ahead or through the doors." He had crystal as his element and had explained on the first meeting that crystals were more than the gems they thought of. There were crystals in a lot of things, not simply the essence, but actual crystals, and he could use his essence to make them resonate and give him a sense of what was around him.



Tibs was realizing that Ganny wasn't only hindering him, but Runner who had working out how to use their essence to sense ahead of them or through doors.

"How about the colors?" Armania asked. "Anyone worked out a pattern there?"

The shake of the head was unanimous. The tiles came in seven colors. Blue, red, green, orange, yellow, purple, and black, but no one had yet to figure out which did what, if anything.

"Natalie, your team's next, do you—"

"Don won't let me do anything," she replied. "Not yet anyway. He's certain that the way to do it is to not trigger anything and follow the right wall. If that doesn't take us anywhere other than the lion crest room, I might be able to convince him to let me test the tiles, but that isn't going to be on this run."

"How confident are you he can win the game?" Armania asked.

"He knows is," Tibs answered. He'd asked the sorcerer how he was so good at strategy and had been able to move the conversation toward the came of Conquest, although Don called it King killer. "He says he's good at it, but it's Don, so it's not easy to know if he's boasting." Tibs had wanted to switch to light, but with his eye giving that away, and the sorcerer glaring at him the entire time as if Tibs was already accusing him of being a liar, he had to rely on his instinct. "So if there's someone else on your team who knows it, they should do what they can to be on Don's good side so they can make suggestions."

"My team's after Natalie," Tandy said. "I'm going to see about activating all the red triggers. Hopefully, I'll survive to report the result."

"Don't joke about dying," Tibs ordered her. For as much as this floor required them to think, mistakes still cost lives. "We need to be careful. If that means it takes months or a year to figure it out, then that's what it does. Each time one of us dies, it is going to set up back, and there's no telling we'll be able to find anyone to replace you."

"I wish there were more Runners we could bring in to help," Armania sighed. "But this is breaking the guild's rules in a big way. We can't risk someone telling them to get in good with them."

"It wouldn't do that," Tibs said.

She snorted. "There's always someone who thinks they are special enough they can make anyone like them, with the right piece of information."

"And them treating Don like they do," Tandy said, "is making a lot of the Runners who don't like they were forced to come here think they can avoid going on runs if the guild likes them."

"Those people are definitely not paying attention to how the guild's acting," Bronze said.

"The type of people who think they can swindle their way into other's good graces tend to only see what they want to see," Gerald said.

"Which is why we need to be careful," Armania said. "Is there anything to add to the map?" they shook their heads. "Okay, we'll meet again after Tandy's back from her run and go over what she found out. And keep your ears open for any mention of the boar crest. As far as I can tell, no one's seen it yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

“You can’t do that,” Jackal said, taking the Infantry piece and moving it back to the square it started from.

“It’s right there,” Tibs pointed at the sorcerer facing it, four squares away.

“The Infantry is on foot, so they can only move one square, they have a halberd for a weapon, so they can only reach one of the three squares in front of them for their attack.”

“This is a stupid game,” Tibs complained laying his head on arms and wishing he’d never heard of Conquest, or Strategion or King Killer, or however other kingdoms called it. Ganny was evil for using it and forcing Tibs to learn. He already had too many things to do.

“It’s actually a very smart one,” the fighter said. “It forces you to think within boundaries and to maximize your options with each move so that you can win even with you are seemingly losing.”

“Losing to Ganny means one of us dies,” Tibs said dejectedly.

“Then I think it’s even more important you learn the game, don’t you?”

Tibs wanted to glare. He really wanted to. But Jackal was right. He sighed and straightened and studies the board.

He had eight infantry, two sorcerers, two archers, two fighters, the Lord and the Lady. Sixteen pieces with their own set of rules on how they moved or could kill opposing pieces. Except for the Lord and Sorcerers, no pieces had moves that interacted with another one, unless it was to kill it.

Tibs took his infantry and moved it one square ahead. Jackal shook his head sadly and had his sorcerer, the one facing Tibs’s piece, kill it. Three moves later, Tibs’s Lord was dead. Instead of letting Tibs go, Jackal reset the board.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs ran among the tents doing nothing more than enjoying the scents and sights and making sure neither Jackal, Carina, nor Khumdar could find him. Over the last week, the three of them had started working together to ensure Tibs couldn’t escape his daily game of Conquest against Jackal. If the fighter was supposed to not be very good at the game, Tibs would never have a chance considering the way, the fighter so easily killed his Lord each time.

“There—” a hand reached for Tibs and he acted on reflex, pushing the essence through his body, suffusing it with water, and twisting out of the grip. He didn’t know how one of his friends had gotten ahead of him but he wasn’t—Alistair stared at him and Tibs tripped in surprise at seeing his teacher in the bazaar.

“I—” Tibs stammered. Wasn’t suffusing his body supposed to be hard? At least he’d been channeling water. Not that he’d tested it with other essences than his and earth. “What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you.” His teacher looked at his hand, and Tibs again. “And enjoying the vendors,” he added as an afterthought. “I think it’s time we went back to regular training.”

Tibs groaned. “Do we have to? I already have so much to do.”

Alistair smiled. “I think your attempts to drive Harry to insanity can wait.”

“I’m not trying to do that.” Tibs stepped to his teacher. “He let the people in the town

be hurt, so we don't trust him to keep us safe anymore."

"Tibs, things are not as—"

"I don't care. I'm street, I know better than to trust a guard to look after me, but guards look after the cities. Folks like me don't matter, but merchants and townsfolk do."

Alistair sighed. "That isn't true, Tibs you—"

"I don't care!" Tibs's yell was loud and caused people to look at them instead of moving away, they paused and watched. "I don't care what the guild wants, Alistair. What it thinks of me, of us Runners. This is my town. If you won't keep it safe, I will and the guild can go sleep in the noble's shit for all I care."

"Making an enemy of the guild isn't wise Tibs."

"I didn't make an enemy of the guild, Alistair. The guild made an enemy of this town. It made promises that it broke. I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to cause the guild problems, but we're not going to wait on it to let us die either."

They stared at one another silently.

Alistair sighed. "At least do you understand that I am saying what I am because I want you to be safe?"

Tibs snorted. "I'm a Runner, the guild didn't take me out of my cell so I'd be safe. You tried to make things better your way. I'm not going to do the same thing, because it doesn't work. I'm going to make things better for the people I care about, for my town, and the guild can deal with it however it wants."

"Hope that it never gets to that, Tibs. It is possible the guild broke trust, I do not know what the agreements were, but don't make the mistake of thinking that this town can survive without the guild."

"Really? Because it sure as shit didn't look like it was going to survive with the guild until us Runners got involved." Tibs let water cool his temper and let out a breath. "I'll train, Alistair. I have no choice but to be indentured to the guild right now. But I will not be an adventurer for it any longer than I have to. I will do my time, pay what I owe and you will never see me again." He turned and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"As far as I could work out," Tandy said, marking tiles on the map, "stepping only on the red ones didn't do anything useful. Those I'm marking with an 'x' are traps. This one's a fire explosion, so if you're going to trigger it for some reason, so it from a distance."

"Tibs?" Armania called. "Will you be joining us?"

Tibs turned away from the window. "Sorry, just having trouble focusing."

"After declaring war on the guild, I'm not surprised," Bronze said, grinning.

"I didn't declare war," Tibs protested. It hadn't taken long for his altercation with Alistair to become the talk of the town. Don had come down on him hard about how Tibs was ruining all the good work the sorcerer did with the guild to make sure the town was properly defended. Like now, Tibs hadn't had the energy to argue. He wanted his next run so he could deal with problems that had solutions, instead of creating only more problems.

"No, the way I understand it," Gerald said, "it's more that you served noticed." At the confused look, he continued. "It's a procedure back home. Before you can duel someone,

you need to layout why you want to do it and what are the terms for them to avoid it happening.”

“I was just angry.”

“I don’t know if you can afford to be angry like that, Tibs,” Natalie said. “A lot of people have picked up on your anger and are using it. There was a brawl yesterday with some of the guards. From what I’ve been told townsfolk started it.

Tibs groaned. He was just a kid, he was allowed to be angry and say things he wouldn’t mean the next day. Although he still believed what he’d said. “I’ll do something,” He said, not that he had any idea what.

“It might be best if you don’t,” Natalie said. “I think you need to let Don smooth things over.” Tibs snorted. “He has the best interest of the town too, Tibs.”

“I know.” He was so tired. “I just don’t think the guild is taking him with the seriousness Don believes they are. I mean, what has the guild done since we chased Sebastian away?”

“You haven’t exactly let them do much,” Tandy pointed out.

“I didn’t start this,” he protested. “The merchants came to me.”

“Because you’d already done something,” Gerald said.

“Don did,” Tibs said, “We just helped.”

The laughter was mocking.

“No one who’s met Don believes that,” Armania said. “Which includes the merchants. That’s why they went to you and not him. But Natalie’s right. I think you need to leave this be, for now, anything you say will just serve to fuel the town’s anger. Come focus on this, it’ll distract you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tibs,” Alistair greeted him stiffly as he entered the training room. “I’m glad to see you’re here.”

Tibs let out a breath. “I’m sorry for how I said what I said at the bazaar.”

“But not for what you said?”

“Have you—” Tibs closed his mouth on the anger. “Have you talked with the people? Or are we too Street for you?”

“I haven’t, but not for the reason you imagine.” He walked around Tibs, who felt like he was on display, being evaluated and judged. “I’m an adventurer, there’s nothing I can do to hide that. When an adventurer shows up in a town or a city, it’s either because something bad has happened, or will happen. We are not people the common folk wants to talk with.”

“Kragle Rock isn’t just another town,” Tibs replied. “We live among the people here. They know we aren’t any different than they are.”

“Except that you are. You, Tibs, wield essence. Magic. Something the common folk can only dream of doing because they can’t imagine putting themselves through the hardship it takes to unlock that. You’re right, Kragle Rock is different from most other places, but again, it isn’t for the reason you imagine. It has nothing to do with Runners living about the people here. But with how young the dungeon is. You still remember what it’s like to be one of them. Many of them knew you when you were Omega, but in a few years, after the

dungeon has graduated a few more times when the Omegas are lost among the Zeta and Epsilons coming here to further their training or even the Deltas, and, if the dungeon manages it, even Gammas.”

“Not every dungeon graduates to the point where anyone can train there?”

“No, but we are not getting sidetracked this time, this isn’t about dungeons, it’s about the reality you are still too young to understand. A Zeta adventurer can level a house with a thought. It doesn’t matter what element they have, even a Purity fighter can cause it to happen. Stories speak about us as heroes traveling the world to stop monsters, but they leave out the destruction doing that causes. Monsters are rare, and for that everyone is grateful, because when one shows up, and adventurers have to deal with it, there isn’t often much left of the area where it happened. Part of it, I will admit, is a lack of care on the part of certain adventurers. The better ones are given more latitude in how they work and they will make use of it. But another part is simply the level of power required to bring down such monsters.

“You say the people here are different, but they all come from a city away from here. They have heard the bard’s tales, but also the whispered stories of a town simply vanishing in the aftermath of a group of adventurers showing up to end the threat of a monster. We are both saviors and destroyers. And the people who have to flee their destroyed cities tend to forget that it happened in the process of saving their lives. So the stories that are whispered about us often make us no better than the monsters we are sent to deal with.”

“Is it really that bad?” Tibs asked. He had trouble believing a group of adventurers could destroy a city. A building? Yes. He had brought down Sebastian’s house by himself, using only corruption. He had no idea how someone with purity would do it, but he could think of ways to use water and fire and earth. Darkness and Light were tougher, but Tibs was creative.

“You’ll find out for yourself in time. There is a reason most adventurers stay with the guild once they have repaid what they owe. There are not many places out there that accept us with open arms. Now,” he said, as Tibs opened his mouth. “This is a training session. Why don’t we start with how you worked out how to suffuse your body with your essence?”

Tibs swallowed his question and nodded. “You said I could do it, and that it would make me tougher to be hit.” Tibs had thought about how he was going to answer his teacher since the bazaar. “So I’ve been trying. I don’t like getting hit. There’s also this maze on the second floor, just before the boss room.” He’d confirmed with Runners still doing the second floor it was still there and mostly unchanged. “The walls are essence and touching them triggers a series of spears in the entire maze. They hurt.” He shuddered at the memory. “We were able to out-think the dungeon for a while, but it adapted. It was great motivation for me to figure it out.”

“And how do you make it happen?”

“I just push it out of my reserve,” Tibs said then corrected himself at the raised eyebrow. “You mean the first time.” He hadn’t thought about that. It had been simple for him to suffuse his body with water because it was already suffused with his own essence, ever since Bardik. “I forced more essence in my reserve than it can contain.”

“Really?”

Tibs nodded. “I couldn’t figure out another way. I thought that if I can overfill it, it would have to spill over, and that’s in my body.” He bit his lower lip. “That isn’t how I was supposed to do it?”

Alistair laughed. “Tibs, it should be apparent by now that there is no fixed way to achieve a result. You did go one that is considered among the more dangerous ones, but you made it work. Once you had done it that way, did you have to overfill it again?”

“At first. But then it got easier, then I could just make it happen. How did you do it?”

“What is essence, Tibs?”

Tibs felt like groaning at the question, but at the same time, it was such a family technique from Alistair that it comforted him. “It is and isn’t the element.”

His teacher nodded. “If it isn’t, how do the walls of your reserve contain it?”

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it to consider it. How did his reserve contain something that was and wasn’t? “I don’t know.”

“You forced your will on it. I realized that my reserve was my will. I willed it to be contained, therefore, I could will it to let the essence through, in part or in whole.”

That didn’t feel right. Or maybe it simply was Tibs’s situation that made his reserve different? He couldn’t affect his small reserves, other than to channel them, at which point the central one converted into them. He rubbed his temple.

“Yes, essence never stops being confusing,” Alistair said, then became serious. “Tibs, why didn’t you have me contracted when you were able to do it? You clearly have practiced for some time and I applaud you for it, but you know I was waiting on this to continue your training.”

Tibs was happy he’d prepared for that question too, not that he’d be lying, just skirting the truth here and there. “Jackal, he’s my team leader. He’s an earth fighter, and he’s Lambda. He told me that when he was able to suffuse his body with his essence, he was able to graduate.”

“That’s correct. It’s the clearest measure that you are ready for the next stage.”

“My team can’t have two Runners at Lambda. We’re only allowed one who’s one level higher than the dungeon. I don’t want to lose my team.”

“And you’re willing to hold yourself back to ensure that.”

Tibs nodded. “I haven’t had a family in a long time, Alistair. Not until Jackal, Carina, Mez, and Khumdar. I know you’re going to tell me that even if I’m on another team, they’ll still be my family, or that I’m going to lose them no matter what I do, so I might as well get used to it now. But I have them now. And I’m going to stay with them.”

Alistair nodded. “I know you believe the guild is uncaring in how it does things, but you’ll find that dungeons force even it to bend. But I don’t see a problem with keeping this from them. My methods for training you have been unorthodox from the start, why should they change now?”

## Stepping up-74

“Okay,” Tibs said, looking at the tiles on the floor. “Black, Red, and Yellow are safe to step on from here to the intersection, stick to those. I’ll handle the triggers.”

“How about we wait until you’ve done then?” Jackal asked.

“No. There’s a sequence to reset them. If one of you accidentally steps onto one, I can fix it, unless you die, I can’t fix that so no stupid stuff, Jackal.”

“Why—” Jackal closed his mouth at the glare Tibs gave him and grinned. “Okay, I’ll do my best not to think at all. Should ensure I don’t come up with something stupid to do.”

“If absence of thought leads to a better performance out of you, Jackal,” Khumdar said, “then I will suggest that once Carina has become an Alpha Sorceress, she locks up into a tower for study, for that will be an accomplishment that needs to be replicated.”

“Not stone,” Mez said. “It’ll be too easy for him to escape and go right back to thinking.”

“I’ll use metal manacles to hold him,” Carina added.

“Kro is so going to be pissed.”

“No, I’m pretty sure he’d enjoy having you someplace you can’t get yourself hurt.”

Jackal smirked. “He likes taking care of him.”

“So I should stop healing you?” Tibs said, then focused on the floor. He and the other rogues had spent so much time looking over the drawing and what each one had found out that Tibs had been dreaming about it for days now. Unfortunately, in his dreams, the sequence kept changing and it left him now uncertain of the right one. He was happy Tandy had insisted he bring a copy of everything, and not just where they needed to add information.

The others argued good-naturedly about Jackal’s need to be restrained and Kroseph’s willingness to help as they walk to the intersection. It was covered in the same tiles, but as far as anyone had tested, none of them were triggers. No intersection had them and the consensus was that the dungeon use them to let them rest since, on top of the triggers, there would be fighting in the halls. At least, there were no trap triggers in those.

Yet.

Everyone was nervous about the dungeon changing things up on them, and Tibs hadn’t asked Ganny about it because he was worried he’d give her the idea.

“We’re in place,” Jackal called.

Tibs shook himself and consulted the paper for this hall. It was blue, purple, green, orange, green, orange, purple, and orange. The first five were easy, as he could step from one to the other, but he had to jump to reach the orange. He made it, then stepped the rest of the way. Each tile clicked and he felt a rumble in the ground. On the third one, the middle path had opened in the intersection.

“Is stepping on all the triggers supposed to make it easier?” Carina asked, “or harder?”

Tibs shrugged. “What we’ve worked out is how to make sure we don’t block off any

of the paths.” He pointed left. “One of the team worked out how to reach the door with the three crests. We’re almost certain of the one that lets us reach the lion crest, which has the Conquest board behind it. The Dragon crest has a board for a game Gerald called Climb, it’s platforms that raise and lowers according to which one has someone standing on it.”

“So that’s another Strategy kind of game?” Jackal asked. Tibs shrugged. The way Gerald had described the way the room worked it felt more like figuring out patterns, but he wouldn’t be able to tell until he experienced it.

“The team who reached it isn’t certain of the triggers for the last three halls, so I’d like us to head there so I can try to work it out. Oh.” Tibs pointed to a crest shield at the corner, near the ceiling. Instead of a drawing, it only had a line from top to bottom. “That’s how long we have until the entire floor resets.” At the moment, the line was almost all green, except for a little red at the time.

“So, that means the loot chests refill?” Jackal asked gleefully.

“How long does that give us?” Mez asked.

“I suspect,” Khumdar answered before Tibs could, “that it will come to an end near zenith. It would explain the new arrangement of the schedule.”

It had caused an uproar, but a week before, in the middle of the schedule, it had been changed. Now the teams were divided by the floors they could reach, ten Omega teams were going in each day, which caused them to go in much more often. Upsilon teams had six, and Rho, two. They hadn’t been told why, and the rogues who worked on the map with him had mentioned the timer. Tibs hadn’t thought about it beyond figuring out what it meant for the run itself. There were three and one Rho teams now, with two going in each day that was one and five days until their schedule was reset. It would change as Runners died and Teams graduated, but it now meant two or three runs per month.

“That’s what, six hours?” Mez asked.

“Is that enough to do the entire floor?” Carina said.

“Not until we’ve worked out how to get to each room,” Tibs replied. “So right now, we’re working on confirming the path to the dragon room and the triggers to make sure the way there is open. Hopefully, by the time we have another run, one of the others will know how to reach the Boar room and what the game we have to play there is.”

Jackal nodded. “Okay, we get to the Dragon room, do the game, get to the lion one, play Conquest, then we wait for the floor to reset and play another game of Conquest so—”

“No,” Carina stated.

“That’s not how this works,” Ganny added and Tibs smiled.

“How did you not expect Jackal to try for more loot?” Tibs asked.

“The dungeon’s weighing in on Jackal’s obsession?” Mez asked.

“Ganny is.”

“How is it I’m the only one who considers the loot to be a good thing?”

“No, we all consider it good,” Khumdar said. “But we understand that seeking it at the expense of the rules will be detrimental to us coming back again for more loot. This is a situation of looking at the long term gain, instead of the short term.”

“Long term, we get more loot if we get more loot in the short term,” the fighter



replied.

“Only if running into another team doesn’t impose some form of penalty,” Carina said. “Are you willing to risk it? Considering Harry is the one who’ll make the decision?” she added as Jackal was about to argue.

He closed his mouth, unhappy.

“If it’ll help,” Sto said, “if he promises not to hang around to redo a room, I’ll have the rewards I promised him.”

“Didn’t you say it would take longer for what he wanted?”

Jackal frowned, then his face lit up.

“We’ve come across something in starting to work on the next floor that changed that. Changed quite a few things actually, but it’s given me access to more of the essences I needed, so it’s done.”

“Sto had your pouch ready,” Tibs told the fighter, “and he’s willing to give it to you if you promise to leave before the timer runs out.”

Jackal thought it over. “So I can get it now, if I don’t try to redo a room, or next time if I do?”

Sto groaned.

“What did you expect?” Tibs told the dungeon.

“His greed knows no limit does it?”

“Probably, but I don’t think you can make enough loot to reach it.”

“Is it offering more loot?”

“No!” Sto said. “Okay, let’s try this. Tibs please repeat what I say. Jackal, Please don’t say past the end of the timer.”

Tibs looked at the ceiling, raising an eyebrow, but when Sto didn’t explain himself, he repeated the words.

Jackal stared at him, then looked up. “Really? You think asking nicely is going to be enough?”

Sto groaned. “What if I add a little something for Kroseph?”

“Can you do that?” Tibs asked.

“I can make it, but it’s going to be up to Jackal to decide if he wants to be greedy or give it to his special man.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

“Actually, I have,” Ganny said. “Sto didn’t believe me when I told him Jackal was going to be difficult.”

“If you agree, Sto will add something for Kroseph.”

“What is it?” Jackal demanded suspiciously.

“You’ll find out when you get your pouch,” Tibs replied before Sto could say anything.

“And I only get it today if I agree to leave before the timer runs out.”

“Promise to leave,” Carina said.

“Promise,” Jackal corrected darkly, waited a second then brightened. “Okay, I

promise to leave before the timer runs out.”

“That’s it?” Mez asked, surprised. “You’re not going to argue any more than that?”

“It’s for Kro. I’m not going to deny him a present.” Jackal beamed. “Do you have any idea how grateful he’s going to be? He is going to—”

“I don’t want to hear that,” Tibs said.

“I kind of have liked to,” Sto said. “Humans have really strange rituals”

“It’s *them* time,” Tibs said. “It’s none of our business.” He glared at Jackal. “No matter how willing someone is to talk about his.”

The fighter raised his hand in defeat, but grinned. “Then, how about we get on with the reward giving?”

“Once you’re done with the room you’re going for,” Sto said. “I can’t wait to see how you work that one out, Tibs.”

“Are you hoping Jackal is going to die there and you won’t have to give him his reward?”

“No,” Sto replied, offended. “Even if I give it to him now and he dies, I still get the essence back.”

“Well, I am,” Ganny said. “No offense, Tibs, but he needs to learn some patience. And if the price is him getting hurt I am all for it.”

Hurt, not dead. Tibs could deal with hurt.

“It’s going to be part of the loot for winning the game,” Tibs said and stepped to the hallway.

“Shouldn’t we go for the lion room then?” Jackal asked. “We know how to beat that one.”

“I said we were going to the dragon room. This is about more than you getting your loot.”

Jackal closed his mouth at Tibs’s glare and he was somber this time.

“There’s going to be a fight along this hall. Avoid the purple tiles. Some have traps triggers and I’m not trying to explain which ones.”

“How do we deal with unlocking the hallways?” Carina asked.

“After the fight.” Mez looked at Tibs. “Right?”

Tibs nodded and stood.

\* \* \* \* \*

This fight was different.

Yellow and green were the tiles to avoid, and along with the Gnoll, a team of dungeon-made Runners had dropped in on them. It made the fighting more difficult since the Runners had a degree of tactics beyond rushing headfirst at them. Two Gnolls were taken out when they stepped on triggers and traps killed them. One in a fiery explosion and the other as the tile surged up, carrying it and crushed it against the ceiling.

The question of how a tile only a little larger than his foot had managed that distracted Tibs enough the fighter nearly skewered him. They were both water since it was still Tibs best element for close combat. But it wasn’t his only one.

He switched to fire, using the reserve in his bracers to keep his ice sword and shield active, and blasted it with a get of flames. It resisted for a few seconds, but Tibs had the larger reserve, and then the ice armor melted and the creature burned.

Tibs felt his smile turn maniacal and let go of the element. While he had control now, fire remained the one that demanded the most care. It felt too natural to let his emotions go to extremes when channeling it.

His shield suffered the most from the heat and he reformed it, then rejoined the battle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs looked at the notes already written and added his own. Indicating the three tiles he wasn't entirely certain was part of the sequence to open the passage leading to the door. He'd check them if they had time after the room, if not, the next team would.

Like with the lion crest, the dragon was a puzzle. It was also a sliding puzzle but worked differently. Instead of one square missing and using that gap to reform it, full rows and columns slid, vanishing at one edge and reappearing at the other.

"How does it do that?" Jackal asked.

"Essence," Khumdar replied. Tibs felt it as he pushed a row in one direction. It was the same sort of feeling as the doorways that took them to the different floors. Void essence used in a way Tandy was still too new to understand.

Once over the surprise of how it worked, forming the crest was straightforward, although, as with the lion, the closer he got to finishing it, the tougher it got. But it was also simply about finding a sequence of moves that let him change specific tiles while getting everything else back in the same position once he was done.

The last column slid into place to complete the dragon crest, there was a click, and the door slid down with a groan of stone against stone.

Inside, the room consisted of a grid made of one and eight tiles on each side, large enough for a person to stand on them, but at various heights. Most too far apart to be climbed or safely jumped from and some locked in place. Which ones those were changed each time the floor reset as far as they're worked out from the three teams who'd made it in. On the other side was a lever that lowered everything to floor height. So all they needed to do was get one person across.

Tibs jumped to grab the edge of the tile before him, and before he climbed onto it, he lowered half its height, then clicked to a stop. While it did that. One of the left, three tiles away went up close to Jackal's height, and one on the right, six tiles away lowered, to the floor. While he couldn't see them, Tibs knew more tiles over the room were changing heights in response to this one.

Tibs sat on the tile, looking at his friends. "And that's the puzzle in this room. Anytime one of us steps onto tile, it will lower, and others will change in response."

"So you move on them and we use these to adjust your path when you can't pass," Jackal said.

"It can't be that simple," Carina said, then closed her eyes. "If the room is square, that's eighteen times eighteen. Three hundred and twenty-four tiles. There's no way these

eighteen will affect all that.”

Tibs nodded. “Only three teams have made it here before us, so the information isn’t complete, but with the exception of the tile fixed in height, every tile will affect some of the others. Some affect the same ones but in different ways. One might make it go up, another down, up a little, up a lot.”

“Then there is the problem of being on a tile if it hits the ceiling.” Khumdar pointed to one they could see in such a position.

“If that’s going to happen, you jump off,” Jackal said.

“That’s pretty high,” Mez said, looking around. “You can survive it, being stone and all, Tibs likes throwing himself out of high windows so—”

“I only did that trying to get my audience with air.”

“I was under the impression it was throwing yourself off a mountain that allowed it to happen.”

Tibs glared at the grinning cleric. “I tripped.”

“Still,” the archer continued, “you have experience. Carina can use air to float. That leaves me and Khumdar. I don’t see myself jumping those heights.”

“No to say what will landing on a new tile cause to the rest of the floor,” Carina said. “I can probably float across.”

“Ganny made this floor, so I’m pretty sure she set up something to keep us from cheating.”

“Are you saying I can’t do that?” Sto demanded.

“How many tries did it take until Tibs had to go through the maze you made for him?” Ganny replied.

“Tibs, find a way to cheat,” Sto demanded.

“We can still try to come up with something, but I can’t reach that far with essence so I can’t try to activate the lever that turns this off.”

“Do you know where it is?” Mez asked, trying to look over the tiles.

“On the other wall, next to the crest, which is over the loot chest. I don’t think destroying it will do anything.”

“The lever has to be pulled down or up?”

Tibs shrugged. It hadn’t come up in the conversations.

“Then crossing it the intended way might be the only way to do this.”

Tibs smiled and stood. “I’ll tell you what tiles to lower and I’ll look at the result and we’ll go from there.”

## Stepping up-75

Tibs stood on a platform, watching the others move as his teammates followed his directions. His didn’t; which was why he was on it. Trying to observe the board and make notes was too hard when he had to worry about how his platform would react. There was a

pattern, he was sure of it, and now that he'd made it to the center, he was getting a sense of what it was.

At least enough he could get his friends to the other side. "Jackal," he called once the platform steadied. "Two ahead and to your left. Can you make it?" It was twice the fighter's height, but Jackal was hidden behind more platforms.

"I think so."

"Okay, if you do, none of the others should be affected."

"And if we start feeling our platform," Carina continued, "we jump to our previous one."

"Or if I miss and fall," Jackal said.

"No. Only if the others' platform moves. You all start moving without a plan and we're not going to make it."

"Don't worry, Tibs," Mez said. "We're not as scared of this as Jackal."

"I'm not scared. Just worried my actions will kill one of you and then I'm going to have Tibs wanting to kill me."

"I wouldn't kill you. Kroseph wouldn't forgive me."

"I don't know," Carina said. "If Jackal kills one of us, he might find it acceptable. He'd forgive you in time."

"I am not killing Jackal, and he isn't going to get anyone killed, so we don't have to worry about what Kroseph will think." Tibs shook his head. "Now stop delaying and get on it."

With a grunt, then a groan of sliding stones, the landscape of the room shifted as platforms rose and dropped. Looking around, he counted one and one which had moved. That meant he'd missed one. He was almost certain each platform was connected to one and two others. He made his notes, then instructed Carina. It was slow going, but he hoped that there was a fixed and quick way through; once they worked out how each platform affected the others. It would take multiple runs to get it all, but it had to be the only way to get through the three crest rooms to unlock the boss one.

So Tibs moved his friends and himself slowly through the rooms and only had three near-death, two because of a miscalculation on his part and one when Khumdar couldn't reach his assigned pillar, and the one he fell on sent Carina's flying to the ceiling. Her element saved her, as she threw herself off and used it to stay afloat until they all settled and Tibs could direct her to a safe one.

Jackal didn't look in her direction once while she was in the air.

Tibs got the others off the platforms before him and he made more notes.

The chest was open, with Jackal looking unhappy, and the crest had been touched. The fire essence filament shone from it to where it vanished in the distance.

"It's empty," the fighter said, pointing at the chest.

"Yes," Sto replied. "I didn't want to risk *someone* taking something not for him, and causing problems. Have him close it." Tibs instructed Jackal and when Sto said so, had him open it again.

Jackal took out a belt pouch.

It was different from the usual coin pouches Sto had on the first floor. It was larger—the length of a hand to the middle of the forearm—and made of sturdy leather, instead of cloth or thin leather, and boxiness to it, instead of the usual formless bagginess. He'd seen some like it at the workers' belt. But theirs would have extra loops for tools.

Looking at it with his sense, it felt... odd. He couldn't sense the essence that had to be woven through it—Jackal put his arm in it to his shoulder—but he could still tell there was something not quite right about it.

“Khumdar, can you tell anything about it?”

The cleric shook his head. “Despite the evidence, I sense no secret from the pouch.” Jackal took Mez's bow and put it in. The cleric stepped back when the fighter approached, putting his staff at his back.

So it wasn't a darkness thing that let Tibs know something was different about it. Light maybe?

Jackal gave up and pulled armor pieces out of Carina's backpack.

“He is having a lot more fun with this than I expected,” Sto said. “Close the chest, Tibs. I'll tell you when to open it, but Carina needs to take what will be in it.”

He did as instructed, closing the lid on an empty chest, then opening it to one containing a blue-gray robe.

“I thought you couldn't change anything in the room when we're in it.”

Jackal was putting dented metal breastplate in his pouch and the way it distorted to fit into the opening gave Tibs a headache.

“The chests are an environment of their own. I can't move it while you're there, but what happens inside it can be determined ahead of time and will keep happening. In this case, each time the lid closes, something else is put in it. Before Jackal asks, the other chests don't work like this one, and it won't work like this next time. This was the simplest way I could come up to distribute your rewards without one person trying to take everything for himself.”

“He wouldn't do that.” Tibs called Carina over and instead of fighting with Jackal, who was pulling something else from the pack, she took it off.

She pulled the robe out and Tibs closed the lid. Again, there was something odd about it to his sense. She ran her hands over the fabric and admired the imperfections in it that matched the wear and damage her robe had taken over time.

“Like she asked, it has reserves hidden throughout for essence. A few only accept air essence, but there are enough of the others she'll be able to fill them with all the other essences. It's also woven through with a mix of metal, earth, water, and fire essence to make it as resistant as possible and to keep her from overheating in it. Mez next.”

Surprised, Tibs called the archer over.

Mez opened it and took a quiver. Tibs paid attention this time and as soon as he touched it, all essence vanished from his sense, leaving behind the sensation of something not quite right.

“Mez has mentioned a few times how running out of arrows can be a problem, so this quiver never will. It's set to remake any arrows put into it when it's fed fire essence. Don't

ask how that works, I needed a way for him to be able to change arrows if needed. The arrows take time to remake, so he is going to want to be careful with how he uses them, and of course, people will notice it happening so something else he needs to be careful of.”

Mez looked awed once Tibs was done explaining. “Thank you. For it and the bow.”

“I had nothing to do with the bow,” Sto said. “That was just a randomly assigned loot.”

Tibs grinned. “He says you’re welcome.”

“Khumdar next.”

The cleric hesitated. “I have not asked for anything. Nor did I contribute to the ideas which led to the dungeon awarding these.”

“Jackal and Carina wouldn’t be who they are if not for the three of you,” Sto said, and Tibs repeated. “It felt wrong not to acknowledge that.”

Khumdar opened the chest and pulled out a black robe. It had the same protection as Carina’s, plus something just for him. “You mentioned how aren’t particularly suited at hiding, in spite of darkness being your element, so it’ll help take care of that. When you feed your essence directly into the robes, it will create a field that lets you and anyone close to you blend into the shadows. The darker the shadow, the easier it will be, but with enough essence, you should be able to hide even in a faint one.”

“This is more than I deserve, Sto.”

“It’s a gift, not something you needed to earn. And now you Tibs.”

“Are you sure? You gave me the bracers, the pouch, the shoes.”

“Two of which you no longer have.”

“Because I destroyed them.”

“Still, what I said to Khumdar applies to you too, more so.”

He opened the chest and in it was an armor. Other than the essence woven into it, it looked like the one he wore, minus the bracers.

“I considered remaking the pouch for you, but even if people can’t tell what’s in it, it’s still a pouch and it’ll draw the attention. So I altered the hidden places on it to accommodate more coins, and larger things, like an amulet. There’s also a variation on Jackal’s pouch included in the belt. It might take you trial and error to get it right, but you can use your darkness essence to move things from the compartment to your hand. It’s more complicated than that, but it felt like an appropriate way to trigger the sequence of essences to make it happen, darkness being about hiding stuff and all that. It’s limited to something the size of a long knife, and only six of them. That’s because I needed to limit the essence it uses and you now make your sword and shield out of ice, so a place for your knives felt it was enough.”

Tibs tried to think of something more appropriate than thank you to say. “Thank you,” he finally said. Everyone was silent. Even Jackal had had enough of playing with his pouch and taken everything out of it.

He looked at his friends and asked the one thing that was bothering him. “Don’t you think all this gives us an unfair advantage over the other teams?”

“Not as much of one as you think, Tibs. As you noticed, this floor is more about how you think. The fights are there because I reminded Ganny not everyone on the teams are

thinkers like you, and the sorcerers tend to be. They need to be challenged too. Once I'm closer to opening the fourth floor, I'll shift the loot list to have more defense-heavy items like what's part of your armor and the robes because you are all going to need it for that floor."

"So there's going to be a lot of fighting on the next floor?" Tibs asked, looking at Jackal, who grinned.

"Oh yes. Enough that—"

"You can't tell them more," Ganny interjected. "I swear, I leave for a few minutes to keep them from getting out of control and you go and tell them everything."

"Hi, Ganny."

"I didn't tell them anything."

"You told them there's going to be fighting, that's something."

"It was that or have Tibs give me back the armor."

"What? You wouldn't. Sto put a lot of work into it. Into all of them."

"I..." Tibs sighed. "I'm just glad to know this isn't going to be so special soon. You're the one always telling him not to be so sweet on me."

"Oh, I gave up on that. He's smitten and every time you have a run and out-think him, he just gets more so."

"I am not smitten," Sto grumbled. "Anyway, there's one item left. Tell Jackal to open the chest."

Jackal opened it eagerly, then frowned. He reached into the chest, but stop. "If it's for Kroseph, can I touch it?"

Sto laughed. "He thinks! Yes, he can touch it. Since I didn't expect you to bring his man to me, I couldn't use the same method to hide what it does as I did for the rest of you. It's like your old pouch. Anyone touching it will be able to sense the weave in it."

"It's safe."

Jackal pulled a simple golden band out of the chest.

"So, I've worked out how special Kroseph is from the way you guys talk about him. To Jackal and the rest of you. From other teams, I've also picked up on the fact that Runners tend to live longer than ordinary people. And Tibs has often mentioned how one of your friends dying hurts. I didn't make all the connections as fast as I'd like to have. Things like growing old and dying because of it just seems wrong to me, so something like Kroseph getting old and dying of it, while Jackal doesn't, took a lot longer to understand. But I do now. And I don't think it's fair. So I made this ring for him. It's going to make him age slower. I don't know if it's going to match Jackal because even with as much thinking about it as I've done time is a fuzzy thing and no one has talked in much detail about how and why Runners don't grow up the same way other people do. But it'll give you time to find out and explain it to me, then I'll be able to make him another one."

Tibs stared at the ring, eyes wet.

"Tibs?" Jackal said. "I'm no longer sure I should keep it."

"You keep it." He wiped at his eyes. "And you make sure you live, okay? That ring makes it to Kroseph can be with you for a long time. He'd not going to get old like others,



but like Adventurers.”

“I can’t,” Jackal said, his voice cracking. “Tibs, I can’t give him that. I can’t ask him to live long when I’m going to die.”

“No. You aren’t going to die.”

“Tib’s, I’m a Runner,” Jackal snapped. “If I survive this, and don’t you fucking dare go easy on me because of my man, I’m going to be an adventurer indentured to the guild. I’m not one of the heroes the bards sing about. I’m the kind of adventurer the guild throws at monsters to slow them down while they prepare a defense. We get eaten.”

“Then you get better. You stop playing at being an idiot so the guild knows to keep you alive.”

“I’m not—”

Tibs glared his friend silent. “You stop. You do that for Kroseph. You do that so you come back to him every time.”

“I don’t know how. I’ve fought that part of my life so hard, Tibs. That’s who my father wanted me to be. He wanted me to learn and to do, and to rule. I didn’t, because it was the only way I knew to hurt him.”

“We’ll help you,” Tibs said. “You’re doing it for Kroseph, not your father.”

“We’re all going to help,” Mez said.

## Stepping up-76

Getting Jackal to leave most of the loot out of his pouch, for the guild to get, turned out to be easier than Tibs expected because of how distracted the ring made him. Mez’s quiver went in it since it would be too easy for whoever was behind the table to figure out something was odd with it when handling it. Tibs’s armor, as well as Carina and Khumdar’s robes, they wore, leaving behind the old ones.

Jackal was subdued walking to the inn, and Tibs worried. The ring was a good thing, right? Jackal had them wait outside, and that worried Tibs more. He watched through the door he kept open as the two talked, Kroseph looking worried by the time Jackal returned.

Kroseph looked at Tibs, who could only shrug.

“I need a drink,” Jackal said, and headed for the tavern opposite the inn.

Tibs opened his mouth, but Khumdar placed a hand on his shoulder. He waited until the fighter had vanished inside. “He needs time.”

“Time for what? And the inn has better ale. Why does he look like he’s about to have to go talk to Harry?”

“Because, I believe, our esteemed leader is doing something he is not in the habit of doing. He is considering the consequences of his actions.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Okay,” Kroseph demanded as he entered the warehouse. “What the fuck is going on?” He looked at them and seemed confused by how subdued they all were.

Tibs understood some of Jackal’s feelings now. Tibs hadn’t entirely considered the

consequences of giving the ring to Kroseph. Jackal couldn't play the 'lucky find' angle with his man, so he needed to explain how he'd come to have it. That meant telling Kroseph about the dungeon and Tibs's ability to speak to him.

Kroseph knew about Tibs's multiple elements. The server had been key in helping him get a handle on how many of them affected him, but somehow, among that, the dungeon had never come up. It was always all about Tibs.

"Look, no one died," Kroseph said, his worry barely controlled, "so unless you're about to tell me one of you is dying of something Tibs can't cure, start talking before I start hitting." He fixed his gaze on Jackal.

Jackal took Kroseph's hand and led him to a crate and they sat facing one another. With Tibs and the other flanking them. The server looked at them before focusing on Jackal again.

"Something's happened," the fighter said, then faltered. "I wanted Tibs to tell you because he's way better at talking than I am, but a certain someone said I had to be the one doing this." He gave Carina a mock glare, and she rolled her eyes. "There's things you need to know, but you won't be able to talk about them with anyone but us."

"I already know about Tibs's element, Jackal," Kroseph searched the fighter's face. "Which means this is something else." He let out a nervous chuckle. "Are you about to tell me you took over the guild and you want me to stop working at the inn?"

"I'd never ask you to give that up, Kro. You know that."

Kroseph took Jackal's hand in his. "Then what is it? You know you can tell me everything, right?"

Jackal's nod was nervous. "It's about Tibs, and the dungeon. And us too. It's complicated."

"Then tell me and I'll do what I can to help uncomplicate it."

"I love you so much," Jackal whispered.

"That I know." Kroseph smiled.

"Tibs can talk to the dungeon."

Kroseph took a few seconds to process that. "You mean like he talks to your sister's dogs?"

"Abyss no. Those are just beasts. The dungeon, it can think. Like you and me, well, you anyway. We know how great I am at the thinking thing. But the dungeon, it can think, and it has a name. And it's a person. No matter what the guild or the bards claimed. It's an actual person, Kro, with feelings, and rules, and things it wants. It's not an animal."

Kroseph looked at Tibs. "And you can talk with it?"

"It's my element. It lets me do that. We don't know why."

Kroseph nodded. "So you've been able to do it for a while. You didn't tell me then, so if you're telling me now, something's different."

"We didn't mean to keep it from you," Jackal said defensively. "We just didn't think of it."

"It's okay. I knew there was stuff you wouldn't be able or willing to talk about. I mean, you still told me a lot the guild didn't want you to."

Jackal forced a smile. “You remember when I came back from the run all pissed and I didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, it’s about the only time you didn’t look like you had fun in there.”

“The dungeon, Sto, that’s its name. It did something hurtful, not just try to kill us, but something that hurt us here.” He tapped his heart. “It didn’t mean to, but that didn’t help, and on the next run, it and Tibs had a talk. I can’t hear it, only Tibs does, but Tibs told us and the dungeon was hurt that it had hurt us. It kind of likes Tibs, and us too, by association. So after Tibs explained why it hurt, it didn’t know to make sure it didn’t happen. Tibs said I can tell you more, but it’s not important right now. Me and Carina helped it come up with a way to do it.”

“Wait, I thought you couldn’t talk with it.”

“The dungeon can listen to all of us when we’re inside. It’s like its body, it can change it, and pay attention to places. And it likes watching us go through it. And Tibs is really clever, so it likes trying to stump him. It likes watching me too,” Jackal said with a hint of pride, then the grin became silly. “But for other reasons.”

Kroseph narrowed his eyes. “It likes watching you destroy its creatures?” he asked in dismay.

“It likes trying to kill me,” Jackal replied, chest puffing out. Then he leaned in. “I got to fight it.”

“Aren’t always fighting it, when you’re beating its creatures?”

“No, I got to fight it directly, it make a golem, and it put itself in it and we—” Jackal shook his head with a rueful smile. “I’ll tell you later. But yeah, me and Carina helped it and it promised us a reward in return.”

“So that’s why you were so happy that day.” Kroseph grinned.

Jackal mirrored it. “Yeah. Don’t tell Tibs all the things I did to you because of it.”

“Oh, I know better than to start talking about what you can do with that tongue of yours and—”

Tibs groaned loudly. “I’m going to leave.”

“No, you’re not,” Jackal replied with a chuckle. “Well, today we got our reward. And the dungeon made one for you too.”

Kroseph stared at the fighter. “Me? Why? I’ve done nothing for the dungeon.”

“You look after us. Me, Tibs, the team. The other Runners. You’re part of the town and one of the reasons we can go in confident we’ll have a place to come back to. But that’s not why it made it. Remember when I said it listens to us when we’re inside? Well, we talk about you. These guys just can’t shut up about how lucky I am that somehow you haven’t kicked me out of your bed yet, and who am I to contradict them, right? The dungeon’s picked up on how important you are to me. So he made you something because of that.”

Jackal reached into his pouch and kept his fist closed once it was out. His expression grew serious. “The thing is, this comes with consequences. Not from the dungeon,” Jackal hurried to add as Kroseph’s expression darkened. “It wouldn’t do that. It’s about how serious you and me are. If you accept this, Kro, things are going to be different between us. I’m going to have to make changes.”

“I don’t need you to change, Jackal. You know that, right? If whatever you’re holding is going to force that, then I don’t want it.”

“It’s not forcing it, not the way you mean. I love you, Kroseph. You helped give me a reason to fight the dungeon hard. To not let the mess I made for myself drag me down. But I never made you a promise because deep down, I knew something I don’t think you’ve realized. I’m a Runner. I’m going to be an adventurer. I’ve talked with those who guarded us. My instructor, some who come do work for the guild. One thing I got from them is that what we have, it never survives. You’re going to grow old and I’m not; at least, not like you. Unless the dungeon kills me, or one of the things the guild sends me to fight does it. I am going to live decades more than you. Maybe centuries. You’ve heard the bards and their stories of adventurers fighting for always. They aren’t all made up. Because I knew that, I’d prefer one of those killed me while I was with you. I know it would hurt you, but you have no idea what losing you is going to do to me, Kro. My family’s really small, and you’re the only one in it I know isn’t going to be killed by the dungeon or a monster. So I settled on dying first and to enjoy my time with you as much as I can.”

Kroseph placed a hand on the fist. “This changes that?”

Jackal slowly opened it, revealing the golden band. “The dungeon doesn’t know how exact it’s going to be, but if you wear this, you’re going to live a long time. You’re going to be like an adventurer that way. So I’m going to have to change how I think. I’m going to have to start doing my runs knowing you’re going to be with me for all that time, so I am going to have to win. It’s going to have to be about more than proving I’m better than it is, about the loot I get when I win. Kro, if you take this. I’m going to have to start fighting for you.”

Kroseph looked at the ring in Jackal’s hand in silence for a long time. “Are you sure?”

Jackal snorted. “This is me, Kro. Sure isn’t something I’ve ever done unless it involves my fist hitting something. But I don’t care about being sure. I care about you being in my life. If you take this, I promise I will do everything in my power to come back to you every time.”

The server gingerly took the ring. “Then, Jackal, I accept.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jackal and Kroseph vanished for the rest of the night and the next day. That Kroseph’s father wasn’t screaming for him told Tibs he’d been informed and approved. When they reappeared, the two tried to go back to the way things had been, but the change was visible to the point that even Don commented on it with only a small mouth of disdain.

Jackal threw himself even harder in his training, much to the chagrin of anyone he picked as a sparing partner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something was off with Kragle Rock, and Tibs couldn’t figure out what. There had been no reports of unusual crimes from the Runners protecting the merchants. The fighting ring was under control, as usual. The one detail he noted as he walked the streets was that more nobles were out of their neighborhood. That didn’t happen often. Only a few of them went to the marketplace that was becoming established around the transport platform. In

fact, even on the few days when he could expect them to walk through his town, it was just that, to walk through it, on their way to the bazaar.

Tibs frowned. He counted the days. That was it, he thought. The caravan would have arrived in the morning, so the nobles were heading there.

Only they weren't. They were meandering his streets as if they were lost and didn't understand why.

He hurried to the edge of town where, instead of tents being set up and the bustle of merchants and customers, was an empty field with a handful of people wandering it. The nobles weren't the only ones confused by the caravan's absence.

At the edge, Tibs found Cross. She looked into the distance unhappily.

"The caravan's late," Tibs stated.

"Yeah," she replied through clenched teeth.

"There's something I don't know here, and I don't know enough about caravans to know what question to ask you, so why don't you tell me why you're acting like it's a bad thing?"

"Because it is, Tibs."

"Why? You know I'm going to keep asking questions, so you should just answer with everything. It's going to be faster."

She cracked a reluctant smile. "Caravan's function on precision. City's will set their calenders by them. Back in Dorcuvan, they say that the seasons don't dare move at a rate different from the caravans. That's how precise they usually are."

"But stuff happens on the road. They can't know it. There's monsters and stuff, right?"

"Not as many of those as you think. Bandits are the biggest problems for a caravan, and yes, they can't know if a road will have a new batch of those on it. But because of that, a caravan will make sure they have the time to deal with it. If the trip is quiet, it will park about a day's ride away from the town and wait until it's time for them to arrive before continuing."

"Doesn't that mean that if someone wants something early, they can just go to them?"

"Yes, but no self-respecting merchant will sell to those. The bazaar works because everyone knows that's where you need to be early."

"Okay, but stuff happens. Even if they plan for everything, something will go wrong."

"You're right, which is why they have riders whose sole job is to come to tell a town if something like that happened. And yes, something can happen to them too, but you're looking at a level of bad luck even bards won't be comfortable putting in their stories."

"Luck's not a thing," Tibs replied reflexively. Which meant the more likely situation was that someone was interfering. "Can caravans try to cause each other problems?"

"No, they have an organization that manages it." She paused. "There are places, smaller kingdoms, where that's not set up, but anywhere there's a dungeon, the guild will make sure everything works well if no one else does."

"We can't have something like a late caravan disrupt the run," Tibs replied bitterly.

She chuckled. "Considering how they seemed willing to let the town be taken over, that does seem like a strange attitude, doesn't it? One of the things you'll learn about the world, Tibs, is that the people in it don't always make sense."

"I already know that one." He looked into the distance. "Is this worth trying to get Harry to send someone to look for them? None of my Runners are allowed outside the town."

She shook her head. "There's no point. If they're fine and just late, they're going to arrive. If something really bad's happened, there's nothing anyone will be able to do by the time they get there."

"Someone's approaching!" Tandy yelled, running toward them. He stopped and put her hands on her knees, panting hard. "I was on a roof, trying to see if I could find the caravan. See what was wrong. They should have been here before the sun rose. There's someone on horseback approaching."

"That rider you talked about."

"I think they're injured," Tandy said.

"How did you see that far?" Cross asked, hand over her eyes and peering.

"It's a void thing. I can bend the space between two sent of essence and it causes the distance to look closer. I had to get higher because everything vanishes at some point. It's got to do with how the world works. My teacher tried to explain it to me, but when she said there was a curve involved and that it wasn't that of a hill, I stopped understanding."

"Tandy, once you've caught your breath, gather a handful of Runners. If they're injured, there might be someone chasing them. Let's prepare for that." He nodded and ran off.

"I don't know that it's going to help," Cross said.

"Preparations always help. Even then they aren't needed."

Cross opened her mouth, closed it, then nodded. "Right, essence. One of you can probably take on an entire band of bandits."

"The right one, yes. But I think you could take them too."

She shrugged. "But I wouldn't be looking forward to it."

"Right, you're no better of a liar than Jackal is."

She grinned, and they waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time the rider's dust cloud was visible, Tibs had seven Runners with him. Two Earth, two metal, all fighters, Tandy, a crystal sorcerer, and Don. The only one not part of Tibs's Runners.

"Do you want to deal with him?" Tibs asked.

The sorcerer eyed Tibs, and he watched as the snark was swallowed. "I think it's best. That way, the guild won't immediately think you're trying to do their work for them."

Tibs was, but if Don could keep Harry placated, Tibs was fine with it. "I need to know what happened. I can have a cleric see to him, but unless he looks like he's about to die, I need to know it first so I can start planning."

"I know what needs to be done," Don snapped.

Tibs bit back his own snark. “I’m just making sure we deal with the urgency before the politics. If they’re hurt, like Tandy said, someone or something hurt them and that’s probably not far behind. Do you really want to depend on Harry to deal with that?”

“If it’s a monster after them, the guild will be better trained for it.”

People snorted at the sorcerer’s comment.

“But will they?” Tibs asked.

“Let’s see what is going on, then we can start arguing who needs to claim the glory.”

“You’re welcome to that,” Tibs replied.

Don snorted, but the rider was now close enough he couldn’t comment. He stepped forward and had to move away, as the horse didn’t slow. Cross caught the reins and brought stopped it, then Don barely caught the rider as he slide off.

“I have you,” he told the man. His side was covered with blood from the long gash in his clothing. Tibs sensed and the man’s essence, while faint was steady. It was the best way he had to tell someone’s general health. His face was pale, exhaustion and probably blood loss, but he wasn’t dying. “He needs a cleric,” Don ordered.

Tibs nodded for Tandy to go, then instructed another to find him a clean tankard before stepping next to the sorcerer.

“What happened to you?” Don asked the man, stretching him on the ground.

“They took over the caravan,” The man rasped.

“Who did?” Don asked.

“Green and black. People in green and black.”

## Stepping up-77

The room was crowded. Don had convinced Harry to attend, but the sorcerer hadn’t deigned to be here. The guard leader was not happy; not about having to be here, but about here being one of the rooms at the inn instead of in the guild building. Jackal had vanished the moment he’d found out Harry was on his way. This had wanted his whole team there, but Mez had said he didn’t belong among leaders, and Khumdar was away in the town, rooting around for secrets.

So it was Tibs, Carina, Cross, Harry, Casper—the caravan rider, and the cleric who was looking after him, in the small room.

“Tell us what happened,” Harry said.

Casper was still pale. On top of the injuries he’d suffered when Sebastian’s people had attacked the caravan, he was malnourished and dehydrated. Neither of which the cleric could fix with her level of skill. He’d eaten some broth, along with bread. Tibs had provided the water, and now he was rested enough to talk.

“We were about halfway when they attacked. We had guards, of course, but they overwhelmed them. There were so many, enough to capture a city it felt like. They tied those who were still alive when it was over. They killed some to get the caravan master to work with them and within a day, we were moving again.”

“Who gives the orders?” Harry asked.

Casper shrugged. “I was among the prisoners. I didn’t get to see anyone other than who came to take someone away and who was gleeful about the prospect of getting to hurt them.”

Tibs knew who gave the orders, even if Sebastian wasn’t among the attackers. Harry knew too, so he didn’t know why he’d asked.

“We’d been moving for less than a day when I had my chance to run. They had us walk along with the caravan, tied to it, but there were so many of us they didn’t pay much attention and I was able to loosen my bonds. I rushed the guard when it was distracted, then took one of the horses. I got cut before I could calm her and get running, but they didn’t chase me. I think they figured my wound would finish me for them. I pushed her as hard as I could and barely slept. I was able to find some berries and a stream, but I had nothing to hold supplies with, not even a saddle. Her back had to be raw.”

“Your horse is being looked after,” Cross said.

“You’re sure about them being in green and black?” Harry asked.

Casper nodded.

“How far behind you are they?” Tibs asked.

“I don’t know. We were a little more than a week out when they attacked, but with the prisoners, and some of the handlers dying in the attack, it’s going to slow them down. We might also have lost some of the heavy horses to pull the carts.”

“Why would they bother with the caravan?” Carina asked.

“My brother is planning on using it to get close before we have the time to prepare a defense. That you were able to escape means he has too many people with him to have a strong chain of command. That plays in our favor, as is the fact we now know he’s coming. We’ll have the time to mount a proper defense.”

“So you’re going to protect the town?” Tibs asked, unable to keep the dismay from his voice.

“Of course I will defend the town,” Harry snapped back.

Tibs rolled his eyes. “What can you tell us of the people who attacked? Did anyone use essence?”

“I didn’t see anyone with the eyes. But the only people I saw were our guards. Anyone like you would be kept for more important duties, right?”

“Adventurers aren’t cheap,” Cross said. “It’s why the caravans don’t use them.”

“Sebastian has a lot of coins,” Tibs said.

“But he isn’t going to spend it needlessly,” Harry countered. “Not when he can have an army’s worth of people with him.”

“He can’t think that’s enough to win a fight against the guild,” she said.

“He knows how the town is protected, or at least that the guards are ordinary people. He lived here, studied us. That is why my brother is aiming to take us by surprise, to keep the guild from calling in anyone who can take away his advantage.”

“There’s the Runners,” Cross said.

“And he doesn’t know we’re organized now. There was a lot of luck in how we forced



him out. He also knows the dungeon will have killed a lot of us while he was gathering his army.”

“And you’re all Omegas, Upsilons, some Rho, and no more than a handful Lambda, all with only early training. There is only so much you can do if you get involved in the fighting.”

“Oh, we’re getting involved. I’m not waiting on the guild to keep my town safe.” Harry might say he’d protect them, but it was the guild who gave the orders. Tibs didn’t see the man going against those, and the last time it had come down to it, the guild had let the town fend for itself.

Harry didn’t protest.

“We need to know how close they are,” Cross.

“Assume they’re going to be here tomorrow,” Carina added.

“No,” Harry countered. “That will exhaust us needlessly. She’s right. I’ll see to it someone is sent to see where they are.”

“A Runner would be faster,” Tibs said.

“I’m not letting one of you out of the town. You’ll just run off.”

“My people aren’t going to run. This is their town, too. You’re just going to hide in your building like last time.”

“This will not be like last time.”

Tibs snorted.

“Tibs,” Carina warned, “antagonizing an ally isn’t a good thing to do.”

The guild wasn’t their ally.

He nodded, and they asked questions of Casper, trying to build the best picture of what they’d have to fight against.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs knew there had a problem before Jackal told him.

The inn was empty of townsfolk.

The Runners seated at the tables looked at him as he stepped into the main room from the hall. There was expectation in their eyes.

“We have a problem,” Jackal said. “The town knows my father’s on his way.”

“How?”

“I’m giving you one guess as to who would go around telling everyone what’s coming and that they don’t have to worry because he is going to keep them safe.”

Tibs sighed. “Where is he?”

“Where our second problem is. As soon as they heard what’s coming, the attendants left. The only way out of the town is on foot, with a mountain on one side, my father on the other, I have no idea what is in the other two directions, and no one in this town is really equipped to be in the wilderness for any amount of time.”

Tibs left the inn with the Runners in tow. He heard the crowd well before he saw the back of it, and it wasn’t a good sound. From his direction, there were enough people he couldn’t see the people on the platform, only the top of the six pillars around it. They were

going to have to push their way through, and that was bound to start a riot.

He felt Carina work essence and only had the time to glance at what she was doing before the thunderclap sounded over their heads.

“Abyss, warn me next time.” Jackal had his hands over his ears. Tibs’s ears rang loud enough the fighter’s words sounded distant, but he focused on the crowd, who was looking in their direction and parting.

A warning would have been nice, but effectiveness made up for it.

Tibs marched to the front, and Don stood on the platform with his team. He’d put on something more regal looking since he’d caught Casper falling off his horse. The sorcerer had used his fame at being the Hero of Kragle Rock and influence with the guild to get himself clothing more appropriate to his newfound station.

Tibs grabbed Don’s arm as soon as he was next to him and pulled him to the center of the platform. The sorcerer’s team stepped to follow, but Jackal stopped them.

“Why don’t we let them talk, and make sure the crowd doesn’t see how heated it’s getting between them? They don’t need to see dissension among us, do they?”

“Let go of me, Tibs,” Don said, tone hard, but all smiles, until he realized they were blocked from the crowd. He pulled his arm out of the grip.

“What do you think you’re doing, telling them there’s an attack coming?”

“What did you want? For them to be unprepared when it came?”

“No, I wanted to arrange for them to leave. Only now, because you couldn’t stop yourself from grabbing more fame, we don’t have a way to send anyone away.”

“That isn’t why I told anyone. They saw me leading Harry to the inn and started asking questions. I told them we were going to be discussing the strategy for the coming battle.”

“Which you didn’t bother coming.”

“Did you want them to just start spouting rumors on the little I said? I did what I could to stop them, but the story spread too fast. So I decided that gathering everyone and explaining things properly was the best way to handle this.”

Tibs decided not to point out the man had taken the time to change into something useless instead of continuing to try to control the spread of the information. “And you decided to have that here? Scaring the attendants in the process?”

“No, the platform was already getting rushed. A few of the people managed to leave, but then there weren’t any attendants left. When I got here, there was about to be a riot, so I took them in hand, and made sure they knew they didn’t have anything to worry about because the guild and I are going to make sure everyone is safe.”

Tibs stared. “You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

“I can keep them safe,” Don stated, his tone hardening. “I’m the Hero of Kragle Rock.”

“Can you do that without the guild? Because you know they’re going to hide in their building just like last time.”

“Last time, they were taken by surprise. This time, they know the attack is coming. They’ll probably recall the attendants to assure them they’re going to be safe, then we can evacuate the town so no one will get hurt.”

“A lot of people will get hurt even if they do that. Unless you think you can convince them to send us away too.”

Don snorted. “I didn’t think you were too scared to face them. I thought this was your town.”

“I’m thinking on the Omegas and the Upsilon and those who can barely handle the dungeon.”

“Even they’re going to be more of a match for that tyrant.”

Tibs bit back the reply. Arguing wouldn’t help. “Okay. Let’s focus on the current problem. Can you get them to go back to their homes?”

“What did you learn from the rider?”

“Sebastian was hoping to use the caravan to catch us unawares. He has enough people to take over the town. Casper didn’t see anyone with essence. They might be as close to a day away or a few of them. Harry is going to send spotters so we’ll get some warning.”

Don nodded. “Okay. You stand by me and you keep your mouth shut. Look competent and control your team.” He stepped forward, through the wall of Runners, and raised a hand.

Tibs followed him. “Don’t react to anything he says,” he told Jackal and Carina.

Jackal motioned for the other Runners to stay behind.

The crowd grew quiet, and Tibs was impressed.

“Citizens of Kragle Rock. Today we have learned that the bandit who tried to take over our town once and who we forced out is returning.” Fearful murmurs spread and Don waited a handful of seconds before raising his hand again. “We beat him once. We can beat him again. Not only that, but this time we will have the guild to help us. And we know of his attack. We will be ready for it this time. I know it is scary news. I know that most of you would rather be away from here and I’m sure that once the guild has contacted the attendants, they will return and we will start an orderly evacuation of the city. But even if that does not happen. We will keep you safe. I will make sure that not one of you suffers this time. This will not be a repeat of the previous attack. Like then, Tibs will work with me, and so will the other Runners and we will keep you all safe.”

The cheer was slow in starting, but once it did, it grew, and Don soaked it in. Tibs watched the man close his eyes and straighten.

“Am I the only one,” Jackal whispered in his ear, “who’s wondering what Don did to end up here? Because he’s way too good at this to have been just some would-be sorcerer caught for stealing a book.”

Tibs nodded. The man could almost be a noble, or a confidence artist, with the way he’d used the words to calm and control the crowd. He’d made promises Tibs didn’t think he could hold, but that was for later. And Tibs hoped he could have something arranged by the time the guild let them all down again.

## Stepping up-78

Tibs looked over the map of the town, along with Jackal. He hadn’t known there was a

map for the town until Darran had brought it to him. Tibs had mentioned to the merchant the difficulty in figuring out what areas to use in the coming battle because he couldn't easily tell people, since few of the Runners knew the town as well as he did. A few hours later Darran was at the inn with a rolled paper, which Tibs thought would be for him to draw what he knew on; instead, the merchant unrolled a map of the town. There was a group of people, Planners, who had done it, and kept it updated, as well as worked to help set up new areas.

It had been more complete than Tibs's knowledge and had shown avenues of defenses and attacks within the alleyways and the streets.

Quigly entered and Tibs sighed. Another useless interruption. He'd lost count of how many it had been, but they amounted to: I can't be fighting, to I need to be fighting, to I have to leave before the attack started. All of which were out of his hands.

"I can't get the guild to bring the attendants back," he said preemptively. "Not that they'd let one of us leave even if I could."

"That's not surprising," the fighter replied. "There is a war coming, and my understanding is that they plan on using us as fodder."

"I don't know that word, but I expect it doesn't mean anything good."

Quigly nodded and looked at the map. Noting the places where he and Jackal had marked ambushes and blockades.

"You're going to lose."

"I'm not giving Sebastian the town!"

"You are." The fighter indicated the map. "You're waiting for his army to be in the town before fighting it. That's as much as handing it to him."

"We did it before," Jackal replied.

"Yes, because we didn't have a choice. How costly was that? How many people did our enemy have at his disposal? How many does he have now?"

"Enough to take over a town," Tibs said.

"Which you had handed to him."

"Did you come here to tell us to give up?" Jackal snapped. "Or is there something useful in there?"

"In a few days, you're going to be fighting a war." Quigly looked at them. "So why haven't you asked for the one person in this town who had fought one already for his help?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"He said he'd help!" Don nearly threw the tankard he held.

"The guild doesn't care about the town," Tibs replied.

"You knew," the sorcerer snarled. "You knew, and you let me waste my time. You counted on it. You wanted me out of your way so you could set yourself up as the town's hero again. You've been jealous of me since the start."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "I let you do it because you wouldn't listen to me. I used that time to prepare the town because I knew the guild wasn't going to help. You're welcome to go out there and claim all the plans are your ideas. You want to be the Hero of Kragle Rock when this is over? You're welcome to it. You've seen how little help that is, no matter how well the guild treats you for it."

He waited for Don to calm down. Tibs wasn't worried. The sorcerer wouldn't do anything while in the inn and, for as much screaming as he did, once he calmed, he'd focus on the important stuff. The coming battle.

It was when Don had nothing to focus on that he became a problem.

"I thought I'd do good with that title."

"You did. You kept the town from panicking. I can deal with the merchants, but I'm Street. The common folk aren't people I'm used to dealing with."

"I made promises. I told them the guild would help. You think they're going to listen to me once they find out I can't keep them safe?"

"What if you still can? Or at least some of them?" Tibs added. He needed to remember he wasn't supposed to have been able to make plans with Sto for the dungeon to assist as well as he could.

"What are you talking about?" Don eyed him suspiciously.

"The dungeon can protect some of them."

"No. The traps and creatures will kill anyone who sets foot in one of the rooms."

"But the entry all is long enough we can pack people there. Not everyone, but at least some. You're going to have to convince the townsfolk that's enough." And it would be. Unlike the guild, Sto liked the town, even if all he knew about it was what he overheard from the Runners. And even Ganny had agreed to bend the rules as far as they could.

"They aren't going to be happy with only some of them being saved," Don said, then turned pensive. "But if it's worded properly, it can become about saving their loved ones, not them hiding away while they are in danger. And if I tell them the guild supports the idea, it's going to go a long way toward making them accept that."

"Jackal should be able to get Harry to let them in." The guild had already increased the guards at the dungeon's entrance, although they allowed the scheduled teams in. Tibs was curious to see their reaction tomorrow when the door didn't open. Once Sebastian's army was in sight, Tibs expected the guards to be there in force, especially once Harry got wind of the plan to include the dungeon in the town's defense.

"Oh, I have to be there for that." Don smiled. "It's going to be worth disappointing everyone to get to see that fighter of yours be fully put in his place."

Well, at least one person would be disappointed now, that was for sure.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The caravan is half a day away," the runner said, panting.

"Were you able to get details from the spotter Knuckles sent?" Jackal asked.

The runner took the offered tankard. "Just how far they are. The guards sent a dozen sentry, we should be able to get one of them to tell us more when they get here."

"Should we get everyone in position now?" Tibs asked Quigly.

"Get them to their assigned areas," the fighter answered, "but make sure they stick to the plan. As far as anyone spying on us, they have to look like they're just waiting for the caravan. We're not supposed to know this is a coming attack."

"Don, that means it's time for you to get the townsfolk to the dungeon," Jackal said. "I'll be there before Knuckles can get all worked up about it."

“You better,” the sorcerer said, “because I’m not taking the blame if this plan fails.”  
\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs walked through the crowd as it parted to let him and Jackal through. The feeling was tense. At least half of the town was there already. The news of the impending attack hadn’t remained secret. At the front of the crowd, Don waited, and at the top of the stairs, Harry and guards blocked the door, as well as spread along the cliff face.

“You’re up,” Don said, falling into step with them. “This should be amusing.”

Harry glowered at them as they approached. “I knew you were involved in this.”

“Hey, it’s not like anyone here expected you to protect the good people of this town,” Jackal said, smiling. “Yet again. So why are you surprised we took it on ourselves to do it?”

“You lied to me,” Don said, loud enough his voice carried to the crowd. “You promised you’d look after them. That your guild would keep everyone safe.”

“You ready?” Tibs whispered.

“I tried to convince Tirania,” Harry growled.

“All set,” Sto replied. “But remember, I can’t turn the traps off. I’ve removed some of the triggers and anymore and I’m breaking rules and no longer bending them. If they step in there, I can’t do anything.”

“Then do the right thing and help these people anyway,” Don demanded.

“I can’t,” Harry replied through clenched teeth.

Jackal snorted. “So, you are a Wells after all. Nothing more than a thug taking someone else’s orders.”

“I am nothing like you.”

Jackal smiled. “Oh, Knuckles, there’s never been any doubt about that. I make my own decisions. They haven’t all been the right ones, but they’ve all been mine. When’s the last time you made one? The day you betrayed your family for a new master? How’s that working out? Feeling better about all the neck you’ve broken because it wasn’t criminals who got you to do it?”

“You think I want to stand here, protecting this thing?” Harry stepped toward Jackal. “You think I don’t want to be out there, getting ready to stop my brother? To wipe the stain that is the Wells from this world?”

“Why don’t you?” Jackal asked calmly. “Leave your guards here, walk down those steps and through the town. You know your presence can save lives, Runners, and others. You know a lot of my father’s people are only fighting for him because he convinced them there’s nothing here that can stand up to them. Almost as if he knows the guild isn’t going to lift a finger. They see you, Harry Hard Knuckles, on the front line, and they are going to fold. Anyone who’s worked for my father has heard of you. How no one stands in your way. How you never lose a fight. This town can use a protector like you.”

“I can’t.” Harry looked like he wanted to hit Jackal. “I have my orders.”

Jackal nodded. “And a Wells never disobeys his master’s orders, does he?” Harry’s anger cracked a little, and Jackal nodded. “Then do something for these people, Uncle. Let them into the dungeon. Protect them while you protect it from my father.”

Harry looked miserable. "I can't. The door's closed, we can't—"

The rumble of stone on stone had the guard's head snap up.

"What do you know," Jackal said smugly, "the dungeon's not closed anymore."

Harry looked from the door to Jackal and seemed unable to formulate his question.

"How the fuck did you arrange that?" Don demanded.

Jackal smiled. "I have my ways."

"Having me listen in and wait for the perfect moment to open my door goes a long way toward making him look awesome, doesn't it?"

"Are you planning on gawking at me all day?" Jackal asked. "I don't mind, I've been waiting a while for it, from both of you, actually, but you, Don, I thought wanted to grab all the glory of protecting the townsfolk, the longer you look at me like I'm the best thing in the world, the tougher it's going to be for you to sell it." He looked at Harry. "And you Knuckles, are you going to let in defenseless people in, or do you actually have ordered against that?"

"I... I'll let them in."

"Your turn, Don." Jackal stepped aside and turned to face the crowd.

Don shook himself and took position, looking to make sure he was in the center of the step, and looked over the assembled people. "People of Kragle Rock, today will be a hard day. An enemy approaches, and those we looked to for protection have denied us, but fear not. I, Jackal, and Tibs have secured safety for some of you."

Jackal looked at Tibs. He, too, was surprised at being included.

"The dungeon has opened its door to you, but the space is limited. I've convinced the guards to go against their orders and let in as many as will fit. It will be uncomfortable, but it will be safe." Instead of the protest Tibs expected, the crowd waited quietly. "Children and their caretakers will go in first, then the elderly and the sick. If there is still space, then the able-bodied. If you want to fight with us, if you want to play your part in keeping your town safe, in protecting your loved ones, we will welcome you, but so long as there is space no one will fault you for seeking whatever safety is to be found within the dungeon."

The crowd shifted, families with children moving to the front. The town didn't have many elderly, but those who'd made it to the gathering were assisted to the front.

"You will be in the entryway," Don said as people moved. "It is the only safe place in the dungeon. The traps in the first room have killed many. Do not step into it. The dungeon will eat you if you do."

The warning given, Don stepped aside and motioned for people to come up the stairs.

## Stepping up-79

"Are we sure the caravan's been taken over?" Tandy asked. She had her hands in front of her, two hand-spans apart, framing a space where essence did something Tibs couldn't discern. It was void essence, so he couldn't make out the details he'd need to understand it.

Or had the experience to know what those details would mean.

But he could see the effect.

When he looked between her palms, distances changed. He could see the horizon as if it was only a few paces before him. He was watching a procession of caravans approaching. He, Tandy, and Quigly stood on a roof for the better vantage point, and only the fighter looked like he'd rather be elsewhere.

"Wouldn't that be a kicker?" Quigly said. "We do all that and that rider was setting us up to destroy an innocent caravan."

"You care?" Tandy asked.

"Of course I care. I didn't end up here butchering innocent. I killed a tyrant's army. I killed his soldiers. If I'd won, bards would be singing of my heroism. Fuck, if I'd died, they would have done that too. But I couldn't be allowed to be a martyr, so I was made a butcher."

"He didn't lie," Tibs said. "Harry would have known." Jackal was adamant there were ways to lie to Harry, and the events that led to Sebastian trying to take control of the town supported that, but Harry had learned. He'd asked direct questions with only yes or no as their answers, and the rider answered them plainly. The only way Tibs could think of tricking Harry with those would be to use magic, and Tibs would know if essence was being used. The rider had been ordinary and had nothing on him with essence.

"I'd still like to see confirmation," Quigly said. "There's nothing easier to do than turn the protectors into monsters with care and planning on your opponent's part."

"I wish Cross was up here with us," Tandy said. "She knows some of those people. She could tell us if someone looks out of place."

"I couldn't offer her enough coins to climb up with us," Tibs replied.

"You didn't offer me any money," Quigly said.

Tibs grinned. "You never asked."

"Well, next time you want me this high, give me stairs and a level surface."

"I'm not seeing any black and green," Tandy said, searching what she could see.

"Can you move it, show us a different angle?"

She glanced at the fighter. "This isn't the far sight you're thinking of. I'm not that strong. I can only show you what's in front of me." She moved her hands to demonstrate, panning over the horizon, and what they saw moved. "One of the Attendants would have been able to give us a look anywhere along the caravan, from any directions we needed."

"But not one of them stuck around, did they?" the fighter said in disgust. "We could have used that kind of power."

"We could have used anyone the guild would have been willing to lend us." Tibs echoed the disgust. At least the townsfolk would be safe.

Few had offered to help, once it was clear more than anyone thought possible would fit in the dungeon, and Quigly had positioned those who had at the rear, within the town, acting mostly as support due to their lack of fighting experience. Tibs was curious what Harry thought of the entryway being so much larger, but not enough to ask and risk having to answer the Light Essence guard's questions.

"I see green," Tandy exclaimed. Tibs looked, but didn't see anyone wearing green.



Cursing, she stepped to the side. “There, behind the driver. She’s hunched down.”

Tibs saw her. Surreptitiously looking over the driver’s shoulder. She couldn’t know anyone who saw her, but she was still careful. He wished he knew for certain Sebastian was there. Handing him over to Harry would be satisfying.

“Go take position,” Quigly instructed.

With a nod, Tibs slid down the roof, then dropped the three stories, switching to air to create a cushion under him. Quigly had arranged every Runner who could use their essence at range at the periphery of the bazaar space and once the first wagons were all the way in. They were to attack with everything they had. It wouldn’t be enough to destroy them all, or even those in range, but they had the element of surprise for the moment and they were going to take advantage of it.

After that, the close-range fighters would get involved.

\* \* \* \* \*

The level of excitement as the caravan drove onto the bazaar ground must have made Sebastian’s people think everyone was rejoicing at the soon-to-be-available good for sales. They thought they were about to spring a trap, instead of driving into an ambush.

Carina grinned at Tibs and Mez. Then the call came, and they unleashed.

Mez destroyed half the wagon before them, Tibs and Carina the rest. The survivors screamed as they tried to avoid being targeted as they fled. Instructions were to allow anyone not in black and green to go. Some of them would work for Sebastian, but they could deal with them later.

With the wagons on the bazaar ground reduced to a variety of kindling, they moved on to the ones still outside. Without any of Harry’s guards around, it had been agreed that the town’s limit would be ignored. Breaking the guild’s rules would be dealt with after the town was safe. Until then, anything went.

Tibs ran with the surrounding Runners, hoping this could be ended easily, but by the time they were close enough to attack the next wagon, people in black and green were taking position before it, planting large metal shields before them.

Essence attacks that hit them were deflected around them.

“I really wish they hadn’t thought about those kinds of defenses,” Carina muttered and used air to pick up burning debris and fling them at the shield bearers. One fell from the assault, but the shield was quickly up.

Tibs sent an ‘x’ attack at them, but it was also deflected.

“It won’t work,” She yelled. “Those shields are enchanted to repel essence. None of us are strong enough to overwhelm them.

A Runner screamed as an arrow hit them.

“And they’re going on the offensive,” Mez stated, shooting down arrows. Other archers joined it and arrows made of all kinds of essence flew at the incoming barrage. Tibs was amazed. The dungeon didn’t lend itself to that show of skill.

“Tibs!” someone yelled, and he saw the archer lose the arrow in his direction. He suffused himself with his essence and tried to step out of the way. He felt the arrow hit his shoulder, but by the time he looked, it was passed. His armor shimmered slightly as his

essence returned into his reserve.

Carina stared at him before returning to using air to deflect arrows.

He added a layer of ice to his armor, then did his best to join in deflecting the arrows, but his aim was horrible.

A rumble announced a change in their attacker's tactics.

"Scatter!" came the order as fighters ran around the shield bearers and archers. A lot of fighters.

As much as he hated to do it, it was time to take the battle to the town's streets and alley.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs ran because he had people after him. A lot more than he had expected. He kicked off a wall to make the turn, throwing water and icing it where he landed, using the slide to get to his feet and run again. He left the ice there and smiled at the yelps of surprise and pain.

He switched to corruption and threw some at a column holding a balcony as he ran by it. That column weakened silently, but the other one screamed in protest as it was pulled down by the falling balcony. He'd clean up that mess once this was over.

When the screams came, he looked over his shoulder. Those who hadn't been caught under the falling balcony were busy dealing with the splashed corruption. That was a definite oops.

He went back to running. He knew whoever he came across next would also chase him. It seemed that Sebastian had given instructions Tibs was the main target. So he ran.

He changed direction as he noticed the smoke. Another thing Sebastian's people did was set fire to a lot of buildings. As Jackal said, this was no longer about taking over the town anymore for his father. It was about hurting Tibs. He switched to fire and absorbed the flames, refilling some of his reserves.

He came on the group attacking Runners and joined in, his vicious-looking ice sword in one hand, ice shield on his arm, and ice armor over his leathers. He was quick, precise, and deadly, using his ability to extend his blade to surprise one of his attackers.

Three Runners were dead, and he buried that pain. He didn't have the time for it. Four were injured, as were the two women they had been protecting. They carried quivers.

They had one cleric, back at the inn. That's was all. This time, the rest of them had been quick to barricade themselves in the guild building. Not all of them had wanted to, she'd told him, but they hadn't been willing to disobey orders.

"Can you move? We need to go to the inn."

The trek was slow, and Tibs had to deal with the attacks. But while he had to limit himself to water, he still had his element, and this day was giving him ample chances to practice with it. He didn't mind if he drained so much of someone set on hurting his people, his town, that it left them dead.

All he needed now was to get within striking distance, and he had enough control to stagger his opponent with weakness. The one issue he had was that he couldn't put that essence into his reserve while he channeled another one, and while people who didn't even

rack as Omegas had little in the way of essence, it was starting to accumulate in his body uncomfortably.

When that battle finally ended, he used the excuse of catching his breath to let go of water so he could stop suffusing his body with his essence. The only time he'd done it was when he'd drained Bardik, and he didn't know what it had done to him, since he'd been busy suffering from corruption poisoning right after that. In the middle of a battle for his town was not the time to experiment with that.

On the way to the inn, Tibs was given another reason to be angry at the guild. As they were fighting off another attack, a group of adventurers escorting noble-dressed people didn't even slow. Tibs used his anger on his attackers, but still lost another Runner.

The inn was busy. The tables were used as beds for the injured who couldn't stand or sit. Kroseph and his brothers were running around passing boiled clothes to those who cleaned the wounds. The cleric looked up from where she sat, looking exhausted, and stood.

She looked at the injured he brought over, healed the worst one enough she wasn't worried he'd die, then returned to her chair.

This was the price of his secret. He couldn't heal anyone without revealing it. Purity didn't heal discretely. You knew it when it was used on you. Any Runner with one run could identify the sensation. And the townsfolk would still realize something was happening, and he'd be the only explanation. He wanted to believe they'd keep his secret, but it only took one to let it slip for the guild to find out.

A bowl of stew was pushed in his hand. "Eat," Kroseph said.

"I'm fine, keep it for one of them."

"You have to eat Tibs. You're out there fighting. If you die because you were faint from hunger, Jackal is not going to forgive me."

"I don't need to."

The server opened his mouth and Tibs raised an eyebrow. He closed it and leaned in. "You don't have to eat?"

"Not right now, and not for a while." When he suffused his body with Purity, it did more than heal his injuries. It healed his other conditions as well. Doing it when he was tired left him fully away. Hungry, fully sated.

There were limits. He'd tested it with sleep. After the fifth day, no matter how long he suffused himself. Only a long night of sleep helped. He figured it was the same with food, so others could get his portion for now. If this battle lasted more than five days, they had bigger problems than him going hungry.

He mentally cursed himself. Why had he gone and thought that?

## Stepping up-80

"Over there!" someone yelled, and Tibs looked up from the woman he dispatched in time to see green and black vanish round the corner.

He cursed. Of course, this had been a distraction. He should have realized it, with

how easy it had been to spot this group of attackers. Sebastian hadn't been content to only attack from the bazaar field, his people had quickly spread and sought to enter the town by any of the alleys.

Fortunately for them, Quigly had expected it and positioned teams both at the entrances close to the bazaar and junctions where those alleys met. Unfortunately, it had spread their forces thin and after only half a day of fighting, keeping Sebastian's forces out of the town was impossible.

Their lone cleric couldn't keep up with the injured and Tibs was starting to wonder if his secret was worth the cost.

"After them!" Tibs yelled and ran. If they'd used a distraction, then this was important, and they had to be stopped.

"But my guy's not dead," the fighter he was with yelled.

"Who cares!" the other fighter replied, falling into step with Tibs.

As much as Tibs wanted to be with his team, Quigly had been quick to point out that as some of the original Runners, and with the notoriety he and Jackal had, they were better used leading different teams and raising morale that way. The two fighters he had were Upsilon, both metal for their elements, not that they could do much with it at this point.

Tibs worked hard to remind himself he'd been there too, and unlike them, he'd done his training in the dungeon, not trying to save the town.

They crossed empty streets, barely keeping the invaders in sight, and the quality of the buildings increased. They were deep in the town this time. How many Runners had they lost for them to make it this far? What were they after?

Jackal had made it clear that after the defeat Sebastian had suffered, this was about hurting him personally, but he couldn't see what was in this part of town that would do that. The group ahead turned into an alley that led to the noble's area and were sent flying back.

Tibs and his two fighters slowed. Essence was the only way to cause that to happen, and with the Runners closer to the edge of the city, it meant the nobles were actively protecting their territory.

The invaders were on their feet, sword drawn, by the time Tibs reached the intersection and saw that instead of a noble, it was an adventurer with golden eyes in enchanted chain mail armor.

"Good," she said. "Since you're here, you deal with that. This area is off limit."

"Aren't you going to help?" the fighter who'd been quick to follow Tibs asked.

Tibs readied himself to take on the five invaders by forming his sword and a shield. An adventurer meant guild.

"You can't afford me, kid," she replied.

"Ignored her," the other fighter said, "we don't need them."

The other group was three women and two men, each in light leathers for mobility and armed with swords. By the smirk on their face, they thought little Tibs's group. That was fine. Tibs liked being underestimated.

He ran at them. No essence gave him the advantage, but they were better trained. He used ice to slide through them, slashing at whatever was within reach, then was on attacking

their backs. He got in a few hits before they were over the surprise. Then he had two to deal with, while the others focused on the two fighters.

In her alley, the adventurer leaned against a wall and watched.

Tibs quickly had to back and focus on defending himself. He iced patches of the ground, but they stepped and jumped around them.

He got one when she backed after he blocked her attack and he elongated his sword, piercing through her midsection. That cost him his ability to properly defend himself, and his other opponent took advantage of it, slicing into Tibs's sword arm.

He lost hold of his sword, which started melting immediately, and Tibs filled the bleeding gap with ice to stop the blood. He dodged repeatedly, backing away. The man pushing him grinned until Tibs had a knife in his uninjured hand and threw it at him.

He didn't expect to hit, but all he wanted was the surprise. Then he blasted the fighter with water and iced that. The man looked at him in horror as Tibs formed a sword and stabbed him with it.

The other two fighters with him had dealt with their opponents, although one now had to support the other, and were staring at him while he made another sword and dispatched his other opponent.

The adventurer was no longer leaning against the wall. She was staring, too.

The entire fight had cost him a quarter of his reserve. If, like he expected, each of his elements had increased his central reserve, it meant he'd used twice as much as he should have been able to. Her expression told him that even if she didn't know who he was, she considered what he'd done unusual.

He'd deal with that if it came back.

"You could have helped!" the fighter supporting the other yelled at the adventurer.

"Don't bother," Tibs told him. "She's guild." He looked at the injured man. His leg was cut deeply, and he covered it with ice before adding a wrap of his essence to keep it from getting worse. At least that he could use without anyone realizing it, so long as he provided an alternate reason they could support their weight or stopped bleeding.

"You're guild too," she said.

"I'm not," he replied.

"Don't lie to yourself."

He glared at her. "I'm a Runner. I care about the people in this town. I look after them and the other Runners. I thought the guild would too."

"We all start like that, but don't worry, it's going to get beaten out of you."

"I will never let the guild turn me into someone like you."

She snorted. "A lot of us think that, at first. Don't worry, they'll take care of that too."

Tibs kept himself from replying. He had more pressing things to do, like get his fighter back to the inn so the cleric could look after him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carina dropped into the chair next to him and rested her head on her arms. "I hate Jackal's father."

“You aren’t alone,” he said between bites. Kroseph hadn’t taken no for an answer this time and Tibs had needed something to take his mind off that adventurer who’d been willing to watch them be massacred.

“Did you lose anyone in the group you were with?” She accepted the tankard Kroseph brought her.

Tibs shook his head. “But we’ve lost too many overall.”

She sighed. “I guess the guild’s going to have to do another emptying of the cell to have enough Runners to go through the dungeon.”

“That’s what I don’t get,” Mez said, joining them. “I can understand them not defending the town. I don’t like it,” he hurried to say, “but I can understand it. But they’re leaving us to die with it. I thought they wanted us to survive at this point.”

“They wish for us to become stronger,” Khumdar said, taking his seat. “This battle is no different on that front than us going through the dungeon.”

“It might even be better for some of us,” Mez mumbled in his tankard. “Since they’re actually in danger here.”

Tibs shrugged. He’d take any advantage he could anywhere when it came to surviving. Even if that was Sto being sweet on him. “Anyone seen Jackal?”

“He’s probably fighting somewhere,” Mez said.

“I know that, but has anyone seen him?”

“Kroseph would be the one who would know.”

Tibs nodded. He wasn’t worried yet, but he’d like to know that his friend was okay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs stood on the roof, watching the caravans that had been turned into walls around Sebastian’s camp while he was keeping the Runners busy during the day. Maybe that had been the point of the incursions, as Quigly called them, to keep them occupied while they fortified their position.

Tibs expected there was more than one reason for everything Sebastian did. He was smart.

The incursions had stopped with the setting of the sun, which had surprised Quigly. The surviving Runners were either hurt or tired. The tactical thing to do was press the advantage, as far as he was concerned. Which made him wonder what else could motivate their opponent.

Tibs hadn’t told him what Jackal had. It wasn’t like knowing this was about hurting Tibs would help defend the town. And even thinking about it made Tibs feel like he was making himself too important. How could someone like Sebastian want to hurt him? He wasn’t like he knew Tibs had destroyed his house. As far as anyone knew, Don was the only one with Corruption as his essence, and the sorcerer had been happy to take the credit.

Sure, Tibs had been the one to hold the merchant together, persuade them not to give into Sebastian’s bullying tactics, but it wasn’t like that had to have hurt the man all that much.

He knew that for whatever reason, Sebastian held him personally responsible for his defeat—every spy Khumdar had uncovered had, among their orders, finding out what they

could about Tibs—but he simply didn't understand why.

He watched the torch glow on the other side of the barricade and considered going there in the night. Maybe he'd be able to find Sebastian and end this quickly. Or, more likely, like Jackal said, his father was counting on that to lure Tibs into a trap. Getting himself killed wasn't part of what Tibs planned on doing.

He idly wondered if he could channel enough fire essence to throw at the camp and destroy it. Then, at the questions that would raise from the guild. It would definitely get Harry to ask him about it.

With a sigh, Tibs settled for making sure Sebastian didn't try anything in the night.

## Stepping up-81

Tibs stood, trying to make out what could cause the increase in illumination at the back of Sebastian's camp. There had been activities all night long, distant sounds of construction, but the wagons had been arranged in such a way that Tibs couldn't find a roof that gave him a view of what they were doing. Now, in the pre-dawn, it looked like Sebastian's people had lit a bonfire.

There was a distant clunk, then Tibs stood there, stunned as a large ball of fire arched over him and fell on a building, splashing over the others, the smell of tar finally catching up to him. He ran and jumped down from the roof, uncaring of who saw him. He needed to put the fire out before it spread.

Runners were already around the buildings when he got there. Fire users pulled the flames away from unaffected buildings. Air users were pulling at the air, trying to suffocate it, but they weren't managing it. With so many people around, Tibs pulled water around him.

"Don't!" someone yelled, as Tibs was about to throw it on the closest burning house.

Cross ran at him. "That stuff's everburn, water's just going to make it burn hotter."

"Magic?" How else could water help fire burn?

"Alchemy. Sort of like magic, I guess, but it doesn't need people to be able to have essence."

He stared at her. "Why hasn't the guild told us that's a thing?"

She snorted. "You're going to have to ask them. I just know about it because one of the caravans I guarded, years ago, had an alchemist traveling with them. She couldn't make everburn, her stuff was oils to keep infections from setting in, to soothe stomachs, and help skin glow. But she knows about a lot more than that. Like you, I like to ask questions."

"How do we stop this, then?"

She shook her head. "Any houses with everburn on it are done for. The only thing we can do is keep the flames from spreading."

Tibs cursed and looked at the burning house. "Sebastian sent this flying from his camp. Can an alchemist make that happen?"

"I have no idea."

"A Catapult can," Quigly said, joining them. "It's usually used to send boulders at

castle walls, but anything that can be put in its bowl will be launched.”

“It’s going to burn his own things down,” She said. “Everburn doesn’t care whose stuff it burns.”

“He’s going to have kept that in mind,” the fighter said. “I talked with some of the more advanced wood users. Essence can be used with wood to make it more resistant to fire.”

“That means he has adventurers,” Tibs said miserably.

“Or he had the wood treated before coming here.”

“There could be woods naturally resistant,” Cross mused.

“Then we need to go destroy that thing.” Tibs headed toward the bazaar ground.

“Tibs, stop! You can’t just march in there.”

“I can’t let Sebastian burn down my town!”

“At least wait until you can have a team. You’re not going to survive going by yourself. They’ll be looking for exactly that.”

“They aren’t going to see me!” He couldn’t pull Bardik’s trick of vanishing from sight, but suffusing himself with darkness made him harder to see. All he’d have to do was move slowly and keep to shadows.

Quigly stooped him by grabbing his shoulder. “I’m not letting you commit suicide.”

“I’m not letting him burn my town!”

“Look, the fact he hasn’t sent a second one of those tells me he only has one catapult. Cross, how would Sebastian go about putting this everburn out?”

“Smothering the flame is the only way the alchemist said worked. But we can’t do it and we have air users. I don’t see how he’d do it.”

Quigly closed his eyes. “Those we have aren’t strong. And they’re working on large areas with air all around the fire. Don’s managed to put out one house with the help of an air sorcerer, but that left him exhausted. The catapult’s bowl is a contained area. If he fills it with sand, it would smother it, then he just flings the sand at us and he can safely refill it with this stuff.

Tibs and Cross stared at him, and he rolled his eyes when he noticed. “I tried to depose a tyrant king. I had to learn about the weapons he could use against me. I’m glad everburn isn’t something he had access to, now that I know about it.”

“Fine, I’m still going there to destroy that catapult.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I—”

“You put me in charge!” Quigly helped. “I just offered to give you advice. You’re the one who insisted I give the orders on top of making the plans. We’ve already lost too many people. I am not losing you needlessly.”

“So you’re going to let Sebastian send more of those at the town?”

“Not if I can help it. We have other, better ways to stop this.”

“How?”

“For one thing,” the fighter said, smirking, “we have essence.”



\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs fumed as the archers assembled on the rooftop with him. He was angry that Quigly had been right, that Tibs had been so focused on avenging the destruction that had happened he hadn't thought beyond acting; doing anything that gave his anger an outlet.

They had three wood archers, one who was Rho. Four fire archers, Amelia was Lambda, Mez Rho while the others were Omega. They would still be able to return the favor to Sebastian.

The distant thunk made him curse. Then he watched the ball of fire fly over them.

"Don't rush," Amelia instructed while Tibs watched it. "There's nothing we can do for this one. Our goal is to make sure they can't send another one."

The direction was different, and the arc looked higher. Tibs guessed where it would hit, and he had mixed feelings. The guild would have to respond to an attack on them, wouldn't they? And winning was all that mattered, right, no matter who helped that happen.

He noticed people on the roof of the guild building. Did they think they could—the ball of fire dropped suddenly; as if someone had smacked it out of the air and hit buildings blocks away from the guild. Unlike the first one, Tibs saw the fire spread as the everburn flew in all directions from the impact.

To protect itself, the guild had sacrificed a large part of the town. Tibs ground his teeth, wishing they would all throw themselves in the pool of corruption, and focused on the archers. He was there, supposedly, to protect the archers. He was skilled enough with his water to block any attack sent their way short of another ball of everburn. But he suspected Quigly had placed him here so Tibs could see progress was being made.

"Wood archers," Amelia called. "Charge your arrows."

Tibs felt essence shift. Richard was the Rho Archer, and he's spent the last hour instructing the other two on how to create one specific effect he promised would bring the catapult attacks to a halt.

"Fire archers, ready your attacks."

Fire essence filled arrows or the space where the arrow would go. They hadn't learned any specific attacks. Fire was devastating enough, even in its simplest form.

"When ready, Fire!"

Richard was the first to let his arrow go, and Tibs was distracted enough watching it, that one of Sebastian's archers got an arrow halfway through Tibs's mist before it registered and he stopped it by icing it. Then he focused on the return volley.

The mist's effect was limited because of how difficult it was to set in place. It couldn't just be essence in the air as shifting that took too long compared to the speed of an arrow, so he'd had to work on making the water small enough it could easily suspend there on the essence.

He was amused that he now knew how Alistair had made a ball of water float in the air all those months ago, even if he couldn't imagine how much essence it took.

He flicked water jets at the arrows, deflecting them. His archers kept firing, the fire ones faster than the wood. Tibs was getting worried about how nothing was happening. He'd be angry at the empty promises; if he wasn't so busy keeping everyone alive.

The youngest of the wood archers stumbled with a gasp, lost her footing, and with a glance, Tibs had a bank of snow under her before she hit the ground. The action registered only after she hit, and he was too busy with the arrows to question how he'd done it.

Fire was spreading within the walls formed by the stacked wagons, but Tibs still couldn't see anything that would stop the catapult. They had time, but he didn't think they'd get a second chance at this.

He heard it before seeing it.

The cracking of wood. It was much louder than he'd expected, considering the distance. Then he made out screams. After that he saw the trees grow; a lot of them, growing fast.

"I don't expect they'll be able to use that thing through those trees, even if it isn't destroyed," Richard said with pride.

"Don't let pride be your downfall," Amelia said, firing steadily. "You may have taken out their largest weapon, but there are still more of them than us. Go back to firing."

"That used up all the essence I had."

"Then fire regular arrows. This isn't won until the enemy is no more."

Things were desperate indeed when Tibs was starting to like a noble.

## Stepping up-82

Sebastian didn't let the destruction of the catapult stop him, as Tibs had hoped. Even before the elation over the victory passed, Sebastian had his people running into the town from all directions in what had felt at the time as a desperate last play to Tibs.

Now, as he chased another group of Sebastian's people, and watched more burning buildings, he understood. They carried pouches filled with everburn that they flung at buildings. The thing leather burst on impact and all it did was for another to throw a torch at it and it was yet one more building removed from his town. One less home for his people to return to when they won.

According to Kroseph's father, the people in the dungeon had enough food for two more days, which Quigly felt was enough. Without the catapult, Sebastian only had his army, with only a few items, like the shields, that could block essence.

Tibs tackled the slowest of the people in green and black and the others kept running. He ran his sword through her back, then was up and ready to pick up the chase when he saw the fire spread from the black patch of everburn.

He looked around to confirm he was alone. So many of Sebastian's people were in the town that the teams had had to break up to deal with them all. The woman at his feet was dead.

He switched to fire and approached the flames. This was his first time alone with everburn. He wanted a way to end the fire. And that meant sacrificing the chase.

There was essence in the everburn, but only in the way there was essence in everything; Water, earth, air, fire, darkness, and even corruption, along with more he

couldn't identify. He couldn't explain where the fire essence it emitted came from, because that was where it differed from other burning things, like a log or a torch. Where they kept the flames alive by consuming what was burning, and the fire essence was a consequence of the flame, the everburn generated the essence without being consumed and that fed the flame, making it nearly impossible to extinguish, as well as burning far hotter.

He took control of the essence and it fought him; the pressure mounting against his will as more and more accumulated. While he did that, the flames on the everburn died, but the wood of the wall kept burning. Any attempt to reach for its essence to snuff it out was enough for some of that from the everburn to escape his control and reignite the fire.

Then, even controlling that was too much, and it shattered, causing him to stagger back as the fire roared back to life, the burst of concentrated essence causing the wall to burn entirely in seconds.

Hands on knees, he looked at the damage. Not doing this correctly would cause the house to burn down faster, not that they'd kept that from happening. Any building with everburn on it was destroyed. All they were able to do was keep the destruction to that building. Which now, with all these people running around and flinging everburn, would be difficult.

If they needed to save a building, Tibs decided, it would take multiple Runners with fired as their essence working together. With the strongest containing the everburn. The way this was going, Sebastian might destroy the town even if Tibs stopped every one of his people.

He took up the chase. There was nothing he could do for this building. His best hope was to prevent more everburn from being spread.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scream came as Tibs dispatched another one of Sebastian's people. He'd been running all morning and early afternoon. He'd lost track of how many people he'd killed, but there always seemed to be more. The only part of the town free of damage or fighting was the nobles' neighborhood. Every road and alley leading there seemed to have an adventurer keeping anyone out.

The scream came again, and now he heard the mocking laughter too, multiple people laughing.

He went up the closest building and made the rest of the way from there. He peeked over the peak of the roof and into the square. Three archers in green and black were in sight, casually loosing arrows at the screaming man who Tibs couldn't see from this vantage. Each of the two ways out in his sight had a fighter standing in it, enjoying the entertainment. He could hear others also out of sight. There were two more, so they would also be guarded.

The out-of-sight man screamed again in pain. Tibs couldn't wait. He went over and slid down the roof. It was low, only three stories. He wouldn't even need air for his landing.

He suffused his body with earth and rolled with the impact, letting go and switching back to water. He had a wall of ice up before the archers and one fighter. Then he has his ice sword and shield ready.

He saw who the man the archers had been shooting was and sighed inwardly. Don was

going to hate that Tibs was the one saving him. He noted the four dead Runners, then had to focus on the two approaching fighters and keep in mind there were at least two more.

He had one down quickly, then was parrying the other. An archer made it around the wall and Tibs shoulder the fighter aside long enough to make an 'x' attack and the archer didn't get up.

The fighter got in close and tried to bash Tibs with the pommel of his sword, but Tibs had a knife in his shield hand and that in the man's stomach, ripping it out viciously before sending it back into his magical hiding place. A side effect Sto had forgotten to mention was how only the knife went there, none of the blood using it cause. With his sword and shield being ice, the only thing he needed to clean after a battle was his armor and himself.

A third fighter was around the wall with the other two archers.

"Don, can you do something about those archers?"

"Would I be in this situation if I could?" the man snarled back. "You're so bloody abyss good, just deal with them."

Tibs did an 'x', but the archers threw themselves aside. That was the problem with having to move his sword for the attack. Anyone with an inkling of sense knew to get out of the way.

He blocked and used his shield to bash the fighter away, leaving her bloody. He'd stopped trying to make his shield smooth after he realized how effective the jagged edges on the front at hurting people, settling on making the edges more difficult to notice.

She was more careful when she attacked again, darting in and out. He nicked her when he elongated his blade, but trying to keep her between him and the archer caused him to forget about the fourth one until a sword pierced his side. The fact he wasn't standing still probably had saved his life, since he obviously couldn't count on Don to warn him.

He had his essence wrapped around the injury as the sword left it, and had them both in his sight, parrying and blocking. Don was slumped, three arrows in him. The fact he hadn't melted them away kept Tibs from thinking he was playacting. Then he focused on his opponents.

They didn't work well together. Tibs knew enough about team fighting now to tell that. One would attack, leaving the other open; and neither tried to give the archers an opening. The two of them had to make them for themselves and one of the fighters had an arrow in his back because of that. Not that it seemed to slow him.

Tibs blocked with his shield, then stabbed, and the man grunted, stepping back, but he couldn't tell if he'd pierced flesh. He pressed the woman, keeping to jerky movement to keep her on the defensive, and the archers from hitting him.

A patch of ice had her on her back. Then he had his sword in her chest, and air knife in hand and throw at an archer, using the reserve in his bracer to control it and ensure it hit. Then the other fighter was on him again, screaming as brought his sword down over and over, hard enough each blow Tibs blocked chipped some of his shield away.

The man finally slowed and Tibs ran him through with his sword and got an arrow in the back for his work. He ground his teeth as he turned to face the archer, who paused in notching another arrow, his eyes growing wide as Tibs walked in his direction.

If not for Don and the possibility he was conscious, Tibs would burn the man to ashes. Instead, he blocked the next arrow, not slowing. The archer fired another, which Tibs also blocked, then turned and ran. Tibs sent an 'x' blast at him, then headed for Don.

The sorcerer was still slumped but breathing. Tibs could pull the arrows out. Probably should; that would serve Don. Knowing him, he'd probably hidden behind the Runners. He deserved the pain of having them pulled.

Don groaned, opened an eye, and cursed. "I hoped I'd been delusional."

"I'd hoped you would have been smarter than to take on seven of them and gotten people killed."

"There were ten of them," Don snapped, then stifled a groan.

"Then you're even more stupid." Tibs kept the rest to himself. It was too late for the dead, and there could be more of Sebastian's people showing up at any moment. "Can you deal with the arrows? If you can't, I'll be happy to pull them out."

"I can bet you would." With a hand on a shaft, Don caused it to rot away to the usual dark purple goo Corruption always caused. When they were gone, the sorcerer didn't bleed. "It's something I can do," he said.

Tibs rolled his eyes as he pulled the man to his feet and carried most of his weight. He could sense the essence left in the injury, keeping the blood from leaking.

"You have an arrow in your back."

"I'm not trusting you to take it out. Someone at the inn can deal with it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The cleric took one look at the arrow protruding out of Tibs's back and had someone take Don so she could deal with it. The sorcerer protested he was the one in a worse state, and while Tibs agreed with him, a little suffering would do the man good. Once the arrow was out and she healed him enough to stop the bleeding, she moved on to Don.

"You saved him?" Kroseph asked, bringing him a bowl of stew. So many Runners had died that the worry they'd run out of food had proved mistaken.

"We need everyone we have, and he's good with organizing things. We just have to keep him from going out and getting more Runners killed. Or make sure he's with Runners who can stand up to him."

"That means you need to go with him."

"Jackal could too."

Kroseph smirked. "My man would just kill him."

"It's tempting. Have you seen the rest of the team?"

"Mez came by after you stopped this morning's attack, then he off hunting. Carina was out with a team dealing with the fires. Jackal is having too much fun beating up his father's people to bother with eating. Khumdar..." the server shrugged. "He's enjoying his cloak of shadows too much."

Tibs grinned. The cleric hated not using it, even when there was a risk he'd be reported to the guild.

"Eat Tibs. Rest while you can. From what Jackal told me of his father, it's when it looked like he's about to lose that he becomes the most dangerous."

## Stepping up-83

Tibs stalked the group of Sebastian's people through the town. They knew he was there, as demonstrated by how they kept trying to lose him, temporarily splitting up and rejoining, thinking that by forcing him to choose one of them to follow, it would increase the chances they'd all get away from him.

Unfortunately for them, even when he lost sight of someone, their essence made it easy to pick up the trail again. It was unfair, and if not for all the damage they'd done in just that morning and part of the afternoon, Tibs would feel bad about it, but half the town was on fire or burned down, anyone other than him with fire essence was occupied keeping it from spreading.

Those were the only Upsilon still alive. As careful as they'd been, taking on Sebastian's people had been too much for the Omegas and Upsilon.

Now, Tibs planned on making any of those still in his town suffer for it. This wasn't the first group he'd tracked and killed since leaving the inn, and it wouldn't be the last today. Before the sun set, Tibs wanted Sebastian to have no one left to defend him.

Let him try to be any danger to his town then.

The group had a specific goal. Their constantly regrouping made that clear. He didn't know what it was. They were in one of the few parts of the town untouched by the fire, but it had nothing of value. They were mainly houses with courtyards, and if destruction was their goal, they'd be flinging everburn at them.

Whenever they reached what they were after, Tibs would strike.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tibs used the alleys to walk around the courtyard where the seven people in green and black were assembled. They were in the center, waiting.

They had to be waiting for him. Was this Sebastian's attempt at being more dangerous? Have his people led Tibs in an unfair battle? None of them had essence. They looked proficient enough, but could they think there was enough of them to take on someone with essence? Anyone at Rho was deadly with their essence, Sto saw to it.

This felt too much like an attempt at a trap, but none of them carried everburn. Even when he wasn't on fire, the way it released fire essence was distinctive. If they had carried some, Tibs would have ignited it and moved on. They didn't even have anything with essence woven through it. Not special armor or weapons. Sebastian hadn't given the people attacking the town anything good, but at least one person on each team had had something to give them an edge in a fight.

They felt like the sacrificial lamp of stories.

Tibs sensed around him. At the edge, toward the transport platform, there was a fight. Essence was used offensively and defensively. Adventurers stood in alleys leading to the nobles' neighborhood. Lone people moved about, peppered through what he could sense.

And one stood on a roof three houses behind Tibs. Tibs looked around the alley and gauged the rooflines. They couldn't see him from there they were, but they'd have a view of the courtyard. He had something with air essence in it, but no essence of their own.

So they were the trap this group had led Tibs into. He smiled and didn't bother with his weapons. He was going to have fun, and if that meant he had to run after the assassin, to keep him from reporting to Sebastian what he was about to see, he'd do that.

Tibs strode into the courtyard. Other than water, he could only use the other essence in the most basic way, but that would be enough. They turned toward him, weapons drawn, and seemed unsure. Hadn't Sebastian told them who he was? Had they expected a tall warrior like Jackal? Maybe someone in robes like Carina or an Archer.

Didn't any of them know he was small and while no longer skinny? Other than his leathers, he looked unassuming.

Time to demonstrate that he was still dangerous.

He channeled air and sent them back with wind. He switched to earth and tried to have it grow over them before they stood, but he overestimated his control over how much of an area he could hold and they broke through the soft earth.

"He's not alone!" the woman who seemed in charge yelled.

"I didn't agree to that!" a man replied and ran for an alley. Tibs had a ball of fire on him before he was halfway there. No one was leaving this courtyard.

He grinned at the others as he approached them. They were all looking at him, comprehension dawning, and with it fear. The eye color of anyone who had an element was difficult to miss.

A fighter ran at him, her sword high and screaming. He switched to earth and suffused himself with it. Her eyes went wide as his skin turned rocky, but she didn't slow. He blocked the sword with an arm, then punched her hard enough she landed among the others and didn't stand.

He let go of the essence.

"Stand!" the leader ordered as her people backed away. "Remember your orders."

They had to be something to the effect of 'keep Tibs in the courtyard until the assassin gets to him.' Said assassin had come down from their roof and was moving toward the courtyard, but doing so slowly, cautiously. It meant they couldn't see what Tibs was doing.

He channeled corruption and melted a sword. Light, and he had a blade of it in a man's shoulder. A ball of darkness formed around a woman's head and she claws at her face, trying to remove it.

Purity... well, he couldn't think of a way to use that essence to hurt and scare them.

The leader looked at her people, then at him, in disbelief. She seemed to be at a point where she couldn't believe what she saw, so he decided to help her. He channeled water and made a ball in one hand and used the essence from his bracers to form a ball of fire in the other.

She stared at him, and this proved too much for her. She bolted as another of her people did the same. He threw the fire at him and quickly etched the 'x' attack with his finger, confirming that it didn't have to be done with a knife and it could be done smaller without affecting the end result.

The last two stood frozen in place as he walked toward them. One dropped his sword

and raised his hands in surrender.

It was too late for that. But Tibs gave him a quick death. A lance of light through his eye.

He stood before the last of the group and crossed his arms over his chest. “Now, what should I do with you?” He sensed the assassin approaching. If she noticed him in the terrorized state she was in, she didn’t react. “Maybe I should cut you up and put the pieces in a bag and have that sent to Sebastian. Do you think it would be enough to make him stop?”

The assassin was only a few paces behind Tibs, and he couldn’t hear him. They were good. Maybe that was what the air was for? Carina had come up with a way to use her essence to move silently. Only he didn’t sense any focused air essence around the assassin. He stopped his curiosity. Now was not the time to be distracted, not when the assassin was about to—

Tibs spun and planted the ice knife in the man’s chest. He was older, his face was scarred, and the look of surprise was satisfying. Tibs purposely missed the heart and pierced the lungs instead. The expression became determined and Tibs had ice spines grow out of it.

The man screamed in pain and grasp at his chest, instead of trying to plunge the knife he had been holding into Tibs.

Tibs use Purity on him. “Can’t have you die just yet. You, on the other hand,” he told the last of the bait as he turned, “have outlived your usefulness.” He lobbed her head off with an ice sword. The assassin was on his back when Tibs faced him again, saying something he didn’t understand through gritted teeth.

Tibs crouched next to him. “I hope you speak Pursatian. We need to have a talk.” The man glared at him, and Tibs extended another ice spine from the knife. “Just tell me if you can speak it.”

“I can,” he said, his accent thick. “You are a dungeon-made monster.”

Tibs shrugged. “That sounds like you want it to be an insult, but I know the dungeon, so it isn’t. Did you really think you’d kill me?”

“Yes,” then he let out a bark that could have been laughter, but he was choking on blood.

“Don’t die on me.” Tibs used purity to heal him enough he stopped choking.

“He paid me enough to buy a duchy,” the man said when he could breathe, and continued before Tibs could ask what a duchy was. “But he did not think I would. It is why he gave me this.” The man reached for what was at his neck, but Tibs caught the hand as well as took hold of the essence there. It was an amulet he could now tell.

Tibs pulled it out from under the man’s vest and he held a leather-wrapped stone he was familiar with. Carina hadn’t made much of when she’d gotten the new power stone from Sto, but she had shown him the work the leatherworker had done, and she often held it when she pulled essence from it.

“Sebastian to me that if I found myself in the position I am in, I was to tell you that its owner is enjoying his hospitality. He will be sure that they enjoy it—” the ice ripping out of his chest silenced him.

\* \* \* \* \*



Tibs marched into Sebastian's encampment. The few who tried to stop him once he was inside the barricade of wagons were dead, run through by his ice sword. He wasn't so far gone in range to let go of his one certain advantage over the man. Surprise.

Sebastian sat on a throne-like chair made of wood. Or at least it resembled what Tibs remembered of bards stories where thrones had been described. Big, ornate, and looking uncomfortable. He had a crystal goblet with dark wine in it and smiled as Tibs approached.

Only two others were there.

Carina was attached to a contraption of metal and wood and ropes. Next to that, a muscular man stood, holding a rope and connected to something behind it.

"Run Tibs," Carina said, then she was screaming as the man raised the hand holding the rope and the contraption creaked and groaned, and pulled her arms and legs further back.

"That's enough," Sebastian said. "Tibs isn't going to run. Are you?"

Tibs looked at Carina, who was panting, eyes closed, still visibly in pain, then at Sebastian, who had a satisfied look on his face.

"The trick to beating one of you adventurers is to force you to exhaust yourself, physically, and your essence. So you throw just about everything you have at her and eventually, those you have in reserves, with express orders not to do anything until she'd exhausted, strike. Now, experienced adventurers aren't taken down just with that. They have more tricks than the most experienced card shark, but you aren't experienced, are you? All of you here are barely adventurers in the making. You don't even call yourselves that yet. Runners are what you call yourselves. And Running you do."

The man smiled. "Running to my music." He continued before Tibs could work through why he was bothering with this. They both knew what he wanted. "Now, capturing an adventurer isn't enough. After all, essence is a resource that's ever-growing. Leave any adventurer along even for a few minutes and they'll be ready to fight you again. But focus, now that's something that can be controlled." He motioned, and the man raised the rope again. Carina screamed in pain; and stopped when the man pulled on it. "Before you consider rushing to kill him, if he lets go of the rope, your dear Carina will be ripped apart."

Tibs used water to cool his rage. He needed to be able to think. And what he came up with left him stunned.

"All of this was so you could capture Carina?"

Sebastian laughed. "Hardly." He pushed himself off his throne. "All of that was to keep you busy. To whittle at your little adventurers until you had no choice but to split apart." He stepped to Carina and caressed her cheek. "So that you wouldn't even know I had her until I sent someone to tell you."

"Fine, I'm here. You can let her go."

Sebastian snorted. "Oh no. She is integral to what I am planning. Not just a method of getting you here." His expression darkened. "You took what is dear to me, Tibs. I am going to take the thing you love the most in this world from you."

"This is because I kept you from taking the town?" he asked in disbelief.

Sebastian stared at him. "What the fuck do I care about this miserable town? If I wanted it, would I be destroying it right now? No, this is about how you took my son from

me.”

Tibs tried to answer that and couldn't come up with anything.

“At least you have the decency not to try to deny it,” Sebastian said in satisfaction.

“Jackal ran from you way before I ever met him.”

“He would have come back,” Sebastian said dismissively. “Even with him being here, I would have gotten my son back, if not for you and how he loves you.”

“He doesn't love me,” Tibs replied before he could stop himself, but shut his mouth on the rest. Redirecting Sebastian's anger on Kroseph was not something Tibs was going to do.

“You're his family! You ripped him out of mine and made him yours!” Sebastian had a knife in his hand and was waving it in Tibs's direction. “I told him I forgave him for running, for letting me think he'd died. I told him how happy I was to have him back again and in the perfect position to finish the dream my grandfather had. My son would have given me the guild if not for you!”

Carina gasped and Tibs stared at Sebastian's knife hand holding the pommel, the blade embedded in her chest. Even the man seemed surprised at his action.

“Well, fuck,” Sebastian said, then he was hit by water that sent him crashing into the man holding the rope. Before he could let go of it, he too was covered in water. Even a few hand-spans of ropes were soaked and iced in place.

Tibs ran to Carina, who was still; held by the contraption, he told himself, even if he could sense the essence in her dissipating. He pushed purity in her before he reached her, and he felt the wound repair itself around the knife. But her essence kept growing thinner.

He pushed his essence into her. Tried to use it to prevent what was left from leaving, but it was insubstantial to it. Even to his sense, it registered less and less, until there was nothing in her. Even her eyes were back to an ordinary brown.

“No,” he whimpered. “I said there was no dying!” He cut her down and held her. “You still have to help me with my letters. I'm going to stop complaining, I promise. Just wake up, Carina.” She had to be asleep. He needed her to just be asleep. He'd already lost too many friends. He couldn't lose someone as important to him as her.

The pain was too much like that of losing Mama.

Those men still hadn't been punished for what they had done to Mama. He raised his head to look at Sebastian in ice from the next down. The other man had been fully encased, and he'd already suffocated.

The men who had caused Mama's death had escaped him. He'd find them, eventually. One day, they would pay. But he had the man who had killed Carina right here.

And him, he could make pay for taking her. He could make him pay for a very long time.

## Stepping up-84

Tibs held Carina.

He held her for a while now. The sun had gone down while he made Sebastian pay. Some of his people had tried to stop Tibs, and what was left of their bodies littered the area. He didn't remember what he'd done to him, nor did he care. They'd tried to stop him from taking his revenge, so he'd removed them.

There had been only him and Carina for a while now. Long enough, all the warmth had left her body. Long enough, he knew this wasn't her anymore. But he couldn't let her go. He needed to hold on to her. To keep something of hers by him. He had nothing of Mama but faded memories. He didn't want the same to happen to Carina, so he held on to her.

He was aware of someone by the soft curse they said.

He didn't move. If they were here to kill him, he was finally fine with it. Better that than having to live with the hole in his life with Carina had been.

"Tibs?" the question was soft, but insistent, not the first time his name had been called to him. He wanted to ignore them, to ignore him, but he recognized the voice. One of the few people he had left.

He looked up at Jackal. "She's gone."

"I know." The man tried for a smile, but it fell. "Looks like you made my father and his people pay for it."

Tibs looked around and in the soft morning light, the carnage he wrought was visible. Bodies still smoldered or burned. He remembered someone with a pouch of everburn, and Tibs had made use of it. A little could go a very long way, even when forced down someone's throat. Others were partially melted, the near down of corruption pooling around them. There was a pile of dust that had been someone. Tibs had pulled all the water essence out of them, and they had crumbled away.

There were more. There had been more people left than Tibs had expected, and Sebastian's screams had drawn them. He looked and felt nothing. None of the joy he'd felt at the pain he inflicted was left. None of the satisfaction at the knowledge they had gotten what they deserved for aligning themselves with a man like Sebastian.

Sebastian.

He remembered thinking of him as a masterpiece. Now, as he looked at the pieces of the man encased in ice, still in the man's shape he had been, but with each piece detached, he felt nothing. Tibs remembered managing to keep him alive as he cut him apart—Finger by finger, joint by joint—but he couldn't recall how he did it. Purity, most likely.

"It's a good thing I came alone," Jackal said. "We can't have anyone see this."

"Why?"

Jackal forced a grin. "Come on Tibs. We all know you're good, but there's no explaining this without revealing your secret."

"Why did you come alone?" he didn't care if everyone knew what he'd done. Maybe it would keep anyone from ever hurting one of his friends if they knew this was what awaited them. If he was going to live, he didn't want anyone else to ever die.

"Someone saw you head into my father's camp, and when Carina didn't come back once the sun set, I had a good idea what my father had done. I'm sorry I didn't keep her safe,

Tibs. I thought... I expected him to come after me.”

“It’s not your fault. I should have kept her safe. Instead, I let myself get distracted, just like Sebastian planned. He knew exactly how to get me to do what he wanted.”

Jackal squeezed his shoulder. “You avenged her, Tibs. You have to let that be enough.”

“It didn’t bring her back.”

“But it brought her peace. She can go to air knowing the person who did this to her paid for it.” Jackal looked at his father and chuckled. “Paid dearly, I’m guessing.”

What did it matter? The satisfaction hadn’t lasted. And now Sebastian wasn’t suffering anymore. He should have found a way to keep him alive longer, eternally, in constant pain. Sebastian shouldn’t have stopped feeling pain while Tibs still did.

It wasn’t fair.

“I’m going to bury all of this.” Jackal stood. “Maybe leave enough pieces to come up with a story, but anything not water has got to be gone before anyone else gets here.”

Tibs felt the earth essence before the ground shook. He could tell where it opened up to swallow bodies. Feel the essence he’d used on those go down with them. The fire did, smothered once it was buried. Cross had been right. Without air, everburn stopped burning.

He didn’t react.

He didn’t care.

All he wanted was for Carina to be alive again. He wanted his friend back.

“There, now we can tell them you lost it when you saw what my father did to Carina, and it’s believable, while not impossible.”

Tibs forced himself to look around. To see what Jackal had done. A few bodies were still on the ground, one with ice exploding out from her chest. Tibs had turned the water in her heart to ice with a thought, and it had caused that.

The man who had held the rope was there, next to the contraption. The ice melted, leaving him wet and dead. Other bodies either had marks they had died by water or by blade. Had he killed anyone with his sword? He remembered using darkness to cut someone. If he remembered how; he should tell Khumdar.

Sebastian’s head was still there, the ice starting to melt, with the circlet around his head. It was magic, and it had made it difficult to encase him in ice, but Tibs had had more essence than it, so it had failed. He felt more of the man’s enchanted clothing and items under the ground.

“There, you got angry and lost it on my father. Some of his people tried to protect him and you killed them, too. The rest fled, taking his body with them as...” Jackal shrugged. “Who cares. It’s not like I was here to ask them why, or you were in a state to question them, are you Tibs?”

“She’s dead.” He clutched her body tighter.

“I know.” Jackal crouched next to him. “Let’s take her back, Tibs. She deserves better than being here, among my father’s stuff.”

“She deserves to be alive.”

“Yes, she does. If the world was fair, I’d be the one dead here, not—”

“Don’t say that!” how would losing a different friend be fair? “I don’t want anyone to

die!”

Jackal nodded. When he offered to take Carina, Tibs pulled away. No one would take her from him. He let Jackal help him up, then they headed back to town. She grew heavy in his arms, but he continued to hold her despite the growing pain. It was his fault she died. He should suffer for it.

Cries sounded as the Runners watching over Sebastian’s camp saw them, and immediately died. By the time they reached the first building, more Runners were assembled. Tibs didn’t care who they were, only that they didn’t get in his way.

“Who did this?” someone demanded.

“They’re dead,” Jackal replied. “As is my father. The rest ran off. It’s over. Someone go tell Knuckles it’s safe to let the townsfolk out of the dungeon. Tell him. Tell him Carina’s dead.”

The procession grew around them, and the rest of his team joined in before they were at the inn. There, Kroseph waited for them.

“I am so sorry, Tibs,” He whispered, hugging him around her body. “I hope you made him suffer.” Then he guided Tibs inside the inn, and to a room, where the cleric waited for them.

“Can you save her?” Tibs asked, suddenly hopeful. She had more training. She knew how to use purity for more than generalized healing.

She shook her head. “I can make sure she is preserved until her body can be returned to her element in the way she wanted.”

“Her family should be told,” Khumdar whispered.

“I’ll get on that,” Jackal replied sarcastically, “As soon as we have a way to send a message out.”

“I simply mean that while her element is air, her family is from purity. They may wish to handle it the way it would be for them.”

Jackal sighed. “I know. I’m just...”

“We’re all angry,” Mez said. “If your father wasn’t dead already, I’d have an arrow for him.”

“His head’s still there. Feel free to get some target practice in,” the fighter replied.

She guided Tibs to the bed, where he laid Carina’s body. She did something with Purity, but he didn’t pay attention. His attention was on Carina. When she moved away, he pulled the stool next to the bed and sat on it.

“Tibs, you should come down,” Jackal urged him.

“I’m not leaving her alone.”

“Tibs, she—”

“Let him be,” Kroseph whispered. “He has to deal with this in his own way.”

One by one, Jackal the last, they left him alone with her.

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but he’d already done so. He’d beg, pleaded, explained. He’d made promises and curses. Now, all he had left was to make sure she knew he was there for her still.

All she had to do was wake up and tell him what he could do to make this fair.

\* \* \* \* \*

The plate of food had been steaming when it was placed before him. Now, it was probably cold. He hadn't touched it. He wasn't hungry, or thirsty, or anything. He felt like that void that had been inside him after he'd taken the shadow from Water. He wanted there to be something to fill him, anything.

He hadn't wanted to come down, to leave Carina's side, but Tandy had wanted time alone with her friend; time to say her goodbyes. Tibs couldn't refuse her that. Carina hadn't been important only to him. As demonstrated by the others in the inn, waiting for a turn to sit with her.

It made him feel slightly better to know so many others had cared for her, but then he felt bad because his inability to keep her safe was the reason they were now in pain, too.

Something poked his leg, then whined. Tibs looked down at the dog seated next to him. It licked its muzzle. Within thinking, he took the steak from the plate and gave it.

"I swear," Serba said, "nothing I do teaches her to stay away from you."

Tibs shrugged.

"How are you doing, Tibs?"

He didn't answer. Those who mattered knew how he felt and didn't have to ask.

She cursed softly. "I'm sorry for what it cost you, but I'm happy you killed the bastard."

"What do you want?" she wasn't here to thank him or say she was sorry. She hadn't cared about him or Carina. Her dogs cared more about the two of them than she did.

"Your presence is being requested by Guild Leader Tirania."

Tibs petted Thump's head, and the dog licked his hand. The gesture felt more comforting than Serba's empty words.

"Did you hear me, Tibs?"

"Yes." He scratched Thump behind an ear, where she liked it, and her tongue lolled out.

"Well?"

"What?" Thump looked at him, and he thought he saw sorrow in her eyes. She knew how much of a pain Serba could be.

"She isn't going to like that you're making her wait."

"I don't care." What did he care what Tirania wanted? Where had she been when they were attacked? When Carina was killed?

"Tibs, she isn't someone you tell no to. And I'm pretty sure this is about rewarding you for how you saved the town. Come on, you're a hero again. You aren't going to refuse to have the guild leader sing your praises, are you?" the grin Serba gave him almost made him channel fire and use it on her.

He let water cool his anger. She was just a messenger. Anger at her wouldn't help anything. Anger didn't help. He needed to remain calm if he wanted something to come from Carina's death.

"Yes, I am." He had more important things to do than play Tirania's games, whatever they were. Sebastian had manipulated him and Carina had died. He wasn't letting someone

else dictate what he did. When he was ready, and not before, he'd find out how many of the Runners had survived. He would have to rearrange the patrol schedule, but at least with Sebastian dead, the threats on his town should be minimal.

"Tibs," she said in exasperation. "You really don't want my uncle to be the one to drag you there."

Tibs would love to see Harry try. He had some choice words ready for the guard, and how he went about 'defending' the town, which he had claimed he'd do. Adventurers were no better than nobles, Tibs had decided.

He forced water to cool his temper again. Did he have anything to gain by angering Harry? He had to work with him, even if indirectly. If the guard enforced his authority and stop Tibs's Runners from patrolling the town, that was a headache no one needed.

He got out of his seat and followed Serba out. Before they made it one block, Jackal was at his side, angry, but silent.

Instead of the guild building, she led them to the transportation platform, where a crowd parted before her until he could see Tirania standing on it, Harry on one side, Alistair on the other. His teacher's expression was neutral, but Tibs knew him enough to read the anger in his eyes anytime he glanced at Tirania. Harry stood straight, as usual. A man forever on duty, ready to obey orders, no matter how wrong they were.

"And here he is!" Tirania proclaimed, her voice projecting further than it normally could. "Your Champion!"

The crowd exploded in cheers and Tibs wanted to burn them all, but he called on water again. They weren't to blame. They had nearly lost everything and needed something to celebrate. Tirania was using that, using them, using *him*, to distract from the fact she had hid away when they could have all used the guild's help.

He could feel his anger rise, despite water and he forced it down as he stepped forward and she continued proclaiming his exploits, going all the way back to saving the dungeon. He doused his anger over and over at the satisfaction in her eyes. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she was rejoicing in how she turned his work to her advantage, making it seem like she had been behind it all.

And they bought it.

He had to ice the water over his anger at the realization that they thought her a hero through his actions.

She had stood aside and let Sebastian attack them when she could have stopped the man each time. Probably by herself, definitely with the help of all the adventurers she had at her disposal. If she'd simply stepped outside her precious guild building, Carina would still be alive right now.

As he stood next to her, her hated hand on his shoulder, and he smiled at the crowd, Tibs discovered that anger didn't have to run hot.

Anger could be glacial. It could be slow in making plans, calculated in how he was going to destroy her and that guild that did nothing but lie to them.

Water had either been wrong or purposely misled him.

Water didn't have to be about comfort.

Water could be about destruction.

And when he was done with this cursed guild, there would be nothing left behind but waves retreating in the distance.

End of Book 2.



# Book 3 - The Broken Step

## Notes

Open th book with the funeral

As a consequence of events in book 2, Tibs decides to destroy the guild.

Have one side of the problem for the book be the consequences of Sto breaking the rules and have the overseers show up to punish him?