

The new armor chafed, and Tibs didn't hide his discomfort. His appearance had been that of someone with coins, so it made sense he'd buy proper armor for the runs, and it marked him as someone unfamiliar with wearing armor, otherwise he would have bought it weeks before and broken it in.

While he milled with the other fighters waiting to be put on teams, he kept his attention on the darkness and light adventurers as they questioned the runners before letting them in. The flow was steady enough, he quickly had a sense of the etching they used, how they placed the Arcanus within it, and how the essence interacted, even if he didn't know enough about these types of etchings to work out exactly what they did.

Because of that, he'd need time before he could figure out how to alter the etching so they it behave in the way he needed it to. So it wouldn't notice the darkness etching, or the brand it hid.

And that started with working out how attentive the two adventurers were to their work. He started by tugging at the strands. Not pulling them out of the etching, but simply distorting them and seeing at which point it was noticed and brought back into place.

Tibs ended up pulling on the darkness strand so much without it being noticed that the etching fell apart. The adventurer was more attentive the second time, but her attempt at pulling it back in place was clumsy, and again, the etching fell apart. He let the next attempt go, so the team could do their run.

He let the team after them go unimpeded.

With the next one, he tested the light adventurer, and this one was more attentive and more skilled at keeping control.

With the next team, now that he had a sense of how subtle he needed to be, he set about testing shifting one of the Arcanus. That would be the best way he had to alter the effect of the etching to his need.

He started with Jir, because its main effect was to adjust how intense the Arcanus it was linked to within the etching was. The closer it bracketed an Arcanus, the more intense its effect would be. Many of them were around sets of Gur, Maur, and Qu. Gur let the adventurer decide what they were affecting, but by where it was placed and by how they thought about it when creating the etching. Maur also affected what was affected, but was used more to remove things entirely from being affected; this one was almost entirely based on the adventurer's intent. Qu set how the etching responded when the other criteria were met.

Based on what Tibs knew they were looking for and the combination of elements, Gur would be to sharpen the etching's search to specific types of secrets and lies. Maur would be so it would ignore some version; although Tibs couldn't think of why some should be ignored. And Qu would do something to tell them the correct one had been found and then...

Until someone tried to lie about not working against the king, Tibs wouldn't know how it alerted them.

And that only accounted for what he had learned about why they checked the runners, not the actual reasons. It was possible they also checked to make sure Runners didn't go with something that would give them an advantage, or lie about how strong

they were, for those who had an element. Not every guild cared about Runners cheating, but he didn't know if this one did. Weakening the criteria to the point where they didn't register much would be part of how he could be sure his brand wouldn't be noticed.

He spent the rest of the day remaining at the back of the fighters, so no one would think he was volunteering, carefully altering Jir, causing the etching to fall apart more often than not, spending time letting a purity etching deal with the headaches this caused him, and watching for if the process to put fighters on team changed from volunteers to assignment so he could leave at that point.

Tibs expected they'd let the cowards hold back until there weren't enough fighters left who volunteered, and the first day had enough of them he didn't have to worry about it. He hoped this would continue for a few days, because finding the balance of Jir so it would weaken the effect, doing so in a way the adventurers didn't notice, and didn't cause the etching to break was proving to be harder than he'd expected.

He fell on the bed in his room after a light meal and was immediately asleep, with the next day adding one complication he cursed himself for not having foreseen. He was dealing with different adventurers, so needed to learn how attentive they were before he could go back to working on adjusting the etching, causing yet more of them to fail. And at one point, causing an argument between the two as to if the light adventurer had even listened to their instructors when they were taught the etching.

That had set Tibs back since he needed to let them proceed unaffected long enough their attention went back to only doing the work, instead of making sure the other wasn't screwing up. He didn't make as much progress as he would have liked, but he still did. The third and fourth day brought with them that same problem, although on the fourth, only one of the two adventurers was new, so things proceeded well enough that by the time the day ended, he was confident that not only did he have Jir at the exact point where the etching remained intact, while barely did what it was supposed to do, but he had worked out the exercises to test how attentive the adventurers were so he gained a good sense of it with only six teams going in.

He ate well that evening, trying to ignore the bard who sang about Far Reacher, an adventurer of old who, according to the songs, had found many of the dungeons and had been instrumental in forming the guild as it existed now.

He rejoiced anytime a caravan he traveled on didn't have one of them, or worse, a troupe, traveling along. He had had to listen to Light-Fingers's infamous 'exploits' too often then and without a way to get them to stop.

The stories now had him the one who attacked the dungeon. The one who led the dissidents determined to undo the good the guild had brought to the world. One had even dared sing how Light-Fingers had been the agent of a criminal who had nearly destroyed Kragle Rock.

Tibs had managed not to punch that woman for ever implying he would have been on Sebastian's side, but the destruction of her instrument was his doing. Not that anyone could explain how the fire that consumed half her wagon had started. He hadn't intended to do more than burn in within its case, but once the fire was going, the satisfaction of making her pay for the lies she told people had been too great.

The next morning he was well rested, and in good humor, as he arrived to the

fighter's waiting grounds, ready to quickly assessed the adventurers, make sure he could adjust their etching while excited about going in, then take his turn and finally go on a run.

The good humor didn't even sour when he sensed the group of adventurers heading for the waiting grounds, not even with two among them somewhere past Gamma. It faltered when he realized everyone in the group had light or darkness as their elements.

It fully soured as the two instructors led the group to stand before the door, then motioned for a team to be sent to them, and proceeded to demonstrate how to form the etching. He was too stunned to react to how precise their etching was as they tested the team leader. Then they had two of the adventurers test the next one, and two more the one after that.

How hadn't he considered that by causing so many of etching to fail among the adventurers as he practiced, no one would notice and bring it up with the trainers. Or that instead of putting them through more training where ever they received it, they would come here for in the field supervision.

Hopefully, once they had put each adventurer to the test, they would leave and Tibs would be able to—

The darkness instructor's head snapped up, and she searched the assembled Runners.

Tibs wanted to add an etching over his weave to hide it even more, but he was scared she would notice—

Her gaze stopped on him, and she raised her hand.

Tibs bolted.

He didn't care that he didn't sense her etching. He wasn't waiting for her to call to the guards to restrain him. He shoved other Runners out of his way.

Now the call to stop him came, but it caused confusion among the Runners, instead of galvanizing them to action. The guards, on the other hand, acted, even if they looked perplexed. Tibs expected this was the first time they had to stop with a fleeing runner, or one that wasn't fleeing in fear after what they'd experienced inside the dungeon.

He jumped over the first guard, who blocked his way, then rolled back to his feet when the stiff armor didn't let him pull his legs completely out of the guard's grab. He shoved the next guard to try away, adding All the earth essence from the reserve in his bracer to his arm to increase his strength. Then he moved it to his leg and pushed himself over the other one.

By the time he reached the gate, the weave hadn't changed, but they were slowly closing. He emptied the air reserve, forming the etching and as his foot touched the ground next and pushed off, he was launched forward at the speed of an arrow, making it outside and barreling through too many people.

Then he was running through the alleys, channeling air to refill the reserve.

When he slowed, he no longer sensed a pursuit. There hadn't been any adventurers after him, but guards had tried. The guild couldn't act as openly within a king's city as they could if they were far from it. Or if it was a city they built.

It didn't mean he could afford to ignore them. Not acting openly didn't mean not acting at all. But so long as he stayed on the move and attentive, he would be able to stay one step ahead of them until he left.

And he had to leave.

This had been the closest he'd come to doing a run, and he'd screwed himself over by not planning properly. A lesson, he told himself in an attempt to feel better about the situation. This had taught him a lesson. The next time he had to manipulate etchings this way, he'd make sure he knew how the trainers would handle it.

He didn't help as much as he'd like.

He didn't need to get into the dungeon just to do runs. He needed to go in so he could go through how the guild arranged the audience so he could have them believe he'd gained an element and learn how they went about setting things up so one Runner could travel to another dungeon and continue their runs.

He'd learned that once he'd rebuilt enough of his strength to convince someone he was Upsilon. They had asked to see his documentation. His eyes hadn't been enough. They'd wanted confirmation of the test he'd gone through, which dungeons they were taken at, what the guild official designation for him was.

He'd tried to find out from Runners by acting like one of those who admired their courage or their strength, but not a lot of them traveled, and those who did told him they handed the papers to the guild when they arrived, and he had yet to come across one who had known enough of their letters to bother reading them.

He knew who he could go to and be certain they would know how to read. But sorcerers who traveled to other dungeons did so as part of the academy they were training to join, and Tibs didn't need any nobles' assistances even with that.

With the sun setting, he realized that while he hadn't told the guild where he resided; they had the name he used here. He didn't see anyone watching the house where he rented his room, or sense any adventurers in the area, but he still slipped in through a window. Everything was where he'd left it, and no weave hid among his things. He left the new armor behind, and returned to the alleys, where he wandered, on alert, until morning.