

He sensed the concentrated water essence manifest and changed direction. Tibs had planned on wandering the markets today. On resting from all the reading that hadn't provided him with information he could use here. The kingdom had a surprising lack of reported dangerous areas.

The essence was so dense, it could only be one person arriving on the platform, and Tibs was.... He wasn't sure what he was, but he could justify it as being curious as to what Alistair was up to, arriving so early.

Or was it early for him? It had been a long time since Tibs traveled by platform, and he sometimes forgot how time shifted using it. He'd read that time wasn't the same in every kingdom, but explanations of how the sun moved in the sky, how the distance between kingdoms had an effect, and other explanations were incomprehensible to him. Then there were the *other* explanations.

Such as how it was caused by Void, because the element wasn't stable. And the explanation for *that* conclusion was that it was the only element that caused those wielding the essence to see things out of sequence, that could cause them to lose their minds. There was a sense of intent in how those who wrote about that described the element's effect. As if Void wanted those with it as their elements to go insane.

Tibs had seen how strange adventurers with void essence could become, but he knew the element didn't want it to happen. The elements didn't want anything when it came to people.

Alistair ignored the booths, heading directly for the university.

When the guard stopped him, Tibs used air to bring their words to him.

"... she isn't here at the moment," the guard said. "She expects to return sometime after Zenith."

Alistair looked up. He looked annoyed. "Then tell her the guild agreed to her gift. I will be back at sundown to take possession of it." He turned and headed the way he came, and Tibs returned to his wandering.

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"There you are," Charlie said, panting, reaching Tibs's table. "I need your help."

He'd paused his wandering to his room and change into something more suited for the rain when the sky turned dark; then had decided to get food at the tavern by the house.

"I'm not working with you." He kept his tone neutral. "I'm not doing anything other than my research."

Charlie looked around and lowered his voice. "If I wasn't desperate, I wouldn't be here. Please. Thibaud, We are in trouble."

He wanted to tell him no. He wasn't someone an old acquaintance could just show up to after agreeing to stay away and ask for help. But the desperation was plain in Charlie's eyes.

Tibs rubbed his temple. "What happened?" He owed him to at least listen.

"Not here. Come with me."

He almost said no. But he'd already agreed to listen.

Outside, wind pushed them, and he let the rain slam into him, not complaining, the way Charlie was. Thunder rumbled, and a dozen heartbeats later, lightning flashed in the distance, promising that the storm was only beginning.

They dripped waters when they entered the house, and Tibs immediately noted one of Charlie's team was missing.

"He's going to help?" The leaner of the two women asked.

"I told you he would."

Tibs didn't bother glaring at the man. If he didn't like what he heard, he'd leave and reveal him to be a liar.

"Where's your rogue?"

The look they exchanged told him what Charlie hoped he'd do. Now he glared.

"Reanar went and got himself caught by the guards," the guy who was muscle said.

"After I told him not to do anything stupid," the lean woman said. She was the smart one of the group, he thought Charlie had said.

"Get yourself another rogue."

She leveled her gaze at him.

"A different one."

She raised an eyebrow at Charlie.

"We don't have the time," the man said. "We only have two days to get it."

"Tell them you need more time."

"She isn't someone you go back to and say you can't do what you agreed to," the woman muscle said.

"And..." Charlie looked away.

"What?"

He sighed. "You already have access to the university."

Tibs looked at them, teeth clenched. "Was this always the plan? Get me to help you?"

"No!" Charlie protested, but he waited for the others.

"Charlie said you were out," the smart one said. No light on the words. "Reanar had made contact with someone, but he didn't tell us who before being caught. If we had more time, we'd find someone, but as Jeanine said, our boss for this doesn't take change of plans well. I had to point out it's asking you or she's going to send killers after us to get him to find you. He said you're the best he's worked with."

He kept his opinion to himself. Pointing out he was the only rogue Charlie had worked with, other than the one on this team wouldn't help anything. "What are you after?" So long as it wasn't something the university kept for its research, the security was light.

"Just a spear they have on display," she said.

"The Corbin Spear?"

She looked at him in surprise, and he groaned.

"You don't have two days. The guild representative is coming at sunset to take it."

"How do you know?" Jeanine asked. "The information we have said two days."

"I overheard him tell the guard when he found out the administrator wasn't in this morning." The display case only had a simple lock. No enchantment on it. The room hardly saw any traffic. "Do you have a fake to put in its place?"

"This was supposed to be a smash and grab," the, he questioned how smart she was now, said.

He looked at Charlie.

“This is what we have to work with, Thibaud. I don’t have a theater to make me all the fakes I need. Or someone for papers. Reanar was working on having someone sneak him in. He’d grab it and run. He’s really fast. We have a meeting point arranged, then we were going to be out of the city before they had time to organize.”

“And how are you dealing with them chasing you? The university gets favors for what they give to the guild.” He fixed his gaze on the man. “The adventurer’s guild.”

“We have our escape route set,” the muscle said. He unrolled a crude map. “These are smuggler’s routes. Very few people know about them. And they’d have to know the symbols to be able to follow them.” He tapped lines of drawings. One was a bird, and other a turtle. There was a wolf’s head, and one that might be a boar’s. “We can take any of them, and we disappear.”

“Except Wolf’s Trail,” Jeanine said. “I am not going through there again.”

Tibs looked at Charlie, who shrugged.

“Lot’s of stories about things roaming parts of it, but we didn’t come across anything when we took it here.”

“That’s because you lot sleep so deep the abyss could take you and you wouldn’t wake up until you were gone.” She shuddered. “I heard things...saw things.”

No light on the words. It only meant she believed what she said. She could have imagined it. He didn’t know why he hadn’t found stories about it in the university, other than smugglers wouldn’t be likely to talk about the trail they used.

“I want the map.”

“We need it,” the muscle said.

“Then make me a copy.”

“Thibaud—”

He glared at Charlie. “I’m going to have to run, too. I’m going to be better than smashing and running, but someone is going to notice something. I’ve come here with a caravan, so I don’t know the secret ways to move. I need that map. And no. I’m not going with you. I’m going to make my own way. You tell me where to meet with you once I have it. You hand over the map, and I hand over the spear. Then go our separate way.”

“Agreed.”

“Charlie,” the muscle started.

“What’s the alternative, Marok? We need him to get this done. We wouldn’t even know we’re out of time if not for him. We have however long it takes Thibaud to get it to find someone to make us a decent copy.”

“You work that out,” Tibs said as he saw there was going to be protests. “Where to I meet you with it?”

Charlie told him where the house was, the marks that would tell him which one they’d be waiting in, and he left.

This time, he didn’t let the wind and rain bother him. There was hardly anyone out, and those who were wouldn’t see him through all the falling water.

The thunder was louder, and the lightning was only six heartbeats behind. If he timed it right, the storm would prevent a chase even if someone noticed him. He didn’t bother going to his room to change. The oiled poncho hid what he was wearing, and in this weather, the guards wouldn’t bother looking if it was good quality.

He let the rain pummel him once he passed the last intersection before reaching the doors and entered without waiting for the guards' permission. No one would stay in that storm unless they were forced to.

By the time he reached the display room, he was no longer leaving a trail of water. There was no one there, and the closest people he sensed were among the book collection. No one was heading in this direction, so he unlocked the case using essence, then etched darkness around the spear as he took it out. He layered the etchings on top of each other because he had no way to camouflage it. Darkness etchings always worked better if people could explain away what they thought they'd noticed.

He missed suffusing himself.

Then he headed out.

The etchings started coming undone as soon as the rain pummeled him again, hitting hard enough that even once he kept it away from him, his mind kept echoing from it. Lightning followed the thunder only four heartbeats apart. Then, how close the storm would come to the city was the least important thing. He sensed the void in the rain entering his sense, followed by dense water essence.

He was early. Even if it was so dark it might as well be night, he couldn't be close to sunset yet. He ran, making a detour to ensure Alistair couldn't sense how he was affecting the water. He had no idea how far his old teacher could sense water, but he figured that if he was so far Tibs couldn't sense the man, he couldn't sense what he did in return.

It meant reaching the neighborhood where Charlie and his team waited took longer. It might be sunset by the time he sensed the group within the house. The space between lightning and thunder that dropped to two heartbeats, then stretched to three.

He shouldered the door opened and slammed it closed, ignoring the swords pointed at him to lean against it and catch his breath. He rubbed his temple. It felt like feeling the rain fall around him was causing it to ache.

He pushed himself away and placed the spear on the table. "Where's the map?"

Marok put it on the table, and Tibs unrolled it. It was the one they'd showed him earlier.

"We have our copy." The man tapped the long leather tube resting against the table, before opening it and placing the spear in. There were more pages in it than just their map.

"How do I identify the trails?"

Charlie took a stick of charcoal and drew a form. "You're going to have to search for the first one, but it's going to be in the underbrush. It's a stone planted in the ground. It's carved like this, and the trail marker will be looking in the direction of the next one; they're roughly three hundred paces apart.

He wanted to ask where Jeanine had heard the sounds, but he didn't want Charlie to know which of the routes he was taking.

He rolled the map. "Then I'm—" He froze. How had he missed this until now? He looked at the door. The dense essence of Alistair was approaching. Did the man have a way to mask himself?

Every element could recreate the effect of the others with the correct use of the Arcanus.

"You need to run."

“What’s going on?” Jeanine stood, drawing her sword.

“They found us. You have you leave, now.”

“How?” Marok demanded, slinging the leather tube over his shoulder. “Where you followed?”

“I must have.” Better that, than they realized the truth. “Get out, lose yourself in the storm.”

“What about you?” Charlie asked. “You should come with us.”

“I’m going to hold them back.”

“Are you crazy?” the smart woman, Lidia, he remembered her name, asked.

“I can deal with guards. Ask Charlie, if he hasn’t already told you stories.” But could he deal with Alistair? “Get out of here before they reach the house.”

Charlie hurried the others to the back of the house, and Tibs sensed them leave it. He wanted to follow them. Run away from Alistair. He didn’t think he’d fare well against his old teacher, but he had to distract him long enough for the other to escape.

He rolled the map and secured it inside his leathers.

He should have known this would turn bad.

He readied himself.

There had been five people on the team.

He ran out the door, toward Alistair.