

Tibs stood in the alley's shadows, watching the crowd pass; watching the shadows each person contained. They were strangers, so he figured this was a safe way to practice. However many details he'd see, they wouldn't matter to him.

He channeled darkness, then pulled the thinnest strand of it out of his reserve. He kept it from flowing out into the channel, guiding it to his node of sight. The pull was stronger; like the node was parched for the essence. As soon as he let some in. The shadows gained sharpness, definition.

Most were in the form of people. Some might be items. Others were more difficult to understand, even as they seemed sharper. He focused on one such shadow, and fed the node more essence. He thought they were parts of heads, faces looking at one another. The mouths moved, so they might be talking, but there was...something passing between them.

Were they words? He fed more essence and paid more attention. The faces were that of a man and woman, her with sharp features, him with softer ones. But Tibs didn't care about that, he wanted to work out what was passing between them and although he could tell the added essence had sharpened it, he still couldn't understand it.

He hesitated to add more essence; Khumdar's warning and what he'd almost seen of Mez's secret reminding him there was danger in what he was doing. But he was careful, and it didn't matter what he saw. These were strangers. And only a little more wouldn't hurt.

Only a little more didn't go as Tibs planned. The extra was pulled to a different node, and that one was hungrier for essence, more savage as Tibs fought to keep even more from going into it.

Desperate, he went to stop channeling, but fear gripped him. If he let go of it, he wouldn't know who was after him. He wouldn't catch them in time, and they would take everything away from him.

He couldn't let that happen. They might get to his friend, he might lose them too, be alone again.

With a reflexive breath, he noticed how strong and unwarranted the fears were. His friends could defend themselves, and he had dealt with Sebastian's plan to take everything from him.

Forcing his reserve back to his element left him panting, and immediately, he caught some of the passerby glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. Noticed the suspicious expression, the speculation. Them making plans.

He looked up at them, pulling essence from his reserve to make an ice knife, and the expressions shifted to curious disinterest; or weren't looking at him. Had he imagined the looks? He shook his head, trying to clear the lingering...something that clung to it.

No, not his head. That other node. Darkness clung to it still, even without any left in his channels. Try as he might, he couldn't pull it out.

He rushed deeper into the alleys, trying to escape the townsfolk's plans for him. He needed a safe place to hide. He had to find a box to crawl into until they all forgot he existed.

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The sense of the air changed well before Tibs saw the lake; even before he stepped past the last building that was part of Kragle Rock proper.

He glanced left and right, certain someone was watching him.

Exhaustion had forced him to stop before he found a place to hide—a hole reminding him of the one he and Mama had lived in—and he'd gained enough control over the unfounded fears to know he needed help. And he could only think of one place he could have enough peace to sooth away the fears.

So he'd headed there, fighting to ignore the sense he was followed.

The buildings thinned until he walked on grass instead of packed earth, and looking on each side, the buildings were all a good five and zero paces away, following the contour of the lake; as if the builders understood that there was something that couldn't be disturbed about the area, or someone was making sure the lake was protected. The guild? Sorcerers who also had plans to buy it and build an academy over it?

He should ask Darran if anyone owned it already. He wouldn't lie, he told himself, to fight the certainty the merchant would plot against him.

As with many things relating to the elements; Tibs couldn't find the word that defined what the change felt like as he approached the people by the shore—where they watching him? Plotting against him?. The closest one he had was: wet.

The air wasn't wet; there was no more water essence in it here than in the part of the town he'd walked out of. But this...wetness he sensed as he approached seemed to fill more of what he sensed the closer he was.

Only a few of the people standing or sitting on the shore were Runners, or nobles with elements, or knights with the same—he still wasn't sure how to think of them—but they knew what to think of him. He was a threat to them; he could see that in their eyes—no, he didn't, it was the fear speaking.

Fewer had water as their elements, but unlike the others who seemed to be there enjoy the calm—and plot against him—they were taking advantage of the closeness to the element that the wetness represented. The Runners and nobles sat, looking like they were deep in thoughts, pulling essence to them. One of the nobles sat in the water, with their robes billowing on the surface.

The group of knights was on one knee by the water, head bowed. There was something reverential in the position Tibs thought would amuse Water.

The one thing they all shared was that they looked at peace. They were at ease—a lie! they only acted that way so Tibs would let his guard down—Water soothing away their worries for a short time.

A look back confirmed the buildings arched around the lake—was that motion in the shadows? Assassins waiting for him to look away before striking?

He'd thought that what had kept merchants from taking up the shops around the corruption pool had been the smell, but maybe there was something about the closeness of the element that pushed townsfolk to not establish themselves there.

He sat on the sandy shore next to a water knight, who nodded in acknowledgment before closing her eyes again, and let Water quiet his fears—he couldn't trust Water. She had her own plans for him. She's manipulated everything to get him—

He could do with peace, Tibs forcefully told himself.

He focused on matters that were real. The increase in out-of-town runners that brought an increase in trouble makers with them. They targeted any establishment that had things they could pocket, or coins to steal. Because of that, Irdian had increased the number

of guards patrolling the streets. He was targeting Tibs, the fear whispered, and Tibs did his best to tell himself it was wrong. Merchant Row wasn't targeted anymore than elsewhere. Only there did seem to be a larger number of Irdian's guards among his streets, when he compared them to the rest of Kragle Rock.

He breathed and tried to let the intruding fears flow away, let Water wash them out of him.

Of course, the increase in Irdian's guards had led some of the merchants wanting to renegotiate the contract—hadn't that been the Commander's plan all along? If Tibs didn't have to do as much of the work to keep them safe, why should they pay him as they did? Let them go, the fear whispered. They are only weighing you down. They will work with Irdian to destroy you. Let them be reminded what trusting the guild's guards led to.

He breathed and attempted to let Water douse his mounting anger.

The fear fought Water's soothing, kept intruding. Even Oneness seemed to be helpless against it. And he spent the time having to remind himself that it was all in his head. And he could sense the darkness clinging to the node as proof.

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Tibs stared at the sword through his chest that pinned him to the wall, then the self-satisfied smirk on the woman's face who held it.

He'd gotten some handle over the fear of the previous days and with multiple visits to the lake. And while he had brought in his sense because of how many people there were in the street and so many pushed and pulled their essence about, practicing the basics of what they could now do. He had also done it to fight the urge to push it further. To make sure he would sense anyone attempting to kill him.

He hadn't pulled it in so much he no longer sensed anyone, and he had sensed her running. Only he had ignored the fear's clamoring she was after him. She was someone's guard in a hurry to do their biddings, he'd decided by the sword at her hip. Even as she headed in his direction, he forcefully ignored the mounting fear. While there was less of it, essence still clung to the node. Then she had him in the alley, the sword through his heart, and he was pinned against wall. If metal could still hurt him, he would be dead.

"What is your problem?" he demanded, annoyed at her for stabbing him and himself for ignoring the fear. He formed a bubble around them to keep sounds from leaving.

Brown hair shorn short, amber eyes. Worker's clothes. Nothing about her was familiar. She frowned at him, looked at the sword and tried to twist it, but the wall held it as much as it held Tibs. If he let go of the annoyance, was able to silence the fear, her confusion could be amusing.

"I will get the bounty," she replied. The accent was familiar, but Tibs couldn't place it.

"What bounty. And will you stop shaking the sword? You're just making the rip in my shirt larger. Do you have any idea how much time mending this is going to cost me? Like I'm not busy enough already." He glanced at the wall, trying to see if the vest was also cut, then realized the absurdity of the motion.

Maybe Don was right, and he should pay a seamstress to do the work. Maybe buy more shirts and vests, so he wouldn't have to worry about how long it might take to get it back. He had the coins after all. He should spread them around.

"Someone is desperate for you to be dead." Her accent thickened as she snarled. "I

will get the fortune.” She pulled a knife, but Tibs caught her hand before she added a hole to his clothing.

“What fortune?” Great. Who else could want him dead? He hadn’t tried to piss off anyone. Hadn’t he? The fear said. How many nobles hated him because he broke into their houses? Weren’t the known to go to extreme to avenge any perceived slight?

“The one held for your head.” She pulled, but he had earth locking his grip in place. “Why are you not dead?” she yelled. “Months watching and planning. Watching others fail. Wait until you grow lax. I am too fast. You don’t defend.” She glared at him. “Die!”

He stared back at her and ignored the fear clamoring it had been right. His head had been the proof needed to be paid by the Brokerage. If she’d been here for months, that meant well before he’d destroyed the contracts. Archer had said there would be chaos, and Tibs had figured anyone hunting him for the fortune would find out about it and leave him be. After all, there had been no attempts since he’d returned.

He looked at the sword in his chest. He’d assumed this trouble was finally over. The fear laughed at him.

Tibs shoved her away, and she nearly fell. He pulled the sword out. “I’m a Runner. The dungeon is always trying to kill me. This isn’t going to do it.” This isn’t some grant plan, he told his fear. It’s one assassin who hadn’t gotten the message yet.

He considered the sword the fear wanted him to plant into her hear. Only that wouldn’t spread the message he wanted. Dissolving it would impress on her the futility of what she tried to do, but that would send a different message. There were already enough stories around him the bards to made use of.

He planted it into the ground. “Don’t,” he told her as she stepped forward, knife pointed at him. “I’m just annoyed right now and I don’t want you dead. Don’t get me angry.”

“I get you dead.” She took another step, and the next was stopped by the ice encasing her foot, then both of them.

“They won’t be able to pay you,” he stated, watching her struggle to free herself. She screamed and pulled until she was left panting. “Did you get the bounty from the Brokerage?”

“No,” she said, the word glowing as bright as the anger in her eyes.

“They were attacked.” He stepped closer and caught the hand, taking the knife out of it and dropping it to the ground. “What I heard is that the thief managed to burn the contracts before they killed him. There are also rumors all those coins they were supposed to use to pay you have been stolen.”

“Lies! You try to save your skin.”

“If that’s all I care about, there’s a sword here I can shove through your chest, and we can find out if you’ll survive that as easily as I did.” He sighed. “Look. I’m already busy enough. The ice is going to take a while to melt. When you’re free, go to the Brokerage and find out what’s happened to the contract.” He turned and walked away. “Or don’t, but if you’re planning on trying this again, remember what happened here, and that I’m not going to be in this good of a mood if you get the drop on me a second time.”

This is done, he told the fear, and with what he felt was reluctance, it retreated and it seemed to him there was less essence clinging to the node.

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“Hello.”

Tibs had an ice knife in hand—and the fear made an attempt at returning—before he was done looking up from the vest he was mending. The shirt had been quicker, but his vest was leather.

Clara smiled as she motioned to the knife and vest. “Had a rough day?”

“What are you doing here?” he asked, letting the knife dissipate as the fear did the same. “I mean,” he took a breath and calmed himself. “You weren’t among the cleric when they arrived, so I thought they weren’t going to let you come back as punishment for not hiding when you were told to and helping us against Sebastian.”

She sat. “It was finally agreed that I did what Purity demanded of me and nothing more by those who judged my actions. It was not a fast decision, which is why I have not been here sooner.”

“Do you have a team?” Tibs ask as Kroseph placed a tankard before her.

“Welcome back Clara. This is a thank you from everyone you saved,” the server said. “If you’re hungry, I can bring you food.”

Her pale skin turned pink. “I could eat.” She stared at the tankard, then sipped it. “I have a team. We have our run in three days.”

“Shouldn’t you be with them, then? Figuring out how the team dynamics?”

“They have already said what is expected of me, how they will keep me safe.” She hesitated. “I don’t want to wait for one of them to be hurt or near death before helping. I have seen so much death already. I want...” She slid the tankard back and forth. “Could you introduce me to your...cleric?”

“You want to speak with Khumdar?” he asked cautiously. Clara had the least shadows within her of anyone he’d seen, but he was wary of anyone from Purity asking to speak with someone they loudly claimed was a charlatan and needed to be put to death.

She shook her head. “I want him to train me in the use of the staff.”

“You want to fight?” This time it was surprised that flavored the question. “Doesn’t that go against what you’re supposed to do?”

She looked into the tankard. “Purity demands I work hard to save others. Devote myself to it. But the Siege, then Sebastian’s Assault, showed me that preventing other from being hurt can be more effective than healing the injuries they might gain when it comes to keeping them alive.”

“Won’t that get you in trouble with your superiors?”

The smile was small. “I have elected to become a Runner. I am no longer under the supervision of those who prefer comfortable preaching. I am under Purity’s direct command. Purity does not care how I apply myself to the work, so long as I am diligent in it.”

Tibs considered her words, the lack of light on them, while Kroseph placed two plates on the table. “I can’t promise Khumdar will want to help you. But I’ll explain what you want and vouch for you.”

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“How is she?” Tibs asked as they reached the top of the steps.

“She is obstinate,” Khumdar replied darkly. “Nothing I do will causes her to change her mind. Regardless of how often I strike her down to show how ill-suited to fighting one

of her ilk is, she stands and readies for me. I utterly despise her,” he snarled.

“Good to know someone can get under your skin,” Jackal said, then, “We’re good,” to the cleric by the door before she stepped forward to look them over. They were inside before the guards reacted.

“She was that cleric who helped us with Sebastian’s assault, wasn’t she?” Don asked. “Even for a cleric, she was odd.”

“And have you had the *honor* of interacting with many of them?” Khumdar asked defiantly.

“My family used to have money,” the sorcerer replied, barely on this side of snapping at the cleric. “So many is too strong of a word, but I have met some when me or one of my relatives needed their help.”

“All clerics are strange,” Jackal stated, placing a hand on the doorway.

Tibs looked at Khumdar as he sensed the fighter unlocking it.

“He is not incorrect. The closeness one of us will share with our element affects us more than others. We all develop...oddities.” The doorway opened, and they stepped through.

“Alright, Dungeon. This is it. We’re beating your boss room.” He motioned ahead. “Tibs, how about you make sure it’s playing fair and there’s still a way to reach the rooms?”

“Oh, like I’m the cheater here,” Ganny replied. “You’re the one always pulling one trick or another. You might as well be a rogue for the ways you’re always cheating.”

“You got Ganny angry,” Tibs said, stepping to the edge of the hallway.

“Good.” Jackal rubbed his hands together. “I love going up against someone angry.”