

Tibs found himself engulfed in the fighter's hug nearly as soon as he stepped into the inn. He suffused himself with earth reflexively to survive the crushing force.

"Where were you?" Jackal demanded as he released Tibs. "Your message just said you were going off with that archer!"

"He was watching. I couldn't sneak much on the page."

"Where did he take you?" Jackal looked Tibs over, frowning. "What happened to you?"

"The city is called Shellbridge." He headed for their table to give Jackal time to comment on it, and so the rest of the conversation would be more private.

"Welcome back," Kroseph said, placing a tankard before him. "I'm glad you returned whole, if slightly singed."

"The armor will repair itself," Tibs commented.

"He's more worried about if you were in it when the singing happened," Jackal replied. "I thought you knew better than to step into fire."

Kroseph patted the fighter's shoulder. "Yes, of course; I'm the one concerned." He chuckled and headed to the bar.

"Why did you go with him to this Shellbridge place?"

"You don't know it?"

"Should I?"

"Archer said your father had businesses there."

Jackal opened and closed his mouth. "I didn't know that. Where is it?"

"I don't know. A lot of people spoke Pursatian, so it might be in the kingdom I'm from, but there were also a lot of other languages."

"Okay, so *why* did you go?"

"He threatened to tell the guild I have more than one element. When I chased Sebastian as he fled, Archer tried to stop me. I was channeling air, and it was before I controlled myself. I knocked him off a roof with wind. He made it close enough in time to see me burn the area around the platform."

"I am going to kill him."

"It's over," Tibs said, taking the bowl from Kroseph. He wasn't hungry, but this was home food. He wasn't passing it up after all that time eating the spicy kind.

"You killed him?"

Tibs shook his head, enjoying the mix of flavors.

"Then he can come back.... He will come back, and demand more. His kind always does."

Tibs shrugged. "If he does, I'll deal with him. But I don't think he will."

"Why?" Jackal asked when Tibs ate instead of adding to that comment.

"He wanted out. Out from your king's employ, and he needed coins for that. He had me rob a place called the Brokerage." He watched Jackal for a reaction.

"I sort of remember my father using that name a few times," he said, frowning. "But I never learned what it was." He grinned. "Never tried to."

Tibs nodded. "It's the people Sebastian gave all his coins to so they could pay assassins to come after me, and to cause Kragle Rock problems." He returned the grin. "They don't have any of those coins anymore."

Jackal whistled. “With all those coins, you’re never going to have to worry about the guild owning you.”

“They went to Archer,” Tibs said. “Well, most of them. I kept a few bars, and he said they are worth plenty, but he has a whole lot more of them, along with the coins.”

“Why?” Jackal asked, stunned. “You did the work. It’s not like he’d know how much there was...right?”

Tibs shrugged. “We agreed he got the coins, and I got to end the problem for my town.”

“Tibs, you’re a rogue. Rogues lie, along with stealing.”

“I didn’t want to risk him figuring out I’d cheated him and going to the guild.”

“He’s not that clever,” Jackal stated.

Tibs shrugged again. Archer was much more clever than his friend gave him credit for, Tibs was sure of that. And there were the stacks of papers. They’d been kept with the coins and bars, so they had to be worth something. If Jackal knew his letters, he might know about them. As it was, once he had his talk with Don, he’d go see Darran. The merchant would definitely know what they were.

“Taking the coins won’t be enough,” Jackal said. “My father doesn’t leave a lot to chance. There will be—”

“I burned the contracts.”

Jackal stared, then looked at Tibs’s armor.

“That’s not how this happened.”

“You’re going to have to tell me how, then. And okay, if there are no contracts left, it’s going to be hard for anyone to enforce it.”

“You know about contracts?”

Jackal smirked. “I never looked at one, but my father was always talking about them, and how he needed his scribes to do it right, so they said what he wanted, instead of what the other people would read. Letters are way too complicated for me.”

“Can anyone in you family have a copy of them?”

“Why would there be two copies of a contract?” Jackal asked, as if writing the same thing twice was offensive.

“It’s what Darran did with the contract between the sorcerers and Don for the corruption pool. So that they couldn’t make changes to it. The sorcerer acted like that was normal.” He’d done the same with the contract between Tibs and Don for how the coins would be distributed for the same reason. Even if Tibs assured him, there was no need. He trusted Don, but Darran hadn’t budged, and Don hadn’t been bothered either.

He’d trusted Don to keep his word on that, yet distrusted him at the first falsehood. Then thought he’d go to the guild because Tibs had kept things from him. Well, a lot of things.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, and Tibs realized he’d said some things he hadn’t caught.

“Sorry.”

“I was saying that even if there’s another one of that contract, I don’t think anyone other than the scribe who inked it will know. And they’re probably long gone at this point, either scared by the infighting for who will become the new family head, or they were clever enough to write themselves a few writs of payment and will retire off that.”

“So your family isn’t going to continue Sebastian’s revenge?”

Jackal let out a bark of laughter. “They’ll never think to avenge him. If one of them worked out you did it, they’ll be showing up to thank you. My father held his position through fear, intimidation, and removing those who got close before they could threaten his position.”

“Your father has people in his family killed?” Tibs asked, horrified.

“Or killed them himself.” Jackal shrugged. “He never saw our family as more than a means to maintain his status. Like I told you; Wells either lead or follow. He was never going to follow, so if someone thought they could replace him, they weren’t family. Just some obstacle that had to be removed. Anyone left who, somehow, still has an inkling of leadership is fighting with the others like him for who’ll take over. Considering my father, and what you did. The winner isn’t going to have much to work with once the chaos settles. They aren’t going to be a problem. That archer, on the other hand...”

“I told you. He just wanted out. His wasn’t lying.”

“But he might change his mind. Do you know how long until the dungeon opens? I can get a bracelet and we can go to that city and make sure he isn’t going to be a problem.”

“I came here from the platform.”

“You can go and find out.”

“Getting ready for the new floor keeps Sto busy; he won’t be listening to the outside. And there are things I have to do.”

“More important things than making sure someone who knows those kinds of secrets can’t come back to make your life difficult?”

Tibs considered the question, and even if he hadn’t trusted Archer to mean it, the answer was the same. “Yes.”

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He hesitated before the door.

Excuses for things to do that were more important, or seemed more important, than this has come to him almost as soon as he’d left the inn, and Jackal. There were the stacks of papers; Those had to be more important than this. And Jackal could be right, maybe Archer would become a problem; they should take care of him now, before he could setup something like the letter again to protect himself.

And more to tempt him away from this course.

But he wanted; he needed to do this.

He knocked.

The house was in a better neighborhood than what Tibs had expected. It certainly wasn’t the worker’s boarding house he’d found Don in last time.

The door opened, and the sorcerer looked at him, first in surprise, then annoyance. “Looks who’s back to darken my doorstep.” He looked well, which somehow surprised Tibs. He was clean, as were his clothes, although he needed a shave. Tibs had never seen Don with facial hair before. The room was small, but respectable. The kind of place he’d expected someone like the sorcerer would pick when he had a choice.

Don sighed and stepped out of the way. “So good of you to end your time away and come see me.” The tone dripped with sarcasm, and Tibs’s mood darkened.

“I was planning on coming sooner,” he said, fighting to keep his voice neutral as he

entered.

“Oh, of course. But whatever took you away must have been so much more pressing.”

“I was blackmailed into it.”

Don paused in closing the door, eyed Tibs, then finished. “Jackal didn’t tell me that.”

“You talked with Jackal?” Tibs asked, surprised.

“What do you think, Tibs?” Don replied, his tone darkening. He took a breath. “When you didn’t seek me out, I figured it was on me to be the adult and find you so we could talk things over.”

“Oh.” Tibs sat on the chair away from the desk, felling...small. At no point had it occurred to him Don might want to resolve things. Just like he’d decided the sorcerer was bad because he’d lied about how he joined his team. Then lashed out when Don accused him of keeping secrets. Tibs had come here expecting to have to convince him talking was the better thing to do.

“How did they blackmail you?” Don asked, taking the seat by the desk. His voice only held curiosity.

“They know I have more than one element and threatened to tell the guild if I didn’t go with them.”

“How did they know?” he asked, suspicious.

Tibs sighed. “When this started. If I channeled one of the elements, it changed how I thought. I became more like them. Because of that, I was careless. They were protecting Sebastian as he fled to the platform. He saw me use air and fire, and he knew I was supposed to be a water rogue.”

“You could have said you had items,” Don said, and Tibs was surprised again. Somehow, he’d expected Don to be offended someone had found out his secret before him.

“I’m just Rho, as far as the guild is concerned. I wasn’t that when it happened. How would I explain them? Or how I was able to hide them from the guild? Anything he told them would have caused them to look too closely at me. And what he wanted me to do was going to help the town. So it was easier to go with him.”

“All Jackal told me was that you’d left.”

Tibs frowned. “I told him with who, I thought he’d be able to work out there was a good reason.”

“The conversation didn’t go particularly well,” Don said.

Tibs nodded, easily imagining Jackal angry at Don on his behalf. “I’d have expected him to tell Mez.”

Don sighed. “I’ve been avoiding him.”

“Why? I’m pretty sure that even if I was angry, he’d still want to be your friend.”

“Yeah, and after the way I treated him, I don’t deserve his friendship. That and I knew he’d convince me to go to you and apologize so we could be a team again. I didn’t do anything wrong,” he added forcefully, “so what should I—” he closed his mouth and breathed.

Tibs nodded and looked at the books stacked on the desk while he swallowed his discomfort. “You didn’t tell Tirania.”

“Did you really think I’d betray you like that?” the anger was creeping back into his voice.

Tibs looked at the floor. "When I'm angry, I lash out."

"And you thought it's what I'd do, too."

"Don—"

"It's not like I gave you a whole lot more to change how you thought of me," the sorcerer said over Tibs's attempt at an explanation, sounding resigned. "When we first met, I treated you like nothing. I lashed out at you and your team for protecting Mez. I lost track of the numbers of times I went out of my way to make your life more difficult, even after you sought me out and screamed at Harry to defend me." He chuckled, but it died quickly. "After I left you to be killed by Sebastian's men. I was an idiot to think all that would be erased by just a few runs of me just being there and doing my part."

He took a wooden cup from a drawer and offered it to Tibs, who filled it with water.

"I almost told her." He drank.

"Then why didn't you?"

The chuckle was bitter. "Because, it turns out, I'm not so important that she will drop whatever she's dealing with to speak with me. She was dealing with some stuff from above her, is what I found out afterward. Still is I think. But while I sat there, waiting for her to make time for me, I had nothing to do but think, and all these things I mentioned came back to me. And I realized that maybe you weren't entirely wrong not to share everything with me." Another bitter chuckle. "So we got lucky. I know it's not a thing," he said dismissively. "But I also understand how it is that anyone who doesn't understand how the elements work believe it is. If she hadn't been busy that day, I'd have gone back to being that petty asshole, more interesting in his hurt feelings than someone's reasonable justifications for holding things back."

"Where were you hiding? I tried to find you a few times. Tirania mentioned you were in the guild. Did you spend all your time there?"

Don frowned. "No. I went there to train, but I wasn't hiding."

"Then how come I couldn't find you?"

"Kragle Rock's a large place, Tibs. I don't know. I mean, I spent time walking around. Tried to commune with Corruption at the pool, mostly did what I could to avoid feeling like the ass I figured you thought I was."

"So, I just didn't try hard enough." It hurt to think he hadn't wanted to fix this that badly. He thought he was better than that.

"Or it just didn't line up. As I said, I get why people believe luck is an element."

Tibs nodded, and the silence stretched. He wished Don would make demands. Tibs was ready for a confrontation or an argument. He didn't know how to just... tell him.

"What do you want to know?" he finally said, as a compromise.

Don laughed. "What don't I want to know, Tibs? Do you understand how impossible what you did is? What I think I've worked out you can do?" He motioned to the stack of books. "I tried to find books about anything coming close, but anything the merchants here could offer was about sorcerers and how to go about pulling essence from objects. I haven't read anything among all the books I did that do more than that. I want to know how it happened? Why you? What else you can do?" As Don became agitated. Tibs imagined Lightning coursing through his body.

"I don't know a lot of the answers. I don't know why me. When I had my audience,

there was a shadow within Water, and I reached for that, instead of taking her as my element. I talked with people about some of how their Audience went, and only one mentioned that shadow, but they didn't take it."

Don closed his eyes. "I didn't see that. Do you know what the two of you have in common? Do they also have water?"

"They don't."

"So, that shadow gave you all these elements?"

"No. I've had to get audiences for each of them."

Don's eyes snapped open. "You can't have more than one audience. Certainly not with the other elements."

Tibs grinned. "Who told you that?"

"My... Right, I shouldn't trust what the guild tells me. But everything I've read says it's impossible."

Tibs shrugged. He figured now was not the time to point out books weren't about truths, but what people believed in.

Don studied him. "Corruption is one of those elements you have, isn't it?" Tibs nodded. "It explains why you didn't react immediately when I used it on you. You have no idea how much it bothered me that you could resist the pain even that short time. It didn't actually hurt you, did it? When I concentrate, I can keep corruption from being painful even if I'm subjected to a lot of it."

"It's... I don't have to think about it."

Don raised an eyebrow. "Okay, that's... Sebastian's house. That was you and not me, wasn't it?" Tibs nodded. "I couldn't work out how I'd done it. The best I managed was that I'd caused a cascade effect within the weave when I pushed corruption in, but that was because I thought it had to have been me. How did you do it? The amount of essence needed to bring a weave of that magnitude down is..." He shrugged.

"I have a lot of essence."

"Yes, our reserve holds more as we become stronger, but—"

"No, each time I get a new element, my reserve increases by the size of that reserve."

"So, you have a full reserve for each of your element. That's what I was... it isn't what you mean?"

"My reserve for each element is really small. I can barely do anything with what's in it. But I have another one, a really big one I can change."

"And that big reserve is the size of all your elements' reserve, as if they were side by side, and they were like mine. But if it's all water, how did you take down the weave on Sebastian's house? And why the small reserves, then?"

Tibs let go of water, and Don stared. "It isn't water. Sto called is Life, and if I reach for a small reserve, it all becomes that element."

"Who's Sto? No, let's get back to that later. What are you talking about? Life as an element? That isn't a thing."

Tibs shrugged. "Everyone has it. In the townsfolk, it's so thin that if they're in a crowd, I can't tell them apart. If there's a Runner in them. They're all I can make out."

"And we have it too?"

"It's different in Runners. It's... colored by your element. It's the best word I can

come up with for how it feels.”

Don nodded. “Words never seem to be adequate when talking about essence or the elements, do they?”

“Yours is tinted purple, like your eyes. I don’t know if that’s really how it is, or if because I’ve seen your eyes, it’s how I ‘see’ the sense of it, but Jackal’s red-brown, Mez is red-orange, Khumdar is black. Someone with metal is that gray of their eyes too.”

“So a Runner’s essence is composed of our element and that... I’m getting it wrong again.”

“It’s not a mix of the two. I can sense your essence through your body, but it’s different. Yes, I can sense you pulling it out of your reserve now,” he said as Don’s essence poured into the channels. “I can tell you’re filling your channels. What does it do?”

“Nothing yet. This is an exercise to strengthen them. I’ve read the theory, but my teacher won’t confirm any of it. Something about not letting what I know prejudice what I can do.”

“You can do anything.”

“No, our element limits what we can do.”

“No. It’ll change how it’s done, but if someone does something with theirs, you can do the equivalent with your element.”

“How do you know? Is that something with having all the elements?”

“It’s something I noticed, and my teacher sort of confirmed it. He made it so no one could listen in on our talk using water at one point. Only shouldn’t that be something from air? It’s what happens with a weave, how the Arcanus in the filigree change what it does.”

“Yes, but filling my channel isn’t the same thing. That only creates specific, documented effects. I’ve read books about that.”

“I don’t know about how the channels work,” Tibs admitted, “but what if they’re wrong about how it works?”

“When they think they’re wrong, they note it within the text. Often with thoughts about the kinds of experiment they’ll attempt to pursue the question further.”

“What if they don’t know they’re wrong?”

Don shook his head. “When they write the conclusion, they’ve spent decades on the subject, some a lifetime. They know they are right by then.”

“Good scholars never say they know something for certain,” Tibs said, “only that they’re confident about what they’ve worked out.”

Don stared, mouth working, but no words coming out.

“Think about it this way. Does your teacher know that an amulet works like a reserve?”

“Of course,” Don replied, regaining confidence. “It’s the primary way to increase how much essence I have. It’s how sorcerers store a lot of the other essence they need for their castings.”

Tibs was momentarily put off, but it made sense sorcerers would know that one. After all, the corruption sorcerer they’d dealt with had many amulets and other kinds of reserve on her.

“Okay, then, how about refilling it? How does he go about it?”

“The same way we all do,” Don said, searching Tibs’s face. “He stores it so it can

absorb from what's around us.”

“Have you tried pushing your essence into it?”

“That isn't how it works, Tibs,” Don said, slightly annoyed.

“According to who?”

“Everyone.” Exasperation was slipping in.

“Not according to me.”

“Tibs, just because...” the sorcerer frowned. He shook his head and opened his mouth, closed it. In a huff, he stood and went to a chest. He rummaged through it, pulled an amulet and faced Tibs, his expression defiant, then surprised, then angry.

“Why would he hold that back from me?” He snapped, then swore colorfully. “Do you have any idea how many of them I had to buy, so I'd have a full one while the other recharged? How many times did I almost die in the dungeon because I'd exhausted the one amulet I had that had enough in it to do anything with? There's two dozen in there that aren't of use at the moment!”

“I don't think he's keeping that from you,” Tibs said as Don threw the amulet in and picked another one. “When I showed it to my teacher, he was surprised. He never thought about it because he isn't a sorcerer. But he's known sorcerers. Why didn't any of them tell him if they knew?”

“Because rogues can't use essence the way sorcerers do.”

“But you talk with your team about stuff you can do. How come he never saw the team's sorcerer do what you're doing? It's kind of obvious you're doing something, even if I wouldn't know what.”

“You're saying that even sorcerers don't know that we can push our essence into an amulet to charge it?”

“Why would your teacher keep something this important from you, if he knew about it?”