

“It’s done!” a man proclaimed from the inn’s door. The room fell silent as everyone looked in the warrior’s direction. “The third floor’s cleared!” Quigly raised a fist. “Soon, it’s on to the fourth!”

Cheers erupted, most of his friends joining in, except for Jackal, who looked at Tibs and lowered his voice. “Any idea when that’ll be?”

He shook his head. Not being able to speak with Sto during the runs had meant that when he wondered about it, he couldn’t ask. It hadn’t come up often since until they’d reached the boss room. Tibs had been more focused on working the puzzles on that floor than wondering what came next.

And in the few times he’d forced himself away from everything he needed to do in Kragle Rock to sit by the cliff side and talk with Sto, it hadn’t occurred to talk about the future runs.

Don glanced at them, but Quigly was at their table, his team behind him.

“Take that, best team.” The warrior smirked. “We cleared it first.”

“You know it’s not a competition, right?” Mez said.

“Of course it is,” Jackal replied, as Quigly’s team rolled their eyes nearly as one.

“And congratulation. Was the loot worth the fight?”

“Not that we got to keep any of it,” the warrior said, looking around furtively, “as you know. But it was a full set of plate armor with some enchantment on it. Too fancy for my taste, anyway. But I’m sure a fighter like you, you know, so interested in looking good for his man, could make use of it; if he beat the room, or is willing to buy it back from the guild.”

Jackal snorted.

“Only if it’s the same item for the next team,” Don said, then looked at their sorcerer. “I’m curious. How did you know it was enchanted?”

“I could feel the weave when I picked up the helmet,” Quigly said, which earned him a surprise look from Don.

“And I could sense it without having to touch it,” the warrior’s sorcerer said smugly. “I am, after all, nearly Kappa.”

Tibs looked at Don.

“For us to graduate to Kappa, we need to be able to tell apart the essences that make out a weave. Congratulation,” he told the sorcerer, which earned him a surprised look.

“You shouldn’t tell him that,” the man replied, his admonition marred by his confusion at Don’s behavior.

“You’re free enough with what you can do,” Don replied. “It’s not like they’ll do anything with the information. Only sorcerers can think if the ways needed to tell essences apart.”

“And tell me, Arabis,” the man said with hint of defiance in his tone. “How are you coming along in your studies toward ranking up?”

“I’m getting there,” Don replied casually, again surprising the sorcerer.

“Then,” he said, his tone confident. “I will look forward to observing you taking the test. As I’ll get ready to take the one for Epsilon.” The earth sorcerer turned and walked away.

“Kind of full of himself, that one,” Jackal commented.

“I think it’s a sorcerer thing,” Quigly replied. “Them an knowing so much.”

“I can tell you that knowing more than the rest of you has nothing to do with someone’s ego,” Don said. “I know idiots with larger egos than that one. Although he barely knows more than they do.”

“Yep,” Jackal said with a smirk. “Sorcerers and their ego. Do have to love them. How hard was the room? We stepped in on our last run. The first fight was tough, so we didn’t risk the second.”

“It’s hard. If you aren’t already doing it, hoard the healing potions the dungeon gives, because you’re going to need them. I’m not going to say much more than that, because this is one time I don’t want that ‘don’t talk about it’ rule, causing us to miss a run. It was our fourth time in, and for a moment, I didn’t think we were going to survive the boss after the fights to reach it. I know how you fell about it, Tibs, but we got lucky.”

“You fought everything in the room?” Don asked pensively.

“No choice. If you think the previous boss rooms put your fighting to the test, this one makes the first time in those room fell like celebrating a hero’s return.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Jackal said, “as unhelpful as it is.”

“I’m telling you, stock up on all the potions. You’re going to need them.” The warrior left to rejoin his team at the table they’d taken.

“Are you sure there’s a way around the fights?” Jackal asked once Quigly was away.

“Maybe not all of them,” Don replied. “We’ll almost certainly have to fight the boss.”

“But the floor’s about being clever,” Tibs added, “on top of being good at fighting.”

“So they cleared the room the hard way?” Mez asked, and Tibs nodded.

“Which means,” Jackal smiled, “that sorcerer of theirs and his rogue aren’t as smart as they think they are.”

“Like there was any doubt of that,” Don replied, rolling his eyes.

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“Not so clever, are you?” Irdian said, as a guard held Tibs before the commander. “This could make your team miss another run.”

“You can’t keep me in a cell for nine days.” Tibs had waited until the schedule was up, and now that his team no longer went first with each schedule, they’d ended up last on this one.

“I can keep you for as long as I think your crime deserves,” Irdian replied flatly.

“It was just a pocket. And a noble’s pocket at that,” he grumbled. “And didn’t even get a silver from it.” He gave the guard an angry side-eye while she kept looking ahead.

It had taken more work than it should have to get caught. He’d picked three pockets in sight of guards before one of them noticed. Then, because Tibs didn’t want to make it obvious he wanted to be caught, he’d ran. Only to realize he’d lost the guard in the crowd and they hadn’t seen enough of him to take up the chase when he walked back toward them.

He knew these guards weren’t idiots. They were part of those who had survived both Sebastian’s attacks on the town and his infiltration of the guards. But if not for Serba’s dog, his attempts to be captured would have failed.

The guard at his side had spotted him and given chase. She’d been better at keeping up, but Tibs had reached the point of risking looking eager to be caught when he’d been

tackled to the ground by a large black and white dog, who then proceeded to sniff his pockets. Serba had rolled her eyes as Tibs gave the dog jerky, and she nearly let him go when he shook his head moments before the guard caught up with them.

Then the guards had brought Tibs to the closest guardhouse, where he'd been searched and freed of his tools. He'd replaced his usual bracers with normal ones because he didn't want to risk one of the guards had an element and sensed they were enchanted when they touched them, and also so they'd have something to find when he was caught. He'd also poorly hidden a few more picks on his person. Which weren't all found.

There was only one item he didn't want them to find, so he was disappointed others were missed in their scrutiny. He'd considered offering to train them, but figure Irdian wouldn't care for the suggestion, and that the other Rogues would see it as helping the enemy, instead of making everyone protecting Kragle Rock better.

Once freed of the tools of his trade they found, Tibs's guard was instructed to take him to Irdian, instead of to the cells.

"Are you under the impression nobles don't care when some thief picks their pockets?" the commander asked in a bored tone.

Tibs wanted to remind the man he was a rogue, but it was a waste of time. "They'd have to know it happened to care. He didn't even turn to look when she caught me." He gave a sharp nod to his captor.

Did she look sorry?

"And do you think running from your capture will go unpunished?"

"By adding seven days to the two picking a pocket gets us?" Tibs asked, not having to act dismayed.

Unlike Harry, Irdian wasn't all about the rules, but he was filled with so much metal he was unbending about how things were done. He'd add as many days to Tibs's sentence as he could justify, but not one day more. "Maybe you need to train your guards some more if you don't want us to slip by them so easily."

"Insulting my people will not help your case."

Tibs shrugged. "I'm not insulting, I'm pointing out flaws in how they're trained."

"Take him away," the commander told the woman who had a hand on Tibs's shoulder. She hadn't gripped him at any point, only kept a hand there as if that was enough to keep him from running off. "Four days in the cell. Next time, don't bother me with him. We have a system in place for handling criminals. He's to go through it the same as other of his ilk."

"Yes, sir," she replied stiffly, then led Tibs out. "I'm sorry," she said after a few steps. "I thought he'd be lenient after what you did for us."

That didn't make Tibs feel better about what he planned on doing and how it would impact her. The insults he could justify, because while she'd clearly felt bad about what he'd said. They would only lead to her training harder, hopefully. That she was one of his supporter among the guards didn't change that.

What was coming? That could hurt her career. He was trying to think of ways he would make it up to her when they started down the stairs leading to the cells. With the medallion around his neck—it had been easy to move it around as he was searched so they wouldn't find it, and then put it on while they were busy looking over what they'd taken off him—the door on the left was clearly visible again. No visible lock, or one that he could

sense, and the hinges were on the other side. Hopefully, whatever kept the door closed would give way because he wore the medallion.

He breathed out a whispered, "I'm sorry." Then shoved her to the right and elbowed the door, which opened, and he ran down the stairs.

Her yell of, "Stop!" sounded behind him.

At the bottom, the man, more a clerk than a guard, looked up from the papers on the desk. His eyes shimmered in the light; crystal. Tibs felt essence move, and he slammed his will into that, undoing whatever the man was attempting. He hopped over the man and desk, and ran down the short hall to the door at the end. He passed a room with a table and two unoccupied chairs. Dices on it, as well as the remnant of a meal.

The door had a lock, but no weave through it. He considered icing it so it would shatter on impact, but this wasn't about pissing off the guards anymore than he already had. He made a wall of ice behind him, and picks then set to work on the lock.

It opened as the ice cracked under an impact of crystal. Tibs ran into the new room and stopped nearly immediately.

He'd expected another hall, with doors where the confiscated items would be held. Serba had only told him she'd delivered it to a large room. Not that it was the only room there.

Shelves were before him, and seemed to be set in twos on his left and right, going further than he could see in the low light in all directions, further than he could sense. He stepped between the two facing him. Crates with numbers painted on them lined the shelves. In a few, he sensed weaves.

From what Serba told him, he'd expect to only have to search a few rooms before finding the crates containing his stuff. Even if it had all been in one room, he'd figured he wouldn't have to look through more than a handful of them before knowing the ones that were his.

This was larger than any merchant's warehouse could be, and there were far more items than Tibs thought a town like Kragle Rock could have confiscated.

Crystal wrapped around his feet and arms, locking him in place. He was grabbed, then dragged, but he barely noticed. The crystal shattered into nothingness when he landed on the floor of a cell, and he didn't pay attention to the other occupants, giving him space as he stood and sat on a bench.

That had been nothing like he'd expected.

Was it even possible to find the armors, weapons, and tools the guards had taken from him among all those there? He'd have to find out what the numbers and letters on the crates meant. There had been an order to the few he saw, so it had to have meaning. Serba might be able to help with that.

He leaned back against the stone wall.

He wasn't giving up on getting his stuff back. Not yet, at least. But it looked like he might have to consider it soon if what was painted on the crates didn't help.