

Quigly dropped into the chair. “You weren’t kidding,” he told Jackal, who grinned.

“Am I ever?” Tibs’s friend frowned. “What am I not kidding about this time?” It was only them at the table. Mez was off with his girl, something about making her parents happy. Don had been asked to join other corruption sorcerers for something. Probably reading and talking about stuff that gave people headaches. Khumdar was... well, Tibs had no idea, and had stopped worrying about it some time ago. The cleric had his own things.

“The fourth floor,” Quigly said. “What is that thing?”

“Can’t talk about it,” Jackal said. “You know the—”

“Get off it,” the warrior said, lowering his voice. “You’re the first one to break the rules when it suits you.”

Jackal looked at Tibs, who used the excuse to of looking around to confirm no one was close-by to channel air and make a bubble to keep sounds from leaving the table. The inn was already quiet, so nothing changed in what reached them. Then he nodded to his friend.

“Did the guard tell you the fourth floor had been reached?” Jackal asked, extending an open palm to the warrior. With a sigh, Quigly put a gold coin in it. “What did it look like?”

“But how is that possible?” the warrior asked, voice still lowered. “Dungeons are just passages and rooms with traps and monsters there to kill us.” The warrior moved to raise his tankard, but Tibs stopped him.

“Once we’re done,” he said.

“How do we know what dungeons are about?” Jackal said, smirking.

“It’s what bards sing about them being,” Quigly stated.

“You shouldn’t believe them,” Tibs grumbled. He’d caught one practicing, and it had sounded a lot like the song was about the Siege, except for the fact the guild had been part of defending the town. Paying attention to others, Tibs had noticed how nearly all the songs were about adventurers and the guild coming to the defense of people. He’d wanted to ask if they had song about Adventurers who got branded. Those who left the guild, but he’d been worried about what they’d think. What they might report to the guild.

Who better to spy for them than the bards?

“You’re smart, Tibs. What do you think it’s about?”

“I don’t know,” He replied defensively. Then shushed them as Kroseph brought them tankards. Quigly had to suspect he knew everything they did, being Jackal’s man, but Tibs didn’t want to risk revealing it now. He finished his tankard as the server placed the replacement on the table.

“You okay?” Quigly asked, then looked at Jackal. “Don’t you ever let him rest?”

“I’m not the one pulling him to bed all the time,” the fighter protested. “He’s the insatiable one.” He looked at his man with concern. “When he’s feeling better.”

Kroseph kissed the top of Jackal’s head. “It’ll pass. The last caravan must have brought more than their wares. Something’s been going around.”

“The caravan was here weeks ago,” Quigly said.

Kroseph shrugged. “Only way a sickness could get here. The platform has magic to prevent those coming through from spreading them.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tibs said.

“They don’t talk about it. I know because dad asked when he was considering opening the inn here.”

“I’m feeling fine,” Quigly said.

His essence felt fine too, just like Jackal’s, and Kroseph’s, and anyone Tibs sensed. But just like all of them, the warrior’s temper had been easier to trigger.

“You’re a Runner,” the server pointed out. “You’re made of tougher stuff than the rest of us.”

“Metal,” Jackal said.

“Do you want food? The offerings aren’t as good as usual. Milly’s a decent cook, but she isn’t at her best either.”

“Where’s Russel?” the warrior asked.

“In bed. This hit him hard this morning.”

“Did you ask Clara to look at him?” Tibs asked. Maybe he could see what she thought of this. He wouldn’t have to reveal anything of what he could to express concern.

“She’s a cleric,” Kroseph replied harshly, “I don’t have—”

“She’s a Runner,” Tibs corrected, surprised at his friend’s reaction. “And she’s a good person. Ask her next time she’s here.”

“I will,” Kroseph replied, frowning. Then he returned to the counters.

“I mean it,” Quigly said once the server was out of earshot. “Let him rest.”

“I am.” The fighter looked at his man. “I had someone look him over without his knowledge. They didn’t find anything, so Kro’s right. Whatever this is, it’ll pass.”

Even if he couldn’t find anything wrong, Tibs had put a purity weave on Kroseph, but it had done nothing. There had been nothing there for it to go to a repair. He wished it was as simple as filling someone with purity to cure them of all that was wrong, but that wasn’t the type of curing that helped. He expected it would have the same effect on the living as it had on Carina’s body when the clerics there had used purity to make it go away.

So all he could do was the same as everyone else. Wait for it to pass.

“What are your thoughts on the fourth floor?” Quigly asked Tibs.

“Why would I know anything?” he replied defensively.

“Because you have this annoying habit of asking questions and people actually answer you. You have to have asked someone about it.”

“We can’t talk—”

“Don’t try that. You’re a rogue. You didn’t want me to call over a server for my drink and you did something that makes sounds softer around us. Which proves my point because I can’t think of how you’d do that with water. So you asked someone to teach you more advanced stuff than we’re being taught.”

Tibs sighed. He had no idea why he’d protested. “The world’s old, right?” even he’d known that before Don brought it up. “And dungeons haven’t been there all the time. I mean, this one was...born, I guess, not long before the guild brought us here. It’s why they brought us. So it would be fed and grow faster.”

They nodded.

“The guild doesn’t know everything about how dungeons do what they do.”

“They say they do,” Quigly said, and Tibs rolled his eyes.

“So, maybe there was a city there, and the dungeon just found it. Maybe the city’s

why there is a dungeon here.” He added a shrug for good measure.

“But there can’t be a city under a mountain,” Jackal said, laying on the disbelief thickly enough. Tibs glared at him. “How would anyone live without the sun?” he continued.

“Dwarves,” Quigly whispered in a tone of realization, and Tibs forgot about his planned words for the fighter. He’d heard that word before, but he didn’t remember where.

“Those aren’t real,” Jackal scoffed, and Tibs was surprised he knew what they were. “Bards made them up so boring stories would be more interesting.”

Tibs hadn’t heard bards sing about them. Or rather, he didn’t remember it. Maybe that was where he’d heard the name. There had been the occasional bard in a tavern on his street.

“How do you know?” the warrior asked.

“Have you ever seen one?” Jackal countered.

“What are they?” Tibs asked, somehow being sure they weren’t tall... no taller than he was.

“They aren’t real,” Jackal stated.

“Fine,” Tibs snapped. “What do the bards sing they are?”

“Short,” Quigly said. “No taller than you. Stocky. The story I remember said it was because the weight of the mountains rested on them. They lived in cities of stones, never seeing the sun.”

“Then how would any bard know about them?” Jackal asked derisively.

“Tibs said it. The world’s old. Maybe an adventurer went in a dungeon that was deep enough, like this one, and there was a city there, too. Maybe there was something there telling them about dwarves.”

Jackal rolled his eyes, bringing his tankard to his lips. “Next thing you’re going to say is that Elves are real.”

“They are,” the warrior replied with a certainty that made Jackal pause and Tibs stare. There was no light on the words.

“What are Elves?” Tibs asked cautiously.

“Wee little things with pointed ears,” Jackal said mockingly.

“They aren’t little,” Quigly said quietly.

“You’ve seen one?” Tibs asked, ignoring Jackal’s scoffs. At least Quigly believed what he said.

“I...” he swallowed. “I think so.”

“So you don’t know,” Jackal said triumphantly.

“Can you tell me?” Tibs asked.

“It was in my third year in the army,” the warrior said, even as he shook his head. “The kingdom abuts this forest, sunward. It’s the entirety of the border there, because the king’s never been able to expand into it. We call it the Damned’s Forest. Anyone sent into it is damned to never return.” He took a long drink. “My regiment was charged with protecting the woodcutters the king sent in another attempt to expand his lands. They only fell one tree.”

He fell silent, looking into his tankard. “You have to understand. Those aren’t trees like you ones you’ve seen. Those trees touch the sky. Their trunks are too large a hundred men can’t encircle one of them. It took four days to bring down that one tree. Six men died in that fall because they couldn’t run far enough. My ears rang for hours afterward. When it

stopped, there was only silence.”

He rubbed his face. “It wasn’t the silence of a forest, with the rustling of leaves, singing of bird, scurrying of animals. The silence was complete. Like that in a cavern after the entrance caves-in behind you. All there is is you and the beating of your heart; and the knowledge death waits for you.”

He fell silent again, his gaze distant. “They spent what was left of the day setting up to start on the second tree. Then never got started.” The silence stretched. “Half the woodworkers never woke in the morning. Some had their throats cut, some had vines around their necks.” He shuddered. “One had leaves in her mouth, and I swear they were still growing out of it as I watched. But that wasn’t the really scary things about it. What was terrifying was that it happened under the watchful eyes of the sentries. Not one of them had been killed. No one had seen or heard anything happening. Whoever... whatever had done this had gotten into the camp, killed nearly a hundred men and women and not been noticed.”

He drained his tankard. “The woodcutters wanted out. I didn’t blame them. But the captain in charge was this hard ass woman scared of nothing other than the king. She had them back to work, and us forcing them there. She was going to make sure work happened until there were no trees visible from a league away. If it meant the death of more of us. She didn’t care. We had to help with the work to make up for the dead. Not one of us was willing to go against her orders. Not then.”

He stared into his tankard again. “The first to put a saw to the trunk simply fell, the second to fall didn’t even get to raise it. We scrambled to find the attackers, but there was no one. It was only us and the trees. As we searched, more of us fell. Then, finally, I thought, someone saw something, pointed as a sentry was pulled back into the undergrowth. I ran in that direction with all the fury terror granted me. Someone to make pay, to make scream.

“The only ones to scream was us.”

Tibs had never seen Quigly this afraid. And there was not even a hint of light on any of the words.

“My sword cut every shadow I saw. Any leave that fluttered tasted my blade. I cut a path to nowhere in my search for our enemy. I wanted to find whatever they might be. And regretted it the moment I did.” The tankard shook in his hand. “I was on my back. Whatever my sword had hit, had struck back and send be to the ground paces away. I groped from my sword as he, it, approached. I can’t tell you about the ears, but it wasn’t small. Taller than I am, lanky like a branch. Skin like the bark of the trees. Eyes... green like us shouldn’t be possible. It pointed a spear at me, hate in those eyes so deep I soiled myself.”

His chuckle was almost a sob. “I ran. There was finally something scarier than the captain. I screamed, and I ran. Let them call me a deserted. Let them send me to the stockade. That was preferable to whatever death waited for me in that damned forest. I have no idea how I made it out. Why I wasn’t pinned by that spear the instant I moved. I was just happy I did. I don’t know who else, if anyone else, made it out. I told them everything when I reach the garrison. Warned them that only death waited there. There had been nearly four hundred trained soldiers escorting half that in woodcutters, and I was the only one to make it back.”

When Quigly looked at him, Tibs saw the fear in his eyes.

“There was nothing left behind I found out later, not even that felled tree as proof we’d ever made it to the forest. Those the king sent to retrieve the tools, armors, and weapons found nothing. If not for the trampled grass leading to the edge of the forest, I’d have been accused of never even going to the forest.”

“It had essence,” Tibs whispered.

Quick shuddered, then nodded. “I didn’t make that connection until years later. But that wasn’t an adventurer. That wasn’t anything like us. Maybe it wasn’t an Elf, the way the bards sing about them,” he told Jackal, who looked pale. “But it was nothing I’d ever encountered before, or since.”

“Did you ever go back?” Jackal asked, hand trembling as he picked up his tankard.

“Are you fucking insane?” Quigly snapped, then looked around, but no one reacted to his outburst. He still lowered his voice. “I never stepped within three leagues of that cursed place. I went to the stockades more than I can count for refusing to be on patrols going near it. I will walk into the dungeon naked before I even contemplate laying eyes on the forest again.”

“But that might not have been an Elf,” Jackal said, his confidence returning in the stretching silence.

“In a forest, protecting the trees from invaders, and using the forest as its weapon.” Quigly leveled his gaze at the fighter. “Maybe they weren’t short, but they sure fucking meet everything else the bards sing about them.”

“Yes, but you still can’t know for sure that it was an Elf.”

“How about you go there and find out for yourself?”

“I..I think I’m going to stick to running the dungeon,” Jackal replied, sounding less sure. “It sounds safer.”