

Cold hit Tibs as the world materialized around him. The wind pushed it in through the jacket he wore over his armor, and the still unrepaired gaps in it. He imagined this was what it felt like to have ice unexpectedly appear in your trousers. At least, Jackal's reaction when Tibs had made that happened matched how this felt.

The fighter might have become immune to Tibs kicking his shin, but he still felt cold. Of course, he hadn't considered how direct Jackal was in dealing with problem, so his solution to removing the ice had been to pull his trousers off. Tibs had seen his friend without them often enough while they shared a room to be unbothered, but the rest of the inn hadn't.

The ensuing commotion had been amusing to Jackal, but Kroseph hadn't been pleased with Tibs for causing it.

"Of course, it's raining," the archer grumbled, looking beyond the column. Unlike the platform in Kragle Rock, Mountain Sea, Kadalisayan, as well as the other cities he'd traveled to in his search for where he'd been taken from, this platform had a roof connecting the pillars keeping the rain from falling onto it. "Come on, we need to get you an overcoat before this kills you. Considering the holes in that armor, that jacket isn't going to help."

"I'm fine." Tibs replied sharply. He couldn't control the cold itself; it wasn't something linked to water, even if he could create it when he made ice. But he could use air to keep the wind from reaching him and making it worse. The cold that still made it through he dealt with by creating a layer of water between him and his armor and warming it with fire.

"You only think that," the man said, heading for the opening. "The wind's going to force that rain in those holes and you're going to get cold sick."

"Water is my element," he snapped, following him.

The wind shoved them back as soon as they stepped into the rain and the archer cursed. "Well, I need something to keep the wind and water out."

Tibs could keep the man dry, and since he knew about air, even keep the wind from bothering him. But he didn't offer. Tibs was in no mood to make the man's life easier after how hard he'd made it for Tibs.

No, he couldn't bring his team, or even only Jackal. No, they couldn't delay so he could have a talk with Don. No, he couldn't tell anyone where they were going and why. It had almost been no to Tibs getting his armor, but he'd made it clear he wasn't breaking into any building without his equipment.

The archer had choice words when he saw the state of Tibs's armor. Four days hadn't been long enough to repair even half the damage it had suffered, but Tibs felt better in it than even the armor he'd worn out of the dungeon. If nothing else, the hidden places that were repaired enough he could put fingers in, still had their contents. However the extra space worked, it had protected them.

In the process of equipping himself, he'd distracted the archer enough to write a quick note for Jackal, then pass it to the rogue he'd signaled on the way in, as they exited. It only had that he was leaving and with whom, since he knew nothing more, so the fighter wouldn't worry about Tibs vanishing.

So, as far as Tibs was concerned, the archer could freeze the entire time they were

here. So long as he told him which building, and where in it was the safe with the coins, the archer could catch the cold sickness and die of it.

Maybe once he was no longer angry at the man, he'd feel different.

The archer pulled Tibs into the first building, which sold ponchos similar to the ones they'd bought to go up the mountain in Mountain Sea, but instead of being thick wool, it was thinner and coated in beeswax. He put on the one the archer bought for him, and once outside, he barely had to use essence to keep the wind and water from bothering him. The archer still had to use a hand to keep the rain out of his eyes, but they moved faster.

The area had the feel of Market Place, except that of only booths, permanent buildings also littered the area. They looked hastily put up, but still had a sense of permanence to them.

Once they left the immediate area of the platform, the buildings were made of stone, but unlike Mountain Sea's large white stones, or the gray ones of Kadalisayan, these came in varied colors and were roughly shaped, creating patterns, as well as ample purchase for any enterprising rogue.

The wide road had wagons and carts moving along it, much like Dungeon way did, in Kragle Rock, but this wasn't the largest of the roads. To the left had been one twice the width, and seemed to be the main road to the platform. Horses, cows and other animals Tibs didn't know pulled them. Even Mountain Sea hadn't had so many of them. The backs were covered with cloths on which the water beaded the way it did on his poncho.

He easily located the city guards. The armor was visible where their poncho ended and created distinctive shapes. The ponchos also bore their armor's colors. Deep blue and yellow stripes. Some marched among the crowd, but most were in doorways or awnings to keep the rain off, and only a few seemed to pay attention to the people. It reminded him a lot of other guards from the cities he'd visited, and he wondered if a city needed someone like Irdian or to follow purity for the guard to take their work seriously.

The tavern they entered was warm, nearly stifling so, when compared to outside. The room was large, with half the tables occupied. Ponchos and overcoats were draped over any unused chairs as well as pegs along the wall. A fire roared in the fireplace and the tables closer to it had more people around them.

The woman behind the bar raised hand in their direction, then closed her mouth on noticing Tibs. "It's good to see you're still around, Archer," she finally said. The name glowed faintly.

"That's really the name you're using?" Tibs asked. Then realized he understood her, which meant she spoke Pursatian. Had anyone else? He hadn't been paying attention. Were they in his kingdom?

"It's my name." More glowing words.

"No, it isn't. She was going to call you by your real name until she saw me."

She looked at him in surprise, but it wasn't that much of a reach. Tibs didn't think they were special to each other, but they were friends. It had been in how her expression brightened when she saw... Archer.

"Why did you think I might not be around anymore?" he asked her.

"Word is you never reported in when you last job ended. That usually only mean one thing."

He shook his head. "It put me in a situation that's taking time to handle. I'm almost done. I'll report after that."

It was fortunate that only Tibs saw the light on those words.

"Who's your friend?" she asked.

"I'm not his friend," Tibs replied. "I'm how he's handling his problem. I'm Tibs."

She looked at him. "I'm Sania." She filled two tankards from a barrel and placed them on the counter. "To help with the cold," she told Tibs before looking at the archer. "Isn't he young for your kind of thing?"

"I'm a Runner," Tibs said. The drink had little what Tibs had gotten to recognize in alcoholic drinks, and what it had was thin, so he took a long swallow, only to choke on how spicy it was.

"Not used to Jungen Beer?" she asked, chuckling.

Archer snorted, sipping his. "They don't need it where he's from. The weather's actually nice there."

Tibs felt his face heat up from the spices and possibly other stuff, then that spread down his body and he could see how it would feel good to someone who felt the cold from outside. He didn't take another sip. Ale was to quench his thirst, not... what this one did.

"You're going to want your room?"

"I thought you expected me to be dead," he replied with a smile.

She shrugged. "Business has been slow. Haven't needed all the rooms yet."

Maybe they were special to each other, Tibs decided.

She fetched a key and handed it over. It had no essence in it, a long shaft and teeth. He didn't see how many in the exchange.

The room was on the fourth floor. Tibs sensed and listened as Archer unlocked it. No unexpected sounds, essence, or motion within the lock, but that didn't mean it would be simple to pick.

The room was not what Tibs expected. It was larger than Kroseph's, and like his, had a single bed wide enough for two, if they were special or planned on enjoying each other. There was a red and black carpet on the floor next to it, a chest at its foot, and a shuttered window at its side. Next to that a small table with a washbasin and pitcher, and on the opposing wall an unlit fireplace and a desk with locked drawers by the door.

Everything had a layer of dust that spoke of months without being occupied.

"You shouldn't have given her your real name," Archer said.

"You don't trust her?" he motioned to the room. "Seems like you should, if you live here."

"I don't live here. This is just for when I work here."

It explained the dust, but Tibs had been sure the way they talked and looked at each other meant... it was none of his business.

"Don't you have a house? I'd think a king would pay well enough to get one."

"If I had one, it wouldn't be anywhere near where I expect to work." A small smile formed. "Might get one of those after this. Far from here."

"Why are we in here?"

Archer moved to the fireplace, which already had wood in it, and logs beside. "Don't you want to rest before the work starts? Get dry?" A striker caused the sparks to catch on

the shaving.

“I am dry. I want this done with so I can go home.”

“You rush into this, and going back might not happen.”

Tibs showed the bracelet around his wrist. He’d had to put it on for the Attendant to agree to take them. “When this turns red, I’m leaving. If the job’s not done, I’ll deal with the consequences, and you’ll have missed your chance at all those coins you’re after.”

Archer looked over his shoulder, his hand before the growing fire. “How long until that happens?”

“I don’t know.” Tibs snapped. “You wouldn’t let me talk to anyone so I could find out.” Not that anyone would have known, but it would have made passing along a message a lot easier than counting on coming across a rogue that would notice his signal.

“How long did it take last time?”

“It’s never the same.”

“They have to have told you something,” he insisted.

“Could be as long as months, as short as weeks.”

“Weeks, more than one?”

Tibs glared at him. “I. Don’t. Know.”

The man nodded and stood, the fire firmly caught. “Two weeks is ample time.”

“I’d rather it take less,” Tibs said.

“It’s going to take as long as it needs. I don’t want this to fail because you are in a rush. Get used to it.”

“I never go faster than I have to, but I don’t sit around doing nothing when I can be working out how to get the job done. If you want to rest, tell me where that building is so I can see how I’ll break into it.”

With a sigh, Archer stopped in the process of taking off his poncho. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

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Tibs was impressed.

“That looks like a battlement.” Quigly had talked about them when recounting some of how he’d ended in the catacombs before being sent to the dungeon. Tall stone walls with Parapets and guards walking them at all times. Tibs seen those on city walls in his travels, and could imagine a castle having them, but this building was in the city itself.

The wind had died as they walked, which made the rain less of a problem. The walk had felt like they’d crossed Kragle Rock five times, and the large town, not that of when it was only tents and a few building. He knew cities were big, but he wasn’t sure he understood how big some could be. Mountain Sea hadn’t felt this big.

The buildings had changed as they crossed neighborhoods. The quality of the work went up and down, the styles shifted. The quality had gone up steadily over the last blocks, as had the attentiveness of the guards Tibs noticed, and how many people were hiding in the shadows.

He occasionally sensed an element. And adventurer, by the concentration. This city didn’t have a dungeon, so they’d be here as part of work for the guild. Or for themselves. Maybe visiting, or earning coins without the guild finding out.

So long as they weren’t here protecting what Tibs was after, he didn’t have to worry

about them.

The building was six stories, and all stone. It was two floors taller than the surrounding buildings, with the same kind stone work. He'd be able to climb it, but the constant guards made doing so undetected difficult. He didn't have Khumdar's ease at using Darkness to hide. Jumping to the roof meant crossing the large plaza surrounding it. A strong deterrent against most, but Tibs could do the jump easily, even if that would require a running start, and avoiding the guards that were patrolling up there.

Then, there were the enchantments.

He had no idea what the weaves did, only that there were a lot of them; or a complex one over the entire building, stronger over the first three floors. It wasn't to the level of what protected the guild building, but the only place he'd encountered something similar was Sebastian's house in Kragle Rock. He'd been able to bring that down, so he could do that here, but if he brought the whole thing crashing down, he wouldn't be able to get the coins, and he didn't know if losing the building would be enough to stop the attempts against his town.

"What is this place?" he asked, unable to hide his awe.

"It's called the Brokerage."

"What do they break?"

Archer chuckled. "Broker. For the right amount of money, they make things happen. If you need someone killed, and don't have an assassin handy. You pay them and they'll find one. They'll also make sure the work gets done, if you pay well enough. How much you give them determines the quality of the work. You want something stolen, information gathered, or disseminated. They are who you pay. Whatever you need done, they can do it for you."

Tibs watched the guards patrolling the street. "Why are city guards protecting them if they help crime happen? Are they corrupt?"

"Not all of them," Archer said. "Officially, the Brokerage exists to help merchants establish contracts with providers or buyers. They help the common folk find workers to repair their homes. Nobles will use them to local something they want and get it for them."

"Steal."

"Not always. It could simply be buying it. But because they offer their service to everyone, it means a lot of those are the legal kind, and that offers them the luxury of helping criminals."

"They have so many coins," Tibs said, "that everyone is afraid of what they'll do with them if they're angered."

"They're more afraid of what will happen if they suddenly cease to be. Sebastian's death is still causing chaos. No one wants to add to that."

"Is this Jackal's city?"

Archer didn't answer.

"You know I can just ask someone what city this is, right?" He'd listened and had heard enough Pursatian to be confident it was a common language here. "Then I can ask Jackal if that's the city he's from."

"And what is it going to matter?"

Tibs considered it. Other than telling Jackal he'd been in his city, what was there to gain? That maybe they were from the same kingdom, even if Jackal said they spoke Filenian

where he was from? Tibs didn't know what that sounded like, so it could be one of the other languages he'd heard here.

"I'd just like to know," he admitted.

"Shelbridge," Archer answered with a sigh. "And no, this isn't Jackal's city."

"How is Sebastian's death felt here, if it isn't his city?"

"Did Jackal tell you his father only controlled one city?"

Tibs nodded, and worried Jackal had lied to him. He didn't have light when they'd talked about it.

"I'm not surprised. That boy worked too hard at not knowing anything about what his father did. Even if Sebastian's operations were limited to that city, his death would be felt elsewhere because that city is important to other places. No city exists alone. But Sebastian's criminal reach was so wide, he had an effect on your town long before he set foot there."

"Because Harry and Jackal were there," Tibs stated.

"No. Because there is something there he wanted. That the thing in question happened to be his son just made him put more people on it. The thing to keep in mind, is that if there was something Sebastian wanted, he reached for it. And Sebastian wanted a great many things."

"Can we go inside the building?"

"Not without a good reason."

"You don't think wanting to know where they keep your coins is good enough?"

Archer smiled. "I might, but they certainly won't."