

Tibs's sword slid over the scaled skin without leaving a mark in spite of him adding metal to make the edge sharper this time. When he stabbed one, the sword went in fine, but they were adept at avoiding that.

"They're resistant to fire!" Mez yelled after letting loose arrows.

"Of course they are!" Don snapped. "They're based on dragons."

"I don't need a lesson, Don!" the archer replied.

"I'm not—" a creature's scream devolved into a gurgle. "I was only—" Another flew past Tibs, propelled by the corruption also eating it. "Why does it feel like the dungeon has it in for me today?"

"Oh, I don't know, Don," Ganny chuckled as Tibs stuck a creature's leg in place to keep them from reaching the sorcerer. "Why would I ever be annoyed at you after what you pulled during the game of Conquest?"

"You're not supposed to target one of them," Sto said. "That's borderline cheating."

"No, it isn't," she replied. "It's just randomness that made these Dragoling especially sensitive to Corruption."

"That sound a lot like one of my reasons, which you'd then claim they'd see through. You know, when you wouldn't let me do these kinds of things?"

Tibs slammed his shield into a Dragoling and more of the spikes shattered, but those that pierced its hide, he expanded until they exploded out of it.

"You were helping Tibs," she replied. "I'm not."

He etched another sticky water at a Dragoling's feet, only for that to turn to steam as it stepped in it.

"So, it's okay to... adjust things if it's going to kill them, but not to help?" Sto sounded too calm for how annoyed Tibs knew he had to be. He dodged under claws and jumped out of the way of a tail, trying to trip him. "Was Tibs right? Am I here to just kill them?"

"No, of course not. But like you keep telling me. Who's going to tell? Tibs?"

Tibs ground his teeth at the pain from the claws cutting through his armor into his arm. He had to focus. Surviving this fight was more important than whatever they talked about.

He blasted the Dragoling with an etching of water, spirals until the connected lines and a lot of essence pushed in. It landed on its back, far too close for how much essence Tibs put in, steam rising as it got to its feet. Tibs added making his water attacks resistant to fire to the unending list of things he needed to figure out.

He blocked claws with his shield, stepped out of the way of a kick. His sword skidded over a leg as he sliced at it. The ice continued to melt, revealing the added metal. With a snarl, Tibs stabbed it in the chest, yanking up even as the sword melted.

"Something's happening!" Mez yelled, as Tibs reformed his sword, and staggered under a punch as a gathering of fire essence behind the attack force caught his attention.

"Details!" Don yelled.

"I don't know! Just a lot of fire building and that can't be good!"

Tibs threw himself away and formed a wall of ice between him and his attackers. There were etchings within the essence. More than any of Sto's creatures had managed before. Was he making them better to force them to—it wasn't one etching.

“Whatever it is! You need to stop it!” Don yelled.

No, it was one, but it split at the source. Three of the creatures were making it.

Etching could be done in collaboration?

Ice exploded as a Dragoling slammed through. Tibs didn’t have time for this.

“I don’t know if I can!”

He opened the ground under the creature, but it stopped its fall by catching the edges. That’s be enough. He closed the ground on it. The others seemed to be held back by the ice.

“You’re the only one with fire as his element, Mez. Divert it if you can’t stop it. Over or around us. It doesn’t matter, but I don’t think we can survive whatever they’re etching.”

Tibs saw Mez look in his direction out of the corner of his eye; the fear. Jackal and Khumdar had regrouped with them, keeping the Dragoling from approaching. Tibs nodded, and the fear lessened.

Diverting he could do, and Don would think Mez was doing it. All he needed to do was time this properly and—

The etching bloomed.

With a curse echoed loudly by Mez, Tibs channeled fire and shoved his will against the rolling essence moving through the Dragoling and toward him, and behind him, his team. He shoved harder without effect. Mez formed a barrier, but his fire essence was crude, relying on how strong the archer was to hold the attack back. Unfortunately, the etching was designed to go through pure power; he could sense that much. And there had to be something making it resistant to being wrenched away.

Or maybe the Dragoling sorcerers were simply that more willful than he was.

Tibs ground his teeth. “No.” He wasn’t letting his team be beaten by a bunch of upright lizards just because they were able to etch together. If he couldn’t push it back, then he’d do something else.

He formed his etching among theirs. Lines and waves; he couldn’t think of how to add a spiral to lines that didn’t connect into a point, but it didn’t matter. He had ample essence for this, and he might have time to add it afterward. He added a filigree of Kha and Fey; he needed this sticky but solid. Were those the right Arcanus?

He cursed. He didn’t have time for indecision. He needed to act! He fed his etching essence and pulled as hard as he could. It moved with more ease than he’d expected.

Their etching hadn’t been made to prevent him from using his will against it, only to keep it from being pushed back. It had no defenses against being pulled.

His smile went away as he noticed his etching changing, being deformed by what happened to the Dragoling’s as he pulled. His lines were bending inwards, parts snapping off under the strain. Others touching and forming a point.

One pointed at him.

Before he could think of an option, it was rushing at him.

The fire engulfed him. It’s roar and his pain burying Sto, Ganny, and his friends’ screams.

Fire fucking hurt!

He pushed against it, and the pain eased enough he felt the essence flow around him and toward his friends.

Fuck that!

He pulled again; harder. Fuck the pain. Better he suffer than they die.

He screamed as he pulled harder still. He has space for it.

He thought he had space.

His immense reserve filled with a fraction of the essence he was pulling in. He suffused himself in fire and took in slightly more. He couldn't let any pass. Mez wouldn't be able to deal with this. He pulled and forced more into his reserve. When cracks formed, he willed them intact. He didn't know if he'd survive his reserve breaking this time, but he still had to force more in.

Denser. He pushed and packed it ever denser. Some escaped his reserve. Not through cracks but through his channels, rolling out the way fire could roll across a floor. It couldn't be good, but he couldn't stop.

When it seemed like his channels were filled, how he perceived his surroundings shifted. He couldn't tell what any of it meant, but he saw the world around him in a way he never had before.

Then it turned dark.

He felt his panting. Sensed the fire was no longer around him. His hands and knees pressed against something that had to be the floor, but he couldn't feel the cool stone.

The only thing he felt was fire eating him from the inside. He might have screamed as let the excess essence explode out of him as a formless mass. He couldn't tell through the all-encompassing pain.

He felt the panting again.

Unlike the last time, he wasn't cold. He also wasn't dying. His reserve was still full of denser essence. He was no longer suffused with fire. That was what he'd release, along with what had filled his channels.

Those had changed.

Great. More he'd have to deal with that he wouldn't be able to ask about because no one at his rank should be able to do so much yet. He was getting tired of that.

He sensed earth approaching, darkness and fire. Had a vague sense of that fire diverting the wave of essence he'd released. Jackal, Khumdar, and Mez. He couldn't hear them. Jackal, at least, should be calling for him.

He might not be dying, but fire had injured him a lot.

He channeled purity and suffused himself with it. When essence started moving through his channels, he pushed it back into his reserve. Now was not the time to deal with that.

"—you're okay?" Jackal sounded scared.

"I am." Tibs's voice sounded raw. He'd swallowed fire and his throat wasn't healed yet. No part of him was fully healed. He moved his hand and felt his skin crack. He snapped his eyes open.

No, it was his glove, darkened and cracked. He still wore gloves. They were nearly gone, but enough was left he sensed the weave working to repair them. Enough of his armor had survived, those weaves were working too. Could he feed it the essence it needed and speed up the work? What essence would they need? Whatever made up leather or something else?

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, worried, and winced when he looked up at him.

“I’m healing.”

“Your face looks like that burned dessert Russel made a while back,” Mez said. “The one where we had to break and scrub the outer layer to get at the custard.”

Tibs rubbed his face and came away with flecks of burned skin.

“That’s not improving things,” Jackal stated.

Tibs grinned. “But I’m getting there.” He offered his hand to the fighter, who pulled him to his feet.

His armor felt tight. Like he’d worn extra clothes before putting it on. He wasn’t looking forward to taking it off. Which he’d have to do before they left. He wasn’t sure how he’d explain exiting with his armor so damaged he could see his brown skin in places.

“How?” Don asked. He hadn’t moved, and was staring at Tibs. “No one can survive that kind of fire.”

“I—” Mez started.

“It’s—” Tibs said.

“Your eyes!” The sorcerer exclaimed in fear.

Right. Purity meant that no-longer-color color. He couldn’t let it go since he was still healing, and even if he could, the damage was done.

“I can explain, Don.”

“You can explain?” He laughed in a way that didn’t sound entirely right. “Explain?” It died, and he glared at Tibs. “What the fuck is there to explain? What are you?”

“I’m me. I’m Tibs, from the street.”

“No one does this.” Don motioned up and down Tibs. “Survive being burned to ash. Have the color take on that of purity when it was water before. Are you something the dungeon made? Some creature it sent to spy on us?”

“Can I do that?” Sto asked.

“No,” Tibs replied.

“I don’t think you know what I can—”

“I’m not some creature,” he said, cutting off Sto. “This is something I’ve...” He trailed off. “After my audience...” He trailed off again. How was he supposed to explain this?

“Wait. After your audience?” Don asked, frowning. “You’ve been able to do this since by then?”

“Not all of it,” Tibs replied. “I had to—”

“That’s how you were so fucking better than me? You fucking cheated?”

“I didn’t cheat!” Tibs snapped. “It’s not my fault you didn’t know to take the—”

“Don’t you fucking put that on me! I did everything the way it’s done. I am this strong because I fucking worked at it as hard as I can. I’m not some street born rogue cheating his way into power.”

“I didn’t cheat,” Tibs growled. The sorcerer was lucky he had to hold on to purity, because the temptation to force him to cool down by blasting him with water was high.

“Oh, no. Because the great and mighty Tibs Light-Fingers always does things the right way. He never sneaks around doing stuff behind other’s back. Stealing their success for his own.”

“Don,” Mez said, “that’s not fair. He—”

“You knew about this?”

Mez looked at Tibs, then away. “Yeah,” he finally admitted.

“You all knew?”

“Don,” Jackal said, his tone firm. “Now isn’t the time. I know this is—”

“Oh, you know, do you? You know so well how it’s like to be thought so little by your team they keep secrets from you?” He leveled his gaze on Tibs again. “I guess your ‘no more secret’ talk only applied to me.”

“What did you expect me to do?” Tibs snapped.

“How about being honest, for once in your life?”

“And have you run to the guild? Use this to make yourself look better in their eyes?”

Don stared at Tibs. “That’s what you think of me?” The disbelief was loud. “After everything, that’s all I am?”

“What do you fucking expect me to think, Don? After all the ways you went about hurting me and my team?”

“That was before!”

“Before you abandoned me to Sebastian’s men, you mean? Before you lied your way onto my team? Before what, Don? What the fuck did I have to go by that would prove you weren’t going to put your need to be better than everyone above our survival?”

“You said you knew he told the truth,” Mez said.

“That he believed what he said,” Tibs countered. “I can’t know if he’s going to change his mind.”

“Knew I told the truth?” Don looked perplexed, then stunned. He threw his arms up. “Of course. Why would Tibs Light-Fingers stop at three elements? Light, right? What else can you do? What other element did you somehow steal?”

“That’s enough!” Jackal snapped. “We have a room to clear.”

Don snorted. “Of course that what you care about. Fuck, no wonder you’ve been sticking so close to him. Your man has to be wondering what you get up to with him. He’s how you get all that loot.”

“Leave Kro out of this Don,” Jackal warned.

“What? Scared he’s going to find out you’re with another man and rib your—”

“That’s enough, Don!” Mez snapped.

That seemed to shock the sorcerer. “Yeah. I guess it is.” He glared at them, turned, and walked away.

“Don,” Jackal called.

“Have fucking fun clearing the room,” the sorcerer replied.

“I guess that’s it for this run,” Mez said.

Jackal sighed. “Let’s collect what dropped.” He looked at the dragon, impassively watching them. “It’s not like we were going to make it on this run, anyway. Thanks for saving our lives, Tibs.”

Tibs nodded and started collecting the silver coins. His armor was stiff and uncomfortable, but it was Don’s reaction that discomfited him the most. Once they were out and he had to have a talk with the man before he told Tirania everything.

“Are you okay, Tibs?” Sto asked.

“I’m healing.”

“That’s not what I mean. You did something to yourself when you absorbed all that essence.”

Tibs did what he’d avoided doing and sensed within. His channels were more there; better defined. Or maybe he was just more aware of them now that he’d felt so much essence flow through them. Then there was the essence in his reserve...

“You must have seen other Runners with channels like this.”

“A few, but they became like that over time. Yours were barely there before the fight. A change that drastic can’t be without consequences, right, Ganny?”

“It would damage you,” she replied.

“It hurt,” Tibs said. “But it was that or the fire ate me and my team. Ganny, is there something I can do to have fire not hurt me anymore? None of the other element I have hurt me like that.”

“How elements work for people isn’t something I was taught. Maybe you should ask Fire.”

It would be simple enough to arrange. Fire hurt him unless he actively controlled it away from him. So, like his second audience with Water, all he had to do was let the element bring him close to death.

And then what? Create yet another place around Kragle Rock with a connection to an element? How many of those before someone wondered how they were appearing? Were there books explaining how they were made? If they looked at them close enough, could they tell who had made them?

“Tibs?” Sto asked.

“It can wait.” He already had so much to do, anyway.

They headed out once the coins were collected, and his armor packed in Jackal’s bottomless pouch. He put on one of the normal leather armor from the loot, and was fully healed by the time they reach the exit.

He was surprised Don wasn’t there, fuming at having to wait for the rest of the them before he’d be allowed down the stairs. Maybe Don’s reputation for vindictiveness cowed even guards and clerics. He sensed the sorcerer at the edge of his range, having nearly reach the town. He’d catch up to him in their room.

They handed over the magical items, less the handful of amulets Jackal kept, and the enchanted picks Tibs planned on selling to Darran. Then they heading into town.

Don wasn’t in the room. Nor were there indications he’d been there. Tibs couldn’t sense him, but the worker’s rooming house was outside his range. He laid his armor on an unused bed, so it could repair itself properly. It could probably manage it in the cramped chest, but it had never been so damages, and he didn’t feel like risking it.

He put on a comfortable set of clothes and climbed onto the roof. It was time to go have a talk with Don.