

The trail didn't improve.

It was as if it had had been years since anyone had traveled it. With few exceptions, the markers were buried until leaves and sometimes earth. He was impressed at the care Charlie's team had taken not to leave evidence of their passing. Unlike him, they would have to unearth each marker to see the direction they needed to travel in, and they'd put everything back close enough the weather had hidden what they'd done.

Every few days, he tested another combination of elements. Water, along with most other elements, didn't produce a change in his personality so strong he lost himself, except with Wood, Earth, and Purity. With the others, he felt a pull to be both that made it easy to remain himself.

Wood and Water had resulted in days of going around and healing every tree, of chasing injured animals to heal them. He'd needed fever for that and had returned to himself. During another practice at remaining himself with both elements, the animal he'd eventually chased had gored him, and he'd almost let himself die from the injury continuing to chase it because healing it, helping it, had been more important than anything else. He'd reflexively pull the corruption and festering out, but he continued to bleed until he was too weak to move and channeled Purity, forgetting in the moment he couldn't suffuse himself. Water and Purity had led to him needing to soothe and calm all the animals around him.

Because it was more like he was channeling Water for the first time again, than being someone else, he returned to himself faster.

Testing Purity with Air and Earth, led to the same result. As if the need for hard work that exemplified Purity became an increase in what the other element's personality was.

Water and Earth resulted in days of sitting around not doing anything, barely even thinking. Water's need for soothing and calm played into Earth's need for things to be slow and became not doing anything.

He didn't know what had pulled him out, but he'd returned to himself famished and weak.

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He sensed the group ahead on the trail and counted them at almost thirty. The number made him reluctant to encounter them, but more than half of them were injured. All of them had untreated infections, and two were grave enough; they were carried on a crate containing metal weapons. One of them had so much corruption in them it was eating their life essence.

They could use his help.

And they would have information about the trail. Maybe not about what lead to the dungeon, but at least about the danger that resulted in all those injuries.

He heard them before he saw them.

"Hail Travelers," he called. "I'm alone, and not seeking conflict." He doubted they believed him, but this ensure there was no fighting because his presence surprised them.

They stopped walking; the sounds dropping to that of rustling. "Advance slowly," a man yelled. "Make sure we see your hands and know that we have crossbows at the ready."

"I am advancing." He kept his hands away from his body. He wished he'd taken a sword. Someone traveling along without a weapon could be suspicious. Making one, but

not have a scabbard for it wouldn't help. He considered channeling an element, but there was no telling how they'd react to encountering an adventurer. They were smuggling. Channeling Purity could help, but a cleric traveling along?

Tibs couldn't think of a way to explain it.

He stopped when the man and woman aiming crossbows came into view. They were among the healthier looking of the group, and they still looked like they'd been in a fight against a much larger group.

"I know something of healing," Tibs offered when they didn't lower their guard.

"You an alchemist?" the woman looked beyond him, searched for others she expected to accompany someone like that.

"No. Just someone who travels in the wild often to avoid encountering those on the roads who disagree with how I...decided to live my life. I've had to learn how to use herbs and plants to deal with those disagreements."

"You aren't armed," The man said.

Tibs forced the chuckle. "A bear decided my camp was its land and didn't give me the time to gather my things. I've been foraging."

"And you can heal our injured?"

"I can look at their injuries, and do the best I can, but by the looks of some of you, what you really need are clerics."

They whispered, and Tibs didn't bother bringing the words to him. What would matter was what they did.

They lowered their crossbows. "Any help you can give us will be appreciated," the woman said.

Tibs absorbed the corruption out of those twos partially healed injuries. He wished he could do more for them, and the others. But his Purity etching healed too quickly to be natural, and he'd yet to work out an etching for Fever that repaired damages. He could do some healing in others by willing the essence. But it wasn't as natural as when he did it for himself.

He looked over the injured. Those already on the way to recovery, he did as with the first two and ensured the infections left over had a chance to spread to their life essence. Then he was left with seven gravely injured. One who would soon need to be carried.

All he could do for them was remove the corruption and festering and hope they healed sufficiently for their bodies to be able to fight what regained a footing as they continued traveling.

"I'll need bandages. Do any of you know about forest plants?"

"Our herbalist was killed when..." she trailed off.

Tibs nodded. He'd ask once he'd done what he could. "I'll need a mortar and pestle, and someone to help me gather the right plants." Since they didn't know the right plants, he didn't have to worry about coming up with excuses for taking bad ones. He'd grab what he could, and take away all the essences as he mashed them.

When they returned, one had gotten worse, and Tibs started with them; instructing their soiled bandaged removed as he mashed plants and spread them over fresh bandages. He needed to read up on herbalism. It would be a good identity when traveling. He pulled the corruption out, along with the excesses of fever that lead to making things worse in the

body, instead of keeping the body working.

She took most of the plants he'd gathered, and Tibs worried about being able to continue the charade, but the woman who'd helping had paid attention and returned with more of the plants he'd taken.

He redid the bandages of the other two who were unable to move. He didn't think they'd make it. They had little life essence left, and he couldn't add much before he caused damage. He'd have to travel back with them to continue healing them. And by the looks some of the others exchanged, they knew how precarious their conditions were.

There was hardly any light left when Tibs finished bandaging the last of their injured, and he didn't have to act tired. He'd used a Purity etching to keep exhaustion at bay, but it couldn't remove it entirely, and it lost effectiveness with each application.

"Thank you." The warm broth in the mug smelled wonderful after smelling festering and rotting flesh all day. They were gathered around the fire, with the injured nearly too close to keep the forming chill from making their condition worse. "I hope you won't be offended with me asking, but what happened? I was led to believe this trail was safe from bandits and guards."

The two leaders exchanged a look, and none of the others looked at Tibs.

"It should have been," the woman said. "It's been every previous time we traveled it. The last time was two raining seasons ago. Nothing like this happened."

"Not like this," the man said. "No."

"But there was something? Even before?"

They exchanged another look.

"A week back on the trail, the lands' mostly flat plain. Hardly one tree to be seen. Sometimes, there are lights in the distance."

"Fires? People making camp?"

"Like the stars," she said. "Faint and shimmering. Each time, we lost a few people, unable to resist them."

"Resist their curiosity?"

Another look. "The call," the man said. "Last time, I warned those with us about it, even restrained the two who still wanted to go. They went on and on about how what they wanted was there. How they needed to go find it. The next day, when we left, they had no idea why they wanted that, or what they were after. They just remember the need to go."

"And this time, something attacked you?"

"Monster," someone whispered. Tibs didn't see who, but there was no light on the word. Hadn't been light on any of the words.

"I don't know about that," the man said. "But it was..."

"It was made of stone," the previous speaker said. "Bigger than any wolves I've ever seen. Blades just skipped off it. It gored Rodnick before anyone knew what happened. Lalia..." he looked toward the three on the crates. "You saw what it did."

"The worse is that once someone was hurt, it no longer cared about them. It's as if all it wanted was to make as many of us suffer."

"The only reason we finally stopped it is that it decided to drag Anitda away, eventually."

"And sacrifice a few of the maces," the woman said.

“It dragged one of the dead away?” and un-animal like as the attack was, that was—
“I wish I’d been dead,” a woman said. “I think I was just about the only one to avoid its attack and I was in the process of pushing it back when it lunged under my shield, bite into my calf, and pulled.”

He saw little of her in the firelight, but by what he sensed, she was the strongest.

A dungeon made creature didn’t mean there was a dungeon nearby, but the lights were difficult to explain otherwise, as was the pull to go to them.

Dungeon creatures that escaped were always dangerous, because they could only do so once the dungeon learned how to make creatures with a sense of autonomy. Like the Dogs Sto had made on his fourth floor. They’d been so much like ordinary dogs that Tibs had been able to bribe some with Jerky. He had no way to know if Sto was exceptional in having them on the fourth floor, but even on that floor, creatures were dangerous. If one escaped, it would continue to act as if it was in the dungeon, attacking anything it came across.

That it mainly injured made Tibs think it was made to test Runners’ perseverance. Would they turn back because of the injuries? Push forward. That it had tried to drag one of them back to.... He couldn’t think where it had been going. Challenges in the dungeons were limited to the rooms or the halls. Neither Sto nor Firmen had had creature that took Runner somewhere else.

And the lights? The pull? They had to be essence work, but as far as Tibs knew, Dungeons could only do that within its influence. Could it stretch as far as the road? If so, why bother with the creature? It would make more sense for it to turn that area into where it tested the people. He didn’t know how a dungeon would turn a plain into rooms and hallways. Firmen had used the trees to shape the passages.

“You’re being pretty quiet,” the man said.

“Just taking this in. I’ve heard storied of creatures, but I’ve always assumed they were bards making things up.”

“My advice is to turn around. The trail isn’t safe for one person.”

Someone chuckled. “Is any part of it safe for the lone traveler? This is the wilderness. You’ve been lucky to make it this far.”

“Luck’s not a thing.”

“Who told you that?” the man laughed.

Tibs shrugged. “Just something we know, back home.”

“Well, luck’s why we survived,” the woman said. “And I’m not putting it to the test again. This is the last time we’re taking this trail.”

Tibs nodded. “Is the trail harder to follow through the plain?” He’d deal with the creature, investigate the lights, and the next group to take it would be fine.

“Slightly easier, actually,” the man said. “The grass has been trampled so much over the years it doesn’t grow well where the trail is.”

“You hardly need the markers once you reach the plain,” the woman said.

“Then I’ll travel away from it and find it again on the other side.”

“You’re not going to make it. Those lights probably reach further than the trail. You need someone who doesn’t hear the call to keep you from going to them. I’m telling you. The best thing you can do is come back with us to Jisteiston. We will return to

Esteskarest by the road and we will keep you safe from whoever we encounter who might not agree with you life. It's the least we owe you for the help you gave us today."

"Unfortunately, I can't afford the delay. My business is urgent."

"It won't happen if you follow the trail."

"It's a risk I have to take. Death is preferable to disappointing him."

"That doesn't sound like someone you should head toward."

Tibs grinned. "I could tell you what he does when he's happy with me." As he'd hoped, as with most people. Being willing to speak of things special people got up to in the open made them stop talking with him.

Of course, those few times when that didn't work, he had to make up stories. Fortunately, Jackal and Kroseph had given him a wealth of them. And he'd, unfortunately, pickup a few more over the years.