

Chapter 23

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Tibs crouched on the roof, looking at the other ones, and only seeing shapes in the faint light Claria provided. Getting up there had been an adventure, with the constant worry the corruption in his essence would make a hand, arm, or leg seize up and cause him to fall to his death. The last time he'd had to take climbing a wall this slow was so long ago that he only remembered that same worry as he experienced it on this climb.

And the wonder on standing on the roof, looking at the expanse of them stretching further than he could see, that been why he'd done it again and again, until going up a wall was as natural for him as walking along the shadows in an alley.

The wonder was diminished now; Kragle Rock wasn't a city, so the roofs ended, instead of vanishing in the distance, and he'd seen more wondrous things, like Water herself and the other elements. A mountain stretching so high he lost sight of it in the clouds, or could hardly see the streets and buildings as he looked down from it onto MountainSea.

The sea...

Bardik had mentioned his wonder at watching it, wanting to find out how far it went, what might be hidden there. Tibs understood that feeling. There was so much of it...

There was so much of the world.

Motion in the darkness.

Tibs focused on it, two roofs over. It was gone, lost in the deeper darkness, but he could sense the essence in the Runner, along with the golden tint to it: Tandy.

Except for Muller, the rogues Tibs had talked with had agreed to help him catch this thief that seemed determined to disrupt their quiet town. So they'd taken turns watching the nobles' neighborhoods from the roofs.

The first thing they noticed was the guards the nobles had walking the streets. Mean-looking men and women in armor meant for combat, not for appearing respectable. Tibs had put on his best clothing and walked through the neighborhood to get a sense of them. Only one had an element, metal, and he thought she was Epsilon or Delta.

In the time they had been watching, the thief struck twice, and Blazer nearly caught them before being tripped and send off the roof. He wasn't dead but hadn't woken since, and because of the cursed rules, no cleric would touch him until it was his team's time in the dungeon, and then only if the team brought his unconscious form.

Of course, they could pay for one of them to break the rules, even the clerics knew greed, but it wasn't like Tibs or the other rogues had the kind of gold a cleric would demand, so none of them had wasted time asking.

What the sightings, along with the information Tibs received from Harry on the previous theft, told them was that the thief struck every fourth night. So tonight, one of the houses would be broken into, so the five of them were spread throughout the roofs, waiting.

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Maybe the thief knew they were there and wouldn't strike. It was what Tibs would do, once he found out people were after him. Break the pattern, let them exhaust themselves searching while he planned. It wasn't like he'd be in a hurry if he only stole to hurt and disrupt the town.

He'd finally convinced Darran this thief wasn't someone deserving of being protected, and the merchant had asked around to the others like him, who weren't overly particular as to where an item had been obtained and told him that no one had bought anything that could come from a noble's home.

There was the possibility the thief took what he stole away through the platform to sell in a city, but with how expensive traveling that way was, it would talk away a lot of the coins that could be made selling valuables.

And in Kragle Rock, if coins were the goal, there were better items to steal, especially from the nobles. Just one book would get more coins than any painting done to have a way to look at your family.

No, this was about causing his town problems, so the thief wouldn't strike now that

The flash of fire was brief. The signal Radkliff said he'd give if he saw the thief. He was too far for Tibs to hope to be there on time, with how he needed to be careful, but as with the other two he could see, he moved toward the roof the other rogue was on.

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Tibs was halfway there when he heard the commotion. He'd wanted to be further along, but after nearly falling when a twinge in his leg on landing had caused him to panic, he'd forced himself to slow even more. It hadn't been the corruption, just the normal not landing quite right, but because corruption was always at the back of his mind that was what he'd thought, and because of it, nearly killed himself.

There was a cry, fire, where he saw a form run away, then the fire was flaying as Radkliff lost his balance. Tibs hoped he was okay and only hesitated a second before taking off after the fleeing shadow.

The end of the roof approached and Tibs's steps staggered, but he forced himself to continue and jumped. He wouldn't make it. The hesitation had cost him the speed he needed. He pushed the panic down and thought through his options. He only had one and send the essence ahead of him.

Water formed at the edge of the roof, extending it, then solidified as his foot touched it. He grinned at the solid footing that gave him. He needed to stop thinking of it as *his* water, but unlike corruption, his water didn't make his life more difficult. In fact...

He sent more essence ahead of him, as he pulled what was behind back into his reserve, and took away the slope of the roof, allowing him to run faster. When the next roof was in sight, he already knew he could make the jump, but still kept running and took the leap. At the highest point, he send the water down, at an angle to the roof, and ran down it, picking up more speed.

He saw the form, and sense it at the edge of his range. No element.

Without having to worry about being able to make the jumps, Tibs took a more direct

approach toward the thief closing the too-long gaps between roofs with water.

They were out of the nobles' neighborhood when the thief noticed him. The roofs were lower, but also closer, making it easier for Tibs to close the distance. Only a few roofs and he would be—

He bit back the cry as pain lanced up his leg and he fell. He threw water down, made it as slippery as before he learned to take that aspect away, and adjusted its shape so he kept moving toward the thief as he fought against the corruption.

He was never talking with it for this, he promised.

He cursed as he lost speed despite how slippery the ice was, then realized he didn't have to, shouldn't let himself, be limited by what his body could do. So he couldn't run at the moment, he still could alter the surface he was on.

The water rose behind him, and Tibs was sliding down the slope faster. He forced himself to his feet, favoring the corruption weakened leg.

He was catching up to the thief now. He would have them in a few—

They jumped down the roof and Tibs overshot them.

He maneuvered the water around and tested his leg. The corruption was becoming more manageable. Good. He didn't want to see what the mix of water and ice he was using over the roofs would do to the building's walls.

He didn't see the thief as he set foot on the ground and turned the water he didn't reabsorb into mist. He didn't need to see them, there were few people out at this time of the night and Tibs still sensed their essence, as flimsy as it was.

They were moving cautiously away from where Tibs was. He followed, choosing silence of over speed. They were well inside his range and he could now tell they had nothing on them with essence.

He controlled his glee. He'd seen Cross take on fighters with essence and win. Thinking he was assured a win just because he had an element, multiples, would make him overconfident. That thief had gotten away from Radcliff and Muller. Essence or not, they were good.

When they stopped moving, Tibs continued, but more cautious. They were inside a house. This part of the town was newly built, and most houses were unoccupied. They had two floors, so would be more expensive. There were all sorts of rules about the houses, Carina and Jackal told him and he'd stopped them the instant the headache started. He didn't need to know why some larger houses in part of the town cost less than smaller ones in others.

He had his team's room and that was more than enough for him.

The thief was the only person within Tibs's range.

He circled the house, studying it. No essence, so no magical defenses, but that left plenty of normal ones.

He tested his leg, the corruption was back to the usual throb, then slowly climbed to the second-story window. He essence to sense on the inside, and felt the string he couldn't see, it stretched through the room and connected to something too complex for Tibs to identify, but it had a point, and it pointed at the window.

The window opened by pushing it, so he iced the string in place, then made a shim to undo the latch. He slipped in and closed the window.

The door to exit had another string attached to it, this one leading to a pouch suspended next to it. Opening it would cause the pouch to dump out its content. Tibs didn't think that would be good. He carefully took it down and used the string to tie it shut securely before putting it in his pouch.

He cracked the door open, and a candle provided only enough light to cast too many shadows from the wooden boxes that lined the hall. If Tibs couldn't sense people, he would think the thief had half a dozen of them hiding in them.

He opened the door fully and looked at the item pointed at the window. There were parts of a bow attached to a wooden beam and the arrow was much thicker. A latch held the bowstring taught and connected to a lever.

It was an odd contraption.

He looked at the corridor and the barely visible floor. Interlocking wooden planks. So many ways a trigger could be hidden. Tibs smiles. At least he had ample experience with trapped floors.

He spread a thin coating of water over the floor and hardened it. He didn't bother sensing for triggers under the floor, this wasn't about allowing others to follow him. He stepped into the corridor and listened. The only sound was someone moving below him.

He ignored his curiosity as to what was in the boxes and spread air essence and felt tripwires in the shadows. All at floor level. Tibs smiled. This was easy. Even the first triggers on Sto's second floor were at varying heights.

He stepped over them and reached the stairs. The ground floor had more lights, but also more shadows, from yet more wooden boxes. What was this thief doing with so many boxes? They couldn't all be to hide traps. They would get in the thief's way as much as anyone trying to sneak in.

By the sounds, the thief was eating. So he wouldn't expect anyone. Even if he knew about essence and adventurers, as far as Tibs knew, he was the only one able to sense people.

He smiled and decided to teach this thief a lesson.

Don't get in the way, he warned the corruption, then leaped over the stairs and landed on the ground floor. He straightened, opened his mouth, then was throwing himself to the side as a knife flew through where he'd been.

So much for taking them unaware.

"You're a kid?" the thief asked, surprised. "What are they doing sending a kid after me?"

Tibs looked around the box, taking out his air knife. "I'm a rogue." The man was standing behind the table, a knife in each hand. He didn't have a sword. Maybe they were right and thieves mostly used knives?

"Are you the one with the water that was chasing me?"

"Maybe."

The man chuckled. "A kid. I thought dungeons ate anyone not strong enough."

Tibs kept himself from replying. The conclusion seemed obvious to him, but if the

thief didn't reach it. Tibs would enlighten him with more than words. He stood and threw the knife at the man, who moved aside even if the aim was off. At least, with this knife, Tibs didn't have to worry about how bad his aim was.

With a flick of the hand and a bit of will, the knife changed direction in mid-air and impaled itself in the man's shoulder.

"Maybe you shouldn't underestimate me just because I'm younger than you." The man looked to be Bardik's age, with long dark red hair held at his back, his face was long and his eyes brown. His clothing was light black fabric, for ease of movement or difficulty of being seen on the roofs.

With a snarl, the man threw a knife at Tibs, who used water to intercept it. He stepped forward, absorbing the water and the knife fell. "You've been stealing in my town. You've been making the nobles angry on purpose. Why?"

The man threw his other knife and Tibs caught it using water again. "Because I was paid to do it." He pulled the knife out of his shoulder and threw it at Tibs. It stopped within arm's reach and Tibs plucked it out of the air. "Fucking magic."

"Why would someone pay you to cause trouble in my town?"

The man shrugged. "That's not my business."

Tibs was almost within striking distance with a knife, and the man didn't move. Tibs stopped, trying to work out what he was up to. "I want you to leave."

The man laughed. "Kid, you can't afford my rates."

"Then I'm going to have the guards throw you out."

"Like they can do anything. I've been acting under their nose and not one of them even knows I'm here."

"They will when I hand them over to them."

"So you work for the guard? I thought thieves were better than that."

"I'm a rogue."

"What you are is dead." The man flung something at Tibs, and Tibs had water splashing forward to catch it, only it wasn't a knife, but a small bag that broke open under the impact, then splashed in the man's face with the water.

The man sputtered and wiped at his face angry, then saw what his hands were covered with and looked scared. With a scream, he lunged at Tibs, who side-stepped. Then the man was on the floor, between boxes, writhing in pain. His skin bubble where the wet dust ran on it, and Tibs moved away, then forward, pushing his essence into the man, trying to stop what was happening, but it was eating away at the little essence there and Tibs couldn't figure out how to stop it. It didn't attack his essence, but wrapping the man's in his also did nothing to slow it.

When the last of the man's essence was eaten away, he became still. His face was pocked marked and blistered, his eyes ran with blood, and his expression made Tibs fight against throwing up.

He couldn't be certain it was the same thing in the pouch he'd taken, but he wasn't taking a chance. He'd stop by the pool of corruption as quickly as he could and throw it in. He didn't want anyone, not even him, to have something that could cause the terror he was

looking at on the man's face.