

Tibs let his thoughts float on the water essence around him. There was so much of it around the lake, he hardly had to pull the essence to him for his reserve to absorb it.

The novelty of how calm the lake was had worn away, so it was mostly people with water as their element who sat around, or in, it. Many of them were Runners, all well below Epsilon, while a few were adventurer above that.

A group of six sorcerers stood by the water, but well away from anyone. One was around Gamma, while the others Delta. Their attention definitely on the lake. A scattering of adventurers sat among the runners. Other than the ruggedness of their equipment, and Tibs sensing how much more essence they had, they could pass for other Runners, reading, or talking, while water essence gently refilled their reserves. Only three Runners were, like him, actively pulling essence in, and in them, Tibs could sense their reserves filling.

He'd asked Darran about buying the lake, like he had the land where the corruption pool was, but unlike it, the guild wasn't looking to discharge itself of the land the pool rested on. It could still be purchased, the merchant had told him, but the amount of money needed to convince the guild would be so high that even a merchant like him would have trouble explaining where it had come from.

Darran hadn't said more, but Tibs had understood the message. The guild would ask questions, and it had adventurers who could force Darran to speak the truth. And in the end, what would Tibs gain from owning the lake? Coins for selling it to water sorcerers? He'd need a lot of them to help the Kragle Rock survive the destruction of the guild.

Tibs had made the mistake of asking Darran how towns that didn't have a guild worked, and the merchant had talked him through pages and pages of numbers explaining how the coins were distributed. He'd then casually mentioned that if someone like Tibs was cautious about how he used the Promises he had, such a person could manage to set up the infrastructure that would be needed if a town wanted to... he'd smiled in that way that made it clear he knew something others didn't... to force the guild to leave them alone.

And Tibs figured the town would own the lake once the guild was gone. And if the governing body—another thing Darran had explained a city without a guild needed—wanted to, they could sell it and get the coins directly.

Tibs had no idea how he'd go about finding people to run things in Kragle Rock, but he was starting with Kroseph. The server knew business and what Runners needed and—

The sorcerers were no longer focusing on the lake, sending essence in it and pulling it out. There was no one with air around, so Tibs used it to carry their words to him.

"...happened before?" one of the Delta sorcerer asked. They had an etching before them too complex for Tibs to understand.

"Three nexus this close together?" the one next to her replied. "Not in this configuration."

"I don't know if the Berkion site qualifies," the one facing them said.

"I was thinking about Jusciten," he said, "but Berkion is..." Tibs's focus wavered as he felt eyes on him and what they said was lost to the distance. The sorcerer motioned to the lake and the town.

Tibs stood as he looked around, but no one seemed to be watching him. He headed for the sorcerers.

"...wish I'd heard about that floor," the Gamma sorcerer said, "before they started

sending those Crawlers in.”

“Like we could have done anything about it,” the other woman said. “You do remember how hard it was to get permission to leave the academy to study this lake.”

“Still, to have seen that city before the Crawlers broke everything,” the Gamma sorcerer said wistfully.

“The dungeon rebuilds anything we break,” Tibs said, and they stared at him as if they didn’t understand what he’d said. Maybe they didn’t? Did the magic of the platform make it so anyone who received it understood anyone else who had it or was it—

“And why would that matter?” the Gamma sorcerer asked. The tone wasn’t quite as dismissive as Tibs had received, but it was clear he thought little of his opinion.

“If you ask the guild, I’m sure they’ll let you go in tomorrow. Whatever Quigly’s team breaks, it’ll be fine by tomorrow morning. They probably won’t charge you too much to be added to the schedule since there’s no one doing that floor for the rest of the week.”

“Do a crawl?” one of the woman said disdainfully? “We’re no crawlers anymore. We’re scholars.”

“Then you won’t get to know anything about it,” Tibs said.

She snorted. “We’ll ask those who survive it.”

Tibs smiled. He’d make sure to let Quigly know about these sorcerers so he could ask for a lot of coins to give them the information. “What’s so special about the lake?” he asked.

“Nothing,” The Gamma sorcerer replied, cutting off the sorcerer who was about to answer Tibs.

“You were studying it kind of hard, for it to not be special. The only other place where sorcerers looked at it like you were is the corruption pool. Is that where you were pointing to?”

“Don’t,” the Gamma sorcerer said as that same sorcerer opened his mouth.

“What’s he going to do? He’s a Crawler. I doubt he even understands the significance of this lake, let alone that this city somehow has three of them.”

Three?

The sorcerer ignored his superior’s glare. “Nexus, like this lake, that pool, and the area by the training grounds, should take centuries of something concentrating the essence until there is so much of it a connection to the element form.”

“Can’t they happen if something big happens?”

“Exactly!” Then the sorcerer gave Tibs an odd look.

“There was a corruption adventurer in not long after the pool formed, and I asked him if he was going to remove it. He told me he couldn’t because something had happened to make the pool close to the corruption element.”

The sorcerer gave the Gamma one an uncomfortable smile.

“You might as well continue.”

“The mystery is how there could be three events that would create such a connection to three of the elements.”

Water, corruption and.... Right, Earth. Tibs had had his audience behind the archery field. Did that mean there was such a place inside Sto? One for fire? Would Fire sorcerer try to buy the dungeon away from the guild if that was the case? What about where he’d had

his audience with Light? Or the alley for Metal? How many until Kragl Rock receive so much attention the Guild couldn't ignore it anymore?

He walked away, his mind spinning. He had to hurry to find a way to bring Marger here.

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Tibs slowed his pace as he felt watched again. He extended his sense, but no one within the Market Place crowd stood out. He reached for the jerky in his pocket. No one with an element was directing their essence at him, which was usually what triggered his sense. Some of the guard were keeping their eyes on him, since they knew he was a rogue, and Irdian probably had orders to catch Tibs in the act so he'd have an excuse to send him to the cells again, but this wasn't what triggered his sense.

"Hey Serba." He dropped his hand, and the dog that had saddled next to him snatch the jerky out of it. The dog was massive and with black fur. "Who's this?"

"Timber," she replied, falling into step on his other side. "Who is going to get a talking to. It's your essence, isn't it? You're doing something that makes dogs like you."

"I'm just being nice to them." He rubbed the dog's head. "The dungeon has dogs now."

"And do you have them eating out of your hands too?" she asked in derision.

"I didn't have any jerky." He glanced at her. "Does Irdian have sorcerers keeping watch on me?"

She snorted. "You aren't so important the commander will devote those kinds of resources. You and your rackets are only one of the many things he needs to deal with. And right now, the nobles that are trying to cut themselves off from the city are taking most of his attention. What made you think he'd done that?"

"Just a sense of things." He studied her face while focusing his sense on her. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," she replied, tone sharp. Her essence felt as full as someone without an element did, so she might not have caught what was going around.

"Do you know what's making people sick?"

"No." She hesitated. "Neither do the clerics."

He raised an eyebrow to prompt her.

She sighed. "Yesterday, the men stationed at the edge of the city on Dungeon Way just dropped where they stood. We have guards suffering from the Weakness, like everywhere else in the city, but they said they'd felt fine, then all of a sudden, exhaustion hit. The Commander had clerics look them over, and all they said was that he had to stop overworking them. But Irdian doesn't do that. The schedule has us on light patrols unless there's something going on, and they include times for us to rest."

"But do they rest?"

She shrugged. "That's not my problem, or the Commander's. I'm dealing with it by avoiding anyone who isn't a Runner as much as I can." She slapped her thigh three times and Timber moved next to her. "I have to get back on my patrol. I just need to know one thing. How is Jackie dealing with the dogs in the dungeon?"

Tibs grinned. "By hitting them as hard as he can. But don't worry, they still like him."

She smiled. "I'm starting to like this dungeon."

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Tibs turned into the alley, passing through the shadows cast by the setting sun. They were still watching him. The sense had come back not long after Serba had left, and he'd spend the afternoon trying to locate them. Now, he was left with one conclusion. They had an element. And there was only one element that has a chance to hide itself from his sense.

The only ones Tibs could think of with the coins needed to hire an adventurer were the nobles. But while some of them didn't like him, and a few probably suspected he broke into their houses, he only took a silver, so they had no reason to take drastic actions. There had been the Brokerage, but there hadn't been any assassins since the woman, so he figured word they no longer had the contract for his death had gotten around. This could be someone who hadn't gotten the message, but it felt... wrong.

If they had darkness, why stretch this? They could have attempted to kill him that first time he'd sensed this.

He stepped onto an unusually empty street. The cleric and guards at the door of a house would be the reason people avoided this area right now. The guard nailed a white plaque to the door. Three others had such a plaque on their doors on that side of the street, four on this side. Far too many doors throughout Kragle Rock had them, marking the houses as having someone afflicted by the Weakness living there, and that others were to stay away.

Don had explained what contagion was. How sickness could jump from one person to the other. How it happened he didn't have a definite answer. All he'd read, and all the physicians he'd talked with had, were theories. Idea of how it might happen. If the clerics knew, well, they never spoke of anything they knew. It was as if they were afraid that if other knew what they did, they would no longer be needed.

Not that needing them seemed to help anyone at the moment.

Someone called to the passerby at the intersection further along. That road was as busy as others, and the man proclaimed his potions as being able to protect from the Weakness. They weren't allowed to stand in the street and sell, but they seemed to matter to Irdian even less than Tibs did at the moment, so alchemists filled stalls in Market Place and before the dungeon and the streets. Each claiming to have a remedy for it and all other ailments.

Of all of them, Tibs had only sensed two who, like the blacksmith and baker, had a faint element in their essence that didn't show up in their eyes.

Alchemy was a real thing, Don had confirmed when the first one had appeared and Tibs asked how what they sold could work if they couldn't weave or etch. Alchemy was a process of pulling essence out of objects much like sorcerers did, but by using natural processes, such as soaking and filtering, boiling and overheating.

Tibs asked how such thing was possible, and Don had pointed to something as simple as coating a blade with rotten meat to impart it with some corruption so the rot would spread to the victim. Alchemist simply used more refined method.

Alchemy, he'd told him, was the domain of those who aspired to an element, but couldn't work up the courage to go through the steps to gain one. Don hadn't spoken with the mocking Tibs expected, as if he thought it was a valid route to take. Unlike adventurers, who seemed to mock anyone who lacked the fortitude to even try.

But, as real as it was, because the potions alchemist created didn't have the

immediate result of those made through essence weaving, it led to charlatans, claiming to be such, and as far as Tibs was concerned, those were who filled the market and streets; taking coins from the desperate, while offering only false hope in return.

He'd set his rogues to watch those who only came for the day, sold lies, and then left. Those would return home only to discover that the coins they had made had stayed in Kragle Rock, where they belonged.

Tibs shook himself and stepped between two houses as the cleric and guards moved on to the next one to be marked. He had something to deal with, and with them moving away, this would work as a place to have the confrontation.

He slipped into a dark corner, resisting the urge to use darkness. Since they were using the essence, they would be able to sense someone else using it, and he didn't want to give away that advantage yet.

He waited and listened, and listened more. Darkness couldn't make someone disappear completely, at least not unless they were much stronger, according to Khumdar. It made someone not want to notice the person wrapped in it, but since he knew they were coming, he should be able to make something out of them, enough to plant a sword through and finish this.

But no one came. No muffled steps. No barely noticeable shadow creeping along.

But he still felt watched.

Which meant they were that powerful, and Tibs only had one way to know where they were. He breathed his nervousness away. He'd only use a little essence, and he would be extremely careful with it.

He channeled darkness and pull the thinnest strand of it out of his reserve, then kept a tight hold on it as he let it travel through his channels to his node of sight.