

Tibs watched Kroseph and his father speak by the bar. The server had been ready to get back to work as soon as he'd been strong enough to move about, but his father wasn't risking him having a relapse.

"Do you think the dungeon can make more rings like it?" Don asked. "Everyone in Kragle Rock would benefit from one."

"The way Tibs explained it," Mez said, when Tibs didn't answer, "is that it was hard for the dungeon to make it."

"And I don't want a city filled with people not growing old," Jackal added distractedly.

Tibs pulled his attention away from what was turning into a heated argument between the two. "And we'd need to give everyone an amulet, which I'd have to refill." Don nodded thoughtfully. "There's one thing I don't understand. How come the ring didn't drain itself fighting what's afflicting him? It increased how much essence it gives him once it pulled from the amulet. Why did it slow down as he got weaker?"

"I don't think it's what it did," the sorcerer said, turning pensive. "A weave this complex needs to be able to adjust to changing situations. The one most likely to have an impact will be the availability of essence. So it's reasonable it has a way to give out less if its internal reserve runs low. Under normal circumstances, I doubt it could be noticed. He might age slightly faster until it replenishes itself. But the Weakness put more of a demand; until it reached a point where all it could give out was what it pulled in. Which was only enough to keep him from dying."

"So if he doesn't get a new amulet in time, he'd going to go back to nearly being dead?" Jackal asked worriedly.

"We won't let that happen," Tibs replied as the server headed in their direction.

"Can you sense how long the amulet will last?" Khumdar asked.

"It's too early. I can sense it pulls more when Kroseph exerts himself, but I can't tell how much."

Mez winced. "That's going to hurt Jackal."

The fighter looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"You can't cause him to exert himself," the archer said. "That means no bed fun."

"Right." Jackal stood and took Kroseph's arm, only for his man to pull it out.

"I'm not sick."

"I'm afraid you are," Don replied, and Kroseph glared at him, dropping on the free seat.

"I'm not bedridden." He looked at Jackal, sliding another chair to the table. "And you know better than to treat me as if I was. What's the plan?" he asked Don.

"I think the plan is to find a way to have the dungeon make a ring to handle this one specific issue. It wouldn't be as demanding on it, and should allow for it to have a larger internal reserve, as well as a more efficient process of refilling itself."

"Doesn't that mean it's going to drain people?" Jackal asked. "That's just moving the problem around, not fixing it."

"I can't answer that," the sorcerer said. "There's a little of all the essences in the air, enough it was able to keep you alive."

"Barely," Jackal grumbled, taking his man's hand in his.

“But Tibs can change one essence into another. It’s possible the dungeon can do the same, and it might have a way to make a weave that does it.”

“Or not,” Tibs said.

“It seems that only in figuring out the source of the illness will this be resolved,” Khumdar said.

“And do you have any idea on what that is?” Mez asked. “Oh hoarder of secrets.”

That the cleric didn’t immediately answer caused Tibs to stop sensing Kroseph and watch him.

“I do not know... I cannot know if this might be related or not,” Khumdar said cautiously. “But there is something hiding.... I do not know the kind of secret it might be. Be it person or condition, but I became aware of it shortly before it was noted people fell ill.”

“Do you know where it is?” Don asked.

The cleric shook his head. “It comes and goes; or that is how it seems. At times, no matter how hard I search for it, I cannot sense that secret anywhere. Then, it will be so clear I will be incapable of not being aware of it, and yet still unable to locate it.” He closed his eyes. “I cannot sense it at this time.”

“You said shortly before this started. Any idea how early?”

“Unfortunately no. I am also unaware of how it came to arrive. Secrets are not as the sun shining its light down on us. They do not blind with their arrival.”

Don became thoughtful. “Tibs, how was the people’s essence before the sickness was made official?”

Tibs shrugged. “I didn’t pay attention to that. To many people around, and it’s already so faint I can’t tell them apart in a crowd.”

“What are you thinking?” Kroseph asked.

Don tapped a finger on the table. “It’s the rare sickness that strikes hard. Most of the ones I read about build over time. It can be days, if not weeks, before an afflicted person shows signs. It’s what makes the contagious kinds so dangerous. By the time the first person falls from it, entire neighborhoods are afflicted.”

“Are you thinking it’s what happened here?”

“The guards noted a rise in fighting in the days before the first case was recognized. There were also more people saying how tired they were. Considering how Tibs senses the sickness acting, it seems the two can be connected.”

“I get the people being tired one,” Jackal said. “But fights are always going on.”

“Not like this. The guards know the most likely spots fights will start because they track them. They don’t know about the pit, you don’t have to worry about that. What’s changed was how spread the fighting became. Over ten days before that first case, fights started in parts of the city that had never seen them, and over things that were mostly meaningless. Enough, most didn’t understand why they got angry over them. When asked to describe the reason, all they could say was that they just ‘lost it’.”

“People lose their tempers all the time,” Mez said

“Yes, and it is prevalent enough that many scholars studied what cause it to happen. What kind of person is more likely to lose their temper, what types of situation are more likely to make someone who isn’t prone to anger get angry. There are a lot of them,” Don

said, shaking his head. “And over the books I’ve read, some contradict each other. But one that comes up nearly in all of them is how being tired, how a loss in vitality, leads to an increase in loss of temper. Which is what the sickness seems to be causing.”

He rubbed his temple. “Next time we’re allowed to travel, I’ll look for books that are more detailed on the subject. Those were just generalized compendium I looked at as part of figuring out what interested me.”

“You read the strangest things,” Mez said.

Jackal snorted. “It’s just strange that he reads. And guards’ reports? If you are so bored, I’m sure Khumdar will be happy to include you in his staff training.”

“No,” The cleric stated.

Don shook his head. “Your attempt at getting me to endure pain has shown that putting myself in such situation is not something I care to do.”

“You don’t always have a choice,” Jackal pointed out.

The sorcerer’s nod was confident. “And just like I did then, I will deal with those situations. But I feel my time is better spent learning, instead of suffering. I can learn how to use my essence more efficiently, both as attacks and defense, and support.”

“And that what the team is for,” Tibs said. “To support each other.”

“Never thought of corruption as something that would support a fighter,” Jackal said.

“That’s because you have Tibs,” Don replied. “Other teams have had to rely on the potions or simply learning how to splint an injury, or what to use to keep infection from spreading. Before the clerics arrived, I drained infections out of more than one Runner and townsfolk.”

Tibs stared at him.

“You went about helping people?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“Those who didn’t piss me off, yes.”

“There were some of those?”

The sorcerer chuckled. “There were a lot of people here, even back then. And while it might seem unimaginable to you, considering how easily you irritated me, yes, some did receive my goodwill.”

“How come I never heard about that?” Tibs asked.

Don deflated. “Because I was enough of an idiot to believe word of my good actions would undercut the value of being feared. If I couldn’t act without being noticed, I swore them to secrecy.”

“Don Arabis could be a nice guy even back then,” Jackal mused, tankard to his lips. “I’d have never guessed it.”

“Good. I’d have felt the need to hurt you otherwise.”

“You’d have tried to—”

“As amusing as listening to you two try to out badass each other,” Kroseph said.

“That isn’t what this is about,” Jackal protested.

His man patted his hand. “I’m sure it isn’t. But how about we return to the sickness? Did any of this talk lead to an actual solution?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Don answered. “Khumdar is right that this will only be resolved by finding the source. But if the dungeon will make the rings, it will keep the damage under control until the solution is found.”

“So you’ll ask?” Kroseph asked Tibs.

“If Sto will talk to me. I’ve gone to the field each day, and neither of them said anything.”

“Why wouldn’t they talk to you, or want you to talk to them?” Don asked, and Tibs shrugged.

“Is it in danger?” Jackal asked.

“He’d call out for help if he was,” Tibs replied. “He did before.”

Don tapped a finger. “Can you tell when the dungeon listens to us?”

“Only if one of them speaks first. Why?”

“I’m thinking that the instructions for you not to talk to it don’t mean we can’t talk among ourselves. If it happened to overhear us talking about the problem in Kragle Rock, it would let it decide if it wants to help.”

“He will,” Tibs stated. “Sto understands how important the town is to the Runners. It’s why he helped with the food when Sebastian had the supplies coming in ruined, and why he provided us with weapons to fight.”

“Then we spend tomorrow’s run talking about the sickness,” Jackal said. “And how the rings are the solution.”

“Hopefully in a more discreet way,” Don said, chuckling, “but ultimately, yes.”

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Tibs kept going over the numbers in the ledger when Clara sat opposite him. He added them while she silently stared. He checked they weren’t so far off what they should be that he needed to bring it up with the merchants; and still she stared. Even as he turned to page to write more of them, it was all she did.

He put the quill in the pot, closed the book, and looked at her. Now he saw there was anger in her stare.

“Yes?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What happened?”

He glanced at the ledger, knowing it wasn’t what this was about. “About what?”

She motioned to Kroseph, serving a table.

“He got better.” After a full day without showing weakness, this morning his father had allowed him to work again.

“How?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know. He woke up and felt better. We’re keeping an eye on him in case he falls sick again.”

“You’re hiding something.”

“I’m a rogue. It’s kind of what we do.”

“This isn’t a rogue thing,” she spat.

“Clara. I don’t know what you mean. Kroseph can’t be the only one who gets better.”

“He was so weak I didn’t understand how it was he wasn’t dead. And he just woke up feeling better?” She waved his protest aside. “But that’s not just what I’m here about.”

“Okay.... Then I’m not sure what you’re here about.”

“You don’t have a cleric.”

“Khumdar is—”

“He can’t heal.”

Oh. This could be a problem.

“Without a healer, how is it that your team hardly ever needs healing going into and out of the dungeon? There’s a reason there’s still a cleric at the door, even with each team having their own. I’m drained well before we get to the boss room. I’ve lost teammates because I didn’t have the reserve to heal them. When’s the last time you lost someone?”

Carina’s body flashed in his mind.

“We’re always careful. We make sure we have potions—”

“You mean above all those the Guild took from you?” She smiled at his surprise. “The nice thing about the guild is that it’s willing to share information with clerics about healing related things. Like how many potions the teams bring out. For your team to have as many as they took, and still drink enough to deal with everything the dungeon throws at us, you either have a way to manipulate what it gives, or something else.” She locked eyes with him.

“We’ve had to carry Jackal out a few times,” he said. “Just on our last run, he was so hurt I didn’t think the cleric would be able to fix him.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Did you know Quigly lost people on the fourth floor on both his team’s run?”

Tibs shook his head. The warrior didn’t talk about the people he lost. He was more pragmatic about it. And Tibs wasn’t keeping track of the Runners who died past Upsilon. It was already depressing enough how many he lost in spite of the help he provided.

“So explain how it is that your team went in twice and didn’t lose anyone? You spent the entire day there both times. I know you and Jackal well enough to know you didn’t find a comfortable bench to sit on and talk the day away.”

He doubted using the pastries would work as an explanation, since Quigly’s team would have encountered them too.

“Explain to me how it is Jackal’s man is the only one who seems to have gotten over the Weakness? And why you’re hiding how it happened when he could help the others.”

“I don’t want to hide it,” he snapped, and her expression turned to surprise. “I don’t —” he closed his mouth on the admission. “If I—” he couldn’t say that either. He breathed his emotions steadier. “If I had a way to help everyone, I would.”

“You did cure him,” she said, surprise and excitement filling her eyes.

He shook his head. What he was coming up with had risks, but it was the only thing he could think of to keep her from pressing further.

“We found an item in the dungeon that’s letting him move about.”

“An item?” she said suspiciously. “That the guild somehow didn’t take from you? Because I expect something like that would cost more than all the silvers you’ve accumulated to buy back.”

“It didn’t cure him. If he takes it off, he’ll fall sick again.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain how you kept it from the guild.”

This was what they got for each team keeping how they went about it to themselves. Tibs didn’t know how Quigly’s team, or Saraf’s or Drafiss’s managed it. He just knew that each of them had sold enchanted items to the merchants the guild would have taken and made impossible to buy back.

“We found something that lets us sneak small items out without the guild knowing. We’re not the only ones who found a way,” he added. “We just don’t talk about it, so the guild can’t stop us.”

After helping against Sebastian, he knew she had no more love for the guild than he did, but he wasn’t willing to say more.

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “But if the guild had it, they could figure out how it works and help everyone.”

Tibs snorted. “It’s the guild. They’d take it and charge so many coins only nobles would benefit.” Even after a week of them having the pastries, they hadn’t said anything of what they did. He’d asked Alistair about it during his training after the run, saying it was what was distracting him, instead of admitting to the nightmare still pressing on his mind. And he hadn’t had an answer during the previous day’s training.

She nodded reluctantly. “How about if one of our sorcerers studied it?”

He considered it. “Does purity have any you are certain would use what they learned from it to help the town?” even if she did, he could say he needed time to talk it over with the team and see what to do about making sure Kroseph was safe without it.

But after a few attempts at speaking, she shook her head. Even she knew that Purity also fell victim to those in power not being willing to share what they gained.

“Then I’m not risking Kroseph’s life on this. I’m sorry Clara. But we found it in the dungeon, so we might find another one, and you can have it and see if someone can make more. I’ll give you any we find. You, I trust to give them to those who need them the most.”

And hopefully, soon there would be so many of them then deciding who should have one wouldn’t be a problem anymore.