

“Sto can change the color,” Tibs reminded Don as he frowned at the blue-gray robe. “It isn’t bad,” the sorcerer replied.

“You mean corruption sorcerers aren’t required to dress in that sick making color?” Jackal asked from the bed he stretched on.

“It’s traditional to wear our element’s color,” Don said, opening the robe, “but not required. Especially not for it to be the only color worn.”

“So, you wearing just that was...” the fighter trailed off, grinning.

Don fixed his gaze on him. “A warning to others of how dangerous I am.”

Jackal lasted a few seconds before he had to look away, his skin slightly green. Tibs forgot Don’s eyes had that effect on others, now that they no longer did that to him.

“And it is no longer something you wish to advertise?” Khumdar asked, resting against the table.

“I’ve...” Don studied the robe, then looked at them. “I’ve realized it doesn’t matter if anyone else knows how powerful I am. It doesn’t matter what they think of me.”

“So glad we could help,” Jackal said, putting his hands behind his head.

Don snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself. My teacher was on my back about my attitude long before you.”

“Really? So we had nothing to do with you becoming a better person?” Jackal smirked.

“Jackal,” Mez warned.

“I mean,” the fighter continued, “wasn’t there this thing about you tricking Tibs into accepting you into our team because you—”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?” Don sighed as Jackal grinned. “Fine. Watching Tibs going on like he’s just another one of the people living in Kragle Rock after he was called the Savior of the Dungeon and Hero did have something to do with me realizing I didn’t have to shove what I’d done or could do in people’s faces to be respected.” He grinned. “Happy Jackal?”

“Of course.” The fighter smiled. “Did you think I was trying to get you to say *I* played a part?” He snorted. “I’m the first one out there showing just how good I am. What do you think all those fights I get into are about?” he looked around when no one replied. “No smart comments?”

“We all know that’s why you do it,” Mez said.

Jackal looked disappointed.

“And yet.” Khumdar smiled. “You have yet to take on Cross a second time.”

“I’m not that stupid,” the fighter replied.

Don sighed. “I so wish I could argue that point.”

“Just wait,” Tibs said, closing the chest. “He’s not *that* stupid, but he’ll do something stupid at some point.”

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Tibs sniffed, surprised at how normal the air smelled.

“Did you think we enjoyed the smell anymore than you?” Don asked as they approached the pool of corruption.

“How are they doing it?” Tibs asked.

The work of the last weeks had resulted in a mesh of scaffolding creating a sort of

dome over the pool. The beams seemed too thin to support the wooden steps going up along the front, let alone the small circular wooden building atop it, but they all had essence woven through them.

“Essence work,” Don said with a shrug. “Obviously.”

A woman in gray work clothes with purple trim matching her eyes stepped before them. “Acolyte Arabis, how can I assist you?” The look she gave his attire was filled with judgment.

“It was a dungeon find,” Don replied casually. “I’m still deciding how I’ll accent it.”

“I thought you couldn’t be an acolyte until you reached Epsilon,” Tibs said as she nodded, none of the judgment leaving her expression.

“The title is ceremonial,” she said. “An acknowledgment of his contribution to the academy. Once he is free of the guild, it will become a mark of his position within our organization.”

“I’m here to use the recharging chamber, if it’s available,” Don said.

“It is. Few are willing to travel here yet just to make use of the chamber.” She stepped out of the way, but placed a hand before Tibs as he followed Don to the steps. “And who might you be?”

“Tibs,” he answered, wondering if she really didn’t know who he was, or this was something she had to do.

“He’s a friend,” Don said.

“His element is water,” she stated. “This isn’t for him.”

“Tibs’s curiosity is never ending,” Don replied, his tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. “He wants me to explain how recharging works here, since he doesn’t have access to a connection to his element. I figured that since I’ll be sitting not doing much more than waiting, it’s going to help pass the time.”

She looked at him. “I don’t want anything remaining after he’s gotten sick.”

“I’ll clean it up,” Don assured her.

The steps trembled as they went up, and the weave in the structure moved, almost as if it was reacting to them, although Tibs wasn’t sure how.

“How solid is the weave?” He asked. It didn’t have the usual density of the stronger enchantments.

“It won’t fail,” Don replied. “Strength isn’t always accomplished by putting more essence into a weave.”

“Sometimes how it’s woven that matters.”

The door opened with a push from Don, and the circular room only had a table, chairs, and a small chest next to them. A look inside showed a variety of writing implements.

“I thought people are going to come here to recharge their reserves?”

“The workers already do,” Don said, moving the table to the wall.

“Then why the papers and inks?” Tibs put a chair next to it and went for another one.

“Because not everyone feels the need to accelerate the natural recharging process. So reading or making notes on what they are researching is a way to pass the time. Once the structure is finished, there will be research areas, a library, living quarters for those here long term, I expect.”

“How long with that take?”

Don chuckled, putting the chest on a chair. “Decades, possibly centuries. It might never be finished the way you think about it. Having a city surrounding it will limit the space it can take, but sorcerers are creative in how they build. And while corruption leads many to think we only care for the easy way to accomplish things, we aren’t afraid of hard work if it will get us what we want.”

Tibs remembered how easy everything had seemed while he’d channeled corruption. There had been this undercurrent of not wanting to put anymore effort in how he destroyed Sebastian’s house than he had to. It falling on top of Tibs had only been an annoyance at having to melt more of it than he’d planned to.

“You say having a city around it like that isn’t how it always is. The library in Shelbridge was in the middle of it.”

Don studied the center of the floor. “A lot of the academies are in cities, but this is the first one where corruption manifested itself within it. The others are in the wilderness. Only three of them are under a day’s ride from a city. Each academy had a town grow to support them, but it’s only the brave folks who settle there if they don’t have a familial connection with one of the sorcerers.”

“What are you doing?” There was nothing unusual about the floor, as far as Tibs could sense. Nothing even a weave to protect it against corruption. This far from the pool, there was no danger of something falling in and splashing the liquified essence so high.

“I’m considering how to structure the etching.”

“Is it going to help recharge the robe?”

Don chuckled. “With what you showed me, all I need for that is to stand at the edge of the pool. This is so I’ll be able to fill the robe’s reserves with corruption. They’re filled with air essence right now.”

“Right.” Carina had been overjoyed at all the reserves the robe contained; Two and four. Once for each element. Since air was all she could use then, she’d have filled them all with that. “How can an etching remove the air essence? You can’t affect air with corruption.”

“Actually, once I have the training, I’ll be able to manipulate air essence. Right now, I only know it contains air because that was her element, and you didn’t contradict me. But an etching can be made to affect the other elements. It’s what adding Arcanus is about. Change what the element the etching is made of can do.” He closed his eyes, and essence flowed to the floor. “This is one was created a long time ago to drain amulets, so they can be refilled. There are a lot of variations since not every corruption sorcerer had learned it when they needed to drain their first amulet, but this is the least complicated one.”

“Can’t they just get amulets that take corruption?”

“You’d think so, but rarely.”

“Is it because people don’t like corruption?”

The essence stopped moving and Don looked at Tibs.” What?”

“Is it because people don’t like corruption that there aren’t a lot of corruption amulet? There has to be a corruption dungeon that can make them.”

Don chuckled. “Dungeons that fixate on one element are rare. The Purity one is the only one I’ve read about.”

“Sto’s stone,” Tibs said. “It’s why he picked that name; it’s what he is. Stone Mountain

Crevasse,” he said at Don’s quizzical expression.

“They are named after where they are, what they are made of and... is there a crevasse?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know what that is.”

“You don’t know what a crevasse is? Didn’t you question why it’s in their name?”

“It’s a name. Why would I question it?”

“Good point.” The essence flowed again. “A crevasse is a break in the ground. And I guess that there probably is one somewhere in the mountain range. It’s funny they picked that as their name. I thought it was just Sto. Like you said, I didn’t question it. But they aren’t fixated on earth as their elements. The people golems and the Gnolls are made flesh, like us.”

“The Ratlings and Bunnylings are made of stone.”

“Maybe they didn’t know how to use the other elements that way until the third floor. There is a thesis that postulates that dungeons can only use the element that is most prevalent where they form. And as they grow in power, they gain access to more, and incorporate that into—” he chuckles. “But to answer your actual question. The reason there aren’t a lot of amulets that start with containing corruption is because corruption is only one of twenty-four elements with a disproportionately smaller number of users. All amulets are repurposed at one time or another, and most get essence that isn’t corruption. Draining one completely, then putting a little corruption in it will start the process, since they then refill naturally.”

“Why not just get a Runner with air to drain those in the robe? It would be faster.”

“Aren’t you worried about what they’d think?”

“Sto’s made a lot of items with reserves in them. Bow’s like Mez’s, swords and armors. Even robes. They’d just think we got a more powerful one.”

Don smiled. “And how do you explain they can’t sense the reserves I want them to drain?”

Tibs opened his mouth and closed it. He hadn’t heard of anyone else having something like that. Not that they’d talk about it if they did. But considering Sto had said it took a lot of essence to make, he probably hadn’t made others.

“Remember, I can’t sense the reserves. I’m hoping it’s something the dungeon can change if, once I’ve filled them with corruption, I still can’t sense them. I have to be able to tell how much is left if I’m going to make effective use of it.

“I could have drained them for you.”

“But this is going to let you practice etching.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You’re doing all the work.”

“I’m laying down the pattern. I always do this before a new etching. So I can make sure it’s the way I need it to be.”

“You can do that?” As far as Tibs sensed, Don was making an etching. The Arcanus wasn’t there yet, but it was no different from any of his etching that didn’t use Arcanus.

Don started at him, “How do you make a new etching?”

“I...etch it?”

“And if you make a mistake?”

“I start small,” Tibs said sheepishly, and Don snorted. “I clean up the mess.”

“Your teacher never showed you how to lay down a pattern?”

“I don’t think it’s something he does,” Tibs said after thinking back. “He makes motions, and the etching happens.”

“Maybe he didn’t have to make something new with you.”

“He made a solid water bust of Tirania as a practice target. I don’t think he had much use for that before me.”

Don let out a slow whistle. “He must be good. My teacher still lays down a pattern anytime he has to make even a simply alteration to an etching.” He looked at the pattern before him then sat. “Sit, we’re ready to get you started.”

Tibs grumbled as he sat. “You could have warned me this was why you wanted me to come, instead of saying you wanted company.” He rubbed his temple preemptively.

“And have you running in the opposite direction?” Don replied with a smirk. “I know you too well, Tibs.”

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Tibs wished the headache faded in time with the essence draining out of the robe. There might be an end to it, then.

“Is it working?” Don asked.

“You said I didn’t make mistakes.” He couldn’t sense the reserves, but air dripped into the etching and dispersed out of the outside edge.

“You didn’t. But this is a dungeon made item. One that’s more complex than the usual amulet one would make. I have no way to know if one of those weaves interferes.”

“It’s working. But I can’t tell how fast.”

Don nodded and stood, stretching. “Since no one’s lining up to use this chamber, it’s going to hours before anyone checks in on us, if they even bother.”

“Don,” Tibs hesitated. This had bothered him since they’d left the dungeon. “How do you think Khumdar did what he did? Darkness shouldn’t have been able to pull earth along like that. It doesn’t matter how many earth fighters he talked with.”

“I have no idea.” He walked around the chamber. “I never read anything about someone other than a sorcerer being able to pull essence out of items. I certainly haven’t read anything about purity clerics doing it, not that there are many books about what they do.” He stopped. “If he isn’t a sorcerer.” He raised a hand. “I’m not saying I don’t believe him, but... with you, I can just go, you’re impossible, and I will deal with that. Him. Being a cleric of Darkness raises so many questions about just what else has been kept out of the libraries. And why it’s been done. How powerful is he? It’s one way I can think he’d be able to do something that shouldn’t be possible now.”

“Lambda,” Tibs said. “Somewhere in the middle of how it feels when I compare it to someone who as just graduated by how the guild does it, and one that’s just become Kappa. You and Jackal are a little denser than him, Mez less.”

“You?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t think it matters how dense mine is, since I barely know how to do anything with it.”

“That’s nowhere near strong enough to do it through sheer will.”

“I’ve pulled at other essences before,” Tibs said, already knowing that hadn’t been the same thing. “And my teacher said it’s something anyone can do. It’s how we can disrupt

someone else's attack."

"Yes, will can be applied and indiscriminately affect essence, but that isn't what he did. Do you know what Arcanus he used?"

"I was surprised when he did it during the game of Conquest. The other times too busy fighting."

"Didn't you ask him?"

Tibs shook his head. "For him, darkness means accumulating secrets, so I let him have them."

"Considering he claims not to have received training—"

"He didn't lie about that. I'd have seen the light on the words."

"Don't rely too much on that. With Darkness as an element, if there's anyone who can find a way to lie and not have Light react to it, it's going to be one of them. Him, since being a cleric seems to add more to what he's capable. Add to that he goes around finding out things, and he could have gained knowledge about etching and the Arcanus." He stopped moving. "Actually, we shouldn't assume his effective training is any lower than ours. He isn't categorized by the guild or anyone else, as far as I know."

"So he could be learning things above Lambda?"

"Or above Kappa, or Epsilon. The teachers are all at least Delta, after all."

"Not all of them."

"The guild says they are."

Tibs shrugged. "The density of their essence says otherwise. Do you think the guild is lying?"

"Don't you know?"

"I haven't asked anyone directly. So long as the person saying it believe it's true, that's what light sees. We've only had clerks tell us about the teachers."

"And the teachers themselves."

"Who were told their rank by the guild."

Don nodded. "And the guild might not be lying either. The way the tests are build they don't test how much essence you have directly, but what you can do with it. You need to accomplish a specific goal that is difficult, but other than the one where suffusing ourself is how we pass it, the others don't care how you succeed. Just like strength can compensate for knowledge, knowledge can compensate for strength." He smiled. "I think Khumdar's attack was an etching."

"But could anyone here teach him how? It isn't like he has access to books."

"I suspect he wouldn't bother asking. He'd just uncover the secrets."

"And that's enough? It wasn't that easy for me to learn how to etch."

"Who knows. Clerics like him aren't supposed to exist. The ones from Purity go on and on about how that's the only element that produces them. That corruption is the enemy of everything. Khumdar would prove they are wrong. And if I'm going to be generous, they exterminate any who claim to be clerics of other elements because they don't know any better. The end result is that there is no way to know what a cleric can or can't do. It's possible that cleric can somehow put together how Arcanus works within an etching without needing to be shown. The only way I'd have to know is to ask him, and I'm not sure I'd trust the answers he'd give me."

“Don’t ask him when I’m around.”

Don chuckled. “I don’t plan on asking. Unlike you, I don’t go looking to get headaches.”

“I don’t go looking for them,” Tibs complained. “They just always find me.”

“Of course.” Don chuckled. “That’s why it’s so easy for you to keep your mouth shut and not ask questions.”