

“When will there be another caravan?” Tibs asked the barman when the cheers quieted.

“You’re better off seeing if Mother Natril will see you one of her horses so you can catch up with yours. They only left this morning.”

“And what a commotion that was,” the old man seated at the end of the bar said, his words slightly slurred.

“I’d have expected them to pack last night,” Tibs said. “It’s been the way in previous villages.” The better to be away before anyone thought too hard on the fun they’d had the previous day and night and come demanding to have perceived wrongs righted.

“Don’t know about that. Just that there was almost a fight. And it didn’t stop when I told them you were dead.” He frown and looked in his tankard. “You see him too, right? He isn’t a spirit haunting me.”

“You went into the forest,” the barman said. “No one who ventured in before ever came back.”

“What was the fighting about?” Tibs asked. He wasn’t concerned about what Graiden had been told. The only way it affected him was that there was no chance he’d leave his pay behind. Not that he expected the guard chief could have. As far as he was concerned, Tibs had abandoned his position. Those people didn’t get paid.

“What fight?” the old man said, grinning.

“How about I pay for a beer?” Tibs asked, sliding a copper across the bar. “Maybe that’s going to help you remember.” He motioned to the barman before the drunk could reply. Tibs doubted the man was allowed to drink anything more expensive than that. He pulled the tankard away once the barman put it down. “Who was fighting?”

“I’ll remember after I’ve tasted it.”

“I’m sure you remember that much without drinking. And if you can’t. Maybe I should drink this instead. It’s still my drink until I give it to you.”

“The kid and the old man,” the drunk hurried to say.

Tibs frowned, handing the tankard over. He hadn’t expected it to be that, or to be an actual fight. He’d figured Rigel had gotten into an argument with Graiden over his coins. Or maybe sending someone to look for him, although that was unlikely. As much as he’d gotten to appreciate Tibs, the caravan master wouldn’t risk his schedule for anyone.

“What was the fight about?”

“You.” The man took a careful swallow, as if he feared he’d received poison instead. The sigh was filled with delight, and he gulped down half of it. Maybe Ale was all he was usually allowed.

“But why?”

“The kid wanted them to stay. To wait for you to come back. The old man wouldn’t have any of it.”

Tibs nodded. Graiden wouldn’t have any time for that.

“The old man looked like he might give in when I told them the news. You know. No one survives the forest.” He looked at Tibs again as if he wasn’t sure he was real, then drank.

“How did Jeremy react?”

“Who’s that?”

“The young man.”

“Told me I didn’t know you. That you wouldn’t let a stupid forest eat you.”

Tibs shook his head in disbelief. Jeremy thought far too much of him.

“The old man seemed confused for a heartbeat, then said if you’re dead, then there was no point in waiting and that they were already starting late because of the kid arguing.”

That was a lot of precision from who Tibs expected was the village drunk. But maybe the people here looked after him, so ale was all he drank, instead of the stuff that would destroy his mind.

“Kid was ready to argue some more. But the old man told him that if he wanted to go rescue a dead man, he could do it on his own and not get paid for it.” The drunk looked at Tibs. “Thought he’d do it too. He got that look in his eyes. Like there was nothing he wouldn’t do to save you. He was...” he hurried to drink, finishing the tankard, “scary.”

Tibs had trouble imagining Jeremy being scary, but to him he was just a kid. To the drunk, he’d be a guard with a caravan. Someone who killed bandits, animals and monsters without hesitations. There weren’t many songs about caravan guards, but there were stories. What else did they have to do when they stopped in villages, but tell stories in exchange for drink and food?

“But he left with them.”

The man nodded. “I thought the truth would sink in when he didn’t run to die in the forest with you, but he looked serious when he disappeared among the other folks there. Like he’d gotten screwed over by one of the wagon folks, but he wasn’t going to get angry. He was going to get even.”

Tibs stared. There wasn’t much light on the words, enough he figured the man exaggerated here and there. But in the end, it was just what he thought the look on Jeremy’s face had meant. He found it easier to believe the young man had buried his pain under determination. How often had Tibs told him that if he was going to be a guard, he had to but the caravan before everything else, even the things he wanted. Jeremy might have wanted Tibs to still be alive, but the caravan had to come before that.

He hoped the young man used that to focus on his work instead of trying to impress anyone else.

Tibs slid another copper to the barman and passed the new tankard to the drunk. “Extra payment for what you told me. Take your time with this one.” He turned to the barman. “You didn’t answer my question. How long until another caravan?”

“Long. A season, maybe two.”

Two meant he’d be here over the cold season. Hopefully, someone here would sell him warm clothing if he couldn’t convince Firmen to make that one of his loot reward. He didn’t want to let himself be affected by the cold, but without clothing, it would make everyone curious.

“Does anyone have a bed I can sleep in?”

“It can’t take you more than days to catch up with you caravan,” the barman said. “You don’t what to stay here. We’re nothing like the places you see. The most entertaining thing we do is watch Nealsin stumble to his house when I have enough of him complaining I won’t refill his tankard and kick him out of my tavern.”

Tibs shrugged. Even without the dungeon, at this point, he wouldn’t go back. Jeremy

would be intolerable after being proved right that if they had stayed, Tibs would have returned.

“Well, space in the attic,” the man said, sounding uncertain. “If you get hay from Mother Natril, you can spread it there. It’s not going to be much when the weather turns.”

Hopefully Tibs would have an alternative before then. “Where can I find Mother Natril?”

* * * * *

Mother Natril was the old woman who worked the farm Nadirward of the village; well away from the forest. Tibs wasn’t sure how she managed to cut down the field, as well as tend the animals she looked after. She was one of three farmers who provided the grains and vegetables. Breads and root vegetables were what he had to look for during his stay, unless he brought in meat. They had a few trappers, but since they were scared of going deep into the forest, they didn’t bring much back.

While negotiating, Tibs helped her feed the bull and cows, the goats and horses. Tibs wasn’t sure how the barman expected him to reach the caravan on either of them. They looked to be as old as Mother Natril.

The sun was touched the forest by the time they were done, and he’d earned himself a corner in her house, the one her daughter had slept in before finding herself a man and they built their own home. It came with feeding the animals every morning, cleaning the stalls, and walking those that couldn’t be set loose unattended because they could walk through the fragile fence that marked the enclosure.

Tibs hadn’t argued. He knew why, but he didn’t mind. He knew she wasn’t Mama. But she was a woman who needed the assistance, and providing it comforted him. It also gave him something to do while he let Firmen and Merka get over his run.

A few days, then he venture back in. Mother Natril would have rested and be able to resume the work for the day or two he spent with the dungeon.

* * * * *

Tibs felt the eyes on him as he worked. The barn was open on one side, with the feeding trough there. A glance over his shoulder only showed him a form hurrying behind the corner of the house. He’d expected a child, but what he sensed was adult sized.

With Mother Natril in the house, and no one else around, Tibs made a disk of water, stilling it until it reflected the house and its corner. When he saw the man peeking around it, Tibs knew there might be difficulties.

The man didn’t approach. While Tibs worked, or as he headed to the tavern, once he was done. He refused to take away from the food his host had. She wasn’t the ‘a death’s feet’ many of the bards described villages as being, but she had little to spare, and Tibs had coins to pay for the vegetable stew the tavern sold.

The man he rescued sat two tables away and watched him warily. Tibs didn’t acknowledge him. Focusing on eating and speaking with those who approached him.

From them, he gained a sense of why the man watched him. They asked mostly about his rescue of Joman and the monsters he had to fight. Deny as he did, Joman had seen his torn clothing. Tibs had hoped the man would have been too out of it to notice he’d put him down long enough to remove his shirt and cut his pants short as to remove most of the visible damage to them. Those were already dark, so the blood wasn’t as visible, and he’d

removed to worse of the stains with an etching of purity as he walked.

He didn't like making the man sound like he was addled, but Tibs stuck to his story of finding him in a gully. The rips in his pants, he explained with getting them torn on the underbrush, and that he'd ditched his shirt for the same reason. It had been soiled enough Joman might have mistaken that for blood.

When the man finally sat before him, he looked scared. "Why aren't you telling them what you saw?"

Tibs motioned to the barman before replying. "I told them I saw you and brought you back to your woman."

"But the things," he hissed. "I know you saw them. They cut you. You had—" he closed his mouth as the barman placed a tankard before each of them. He looked at the man with pity, then left. "You had bandaged yourself," he whispered.

"Some of the trees have sharp thorns," Tibs said. He wished Mind was one of the elements he had. With it, he could sooth the man's mind, make the things that had hurt him hazy. Help him put that behind him, move forward with his life, instead of always thinking back. The element could do much more. Bards had many songs of adventurers using it to make others believe whatever they needed. Have them see what wasn't there, and the reverse. Mind felt like a dangerous element to Tibs. One easier to give into and abuse than Corruption.

"No. They are thing made of trees, that's what have the thorns. Like knives they cut you with." He rubbed his forearm where he had been injured. The cut had been shallow and already scabbed over by the time Tibs had found him. He'd removed the corruption that had formed, but otherwise left the injury.

"I don't know what it was like," Tibs said, trying to sound supportive. "Being lost like that. I had your trail to follow, and it wandered." He considered adding details, but he didn't want to sound like a bard telling a story. "You were delirious when I found you. Maybe you ate some of the leaves and they didn't agree with you."

"I didn't," the man snapped. "I didn't touch anything in the abyss forsaken place."

"Maybe it was hunger then. Did you sleep?"

"Why are you doing this?" he yelled, and the tavern fell silent.

Tibs wished he could explain it. Tell him he was better not knowing. That there were things that, even if you knew there were real, was better believing they weren't. That he'd gain nothing trying to force what he'd experienced to be real and risked losing what he had.

Tibs had seen madness take people in his travels. Some caused by sickness. Others by obsession.

"How about you go home, Joman?" the barman called.

"I want to know why he's lying!"

"He saved your life," the man snapped. "How about you just thank him for that?"

"Saved me?" Joman looked at Tibs in anger. "He controlled it. He made the trees move out of the way so he could carry me out." The smile was triumphant.

Tibs wished he hadn't realized that part. Because now, Joman would seem insane to the others. "I didn't," Tibs said as gently as he could. "You were just tired and hungry and scared. Your mind—"

"You can't fool me. You're something of the dungeons. Something made to eat us."

“I’m just someone who is used to the forests; who can follow trails. I’m sorry you feel I’m responsible for what happened to you. All I wanted was to get you back to your woman.”

“Joman,” the barman said, taking the man by the shoulder before he could speak. “You’re going home, now.” He pulled him away, returning once Joman was out of the tavern. “I’m sorry about that. You saved him and—”

“It’s okay. He went through something that scared him. He’ll calm down in time.”

“You’re nicer about what he said than I’d ever be,” the woman at the table next to his was. “I’d have told him to leave me and never bother me again.”

Tibs shrugged. Just like he didn’t think there was anything he could tell Joman that would convince him. He wouldn’t be able to make the woman’s question what actions she would have taken, no matter how bright the words were.