

Tibs reached out and pulled the corruption out of Jackal even before dropping next to him. "I'm sorry," he repeated. While the sickly purple that spread over the fighter's left side was vanishing, some had already seeped into his essence and was out of Tibs's reach.

"What about?" Jackal asked, his voice weak.

"This." Tibs motioned around them. "If I hadn't lost control of the essence, Don wouldn't have had to do what he did and distract you and you wouldn't have gotten hit, and ___"

Jackal laughed, then groaned, nearly doubling over.

"It's not funny." Tibs helped him lie back down and applied weaves of purity.

"Kinda is." Jackal panted. "The way you think I didn't mean to get hit."

"You don't get hit. You're too good of a fighter."

"I get hit plenty." His friend already sounded stronger as purity spread from injury to injury. "I couldn't think of a faster way to get away from the boss so Don could do what he was planning."

"It's still my fault. I tried something and—" he closed his mouth. "This wouldn't have happened, and—"

"You won us the fight," Jackal stated.

"Don did. He was able to get control of the essence. Without that—" he swallowed "—everyone would have died."

"I was able to control it," the sorcerer said, "but I'd couldn't throw that much corruption around. Any less, and it would have survived to continue fighting. So you were vital to winning." He studied the fighter. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm going to be sick for a while, aren't I?" Jackal asked, pushing himself sitting.

"Sorry. Once corruption mixes in with your life essence, I don't know how to—"

"I'll live," Jackal said. "That's the important part. And we're getting a lot of loot out of it." He motioned to the chest that hadn't been at the back of the room before the fight.

"I'll get it," Mez said. "Unless you feel you have to be the one pulling it out of the chest?"

"I think I can let you have that privilege, this one time."

Mez smirked as he headed for it.

"That wasn't how this was supposed to go," the Them grumbled.

"Don't come complaining to us after you cheated and they beat you," Sto replied angrily.

Tibs couldn't make out what the Them grumbled in reply, their voice growing softer as if they were moving away.

"I don't know what it is with the dungeon," Mez said, returning with a bulging bag in one hand and a ring in the other. "But the bag's filled with yet more ring."

"It's making us rich," Jackal replied. "Those gold rings are worth a lot, right Tibs?"

The archer frowned as he looked the ring over. "Those aren't—"

"Trust us," Jackal insisted. "We know our metals."

The archer looked up from the ring and exchange a look with Don and Khumdar, then shrugged. He handed the bag to the fighter, who put it in his pouch. "So, now what? We have time before we need to head out. Are we continuing to search for the floor's boss?"

"I hate to say this." Jackal got to his feet and Tibs readied himself to steady him. "But

we're ending this run early. Without me in top form, you guys don't stand a chance."

"I don't know," Don replied, looking the fighter over. "We don't need you at your best to distract everything we come across so we can take them down."

"I take down more of them than you have," Jackal countered.

"Than I have, certainly. But than we have?" the sorcerer studied him, a smile forming. "Accept it. You're nothing more than the distraction in this team."

Jackal grinned. "I know I'm distracting you, but how about your stop eyeing me like that?" he paused as Don blushed. "My man doesn't share."

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The trek to the floor's exit was arduous. City guards and dogs descended on them in droves. Even 'citizens' burst out of their houses to assault them. True to Don's prediction, Jackal threw himself at all of them, including the dogs. And true to Jackal's words, even without being at his best, he took down more of them than the team did, but at a cost, and he refused to let Tibs heal him, claiming he needed all his reserve in case the dungeon dropped the sky on them.

Considering that each time another group of dungeon creatures attacked, Sto went on a tirade about the Them and how they had no right to take control like they did, Tibs thought that danger was real. It also made him wonder what and how strong the Them was. He hadn't known something could take away control from Sto. Even Ganny could only make changes if he let her.

They remained on their guard even once they passed through the doorway. Sto had never put creatures or traps between it and the outside, but the way things had gone, they all understood things weren't normal.

There were no attacks, and the cleric healed Jackal as best she could, commenting on the corruption and eyeing Don as if he was the one to have done it.

Tibs shook his head each time Jackal opened his mouth. Even without trying, he could sense a secret trailing them, and now, he recognized it as what he'd felt through the town. Khumdar nodded, confirming he sensed it, too.

Even in the inn, he felt it.

Kroseph was at Jackal's side before they reached their table. "You look like you took on all of Serba's dogs."

"He did," Tibs said, looking around. Everyone looked exhausted, and he wished he could just hand out the rings, but the Them was still there by the door, some of that secret stretching throughout the room. "How's Russel?" He could at least help one person right now. If he could pull this off.

"Still under the weather. Silvie is in the kitchen today. I'll get your ales."

"You think he'd like me to visit?" Tibs asked before Kroseph stepped away. He wrapped the hand he dropped on Jackal's leg in darkness and wished he knew how to etch or weave with it. He'd have to rely on the Them having too much to pay attention to, to notice this.

"Sure?" the server looked between the two as Jackal placed a ring there without giving outward signs of the motion. Nothing about the secret changes, so it didn't know?

He sent the ring the hidden his pouch, hoping its enchantment worked on the Them as he stood, and again no changes he could sense. It followed him as he went up the stairs and

knocked on a door. He entered without waiting, and Russel raised an eyebrow. He was reclining on one side of the large bed, pillows stacked under his back, looking pale.

“You look like you had a rough run,” Kroseph’s brother said.

“No more than the others,” he replied, shrugging. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired and hoping it’s going to run its course quickly,” Russel answered. “The kitchen needs me.”

Tibs nodded, and pulled a chair as the Them hovered in the room’s corner as if it was looking over the carved stones on the dresser.

“It’s just my luck to get the abyss cursed thing twice.”

“That’s not a thing,” Tibs replied before realizing it, his attention divided. How long would the Them stay here? He couldn’t keep the ring hidden once he handed it to Russel.

The man laughed, then coughed and Tibs held him, sensing for anything he could do. He didn’t seem to be losing essence at the moment, but it was dangerously thin. He helped him drink from the cup by the bed, then settled him against the pillows.

“Maybe it isn’t for you adventurer types. For the rest of us, we kind of rely on the thing.”

“No, you don’t.” How boring would the conversation need to be for the Them to go check in on something else? He wished he could tell Sto to cause something that would call it back. “I’ve seen how you work. You prepare everything you’ll need ahead of time. You make sure anyone assigned to work with you knows the plan and their duties. You do everything so your day will be smooth.”

Russel smiled. “Then things happen.”

“Stuff happens,” Tibs said with a shrug. “That doesn’t mean there’s an element making it happen.” Even if this time there was the essence of one involved. Go away, he mentally ordered the Them. He could explain giving the ring as something to make Russel feel better, but would it start acting immediately? He’d only implied that the ring would help from how Sto spoke and because he knew his friend wanted to help their town. But he had no idea how it would help and if the Them would be able to tell.

“Sometimes it feels like they hate us,” Russel said dejectedly.

“They don’t.”

“You sure about that?” now there was a hint of anger. “Look at what happened to this city and tell me it doesn’t seem like they weren’t involved. We even ended up with that pool by Merchant Row.”

“It was people doing those,” Tibs said. “Not the elements. They don’t care about us one way or another. What happened To Kragle Rock was because of Sebastien wanting power. The pool happened because Bardik used me to have concentrated corruption essence smuggled here, and something happened where they were stored. Stuff happened because the guild doesn’t care about the people here, what happens to us beyond sending us in to feed the dungeon and taking coins from those who live here. It’s all people doing that. Not the elements.”

As he finished speaking, the secret moved away, through the wall, outside of the building.

“You think it’s over?” Russel asked, as Tibs tracked the Them. How far could they ‘hear’ what he said? ‘See’ what he did? “other than this sickness, I mean. That man’s dead,

and Kro tells me there's no one in that family looking to avenge him."

"I don't know." They were two blocks away and none of the tendrils of secrets emanating from it were directed at the inn. "The world's a lot bigger than I thought, and there's always people who want power." He put the ring on the man's finger, earning himself a frown. "And so long as the guild doesn't care about us, so long as they're allowed to continue not caring what's done to the people in Kragle Rock, someone is going to try, and we're going to get hurt in the process." He smiled. "Unless we're ready to deal with them ourselves."

"Which is something you're working on."

Tibs shrugged.

"What is this?" Russel spun the ring, and it was no longer as loose as when Tibs had slipped it on.

Tibs smiled. "I think the sickness is about to run its course."

The cook stared at him, then started pulling the ring off. "You need to give this to someone who matters. Someone important."

Tibs stopped him. "You matter, Russel. You make our food. That's kind of as important as if gets to us Runners. And we have more. We just have to be careful distributing them."

"Don't take this wrong, Tibs, but how? How are you doing this? You're just a kid and you save the town twice."

"We all did that."

Russel snorted. "If you and Jackal hadn't been there, the town would have fallen when that man arrived."

"Jackal held it," Tibs said. "I wasn't here when Sebastian started the Siege."

"Barely. I know he's Kro's man, so I shouldn't say anything bad about him, but Jackal didn't make any friends with how he went about keeping that man from taking over."

"He was fighting for the town. He didn't have time to let people argue with him over how to do it."

"And somehow, once you got here, everything started running a lot smoother."

"I just helped," Tibs mumbled, and Russel laughed, then he coughed, but not as badly. Tibs couldn't tell if it was the ring. It was pulling essence in, but if it was pushing some into the man, it was too faint for him to sense it.

"Oh yes, you were just hanging there, in the back, waiting to be told what to do to be helpful." He fell quiet, turning the ring on his finger. "And now, you bring us a cure." He wiped at his eyes. "Do you understand just how..." he couldn't seem to find words.

"Kragle Rock is my town," Tibs said. "I'm not going to let anything happen to it, or the people who live here."

"But how?" Russel demanded, sounding almost angry. "You're just a kid, Tibs. How can you do all this? What are you?"

"I'm..." Tibs tried to answer as Kroseph's brother's expression turned fearful, as if he was scared he'd offended some powerful creature and it would lash out. He wanted to tell him something that would explain how it was he did more than most. He wanted to tell him Sto was the dungeon, and that Sto was their friend, all of Kragle Rock. People deserved to know they weren't alone in this. But he couldn't say so much and endanger his friend.

“I have allies,” he finally said. “Kraggle Rock has allies. They can’t always help, but they always want to.”

“And those allies...” he turned the ring again. “They made this?”

Tibs nodded.

“Enough for everyone?”

“Hopefully.”

“I thought—” he wipes at his eyes again. “I thought I was going to die too, Tibs.”

“What do you mean ‘too’?”

“Didn’t you hear? The sickness took Miss Nourtamont this morning.”

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“We need to get the rings out now,” Tibs whispered, sitting at the table.

“Then those are the rings?” Don asked.

“Of course,” Jackal replied. “Didn’t you know?”

“With how they were all we were getting, I suspected.”

“I had no clue,” Mez said.

“We need to let Quigly know,” Tibs added, “and any Runner Teams that make it to the fourth floor. We’re going to need all the rings if we’re going to protect the people here.”

“What about that thing here for the dungeon?”

“Sto’s going to have to deal with that. And I think it’s mostly a dungeon thing, anyway. It took control of things while we were fighting the boss. It’s why the corruption did what it did, not me.”

“You still should—”

“And if you hadn’t tried something,” Tibs cut him off, “we’d all be dead. The Them was cheating, trying to kill us.”

It silenced the sorcerer and the others.

“I’ll talk with Quig,” Jackal said. “Should I tell him about how dangerous the dungeon is going to be?”

Tibs shook his head. “It doesn’t like me, because of my elements. I don’t think it is going to do anything to anyone else.”

“Which means our next run is going to be challenging,” Mez said, annoyed.

“Challenging is how we like things,” Jackal looked around the table. “Right?”

“We had to help you walk,” Mez replied.

The fighter shrugged. “It won’t catch me by surprise again. And how about I give you a challenge of my own?” he asked, cutting off Don’s response. “What is up with Quigly and his woman?”

“What woman?” Tibs asked. He didn’t know the warrior as well as Jackal, but he was sure he’d have heard if he’d found himself someone special.

“Cross,” Jackal replied.

“She’s not his woman,” Tibs scoffed. He knew her well enough. “She doesn’t have a man.”

“So that’s the problem.” Jackal grinned. “Quid’s adamant she’s his.”

“I’m guessing he hasn’t told her that,” Mez said. “She doesn’t strike me as someone who lets anyone tell her whose she is.”

“She punched him through a stand in Market Place,” Tibs said. “Maybe that was why?”
“As interesting as that is,” Don said. “The rings? You say it’s important we distribute them? Why is it more important now than it was this morning?”

“Someone died from it,” Tibs said.

“Are you sure?”

“Russel told me. He was afraid he’d be next.”

“How are we doing this?” Mez asked. “The five of us can’t manage it.”

“I can have the rogues go around.”

“You can’t just have them dropped into pockets,” Don replied. “Unless the dungeon made them more powerful than Krosep’s ring, people need to wear them.”

“We go to the merchants,” Jackal said. “Tibs can talk with Darran. I know a few of them too. No one’s going to question people going to see them.”

“And what are the chances they’ll sell the rings instead of giving them away?” Mez asked.

“High,” Tibs grumbled.

“Especially if there isn’t enough for everyone,” Don said. “The temptation to sell them to whomever can pay the most will be high. The rogues might be a better idea.”

“And can we trust them?” Mez asked.

“I know who I can trust,” Tibs replied, not liking the way the archer was looking at him.

“That isn’t going to be a lot of people helping.”

Tibs glared at Mez, and the archer looked back with a steady gaze.

“You want to involve Amelia.” Tibs had trouble not spitting the name, and he hated himself for it.

“She’s proved she can be trusted, Tibs.”

And she had. Only it didn’t seem to be enough. Despite all the good she did for his down, she was a noble, and that one act undid everything when he let it.

“She and her allies among the nobles already go around helping folks,” Don said in the stretching silence of them waiting for Tibs to say something. “I’ve interacted with them.”

“And that raises the point of what are we doing about the nobles?” Jackal asked.

He felt their eyes on him even more acutely.

Let them find their own solution, he wanted to spit. Let them build their wall and keep any of the town from going in. Let them stew in the sickness.

“They can have one of their team get the rings,” Tibs said.

“They don’t have one doing the fourth floor yet,” Mez replied.

“What about that woman’s team?” Don searched for something, then seemed surprised. “I never heard her name. Silver hair, always wears a gold pin encrusted with gems.”

“Lady Mirabel,” Mez said. “She lost her archer in the process of clearing the third floor. She’s looking for a replacement and will be redoing it to make sure they work well with the rest of her team.”

“Good,” Tibs said, knowing he was being unreasonable. “Then she can get them the rings once she makes it to the fourth floor.” He crossed his arms over his chest and ignored

the looks of disapproval.

Until Jackal joined them.

He sighed. "We take care of the townsfolk first. The nobles get the leftovers, for once."