

Jackal stepped back with a surprised curse when the dogs growled at him. Serba let out a series of whistles, and the dogs' ears straightened, a few ending their growling.

"I said settle down!" she snapped, and they all had their rump on the ground, three still glaring at the fighter while the other four looked at Serba. Tibs laughed at the disbelieving expression on their face, which mirrored Jackal's.

"Serba?" The fighter asked cautiously. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied dismissively. "It's too tight, and too hot and too..." She shook her head. "How do you deal with all this?"

"Sto?" Tibs asked.

"Of course," she replied. "Who else would I be?"

"Serba, what happened to you?" Jackal motioned to her cut and bloody armor.

She looked down and tentatively touched the healed injury, almost fearfully. "They hurt me," she said, her voice growing distant. "I tried to fight them, but I couldn't bring anything to protect me. It hurt." She looked at Tibs. "It hurt so much. More than what Bardik did. It hurt me..." She searched for words, then tapped her chest. "Here. I didn't know if you'd heard me. They broke me. I was losing—"

"What are you—"

She spoke over Jackal as if she didn't hear him. "Then we were here, running and fighting." Her expression darkened. "You had the gall to tell me to stay out of the fight, and I thought you were just going to let that thing kill you." She chuckled. "But it was just you being clever, as usual. I'd have never thought to lure them where there was no essence. I ran after you because I wasn't going to let my first worthy leader just go to his death. I didn't know what to do when the wall came up, then that thing stabbed you, so I sent my dogs to help, but all it did was make it notice me and..."

She touched her stomach again, thoughtfully this time. "You were helping, then you had to go. Then you were holding me and I knew I'd be okay. I hurt, then you were being stupid and telling me my dogs were worth less than I was, so I took matter in my hands and did I didn't let my one chance to do something good pass. What did it matter if I wasn't going to be me after. It's not like I..." she looked at Tibs and Jackal. "Wait. How am I still me?"

"But you're Sto," Tibs said, trying to breathe his worry down.

"Of course." She grinned. "Stone Mountain Crevice. That's me."

"So..." Jackal eyed the dogs. "You aren't Serba?"

"Don't be an idiot, Jackie. Of course I'm your sister." She paused. "Okay, that is odd."

"Both Sto and Serba are in you?" Tibs tried.

"Which one is in control?" Jackal asked, hope and fear in his voice.

"That's not how this works." She rolled her eyes. "Why did I do that? How come I don't have to think about everything I do? Why does it just happen? Ganny? How does any of this work?"

"I have no idea," she replied with a laugh.

Serba looked up, then around. "Where are you?"

"Right here," Ganny replied, her voice cracking with worry. "Can't you see me?"

Serba rubbed her face, and the elements shifted inside her. Tibs tried to make sense

of how they moved as she stared at her hand in surprise, turning it over. He'd thought some would move where he figured the node of sight was, but none concentrated in that area. She looked around again, then stopped on her left. "There you are," she said, relieved. "This is going to take some getting used to."

"Okay, what in the abyss is going on?" Jackal asked.

"I told you," Serba said, sounding annoyed. "I was—"

"Tibs," Jackal cut her off. "Tibs, you tell me what's going on with my...sister. And keep it short, you don't have that much time. They were gathering when I made it inside the dungeon."

"The Them attacked Sto because he help against Sebastian, and against the sickness, which turned out to be the Them causing it. Dungeons aren't supposed to help. There's some people who—"

"Simple, Tibs. No time."

He nodded. "He called out for help, and I came. Because of the dogs on this floor, I convinced Serba to help by implying she was more important than you are. Sorry."

The two of them rolled their eyes in an almost identical manner. Then she was surprised by the action again.

"We got in and fought the golem guards. She took control of the dogs because Sto make them—right, no time. You'll have to explain why that is. We made it to the city hall, but the Them was waiting. I tricked them into the trap that takes away essence, then I fought them, using the guards since they were attaching them too. But before I won, they realized Serba was there and attacked her to hurt me. I killed them, tried to heal her, but Sto was dying. She told me to go help him. I tried, but I have too much essence. I thought one of the dogs would work to hold Sto while he healed."

Serba snorted, then froze in surprise again.

"But she wouldn't let me. She told me a lot of bull about not being important, and that she only had this chance to be good. I wasn't going to let her do—"

"I shoved me into me," Serba said, then frowned. "Did that sound odd to any of you?"

"Yes," Jackal and Ganny said.

"And here we are," Serba continued, grinning. "Whatever I am." She looked at Ganny.

"You're alive," Tibs said. "That's the important thing. What about the part of you that's...you."

She closed her eyes. "That's still broken, but nothing's escaping past..." she motioned to herself.

"Your body," Tibs offered.

She nodded. "And you really don't have to do anything to make the sounds come out? I had all the parts in the golems there, but I could never get them to do anything. How do you not have to control any of this?"

"Sto," Ganny asked. "How about the rest of you? Are you...is it still..."

Something rumbled in the distance. When it stopped, Serba was panting. "It's hard, but it's still there."

"Maybe once you have rested?" Ganny offered.

"Okay. This is weird and all," Jackal said. "But Tibs has to hide. The entire guild is on its way to wring his neck."

“What?” Serba said, getting to her feet. Then she looked at her stance in surprise. Tibs saw the effort it took for her not to comment on it. “Why?”

“They claim he tried to kill some important guy. The one checking on the guild leader. To see if she was doing her job or something like that.”

“Tried to kill him?” Tibs asked, worried.

“I know. I have no idea where they got the idea, but then this old cleric, who looked like he’d just been visited by his element, said you’d gone into the dungeon and I took off while the commander was putting his people together. When I shoved my way past the guards at the door, I could see the mass of them leaving the city. Hopefully, they don’t know you the way I do and they’ll go through the other floors before making it—”

“They’re on this floor,” Serba said, alarmed. “I don’t know if I can stop them. It’s hard to feel right now.”

“No.” He’d failed. There hadn’t been enough corruption to finish the job. “You and Jackal hide. I did this, so I’ll deal with them.”

Jackal stared at him. “That’s what you were working on? Abyss, why didn’t tell me? Let me help?”

“Because you’d want to help. This isn’t like kicking in a door. I thought...” He breathed the worries down. “You aren’t paying for me failing. Sto, you can hide him, right?”

“I’ll take him to the cradle,” Serba said. “Once it’s sealed, no one will find him.”

“Then you two go and I’ll—”

“No.” Jackal crossed his arms over his chest. “I am not letting you face them alone. We’re a team, Tibs. We work—”

“You have Kroseph.”

“You think that you getting killed isn’t going to hurt him?”

“I’m not his man. You made him a promise.”

“And you’re my—”

Serba’s shrill whistle silence him. He glared at his sister as she whistled again, and the dogs took position around Jackal.

“Tibs gave an order, Jackie.”

“Don’t call me that,” Jackal replied. “You know I hate it.” She grinned, and Jackal turned to stone. “You really think you can force me to abandon Tibs?”

More whistles. When she took a step back, the dogs took one to follow, the four that found themselves behind the fighter closer to him by that step.

“I’m made of stone,” he said. “Your dogs can’t do anything to me.”

Another step back and a whistle. Jackal looked over his shoulder, worried, as the dogs approached. “Tibs. Tell my...sister to stop this.”

“You go do what you have to,” Serba said. “I’ll keep Jackal safe for you.”

“Tibs,” Jackal snapped. “Don’t you even think of leaving me here with those.” He motioned to the dogs.

A different whistle, and a dog lunged to snap at Jackal’s heels. The fighter jumped away, and toward where Serba was backing. He glared at her as she took another step.

Tibs took off toward the stairs and ignored Jackal’s angry calls and threats.

This was so him and Sto would be safe. Or was it Serba now? It was going to be confusing for a while, but they’d figure it out. Once he had handled Irdian and those he’d

brought, Tibs would help.

Tibs nearly ran at the group of adventurers, confusing them for some of the golem people Sto had made and that the Them had let loose. It was only when they entered his sense he realized the mistake, and by then, they had noticed him. The archer's arrow exploded behind Tibs as he ran into an adjacent alley. Instead of fire blooming, a weave extended in all directions, snagging his leg, and caused him to fall.

A net, he realized as his initial attempt to keep it off cause the weave to move higher on his leg. He doused it in corruption and absorbed it back as he ran off again. No point in leaving evidence of how he'd broken free. He jumped to the roofs and lined himself with the stairs. Let them search the alleys and wonder where—

Adventurers leaped on and over the roofs, chasing him. One stayed in the air, catching up to him.

Tibs ground his teeth. That was his trick.

He almost suffused himself with Air to show what he could do with it, but realized the world of trouble that would get him into. Them realizing he had more than one element would just make them work harder to catch him. And Tibs had no plan on getting caught.

Which meant he needed to escape these adventurers while only openly using water. He smiled.

This should be interesting. Time to see what they'd forgotten about being a Runner.

He jumped chimneys, leaped over gaps between buildings—and saw the people in the alleys keeping up with him. Fire exploded between buildings as he readied to leap, and he coated himself with ice before passing through. There was nothing left of it by the time he landed on the other roof, not even water to wet him, and he had to suffuse himself with purity to chase the pain the fire caused him away.

They definitely had strength. The best thing he could do was make sure not to confront them direct—

The roof exploded out from under him, throwing him in the air. He fought the urge to channel air, sending water ahead of his fall instead, icing the channel to slide along and directing it so—

It shattered as he landed into it and he continued to fall. The theft of his element had been so abrupt he hadn't immediately understood what had happened, but when he sent water ahead of him again, he was ready for the adventurer, pushing back against the Arcanus they were trying to force within his essence.

He fell into the water channel, but it hadn't iced as he had willed it, so he passed through, with the street approaching too fast for anything fancy. Water and immediately after that Air, arranged to create cold, and Tibs crashed into the mound of snow, then was running again, his steps uncertain until purity cleared his head.

He made a turn, then darkness fell over him. By the time he wondered how it was he couldn't see through it, he'd dropped to his knees in exhaustion. He tried to think. There had to be an element he could use, but his mind was muddled, as if he'd been training hard for the entire day, and then looked at his ledger. He should know how it all worked, but he just couldn't get his mind to piece things together.

He fell to his side.

What he needed was sleep. Rebuild his strength and he'd be able to keep going after

that.

“I have him subdued,” a woman called. Her voice pierced through the fog in Tibs’s mind with a warning of danger and the need to be refreshed now.

He suffused himself with purity as the darkness went away, and he planted ice swords into the person standing over him; then he was running again.

“Catch him!” a man yelled, and Tibs sensed the etching form where he’d come from. He couldn’t tell the element, but he threw himself aside as soon as it was released. He was back to his feet as they cursed. He turned into an alley as more etchings were thrown at him. Elements he knew and others he didn’t. Assembly of lines and Arcanus so complex even those made of element he could sense were beyond his comprehension.

He dodged them, threw water where he thought it would help, hardened himself when all he could think of doing was surviving the impact. Which he did.

He thought that as hard as they were trying; they weren’t aiming to kill him.

He suffused himself with earth as the bundle of unknown essence registered through all the other etchings too late for him to do anything else. It struck him in the back and clung to him. He tried to will it away, but the adventurer was stronger than he was. Still, it was a solid etching, so he could—

Instead of pulling it off, reaching over his shoulder and grabbing it stretched the etching like it was made of the taffy he’d watched a candy crafter make at a caravan booth many visits before. But unlike that, this was also sticking, coating his hand, instead of being flung away when he tried to get rid of it. And now what was on his back was oozing down.

Blasting it with water didn’t help, the water just... Tibs had no idea what had happened to it as it made contact, but the oozing etching remained. He put corruption between the etching and his clothing, and instead of eating away at it, the corruption flared out of his control, eating at his clothing.

Using metal to cut it off sent that essence expanding in all directions. What was this element?

And it was getting heavier as it coated his legs. As if he had to force his way through the air. Air sent some of it flying off, making people around him exclaim in surprise, and making him realize they were catching up to him.

Then his foot caught on something, and instead of quickly adjusting and keeping his balance, Tibs’s legs dragged, slowed by the etching, and he fell forward. The etching also kept him from putting his arms before him to cushion the impact, but the ground was earth, so it didn’t hurt. As he pushed himself to his knees, the etching pulled him down, sticking to the ground.

“Got to admire his determination,” a man said to Tibs’s side.

“I admire nothing from a would be assassin who uses what we taught him against us,” a woman spat.

He saw the kick out of the corner of his eyes. Leather boots instead of metal. Before he thought better, he suffused himself with earth, and immediately let go after she hit and cursed, bouncing on a foot to others’ laughter.

Had his skin changed color? Had they noticed? He couldn’t use earth again, not with

—

He looked at the ground, the packed earth that made it. He knew how to escape.

He softened it until his weight pulled him through it.

“I don’t think so,” another woman said, when Tibs was almost all the way in, his face raised with his mouth in the ground. He stopped falling. “I have no idea how you’re doing that, but earth is mine.” He pushed his will against the essence that was holding the ground solid. “At least, now we know you’re not going anything.”

All Tibs saw were booted feet move around him. There had to be something he could do to escape.

“Are you taking that off?” an older sounding man asked.

“After he shrugged off Kirian’s drain and stabbed her?” a younger one replied. “That’s staying on him until the Commander’s here to take him.”

“I say we save everyone the trouble and kill him,” someone spat.

“That isn’t how we do thing,” a woman replied.

“He fucking tried to kill Marger!”

“It’s not like I haven’t thought about doing it a time or two,” someone else replied. “He’s grown so full of himself it’s like last decade he wasn’t graduating to Epsilon with us.”

“He has earned the position,” the older man said.

“Would it kill him to remember where he came from?”

“I’d say that it almost did,” Irdian said. “And you can think of doing whatever you want to whomever you want, Seros. It’s once you act on it that you become my responsibility.”

Scuffed metal boots stopped before Tibs and the man crouched. “I knew you were trouble, Light-Fingers. You and your machinations and your rackets so you’d run this city. You think you’re the first we’ve taken from the cells to waste the opportunity we gave them trying to carve themselves a little kingdom for them to rule as they see fit?”

Tibs mouth was under the street, so all he could do was glare at those boots. He wasn’t the one ‘ruling as they saw fit’.

“I will give you this much. I’ve never heard of one of you so brazen as to try to kill a supervisor before. I guess you can take comfort in that, I suppose. While you rot within Despair.” Metal essence wrapped around Tibs. “I have him.”

Tibs fought against the metal as soon as the earth loosened, physically and with his will, but nothing happened.

He lifted and was positioned until he and Irdian were eyes to eyes. “Anything to say? To justify what you did?”

“I did what your guild force me to,” Tibs said through gritted teeth.

“I’m curious what you’ll tell the magistrates to support that,” the man said in a flat tone. “If you’re even given the chance.”

Tibs glared, but stayed silent. His attention was on the essence holding him. The instant Irdian was distracted, Tibs would break his hold over it and run.

“What about the Runner the door guards mentioned?” Irdian asked.

“He must have gotten lost among the buildings,” someone replied. “If his plan was to help his friend, it failed.”

Tibs cursed. Of course, the guards would have recognized Jackal, and everyone knew they were on the same team.

“Zuk, you and Ambry stay at the stairs until the dungeon’s about to close its door. If

he survives that long, he'd going to try to escape and he will save us the trouble of rounding him up with the rest of Light-Finger's teams. Or did you think I was going to give them a chance to destroy whatever evidence of your plan you left behind?"

And because none of them had broken the Commander's precious rules, Tibs knew he'd let them go.

"What if he doesn't show up?" a woman asked.

"Then he's already dead, or will be well before the dungeon opens its door again," Irdian replied.