

Tibs slipped past the stunned clerk's fumbled attempt to catch him, then suffused himself with darkness, adding that to his sheath, and speed for the exit. He needed to be out before they thought to sound the alarm. He didn't know what measures they had in place, but he expected remaining hidden wouldn't be possible.

"Stop him!" a man yelled in the distance behind him, not long after Tibs had turned a corner. The man's feet were wrapped in earth essence; a way to avoid slipping as he made the turn like Tibs had done.

The clerks in the corridor looked in the man's direction, then searched around.

"Stop who?" someone asked.

"Just block the corridor!"

Ahead, essence formed into an etching that stretched from one side to the other.

Tibs smiled. The essence was metal. The adventurer was well into Delta, but his expression was more bored and curious than attentive. His smile faltered once he realized he didn't have metal within his bracer's reserve. He'd have to hope his sheath would be enough to hide him while he did this. He channeled metal and slipped it within the etching. Then grabbed the other man's essence with both it and his will and pulled.

The adventurer staggered, hand to his head, as Tibs ran past. He'd just gotten a reminder that strength didn't matter if he didn't apply himself to what he was doing.

"There's something there!" someone yelled, and Tibs ducked a badly aimed lance of an element he didn't know. He suffused himself with darkness again. He grinned at the sounds of confusions which followed. Then he was in the air, his concentration broken, along with the shoulder that had received the blow.

He pushed through the pain. His landing first. He couldn't be slowed. Ice on the floor from where he'd land to the intersection; the essence tight in that way that made it even more slippery.

He landed badly, and the added pain broke his concentration, but the ice was already in place. He breathe the pain away as he slid and as soon as he could manage one thought he suffused himself with Purity.

"I think he's there! On the ice!"

He glimpsed golden eyes behind him as he got to his feet and ran, spreading the ice until it covered the floor, and using essence to give himself traction.

With the intersection approaching, he attempted to orient himself to the exit, and in the unexpected confusion, he realized he'd dropped the medallion. He couldn't tell where it was now, but he was confident it had been to the left when he'd headed down this corridor, so that was how he turned. This corridor was long, hopefully, long enough to reach the training area where the building's magic didn't make the layout a maze.

He shouldered clerks out of his way as more orders to stop him came from the intersection. He was more interested in breaking their concentration than remaining fully hidden.

Unknown essence formed before him, but with just enough familiarity Tibs threw himself to the side, laying down ice again before the void adventurer appeared. But she was already turned, and her fist connected with Tibs, causing him to lose his breath as he slid again.

How was a question for later. No, actually, he already knew the answer to that one.

Void adventurers could see things out of sequences.

He was on his feet and running again, and now people were getting out of his way. The sheath was coming undone. He didn't sense someone's will on it, so he simply had too much to focus on.

That one mattered most, so he remade the—

Essence formed ahead of him again.

Not this time. Tibs made a block of ice where it was; then it shattered in time with a pained cry behind him. He still sensed the adventurer, so that hadn't killed her, but she was lying on the ground.

More people ahead, Runners among clerks, adventurers, guards and instructors, so he had to be getting closer to—and he knew where the exit was.

“Stop!” someone ordered him. “Tibs Light-Fingers, you are ordered to stop!”

Right, he'd been interrupted from remaking the sheath.

Essence formed ahead of him. A lot of it, from a lot of people.

This was going to be—

Runners threw etchings at the guards.

—easier than Tibs expected?

He ripped apart a stronger etching, while the adventurer was distracted battling attacks aside.

They would get into so much troubles over helping him, Tibs wished they hadn't. But he also couldn't deny that without their help, escaping might have been impossible. He'd find a way to make it up to them once the chaos died down.

An adventurer threw himself at Tibs, moving faster than Tibs thought should be possible. He jumped out of the way, then had an air disk to bounce off as the man turned with a suddenness that should have wrenched bones apart. His silver eyes tickled at Tibs's memory, but he had more important things to deal with. Another air disk and a jump higher put him out of the man's reach.

Tibs saw daylight as he landed.

“Close the doors!”

Not if I can help it. He iced the floor under the guards grabbing for the handles. They fell, but the doors still moved to close. He added ice, made a wall of it to stop them, and the ice immediately cracked under the strain, and he sensed a weave unraveling it.

Adding ice didn't help. He didn't think earth would fare any better. He needed something hard but which could take the strain without needing anything added, because he couldn't even think of what Arcanus could be used at this point.

The ice shattered, sending spikes in all directions, and he knew what to use.

He formed metal spikes in the path and sent them in the stone floor with all his will.

“Who's helping him!” someone yelled.

The metal spikes strained, but bent slowly, instead of shattering. He was going to—

Essence gathered between the door. Ice so clear, the sense of what was being done was his only indication.

He didn't bother attempting to rip it apart. Someone that skilled wouldn't let themselves be distracted. Instead, he suffused himself with corruption, and threw that at the ice and the doors.

The etching fought the corruption. His attack wasn't strong enough to remove all the ice by the time Tibs jumped through it, but instead of stopping him it shattered into sharp blades; cutting his clothes to ribbon. Without water as his element, he wouldn't have survived to land and keep on running.

He was outside, and they were pursuing him.

Calls for more guards would come soon.

He turned into the first alley and suffused himself with darkness. This would make it harder for them to know where he was, and the alleys were as confusing as the magic protecting the interior of the guild building. They'd spend the day trying to find him among them.

And failing.

He used air disks to make it to the roofs.

Because he wouldn't be in the alleys.

That took care of the normal guards. Unfortunately, adventurers had elements, and, while he hadn't sensed one, someone might have darkness, and an element had an ease at locating the same element, even darkness.

That was a problem he had no matter what element he channels.

So he let go of all of them.

As far as he knew, he was the only person able to sense life essence. If someone caught a glimpse of him, he'd just be another of the townsfolk without an element.

Once he got a change of clothing.

Which he'd have to get on the way, because Sto needed his help. There had been no more cries for help, but Tibs refused to entertain that he might be too late. Sto was a dungeon, and the Them might be able to take control away from him, but he couldn't be so powerful as to kill his friend outright.

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Tibs cursed as he jumped down to grab a drying shirt. Then he was back on the roofs. He wouldn't be able to do this alone, and he couldn't go to any of his friends for help. He couldn't go to anyone, because who else but a Runner could deal with the danger Sto had created? Especially on the fourth floor, where on top of the golems the Them would set against Tibs, there were...

He cast his sense about. There was one person he could ask and hope she agree.

He didn't bother sensing for Serba; she was only one more barely noticeable wisp of essence among a town full of them. Her dogs, on the other hand. While their essence was as thin, the shape of it was different enough, he'd gotten used to noticing it.

Now, he just had to run until one of them was within his sense and head in that direction.

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Tibs had picked an escort.

He'd been both surprised, and not, when the first rogue ran on another roof parallel with his. Of course, it would be rogues who'd think to check up here. And it would be Runners, since they knew of his predilection for them. Then there had been a second and a third. Then it was all six of them running toward a far plaza where Tibs sensed a large number of dogs.

Now, he was down to three as the roofs gave ways to the plaza. Two of them had dropped down, leading guards away. He motioned ahead and to the left, and another rogue dropped from her roof.

Along with the dogs and people, Tibs sense metal. A lot of it. Armors and weapons, worn, not on display. Of course, she'd be with other guards. That was her job.

He motioned the other rogue to the right and he, too, vanished down.

He motioned the last rogue to keep his distance before dropping to the ground and approaching the plaza in the shadows.

The sounds were joyful, someone grilled food. Someone else sang off key with too much gusto. The guards he saw were as relaxed as everyone else gathered. A celebration. Those had popped up unannounced in the last days, as it became clear the sickness had broken.

He could sense they all wore Sto's ring.

He hesitated, then reminded himself he didn't look like someone who'd escaped from the guild. He wished his hair was longer, so he could tie it back and look even more different, but it would have to be enough because there was a dog playing with a child.

And where there was one, there would be others and Serba would be close by.

He stepped into the crowd and tried to look like he was one of them, out to enjoy himself. Once he'd saved Sto and the guild was dead, he'd join them for real. For all he knew, a power hungry adventurer would see the death of their leader as the time to take over. He'd have to make sure that any who tried didn't succeed until the rest learned to leave it be.

He found a pack of dogs dancing at the feet of more children, who held pieces of meat in the air, but no Serba. No, she wouldn't be among the people. Her job was to protect them, but she didn't like people enough to be among them. He located the nearest alley and made her out in the shadows.

"Serba," he called as he approached. "I need your help."

No one even looked in his direction but her.

She stared at him in disbelief. "What do you need my help for? You have Jackie for that."

"You're the one I need." He raised hand. "And I don't have the time to argue. Someone's life is in danger."

Hesitation flashed in her eyes. "Then you should—"

"You," he snapped and breathed. "You're the only one who can help, Serba. If you don't, one of my friends is going to die."

She gave him a sharp nod, then let out a series of whistles.

"Guards and adventurers are probably going to get in our way."

"Why?" A dog nuzzled Tibs's leg and looked at him plaintively.

"Sorry," he told it, "no jerky right now." To Serba. "I pissed off the guild. Is that a problem?"

She laughed. "Just tell me what to do. Jackie follows your lead, so I will, too."

"He's the team leader," he replied, running off.

"Keep telling yourself that," she said, she and her dogs keeping up with him.

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Another pair of guards fell under the dogs, and they kept going. The first time she

send her dogs against guards, Tibs had been worried, but she reassured him they weren't trained to kill.

Then Tibs sense what he knew would eventually happen. Someone with metal as their element, with their essence denser than Don, if only barely so. Which meant this was an adventurer.

"That direction," Tibs instructed. It would take Serba away from the confrontation while keeping her heading toward Sto. "I'll catch up."

She took the turn without question, and not long after that, the adventurer appeared.

The air disk Tibs etched sent him in the air, shield and sword of ice forming as he fell toward the man. His falling attack was expertly deflected, and Tibs was sent to crash uncontrollably to the ground.

Except he kept control. As soon as he touched the earth, it moved to turn him, and once his feet were under him, he propelled himself at the adventurer.

An air disk had Tibs in the air, his ice shield and sword at the ready. The adventurer watched with none of the surprise Tibs's use of other elements had caused today. This one might not know who he was, or what he shouldn't be able to do.

The man blocked and struck back. Tibs used essence to assist his parry, then he planted a punch backed by earth and the man staggered. Mez often said he relied too much on essence to help his fighting, but Tibs felt the same as Jackal. Winning was more important than doing it the 'right way'.

He nudged the swing to ensure he ducked under, then another nudge so the man couldn't properly parry his attack and the blunted tip of Tibs's sword hit the man in the face, breaking his nose and making him reel back.

"Not looking to kill you," Tibs said as the man looked at the blood on his hand. "Just walk away."

"I don't let murderers live."

Tibs smiled. He'd done it. The guild was done for.

The adventurer came at Tibs fast, doing something with this essence Tibs didn't understand as he struggled to keep the far too fast attacks from cutting him. He could sense the edge of the sword was sharp enough it would cut any normal material. It wouldn't hurt him, but that was something he didn't want to reveal.

Tibs didn't know how metal could make someone faster, but he knew the solution. He disrupted the essence, and the man stumbled. His skin turned to metal as Tibs brought the pommel down on him, so he added earth to the strength of blow and the man dropped.

He didn't move, but he wasn't losing essence. Tibs ran to rejoin Serba, who had made good time.

"You're not just a Runner, are you?" she asked as he fell into step.

"I am."

"Then where did you get whatever let you jump like that?"

"The dungeon."

"The guild takes everything that comes out of there. So you—"

"They only take what they know we find. We've found ways to sneak things past them."

"Irdian is going to have a fit if he finds out."

“You going to tell him?”

“He’s not who I work for,” she replied. But before Tibs could ask what she meant, he saw the alley opening up and marking the end of the town proper. If the guard knew he was heading for the dungeon, they would—

They ran out with no one there.

Why were there no guards? If someone had murdered his leader, Tibs would make sure all the way outs were guarded.

“Tibs, please tell me your friend just got into the worse fight in their lives among the stalls.”

“Inside,” Tibs replied.

No, of course, they wouldn’t bother watching this side of the town. There were no way out here. Only the dungeon. They’d be guarding the transportation platform as well as the roads and alleys opening up onto the wilderness.

“I’m not a Runner.”

“It’s okay. This doesn’t need a Runner.”

“It’s a dungeon, Tibs. Only Runners go in there.”

“No. Anyone who goes in is called a Runner. But this isn’t a run; it’s a rescue.”

The guards watched them pass, perplexed instead of worried. One called after Serba, but she didn’t reply.

“You can’t go up there!” one of the guard at the bottom of the stairs called as they ran, instead of trying to stop them.

At the top, the cleric stepped forward, while the two guards looked on, bored.

This might be out of order, since there would already be a team on each of the active floors, and it was only the two of them, not counting the dogs. But the cleric looked determined to do his duty and not let them pass until he had assured himself they were whole. Tibs didn’t know this one, even by sight, and he was well past Epsilon, not that he was the first one strong enough Tibs didn’t understand why they were on door duty.

Tibs hoped this work, because them being slowed could give the guards time to wonder why the dogs and the lack of a full team. He channeled Purity and locked eyes with the cleric. The man stepped back in surprise and Tibs felt his eyes on him as they ran past and into the dungeon.

He breathed easier when the guards didn’t follow.

When Tibs stopped by the doorway, Serba put a hand on the wall, panting hard. “How are you not out of breath?”

“Essence.” He replied, making a purity weave and applying it to her before opening the doorway. “I’ll explain later.” He motioned to the doorway. “We have someone to save first.” The light was tinted the orange of a later afternoon than it was outside.

She looked at it, then at him, fearfully. “Tibs, I know I said all you had to do was tell me what to do... but that’s...”

He placed a hand on her arm, and she jerked. “Serba. I can’t save him without your help. Please help me save him?”

She stared at him, then sighed and grumbled, “What is it about you that makes us do stupid stuff like this?” She stepped through the doorway.