

Finding Khumdar took work, but wasn't particularly difficult.

The cleric wasn't hiding from him specifically, or at least Tibs didn't think so, but unless he was interacting with someone, he always wrapped himself in darkness, making himself a secret from those around him.

And as Khumdar has said during their run, secrets stood out to those with darkness as their element and he could use that against the cleric. So he suffused himself with the element and cast his sense about, using what he knew of the man to identify the 'flavor' of his secret. It took time, since as wide as his range was now, it only covered half the town, but eventually, he found him.

Which was good. Tibs dreaded having to use the node of sight again.

"I need your help," he said, stepping out of the alley as the people the cleric had been talking with moved away. One had Wood as their element, the green tinting their essence, and was somewhere between Epsilon and Gamma. But they weren't dressed as most adventurers were.

"And what may I help you with?" Khumdar asks. If Tibs's sudden arrival surprised him, he didn't show it. As he rarely showed anything.

"I need to know how you make people not notice you." Tibs fell in step with the cleric as he joined the crowd. "I can't suffuse myself with darkness for this."

He'd realized that to ensure the kill was final, he'd have to suffuse himself with whichever element he'd used to do it. He expected it would be corruption because of the many enchantments Marger wore, but there might be a better alternative. What Tibs was certain of was that it wouldn't be darkness, and since he would need it to hide, he'd have to rely on the reserve within his bracer, and, even if he filled all of them with that element, he still wouldn't be able to replicate the effect of when he was suffused with it.

"And will you tell me what this 'this' is?"

"Only if you make it a condition to helping me."

Khumdar nodded. "You must start by remembering I do not have your training. My... interaction with my essence comes vastly with how I am connected to my element. It seems to give me an understanding of a sort without having to experience the training you do."

Tibs nodded. "If you let me sense what you do, I can probably work it out."

The cleric gave him one of his rare smiles. "I believe you are correct." Essence spread out from him, surrounding both of them and then... "As you can sense, I am hardly doing more than wrapping us with my element."

Except that wasn't true. The essence sheathing them wasn't raw and unformed. What Tibs sensed wasn't the filigrees Alistair had taught him, or even the Arcanus, although he could almost feel the shape of the letters through the sheath. It was like—

Someone bumped into him and Khumdar caught him before he fell. All around them, the crowd was growing ever tighter.

"As you can see, this comes with a drawback. With us being hidden from them, they do not know to make space for yet another person among them. It is why I prefer moving along less traveled routes this way." He angled them outside of the crowd, and they had to dance around the people.

"Does this happen when you suffuse yourself?"

The cleric stared at him.

“When I do it, it’s like people know I’m there, without knowing I’m there. When I do it with water, they don’t move out of the way, they just glide against me without quite noticing it. With Darkness, people stay just far away so they won’t touch me.”

“That is...interesting.” Khumdar thought. “When I suffuse myself, it is as if I become closer to the shadows. They cling to me, make me harder to be seen and easier to...” The smile was mischievous this time. “Mayhap, this should remain one of my secrets. But it does not afford me a way to move among a crowd unnoticed.”

“Do you think everyone who had the element gets something different when they suffuse themselves?”

“I...do not know. We are, neither of us, as the others are, therefore it may be unwise to think of what we do as anything like them. After all, all fighters with earth as their element seem to have the body of stone our leader does. It maybe more our difference in how we are connected to our elements, than we as being different people, that is responsible.”

Tibs focused on the essence surrounding him. “Are you thinking about the Arcanus you have in the...” he tried to find a word to describe what it felt like. It was closer to a weave than an etching, in the way it just seemed to be there, but it lacked the structure of the lines that connected the Arcanus. “I don’t know how to call this,” he finally admitted.

“I am not willing my essence in the way you do. I am familiar with the Arcanus, as is any who has learned to read and write, and, through speaking with others, I understand some of what they do as part of being used within the weaving and etching most adventurers do, but I do not know if that knowledge influence what I am capable of accomplishing, as I do not have another like me to compare to, or ask questions of.”

The words were odd, as Khumdar said them. There was no light on them, nor darkness, but Tibs still got the sense there was something there. Maybe Khumdar didn’t want him to know he was lying, and because he knew how light worked, and how Tibs sensed darkness, his essence was doing...something in an attempt to keep him from finding out? Maybe he didn’t even realize he was doing it.

Tibs didn’t mention it. Khumdar was allowed his secrets.

“Can you focus on—” he gestured around them. “—it?”

“I am unsure what you are asking.”

“Can you concentrate on making what your essence is doing...more?” Tibs waited for something to change. “Well?”

“I am concentrating as hard as I am capable of on making myself more unnoticeable.”

“Then it doesn’t work like that. Stop hiding, then do it again.”

The sheath disappeared within the cleric, who looked at Tibs. He nodded, and it reformed. Before Tibs could focus, it was already all there. The sense of the Arcanus floating within the rest of the essence.

“I need you to do it slower this time. Take it step by step.”

“I do not have steps to take, Tibs.”

“Really? I need to think about each line; how they connect, where they spirals out, how the filigree will be, where the Arcanus go within that, before I can get an etching to work. Some I’ve done often enough, I don’t really have to think about it anymore, but it still happens. Like once you’ve learned your letters and you are writing for a while, you don’t

have to think about how the letters go in the words you need to write. You just write. Is that what is happening with this?"

"I do not believe so. I never had to think beyond my need to hide."

"Maybe it's how all clerics work," Tibs mused. It would explain Clara's difficulty in explaining how she healed. "Maybe that's why purity cleric start healing so quickly. It's why they become clerics. It's what they want to do, so they just can. And as they get stronger, they have larger reserves so they can do bigger healings. I just played curious," he added at the raised eyebrow. "Everyone knows I always have questions, so they never ask why I'm asking about something."

Tibs breathed his frustration away. This wasn't helping him. The essence was like nothing he'd learned how to make. It was like the raw essence took the needed form by itself.

"So anytime you want your essence to do something, you just have to want it and happens?"

"No. If what I desire isn't within the realm of Darkness, I am required to think about what it is that I wish to accomplish."

"So you had to think about how to form the ax head for your staff?"

"No. I need approach what I seek to do in how it relates to my element. Darkness is of ethereality, not solidity. But then so is fire, of a sort, and it can serve as a weapon. How could Darkness be like Fire, so that I could make use of it in combat?"

"The darkness that trailed your staff," Tibs said, remembering one of the earlier times Khumdar had done more than just fight with it.

"It did not burn, the way fire does, but I could unleash it, so that it could weaken those it touched. Then I needed consider how could Darkness be more like Metal, which is unbending, with a sharpness like that of good wit. The form you saw it take was of the element's own design, not my will."

"And you never have to think about which of the Arcanus you want there," Tibs said. "They just are."

"That is correct."

He sensed the shapes within the sheath. "But I can sense them there. Not clear, but like looking at writing through a dirty window." Tibs made a cloud of darkness essence and tried to cause one of the Arcanus to form in it the way he sensed it within the sheath.

"Mayhap that is because I do not properly understand them," Khumdar mused. "It might be that I too have a reason to seek knowledge of what each means, and that in doing so, my array of capability will increase beyond simply having more essence to use."

"You should find other clerics to ask," Tibs said, focusing on making Ank form.

"If only that I could."

The light was faint, but surprised Tibs enough, he stared at the cleric, and the cloud dissipated. Khumdar was lost in thoughts, and Tibs went back to trying to get Ank to form.

Khumdar had always said to be the only one he knew like himself. There had been no light on the words when it came up the last time, but now he'd lied about not being able to ask other clerics. How Khumdar could be truthful about one and caught in a lie about the other was easy. He didn't know any other clerics of Darkness. So there was no one else like him.

But he knew other clerics. And Tibs was certain Khumdar didn't mean those of purity.

He breathed the questions away. As interesting as it might be to know more about that part of those who had an element, Khumdar had lied because he didn't want Tibs to know. Or maybe he wanted? Wouldn't the darkness have tried to hide it otherwise? Maybe he didn't know he wanted Tibs to know?

He stopped. There lay headaches, and Tibs would have enough already with trying to get darkness essence to do what he needed it to.

* * * * *

Tibs leaned against the wall. Even though it shouldn't, since he had the element, the sunlight hurt his eyes. The sounds of the people haggling hammered at his head hard enough he wanted to scream, and he was hungry. Morning meal had been quick, so he could get back to training, and clearly not enough. He suffused himself with purity, and it all went away, with only hunger returning once he released it.

"Would it not be more effective if you remained suffused?" Khumdar asked.

"You can tell I used purity?"

"I have seen its effects on you often enough to recognize them."

"I can't depend on purity. I'll need to be suffused with another element."

"I see."

Tibs looked up, locating the sun well past zenith. No wonder he was hungry. "If you want..." he did owe him that much after all the help he was giving him.

"You respect my secrets. I shall respect your desire to maintain yours."

"I need food." He located a sign with the top of a tankard over the heads and headed for it. They found a table with empty tankards on it and claimed it. A harried server took them, then returned with filled ones and Tibs asked for whatever the cook had ready.

He cleared his mind once the man had left and set about making the lines of darkness around his hands. Each returning to itself and connected to those next to them with a filigree of Ssy, Par, and Ike. Why Ike worked there without tearing the etching apart, Tibs had given up understanding. Alistair had told him that the Arcanus's effects were influenced by those next to them, but this was the first time Ike didn't outright send an etching moving.

"You have succeeded."

"It's not the same."

Khumdar placed his hand, wrapped in its own sheath, next to his. "I do not notice a difference."

Tibs chuckles. "Mine is built of essence lines and filigree. Yours is just...there."

"Then, how do you expect they will differ?"

"I have to keep thinking about it. And feeding it essence. It's an etching, so it's 'doing' something and not just being there like yours, and that means the essence is going... somewhere." He connected the flow to the reserve in his bracer. "It isn't a lot, like this, but I'll have to see if one reserve is enough to maintain it around all of me for the time I'll need it."

The server placed the plates down, a thick stew over a dark slice of bread, and Tibs asked for a second from the server before starting on this one.

* * * * *

People glanced in this direction.

It was the first thing Tibs realized once he stepped among them, sheathed in darkness. Then they'd look around, searching for whatever it was that had caught their attention before going back to what they were doing. A few walked where Tibs had stood, as if they understood there had been something there, but didn't realize he'd moved. They looked the spot over, glanced around, and went on with their task.

It seemed that the more someone tried to 'see' him, the less they did. Those who reacted to his presence had caught sight of something out of the corner of their eye, and once they looked, they couldn't see him.

In the time it took him to walk to the guild building, the reserve in his bracer lowered slightly, but not enough for him to workout how long it would last.

He stepped at the back of a group of clerks returning to the guild, hoping that if the guards notices something, they'd dismiss him as just another clerk. But fifty paces from the building, the weave within the doorway did something it had never done before.

It stretched toward the group. Toward him.

He stopped and stepped back, counting each step. With each one, it receded. Sixty paces was as close as he could get before he triggered the enchantment.

Or did it? He hadn't been to the guild since starting work on his sheath, and with that training came a shift in who he was, how he thought.

In his intent?

Mind was part of the weave protecting the guild. Every element was.

He stepped into an alley, let go of the sheath, and stepped out, heading for the building.

The enchantment didn't react to his approach, but the guards took him in and nodded. Tibs wasn't an anonymous clerk, or just one of the other Runners. When he came and went from the guild, they noticed the Hero of Kragle Rock.

What he would need was a way in without being noticed.

And to be able to use his sheath once he was inside. At least that one he could test. He walked to the back, because the front of the building always had people. He let the magic confuse him, and once he found himself alone in a corridor, formed the sheath, ready to let go the moment he sensed a reaction.

But there were none. Not even an alarm.

Once someone made it inside, the magic seemed to ignore them. It was a flaw, in his opinion, and it could be why people like Tirania and Marger had so many enchanted items on them. They understood they couldn't depend on the building's enchantment for their safety.

Now, did anyone walking this part of the building have magic that would let them pierce his sheath? Only one way to find out. He took the medallion from the pouch and oriented himself to the building's entrance. Knowing that, he took the long way there.

Many of the clerks glanced in his direction, then went back to where they were needed. Even the one with darkness as her element did nothing more than an extra look around before continuing on her way.

There might be one who'd try something Tibs would have to actively defend against, but anything a rogue attempted came with risks.

He headed for the exit, pleased with his test, only to freezing in place as he realized a

final problem. If he couldn't enter sheathed, could he exit this way? Would the enchantment reach within the building? More importantly, would someone notice what it did? Had he been within sixty paces when he'd sheathed himself? He didn't know; the magic made it he had no idea where he was, and once it took the medallion, he hadn't paid attention.

Could he afford to test this?

He definitely couldn't afford to be discovered.

How ever he made it in, he would stay as far from the entrance as he could. Fortunately, there were plenty of training rooms well past that distance he'd be able to slip in to sheath himself. Which was how he let his sheath go without being noticed before exiting the building.

He had a way to make it to Marger once he was inside.

Now, he needed to figure out a way to kill the man, as well as get in and out unnoticed.

How much of a disguise would he need not to be recognized? At the library, all he'd had to do was make himself look like someone who had the needed coins to belong there. Here, he could make himself look like a clerk, but there was still a chance a guard would recognize him.

Recognize the Hero of Kragle Rock.

So, he had to work on that one. He had time, since he still didn't have a way he was confident could kill the man, and because of all those enchantments, Corruption would be needed.

Which meant that, like it or not, he needed Don's help.