

Chapter 21

15

Tibs stood, hands on the low stone wall, fighting the urge to throw up at the putrefaction emanating from the pool of corruption on the other side of it. It was night, not that anyone would come here even in the day, and he wore rags. He wasn't losing good clothing to this; like he had with his audience with Fire.

He'd tried to come here via the roofs, but his leg had cramped before he'd grabbed onto the window ledge. The corruption was making him suffer on purpose, Tibs just knew it. Stealing the roofs from him, forcing him to resort to the alleys and having to avoid the guards and bribe one of Serba's dogs.

He'd still come, because he wanted the roofs back. He'd finally reached a point where he'd endure whatever humiliation the element put him through, so long as it took out what was in him.

He pushed himself up and onto the stone wall, kicking a stone off and it plopped into the pool. Tibs stared at it. It was the only thing visible in Claria's light. Even the ripples it had to have caused in the liquid couldn't be seen.

He heard the bubbling as the corruption ate away at the stone and he was certain the stench increased, forcing him to swallow bile. How was it affecting the stone? Wasn't that a base element? What would it do to him if he got closer?

Wasn't he close enough already? Ganny said all he needed was a strong emotion in the presence of the element and he was fucking terrified just crouching there, staring as the stone ceases to exist. Why wasn't Corruption getting this going already?

Because it was going to make him suffer every step of the way. It was going to force him to jump in there, feel himself melt.

He swallowed more bile.

Just push, he ordered. That was all he needed to fall in. He didn't move. Push! Did he want the roofs back or not? Did he want his body under his control, or to suffer this constant uncertainty as to when it was going to fail him, yet again, because the corruption seeped into his essence decided to his day hadn't been miserable enough?

What if he didn't survive it?

Fire had nearly killed him. It had taken Sto's intervention, and Tibs being able to hear him to survive enough of the damage he'd made it to the clerics to be healed.

And if Corruption had any interest in giving him an audience, why hadn't it done that back when he'd been covered in the stuff and thought he'd die? That had been enough for the other elements.

It didn't want him. That was the only possibility. If he jumped in there, he'd dissolve into nothing.

He dropped on the dry side of the wall. Water was wrong. Or at least, he needed to find a way to do this that didn't guarantee he'd die.

He'd ask Sto, maybe. Try to find a cleric he could trust so there would be healing available.

He didn't have to do this, he told himself; reminded himself. The corruption would leave his body eventually. He just had to be patient, then Corruption wouldn't have a hold on him.

He looked at the corruption. "I don't need you," he whispered and walked away.

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Tibs followed the guard through the guild building, counting his steps. He didn't know why he'd been summoned, but this was another chance to work out the layout, attempt to figure out how the protection worked. There had to be a system. This was just another puzzle and with enough information, he could work it out.

The response, after the guard knocked on the door, didn't come from Tirania, as Tibs had expected, but Harry. What did the guard leader want with him? Tibs hadn't done anything that could get him called; the corruption in his essence ensured that. Picking coppers out of pockets wasn't something Harry would bother with. If Tibs messed that up, the normal guards would deal with him.

"Leave us," Harry ordered the guard, and it was only the two of them.

Tibs crossed his arms over his chest. "I didn't do it."

Harry chuckled. "Would you tell me if you had?"

"Am I lying?"

"You did something. You're a rogue, you can't help it. But no, you didn't do this."

"Then I'm going back." Tibs turned to the door. "I need to train."

"I need your help, Tibs."

He froze, hand on the handle. "I'm a rogue. You don't even want us here." He faced Harry, who looked tired. "Why would you even want my help?"

"Someone's stealing from the nobles."

"Good for them," Tibs said before thinking, and grinned.

"No, not good for them." Harry rubbed his face. "Not good for anyone. The nobles aren't going to take this for long. If it doesn't stop, they're going to take matters into their own hands. They aren't going to care who gets hurt in the process of catching that thief."

Tibs was the conscious decision on the man's part in using that title instead of rogue, but he wasn't sure why. Did he not know if this was the work of one of the Runners, or was he just too annoyed at them?

"You're in charge. Tell them to let you deal with it."

Harry's expression darkened. "Don't be any more difficult than you already are, Tibs. You know nobles. Only two of the families here do more than pay lip service to my authority. This has to stop."

"Then find the rogue." It had to be a Runner. Tibs would have heard about a stranger stealing in his town.

"I need your help for that."

Tibs stepped to the desk, put his hand on it. “You want me to betray another rogue?”

“I want you to help keep this town safe. That *thief*—” this time Tibs heard the anger in the word. “—is endangering everyone. They aren’t like you, who just breaks in, walk around, and leaves. Or Ania, who leaves poems praising the resident, or Tandy, who peruses the books before leaving, or... any of the other Runners and your cursed training, who don’t actually cause trouble. What this thief is doing is breaking the rules.”

“Every Rogue breaks your rules, Harry,” Tibs said dismissively.

“But you don’t do it to stir up trouble. I only know about you doing it because I know you. Ania’s poems are endearing and residents actually hope she’ll drop by their house. The others at least are discreet and don’t do anything once in there. Or at least anything that leads to complaints. This thief’s taken valuables from the houses they visited. Stuff the owners have noticed and only from the nobles. It’s got to stop, Tibs, before it escalates.”

“And you think I can do that?”

Harry sighed. “You know the rogues in the town. Even the new ones. If it’s one of them, then just get them to stop. I’m not asking you to hand them over to me. Have them return what they took, make sure they don’t do it again and the nobles don’t have a reason to pursue this. If it’s not one of the Runners...”

Then it was someone intruding in his town.

He wanted to tell the guard leader where to shove his request. Tibs didn’t work for him. But if this was some stranger trying to cause trouble... Harry might be a guard, but he did care about the town. He also didn’t lie. If he said this would escalate, Tibs had to believe him.

“I hate that you know me this well,” Tibs said.

Harry smiled. “I wouldn’t if you didn’t constantly poke your nose into guard business. You made it hard for me not to get to know you.”

“If it’s a Runner, I’m not handing them over to you, but I’ll get them to stop.” He considered the rest. “If it’s a thief. I’m going to try and get them to stop. If they won’t, then I will make sure you get them. If that doesn’t work for you, Harry, I—”

“Do nothing?” the guard leader asked, grinning, then sobered. “I just want this to stop, Tibs. You get that to happen, and I don’t care who this thief was and where they went.”

Tibs left, wishing he could convince himself not to get involved. Since he couldn’t, he’d have to make sure those he talked to know he did it for the town and not Harry. He didn’t know that, on top of the cursed Hero of the Dungeon crap that gave him all the special treatment he had to fight against. He if wasn’t careful, the next thing he’d hear was that people thought he worked for the guild.

Tibs shuddered at that thought.

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Tibs wished the bazaar and the merchants there were still there so he could ask them who they suspected to be thieves among them. Or at least the kind of thief who’d want to cause trouble. But they’d left weeks before. They’d brought new people here and Tibs found it easy to imagine a thief among them would find a town like Kragle Rock more lucrative—he had Darran to thank for that word—than the caravan.

That left the merchant as a quick source of information about who might be new in town. Darran paid attention to the new people, but as customers and potential competition. He was halfway to Merchant Row when he notices the excited people heading to the north of the town. The last time it had been the arrival of the caravan. What could it be this time?

North was the fighter's training field, so it could be as simple as a fight, and those happened all the time there. So it wouldn't be something he had to care about.

He pushed through to continue on his way and hesitated. One of those fights wouldn't excite the town; they always happened. For them to be want to watch, it had to be big, and Tibs could only think of one person who'd manage to get into the kind of fight that would draw a crowd.

Jackal could handle himself.

Or get himself killed.

Tibs joined the crowd, then ran. Knowing Jackal, if this lasted long, he'd end up in bad shape.

Instead of Jackal in the center of a marked circle in the ground, Cross punched a Runner in the face hard enough that when he fell, he didn't stand. Now that he didn't move, Tibs recognized him. Karl. Around the circles were other fighters, nursing injuries. Metal, earth, one water. Jackal was also not among them.

"Who's next?" Cross yelled, arms extended as she turned in place. She looked like she was receiving an ovation no one was giving her. "Come on, there has to be someone here who wants a piece of this!"

Karl struggled to get to his feet, then Pyan was helping him and pulling him away. Karl was pissed and looked like he wanted a rematch, despite his condition.

"I thought you Runners were all-powerful and stuff," Cross yelled.

A woman in leather armor that had seen better days stepped out of the crowd and as she picked up speed, Tibs saw her eyes glimmering. Crystal was her element. It was confirmed as she swung without slowing her run and the light reflected off the crystals forming over her fist and forearm.

Tibs saw Jackal standing with the crowd and lost interest in the fight.

"I thought you'd be fighting her," he said, once he was next to him.

Jackal shook his head. "When a stranger jumps in the pit demanding to fight everyone, you let the others get pounded until you know what the fuck's going on." He lowered his voice. "What's her element?"

"She doesn't have one," Tibs replied, as softly.

Jackal stared at him, then looked at the fight, where the crystal fighter was stepping back with each punch she blocked from Cross. "Karl's only a little weaker than I am. She already took down Brent, Asmial, Mog. Arruh and Damian took her on as a team. Lidia's about to go down."

"She came with the caravan," Tibs said. "I thought she had left with them. She was one of the guards there."

"You know her?" Jackals asked, not taking his eyes off the fight.

"We talked. She's the one who showed me the puzzle I told you about."

“You didn’t say she was a guard.”

Tibs shrugged. “It wasn’t like I thought it was important. She was just someone I met and who likes puzzles too.”

Jackal nodded as if Tibs had revealed something. “Then she’s smart. I thought she was Metal, with all of it on her armor, but I couldn’t figure out why she wasn’t doing anything with it. Maybe she’s only using it as extra weight. Forces her to get stronger just by moving.” He winced as Cross landed a punch in Lidia’s stomach that lifted her off her feet. “And adds to the impact.”

“I’d think all those weights would slow her down.”

“Only if they’re recent addition. Heavy stuff is a way fighters in the pits got stronger.”

Tibs thought about what he’s seen of the armor when they spoke. “I think they’ve been there for a long time. Some have new straps holding them in place, but most have been there a while.”

Again Jackal nodded. “She’s used to the weights, stronger, and knows how to use the added momentum they give her motions. I wonder how well she’d fare against someone who used their essence properly in a fight.”

“Like you?”

Jackal grinned. “Come on, Tibs. Don’t insult me. You know all I do is stone up and punch stuff.”

Tibs snorted. Why did his friend insist on acting dumb after using a word like Momentum? Tibs didn’t know that one, so it had to be one of the smart words. He didn’t call his friend out on it.

“So you want me to fight her?” Jackal asked.

“Isn’t that your decision?” Tibs replied, studying his friend.

Jackal didn’t take his eyes off the fight. “Do you think I can beat her?” Lidia crumpled after Cross landed and uppercut.

Tibs shrugged. “Only if you fight smart.”

Jackal grinned. “Oh well, it’s been a while since I had my ass handed to me by someone in town. Could be interesting.” He stepped forward and Cross turned to face him. She noticed Tibs and gave him a wave before focusing on Jackal again.

“Big and strong.” She smiled. “Just like I like them.”

“Seems those you like end up bruised and broken,” Jackals said. “So how about we settle on you mildly tolerating me? Like everyone else in town.”

She stepped around him. “I’m not going easy on you, no matter how little I like you.”

He moved with her. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Then he rushed her, stepping to the side to avoid her punch. He stepped back, then rushed and dodged again, and again.

Tibs watched, concerned Jackal hadn’t tapped into his essence yet. The fighters moved within the circle, Cross moving forward as Jackal stepped. Trying to punch him, and Jackal dodging most, deflecting some, and enduring those that connected.

“You planning on at least trying to hit me?” she demanded, her breathing ragged.

“Can’t. My man doesn’t appreciate it when I hit on anyone else.”

She paused. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Jackal shook his head. "I'm a one-man kind of guy. He still wants me, so you're going to have to be happy with doing all the hitting."

"Then why did you step in here if you aren't going to fight?"

"I never said I wasn't going to fight you," Jackal replied, grinning. "I said I wasn't going to hit you." He pulled out a coin. "How about we make this worthwhile?"

Tibs couldn't tell what it was from where he stood, only that it was pale, so silver or electrum. He didn't think Jackal had gold.

"Isn't a fight worthwhile in and of itself?" Cross asked as they circled each other.

"If it's a bar fight, maybe." Jackal motioned around them. "This is a match. In those, the winner should be properly rewarded. What do you say?"

With a shrug, she pulled a coin. "It's your money."

"It is, and I love myself some coins. Tibs!" Jackal threw the coin at him. Electrum. "Hold on to them for me, will you?" Tibs caught Cross's coins. Then the fighters were circling again.

"Aren't you going to do whatever it is your element lets you do?" she asked.

"Come on, how fair would that be? You don't have an element. Why would I need to use mine to win?"

She slammed her fists together and the metal on the gloves clanged. "Seems pretty obvious what my element is."

Jackal smiled. "First time around anyone with an element, then?" He rushed her.

She stepped aside but didn't punch. "I've been in town a while."

"Then you haven't been paying attention. The eyes give the element away."

"My eyes are gray." She feinted, then punched.

Jackal blocked the attack. "Wrong gray for metal."

She stepped away. "Aren't you going to mock me for pretending, then?"

"After you took down half a dozen fighters who do have their elements?" he lunged at her but stepped aside as she tried to hit him. He grinned and with an exasperated cry, she threw herself into a series of attacks.

She got in enough hits that Jackal no longer smiled, but he didn't hit her back. He moved around the circle, forcing her to move with him as they pushed her attacks each time one got through.

Tibs noticed her breathing was heavy now and thought he understood what Jackal was doing. He smirked. Stone up and punch stuff indeed. At this rate, everyone was going to realize how smart the fighter was.

Her attacks slowed as Jackal kept talking, but now too softly for Tibs to hear. Whatever he said, she didn't like it. Then, Jackal caught her punch in his hand, pulled her off balance and she was face down in the dirt, with his foot on her back.

"I believe I win."

He looked at him sideways. "Feels more like you cheated. Fighting involves throwing punches."

“You even seen Samol women fight? But how about this? If you can get up, this fight’s not over.” Jackal’s skin turned gray, and Tibs sense the fighter pull essence from the ground. He’d seen him do this often enough to know nothing short of someone stronger in with the element would move him.

She tried, grunted, and looked at him again. “You’re using your element,” she spat.

“Essence,” he replied. “And you made a point earlier of telling me I should.”

“You’re smarter than you look,” she said, tried again, then slumped. “You win.”

Jackal snorted. “I’m just smarter than those you fought to his point, which, really, isn’t saying much. The really smart ones know not to even try.” He offered his hand and pulled her to her feet. “I was a pit fighter before landing here. I learned to win, instead of fight.”

Tibs joined them. “And I do what I can to keep him from getting into too much trouble.” He handed Jackal his coins. The fighter grinned, then made a show of putting them in his pouch.

She rolled her eyes, then looked at them. “He’s on your team?”

“He’s my team leader.”

“Against my will,” Jackal added. “I said Tibs should be it, but he refused.”

“Carina wanted it.”

“She wanted it too much.” Jackal grinned at Cross. “Never hand over power to someone who wants it.”

“I never hand over power to anyone,” She replied. “You want it from me. You’re going to have to take it by force.”

“I’m good.” Jackal grinned. “Unless you want to keep fighting after you’ve had me, I’ll buy you a tankard with that new coin I won.”

“You’re buying me more than one,” she replied, “unless it’s filled with something really good.”

“The ale here *is* really good.” Jackal motioned for them to leave, and Tibs followed. Now that it was clear the fighting was over, the crowd dispersed.