

Chapter 62

“That might be the least dignified arrival I have witnessed,” a woman said.

Tibs untangled himself, groaning as he opened an eye. How was he still alive? That fall had to have been—

The form looking down on him straightened. “Good, you are all here. You had me concerned for an instant.

Tibs sat. Of course, his audience.

He looked around and was surprised at the banality of the space. A stone room with a stone table and two stone chairs. Shouldn’t Purity be more... he searched for the word.

“Yes?” she asked.

He stood. “Sorry, I was just expecting...” he motioned to the only things beside them.

“More what?” her tone was... he wasn’t offended, or even amused, more like... nothing? She sounded bored was the best Tibs could come up with.

She shrugged. As with her voice, her form was feminine, but plain, like the room they were in. With the other element, there had been a sense of vastness. He has been in their presence in what felt like a place, but there had also been the sense they weren’t limited by it, or by anything.

“Your mind seems to have trouble staying still.” She motioned for the chair opposite hers. “Sit.” He did. “Now, please find that through again and complete it. More what?”

“I’m not sure.” He tried to sound confident, but she could see his thoughts, so she knew the truth. “I guess the plainness makes sense now that I think about it. Everything in the city is plain.”

“And you believe they are such because it is what I am.”

He couldn’t tell if she was making a statement, so was so bored the question didn’t make it to her voice.

“The other elements were more...” he hesitated. He didn’t want to offend her, then remembered she heard his thoughts. “They had stronger personalities, is the best way I can put it.”

“And you believe that makes them more?”

“I don’t know,” he said after thinking about it. “I don’t know a lot.”

“Few of your kind do, as much as they delude themselves otherwise.”

“It was like there was more to them if that makes sense,” he continued, then shook his head at what he’d said. “That’s not right. More to them, maybe. Like they had concentrated a small part to speak with me.” He motioned around the room. “This feels like that is all there is.” He hesitated. “Shouldn’t there be more?”

She shrugged. “We are what we are. What we are not is not a responsibility of yours. Despite what it may seem; what you have undertaken. You need not concern yourself with my state.”

“You know who I am.”

She nodded. "You are a child of humans. One who has set himself on a journey that will see you dead should try to reach its end. You should not have done this. Your kind is too fragile. And yet." She paused. "You do not fear that outcome. That is interesting."

"I was going to die before I came to the dungeon. No one lives long on my street unless they're willing to kill without thinking about it. I can't do that. Then the dungeon was going to eat me. I know that's not true, but I didn't know that then, and..."

"Please say it."

He nodded. "I want to make the men who hurt Mama pay for what they did. That's going to help." He motioned for her torso. Unlike the other element, the shadow was there, plain to see.

"It won't if you are dead."

He shrugged. "At least I'll die trying. I'm okay with that. It's not like even with it I know where they are. It's accepting they won't be punished that I don't want."

She studied him. "I did not think you would come," she finally said. "The places where my connection to your world exists have grown few, and they are guarded strength, if not all with cunning. I am impressed with how hard you worked to reach me."

"Be not pleased?" somehow, that disappointed him.

"I am not someone who is pleased. Being pleased means you are done with the work. The work always continues. It is better to appreciate what has been accomplished than be happy with what has been done."

Tibs nodded. "What do I have to do to get the shadow?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You only have to take it, as it is with each of us. I leave obfuscation to the others. Light and I have this in common. We prefer being straightforward."

Tibs walked around the table. She turned in her chair to face him, her expression impassive. He reached for it and stopped.

"Will this hurt you?" he'd been so preoccupied with figuring out how to get the shadow from the others he hadn't considered what it would do to them. They hadn't acted like it hurt, but did he know what pain looked like to an element?

"It is not I that it will hurt."

He nodded. She might be straightforward, but it wouldn't be as simple as closing his hand over it. Even with Fire and Corruption, the ease had come with the hint of a cost, or, with Fire, the burning immediacy of it.

He touched her and immediately pulled his hand away. The pain had been intense. Not like the fire. Heat, but not the burning of his flesh. That memory was still clear, even after months.

He touched her again, and the pain returned. A deep burning that reminded him of when he'd been doused with corruption, but only in how profound it was. This burning also reached into his essence. He pushed and ground his teeth. When he opened his eyes, he only had his fingers in her to the first knuckle.

He pulled his hand away in fright as he saw there was nothing left of his fingers inside her. His fingers were whole.

Was this a trick? An illusion to make him think he couldn't do it? He searched her face for signs of duplicity, but all he saw was curiosity and only a hint of that.

She was Purity. Hard work was what she appreciated, so this was something he needed to work at.

He touched her again, and this time he kept his eyes open and watched his fingers break her 'skin' and the pain felt more intense for him watching his finger dissolve.

It wasn't like the man in the pool of corruption. Instead of melting, his fingers exploded, like ambers from a kicked burning log, and left nothing behind.

He pulled his hand out, his blood running cold. Was it only something pure that could pass through her skin to reach the shadow? There had been nothing left of his fingers, of him, inside her.

"Am I not..." he searched for the words. "Pure enough? Worthy?"

"Are you not?" the question had no judgment to it.

If there was nothing left when he pushed inside her, how could he grasp the shadow?

She was Purity. The only way he could do it was by working at it.

He slammed his hand into her before he could think better of it and screamed in pain. His wrist was in, then half his forearm. He fumbled about, trying to feel the shadow, grab it, but he couldn't.

He realized he'd closed his eyes.

Opening them didn't help. He saw the shadow, but there was nothing of his hand to close around it. Despair clawed at him, but he pushed it away. More work was all he needed, and he pushed more of his arm in, hoping that with enough, there would be something left for him to use.

He kept his eyes fixed on where his arm entered, despite the desire to close his eyes in the belief not seeing part of himself disappear would diminish the pain. He was to his elbow now. Would he have to go in completely? Would he be able to come back?

Watching, he noticed the white line where his arm met her body, then realized it was on his side, in his arm. A white so bright, so clean. He wondered why it wasn't going in. This had to be the pure part of him who he was, the part that she...

White wasn't Purity's color.

The only essence that ever registered as white to his mind was his, the one filling his vast reserve, the one Val called life. He searched the line for a sign of the other elements. Blue, red, brown, purple, black. The storming blue-gray or even the brightness that was Light. None of them were there.

The only essence pushed by was his white one.

He stopped pushing. His arm was in past the elbow. If she was a living person, his hand would be out the other side—that was an image he'd have preferred not having—so there was enough there.

Why wasn't there any part of himself in her? If the other elements got through, they should be there, giving his arm form and solidity... shouldn't they?

Except they weren't his element. His element was white, Life. That was him, the pure him. Then why wasn't he inside her?

Because, being who she was, she'd make him work for it.

He relaxed. Pushing physically wasn't making it do in, so he needed a different way. It didn't change the pain, other than since he wasn't pushing against it, it seemed easier to set it aside, as he had the despair.

He could control his essence, move it around himself and into others.

He pushed all of it, and nothing happened. He sensed instead of looked. Where his essence pushed against Purity's skin, it pushed back. He focus his push on a single point, the smallest he could think of, hoping he could overwhelm her. Only she wasn't a person, she was an element. She was Purity. She might seem more limited than the other he had met, but she would always be more than he could be.

But he was also a rogue.

She'd mentioned cunning.

Had that been a clue, or was she simply pointing out what had happened? He'd used cunning to get around a strong defense. It had worked because the guards hadn't expected it. She would, wouldn't she?

He continued the assault, but moved one strand away, then pressed it. He put as little strength as he could into it. The way moving slowly in soft shadows made people not notice his movement.

It wouldn't. It couldn't work. She was not someone; she was an element. Moving one strand to the other side of his 'arm' and pushing 'less' wouldn't mean she didn't notice. Her body wasn't what he was fighting against, she was the entire space he was in.

He could have cursed.

He stopped pushing against her 'skin', and let his essence explode around him.

He felt her smile as he dispersed. He was through her and the room.

Maybe the vastness of the other elements was an illusion; because the room was the limit of what she was. He shifted his focus away from that and onto the work he was doing. He felt the shadow of the element, was all around it, through it as he was through her. With a thought, he 'grasped' it, and it was no longer there, but inside him, where Purity made a space between light and darkness.

His element's reserve again grew, and then...

Nothing.

He was seated opposite her, wondering why nothing had happened. He had all eight elements. Getting the first four had unlocked his element. Shouldn't getting these do... something?

"Sometimes," Purity said, "working hard does not mean using brute force."

He nodded. "I sometimes forget I'm a rogue."

She nodded. "And sometimes, going the work correctly will still not give you what you expect"

He frowned, and she tapped his forehead. "Be careful not to let this get in your way."

"What happens now?"

"No, you go on your way. You still have a long journey ahead of you, and it must begin with you surviving the next few steps."

Tibs opened his mouth to protest—