

Stepping up-15

Tibs stood by the pool of corruption, fighting the urge to throw up. It was night, and he was dressed in rags. His audience with fire had taught him not to bring anything valuable to audiences if he could avoid it. He'd tried to come via the roofs, but his leg had cramped at the idea of climbing a wall, so he used the alleys.

He missed the roofs. If only for that, he needed to get this done with. He stepped to the fence keeping people from getting close, and kicked a stone as he placed a hand on it to climb over. It plopped into the corruption and in the Claria's light, Tibs stared as it bubbled and dissolved.

Stone dissolved into nothing, and that was supposed to be a basic element. Shouldn't that be safe from corruption? His hands shook and his mouth was dry. Ganny said that all he needed was strong emotion when with the element. He was next to the corruption, and he was terrified. Why wasn't he having his audience?

He told himself to climb the fence, but his body didn't obey. What would that do to him? The fire had nearly killed him, and there was nothing here to draw essence from to keep himself alive. Or a cleric who would heal him.

He let go of the fence. He'd try another day. That was it. He wasn't ready today. He hadn't prepared properly. Tomorrow night, or the next one.

He'd do it then.

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The guard escorted Tibs through the guild building. He hadn't told him why he'd been summoned, and Tibs had expected Tirania, Alistair wouldn't have sent for him.

He hadn't expected Harry to be the one to summon him. They hadn't interacted since the last time.

"Leave us," the guard leader told the man, and it was only the two of them.

"I didn't do it," Tibs said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Not that you'd tell me if you had."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "Am I lying?"

Harry smiled slightly. "You did something, but I know you didn't do this."

"Then I'm going back. I have to train."

Harry sighed. "Tibs, I need your help."

That gave him pause. "I'm a rogue. Why do you want my help?"

"Someone's stealing from the nobles."

Tibs smiled. "Good for them."

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

"You're in charge here. 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 how nobles are. There are only two families here to do more than pay lip service

to my authority. This needs to stop.”

“Then find the thief.”

“I need your help.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You want me to betray another rogue?”

“I want you to help keep this town safe. That thief is endangering everyone. They aren’t like you, who just breaks in and leaves. They aren’t like that Ania, who leaves poems praising the house’s resident.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t heard of that one. The name was familiar, air rogue, he thought. “What is this rogue—”

“A Thief, Tibs, whoever they are, they’ve broken my rules. That makes them a thief.”

“Every rogue here has broken your rules,” Tibs pointed out.

“But you’re being careful and discrete. I know about it primarily because I know you, and the other rogue. Or, like Ania, I’ve read her poems. Those the ‘victims’ aren’t particularly angry about.” He snorted. “Some actually consider it a mark of pride to have on. They’ve been visited by a Dungeon Runner.” He shook his head in amusement, then sobered. “This thief takes valuables from the house they break-in. The nobles are complaining. And I need this to stop before they escalate it.”

“And you think I can do that?”

“Tibs, you can talk to them. Find out which one does it. If you don’t want to hand them over to me, get them to stop.”

Tibs wanted to tell the guard to go do something obscene with his request. He didn’t work for the guards. He was a Runner and a rogue. But Harry cared about the town, about keeping everyone safe, and he didn’t lie. If he said this could escalate, Tibs believed him, and he couldn’t just let that happen to his town.

“I hate that you know me this good,” he said.

Harry smiled. “You’re the one who kept poking into my business, Tibs. You make it hard for me not to get to know you.”

“I’m not handing them over to you,” He said. “But I’ll get them to stop.”

“Thank you, Tibs.”

Tibs left with a sigh. He was going to have to be careful and make sure he did this for the town, and not Harry. He was not doing this to help Harry. The man was a guard, and rogues didn’t help the guards.

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Tibs had gone around the bazaar, talking with every merchant he’d worked out would buy something without asking questions. There was more than he’d expected, until he remembered Sto. All a thief had to say was that the item was loot and the merchant would have a justification to take it. Not all merchants did, though. And of those he talked with, none admitted to any recent buys, and Tibs believed them.

He was on his way to Merchant Row, to check in with those merchants, he became aware people were excited, and heading for the training fields.

He tried to ignore them; he knew which merchant would take stolen goods and which wouldn’t and he figured he needed to talk with them before the thief became aware he was

looking for them, but someone mentioned a fight in the process of happening, and Tibs sighed. He knew who would be involved.

He hurried through the crowd, and when he made it to the front, he stared as Cross struck a fighter across the jaw and sent them to the ground, where they stayed. The Fighter was one with Metal as his element. Karl, or Clark, Tibs didn't remember his name.

"Who's next!" she yelled. Slowly turning in place, arms extended as if she was taking in applause. She wasn't getting any.

The fighter struggled to his feet, then was pulled out of the cleared space the crowd left. He fought to return to the fight, but he was still too injured and his teammates led him into the crowd, where they disappeared.

"Come on, there had to be someone here who can beat me. I thought you Runners were all-powerful and some such."

A woman stepped forward. She wore leather armor that had seen better days. Tibs saw her eyes as she ran at Cross and only made out a shimmering. Crystal. She swung, the light glimmering off the crystals forming over her first and forearms, then Tibs saw Jackal and he headed for the man.

"I expected you to have fought her already," he said once he was next to him.

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

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

Jackal looked back at the fight, pensive. "She just took down Karry. I don't think Lidia will hold out long. Before him was Brent and Asmial and she took both of them down."

"She came with the caravan," Tibs said. "As one of the guards for it."

Jackal looked at him. "You know her?"

"We talked. She's the one who had the puzzle box." He'd told his team about the encounter, but other than the box, he hadn't given details. They hadn't been curious about it.

"I thought she was metal, considering everything added to her armor," Jackal mused. "But it might just be for extra weight." He winced as Cross landed a punch in Lidia's stomach hard enough the fighter was lifted off her feet. "And for added impact."

"Does it help?" Tibs asked. "Wouldn't all that extra weight slow her down?"

"Only if she added it recently. Carrying weight is a way fighters in the pits get stronger. By always carrying them like that on her armor, she'd get stronger and used to moving with them. I don't know how effective it would be against someone who uses their element properly."

"Like you?"

Jackal grinned. "Come on, Tibs, don't insult me. I'm just the stone up and punch type."

Tibs snorted.

"Do you want me to fight her?"

Tibs looked at his friend. "Isn't that your decision?"

Jackal watched the fight. “Do you think I can beat her?” he asked as Lidia crumpled to the ground.

Tibs shrugged. “Only if you fight smart.”

Jackal grinned. “Well then. I think I’m do for getting my ass handed to me.” He stepped into the ring and Cross turned to face him. She noticed Tibs and gave him a wave before focusing back on Jackal.

She grinned. “Big and strong. Just as I like them.”

“Seems like those you like end up bruised and broken,” Jackal said. “So how about you stick mildly tolerating me, like everyone else in town?”

“I’m not going to go easy on you, no matter how little I like you.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Jackal rushed her, then stepped to the side to avoid her punch. Then again, and again.

Tibs watched, concerned. Jackal hadn’t tapped into his essence yet. He stepped back, and she stepped forward. He either dodged or deflected her strikes. The few that got through, he endured.

“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 raised an eyebrow. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

Jackal shook his head. “I’m a one-man kind of guy. He still wants me, so I’m afraid you’ll have to contend with doing all the hitting.”

“Then why did you step forward if you aren’t going to fight?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going to fight you,” Jackal said. “I said I wasn’t going to hit you.” He pulled a coin from his coin pouch. “How about we make it worthwhile?” Tibs couldn’t tell what it was from where he stood. It was pale enough to be silver or electrum. Tibs didn’t recall his friend having any gold.

“Isn’t a fight worthwhile in and of itself?” Cross asked.

“You’re thinking of a bar fight.” Jackal motioned around them. “This is a match. The winner should be properly rewarded. What do you say?”

She pulled a coin from a punch. “It’s your money.”

“It is, and I do love myself some coins. Tibs!” Jackal threw the coin at him. Electrum. “Hold them for us.” He caught Cross’s coin, then the fighters were facing each other again.

“Are you going to do whatever it is you do with your element?” She asked.

Jackal shook his head, circling her. “I like my matches to be fair. You don’t have an element, so I’m not going to use mine.”

She narrowed her eyes, mirroring his movements. “What makes you think I don’t have one?” he hit her fists together, making the metal on the glove clang. “I’d think it’s pretty obvious what it is.”

Jackal smiled. “First time around anyone with essence, then?”

“I’ve been in town for a while now.”

“But you haven’t been paying that much attention if you don’t know the eyes give the element away.”

“My eyes are gray,” she replied, feinting.

“Wrong gray for metal,” Jackal replied, blocking the actual attack.

“Then aren’t you going to mock me for pretending?”

“Not after you took down four fighters with elements.” He lunged at her, but instead of hitting her, he stepped aside as she tried to hit him. He grinned at her and she threw herself in a series of attacks.

He got in enough hits that Jackal stopped grinning, but he didn’t hit back. Simply stepping around the open space, forcing her to follow him, and he blocked and deflects her punches.

Tibs noticed her breathing was coming harder, and he had an idea what Jackal was doing. He was forcing her to tire herself out instead of trying to overwhelm her. He shook his head. Jackal wasn’t going to be able to play the stupid fighter long if he did this too often.

Under a minute, she was noticeably slowing. Jackal caught the next punch and pulled her off balance, tripping her and then placing a foot on her back.

“I believe I win.”

She looked at him. “I don’t know. This feels like you cheated. Fighting involves throwing punches.”

“If you can get up, I’ll consider the match is still going.” His skin turned gray. And Tibs sensed Jackal pull from the ground. He wouldn’t move from there, no matter how strong she was.

She made two attempts, then gave up. “You’re smarter than you look,” she finally said.

Jackal snorted. “Just smarter than those you fought at this point, which really isn’t saying much for me.” He offered her his hand and pulled her to her feet. “I was a pit fighter before landing her. I’ve learned how to win, instead of fight.”

Tibs joined them now that the fighting was over. “And I keep him from getting into too much trouble.” He handed the coins to Jackal, who grinned at them.

She looked at them. “He’s on your team?”

“He’s my team leader.”

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

“Carina could have done it,” Tibs said.

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

“I never hand 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. “But unless you want to keep fighting, I’ll buy you a tankard with that coin I won.”

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

Jackal smiled. “The ale here *is* really good.”

Tibs followed them as the crowd dispersed.