

Chapter 63

His throat clamped shut with a painful croak.

“He’s back,” Val said.

“You could just crush him,” Craren said.

Tibs wished she did.

He’d forgotten how much pain his body was in while he was with Purity. Once he’d been sitting before her again, the pain of getting the shadow had ceased to be. He opened an eye and looked up. The door was only twice his height away.

He snickered, then stopped in pain. How had he been terrified of that fall? He’d thrown himself out of windows far higher in his attempts to have his audience with Air.

He struggled to his feet.

The room was more cavern, with uneven walls and floor. His thinking felt clearer than before his audience. Maybe his time there had allowed him to rest. Maybe being in Purity’s presence had healed him a little? Although he was in too much pain still for that.

Regardless, he was happy he wouldn’t have to deal with whatever surprises this room had. He used the handholds the unevenness provided and climbed back to the door and the opening.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Craren demanded.

Tibs didn’t answer until he’d pulled himself through and was catching his breath. His first attempt was only a hiss of air, accompanied by pain. He formed water in his mouth and had trouble swallowing it. When had he stopped using his essence to wet his mouth and throat? He couldn’t think that far back.

“Leaving,” he croaked.

He used the door to stand.

“You can’t just let him leave,” Craren said.

“He passed the test,” Val replied. There was a forcefulness to the neutrality of her tone and Tibs couldn’t tell if she was hiding her anger or didn’t want to show even a hint of pride. “He worked hard, Purity took him and judged him worthy. Who am I to pass judgment now?”

“The dungeon he’s in. Come on, no one will know.”

“How sure of that are you, Craren?” Val was quiet and Tibs was too tired to do more than put one foot before the other. If she broke her rules, there was nothing Tibs could do to stop her. “Do you think Rangar expected anyone to mind what he did? Until they came and killed him?” She hadn’t emphasized ‘them’ like Ganny did, but Tibs had the sense they were the same people.

“He was out of control. He wasn’t listening to you anymore. If they hadn’t stopped him, his creatures would have been unleashed on the world.”

“But how did they know he was about to do that? We didn’t tell them. Sparky didn’t, not the way he felt about Rangar. Do you think he told anyone else?”

Craren was slow to answer. “No. He didn’t trust anyone but you, and that’s only

because of your bond.”

Craren and Val’s voices faded as he walked, as if they stayed behind, discussing the other dungeon.

The hall remained a hall, and when Tibs fell unconscious, he didn’t wake to screams, just the pains and aches of his body, and not feeling any more rested. The dungeon didn’t stop him or help. Val didn’t even offer food. The idea of eating made Tibs sick.

The trip back to daylight was shorter than that to his audience. It had to be, not that Tibs was sure of anything by the time the point of light was stronger than the dungeon’s own.

Then he was outside, and the brightness blinded him. Arms closed around him, and he didn’t care what they intended to do with him. Maybe they’d figured out he wasn’t one of them and they would—

“I’ve got you,” A man whispered.

A cell would have a cot where he could sleep properly. He’d take that.

“Show me your eyes.” Fingers took his chin and moved his head up. He prepared himself for the too intense light and opened them. The man’s eyes, with their non-color, turned sad. “At least you came back so you can try again.”

“How—” Tibs’s throat closed up painfully as he was seated.

“More meditation and reflection,” The man said. “Much as before.”

“How long?” He forced out through the pain.

“There’s no way to know, you will—” He looked over his shoulder. “You mean how long you were in the dungeon?”

Tibs nodded.

“Longer than anyone I have ever heard of. Twenty-four days.” He put a small cup in Tibs’s hands. “Eleven days ago is when we considered everyone who was going to have their audience to have returned. I admire how hard you tried, but I respect that you recognized your limit and returned, even if it took so long. I’m sure that next time, Purity will take you in. Drink it slowly. It will help.”

The liquid was like syrup, but had no scent or taste. It coated his tongue and throat and soothed it, then his stomach. It didn’t take his pain, thirst, or hunger away. But his mind cleared enough that he realized why had caused the man’s reaction.

His eyes were still brown.

“It will be a while before someone’s here to take you back,” the man said. He no longer sounded like he was soothing Tibs. He sounded like a man performing his duty now. “As I said, we no longer expected anyone to come back at this point. Just wait here and one of the clerics will take you to your chamber where you can rest fully.”

The man walked away.

The man simply left him alone in the small room filled with plain and not too comfortable chairs.

Of course, as far as he was concerned, Tibs wasn’t an intruder, just another supplicant who hadn’t gained his audience.

Once his cup was empty, he stood and walked out of the door. He didn’t even recall walking here from the dungeon. Men and women walked by, but no one even glanced his

way. Tibs joined them and after a couple of turns, was on a larger path and then headed for the gate that marked the area reserved for the dungeon.

The guards there didn't stop him.

Outside, he received looks, and people gave him space. More to avoid smelling him, Tibs decided, than out of respect. His walk felt aimless, and sometimes he wondered why the dungeon had recreated a city around him. What the trap or puzzle could be he needed to overcome to proceed toward his audience.

Then he remembered he had met Purity.

He was out, and he needed to go...

It would come back to him.

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He looked around the marketplace, the smells both enticing and revolting, but the sights...

Those were familiar.

He'd been here before.

No, he'd come here to learn something.

To learn the way back.

He knew where he needed to go.

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The door opened and Zackaria took a step back, covering their nose as their eyes grew wide in surprise.

Tibs smiled. He'd gotten it right on the first try. He'd found the right door even with the dungeon trying to confuse him. He'd made it.

Which was good, he decided, because darkness was right on his heel.

No, it was right here.

He barely felt Zackaria catch him before darkness was all he was.

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He woke in a bed that was too fancy and comfortable to be his. His pain was gone, as was his hunger or his thirst.

That felt wrong. He'd lived with both for so long that it was like those should be normal.

"How do you feel?" Carina asked, and Tibs opened his eyes.

"Strange. Where's the mountain that should have fallen on me?"

"You returned," a man accused, and Tibs looked at Peolo. "You understand that I will not get you in a second time."

Right, his eyes.

"We don't have the time, anyway," Carina said, showing the bracelet with its still yellow gem. "I'm surprised it didn't turn red already."

Right, two and four days, plus however long he was asleep here.

"I know you thought Purity was for you," People said, his voice strained by restrained. "But now you have to accept that what you want isn't always what is right for

you.”

Tibs kept his confusion from showing as he nodded; then the cleric left, and he looked to Carina. “What is wrong with him?”

“You came back.”

That didn’t help. “So? They let others leave. The guy who helped me from the dungeon seemed proud I’d decided to do that.”

“He thought you were a supplicant.”

Tibs considered it. “Peolo thinks I gave up. He thinks I wasn’t determined enough to see it through or die trying.”

She shrugged. “You aren’t one of us. People who don’t grow up as part of purity aren’t has...” She trailed off. She looked at the closed door, and Tibs felt air essence shift. “Did it work?”

“I had my audience. I have all the essences, but if it did something, I can’t feel it.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Water said I needed it. Maybe I need to do something more before I get whatever I’m supposed to. Or maybe there’s nothing for me to get. She did say it would be hard. Maybe all I’m getting out of this is a little of more of the essences and I have to learn to deal with it. Since I know how to have an audience with her, I’ll go to the lake and ask her what she needs me to do once we’re back in Kragle Rock.”

“Why aren’t I hungry or thirsty? How long was I asleep?”

“Only one day. It took me a lot of work to convince Peolo to heal you.” She paused. “I think he gave in because it means you’ll leave sooner.”

“He’d really rather I have died, doesn’t he?”

“Don’t be—” She sighed. “He’s disappointed. I think he’s angry he took a chance and he was wrong. I wish I could tell him you didn’t just give up.”

“What did you do while I was in the dungeon?” Tibs asked to change the subject.

She brightened immediately. “I spent time with my family. As disappointed as my mother was in me when I spent more time in the sorcerer’s library than my meditation and preparing to become a cleric. She was afraid I was showing an inclination to laziness. She beamed when I told her I made Rho in only a few months.”

“They don’t use levels here, do they?”

Carina shook her head. “But they have to know them because clerics will go to other dungeons as part of their training.”

“I’m glad your time waiting was good.”

“I’m glad Peolo forced me to go. I didn’t realize it would be this easy to fix it. I was terrified that I’d try and I’d find out they hated me.”

“It’s better to try to fix things,” Tibs said. “We’re Runners, so we might die before we can if we wait too long.” He studied her. “Do you want to stay?”

She ran a finger over the yellow gem. “I can’t. When I’m recalled, I have to go.”

“I mean until then,” Tibs said. “I’m going back as soon as I get out of bed.”

“Oh? Don’t you want to spend more time resting?”

He rolled his eyes. “What I want is food. After the ways the dungeon tortured me with tables full of the stuff, I want real food, made by one of Kroseph’s brothers.”

“You have to take it easy when eating, Tibs. You might—”

“I’m fine, and I am going to eat all the food at the inn.”

The soft knock interrupted Carina’s protest. Zackaria stepped in with a tray with a couple of slices of bread, meats, and cheeses, along with a tankard.

“I hope I’m not interrupting a special moment.” She looked from one to the other meaningfully. “I thought Tibs could use something to eat after his experience.”

Carina stood. “I’ll go give my proper goodbyes and we can leave once I’m back.”

“Are you sure?” Tibs asked.

“My family will understand.”

Tibs nodded and took the tray from Zackaria.

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Tibs rubbed his stomach and did his best not to show the pain.

“I told you to take it easy,” Carina said, chuckling.

“It’ll pass.” Tibs winced and slowed his pace. Eating the food Zackaria brought him had rekindled his hunger, and they had been happy to feed him more and more. Carina had taken longer than Tibs expected to return and had definitely overeaten as a result.

“If you think you’re going to be sick, we should stop at a tavern until it passes. We don’t have to go back to Kragle Rock this instant.”

“It’s just the motion pushing the food around,” He replied.

“Zack’s too soft,” she said.

“I was hungry.”

“And how hungry are you now?”

“I’m hoping the walk from the platform to the inn will make me hungry again, so I get to enjoy their food.”

She looked at him and shook her head, chuckled as they stepped into the line to get to the platform. The long wait helped settle his stomach. Then, as the assistant stood next to them and made the motions to take them back, Tibs concentrated on sensing something new he could pick up.

There was nothing new. It was all tingling and indistinct essence moving around.

It wasn’t until that went away and Kragle Rock materialized around them that there was something new.

The pain was new.

Being shoved back by an arrow in his shoulder; that was new too.

Tibs screaming in pain as he fell back? That wasn’t entirely new.