

Chapter 50

Tibs walked along Merchant Row, observing the merchants, the customers, the men and women dressed in green and black who might or might not be Harry's people. Tibs couldn't tell anymore unless he saw them doing something that Harry didn't allow. Here, they were keeping merchants from assaulting one another or listening to complaints.

Another thing he was doing was trying to ignore the fighter who was trailing him. The man wasn't very good at it.

As many nights as Tibs spent patrolling the row, he wasn't able to stop all the acts of sabotage, and it led to these arguments, as one merchant accused another of being responsible.

Tibs noted the man and woman, dressed in green and black, hassling the leathersmith. He stayed far enough they wouldn't notice him, since the guards and the people working for Sebastian knew him. Every few nights, when he found the time to train, another thief tried to get him discovered. He'd won those encounters, and even got a couple of them caught in his stead, but he wasn't sure how far Sebastian would push this. Jackal was certain his father wasn't going to stop until he was crawling to him, asking for forgiveness.

He couldn't hear what the might-be guards said, but he could read the promise of violence in their bodies. They were demanding some form of payment for the protection that should come simply by the shop being on the row, and the guild protecting the town.

Tibs would find them later and... he had no idea. He wanted to make them pay, but he didn't know how to go about it. If they were guards, Harry would take it as Tibs causing him problems, and even if the guard leader could tell Tibs wasn't lying, would the two guards have the protection that meant they also wouldn't be lying as far as Harry knew?

His attempt at explaining that to Harry had gone so well the last time, [need to add that scene in a previous chapter] with his lieutenant boldface lying to Harry about not having anything magical on her while Tibs could see the essence weave. But he couldn't point it out without having to explain how he saw it and...

He wanted to scream in frustration.

Instead, he stopped, spun, and glared at the fighter.

The man stopped as if it had been his intent.

Tibs didn't recognize him, but he had to be one of the new Runners. He was older, mean-looking, and wore a shirt of dirty gray-green rags. The pants were new, so he had been through the dungeon once. His essence was slightly denser than the townsfolk, but didn't have a tint, but there were a lot of secrets in this man.

"Well?" Tibs demanded.

People instinctively walked away from them, wary of the possibility of a fight, and it let Tibs spot the guard watching them. Was he looking to keep the fight from happening, or make sure it ended badly for Tibs? He hoped it was the former. He wanted there to be some guards he knew for certain were Harry's people.

"We need to talk." The man's voice was deep and with a growl that made Tibs think it was how Bigger Brute should talk.

“Talk.”

“Not here.” The man didn’t look around. His brown eyes didn’t even flick to show if it was the guard he was concerned about or someone else.

Tibs didn’t have the time. He had too much to do. “You want a dark alley or a tavern?” But if he didn’t deal with him, the fighter might act when Tibs needed it even less.

The man looked at him suspiciously. Tibs’s reaction wasn’t what he’d expected. Tibs could fill a few taverns with the number of people who were surprised when he didn’t act intimidated by them.

“Tavern.”

At least this wasn’t about stabbing him, then.

The man nodded to the tavern between the cookware shop and cobbler. Tibs waited until the man headed in that direction to move and stayed out of reach. The fighter didn’t have a weapon, but Jackal was proof that for some of them, fists were weapons enough.

The tavern was busy; a combination of people pausing during their shopping and this being one of the few with good ale. Sto couldn’t make ale in a way that would help the town. He could make water skins, and he could make ale, so he could fill one with the other, but when Tibs tried to explain about the barrels, Sto asked for him to bring one and...

The man pointed to an empty table at the back, then headed for the bar. Most people were standing there, drinking in a hurry before heading back out. Tibs didn’t see anyone eying him. One Runner sat alone on the other side of the room, looking in his tankard as if there might be an escape in it.

Tibs sat, his back against the wall. The man returned with two tankards and placed one before Tibs as he sat.

Tibs eyed it; felt the essences in it. There was corruption in it, but he’d discovered that corruption was part of a lot of things, now that he could sense it. Poisons hadn’t surprised him; But ale, wines, and spirits had. He took a long sip, watching the man. If there was poison in this, someone was in for a surprise.

The man drank. “I’m told you’re the one to talk to about surviving the dungeon.”

“We’re not allowed to talk about the dungeon outside of it.”

The man leaned forward. “Do I look like I give a fuck what the people running this place want? I wasn’t planning on sticking around, but I saw what happened to a few who had the same idea. They pulled us out of bed so we could watch them being thrown in that thing buck ass naked.” He took another drink. “Now I’m thinking surviving that thing is my best bet. That means you telling me how.”

“You’ve been in,” Tibs said, then smiled at the man’s surprise. “The pants, they’re from the dungeon.”

“The thief got—”

“Rogue, if they’re a Runner, they’re called rogues.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “The rogue got them out of the hiding spot in that first room.” He said carefully.

“Did you take steal them from your rogue?”

“I took them when one of those spears went through his head. I figured he wasn’t

going to need them anymore and they fit me, so it isn't like his skinny ass was going to be able to use them, anyway."

For the harshness of the tone and the way he sounded dismissive about a man dying before him, there was something that made Tibs think the core of it was true. He'd taken them off a dead man. Was it because of his light essence, Darkness?

"I watched him turn to goo, and that sent the four of us running out. I'm not going to end up like him, so don't force me to insist."

Tibs raised an eyebrow, tankard to his mouth. "You think you can force me?"

"Kid, I've broken men three times your height, way thicker than you, and who knew how to kill people. You aren't even going to make me sweat."

"Any of them about to do this?" Tibs pulled the water out of the man's tankard, through it, turning it into essence and back into water, holding it there, crystal clear.

The fear in the man's eyes was quickly covered up.

"I guess they didn't tell you everything about me."

"How about you give me my drink back?" The trembling in his voice was small.

He put the water back, but even before the man made a face after sipping it, Tibs knew it wouldn't be right. The essences he could sense hadn't mixed the same way; hadn't woven together as they had been.

"Look," the man sounded more reasonable. "There's no way you work with them, this guild. Story is that you saved the dungeon, but I don't believe—" he looked in his tankard. "Anyway, what I do know is that you're one of the few still alive who was dragged here with the first group. You've been thrown into that thing more often than anyone else here. You can't tell me you aren't any less eager to get out of here than I am."

"This is my town." Tibs considered what he said next. "So I'm not leaving it."

The man snorted. "You don't run this place. Best I can work out no one does right now, although some guy's looking to take control of it."

"You plan on working for him?" Tibs tried to keep the question casual, but the man's expression turned guarded.

"What's it to you?"

"This is my town." Tibs fixed his gaze on the man. "The guild built it, and they brought me here. But it's my town. All I have before this was a box to keep the worse of the wind and cold off me, and I had to defend that if I wanted to return to it. I am not going to let Sebastian take this from me. If you plan on working for him, I'd rather you walk your ass in the dungeon and let him eat you."

The man stared at Tibs. "How old are you, kid?" Disbelief seeped into his tone.

"Old enough, I survived my Street. Old enough to be someone who survived the dungeon and who you came to for help."

"You know the kind of man he is? If you get in his way, he's going to crush you."

Tibs shrugged. "He knows. He tried, and I'm still here." Exaggerations were in his favor right now, not that he planned on letting Sebastian crush him when he tried.

The fighter studied him as he sipped his tankard, then made a face and motion to a server.

“How did you survive those early days in the dungeon?”

Tibs shook his head. “Are you, or are you not planning on working for Sebastian? I’m not wasting my time with someone who’s just going to get in my way later.”

The tankard arrived, and the man handed the copper for it, having trouble letting go. As if it was dear to him, or something he’d held onto for a long time. Had he come here with coins? The guards had taken everything Tibs had when they threw him in the cell, but maybe catacombs and kings did things differently.

“I’m not.”

Tibs thought there was something there, again, and he believed him.

“I’ve done the work for others thing, and it didn’t end up going well.” He smiled to himself as he sipped his ale. “After that, I decided I’d be the only one in charge of my decisions.”

“Protect your team. Make sure they protect you.”

The man snorted. “That’s not how the world works, kid.”

“This isn’t the world. It’s the dungeon. If you want to survive it, you need a team and you need to trust them to keep you safe. Harry said you get told who’s on your team, but if it’s like it was for me, they’re not going to care if you make your own. You’re going to need a rogue who’s clever enough to can work out what the dungeon tries to hide. You’re the fighter, so your job is to be the first one in the fights, keeping the creatures away from those who need distances for their attacks. That’s your archer for sure, and probably your sorcerer, at least at first. Carina said that more powerful sorcerers can be on the front lines. They’ll be able to pick off monsters so you don’t get overwhelmed, and your rogue should be able to help out too if he’s any good.”

“That’s four. The teams always have five people.”

“Clerics aren’t here yet, at least not to join the teams. I don’t know what they’ll do that. I figure you’ll have the chance to pick one if you’re still alive, then.”

“You expect me to trust a thief to—”

“Rogue.”

“A rogue,” the man said irritably, “at my back. All I’m going to get out of it is a sword in it or its edge across my throat.”

Tibs shrugged. “You asked me how to survive your runs. Ask any of the teams who survived this long. You have to trust one another or you die.” He paused, his mood threatening to drop. “Even if you have that, surviving isn’t guaranteed. But if you want a chance, you need to have a team you trust.” Tibs snorted. “Even Don’s managed to put one together, and he’s enough of an asshole, we all expected him to be kicked into the rats by the first team made.”

“I haven’t heard the name before.”

“He’s a sorcerer with corruption as his element. Water’s mine. He thinks he’s better than everyone here, even the nobles.”

“And you say he has a team he’s able to control, even though everyone hates him?” the man asked thoughtfully.

“Don’t even think about it. Don’s got no problem using his element. He’d going to

have you begging to stop.”

“Kid.” The man stood. “I don’t beg.”

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The man fell onto the free chair next to Tibs, shattering it. Tibs watched the man curled in pain on the floor before looking at Don, standing smugly next to Akron, his fighter.

“Did you really think you could use him to get rid of me?” the sorcerer asked. “I didn’t even need his help to deal with him.”

Jackal shook his head at Don. “You know you’re going to have to replace that chair, right?”

“I’ll deal with that too,” Don replied.

“I told you not to think about it,” Tibs told the man, then to Don. “I didn’t send him. I told him you were good enough to build a team you trusted to protect you. He decided that was the team he wanted.”

Don put his hands on the table. “You’re lying. You think I didn’t notice how no one’s paying attention to me anymore? Yet you’re still the savior of the dungeon? I know you’re behind that, too.”

“Might have more to do with that ever so pleasant attitude of yours, Don,” Jackal said, grinning at the sorcerer. “You know Tibs doesn’t care enough about you or how good you think your team is. He’s got me, so he already has the best the town has to offer.”

The sorcerer sneered. “You think you compare to me? I seem to recall you on your knees before me, crying.”

“Pain’ll do that to me,” Jackal replied. “Meet me on the training field if you ever want another go at it.”

“You aren’t worth my time.” He glared at Tibs. “Neither of you are.” Don spun and screamed in fright as he faced an angry Kroseph.

“The chair, Don,” the server said through clenched teeth.

“I was heading to pay for it,” the sorcerer hurried to say, then was pushing through the crowd, the server on his heel.

Jackal looked at Akron. “You know he’s going to get you to pay him back.”

The fighter shrugged. “I can deal with his temper if it means surviving the dungeon. You two watch yourself. The town’s turning nasty recently.” He headed for the exit.

Tibs crouched next to the man on the floor. The corruption was hooked deep within his body. Looking solid in the otherwise ephemeral essence. He had warned him, so Tibs didn’t have to do anything. The cleric should be able to deal with this before the run, and since Don was the only person with corruption in the down, he wouldn’t be able to deny doing this.

Only, this wasn’t Don just being an asshole.

Tibs had no doubt this man would have gone as far as killing Don to get the team. And considering how strong Don was, this was only a small use of his essence. Tibs could get candy to dissolve into foul-smelling goo just by pushing corruption essence into it. What could Don do to a person with his?

Harry already didn't like the recruits, so how was he going to act to someone attempting to kill a Runner? Would it be just a cell? Or did they have worse punishment for them?

He took the man by the shoulder and pulled him onto a chair, absorbing most of the essence in the process and disrupting what was left. The pain would quickly go away, but if it was the same as what Tibs had done to his friend. The man would be sick for a while.

"It'll pass," Tibs said, "Don's quick to put people who don't matter to him out of his mind."

"I am so glad he was nowhere near this strong when I pissed him off," Jackal said. "What's your name?"

"What'd you care?" the man snarled.

Jackal took Tibs's tankard and placed it before the man. "I'm Jackal, you already know Tibs. Seeing how we're all on Don's bad side, we might as well get to know each other."

The man glared at the sorcerer's back. "Does he have a good side?"

Don and Kroseph's father were arguing, and it didn't look to be going in Don's favor.

Jackal chuckled. "Not that I've ever seen, but he's held on to his team, so there has to be something there, right?"

The man took the tankard. "I'm Quigly. Quigly Marshal." He drained it.

Tibs waited until Kroseph looked in their direction to motion for more ale. As the server stepped behind the bar, Don handed a silver piece to his father.

"Tell me, Quigly Marshall," Jackal said, studying the man. "What did you do to get sent to the catacombs they took you out of?"

The man smiled and fought to keep it as he straightened through the pain. "I killed an entire regiment of Kink Barnacle the Just by myself."