

Chapter 18

Tibs stared at the woman seated at his table, feet on it, playing with something he couldn't see from where he stood. Her boots were what caught his attention: thick leather, scuffed and scratched, but with bands of dark metal attached to them with newer leather strips. The metal was dented in places, as well as scuffed. A set of gloves on the table has a similar arrangement, with the metal on top of the gloves, knuckles, and fingers.

The table wasn't really his, or his team's. No one could claim any of the tables at the inn, technically—why did he keep using that word? Not even Jackal, being one of the server's special man, could make that happen. So this woman was in her right to sit there since the table had been unoccupied, but the Runners had an understanding.

You didn't sit at another team's table.

She looked up at him, went back to looking at what she held, then paused, looking up again. "You Light Fingers?" Her hair was black, short, and straight and her eyes were dark brown. Tibs sensed for what element she had, expecting her essence to have a tint matching her eyes, but she only had the wisp of someone without an element.

"It's Tibs," he answered, her using that nickname for him adding to the annoyance of her being at *his* table.

She dropped her boots to the floor, and they landed with a thud that resonated with their weight. She had the same old and worn leather covering her chest and shoulder, along with the metal bands strapped to it. Her arms were bare, lightly tanned, and muscular, except for bracers that also had metal attached to them.

She offered her hand to him, moving her arm as if she didn't feel the weight of the metal on the bracers. "I'm Cross."

He looked at the hand, thick, callused, with scarred knuckles. "Okay."

She pulled the hand back and leaned in the chair, then lobbed the object in her other hand. "Got something for you."

He caught it—a wooden cylinder the diameter of his fist and twice the length. "Why do you think I'm who you're looking for?" He turned it over in his hand. The long side was covered in a series of squares that had some play to them.

"A few things," she answered with a shrug. "I'm told that Light Fingers is the youngest of the Runners, and you look kind of young. He also has normal eyes, even if he has an element."

"How do you know I have an element?" he demanded.

"But," she continued, ignoring his question, "mainly because you stood there glaring at me like I was sitting at your very own, private, table, and that friendly server told me this was the table Light Fingers' team sat at."

"Kroseph told you my name is Light Fingers?" Tibs asked, suspicious.

She searched the room. "Is that him?"

She pointed to a man on the heavier side with red wavy hair. Laurence, one of Kroseph's brothers. He shook his head.

“That’s who told me.” She nodded to the cylinder. “What do you think?”

He thought he needed to have a talk with all of Kroseph’s brothers, but he focussed on what he held. Wooden, with each square size of the nail on his thump. There were one and six rows of them, and the same number in length. The play moved only length-wise, or along the circumference, and only if they were properly aligned.

He sat.

Only two possible directions, but no actual motion. What was blocking it? He searched for one of the squares that could be pried off, gently pulling at each. Cross watched him carefully, but didn’t seem ready to stop him.

If none of the squares could be removed, then this was unlocked another way. He tested the caps. Those didn’t move, but each end had a row of decorative carving that continued over the top. Carvings were an easy way to hide how a piece could move.

He found the square that slid up, allowing the one beneath it to go in its place, and then the squares in that row could slide up and down. Testing the rings, they didn’t. So, how would this work? The only possible motion at the moment was in that row, so he slid up one square, then tested the ring. On the fifth one, the ring with the empty square spun freely.

He smiled. This was a combination lock, where he’d have to work through the sequence of positions to get it to the place where one of the caps could be removed.

“What’s in it?”

“Nothing, as far as I know.”

He frowned. “Then why give it to me?”

“I heard you like puzzles.”

“From who?” he tried to think of who might think that and speak freely of it. His team might figure it out, from his liking to pick locks, but they wouldn’t talk to someone they didn’t know about it. He hadn’t even realized puzzles were a thing, outside of locks, until that box in the Caravan Garden.

Where he’s amassed a crowd without realizing it as he unlocked it.

“It’s just something I heard from people among the booths. How Light Fingers was good with puzzles and locks.” She smiled. “I like puzzles too, no good with locks, so I thought I’d ask around after him, well, you. You work it out?”

“Tumblers. Puzzles are just different kinds of locks,” he explained at her raised eyebrow. “This unlocked the movements and now it’s just about finding the right arrangement of rings and rows until one of the caps comes off.” He offered it back to her.

“Not going to try to unlock it?”

“Why do you want me to?” She didn’t seem like she intended him harm, but merchants weren’t the only ones who knew how to use words to get what they wanted or act like something didn’t matter when it was the most important thing to them.

She grinned. “I just want to see you do it. It’s clear you enjoyed working out that much.”

There was something in her smile, the tone. Not that she was trying to deceive him, but that she didn’t think he could. An unvoiced challenge. He’d only worked out part of how the lock worked, he decided, and she counted on that to stump him.

He looked around for anyone watching them, but unlike at the shops, in the inn, people minded their business. He spun the ring and tested each column until one moved, then looked for the ring that unlocked, the bottom one. He spun it until a column unlocked and then... none of the rings moved.

Did the puzzle have false moves? He was early enough he could go back to check, but how complex would the mechanism have to be to allow that? She's implied it was a box since she'd said it was empty, so there needed to be enough space to contain something.

Had he missed a detail? The one she believed would stump him?

Then he understood. There weren't one and six rings. He turned the cap until the piece he'd slid up was lined up and slid it down. He continued turning the cap until a new column was unlocked.

Three moves later, he was blocked again until he realized the bottom cap also had a hidden piece. Then he was moving quickly, testing each square until something moved in a ring, then a column. This was more about being patient than finding a specific pattern.

He stopped thinking about what he did, his fingers moving on their own, slowly making progress until—his hand cramped and he barely closed the other one on the puzzle before it slipped out.

He cursed.

"Are you okay?" she asked, worried.

"I'll pass," he hissed. He set the puzzle on the table in case the corruption made his day truly miserable and spread to his other hand. He could see the desire to ask on her face, but she didn't, and he was thankful. She'd be able to find out easily enough just by asking around.

He had to go to the pool and have that audience.

His stomach turned at the idea. The corruption would leave his essence, eventually. It had diminished over the months after all. So he just had to wait. Using his working hand and the table for support, he went back to solving the puzzle. Then used his other hand to hold it in place as he spun a ring, and after six more moves, he could manipulate it with both hands.

Then his fingers were working fast again until, when he came to spin the bottom cap, it came off instead. The space revealed was small, and, as Cross had said, empty. It wouldn't even fit a stack of coins, so Tibs couldn't think of what it might hold. The mechanism took up a lot of space.

"That was pretty good," she said, "especially because of what happened." She let the unasked question hang.

And Tibs ignored it. "Was that because you couldn't open it yourself?"

"No." She motioned to a server. "Even if your hand hadn't cramped like that, I can do it faster than you." The girl, one of the townsfolk's daughters, put two tankards on the table and left. "You earned it," Cross said, pushing one at him. "It's like I said. I heard you like them, so I brought it."

He took a sip before picking up the puzzle again, placing the cap in place. Sliding one square was all it took to lock it, but then he had to work backward to reset everything. "Are there a lot of them? Puzzles like this?"

“It depends on your definition of ‘a lot’. This is a simple one. Most of the portable puzzles are kind of simple.”

“So there are larger ones?” the box had been larger when the cylinder, but Tibs didn’t think of it as big. It had also been more complex than this. There had been an actual pattern to the steps.

She chuckles. “Some are as big as people. Heard a story, once, about a castle in the Ylmiyan Low Lands, that is supposed to be a puzzle.”

Tibs looked up. “The entire castle?” his fingers kept moving.

“So I was told. I’ve never been to Ylmiyan, so I don’t know if it’s true.”

“Why hadn’t you gone?” He reached a step that slid the square from the cap back in place, but it could spin, so that wasn’t the final step.

“I’ve yet to find a caravan willing to go there.”

“Why don’t you use the transportation platform?”

“There aren’t any dungeons in Ylmiyan, so no reason for the guild to invest in one there, and nothing of value to motivate the merchants. The whole of that area’s desolated.”

“Then how did you hear about it?”

She smiled. “Because there’s always someone stupid enough to travel to those kinds of places just because they’re there. And some are strong enough to survive their stupidity.”

The square from the cap slid into place, and none of the rings turned. Tibs handed it back to her.

“Okay, that’s impressive. I have to look at it to make sure they’re aligned and locked, and not just misaligned.”

Tibs shrugged.

She took it and stood. “I’ll bring you another one if I come back this way.”

“Isn’t the caravan coming back?” He’d been sure Darran had said it went back to the city, then returned. And that there would be others in between, now that the first one had established the route.

“Of course, but I might not be among those guards.” She shrugged. “It gets boring always doing the same trail. Trouble learns it can’t get away with it, and stops trying.”

Tibs chuckled. “If you want trouble, you should stay here. Seems there’s always some happening.”

She studied him, putting the puzzle in a bag at her belt. “And how much of that trouble are you the one causing?”

He grinned at her. “As far as anyone knows, none of it.”

She grinned back, picked up her gloves, then ruffled his hair as she walked by. “I’ll see you later, Light Fingers.”

“It’s Tibs,” he growled at her back, but couldn’t stop smiling.