

## Chapter 63

Tibs didn't own the night anymore, but he still owned the roofs.

He watched as two rogues broke into a house. One of the merchant's house. Where the owner was, he didn't know. It was late for any shop to be opened, but there were the taverns. Tibs had found out he was no longer the only one practicing his skills when Harry had accosted him and demanded where a valuable figurine was. Tibs hadn't known, had said so, and because of his element, Harry had believed him. Not that it had improved his mood.

Tibs had paid closer attention after that.

Pickpockets were too common for his liking. Younger nobles, it seemed, although a few of the Runners did it too, unlike him, not seeming to care whose pocket they picked. Tibs didn't like that. They were stealing from the townsfolk more often than not, and that would hurt everyone.

The nobles surprised him in that they seemed to prefer to pick other noble's pockets. Maybe copper wasn't valuable enough to practice with, Tibs had thought as he'd liberated the silver the noble rogue had picked out of another's pocket. They might be nobles, but they weren't a match for the Runners.

Tibs returned to his walking with the two rogues in the building.

He'd had to decide how far he'd go to protect his town. Would he stop other rogues from stealing from it? They needed to train too, and he couldn't expect all of them to share his hatred of nobles or his love of his town. Kraggle Rock was his town.

But he wasn't its defender, he'd decided.

That was Harry's job.

Tibs was just another rogue practicing his skills.

He reached the end of the roof and concentrated. He wasn't there yet, but he'd realized that he didn't need to make the surface large enough for his whole foot, and the smaller it was, the less air essence he needed, the less he lost and the harder he could make it.

He could make this jump without help. The guards were now watching over any hay bales left outside after a few of them were broken by someone jumping into them. Tibs hadn't bothered pointing out that he'd fallen into them over and over, not jumped.

He launched himself off the ledge, formed the toe size disk of air, and used it to propel himself to the center of the roof. His landing wasn't smooth, as the disk had broken as he pushed on it. Air essence was simply too fragile to take on his weight with the size of his reserve.

He'd now tested every way he could think of and had to accept he'd need an amulet before he could form one solid enough to jump off from reliably.

He walked again, reaching Merchant Row, and saw a rogue break into another house, one climb a wall to reach an open window and one being dragged away by a guard.

With the rogues training in force, the guards had also redoubled their efforts. Tibs saw a muscular dog sniff around a rain barrel, relieve itself, then run off into the darkness.

He recognized it as Ripper. Serba's major threat when she unleashed the dogs on someone. Thump was the chaser. Once it had a scent, it wouldn't lose it short of someone using air essence to scrub the air behind them. Carina had explained it was something she could do. So Tibs could, once he had more essence.

Where Serba was, Tibs couldn't tell. She was better than most at moving unseen, and her dogs didn't always show where she was. At least twice, she'd surprised Jackal because the fighter was always on the lookout for her dogs, and she was without them. The fighter seemed as scared of her without the dogs as he was of them.

The dog sat next to a form in the shadow and Tibs thought he'd located Serba, only for a whistle to come from further away and the dog took off, surprising the guard who'd been leaning against the building. At least now he knew she was nowhere near him, not that her dogs could smell him all the way up here.

He leaned down and carefully pushed the shim between the jam and window until he forced the latch out of the way. He pulled the window open and listened. The owners were there, he'd seen movement in the light of a lower floor, but that was the fun of it. Moving around a house without being heard by the occupants.

He slipped into the bedroom and rubbed his hands. Nobles always kept such interesting things in their bedrooms.

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Tibs entered his room quietly, rolling the silver coin over his fingers. He placed it on the table for Jackal to add to the team's pouch in the morning. Taking only the silver hadn't been easy when he'd opened the drawer, and a pouch of coins and gems had been spilled in the bottom. Tibs didn't know the name of the stones. Only that some were green, others red, some clear, and when he'd looked at a candle flame through it, it did interesting things to the light. They'd all been pretty, but he thought they'd be missed, so he'd taken the silver coin, closed the drawer, and stepped out of the room to explore the floor.

The one locked door had led to an office with only papers with words on them, too many words for Tibs to even want to look at them. There had been one crumbled on the floor, and if not for its absence being noticed, Tibs would have taken it. Only nobles had so many coins they crumpled paper and threw it on the floor. The paper that Pyan had returned to them with the map had so much information crammed on it, Tibs didn't know how Carina could read any of it.

He sat on his bed and reached under it for the pouch he hid there. It was where he kept the coins he took from the noble's pockets. He had to be careful spending them, as silver was the smallest value they carried and the difference between them and electrum wasn't easy to tell by touch. He only took one coin each time, but he wasn't sure what he'd do if he ever pulled a gold coin that way.

"Tibs!" the call was faint but unexpected enough Tibs nearly dropped the pouch. He looked around he didn't think it had come from the win— "Tibs, help!"

He stood. The voice was Sto's.

"Jackal," he called, and the fighter was on his feet.

"Tibs!" Sto cried out. "It hurts!"

“What?” Jackal was putting his pants on.

“What’s going on?” Mez asked.

“Get Harry,” Tibs ordered.

“Why would I want to do that?” Jackal complained. “Did you just wake me?”

“Will you all shut up,” Carina groaned. “It’s not even light.”

“The dungeon’s in pain,” Tibs said. Pulled his knives to his belt. He wished he wore his armor, but tonight had been a moving silently night.

“You can’t hear him this far,” Carina said, then yawned. “It was just a dream.”

“He’s screaming his head off,” Tibs snapped. “I’m going to help him. Jackal, I’m going to need—”

“Go,” the fighter said. Putting on a shirt. “I’m going to be right behind you. Mez. You get the guard. Carina, you have to—”

Tibs was too far in the hall to make out the rest.

Sto’s cries became stronger as he ran through the town. What could hurt a dungeon like this? And what could Tibs do to help him? The screams turned to whimpers as he reached the clearing, and he could already see motion by the entrance.

“Stop!” Tibs yelled. One of them turned in his direction and pointed. Three of them detached from the group and went down the stairs, making it halfway by the time Tibs reached the bottom.

“Tibs?” one of them asked. “What are you doing here?” A torch lit in the man’s hand.

“Bardik?” Tibs tried to understand why he was here, with people hurting the dungeon. “What’s going on?”

“We can’t let him leave,” a woman said, at the edge of the light. “If he—”

“Let me handle him,” Bardik said, and Tibs drew a knife at how cold the voice was.

“Put that away, Tibs,” Bardik said with a chuckle, stepping in his direction, and the other two vanished into the darkness. Tibs extended his sense to keep track of them.

“You have to stop,” Tibs ordered.

“No.”

“Bardik, you’re hurting him.”

The adventurer stopped. “Him? That thing has tried to kill you multiple times, Tibs. How many of your friends has it eaten?” Bardik asked angrily. “Its kind kills thousands every season! It has to stop.”

Something broke at the top of the stairs, and Sto’s pained scream nearly floored Tibs.

“He hasn’t—”

“Bard!” someone yelled at the top of the stairs.

Bardik looked up, then back at Tibs. “Just go back to your room, Tibs. This doesn’t concern you. Once I’m done, we can talk about where we go from here.”

“I’m not going to let you hurt him anymore,” Tibs warned.

Bardik chuckled and stepped back, extinguishing the torch. “Stop him if he tried to follow me,” he said. “But try not to kill him. He’d just young and naïve. He’s not like them.”

Tibs ran after Bardik’s form and dodged the one that tried to catch him.

“How?” the woman exclaimed.

“I’ve got him,” a man said, and Tibs ducked, but the man was faster and grabbed his arm. Tibs sliced at the leg, but his knife slid over something hard. The essence flowing through the man was gray, so metal. Tibs twisted, trying to get out of his shirt.

“Nope. Don’t think you’re the first rogue I’ve had to—” the wind burst knocked both of them down. Tibs was up and looking around.

“Go!” Jackal called from the darkness. “We’ll deal with these.”

Tibs ran up the stairs and caught the scent of something putrid, utterly wrong. It was the smell that hung where the Caravan Garden used to be.

More forms ahead, four of them, with Bardik weaving between them as if he saw in the dark. Which he had to since darkness was his element.

“Stop him,” Bardik said, outlined against a faint light. That of inside the dungeon, Tibs realized. And now made out the gash in the stone wall that normally blocked the entrance during the night. It was like the edges were melted. He dodged through the people. They couldn’t see in the dark. He made out broken bottles on the ground, small, dark-colored.

Someone grabbed his collar and pulled Tibs back. He rolled back to his feet and barely dodged the swing. The essence was golden, void. And Tibs didn’t know what that let them do. Tibs saw the swing, stepped out of range, and the fist still connected with his shoulder.

“I’m going to tell you to stay down,” the man said as Tibs got to his feet. “You come at me again, and I will put you down permanently, kid. I don’t care if Bard likes you, you’re in the way and I don’t let that happen.”

Tibs threw himself to the side. He didn’t have the time for him. As he flew, the space between him and the man shifted so he flew in his direction instead of beside him. He turned so his shoulder took the impact, then was on the ground.

The man raised his foot. “I’m going to make this quick and pain—” the explosion sent him flying back. Tibs scrambled up and ran for the dungeon’s opening.

Sto was back to whimpering.

The floor of the trap-room was littered with broken bottles and pools of corruption eating at the tiles. He stepped around them carefully and hoped Sto hadn’t changed the pattern since his last time through. One trigger activated, but Tibs was already running and the spear missed him. The room depended on people standing in place, he realized. Anyone running should be able to avoid being skewered.

The boulder room had little corruption in it, instead having mainly copper coins littering the floor. One stone rat was spasming as it dissolved in the foul liquid.

The warren room was much the same. Copper coins littering the floor where stone rats and rabbits should be.

Jackal had told an adventurer to run in the dungeon; back before it had graduated. Something about the man going to get his own loot instead of taking theirs. This was what happened when someone was too strong for the dungeon’s level. The first-floor boss had no legs or arms but was still alive.

Tibs ran down the stairs.

Bardik wasn't in the first room, and Tibs could only think of one way he'd crossed it unless darkness let him jump over the pool or walk on water. It was the same way Tibs now had to do it and hope Jackal had been right. He ran as fast as he could, not even trying to avoid the triggers. He felt the wind behind him as each slab came down almost on him.

In the ratlings' room, Tibs stopped. He hadn't meant to, but the massacre froze him. None of the ratlings seemed to be dead, but they had been incapacitated. Legs cut, corruption poured over their heads. Torsos opened up. He forced himself to move again, and he didn't look at the bunnylings in the next room.

After that was a long hall with broken bottles and corruption dripping from the walls. It opened to a gigantic cavern, with the remnant of three BBs. And Bardik in the center, throwing a vial as far as he could in the room.

"Stop!" Tibs yelled, and Bardik spun, staring at him. He had another small bottle in his hand. Taken from the satchel at his side, Tibs guessed.

"What are you doing here?" Bardik asked, looking beyond Tibs as if he expected to see others arrive.

"Stopping you," Tibs replied, taking out his second knife. He was getting more knives after this, learning out how to wield a sword.

"Why?"

"Because this is wrong."

"I'm setting you free, Tibs, don't you see that? With the dungeon dead, you can go anywhere you want."

"Bullshit. The guild isn't going to set me free, not even once I reach Epsilon."

Bardik grinned. "Figured that one out, did you? It's not going to matter once there aren't any dungeons left. No dungeon, no guild."

"So you're going to kill every dungeon out there?" Tibs asked. Like with the children the kings had given the guild to feed to a dungeon, every dungeon dying was too abstract for Tibs to understand. But he knew this dungeon, and Sto dying wasn't something he wasn't willing to let happen.

Bardik shrugged. "As many as it takes."

Tibs shook his head, "I'm not letting you kill him."

"Him again," Bardik said angrily. "What is it with you, Tibs? I heard you befriended a random dog. Are you so desperate for a family you'll take in even this thing to have one?"

"It isn't a thing. This is someone."

"It's an animal!" Bardik yelled.

"Even if it was!" Tibs yelled back. "You don't kill an animal for trying to survive! It's the guild that forces people to go in dungeons that's wrong. The dungeon didn't do anything wrong."

"How can you say that after it ate your friends?" Bardik demanded. "How can you say that of something that eats us!"

"He tries to make us stronger, and sometimes we die."

Bardik stared at him. "It kills, that's the only thing dungeon does. Nothing that kills

like that deserves to live.”

“Does that mean you’re next to die for killing the people in the Caravan Garden?”

“I didn’t do that!”

Tibs pointed to the bottle the adventurer held. “One of the messengers delivered one of those there. Do they know what’s in them? Are they part of whatever this is?”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Bardik said through clenched teeth. “You think I wanted them to die?”

“I think you don’t care enough about people to care if they live,” Tibs said, calming himself. “So long as you get what you want out of them. Just like the guild.”

“I am nothing like them!” Bardik spat.

“Then prove it and leave with me,” Tibs replied, hoping the adventurer hated the guild enough not to want to be like them.

“No.” Bardik threw the bottle over his shoulder, and Tibs stared in disbelief as it shattered and stone sizzled. “Somewhere in this room, in the floor or the walls, is the dungeon’s core. Its heart. So long as that’s intact, nothing I do matters.” He took another vial from the pouch. “This is the only stuff I’ve found that can get through dungeon stone.” He threw it at the wall and pulled out another bottle.

How many in the pouch? He could see the weave of essence through it, so was the size even real? What if the inside was so much larger? He needed to take it from Bardik.

“I’m going to destroy everything in here until I find it, Tibs. Once I do, I will crush it with my bare hands and ensure it never takes one more life.”

Tibs gripped his knives tighter. “I’m not going to let you.”

Bardik laughed. “Come on, Tibs. What do you think you can even do? You’re Upsilon. You’re so far below me I can think you dead.”

“Why didn’t you do it then?”

The adventurer’s expression softened. “Because I don’t want to hurt you.”

Tibs shook his head. “It’s because you’re afraid. You don’t care about me, you said it, you don’t have friends. They took away some of your power and now you’re scared that you’re weak enough even someone like me can stop you.”

Bardik shook his head in disbelief. “Have you somehow missed the carnage I wrought on my way here?”

Tibs shrugged. “Jackal can do as much. He’s looking forward to it too.” He motioned the man forward. “Take a knife and fight me.”

“You’re serious.” Bardik moved the satchel behind him.

Tibs nodded. The essence running through Bardik was dense, denser than almost anyone he’d seen other than Tirania and Harry. The adventurer might among the most powerful people in the town. All Tibs had was a surprise or two. He really wished Jackal was here right now.

“Have it your way, Tibs. When you wake up, we can talk about you making smarter decisions.” Bardik stepped to the side and vanished from Tibs’s sight; darkness hiding him, even if there were no shadows. What didn’t vanish was the dark essence coursing through the adventurer’s body.

Tibs looked around, purposely not following Bardik as he walked around the room. He steadied his breathing. He had only one chance. When the adventurer stopped moving, Tibs spun and threw the knife for the man's chest.

Bardik caught it out of the air, his hand tracing shadows before vanishing with the knife. "I'd asked how you know where I am." His voice had an echo that made it hard to locate. "You were always resourceful. Being forced to work with less gets you to push harder." The knife clattered to the ground. "You might as well be unarmed, Tibs." Bardik approached.

Tibs threw his other one, and this time Bardik stepped out of the way. Cursing, Tibs ran for the one on the ground, but Bardik was there first and caught him, pulling Tibs against his body and catching his neck in his elbow.

"Don't fight it," Bardik said, as Tibs fought to escape. "You did your best, but you were never going to win against me. I'm not going to kill you, so just relax. Let the darkness take you. Give in. There's nothing wrong with losing to someone stronger than you are."

Tibs called his water to his hand and formed a blade that he planted in the adventurer's legs. Bardik cursed and Tibs almost broke free, but dark strings clung to him and made it difficult to move. Then Bardik held him again.

"Resourceful," He said through clenched teeth. "I always did like that about you, Tibs. But it's over. Believe it or not, I'm even more proud of you now than I was five minutes ago." The arm tightened around his neck and Tibs tried to reach for his pouch. He needed more essence to coat his throat, to protect himself. Bardik grabbed the arm and held it away. "If you want something, Tibs, I think it's safer for me that I don't let you have it."

Tibs saw spots as his need for air became painful. He fought on for Sto, but he was getting tired. He wouldn't last long unless he did something drastic. He looked at the hand holding his arm, at the essence flowing through it. He'd never done this on someone. He was too afraid of the results. He could push his essence into people and pull from monsters, and other than the elemental tint, the essence in people was the same as that in the monsters.

Tibs mentally grabbed onto the essence in the adventurer's hand and his arm and pulled on it as hard as he could.

Tibs's reserve finished filling as Bardik staggered and gasp. His hold relaxed enough Tibs could breathe again, but not enough he could break free.

"What was that?" Bardik asked.

Tibs wanted to pull out more, but his reserve was full. The arm tightened again. Alistair had warned him against overfilling his reserve. It was something for a later rank. Which meant it could be done. But was it one of those things the guild did by rote, or because there were good reasons for waiting?

The spots reappeared.

Tibs didn't have a choice. He had to do everything he could to protect Sto. He was the only one who could. He grabbed as much of the essence coursing through Bardik as he could and pulled it into him.

The adventurer staggered, regained his footing. "You're doing this." He tightened his

arm harder around Tibs's neck.

Tibs felt his reserve crack. The essence escaped inside his body and would have cried out if his throat wasn't already constricted. He didn't want to do this again, but it hadn't been enough. He pulled and lightning coursed through him, searing his insides. Bardik didn't let him go. The lightning burned him inside out, but he kept pulling.

He fell to his knees and coughed blood. It didn't matter, he could breathe again. Bardik was still moving, but he was still connected to the man's essence, even if they weren't in contact. He pulled again and screamed. He tried to take hold of the essence burning him. To push it out of the painful area. To force it into places it seemed to fit.

The pain diminished. The heat died down. Unlike when he'd burned from the outside. This wasn't replaced with cold. He could feel his body again, but with that came the pressure of the essence he was holding in. There was so much. He couldn't hold on, but what would happen if he let it go? Would it flow back to Bardik?

He panted and pushed it denser. Into his body, into his reserve. Then it was only him there, and a sense of his essence being denser. When he fell for his reserve, energy flowed out, coursed through his body. Dense flows. It reminded him of what he saw in Harry and Tirania, except there was no tint to his essence.

"You did this," a man said, voice raspy. Tibs looked at him. Bardik was old. His skin was wrinkled. Some of his hair had fallen out. "You are a rogue, Tibs, a stealer of life." The old man laughed, then coughed. "Clever, clever boy. But not clever enough." Bardik threw the satchel in the air, higher than his thin arm should have been able to.

"No!"

Tibs threw himself at the satchel, flew over it, landed, and rolled back to his feet. It was falling. He threw himself under it this time, catching it and hearing the bottles break. Smelling the putrefaction and then feeling the burn.

It was different from what had burned through him. As painful as it had been, it had been a clean burn. The essence was right for him, there was just too much. This was wrong in all the ways something could be wrong. Every instinct screamed at him to throw it away, but he tightened his hold on it. Where ever it landed, it would eat away at what was there.

With him between it and the floor, he could hope he'd absorb enough to save the dungeon. He felt it seep into him, the burn outside now inside him, tinting his essence, but in a way that was wrong, like corruption was wrong.

A voice made it through the scream, a woman, no a girl. Her tone sounded reassuring, but he couldn't make out her words.

"Tibs!" someone over him said. "Jackal! Get the clerics! Darkness, Tibs. Look at me."

Tibs forced his eyes open, and Khumdar looked at him. The older man terrified.

"Tibs, I do not know if I can do enough, I implore you not to die. Remember, no dying."

And then the pain became worse.

But at least this time, it had the decency of stealing his consciousness away.