

Chapter 03

The humid air broke his concentration, and he was surprised by how bright it was again. He wished he could arrive in MountainSea in the evenings or early morning, when the sun was still hidden by the mountain, but he couldn't figure out how time changed from one place to the other, so he kept being blinded on his arrival.

He joined those to the side of the path, waiting for his eyes to adjust, and listened to the sounds of the marketplace just outside the pillars. Merchants calling out their goods, the bustle of people. The promise of pockets heavy with coins. It had been so long since he'd dipped his fingers in a pocket and taken one out. He missed it, but the corruption in his body made his fingers untrustworthy. One spasm and he'd lose a hand.

He would be back to himself, Tibs told himself; opening and closing a hand, feeling the ache. An exercise to gauge if it had gone down. Maybe it had. Or maybe he was trying to convince himself. Keep the despair of being able to do what defined him again.

He joined the throng of people passing between the pillars and kept his hands in his pocket as he passed through the market and onto MountainSea Road, which ran through the center of the city, from the mountain to the sea. At Carlisle Way, he went left and followed it until it widened, at Stone Drop, into a small shop district where Kroseph's family had their inn.

He stepped in and was blind again, until his eyes adjusted to the much lower level of light.

"It is little man!" a woman yelled in heavily accented Pursatian, while he still barely saw anything, and Tibs readied himself. The woman grabbed him and lifted him off the floor. "Little man return!"

"Hi Jesebel," Tibs greeted her.

"How trip?" she asked, carrying him to the back of the eating room, by the bar. She was one of Kroseph's sisters or a sister of his parents. Tibs had tried to learn, but explanations came too quickly between other duties, and as all but Kroseph only managed broken explanations, he still wasn't sure.

Greetings exploded on the way; his hair was ruffled, his back patted, his name called. More was said in a language he didn't understand but now recognized as the one spoken locally, and then he was placed down.

Jackal once told Tibs that enthusiasm was one of Kroseph's defining traits. After visiting the family multiple times now, Tibs decided it was shared by every one of them.

"Tibs," the older man behind the bar greeted him, then instructed Jesebel to get more ale.

"Mister Fernan," Tibs replied, taking the offered tankard as he sat on the stool and had his hair ruffled again.

"How were your travels?" he asked. The perfect speech was a reminder that unlike the others in the family, Kroseph's father had the magic the platform imbued that let them understand each other. Only those who worked at the inn in Kragle Rock had received it; since it was expensive.

Tibs placed the copper on the counter. "I didn't find it."

"You will." The man glared at the coin before lifting his gaze to Tibs. They locked eyes, and after a few seconds, he sighed, took the coin, and placed it in a box under the counter. They had this contest of will each time Tibs returned, and like the previous times, Tibs couldn't explain why he insisted on paying for his drinks and meals. Why he wanted to be treated as a customer here when he was more of their extended family in Kragle Rock.

The closest Tibs came to an explanation was that he didn't want to become too comfortable here. This wasn't his city. He was only visiting, and visitors paid for what they had.

"Where's Kroseph?"

"Off with Bad Fighter," Jesebel said, returning from the back with a barrel of ale over her shoulder. She was one of the stronger family members, and she didn't approve of Jackal.

"Do not, bad mouth Kroseph's man," the innkeeper snapped. Tibs didn't understand Jesebel's reply, but the derision in her tone was clear. She was the one person Jackal couldn't seem to charm.

"Where are they?" Tibs asked, instead of allowing the argument to escalate.

"The arena." The innkeeper glared at the departing Jesebel and took the barrel, moving it with the others behind the bar. He sighed. "At least this way he isn't going to end up in a cell anymore."

Jackal called himself a thug with too much pride for Kroseph's father's comfort, and without the dungeon or the training to survive it to direct his energy at, the fighter had gotten in several brawls, more than on which ended with him spending a night or a few days in a cell, and having to most of the coins he'd had when the last one had destroyed a tavern.

Jackal spent the following days apologizing to Kroseph. He hadn't meant to fight. He'd just gone in for an ale, but someone there had badmouthed the inn, and he couldn't allow that.

Tibs head about it when he'd next visited, and how Jackal had promised that was the last brawl, only to get into another one a few days later. Fighting was for Jackal like picking pockets was for Tibs, and Tibs had more willpower, it seemed.

Kroseph had suggested the arena, and Jackal had fought against it. He'd gone to the fights there as if he was heading for his hanging, rather than a way to work out his aggression, and even make coins. Kroseph had sounded baffled when he'd told this to Tibs, and Tibs had explained how Jackal saw stepping into the arena as willingly risking death and leaving Kroseph alone.

Kroseph had yelled at the fighter after that, then they'd made up, and then Tibs had left because they'd forgotten he was in the room and they were moving on to 'them' time.

"When did they leave?" Tibs asked.

"Just as you arrived," the innkeeper answered, surprised. "Didn't you see them?"

"All the light in this city blinded me."

The man chuckled. "If you hurry, you might get to watch him fight. Since they don't plan ahead, it takes the organizers time to find a fighter that's a match for him."

"They Have Runners?" that's who they'd need to be Jackal's match, and he hadn't

heard of any others coming here.

“No, but the rules keep him from using his element unless his opponent has one too.”

“Jackal cheats,” Tibs replied flatly.

“I’ve seen,” the man said with a chuckle. “But the arena uses a sensitive to ensure there is not essence use during fights where it isn’t allowed.”

“What’s that?” no one had mentioned that word as a person before.

“All I know is that they’re people who are sensitive to essence being moved around.”

“Can I talk with one?” Tibs asked eagerly. That sounded a lot like what he did. Maybe they could help him with his element.

The innkeeper laughed. “Even the curious Tibs.” He shrugged. “I wouldn’t know how to contact one, but since they know Jackal has an element, I expect they will have one there.” He grinned. “They also know he cheats.”

Tibs finished the ale, then ran out, ignoring Jesebel’s calls to return.

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The arena was packed. That was normal, based on the few times Tibs had come. The one copper fee to enter was low enough even some streetfolks were there. The crowd made resisting the pockets tougher, and his hand cramping before he’d reached into one, made him push them into his own, cursing softly.

Feeling coins against his fingers was so much better when they weren’t his own.

Instead of going for the seats, Tibs headed for the front. He wanted to see into the pit this time, not just the fighters in the center. People complained as he made his way, and then that he was blocked their view as Tibs pulled himself up to look over the stone railing.

He knew Jackal wasn’t in the pit yet. He was too far for Tibs to sense his earth-tinted essence, but he’d be somewhere under the seats, where the fighters waited for their turns, and it wasn’t who Tibs was looking for.

He searched the pit the two fighters bashing each other with staff were in. If a sensitive’s range was like his, they’d have to be close, to know when essence was used. Tibs could tell neither fighter had an element from where he stood, but if they moved away they would be out of his sense.

Guard stood against the wall. They were there in case someone jumped in. He’d been told it happened sometimes, when a popular fighter was scheduled. Or the rare occasion when a fighter tried to flee. All fights were voluntary, but once started, there were set ways they needed to end. One could forfeit or lose the fight. MountainSea didn’t allow fights to the death, so occasionally the guards had to intervene, and sometimes, they weren’t in time.

No guards moved from where they stood as the fight moved through the pit. Then it was over with a cheer, and the fighters exited. Tibs couldn’t tell who the winner was, and since he didn’t have coins riding on it, he didn’t care. There were officials in a booth, along with nobles. If there was a doubt who won, they decided and posted it on a board by the exists.

The new fighters were in a mishmash of armors that made no sense to Tibs. They entered the circle marked with stones in the center of the pit, putting them just at the edge

of his sense. The crowd cheered, calling one name or another. Coins were exchanged.

Not all betting took place via arena-approved methods.

If the sensitive wasn't one of the guards, and since they couldn't move to ensure the fighters remained within their sense, it would be one of the officials. The fighters were far enough he couldn't make out the sound of swords striking shields over the crowd as he searched for anyone within the pit that looked official, but he only saw guards and the fighters.

One fell, the other raised his sword. Cheer and jeers sounded. Coins changed hands, copper, with a few silvers. Tempting loose pouches and pockets. He focused on the pit as two new fighters entered, a man and a woman. No armors or weapons.

He looked at the booth with the officials again. There were too far to see any details of the fight, but since they made the final decision when it wasn't clear, they must have something. Magic, most likely.

The fighters only wore short pants, except for a tight wrap around the woman's breasts. The fight was quick, devolving to them wrestling in the sand. The woman was the victor. She helped the man up and they exited.

Jackal stepped onto the field along with an older, more muscular man. They only wore pants. The cheering was as loud as the previous fighters, but Tibs heard Jackal's name and the one of his opponent, as coins changed hands again. This time, a woman accompanied them, spoke once they were in the circle. She spoke again when neither acknowledged her, too busy glaring at one another. One the third time, they broke it and nodded to her.

Tibs thought he'd identified the sensitive and tried to find a distinguishing mark so he could find her again, but he was distracted by the fight that started the instant she was out of the circle.

Jackal punched the other man in the face, who barely reacted.

Tibs was impressed. Even without using his essence, Jackal was strong. Quickly, the fight moved out of the circle, and beyond Tibs's sense. He searched for the woman, but she was nowhere he could see. How far could she sense? Could it be trained, extended?

He focused on the fight, pushing his sense, trying to sense if Jackal used his essence. A punch landed in Jackal's stomach hard enough it lifted him off the ground. He rolled out of the way of the foot aimed for his head. Enough sand lifted from the impact Tibs wondered if that might not have been enough to kill Jackal if it had landed.

The crowd cheered.

Tibs didn't.

Jackal was up and kicked the other man's knee, with no visible result. The response was a backhand that sent Jackal flying back, then was on the ground again. Tibs hadn't paid much attention to his opponent; did he have an element? Wouldn't Jackal use earth if he did?

The man kicked Jackal in the stomach when he reached him, sending him rolling away. He strode for another one, but the guards were pulling him away before. The crowd screams protests.

Tibs ran, looking for a way under the seats. He'd seen Jackal hurt often enough to know he was in bad shape right now. He found a passage, but then realized it didn't help him

much. Corridors branched off in multiple directions, and even when one pointed toward the pit, it might not go that far.

He pushed earth essence into the surrounding stone. The arena was entirely made of it. Maybe he could push enough of it around to sense where the corridors led, but he didn't have the practice spreading it he had with water and started losing contact with it before he had more than his immediate surroundings and he had to pull it back. As with water, he had more than what he'd sent out, but no amulet for it, so nowhere to keep it.

On the next run, Tibs was keeping all the amulets. He was tired of never having enough of the essence he actually needed.

He avoided people by the faint essence they all had and continued ever deeper into the arena. The corridors were lit by the outside light, reflecting on mirrors placed on the walls through them.

He couldn't avoid everyone, and when guards or fighters saw him, they called after him. The guards in a serious tone, while the fighters in amusement. The corruption remained quiet, so he evaded those who chased him.

Until the woman in the blue and gold robes stopped him with a stare. Serious, stern. She said something Tibs didn't understand but sounded angry and he turned to run. Why did there have to be a noble down here? She raised her voice as he ran and fighters stepped out of rooms, reaching Tibs. He ducked and dodged the hands, and thought he was free when corruption locked his leg and he crashed to the floor, swallowing the scream of pain.

He hated corruption.

Among laughter, someone picked him up and sat him on a bench, and Tibs nearly lost the battle not to scream as the jostling increased the pain. When he opened his eyes, she was standing before him, watching him. No, she was studying him; her gaze curious. He noted she wasn't the one who'd stepped into the pit for Jackal's fight, then was busy fighting the pain. Corruption was being stubborn.

She said something and through gritted teeth, he replied. "I don't understand you."

"Pursantier? Who are you, child?" her accent was slight.

"No one important." He could breathe easier. Corruption was finally relenting.

She reached for him, and he tried to slide out of reach, but the motion caused the pain to spike. She took hold of his left arm and pulled up the sleeve.

"Children who are not important do not benefit from this." She ran a finger along the bracelet. "Sealed. Enforced. You are not at a dungeon by choice."

"What do you care?" he snapped, then focused on breathing through the pain.

"There is another with such a bracelet. One who does not shine so bright as you."

Of course, it would be her. "You're the sensitive." He took in the robe's quality, the jewelry. She didn't have as much as other nobles he'd encountered, but enough.

"You seem to have a dislike of me, and yet we have not met before."

"I've never enough of your kind." He should have better self-control; he cursed corruption for the distraction. Nobles were not people he wanted to annoy. If one took a dislike to you, life became extremely difficult.

"My kind?" she asked. "And what kind is that?"

“Nobles.” The pain ebbed and he couldn’t keep the sigh from escaping.

“It seems your leg is better,” she said, with a glance at it. “What afflicts you?”

“Can you tell?” at least his tone wasn’t as angry this time.

“I am sensitive, not all-knowing. I see you have the essence, but not the eyes to tell me what element you have. I have never known of such a condition.”

“I’m too young.” He massaged his leg. It didn’t help with the pain, but it gave him a sense he was doing something.

“You are indeed young. Can you walk?”

“Why? You can’t get one of them to through me out?” he demanded. A few fighters remained at the periphery, watching them.

“If that is what you desire, it can be accomplished.” She waited a few seconds, and he didn’t acknowledge her. “You watched the other with this bracelet’s fight. I expect it is who you are running to see. I can take you to him.”

Tibs looked up from his leg and narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“Why would I not?”

Tibs had more answers for that than he had time. “Just tell me where he is.”

She motioned along the corridor. “The infirmary.” She said a word, then looked at him expectantly. With a sigh, he repeated it. She said it again, and he paid better attention. At least when Carina taught him something, she didn’t sound so haughty about it. After the fourth time, she nodded. “That is the local word for it. I wish you well, child, even if you do not wish the same to me.” He watched her go, trying to work out what her game was.

By the time he could stand, the fighters were gone too. He followed her direction, then asked for the infirmary, and finally reached it. Kroseph was seated next to Jackal, his eyes red from tears. The fighter had more bandages on him than bare skin.

“Tibs,” Kroseph said on seeing him, but not managing his usual smile, “tell this idiot the arena isn’t there for him to get himself killed in it.”

Tibs looked at Jackal, at the way the essence flowed through him and reacted to his injuries. A broken leg and an arm. The essence through his head was wrong, but Tibs didn’t know enough about those kinds of injuries to know what it was. He had cracked ribs and broken ones. More things wrong inside him.

“Why did you anger him?” Tibs asked.

Jackal took Kroseph’s hand in his and winced at the pain it caused. “You know me, always saying the wrong thing. I’m sorry.” He gazed at Kroseph lovingly.

“I mean the other fighter,” Tibs said and looked away from the two of them, gazing in each other’s eyes.

“Who?” Jackal turned his head to look at him. “Tibs!” he winced in pain. “When did you get here? Did you see me fight?” there was something wrong with the way his friend looked at him.

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked, looking around for someone to help.

A thin man carrying wraps under an arm and a knife at his belt paused by them. “Head bruising.” He touched his head, then shook it sadly. “Go to cleric. No healing that here.”

“There has to be something you can do,” Kroseph demanded.

The man answered him. The tone didn't sound hopeful, then continued on.
"Rest and food," Kroseph said. "And maybe he'll be okay." He swallowed and squeezed Jackal's hand.

"Tibs will take care of it," Jackal said with confidence. "He's my best friend."

"Clerics are expensive, Jackal. I doubt Tibs has enough money."

Jackal smiled and Kroseph seemed to realize what he'd meant. He knew what Tibs could do, but not having to depend on it to survive the dungeon meant it wasn't the first thing he considered. He looked at Tibs hopefully.

The arm, leg, and ribs weren't a problem. The inside of his body didn't feel too damaged, more like it was all bruised. But the head was a problem. This wasn't like what Carina had had, but just like then, he was reluctant to wrap it in his essence and apply the pressure he does for broken bones. He could hurt if he did it wrong, and he knew that hurting the head was a bad idea.

Even if he couldn't deal with that, there was the rest of him.

He hesitated. Could that noble sense him from where she was? Her sense went further than his since she'd known he was in the audience and he would have noticed someone like her. What would she do if she could tell what he did?

The abyss with her. "Cover his mouth," he whispered. He wasn't letting his friend remain injured because of her. If she came demanding answers, he'd deal with her. Maybe she'd seek him out in Kragle Rock, and then Sto could help deal with the body.

He encased the broken leg and tightened it back into place. Corruption flowed in with his essence, then Tibs felt it seep into Jackal. With a curse, he tried to pull it back, but he couldn't grasp corruption; it wasn't his element. Hopefully, it wasn't enough to make things worse.

"We're okay to take him to the inn," Tibs said, putting as much confidence as he could in his voice. Kroseph didn't need uncertainty right now.

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Tibs stood before the shop and hesitated. He should have done this sooner. So much sooner.

He'd rather be at the inn, but there was nothing for him to do there. Kroseph's father had contacted a surgeon to look after Jackal and treat the fever that had developed. That Tibs was sure corruption had given him.

He entered the Cliffside General Gatherer and had to step aside to avoid colliding with a man carrying packages. Tibs headed for the counter where the heavy-set man stood. The tall and thin woman was speaking with a group of nobles by a display case.

"Hi," Tibs greeted the shop owner. "I don't know if you remember me. I came to your house and asked for a Sea Drop."

The confusion on the man's face turned to worry as he looked around the shop. "Why are you here?" There was a hint of fear in his voice.

Tibs knew the man played a part in what happened to Sto; That box he'd given him was part of it. But what he remembered more was the worry about what Bardik was planning. The concert for the man himself.

He decided just saying was the best way. “Bardik failed. He was captured. They sent him to a prison.”

The man didn’t immediately react. “Oh.” The man’s tanned complexion paled. “No.” He grabbed onto the counter, his arms shaking. “Tari—” The whisper was cut up by him falling and knocking over something behind the counter, which shattered.

“Chuck!” the thin woman yelled, and before Tibs reacted, she jumped the counter. Tibs looked around it. Chuck was on the floor, shaking, eyes wide with fear. She raised his head and placed a small bottle to his lips, whispering something Tibs couldn’t make out. She noticed him and the concern turned into anger. “Leave!” The rest was in language Tibs didn’t understand, but even the lyricalness of the words couldn’t cover up the hate in them.

Tibs ran.