

Chapter 77

“I hate this,” Tibs grumbled as the crowd cheered.

“Come on,” Jackal said, “enjoy the show.” He joined in the cheering at the woman connected with the man’s face hard enough that he staggered to the side.

“It isn’t a show,” Tibs complained. “It’s two people needlessly hurting each other.”

He hadn’t known the town has a fighting circle. Considering Harry’s rule against fighting, the guard leader didn’t either. He studied how he felt, and yes, it was him, not Water that hated this. He’d have put a stop to it when it started if he’d found out. They had enough with Sto giving them something to fight, they didn’t need to hit one another.

Once this exercise of Jackal’s was done with, Tibs was bringing an end to this place.

“There’s nothing needless about this, Tibs.” Jackal sat and the fighters went at each other again. “That’s why I brought you here. This might not be pretty, but it’s needed for our town to survive. Especially if you want really violent crimes kept to a minimum.”

“The dungeon already has them fight,” Tibs complained.

“What do I do between runs Tibs?”

“You train.”

“What did I do when the dungeon was healing?”

Tibs trying to work out what Jackal was getting to. “You went to MountainSea with Kroseph and his family.” Was this about forcing him to think about something other than the now? It was easier, with Water being less of an influence on how he thought, but he didn’t always enjoy that. There was a comfort in not thinking about yesterday or tomorrow. In not worrying about what his actions caused.

“And?”

Tibs thought it over, and not liking what he was coming up with said, “you nearly got yourself killed in the arena.”

“I didn’t go in looking to die,” Jackal replied in far too casual a tone. “And the Arena wasn’t going to let me die. It looks bad for them when a fighter dies outside of a deathmatch.”

“The healer there didn’t sound like he thought you’d live when I got there.”

Jackal smiled. “But I wasn’t dead, was I?”

“What’s your point?” Tibs demanded angrily.

“I’m not like you, Tibs. A lot of us here aren’t. I don’t just accept that violence is something I have to do. I crave it. I rejoice in it. Sure, the dungeon gives me the best fights I have ever had, but how often do I get to fight it?”

“You’ve fought here?” Tibs asked in dismay.

Jackal chuckled. “Who do you think helps get this started?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Tibs stood as he yelled, and silence spread from him to the entire room as the people there turned to look at him. Even the fighters noticed the change and paused to watch him. His face burned in embarrassment, but his anger kept him from sitting down and wanting them to forget about his outburst.

“How can you do this to one another? Didn’t Sebastian kill enough of us? Are you looking to finish what he started?”

“I’ve got this,” Jackal said over the raising murmurs as expressions of confusion turned to anger. “No one needs to worry about a thing other than—” he winced “—not paying attention to their opponent.” He placed a hand on Tibs’s shoulder. “No one’s killing anyone here, Tibs.”

The grumbling continued as the others sat.

“What do you call that?” Tibs pointed to the result of the previous fight. Arruh was stretched on a bench, his face bloody and an arm at an unnatural angle. Tibs could sense the other injuries the man had.

Jackal grinned. “Alive and in a fucking lot of pain.” His expression sobered. “But he’s alive. He’ll get healed when it’s his team’s turn to go into the dungeon. And for now, he’s gotten the fight out of him.”

“When Harry finds out about this, he’s—”

“Knuckles isn’t finding out, Tibs. We’re making damned sure of that.”

“But—” Tibs couldn’t find the words. How could Jackal think this was a good idea? How could his friend take part in making something that would only end up hurting the people in his town?”

Jackal sat, making Tibs do the same as the other stood and cheered. “Tibs. The guild took each of us out of cells. We were all criminals before coming here. You run the roofs. Carina sneaks in reading books she shouldn’t. I fight. I have to fight, I love to fight, Tibs. Everyone who steps into that circle is like me. It’s part of who we are more than the element we’ve taken. If we didn’t have this, we’d be starting fights elsewhere, and possibly without meaning or wanting to.”

“The tavern fights.” He’d know most of those were arranged. He hadn’t liked it but he had accepted they’d happen.

“One of the ways we keep Knuckles from looking for this place. And it gives the townsfolk a show to watch. Notice how it’s just Runner here? This isn’t for them.”

“How can you be sure no one’s going to die?” fighting his despair, kept him from being angry.

“Can never be sure of that, but have rules. Only fists. No element. And there’s always a stronger fighter than those in the circle keeping watch to make sure it stops before it goes too far. Some go in to settle scores, others to prove they’re better. Most of us just do it because it’s how we have a good time.”

Tibs wanted to cry, to scream. To accuse Jackal of betraying everything they were doing. He let go of Water and it only reduced the intensity of what he felt. He tried to calm down, so he could explain how wrong all of that way, but his emotions strangled the words.

“Tibs,” Jackal called as he turned and pushed his way out.

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The dog fell into steps with him and whined as he looked up.

“You know,” Serba said, falling into step on Tibs’s other side. “I swear he’s more loyal to you than he is to me. Anytime he catches your scent, it’s all I can do to keep him at

my side.”

“Go away.” He should have climbed to the roofs. Thumper nuzzled his leg.

“My brother might have the tact of a boulder, but you know he means well, right?”

“He’s getting them to beat on each other,” Tibs replied, words clipped. “We’re supposed to help each other, not hurt one another.”

“He’s giving their violence an outlet.”

He rounded on her. “We have the dungeon for that!”

She chuckled. “Not unless they can go in anytime they feel the urge to put their fist in someone’s face.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You fight in there?”

She chuckled. “I work out my frustrations in other ways.” The lecherous smile she gave him made it clear how.

He kicked a stone and started walking again. “I want the town to be a safe place.” He place a hand on Thump’s head and scratched the base of the ear.

“The circle’s part of that. Everyone, everything has urges. They’re going to come out no matter what we do. My dogs have to chase each other, snap and bite. Thugs have to hit people.”

Tibs sighed and looked up. Torus was the only visible at the moment. Did he feel lonely too? Or did looking down on them mean he never felt that? “I hate it.”

“It doesn’t change that it’s needed.”

“I hate that what you and Jackal tell me makes sense.” He looked down at Thumper and looked at him tail wagging. Did dogs worry about things like this? “It means I’m getting used to it. To having people being hurt, letting them get hurt.”

“You’re only getting used to that now?” Serba asked, sounding amused. She raised a hand as Tibs glared at her. “You said you’re street.”

“This was supposed to be different.” The tears were born as much of frustration as sorrow. Completely normal reactions that somehow felt out of place, even while he wasn’t channeling Water.

He was surprised when she squeezed his shoulder. “It’s one of the world’s lessons. It doesn’t matter where you are. It’s still going to suck.”

He chuckled.

She smiled. “You good?”

He snorted. “No.” He sighed. “But that’s getting to be normal too.”

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Tibs walked to the mountain, away from the steps leading to the door. Even with the plain devoid of people, Tibs didn’t want to be too obvious. There were no guards at the door, not that Sto needed protectors because Harry still hadn’t replenished the ranks. One could still walk by at any time.

He looked over his shoulder to make sure neither Jackal nor Carina were in tow. Giving them the slip had proved harder than it should have been. He was a rogue, after all, and they weren’t. But they knew him so they knew his usual routes. The other problem was that in vanishing like he had, he caused them to worry. He could ignore the pull of Water to

put their well-being before he wanted, but it was still there, reminding him he was causing them pain, no matter how little, or that they'd understand once he told them

He was tempted to let the element go. Water was exhausting, with always worrying about everyone else. He wasn't supposed to care about the consequences of his actions when he channeled an element. He was supposed to be entirely in the now.

Unless his actions when contrary to that element, then all he could do was worry about it. Letting it go would solve that, but it wouldn't give him the practice he needed in remaining himself.

"Tibs! Welcome back. Oh, your trip was successful. But what happened to your element? It's all water now."

Tibs smiled. "The work's all done?" not feeling like getting into his problems right now.

"Yeah, Ganny's plan too more work than either of us expected. How long has it been? Where's everyone? I expected crowds eagerly waiting for me to open my door. Or at least the usual guards."

Tibs's pleasure at Sto's return fell. "Most at busy helping rebuild. More died.

"I'm sorry. What happened?"

"Sebastian tried to take over the town while most of us were away. We won, but he got away."

"Wait, does this mean there's going to be fewer Runners to explore my third floor?" Sto ask.

"Yes, Sto," Tibs snapped. "Runners died defending the town, so there's going to be less of us to see that floor."

"What...did I say?"

Tibs sighed. "I'm just tired." He sat and leaned against the cliff face. He knew better than to expect Sto to react the same way he did, or even the way another human would. He was a dungeon. His priorities were different. His understanding of how Tibs felt was based on what Tibs had told him, not because Sto felt the same. He existed to pull people in, and tested them against his traps and creatures. What happened outside was... distance for him.

"Then I hope you'll rest before your run, you're going to need all your strength and cunning. Do you know when you'll be in?"

Tibs chuckled. "The guild isn't going to recall the others until you open your door, it's going to be a few days after that before there's enough of us back for them to set up the schedule. Once they call them back, they have two weeks to return."

"That's... eighteen days. Why so long? I'm ready now."

Tibs felt the vibration in the stone, but he couldn't see the door from where he was.

"There, now they know." He paused. "You know, there are no guards, so you could tell the Runners they can come in whenever they want."

Tibs chuckled. "You shouldn't have opened your door. The guild will have guards there before I reach the town."

"Tibs," Sto said, the hesitated. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Of course."

“Don’t ask the other teams for information on the third floor. I was you to experience it as if you were the first time to go it. It’s going to be worth it, I promise.”

Tibs closed his eyes. Thinking of sharing information brought Pyan to his mind, and with her Geoff. Then other’s he’d lost. Of that team, Tandy was the only one left. He had no idea who she’d team with once she returned.

“I won’t.” He’d have to warn Carina, but she’d appreciate discovering the floor as much as he did.

“You are going to have so much fun!”

Oh, that did not bode well.

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“Tibs,” Darran called as he approached the table.

“I was going to go get my armor,” Tibs said noting the back the merchant had with him.

“I decided being in public would make trying to get you to tell me how it got damaged the way it did less tempting. And don’t worry about paying for it. Consider it my thanks for leading the defense of the town and making sure Merchant Row wasn’t forgotten in the middle of all the troubles.”

“Didn’t Don, lead the defense?” Mez asked. He and Khumdar had arrived that morning. Tibs had been surprised to see the cleric arrive on the fourth day after the recall was sent. He’d cut it close the last time. He wasn’t surprised that the version of Don’s story had already reached them.

Jackal smiled. “We’re happy to let him spread that story. Keeps the guild out of our lives.”

“But we of Merchant Row know who the true heroes are.”

“I wasn’t here for most of it,” Tibs protested.

“You were here in inspiration,” Jackal replied.

“Don’t you start telling people that,” he warned the fighter, his tone sharp enough Mez raised an eyebrow and Tibs took a breath to calm himself. How he felt about Jackal’s part in the fighting circle kept slipping into other arguments, even needless ones like this.

“And now that Sebastian’s gone, and the guild is going to bother Don for anything they want to happen in town, I can finally go back to running the roof, practicing in the noble’s houses, and just resting between runs.”

“Ah, yes,” Darran said, and Tibs immediately had a bad feeling about what would follow. “Jackal, do you mind if I borrow Tibs? I’ve been tasked by the other merchants with addressing something with him.”

“Look,” the fighter wanted. “Whatever they’re complaining about, Tibs had nothing to do with it.”

“This isn’t about any of the troubles that might have happened, or might be happening.”

Tibs sighed. “I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Tibs,” Carina warned. “You don’t have to help with anything. Remember, there are more important things than looking after others’ wellbeing.”

Tibs nodded and checked how he felt. This was him, not water. “Darran wouldn’t have come to us if it wasn’t important. Do you want another table, or elsewhere entirely?”

Mex exchanged a quizzical look with Jackal and Carina. He’d been happy for Tibs that his eyes had finally changed color, but he hadn’t been told everything that meant yet.

The merchant looked around uncomfortably. “I’d prefer a tavern. One without Runners.”

Tibs hoped that whichever Runners had been taking advantage of the merchants would be easy to convince to stop. He didn’t want to have to set rules again and enforce them.

Darran led him to the Drunk Sow. A tavern near the worker’s neighborhood. Everyone in it looked tired, but content. He ordered a tankard each, and they sat at a table.

“There’s been a rash of robbery,” Darran stated. “Nothing valuable. Mainly supplies for runs, but it’s affecting how the merchants feel toward the runners. If it continues, it will affect the balance of mutual respect we have.”

“Have you told Harry?” Tibs asked, knowing the answer.

“No one wants to deal with them after the harassment they suffered at their hand.”

“Those who worked for Sebastian are gone,” Tibs said. “Killed or fled.”

Darran watched him as he sipped his tankard. “Did they work for that man? Or did the guild simply take advantage of the situation? Most of us came here with the promise of... not easy time, but with expectations, this wouldn’t be a city. There’s a dungeon, the adventurer’s guild has a hall here. The implication was that we would be better protected. But those adventurers were replaced within months of arriving by ordinary guards, corrupt ones at that. To make that worse, they were brought here by the then-new leader of the guards. A man still in charge.”

Tibs wondered if explaining that Harry had been fooled by Sebastian and that magic had been used would make Darran willing to go to him. Tibs was still angry at Harry for not listening to him and Jackal, but he wanted to believe he’d learned and that he would do better if given the chance.

“Those were only the worse of why we are now reluctant to go to the guild. Complaints have been ignored from the moment we arrived. Small things, nearly inconsequential, but which accumulate. Even those who have had enough can’t necessarily leave, because the clauses in the contracts we signed are rife with ways the guild can extract more in the process. Not every merchant in the row has had the fortune I have had.”

“I’ll talk to the Runners, make them stop, but I don’t understand why you’re telling me everything else.”

“During the siege, Jackal and Quigly took charge of protecting the Row, but he was only continuing what you started. You arranged to protect us from the corrupt guards. We, all the merchants of the Row, would like to restart that arrangement, but officially. We want to hire you to provide the security for Merchant Row.”

Tibs ground his teeth to stop himself from immediately agreeing. Of course, he wanted to help. And he didn’t believe it was Water influencing him. But should he? Was it the wise thing to do for him, the Runners, or even the town?

This would put him against Harry.

Who had been willing to let the town be destroyed by Sebastian, maybe even finish the destruction if it came to it.

Alright, so maybe Harry couldn't be trusted with the Town's best interest. It was the guild he was loyal to.

He'd have to rely on the Runners. Could he depend on them? On them not taking advantage of the position, on them surviving the dungeon so they could keep helping with the town? Could he use this to help the new Runners? The ones the guild was sure to bring in to make up everyone who'd died during the siege?

Would the Runners even want to help? A lot of those who had been part of the first group had died in the siege. He'd have no idea what the new Runners would be like.

More importantly.

Could he do this?

He wanted to. He wanted his town to be safe, even if it wasn't the perfect place he'd thought it to be. No, because it wasn't perfect, he wanted to push it in that direction as much as he could. But he was just a Runner. What did he know about keeping people safe? Most of what had been done before had been implemented by Jackal. Tibs had only handled the rogues.

Jackal was still there, and Quigly would help. He'd help as much as they were willing to trust him back then, and had kept the town safe during the siege. As much as the idea didn't sit well, Don would also help. And if Tibs could trust him to keep his ego in check, Don would be able to keep the guild's interference down.

"I'm willing to do it," he finally said and immediately continued as Darran smiled. "But it depends on being able to find people to do this with. I don't know if I can get a lot of the Runners to help."

"There will be money to pay them with," Darran said.

"The first rule is that no one talks coins with anyone other than me."

Darran grinned. "Planning on keeping most for yourself?"

Tibs glared at the man, trying to determine if he was trying to be funny. He knew him better than that.

"Only talking money with you," Darran stated.

"You need to be certain none of the other merchants will take Harry's protection. This won't work if I can only protect some of the shops"

"On that, you have no worries. The few who were uncertain about this only had to be reminded of what happened to those who took the guard's protection before the siege to decide the danger was too great.

"This isn't me saying yes," Tibs stated, wishing the merchant would stop smiling. "I'm just going to see what I can arrange and we can talk again later."

The smile did not diminish. "Just knowing you are willing to take this on makes me feel safer."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "Really? You're asking a rogue to look after your valuables and you feel safe?"

"Ah, but Tibs, I'm not asking a rogue. I'm asking you."