

Chapter 75

The front half of Sebastian's house was rubble. A mix of melted and broken wooden supports and walls. The back half was still standing, but listing forward, and looked to be about to continue falling at any time.

Harry's guards surrounded it. Tibs knew them to be because he recognized a few of them. They no longer wore the black and green that had been the guard's colors before. The only symbol of their status was now a painted insignia on the front of their armor; a white shield with two crossed swords. They had been hurriedly painted over the leather or metal, and each was sufficiently different Jackal had commented how easy it would be to paint it on their leathers and pass themselves off as guards.

Tibs hadn't even considered it. Harry's guards weren't liked by the town, and Tibs wanted them to know those who protected them had nothing to do with the Guard leader.

There were only a dozen guards around the property, with maybe twice that patrolling the town. Harry had lost a lot of people to Sebastian's treachery, and until the attendants allowed the platform to be used again, he couldn't bring anyone new. A few of the Runners had been offered a position among them, but not one of them accepted.

The only people to arrive, in the two days since the fight for Kragle Rock had come to a decisive end, were adventurers. Tibs counted eight of them, each with Corruption as their elements and they were moving what Tibs and Don had created in the process of destroying the enchantment and the house into barrels.

They, along with crates of various sized, were transported to the guild buildings by other adventurers and people with essence that worked there.

Tirania had gotten the attendants to bring these adventurers in within hours of her coming to the inn, but she hadn't gotten them to do anything for the town itself, like get supplies in.

Tibs had tried to get into the house that first night, to retrieve one of the crystals so Carina could figure out what it was, but even then, the guards were there and were keeping an eye out for anyone attempting to get in, and for Tibs specifically.

"You know we aren't going to let you in, don't you?" the guard said, approaching Tibs.

Tibs didn't reply. This wasn't about getting in, it was about finding the patterns that would let him sneak past the guards. He'd get in, Tibs was certain of that. And he'd get a piece of that crystal.

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The remnant of the house was lit by globes of lights. Some stationary, others following those searching through the rubble.

It forced Tibs to remain at the edge of the work. He'd be able to get closer, maybe even into the house to get one of the crystals he could still sense in the cellar, but he'd have to use Darkness to slip through the shadows, and he'd promised Jackal he wouldn't.

He didn't think he'd do anything destructive while channeling darkness, but he also had no idea how it would affect his mind. Secrets were something Darkness enjoyed, so would he get distracted by them and ignore his original intent?

He hadn't expected the light. That was the problem.

It hadn't been there the previous night, and Tibs hadn't known anyone other than Harry had that element. It meant he'd either missed someone there, more than one, by the number of light globes floating around the house, or Tirania had gotten to attendants to bring in yet more adventurers while doing nothing to help the town.

Cursing under his breath, he turned away and climbed to a roof. He'd break into one of the nobles' houses as a way to vent his frustration.

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"You're alive!" Tibs was across the inn and hugging Serba.

"Let go of me." She said, tensing.

Tibs smiled at her, stepping away. He looked around for her dogs and his face fell when he saw none.

"I let them outside," she said. "I'm not letting you corrupt them anymore."

"I'm out of jerky," Tibs said.

She rolled her eyes. "Like you even need that." Tibs followed her to the table, and Jackal leaned to the side, then looked under the table.

"Serba," he said tentatively, "do I want to know where your monsters are?"

Instead of answering, she handed the fighter a folded piece of paper. Jackal looked at it suspiciously before taking it, unfolding it to glance at it, and passing it to Carina. The fighter relaxed slightly the instant he looked at it.

Carina frowned as she looked it over, then. "Tell my brother whatever you have to, but get back in his employ. Keep me apprised of how he is altering the town's security. Get on good terms with your brother and let me know what he and his band of annoyance are getting up to."

"Dad's alive," Serba said.

"And he wants us to be friends," Jackal replied mockingly. "He might have lost his mind when he escaped."

"How does he expect you to work for Harry again?" Carina asked, handing the paper back. "As far as he knows, you joined your father against the town."

Serba dropped an amulet on the table. "He made sure I had a way to trick Knuckles."

"Harry knows about them," Carina said. "As far as I know, he forced everyone still working for him to remove everything before he questioned their loyalties."

"I don't need it. I was actually working against my father and for him." She nodded to Tibs, who was back in his seat. "He's going to have to believe me, since it's the truth."

"That might not help as much as you'd like," Jackal said. "Knuckles isn't particularly happy with Tibs and us at the moment."

She shrugged. "I don't need him to be happy, just to believe me, because I want to keep working toward protecting the town. You know Dad's planning something already."

Jackal nodded. "At least, with him alive, it's going to be more targeted than just erasing Kragle Rock."

Serba glanced at Tibs before focusing on her brother. "You think that's a better thing?"

“I can keep Tibs safe from him. There’s no way I can protect the entire town from his after-death revenge.”

“I can protect myself and the town,” Tibs said.

“Not against our Dad,” Serba said.

“We did it already.”

She nodded. “And I don’t think you realize how much he hates you for it.”

“Everyone was part of it.”

“That isn’t how he sees it. When he found out you were back and survived the ambush, he was livid. That’s also when your side started getting the upper hand.”

“He really thinks Tibs makes that much of a difference to the town?” Carina asks.

Serba watched him. “Tibs had a way of... getting to people and animals. Of making them feel like things might go in their favor. That leads to people not caving into my father’s demands, and...” she motioned around. “Standing up for what they want to protect. I doubt he’d have won even if you weren’t here, Tibs, but he has decided you’re the reason he lost. So he will make you pay for it dearly.”

“How?” Tibs asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Our father’s too devious for me to even guess at it. But he’s going to aim for what will hurt you the most.”

“That the town,” Tibs said, “it’s people.”

Jackal sighed. “I hope he doesn’t think that, because that puts us right back to keeping the town from being erased.” He nodded to the paper Serba held. “While I appreciate the warning, doesn’t you coming here in person put you at risk? If you got that, it means Dad has people in the town again.”

“I’m sure he does, but not the one who handed this to me anymore.”

“Does that mean the attendants are letting people use the platform again?” Tibs asked, hopeful. “Will we have good food soon?”

“I don’t know about that, but yes, there’s been a few arrivals earlier.”

Finally, Tibs thought, good news.

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Tibs cursed.

There was nothing left of Sebastian’s house. In one day, everything had been removed, down to the lumber that had remained standing until then. From asking around, Tibs learned of a downside to the attendants allowing the platform to be used. The guild could bring in a larger workforce.

The entire plot of land was down to bare earth. The cellar was filled in, and even if he hadn’t promised not to channel earth, there was no point in it. Tibs couldn’t sense any of the disturbances the crystal caused, even while standing over where he had shattered it.

All this waiting for the opportunity, and it had been a waste of time.

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“How much?” Tibs asked the man seated at the table, feet on it and balancing on the chair’s back legs.

Tibs had followed him from Sebastian's house after the man had come to it as Tibs was leaving. He was an adventurer and had Corruption as his element. The density of the essence placed it around Delta. Needing to do something after failing to get a crystal, Tibs had decided to handle a blight on his town that had been there too long.

The man raised his eyes to Tibs from the tankard he was holding. They were the same not quite purple that used to make Tibs sick as Don, and stood out even against the deep tan and sandy-colored messy hair.

"This is a copper," he replied, "but you're going to want to start with something softer, kid. Getting used to the hard stuff will ruin you."

Tibs ground his teeth, unable to tell if the man was mocking him.

The man had headed to the Crawling Worn directly after walking the entirety of Sebastian's property. It was the only tavern with good ale, as the owner had somehow gotten a delivery arranged with the first arrivals.

"How much to buy your services?"

The man studied Tibs with more attentiveness, then smiled. "You're way too young to be needing my services, kid. Go back to playing at being an adventurer."

Tibs put his hands on the table. "I'm a Runner," he said through gritted teeth. "And I don't fucking care what you think of my eyes," he continued as the man opened his mouth. "Ask the guild about it since—" He swallowed the rest. He wouldn't get the man's help if he insulted him. "How many coins will it take to get you to remove a pool of corruption?"

The man dropped his feet. "You're talking about the one at the end of the shops?"

"Yes, how many coins?"

"Can't be done."

Tibs fought his anger. "I can get the coins. The dungeon's going to open soon." Sto still wasn't speaking, but it had been close to four and zero days since he had closed his door. "The third floor's going to be accessible then, and the loot's will be better."

"You are going to do a third floor?" the man asked, his voice a mix of disbelief and amusement.

"Yes." Tibs wanted to channel water and show this man he wasn't some kid pretending, but it would derail him.

The man's humor left. "Take a seat."

Tibs thought about staying as he was, but he was too short to loom, so he sat.

"Don't go on the third floor for this."

"Listen, I—"

"I'm not going to have you die for something that can't be done."

Tibs tried to understand. "But Corruption is your element. It's just a question of you being strong enough, right?" If Delta wasn't strong enough to deal with that, could Tibs find anyone higher?

"You know your stuff." The man smiled. "Good on you. But strength isn't going to help here."

"Why?"

The man considered something. "I already checked the pool out. I figured I could

make some quick money from the guild even if I asked for less than my normal rates. The guild doesn't usually like having one of those that close to them. But it can't be removed."

"How is that possible? It's just essence, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you the how. In fact, since you live here, you can probably tell me. Something must have happened after it was created. It would have been... significant and it would have involved more Corruption."

Tibs shook his head, thinking of the one thing of significance that had happened.

"Yeah, no one I asked seems to have noticed anything after it was created, either. But no matter what, somehow, that pool now has a direct connection to the element."

"What does that mean?" Tibs asked.

"You've heard of those having an audience, right?"

"I had one."

The man stared at him, and looked like he was about to ask a question, then changed his mind. "That place you were taken to," he said, watching Tibs. "It has a direct connection to...your element. It makes the audience easier, but it also makes the concentration of essence higher. To the point that your reserve will refill as fast as you're using the essence."

Tibs hesitated, since it seemed like that would make the job easier, not harder. "Not running out of essence means you can work harder."

The man shook his head. "But not hard enough to do what you want, because that pool can't be emptied of essence. Clearing up what happened at that house was just about collecting the essence that was left behind and eating everything. That pool... that's something different."

"Because of what you say must have happened there."

The man nodded.

"What am I supposed to do about it, then?"

"Buy the land before news of it reaches a Corruption sorcerer. Or before someone realizes how valuable it's going to be to them for their research and experiments. Right now, it's a blight no one wants to have here. So it'll be cheap. Once the sorcerers get here. There's going to be a fight over who owns that land. With the winner able to demand whatever they want for it."

"You've realized what it's worth."

The man nodded. "But I don't like to be attached to one place. I'm the wandering kind of adventurer. Buying that land means I'd have to stay here until I sell it, otherwise it'd be stolen, and getting what I'm owed from that kind of theft is more trouble than it's worth."

Tibs nodded and tried to think of everything. As much as he didn't like having the pool there. If it was as valuable as the man claimed, he should look into it. Jackal or Carina would know how to go about it.

"You said you don't know what happened, but do you have an idea what must have happened for the pool to become what it is?"

The man was thoughtful. "The fact no one noticed anything makes it hard to guess. It normally takes something big for one of the elements to take direct notice of a place in our world. But that's what happened. Corruption noticed that pool for some reason, and because

it's paying attention to it, the essence flows freely.”

“So someone could convince Corruption to stop?”

The man stared at Tibs, then burst out laughing. “Oh, kid. You clearly have no idea what Corruption's like.” His gaze became distant. “It gets you to agree, never the other way around.” There was sorrow in the man's voice.

Tibs stood, trying to decide if it was worth attempting it. “Thank you for the information.” He put a copper on the table, then turned and left.

He was the reason the pool couldn't be removed. If he asked, would Corruption stop paying attention, or would he pay more attention to it because of it? Tibs remembered what Jackal had told him of when he'd channel corruption. How convincing he'd been.

He cursed.

Now that was going to stay there and eventually bring sorcerers to the town.

And what about the other places? Was there a spot behind the archery field with a connection to Earth? Or the lake to Water? The top of the mountain? Did Sto have a room that would never run out of fire? He frowned. Wasn't that the same room he'd tried for his audience with Light? Was that why it hadn't worked? Wouldn't Sto be able to tell there was something odd about that room?

He screamed his frustration and the few people on the street moved further away.

He didn't care about those other places. They weren't a blight.

All he'd wanted was to have that pool out of his town. If the guild had acted to remove it when it had first appeared, it wouldn't have been there for Tibs to have his audience in, and this wouldn't be a problem now.

This was another place the guild had failed his town.

The list of those failures was becoming too long.