

Chapter 28

Tibs waited among the Omegas. He could tell who had been on runs from the new arrivals by how they were already clustered in groups of five instead of nervously looking around, waiting for what came next.

He'd cautiously walked to the stalls to see what they sold, ready to back away the moment Sto spoke to him, or he overheard the dungeon's commentary on the team inside, but neither happened. Sto would be focused on them, and he had to 'speak' to Tibs for him to hear Sto's voice.

The offerings were better than what the guild handed to the Omegas, but nothing of the quality the merchant in town sold. They were also cheaper. A handful of copper would get someone a piece of armor that could last them until they could reliably reach the first-floor boss room.

It was that handful that was proving to be a problem for the merchants. Split between five people, the first floor gave little in the way of coins. And from what Tibs had observed, the team members didn't trust each other enough to pool their coins for one of them to afford the armor.

They also died too easily for those merchants to offer for the armor to be paid off from future runs.

Tibs waited for the team to exit. It was Fedora's first run with her element, and he wanted to hear about how it had gone, what realizations she'd made that her teacher hadn't even mentioned.

He wanted to share in her excitement.

The team exited, and dread built in Tibs. Only three of them, one being carried. The fighter and team leader and the sorcerer. Tibs couldn't make out who was carried until the cleric healed them and the team's second fighter could stand.

No.

She had her element. She couldn't... He looked at the door again. Wishing for her to have been delayed. He thought about stepping forward, within Sto's range, and asking what had happened.

But Sto would tell him. Sto loved regaling Tibs with other team's misadventures, and while he no longer talked about who and how they died, if Tibs asked...

No.

He watched them step down and head to the guild's table, noting what they carried. Cheap armor they dropped on the table. The fighter walked away, and the defeat in his eyes as he saw Tibs sent Tibs running.

No. Not again!

He shoved through the crowd, fighting the tears.

Why? Why had it done this again? He knew Omegas didn't live. So why had he helped her, gotten to know her? Hadn't he learned his lesson?

He couldn't get attached to anyone outside his team because any of them could die.

Geoff was proof of that. It had been a warning of what awaited him with Fedora. No, the rogue he'd been training. He couldn't think of her as a person. He couldn't think of them beyond being Omegas.

It hurt too much.

The pained cry escaped his lips as his leg locked up. He was eating dirt, not caring until he noticed the laughter.

He looked up as it spread, wondering who would laugh at him. Who would laugh at anyone for tripping, for being in pain?

It was Don.

Of course, it was him.

He was bent over with laughter, and so was his team. And with the four of them, Radcliff was absent, Tibs noted, laughing along, it was enough to get the crowd going.

"Look at him," the sorcerer said as he tried to catch his breath. "The great savior of the dungeon can't even stand on his feet. He's crying because he fell!" He was laughing again.

Recognition caused some of the townsfolk to stop laughing, but not maybe of them, and Tibs considered throwing a knife at the sorcerer; his air knife, to ensure he didn't miss. But one of his teammates would jump in front and take the hit for Don. Then Don would be mocking him even louder.

He tried to stand, to show Don he wasn't weak. That he could endure the pain, but the corruption sided with the sorcerer, increasing the pain until the cry escaped against his will, and Tibs hadn't made it past being on all four.

The laughter increased. Everyone joined in, it seemed to Tibs. Everyone who still had a town to live in, Runners to provide them with coins, because he had saved Sto, was laughing at him. He was going to make them pay.

"Have you no shame?" a woman demanded, then a hand took his arm and helped him stand. "Do you not recognize Light Fingers? He saved this town, and this is how you repay him? Laugh at his pain?" At least there was one person in this abyss forsaken town who was on his side, even if it meant enduring his nickname again.

He blinked and focused through the pain and tears and wished he hadn't.

He should have known. This day was simply going to be the worse day for him. It wasn't the dress that gave her away. By itself, he could have thought she was a successful merchant since it wasn't the large and far too decorated thing *they* wore. It wasn't even the jewels on her, too many of them for the common folks. Again, a successful merchant with not particularly good taste could wear those.

He was the look she gave the assembled people, those laughing at him.

The look that told them just how superior she was to each and every one of them, because she, at least, knew who he was. She had the good sense not to laugh, because she was bred from much better stock than them.

A fucking noble had just come to his defense.

This day was simply the worse day ever.

He wrenched his arm out of her hand. "I don't need your help," he snapped and

wished he could move away, but any weight on the corrupted leg caused pain to shot-up.

“I am helping you,” she said haughtily. “You should appreciate that I at least know who you are.”

“Don’t,” he growled. “Don’t help. I’m not a thing for you to use to make you feel better than the rest of us.” Like being on good terms with the guild wasn’t trouble enough. Now Don was going to spread stories of how Tibs was friends with the nobles.

“Well, I say,” he replied, offended.

“Go say it elsewhere. We don’t need you here. This is our town.”

She looked at him as if she’d realized she was next to a slug. Then she snorted. “You’re indeed all the same.” She turned with a huff and strode through the parting crowd.

“Oh, that’s got to hurt,” Don said, snickering. “The hero has just had a fight with his woman.”

“She isn’t my girl!” Tibs yelled. The crowd had thinned, but those who stayed were now laughing with the sorcerer.

“Oh, I know what I saw,” Don replied between bouts of laughter. “I knew you had aspirations of greatness, but I didn’t think you’d lower yourself to offering your body to one of *them*.” The disgust was so strong it could be comical, and the crowd thought it was.

Tibs took a step forward and at least this time he didn’t scream as pain exploded in his leg and he fell. The sorcerer laughed harder as Tibs looked up and glared at him through tear-filled eyes.

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Tibs hated the sorcerer almost as much as he hated corruption. He stoked the hate. It was better than feeling the loss.

His leg was still painful, hours later, but he could endure it now. It hadn’t been this long-lasting since his early days out of the sick-bed.

He hated that noble, too. What had she been doing there? Out of their part of the town? There had been nothing to attract nobles, had there? He tried to remember where he had been, but thinking about that brought back why he’d been running away, and he focused on his hate and anger again. That noble.

They always made things worse.

“Settle down, Tibs,” Jackal said, “you aren’t—”

Tibs glared at the fighter, who raised his hands in defeat from his bed. What was he even doing here? In their room, he should be with Kroseph, doing *them* things. Tibs wanted to be angry alone, without distractions.

“Fine, keep pacing. Stay angry.” Jackal stretched back, hands behind his head. “But instead, you should do something about it. Break into Don’s room, still his coins. Put dung in his bed. It’ll make you feel better than pacing.”

“Do something?” Tibs snapped. He shouldn’t have told the fighter why he was angry, but Jackal had been there when Tibs slammed the door. “And have the corruption hurt me at the worse moment? He probably did this to me. He’s corruption, after all,” Tibs grumbled.

“Did he?” Jackal lost all amusement, looking ready to take on... well, Don’s team.

Tibs thought about saying yes. Jackal would make the sorcerer pay and not care about

the consequences. He was that kind of friend. So Tibs had to care about them for him, and even as angry as he was, he didn't want Jackal to end up in the cells and miss the next run, the chance at loot.

"No." He sighed. "I'd have felt the essence come at me. It would have been obvious." He dropped onto his bed and winced as his bad leg bent painfully. "Everyone laughed, Jackal."

"They're idiots," Jackal said, no longer looking ready for battle, but not back to the jokester attitude, either. "Next time the dungeon's about to die, you let it happen. That'll teach them a lesson." He frowned. "No, never mind. I don't want the dungeon to die."

Tibs had to fight hard not to smile. "You'd miss the loot."

"Well, yeah." He smiled at Tibs, then grew serious. "But the dungeon's your friend. You don't let a friend die, no matter what."

Even if that friend had killed someone you knew? He swallowed, the pain fighting to resurface, and he couldn't muster anger at Sto. He knew Sto hadn't set out to kill her, kill Fedora. He'd tested her, and she'd failed.

He looked out the window by his bed. The clouds were dark red with the setting sun. Soon would be when he'd run the roofs if he didn't have to worry about what the corruption did to him. It was how he liked to deal with his pain. Run up there, scream sometimes. Now he was stuck down here with the rest of them.

"I'm just so fucking tired," he said, looking away. "Of people thinking I'm so hero, or Don thinking I'm against him, or the corruption hurting me at the right moment to make everything worse."

"I know," Jackal said simply.

"I'm sorry for dumping this on you. I'm just..." Tibs clenched his teeth in frustration.

For something other than complain, or pace, Tibs got out of his armor, pausing anytime laughter came through the window. They weren't laughing at him; he reminded himself. Maybe they were. Don would make sure no one forgot what had happened. He'd probably tell everyone what room Tibs was in, so they knew what open window to look out for.

And Tibs could do nothing to stop the sorcerer.

He clenched his teeth at the pain as he took the legs off. Jackal didn't offer to help, and Tibs was grateful. Then peeled off the sweaty underclothes, mulling things over.

Jackal was right that he should do something about what was happening.

He opened the chest with his stuff, and his dark clothes were on top. Mez still had them cleaned. Tibs looked through them for something older.

He couldn't do anything about Don. Anything that wouldn't end up causing more trouble afterward. But he could do something.

He put on the old set. It wasn't as dark as the one he used to run the roofs, or move unnoticed in the alleys, but it would do.

It was time for him to confront the root of this particular set of problems.

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He had to take an indirect route. It was still early enough that even with the sun set,

there were a lot of people out. He didn't want to deal with people right now. Not those who might laugh, and especially not the guards. They wouldn't know where he was going, unless he was already close enough he could just run, and then deal with the questions afterward, so no. No guards, no bothering with lying to anyone, just deal with this once and for all.

The smell caused him to falter. He'd turned back before, but not this time.

It wasn't keeping him away this time. That was why the smell make him sick, make him want to be anywhere but here. It wasn't him to continue to suffer. It enjoyed this game of him never knowing when it would strike again, causing him to fall off a roof and die. Or worse, trip in a street and be mocked, on a day when he should have been able to mourn in peace.

No more.

It was time it learned that Tibs wasn't someone it wanted to mess with.

He was going to fucking kick Corruption in the balls.

He skirted the area until he located an alley going straight to that part of Merchant Row. When the stench increased, Tibs picked up speed to show he wouldn't be deterred this time. When it got bad enough his stomach tried to empty itself. He swallowed the bile with a snarl and pushed himself. He ignored the throbbing in his leg, the corruption still there mixing with the exhaustion.

He crossed the street, fighting the urge to slow down, the voice telling him to reconsider what he was about to do—probably corruption seeping into his mind—that there had to be a better way.

He was fast enough that even if all he did was hit the low stone wall, he'd tip over it and fall in, so he placed his hand on the top and propelled himself over it.

There, there was no turning back now.

He looked down at the approaching darkness. It should be dark purple, but it didn't have any color in the faint light of Claria.

Oh fuck. He couldn't turn back anymore. What had he been thinking? This was stupid beyond even something Jackal would do. He took a breath of fetid air and turned so his back would hit instead of his face and braced himself.

The impact didn't splash. The corrupt liquid clung to him, viscous, burning with cold fire that made him want to scream. How long? How much did he have to endure? He'd thought the pain he'd felt each time the corruption in his essence acted up had been bad, but it was but a shadow of this. When would it end?

Once he died?

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“Welcome!” Someone greeted enthusiastically.

Tibs fought the urge to open his eyes and look at the speaker. That would just let more corruption eat at him and he was already in...

Where was the pain?

He opened an eye a little. Everything was dark and moved as if it wasn't quite solid. Dark purple. The color of the pool of corruption. Tibs was seated at a table, and opposite him was someone with features so fine he couldn't tell if they were a man or a woman.

Their smile was radiant.

“I’m sorry for the pain you had to feel getting here. Rules and all that.” They rolled their eyes, the motion odd as they were entirely the same dark purple. Even the voice was indistinctly either. “I never got why the others are so strict about sticking to them. I mean, if one of you wants to meet with one of us, why not just let it happen, right?” They place their elbow on the table, the surface of which wobbled slightly, then rested their chin on their hands, which also wobbled. “It is such a delight to finally meet you, Tibs.”

Tibs startled. None of the elements had addressed him by name before.

“I hope you don’t mind me using your name.” They looked worried they’d offended him. “I’m not big on the titles and formal stuff.” They smiled. “I mean, we’re going to be working together, right? That is why you’re here.” They offered him a hand, and over the open palm, the shadow of an element floated there, offered to Tibs.

“Just like that?” Tibs asked, eying it suspiciously.

“Of course, why would I...” They shook their head in annoyance. “Let me guess. The others made you work of it. Of course, they did. I don’t get it. What is the point? You already suffered getting to them, and once there, you have to what... prove you’re good enough to deserve what you sought? Someone like you comes around one in...” they frowned. “How many of your lifetimes had it been since the last one?”

Tibs shrugged, busy trying to figure out what the game was. He didn’t believe they were just handing it over.

“Right, sorry. Time’s a human thing... Well, and out-there thing. Everything there feels it. Here, we... we have the rules and that’s about it.”

Tibs nodded. “Don’t those rules say you have to make me earn this?” He pointed to the shadow over the proffered hand.

They smiled and lowered their voice conspiratorially, as if someone might overhear them. Maybe there was. If there were rules, there had to be someone who enforced them.

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” they whispered. “I’m like you. Something of a rule breaker. You’ve made it here, you’ve proven yourself enough to me. Testing you again is just redundant.”

“I don’t know that word.”

“What word?” they asked, surprised.

“Redundant,” Tibs repeated carefully.

“Are you sure?”

Tibs nodded.

“Well, that’s interesting. I plucked it out of there.” They tapped Tibs’s forehead. “I’m plucking all the words I’m using from there. No other way to communicate.” He looked at him. “I guess that technically—” they grinned as Tibs narrowed his eyes “—there are some many words in there you might not realize what they all are.”

Tibs rubbed his temple as he tried to work out what Corruption meant. “You’re starting to sound like Alistair when he wants me to realize something.”

“Sorry. You doing lessons is definitely not something I intend for you to do. The others can take care of that. All I’m here for is to offer you what you want and, in return,

remember that I didn't make you work for it. I'm here to make things easier for you, that's all. If we work together, it's all going to be much easier." They smiled. "Do you get me?"

Tibs kept his eyes on that face as he reached for the shadow.

He'd finally realized what they reminded him of. The con men and women of his street. The sweet talkers who convinced you to hand over the last crumbs of bread while having you believe you'd get a whole loaf out of the encounter.

The expression didn't change. They didn't pull their hand away at the last moment. When Tibs touched the shadow, it melded into his fingers. The core of his essence expanded, making space for the element among the others.

They smiled. "See, not everything needs to be a chore. You can tell the others I treated you with the proper respect you deserve when you go see them."

Tibs nodded, studying the feel of the essence, now that it was part of him. As with the others, he couldn't find the right way to describe it. The closest he came to surprised him because there was nothing sickly about it.

It was simply sticky.

"Now what?" He asked, expecting the line to be pulled, now that he'd taken the bait.

"Now, you go back," they answered. "As much as I enjoy your company, you belong out there."

"Wait." Tibs swallowed. "If you send me back where I was, that's in the pool." His voice faltered and was weak when he uttered the words. "It hurts."

They looked at him, surprised. "Tibs, I would never hurt you now that we are friends. You're special, remember that. If one of them hurts you after you took part of them into you... well, I don't think highly of them. And neither should you."

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Tibs broke the surface with a gasp and scrambled not to be pulled back under the viscous liquid, then stopped when he realized he was sitting on the bottom and the liquid only went to his shoulders. He was certain that as he'd held his breath, he'd been dragged under much deeper before reaching Corruption. The way the man who'd fallen into it had trashed about, when they had jumped out of the Caravan Garden building, had led him to think it was bottomless.

He stood and all but below the middle of his thigh was exposed to the cool air. And the breeze made his private part shrivel.

He dropped. Fuck, he was naked. The corruption had eaten his clothing. He looked around. Now would be when Don was here to gaze into his element. He would never let Tibs live this down.

Tibs looked down at what he was sitting in.

Maybe he should have Don see him right now. See just how superior the sorcerer felt. Maybe he'd want to prove he was the better and step into the liquid.

Tibs shook himself.

Don didn't deserve this, no matter how angry Tibs was at him. Tibs certainly wasn't one to gloat, even if now was the time for it. No, now was the time to head back to his room without anyone seeing him. That wouldn't be easy. He could hear people in the distance. He

looked up to locate Claria. Not a lot of time had passed during his audience.

He saw the roof as he considered his option and reflexively flexed his leg.

There was no pain.

He smiled.

Without the corruption getting in his way, He knew exactly how to go back to his room without being seen.