

Chapter 57

Zackaria returned with a crystal container and crystal goblets, placing them on a low table while Peolo studied Tibs. They filled the goblets with red wine and handed them over. They smiled as they looked at them in appreciation, and Tibs thought they were seeing them as a painting to be admired.

Peolo glanced at them and his expression turned pained. "I'm afraid we're going to need privacy, Dear." He smiled at Zackaria. "I'll make sure we all spend time together, but for now, you can't stay. This is going to be...Order business."

"Of course." They kissed the top of Peolo's head. "I'll be working in my studio. I look forward to hearing stories of your adventures in the dungeon," they told Tibs and Carina before heading out of the house.

"Carina," the cleric said, shifting his focus to the two of them again, "there are rules."

"You were the one who told me that obeying rules without questions led to chaos."

"That was when you were a child and didn't question anything you were told."

She smiled. "You never said anything about no longer questioning them once I grew older."

"I know you were beyond my advice the day you stole your first book." He ran a finger along his goblet. "I doubt I'm the reason you kept on questioning everything, but saw how little success everyone else demanding you obey blindly had." He smiled at her fondly. "I preferred that we remain friends."

Peolo looked at Tibs. "This isn't me agreeing to help, but tell me why you want purity when there are so many other elements who would suit you better."

"Because I have to."

And Tibs realized that Jackal's words about lying with actually lying were something he'd heard before.

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Never lie," Old Grangston had said, his voice shaking from age, pain, and probably tainted ale. "Especially when you lie to a mark."

The old man wasn't talking to Tibs. He hadn't known Tibs was present. If he had, his three apprentices would beat Tibs up instead of listening to a lesson.

Tibs has sneaked to the back of the shack the old man claimed at his home and listened through a broken plank. He had watched Grangston twist a noble around his tongue, and Tibs wanted to learn from him, no matter how many times the old man told him no.

"The truth is the best lie to tell. You twist it, you bend it. You mold it until it suits your needs, but never, ever, break it."

Tibs had never gotten good at it, and with each attempt ending in a beating, he'd given up on using his tongue to steal. His hands were better at it.

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But now, his tongue was all he had.

“That is a rather bold claim to make.” Peolo’s tone didn’t hold accusation, but there was an expectation of needing more in it.”

And Tibs wasn’t stealing with it this time.

Not really.

The elements were there for any who could get an audience, after all.

“Maybe I don’t have to,” he admitted, “but I’ve watched the others with their elements. I’ve watched what they do, how they talk about it, and I came to the conclusion that Purity is who I want.”

“Conclusion?” Peolo said, sounding amused.

“Carina taught me the word. It means that I think over what I want, what’s available, and what I can do, then pick something.”

“And Carina explained about Purity?” now there was a hint of disbelief in his voice.

“No, well, a little. I spoke mostly to the clerics who came to Kragle Rock when the dungeon graduated. There was an... accident that created a pool of corruption, and one of them tried to remove it by herself. When I asked her why she tried it when it had to seem impossible, she said that it wasn’t the success that was important. It was that she did the work as best as she could that mattered.”

Tibs paused and thought back over his life. He didn’t have to pick and choose the events. Nearly all of them fit what he was saying.

“I’ve had to work hard all my life to stay alive. On my Street, now in the dungeons. The guild didn’t make it easier on me because of my eyes.” He hesitated as he realized what he’d said and said the best thing he could think of to explain it. “Even if I had no element when everyone else did. It’s been tough.”

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“If you think you’ve screwed up,” Grangston said harshly, “don’t act like it. The mark doesn’t know what you planned to say, or what’s supposed to be the right thing you have to say. You’ll be telling them you screwed up or not by how you behave.”

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“How many times have you gone into the dungeon?” Peolo asked.

Tibs shrugged. “A lot.”

The cleric looked at Carina.

“It’s hard to say,” she answered. “At first, they just grabbed us off the street if our role was needed to fill a team. We didn’t get to tell them we were tired, or that we’d already gone that day. We went in with strangers and did what we could to survive. When the dungeon graduated, we’d build our teams and there was a schedule. More for the nobles than us, I think. I think that since then, we’ve gone in more than a dozen times, less than twenty, I’m sure.”

“What is your role, Tibs?”

“I’m a rogue.” He straightened and puffed out his chest.

Peolo smiled slightly and didn’t seem surprised. “Those aren’t known to have the best survival rate. There is a lot of distrust, them being thieves who are simply granted a more official-sounding title.”

“I was a thief. That’s how I ended up in the cell that had me sent to Kragle Rock; I picked the wrong pocket. But I’m a Runner now, and a rogue. I want to continue because it’s what’s right for me. When I reach Epsilon, I’m going to become an adventurer and work for the guild.”

“You sound very confident about your chances.”

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“Never think of your real reasons for what you’re saying. They don’t matter and they’ll show on your face. Not one of you’s good enough to make your face say something you aren’t thinking.”

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“What’s my other choice? Think about how I’m going to die and not reach it? I can’t go back to my Street once I’m free after everything I’ve lived through. I’m going to make it. I have to.” He looked at his hands and lowered his voice. “For Mama.”

“Does your mother know what happened to you?” Peolo asked,

He shook his head. “She died; in the cold. She wouldn’t want that to happen to me. The dungeon’s hard, but I’m no longer on my Street. I have to survive; for her. My team’s not going to be enough now, not with him being Rho. I need an element. I’m going to continue even if I can’t get one. I don’t care how hard I have to work.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll be the first adventurer ever not to have an element, but my chances are better if I have one.”

“And you would rather not have an element if you can’t have Purity?” There was a forced neutrality to the tone that made Tibs consider his response.

“I don’t want to die,” he finally said with a sigh. “So I’ll take what I can get. But none of the others sound right for me. Fire’s all about heat and energy. Air’s about playing around. Earth is grumpy. Water’s about waiting around. Darkness is about being mysterious.”

“Wouldn’t Darkness be a good fit for you? Rogues and mystery go well together.”

“It’s what I’ll take if I can’t get purity,” Tibs said. “But the one darkness rogue I’ve known was alone because he could tell how devious everyone is. I know people are devious, but I don’t want to be alone. I want to believe some can be my friends, my family.” He wiped at his eyes. He hadn’t intended to let Bardik’s memory get to him.

“Uncle, I know there are no Purity rogues, and I know Tibs won’t reveal it to anyone. It’s his one chance to continue advancing with us. I don’t think he can survive what’s coming without an element.”

“He said he’d take darkness,” Peolo replied.

“Do you really think he’ll survive an audience if his heart isn’t in it?” she countered.

“There are no guarantees he’ll survive an audience with Purity, either.” He looked at Tibs. “You understand that there are no guarantees either way.”

Tibs snorted. “I’ve known that my whole life. Anytime I’d get a little, someone bigger and tougher showed up to take it. But I didn’t let that stop me. If I’m going to die because an element refuses me. I’d rather it be the one I want to be with than my second choice.”

“I can’t even promise you’ll make it to have your audience,” Peolo said.

Tibs looked up in surprise.

The cleric smiled. “Do you think we have it any easier because we have a dungeon

dedicated to our element? It's still a dungeon, and it still wants us dead. All we did was find ways to incorporate that aspect into the rituals that lead to the audience and ensure only those who work truly hard make it that far."

"It's okay," Tibs said, trying to sound like he was forcing himself to stay positive. "I'd rather have a chance at the audience than settle for another element."

Peolo nodded. "Alright, I'll help."

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"Never, ever, ever, react to your victory. It'll mean nothing if that noble has a guard cut you're throat while you grinning at him."

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Tibs covered the bracelet as Peolo nodded to it, happy for the distraction from his elation.

"How long until you need to go back?"

He focused on it as a reminder of his servitude to counter how please he felt.

"There's no way to know," Carina answered while Tibs still brought himself under control. "A few weeks, at least, is what we were told."

"That might not be long enough," The cleric said. "Unlike with the other elements, there is no speeding through the process to have your audience. Getting to Purity takes as long as it needs to. I can't simply go with you and lead you into Purity's embrace. Like everything else, you will have to work for it to happen. What will you do if the gem turns while you are still working toward your audience?"

The shrug came easy. "I'll accept whatever comes." It was how he'd lived. He tried as hard as he could, then events unfolded as they would. "If it's my death, then I've gotten there aiming for what I wanted."

Peolo's lips tightened in a line. "I'd rather you live unhappily than die fulfilled."

Tibs smiled at him. "I'd rather live happy and fulfilled."

The cleric chuckled. "I hope I was never this refreshingly naïve. Otherwise was a grump have I turned to in my old age?"

"You're not old," Carina said.

Peolo rolled his eyes. "I am three times your father's age. Remind me again what you said when you found out how old he is?"

She straightened. "I will not. We have company."

Tibs looked at her, wondering what she could have said she didn't want him to hear.

"You know that as you get more powerful with your element," Peolo said, "your body will change, correct?"

Tibs nodded. "I got from the adventurers in Kragle Rock that some are a lot older than they look. Some call what we do a 'crawl,' or a 'dive'. It's what they used to call doing a run when they did it."

The cleric nodded. "The more powerful you are, the higher in rank, as your guild counts it, the slower you age. I don't know how adventurers handle it, but here, most have families, since we are all dedicated to Purity." He looked at Carina and smiled. "It makes it possible that we don't have to fear outgrowing the children we have grown fond of."

“Do you have many?” Tibs asked as Carine looked at her feet, her dark skin turning darker in embarrassment.

Peolo shook his head. “My love is Purity. I don’t have any left to dedicate to a family.”

“Then Zackaria is...” Tibs trailed off. He only had other Runners as a reference, and while not all of them had someone special. Any who had someone looked a lot like Jackal and Kroseph, or—he swallowed—Pyan and Geoff.

“What Zackaria and I have is comfortable. I like and enjoy their company and they enjoy spending time with me. But eventually, they’ll grow bored with me not giving them what they want. I explained it to them when they courted me, but they think that their love is enough to change me. They’ll realize it isn’t, and there will be pain and anger. They might lash out at me. Then, they’ll go to someone who can give them the kind of happiness they want. Until then, we enjoy each other’s company.”

“You make it sound easy,” Tibs said softly, “them leaving you.”

“It is, now.” Peolo grew thoughtful. “The first few were hard. I didn’t become a cleric knowing where my devotion would take me. Like Carina’s parents, I, too, married.” He smiled. “She was a lovely woman, a fighter.” His smile fell. “My duties to Purity got in the way. Fortunately, we didn’t have children. Then there was a man, outside of the order, because I thought his shorter life would make it easier for him not to be as involved with me. Instead, it made him ask for him, and not being of the order, I couldn’t make him understand what Purity means. We argued and fought. There were a few more until I understood how much I could give, and learned to accept the consequences.”

“Wouldn’t it be better not to be with anyone, then?”

“Tibs,” Carina exclaimed.

Peolo chuckled. “Possibly. But Purity doesn’t warm a bed. Hug me when I’ve had a hard day. Devotion and hard work don’t mean you don’t have a right to comfort once the day is over.”

Tibs looked at the floor, seeing the similarities between the cleric and Jackal. “I’m a Runner. I don’t want to die, but I will. I can’t put someone through that kind of pain.”

“Then take your pleasure where you can. There are plenty of men and women willing to offer it without attachment.” He drained his goblet. “But now that I have talked about myself far more than I am accustomed to, there is a last warning I must give you. I can get you into the dungeon within the next group of acolytes, in three days, but there is nothing I can do to help you leave, should you survive your audience. Once an acolyte exits the dungeon, they are carted to start their training.”

Tibs nodded. “I’ll find a way. What do I have to do to get ready?”

Peolo looked Tibs over again. “Get your hair shorn. On the morning I’ll take you in, you’ll need to take a proper bath. I’ll have acolyte’s robes ready for you.”

Tibs frowned. “Don’t I need to starve myself?”

Peolo laughed. “The dungeon will see to that part itself.” He glanced at Carina. “In fact, you should go with Carina when she visits her family and enjoy their cooking.”

“What? She was on her feet, glaring at the cleric. “I’m not going there. There’s

nothing you can say that'll get me to want to ever see them again after the way they treated me.”

People smiled. “It is the price of my help to get Tibs into the dungeon.”