

## Chapter 55

The bored-looking woman behind the table didn't look like the usual person there. Normally, those who looked through the items the team got from Sto were sorcerers, occasionally, they'd be from another class, but this was the first time Tibs couldn't tell if she even was an adventurer, other than by how dense her essence was, and the silvery tint to it. She looked to belong more in that room Tibs had accidentally wandered into previously where the guild clerks worked.

She set aside two pieces of armor, the usual amulets—which were now the most element-related loot—a sword, three healing potions, and a quiver that Mez had studied before deciding he wasn't interested in it. They were at the point where nothing Sto gave out as loot, other than the potions, helped them.

Each of them got four silver and six copper in exchange.

The normal items they were left with were the set of noble's clothing, leather boots, gloves, epaulets, worker's pants and shirts, and a lot of meats and vegetables, including some that Jackal had given Sto when they entered.

Those would go to the inn, even if Kroseph's father couldn't pay for them. It was home, so the food belonged there. The armor and clothing would go to Darran if he wanted them and to those offering the best price for what the merchant didn't.

The merchant at the stalls called to them with offers to unburden them in exchange for the wares they offered, but a quick discussion between them and Jackal had them walking away. Their offers weren't good enough to warrant antagonizing Darran. The merchant always offered them good coins and services—such as repairing Tibs's armor—for what they brought.

The merchant took the armor, and Tibs's, with a shake of the head, but didn't ask how Tibs had managed to get most of the back ripped. The clothing went to the tailors. Tibs wanted to hand the noble's set to the one who refused to pay Sebastian, to help her, but she didn't have the coins to pay them, and Jackal wouldn't accept her offer to pay them once she sold them.

As payment for the food they brought, Kroseph's family cooked them the best meal Tibs ever ate, even better than what he'd found at the last bazaar.

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"I know you're responsible for this," Harry growled, waving papers at Tibs. There were letters on them, Tibs saw that, but he didn't bother trying to decipher them. "All these reports of fights, you are behind them."

"You told me to stop the thieves," Tibs replied, trying to use darkness as a shield for his words.

"You're lying. I told you to stop one thief."

Tibs shrugged. "There are others. I figured you were going to ask me to stop them, too."

"Stop lying," Harry said through gritted teeth. So much for the guard leader just assuming no one lied to him. Or maybe it was because Tibs was a rogue.

Tibs picked his next words carefully. Not because he planned on lying, but because angering Harry more wouldn't help.

"Those thieves have been working around the guards, Harry." Not your guards. Tibs had identified a handful who were loyal to Harry, and those were working themselves hard trying to stop the thieves and the fights. If he could convince Harry to have them look the other way for those, it would make Tibs's job easier.

"The merchants are suffering, and we need the merchants to buy our loot. Me and some of the Runners are keeping them safe. When we tried handing them over to the guards, they were almost more interested in putting us in cells because we fought so—"

"Fighting isn't allowed outside the training fields," Harry snapped.

Tibs swallowed his annoyance. "Does that mean you're now allowing thievery?"

The guard leader glared at him.

"Then isn't the fighting the lesser problem?"

"Rogue," Harry cursed.

"You said I could train so long as I didn't get caught. I'm applying this here. None of us have been caught fighting." He was sure the guards writing those papers on the fights did so based on what the beaten thieves told them. There had been a discussion about killing them to prevent that, but Tibs would never be able to get Harry to look the other way from that.

"You think it makes this better?"

"I'm not doing this to make you feel better!" Tibs snapped, then swallowed the rest at the glare he received. "I'm doing this for the merchants and the town. Sebastian knows that if he disrupts the merchants, the town will be easier to control." Darran had explained it, not that Tibs had understood it all.

"My brother has nothing to do with what's happening." Harry sounded like he wished it wasn't the case. "I've questioned him about it, multiple times."

"He's lying to you!"

"He can't!" Harry was up, hand on his desk, glaring so hard at Tibs, he thought he saw the light from his eyes move forward.

Tibs shook from keeping his frustration contained. "I told you, he has something that lets him lie to you. Him and that lieutenant." More did, but Tibs figured that if he could get Harry to find it on her, it would be enough to make him suspect others had the same thing. Harry wasn't the most trusting person Tibs had noticed, other than his overconfidence in his ability to know when someone lied.

The guard leader studied him. "I know you believe that, but I've had them checked. I brought in a sorcerer so he could tell me what kind of magic they are using."

Tibs stared, the surprise dampening his anger.

"I'm not an idiot, no matter what you seem to think."

"I don't—" Tibs shut up. He hadn't had good thoughts about Harry recently.

"My brother has too much magic on him. He always believed that was the only way to stay alive, but he has nothing that lets him hide lies from me." Harry dropped into his chair.

How could that be? Tibs remembers what Bardik had told him about the magic of the

pouch Sto had made for him, how it took a specific set of abilities and way of thinking to see through its protection. Could that be the same as what Sebastian was using?

Except Tibs could easily tell the guard who had one. Except Tibs's abilities weren't normal, so... he so wanted to scream. He needed answers, but there was no one he could ask his questions to.

Harry was still looking at him expectantly. Reminding Tibs they had gotten sidetracked from the actual issue.

He let out a breath. "Harry, we aren't starting those fights."

The man rolled his eyes.

"I'm not lying."

"But you told those helping you not to tell you how they did their parts, didn't you?"

Tibs smiled. "I find they work better if they don't have to worry about what I'll think of their methods. I leave peering too closely at other people to those with Darkness or Light as their element.

"Light preserve me if you'd been a Darkness rogue."

Tibs kept his face impassive. He was counting on Harry being too set in his belief to wonder. Tibs's element was water. That had been established with his audience. No one could have more than one element. So it was impossible for Tibs to also have darkness.

Tibs offered the one compromise he was willing. "I'm going to tell them not to start any more fights. But unless you can get the guards to keel the merchants safe, we will continue to do it. If they catch Runners fighting, you can put them in cells."

"I will," Harry stated. "And the instant one of them tells me you ordered them to fight, I'm throwing you in there along with them."

Tibs wasn't worried. He'd always worded everything in terms of protecting the merchants. Not once did he say they had to fight the thieves to stop them. And Harry would know if one of the Runners would lie in an attempt to get out of the cell. And Harry wouldn't be able to get himself to take the Runner at his word.

"Get out of here," Harry said in disgust.

Jackal fell into steps with him as soon as Tibs was out of the building. "I'm not noticing any missing pieces," he commented, looking Tibs over.

"Harry wouldn't do that."

"I heard light essence can burn stuff, so you never know what will happen if he gets angry enough."

"That's fire." Tibs thought back to the way the light had moved out of Harry's eyes. Maybe it hadn't been his imagination. "Did you know Harry doesn't have any secrets?"

Jackal shrugged. "I never met him until I was here. All I had were stories of how he betrayed my family for the guild. But since he has light as his element. I expect it's hard for him to keep secrets."

"Maybe I'm just not strong enough to see them. I'll ask Khumdar."

"I don't think it's a good idea to have him get close to Knuckles."

"He probably has already. Two alleys ahead, on the left."

"Saw them. You think they'll try something?"

The man and woman leaning by the entrance did everything but look in Tibs and Jackal's direction, making it obvious what they were doing. They wore worn leathers, the kind Runners ended up wearing after a few runs without getting upgrades from Sto. They could pass for Runners, especially from the most recent group. But with the escalation in attacks on the merchant recently, Tibs had met all of them, even those who took Sebastian's coins.

"This is more public than the other attacks." Tibs sensed ahead, around them, for anyone hidden in the alley. "They're alone."

"My father's going to reach a point where he isn't going to care how public things get. If he can get someone to kill you, we're going to be at a serious disadvantage."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "You can give them instructions better than I can. You should be the one doing this."

"This isn't about who gives the orders, Tibs. If that was it, Don would have taken over already. The others are doing this because they see you standing up to my father."

"I'm not doing anything special."

Jackal chuckled. "I so want Knuckles you catch you saying that one day so we can find out if you actually believe that."

"I'm not," Tibs insisted. "Anyone who cares for the town and bothers to look at what's happening would do something about Sebastian."

"Knuckles doesn't."

"Harry's blinded by his light," Tibs said in exasperation.

The two thugs stopped looking away and glared at them as they walked by.

"We can go around and catch them by surprise," Jackal suggested.

"We don't start fights," Tibs replied. "That's how we keep out of the cells."

"That's just no fun," Jackal grumbled. "Let's go eat then."

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Don't first among us again," Mez commented as they looked the posted schedule over.

"His coin to waste," Jackal replied.

"We're low on the list again," Carina said and glanced at Tibs. "You think it's still because of you?"

He shook his head. "Tirania isn't like that. The first time it was to tell me she understood. Now it's just random."

"How certain are you she has much influence on the order of the list?" Khumdar asked.

"She's the guild leader," Tibs replied.

"That is my point."

"It doesn't matter," Jackal said, as Tibs tried to understand what the cleric meant. "It means more time to train."

"But with whom?" Carina asked. "Pyan and her team were who kept the others coming back."

“Would not some of the recruits be willing?” Khumdar asked. “Many seem eager for fights.”

“It’d be nice to fight some of them,” Jackal said.

“You’re still going to be stronger,” Mez replied. “I haven’t heard of them risking the second floor yet.”

“Being physically stronger isn’t everything,” Jackal said. “They’re going to be more vicious than anyone else.”

“Then you should get that woman the merchants are having guard the booths,” the archer said. “I hear she’s taken down the fighters who went up against her.”

“How about Quigly?” Carina asked and raised an eyebrow at the looks she got. “He’s the only recruit I know of. I’m not like Tibs and learning all their names.”

“Why don’t you ask him, Tibs?” Jackal asked.

“You’re the fighter,” Tibs countered.

“But you already helped him with Don.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “It isn’t because I do something nice that someone is going to like me.”

Jackal sighed. “Why isn’t Knuckles around when I need him to catch you lying?”

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Quigly didn’t come to the training field alone.

The fighter had been quick to accept Tibs’s offer when he’d made it, but he hadn’t said anything about bringing anyone else. Four others, another fighter, a woman, a rogue, a woman, an archer, a man, and a sorcerer, a man. They all looked like they had come from a fight, even if their clothes were of better quality.

“Meet my team,” Quigly said. “And they aren’t particularly happy at being here. So I want to make one thing before you get on their bad side. This is about helping us. Not some trying to prove you’re tougher than we are.”

“With all due respect to you and your team, Quig,” Jackal said.

“Call me that again, and you’re going to find out that sharing a meal with you won’t keep me from turning this little thing you’re planning into the nastiest fight of your very short life.”

“Do I need to kick you again?” Tibs ask Jackal as the fighter opened his mouth to reply. Jackal closed it and stepped back. “Jackal likes nasty fights, but he isn’t always smart in how he gets them.”

“Hey,” Jackal protested. “I’m never smart.”

“Is he for real?” the other fighter asked. Her left arm and calf were covered in leather armor.

“He is,” Carina answered. “Every team needs an idiot, and no one else wanted the role.”

She looked them over. “And he’s your team leader?” Suspicion dripped from her tone.

“Not willingly,” Jackal said. “I was tortured into the position.”

“How in the—”

“Enough,” Quigly said. “It’s something of an act with him and his team. The goofy idiot everyone underestimates. The team that doesn’t quite take anything seriously enough.”

“Okay,” Jackal said, “that’s just hurtful. No one underestimates me. Do they Tibs?”

Tibs studied Quigly. The man was watching them, not letting the antics distract him. This wasn’t the same man Tibs had first met, then helped, or who had shown up at the meeting to support him. There was a hardness to him now. Tibs wasn’t sure if that meant what he’s said about the regiment was true, but wasn’t going to underestimate him either.

“Tibs?” Jackals asked, sounding worried. “I need my confidence boosted here.”

Tibs shook his head.

“Okay, then,” Jackal said, the switch to seriousness causing the woman and the man Tibs figured was the sorcerer, even if the left side of his body and arm was covered in leather armor, to stare at him. “Onto the main event. I’m Jackal. You’ve all at least met Tibs. That’s Khumdar, Mez, and Carina. Quigly, if you’d do us the honor of introducing your team.”

“I’m Quigly, warrior.”

“The guild—” Mez began.

“I really don’t give a fuck what those people want,” the warrior replied. “I fought a king. I get to decide what I am.” It was more than the confidence with which Quigly said it that made Tibs believe him. There was something...else.

“This is Ma-nim,” he indicated the woman with the armored arm and leg. Her features were delicate and skin a little lighter than Tibs’s. Her eyes were gray and angled differently from most people. Carina had told him where people with those kinds of eyes were from, the first time he saw one, back in MountainSea, but he hadn’t paid attention. “She’s a fighter. That’s Stabby, archer.”

“Stabby?” Jackal asked, barely containing a grin. The archer nodded. He was lean, with frizzy blond hair and freckles on his cheeks. “Who names their son Stabby? My father hates me and he saddled me with something better than that.”

“Stabs doesn’t say much,” Quigly answered after a few seconds of Jackal waiting expectantly. He indicated the other woman. She was stocky, with short-cropped black hair and fair skin. “Jabba is an assassin, and on her right is Ren, war mage. Don’t ask. As far as I know, he didn’t even know magic was a thing until he had to pick a class.”

The lean man grinned. “If I’m going to kill people, I want it to be as easy as I can.”

“You aren’t killing anyone here,” Mez said, tone hard.

“That’s okay.” Ren smiled in a way Tibs didn’t like. He’d seen that smile before, back on his Street. “I’m a patient man.”

Ground rules,” Quigly began.

“I think you don’t know how this goes,” Jackal said, expression hardening.

“Ground rules,” the warrior repeated, eyes fixed on the fighter. Jackal slowly made fists, but nodded. “Any of you do something that normal people can’t do, and this ends badly. Tibs said this is training for the dungeon, not about getting our asses handed to us. We are not here for your entertainment. Am I clear?”

“It is,” Jackal answered, words clipped. “No essence, except for the sorcerers. Yours

tries anything untoward, and Carina will do more than hand what's left of his ass to you. Is *that* clear?"

"It is," Quigly replied with a chuckle. "How about you and me take this to the side, so no one other than you gets hurt?"

"Pair up," Jackal said. "Don't let the *Omeegas* intimidate you."

"Lady Ma-Nim." Khumdar bowed to her, which seemed to take her by surprise. "If you would do me the honor of sparing with me." She studied him and his staff before nodding.

Jabba stepped before Tibs, looking down at him while the archers moved toward targets and Carina escorted the war mage to an open area.

"Light Fingers," she greeted him.

"Jabba," he replied. They'd only exchanged a few words when he'd introduced himself as part of getting to know the recruits.

She reached for him, and he stepped to the side and out of the way, then he was under her attempt to grab him. When Tibs stopped moving, he was next to her, looking up and smiling. His knife was pressed where a man's most precious part would be.

She smiled. "I don't have a weapon, yet."

"So?" Tibs asked, not moving.

"Wouldn't it be more fair of you to fight without one?"

He stepped away, watching her. "If we cared for fair, we wouldn't be rogues.

She crossed her arms. "Too small for real weapons?" she asked with a smirk.

"Quigly said no essence."

She raised an eyebrow. "What does that have to do with it?"

Tibs made sure the fighters were busy trying to outdo each other before letting the water flow down his free hand. He took control of it this time and shaped it into a sword, trying to make it like those fighters' used, but it still ended up with jagged spikes and edge.

"That's... I didn't know magic lets you make stuff."

"It's essence, not magic."

She frowned. "What's the difference?"

Tibs opened his mouth and paused. "I'm not sure. My teacher referred to anything we do with it as essence, or etching, or weaving. It seems to be only when it's in an object that it's called magic. Or when sorcerers do it."

"Okay, but that's ice. It's going to break on the first hit."

"It's not ice, it's essence. It's as hard as I want it to be. I've cut rats, Ratlings, Bunnylings, and golems with it."

"Ratlings?"

"They're like the rats, but bigger, stand up like us, and use weapons. They're on the second floor."

So the Bunnylings are the bunny version. Still made of stone?"

Tibs nodded. "Everything's made of stone. I don't think the dungeon can do any other creatures." He'd have to ask Sto about that on the next run.

“Good to know. Now, how about you put the sword away, or whatever you do to get rid of it and lend me a knife so we can have a proper fight?”

The sword melted as Tibs absorbed it back. He took a step back and crouch. “I’m keeping the knives.”

Jabba crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t you want this to be a fair fight?”

He smiled. “You’re a lot bigger than I am. I think that makes it fair enough. Don’t you?”

She smiled and crouched. “I like you, Light Fingers. But I’m not going easy on you.”

“My name’s Tibs,” he replied. “And until you start calling me that, you can expect to get cut.”

Jabba’s smile turned feral.