

Chapter 69

Tibs looked at the large room with the broken crates strewn about. “It might be time to move these to another warehouse,” he said, smiling. “Using fire or air in here again could bring it all down.”

Carina looked around thoughtfully.

“Remember,” Jackal told her and Kroseph, “if one of us starts agreeing too much with him, the other two need to call him out on it. And Tibs, if we say so, you release the essence.”

“Of course,” Tibs replied. “This is just practice, after all.”

Jackal looked away, rubbing his eyes. “I think corruption picked that color so we couldn’t look him in the eyes and tell if he’s lying.”

“I’m not,” Tibs grinned.

“I don’t think the element chose a color,” Carina said. “It just is that.”

“It’s still unsettling the way the color change with each element,” Kroseph said, not having the difficulty looking at him Jackal had. “And how your expression is different. It’s like you’ve been replaced by someone else.” He then looked at Carina. “What is that color?”

“I’m still me,” Tibs replied. “And when I sense Don’s reserve, it registers as purple to me, a lot like his robe, but not quite. His isn’t the same color as me, mine isn’t odd like his.” He smiled. “The advantage of having more of it, I guess.”

“How do you feel?” Jackal asked tentatively. “No urges to go on a rampage and melt the entire town?”

“Of course not. All I suggested the other day was that we go and melt your dad’s house.”

“With everyone in it.”

“Of course, what’s the point if your enemies aren’t there when you bring a building down on them. The goal is to make it easy on you, right?”

Jackal squirmed under the other two’s attention. “I didn’t agree to it,” he protested weakly.

“But you considered it?” Carina asked.

“He made good points. That’s why we have to watch each other. He’s... quite convincing.”

“So being convincing is what he’s like when using corruption?” Kroseph asked.

“More like sneaky,” Jackal replied. “I’m not sure how honest he was, or if he just wanted to be outside, then do whatever he wanted.”

“Jackal, I’m hurt. I’d have done what we agreed to.”

“And then?” Carina asked.

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know. I’d have seen what happens?” he smiled. “The is a lot that can be done out there.”

“Like melt the town,” Jackal said.

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Of course not. Can you imagine how annoying it would be to

deal with all that complaining?”

“So it’s about not bothering others?” Kroseph asked. “I thought compassion was Water’s thing. If Corruption’s like that too, and he’s convincing, that would work in our favor.”

“Except Water wants to help everyone,” Carina said, “even our enemy.”

“So do you want to help Jackal’s father too?” the server asked.

“Of course not.” Tibs paused and considered it. Sebastian was strong and, ultimately, Tibs wanted out from under the guild’s control. Maybe with the man’s help that would be easier... he noticed the way Jackal was looking at him.

“What are you thinking?” the fighter asked.

“Well, I don’t want to help him, of course. But he doesn’t know that. What if I told him I was fed up with the guild and how all they’re interested in is feeding me to the dungeon? Look at how they aren’t protecting the town. This is too much for a kid like me to deal with. I could convince him I want to help him take over, then turn around and bring him down.”

“That isn’t a bad—”

“No.” Jackal cut off Carina. “It’s too good. So he’s planning something else.”

“Jackal. You know me. I want what’s best for the town, for Sto, for all of you.”

“I know Tibs with the brown eyes,” the fighter replied. “He wants all that. You... have your own plans.”

Tibs sighed. “I’m not going to win here, am I? You’re too afraid of doing what has to be done, so you’re seeing my plan as a ploy.”

“Tibs,” Carina exclaimed. “How can you say that? Jackal’s like a brother to you.”

“You think my idea’s good. That it would work. He’s the only one who doesn’t want to do it. I know he’s the leader, but a good leader listens to the person who is smarter than he is. And that’s you.”

Kroseph whistled in admiration. “I think that he’s about getting his own way.”

“It’s about doing what’s right for the town,” Tibs countered.

“Turning Carina and Jackal against one another isn’t good for the town,” the server countered. “You’ve told me that you aren’t good at stealing with your words, but with Corruption’s influence you seem to be very good at it.”

“But he isn’t wrong,” Carina said doubtfully.

“That’s always how the confidence people do it,” Kroseph said. “They give you just enough of the truth you won’t notice where the lies are.” He chuckled at the surprised look she gave him. “I’m a server in an inn. Back in MountainSea they’re a staple anywhere you get crowds. My father made sure I learned how to spot them before they could use me to swindle him.”

“That’s why this isn’t going to work,” Jackal said. “We can’t trust him.”

“Look, I’m not lying. I want to help and this is the best way to do it. I know Kroseph means well here, but he’s seeing a threat where there isn’t one.”

“No, he’s right, Tibs, let go—”

“Wait,” Carina said. “He might be right.”

“Carina,” Jackal said in exasperation.

“No, Jackal, listen to me, please.”

Tibs didn’t smile as the fighter looked in his direction, uncertain. Even with Kroseph pointing out what Tibs had been doing, the doubt had been seeded.

“Okay.”

“So Tibs, you want to pretend to switch sides. That means you’ll have to keep Corruption as your element.”

He nodded. That was obvious.

“But for Jackal’s father to want your help, you’ll have to do more than just have information for him. You’re going to have to be able to use the essence in a meaningful way. Melting stuff isn’t going to be enough.”

“True, but it’s not like Sebastian knows what I should be able to do. I’m just Rho.”

“He’ll know. Remember, he’s smart. Unlike Jackal, he’ll have done his research. I think you need to get Don to train you.”

Tibs opened his mouth and closed it. The idea had merit. Don was the only expert in town, and getting him to agree would be simple enough. He already thought he knew more than everyone around him.

“You’re considering it?” Jackal asked in dismay.

“Her idea is good. Don’s full of himself, so he’ll believe me when I tell him I realized his element is the best.”

“Don isn’t an idiot,” Kroseph said. “He knows Water is your element.”

“Then I’ll tell him the truth. Bringing him into my confidence is going to make him feel superior, so more inclined to help.”

“He’s going to tell the guild,” Jackal said, “you can be certain of that.”

“Right, that is going to be…” Tibs trailed off.

Would it be a problem? He had power. Potentially a lot of it. And the guild wanted power. He could use the knowledge he had to get them to loosen the noose around his neck. He rubbed the bracelet. Well, his wrist.

“You were right,” Carina told Kroseph. “With Corruption, Tibs is definitely self-centered. He’d never consider revealing his elements to the guild or Don otherwise.”

“Are you done with this experiment, then?” Jackal asked, sounding annoyed. She nodded. “Let go of the essence, Tibs.”

He did. He wasn’t worried; it wasn’t like he’d think any… he frowned, thinking over what he’d been contemplating.

“Welcome back,” a smiling Kroseph said.

“I wasn’t gone,” Tibs replied. The ease with which he’d been willing to betray his friends bothered him.

“You were contemplating working with the guild, right?” Carina asked.

“I was going to sell what I know about the elements for my freedom,” he replied.

“They’d never give that to you,” Jackal scoffed.

Tibs nodded. “With corruption, I didn’t believe that. Like with the other elements, I

don't think about the consequences of what I want."

"And what do you want?" Kroseph asked.

Tibs hesitated. He'd thought he knew what he wanted, but Corruption had shown him the town's safety wasn't what was most important to him.

"I want to leave." His face burned as he said it.

"Well, duh," Jackal replied. "You aren't an idiot, Tibs. Of course, you want out."

"But I keep saying I want to keep the town safe."

"So? Just because you want one thing, it doesn't make the other thing you want a lie. I want to take Kroseph and—"

"Jackal," his man warned.

"But that doesn't mean I don't also want to help you."

Tibs nodded.

"Does that mean using corruption isn't possible in the plan?" Kroseph asked.

Tibs thought about it. He couldn't lie to himself, but could he convince himself, even while using corruption, that removing Sebastian from the town was what was best for him? It would make him look better to the guild, and Tirania would give him more leeway, and with that, he could work toward gaining his freedom.

Would thinking that was be enough? With the elements, his thinking was narrower.

"I can still do it." Tibs didn't try to sound confident. "But I'm going to have to be careful that something doesn't happen to change how I think about what we're doing and makes me not follow the plan."

"You mean like how you stayed behind instead of returning to the inn, as per the plan," Jackal said. "And rescued Don?"

"I wasn't rescuing Don," Tibs replied, offended. "I was keeping the archers from killing a Runner who had no idea what they were appearing into. I could feel someone was arriving."

"You could sense the void essence?" Carina asked.

"No, but I can sense any big shift in essence, and on the platform, what else was it going to be?"

"Tibs, everything's going to change as we attack my father's house," Jackal said. "I think it's best if we come up with a new plan."

"Finding a way for Tibs to think like himself while channeling essence would be the best way."

"Can you make that happen in the next few days?" Jackal asked.

"How about your bracers?" Kroseph asked. "Carina said her amulet feels like a different part of herself. Couldn't you use that and not channel Corruption?"

Tibs shook his head. "Unlike her, I've had to learn to use amulets as part of my reserves, since mine are so small. I don't know how to think of them as a part of me." He considered it. "And even if I manage it, I don't know there's enough essence there to do what we're aiming to do."

"We need more time," Carina said.

“Which we don’t have,” Jackal countered. “If we don’t—”

“How about we stop now,” Kroseph said. “We’ve made progress in knowing what we need to work on. The rest can wait until after we’ve had a meal. I’m sure I can get Russel to cook you up something edible.”

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Don looked over the rough sketch of part of the town on the table. He placed a finger on a group of buildings. “That won’t work. The Crawling worm’s right here. They’re going to notice that what used to be an empty house now has people in it.”

They were working on finding places for the attendants to take the families trapped near Sebastian’s house. Don was there as part of Quigly’s suggestion, and because of the part he’d played in getting the attendants to join in the town’s defense.

Jackal wasn’t happy about it, but kept his temper under control.

Barely.

“I didn’t know my father had people in the Worm.” The words were clipped.

Don looked at the rogue he’d brought. Citlali was an older woman with lean features and normal green eyes.

“Best I’ve been able to tell,” she said, “they got there last night. I’m sure you’ll get word of it by the end of the day.”

Tibs elbowed Jackal in the side as he opened his mouth. Now was not the time to argue over who should have been given the information first. Don’s smirk had Jackal shaking from restraining himself.

“What’s the alternative?” Carina asked, louder than she had to. It forced Don to look at her and broke the building tension. “There’s still the need to house those families, and if they can’t rely on that tavern for food, that removes that entire neighborhood from our lists. The only other houses I can think of to house them, with a tavern I know isn’t taken over, is in the noble’s neighborhood.”

Don rolled his eyes. “Like those people would ever allow anyone like us there. They’d just hand them to Jackal’s father to make sure they were left alone. The only reason they haven’t been suck—kissing his boots is that there’s more of us who have an element, than of them. They know that all the money they have won’t save them if they really piss us off.” He looked through the drawing of other sections of the town and pulled one out.

“This is where we’re putting them.” He tapped six houses around a courtyard. “It’s away from anything important, and from what I’ve been told, they already did a sweep, so if they were interested in it, they’d have taken it. The closest tavern isn’t close, but the fact no one’s looking at that area is more important. That courtyard also means the kids won’t have to be inside all the time.”

“That’s an open courtyard,” Jackal countered, indicating the spaces between the houses. “All it’ll take is one of my father’s people walking by and they’re going to see those kids playing outside.”

Don’s grin made even Tibs want to punch him. “Maybe if you bothered walking around and learning the town, you’d know that whoever drew this screwed up. The houses are close enough together to block all visibility except along this path.” He tapped on the

lane connecting the courtyard to an alley. "I'd have expected you to know that," he told Tibs.

"The town's changed too much. I haven't been able to learn the new sections yet."

"Even if you're right," Jackal said. "Putting them there means we need to have more people assigned to make sure they're safe. Less chances of them being found doesn't mean no chances."

"How many people you think it's going to take to keep those you house not far from a tavern your father owns safe?"

Jackal ground his teeth. "Alright. Your idea is better."

"Thank you." Don put so much superiority in those two words, Tibs was surprised his friend didn't throw himself over the table to strangle it out of the sorcerer.

Tibs was proud of Jackal for that.