

Chapter 51

“Have you ever heard of a King Barnacle the Just?” Tibs asked Alistair, who was seated before him on the floor, legs crossed over each other in a way that looked to be painful, but his teacher didn’t seem to mind. Tibs was seated on the floor too, but his legs crossed the normal way. This was supposed to be another session of him trying to push his essence out of his reserve, but since that had already happened when he’d absorbed some of Bardik’s essence, his mind kept wandering.

He really wanted to tell his teacher about that, so they could move on to something useful to him, but...

Secrets weren’t supposed to make *his* life difficult.

“I can’t say the name is familiar,” Alistair answered, eyes closed, “but the world is large, and there are many kings. Now focus on your reserve, Tibs.” For a few seconds, during which Tibs fought the urge to ask why there were so many kings, the only sound was their breathing. Alistair sighed. “Why do you ask?”

“One of the recruits claims to have killed one of his regiments.”

Alistair opened an eye. “Did he, now?”

“Is he lying?”

“Do you know how large a regiment is?”

Tibs shook his head. “Jackal told me it’s a group of people that fights for a king, and there’s a lot of them in one, but he didn’t know the number.”

“They’ll vary in size between kingdoms. The smallest I know of is made out of two hundred and fifty soldiers. Julius of Bastalon keeps his regiments at one thousand.”

Tibs didn’t bother working out the size of the numbers. Hundreds were enough to boggle his mind, so a thousand would be bigger.

“Then he’s lying.”

“Exaggerating, at the very least. Did he say if he was alone when he did it?”

“Sort of.” Tibs shrugged. “*I killed a regiment*, is what he said. Maybe he was trying to impress us.”

Alistair looked thoughtful. “Criminals are not who I tend to interact with, certainly not any that would be pulled from catacombs. Unlike you and those who arrived before, they aren’t breaking laws simply in the pursuit of surviving. They’ll be at ease with it. Laws are ___”

“Rules,” Tibs said. “Like the ones Harry set for the town. I know what laws are. So those recruits, they’re all bad people?”

Alistair started responding, but stopped. “The laws they broke are king’s laws. That makes them more important, but not all laws are just. If this king Barnacle feels the need to proclaim himself ‘the just’, I doubt he is. It doesn’t mean what this recruit you speak of did was right, if he did it, but he may have felt his reasons for it were good.”

Tibs thought about Bardik, who was willing to kill Sto to stop the guild from exploiting people like him. “What happened to Bardik?”

“Who?”

“He was the leader of those who tried to kill the dungeon. He was an adventurer, and he has darkness as his element.”

“Right, him. You knew him. He was here because he’d broken guild rules, then trying to destroy a dungeon is among the worse thing he could have attempted. He was sent to Castle Despair.”

“I thought he was sent to a prison.”

“The castle is a prison, or rather, its catacombs. That’s where we send prisoners who are too powerful to be held anywhere else.” Alistair studied Tibs. “Put him out of your mind, Tibs. No one sent to Castle Despair ever leaves it.”

Tibs closed his eyes. He thought it would be kinder to just kill Bardik instead of sending him to a place like that. “So, could he have killed a regiment?”

“Bardik,” Alistair asked, surprised.

“No, Quigly. That’s his name. The recruit’s name.”

“Could one man kill a full regiment?” his teacher mused. “A smaller one, maybe, if this man knows how they operate and had time to prepare the terrain. But such a man wouldn’t be here. A man who defies a king this solidly is beheaded in front of a crowd to ensure it’s never attempted again.” Alistair fell silent, and Tibs opened his eyes. Alistair looked back at him in curiosity. “It is possible that your recruit was caught for something else. A king can’t act in reprisal if he doesn’t know he has that culprit in a cell. But then, he wouldn’t be in the catacombs.”

Tibs hesitated. “Why are you looking at me like this is my fault?”

Alistair chuckled. “That isn’t why I’m looking at you. If anyone else had told me this, I’d tell them the man was outright lying to them. But you, Tibs. You have a habit of attracting the oddest people.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at your team. The son of a master criminal. A man claiming to be the cleric of Darkness, when no such thing is even possible. You, a rogue, have befriended Harry Hard Knuckles, whose dislike for us is so intense that if not for his orders from the guild, we’d all be in cells.”

“Harry isn’t my friend,” Tibs scoffed. “He doesn’t even like me.”

“But he respects you enough to ask for your help. That’s an even harder thing to make happen”

“I’m not special,” Tibs grumbled. He didn’t want to be respected by the guard leaders, or the guild. He wanted to be Tibs, Runner and rogue, and nothing else.

“Your eyes contradict you, Tibs,” Alistair replied with a smile. “But it’s also how you think and what you’ve accomplished.” His teacher’s expression became serious. “I suspect that you, Tibs, will be someone who accomplishes great things, given time.”

“I don’t— I’m not—” Tibs’s frustration strangled the words. He was only interested in keeping the town safe, surviving his run, reaching Epsilon, and then...

He didn’t know what would happen then. He’d be an adventurer and no longer a Runner. But that didn’t mean he’d do what Alistair thought.

And he wouldn't do anything if he couldn't figure out a way to graduate despite not being able to push water out of his reserve. "I'm going to start by reaching Lambda," he told his teacher resolutely and closed his eyes. There had to be a way to make himself slippery, as had been described, without suffusing his body with water.

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The thief moved cautiously through the dark alleys.

She knew she was being followed. Anytime Tibs got close enough to watch her, she looked over her shoulder and around, even up. She'd almost seen him one time, despite his dark clothing against the night sky. So now, he relied on his senses, keeping track of her faint essence.

He hadn't been able to stop her sabotage. She'd sneaked into a tavern's stockroom, the Sleeping Drunk, and had poured something into a handful of smaller barrels. Tibs hadn't felt the corruption she was carrying until it poured out of the container, and it reacted with the drink too quickly for him to stop it.

Smaller barrels meant more expensive alcohol, spirits of some kind; since wines were in bottles. She got to half the barrels before Tibs could pull the corruption out of what she poured as she poured it. He wanted to get close, to take the container and find out why he couldn't sense through it, but since he hadn't been able to stop her from causing damage, he wasn't to follow her to whoever was giving the orders.

He wanted to hand over that person to Harry. Hopefully, they would have a connection to Sebastian Harry wouldn't be able to ignore.

When she stepped out of the alleys and onto the road, they were in the part of the town the resident called the garden neighborhood because of the large section of grass and plants that had somehow escaped having houses built on it. Many of the merchants had a house here. She walked like she belonged, staying on the street, so Tibs thought they were close to her destination.

He was down in the lane, ready to continue following her from the ground when realized there was essence over him and jumped in time to avoid the crate that fell. He'd been so focused on his saboteur, and used to ignoring normal essence, that he hadn't paid attention to what had been in the balcony's doorway. He barely made out the form of someone disappearing inside.

He curse at the tankards that spilled out of the broken crate and rushed for the end of the lane before his target moved out of his range or among too many people for him to make her out.

A man stepped out of a darkened doorway and Tibs threw himself to the side at the sight of light reflecting off metal. The knife flew by and he was running toward them. They drew a sword and Tibs stopped.

This was more than just keeping him from following her.

"We don't like it when people interfere in our business," the man said.

Tibs curse again. She was reaching the edge of his range. He ran again, sending air essence before him, hardening it and compressing it. This man didn't know who Tibs was, and he couldn't see his eyes in the dark. When he stepped on the essence, it sent him over

the man, who curse and tried to slice him up.

Tibs landed on the other side and ran.

He'd have to slow once in the street, but he was making back what he'd lost, and he could hurry without seeming to be running. Unless he wanted to draw attention, the man would have to act more normal, and that would let Tibs stay ahead of him.

People in houses stepped out. Tibs felt them ahead.

More than should be normal for this time of the night, and they didn't go anywhere. They stayed by the doors. He slowed as he stepped onto the street, then slowed again. The seven of them stepped forward, each armed with a sword.

"I told you," the man behind him said. "We don't like it when people in our town step out of line."

"This is my town," Tibs hissed. "And I don't like having criminals causing problems for the people who live here." Himself against eight people. He wasn't Jackal, and he wasn't sure the fighter could take on these odds, even with his stone skin.

He cursed. He wasn't finding out where she was going tonight, but he has still learned something. Sebastian had a deeper foothold in his town than Tibs had thought.

He ran for an alley, and the closest to it rushed to block it. Two women and a man. Tibs armored an arm and made a sword out of ice. He blocked and cut one, then shouldered the other aside. The last jumped on him and they went down.

Using earth, he strengthened his elbow strike, and she was off him with a surprised cry of pain. He was running, then climbing, and only once he was many roofs away did he slow. The cuts in his shirt were coated with a liquid that had a lot of corruption in it. They might not be chasing him because they expected him to be dead soon, regardless.

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"I," Tibs announced as he dropped into the chair, "am going to kill each and every one of them."

Jackal looked at him, tankard to his lips. "That's a lot of people, Tibs. And the town needs them to be, you know, a town."

Tibs glared at the fighter. "Sebastian's people."

"Oh, I'll help." He drank, then returned to eating.

"What have they done, this time, to enrage you such?" Khumdar asked.

"They're ensconced in the garden neighborhood. Enough they can come and go from people's houses without being stopped."

Jackal nodded. "My father considers the town his, and he's going to make sure his people can move about without problems, and with most of the guards under his control, that neighborhood is only the start."

"How many guards have that magical item that lets them lie to him?" Carina asked.

Tibs shrugged. Other than the lieutenant, he suspected a handful of them had one, but all he could say was that they had something with woven essence in it. Not what it did, since he couldn't tell what most of the essences were.

"And they don't need one to get away with lies," Jackal said. "Knuckles is too sure people are afraid to lie to him. And he doesn't believe anyone can lie to him."

“Maybe you should show him,” Carina said, “since you said you could lie without actually lying.”

Jackal snorted. “I’d end up in a cell until I’d died of old age. Us Wells can be a vindictive bunch at times.”

“I thought Wells were smart,” Tibs replied.

“Have you met me?” Jackal asked, offended.

“You really think that act fools any of us, Jackal?” she asked.

“It’s not an act,” he protested. “I’m as dense as the stone I’m made of.”

“Fine,” She patted his hand. “If it makes you feel better, I believe you.”

He smiled. “It does.”

“My dumb and loving man,” Kroseph said, placing a place with meats and vegetables before Tibs, along with a tankard. “I wouldn’t have him any other way.”

“I thought you’d have me any way you could—”

Tibs gagged. “About to eat here. How about you keep that to your special times?”

“And how special they are,” Kroseph said, grinning as he took the empty plates and tankards.

“You can go with him,” Tibs said to Jackal, as the fighter longingly looked at his man.

“After the last time I took him away while he worked, his father made it very clear what he’d do to me if I did it again.” He grinned at Tibs. “And I need that part so I can—”

Tibs groaned as loudly as he could, and Jackal laughed.

“Have you considered,” Khumdar said, watching Tibs, “that this goal of you handling this situation by yourself may be unrealistic?”

“Are you volunteering to help?” Carina asked. “We will as soon as Tibs stops doing alone all the time.”

“You’re sleeping when the sabotage takes place,” Tibs replied.

“I too will help, although my skills may not be well suited for such a direct endeavor.”

“Then that’s just three of us,” Jackal said.

“Is it?” The cleric smiled. “Have you, perhaps, not looked around?”

Tibs looked at the room, along with Carina and Jackal. At the people eating, Kroseph and one of his visiting sisters serving them. His father, behind the bar, laughing with the people standing there. Russel, stepping out of the kitchen to drop a platter of food on the counter for one of the other servers to take.

“I don’t think Kroseph’s family can do much to help us,” Tibs said.

“I don’t think that’s who he means,” Carina said thoughtfully.

Tibs looked around again. That only left the people eating, drinking, arguing, making plans for their next runs. Most of them were Runners.

“They aren’t going to help,” he said bitterly. “All they want to do is get out of this town.”