

Chapter 01

Tibs paid attention to the essence around him as the world materialized. He couldn't sense the details, as void wasn't one of his elements, but he could still tell it about from all the others he couldn't differentiate by the way it stretched from the city he had been in, to this one.

Dry heat slammed into him.

He'd forgotten, in the week he spent in MountainSea, as well as the stop in Kragle Rock, that it was High Heat in the kingdom of Pursatia. Seasons changed so much when traveling from one city to the other using the transportation platform.

He stepped down, then to the side, before pausing to look at the column that stood at the bottom of the stairs. He sensed the essence in it, as he had all the others, and he could tell it was connected to the platform, despite standing away at the bottom of the steps. He didn't bother walking around this time. He'd done it enough over his months of traveling to tell all eight columns around the platform had their essence flow similarly to the center. He didn't know what role they played in the attendant moving people from one city to another, but that connectivity indicated they had to play one.

As with many of the cities, this column had a board added to it, with a grid painted on it. Five columns and nine rows. At the top were words on two lines, and in each of the boxes was a number.

He forced himself to decipher the letters of the top line. He'd rather not bother, but he had promised Carina he would work on them while he searched for his city. He whispered each of the letter's names to himself, then pronounced them until he had the name of the city he had arrived in: Zaranka.

Under it was the name of the month, a plaque that was changed each time a new one started and he could already read this one since it had been the same month in the last Pursatier city he had visited, Tameria, and the same names were used in the entirety of the kingdom of Pursatia: Burning Brush.

Listening to the people around him, he could make out those who were from the kingdom, because he understood them, from the visitors. They didn't speak it the same way he did, and that has surprised him the first time he had arrived in Pursatia. He'd expected everyone in the kingdom to speak the same, but they had different inflections; accents, as Carina had explained. This one sounded much like the previous city, since they were both on the west side of the kingdom.

One of the merchants identifying Tibs's language had given him a place to start looking for his city, and he knew it had a transport platform. He'd expected those two pieces of information to make the search simple, especially when one of the attendants told him only the largest cities had platforms because of how expensive they were to set up, but this was the sixth Pursatier city he'd been to.

The accent made him worry if this was the right city, but Carina had told him that in some of the largest cities, accents could vary from one part of it to the other. He didn't remember a specific way the people on his Street spoke, so this could still be the right city.

He rejoined the line of people leaving the platform and followed them along the main road.

The pain he'd lived with after waking from saving the dungeon had dulled into an ache deep within him. As if his body had given up fighting corruption infecting it, he had to be content with that. He could ignore it most of the time; only sudden movements made it flare-up.

After counting two sets of ten of the larger streets, he turned left.

The area he wanted wouldn't be close to the platform or major roads. He didn't know where his Street was within the city, but there had been nothing like wealth anywhere within sight. The walk to the cells had been long, as had had the one to the platform.

Another thing that wasn't within sight was a wall, so when Tibs saw the city wall after turning a corner, he turned around and tried a different direction. When he'd asked about it, back in MountainSea after his first Pursatier city, Kroseph's mother had told him that all cities had walls; it was what made them different from towns.

She'd laughed when he pointed out MountainSea didn't have walls. The mountains surrounding it were walls enough to keep them safe.

He made another turn before the main road and looked for the urchins. He'd noticed a difference in them during his other cities. They were a good representation of how wealthy each area of the city was. The clothing was part of it, but it was more the energy they had in going after anyone they identified as a tourist. Anyone they suspected had coins and could be convinced to part with some of them, either with a sad look, a story, or quick fingers.

Tibs didn't fall victim to any of that.

When the sun dropped low enough torches were lit, Tibs looked for an inn to spend the night in. As much as he wanted to run the roofs, he'd learned that in a strange city, the people those belonged to didn't appreciate strangers.

On the fourth day in Zaranka, he came across urchins who reminded him of his Street and knew he was getting close. They looked at him but didn't chase after him. They were too worn down by the street and counted on the misery on their face to be enough for someone to drop a sliver of copper. If that wasn't enough, some survived by offering to do things that would kill them slowly, unless they encountered the wrong person and things went too far.

Then they died right there.

The condition of the buildings worsened, which told him he was heading in the right direction. Soon, he'd recognize an alley, a plank, broken off a wall in a specific way to mark the space behind it as belonging to someone.

He'd find his place. The one where he survived the cold seasons, Deadly Ice, the coldest month was called in Pursatia, with only a small fire keeping death away. The thought of extinguishing it and allowing the cold to take him to Mama had been constant, and even now, he wasn't certain why he hadn't—

"Now, here's someone who's wearing clothing that don't belong to him," A woman said, stepping out of an alley a few paces away from Tibs. "I think there's someone out there who could wear them so much better." She was tall but thin. The thin of the sick; of those who didn't eat as often as they wanted, or needed. The thin of the Street.

“That means we’re going to have to get him out of them,” a man said behind Tibs, out of easy reach. “You think Grabby’s gonna pay to use him?” a glance over his shoulder let him see the thin man with dark skin, which had a sickly sheen to it. He’d seen it before, not that he knew what the man had. Only that he had to be very sick.

Neither had an element; and what essence flowed through them was fainter than most people.

Grabby wasn’t a name Tibs was familiar with, but this area didn’t look right yet to be his Street. He hadn’t had any reasons to interact with anyone off his Street since that meant they were after something he had.

They had no visible weapons, but there were plenty of broken planks and rocks for them to use against him. On the street, weapons weren’t limited to what you could carry.

Tibs had two knives; the one at his belt and the one in the bracer on his left forearm. The one on his right had his lockpicks. They were the only piece of armor he’d kept for his travels. The rest was stored in the room the guild provided him, and he wore what he considered to be his worse set of clothing, so he would fit in better.

Looking at the rags the two wore, he realized he forgot how little people had on the street. He’d been gone for three seasons at the most, and he’d already forgotten what it was like to wear rags.

No wonder they wanted what he had.

“You don’t want to do this,” he told them. Not that he felt it now, but you never showed fear on the Street. Fear got you dead. Once you’d survived and were hidden, then you could be afraid.

“You hear the kid?” she asked mockingly. “We don’t want to do this? Just because his daddy gave him a pointy stick?” Her face darkened. “This is our street. We do whatever we want. If you didn’t want to lose your stuff, you shouldn’t have come here.”

Tibs turned and stepped back, letting him watch both at this edge of his vision.

She was the healthier one of the two, which made her the more dangerous. The man’s hand was shaking, and the little essence coursing through him was frayed by the sickness afflicting him.

“I’m a Dungeon Runner,” he stated, “If you attack me, I’ll kill you.”

“What’s that?” she asked. “Some fancy words for bed wetter?” The man snorted, then coughed. “Get out of those and we won’t hurt you too badly. Grabby pays more when the boys we bring him aren’t damaged.

Tibs drew the knife at his belt.

“We’re going to have to hurt him,” the man said.

“Good.” The woman picked up a thick plank. “I wanted to have fun.”

Tibs ran for her, knife underhanded as Bardik showed him. She grinned at him, raising the plank over her head with both hands. She didn’t even bother protecting herself. Tibs would have an easy time cutting her open, then—

His leg buckled under him as blinding pain flared. It felt as if the bone had snapped. No matter how often this happened, each time was like the first with how intense the pain was. He raised his hand, coating it in earth and adding water over that, icing it for extra

protection.

The impact dropped him to a knee as well as sent pain reverberating down his arm. He slashed blindly, unable to push through it to use their essence to locate them. Her curses, more than the slight resistance, told him he'd connected.

"Grabby's not going to give us much for him by the time I'm going to be done," she snarled.

He forced himself to pivot through the pain as she moved. His leg wasn't broken. As real as the pain was, there was no damage to it. It was his essence, reacting to the accumulation of corruption in it, that broke; and just like the flow broke because of an injury, his body thought he was injured because of the essence.

He nearly missed the man running at him because of how faint his essence was and didn't entirely deflect the kick, but there was little strength behind it and he barely felt the impact with his shoulder.

Tibs pushed the man back, and he barely stayed up. His panting interrupted by sickly coughing.

"Are you trying to be funny?" She demanded. "Fighting on one knee?" She ran at him before he had a reply for her. He deflected the plank with a blast of air and stabbed her in the side while she was off balance. With a cry, she dropped the plank and fell back.

The pain diminished, and he pushed himself to his feet. He was sweating more than just from the heat, more than it could wick away. He let it. He needed to keep fire in case this hadn't been enough to scare them off. Stopping the strike had cost him all the air in his reserve. He had enough earth and water to coat an arm, but fire was the one element that scared everyone equally.

She was on the ground, holding her bleeding side and crying. The man looked at him in fear before running off.

Tibs sighed and leaned against the building, taking the weight off his leg and forcing the essence into the proper flow. The corruption made the work difficult—as if it actively wanted to make his life painful—but he was able to bring it back to its usual dull throbbing.

"I thought I heard someone scream," a man said, followed by the sound of an impact and the woman's louder scream. Tibs forced his eyes open and readied himself.

The man was older than the one who fled. His face was scarred, his hair dull brown and thin, dirty. His clothing was a patchwork of rags, making a shirt, pants, and shoes. He was one of the people running the Street.

Tibs had never seen him before.

The man kicked her injured side again, then glanced at Tibs. "I'm guessing you did this?"

"She attacked me."

"Where's here boytoy?"

Tibs nodded in the direction the man fled.

"Ain't love grand?"

"That wasn't love."

"They thought it was." The man shrugged. "Now. As a thank you for dealing with this

bothersome bitch, I'm not going to kill you. You're going to drop the knife and pouch and you're going to walk on down that lane. It'll take you to the places your kind is welcome."

Tibs shook his head. The man didn't have an element, and his essence was faint, but that of a healthy person.

"Don't be stupid, kid. I'm being generous. I'd rather kill you and sell your insides to people with copper."

"I'm not afraid of you." Tibs pushed himself off the wall.

"You're not?" the man asked, surprised. He looked around, then let out a sharp whistle. People stepped out of alleys. Men and women, young and older, all were dressed in better rags than the woman on the ground, who was no longer moving. Some held knives, clubs, one even had a rusty sword. Tibs stopped counting at ten. The man smiled, showing rotting teeth. "How about now?"

Tibs was terrified, but he shook his head.

"That is too bad. If you'd been scared, you'd have done what I told you. Now you're going to try to be brave, fight us, and end up dead. It's probably one of them that'll do it. Do you have any idea how boring that's going to be?"

"Then come try to kill me yourself."

The man laughed. "Kid, I didn't stay alive by accepting stupid challenges like that." He stepped back. "Kill him, but don't—"

"Guards!" someone in the distance yelled, and the call was taken up.

"Oh come on!" the man yelled. "I get handed this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the guards show up? It's just the Rafians trying to scare me off again."

"It's the guards," a man said, running into the alley.

"Why?" the man asked in disbelief.

"Something about a noble's kid being missing," the runner panted.

The man looked at Tibs, who shook his head.

"Scatter," the man yelled, "anyone caught is on their own."

They vanished down multiple alleys and Tibs picks one no one else had gone in. He had no intention of encountering the guards himself, so he cursed when he heard booted steps following him. He slid down and squeezed under a half-fallen building.

The feet passed him by and he gave them a minute before crawling out and heading for where he thought the main road was. The crowd there would make it easy to get lost and

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"I saw someone!" a woman yelled, and Tibs looked over his shoulder as she rounded the corner. "Over there."

He turned into an alley. A crowd didn't help him if they saw him enter it.

"There!" someone else cried.

"Stop running!"

Why did guards always yell that? Who in their right mind stopped and waited for the guards to reach them? Tibs never had, and he wasn't about to start.

He put his foot down, and the corruption forced the issue. The pain of the fall barely registered against that coursing through his body. He put a hand under him to push up, to get

going again, but he didn't have the strength needed.

Yells reached him through the pain, then were distinct voices. He was gripped and pulled up. He screamed in pain and was dropped.

"What did you do to him?" a woman demanded.

"Nothing, I was just helping him to his feet," a man replied defensively.

"How often do I have to tell you, you don't rough the streetfolks."

"He's not one of them."

"Then you really can't—"

Tibs crawled away, pushing through the fading pain.

"Kid, don't do that," she said in exasperation. She grabbed him and sat him. He reached for the knife at his hip and she closed a hand on his. "You're safe. Whatever they might have threatened to do, they can't hurt you anymore.

Safe? A guard was telling him he was safe? That she wasn't going to beat him just for existing? That she didn't mean him any harm? The guards Harry had brought with him to Kragle Rock hadn't been like the previous ones, or the one from Tibs's Street, but Harry didn't let anyone break his rules, not even his guards.

"What's your name?"

He considered not answering, but angering her, when she had three others to say she hadn't done anything to him, was a bad idea.

"Tibs," he answered, defeated.

"What are you doing here? Did you get separated from your parents? Are you lost?"

He hadn't been lost until the guards had forced him to run for his life. Why was she being nice? He could lie, but something about her made him want to be defiant. For her to break her act.

"I'm looking for the Street." He made sure she could hear the capitalization.

"Why would you want to go there?"

"That's my business," he snapped. Tibs pushed himself to his feet.

"That's not the noble's kid," one of the other guards pointed out.

"The others will find him and bring him back to his father," she replied, watching Tibs. "This one's our responsibility." She motioned the way Tibs had come. "The Street's that way. A dozen blocks. If you're serious about going there, we'll escort you. You don't want to run into the people who live that way without protection."

Twelve was ten and two. So roughly where he'd been attacked. That hadn't looked like his Street, and if it had been, that gang leader wouldn't have been a stranger. Even if he hadn't been one when Tibs left. He was familiar with all the gangs of his Street, had to so he could avoid any of their members.

She could be lying, but why? She was willing to escort him there, so there was no point in sending him to a safe neighborhood pretending it was the Street. He realized they thought he was one of the well off kids, so she probably thought he was going there for some fun. Guards didn't care what happened to streetfolk.

This wasn't his city.

He sighed and headed for the main road, ignoring their calls. He had no reasons to

stay now that he'd confirmed that.

Maybe the next city would be the right one.