

Chapter 34

Tibs squinted, he'd gone from the light of lanterns to daytime. He located the sun through the gray clouds; midmorning.

"Bracelet," a woman said before he could run off.

He raised his left arm and pulled the sleeve down to show it.

"Name?" She wore the green and black of the new guards, but her eyes were the gray of metal essence wielders. He tried to determine what her class was, but she had no armor on, no sword at her belt, no bow, and he didn't think she was a sorceress.

"Tibs."

She took a book out of a pocket and flipped through it. It was smaller than her palm, the cover was black leather. She smiled. "Ah, Mister Light-Fingers."

"I haven't stolen anything here," he said. The slight whine in his voice was because he was tired, he told himself. If the new guards knew the name Bardik had given him, he'd never escape it.

She raised an eyebrow. "Meaning you stole elsewhere." She made a note in the book.

"Before here," he hurried to say. "I've been good."

"You're a thief," she said casually, putting the book away. "You aren't kept around to be good." She cupped the bracelet in both her hands and her eyes became unfocused.

I'm a rogue, Tibs mentally corrected her as he paid attention to what she did. He felt essence move; not his, and other than knowing gray eyes meant metal, he couldn't tell the kind of essence she was manipulating, or how she manipulated it. Unlike when he'd felt Walter manipulate water, here he couldn't sense any of the details of what she did. The bracelet loosened, opened, and when she moved her hands away, she kept it.

Tibs purposely didn't rub his wrist. Alistair gained the reflex from when he broke the rules and was branded. Bardik said the brand he wore itched. Tibs wouldn't give in to the discomfort he felt now. He wouldn't act as if he'd been marked.

She placed the bracelet in a crate and seemed surprised to see him there. "You can go," she said, making a shooing motion.

Tibs ran past those waiting for their turn on the platform, and he wondered how they'd known not to have someone there when he arrived, or what would happen if there had been someone there. He could ask Alistair later, right now he needed to make it to his room.

He skidded to a stop. Did they have one? Where would they go if they didn't? Someone bumped into him and Tibs reflexively checked he still had his pouch. Then he realized the crowd wasn't only larger than he'd expected, but the quality of the clothing much higher. Right, they'd been called back because the dungeon was reopening, and others could now run it too. He looked at the people. People with coins, he decided.

Tibs headed for the inn. He decided that even if they had a room, that was the more reliable place to find his team. He had to push through people which elicited curses; and having to use his hands to make space before him made resisting the urge to

dip his fingers into those full pockets difficult to resist. He needed to ask Alistair what the punishment for picking pockets was in the town. It couldn't be the loss of a hand, not if they wanted him to be an efficient rogue.

The inn was busy, but not full. A harried Kroseph noticed him and motioned to a corner. Every table was occupied, but most had free seats. He recognized Runners, but there were a lot of strangers too, looking around with a mix of nervousness and eagerness.

The fighter stood before Tibs reached them. "There you are, Tibs," Jackal greeted him. "How was the sea?"

"It was nice," he replied.

"Just nice? You seemed so excited to run to see it, and it was just nice?"

"Let him be, Jackal," Carina admonished. "We were worried, Tibs."

"I wanted to make sure I got to see the sea," he replied. "With the gem turning red I had to hurry."

She looked at him. "Tibs, you had two days. That's what Harry said; once it turns red we have two days to come back. I yelled it, but you just kept running."

"Oh."

"Hey, you came back," the archer said, placing four tankards on the table. "The server gave me four," he explained at Carina's raised eyebrow. "Considering how he was fawning over Jackal earlier, I figured the extra one was for him."

"You're still here?" Tibs asked, unable to mask his surprise. Considering how the archer had reacted to the way Jackal had taken down the man trying to strangle him, Tibs had expected him to want nothing to do with them.

"I'm still making up my mind." Mez looked at Jackal. "When you sent me to pick this up, were you expecting me to pay? The server didn't ask for anything, but I want to know now if I should expect to be stopped when we leave."

"I still have enough left with him to cover these," Jackal replied, then smiled. "Next round's on you."

"What did you think of the sea, wasn't it amazing?"

"Tibs thought it was just okay," Jackal said.

"You saw the sea?" Tibs asked.

"That was what I wanted to do before coming back here," Mez said, "I told you that."

"We all went down to the sea," Carina said. "We would have gone with you if you hadn't run off."

"Isn't it funny how we didn't see you there?" Jackal asked.

"The pier is big," Carina said, glaring at the fighter, "and there's more than one. So Tibs was on another one, right?"

"Yeah," Tibs said, then glared at the fighter when he looked like he was going to press. He'd respected his secrets, Jackal could swallow his curiosity and indignation. He placed the Sea Drop on the table. "I did find a candy, it's supposed to be very good." And hopefully, it could be broken and shared.

Mez looked at it, then leaned back in his seat. “You know, those three aren’t going to be happy when they return. You beat them pretty bad.”

“If they come back,” Jackal said, taking a long swallow of his tankard, eying the candy suspiciously. “Like you said, we beat them bad.”

“It doesn’t trouble you that they might be sentenced to death because of what you did to them? If you’re that callous about someone dying, I don’t think we’re going to be able to work together.”

“They were going to kill you,” Carina said. “It was three against one. I know you felt confident, but that rock thug had you by the throat by the time Jackal got him off you. I don’t want them to die, but what do you think would happen to them if they’d done that here? The guild isn’t nice with those who break the rules. We aren’t supposed to try and kill one another.”

“Unless we’re in the dungeon,” Jackal added.

“And you feel that makes it okay?” Mez demanded. He stopped, rubbed his face then sipped his ale, all the while glaring at Jackal, who seemed happy to ignore it. “Look, if you’re no better than them, why should I join this team?”

“Tell me you’re some purity user under that fire,” Jackal said, annoyed. “You didn’t get here by paying for it like these new people did. You were in a cell just like we were.”

Mez stifled a scream. “Yes, I broke laws, I don’t claim to be pure, but we have a chance to be better now. Why is it everyone here seemed to see this chance as nothing more than an opportunity to do more of what they used to?”

“Because that’s what the guild wants,” Tibs said, which had the archer glaring at him.

“I think he’s right,” Jackal said, sounding pensive, and Carina looked at him suspiciously. “What? The guild took people from prisons, not noble’s sons and daughters. Us, criminals.”

“Alistair says it’s because having to live hard forced us to find out what we are,” Tibs said, and Jackal nodded.

“You’re also assuming that what you saw us do isn’t us being better,” Carina told Mez. “Tibs and Jackal are street. Do you know what that means?”

Mez nodded and pointed to Jackal. “Him, I’d figured as that. Tibs, I just heard he was a good rogue.”

“Jackal hasn’t hurt anyone here,” Carina said. “Tibs hasn’t stolen anything.”

“It was hard,” Tibs grumbled before taking a drink.

“Here,” Mez said, staring at her.

She sighed. “The rules only apply here, Mez; under the guild.” She raised a hand before he protested. “But once we left, we visited Kroseph’s family, we climbed a mountain, as a team. We looked at the sky, at the city. We didn’t start committing crimes.”

Mez didn’t look convinced, so Tibs added. “I fell off the side of the mountain. I got hurt bad and Jackal rescued me. They carried me all the way down to the city and

they found someone to heal me. When we saw another runner in trouble, we went to help you.” Tibs paused long enough for another swallow. “I don’t think we’re good. We have a past, and that affects who we are. But I think I’m better than teammates who are willing to kill one of theirs. We did what we did to help you, not hurt them.

Mez sighed. “I am grateful, you did save my life, but don—”

“Did something like that,” Jackal said, just as Tibs grumbled.

“Is an ass.”

Mez snorted and stared at him.

“I’ve been on his team,” Tibs said, “twice. Back when they pick random Runners to fill a position.”

“Look,” Jackal said, “let’s put aside if you’re going to be on the team as one of us. What I need to know right now is if you are willing to be on the team for the next run, because I need to work out if I’m looking for one or two people to round us up.”

“I’ll do that,” Mez answered. “I owe you at least that.”

“Any thought on who will be the fifth?” Carina asked. “Are we looking at one of the new arrivals?”

“I’d rather one of us,” Jackal replied. “I don’t trust these nobles to have our best interest at heart.”

“And I don’t see them wanting to join us,” Mez said. “Not when they can have their guards with them.” He straightened as Carina opened her mouth. “It’s a good thing the dungeon resets after a run, can you imagine having to survive off those people’s leftovers? They’ll probably let the guards do all the work and collect the reward for themselves.”

“They can’t bring in guards,” Carina said. “You saw the argument that woman had after she arrived, right?”

“Saw, sure,” Jackal said, “Understood? Not a thing.”

“You didn’t...” Carina trailed off. “I thought the platform would make it so we’d understand them too. It means she spoke my language.”

Mez chuckled. “How much are you willing to bet the guild has someone who can do to them what the platform did to us, for the right fee?”

Jackal raised his tankard to the archer. “At least you understand how the guild thinks. They needed us to be able to communicate. The guild doesn’t have to care how much trouble the nobles get into because they can’t speak the language.”

“And if the nobles want to get better,” Tibs said, “they have to fight the dungeon themselves. Nobles don’t need the loot, right? They’re nobles.”

“Not all nobles are wealthy,” Carina said, glancing at Jackal who raised an eyebrow in return. “And even those who are, can always want more.”

“So we don’t have to worry about the nobles taking all our loot,” Jackal said, smiling. “I’m going to say hi to Kro, then how about we go see to our room?” He didn’t wait for a reply.

“Didn’t he and Kroseph spend time together already?” Tibs asked. “You said he fawned over Jackal.”

“And that’s all Kroseph had the time to do,” Carina said. “If we didn’t have priority as Runners, I don’t think we’d be able to get a room anywhere in town.”

Jackal returned with a perplexed expression. “You won’t believe what I just found out. The town’s been named.” He grinned. “Some noble went and registered the name as Kraggle Rock.”

“They can do that?” Tibs asked. “Could we have named it? Can we change it?”

“Nobles can do anything they want,” Mez said.

“We couldn’t leave,” Carina said, “so I doubt we would have been to make it to wherever this kingdom’s registry hall is. And we would need a lot of coins.”

“What does Kraggle even mean?” Jackal asked, chuckling.

“A noble did it,” Tibs said, “so it can’t mean anything good for us.”

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Getting a room was simple. They showed up at the rooming house. The woman behind the counter recognized them, took them to the storage room holding the chests, and they had taken that to the room she’d given them. They were on the fifth floor this time.

Tibs took the left corner bed again, with Carina the one next to his and Jackal the opposite one. They decided to let Mez stay with them until they resolve if he would stay on their team.

Once they were settled in, and Tibs was back in his armor, he pulled Jackal outside and handed him the coins he’d taken in MountainSea.

“Tibs, those are you cut from the runs.”

“They aren’t.” He wiggled his fingers.

“How long have you been doing it?” Jackal asked, looking around. Then counted the copper coins.

“Since the arena. I tried to not do it there; because it’s Kroseph’s home, but like Carina said, the rules are for here.”

“She said that once we were back. That’s eighteen. Do you want a silver for fifteen?”

“I’m a Rogue, there’s only so many pockets I can resist. I don’t want them in case the guards decide to search me and put me in a cell.” He rubbed his left wrist.

“You’re the one with the pouch no one can see in,” Jackal said. “And the guards aren’t going to care about what you did outside of Kraggle Rock.” Jackal snickered as he said the name. “It just sounds funny.”

Tibs shrugged. It was his town’s name now. He wouldn’t make fun of it. “Are you sure?”

“We beat up three Runners. If there’s one thing we need to worry about having Hard Knuckle come down on us, it’s that.” Jackal handed him a silver and three coppers. “You keep them, you earned them.”

“I stole them,” Tibs whispered.

Jackal patted Tibs on the shoulder and whispered back. “You’re a Rogue.”

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“Up for some training?” Bardik asked, suddenly next to Tibs.

Tibs didn't startle, but only because he'd been readying for the other rogue to do something like that, and because he'd decided he wasn't giving him the satisfaction anymore, even if that took all the willpower he had. There had to be a way he could use sensing essence to tell where the rogue hid.

Tibs nodded and followed Bardik to their usual spot, and instead of the usual stacks of lumber, workers were putting up a building.

“I guess we don't have this spot anymore,” Bardik mused. “Come on, I know another place we can train.”

They walked through alleys Tibs didn't know, and he realized construction hadn't stopped while he'd been away. He'd have to refamiliarize himself with the layout of his town. Would there come a day Kraggle Rock would be too large for him to know properly? Would he have to go back to knowing only a few streets then? Would he be relegated to that instead of having a town?

A hand forced Tibs to stop moving and Bardik looked at him quizzically, his hand on his chest and a guard in green in black walking where Tibs would have stepped.

“Is there something you want to tell me before you start a fight with one of these new fancy guards?” the rogue asked.

Tibs bit his lower lip. “I'm afraid the town will get too big for me to know,” he admitted. “I don't want to just have a few streets anymore.”

Bardik looked around. “It's going to happen, Tibs. Even the people who plan how the city grows are going to lose track of it, eventually. That's how they end up with places like the street you grew up on.” He chuckled at Tibs' stunned look. “Did you think they planned for places where Street Folks would go?”

“So I'll be Street again.”

“You'll always be Street Tibs. It's in you, just like your essence is. But you won't be locked in. Sooner than you think, you'll be able to leave this place, see other cities. I'll show them to you if you want.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the man. “That's sounding a lot like you want me to be your special guy.”

Bardik laughed. “No, I just think you'd enjoy seeing more than this town. Did you like MountainSea?” He began walking again.

“It's big and bright.”

“Yeah. And the sea. I remember gazing at it, trying to see where it ended. Imagining traveling there to discover things no one had seen before.”

“Did you do it?”

Bardik shook his head, absently rubbing his left wrist. “I had to grow up, then the guild happened.” He moved his hand away. “But I will, one day. When I'm free of all this.”

They reached another construction site, this one at the edge of the town, spikes marked a perimeter even closer to the lake than before.

“I thought you might like seeing how close we're getting,” Bardik said.

It looked so small compared to the sea. Even at a distance, it was larger than the lake, but he hadn't gotten to touch the sea. Eventually, he'd get to touch the lake. Guards walked along the spikes and looked at them as they passed.

"Do you know them?" Tibs asked, taking his knife out.

"No. Harry Hard Knuckle brought them in. I'm just happy I no longer have to keep you miscreants in line." He faced Tibs and had a knife in his hand. Like every other time, Tibs didn't know where it had been hidden.

"You got me to commit any crime I did here," Tibs said, darting toward the Rogue.

Bardik stepped aside lazily and swiped at Tibs. "I didn't have you steal one thing, Tibs."

Tibs ducked under the swing and studied the ground. Too uneven for him to coat it with water, and he couldn't use his other essences. "If it wasn't a crime, you'd have done it yourself." He reminded himself this wasn't about beating Bardik but learning from him. Beating him would just be nice.

He dodged the next two swings and parried one. "Is it gone?" Tibs asked, nodding to the wrist.

"I haven't finished paying for my crime yet."

Tibs cursed as the tip of Bardik's blade nicked his armor. The Rogue wasn't fighting as hard as he could, Tibs wouldn't last one blow. All Bardik had to do was vanish and the next thing Tibs would know, his knife would be impaled in his heart. This was how Bardik taught him to be nimble on his feet, swift in avoiding being hit.

"How was the candy?"

"I haven't eaten it yet. I'm going to share it with my team."

The Rogue chuckled. "Ah, to have the days when my team meant something again. Hang on to them, Tibs. Soon enough there's going to be gone."

"What?" Before he could get over his surprise, Bardik had his knife under Tib's throat.

"Don't let—"

"Was that a trick?" Tibs demanded. "What do you mean, they'll be gone?"

"Don't worry about it." Bardik turned away.

"No. You don't tell me that and walk away. I lost too many people. Will something happen to them? Do you know something I have to know to keep them safe?"

Bardik faced him, hands now empty. "Something always happens, Tibs, the dungeon should have taught you that by now. But I don't mean they'll die. That isn't something I can know, Tibs. But you're all Runners. You know what *that* means. I just meant that as you go up in ranks, the guild will make demands on all of you who survive, you will have different duties, you will grow apart, become strangers to one another."

"No," Tibs stated.

"Tibs, the guild—"

"We are going to stay friends. Even if we have to go our separate ways. We are going to stay friends." Tibs glared at the man, dared him to contradict him. He wouldn't

let distance change how he felt about his friends. That he might one day meet them again and not know who they were scared him almost more than the thought of one of them dying.

“I hope you do, Tibs.” Bardik sighed and for a fleeting moment, he seemed old and it reminded him of something he couldn’t place. Then the Rogue grinned. “What did you think of Charles?”

It took a few seconds for Tibs to catch the new conversation thread. “He goes by Cliff now.”

“Really now?” Bardik chuckled. “He never did like the name. It’s been too long since I’ve seen little Charles. Once I’m done here, I need to see about going to MountainSea again. Find out what he’s up to these days. The next time you stop by Old Walrus’ tavern, bring it with you.”

“I can’t put it in his pocket.”

Bardik laughed. “Just go there and enjoy a tankard of ale.” Bardik flicked a copper coin at Tibs. He caught it and when he looked up, Bardik was gone.