

## Chapter 01

With a scream, wind ripped the crate apart. Broken wood flew in all directions, a plank shattering on the wall, partially embedding itself. Tibs kept screaming as he tried to keep the pieces within the whirlwind. When the last of it flew out, past his head, he dropped to his knees, panting as the wind died.

He wiped at his eyes and cursed himself for it. He didn't have time for tears or the pain of loss. He wanted to keep himself filled with ice so he wouldn't have to feel it, but he needed to train, and, for that, he had to channel the other elements. Water was good to fight and defend himself with, but if he was going to bring the guild down, he needed to master all his elements because they knew he had Water.

They had many adventurers of higher rank in that element, much older and with years more training than he had. His one advantage was his many elements. If he could figure out how to recreate what he'd seen other Runners and adventurers do with them.

He gritted his teeth and stood.

He'd seen Carina use Air to turn items into projectiles. He'd even sensed how she wove the essence to make it happen.

He recreated the weave and, as the wind picked up in the center of the abandoned warehouse, it was already frayed at the edges. He focussed, willed them back into place; added essence to increase the wind and fought to keep the weave from breaking under the added pressure.

Dirt rose off the floor into the whirlwind, along with smaller debris left over from the day's previous practice. *There*. That was how he should be. Now, all he needed to do was alter the weave so it would wrap ar— It unraveled, and the wind died, dropping what it had kept aloft.

"Why?" Tibs screamed. "Why can't I do this?"

No answer came. Air was probably too busy having fun to bother helping him avenge someone dedicated to her.

Killing Sebastian hadn't been enough.

He'd killed Carina, but only because the guild had let him do it. They hadn't upheld their part of the bargain with the people of Kragle Rock. With the Runners they had brought here to serve as food for the dungeon.

To indenture the survivors into the guild's service.

It was what Alistair had told him, using less harsh words. What Bardik showed him through his punishment. They were all here only to serve the guild.

It acted like the Runners were valuable, and yet had left them to fend for themselves when Sebastian tried to gain control of the town, then when he returned to destroy it.

To destroy Tibs.

Tibs screamed, unable to stop the memory of the man running a knife along Carina's throat. Of how he was kept from saving her life.

He wanted to feed his rage to Fire, but, as angry as he was, there would be nothing left of the building if he did; of the neighborhood. It was possible that all that would survive of the town was the guild building, and that was the opposite of what Tibs wanted.

He switched to Earth. Sent a wave of it out, made the ground ripple, then flattened it. He formed a weave through the dirt, used it to shape it, lift it in the air. It immediately frayed, but not as much, as if something about earth essence made it want to stay unchanged.

He moved the dirt around him, added more essence to get it to move faster. If he couldn't use Air to

make the sand blast Carina had, maybe he could use Earth directly to make it happen.

Except that Earth didn't want to move fast.

He could make columns to slam into his opponents, cracked the ground open to crush them once they'd fallen in. He'd done some of that when Sebastian attacked the town, and adventurers could make it happen faster than he did, but he had seen none of them manage the sand blast.

The column of earth moved around Tibs in a lazy circle, and he cursed. He wanted sand to rip everything in the warehouse apart, the way Carina had done. He pulled Air from his bracers and wove that through the Earth to add speed, but the explosion sent him off his feet.

It could be done! He cursed silently as he got to his feet.

Sto was filled with weaves containing multiple essences. Sorcerers pulled essences from items and wove them together. Carina had told him about that, about how eager she was for her training to move on to teaching her how to do it.

If sorcerers could do it, so could Tibs.

He pulled Earth essence from the ground and Air; carefully mixed them. All he had to do was be—the detonation sent him through a crate, and it was only because he was already channeling Earth that he kept from being injured.

"Fine," He snarled, standing. "Let's see how you like this one, then." He channeled corruption and let the essence spill off him.

The air took on a putrid smell. He didn't like it, but it no longer made him want to throw up. The wood rotted away; the nails falling and melting. In places, the ground bubbled as everything the essence touched took on a purple tint. Even if the corruption essence didn't outright melt something, like the stone that made the base of the wall, they had other elements within them the essence could latch onto. And there were insects within the earth under his feet, small burrowing animals.

He pulled the essence back from the ground. They'd done nothing to him. They didn't deserve death, especially not one caused by corruption. Even the rats he knew lived in the cracks in the walls shouldn't die this way, as much as he hated rats. Sto's stone rats he could take pleasure in destroying, those within the town he just didn't want to have anything to do with.

He pulled the essence to his hand and made a ball. He spun it and let it expand, creating a whirlwind of corruption essence. The crates it touched melted into goo, but the freed pieces weren't picked up to be flung. He needed a weave to make something happen, or an etching.

He pulled the essence back into him and took a slow breath.

He pulled his knife and etched the 'x' with that essence, but as he stabbed the center, all that happened was that it dispersed. Only Water created the blast when he did that.

He did the knife flick, hardly having to think about it anymore, and a blob of corruption flew out and impacted a broken plank, then sizzled as it melted. He looked at his knife. Even focussing on keeping the essence from eating at it, the edge was now dull. Corruption and Fire did that when he used the knife flick. The other elements didn't harm his knives, but they also barely had any effect.

A flick of a mental finger sent more corruption essence at another crate, and the wood bubbled as it rotted away. Corruption, like Fire, was nothing but destruction. He pulled the essence away from the wood. But Corruption at least let him remain in control, no matter how raw his emotions were.

"What have you been doing in here?"

Tibs spun and, with a snarl, flung all the essence at the speaker. How dare anyone come here and bother him?

He recognized the man through the purple cloud, as his skin turned stone gray; the only indication Jackal was worried.

"No!" Tibs yelled in fear and dissipated the essence until there was too little of it to do any damage. Just like every element, there were traces of corruption all around them.

"What are you doing here?" Tibs yelled, glaring at the fighter. "I could have hurt you."

"It's time."

Tibs spun and channeled Light. "I'm not going." He'd yet to find something useful to do with it, which meant he needed more practice. He made a ball of it, and it glowed over his hand.

"Tibs," Jackal said gently, "You have to come. She'd want you there."

He whirled and threw the ball of light at Jackal. "You think her parents want me there?" he demanded. "I got her killed!"

"No, Tibs, you didn't." The fighter stepped aside, and the essence hit the door, splashing light. "My

father did that. Everything that happened is on him, and you made him pay. Now, it's time to be with Carina so her family can do the rites they need."

"They don't need me for that." He channeled Darkness. It was more than the opposite of Light. It weakened, possibly to the point of death, and Tibs thought he could make use of—

"It's not about them, it's about you."

"Then, I don't want to go." How much essence would be needed for something to become so weak it couldn't live anymore?

"You have to go."

"No, I don't!" he'd wound back to throw the Darkness before he realized it and let go of the essence. He let go of all of them. "I don't want to see her again!" He swallowed. "Not like that." Tears came and he let them. "It's not fair. She was going to be a great sorcerer and because your father wanted to hurt me, she's dead."

Before the pain brought him to his knees, Jackal had his arms around Tibs. "I know. But it happened. Now we have to go on. That means going to her home; being there for the rites and saying goodbye to her."

"I don't want to," Tibs said through his sobs, holding onto the fighter.

"I know."

"They're going to hate me."

"They won't. If they have to hate anyone for this, it's the guild. They were supposed to protect Carina and us. She died because they didn't do what they should have."

"I hate them," Tibs growled, envisioning that building burning down, melting to purple goo and filled with darkness until no one in it had strength to draw breath.

"I do to."

Tibs shoved himself away from Jackal and glared at him.

He'd intended to push his friend away, but even if he wasn't stone anymore, his essence was Earth and he remained anchored to the ground.

"How can you say that and be so fucking calm about it?" he yelled.

Jackal leveled his gaze on him, and Tibs wanted to hate him for how calm he looked.

"Because if I let myself be angry, I'm going to use my fists."

Tibs laughed bitterly and motioned at the wreckage inside the warehouse. "So, hit something!"

"I don't want to hit something, Tibs. I want to hit people. I want to hit those who let this happen, but I can't. So I want to hit anyone that I can reach, and I can't use the pit, because there's no one to fight there. Even those who are healed aren't in a state to fight. So I can't let myself get angry. I'll do that during our next run. Sto can take the damage I'll cause."

Tibs ground his teeth. "Fine." He channeled Water, then used it to cool his anger. He had to make it ice before the desire to channel Fire instead and burn everything went away.

When Jackal opened the door, Tibs stepped outside, no longer quite caring about what he'd have to endure.

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Tibs thought he recognized one of the three women at the bottom of the steps, holding the stretcher on which Carina's body rested. She might have been at the meal Tibs shared with her family, which would make her a sister, cousin, or an aunt. None of the five men looked familiar.

Tibs had expected to reach the platform and just go to Carina's city. Instead, he had to put up with being used for another of Tirania's show.

"Tragedy strikes in all forms," the woman said, and Tibs contemplated letting go of Water. He couldn't channel Fire. Too many here were innocent, had not even been here during the attacks, or were more of Sebastian's victims. She thought him subservient, so he could catch her by surprise as she went on about those left behind.

He could wrap her in Corruption, watch her melt. It would feel so good to hear her screams turn to gurgles.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, spoke of how he was continuing through the pain of loss. How everyone needed to use him as an example.

But there were clerics here, and they might be able to save her. And what would killing her accomplish? Give him short-lived satisfaction? Her leader would simply appoint someone else to her position and nothing would change. Just like they'd replace that first guard leader with one who did things the way the guild wanted them done.

He'd be dealing with those false smiles again as this new person would reassure everyone they cared for

the people and would never let what had happened before take place again. All the ways they would...what? Tibs still had no idea why the guild did what it did.

Alistair said they had reasons, but he'd never given them. To Tibs, he had sounded like he didn't know what they were.

Ice was good for that. For thinking, instead of lashing out in anger. Jackal could decide to hold his anger in until he could do so safely. Ice cooled Tibs's anger until he could think and plan.

And he needed to plan. If he wanted to keep Kragle Rock safe from the guild, he needed to come up with a plan to end all of it, not just the woman in charge of the building lording over his town.

"And we will march on," Tirania pronounced. "We will honor the fallen by rebuilding; by becoming stronger. When the next challenge comes at us, we will know we can defeat it because, together, we already defeated many."

The crowd cheered, but to Tibs's ears it wasn't as enthusiastic as on the day after Sebastian's death. People had had time to think, too, consider what Tirania had said then, what it meant. Maybe her words no longer sounded true to them as well. Maybe they didn't have to see the light her words carried to his sight to know she lied to them.

Oh, they weren't all lies.

There were simply too many of those for Tibs to care about whatever truths she slipped between them.

The woman holding the stretcher on the right looked angry as she stood there. Could Purity be used to tell when someone lied? Wouldn't lies be impure?

Paolo had made it so Tibs understood their language by using purity to let Tibs understand the meaning within the words. The pure meaning, or something like that. Tibs didn't remember the details. He'd been preoccupied with dread at going hungry in the dungeon.

"May all the dead return to the Elements," Tirania said with finality, "as this fallen hero does." She stepped aside, and the procession climbed the steps, taking place in the center of the platform.

Tibs rejoined what was left of his family. They would be next. The only ones allowed to go. Other had asked, he'd been told. Tandy had demanded, begged even.

Tibs might have been able to help her, if he'd learned about it sooner, instead of as he and Jackal walked to the platform. But he'd been busy training since Carina's death. *That* was the best use of his time.

The essence shifted over the platform. The air turned golden, then people holding the stretcher carrying Carina, it and her, along with the Attendant as their side, vanished.

The Attendants

They were cowards, but they weren't the reasons the deaths happened. They could have lowered the numbers, if they'd stayed to transport people away, but the guild would have prevented them from taking Runners away, even those who had no chances of surviving against Sebastian people. They would never let them go. He'd feel differently about the Attendants without the ice, but right now, he understood that they had never pledged to keep the town safe, to ensure as few as possible were hurt.

They were people with a job to do, nothing else. Sebastian targeted the platform and the Attendants during the Siege. They had every reason to believe they would be targeted again, so they'd fled.

Tibs understood cowardice. He hadn't killed Don for abandoning him to his death; he couldn't hold the Attendants responsible either.

At least it was how he felt for the moment, filled with ice so cold it cracked as he walked up the steps to stand at the center of the platform.

Tirania hadn't even bothered getting them to wear the bracelet as a way to force them to return. Did she think their actions showed they were devoted to the town *and* the guild? Was she lying to herself, and believed that loving the town meant loving the guild?

She didn't have to worry on his account, at least.

Tibs was returning.

Tibs would be back, and he would find a way to make her regret ever making him think she cared about any of them.