

## Chapter 29

“You can’t seriously be doing this,” Jackal told Pyan as he and Tibs reached her table. She was alone again, only this time it wasn’t because her team had abandoned her. It was because she’d abandoned them. “You’re the team leader. You can’t just walk away from them and join another one.” There were four tankards before her, and as she reached for one, Jackal took it.

She glared at him. “What has being a leader gotten me?” she demanded. “Geoff’s dead.”

To Tibs’s surprise, instead of drinking the tankard’s content, Jackal sniffed it and made a face. “You shouldn’t be drinking this stuff, Pyan, especially if you have a run today.”

“What do you care?” she asked, taking the tankard from him and downing it. “You’re always drinking, even when you have runs.”

“Ale, not this stuff. That’s going to kill you.”

“Good,” she snarled. “That’s what I deserve for getting Geoff killed.”

“You didn’t—” Jackal ground his teeth and looked at Tibs, his expression inviting him to jump in and help.

But Tibs didn’t know what to say. Or rather, he couldn’t think of anything that disagreed with her. He’d come down from his excitement at being rid of the pain of the corruption in his essence to the memory of Fedora’s death, and it still hurt. Enough that he thought about not getting out of bed this morning.

Wouldn’t have, if Jackal hadn’t dragged him out.

Numbing the pain with whatever she was drinking had a certain appeal. As did ending it completely, so he would never have to feel like this again. If not for his friends and how his death would make them feel, Tibs might have done it already.

“At least get a different team, Pyan,” Jackal said.

“Why? Tihomil’s a good leader.”

“He’s an Omega,” the fighter replied, exasperated. “His entire team is. They’re just doing the first floor. You’re not going to get anything out of that. There’s got to be an Upsilon team in need of a fighter. There’s been a lot of them not making it out of the dungeon, too.”

“At least I have a chance of keeping them alive on the first floor.” He raised her tankard and motioned to her table.

“You’re hurt,” Jackal said, looking at Tibs again. “Don’t make this decision now. Help them for this run, then rest. Grieve.”

“Don’t you fucking tell me what to do.” She was up and in Jackal’s face. “Your man’s still here.” She pointed to the approaching Kroseph. “He’s safe. You see how you feel when he’s dead, and it’s your fault.”

“Geoffrey’s death wasn’t your fault,” Kroseph said, putting the tankard on the table. “And this is your last one. You have a run today.”

“Don’t tell me what to do either,” she ordered. “I have the coin. You’re going to keep

bringing them to me.” He threw a silver at him and the server caught it with the ease of a man who had many of them thrown at him by angry or too drunk to aim customers.

“I want you to come back and spend more of your well-earned coins.” Kroseph placed the coin on the table. “So yes, I can tell you that this is the last Itricion I will be serving you.”

“I’ll take my coins elsewhere,” she threatened. “What’s the owner going to say, then?”

“My dad’s going to say he doesn’t want your death to be because of something I let you do. There are plenty of taverns that won’t care about more than the coin you’re giving them right now. We aren’t one of those.”

“Fine.” She sat and drank angrily.

Tibs could see that she’d go to one of the taverns. She’d lost her special man. Her pain was stronger than what Fedora caused him. He’d only known her for a short while and as nothing more than a friend he tried to help survive the dungeon.

And failed.

“Tibs?” Jackal called, halfway to their table.

Tibs shook his head. He didn’t want food right now. He didn’t want to be around Jackal and his good mood. He also didn’t want to think about Fedora.

“Pyan?” he said when she slammed the nearly empty tankard on the table. “Why don’t we go to the training field and you start teaching me how to hold a sword? My sickness’s gone.” He forced the smile.

“What’s the point?” she replied, her mood turning morose. “It’s not like it’s going to keep you alive any more than Geoff. That thing’s set on eating all of us.”

“It’s got to be better than sitting here, right?”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“I’ll tell Kroseph to let you drink more when we come back.”

“And I will agree,” the server said, startling Tibs. He’d expected him to go with Jackal, or go back to serving customers.

“Kro,” the innkeeper called.

“I’m dealing with a customer, Dad.”

“This can’t wait. Go to Gulmer and see if he’ll sell us salt. We’re almost out.”

Kroseph frowned. “How’s that?” He headed for the bar. “There’s four bags left in the cellar.”

“Rats got into there and ripped them open, and somehow this morning’s rain found a crack and got into that too. Russ was only able to salvage enough for the day.” The rest of the conversation was lost among the rest as they were close enough they no longer needed to raise their voices.

Tibs refocused on Pyan, who still looked like she’d prefer to keep drinking. “Please? I’d rather do something than think about—” He closes his mouth.

She sighed, standing. “Come on. Let’s go waste your time.”

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For the next five days, Tibs found her every morning before she’d drank too much,

and convinced her to go to the field for training. She made him pay for it each time by forcing him to use a sword nearly his height and that felt heavier than he had to be. When he pointed out a short sword was what he wanted, she'd smirked evilly and told him to deal with it. She was training him. He was going to learn the way she wanted. If he wasn't happy about it, he could let her drink in peace.

Tibs had swallowed any more complaints and used as much of the little earth essence he had as he could to make himself strong enough to hold the massive weapon up. He got to train with pulling in that essence as he used it, but it didn't help. There was only so much of it he could put on his arm before it became visible and gave his secret away.

Tibs was so exhausted after a few hours of this that he had no strength to think about anything for the rest of the day.

On the sixth day, Pyan's table was occupied by her old team and the new one, but not her.

The solemn expression and tankards made Tibs stop before he reached them, then he forced himself to approach them.

"How?" he asked, swallowing the pain. They didn't have to tell him she was dead. "You weren't due for a run for three more days." He couldn't stop the accusatory tone.

"She talked the guards in letting her fill out one of the Omega team that was missing a fighter," Tandy said.

Tibs stared at her. "The first floor killed her?"

"It's hard," Tihomil said, and Tibs glared at him. Of course, it was hard for him. He was still an Omega archer.

"She was Rho," Tibs said, looking at the others for an actual explanation.

Karl gave it to him. "She gave up."

Tibs swallowed. He'd tried so hard to use avoiding his pain to keep her from having to feel hers. How could he have failed like that?

He backed away, trying to decide if he felt disgusted by them sitting there when they'd done nothing to help, or him, who'd used her for nothing.

He turned and shoved Jackal out of his way as he ran out of the Inn, ignoring his friend's amused ribbing. Nearly blind from the tears, he climbed to the inn's roof, then tried to outrun his pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house wasn't what Tibs expected, not the first time he'd looked at it, and not this time.

He hadn't outrun his pain, but he'd outrun the tears. He cursed corruption for not being there. Something to make him trip and fall and break his neck would have been nice.

So much for corruption and its promise of helping him, he'd thought bitterly.

His roof running had taken him near the noble's neighborhood because there was just no way to avoid ending up there if he ran for any amount of time. And as he'd considered turning around, he'd realized that after failing two friends, he could make sure Jackal didn't have to deal with his father.

The small house Sebastian had told Jackal he'd bought so he could stay close to his

son was anything but. At least he hadn't lied when he said it was on the outskirts of the nobles, for the moment. It was the only occupied house and by the lavish construction, Tibs expected only nobles would afford them.

The house was away from the road, with a yard filling the space, and a path leading to the front entrance. There was a yard at the back, as well as on each side, with houses marking the limits, with their yards also in front, pushing the road away.

It was a noble thing, wasting the space that would be better used for another building.

Sebastian has the largest house of them, as well as the only one with yards all around, and was two stories tall. It made reaching it from the street without being noticed difficult, but Tibs hadn't come by the street. And it was the same height as the buildings around it. He'd had to use essence to reach the roof, extending it with water, but if he'd wanted, and was interested in taking his time, he could have found a path with a roof close enough he'd be able to make the leap unassisted.

He'd walked around it the first time he'd come. The day about Sebastian spoke with Jackal. It had been to familiarize himself with it. In case Sebastian caused problems for his friend.

Tibs was done waiting for that. He was going to make sure the man knew he wasn't safe in Kragle Rock. It was Tibs's town, and he didn't want him here.

He lowered himself from the roof with one hand. Whoever had built it had only considered the distance to the ground as a deterrent against rogues, so the window was close enough to the roof Tibs could reach the bottom without letting go of the roof.

He paused as he was about to push on the window, to test if it was locked. The essence woven through it tingled. There had been no essence there when he'd come the previous time. The window only had a latch to keep someone like him from pushing it inward and getting it. He hadn't been impressed by it then.

He opened his sense and nearly lost his grip on the roof.

The essence wasn't simply woven through the window. It was a tight, complex, weave. He studied the other windows on the house within his range and they all had the same kind of weave.

He climbed back up and sat on the roof.

Tibs knew little of enchanted items. Sorcerers and dungeons were the ones who made them, not rogues. But Tibs had sensed many of them since acquiring the ability to sense essence. What he had determined was that the tighter the weave, the stronger the effect was. The complexity he wasn't certain yet, but complexity meant multiple essences used, so he thought it means the result, once triggered, would include all those essences.

Tirania's distance talking gem was tightly woven, but it didn't feel too complex. The armors and weapons Sto gave as loot were neither complex nor tightly woven. The magic protecting the Guild building was both tight and complex, more so than this house, but only because it permeated the entirety of it, not only the access points.

He looked down at the window. Could essence be woven into a lock? If it could, what kind of key would be needed?

He'd have to come up with a way to ask Alistair. He was a rogue, so it should be

simple.

Only, that was for later. Right now he wanted into this house and that window kept that from happening. He cursed, stood, and looked around.

He smiled.

The smoke drifting out of the chimney was thick, so they had a good fire going, and they probably thought that was enough to keep anyone from entering that way. He climbed on top and looked into the opening. Alright, the smoke and the size of the chimney would keep most rogue out, but neither was a problem for Tibs, being as small as he was, and having essences to help him.

The light was far enough it would be the ground floor. From there, he could sneak about until he found Sebastian and gave him his orders.

The tightness made holding on easier as he lowered himself, using air essence to move the smoke around him so he wouldn't choke on it. As he got close enough to make out voices, he felt the heat of the large fire. Lowering himself further, it became uncomfortable, and he considered moving up and looking for loose bricks to enter a room on the second floor.

"This isn't much," Sebastian said, and Tibs froze.

"Yes, sir," a woman answered. "We have to be careful not to alert the others." Tibs knew that voice.

"I understand," Sebastian said dismissively. "How is that coming along? Did the... reminder you left have the intended effect?"

"I don't know, sir. No one has seen your daughter since."

Sebastian snorted. "She'll show up and come groveling for a bone. I'm more interested in the other. Did it remind them where their allegiances are?"

"I... think so, sir," the woman said. She was the one from the fire. Tibs was certain of it. The one who had been screaming at him, Jeanna, and Don for acting. "The problem is that if I'm too direct in asking, all it'll take is a stray word for them from Hard Knuckle to pick up a lie. Without more ways to shield them, I can't—"

"Fine," Sebastian said with an annoyed sigh. "I have the craftsman working on making more already, but they're frustratingly slow to make. And before you say it, I can't rush him. I learned that the hard way with the previous sorcerer I employed. She went up in flames in the middle of enchanting one of those." Papers were moved. "How about that... annoyance?"

"I have someone on it. Again, it has to be done carefully, but trust me, they will learn that you are the better of the available options."

"Good." More papers. "And my son?"

She sighed. "Sir, I—"

"My son," Sebastian repeated, tone turning angry.

"I haven't been able to get anyone he wouldn't recognize close to him. The person I paid to deliver the message was found the next morning beaten to a pulp. I don't think your son appreciated being told he needs to return home so he can take up his studies. I sent three more, with the skills to take him on, and only one returned, barely able to walk and

Speak.”

“And what did they have to say for themselves?”

“Your son gave them a message to pass along. He’s a Runner, not a Wells. He belongs to the guild and the dungeon, not you. Anyone else sent with messages from you will not be returning.” A hesitant pause. “Sir, if I may?”

“Go on.”

“Jackal is a lost cause. You should focus on getting one of your other children ready. Even Serba would be a—”

“No. Jackie will take over for me. It is his duty. It is how it will happen. He just needs to be made to see that.”

“If you say so, sir.”

“I know so,” Sebastian snapped. “You’re dismissed.”

Steps going away, a door opening and closing. Silence.

Movement again. Soft shoes instead of boots. Crystal clinking, liquid pouring. A sigh.

“Why, Jackie? Why are you fighting your destiny so damned hard?” Sebastian’s sigh sounded pained. “You know what was read. You’re the only one who can ensure our family’s survival.” Sebastian sat. “Cursed Abyss. Maybe I should have told you she was the one who’d read it. Maybe you wouldn’t have fled if you’d known that.”

A knock. “Sir,” a man said on the other side of the door. “Your guests have arrived.”

Sebastian stood. The door opened, then closed.

Tibs lowered himself, and the heat of the fire became painful. Cursing silently, he moved up. He’d wanted to take the papers. Carina could have read them and they would have known what Sebastian was planning.

Still, he could tell Jackal about what he heard and they could look for who Sebastian was targeting. Khumdar could help, as could Carina. Mez... Mez would work to protect the town. Once he saw Sebastian wasn’t any kind of noble, but just another criminal, even the archer would help.

This would be the perfect way to hurt Sebastian and get him to leave his town.