

### Chapter 43

Tibs enjoyed the porridge, possibly too much, as Kroseph brought him a third bowl.

“You’re up early,” the server said.

“Late, I did stuff through the night,” he slowed himself. This was going to be the last bowl today. He shouldn’t eat too much.

“Oh?” Kroseph plotted into the chair next to Tibs, “Have you finally found yourself someone?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the server, spoonful almost to his mouth. “What has Jackal said?”

“Nothing.” Kroseph leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Why, is there something I should know?”

“I’m not interested.” Tibs purposely went back to his food.

“You’re still young, Tibs. You’ll meet someone and then you won’t want to ever be without them.”

“Shouldn’t you be working?” Tibs asked, more bitterly than he’d meant to.

“It’s early, Pa isn’t going to get on my case until at least a few more tables are busy.”

Like Jackal, Kroseph meant well, but Tibs wasn’t like them. When he saw the two of them, he couldn’t just see their happiness. He saw Kroseph, devastated by Jackal’s death. Tibs wouldn’t risk causing that to another person. If it meant he’d only have friends, he was okay with that.

Tibs looked at his porridge, his appetite vanishing as how Bardik’s viewed the situation he was in sank in fully. It was more extreme than Tibs, but he’d just admitted to himself he was willing to make do without someone special in his life because he had friends.

“Are you okay?” Kroseph asked.

“Something someone said sort of sank in deeper,” Tibs answered. He was annoyed at Jackal and his guy when they told him he’d find someone, and he had done the same to Bardik.

“Must have been heavy for it to make you look like this.”

Tibs pushed the bowl away.

“Is someone contemplating death?” Kroseph eyed the bowl. “You don’t push away food.”

“Just Runner stuff. It’s not Jackal,” he reassured the server.

Kroseph patted Tibs arm. “If he’d told you something that made you push away food, he’d have told me first. Do you want me to take it away?”

Tibs shook his head. “I just need to let it pass.”

“It’s going to get cold, I can get you another bowl when you’re ready.”

“It’s still good cold.”

It was the server’s turn to narrow his eyes. “That’s a street thing, isn’t it? You aren’t there anymore.”

Tibs wanted to say it wasn't, that it was a Tibs thing. Or that it wasn't a bad thing. "It just is. Food shouldn't go to waste."

"It won't, there's a couple of dogs in the area that'll eat anything."

"I'll finish it."

"Kro!" the innkeeper yelled from the kitchen door. "You know that Runner of yours only gets so much leeway when he's keeping you from work. Talk to him later."

Tibs leaned around Kroseph to wave at the older man.

"Hi, Tibs. Kro, get in here now. Tibs gets no leeway."

The server smiled and stood. "You sure about the bowl?"

Tibs nodded and did what he could to put Bardik out of his mind.

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"Hey guys," the woman called.

"Pyan! You're still alive," Tibs called back.

She chuckled. "Didn't get much chances to do runs after the one with you. Jackal, Carina. Good to see you two are still with us."

"Tibs just can't let us die," Jackal said, "and you know how I am, I can't stand saying no to him."

"That," Carina continued, "and he kind of did the almost dying thing for us when he threw himself off a cliff."

"I fell," Tibs grumbled.

"Yeah, now I remember why the run with you guys was fun," Geoff said.

"Excuse me," a thin woman said, "but—" She stopped when Carina hugged her.

"Tandy! I'm so glad your team's working out for you."

The Rogue gave a strained smile and eventually lightly put her arms around the sorceress. "Thank you." She hesitated. "Can you let go of me? You know I don't like..." she trailed off.

Carina let go and backed away. "I'm sorry, I forgot. Tandy, this is Jackal and Tibs. That's Mez and Khumdar."

"Hello Mezano," the Rogue greeted the archer. "It's good to see you aren't with Don anymore."

Tibs eyes the archer as he looked uncomfortable. He might be blushing, but Tibs couldn't be sure with his darker skin.

"Hey, Tan. Thanks. These guys kind of save me, and they aren't as bad as they appear."

Jackal cursed and Tibs glared him into silence. He would not say something snarky now. The fighter raised his hand in defeat.

"I'm glad. That sorcerer had no right to force you to be on his team."

"Well, it's clear you two know each other," a sorcerer in bright green robes said, stepping around the blushing Rogue. "I'm Amid," he told Khumdar, offering his hand. "Sorcerer and one day ruler of the Forest of Teltirak."

"I am Khumdar of Temerity," He looked at the hand uncertainly before taking it. "Cleric."

The other team stared at him.

“Maybe we need to come up with something else,” Jackal said, “this could be a problem.”

“Why?” Carina asked. “Because they aren’t looking at you?”

“You know me so well, dear.”

“How did you score a cleric?” a tall man in leather armor asked. “I thought they weren’t showing up as Runner for another level at least.”

“And you are?” Jackal asked, looking the man over appreciatively.

“Taken,” Pyan replied, smirking.

Jackal opened his mouth, closed it. “I did something like that to you, didn’t I?”

She grinned. “You did, but he is taken, aren’t you, hun?”

“Taken and branded,” the tall fighter as he pushed the collar of his armor down to show a red mark.

Pyan’s tanned face became much darker. “That was an accident,” she said. “I... got carried away.”

“No need to be bashful, Pyan,” Jackal said. “Enthusiasm is a good thing. One day ask me about the marks my man leaves on me.”

The woman put her face in her hand. “Oh, I so don’t want to see that.”

“I’m Karl,” the fighter said. “Earth element.”

“What about you, Tandy?” Jackal asked.

“Void,” Mez said as the woman raised her golden eyes to look at them. He cursed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t—”

The woman laughed. “It’s alright, my eyes give away my element just like yours do, Mezano.”

“Still, it isn’t my place—”

“Mez,” Jackal interrupted the archer, “when a woman says it’s okay, the proper response to bow your head and say ‘my lady is too gracious.’ Don’t make too much of an ass of yourself, that’s my job.”

“To make an ass of himself,” Carina said, “not make an ass of Mez.”

Tandy shook her head and chuckled. “You have found yourself an odd team, Carina.”

“These two remind me of being at home,” she replied. “I have brothers who are kind of like them.”

“And Mezano?” Tandy asked.

“We’re still working things out, so tell me where to stop and I will.”

The Rogue raised an eyebrow.

“I have eyes, Tandy, he is a good-looking guy. I’d give him a chance if I thought he was available.”

Mez cleared his throat and opened his mouth, but Jackal cut him off again with a stage whisper. “Women are fighting over you, do not interrupt.”

“This sounds more like they are negotiating who can get the most out of him,” Khumdar said.

“Am I supposed to be flattered?” The confused archer asked.

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Because I should be the one wooing one of them.”

“And which one would you be wooing?” Tandy asked. And Tibs stepped away. He hadn’t expected other people than Jackal and Kroseph to have those kinds of arguments.

The archer looked from Carina to Tandy, a serious expression on his face.

With a Curse Jackal covered the archer’s mouth when he opened it., “You, Tandy. He’s going to woo you.” He glared at the archer. “She’s a void sorceress, and I need my archer, do not anger her.”

Mez pulled the hand off his mouth. “Of course I was going to say Tandy. But how would that have sounded if I just blurted it out? I have to show her she’s the better choice.”

Carina let out a breath. “You do know that if it was anyone other than Tandy, I’d blast you, right?”

“Did you want me to pick you?” the archer asked, sounding more confused.

“No, but being called the inferior one still isn’t a nice thing.” She looked at Tibs, who had taken another step back when Jackal had pointed out Tandy was a sorceress. Sorcerers had a lot of range. “I’m starting to agree with you about not getting anyone special. I’m not really liking how the guys behave when they are around their someone special.”

“You do know there are women out there too, right?” Jackal asked.

“Yes,” she replied, “But I want a man.”

Amid cleared his throat. “I’ll start by saying I have absolutely no idea what’s going on right now, but I am a man.”

“Can you trip over your tongue anytime you look at me?” Carina asked. “How about insult me without meaning to?”

The sorcerer looked at her, eyes wide. “Why would I ever want to do that?”

“Oh, Jackal never plans on doing those things,” Tibs said.

“And stabbed in the back,” Jackal sighed.

“I’m a Rogue,” Tibs replied.

“You’re supposed to be my Rogue.”

Tibs looked around. “Who’s got coins?”

“Can I ask,” Khumdar said, “but this was to be a training session, was it not? I am getting the impression I have joined a theater troupe. And one that needs some work at that.”

“It is,” Jackal said, sounding serious. “We’re looking to work on team cohesion, like I said yesterday. Our next run will be the first the five of us are doing together, and the first for Khumdar.”

“Can a cleric fight?” Karl indicated Khumdar’s staff. “I was under the impression clerics only healed.”

“Ours is special,” Jackal said proudly.

“Let’s not turn this into another comedy routine,” Khumdar said. “I will not go into explanations, no matter how you ask. It should be obvious I am not of purity.”

“So you’re just calling yourself a cleric,” Pyan declared, a trace of mocking in her tone.

“With all due respect, lady Pyan, I am not on your team, nor am I indebted to you. My team knows my circumstances, and that is enough for us.”

“This is why I’m thinking we need to go with something other than cleric,” Jackal said, sounding serious. “You’re having that reaction and you’ve seen the dungeon, you know things aren’t always as clear as we want. I don’t want to think what the nobles are going to do if they decide you’re mocking them or something.”

“You buy it?” Pyan asked.

Jackal looked at her. “Pyan, he’s on my team, what I think of him isn’t something I’m going to share with you, but if I didn’t think he could help my team, he wouldn’t be on it.”

“Fair,” she replied. “I guess I haven’t seen enough of the world yet to know everything about it. I apologize Khumdar.”

The cleric nodded in response.

“Karl’s question does remain. Can you fight with that?”

“Not yet. I have only recently acquired it. I have familiarized myself with how it moves when I swing it, but I have not tried to hit or block anyone with it.”

“Geoff, you’ve used your bow to strike, do you think you can help Khumdar work out how to fight?”

“Bow fighting?” Mez asked, “you can do that?”

“If your bow’s built for it,” the other archer said. “I can show you while I show what I can to Khumdar.”

“Alright,” Jackal said. “I’m going to call this individual training. Seems like team cohesion will be for another day.”

“You hadn’t thought this through, had you?” Pyan said.

Jackal pointed to Tibs. “I did want him to be the leader.”

“Then you go fight with the two fighters,” Tibs said. He stepped to the other Rogue. “Do you know how to throw knives?”

“I have some training in it, yes.”

“Can you show me?”

She looked around. “We don’t have anything to throw at, but I can show you how to hold your knife. Maybe throw it at the ground so you can get a sense. Pyan, is it alright if I teach Tibs?”

Her team leader nodded as she eyed Jackal. Karl’s skin had turned gray.

“That leaves the two of us,” Carina told Amid. “But I’m not sure there anything a wood sorcerer can show an air one, or the reverse.”

“Yes, but tell me, before you were caught, did you get a chance to read a treatise by...” their voice faded as Tibs followed Tandy away.

“Did you really find the door leading to the boss before anyone else?”

“I don’t know. We were the first to open it, and I’d noticed it before, but maybe someone else did before that and didn’t have the tools to open it.”

“How did you know it was there? Even after I found out about the fourth room, finding it was hard.”

Tibs shrugged. “I just noticed the way the door’s color doesn’t quite match.”

“You have better eyes than I do, then. I had to feel around; the door isn’t the same stone, even if it looks the same.”

“Did you know about the key?”

“I knew about one of the boulders in a corner turning, but it wasn’t until I overheard another Rogue talking I realized there were more, and I found it on the next run.”

“Someone else had to tell me to. I used my water to unlock it before that.”

“I’d heard you had water, in spite of your eyes. Your age, I understand.” She took a knife from the sheath at her waist.

“It’s what my teacher says.” He took his from his bracer.

She smiled. “The benefits of success.”

He looked at his wrist. He was so used to it now; he didn’t even feel it anymore.

“On my next run, I will find something that will let me afford something like that.”

“You’ll find better. I didn’t have access to the second floor. When you do, go to the Shield and Rope. Darran has items for us specifically.”

“I’ll visit him then, thank you for the recommendation.” She looked at his knife. “This one isn’t made for throwing, so you won’t have the same accuracy. If you plan on throwing, you’ll want to get knife balanced for it, but I’d wait to you spend good money until you know how to keep the dungeon from eating them.”

Tibs looked at her in surprise.

“I overheard people in a tavern. Trainers to archers debate teaching their student how to do it right now instead of waiting until they graduated.”

How could someone do it without first being able to sense the essence around them? Or was that part of what they also wanted to teach?

“Okay,” he said. If he could work out how someone did it would sensing essence, he could teach Mez and maybe Tandy. He wasn’t sure how he felt about showing anything he wasn’t supposed to know to another team, but it was nice to have someone else to learn from.