

Planning-26

The inn was busy, but not as much as before. Most of the people there were townsfolk, instead of Runners, and the Runners there were like Tibs, experienced. The Omegas and the few Upsilon teams didn't come to the inn. They stayed with the families that housed them. Tibs wasn't sure if they'd be allowed to move out on their own before they reached Epsilon, or if this was how the guild intended to do things from now on.

Kroseph brought their food and drinks, paused only long enough to exchange a concerned look with Jackal, then moved on to serving others. Jackal ate heartedly, while Don barely touched his plate. Tibs ate without concern for the tension at the table.

"Alright," Jackal said, leaning back on his chair now that his plate was empty. "Don, whenever you want to start." He emptied his tankard and motioned for a refill.

"Like I told Tibs, I was going to be a scholar. My family were nobles, but we had wealth enough we could mingle with them and not be overtly ostracized. It was a good life. I lacked for nothing, and the inconveniences I had to deal with were minor in comparison. Unlike many in my family's position, I didn't have aspirations of being a noble."

Jackal snorted, and Mez was the one to glare at him.

"I was going to be a scholar," Don said softly. "My dues to the academy were paid already. All I needed was to be of age. I'd demonstrated my aptitudes and some of the lower masters had expressed an interest in taking me on as their apprentice. My future was set, my dreams were about to come true."

He fell silent.

"What went wrong?" Khumdar asked.

"My family were successful merchants. We traded primarily in textiles, and we had contacts all the way to the neighboring kingdoms. As I said, we had wealth, and that is where it came from. We imported mostly raw textiles, but my father was investing in tailors as a way of ensuring what he brought to the city was turned into something that would be seen. Nobles wore clothes made of our textiles. What we didn't know was that in doing that, my father made himself a rival of a noble who had discreet holdings in a large number of the tailors in the city. None of them dealt with my father, but our tailors gained popularity and he lost customers."

He sipped his ale. "Nobles are not keen on honest competition against a family that isn't of their stature. Instead of pushing his tailor to offer better quality, or lower their prices. He destroyed my father. He had him accused of sabotaging other shipments of textiles, had evidence found. My father's businesses were taken from him, his—our family's wealth, when with them. We lost more and more until we could no longer live in the neighborhood I had spent my life in. We moved to a smaller house. It was hard. My father continued destroying himself fighting against the accusation, that noble, the drinks. But we still had enough that we managed without having to resort to menial work. And within months of that happening, I would no longer be a burden on them, as I would move to the academy, live there."

Again, he fell silent.

"It did not happen," Khumdar stated.

Don shook his head. "I was no longer suitable to attend the academy. The academy has standards, you know. Only the best of the best is accepted there," he said bitterly. "They mean only those with the social status, not the ability. We had paid," he spat. "Masters had looked at me, at the work I had done to demonstrate I met the requirements and judged that good enough to consider taking me on. But I was now part of the rabble, beneath them. My work was now subpar." He slammed the tankard on the table. "Of course, then never returned what my family had paid. We could have used the money."

He paused, picking up only as Khumdar opened his mouth. "I was angry," he growled. "My family had been good and decent folks, and we have been ground into the ground by those 'better' than us. I decided that their way was the way things happened. I was no longer let anyone push me around. I would be like them and ground others under my boot." He smirked. "And it worked. I couldn't get back what they'd taken from me, but no one took from me again. And it got me books. It got me people doing my bidding. It got me respect."

He drained his tankard. "It got me caught for possession of academy material and sent to a cell for as long as my family needed to pay the restitution for what I had taken. They acted like me touching those books had destroyed them and demanded more gold than my family had, even when we had wealth. My stay in the cells did not improve my attitude. Then I was sent here, given a change to be a 'worthwhile' member of society again," he spat. "As if I had been nothing more than..." he trailed off, looking away.

"Me," Tibs said.

"A thief," Don corrected. "It isn't an excuse, but I was going to be a scholar. And because of some

noble's machination, they only saw me as a thief. I lashed out the only way I knew at those I met. Did what I could to ground them under my boot. I'm sorry Tibs."

"Did your father commit those crimes?" Jackal asked.

"Jackal—" Mez snapped.

"No, Mez," Don cut him off. "It's a valid question. The truth is that I don't know. If you'd asked me that then, I would have told you without a doubt that my father would never do such a vile thing. But I've seen too much of the world, did too many vile things myself and felt justified in doing them to be certain of anything anymore. I want to believe my father is innocent, but he is so lost in the drinks now that I couldn't get him to answer me." He sighed. "And it no longer matters. I let what happened then turn me into a man no one could stand, not even those claiming to be my friends. Of everyone I surrounded myself with, I think no more than four didn't look at me with hate when they thought I couldn't see them. I don't want to be that man anymore."

"You think telling us that makes what you did go away?" Jackal asked.

"No. What I did to you isn't something I can ask you to forget or excuse. I am merely providing context leading to our encounters. Mez I needed to belittle because you represented everyone who had caused me pain. I couldn't see past your need to hold yourself and other to a better code than what was considered normal. All I saw was pretense, so we would look up to you. You, Jackal, terrified me. It wasn't that you'd beaten the men I had then. I didn't care about them. It was that not even a day in knowing him. You were stepping between me and who I wanted back, who was mine. No one had dared doing that since getting my element."

Jackal smirked. "You might remember I was kind of full of myself back then."

"That didn't matter. You had decided someone I thought was dirt deserved to be protected from me. So I hurt you as much as I could to teach you your place."

"Never was good at learning that lesson," Jackal replied.

"That made you scarier, because I had to believe you would get back at me. I made you and Tibs monsters looking to make my life miserable. And then, we had to work together against your father."

"Would that not have let you see they were not such monsters?" Khumdar asked.

Don snorted. "Only if I bothered looking. The scholar never assumes, always studies. Turns out I make a lousy scholar."

"You were angry," Jackal said. "That's going to mess with your thinking. But why corruption? Why not go for something like fire or metal. Something that tells everyone how dangerous you are?"

"One of the first thing our instructor told us was to think carefully about which element was best suited for us. That picking one that didn't align would make our progression harder than he needs to be." He looked at them. "Didn't yours tell you the same?"

"Once I made that crystal glow," Mez said, "I was taken to another archer who told me I could pick an element and gave me a list to pick from. I went with fire because it seemed more useful than everything else, especially those I didn't understand. How is mind an element?"

Don looked at Tibs.

He shrugged. "Tirania told me to pick one of the four core elements. When I asked about the rest, she said they weren't as good. Between water, fire, earth and air, water seemed more suited to what I do. But I didn't get much of what it meant."

"They told me I might as well get earth since I'd already shown my skull was as thick as it," Jackal said.

The sorcerer looked at Khumdar.

"I did not go through the same as you. Darkness called to me and I answered."

Jackal snorted. "Our cleric loves wrapping himself in mystery. I don't think he's answered that question the same way twice."

"Right," Don said disdainfully, "Cle—" He snapped his mouth shut. When he spoke again, his voice was controlled. "Wouldn't you be interested in answering some questions? I'm curious as to what it means to be a cleric of an element other than Purity."

"Not particularly," the cleric replied, with a smirk.

Don looked like he would push, but stopped himself. When he opened his mouth, Jackal pushed papers at him.

Don took them, looked at the diagrams on it and then at the fighter. "Now you expect me not to ask how your sneaked them by the guild?"

Jackal looked at the others. Mez nodded. Tibs studied Don. He believed that he wanted to be better, but this was something that could cause problems if he wasn't careful, not just for them, but for every Runner. If the guild learned there were items they couldn't detect easily, they would scrutinize everyone.

He nodded. They'd never know without testing the sorcerer.

Khumdar shrugged.

"The dungeon dropped a pouch, a few runs back, that can't be detected and that fits a lot of stuff in it."

Don narrowed his eyes. "You expect me to believe that you got lucky enough—"

"Luck's not a thing," Jackal said, smirking.

Don breathed slowly, but when he spoke, he was calmer. "Do you understand how rare such an item is? That as far as I know, no such item has ever come from a dungeon?"

"How would the guild know?" Mez asked.

"When the Runner hands it over they—"

"Why would a Runner hand something like this over?" Jackal asked.

"How else are they going to..." he trailed off. "You were able to tell what it is." His expression became thoughtful. "How does it work? How did you know?"

"How it works is beyond me. As for how I knew, after the chests that are larger inside than out, we're no longer taking anything for granted. Reaching in to see if it contained anything, I couldn't touch the inside, so I kept reaching further. I had it to my elbow."

"And we can't tell there's a weave through it," Tibs added, "unless we touch it."

"What about something enchanted you put inside?"

"It vanishes from sight and senses," Jackal said.

"Can I touch it?"

"Not without my man's permission," the fighter replied.

"What?" Don asked, perplex. "Why would he have a say in..." his pale skin turned red. "That's not what I'm taking about."

Jackal burst out laughing. "I know. But it was too easy. And yes, you can, but not here." He stood. "How about we retire to the team's room? It's been a while since I've been there."