

Tibs winced as he put his shoulder to the wagon along with the others. He was using his uninjured shoulder, but the effort of getting it to lift out of the mud was straining him all the way to his other one.

“Okay,” the wagon’s owner said, defeat in his tone. “This isn’t working.”

With a unified sigh, they let it fall down the little they’d managed to lift it, which had still left a quarter of it in the mud. They were all baffled as to how it had happened. The last two day’s rain had turned the road soft with mud, but the track had been packed enough to hold, until now. Tibs hadn’t seen the wagon slide to the side and skin until those wheels were almost in to the axle. Only that the merchant had properly tied down his goods had kept them from shifting, and causing the wagon to fall on its side and spilling its content.

“Alary,” Graidan called. “Get two of the horses and add them to these. We have to get this wagon out, and we can’t wait for the rain to stop.”

“This is when I wish I had magic,” Jeremy grumbled. He was covered in mud that the rain hadn’t entirely washed off him. As they’d push, he’d lost his footing and slipped.

“Never say that,” Filmer said. “Magic is a curse. It turns you into a creature that cares only about itself.”

“There’s plenty of adventurers out there using they magic to help people,” the young man replied, offended.

“You ever met one of those?” she countered.

“Well... but the bards sing about them.”

“You can’t trust bards,” Tibs said, earning himself a disbelieving stare from Jeremy and amused ones from the others. “They tell stories, and they have to change what happened to make them interesting. You think they’d sing about a bunch of people who can’t push a wagon out of the mud?”

“If one of us could lift it with magic, they would.”

“If someone here had that,” a gruff sounding man said, “I’d slit their throat when they weren’t looking.”

“Why?” Jeremy asked, horrified. “They’d be helping.”

The man snorted. “They’d be turning us into husks to power themselves. That’s how magic works, you know. They pull the life out of you until there’s nothing left.”

Tibs stayed out of the discussion, only partially listening, more trying to come up with a way to get the abyss cursed wagon out of the mud. He had magic, but he couldn’t think of something that would work and not draw attention. He could strengthen his legs and body, and there might be enough essence in his bracers to harden the ground for proper bracing, but if he was the only one able to properly anchor himself, the others would wonder how. He might be able to harden the mud under everyone’s feet, but they might wonder how that had happened, and he didn’t have enough to do that and increase his strength.

None of the other elements he had in his bracers were good for strength, not even metal.

And with how thick the mud was, he didn’t know if they’d be able to lift it without enhanced help. He could channel earth. That would give him enough, and with the rain and how they’d all be busy, they probably wouldn’t notice the change of color in

his eyes.

But all it took was one.

Everyone knew that the eyes told the truth about who someone was. And that was ever more true when it came to magic.

“What do you think?” Jeremy asked.

“About what?” he looked around, but only the young man watching him. The others were looking forward as two horses were added to the two already harnessed to the wagon.

“Do you think that if an adventurer rode by, they’d just keep going, like Barta said?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know. It’d depend on the kind of person they were. Even without magic, not everyone wants to help those in trouble.”

“Okay, everyone in place,” Graiden called. “On my mark, lift!”

Tibs put his shoulder against the wagon and spread earth essence under their feet. He didn’t turn the mud packed earth hard, but willed it to resist sloshing around, and counted on everyone and the added horses to be enough.

When Graiden gave the signal, Tibs and the others pushed. The wagon resisted, and then rose.

Mutters of encouragement spread as the mud dropped below a quarter of the wheels. Calls for the elements to help, and a few specifically for Earth.

Then, with a jerk, the wagon lurked forward and Tibs’s slick shoulder slid. He hit his head and lights exploded. With the break in his focus, the mud turned soft again, and he fell, landing on his injured shoulder and cursing the abyss in different language while the others cheered.

When his sight cleared, the wagon was no longer there, and he heard other wagons start moving. Jeremy offered him a hand and pulled him to his feet.

“I’m pretty sure that if we had magic, someone could fix your shoulder.”

“You need a cleric for that,” Tibs said, catching his breath from the pain the effort had caused. This had worsened his injury. He’d probably have to wait weeks more before he could justify healing it.

Jeremy was looking at him in surprised and Tibs realized what he’d said.

“I’ve listened to a lot of bard stories. It’s how I’ve gotten to dislike them. It’s always clerics who do the healing.”

“But magic can do anything,” Jeremy protested.

“The only place anything does everything is in stories. Out here, we’re always stuck with stuff that only barely does what we want it to do.”

“It should be like the stories.”

Which showed how little attention Jeremy paid to stories, Tibs decided. They might end well, most of the time, but getting there was never a pleasant journey.

“Tyborg,” Graiden called. “Go see Sarnita about your shoulder. And don’t argue. I saw that slip and how you were holding it before you tried to make it seem like you were fine. I won’t have you not pulling your weight any longer than you have to because you’re a stubborn idiot.”

“I’ll make sure he gets there,” Jeremy called. Instead of earning him an approval

from the chief, the man looked at him suspiciously.

Too damned eager, Graiden had said, and it was still true.

* * * * *

Tibs made a show of carefully moving his shoulder, then favoring the other as he tightened the saddle on his horse. A week ago, Sarnita had finally said his shoulder was at the point where nothing but time and some care would see it to fully healed. So he'd applied an etching of purity to finally be done with the discomfort. Now, it was only about acting as if his shoulder was stiff for a couple of weeks.

"Give it back," Loren said in his tone that promised violence. Tibs glanced in his direction in time to see him grab Jeremy by the shoulder and shake him.

Tibs was by them in time to hear the young man's fearful protest.

"I know you took it."

Tibs caught the man's arm as he lifted it. "Don't."

"Stay out of this, Ty," Loren warned. "It's time this thief learns not to take what doesn't belong to him."

"I didn't take anything," Jeremy protested, the words bright.

"If he stole from you," Tibs replied, no letting go of the arm, "you take it to Gray."

"And watch him be soft on him like he is on you?"

It wasn't Graiden who was soft on Tibs, but he was who the guards saw, instead of the caravan leader. Rigel was why Tibs had been kept on even after getting injured and why he'd done all he could to be useful again.

"You don't like how he does thing, you should have found another caravan to work on."

"I'll fucking do what I want to," Loren replied.

"You'll do what Gray says to do," Tibs countered. "And you know he has no tolerance for us fighting. You want to continue alone? You hit him and Gray will throw you out."

"You're going to tell him?" the man said defiantly.

"Yes," Tibs replied, and let go of the arm.

Loren glared at him. "You fucking better keep your man away from me."

"I'm not his man," Jeremy protested.

"Oh, sure. That's why you aren't at his side all fucking day long." The man turned and headed toward where the guards were assembled. Graiden would be there, which meant Tibs had a decision to make. He faced Jeremy.

"I'm not your man," the young man stated.

Tibs studied him. Looked for a clue he could use to justify what he needed to do. Knowing Jeremy lied about having stolen from Loren didn't give him a way to address it, not without questions being asked.

Then he noticed the hand clutching something in the young man's pocket.

"What are you holding?"

"It's mine," Jeremy protested.

Tibs narrows his eyes. "Don't make me pull your hand out."

Jeremy tried to out glare him, but lost. Looking away, he pulled his hand out and opened it. In it rested a tarnished pin of a bird in flight. Tibs had seen it on Loren's jacket

here and there. It didn't look valuable, or impressive, but Tibs knew that neither had to be there for a thief to take something.

"Give it to me."

Jeremy closed his hand and pulled it away. "It's mine."

"No, it's not. Abyss. Do you have any idea what Gray's going to do to you when he finds you have that?"

The young man smirked, and Tibs fought the urge to slap the back of his head. His mood must have showed on his face because the smirk didn't last. When Tibs motioned for the pin, Jeremy handed it over.

"Why?" Tibs demanded, and couldn't wait for the answer. "Loren and the others are your brothers in arms. You need to depend on them to fight alongside you, not worry about getting a knife in the side."

"I'm sorry," Jeremy whispered, looking at his feet and seeming so much younger than the young man he was. "Thank you for—"

"I'm not doing this for you," Tibs snapped, fighting the urge to hug him, make him feel better. He wasn't going to learn about how the world worked through being cuddled. "We all have to trust each other. This can ripple and cause distrust to spread. I don't care about you, Jeremy. You aren't my man, you aren't my friend. You're someone I work with. Nothing more. Someone who nearly made things bad for everyone just because he couldn't keep his fingers to himself. Loren hates thieves. If he had his way and this was on you, you'd have lost a hand."

"Doesn't you having it mean you could..." Jeremy swallowed.

Tibs snorted. "No, because I'm smart enough not to have this on me long enough for it to be found. Now get back to your work, and if you steal for one of us again, I'm letting Loren do whatever he wants with you. Is that clear?"

Jeremy nodded, and Tibs went to get rid of the pin. Fortunately, he knew where Loren's horse was, and with the man looking for Graiden, it would be unattended. It wouldn't end up in the right satchel, Tibs was sure of that. And Loren would suspect him of being the reason. The man wasn't an idiot. But he wouldn't be able to prove anything, so Graiden would leave things be, trusting that if Jeremy was the kind of thief Loren claimed he was, he'd try again, get caught, and brought before the chief to deal with.

And if Jeremy was that kind of thief, Tibs would let it happen.