

Planning-15

Tibs walked among the Omegas working on the locks and triggers. Failing with them. They were bad at it. Nearly without a fault, each one of them would get caught or killed if they were to go into the dungeon right now. Worse than that, few of them seemed to enjoy working with the lock picks or small tools needed.

There were more girls than boys, and with a few exceptions, they were all the smaller of the urchins. Those who were taller or broader, were among those who seemed to enjoy the training, and were progressing faster.

Tibs knelt next to a small girl and kept her from throwing the lock in anger. He didn't try to comfort her. He didn't ask her name, or details about how she'd become a war urchin. He didn't think she'd survive her first run, even if the others on her team worked at keeping her alive. She didn't want to be here; she didn't want to learn about locks and traps.

Tibs didn't ask what she wanted. He did his best to explain how to feel when there was too much tension on the pry tool, how to tell when the pin locked in place. What locking the pin in place meant.

He didn't pause when he felt the eyes of an instructor on him. Tibs didn't care what they taught of him helping, or if they objected. They asking boys and girls who had done nothing to deserve it to walk into a dungeon with barely the skills needed to survive.

He'd do the little his free time allowed to raise those odds.

Even if he was doomed to fail.

When she succeeded in opening the simple lock, she didn't rejoice or look at him for his opinion or approval. She sighed dejectedly, locked it, and started again. Tibs hadn't been there when the instruction had been given, but it seemed that they weren't being trained on the variety of locks he had had to train with when he'd arrived.

Of course, his training had consisted of the trainer assigned to his group pointing to boxes with locks and trap triggers in them and told to get to it. He couldn't recall one time with the instructor had taken the time to help one of them, the way those here did occasionally.

Tibs stood, and the instructor gave him a small nod before continuing on her way, then crouching to help another to the Omega rogues in training.

He wondered if the test to classify them as rogue has involved more than looking at their short statures, and the guild was counting on the dungeon to weed-out those without the temperament to be effective rogues.

Another of the instructor noticed him walking among the trainees and said nothing. Tibs stopped by a boy of his height and a look of determination as he felt between the gaps with a tool for how the trigger was built. When he triggered it, nothing more happened than the click and a pin jutting out from the side. With a sigh, the boy looked around and handed the trap to Tibs on noticing him there.

Tibs reset it, handed it back, and the boy got back to work. Maybe this one had a chance.

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Tibs glanced at the shield to see how much time he had left, then what he still had to set right for the dragon crest to be complete.

"I won't be done in time," he announced, rotating a series of four pieces until he had the dragon's left horn complete.

"Really?" Don said sarcastically, "so why are we—"

"Don," Jackal warned, and while Tibs didn't see the sorcerer, he had no trouble envisioning him stepping back as if struck, and the sneer shatter into the more common meekness and uncomfortableness. The sorcerer didn't often show hints of who he was before, but stress, pain, and annoyance brought that to the surface with more ease.

And this run had brought plenty of each for all of them. Sto had increased the strength of the creature roaming his halls, Ganny had switched around the triggers, and now, some cache were empty, so taking the time unlock them was a waste of time.

Jackal had been particularly affected by that. At the second empty cache, he'd screamed at Sto, and Don at looked at the fighter as if he was insane, and seemed baffled that no one else acted like that was an odd behavior.

Sto hadn't commented.

Tibs wasn't sure if the dungeon was too busy working on the fourth floor, or if it was Don's presence causing Tibs to be unable to respond, that was the cause, but other than greet them when they entered, Sto

had said nothing. Tibs didn't even know if the dungeon was watching them.

"Are staying past the time limit?" Mez asked, leaning against the wall to give his leg a rest.

With how much more brutal the fights had been, and Tibs's inability heal them because of Don, they had gone through the healing potions and the regenerative ones that somehow refilled Don's reserve.

How something that didn't contain corruption had replenished a corruption reserve was beyond Tibs, and without being able to ask Sto, his curiosity was a distraction.

"Do you think you'll have the crest finished shortly after?" Jackal asked. "It'd be good to at least see inside and get an idea of what we'll be facing."

Tibs looked at the third of the crest that was still jumbled and shook his head. The rotating of the pieces, instead of simply sliding, was making figuring out the pattern needed to control where the pieces ended difficult.

"Then get as much of it done as you can so you can figure it out, and we'll head back." The fighter looked at the ceiling. "You know, putting doorways neat these crest would really make thing easier on us."

"Why do you do that?" Don demanded, sounding crept out.

"Makes me feel better?" Jackal asked, and Tibs heard the smirk.

"There's nothing there!" the sorcerer replied. "All it's doing is making you look daft to the rest of us."

"That means stupid, right?" Jackal asked, again with an audible smirk.

"Yes!"

"Then it's fine."

"How is that fine?" Khumdar asked. "Have you not told Kroseph that you were going to be smarter now that you have promised to be there for him?"

"I promised to *try* to be smarter about stuff, but he knows that only goes so far."

"How are you okay with your leader acting like that?" Don demanded.

"Why?" Jackal replied, "you think you'd do a better job?"

"I wouldn't be—" The sorcerer's voice broke. "No, I don't mean that," he added nervously. "I shouldn't..."

"Don," Mez said in an understanding tone, "we're used to Jackal's 'I'm the biggest idiot this side of the abyss' act."

"Hey, I'm the biggest idiot on both sides of the abyss," Jackal replied severely. "And it's not an act."

Tibs chuckled.

"Don't let it get to you," Mez said.

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The iced cracked and cracked again as Tibs leaned against the house's wall, catching his breath. That had been too close. His would be assassin had come out of nowhere and nearly planted the knife in Tibs chest.

Not out of nowhere. Tibs had been aware of the faint essence, but he'd dismissed it as inconsequential. Just another of the townsfolk relieving himself in the shadows, or one who drank too much and needed to let the ground level out under their feet again.

He hadn't even considered this could be another attack, or that the woman would be skilled enough to make him word for his victory.

He knew better.

The ice cracked, and he focused on filling it instead of healing himself. Anger over this led to remembering other reasons for him to be angry, which forced him to think about why he was angry and those reasons hurt too much.

And fire resided in that anger; it made the ice brittle. So he had to cool it down to ambers before he did anything else.

Once he was healed, he gave the body one kick, then pulled it into the shadows again. The rats and dogs would get to it before it smelled enough to be found. He went through her pockets and came away with a couple of silvers and handful of coppers. The knife he took to add to the supplies for when he started training Omega teams.

What he didn't find was an indication of who had paid her to attempt to kill him. He knew Sebastian was ultimately responsible, but with him dead, there had to be someone hiring the killers and trouble makers.

Jackal didn't know. His father had had lieutenants and gang bosses, but he hadn't wanted to be involved, so paid as little attention to how they hired out help.

Tibs paid attention to everything around him as he headed back toward the training grounds.

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“Darran, my good friend,” Jackal exclaimed as he and Tibs entered the shop.

The merchant was immediately on alert. “Greetings,” he said cautiously, then glanced at Tibs, who shrugged. Jackal had asked him to come along, and lied when he’d said it was because he wanted Tibs to keep the merchant honest, but Tibs hadn’t pressed.

“I have a question for you,” the fighter said.

“I shall endeavor to provide you with an answer.”

“Perfect.” Jackal rested his elbows on the wooden counter. “Let’s say that I’d gotten my hands on some dungeon enchanted piece of armor. What would you say to that?”

“I would say that you have handed it to the guild, as you are required to, unless you paid what they asked, then I’ll say you were swindled.”

“I’d never pay what they want,” Jackal stated. “But what if I told you that I came up with a way to sneak one of them out of the dungeon without getting caught by the guild?”

Tibs stared at Jackal in disbelief. He couldn’t seriously plan on telling Darran about his pouch. The merchant wouldn’t be able to keep from pressing for more answers.

“I would say,” Darran said, his eyes flicking to Tibs, “that you are playing a dangerous game, if you have indeed attempted it.”

“Succeeded.” Jackal grinned. “So, could you find me a buyer willing to pay good coins? You’d get your cut, obviously.”

“A buyer I can find you without trouble. The quality of the coins will depend on what you are offering.”

“Like I said, dungeon enchanted armor. Leather chest piece, plain looking and enchanted to be tougher, and slowly repair itself.”

“That is not something that will attract the highest quality, but there is always someone interested in acquiring dungeon made items since the guild limits their availability. So long as you can prove it came from the dungeon.”

“My word’s not enough?”

Darran smiled. “You word is all I need. Unfortunately, the collectors of such items demand more than the word, twice removed, of a Runner.”

“I don’t know how to prove it came from there,” Jackal replied, looking at Tibs, “other than asking the guild.”

Tibs shrugged. How did the fighter expect him to help?

“An expert can be brought in,” Darran said.

“For coins,” Jackal added, and the merchant nodded.

“How can a sorcerer tell that it’s from the dungeon?” Tibs asked.

“It won’t be a sorcerer,” Darran replied. “Jackal couldn’t afford one of them with what he’s describing. From what I have observed of how they work, there are tools that let them see the weave of an enchantment and, that with enough knowledge of the dungeon, it is possible to match that to where it came from. Which raises another issue you’d encounter. With the dungeon being so young, I’m not aware of anyone who’s studied it yet. Outside of the guild, I mean. They are as tight-lipped about their findings on dungeons as they are closed fist about the items they hoard.”

“You’re saying there’s no way I can get good coins for it,” Jackal said.

“I am saying there is no way, now, for you to get better than good coins for it. How long can you hold on to it? In a few years, experts will be doing in weekly with their teams to study what makes this dungeon different from the others, and with the knowledge, it will be possible for you to show this is where it came from.”

“In a few years,” Jackal said, “I’ll be taking out stuff from deeper floors. If I’m even doing runs anymore. I’m going to be an adventurer then.”

“That is certainly the conundrum you are facing. But it will still be worth more than is it now.”

Tibs watched Jackal think, wrestles with his greed. More coins were always better for the fighter, but coin now was also quite good. “How much would you give me?”

“I’ll have to see it to say,” Darran answered, not showing any of the joy he had to be feeling. “I do promise to give you the fair price for what you show me.”

“A merchant’s promise,” Jackal replied dubiously.

“A friend’s promise,” Darran countered.

“A merchant’s promise,” Jackal repeated with the same dubious tone.

“My friend,” Tibs said. He might not trust the merchant with everything, but he considered him

among the friends he had in the town.

Jackal nodded. "Tibs's friend's promise. That I can take. When do you want me to bring it?"

At least he wasn't taking it out of the pouch right now, Tibs thought.

"It might be simpler for me to stop by the inn. I expect your man is aware of what you are doing and can keep it somewhere discreet where I will be able to look at it."

Kroseph knew about the pouch and Jackal sneaking out items. He had to know Jackal planned on selling them, but how pleased he would be about it happening this way? Tibs wasn't certain. Jackal's man wasn't as greedy as the fighter was.

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The knock on the door pulled Tibs out of his thoughts. He'd been lying on his bed, the only one occupied in his team's room at the moment, waiting for sleep to pull him under. He'd prefer using Purity to remove the need, but he had to suffuse himself with the essence for that to happen, which meant letting Water go and that meant feeling everything.

He opened the door, and Don stood on the other side.

"I need a bed," the sorcerer said after Tibs stayed quiet.

"Why?"

"The is our team's room, isn't it?" the sorcerer snapped. "I have a right to a bed here."

Tibs stepped out of the way, and Don didn't seem to know what to do. He looked at Tibs suspiciously, then attempted a smug expression, only for his shoulders to sag, look to the stairs, sigh, and step in.

He mumbled something as Tibs closed the door.

"I said I'm sorry for snapping," he snapped, then seemed to realize Tibs hadn't said anything and looked confused.

Tibs shrugged. He knew it was offensive behavior on Don's part, but he didn't care. "Take any of them except the ones at either ends, and that one." He pointed to the bed next to his as he headed to sit on his bed.

Jackal and Mez always spent the nights with their special someones, or at least at her house, in Mez's case. Tibs didn't know if the archer did anything with his girl. He no longer talked about her or his time there, and she no longer stepped outside the noble's neighborhood.

"What happened to your room?"

Don checked the firmness of both beds before sitting on what had been Mez's. "I was kicked out."

"Didn't you have the coins?"

"Yes, I have the coins," he replied angrily. "I'm not like Jackal and always spending my money. The owner of the house wouldn't let me pay for the floor. He said he's got better prospect coming, so he forced em to take all our possessions out and now I'm... here."

"You paid for a floor?" Tibs asked as the sorcerer pulled his knees to himself, leaning against the wall and rested his head down on them.

"You think I was going to stay in a place like this any longer than I had to?" the look Don gave Tibs was defiant, but didn't last.

"I didn't know you could do that."

"You can do anything your money lets you do," he said in surprising anger.

"Where's your stuff?"

"I leased space in a warehouse until I..." he rubbed at his eyes. "Until I contact the other's families and find out what they want to happen to their things."

Tibs nodded. "There's some space in the chest. I'm the only one who uses it now, and all I leave there is my armor." He stretched on his bed.

"Why didn't you tell me to go fuck myself?"

"You're on the team. This is our room."

"How are you so fucking calm about this? You wanted nothing to do with me when I—when Tirania put me on your team."

Tibs closed his eyes and considered how to best answer the sorcerer. "I'm calm about this, because I don't think the town will survive it if I stop being calm about anything."

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It happened surrounded by people.

Tibs had watched a group of people arrive. They weren't runners; they were too old, dressed too well. Some were dressed the way nobles were, but they were under guards. The guards also looked to be of a higher status. Their armors polished, and in bright colors.

Instead of being escorted toward the dungeon, they headed into the town, and Tibs lost interest. He'd walked away to head to the inn, where he had papers to deal with. Kroseph's father had joked Tibs should rent a room as his office, for all the work he did at the inn.

The problem with a room was that it couldn't be as secure as keeping the satchel with his papers on him or in his room. He also didn't want to work on them alone. In the inn's common room, Kroseph could force him to stop and eat.

The crowd became thicker and rowdier. Tibs pocketed a few coins without looking at what they were.

Then a yell somewhere ahead and the crowd shifted, pulling him along. They wanted to avoid the commotion, and Tibs had no issue doing the same as they stepped into one of the larger alleys to go around it.

That was where it happened.

The crowd halted, and as Tibs bumped into the person ahead of him, he felt pain in his back. Someone pulled him away from the person ahead of him, and Tibs looked down as his forearm's length of a sword extended out of his chest.

"Sebastian sends his regard," a man whispered in Tibs's ears. "And I thank you for making me rich."

The man let go of Tibs, and he slowly fell to the ground.