

Chapter 78

“Let me get this straight,” Stick said. “You want us to take on the guards. The guild backed guards. And give our pay to good-for-nothing Omegas?”

“We’re not taking on the guards,” Tibs replied.

Stick was a rogue and thin enough, Carina had asked if he was sick, which had earned her an annoyed roll of the eyes. Quigly had brought him to the planning after Tibs had told him, Jackal, and Carina what Darran had offered. Carina had brought in Josaca, and Samuel had simply showed up, saying Khumdar had suggested he come. How the cleric knew what Tibs was up to, he put to his obsessive search for secrets, not that Tibs would have kept it for him if he’d asked.

Stick motioned to a server with his tankard before draining it. “Keep telling yourself that when Knuckles throws you in a cell, and us along for helping you with his insane idea.”

Tibs knew the man as one of the recruits. He had stickier fingers than Tibs and they had had a few arguments over him, being too free about which pockets he slipped his fingers into and how empty he left them.

Samuel was an archer, one of the few survivors from the first arrivals, who Tibs had rarely interacted with him despite that. Josaca was a sorcerer, and Tibs knew nothing about her, other than Carina knew her.

They were at Tibs’s team’s table, enjoying the ale that was back to its good standards.

“Knuckles isn’t going to do that,” Jackal said. “He likes Tibs too much.”

Tibs snorted.

“I am with Stick,” Josaca replied, looking at them cautiously. “The guild has an interest in making sure they are in control.”

“Of the dungeon,” Jackal replied. “They’ve demonstrated how little they care about the town when they responded to my father’s attacks.”

“Barricading themselves in a building, behind adventurers and all that magical protection wasn’t much of a response,” Quigly said.

“My exact point,” Jackal grinned.

The warrior shook his head in annoyance. “But, unless the merchants stop paying their taxes to pay Tibs, I don’t think we have to worry about the guild.”

They all look at him. “I didn’t think to ask Darran about that.”

“You should have,” Josaca replied, “if you’re—”

“Lay off, Joss,” Carina said. “Darran approached Tibs without saying what it was about. He didn’t have the time to find out what kind of questions he should ask.”

The sorceress looked around, some of her bluster melting away. “I’m simply saying that Tibs has a history of getting in over his head. Now he’s pulling us in with him.”

“No,” Carina said. “He’s coming to us for help. To find out the best way to go about it, because he knows he doesn’t have the experience needed to do it alone. Would you ask for help?”

“Of course, I’d asked you.”

Carina motioned to the others around the table, and Josaca's expression became guarded.

"Tibs isn't smart the way you and I are, or in the ways Jackal, Quigly, and Samuel are." She glared the fighter's attempted protest down. "But he is smart when it comes to asking questions and getting others to help him. He didn't tell Darran he was doing it. He said he'd see if he could. This is what we are here to decide. All of us."

"What's your problem with the Omegas, Stick?" Quigly asked as the thin man gave the server a sweet smile and almost reached for her hip, but he noticed Tibs's eyes on him and pulled his hand away.

"Kind of obvious, ain't it?" He sipped his tankard. "If I'm doing the work, I don't see why they should be the ones benefiting."

"So they survive," Tibs said.

The rogue snorted. "What do I care if they're the ones feeding the dungeon? Better them than me."

"You should," Quigly said, "because each one who survives because we helped them will be someone to share the burden of protecting Merchant Row once they are strong enough." He ran a finger along the rim of his tankard. "Right now, our biggest problem, as far as I can see, is one of numbers. If Harry objects to what we're planning, we can't stop him from shutting us down. How final that is will depend on how much goodwill Tibs has built with the guild. But the more Runners we add to our numbers, the easier it is to operate despite their protest."

"It's not like you need the coins," Jackal said, "with the loot the dungeon hands out."

"And how much of that do I get to keep?" Stick replied. "Do any of you know how much this training we are forced to go through is costing, or that we're going to have to pay for it at some point? I don't know about you, but I'm not planning on being a slave to the guild for my entire life."

Josaca looked at Carina, while Quigly looked at Jackal.

"I'll give you the details later," Carina told her, and Jackal simply offered a shrug.

"The merchants aren't going to pay us enough for that to make a difference," Tibs said. It didn't matter how much the merchants would offer, Tibs hadn't thought to ask about that either, but the coins the guild demanded for each day of training were gold. Only the dungeon could hope to approach that, and Alistair had told him that even that wouldn't be enough to pay for everything.

"It could be, if we charge enough." The grin Stick gave wasn't pleasant. "After all, if they don't pay us, who's going to keep them safe from all the criminals in the town if we don't? The guards?"

"Stick," Quigly snapped as Tibs stood, water moving over his hand and forming into a jagged blade.

"I will," Tibs said, glaring at the rogue. The sword crackles as the water turned to ice, parts flaking off to reveal sharp points and edges. "This is my town. If you don't want to help, that's fine. But I will protect the people here. I'm going to do it if no one pays me. Sebastian nearly destroyed us. I'm not letting you or anyone else try it."

“Hey,” Stick said, raising his hands defensively, “relax, I was joking. Of course, I wouldn’t do anything against the town and the people here.”

“Why is he here?” Tibs asked, not taking his eyes off the rogue. He was lying. He didn’t need to see the way he glowed to know it. Trying to excuse something with humor was something Tibs had been on the receiving end of often. Even Jackal used it, but with him, it was to excuse the moments where he showed himself as not being the idiot he wanted people to see him as.

“He’s here,” Quigly replied reluctantly, “because he has a better understanding of the rogues who came with us than I do. He proved instrumental in getting them to help and keeping them controlled while we survived what Sebastian threw at us. I also thought he understood what was important. Seems I was wrong about that.

“The dungeon,” Stick scoffed.

“The town,” the warrior countered before Tibs could. Tibs wasn’t sure how Quigly kept his voice steady. “The dungeon’s where we work. It’s like the mines those who can’t afford the land for their farms go to so they can pay their taxes to—” he looked around, even Tibs had pulled his gaze from the rogue to look at him, wondering what he was talking about. “Never mind. The point is that the town is where we live. If that goes to shit, how are we going to rest between runs? You really want the merchants pissed at you?”

“Fine-fine.” Stick took a nervous swallow. “I’m on board. Honest, I am.” He lied as Tibs narrowed his eyes at him. “But you can think of me as what you’re going to have to deal with trying to convince the others.” That wasn’t a lie. And Tibs had trouble figuring out if it was because the rogue knew the others that well, or because he didn’t and just believed they’d be like that. “Fuck, what kind of criminals are you?”

“The surviving kind,” Jackal replied, and Tibs heard the smile in his voice. “Maybe if we hadn’t been sent here, those of us who survive our crimes would be like you and no longer care about the larger painting make of everyone that affects and is affected by us.” He paused. “Maybe if I hadn’t met Tibs, I’d be like you, anyway. But we’re not. We had to depend on each other to survive. And we can take what we learned, teach the new Omegas that they aren’t alone either, and along the way, make sure they don’t die needlessly and they will want to help the rest of us survive in return.”

Stick stared at the fighter, stunned.

“I was told you were stupid,” Josaca said.

Jackal grinned proudly. “Oh, I am the stupid one. So if you think what I’m saying sounds smart, maybe you should pay attention to what Tibs says a little more. I don’t need to include Carina. You two are friends, so you already know she’s the smartest person in this town.”

“Don’t lay it on so thick,” Carina replied, rolling her eyes.

“The point remains,” Jackal said, “I’m the idiot, so listen when Tibs speaks.”

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“Stick, stay seated,” Jackal said as the others stood to leave.

The discussion had gone on too long, as far as Tibs was concerned. They were going to help, so why worry about who would do what, what split of the payment made more sense

to use for which group of Omegas. How would they decide which Omegas they helped? Because as much as Tibs wanted to help all of them, even he knew that was impossible.

But the important conclusion that had been reached was that they would accept Darran's offer. The rest, the others could deal with, as far as Tibs was concerned.

Tibs sat down again, as did Quigly. Carina looked at Jackal, who shook his head, so she, Josaca, and Samuel left. The archer had offered a suggestion here or there, but on the whole, seemed as mystified as to why he was there as Tibs was. He'd have to check with Khumdar.

"You don't have to stay," Jackal told the warrior.

"I brought Stick in. Whatever this is, I should be taking some of the fallout."

Jackal nodded.

Stick looked too comfortable for Tibs's liking.

"First of all," Jackal said, "I want to make it clear that your help during the siege was invaluable. I don't think we would have lasted quite as long as we did if not for the way you kept the rogues in line and on our side."

The smile the rogue gave showed he knew what he'd done and what he believed he was owed in return.

"So, take what I'm going to say next with that in mind." Jackal's expression darkened. "If Tibs doesn't skewer you for what you're thinking of doing, I am going to rip your head off."

The smile vanished, replaced by confusion.

"See, I think you forgot who my father is," the fighter said. "What he trained me to become. I know how you organized the rogues and that it's how you were able to be effective. The problem for you is that I also know what the next step is. Now you're thinking you're too important to be replaced. If you were to...oh, die between this table and the door, the other rogue would rise up and avenge you and we can't deal with that." The smile he gave the rogue wasn't pleasant. "Just nod if I'm even slightly close to what's been going through your mind."

Stick nodded, then swallowed.

"Now. Here's where you're wrong. Those people you organized; they aren't thieves or cutthroats. They're rogues. They're Runners. The dungeon forces us to understand that everyone dies. So when you do...if you do. They're just going to look for someone else to take charge. There might be scuffles as they work out the order, but even if they know who caused it to happen, they aren't going to care. You aren't that important overall. And the guy they end up rallying behind isn't going to let them cause the kind of problem you're imaging."

"You," Stick stammered nervously. "You sound rather certain of how who'd replace me will act."

Jackal shrugged. "I know how Tibs thinks."

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the fighter. He wasn't taking over anything.

"So, you need to decide what's really important to you, Stick. I'm not someone who wants to keep people in place through fear, but I understand its effectiveness. If that is what

it takes, I can scare the shit out of you.” Jackal’s smile turned sweet and Stick paled.

“But you’d prefer if Stick realized that what we’re doing of better for him,” Quigly said.

“See, that’s why I thought you should stick around,” Jackal replied. “You’re better with words than I am.”

“We can’t know how you lived, Stick,” Quigly said. “I can make guesses they can’t, but that’s all they’re going to be. But you aren’t alone anymore. If you can understand that. This can turn into a good thing for you.”

“Or at least a longer—”

“Stop,” Tibs ordered and, for once, Jackal’s mouth obeyed.

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Don preened next to the schedule.

His name wasn’t on it, because he was going in before everyone, even the nobles.

Tibs had been surprised to find out the schedule was up since there had been no gathering the day before, as there had been the previous times Omegas had arrived. He’d noticed a few arrivals throughout the previous day of young men and women escorted by guards, and Tibs had thought Harry was still organizing and would give his speech today.

As the Hero of Kragle Rock, it had been easy for Don to rebuild his team. Even those who hated him and had found themselves without a team on their return had flocked to join. The sorcerer had been far too happy when he told some of them that no, they weren’t suitable for his team.

“There are a lot more teams now,” Carina remarked.

“Only five new ones among the nobles,” Mez pointed out.

“Are any of those new teams the Omegas?” Tibs asked. “Is that why there was no gathering?”

“I don’t know,” Carina said. “Usually, by the time a dungeon is Rho, everyone who comes pays for the chance. With it surviving the attack, it made sense they brought in convicts then, and after the way nearly everyone from that group died, the recruits also made sense. Now, I don’t think we’re going to see anymore convicts.”

“Is that going to affect the plan?” Tibs asked.

Mez stared at him, his expression darkening, while Khumdar simply smiled. When Tibs had asked him about Samuel, the cleric simply replied not to underestimate the man’s value. In the following meetings, the archer had revealed a knowledge of the town that even Tibs didn’t have, and he had been vital in planning patrol routes and scheduling them.

“We’ll have to see,” Jackal replied. “They’re still Omegas, so even if they paid to be here. They will need help. Did you... have any idea what the third floor’s going to be like?”

Tibs shook his head. “We’re going to have to discover that just like everyone else.”

“Except we’ll have the information the previous teams give us to help,” Mez said, then looked at them. “Won’t we?”

“You recognize any of the names before us?” Jackal asked. “Everyone’s new will have been told not to talk about the dungeon outside of it. They won’t have our experience with how the guild doesn’t actually care. So this time, I think Tibs’s right.” He grinned. “It’s going

to be brand new to us.”

Tibs had told Jackal and Carina of Sto’s request for them to explore the third floor without foreknowledge and the fighter had been eager for it, while Carine had only agreed reluctantly and as a concession to Sto being a person, and not simply a creature.

“We have two weeks before it’s our turn, so that’s plenty of time to get in training.”

“Did this siege I and Mez miss not count as training?” Khumdar asked, still looking the names over.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jackal replied. “Did I say our training? I mean, your training. Unless you and Mez got caught in a war of your own while you were enjoying your time away, you two need it much more than we do.”

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Alistair’s expression became one of pride at seeing Tibs. “You’re eyes, they’re blue.”

The smile Tibs wore was forced. He hadn’t been looking forward to this meeting. As used to functioning while channeling Water as he was now, there would be a lot of lies with Alistair and Tibs wasn’t certain he had enough control not to give himself away to another rogue, one far more experienced at it.

He would have preferred not to channel the element for this, but too many people had seen Tibs’s eyes while he channeled at this point, and Carina’s store of the color ‘coming and going,’ and only worked in the early days, before Jackal insisted Tibs always have Water at the ready, both as an exercise in controlling himself, and because that was the element he’d need to rely on until they were certain of his control of the others. None of them had been willing to even entertain testing them now that the town was filling again.

“It started happening after I came back, among the fighting. Sometime toward the end of it, they stayed blue.”

Alistair took Tibs’s chin and made him look up, studying his eyes. “I heard about that. Nasty business. I’m glad you came out of it better.”

“Like you’d have come.” Tibs cursed himself mentally for letting that slip.

“Of course, I would have, Tibs. If I’d been called, I would have taken part in protecting the town.”

Alistair didn’t lie, and Tibs hated his ability to tell that right now. He couldn’t be angry at him for something he hadn’t even known had taken place. And he didn’t want to ask if Alistair would have defied the guild if they instructed him to stay out of it, the way Harry had.

Harry had told him, at some point, that there were times when not asking a question was better than knowing the answer. Tibs understood what he meant now that he’d have to deal with the truth, no matter whether he wanted it or not.

Alistair smiled and seemed invigorated. “Now that you are fully Rho, we can move on to the good stuff.” He led Tibs to a training room.