

## Chapter 41

“Good,” Jackal greeted Tibs as he entered the room. “Now that you’re here, we can go over our training schedule.”

Tibs looked at his friends, processing what Jackal said. Mez was lying back on his bed, seeming asleep. The cleric was seated on his bed, legs crossed in a way that looked painful, his eyes were closed, and his breathing slow. Was he also asleep? Carina pulled a stone plaque and chalk out from under her bed, smiling at him.

Tibs was not doing what she was planning on training him in. “I am going to train at night.”

The fighter frowned. “That’s not going to work for us, Tibs.”

“I don’t need you to train with me,” he answered, unsure why they’d want to take part in his training.

“We need to train together, Tibs,” Jackal said, “as a team. If the boss has shown us anything, it’s that we need to work together, and we have Mez and Khumdar to incorporate.”

“Oh, no. I mean I’m going to do my Rogue training at night. It’s the best way to not get caught when I steal.”

Mez sat. “Care to run that by me again?”

“I’m a Rogue,” he said, enunciating the words as he headed for his bed. “Rogues train by stealing.”

“No,” Jackal said. “The rules are clear. No crime. That means no stealing.”

Tibs shrugged and lied down. “Harry said to just make sure I didn’t get caught.”

“You spoke with Hard Knuckles?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“My teacher called him over, I think they know each other.”

“And he said you can steal?” the fighter asked, still sounding like he didn’t believe him.

“So long as I don’t get caught. If I do, it’s a cell for me. At least I won’t lose a hand anymore.” That was a definite improvement over the street and how things used to be here.

“But it puts us out of at least a run,” Carina said. She had the stone plaque on her lap, and Tibs saw forms that could be letters on it in chalk. “You do remember we need the five of us to go in. We can only get a replacement if you die.”

“Which we won’t arrange,” Jackal stated, looking at each of them.

Carina rolled her eyes. Mez did a gesture with the fingers of a hand Tibs thought was meant to be rude, and Khumdar opened his eyes.

“I’m hoping that is simply some way you have to defuse the tension and not an actual warning because you expect one of us to do it.”

“Well,” the fighter grinned, “It isn’t like I know you all that well. For all I know, you’re so obsessed with coins you have no problem killing one of us so we can replace him and go on the run.”

Khumdar stared at the fighter.

“He isn’t serious,” Carina said.

“Jackal likes to think he’s funny,” Tibs added.

“I am funny. It’s you who has no sense of humor. Kro laughs at my jokes.”

Tibs looked at his friend. “He’s your guy, isn’t he forced to laugh?”

Carina snorted, then covered her mouth to stifle the laughter.

“Now that is funny,” Mez said, and Jackal glared at him.

“Tibs, I think you’ve lost track of the dynamics here,” the fighter said. “It’s you and me against the rest of them. So you should be taking my side.”

“That stopped being true when we became a team,” Tibs replied. “Now it’s all of us against them.”

“Since I refuse to acknowledge you, just think of me as one of the team, instead of your very best friend, I’m going back to the start of this and take Carina’s side and not yours.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

Tibs shrugged. “I’m only put in a cell if I get caught. I’m not going to get caught.”

“May I point out what I think is a flaw in your reasoning, Tibs?” Khumdar asked, still not looking sure of Jackal’s behavior. “This isn’t a city, it’s barely more than a village, for all that it’s called a town. Once something goes missing, won’t this Harry know it’s you? You already as much as admitted you were the one then you asked about being able to.”

“Hard Knuckles is going to need proof Tibs did it,” Jackal said. “He isn’t someone who throws a thief in a cell because he thinks he’s the one who did it. But Khumdar has a point. Knuckles knows what you’re planing. He is going to make sure his rabble is keeping an eye on you.”

Tibs snorted. Like losing one of them was going to be hard. He never saw them look up. “No one is going to know I took anything. Not even the people I take it from.”

“Tibs, I know you think you’re good,” Carina said, “but—”

“I am good,” Tibs said, sitting. “But that’s not why.” He looked at them. “Who here other than us Runners pays attention to how many coppers we have? I’ll just take one to prove I did it.” He looked at Jackal.

“This isn’t like MountainSea, Tibs,” the fighter said. “Here the trouble’s real, Hard Knuckles isn’t a nice man.”

“He seems nicer than whoever was here before him,” Tibs said. “At least he’s keeping his guard under control instead of letting them do what they want. And I have to train. I’m a Rogue, I can’t just practice in the dungeon, that’s going to get us killed.”

“You can already deal with the dungeon,” Jackal said. “Don’t sell yourself short. My understanding is you work out the pattern on the tiles the first time you saw that room, you’re the one who saw the boss door first. You even opened it without any tools.”

“The dungeon’s going to get harder. I never noticed the hidden key in the boulder room. I have to train, Jackal. I don’t want any of us to die.”

“He does have a point,” Mez said. “Of all of us, Rogues are the only ones who haven’t gotten serious training. You’re fought, I shot my bow, I expect sorcerers did sorcery stuff, but the Rogues only had cheap traps and locks to work with. The ones we

have left are good because they were already better than anyone who had to rely on the training they got here to survive.”

“I thought you were against him stealing,” Jackal said.

“I’m not some nobles more interested in being right,” Mez replied. “Tibs had good points. I don’t like it, but unless you can think of someone good that you can convince to teach him. Unlike us, he’s on his own.”

Tibs fixed his gaze on the fighter. Jackal glanced at him then Carina before running a hand over his face. “Okay, but it’s not for the reason you think. You want to tell him, Tibs? You’re the one who found that out.”

Mez looked at Tibs, and as with Jackal and Carina, he considered not telling him. Even now that Jackal had made it clear there was something. But Mez deserved the truth. Every Runner did, but Tibs couldn’t tell all of them.

“You can’t tell anyone outside this room,” Tibs said. “I don’t know what the guild will do if they find out we know, but I don’t it’s going to be anything good.” He waited for the archer to nod. “The guild is charging us for every day of training we get. We can’t get out of it. If you refuse to train with who they assigned you, they’ll find someone else. Once we reach Epsilon, we’re going to have to pay it all back or do work for the guild.”

“You talk like that isn’t how things are always done,” Mez said. “No one offers services for free.”

“They charge three gold per day,” Jackal said.

“That’s fine,” the archer said. “I’m used to—how much?”

“Three gold per day,” Carina repeated.

“That can’t be right. You mean silver.”

Tibs shook his head. “My teacher is who told me. He didn’t lie.”

“Why would he tell you something like that?”

“It came up,” Tibs said, and shook his head when Mez looked like he would say more. “I believe him.”

“Three gold a day,” Khumdar said. “Even nobles wouldn’t pay those rates for training.”

“At least the dungeon gives us loot,” Mez said, sounding like he clung to that fact to avoid falling off the edge of a roof.

“Alright,” Jackal said, breaking the extending silence. “We already knew we were being screwed, right? Knowing how much doesn’t change where we are. We’re Runners, and in a few days, we are going to have a dungeon to run. One that graduated. Tibs, you need to do your Rogue training your way. Fine, I can’t do anything to prevent that, but we still need to train as a team. We need to work out our strengths and our weaknesses.”

Tibs nodded.

“Do anyone here still have essence training,” Jackal asked the room, “or are you also at that ‘be one with your essence’ thing?”

Tibs snorted.

“That’s not what my teacher called it,” Carina said, looking at him oddly, “but yes, until I master my essence, there’s nothing she can teach me.”

“Same here,” Mez said.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked.

He tried not to snicker. “I’m like that too.”

“I told you I was funny,” Jackal said.

Tibs thought about telling them, trying to show them how to move past where they were. He was almost sure Alistair had given him permission, and that even if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t be too angry with him. They were Rogues, so rules didn’t have to stick to them.

But how would his friends’ teachers react? What if their breakthrough came while around others? How would any of them explain it? His teacher would understand. Would the guild?

Alistair had warned him against thinking of Tirania as an ally.

They had their full reserve, Tibs decided, they could afford to do things the way the guild dictated for a while longer.

“So how do we train our weakness?” Carina asked. “Figure out how strength? I’m not sure any of you understand how sorcery works well enough to help me.”

“I’m thinking of asking one of the other team for help,” Jackal said. “Maybe more than one. We can all use the help.”

“Will the guild allow it?” Tibs asked.

“We’re not competing against each other,” Jackal replied. “Our opponent is the dungeon.”

“So long as you don’t ask Don for help,” Mez said, “I’m okay with it.”

Jackal closed and opened his hand. There were only faint lines left, and he didn’t seem to feel any pain. “No danger of that. Tibs, do you work better after waking up, or after a day of being awake?”

He considered it. “Either.”

“Then how do you plan on arranging your training?”

“Our run’s in the morning. I’m going to sleep in the afternoon, train my Rogue skills at night.”

“So that leaves us the morning to train together,” Jackal finished with a nod.

“The run probably won’t always be in the morning,” Mez pointed out.

“True,” Jackal replied, “but unless we plan on putting all our coins in to try for a spot on the first day, Tibs will know long enough ahead to adjust. Right?”

Tibs nodded again.

“Alright, we have a plan. Tibs doesn’t get caught, I talk with a few of the teams to see what can be arranged and we train until our run. And Tibs, I’m serious about not getting caught. Forget the team and us needing you to do the run. Trust me when I tell you that you don’t want to be alone in a cell where Hard Knuckles people can get to you.”

“You’re going to have to tell us what’s between you and him, Jackal,” Carina said.

“Prey I never have to.”

“I won’t get caught,” Tibs said. “I promise.”

“Good. Then I’m going to celebrate before starting negotiations. Who’s with me?”

“I’m going to sleep,” Tibs said, stretching. “So I can start training tonight. Tell Kroseph to go easy on you, okay? You have training in the morning.”