

Chapter 36

The Long in the Tooth tavern was nearly empty, something Tibs had never known it to be since it had opened. As Runners died, how full the tavern was diminished, but it was the first and most popular tavern in the town, in Kraggle Rock. The few people Tibs immediately noticed were townsfolk, a few merchants, and someone, head on the bar, tankard tipped over.

He realized the cleric might not be here; he might have left not long the noble had seen him. He'd be somewhere on the field, being snatched by another team. But if he'd been wallowing, as the noble said, maybe he'd been too withdrawn to notice everyone leaving. If not, well, a second fighter would be a good fit, so long as they could take Jackal's orders.

He missed the man, sitting at the furthest table from the door, twice. He'd been looking for a white robe, like that of Paul; something similar to the sorcerers' but made of a heavier material, and with a hood, that Paul hadn't had lifted. The man's robes were black, and he had the hood over his head, creating shadows that entirely hide his features.

Tibs headed for his table. "Are you a cleric?" he asked, standing opposite from the man. Other than the color, he looked like what Tibs imagined a cleric would.

"Go away," the man said, without looking up.

"If you're a cleric, we—"

"I said," the man cut him off angrily, raising his head, "go—" he stuttered and his black eyes went wide, looking at Tibs. He sighed. "Kid, whoever put you up to this, it isn't funny." The man's eyes weren't that so pale color Paul's eyes had been. This was more like Bardik's eyes.

Maybe he wasn't a cleric, Tibs wondered. Only one way to know for sure. "Are you a cleric?"

The man sighed and took a long swallow from the tankard. "Yes, I am." He glared at Tibs. "Are you happy now?"

Tibs sat, grinning. "Do you want to be on our team?"

The man stared at him, then looked around the inn, searching.

"They're coming," Tibs said. "I ran. I wanted to make sure I was the first to ask you."

"The first?" The man chuckled bitterly. "You think you're the first person to ask me? I went around and offered my services and everyone laughed at me. You're the only one to ask. And I'm guessing whoever sent you running for me didn't tell you anything about me."

"He said you were mopping."

The man opened his mouth, looked at the tankard, then sighed.

"You're a cleric, I need you to heal—"

The man sighed. "Of course you do. I'm not that kind of cleric, kid."

"My name's Tibs. Aren't there just one kind of cleric?"

"That's just what those purity assholes want you to think. I—" The door slammed

open and Mez entered, carrying most of Jackal's weight.

"That's them!" Tibs exclaimed. He ran to them. "What happened?"

"Just tired," Jackal said, his face pale.

"You shouldn't have run off, Tibs," Carina said, angrily. "We're a team."

"But I had to make sure we got the cleric." Tibs pointed to the table. "He's right there, and no one asked him to be on their team yet."

She looked, and her face darkened. "That's not a cleric,"

"He said he was," Tibs replied. The man was headed toward them, looking concerned.

"He lied," she snapped, glaring at the man.

"I did not." He looked at Jackal. "What happened to you?" He placed a hand on his forehead and frowned.

"Had some jackass sorcerer do something to my hand." Jackal tried to raise it, but his face twisted in pain. "Always thought I was tougher than this."

The man took Jackal to the closest chair. "You have a fever." He took the hand in his and Jackal cried out.

The Old Walrus stepped out from behind the bar, but Tibs shook his head. The man frowned and took another step, but Tibs glared at him, and with a shrug, he returned to the bar.

"This is corruption," the man said.

"Like that hard to tell," Carina said mockingly.

"You say a sorcerer did this?"

"His name's Don," Tibs said. "He's an asshole."

The man looked at Carina. "Many of them tend to be, yes." He studied the hand again. "I can help you with this."

"Bullshit," Carina exclaimed. "You can't heal." Tibs stared at her. The only time she used that kind of language was when she was being ignored.

"How right you are," the man said, annoyed. "But it's just like one of you to think healing is the only way to fix something. I can help you, but as she is so eager to point it, it isn't healing. But it will allow you to get better, to heal on your own."

"How much?" Jackal asked.

The man thought it over. "The boy's already paid."

"I didn't give you any coins," Tibs said, checking his pouch in case the man had taken them when he wasn't looking.

He chuckled. "Friendliness and honesty, that's how you paid me. I'm also doing it to show your snooty sorceress that a cure doesn't always come in the form of healing."

Carina protested, but Jackal spoke over her. "If I'm not spending the coins, I'm taking the help." Carina sat, glaring at the cleric.

He closed both hands over Jackal's and closed his eyes. He took a breath, and as he released it, Jackal tensed, then strung more curses one after the other than Tibs had ever heard him say.

"What did you do?" Carina demanded, standing again, air whipping around her.

Jackal was slumped against Mez, breathing heavily.

Tibs sensed Carina's essence and wondered if he could disrupt it if she attacked the man. He wouldn't have to worry about her fighting against it, she shouldn't know it was possible at this point. Even if the cleric wasn't officially a Runner, Harry had said he didn't want any crimes in the town.

The man sat in a chair, looking tired. "I did what my element requires of me."

"That's bullshit," she replied. "The elements don't require anything of us."

"It doesn't require anything of you," he said with disdain, "you're only a sorceress."

"You—" she raised a hand, and the essence formed a construct there, Tibs focused on it.

"Enough!" Jackal said, not looking great, but sounding better. "Carina, no fighting in town, you know that."

"He—" she glared at the man in the black robes.

"Helped." Jackal winced as he stretched. "What did you do?"

"I ended the corruption that sorcerer put in you. Killed it, for all intents and purposes." He motioned to Old Walrus.

"Your essence is about killing?" Tibs asked, wondering if Carina might not be right. "Darkness is about hiding." He thought about something else. "It's about secrets."

The man inclined his head to Tibs as the barman placed a tankard on the table. The cleric took a copper coin from somewhere within his robes, and Tibs heard the tinkle of many coins.

"For you, thieves—"

"Rogues," Tibs said. "Criminals are thieves, Runners are Rogues."

The man took a sip of his drink. "Understood. For you, Rogues, archers, fighters, and sorceresses, the element is simply what their essence is. You manipulate that, and nothing more. For us, clerics—Carina snorted derisively—we reach deeper, into the truth of the element. A fighter of purity can't do what that same element's cleric can. Oh, they can heal, somewhat, but the results are closer to what I did than what a purity cleric does, they boost what the body can do, the cleric makes it right. To do that, they have to reach deep within the element, to give themselves over entirely to it."

Jackal slowly closed and opened his hand, wincing, but he was regaining a proper color. "I'm just happy you did what you did. Or didn't you have a choice, with the element demanding that you kill things?"

"Don't indulge him," Carina said.

"I'm better because of him," Jackal said, "I'd like to know a little more about him."

"You're better, so let's go see Kroseph," she replied. "He's going to worry."

Jackal studied her. "He's going to worry less if I'm better when he sees me, so we have the time."

"I'm not sure I have enough ale to go through that," The man said, chuckling.

Jackal motioned to the barkeep. "Walrus! Round for everyone at this table and

keep bringing them, we'll be here a while, I think." The cleric looked thoughtful until they each had a tankard. Reluctantly, Carina sat with them.

"When I said that we give ourselves over to the element, that doesn't mean we lose our will. I still decide what I'll do, but Darkness, my element, demands that I make use of it, that I use death."

"Oh," Mez exclaimed. "You make undead!"

"No!" the cleric snapped. "That desecrates death, I honor it." He indicated Jackal's hand. "I took away what made the corruption what it is, so killed it. You are correct, Sorceress Carina?" he hesitated.

"That's right," Jackal said. "I'm Jackal, that's Tibs, and this is." He paused. "You heard how teams have to operate now, Mez. I'm afraid you need to decide if you're in or out before we tackle the entry fee."

The archer let out a breath, "I'm in. You got that standing up to Don for me. You didn't have to, Jack, I doubt many would have, and yes Tibs, I am worth it."

Tibs patted Jackal's arm before the fighter could speak. "You're back to being the dumb one of the team."

"When did I stop being it?" Jackal asked, staring at Mez. "Are you trying to steal my spot? And to be clear, Don did this to me because I am an idiot. Also, it's Jackal, nothing else. Welcome to the team." He turned to the cleric. "Go on."

The man looked from one to the other.

"Think of them as brothers," Carina said, then stiffened, as if realizing she shouldn't have spoken to him.

The man nodded and smiled. "Seeing how you have given me your names, it feels wrong not to do the same in return. I am Khumdar of Temerity."

"Of course you'd take that name," Carina scoffed. "And here I was starting to think you might be decent."

"So what am I missing?" Jackal asked. "About this little exchange, we don't have to go over the entirety of what I miss."

"The Temerity family are among the most prestigious purity families. So it makes sense someone like *him* would do everything he can to pass himself off at one of them."

"Isn't that narrow-minded of you?" Mez asked, and she glared at her. "Come on, how many kingdoms are there? Why would you automatically doubt his honor? Do you really believe there is only one family by the name of Temerity? Just in the city I'm from, I know of three others with Dhaliwald as a family name, and we are not related even distantly."

"I make no claims to being of *that* Temerity family," Khumdar said.

Carina turned red and looked into her tankard. Jackal leaned to whisper something to Mez, and Tibs was distracted from that by the smile Khumdar had. When he noticed Tibs watching, the cleric winked at him, then composed his face into something serious.

"So, you kill stuff," Jackal said. "I can see that being an asset in the dungeon. How are you against—"

"Excuse me," a man said loudly, approaching the table. "You are Tibs's team,

correct?” He wore clean, unworn clothing in vibrant greens and gold and stood straight; as if someone had tied a staff to his back.

“I’m on the team,” Tibs answered.

The man glanced at Tibs and immediately dismissed him to look at Carina. “I’m told this team was the first to kill the floor boss.”

She looked at Jackal and Tibs, both of whom shrugged. She shrugged too. “If they say that, sure.”

The man looked put upon. “Are you, or are you not that team? My Lady is ready to pay handsomely for the details of how you did it?”

“How much?” Jackal asked.

“Jackal,” Tibs warned. They had rules.

“I’m just curious at how much the information’s going for.”

The man looked at Carina, who raised an eyebrow. “Two electrum pieces,” he said.

“Per team member?” Jackal asked. “Okay, I’m impressed.”

“Do not be ridiculous; it’s for the information. Why would she pay each of you, when she only needs one of you to talk?”

“Oh well, in that case, no deal,” Jackal said.

The man glared at Jackal and waited. When nothing else happened, he looked at Carina. “Will you let this *man* speak for you, M’lady?”

Tibs had never heard ‘man’ used as an insult before. Even at his angriest, Kroseph didn’t call Jackal that in that way.

Carina stared at the noble, looking stunned. When he kept looking at her, she sighed and stood. She straightened her robe and suddenly, she looked the man’s equal, instead of being another Runner like them.

“That man, as you put so well, happens to be my team leader—”

Jackal choked on his ale.

“—so you have your answer.”

“M’lady, you cannot be serious, no only is he a man, he’s clearly a commoner.”

Carina sighed and raised a hand, air whipping around it. There was hardly any essence there Tibs could see. “Keep insulting my team leader and I’m going to whirlwind you of the building do hard you’re going to break the door.”

The man took a step back. “You don’t understand the opportunity you are missing. My Lady Cabera is—” with a yelp, he ran off as Carina pointed at him.

“What was that?” Mez asked.

“That was an Asemerian, I believe,” Khumdar said. “They have a rigid caste system with women in charge. I’m curious as to why you didn’t negotiate a higher price, if the offer was too low. They clearly have wealth.”

“There’s a rule against talking about the dungeon outside of it,” Mez said, then looked at Jackal. “Maybe the rule isn’t in place anymore, and that’s why he’s asking? Two electrum’s a lot of money, especially for those of us who haven’t had a chance to hold any.”

“If the rule wasn’t there anymore,” Jackal said, “Hard Knuckles would have said so. Let some other team take the risk. I’m just happy that when they asked, they heard we were the first.”

“I told you it wouldn’t matter what other stories were told,” Carina said.

Jackal nodded. “Never doubted you.” She rolled her eyes. “With that little distraction dealt with, I’d like to resolve the issue of you, Khumdar.”

The man nodded. “Let me assuage your concerns. You have given me your names, I have given you mine. Forgoing initial preconceptions, you have treated me in a way I have not been accustomed to in a long time.”

“How?” Tibs asked, surprised at the claim. He couldn’t see how they’d treated him any differently than they did anyone else who didn’t cause them trouble first.

“By treating me like a person, instead of some thing. And a thing no one approves of atop that.” He looked at Carina. “If you will have me, I will be part of this team.”

She squirmed. “I really should be the one apologizing for how I treated you. I am sorry. I’ve been raised with the understanding clerics were something of purity. That anyone else claiming to be one are just swindlers looked to take coins from honest workers.”

“That’s the guild,” Jackal said.

“I shouldn’t have jumped to any conclusion,” Carina said, glaring at the fighter, “and especially that just because you are from a family names Temerity, you were claiming to be from *that* family. You joining isn’t something one person should decide, but I’m okay with you being on the team.”

“Oh good,” Jackal said in relief, “I was afraid you were serious with this ‘I’m in charge’ bullshit. I vote for you to be in too.”

“What are you talking about?” Mez asked. “You are the leader. You’re in.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re in,” Tibs said, grinning at Khumdar. “Our team leader wanted you on the team from the start.”

“I did not! Tibs, you’re in charge, please. You and Carina are the smart ones. You two lead, I’m just the dumb fighter.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Carina said, and Tibs stared at her suspiciously. “He’s going to be ordering us again in under an hour. I can hold out for that long. How about you, Tibs?”

He looked at Jackal glaring at Carina. “I’m staying out of it.” He put his hands over his mouth for emphasis.

Jackal groaned.

“So,” Carina said, adopting the same regal bearing she had with the noble. “I believe Jackal had asked something about how you’d perform something before we were interrupted. I’m afraid I have no idea what he could have been referring to, since he was speaking out of turn, seeing how I am the leader and not him. Wait, that means I can go find that servant and actually say yes to the deal.” She stood, but Jackal grabbed her arm, wincing only a little at the motion.

“You’re enjoying the position too much. Nothing good ever comes from a leader who enjoys ordering people about.”

“Oh, so you’re perfect for it?” She smiled.

“Tibs doesn’t want it either.”

“Everyone treats me like a kid. Who’ll listen to what I say?”

Jackal and Carina looked at one another, but before either could speak, Khumdar asked a question.

“How old are you, Tibs?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the cleric. “Old enough to survive the dungeon. How old are you?”

The man looked at the four of them, a smile forming. “So much older than any of you.”