

“Where is Don?” the Runner demanded, and Tibs looked up from the bowl of stew was enjoying. The man was a fighter with metal as his element. Tibs was getting better at identifying the tint in the essence flowing through them.

“Now,” Jackal replied, “why would anyone at this table know where the asshole is?”

“Jackal,” the man glared at the team leader, “everyone knows he hates Tibs and you are going to keep tabs on anyone that can put your rogue in danger. You also have an annoying habit of knowing too much about the people in this town.”

Khumdar looked at Jackal, who shrugged.

“I like talking with people, and they open up to me. It’s not my fault if you piss off everyone who just looked at you, Arruh.”

“This isn’t about me being jealous of anything. That sorcerer is involved in what happened at the Caravan Garden a few days ago.”

“How do you figure?” Mez asked.

“Who else in this town has corruption as their essence?”

“I have air,” Carina said, “are you going to come to blame me when a strong wind makes a pole fall?”

“You aren’t an asshole who’ll poison you with it just because you got a better steak than he did.”

“Considering the way he behaves,” Jackal said, “I’m surprised there’s anyone left willing to serve him.”

“Jackal, where is he? You know it’s just a question of time before the guards start looking for him, and they aren’t going to care how many of us get raked over in the process. Me and a few others are going to find him first and make sure he pays for what he did.”

“For what you think he did,” Khumdar said. “You have no evidence he has anything to do with that.”

“He’s corruption,” Arruh stated.

“No, he has corruption as his essence. Believe me when I say that is not the same thing.”

“Are you going to help us, or are you going to protect that asshole?”

“I’d like to help you,” Jackal replied. “I’d love to, in fact, but I don’t know where he is. No one’s seen or heard of him since the building fell.”

Arruh cursed and stormed off.

“Would you have handed him over to be beaten if you’d known where he was?” Mez asked Jackal.

The fighter shrugged. “I’m surprised you aren’t out there looking for him, considering you were under his tender care for a while.”

“I would love to see that sorcerer punished for the things he did, to me and others,” Mez replied, “but does anyone here believe he had something to do with that corruption?”

“No,” Tibs said between bites, then felt the stares on him.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, “That man threatened you, tried to feed you to the dungeon. Are you defending him?”

Tibs sighed. “Don isn’t an idiot. If he was, he’d have tried to hurt me already because

he thinks it's my fault his rogue's in a cell and might cost him his turn in the dungeon. There's one person in the entire town who has corruption as his essence. He'd know he'd be the first person suspected. If he wanted to destroy that shop, he'd used something else." He thought about it. "He'd get someone else to do it, that way if they get caught he can claim not to have anything to do with it."

"Until Harry asks him," Jackal said.

"I don't think Harry is going to get to ask anything," Carina said. "Arruh isn't going to stop looking, and the town isn't so big Don can hide in it for always. Someone is going to find him, and considering how angry everyone is about the destruction, I suspect they aren't going to stop at just a beating."

"Will that not cause the people to be put to death?" Khumdar asked.

"Might not matter," Jackal replied. "Everyone's gotten attached to this place. They probably feel that letting Don walk around is just asking for another building to be destroyed. People are going to do a lot of stupid things when they think they're defending their home."

Tibs looked at his bowl, his appetite leaving.

It wasn't his problem, he told himself. Don could take care of himself. If he couldn't it wasn't like the town would miss him. Back on his street, people got worse treatment for less.

Only he wasn't back there.

This was his town. And it wouldn't miss Don. But it might miss the idiots who killed him. Arruh was one of the original Runners, he was a strong metal fighter, loyal to his team too. That would break them up. How would they react? Would they be able to form a new team?

It wasn't like the early days, when you worked with anyone that was put on your team. Now you got to know them. They became family.

Harry wouldn't let Don's death go unpunished. Tibs wasn't sure he'd kill the person who did it, but they would be taken away. And with the Chaos that created, the Nobles could get more control.

He forced himself to continue eating. Don could wait until he was done.

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The barkeep eyed Tibs suspiciously. "Yeah, I know Slim. Why are you asking?"

Tibs shrugged. "He owes me coins." Slim was Don's fighter, his current one, at least. Don was rough on the people he had working for him. Enough Tibs was confident if not for the fact only teams went into the dungeon, Don wouldn't have anyone around him. If he ever lost his entire team, the sorcerer would be in trouble, because no one would want him on theirs.

"Well, I don't know where he is, and I don't want any part of those troubles," the barkeep said.

"I don't tell him you told me." Everyone was looking for Don, but they'd forgotten Don was part of a team. Where Don was, his team would be, at least part of the time. Tibs had been asking around about Slim, Omer, and Karl, Don's fighter and two archers, and

someone had mentioned seeing Slim going into the Drunk Hog. So here he was, asking.

“Look, I don’t know where he is. I just saw him this morning. He ate and left.”

“Was he with his team?”

“No, just himself.”

Tibs finished his ale and left

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“No, Slim hasn’t been around,” the fighter supervising the field said. “He stops by and helps once in a while, but it’s been a few days. He does his training with his team now.” He stopped a fighter as she was about to take her opponent’s head off. “No killing. I don’t care what he said. This is training so you can survive the dungeon. Once you’re Upsilon, then you can try to kill one another since you aren’t going to be my responsibility anymore.” He paired her with another fighter and left the young man to find someone to train with on his own.

“Do you know where he usually hangs out?”

“No. I have enough to do keeping these ones in line. I don’t worry about them once they’ve graduated.”

“I saw him around the new construction yesterday,” the woman sitting by the swords and sharpening on said. “The one on the west side.”

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Tibs held the copper coin between two fingers, keeping the drunk man’s attention on him. “Slim guy, messy hair. He’s probably in fighter’s leather.”

“Oh yes, I know him,” the man said, grinning toothily. “I’ll take you to him for that copper.”

Tibs made the coin disappear and turned away.

“Come on, don’t be that way,” the drunk called after him. “I need that copper.”

This was one aspect of his street he found he missed in the town. The eyes. Back there, there was always someone who saw something. A beggar, an urchin. Many times it had been Tibs, and there was a market for that information. You could find out anything happening on the street with a broken copper in the right hand or a small tankard of something that might have been ale.

The drunk Tibs spoke with was one of the workers, and who’d claimed to know everything that happened in town, but he would have said anything to get the copper. Maybe that drunk was on his way to becoming one of the town’s eyes, but he wasn’t there yet.

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“You’re talking about Rosey,” the serving girl said.

“Tall, brawny for an archer, always scowling?” Tibs asked, having trouble believing Omer went by such a... nice name.

“I guess that if you’ve angered him, he’d scowl,” she replied, “but he’s never said a bad word to me.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Have you tried the construction on the west side? I think he works with a crew there.”

This was the second time the west side construction had been mentioned. He'd already gone there, but there were over thirty buildings in various states of construction. Even for him, the odds of moving through all of them without someone noticing him were slim. If Don got wind someone was this close, he'd move to another hiding place. Tibs had to drop on him before the sorcerer could do anything.

He could wait him out, maybe. Tibs had checked the board, and Don's team had a run in two days. Maybe he'd try to convince someone he could do it, even without his rogue. But he hadn't been the only one checking the board. Other Runners were looking at it. Some of whom Tibs knew had already gone this time.

If he didn't get to Don before that day, he might end up only being able to watch what was done, instead of stopping it.

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Tibs sat on the roof of the building opposite the Drunk Hog as the sun rose, and it was a nice sunrise. With the clouds parting before its light. It had rained during the night, leaving the roads muddy, but now it would dry and if that was why Tibs was there, he could enjoy the warmth.

Instead, he was waiting on Slim to be done with his breakfast. The man had been furtive as he approached the tavern, looking everywhere for someone following him, except up. Tibs wished he'd caught sight of the man sooner, maybe as he'd exited the construction site, but Slim was well into the town when Tibs saw him.

Slim exited the building, and Tibs walked alongside him as much as he could. A few times he had to detour around gaps too wide to jump. He wished he could get his air jump to work. At the construction site, Slim hurried. It was still early enough it was mostly deserted, and the workers who were there were busy setting up scaffolding.

Tibs dropped and followed Slim as the man navigated between partially constructed buildings until he paused before one. Tibs couldn't see what the man waited on. Maybe this was where Omer or Karl would meet him? Maybe that was how they did it, always needing one of the others to lead the rest of the way.

A knife at his throat stopped his thinking.

"You shouldn't be here, Tibs," the man holding it said, not quite in a whisper.

Questions flashed through Tibs's mind. What was he doing here? As far as Tibs knew, he had nothing to do with Don or his team. "I need to talk with Don, Radkliff."

"Do you really think he's going to want to talk to you, Tibs?"

"What are you doing with him? You know the kind of person he is."

"I need a team if I'm going to do a run, and Don found himself in need of a rogue after you arranged to have his thrown in a cell."

"Do you really believe I did that?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. It gave me a team."

"Then let me see him."

Radkliff sighed. "He's not going to be happy about it."

"How happy is he going to be when a bunch of Runners ambush all of you on your way to the dungeon? They think he destroyed the Caravan Garden."

The knife moved away. "I know. Why do you think we're here? I have him," he called. "It's Tibs. I told you someone was following you."

"How was I to know? I'm not a rogue," Slim said, joining them.

"You could look up," Tibs said. "I wasn't hiding all that hard, just following you from the rooftops."

The fighter shuddered. "You people are crazy going up there. You could hurt yourself falling."

"The fall's not that bad," Tibs said.

"It's hitting the ground that tends to hurt," Radkliff continued, and the two of them smiled.

"Rogues are crazy," Slim said. "You better leave, Tibs. Don's not in a mood to deal with you."

"But he's not going to be in a better one," Radkliff said, "when we get ganged on before we reach the dungeon. Unless you think Don's going to stay hidden when our turn comes."

Slim snorted. "Don's not going to miss his run for anything. What do you want to talk with him about?"

"A way out of this."

"You mean one that sees him in a cell like Francis ended up in?"

"No."

"Let's just take him to Don and he can decide how he wants to deal with him," Radkliff. "Sorry, Tibs, but he's my team leader. What he says goes."

Tibs shrugged, then followed Slim down more alleys until they reached the back of a completed building. The fighter pulled part of the wall and Tibs stepped through into darkness. Someone grabbed his arm and led him out of the room and into a large one, partially illuminated by the sun through high windows. This would be a warehouse, Tibs decided.

"Well, this day's starting well," a mean voice came from a dark corner.

"I'm just here to talk, Don."

Omer stepped out of another shadow, bow in hand.

"He's just here to talk, Omer," Radkliff said.

"Oh Tibs," Don said, his voice echoing the way none of the others had. "Talk, really? And what is there to talk about? How you stole my archer? How you got my fighter killed? Oh, no, of course not. This wouldn't be about how you got my rogue thrown in a cell so I wouldn't be able to go on my run, is it?"

"How did you get Radkliff on your team?" Tibs asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. "You can only replace a dead teammate."

The sorcerer stepped into the light, standing tall, his dark purple robes masking most of his form. "It turns out Francis pissed one of the other prisoners and got himself killed in there. Free spot, filled by Radkliff."

Not that Tibs had done it to keep Don out of the dungeon, but it would have been nice to see the man suffer a little for his actions.

“You know the others are looking for you, right?”

“Looking, but not finding,” Don replied. “And don’t think you’re going to tell them.”

“I don’t have to tell them anything, they know where you’re going to be tomorrow. Unless you’re planning on giving up your run now that you have a full team.”

The sorcerer fixed his gaze on Tibs, and he forced himself not to break it. Fortunately, Tibs hadn’t had the time to eat yet.

“Let me guess, the great Tibs had a plan to save me? He’s going to get the guards to protect me from everyone in the town.”

Tibs smiled. “Basically.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot, Tibs?”

“If I thought that, I’d been with the others looking to make you pay, instead of being here trying to help.”

“And you think the guards are going to be any better for me than the other Runners?”

“Harry will.”

Don laughed and Tibs shuddered. Had the man practiced to have that creepy of a laugh?

“Harry Hard Knuckles is no better than the rest. He leads them, so he’ll be the first to sacrifice me just to keep everyone else happy. I know how people like that think. So long as the masses are happy, who cares about the rest.”

“Do you know what essence Harry has?”

“Light,” Don replied dismissively.

“And do you know what light does?”

“Shines in the shadows.” The man sounded bored.

“Do you know what that means?” Tibs asked, fighting his annoyance. Don had to be doing this just to be difficult.

“No, why don’t you enlighten me? Oh, great and powerful Tibs?”

“He knows when you’re lying,” Tibs snapped.

“What?” Don asked, all pretense gone.

“Harry knows when someone’s lying, so you go before him, you tell him you had nothing to do with the building and he’d going to know you’re telling the truth.”

Don crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you get out of it, Tibs? I know you. You don’t do anything unless it serves you.”

“I keep the nobles from outnumbering us,” Tibs replied. “If the other Runners attack you, Harry’s going to punish them. That’s going to break teams. I don’t want that to happen.”

Don snorted. “Unless it’s my team.”

“That Francis tried to kill me. I told you, you can’t lie to Harry. If I’d arranged it, I’d have been the one in the cells.”

“Except for Hard Knuckles being your friend.”

Tibs stared at the sorcerer. “Harry hates rogues, he definitely doesn’t like me, since I’m the student of someone else he doesn’t like. Look, Don, you’re the one with the problem. I’m trying to help you.”

“And you think it’s going to be as simple as walking up to the guild building and asking to speak to him?”

“Basically.”

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It wasn’t.

Almost as soon as they’d left the construction area, they’d picked up a tail. Before they reached the center of town, two full teams of Runners were blocking their way.

Arruh was in the lead.

“Get out of my way,” Don ordered.

“Thanks for getting him out of his hiding place, Tibs,” the fighter said. “We’ll take it from here.”

“No,” Tibs replied, looking around for a guard. Where were they? They had to have noticed ten people in armor and wondered what they were doing. Unless they thought they were going to the dungeon? “We’re going to see Harry.”

“There’s no need to bother the guards with this, Tibs,” the fighter said, his tone hardening. “It’s between Runners.”

“Is it now?” Jackal said, leaning against a building. “I wasn’t aware we’d been given enforcement authority.”

“Jackal,” Arruh said, “this—”

“Doesn’t concern me, I know. I don’t really care, because you start fighting and we’re all getting punished.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” the fighter demanded.

“Me? Nothing.” Jackal pointed to the guards stepping out of doorways. “They, on the other hand, promised me they can stop any fighting from happening.”

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“Do you think I’m an idiot?” Harry demanded of Tibs, pacing the length of his office. “Of course I know he didn’t do that! Why do you think I didn’t have any guards looking for him? He’s upsilon. Do you have any idea the kind of power it takes to create corruption on that scale?”

“Everyone else in town was,” Tibs said, crossing his arms over his chest. He hadn’t done this to be yelled at.

“And I would have had it dealt with.” The fighter ran a hand over his face and grumbled, “rogues. I swear. Maybe you want to take over my job in keeping this town safe, Tibs? Seems to me the way to always seem to meddle, and that Jackal thinks he can order my guards around to help you, you might as well just take over.”

Jackal had vanished before they’d gotten close to the guild, but the guard who had escorted Tibs and Don to Harry had explained how Jackal had found them and explained how there was a fight about to happen and he needed their help to stop it.

“I don’t want to take over anything,” Tibs said.

“Of course not,” Harry replied. “I don’t know if I should blame this on you being a rogue or a kid, at this point.”

“I am not a kid,” Tibs snapped. He hadn’t survived this long to be dismissed as a kid.

Harry glared at him. "Fine. You did a good thing, are you happy now, Tibs? Do you expect a reward? A handful of coins?"

"I kept you from breaking up teams," Tibs said through clenched teeth.

"You think that's not going to happen, anyway? You think the world isn't going to break them? That's why you're a kid. The rest of us know better."

"Fuck you," Tibs told the guard leader and headed for the door.