

Chapter 24

Tibs was pleased. With himself, and the situation.

The nobles had been put in their place by Harry returning the stolen items. They weren't happy about it, but they couldn't deny the guard leader did his job and did it well. There was only one item Harry hadn't returned, because Tibs had searched for it among the wooden boxes and handed Amanda's pictures to Mez for him to return it to his girl.

Tibs wasn't happy about Mez picking her over Tandy, but the decision was Mez's, and as his friend and teammate, Tibs had to help him. So now Mez was his girl's hero.

An unexpected side effect of the thief escaping the other rogues was that not even they knew Tibs was involved in stopping him. As far as the stories went, the success was entirely due to the guards' work. Harry didn't talk about it, which reinforced the idea he couldn't lie.

And the pouch with the powder was destroyed. That was one temptation Tibs didn't have to worry about.

His mood was so good, as he entered the inn, that it made the silence there hit harder.

No one spoke.

The inn was never silent. No, it had happened once, when Harry had appeared among them to scold Serba and scared everyone in the process. But this was different. Somber. The glances he caught were aimed at Pyan, alone at her table, head down, tankard held in both hands.

He couldn't remember ever seeing her like that. Pyan was a bit like Jackal in that she was always loud, even when she was silent. He looked around for her team or Kroseph. Jackal's man always knew what was going on, but none of them were around.

"Pyan?" He asked once he was next to her.

"Go away," she said without looking up from her tankard.

"Pyan, what's wrong?"

"I said." She looked up and glared at him. "Go the fuck away."

"No." Tibs wasn't leaving a friend with the pain he saw in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Did someone fucking cut off your ears?" she demanded hatefully, getting to her feet. "Leave me alone!"

Tibs stepped back as her fist turned into metal with sharp edges, and a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"That's enough, Pyan," Kroseph said, behind him. "Tibs doesn't deserve this."

"And I do!" she turned her hate on the server. "He meant everything to me!"

"Pyan," Kroseph said, tone understanding.

"No! You don't get to talk! Your man's made of stone. Mine wasn't! He..." She turned pale and tears started falling.

Tibs pulled out of Kroseph's loose grip and hugged her as tightly as he could. She stiffened, and he tightened his hold in preparation for being pushed away. He wasn't letting

her do that. She wouldn't suffer alone.

He was going to have words with her team for deserting her when she needed them.

"Let go of me," she ordered.

"No."

"Tibs," she growled the warning.

He looked up at her. "I lost too many people I cared about to let you feel that pain alone. You can hit me if you want, but I'm staying."

Her expression turned from angry to puzzled. Maybe he understood why the others had left. Pyan was scary when she got angry. But he'd still talk with them. He wasn't leaving her, so they should have been strong enough to stay.

The puzzlement broke as she sobbed and then held onto him hard enough he winced in pain. He said nothing. He just held her and let her cry.

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Tibs ate alone.

He wished his team was with him. After his time holding Pyan, and then tracking down his team and realizing each of them was suffering just as much as she was, and instead of pulling together, each of them suffered alone.

He could use the company right now, but Jackal was busy with Kroseph, so he didn't even have the server to talk with. Kroseph's brothers and sisters, as well as the townsfolk who worked at the inn, were nice, but he didn't have the history with them he shared with Kroseph, so it made opening up about how he felt harder.

Carina was working with the surviving Omega sorcerer, while Khumdar was wherever he disappeared to when not with the team. Either off unearthing secrets or training. He had to have found someone to help him train.

Mez was with his girl. From what he'd seen of them, when they were walking about Merchant Row, she was still overjoyed Mez had found and returned her painting. Mez didn't look quite as pleased, and Tibs didn't understand his friend. How could he let honor keep him from being with the person he wanted to be with?

Tandy was seated next to Pyan at their tables, along with the rest of their teammates. After suffering alone for a day, they had pulled back together, but they were still suffering. Watching them, Tibs reaffirmed his promise not to get involved with anyone. He would never put someone through what he was watching.

He focused on his food.

Food at the inn was always good, although Tibs didn't appreciate it as much as usual. The steak was tender and juicy, with just enough of a burned crust to enhance the taste. He thought Russel was cooking today. All of Kroseph's brothers at the inn knew how to cook, but Russel always made the meat taste better.

"Excuse me."

Tibs looked up, and on the other side of the table, an older man was watching him, hands resting on the golden handle of a can of dark polished wood. He almost sneered at this noble, but every piece of clothing and jewelry was filled with woven essence.

With what Tirania had told him of how magical items were made, how difficult it was

for sorcerers to make them, and therefore how expensive they were. Tibs thought what the man wore had to be worth more than the entire town, not including the nobles.

Tibs never included the nobles.

The man's short-cropped hair was gray. His beard was a darker shade and hugged his jaw. His eyes were blue, the normal kind, and his face wrinkled with age.

The jewelry was gold and silver, with precious gems of different colors in them. Necklace, earring, bracelets, and pins on the green shirt of fabric so fine Tibs could probably buy a new armor if he sold it to the right merchant. The black overcoat was thick and looked warm, with gold threads glinting in the lamplight.

"Are you all there?" the man asked.

Tibs looked down at himself. "As far as I know." Was there something with magic that let someone not be all in the same place? Probably. The stories said sorcerers could do just about anything.

When he looked back at the man, he had an annoyed expression, then let out a sigh. And Tibs knew that for as much coin as the man spent on dressing like a noble, it was an act. The sigh gave him away. Nobles didn't sigh, they sneered.

Still, Tibs didn't care for the man. Who wanted to pass themselves off as a noble? Was he one of the merchants who'd come with the caravan and decided to stay? Probably not. A man like this would have been talked about within hours of not leaving with the caravan. In the weeks since, he'd have either been ridiculed or removed by the nobles. Tibs might not care for the man because he was pretending. Noble hated no one more than those claiming to be one of them.

He must be visiting from another city, then.

"Do you know a man going by the name of Jackal? I'm told this is the table he eats at."

What did a merchant, once from some other town, want with Jackal? Tibs hid his suspicion. Jackal sold the loot they got out of Sto to Darran, so this wasn't someone who knew him through business. Unless he was here looking to take coins away from their merchant? If Jackal knew someone like that from before, he would have talked about it. And it would have been from his time in the pits.

Maybe that was why the man was here? He'd heard of Jackal's fighting and wanted to... watch him fight? Pay him to fight? Buy him from the guild so he would fight for him? Nobles did that, buy fighters to entertain them. Kroseph had explained that was in part how the arena in MountainSea came about.

The man was out of luck. The guild wouldn't let Jackal go, and there were no fights in his town. Harry didn't allow them. At best, the man would have to settle for watching bar fights. Tibs suspected not all of them happened by accident. A bar fight was an easy way around Harry's restriction.

The man sighed again. "Clearly, you aren't all there."

"I am," Tibs replied.

"Then how about you answer me?" the man's tone had an edge to it. Not the threat of a noble who thought he could have Tibs arrested with a word. This was more like a knife in

the shadows of the night.

Tibs considered what to say. “I know him.” It was best if he dealt with this. Jackal wasn’t great with hidden knives, and he had to know it was coming to turn to stone.

“Where is he?”

“Busy with his man.”

“A man?” the man’s face turned to disdain. “Of course, he’d do that to me.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow. The man was too old for Jackal. Tibs hadn’t known Jackal before he was with Kroseph, but he’s talked about previous times, and they were always with guys his age. Or rough, from the pits. He’d tried to explain why guys in the pit went to each other, but Tibs had walked out. Jackal knew Tibs didn’t care about those stories, but it amused him to do it, anyway.

Maybe this was someone who had that kind of interest in Jackal, even if his friend didn’t know it? But they’d have to have heard about him before the dungeon, and if that was the case, wouldn’t they have taken Jackal out of the cell before he was sent here? Jackal had said he’d been in the cell a few days before being brought to Kragle Rock. Buying a man’s freedom was a good way to ensure he did what he wanted.

“Get your mind out of there,” the man ordered, and Tibs forced his face back to neutral, raising an eyebrow. “That’s not what I’m here for. What are you that you’d even think that?”

Tibs shrugged.

“When is he going to be done?”

“It’s going to be awhile.” Tibs grinned. “He and his man have a lot of energy.” At least when the two of them went to have their *them* time, they were always gone for a long time.

The man’s disgust became even more pronounced. He looked around the inn and his expression didn’t improve. “When he’s done, tell him I’m looking for him.”

“Okay.” Tibs cut a piece of his now cool steak.

“Aren’t you going to ask for my name?”

Tibs shook his head. “I’ll tell him the guy trying too hard to pass off as a noble is looking for him.” He smiled. “He might be done before the actual nobles here find out about you.”

The man’s face turned crimson, and he slammed his cane on the table as he rested his hand on it and leaned forward. “I would watch my tongue if I were you, boy?”

Tibs shrugged and bit the piece of meat off the end of his knife without looking away from the man. Not grinning was difficult, but worth it for how deeper red the man’s face turned.

“You will tell Jackal—” he made the name sound like a curse “—that Sebastian Wells is demanding to see him.”

“Okay,” Tibs said as he chewed.

The man leaned forward even more. “Do not think to play with me, boy. I will see my son.” Tibs froze for only a second, but that was enough to make the man smile. “Good, at least he told you who he is.” He straightened and placed the cane before him again.

“Therefore, you know what I’m capable of. Consider that, before you decide to show me

disrespect again.” He turned and walked out with everyone in the inn watching.

Tibs wondered if Jackal’s father being here was enough to interrupt when he and Kroseph were doing, then shrugged and went back to eating. It could wait. Interrupting them meant he’d have to see what they were up to, and Tibs could do without that.