

Chapter 22

Jackal looked over the people Tibs brought to the fighter's training field. "I thought you said we'd train a team. I count nine of them."

"They're Omega," Tibs replied. "Teams kinda loose back then, remember?" It had started with a friend of Fedora's, the archer that made her blush, asking if Tibs could get this team's archer to give her pointers, then an Omega fighter at a table next to theirs had asked for help too, and then a sorcerer had seen them talking and soon, well, Tibs had hurried to leave before every surviving Omega in the inn was at the table.

He'd still been surprised when there had only been eight of them, including Fedora, here this morning. The way people were talking, he'd expected them to tell everyone his team had agreed to train them, which would have pulled in even more people.

"And you want us to train them?" Jackal's tone was neutral; no excitement or annoyance. He'd been all for it when Tibs had proposed it. Now, looking at them, that was gone.

"Are we even allowed to do that?" Mez asked. Once Jackal had agreed, he'd send a message to the archer and where to join them. By his expression, this wasn't what he'd expected their team activity to be.

"The rules say we can't talk about the dungeon," Carina said. Her study of the assembled Runners was more cordial. She hadn't been overjoyed at the proposition, but she was willing to help. "There's nothing there preventing us from helping the new arrivals."

"I believe," Khumdar said, "that is because new conscripts are not usual after the initial group. There is an expectation that those who come after, since they must pay to do so, have received all the training they need for the level they wish to take on."

Jackal grinned. "Well then, if it ain't in the rules, we can't be breaking them. Once Knuckles hears we're doing this, he'll probably change the rules so we can't, but until then, we might as well make the best of it." He looked them over again. "Okay, so which ones of you are the fighters?" He leaned to Tibs and whispered. "Shouldn't it be easier to tell them apart?"

Two girls and a guy stepped forward. The guy, the fighter who'd insisted Fedora and the archer be on his team, was bouncing in place with excitement.

"If you fight with swords, get them and join me..." Jackal looked around and pointed to a vacant area. "Over there."

The guy was back from the box with the swords, having taken the first one he pulled out, and talking with Jackal as they walked. He motioned excitedly, nearly stabbing Jackal with it. The girls were slower to get moving and took their time testing the swords before heading for where Jackal was waiting.

Mez sighed. "Archers?" a guy stepped forward along with Fedora's friend. Mez looked at Tibs, annoyed, then back to the two of them. "Come on. I can't train you here. We're heading to the archery field, and you can tell me what kind of training you've

received.” For someone claiming nobles were about helping people, Mez wasn’t particularly enthusiastic.

Carina pointed to two guys. “You and you are the sorcerers.” They nodded, surprised. “I’m not sure how much practice you’ll be able to get in without an amulet of your own, but we can over theory so that—” she stopped looking at the two amulets Tibs offered her. “Where did you get that?” she asked suspiciously.

“They’re a loan from Darran. I have a few more. Once it was clear I couldn’t limit who would come, I got more than I thought we’d need.”

“Do I want to know where *he* got them?”

This shrugged. “He’s a merchant. I expect he bought them off someone.” That was true enough. Now where *that* someone might have gotten them, Tibs didn’t want to hazard a guess. He hadn’t heard of any rogues getting caught stealing, but Darran had said more than once he’d be willing to buy anything Tibs found lying around on his nocturnal walks.

He’d asked about thieves operating in his town, but the merchant had become apologetic about having no idea who might be doing what. Tibs didn’t believe him, but respected that he wouldn’t divulge what he knew.

Carina looked as convinced about how legal their acquisitions were as Tibs felt, but finally shrugged. “I’ll take two more. Those starter amulets don’t have much in the way of reserves, and I have no idea how they’re recharged.”

He handed her the amulets, and they left.

It left Tibs with Fedora, along with the guy who Tibs wished had found himself someone else to train him. At least, when Tibs leveled his gaze on him this time, the rogue blushed instead of making a lewd remark.

“So?” Fedora said. “Are you going to have us walk the crowd picking pockets as training until we’re caught?” She hadn’t quite forgiven him for Karl catching her. The guy looked at Tibs, worried.

Tibs took out a knife, shaking his head as he looked at it. “Not this time. This time, I’m going to focus on helping you stay alive in the dungeon. And that starts with one of these.” He raised the knife. “Don’t bother with them. Get yourself a sword. I don’t care what the teachers tell you about rogues only needing knives. These things aren’t useful unless—”

The guy moved faster than Tibs could react and snatched the knife out of his hand. With a flick it was then flying, lodging itself in a box holding swords. Tibs looked at it. In the exact center of it, as far as he could tell. Tibs doubted that at this distance he’d even hit the box.

The guy’s smugness vanished as Tibs leveled his gaze back on him. “Let me catch you stealing from me again, and it will cost you something.” He paused. “Not your hand, you need that. But there are other parts you can do without.”

Fedora snickered and Tibs tried to glare at her, but the guy’s terrified expression and how his hands almost covered his crotch made it hard. Tibs hadn’t even considered targeting that.

“You can keep using knives if you want,” he told the guy. “Just remember that those you buy will be eaten by the dungeon after you throw them, unless they are made to resist

that. Go to the Sword and Shield. Tell Darran I sent you. He sells the right kind for that.”

Tibs looked around. “Let’s go to the rogue field. I can see how go you are with traps while me and Fedora get in some knife fighting in, since as much as I hate the things, it’s all I know how to use for now.

* * * * *

“I am a horrible teacher,” Jackal said, then dug heartily into his meal.

“Perhaps you should teach them to fight with their fists,” Khumdar commented, “instead of attempting to show them how to use a sword.”

Jackal shook his head, chewing. “Can’t. None of them ever fought in the pits. Without that, they need an element for protection to survive. Even if all they do with the sword is swing wildly, that’s going to increase their chances of surviving.” He paused. “Okay, maybe I’m not *that* bad of a teacher.”

“How are the archers?” Tibs asked Mez, who again looked annoyed.

“Horrible. I have no idea why they picked the bow. Neither ever touched one before coming here. I’m surprised they survived their previous runs. Seems like anyone without training’s been dying.”

“Range,” Jackal said, between bites, then continued. “Anyone smart stays as far from their enemies as they can.”

Tibs joined the other in staring at the fighter, who was back to eating as if he hadn’t said anything.

“What?” Jackal finally asked. Looking at them, trying not to grin. “You guys know I’m not smart.”

“How were your students?” Carina asked Tibs, after rolling her eyes at the fighter.

Tibs sighed. “The guy’s asking to be eaten by the dungeon. He thinks that if I’m his special guy, that’s going to keep him alive in the dungeon.”

“It might,” Mez said under his breath.

“You have something to say?” Jackal demanded.

The archer shook his head. “Sorry. Been having a few bad days. Someone stole Amanda’s family portrait. She’s been demanding I do something about it, about you.”

“I didn’t take it,” Tibs protested.

“I know.” Mez rubbed his face. “It’s the one thing she considers of value she brought. Unlike what you think, Tibs, she doesn’t care about riches. She had it painted before we left as something to remind her of what we’d go back to once this is done.”

“Why didn’t you come to us?” Jackal asked.

“And what would you have done?” Mez snapped, then sighed. He downed his tankard and motioned for another. “You aren’t the law. I went to Hard Knuckles, but never got to talk with him. I’m not important enough.”

Tibs sank in his seat, even if the accusation wasn’t directed at him.

Mex thanked the server. “She isn’t the only one to have lost something. Someone seems to be going through every noble’s house and taking something especially significant to them. Not valuable in money, but sentiment. They are getting angry.” He sipped his tankard. “But that is my problem, and I shouldn’t let that affect how I behave. I apologize,

Tibs.”

Tibs forgot his embarrassment at the hint he was getting special treatment. Harry hadn't said what was taken wasn't worth much in coins. The only reason Tibs could think for someone to take items people were emotionally attached to was to stir up trouble. If they were targeting nobles, they were looking to stir up really big troubles.

“What?” Tibs asked, looking at the others watching him.

“I said,” Jackal said, trying not to grin. “What are you going to do now that you have a special guy?”

Tibs glared at him. “Feed him to the dungeon. Right after I talk with Kroseph about doing the same to you.”

“How about your friend, Fedora?” Carina asked over Jackal's laughter.

“She'll do better. She's angry at me right now, but that makes her work harder at proving she can do better than what I think. She's okay with traps and better than me with throwing knives—” he glared at Mez, who choked on his ale.

“Didn't say anything,” the archer said between coughs, but then he was also fighting not to laugh.

“Fine,” Tibs admitted, “every rogue's better than me at that. Still, I think she'll get to pick her element soon.”

“Can you tell when someone's ready?” Carina asked. “You know.”

Tibs shook his head and lowered his voice. “I can tell their element is stronger than people who aren't Runners, but I haven't noticed anything different in those we were taken to the guild.”

“Have there been a lot of them?” Jackal asked. “I can't think of anyone I've seen among the Omega fighters making it, but they're fighters; we do tend to die a lot.”

“I know of two sorcerers,” Carina said, “but you're right, this group seems ill-prepared.”

“It is possible that it is happening too fast. As I have mentioned, there had not been a need to bring in new conscripts to a dungeon after the first group. As kingdoms want to gain favor with the guild, with will continue sending conscripts if requested, but they may be rounding less experienced criminals, therefore less likely to survive.”

“And they are bringing in more,” Tibs said.

“I suspect it will do little good,” the cleric said.

“You speak as if you've seen a lot of dungeons,” Mez said. “Are they all as deadly as this one?”

“I have been to dungeon towns,” Khumdar corrected. “But I have never investigated the level of deadliness dungeons. I was mostly busy remaining inconspicuous while finding ways to train.”

“Didn't you just walk into this one?” Carina asked. “I mean, walk into the town, not the dungeon.”

Khumdar was slow in responding, and Tibs thought he was picking what would be true and what wouldn't. “I did not have the funds to come. That was paid for me, both the passage through the platform and my admission as a Runner.”

“And what’s your price?” Jackal asked. “No one gives away something like this, and you said, back then, that you also hadn’t been given a choice.”

“I was given one,” the cleric said.

“Do this or die isn’t much of a choice, as far as I’m concerned.”

Khumdar nodded, “I... do not know what they expect of me. I suspect they wished me to die while they could say they had nothing to do with it. Their situation regarding finding me was... precarious.”

They watched him, waiting for more, but Khumdar went back to eating. When he spoke, it was to ask. “How are the sorcerers?”

Carina gave him an annoyed glare before answering. “Chom Sang had the knack for it. He’s more efficient when he pulls the energy out of the amulet.”

“Does that translate into being a better sorcerer?” Mez asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered, and Tibs stopped paying attention.

That thief needed to be stopped and fast. That meant he couldn’t do this alone. He couldn’t ask his team for help. They’d be willing, but he needed rogues to fight this thief since they were able to stay out of Harry’s grasp.