

Chapter 26

Tibs looked around for any of Serba's dogs as they headed to the board listing the orders the teams were going in. The day before, one of them, the big one with ash colors fur that was always growling and anyone other than Serba and Tibs, had been found before the guards' barracks, its throat sliced open.

Tibs had wanted to go to her; she loved her dogs, and he didn't want her to go through the pain alone. But he didn't know where she was. The guards he'd asked didn't know either.

"Tibs?" Carina said, indicating the board.

He scanned it. Recognizing how his name was written was simple now. "We're the third to last team."

"Where you belong," a sneering Don said, walking away from the board. Finding his name was also easy. Tibs looked at the start of the list, right under the noble teams, and there was Don's name. First of the Runners to go in. Some of the other teams were talking about giving the guild coins again, just so they could shut up the corruption sorcerer.

"It gives us more time to train," Jackal said, looking at the board. "Pyan's not on there."

Tibs bit his lower lip. "Do you think she joined another team instead of finding someone to replace..." he swallowed.

"I haven't spoken with Tandy," Carina said, "she's been avoiding me since..." she looked at Mez, then shrugged.

Mez sighed. "I—"

"Explained things to her," Carina cut him off. "I know. Unfortunately, words don't do much for a broken heart."

Pain crossed Mez's face, then he forced it away into something resembling neutrality.

"Alright," Jackal said, turning away. "Let's go find her. If nothing else, Pyan always feels better after hitting me."

"Is that an offer that could be made to Tandy?" Khumdar asked as they followed the fighter.

Jackal frowned. "I don't think she enjoys punching me."

"I meant Mez," the cleric said.

"Tandy uses a knife," Tibs pointed out. Unlike him, she was quite good with hers.

"That'd be cathartic," Carina said, smiling at the archer, and only looked away.

"I don't know that word." It didn't even sound like any of the words Tibs knew.

"It is the action of improving oneself through a painful experience," Khumdar explained.

"But Mez will be the one feeling the pain. How is that going to help Tandy?"

The cleric smiled. "The word doesn't state who needs to feel the pain, so the person will improve."

"Or," Carina said, "maybe Mez is the one who needs to improve."

“That’s enough,” Jackal said, as Mez let out an exasperated sigh. “Mez has duties, and he’s holding to them. I might think he’s doing a shitty job, but I’m going to respect his decision.”

“That is not as helpful as you think it is,” Mez replied, eyeing the fighter suspiciously. Jackal grinned. “It’s exactly as helpful as I want it to be.”

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Tibs was looking for Serba when he noticed the smoke. Smoke in the air was common enough it barely registered, but this was thick, black, and smelled of more than burning wood. As soon as he ran in its direction he saw it, raising over buildings, and quickly he could tell it came from Merchant Row.

Fire was bad. Fire was hungry for a lot of stuff, mostly wood, which was what the shops were made of, as well as most other buildings in Kragle Rock. He pushed his way through the crowd filling the street, pocketing a handful of copper in the process. Guards kept everyone from moving past the center, and behind them, the clothier’s shop burned.

“Where’s the water brigade?” the shop owner demanded of the impassive guard. Tibs only knew the man by sight. The clothes he sold were too fancy for his taste.

“They’re coming,” the guard replied, tone hard.

“The wagon’s broken,” a guard further down yelled. “Just got the word.”

The shopkeeper crumbled, and the guard stepped away, disgusted.

“Do something,” the woman who caught the shop owner told the guard.

“Not my job,” he replied.

“We should,” another guard started, but stopped as he was glared at.

“Not our job,” the guard stated. “Our orders are to keep anyone from approaching so they won’t get hurt. Anything else, someone else can deal with it.”

Tibs was going to have words with Harry once he’d dealt with this. The fire was getting close to the jeweler on the left, pushed by the wind. He stepped around the guard.

“Hey, you can’t go there,” the guard said, reaching for him. Tibs sidestepped the hand, moving closer. Taking control of the fire would be the simplest way to stop this, but he didn’t have enough essence for something this large. By the time he pulled enough from the fire itself, it would have spread to the next building and be even larger.

He’d have to be the water brigade.

I pulled water essence to the fire, but it was pushed back. Too much fire for it to get in. He’d need something more forceful. He needed to treat the fire as one of the dungeon creatures.

He took out his knife, but before he started, a hand grabbed him and pulled him away.

“Get back with the others,” the guard ordered. “I’m not going to have you get hurt on my watch.”

Cursing, Tibs coated his arms with water, causing the man’s grip to slip. He ducked under the next attempt, tempted to use an attack to force the guard away, but Harry wouldn’t like that.

“Someone keep him away,” he called to the crowd. “My element’s water. I’m going to put the fire out.”

Cross stepped out of the group and grabbed the guard by the arm. “Why don’t you let the kid try?”

The man put a hand on his sword and he turned to face her. “Unhand me, or I will—”

“I would love to see you try,” she replied. Then Tibs forced them and everyone else out of his mind.

He only had one attack that had a chance of helping here. More attacks. He had to ask Alistair for more kinds of attacks using water.

He traced the ‘X’ with his knife, etching the needed essence in the air as he grabbed his amulet. For once, it contained the essence he needed. He was going to have to push as much essence in the attack as he could. This was like shattering the crystal sphere, only so much bigger. He couldn’t afford to get drained.

He pulled essence to him before he stabbed the center of the ‘X’ unleashing his attack, then he fought the torrent trying to drain him not by restricting it, but by pulling more essence in, trying to keep pace with it building it as large as possible, larger than he’d ever done.

When his control broke, it wasn’t because he’d run out of essence, there simply had been too much for him to hold in the point where the knife touched the ‘X’, and he dropped to a knee, panting as the jet of water flew at and through the fire.

Unlike when the crystal sphere, instead of continuing beyond the target once it shattered, the water exploded from within the fire. Tibs stared, trying to understand how it had happened as water and steam covered everything.

Cheers rose, then turned to horror as the water was burned to mist and then away by the fire quickly coming back to life.

Cursing, Tibs pushed himself to his feet, pulling water essence into the amulet. He needed to do it again, and this time he had to make it larger, hold on to the essence longer.

“Leon, make me an air sphere,” someone said, stepping forward. A dozen paces away, Don pulled another sorcerer past a guard and was holding his hand to his chest in pain. Don’s fighter and archer eyed anyone trying to get close.

“Don,” the sorcerer pleaded, “air feeds fire. If—”

“Do what I tell you!” Don snapped.

What was Don up to? If he wasn’t busy pulling more essence to put the fire out, Tibs would go kick him where it really hurt. The man was an asshole, but he couldn’t be so self-centered as to want this to spread to other shops. He had to know the guild would punish him for this. The shops were vital to the town, and the town belonged to the guild.

“Bigger,” Don ordered, as Tibs felt the air essence build between the two. Could he stop pulling essence long enough to disrupt what the sorcerers were doing? Leon wouldn’t expect it, but Tibs didn’t know how strong he was. Even with surprise on his side, it was always usually the strongest who won, and Tibs wasn’t particularly strong with air.

No, he needed to focus on putting the fire out before Don was done. Then he could kick the sorcerer.

“I can’t make it any bigger,” Leon said, sounding in pain.

Tibs’s reserve was nowhere near where it had been for his first attack.

“Fine,” Don said, annoyed. “I’ll just have to work with this.” The corruption sorcerer noticed Tibs glancing their way and smirked as he placed an open palm to the edge of the ball. Tibs sensed the man’s essence flow in, and he smelled the fetid effect. He nearly lost his focus as the corrupted scent reminded him of the pool.

Hurry, he urged the essence around him. He needed to be ready before Don—

“When I tell you, we throw it into the fire.”

“Don,” the man pleaded.

“Don’t argue, Leon,” the sorcerer threatened in return.

Leon nodded resignedly.

He couldn’t wait. Tibs traced the ‘X’. Then, stabbed the center and realized he had to let the attack build.

Don looked at him triumphantly as the two hefted the ball into the fire.

Tibs pushed more essence into the attack and the amulet was empty before there was anywhere close to what he’d used before. He had no choice. He released the attack as the ball broke over the fire and Tibs stared, stunned, as the fire sputtered under the putrid air.

Tibs’s attack did little damage to what was left.

This time, the crowd’s cheer shook the ground.

Tibs looked at the sorcerers, and Leon looked as baffled as Tibs felt.

The cheers faltered and grew pained.

“Leon,” Don said, as the fire came back to life again. “I swear, if you—”

“Okay,” a woman said, pushing through the crowd, slapping her hands together. She was a fighter with fire as her element. “This I can deal with.” The guards didn’t even try to stop her, also staring at the rebuilding fire, stunned.

Don’s expression darkened as she spread her arms and closed her eyes. He let out a breath, then inhaled. As she did so, Tibs felt the essence in the fire being pulled toward her, then settling back among the building. She frowned.

She let out a long breath and inhaled harder. This time, some of the essence left the fire, and she absorbed it.

“What’s wrong?” Tibs asked.

“The fire’s fighting me, no, that’s not right it’s—”

“Don’t try to explain it,” Tibs said. “I know you can’t. It’s the element. If I throw water at it, will it help?” he hesitated. “If Don does what he and Leon did?”

“I don’t know. It’s like there’s...” she tilted her head, as if she was listening to something. “Something holding the essence in place.”

Tibs sensed the fire, studied it, and now that he wasn’t distracted trying to put it out, he felt what she meant. There was something in the center that was... holding the essence there. It wasn’t woven essence, so not magic. Tibs had no idea what could do that.

“Okay,” She said, sounding determined. “Let me try this again. If it isn’t enough, we do it together and hope to the abyss it’s enough. My favorite shop’s two down.”

She exhaled, folding in on herself, then breathed in as she straightened. Then screamed and suddenly, the essence ripped from what was holding it, and fly at her, into her. The fire dissipated as the essence vanished.

Then only smoke rose from the remains of the building.

“Wo!” she exclaimed. “That’s a rush.” Tibs watched as her red-tinted essence grew denser, brighter, then settled into what he thought of as a warm glow.

“You’re Rho,” Tibs said in awe, as the crowd cheered again.

She smiled. “I guess I am now.”

Don glared at the two of them, and Tibs figured that if the crowd hadn’t rushed him to hug and thank the sorcerer, Don would have tried to poison both of them, or at least Tibs, with corruption. Tibs shuddered at the idea of having more of it in him.

Then he watched in surprise at the expression on the sorcerer’s face changed, growing shocked as the treatment he was receiving, then he smiled, and Tibs thought it was the first time he’d seen the corruption sorcerer smile with happiness.

“Enough!” a woman ordered. “I want these people dispersed!” A guard forced her way through the crowd. Tibs recognized her as one of the people reporting directly to Harry, but he didn’t know her. Two dozen other guards with her started moving people away.

Tibs looked for Cross, but she’d wisely disappeared. He hoped her help wouldn’t cause the guard to make her life difficult.

The woman stopped before them, one guard escorting a protesting Don to join them. “What did you do?” she demanded angrily.

“They saved the row,” the shop owner said, melancholic, stepping to join them. She glared at him and looked for a guard, but they were all busy with the uncooperative crowd.

“They probably made this worse,” she spat. “Runners have no business doing this. It’s the water brigade’s job.”

“And where are they?” the shop owner demanded angrily. “I don’t see them. One of yours said the wagon was broken.”

“They would have been here.”

“And by then, the row would have been gone!”

“There are rules!” she snapped.

Don snorted. “Rules are for those who won’t act.”

Tibs raised an eyebrow at the sorcerer. He stood straight, as usual, but there was something different in his attitude. When he rolled his eyes at Tibs, there wasn’t as much disdain as before.

“Don’t look at me that way. You’re always breaking the rules.”

Tibs shrugged. He was rogue. Even Harry said it was expected of him.

“You could have made things worse,” the guard said. “There’s no telling what your magic could have done. What would you be saying, then?”

“They would say,” Tirania said, the crowd parting to let her through, “that at least, they tried.” She looked the guard up and down. “That is more than you are able to say.” She smiled at Tibs. “And why am I not surprised you are part of this Tibs?”

He shrugged. “I couldn’t let the fire spread.”

“Not that you stopped it,” Don said.

“You didn’t do any better,” Tibs replied.

“Enough,” Tirania said as Don opened his mouth. “This wasn’t a contest. The three of you saved the row, and the people here. You should be proud of that.”

“I am,” Don hurried to say, then seemed surprised. “I am,” he repeated, smiling.

“Thank you,” the woman who’d absorbed the fire said.

Tirania nodded. “I think you need to go see your teacher, Jenna.” She looked at the guard. “You should go report this fire to Harry. He’ll need to assign someone to look into how it started.” When the guard didn’t move, Tirania raised an eyebrow and her crystal eyes glimmered. “Well?”

The guard walked away.

Tirania watched her until she vanished into the crowd, then addressed them. “Please go about your business. There is nothing worth seeing here anymore.”

Tibs made to leave, but the shop owner hugged him. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save your shop.”

“There’ll be things that survived, and the guild will help me out.” He looked to Tirania, who nodded, then, with another look at the burned building, walked away.

Tibs was surprised to realize it was only him and Tirania left. She was studying him. Her eyes made it difficult to tell what she thought, but in Tibs’s experience, being studied never led to something good.

“What you did here was impressive,” she said. “Do you think you should seek out your teacher also?”

Tibs swallowed. Jenna would graduate to Rho, and Tirania had sent her to her teacher. Alistair already knew what he was capable of. But was Tirania ordering him to have his test? Was she breaking his team?

The ball in his throat kept him from speaking.

She looked at the building. “It’s been brought to my attention that the dungeon is gaining strength much faster than expected, probably a result of the recruits who haven’t survived. I’d expected much more of them. But there has also been a surprising number of Upsilon and even Rho who have not returned from their runs. So I’ve decided to alter the rules. One Lambda per team is acceptable from now on.” She looked at him. “One, Tibs. Until the dungeon graduates, that is all I can do.”

He swallowed the lump. “You’re…” it was for him. She was treating him special again. He wanted to protest. But doing that meant he’d lose his team.

“I’ll talk with Alistair when I see him again.”

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Tibs didn’t feel any different.

Alistair had found him within hours of putting out the fire, and as if this had been prepared days in advance, without minutes of that, he was being tested, and as much as he wanted to fail on purpose. The teachers assembled to observe were all talking about the skill it had taken for him to use that much water.

He was the youngest Runner to make Rho.

He didn’t feel any different.

He looked out the window he sat on and considered climbing to the roof. If

corruption ruined this day for him, he knew to use water to avoid dying.

A hand holding a tankard pushed next to him. “You know,” Jackal said, putting the tankard in Tibs’s hand. “You’re the only person I know who celebrates graduating by thinking of throwing himself out of a window.”

“I’m not throwing myself out,” Tibs replied.

“You’re still not celebrating with the rest of us. We’re not getting broken up. You should be drinking so much you can’t stay conscious.”

“Only until someone else becomes Lambda.”

“No,” Jackal said. “You can still be unconscious from drinks at that rank.” He grinned. “I speak from experience.”

Tibs sipped the ale. “How long until Carina or Mez becomes Lambda?”

“Or you, you’re strong to Tibs.”

He shook his head. Pulling in essence while manipulating it wouldn’t get him to pass the Lambda test, not that he knew what it was. “It’s going to—”

“Tibs,” Jackal said, sounding serious. “You can’t control the world. You have to enjoy what you have while you have it. And if, Abyss forbid, the team has to break up, we will find a way to stay together. I promise.” He urged Tibs back inside the room, then raised his tankard. “To Tibs, our newest Rho Runner.”

His teams and friends raised their tankards and cheered.

Tibs forced a smile and wished he could think of a way to ensure his team would stay together through whatever the guild did to them.