

“Are any of them here?” I scan the large room for anyone looking nasty enough to be who Brandon means.

“No. Xander has a strict ‘no hired help in the club’ rule.”

“He makes the rules here?” That’s going to be a problem.

Brandon laughs. “He wishes. This place belongs to Marygold. She’s the only one who can interface with the node. So only she makes the rules. Xander simply thinks that unless someone has the explorer class, they don’t belong in here.”

“So, not everyone here is an explorer?”

“Everyone here *is* an explorer,” Brandon says. “They just don’t all have that as their class.”

I look around again. This time trying to determine who has or doesn’t have explorer as a class. I want to class anyone muscular as not it, but Brandon fits that description and he has the class.

“Then how does it work? How does Marygold know who to let in?”

“You mean other than whoever she feels like it?”

I look at the tabletop, ignoring my burning cheeks.

“She mainly accepts those referred by another explorer. Then, there’s bringing some sort of relic. That’s how I got in. I figure you’re in on account of your armor. She recognized it, just like Xander did. So she—where are you going?”

I step away from the table. “To explain things to her.”

He grabs my arm. “Sit down.”

“I’m not going to let her think I’m Aaron’s son.”

“She’s probably going to revoke your membership.”

“Then she revokes it. It’s not like I’m looking to go around exploring places.”

“Then why—” he shakes his head. “Just sit down, Dennis. I have to explain a few things. If you feel you need to out yourself after that—”

“I am not hiding anything. It’s not my fault she made an assumption, and all I want to do is correct her, so she can decide properly.”

Brandon plasters on a smile. “We’re fine,” he calls. Marygold is watching us. He lowers his voice. “Please sit down.”

I consider wrenching my arm out of his hand. He’s not holding me that tightly, but there’s an edge of worry to his voice. Like he said. Once he’s done, I can go explain it to her, so I sit down.

“Look.” He keeps his voice low, and I feel Marygold’s eyes on us. “We’re going to Kansas city, right? That’s quite a way from here. Clubs like this aren’t just for putting up relics and bragging about the latest ruin you found. I’m talking generalities, not you specifically. Each club is a place you can get equipment at reasonable prices, instead of getting gouged by the shops once they realize what you do for a living. They’re places you can sleep and not worry about waking up with half your stuff missing. You can get food that isn’t going to leave you sick hours later. The clubs are a lifeline for people like you and me.”

“But I’m not a member of those other clubs,” I reply, voice also low, not that I know why. “So I don’t see what the big deal’s going to be.”

“But you are. The instant Marygold added you to the membership list here, it got

updated at all the other clubs.”

“They can talk to each other? I thought only cities could, and only if—”

“It’s not talking. She can’t send messages through the club. The list is in the system, and every club is linked to it. Don’t ask me how. It’s one thing I have no interest in researching. When a club meets the criteria for being an explorer’s club, they can see the list and update it.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see how that affects me. You said you’re coming with me to Kansas City. You’re a member, so I can come in with you like I did here.”

“What about on the way back? I’m not making any promises I’ll return with you. No, it’s not a threat. It’s just how things are. I’ve never been to that city. There’s bound to be ruins around there to explore, creatures to fight in them. Relics to find and bring back.”

“Okay, but I’m going to be higher level by then. And I’m going to know the road, the places that are safe to stop, since I doubt there’s going to be one of those clubs each night.”

Brandon looks at me like he can’t fathom what I’m talking about. “Okay, let’s try this. What’s the big deal if you don’t tell Marygold?”

“I haven’t earned my place here. Not that I’m looking to earn one. I told you once I deliver the letter, I’m going home.”

“To be a guard. Yes, I got that. So if you’re never going to take advantage of it, what’s the problem with just letting it slide by? It’s not like anyone is going to raise a stink, except Xander, maybe, but no one pays him any attention. People don’t go over the list annually to see if everyone has done enough to merit staying on it. You need to screw up pretty bad to be taken off.”

“Then no one will care if I’m not on it.”

I’m pretty sure Brandon covers up a groan by running his hand over his face. “Are you for real?”

I narrow my eyes. “Why does it matter to you?”

For a moment, I think he’d going to make a joke. The side of his lips quiver, but he shakes his head. “No one’s that good of a person.”

I snort. “I’m not *that* good. I disobeyed my dad when we got a monster wave and went to help defend it. I snuck out of town. I let my dad think I’d gotten farmer as a class, instead of standing up to him and just telling him what happened.”

I think he’s amused, but his expression turns serious as I narrow my eyes further at him.

“Okay, then, how about if you need to protect someone?”

“What?”

“Something tells me that you’re going to have an easy time picking up lost orphans and people who are at the end of their ropes. You might even end up with someone in actual danger, like what drew you to that dead end. What if someone’s hunting the person you’re protecting? You just going to let them sleep in any house offering beds in whatever city you come by?”

“I don’t know. Does that really happen? Orphans are left out to fend for themselves?” Dad is always going on about how dangerous the world is, how people outside of Court are no better than animals. I always figured it was just to scare me.

“I am exaggerating,” Brandon admits. “You don’t get out much, do you? But the point

is, there are bad people out there on top of monsters. You met a few of them already. I don't think you're going to walk away the next time it happens. The clubs are safe places. If you bring someone in, they will be protected from just about anyone short of the city's law enforcement."

"What about another city's?"

Brandon shakes his head. "A city's rule ends at its border. It's why there's such a thriving business in bounty hunting. Cities can pay good money for the return of an escaped criminal. But it doesn't matter to the club in another city. Unless that person does something there to get them evicted. We will all stand between them and who's after them. Between who you brought to be protected and who is after them."

"I didn't know the club did that," I say softly.

He chuckles. "You didn't know anything about the club before I told you, so don't feel too bad about it."

Is it worth it, though? A potential safe place for people in trouble versus letting them think I'm Aaron's son, therefore deserving of being part of the club? It feels wrong. It feels like lying, but not the good kind. The kind that helps someone feel better. Maybe it's because I'm not dealing with the potential situation now. I'm just seeing how I feel. But Brandon's right. It isn't like I'm just going to walk by someone in trouble. For all the fears about the outside my dad has, he raised me to help when I can.

"All right," I say without as much confidence as I'd like to put in. It still feels wrong to withhold information from Marygold.

Instead of triumphant, Brandon looks relieved. "Okay, now that's sorted, how about you find the map in all those you have that shows how to get to Kansas City?"

"I figured I'd go to the West Caravan Market and ask."

"So I'm going to add very trusting to your... personality list."

"That sounds like an insult."

"Trust me, it isn't." He grins. "But seriously, it's best if you know the route before getting with a caravan. They might not get there through the best way for you. Some caravans stop at every settlement on the way, instead of heading for their destination as fast as possible. Knowing how many of those there are can let you work out if that's something you need to ask about when deciding which caravan to sign on with."

"I was told to take one going to Buffalo, and from there I'd be able to find one going to Kansas City."

"Okay, if you're going to Buffalo, then why bother with a caravan? Why not just make the crossing?"

"What is that?" It sounds familiar, but I'm not sure why, or from where.

"Crossing the lake. You have to know there are boats going from Toronto to the Falls every day. There are places to sleep once we arrive, then the convoy head to Buffalo in the morning."

"Convoy?"

"Everyone who crossed is going to the city, so there's an escort system to take them there safely. Because of the number of people, it's not too expensive."

"What does 'not too expensive' mean?"

"I don't know. I didn't bother with them when I went to the city. I'm quite capable of

handling my own problems. And unlike most folks, I like getting into fights.”

“I’m willing to fight,” I stated, because that sounded like it was directed at me.

“I have no doubt.”

“I can fight,” I insist.

He smiles. “I saw how that went, remember?”

“Just because my skill’s low doesn’t mean I can’t fight. The best way to train is by fighting.”

“Now, you’re talking my language.”

“So we wouldn’t bother with the convoy. How much is the crossing?”

“How much of a hurry are you in?”

I close my mouth on the ‘as soon as possible’ that wants to leave it. I don’t know if it’s just that I’m used to getting most of what I want without waiting, so I don’t want to do that. But I do know that if I want speed, I have to sacrifice quality, or money. Dad often said to customers who were in a hurry that he could do fast. All they had to do was choose if they wanted it badly done, or expensive? Court doesn’t have a lot of wealthy people. So that usually got them to agree for him to take the time needed.

I also don’t think that quality is something I want to sacrifice on a boat. It might just be the kind of accommodation we’d have for the day, but I suspect it might also mean how well built the boat is.

“I’d rather cross it safely and for not too much money.”

There’s pride in the smile Brandon gives me. “Come with me.” He picks up the empty bowls and mugs.

“Marygold, I need you to book passage to the Falls for me and Dennis, and we’re going to need rooms until then.”

“Rooms?” she replies, sounding surprised. “What happened?” she looks at me. “Someone out there can actually resist the famous Hills charm?”

“Marygold, I’m hurt. You’re right there. How could you even think I’d spent time charming anyone else?”

“If you two are going to... you know,” I say, my cheeks burning. “I’m going to want my own room. Otherwise, I’m willing to split the cost. So long as there are two beds,” I add.

“I’ll even make sure they are on opposite sides of the room,” she says.

“Come on, Marygold. That’s just hurtful.”

She grins at Brandon. “What can I say. The truth hurts.”

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