

## Chapter 58

“Are they that bad?” Tibs asked as Carina dragged her feet.

He wore an oiled sheet over his nice clothing to keep them dry in the drizzle. Zackaria had cleaned them and had also shorn his hair down to the thickness of a finger. They’d hummed through the process and asked Tibs about the dungeon. He kept his stories to the exciting part of exploring the first and second floor and didn’t mention all the deaths he had had to endure. They were too nice to hear about those.

“They’re a bunch of self-centered, narrow-minded, no imagination Puritans,” she grumbled.

“That last one sound like it would apply to everyone in the city.”

“That doesn’t make it any better!” she yelled in exasperation and some of the men and women passing by looked in their direction.

She wore her sorcerer’s robes; the one she’d gotten from Sto. Peolo had offered her one of Zackaria’s dresses, but Carina had glared at the cleric. Tibs was sure that if the dress hadn’t belonged to Zackaria, Carina would have shredded it.

“Will it go better if you tell them I’m your special guy?”

She glanced at him, an eyebrow raised.

He shrugged. “Seems everyone expects us to have a special someone.”

“That’s not going to help, but thank you for offering. And they aren’t going to have a problem with you. You’re not part of the family, so they aren’t going to have expectations as to who you should have become.”

The neighborhood they entered had larger houses, but they were no more luxurious than any of the others before. By the sound coming from them, as well as the number of people coming and going, the size seemed to accommodate larger families, instead of denoting status.

When Carina stopped, Tibs did the same. Little set the house they stood in front of from the others. It was made of rough stones and the wooden beams supporting the porch were coated in pitch to protect them from the water. Zackaria had explained they used the wood from a tree that was more resistant to rain, but even then, it needed the extra protection.

The three rocking chairs and bench under the yawning looked well used. The shutters were open, the glass keeping the drizzle out and letting the light in.

Voices came from inside.

A lot of them.

“How many people are in your family?” Tibs asked.

“It depends who’s in the city.” She sighed. “By the sounds, I’d say we’re dealing with at least thirty of them.” He looked miserable.

“I don’t have my knife,” Tibs said. Maybe Peolo had known what Tibs might offer to make Carina feel better because he had kept the one knife Tibs had brought to the city. “But I can make one with ice and lower their numbers if it’s going to make you feel more

comfortable.”

She fought against the smile. “No killing my family, Tibs.” She lost, then her sigh wasn’t so filled with misery. “I’m not happy with them, but not so much I want any of them dead.”

Tibs thought Peolo had come close with his offer of the dress.

“I can pick pockets so badly I’ll get caught and they’ll kick us out.”

“No picking pockets,” she said, horrified. “You can’t go into the dungeon if you’re in a cell.”

“It’s kind of how I ended up—”

“No picking pockets, Tibs,” she instructed. He nodded, and she sighed in resignation. “I guess I just have to go through with this and hope it’s worth it.”

“It will be.”

She glanced at him. “For you, certainly. You’re the one getting an element out of this. All I’m getting is…” she motioned to the house.

“A family?” He did his best not to let his confusion sound. Wasn’t a family you didn’t get along with better than no family at all?

“I have a family,” she replied, tone firm. “He’s next to me right now. One’s in Kragle Rock, having too much fun with his special guy. I should have forced him to come so he could suffer with me.”

Yes.” Tibs chuckled. “Jackal among new people who’ve never heard his stories. He’d suffer so much.”

“Right. Then you can tell him of all the chances to impress people he missed once we’re back.” She straightened. “That’s going to serve him right for not being here to support me through this.” She stepped onto the porch and entered the house.

“Carina’s home!” a man yelled as he placed polished stone plates on a long, pale-wood table. Unlike in Kragle Rock, among the other Runners, what Peolo had done to Tibs so he would understand the city’s people let him hear the other language and know he didn’t understand it, but he also understood them. The cleric had explained that what he’d woven within Tibs’s mind purified the words to their meaning, and everyone understood meaning.

Tibs hadn’t quite understood what that meant.

“You’re looking good,” a woman said, as she walked by, stone goblets in her arms. “Who’s your friend?” she was gone before Tibs could introduce himself.

A child poked their head around the edge of a doorway, eyeing them suspiciously. Men and women walked by, offering greetings faster than Tibs could react to, carrying items for preparing the table for the coming meal.

When he glanced at Carina, her eyes were closed and she had a small smile. She opened them as if sensing him looking, and shrugged, but the smile remained.

No one ignored them as they moved, no, worked, but they were too busy setting the table to stop for their greetings. It was a chaos that reminded Tibs of Kroseph’s family at the MountainSea inn when it was busy. Only here, there was no stopping to chat with a customer when serving them. Or leaning against the bar, taking in the room before heading in. Only the youngest children didn’t take part, but they stayed at the edge of the room, out of the

way, as they watched the adults and older children.

“Don’t just stand there,” a woman said as she walked by, carrying baskets of bread in her arms. “There’s lots more food in the kitchen that needs moving.”

Tibs couldn’t read the expression that flashed on Carina’s face. It might have been relief, but that didn’t make sense since she’d been given work to do.

“Yes, Mother.” She hurried to the other room and Tibs followed, only to stop with the woman, Carina’s mother said.

“You don’t have to. Guests don’t need to share in the work.”

Tibs looked around at everyone moving and tried to imagine standing here, just doing nothing. “What if I want to help?” he put his hands in his pockets. None of the people’s pockets were bulging, but he could tell there were things in them. As much as he’d been joking when he talked about picking pockets, he knew that if he didn’t stay busy, the temptation would only increase.

“Then you are most welcome to the family,” she said, as she placed the baskets on the table. With a nod, she indicated a door. “In that room, you’ll find the chairs. Why don’t you help bring them to the table?”

Tibs set to work, and immediately he became one of them. When the chairs were placed, he was set to help bring the candelabras, then fetch the candles. Then he was in the kitchen, turning the spit over the fire in the open back of the house, with only a large oiled sheet hanging over the deck keeping the rain off him and the food. Talking never stopped, but no one questioned who he was or what he was doing here with Carina.

They asked about where he was from, and how he met Carina, but they didn’t press for more than he gave. One teased him, asking if he and Carina were engaged. Because of what Peolo had told him of how things were between him and Zackaria, Tibs knew that means betrothed, like Mez and his girl. No, he told them. They were simply friends and teammates.

He stopped himself from saying they were family because whatever reservation Carina had had about being here, they were gone now, replaced by contentment as she worked alongside her parents, siblings, and others related to her in ways Tibs didn’t understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

They sat as a man lit the candles on the table. He seemed no older than the other adults, but there was a sense of authority about him that turned the lighting into a ceremony. The energy that had filled the house was now an undercurrent to the peace surrounding the table.

There were three and six people around the table, including him and Carina, but not the children who sat on the adult’s laps. Tibs had never seen so many people at one table, or a table so large it fit them all. How was he going to reach for the meat he wanted when it was eight places away?

“You did good work, Carina,” the man said, once he sat among the others. Carina was seated between her mother and father, who looked barely older than Carina. He shared the same brown hair with hints of red, but his skin was closer to Tibs’s light brown than hers and

her mother's dark version of it. "As did your friend. Welcome to our family, Tibs."

Tibs's thank you came out soft. He was unsure if it meant he'd been greeted as her special guy, if anyone who helped became part of the family, or even what being part of the family meant.

"The meal has been made with care and attention," the man intones. "The table set with determination and effort. Fire has been brought to assist in purifying the room. Live pure, work hard, and always keep wary of corruption." Chaos erupted as soon as the last word was said.

People reached for bowls, plates, or bottles. Wine and ale poured among the laughter and meats and vegetables being passed around for each to take. Conversations were light and intense. There was a lack of order to how they served themselves that stunned Tibs, since the work leading up to this moment had felt organized.

The company was good, the food better, and Tibs ate heartily, as did everyone else.

He'd never tell Kroseph, but Tibs thought the food might be better than what the inn served.