

Chapter 02

Tibs paid attention again to how the essence stretched from the city he came from to his town, then snapped out of existence. He opened his eyes to the late afternoon sky over Kragle Rock.

Nothing had changed, since the town had shut down along with the dungeon. Unlike when Sto graduated, there was no work being done to expand. No one but him knew Sto was alive and healing. The guild suspected he was. Alistair had mentioned that dungeons were resilient, but without his ability to speak with him it was more akin to hope than anything else. And that was more than the townsfolk even had.

The bored guard leaning against the pillar at the bottom of the steps watched Tibs. He didn't stop him or demand to see the bracelet on his left wrist. Tibs didn't bother offering it as he passed by. He'd decided after the first few times back that it wasn't his job to confirm he belonged here. The lack of reaction did tell him there was no indication Sto was about to open his door.

A dog fell into step as he turned onto Dungeon Road, which would take him out of the town, to the plain separating it from the mountain that was where Sto existed. The dog was large, with short sandy fur, and looked at him plaintively, licking its muzzle.

"You know Serba hates it when I give these to you, right?" Tibs pulled a piece of jerky from a pocket and handed it to the dog. "Where is she anyway?" Thump was too busy chewing to acknowledge the question. He looked around, she should have been berating the dog for interacting with Tibs. When he looked at Thump again, it was looking back, a miserable expression on its face.

With an amused shake of the head, Tibs gave it another piece.

The road was deserted.

Without access to the dungeon, the nobles had left. A town like Kragle Rock held no other appeal to them, and Tibs was grateful for it. But without their coins, all but the most basic of merchants had also left, which meant that anyone who could afford the cost was elsewhere. Hope in Sto reopening his door wasn't enough to keep people who could leave here.

The town wasn't empty. There were the Attendants, the guild still had a presence, in the form of the guards, and enough people couldn't afford to leave there were taverns still open, but there wasn't much of the sense of life that had filled the town before. Those left, lived with the fear of the town outright dying without a dungeon to bring people to it, and what would happen to them.

They had been brought by the guild and a promise of a better life if they helped build the town, and while, as far as Tibs could tell, they weren't indentured to the guild the way he was, they hadn't been promised a way to leave should things not work out.

More a lack of belief the town would fail on the part of the guild than maliciousness. Dungeons always meant success. And the stories of a dungeon dying were so rare Tibs couldn't find anyone, not even Carina, who had heard one.

Sto wasn't one of those, but only he knew that for certain.

A whistle sounded, and Thump ran off to answer it. Not long after that, the road left the town, turning into a well-trod path winding down to what had become known as the gathering field, where Omega grade Runners assembled while waiting to be assigned to a team for their runs. There were no more guards running into town looking for a free fighter or archer or sorcerer. If they weren't on the field, they weren't doing runs. And since the Omega Runners who ad come after Sto graduated had paid for the privilege, they had all spent their times here.

Enough a handful of merchants had booths there selling food and drinks as well as cheap equipment. Unlike the group Tibs had arrived with, these could be expected to have coins even before their first run.

Tibs remembered the first time he'd seen a whole copper coin. The awe it had been intact, that he could tell what the design on it was, instead of having to guess from the sliver he'd held before. Tibs hadn't even held a half copper before he'd picked up a full one in the dungeon.

Or when he received the first copper coin he'd been allowed to keep; although that memory was tainted by who had handed it to him.

Bardik had stood behind the table, smiles, and nicknames at the ready. Bardik, who had taught Tibs how to fight with knives. Bardik, who had involved Tibs in a plot to kill the dungeon without his knowledge. Bardik, who nearly succeeded in killing Sto, and was responsible for the constant ache deep inside Tibs.

He'd tried to see the adventurer rogue between his trips to locate the city Tibs came from, but no one he'd asked would tell him where the prison Bardik was kept in was. All he found out was that it was the most terrible place the guild had.

Tirania had been the most patient with him, listening to Tibs explain how he needed to find out from the adventurer how he could betray the guild and the dungeon like that. How he could betray Tibs when he thought they could be friends.

She'd nodded in understanding and told him there was nothing she could, or would, do about it. Bardik would never leave that prison, and no one, not even Tibs, would ever go there to visit him. Then she'd explained that some people were never satisfied with what they had. That some needed to destroy when they couldn't have or control. That some simply hated what was different.

Tibs had stopped listening. He knew the why of Bardik's actions. The man had thought destroying the dungeon would lead to the guild losing its hold on town and the Runners here. Tibs hadn't realized he'd still hoped the two of them could be friends until the pain of the betrayal had hit. The one thing he couldn't explain, that he wanted to know from the adventurer was what he hadn't told anyone about how Tibs had drained his essence until he looked older than Alistair.

Tirania and those from the guild who knew more about dungeons said it had been some defense; an attempt at stopping him, but they were guessing, Tibs knew that. For as much as people claim to know about the dungeons, he'd learned there was much more they didn't.

Bardik could have enacted his revenge against Tibs by telling them he was

responsible, by revealing one of his secrets.

He paused at the bottom of the steps leading up the hill that ended where the door to the dungeon was. They were different from when they first appeared, after Sto graduated, or even from the last time Tibs visited. They had been rough then, now they were polished and had designs.

“Do you like them?” Sto asked.

He looked up at them, then continued the motion by turning and taking in the empty field and path leading back to the town. He confirmed he was alone and looked back at the dungeon.

“Did you have to make them rats?” He indicated the designs. That he’d intended for it or not, Sto had given Tibs a hatred of all rat-related things. “You sound better,” he added, walking up the steps. Too many of them had designs of rats running along the edge.

“It’s good for the new Runners to know what to expect.”

On the fifth step, the rats were replaced by Ratlings, and instead of running, Sto’s humanoid creations were killing people. Tibs shuddered at the memory of having one of those on his back, claws coming for his face.

“How’s Gany?” Tibs started up again.

“Gany’s... not well. Nearly losing me did something. I don’t understand most of the explanations. It seems pretty simple to me. If I die, there’s another dungeon to be helped.”

“Losing someone isn’t that simple; especially if they care about you. You saw how Walter’s death hurt me, you understand that, since it’s the reason you gave me the pouch and belt.”

“But you’re human; Gany isn’t. Neither am I. I’m not saying this to be mean, Tibs, but when you die, I’ll go on.”

He nodded. It was why dungeons existed after all. To push the people exploring them so they became stronger, if they survived. Tibs didn’t want to die, but he had no illusions about his chances. With his weak essences, and the fact he couldn’t ask for help in training any but water, it was only a matter of time until Sto put an obstacle before him Tibs wouldn’t be able to overcome.

If he could tell someone at the guild about his multiple essences, they might help him, but more likely, since that was supposed to be impossible, they’d want to study him, find out how to get someone else to have the same. They’d never let him go.

And his one element he had more essence with than he knew what to do with, didn’t exist. Or at least Carina had never heard of anyone with one that let them sense the essence coursing through other people, or use it to heal injuries, after a fashion.

Or as Jackal liked to call it: splinting the injuries until a cleric could heal them.

“Maybe her people are more like humans than they are like you.”

The slab of stone blocking the entrance to the dungeon was still featureless, but the columns on each side and above it were more elaborate now. Instead of just rats or bunnies, there was now a sense of each of the rooms on the first floor.

There was a fighter, skewered by a spear between walls. Boulders, with a leg and an arm being nibbled on by rats. On the other column, the boulder scene was different, the

Runner standing with a rat on top and—

“Is that me?” Tibs demanded. The rogue was on the small size, thin, holding a knife.

“No.” Sto sounded offended. “It’s just a random Rogue. They’re the ones usually panicking among the boulders the first time they see the rats.”

“I didn’t panic,” Tibs stated, trying to stop the shudder at the memory of standing there, frozen in fear a rat glaring at him from the top of a boulder.

Another showed a bunny, launching itself at a sorcerer from a hidden door in the floor. The warren room. The next one he identified was the boss room, the golem breaking an archer into two with its whip-hand.

“Did you make all of these?”

“Of course. Did you think there was another dungeon in here, hiding and adding drawings when I’m not looking?”

Tibs studied the of the trap room, this one a sorceress raised off the floor by an angled spear. He could make out the marks that had identified which of the tiles were triggers when Tibs had first gone through. “You’re good.” It was an easy admission. As unnerving at seeing scenes he’d almost died in was, the skill needed to draw them was undeniable.

“Thanks.”

Tibs sat, his back to the stone door. “Do you know when you’ll be opening?”

The answer too time in coming. “Soon. Everything looks right, but the corruption seeped in deep. I’m not finished cleaning it out.”

Tibs raised an arm, feeling the ache with the motion. “How are you removing it? I thought corruption just destroyed everything it touched.”

“It’s within me, Tibs. And I can control anything that isn’t alive inside me. If I’d known to expect an attack like that, I would have been ready for it.” He paused and his voice was subdued when he continued. “I thought nothing could hurt me. The stone I make is supposed to be impervious to anything.”

Tibs chuckled. “The creatures are all that hard.” He’d sliced rats into two with a dull knife.

“That’s because I make them that way. Hard enough to be a challenge, tough enough to kill you if you aren’t paying attention.”

It hadn’t made the losses he’d experienced vanish, but learning that Sto didn’t exist simply to feed off those who died within his walls had softened it. His purpose was to force them to improve, to get better and stronger. The guild had told them that surviving the dungeon would cause that for them, but they believed it was a secondary effect they were taking advantage of; not the reason dungeons existed.

It was one of the things the guild had wrong about dungeons. One of many. As after as the guild was concerned, dungeons were nothing more than cunning animals.

“So... soon,” Tibs said.

“I can’t give you anything better, Tibs. You know time isn’t something I understand the way the living do.”

“I should tell them to set up the schedule here. That way you’d see how we separate

the days in five weeks of nine for each month, then the seasons. It helped me figure it out, with my team's help."

"How are they? They haven't visited." Sto sounded disappointed.

"Jackal's with Kroseph in MountainSea. Carina travels, looking for books to read, but she stops to see them. Mez is with his family. The last time I saw him, he said something about his mother trying to convince the guild he didn't belong there, not as a Runner anyway. He hadn't done anything deserving of that fate."

Tibs rubbed his wrist. As if picking a pocket to survive had been a crime so grave he'd deserved to end up here, or get his hand cut off, which had been the alternative. Those who made the laws didn't care how it affected those under it. He'd been caught, so he needed to be punished, reasons why he'd been forced to it could go to the abyss.

"And the cleric?"

"No one's seen Khumdar since Harry kicked all the Runners out. He tried to stay and look after me, but there was an argument with the purity cleric in charge here and he got banned from the guild house. If he couldn't look after me, he had no reasons to stay, is the consensus."

"Do you think he'll come back?"

Tibs ran a finger over the bracelet on his left wrist, with the yellow gem in it. "If he wants to live, he'll have to." If he was still alive. Unlike Tibs and any of the original runners, Khumdar hadn't come here from a cell. He'd arrived after Sto graduated, which mean he'd paid to come; or someone had paid for him. He'd mentioned his choice had been here or to be killed, but it hadn't been by guards. Would whoever had sent him here appreciate he was free? The bracelet allowed a Runner to go anywhere they wanted, but all it took was one person to realize who you were and all your enemies could find out.

They'd paid to send him here, so they had the coins to follow him through the transportation platforms.

It was one thing Tibs had learned from asking questions of the Attendants. The person who took you to your destination could always get back there, even if they weren't the ones who set the destination; such as when Alistair as taken Tibs to the caverns where he'd had his audience with Water. Even if that Attendant had never been there before, afterward, they knew the way because they'd felt how the essence had been shaped by the platform and could recreate it. They were there to provide the void essence that allowed the platforms to work which was why they needed to accompany even those able to set the destination themselves.

The platforms and pillars acted as controls anyone with essence could interact with, while the Attendants were the power that allowed the transportation to occur.

"They haven't been back because they can't until the gem in the bracelet turns red. I get special treatment because I saved you."

"Your team helped. Jackal took on one of those adventurers that tried to chase you. He was taken down quickly, but it gave you more of a lead. Mez let out a bunch of arrows. He really likes his bow."

Tibs chuckled. "It was lucky one of the chests had something so well suited to him."

“It was, wasn’t it?” Sto lowered his voice. “I don’t think Gany’s going to believe it was random if it happens again.”

“I don’t think it will.” He stood. “Tell her I’m looking forward to seeing what she did with the third level.”

“How about you start by going through the second floor first?”

“I will. I’m not letting out eat me on your second floor.” Knowing it would happen eventually didn’t mean Tibs had to make it easy. “You aren’t eating me if I can avoid it.”

“I’m glad, Tibs.”

Back into town, the weaver was at his loom this time, working under the awning. “Gone to see the dungeon again?” he asked.

“I don’t want him to get too lonely,” Tibs replied and the weaver chuckled. They knew the stories of how dungeons were nothing more than animals, but unlike the guild, they thought even an animal deserved compassion.

Or they simply indulged Tibs because he was the youngest Runner, and still alive and he’d saved the dungeon, and indirectly, the town. He was allowed his strangeness because of that.

“I hope it’s not going to last any longer,” the man said. “There’s no coins coming in, with all the Runners away, and soon, I’m not going to be able to pay the rent to the guild anymore.”

Another reason the townsfolk’s spirits fell. Most of them had come with the guild and promises of property and opportunities, and technically—Tibs hated that word—they had that. Only it came with a price. The guild hadn’t given them the land or the building they lived in and used for their business. It leased it to them.

The guild only cared about them so long as they could pay for it. Tibs didn’t know what would happen to them once they couldn’t pay. It wasn’t like the guild would pay for them to leave via the platform.

Was this how a city gained a Street?

“Soon,” he answered, putting as much confidence in his voice. “Soon, we’re going to come back, I promise.”