

Chapter 06

“How did you score the first place?” Don demanded, getting close to Tibs.

He stepped back; he knew better than to allow the corruption sorcerer to touch him. The man might not be responsible for what infected Tibs, it was a constant reminder of the damage that element could cause.

That, and the pool at one end of Merchant Row.

How about getting out of our way, Don?” Jackal said, placing a hand at Tibs’s back to keep them from colliding.

“You,” the sorcerer snarled. “This is because of you. Hard Knuckles if your family. No wonder you tried to convince us he hated you. You didn’t want us to realize everything he did for you.”

Jackal sighed. “Don, Tibs says you’re smart. So how about you stop saying stupid stuff? Knuckles wouldn’t get me a tankard of water if I was on fire.”

“He’d put you out,” Carina said. “Harry wouldn’t let a Runner burn to death, not ever you. He’s hoping you’re going to feed the dungeon.”

“Carina, I love you like a sister,” Jackal said out the side of his mouth, “but you realize I’m trying to make a point with Don, right?”

“Then make a better one,” Mez said, which earned him a glare from the sorceress. He sighed.

“You can’t fool me,” Don snapped. “I’m going to talk with the guild leader. There is no way she’ll allow this to stand.” He stormed off, trying to shove them aside, but they moved out of his way. No one in Kragle Rock let an angry Don touch them.

“Is this in regards to something I miss by returning at the last moment?” Khumdar asked. He leaned on his staff, still reeling from his injuries.

“He said we’re first,” Jackal answered, “so it’s got to be because he didn’t have the coins to put in and he’d going in after us.” He started walking again. “Let’s go check the board. I want to see how many noble teams are ahead of us.”

“All of them,” Tibs grumbled. They had all the coins, so it was easy for them to go in before anyone else.

The board had come up in the morning, so the day before was when the teams had to hand over their coins to the guild if they wanted to increase their chances of going in early. On top of secretly charging the Runners for the training they received, the guild let them buy their way to an early position, but since it would tell anyone who had paid what, it forced the teams to hand over a lot of their hard earned coins.

In a quiet way of defying the guild, Tibs’s team had stopped giving coins to increase their position. They’d realized that the last team to go in was no more at risk than the first one. They’d also passed their decisions along and until the attack on Sto, Don had been the only Runner still handing over some coins, and lording going in before any of the other Runners over them.

There was nothing to be done about the training fees. The guild charged each of them

three gold for each day they had their teacher. Tibs shouldn't know, but his teacher, Alistair, had told him as part of explaining what the word 'technically' meant. Once he reached Epsilon, Tibs would have to repay the entirety of the amount, which was more than Tibs could even comprehend. The promised freedom would only come once he no longer owed the guild any coins, not when he reached Epsilon.

They reached the board and the other Runners became quiet, watching them. Tibs ignored them, if they were the first of the Runner teams, it was just randomness, not anyone arranging things for them. He quickly looked down the list, not trying to read the noble names. They were long and had multiple parts to them. Only nobles could afford to have more than one name. He found the first of the Runner team, Pyan's, and kept going. Was Don pissed just because his team had come before him? It was Don, so that was a possibility.

"Okay," Jackal said, as Tibs reached the middle of the Runner's name and still hadn't seen his. "This could be a problem."

He looked at the fighter. Jackal was looking at the list too, but his gaze was higher than where Tibs had been searching. A lot higher. Tibs looked at the top of the list, and found his name there, ahead of every other team, including the nobles.

"Tibs did save the dungeon," Khumdar said, as annoyance formed in Tibs's stomach. "Some form of recompense for make sense."

"Yeah..." Jackal trailed off. "The problem with this kind of reward is that it's poisonous. Tibs, you should have a talk with the guild and have them remove us."

"I will," Tibs agreed, "but we'd better do the run first."

"Tibs, I think you need to get them to take us out of that spot right now."

"I don't see the harm in us taking advantage of it," Carina said, but even before Jackal explained things to her, the annoyance was turning into dread.

"Carina, it's not just the the other Runners we need to worry about, and if you'll look around, they aren't happy about this. Them we can handle. But nobles don't take kindly to being outdone, especially by someone who isn't of their status. Don is going to be the least of our problem, if this remains."

Tibs didn't hear Carina's reply, he was running and cursing not having eaten anything before heading for the board. Tibs liked have something in his stomach before dealing with problems.

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"Am I supposed to care what you want?" a woman demanded. The annoyance in Tirania's voice was loud out of the open door to her office and Tibs slowed. He'd expected to find her alone, but by the tone, Don was still there.

"I was promised that if I paid, I would go before those nothings," and man Tibs didn't recognized said in clipped and disgusted tones. Tibs peeked around the edge of the door frame. Three nobles stood in the office, with Don pushed to the side, glaring at them.

"The system is that whoever pays the most goes in first," Tirania replied sharply. He color-shifting eyes flicked in Tibs's direction before focusing back on the noble.

"And you expect me to believe a nothing had to gold to match mine?" the noble were

a gray cloak trimmed with gold. As the man gestures, the cloak moved to show black pants, of a material Tibs didn't recognize, tucked into black boots. He also wore black gloves, over which were a handful of rings. Each with essence in them.

"Master Kilian," Tirania replied, "you can go into the abyss for all that I care what you believe in. You placed your bid, and it got you the second position." She smiled. "If you were so determined to be first, you should have bid more." She raised a hand to silence the protest. "If you aren't happy, feel free to go back where you came from. I am certain that one of this fine people will happily take your place on the list."

The man turned his glare on the woman and other man next to him. His gaze gliding over Don as if he wasn't there. He noticed Tibs before he could duck back. His eyes were ash gray.

"Tibs," Tirania called, "why don't you join us?"

Sighing, he stepped into the office."

"He's the one who stole your position," Don said, pointing. "He's a thief!"

"I'm a rogue," Tibs replied locking eyes with the sorcerer's sickly purple eyes and forced himself to maintain it until Don looked away. Having an empty stomach was a good thing after all.

"Tibs stole nothing," Tirania said. "He earned it."

"How?" Tibs asked, causing the guild leader to raise an eyebrow. "I didn't put coins it, no one on my team did."

"Tibs," she said warned, "do you really want to question how you deserve to be before all these gentle people?"

"The guild's supposed to be fair," he replied, knowing it was nothing like that. But considering how none of the unfairness was explicit, Tibs figured she'd want to maintain that illusion. "I don't want to be treated special."

Don snorted and no one paid him any attention.

"You are not receiving special treatment, Tibs."

"He has just admitted to not placing a bid," the gray-eyed noble said. "How do you justify him being the first to go in?"

Tirania sighed. "Tibs is the reason there is a dungeon for you to go into. Him and his team were instrumental in stopping the attack that came far too close to destroying it. Going in first is their reward for the work they did."

The nobles looked at him in disbelief.

"You expect me to believe this nothing was part of a team of nothing, and that they were able to stop a group of corrupt adventurers? Do you take me for a fool?"

Don was the only one still watching Tibs, but instead of anger his expression was calculating. That wasn't good either.

"I already told you I don't care what you believe, Master Kilian. I am in charge here, not you. If you want to continue to argue, I can sit here and let you do it and still not care for as long as you want, when instead, you might want to ensure you are ready for your turn in the dungeon tomorrow, after Tibs's team."

The man planted his hand on the desk and leaned toward her. "Do not take for granted

that your position as leader of this little dungeon outpost give you the right to order me around. I am not one of the convict you shipping in. I am brother to—”

“No one I care about,” she cut him off with a smirk. “And yes, being the leader of this little dungeon outpost does give me the right to order you around, Master Kilian. For example, I could tell Harry to grab you by the collar of that expensive shirt you wear and throw you onto the transportation platform and send you back to whatever kingdom your brother, the king, rules and keep for from ever returning here, or any of the other nobles there from being allowed here. Even his knights. If you really anger me, I can even have words with the leader of other dungeon outposts, little or otherwise, and see to it that you and anyone from that kingdom have a difficult time convincing them to allow you there also. That is the kind of power I wield, Master Kilian.”

The noble straightened, and the woman next to him covered her mouth in an attempt to stifle a laugh.

“Very well,” the gray-eyed noble said. “You have made your point. I will retire.” His tone darkened. “If you’ll permit me that.”

She nodded and he turned. Tibs stepped out from the doorway, but the noble still stopped before leaving and looked down on him.

“You, little nothing, would do well to watch what you think of yourself. Little nothing saviors will still end under my boot if they aren’t careful.” Tibs watched him and the other two leave. He’d have to find out which house was his and visit it in the night. Once he could trust his hands again.

“Is there anything you want to add, Don?” Tirania asked, startling the sorcerer who had still been watching Tibs.

“No. You’ve made your position quite clear.” He too stopped before leaving. “This isn’t over.”

Tirania sighed, rubbing her face. “You do realize you’ve made it impossible for me to put you at the top of the list, correct?”

“Why is my team at the top?” he asked, stepping to her desk.

“It’s as I told them. Your reward for saving the dungeon. I’m not blind to what you did, to what it cost you. You aren’t limping anymore, but the corruption is still there, isn’t it?”

Tibs shrugged.

“I wish I knew what was special about the corruption they used,” she mused.

“Unfortunately, the dungeon locked down before we could retrieve any of the bottles, and the ones left outside only contained normal condensed essence of it.” She studied him.

“Why did you go, Tibs? I know what you told the others. You wanted to protect the town, the dungeon, but Harry knows something he isn’t telling me. I’d like you to tell me the truth.”

“That is the truth. I never had a town of my own, just a Street. Kragle Rock is my home. If the dungeon dies, it dies with him. I’m not going to let that happen.”

She nodded and smiled slightly. “I suppose that telling the same story every time ensures you won’t make a mistake in the telling. Regardless of the real reasons, you did act Tibs, and for that I am grateful. I doubt you understand how important this dungeon is.”

“He is?”

She nodded.

She took a gem from a drawer and Tibs paid attention. It was cloudy, with a rose tint to it and he thought hints of gold. He couldn't make out any of the essences involved in making the communication gem.

"Alistair," she said to it, "this is truly not urgent, but the dungeon is open again, so you should already be here, fulfilling your duties to your student." She put it away.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. When he isn't teaching you, his duties are to the guild as a whole, not just me."

"The guild is more than you?"

Tirania laughed and the sound reminded Tibs of crystals gently clinking together. "Ah, the innocence of youth. Yes, Tibs. The guild is much more than me. I'm only the leader of this town and dungeon. Each dungeon had a guild, and a leader, and we report to a central leader who oversees all our operations. It's—"

Tibs raised a hand to stop her. All he'd get out of this was a headache, not understanding. "I'm just a kid and a Runner. What you're talking about is beyond me."

She nodded. "You're a wise one to recognize that. But to answer your initial question, yes, the dungeon is important. Every dungeon is. We need them to train the people we'll need when the time comes."

"The time?" Tibs leaned forward. Not that sounded interesting.

She smiled. "If you consider how the whole of the guild works to be beyond you, Tibs, this is beyond even that."

Tibs wondered if it would be worth the headache to know what was coming in time. Probably not. Once he had the headaches, it would be even harder to understand the rest. "Okay."

She leaned back in her seat and considered him. "Are you going to squander every reward I give you?"

"I don't want any reward. Not if it's going to make the nobles angry at me. You don't know what they can do."

"Harry can keep them in their place."

Tibs snorted. It wasn't like they needed to move to cause Tibs problems. They had so much coins they could pay people to do that for them. Tibs didn't think any Runners would take nobles' coins, except Don, but the fresh recruits didn't know how dangerous it was to break Harry's rules yet.

"I'm just a Runner," he repeated. "I don't want to be treated as anything else."

She nodded. "Alright. Then I suggest you rejoin your team and get ready for tomorrow. I can't change the way this schedule is arranged."

Tibs knew she could. She was making a point by not doing it. To him, the nobles, the other teams.

She was the person in charge, none of them got to dictate what she did.