

Chapter 19

Tibs couldn't enjoy the town the same way. Walking the roofs just let him see how there was nothing outside of the town and the dungeon. The wood was gone, down to stumps, and even those were being removed so the town could expand in that direction.

Walking among the ever-thinning crowd he couldn't see other dungeon runners like him. Instead, he saw slaves with ever-tightening nooses around their necks going about their days in blissful ignorance. When he saw one of his teammates, he made sure they didn't see him.

The entire week of training was wasted, which made him feel worse as each day was three gold he now had to pay and didn't have anything to show for them. Alistair tried to make him feel better, but every explanation about how this was just how things were sounded like another stone put on his back.

He didn't want this to be how things were. He wanted them to be something else. He didn't want to have to live like this.

He wanted to run.

"You look like you learned some back news," Bardik said, standing next to him as Tibs looked out beyond the edge of the town, of his prison. There would be something over the horizon, every story said so. "Or is it a bad truth?"

"Do you care?" He asked. Unlike the early days, when adventurers always patrolled the town's edge, Tibs hadn't seen one for the entire time he'd stood there, looking into the distance, trying to decide if whatever was out there would be better than what was in here.

"I'd rather you didn't run," the adventurer said, sounding tired. "That's for sure?"

"Don't want to have to chase me?" He asked mockingly.

"I wouldn't chase you," Bardik answered, tone flat, and Tibs had to glance at him, also looking into the distance. "I'd have a knife in your back before you took three steps." He looked at Tibs, and Tibs quickly looked ahead again. "I don't want you to run, Tibs, because I'd rather you live."

"Live and do what?" Tibs demanded, rounding on the man. He pointed to Bardik's wrist. "Tell me how you got this."

"No."

"Did you try to run?"

"I'd be dead if I had." He rubbed the sleeve over his wrist. "This is because I accepted my fate."

"Accept my fate? The fate of having *your* guild step all over me? Turn me into a slave? You knew that's what they did because they did it to you too! How can you tell me to be proud of being Street? On my street, we don't let someone walk over us."

Bardik smiled. "You move out of the way, then kick them in the knees."

Tibs tried not to smile. "I aim higher."

The adventurer shrugged, his smile reaching his eyes now. "Every Street's different." He looked Tibs over. "Although I question your ability to reach that target, considering your size."

Tibs narrowed his eyes, losing the little humor that has built. “You want me to show you?”

“Maybe another day.” Bardik looked at the horizon again. “Not letting someone walk over you doesn’t mean you have to be off the street, Tibs. Sometimes you need to be in the middle of everyone, risk getting stepped on because that’s the only place where you see where everyone’s going.”

Tibs so didn’t have the desire to deal with the man’s strange saying. “Are you here because you need me to pay for you training me?” at least that he could afford.

“No, you’re wanted at the dungeon. There’s a team that needs a thief.”

Tibs looked at the horizon. Another day, maybe he’d run. He’d make sure to pick one where Bardik was busy at the dungeon. He turned and headed through the town to see which group of strangers he’d be dealing with this time.

* * * * *

Avoiding his team was easy. The town was large enough now the alleys were plentiful. And he could endure the slop at mealtime to ensure he wouldn’t be somewhere one of them would. They were easy to avoid until his team was called for their turn in the dungeon.

Now it wasn’t just about knowledge of the trap they were all in, he had to keep it from them because they didn’t deserve the misery he suffered. No one deserved it, not even him, but it was too late for him.

“You okay?” Jackal asked. “I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“I’m fine,” Tibs replied, and even he could tell his tone contracted him. In place of Claudia, a slim man wearing the guild’s horrible leather chest armor was with the other. There was only one reason she wasn’t here. That this stranger was among them. The guild had sent her in the dungeon and she hadn’t come out. Another one of their victim.

“This is Radkliff,” Jackal introduced, “he’s a fire rogue.”

Another rogue? Did he think he could take his place? Tibs closed his eyes. What was wrong with him? This man hadn’t asked to be in their team. The guild had made the decision, and the guild didn’t care if there had already been another rogue. He’d been thrown onto teams who already had one too. But why couldn’t everyone he’d gotten to know survive to the next run for once?

“I’m feeling a little underdressed,” Radkliff said with an uncomfortable chuckle. “How did you guys score that sweet armor?”

No, not another trap? “How are you going to pay for her armor?” Tibs asked, dread creeping up.

“I checked with the merchant,” Zarkane said, ignoring there confused look the new thief gave all of them. It wasn’t Tibs problem if he didn’t know who he meant. “Since she died in the dungeon, he wrote her off his book. Something about it being the risk of the trade. That’s not an aspect I know anything about. He did say that if it happens again and we can bring him the armor back, he’d buy it off us. Oh, and we need to find someone to look at what he actually wrote. I’m not so good with the letters.”

“I’ll do it,” Walter said quietly.

“Why didn’t the team with her take the armor?” Tibs asked, trying not to let the anger bubble up. “They could have brought it back to us, it’s the least they could do, she was our—” He closed his mouth as he felt his eyes sting. He rubbed with the back of his hand. He wasn’t going to cry, not again, not anymore.”

“Maybe the entire team died,” Jackal said. “Maybe it happened in such a way that they didn’t think it was worth the risk. Or they thought that if they were seen with it, they’d be on the hook for the coins.” He shrugged. “Maybe they just didn’t care.”

“Why aren’t you any angrier about this?” Tibs yelled at the man, at all of them. They were rat food and not one of them seemed to be more than down about it.

The smile Jackal gave him was pained. “I lost too many people, Tibs, even before this. I had to learn to accept that death comes. It can’t be stopped. Once you do that, the pain doesn’t last as long.”

“I know that! I—” Tibs almost told them about Mama. If she died, how could anyone be safe? He knew it, but it didn’t make the pain any less. “I hate it,” He finally said, softly.

“I am not a fan of it myself,” Walter sighed. “I believe it’s our turn.” He motioned at the team of three coming down the path.

The adventurers at the start of the path looked them over, pausing on Tibs and frowning. Her partner shrugged when she pointed to him, to his eyes.

“It’s a four-room dungeon,” she said after a last look at him. “Do you think you’ll be the first to clear it?” Tibs wished they’d stop being bothered by his eyes. He was the one with the normal color everyone else had the unusual ones.”

“Has anyone come close?” Jackal asked.

“A few teams got in,” the partner said, “but they came out members short.”

“Those that did come back,” she added.

Jackal only nodded. They led them up the part and into the dungeon.

“I’ve got this,” Radkliff said when they reached the first room.

Tibs looked at Walter, who shrugged. If he wasn’t going to object, it wasn’t Tibs’s place to do so.

“Alright,” Jackal said after watching their silent exchange. “Impress us.”

The rogue placed a hand on the floor and a sheet of fire erupted from it to cover its entirety. Tibs was about to ask what good the fire was when he heard a snap, then another and another. A series of them from the room. Mechanism breaking, he understood. Then silence. The fire continued a little longer before it retreated into the hand and Radkliff stood, rubbing his hands together.

“This is now an ordinary floor,” he said, motioning to the room, “if a little hot.”

“Consider us impressed,” Jackal said, taking the lead. Radkliff followed with Zarkane. Tibs headed for the hidden compartment, while Walter trailed after the others.

There was a click and a spear almost struck Tibs, dropping too late to do any good if he had triggered it. A wet cough made him roll and look in its direction. Walter looked at the spear going through his chest with a stunned expression and blood dripping from

over his lips. The spear pulled out and before Tibs reached him, he crumbled on the floor.

“No!” He raised his shoulder. “No!” Walter cursed and coughed more blood as Tibs placed his head on his lap. “You can’t die!”

The sorcerer smiled at Tibs. “You heard Jackal; death comes for everyone. I did think I had longer.” He struggled with the chain around his neck.

“Someone come help him!” he looked at the others, stunned in place.

Walter put something against his chest. “It’s too late for me Tibs. I’m going to feed the dungeon.” He pushed again and Tibs took whatever it was. The amulet.

“No!” he yelled, horrified. “It’s yours. You keep it, we’re going to carry you out, get you to your trainer.”

“Tibs!” Walter snapped, then coughed blood. “I want you to have it, keep it, hide it from those bastards. Tell them the dungeon ate it. Keep it for the sorcerer that’s going to replace me.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“I’m sorry, but you and the others need to survive. You need to promise me that, Tibs. You can’t give up, you have to...” Walter went lip in his arms.

“No.” Tibs shook him. “You don’t get to die!” He looked up, around. “You have no right!” he yelled. “Do you hear me? He was a nice guy.”

“Tibs,” Jackals said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Tibs snarled, shoving it away. “Don’t fucking tell me this is okay. That death happens.” He was up and across the room, shoving Radkliff. “It’s your fault!”

“Hey,” the rogue protested, “it isn’t.”

Tibs shoved him again. “You said it was clear!”

“I hadn’t heard any triggers break for a few seconds. How could I know one of them would be tougher of that he’d have the bad luck of stepping on it?”

“You should have checked!” Tibs pushed him again, but Zarkane caught Radkliff before he stepped into the boulder room.

“Careful, we don’t know if the rat will come out of the room once we step in.”

“Tibs shoved again, and she almost fell in.” He’s got to pay!”

“Jack!” she called “I could use some help!”

“I leave Walter and he gets absorbed by the dungeon!” Jackal yelled back.

She grabbed Tibs arm and pulled him away from Radkliff and the room. “Is that what you want? For Walter to just be eaten?”

“He’s dead! What do you care?”

“We can honor him,” Jackal said, exasperation fighting with pain. “He was one of us, on our team.”

“And How do we do that?” Tibs yelled, pulling out of the archer’s hand and rushing at Jackal. “How do we honor him now that he’s just dungeon food?”

Jackal grabbed him. “You tell me.” He should Tibs slightly. “Tibs, you tell me how you want us to honor Walter. Is there a water thing we can do? Is there something you want to do?”

Tibs glared at the other rogue.

“Other than throwing Radkliff to the rat,” Jackal said with a chuckle. “I think we’ve fed the dungeon enough already.”

Tibs looked at the sorcerer through his tears. Jackal closed his arms around him and held him tightly. “It’s not okay,” The fighter said, “it’s not okay that you lost a friend. I wish I could bring him back, but you can’t find a way past this, Tibs, it’s going to kill you faster than the dungeon will. Life is cruel. You have to become harder.”

Tibs had thought he was hard. He’d survived the Street after Mama died. He’s swallowed each pain he’d felt. Hit harder when he was hit. He’d been alone, and he’d been okay with it. He should have stayed alone.

He grabbed onto Jackal and let the pain out. Muffling his scream into the shirt the man wore over his armor. No one said anything while he cried, or once he was done, and he looked at the body on the floor.

I promise, he told Walter and dried his eyes. “Take the robes, our next sorcerer might need them. The dungeon can have the rest.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called as Tibs headed for the wall.

He ignored the fighter, or the chance another of the trigger hadn’t broken under Radkliff’s fire. He glared at the stone covering the hidden compartment. “You better have something useful in there,” he muttered under his breath, “of I swear I’m going to find a way to tear you apart for what you did to Walter.”

He wiped more of his tears, ignoring the whispering, and felt for the latch and pulled the covering stone off. He grabbed the content and stared at the pouch in his hand, with the belt looped through the slits at the back.

He had no idea what he’d expected when he’d muttered his threat, but not that. What good was a pouch? Words appeared over the pouch, but this time he felt none of the usual elation as seeing new words, understanding them. Pouch of Hiding, Good quality. As he got over his surprise, words appeared over the belt. Belt of Staying, Good quality.

He turned and showed them to the others. Jackal squinted at them as he folded the robe.

“At least the belt’s magical,” he said. “Not sure how making sure it stays in place really helps, but it’s going to be worth a few coins, so we can sell it if it comes to that.” Tibs turned it so the pouch was pointed at the fighter. Maybe at a distance, he could only see the closest description.

“Looks decent enough, is it leather or cloth? At least now we don’t have to worry about where to put the coins we get during a run.”

Tibs stood and crossed the room, still not caring about possible active triggers. He thought some were rearming themselves, or at least it’s what he thought the scratching might be since there were no rats in this room. He hurried to reach Jackal and pressed the pouch in the fighter’s hands and stepped back.

“Tibs, you found it, it’s...” Jackal stared at the pouch.

“What?” Zarkane asked, looking from one to the other.

“Can you still see it?” Jackal asked Tibs, who shook his head. As soon as the pouch left his hand, the words had disappeared. No matter how he focused on it, it was simply an ordinary pouch.

“Jackal?” Zarkane asked again.

“Later,” Jackal looked meaningfully to Radkilff and Tibs was happy they felt the same about this. He handed the pouch back. “It’s still yours.”

With Jackal’s help, he had the belt on over the armor and hooked and the pouch on the side.

“What do we do now?” Jackal asked, looking at Tibs as he was about to put the amulet in the pouch, and flicking his eyes at the other rogue.

Tibs stopped and gave a small nod. “I want to finish the dungeon,” he said with purpose. “Kill the rats and the rabbits teach it that we won’t be stopped by it killing one of us.” Jackal looked at the boulder room, and Zarkane followed his gaze. When Radkliff did the same, Tibs slipped the amulet into the pouch. Somehow the scratching intensified as he did so, and he was trying to find where it had come from when Radkliff spoke.

“Is there a point? It’s not like they’re going to let us keep any of the coins we’d find since the team isn’t complete and we don’t have anything to return any more.”

Jackal let out a sigh. “He’s got a point, Tibs. I’m all for getting our revenge on the dungeon, but sort a sorcerer, the odds it gets to eat more of us. I’m sorry, Tibs, but I’m going to have to say no. We go back, rest up. It’s going to be our turn again soon enough, then we will show this dungeon who we really are.”

Tibs had trouble not smiling and was happy for another series of scratching to distract him.

“You okay?”

“I think the room’s resetting the traps, I keep hearing sounds.”

They looked at him, then the floor, then him again, this time oddly.

“Aren’t you hearing that scratching?”

In the following silence, they shook their heads.

“But if the room’s resetting,” Jackal said, we should leave now. He hurried to cross the room; Tibs and the others followed him.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, the woman looked them over. “You’re back quick.”

“And one short,” her partner added.

“We had some back luck in the trap room,” Jackal said with a shrug. “That kind of stuff happens, you know. Nothing to be done but come back and prepare ourselves for the next time.”

“That’s a great attitude,” the woman said. “Keep it and you’ll go far in the guild.”

Tanks,” Jackal said as they headed away, then lowered his voice. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’m doing my time and I am out of here.”

Tibs had to bite down on his lip hard not to say anything. After losing Walter, it felt wrong not to tell him, especially since he didn’t want to stay. But was now the time

to dump more misery on them?

Halfway to town Jackal stopped them and he faced Radkliff. “I think it’s best if you look for another team,”

“It was an accident, I swear. I didn’t mean to—”

“I believe you,” Jackal interrupted him, “But you mistake, your overconfidence, cost a good man, our friend, his life. Also, we already have our rogue. I think you’d be more valuable to a team who’s missing theirs.”

Radkliff nodded, then looked at Tibs. “I’m sorry.”

Tibs didn’t say anything. He didn’t trust himself yet. He knew it had been an accident. This Radkliff hadn’t meant to do it, but right now he didn’t have the dungeon to be angry as, and he had no idea how to be angry at the guild, so if he lost it, it would be on him. Radkliff had enough with the guilt of causing the death.

* * * * *

Bardik stepped out of a shadowed corner Tibs knew couldn’t be entered from anywhere else because he’d carefully surveyed the area before planting himself where he stood to glare at the guild in an attempt to figure out how to express his anger. If his essence had been fire, he’d have burned it down with one look.

Whatever you’re thinking,” the adventurer said, leaning against the wall, “I suggest you stop.”

“Are you going to report me?” Tibs asked defiantly.

“Nope.”

Tibs went back to glaring at the building. “Then what do you care?”

“Didn’t I saw a few days ago that I’d like you to keep on living?”

“Why?”

“For one thing, you still owe me payment for the training I’m giving you. The dead have a hard time paying their debt.”

“What they’re doing, it’s wrong. This town, us. You. They don’t have the right to treat us like this.”

Bardik looked at the building before them. “I’m not going to argue with you on the first part, but the simple fact this town exist contradict the second.”

“Why isn’t anyone doing something to stop them?”

“Like who? The kings?” the adventurer laughed. “And lose access to the dungeons? The one place they can have their knights train without expecting to lose most of them in the process? They can’t risk it. And for every knight the kings have, the guild has a dozen adventurers who is still indebted to them, not to count all those who are actually grateful to the guild for how they were treated.” Bardik spat. “The guild’s too powerful Tibs. The one dungeon the guild doesn’t control is the purity one, and those assholes aren’t going to raise a hand to stop these people. It’s not their job, if things aren’t changing here, it’s because we aren’t working hard enough at it.” He spat again. “Bunch of hypocrites. Probably share the same bedbugs as the people in that building.”

Tibs stared at the adventurer. He hadn’t thought the man could get angry about anything since he was so jovial even about being trapped in this town too.

He calmed himself and noticed Tibs watching him. "I'm sorry about your friend's death."

"You don't care," Tibs snapped and went back to looking at the building.

Bardik sighed. "Not like you do, but I care that someone died needlessly. The guild feeding the dungeon only serve them." He squeezed his shoulder. "Please don't run, Tibs."

"I won't," he replied, finally understand what Bardik had meant the previous time. "I have to stay in the street and see where everyone's going." Because once he did, he'd know what to do about it and he'd finally have something to aim his pain at.

Bardik sighed. "I'm not sure that's any better. Both end up with you dead."

Tibs faced the man., "Are you going to stop?"

Bardik raised an eyebrow. "I'm not doing anything stupid."

"But you are doing something," Tibs stated. "Right here, in front of them all the while having that on your wrist. You think I don't know those stones you're having me drop or pick form pockets mean more than what they are? They're part of whatever you're doing. What are they going to do to you if they catch you?"

Bardik fixed his gaze on Tibs, the utterly black eyes come. "Are you going to tell on me?"

"No." He didn't have to think about it. He didn't want to help the guild, they were part of what he wanted to fix. Part of what had killed Walter.

Bardik smiled and offered him his hand. "Then I guess we have an understanding if nothing else." Tibs shook the hand, feeling the stone between their palm. "The inn," Bardik said. "You know who, it has to be today."

Tibs nodded and began to pull his hand, but Bardik tightened his grip. "I like the pouch, by the way."

Tibs stared. He couldn't... but he saw the smile in the other rogue's eyes. "Who else can tell?" He'd thought, hoped that the pouch would give him some sort of advantage.

"It takes a specific set of combination of class, element, and level, as well as a rather suspicious outlook on life. So you don't have to worry about it. I'm the only one in town who can notice the enchantment on it. Possibly in the entire kingdom. That was a very lucky find, I can count on one hand the number of items with that enchantment in it."

"Yeah, it was." But the cost was still too high. Bardik let go of his hand and Tibs headed for the inn, wondering what he'd have to do this time to cause the needed distraction. He so didn't want to have to resort to paying a couple of make out too loudly and lewdly. He shuddered at the memory of what he'd seen before things had gotten rowdy enough he'd be able to pick that pocket.