

Chapter 05

Tibs's left wrist itched.

"I don't know what's worse," Jackal said, rubbing his now bare left wrist. "The brand wearing those things puts on us, or what having it removed means."

"I'm going to miss the freedom to travel," Carina said wistfully, running a finger over where the bracelet had been only minutes earlier.

"You'll be able to do that again when the dungeon graduates, right Tibs?" Jackal said.

"But I won't have months of it."

"So long as no one attacks him again," Tibs grumbled, giving in to the need and scratching at his wrist.

"How long until everyone's back, do you think?" Carina asked.

"Two days," Jackal replied, "if they want to live."

Two days was how long the Runners had to return once the gem on the bracelet turned from yellow to red, which it had this morning. It would turn black after that, and anyone not in the town would become wanted, and the guild only cared about getting the bracelet back, not the person who was attached to it.

Tibs hadn't heard of anyone being hunted this way, but some people hadn't returned when Sto had reopened after graduating.

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"Jackal," Mez said, stepping up to the table. He nodded to the others. "Carina, Tibs."

Tibs stared at the archer. Instead of the guild armor, and the good, but worn, clothing he's last seen on the man, he wore new leathers that looked in better condition than Tibs's armor. The clothing was dark brown, with black and silver trim, and of a quality that Tibs wouldn't be surprised to see on a noble.

Mez stepped aside and motioned to a woman, slightly shorter than he was, with copper hair and the same dark tanned complexion as the archer. Her clothing was of the same quality as Mez's, and in the same color scheme, but hers had more silver,

"May I introduce you to Amanda Dhadly; my betrothed."

"You got married?" Jackal asked in dismay, then cursed as his startlement made food fall on his lap.

"What about Tandy?" Tibs asked.

The woman told Mez something, and he shook his head. "It's nothing." She said something in a sharp tone. "Just someone from the past." He looked at Tibs. "I'll explain things to her. She'll understand."

"Mez," Carina said, her expression darkening. "You better hope you can run a lot faster than she can."

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Tibs paced in front of the transportation platform. He reached the pillar with the box of bracelets again; the gems were still red. He looked at the guard sitting on the ground next to it. There was no one waiting their turn. Since the gem had turned red, the platform was

dedicated to arrivals.

“How much longer?”

The man shrugged again. “A few minutes, I’m guessing.”

Guessing wasn’t good enough. Tibs did another circuit and looked in the box again. Still red.

“A few more—”

Tibs snarled as he turned.

Where was he?

Tibs didn’t believe Khumdar would choose to die rather than return. The darkness cleric was aloof, but he considered the team to be his friends. Tibs was certain of that, maybe even his family, as Tibs did. If he didn’t come back, it was because—Tibs refused to think about that. He wasn’t ready to lose someone this close to him.

He reached the box; still red. He turned for another circuit just as the gems darkened.

He stared at them. It couldn’t be. Khumdar wasn’t — The essence on the platform shifted and a golden light appeared. An Attendant fell to the floor, along with someone else.

Tibs ran up the stairs as Attendants stepped out of the building they waited in when not busy. Both men were in terrible shape. Their clothing was cut, ripped and, Tibs discovered when he turned the man in the black robes on his back, bloodied. His hands came away from the robe stained red.

“Khumdar, Are you all right?”

The cleric laughed, then coughed. “I have been better, Tibs. I have been so much better.” Then he was unconscious.

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“You’re all here,” the man standing on the steps leading to the dungeon said. “Because you think you can survive the dungeon.” The man was high enough Tibs expected he’d see him even if he were at the back of the crowd. He’d made sure to be in front and Jackal had been annoyed with him for that. Harry wore his usual tarnished and dented armor, but not the sword he had on while walking the town.

“My name is Harry. I’m in charge of maintaining order.” He looked the crowd over, his eyes glowing brighter momentarily. “Get on my bad side, and you’re going to find out why I’m called Hard Knuckles.”

“Get one with it, Knuckles,” Jackal grumbles, fidgeting.

The crowd they were in reminded Tibs of the first one, both because of how large it was, and because more people than when Sto had graduated were in rags nearly as bad as with he’d had one when he arrived. They also looked around, confused. A few eyed pockets and one nearly reached for it, stopping at the last moment, then holding his wrist.

Tibs recognized the gesture. He’d done it himself, unsure how to feel about still having his hand, but not understanding why he was here instead.

“Those of you who were here from the start will notice some difference,” Harry continued. “With the dungeon having been injured, we brought in more of Society’s rejects, since there isn’t enough left of you to ensure it will return to full strength quickly. Those of

you who are here, instead of at a chopping block. You are getting the chance to salvage this thing you called your life. Shut up!” Harry yelled over a protest. “I don’t care! I don’t care if you didn’t belong in that cell. I don’t care if someone was going whatever fines your city charges for the crime you committed. You were in a cell, and now you are here. If you survive until the dungeon graduates, you can take a trip to your city, if you even know where it is, and demand an explanation from them. You’re going to be in a better position to get answers than if you tried that now.”

Protests erupted, and Harry crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at the crowd.

“This feels familiar,” Mez said unhappily. He was out of his armor, but his clothing still made him look like a noble. Too clean, too vibrant, too costly. This time he was in dark red and green. The one thing about him that shattered the illusion of nobility was the mess of bruises on his face.

The talk with Tandy hadn’t gone as well as Mez had expected. As he’d returned to their room, limping on top of the bruises, Carina rushed out. While she was away, Tibs offered to Splint the archer’s leg, but he’d refused. When she returned, a few hours later, she screamed at him. Jackal had left before she started, but Tibs hadn’t noticed her and once she started, he felt pinned to his bed even if he wasn’t the target.

While she hadn’t touched him or used essence on him, Mez looked like she’d taken a whip to his back by the time she left in a huff.

“Do they really need so many?” Carina asked Tibs, lowering her voice. “I mean, is the dungeon really in that bad of a shape?”

He waited for Sto to comment. They were close enough he could hear them, and he usually answered questions his friend asked Tibs.

Without a reply, Tibs shrugged. “I don’t think so. If he was too weak, he wouldn’t have opened the door.”

“Is the dungeon not...” Khumdar trailed off, looking around. He seemed in better shape than Mez, but that was because his black robes covered his injuries. Tibs could sense the way his essence reacted to how hurt he was. The cleric had let Tibs splint the worse of his injuries but hadn’t offered how he’d gotten them, or what he’d been doing while Sto healed.

Tibs hadn’t asked. His friend would tell him when he was ready.

Tibs lowered his voice. Not that anyone paid them any attention now that Harry was talking about, explaining how the new recruits were to gather in the field every morning so they will be assigned to a team.

“He’s probably not paying attention to this. He’d heard it all before.”

“For the rest of you,” Harry said, and Tibs paid attention. “The veterans of the dungeon, and those who have paid to be here. The process is the same as before. The order your team will go in will be posted on the board. Only full teams are allowed in. Those who paid to be here, you can rearrange your teams as you like between runs.” Harry didn’t sound happy about that. “The rest of you only get to replace dead team members, but you get to pick among the new recruits, should one of them meet your exacting requirement.”

“What does that ‘ex’ word mean?” Tibs asked Jackal.

The fighter opened his mouth, then closed it, looking at Tibs suspiciously. “Why do you think I’d know what it means?”

Tibs smiled innocently.

“It means our requirements are difficult to meet,” Carina answered.

“See, she’s the one who knows all of that, not me.”

Carina snorted and Tibs never stopped smiling or looked away from the fighter.

“I believe,” Khumdar said, “that is one secret that no longer needs to remain hidden.”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Jackal yelled, then shrunk in on himself as he realized his exclamation came between Harry’s instructions. The guard leader glared at Jackal, eyes brightening again, while the other runners looked at him speculatively.

“You did it on purpose,” Jackal growled under his breath.

“The training grounds are on the east side of the town,” Harry said, focused on the crowd again. “The recruits will have priority use of them, but any of you smart enough to realize you need more training. When they have the time, the trainers there will help you.”

“Like any of them can teach us anything anymore,” Jackal muttered.

“They are higher ranks than us,” Mez said. “They may not want to be here anymore than we do, but I’m sure they’ll have much to teach us; if we ask.”

“And you can be sure the guild’s going to charge us for each question we ask,” Jackal said.

“It’ll still be worth—” Mez closed his mouth at the glare Tibs gave him. The archer was his friend, but Tibs didn’t like the way he was taking for granted that coins weren’t something any of them a much of. He missed the Mez of before. The one who didn’t act like a noble. The one who claimed a noble was about helping others. He wasn’t seeing any of that in his friend right now.

Harry yelled something, and the crowd dispersed. The recruits ran off as if they had been threatened by a return to the chopping block. Tibs watched them, searching for... he wasn’t sure what. Someone familiar? From his Street, who could tell him the name of the city? As if anyone from his Street would know that.

A girl was left behind, hugging herself, looking at it took all the willpower she had not to cry. She seemed older than Tibs, but not by much. The rags she wore barely held together. He headed toward her.

“Tibs,” Jackal called.

“Leave him be,” Carina said softly.

He walked into her line of sight and stopped well out of reach of her. “Hi.”

She startled and quickly wiped at her eyes, stepping back. “Don’t try anything,” she warned, but her voice broke with the sob trying to escape.

“It’s going to be okay. I’m Tibs.” He remembered being scared and confused during his first days here. Maybe he could make it a little easier for her.

Her glare warned him she might not be interested in help. “You think I care what you think this is going to be, Tibs?”

He was impressed with how much derision she fit in his name.

“I was where you are when the dungeon first opened. I was going to have my hand cut

off, but I was brought here instead.

She moved her hand to her back. "Good for you," she spat. "I'm not a crook."

"No, you're a Runner now."

"I'm not doing this! My parents are going to come to get me!"

Tibs shook his head. "The guild won't let them. The best you can hope for is that they come visit you if they can afford to pay to travel here."

Her face fell, and she looked about to lose the fight to keep the tears back.

"It's going to be okay," Tibs repeated. "The dungeon's hard, but fair. If you train and pay attention, and work with your team; you'll get through it. You'll get stronger, and eventually, you'll graduate too." He smiled and raised his hand, coating it with water and icing it. "Graduating comes with interesting abilities." He reabsorbed the water.

She stared at him in shock. "I thought the eyes were supposed to show who could do magic. It's what the stories say," she added.

Tibs sighed. It had been so nice not to have to explain this while he traveled. Not to have to lie. "I'm too young. That's what my teacher says. I'm the younger Runner to survive until he gets his element. That happens at Upsilon. You're Omega right now."

She bit her lower lip. "I'll be able to do that when I graduate?"

"If you chose water as your element. There's a lot more to pick from." He noticed the guards approaching. "We should go. You need to head to the training grounds. They don't like it when you wander around." He indicated the group still visible in the distance. "I'll walk with you to where you can hone your skills. But if you want to go there alone, you want to follow the signs that have a hand in a pouch on them."

"I'm not a crook." She bristled.

Tibs smiled. "You're a rogue. That's something to be proud of." He turned headed for the east side of the town.

She fell in step with him. "I'm Fedora."

Tibs smiled. "I'm glad to have met you, Fedora."