

Chapter 19

Tibs got looks from the guards and the Runners as he paced along the waiting field, just outside of Sto's range. He didn't want to know how Fedora's run was going. He wanted to hope her team was managing the run well. Sto would want to keep him appraised, and Tibs was worried that the dungeon would go easy on Fedora's team because of Tibs's involvement with her.

Sto said he didn't play favorites, but there had been multiple demonstrations already that showed that wasn't true.

Motion at the door, two people exiting, and Tibs breathed easier. Fedora was being supported until the cleric placed a hand on her, then on the fighter. After that, they walked down the steps, still looking as if they were injured.

The two placed their armor and weapons on the table, along with a handful of copper. No extra equipment meant they didn't get to keep any, and Tibs had warned her against trying to hide one on her person. He'd heard stories, back in the early days, of those who tried it. They were always caught. The guild had magic, not just suspicions.

The fighter headed for the town, but Fedora noticed Tibs and, after hesitating, headed for him. He wanted to say something to her but found he didn't know what. He remembered how he felt after that first time, confused, hurt, afraid. About the only thing he could offer was the confidence he'd be there after each of her runs, no matter how many teammates she lost.

"It was hard," she said, as he fell into steps with her. "Those traps, they were horrible. We lost the archer. I don't know her name, and the way she just melted." She shuddered. "I tried to convince the fighter—" she nodded in the guy's direction. "—that we should turn around right there, like you said we should once we lose someone, but he was determined to make it to the last room. We lost the other two in the boulder room." She shuddered again. "I used to not mind rats."

He nodded. "It won't be quick, but it gets easier. You'll figure how the dungeon works, how he... thinks, for lack of a better word," he added. "Those who survive their runs will know better than to push needlessly."

"I wish you could just tell me what we need to do to win."

"There isn't much more I can tell you. The dungeon changes things around. The clues were on the floor tiles when I first went through." He noticed the surprised, then thoughtful, look she gave him. She hadn't worked out what the walls were about. No wonder she'd through the trap room had been hard. Having to test each tile as they went. He was impressed with her skill that she hadn't died in the process, or only lost one person there.

"Do you know when I'll have to go in again?"

"No. Unlike those at Upsilon, they'll pick you at random while you're in the field."

"So if I don't go to the field when we're told to, I won't have to go back in."

“When they called you out, did they tell you what the consequences are for not going to the field in the morning?”

“We don’t get food or a bed.” She shrugged. “I don’t need a bed, and I can get food anywhere.”

He rounded on her and she had to stop. “No. You don’t steal in town.”

“They won’t know.” She spoke with the confidence of someone who didn’t understand how this town was different from her city.

“They will. Kragle Rock is too small to have a Street for you to hide in.” And it never would have one if he had anything to do with it. “Harry isn’t going to actively hunt you down, but the moment one of the townsfolk complains to a guard about something going missing, *they* will be looking for you. It’ll just be a cell when you’re caught, but you’re going to fall behind and that will end up getting you killed.”

“You steal. You had me steal.”

“That’s training, and I had you hand the coins back.”

“You don’t.”

“You aren’t at the point where you can pick a pocket and not get caught. And you told me locks aren’t something you’ve had a lot of practice with. The town is filled with rogue Runners. The townsfolk know to pay attention.” He wanted to offer to give her a few coppers so she could afford more than the slop the food tent had for Omega Runners, but he recognize the pride in her eyes. She’d be offended, not grateful. “You need to go through the dungeon, get better, bring back the fallen’s equipment so you’ll get copper, and you need to survive.”

“It’s just not fair!”

He nodded. The guild wasn’t fair. There was nothing he could add to that.

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A large group of men and women in rags and looking wary appeared on the platform as Tibs watched. He’d sensed the shift in essence as he’d walked by and stopped. He didn’t usually bother, but the volume of the shift had taken in the entire platform, which had only happened while the merchants were returning once Sto reopened his door.

He’d expected a new merchant, with cargo, now that the bazaar was over and the caravans gone, but they were convicts. Runners for Sto.

Fedora had had four runes over the last two weeks, and Tibs had been there for two of them. He’d paid a copper to one of the guards for them to send word to him when she went in. On the last one, her entire team returned, deciding the warren room wasn’t worth risking because of how injured they were, and they now knew why it was worth keeping the team alive.

They got to keep the coppers.

She’d tried to kick him for not telling her that from the start.

But out of the convicts who had arrived with her. There were very few still alive. One team’s worth was Upsilon now. Only a few weeks and already survivors were graduating. How long had it taken his group before that happened?

But the death count was much higher.

Even if Sto didn't make the first floor harder for the Upsilon. They had all become stronger running it, and it had increased in difficulty with them. Now the new Runners were contending with a harder dungeon from the start.

So it made sense the guild had to bring more of them.

A man broke from the crowd, pushing through the guards, and before Tibs wondered why they were letting him flee, a large gray dog jumped on his back, sending him face down in the dirt. Serba stepped out of an alley, patted the dog on its head. She hauled the man up by the collar and shoved him back among the others as they were herded to the field, where they'd get the introduction speech. Tibs wondered if Harry would be giving it again.

If these arrivals became normal, he couldn't imagine the guard leader going to the field each time.

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The inn was busy, as usual, and Tibs looked around. Runners at all occupied tables, except for two. Nobles seated there.

Kroseth's father didn't keep anyone out of his inn, unless they caused trouble, but he didn't give nobles the deference they requested of everyone, they few spent time here.

One of the groups had that noble Mez was friends with, the one he claimed was a 'good' noble. She'd returned and had reclaimed the house she'd had before. Tibs hadn't heard of her doing anything wrong, but she was noble, so he figured she was just better than most at hiding it.

The Runners were a mix of old and new, but they'd all gone through the dungeon a few times. Based on the worn, but sturdy and functional clothing they were, some were from the cache in the trap room, others from the merchants, who sold old ones for cheap, and he expected other Runners had given some too.

Tibs had given Fedora an old set of clothing he no longer wore. They were short on her; she was a head and a half taller than he was, but still better than what she'd arrived in.

He saw her at a table with six other runners, three of which had been with her when they'd exited the dungeon the last time, but it was the fighter who caught his attention. He was looking at Tibs with awe on his face.

Tibs headed for them instead of his table to find out what that was about.

"You're Light Fingers!" the boy—he didn't look that much older than Tibs—exclaimed, and Tibs groaned. "Guys, that's Light Fingers!"

Fedora eyed Tibs and seemed amused.

"My name is Tibs," he introduced himself, wondering if she was responsible for spreading his nickname among them. She knew how annoyed at its use he was, and he didn't know her so well as to know if this was the thing she'd do.

"He's the one who opened up the second floor," the fighter said, bouncing on his seat in excitement. "He used to be like us."

"I still am." Okay, so probably not Fedora, since he hadn't told her that part. They were all looking at him now. She had a suspicious look on her now. He'd have to explain his reasons, although their reaction should be enough for her to figure it out.

"Did you really discover the door?" an older girl asked. She had the look of an

archer, well-defined arm, and piercing gaze.

"I don't know," He replied, then made his tone severe. "We aren't allowed to take about the dungeon once we're outside." He eyed each of them. "So I have no idea if someone else knew about it before I did."

"I heard it was you who found it," the fighter said, ignoring or, more likely, missing Tibs's implied warning. "And that you killed the floor boss by yourself."

"No, I didn't." He fixed each of them with a look. "It was my entire team. That's how the dungeon works." If someone was spreading stories of Tibs being some bard song hero, no wonder they were watching him like they were.

"What do you want?" a lanky boy near Jackal's age demanded, now looking at Tibs with suspicion. He was a rogue, Tibs decided.

Tibs considered him, them. They were all Omegas, their essence stronger, but still without a tint. He decided to find out how far the rogue's suspicion went.

He smiled. "I just wanted to see how you were all going."

The rogue snorted.

He looked at Fedora. "I'm glad to see you found yourself dependable people."

"You know him?" the fighter asked, amazed.

She glared at him. "We've met."

"And what does that meeting involve?" the rogue asked, smirking as he looked Tibs up and down. "Is he even old enough for that?"

"That's not what I meant," Fedora replied, looking disgusted. "He's been giving me help with locks and pockets."

The rogue's smile turned nasty. "Right, pockets. And what have you been playing with in his pockets?"

"You're training Fed?" the fighter exclaimed. "Why didn't you say Light Fingers was training you? You are on my team the next time I have to go in, so stick close to me."

"You can't pick who's on your team," a young man in a gray robe said. "You go in with whoever they tell you to."

"Actually," Tibs said before he stopped himself. It was too late now. They were watching him attentively. "They only assign the teams because they figure you haven't worked out you can do it yourself yet. Building your team is part of what this period is about."

"You're on my team, Fed!" the fighter exclaimed.

"Maybe you can let her decide whose team she's on?" the archer said, then smiled at Fedora. "I can tell you in private what the advantages of being on my team are."

Fedora blushed, and Tibs kept from chuckling. Seemed like someone was angling for Fedora as their special someone.

"You can both be on my team," the fighter said, completely missing the annoyed look the archer gave him. Were all fighters dense? Tibs wondered. Pyan seemed to be attentive, so maybe it was only fighters who were men that missed the obvious.

No. Karl didn't miss much.

So it was a Jackal and this guy thing.

The rogue didn't miss the look though and rested his elbows on the table, leaning forward and smiled at Tibs. "If I agree to pick your pocket for a while, will you give me special training?"

"No." Tibs leveled his gaze at the lanky man and didn't move it until he looked away. Let him try to intimidate Tibs. He'd had to learn to resist that from tougher people, and before he'd come here. This guy wasn't Street in any way.

"How have you been faring in the dungeon?" Tibs asked the fighter.

"It's fun!" he blurted out, and Tibs raised an eyebrow. If he found what Sto did fun, then Tibs didn't—"I mean, we survived." Now he looked bashful. Just what did the stories say about Tibs that he'd thought he found the runs fun?

"It's harder," the sorcerer said.

"The dungeon had to grow as we survived more of our runs," Tibs replied.

The man shook his head. "It's not that. It's harder than before. I—" he closed his mouth as Kroseph brought tankards for everyone at the table. Before anyone could act, Tibs placed two coppers on the tray and the serve patted his back before leaving.

"Trying to buy our loyalty?" the rogue asked, pushing the tankard away.

"Celebrating your survival," Tibs replied. "Enough Runners don't get the enjoy that. You should."

The fighter took the rogue's tankard and drank half of it in one swallow. "I'm all for celebrating." He looked at the sorcerer and tried to place him. "You were here before the dungeon was attacked?"

"I did one run. It was—" he closed his mouth again. "I wish we could talk about it." He sipped his tankard. "It would make learning how to survive it easier."

"And what had he told you about surviving the dungeon, Fedora?" the rogue asked, smirking again. "Or are you not talented enough in that to get him to—" he gasped and held his side.

"Count yourself lucky I don't have a knife yet," the archer said. "And stop pushing what you'd do on other people. You want to use your body to get special treatment, you fucking go and do it."

The rogue glared at her but remained silent. Then he looked at Tibs, all amusement gone. "Fine. What do I have to do to survive that thing? I didn't grow up taking what I wanted just to end up dying in there."

"Don't you mean who?" the sorcerer asked, before drinking and covering his smirk.

Tibs was tempted to send the rogue to Don, but all the man had done yet was talk. Talking didn't warrant Don. "You train. You already survived your runs, so your chances of surviving the next ones are higher, but you have to train and find a team you trust."

The snorts at the table gave a good indication of how likely that was for the rogue.

A look crossed the rogue's eyes and was gone. But Tibs had a sense of why he was acting the way he was, and he was glad he hadn't suggested Don. Acting like an ass out of fear was not worthy of the horror that was Don.

"You will lose people you know," Tibs said. "Friends you make. But it's less likely to happen with a good team. Don't push people away out of fear of losing them. All that's going

to do is cause you to die too.” He swallowed his emotions. His own fears and worries and memories. This was for them. “We survive. Each of us has our reasons to do it. Out of spite for those who sent us here, out of determination, out of a desire for power.” He smiled, thinking of Jackal. “Or even because we’re not quite smart enough to know better. But it’s what we have to do. We survive what the dungeon sends at us. We grow stronger, and in turn, he does too, and we continue to get stronger. It will get easier once you get your element, but I don’t think it ever ends.”

They looked at him, taking in what he’d said. He hoped.

“You’re wrong.” The girl who spoke was thin, too much so. Like the others, her clothing looked to be from the dungeon or merchant, but she didn’t look at ease in them. “We’re going to die in there. That’s all we’re good for. The stuff they tell out about surviving a dungeon making you stronger. It’s a lie. You’re lying to us.” She glared at him. “You work for them. You just want us to go in there, so we’ll feed that thing.”

“Tara,” the fighter said, tone gentle, “he fought it, made it to the second—”

“How the fuck do you know?” she demanded. “You think one of us gets to be called something like ‘Light Fingers’? That we get to have guards look at us like we’re not shit to be avoided? If he’d been in there? He wouldn’t be here telling us what to do. He’d be dead!”

“You survived,” the sorcerer said softly. “We all did.”

“And you know how I survived? I was too slow. Liam told us the best way through that room was to run, and I didn’t move in time with them. I saw what it did to them. I barely pulled Carson’s body out before the dungeon took him, too.” She hid her face, sobbing. “We’re all going to die.”

Tibs tried to find something encouraging to say, but if she thought he worked for the guild, anything he said would just be another lie to her.

The fighter places a hand on her back, and she tried to shrug it off.

“Look,” Tibs said. After her accusation, he needed to offer something. “If you’re afraid you aren’t strong enough to survive the dungeon, me and my team can help you train. We sit over there.” He pointed to the table, and Jackal, who was eating with Khumdar, noticed and gave an enthusiastic wave as the others looked in their direction.

Tara glared at him.

“If you don’t trust me, or if we don’t have the specific set of skills that’ll help you, ask one of the other team. We have all been where you are and—”

“You really think one of them will help people like us?” the rogue demanded.

“With one exception, every team will at least listen to you. And I doubt any of them will just turn you away. We’ve learned to help one another. And it isn’t because you’re Omegas that we won’t help you too.”

“Is that one exception a noble team?” the sorcerer asked. “I have trouble envisioning any of them helping us.”

“They aren’t Runners,” Tibs replied. “They’re nobles. And no, they aren’t going to help. They’re nobles. Runners will help.” He’d pass the word around, make sure everyone listened to any Omega coming to them for help. They needed more Runners to survive if only to ensure noble teams didn’t outnumber them.

“I don’t trust you,” Tara whispered.

“I’m not asking that you do. I’m asking that you find people you can trust. But if you need help. We’ll be there if you ask.” He turned and stopped. “I hope I get to see all of you again after your runs.”

He headed for his table.

“Making friends?” Jackal asked. “More friends? Don’t think I haven’t noticed you and that little lady spending time together. You even took her to meet Pyan. I’m hurt you haven’t asked your special girl to pick my pocket yet.”

Tibs rolled his eyes and motioned to Kroseph. “She isn’t my special girl, just another rogue I’m helping. And they’re having a hard with the runs, so I offered to help them train if they need it.”

“Is it wise?” Khumdar asked. “Will the guild not look unkindly on you if they find out are poaching on their territory?”

“I don’t know what poaching means,” Tibs replied, but then grinned. “But if what I’m doing gets the guild to treat me like another Runner again. Then I can’t wait for someone to ask for my help.”

Jackal smiled. “Then you’re about to get your wish.”

Tibs turned, and instead of Fedora, or Tara, it was the lanky rogue who was approaching. He tried to think of anyone who liked guys that would agree to train him because Tibs wasn’t looking forward to constantly turning down the offered and snide comments about how else they could train.