

Chapter 18

“Tibs!” Jackal called. “How’d it go?”

Tibs looked in the direction, his eyes having trouble focusing. “My head hurts.” How long had he wandered the merchant tents and stalls, looking for one of his friends?

“I thought you were good with money?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t know what fifteen was. The numbers in the shops a much bigger.”

“Right, Sorry, I didn’t consider that.”

Tibs shrugged. “I found a shop, and the merchant is nice. He helped me learn the numbers. And he had full armor for forty silver. Which is less than what the guild wants for the chest piece and a weapon.”

Jackal nodded. “I know the guild was going to swindle us, but I didn’t expect that level. Even the merchant I talk with is selling his armor for less than the guild asked, but just by two silvers, you’re is cheaper. I don’t want to think what those who didn’t force the gay at the table to tell them the price and checked it was what they wrote down will have to pay.” He motioned to the shops. “Let’s go find the others, then we can go to the tavern for a tankard to quiet that pain in your head.”

Tibs looked at the Runners they passed, he knew few of them but could recognize the look, or in some case, the chest armor they wore he saw one, a fighter, wearing a full set and she lorded it over the people around her, who had chest armor.

“Walter!” Jackal called, and Tibs winces at how loud he was. The sorcerer looked in their direction, his expression dark.

“Fifteen,” the man said.

“Fifteen what?” Tibs asked.

“Silver, that’s how much an amulet is really worth,” Walter spat, “I have a mind to go to that table and give that adventurer a piece of my mind. Or just drown him.”

“You found one?” Jackal asked, surprised.

“No, they aren’t allowed to even bring them into the town until after the dungeon graduates, but the merchant’s wife and I talked when he was busy with a customer buying, instead of just looking. She’s who told me about the restriction and that when they’ll get them, a basic amulet like the one I bought off the guild is going to be fifteen silver. The guild is just a bunch of crooks,” he grumbled.

“They could be a lot worse,” Jackal said, “trust me on that. And while I appreciate the sentiment about giving one of them a piece of your mind, let’s remember that we’re Upsilon and that they’ve passed that stage years ago. Confronting one about something I’m sure they don’t even have control over isn’t going to end well for us.”

“What did the armor at your shop look like?” Zarkane said as she joined them. “What’s wrong, Walter?”

The sorcerer looked at Jackal, then let out a breath. “I just found out how badly I got screwed over, but Jackal’s right, there’s nothing to do about it now. I’m sorry, I got distracted with sorcerer supplies, I didn’t look at the armor.”

“And the armor in my shop, Gardaron’s, looked like leather,” Jackal says. “I’m

sorry I can't tell you more, but I'm nothing more than a dumb brawler, you're our expert." He smiled at her. "I have to be honest, as the daughter of a shop keeper, I'd expected you to be angrier about this whole thing with the guild trying to swindle us."

She shrugged. "The con is part of being a merchant. You start way too high and if the customer isn't smart or knowledgeable enough to argue you down, that's their problem. I'm sorry you got taken Walter, but getting angry about it now isn't going to help us. Can you imagine how much trouble we'd be in if they decided to keep us out of the dungeon entirely?"

"Can they do that?" Tibs asked.

"They're the ones making the schedule," She answered. "By now I expect they know everyone by face, enough to know who not to pick when a spot has to be filled."

"Filled for what?" Claudia asked, joining them.

"We're just discussing how great the racket the guild has here," Jackal said, "For them, I mean," he added at the other fighter's disgusted expression. "Good armor?"

"Looked good enough, nice swords too, and made to fight with, not to hang on a mantle."

"Okay, so it's going to come down to price versus quality," Jackal said. "Which means more talking with merchants, this time as a group and with Zar checking the goods. Since we don't have someone who knows metalwork, You're going to have to hope the quality of the weapons matches that of the armor."

"Do we have to do that now?" Tibs demanded, not caring if his voice carried a whine.

"Nope," Jackal answered, "first we need to take care of that head of yours and I never consider spending coins without at least one tankard of ale in me."

* * * * *

After going over the merchants and talking over the best prices they could get, they settled on the Shield and the Rope in part because the merchant did offer good prices and good quality, but also because it allowed Tibs to get rogue supplies without being obvious about it.

By the time the day was done, even Tibs was clad in leather from head to toe, and while Claudia supervised the writing of the account the merchant make, which only seemed to make the merchant happier, Tibs secreted his coins in the carious slips in the leather band.

He'd also bought a small kit of picks, which the merchant showed him how to secure within the right bracer. The left one came with a hidden sheath for a knife, and he'd also bought the knife for it.

Jackal and Zardane moved about the store, wriggling in their armor. She'd told them the stiffness would go away the more they moved in it; after she'd ribbed the fighter for bothering with armor at all, considering earth was supposed to be his protection. Jackal had rubbed where the break in his arm had happened and replied that any protection helped.

Walter was the only one not to buy anything; the robes were of good quality, but

the one they'd found in the dungeon came with the minor protection enchantment, and he wouldn't need to worry about ingredients for some time.

Along with the armor, Zarkane bought a bow and quiver of arrows; she could use her wood essence to make arrows, but she wanted the ordinary one in case her reserve dried up while in the dungeon.

By the time they were done at the shop, the sun was below the horizon, and the torches were being lit. They had a meal together and then went about their separate ways. Tibs directly to a cot to sleep the remains of his headache off.

* * * * *

"That doesn't look like guild issued armor," Bardik said, suddenly next to Tibs, and he startled. The adventurer caught his arm before he stumbled into a woman. "You need to work on that; you're bound to start a brawl with this constant, almost falling into other people you do."

Tibs wrenched his arm out of the man's grip. "How do you do that? I was looking!"

Bardik smiled enigmatically and nodded to the hand Tibs had by his belt. "Still reaching for a knife there, I see, except there isn't one. Couldn't afford it? Decided fighting isn't what you want to do after all, or did you go with a more rogue-like way?"

After glaring at the adventurer for ignoring his question, again, Tibs showed him the end of the pommel, barely visible at the edge of the bracer.

"There is hope for you yet," Bardik answered in a tone that made Tibs wonder if the other rogue had despaired of it. He nodded toward an alley formed by two of the more recently built buildings. "Come on, now you're going to need practice drawing it out without hurting yourself."

* * * * *

Before Tibs could ask his question, Alistair silenced him with a gesture and walked around him. He tugged at a piece of armor here, arranged another there, all the while making sounds that could be approval or disappointment.

"It will do," he finally said. "The quality of that first armor has gone down since I bought mine, but this is still well made, and with clever use of the hidden pockets in it, you will be able to surprise an opponent." He smiled as Tibs's face fell. "This is good enough work, Tibs, but only for what it is. The rogues who run this dungeon with you won't be able to tell, but anyone with some experience won't be fooled. Now draw the knife."

Tibs reached under his arm, hooked the pommel, and pulled, wrapping his fingers around it as he came out. This time he didn't drop it, which he was proud of, but it had still caught, which meant if this had been Bardik, he'd have a knife at his throat."

"Someone taught you?" Alistair asked, taking Tibs's knife hand in his and turning it, studying how he held it.

Tibs almost answered, but realized Alistair was supposed to be his teacher. How would he feel about Tibs going to someone else?

"I'll take that as yes," the older rogue said, smiling. "And it's a good thing.

Whoever they are, they know what they're doing. Now, let's see what you can do that has your armor and water working together.”

* * * * *

“You need to focus, Tibs,” Alistair said as Tibs panted. Losing the ice claw at the end of his finger took more out of him than the slashing and stabbing he'd done at the target. “It isn't just water, it is your water. You can make it as hard as you want, so long as you focus properly.”

Tibs leaned against the practice dummy, which barely moved due to his slight weight. Using the pick had been easier. He could move slowly, make sure the ice didn't break. Moving quickly, striking the dummy always broke it. Focusing was easier to do when he wasn't distracted by so many questions.

“Alistair,” he began, then stopped. He almost decided not to bother, but his teacher nodded for him to continue. “Does the guild care about me?”

“Of course.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes at the man who remained impassive. “The other day, you implied Tirania lied to you, and me. At my last run, the first after I graduated, my team was offered armor at ‘great guild rates’ something we could only get that one time, and now that we are getting good coins from the run, we looked around for what the merchants sell.” He indicated the armor he wore. “And found out that those great guild rates are far above what the merchants ask for. How does someone, or something that's supposed to care about me, do that?”

Alistair sighed. He looked around and not finding whatever he'd been looking for gestured next to him, where two ice chairs formed. “Tirania didn't lie,” he said, sitting, “not technically.” He motioned to the other chair.

Tibs sat in it. The ice wasn't cold or hard. It felt like he sat on a cushion. Alistair chuckled at his reaction, and Tibs tried to decide if this was an attempt at distracting him from his questions.

“I don't know what that word, technically, means.”

Alistair nodded. “It means that if you take apart what she said, you'll find that it is all true, but because of things she didn't say, or of implications the way she said it led you to make, it isn't true in the way you thought, in a simpler way, in the end, what she said doesn't mean anything.” The sigh was followed made his teacher sound much older than he looked.

“If you explain how she did it, will you get in trouble?”

Alistair considered the question, then chuckled and shook his head. “What did Tirania tell you would happen when you reach Epsilon level?”

“That I'd be free.”

“Just that? Nothing else?”

Tibs thought back. “That's all I remember.”

“Alright, and what does that mean?”

“That I'll be able to leave this place,” He answered.

“Anything else?”

What else could freedom mean? “That I can do anything I want, maybe?”

“So long as you don’t get caught,” Alistair said with a chuckle. “You need to remember that rogues aren’t always liked by the authorities. We have more leeway than common criminals when we work for the guild, and in a dungeon, no one cares how to get through it, but if you aren’t careful, you can still run afoul of the laws.”

“Okay.” He wasn’t sure about all the words, but the ‘be careful’ message was clear.

“Now, for the rest, you need to understand some things, in fact, the whole reason technically Tirania didn’t lie hinges on you not knowing about these, if you had she’d have technically lied. To start with, do you know how much the guild charges for my services, as a teacher for example?”

Tibs shrugged. How could he know that? He hadn’t even known Alistair could sell his services, even as a rogue.

“The guild charge three gold for a day of my teachings.”

“That’s more than silver, right?” he could already feel the headache forming.

“Do you know the type of coins the kingdoms use?”

Tibs shook his head.

“From the least valuable, to the most it’s copper, silver, electrum, gold, then plati
__”

Tibs groaned. How many kinds of coins were there?

“I guess that for now, anything above gold doesn’t matter.”

For now?

“Let’s see in copper that would be...” his teacher looked up.

“I don’t want to know!” Tibs hurried to say, terrified of the size of the number the man was about to say. “It’s just going to give me a headache,” he said at the surprised expression.

“It’s why we have multiple coins, it keeps the numbers smaller and once you’re used to it, it comes naturally.”

“Breaking coins is easier, at least you can hold those.” He rubbed his temple.

“Breaking coins would me things....interesting, that’s certain. But you do understand money, coins, right? Their value to buy things.”

Tibs gave the man the fiercest glare he could under the circumstances and motioned to the armor he wore. Did Alistair think someone else had bought it for him? Yes, Jackal had talked the merchant down a few coppers, and Claudia had done the calculations, but Tibs had been who had found him, he’d understood that it was a better deal than the guild offered by himself, with only a little help.

“I deserve that look,” Alistair said. “How many days do you think I’ll spend teaching you until you reach Epsilon?”

“It’s only half a day.”

“Valid point, not that the guild cares, but let’s stay with day, it simplifies the calculations.”

Tibs stifled a grown. How complicated did counting get? “I don’t know. I don’t

know how long it takes to reach another level, or if you'll spend every day reaching me, you didn't teach me for that last few days."

Alistair smiled. "Another valid point, even if for our purpose it's not going to matter. You are a dungeon runner." Alistair said it in such a way he sounded proud of having used the term. "That means you can grow faster. Not taking into account your particular difficulties. If you don't have setbacks, you could, realistically, reach Epsilon in a year, so we'll work with that. Now, I am required by guild contract as your teacher to spend most of my time in that year teaching you."

"Even once I can't learn anything new?"

"You can always learn something new," Alistair said, his tone serious. "If nothing else, remember that from this discussion, but for our case, when you'll exhaust what you can do with your essence, I'll teach you rogue related skills."

"Can you teach me those now?" Tibs asked, leaning forward in eagerness. "We could do that in the morning since you said the guild is still going to pay you for a full day. The older teacher doesn't seem like he enjoys doing it."

"I don't expect he does," Alistair answered, thinking something over. "I expect they planned on ending their guild career relaxing among young beauties who would care for all their needs, not teaching the next generation. But I can't. I have other duties to the guild beyond teaching you. I spend my morning taking care of those. Going back to our exercise, how many days in a year?"

Tibs stared at the man. "Cold season, planting season, hot season, and harvest season."

Alistair stared back. "That's it? How many months in a season? Days in a month."

"What's a month?"

His teacher seemed to be at a loss. He rubbed his face and said. "Okay, do you have a sense of how long a year is?"

"It's long, yes. Longer than the seasons."

"Got to be happy with that. For each of the days in the year, the guild charges three gold, and each gold is worth a lot of coppers. Are you getting a sense of how big that number is?"

"Headache inducing big," he answered, purposefully not thinking about it.

"Yes, it's that big of a number, even for me. But you misunderstood something. The guild isn't paying me those gold, you are. The guild is simply waiting until you're free, until you reach Epsilon, to demand that you pay it."

Tibs had to work that over in his head to figure out what he meant. "I don't have enough copper!" he frowned. "Can I find that in the dungeon?"

Alistair shook his head. "Even if you keep pace with the dungeon exactly, you'd be lucky to find half what you'll need to repay my teachings. That's without counting what the guild charges you for a cot, the food they served you, the potions, and the healing the cleric will give."

Tibs felt his stomach drop. "But, what happens when I can't pay everything?"

"The guild will give you work that you'll have to do, and a small part of what they

pay you will go toward that, then there's the interest." He shook his head.

The merchant had explained interest to Tibs while he adjusted the armor. The amount he owed increased a little each year, so long as he paid more than that, in time he'd pay everything off. Claudia had explained the half a percent the merchant charged them was very small. Watching Alistair, Tibs suspected the guild wouldn't charge half a percent.

"I'm supposed to be free," he said, the despair stealing any energy he could have used for anger.

"I know," Alistair said, "and technically you are. I know it seems meaningless right now, but once you reach Epsilon, you'll be able to leave and do whatever you want until the guild calls you. Then you have to do what they assign you."

"What if I don't want to do it?" Tibs recalled Bardik's expression as he talked about the previous dungeon and the children sent into it, and how that hadn't been the thing that made him refuse.

Alistair rubbed his left wrist. "You won't like the consequences."

"Show it to me."

"Tibs there isn't—"

Tibs lunged for the man's arm, but Alistair moved faster, catching him and holding him against this body as Tibs fought to get free. He had to see. He had to be sure Alistair hadn't lied, not like Bardik implied.

Alistair held him with his arms and pulled the sleep up, showing unblemished skin. "It's the memory of it that itches, nothing more."

"The duties you said you have to the guild?"

"Not all duties are acquired through punishment to debt. Some are taken willingly." This time when Tibs fought to get out of the man's hold he was released.

"How can you do that? Come here and teach me? Knowing what it does? How can you still do those things for the guild?"

Alistair sat again, looking old and tired. "At first, it was idealism. I thought that by staying with the guild, I could improve it." He sighed. "Now, it's all I know. I worked so hard trying and failing to improve the guild that I have nothing left. Maybe... maybe if I teach you, others like you, you can make a difference." He shrugged. "I'm sorry Tibs, there isn't a simple answer, my life hasn't been simple."

"I should just stop having you teach me," he snapped. "It hasn't been that long. I can find that in the dungeon, give it and leave, never think about the guild again."

"It won't work, Tibs. The guild won't let you get out of the trap. If you tell them you don't want me teaching you, they'll assign someone else." The man tried to smile. "I'd like to continue teaching you. Not just because I don't want to think of how some of the others will treat you because of your age and how that affects your essence manipulation, but this is pushing me to think in ways I never had to." He did smile. "I'm enjoying working with you."

"I'd like to keep you as my teacher too," Tibs admitted.

The admission didn't make Alistair smile, instead, he grew somber. "I am sorry,

Tibs; this isn't something you should have learned now. This should be a time of amazement of exploring what you can do."

"Why didn't you lie to me?"

The smile was sad. "I've discovered that for a rogue, I'm a horrible liar. I don't enjoy it. I don't enjoy keeping the stories in my head that would let me continue the lies. Truth is so much simpler."

"On you, maybe," Tibs said bitterly.

"I suppose that's true. Why don't you head out? I think processing all of this will count toward today's lessons."