

## Chapter 17

He looked around warily before knocking on the door. The last time he'd been here, his annoyance at being treated special had propelled him. Now, and with the halls nearly deserted, he was unsure he should be doing this.

"Enter," Tirania called after Tibs knocked. She smiled at him. "Mister Light Fingers, this is a surprise. I'd expect you to be watching the caravan, planning how you'd liberate them of some of their valuables."

"No," he stated, his mood darkening, "not you. My name's Tibs," he added at her raised eyebrow. "I don't know why everyone keeps calling me that."

She leaned back in her chair, her smile broadening. "You are someone famous in these parts now. Mister Tibs or Mister Street doesn't quite suit the person who saved a dungeon. Savior of the Dungeon is a little pretentious, even if it is accurate. Seems someone had already given you the moniker Light Fingers, on account of being a rogue, and it's been spreading."

"I've never been caught." He dropped in the chair. It wasn't like she'd reprimand him for stealing, she was a rogue too.

"Anyone associated with a dungeon town quickly learns that Runners of the rogue persuasion will practice their skills at any and every opportunity. Being caught isn't required. It's one of the reasons I needed to ensure a rule strict man like Harry Hard Knuckles knew not to press too hard on the town's rogue population. As I expect you aren't here to discuss your moniker, how can I help you?"

Tibs bit his lower lip, unsure how to proceed now that he no longer had a way to distract from what brought him to her. "Jackal's Lambda." She didn't react to the statement and Tibs realized she might not know who he was. "He's my team leader." She didn't react and Tibs hesitated.

He smiled fell. "You need to say what you have to say, Tibs." She indicated the desk with the papers spread on it. There were a lot of them, golds worth of them. "I have things to take care of while no one's around to interrupt me."

He nodded and felt foolish. Of course, she'd have a lot of work to do, she was in charge of the whole town and everything that dealt with the dungeon. "Harry said that a team can only have one member who's Rho or more, but the dungeon's pushing us hard. There's going to be more than one soon." He looked at her expectantly.

"Then, you'll have to replace one of them with someone who is Upsilon or Omega. There are more of them now, so I'm certain you can find one that will fit with your team."

"But I don't want to change my team." He couldn't keep the whine from his voice, her statement hurt. "They're my team."

"It's how things are done, Tibs. We can't have a team so powerful the dungeon no longer gains anything out of them."

"But he—" Tibs closed his mouth. As much as he wanted to tell her no one had to die for Sto to grow, and that he was already adapting to the increased strength of the teams, explaining how he knew would cause the two of them too much trouble. "What if we don't

do any runs until he graduates?”

She rubbed her temple. “It isn’t how things go, Tibs.” She sighed and reached into a drawer, taking out the communication gem she’d shown him months ago. “Alistair, I no longer care what other duties you have, it’s time for you to return and see to your student. He has questions and I am not the one he should be seeking for answers.”

Tibs watched and sensed as she used it. The essence was so dense within the small gem that he had trouble making out even those he could identify and they were in the minority. One of those he couldn’t identify had to be the essence for mind.

“I wouldn’t think about taking it,” she said, her smile back, but not reaching her eyes.

“I’m not,” he lied, then had an idea. “But if I had one, I could talk with Alistair directly, instead of coming to talk to you.” He gave her his most innocent smile.

Her laughter was deep, rich. “You are a clever one, Tibs. But this is worth more than even you can imagine. And Alistair would need one to talk back with you. I admire the attempt, but I have an easier way not to be bothered by you.”

Could he get in the building if she told the guards to keep him out? While they were Harry’s people, and not adventurers, he’d have the building itself to contend with, with all the essence coursing through its walls.

He nodded his defeat. “How does it work?”

She considered him, then the gem. “I think about who I want to talk with,” he heard her say, “and they hear me.” Her mouth didn’t move.

She’d sounded exactly like she did when she talked; like she had when she’d instructed him and Alistair to come to her office while he was training.

“Can’t you make small ones? Weaker ones? Like with the potions they handed out on the training fields before the clerics were here? It would make it easier for everyone to talk.”

“Why would I want to make it easier for you lot to talk? It’s already difficult enough keeping you from talking about the dungeon when you’re not supposed to. And making an item like this isn’t like making potions. A failure doesn’t result in a weaker version, it results in the destruction of the ingredients needed to make it, and if the sorcerer doing it isn’t careful, the death of that person too.”

“A sorcerer can die weaving essence into something?”

She rubbed her temple. “That, you can have your teacher answer, Tibs. Now, unless you have something I can actually help you with—that no one else can,” she added as Tibs opened his mouth. “I have more important things to deal with.”

He nodded. “Thank you for answering my questions.”

Once the door was closed he studied the essence around it. The weave wasn’t as tight as that of the gem, but it was far more complex, and while he could tell about each thread of earth, air, fire, and water, following them was nearly impossible.

In a way it reminded him of the essence maze Sto had to deactivate the pool room traps, only much smaller while losing none of the difficulty. Even if he could identify every essence used, he doubted he could work out what it did. Her office had no windows, and he wasn’t even sure if it was against an outer wall.

There was something about the guild building...

He counted his steps from Tirania's office to the exit and ended up with a number different than the count when he'd walked to it. He was certain he hadn't miscounted or taken a different route, so there had to be something else in use, something magical, that made working out where everything was in the building difficult.

He shrugged. It wasn't like he needed to sneak into it, so he'd work on it again the next time he was inside. Maybe Carina would have ideas. Maybe Sto would have some too.

No. It was better he didn't give the dungeon more ideas on how to make the runs harder.

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Tibs now understood the excitement everyone displayed as he walked through the stalls. The new area had been turned into a marketplace, a bazaar he heard it called, and thought it was appropriate, some of the things on display were bizarre.

The outside of the bazaar had the wagons, some of them turned into shops, while others only acted as walls or storage. Inside the limits were mostly small tents and wooden stalls, with the occasional larger ones acting as taverns.

Tibs paid a copper for a steaming drink that tasted spicy and sweet, and another got him a small loaf of bread almost as good as the ones he got from the town's baker, but this one was filled with a savory meat paste.

He made the coppers back from pockets. The caravan's merchants, their helpers, or their guards, weren't part of his town, so, other than sticking to his one copper rule, they were fair game for his rogue ways.

The corruption nearly got him in trouble, cramping his fingers as he was slipping them in a pocket, but the crowd had been tight and the jostling that served to distract his target had also prevented him from accusing Tibs of a misdeed. The man had checked his pocket, but nothing had been missing.

Back on his Street, the suspicion Tibs did something would be enough to get the guards called, and he'd have to run until they gave up, but here, he was simply one of the multiple people enjoying the bazaar.

He'd been more cautious after that, but as Darran had mentioned, Tibs didn't always realize what his fingers got up to. As if thinking of the merchant summoned him, Tibs saw the burly, fabric-covered man haggling at a stall selling hardened leather. Tibs stayed a few steps away to avoid distracting him, but Darran still glanced in his direction, then returned to the haggling.

It happened fast enough, and with too many words in a language, Tibs didn't understand, that by the time the two shook hands, he had no idea what had been agreed to.

"Tibs," Darran exclaimed. "What is my favorite customer doing, walking among all these competing ruffians?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Tibs replied. "Don't you have all the things you need?"

The man laughed. "Oh, Tibs. Your youth is so refreshing. Of course, I don't have everything I need. Where do you think I get what I sell?"

Tibs shrugged. "From other cities."

“But how do I get them?”

“The transportation platform. I’ve seen the crates arrive that way.”

Darran placed an arm over Tibs’s shoulders and guided him through the stalls. “It always amuses me how it is that once someone discovers magic something real outside of stories, they start thinking everything happens that way.”

“I’ve seen those crates taken to your shop,” Tibs replied accusingly.

“And I do receive some of my wares that way, but I’m not so fortunate as being a member of those who run the platforms. Do you know how expensive it is for a humble merchant as myself to have something sent through them?”

Tibs nodded. He didn’t know the amounts, but Kroseph had said it was expensive.

“A caravan like this is a much more affordable method of getting my supplies, although it comes with its own drawback.” A couple bumped into the merchant, and Darran apologized, then winked at Tibs as he put away a coin pale enough to be silver or electrum. Tibs tended to forget that Darran did more than steal with his words.

“If the stuff they bring is for you and the other merchants, why are they selling things here? Doesn’t that mean you won’t sell as much?”

“They won’t stay, and most of them sell items I couldn’t make good coins on if I kept them in stock. Rarity has a value of its own. It encourages caravans to brave the wilds to come, they will sell items that sit on shelves in other cities, simply because the good townsfolk here haven’t seen them in a long while. It also means I don’t have to pay as much for them to bring me my goods, so I can endure the few days they will be here.”

Darran stopped at a stall and ran a finger over a box of candies being displayed.

“It also helps them with some of the risks. This was ordered by Olander, he owned the Sweetest good.”

Tibs vaguely remembered the shop. It had been set up after the Caravan Garden had been destroyed and sold much the same as it had. He realized he hadn’t seen it since returning.

“The shop’s not here anymore, isn’t it?”

Darran nodded. “The dungeon closing for so long, too close to him opening it ruined him. I do not know what has happened to him.”

“Then why are they here?” Tibs looked at the displayed candies and stopped on the box of misshapen lumps in layers of blues and greens. He read the letters but didn’t recognize them. Carina was teaching him the letters she knew because she said they were the more popular ones. But not all kingdoms agreed to use the same ones. These weren’t the ones she taught him.

Still, the candies were distinctive. “How much for a Sea Drop?” he asked the woman behind the counter.

“A copper each,” she replied, sounding bored.

“I can get a full meal, for a copper, and an ale,” he said, offended.

“These are Sea Drops,” she said, “not a meal. You can only get them in one city, made by one—”

“By Chuck,” he cut her off and she stared at him, mouth open. “In MountainSea. I’ve

had one from him, and what he sells is way bigger than those. I'll give you a copper for six of them."

She snorted. "Do you have any idea how much I had to pay for them? I was promised a copper for two by the shop that ordered them. I won't take less than that."

"Okay." Tibs turned and started walking away. "Since no one knows what they are, I'll be back before you leave to see how many you have left."

"Three!" she yelled after them. "Three for a copper."

Tibs returned, smiling. "It's rogue. I'm a Runner."

"And you tell people about them. You send them my way."

He handed her four coppers, which she studied carefully, before handing him the candies. He counted them with the same level of scrutiny she'd poured over his coins. He offered one to Darran once they walked away.

"You could have gotten more," the man said before popping it in his mouth. "You were right when you said she wouldn't sell many. These are specialty items. The only reason Olander took a chance on them is that with the air here being so much drier than MountainSea, they will keep a long time. Even with you telling everyone in the town about her stall, I doubt she'll sell many."

"Then I'll come back before she leaves and take the rest." He suckled on the sweet and slightly salty candy before continuing. "Why did she bring them since the shop's not here anymore?"

"She didn't know."

"How didn't she know? It's been months since the dungeon was attacked?"

"And the caravan was already on its way by then."

"Why? Why leave and take so long to arrive?"

Darran chuckled. "The closest city is four months away, at the speed a caravan can travel." Tibs looked at the merchant expectantly. The man knew Tibs wasn't great with those kinds of numbers. "Why don't you tell me how many days that is?"

Tibs narrowed his eyes. "Carina talks with you."

The merchant smiled. "Well, she is another one of my regular customers, like you. And yes we do talk about more than what she might need. Especially now that she has that new robe of hers. That will cut down on the repairs I do. Do remember to bring me your armor."

Tibs sighed. It was bad enough when each of them pushed him to learn more, but if they were working together.... A month was five weeks. A week had nine days. If it was ten, it would be five and zero days in a month, there are four of them, so two, zero, and zero. To that, he took away one for each of the weeks. "One, eight, and zero days."

"A hundred and eighty, that is correct."

"Why can't everyone just use the same way of saying it? Why different letters? Why is it so complicated?"

"A great many people ask that question every day," Darran said with a chuckle, "but few do anything about it."

"Why is the city so far?"

“Because dungeons have no common sense. If they did, they’d appear in the middle of a city. That way, they’d have all the food they wanted.”

“I wonder how they decide where they’ll appear,” Tibs mused. He’d have to remember to ask Sto.

“Universities have entire wings dedicated to that question.”

“But that doesn’t tell me why they bring supplies for you. It’s less than the platform, but if they don’t know that a shop will be here when they arrive, don’t they lose coins out of it?”

“It’s part of all trade-offs when products are involved. They take on some of the risks, just as I do. This time a shop ceased to be. Next time, it’s possible the caravan will not reach us because it was attacked. Those aren’t common anymore, but the reason they have so many guards is that they still happen. There is always a trade-off.” Darran smiled and rubbed a gold coin that hadn’t been in his hand before. “It’s why thievery is so popular.”

Tibs put a hand over his coin pouch even if he knew he had no gold in it. He only kept copper on him since he knew how easily he could lose one.

“There’s a risk with that too,” Tibs pointed out and looked around for guards.

“True, but that’s something a good set of legs will resolve.”

Tibs looked the man up and down, trying to imagine his large bulk running.

Darran grinned. “Don’t fall in the trap of letting appearance deceive you, Tibs. You, of all people, should know better.”

Tibs nodded and found himself wondering how much of the merchant’s build and nothing more than fabric.