

Chapter 17

The meal, after a stop at each of their training tents for a healing potion, wasn't the jovial experience they'd hoped for. In dividing the coins, they'd forgotten about the ten percent the guild took, so it shorted the team of seventeen coppers, because the guild didn't deal in broken coins, so they'd needed to hand over a full one for the half Zardane said what they actually owed.

Tibs was the only one surprised by it. When he'd mentioned breaking a copper piece, he'd received odd looks, with another comment from Jackal about how street Tibs was. Walter had to hand over half his take, which brought the mood down further, but the thought he only had forty-three silvers until he was free of the guild did help.

While they ate, Tibs got Zarkane to help him work out how long it would take for Walter to play off the amulet, and she figured that if no one helped him, and the number of coins was the same each time, he'd have to hand over one silver each run, so it would take him forty-three runs. The number was too large for Tibs to understand, so she explained it as close to a year and a half if he only had a run every two weeks. Would Walter outgrow its use in all that time? Could he outgrow it? Another question to ask Alistair.

There was so much he didn't understand.

"What should we do?" Walter asked as Tibs cleaned the bottom of his bowl with the last of the bread. Stew; Tibs hadn't known mixing vegetables and meats could create something so delicious. Now he regretted not having spent coins on a meal at the inn sooner. Going back to the slop of the mess hall would be difficult.

Jackal raised his tankard, noticed it was empty, and put it back on the table. "Now that we can make good coin from the dungeon, I think we need to assess what the merchants sell, and which ones we can trust to give us a good deal."

"How do we do that?" Claudia asked. "The trust part, I mean. I'm guessing assess means looking at what they sell."

"We ask about the prices, then we compare with another merchant who sells the same thing, or close enough. Right Tibs?"

"I never trust merchants, all they want to do is beat me."

Jackal chuckled. "This isn't the street, this place is too small to have a street. No merchant's going to beat you here. We're too important, with us, they can't make coins."

Tibs wasn't sure how confident he was in Jackal's explanation. The merchants he's interacted with in his first days here had seemed plenty interested in beating him away, but the man had been right about a lot of other things until now.

"How do we decide who sees which merchants?" Zarkane asked. "I mean, we probably want to pick one that's going to sell something we know, but in my case, unless the sign has a bow and an arrow on it, I'm not going to know if they sell something I know. I don't know my letters."

"Same here," Jackal said with something like pride, and Tibs felt better knowing he wasn't the only one, that even older people didn't always know their letters. "But what they sell doesn't matter at this point, because after we've compared what and how

much, someone different will go there, with the accumulated information, and see if we can talk them down to something we can afford.”

“I’m better at stealing than talking,” Tibs said.

Jackal smiled. “Noted, but you can’t steal here, we need you to keep both your hands. As for which merchant, we’ll split up in different directions and just enter one of them. As I said, doesn’t matter which one right now.”

Which was how Tibs ended up standing by a door, looking up at the banner over it with a shield, knife, and rope depicted on it. Underneath were letters, but he didn’t know them. The building was recent, one of those he hadn’t had the chance to climb yet, fresh wood planks without any marks on them not made by the tools to build it.

Tonight, he promised himself, he’d see what the town looked like from this roof.

“Welcome to the Shield and Rope!” the man behind the counter greeted Tibs as he entered. “Where you will find the best equipment an adventurer might want.”

Tibs hopes crashed. He couldn’t afford the best, none of them could. Which Tibs considered leaving to try a different merchant, one who didn’t sell the best. The man stepped from behind the counter. He was rotund and not very tall, dressed in layers of fabric Tibs could imagine hiding all sort of things like tools and knives.

The man paused before Tibs and studied him. “Would you be a thief, perchance?”

Tibs caught his desire to run and held it in place, remembering Jackal’s words. This wasn’t a street. If the man had asked if he was a rogue, Tibs wouldn’t have worried, rogues worked for the guild, he knew, thieves were criminals. He searched the man’s face for some clue as to what answer he wanted, but all he saw on it was pleasant curiosity.

How often had such been followed by a beating?

Was it better to be caught lying?

Tibs missed the street. Things were so much simpler there.

“I was?” he said, unable to stop the uncertainty from sounding.

“Was?” the man asked, his expression not changing.

No beating had to mean this was a good direction to be in. “I’m a dungeon runner now, they classify me as a rogue.”

The man’s face brightened. “What’s in a name?” he shook Tibs hand vigorously. “The important thing is that you are following the path of the light fingers.” Tibs stifled a groan. Was he ever going to get away from that moniker? “Too few follow that path. Everyone needs a good thief, or rogue,” he added with a mischievous smile. He motioned to the counters and shelves. “Now, do keep your hands to yourself while I give you a tour of my wares.” He lowered his voice. “And I do carry the best in anything a goof thief, or rogue, might need.”

Again, the best. But now Tibs felt bad leaving, so he followed him to the counter he’d stood behind as he pointed for this bedroll. Those oils to make the leather resistant to water, that cloak that would keep you warm in the cold months. The man didn’t sound like he wanted Tibs to buy any of it. He was just enumerating what was there. This was so different from what he’s seen done on his street.

Once behind the counter, he took a metal box from under it and, carefully looking

around, unlocked and opened it. He took a leather roll out and unrolled it on the counter, and Tibs forgot about everything else in the shop. Picks, large and small, were on it.

He'd had to make do with an old length of metal he'd found off a cart for a tension bar and a piece of bone he'd rubbed until it was the right shape for his pick. These were gleaming metal. The tension bars came in multiple sizes for the different locks he'd seen on the doors. And the picks had different ends. Having the right one for the lock he needed to pick would make entering so much easier, and some were thin enough that if he had to, he could use more than one. How easy would his life have been if he wouldn't have had to worry about tumblers falling out of place as he worked?

"I see you can recognize the value of a good set of picks."

A set?

Was he drooling? This was a fact-finding mission. He could indulge in something that would help him and on him later, and, he reminded himself, did he really need picks now that he had his element?

He forced himself to look away. "I'm more interested in the armor," he said, his eyes flicking back to the gleaming polish of the picks. What did it matter if he needed them or not? They were beautiful.

The man chuckles. "Of course, you wouldn't want me to know where your interest really is."

Tibs sigh. "I'm kind of new at this." He motioned around them. "At all of this," he added for emphasis.

"I completely understand, after all, you are the youngest customer I've had, here or elsewhere." The man's demeanor changed as he rolled the leather. He was utterly serious. "And I also understand how telling it is you survived not only the street they took you from, but the dungeon long enough you can afford to visit my shop." He put the box back under the counter and when he straightened, he was his jovial self again.

"Now, my armor is the very best leather. I'll have stronger armor eventually, but it's too early for it to be worthwhile. The dungeon doesn't give enough rewards yet for someone to afford banded brass, or offer enough of a challenge to justify buying that kind of armor. Not that I expect you'll care for metal, even when things get more difficult. As a thief, you want flexibility over toughness, to stay light on your feet as well as your fingers. Surviving a hit is all well and good, but it's better when you're nimble enough not to get hit in the first place."

He pulled a chest piece from a shelf. "Due to your stature, I'd have to make modifications to it would fit you properly, but I wouldn't charge extra for the work."

Tibs indicated the leather legs on the shelf next to where the chest piece had been. "You sell legs too?" he noticed another shelf had boots and gloves.

"And helmets." The man's smile. "Young man, an armor isn't particularly useful if all you have is one piece of it. I sell it as a full set. The individual pieces here are so you can try them, on. Although I will sell you pieces if one of damaged beyond repair, but I don't think you're there just yet."

Just how he was wasting his time sunk in even more. If the guild had offered a

chest piece for fifty silver, or more, since he couldn't imagine a knife cost the same at the chest, and they were giving them a special price, just how much would a full set or much better armor cost?

He took a breath and asked. He couldn't go back to Jackal without a price. "How much?" he readied himself for the answer.

"A set like this, which is basic, I sell for forty silver. Now, for you I—yes, I promise, my prices are reasonable." The man stopped and looked put off when Tibs shook his head.

Forty sounded a lot like fifty. How could a full set cost close with how much the guild charge for one piece? Or did the way it sounded had nothing to do with how close they were to one another? Jackal would know, so it didn't matter, but he was curious.

"How close is forty from fifty?"

The man's annoyance changed to surprise and then realization. "Of course, how stupid of me to expect you to know your numbers. How high can you count?"

Tibs reminded himself that Jackal and Zardane didn't know their letters and the man seem understanding. "Ten."

The man smiled. "Then you're set. Numbers work in sets of ten, do you know your letters? No, of course, you won't. Okay, think of it that way. Each set is linked to those first ten numbers. And except for ten, which, I don't understand why they went with that, each set is made to sound like the number it corresponds to. The first set is the numbers you know, from zero to nine." He paused. "You know about zero, right?"

"That's for when I have nothing."

"Good. So that's the first set. The next one starts with ten in the position of zero and you tag the next number to it so after ten it ten-one, ten-two, ten-three." He motioned for Tibs to continue.

"Ten-four, ten-five, ten-six."

"Perfect! Now after ten-nine, you have—"

"Two-one," Tibs said, figuring he had it. He did say the ten was odd."

The man looked at him. "You know, that would make so much more sense, but no, it's made to sound like two, but a little different. Twenty." He pronounced it slowly. "Now, before you worry too much, if you say two-five, or three-eight, you will get odd looks, but they will understand what you mean."

Tibs rubbed his temple. Hadn't he come here just to see if the merchant had good prices and could be trusted? He didn't know about the prices, but if the man was willing to go through all this so he'd understand how much what he sold was worth, Tibs thought he had the trust part down.

"It's a lot, isn't it?"

Tibs nodded. "I miss the street."

The man laughed, and Tibs found himself smiling along. "That won't last, but for what you asked, you just need to remember that the first part of the number is made to sound like that of the original set. So what does forty sound like?"

"Four."

“And fifty?”

Tibs send the number in his head. “Five is the closest.”

“And where are they in relation to each other?”

“Four is below five.” Understand came, and he gawked. The merchant was selling a full set of leather armor for less than the guild had wanted for a chest piece. He fought to keep the suspicion from showing, wondering if the time helping him understand his number had been to create a sense of confidence he’d then take advantage of.

Except, what was it Bardik had said about people in authority and truth? He’d sounded like he spoke about the guild at the moment. Hadn’t Alistair sounded annoyed when Tibs had told him about being free at Epsilon? That he’d been told the same; as if the guild had lied to both of them.

Was it the guild that was swindling them and not the merchants?

“What if I don’t have forty silvers, but I expect that without the armor I won’t survive to make get those coins? what can I do?”

The man’s smile became tinged with pride. “You have a sharp mind. I do offer a competitive payment plan of one percent per month with a minimum expected payment of one silver per month. I can make allowances since the guild decides when you go in, and not you, and that means you can’t be sure if you’ll go often enough. Although it looks like your numbers are now low enough, you should be going in at least once in a month.”

Tibs nodded. As a rogue, he’d been in at least once a week to fill in a spot.

“But that only matters if you decide to buy from me, and I do have an armor set specifically for thieves.”

Tibs didn’t reply. He was trying to understand what forty silver meant, now that he had a sense of what forty meant. If it was fifteen copper to a silver then— “What’s fifteen?”

The merchant looked confused, then seemed like he didn’t know if he wanted to chuckle or groan. “There, my young man, you are falling under the local dialect rule of language. Wait until you are confronted by an entirely different language.”

Tibs tried to articulate just how confused that explanation made him.

“Fifteen is the same as ten-five,” the merchant said.

Forty times ten-five was too much for Tibs to comprehend, so he decided he wasn’t going to deal with it right now. “What if my entire team wants to buy from you?”

“All thieves?” the man asked, unable to hide his eagerness.

“Two fighters, an archer and a sorcerer, plus me. I guess sorcerers don’t wear armor, do they?”

“I do have sorcerer robes.” He headed for a shelf and pulled a large box from it, lifting the lid to show Tibs the content. “The very best wool with a tight weave. This model doesn’t have them,” he said after consulting the lid, “but I have some with pockets for ingredients, I think it might be early for that one. Sorcerers only work with their essence early in their career.” He closed the box and placed it back. “If he’s interested in one of those anyway, it’ll be a little more expensive. If you can convince your entire

team to shop here, I'll give you all a ten percent discount, and I'll reduce the interest to half a percent if you need to take advantage of my payment plan.

Tibs nodded, not mentioning that the man hadn't said how much the robe would cost, so he had no idea what 'a little more expensive' meant, that he had no idea what one percent was, so even less half that, but he already had enough of numbers.

"I'll have to talk about it with them."

"Of course," the man answered with an understanding smile. "I'll be here once you've made your decision. I'm certain you'll find no one offering better prices."

Tibs stepped outside and squinted to stop the pain the sunlight added with what he was already feeling.

How could talking and thinking about numbers be so painful?