

Chapter 12

“Ah Tibs!” Darran’s jovial expression turned serious. “What happened?”

Tibs eyes his cut shirt, and the blood that soaked the sleeve where his attacker had cut his arm. “I’m fine.” It had been the first of his would be assassin attacks, and the only one that reached his flesh. The other cuts on his shirt were sacrifices he had to make in the process of getting close to her to end the attacks, and her. She’d smirked as her life essence had ebbed away, probably thinking that the poison on her knife would finish the job.

The corruption in it hadn’t affected Tibs, and he’d easily healed the cut with Purity.

He hadn’t killed her with essence, since he didn’t know if that left traces a skilled adventurer could use to guide them to the culprit. Tibs could sense essence, and his swords left traces of water essence in the cuts, which dissipated after a few seconds, but was that because he was not skilled enough to sense what was left, or there was nothing left?

He couldn’t take a chance.

He left her body in the alley where she’d attacked him. With all the thugs and troublemakers acting on Sebastian post death revenge, plenty of bodies had been found by the guards. She’d be one of those. Another skirmish for the glory of being Sebastian’s hand in the destruction of what Tibs loved.

“You are bleeding,” the merchant said, stepping around the counter. “Why weren’t you wearing your armor?”

“It’s Kragle Rock,” Tibs replied as Darran took his arm to examine it. “I don’t need to wear armor in my town.”

He’d also hadn’t wanted Darran to realize it wasn’t the armor he had sold Tibs. Sto had made it identical, but details were important to merchants and thieves, so Darran was skilled at noticing them. The merchant might not think much of it being different, but he might. As friendly as he was, Darran was a merchant; coins drove them. What would the guild give to learn Runners weren’t handing over all enchanted items they found in the dungeon? That the dungeon made some that couldn’t be detected as magical?

“There is no cut,” Darran said, turning his arm over.

“I had a cleric heal it.”

The merchant eyed him suspiciously. “You paid what clerics charge for this?”

“I know a few.” Tibs knew one, but he hadn’t seen Clara in Kragle Rock since the end of Sebastian’s raids. She’d been recalled, and he didn’t know if she’d be allowed back after disobeying the orders not to help the Runners.

The injury in the alley, with no one watching, had given him the chance to experiment. Instead of applying the weave, if it was even that—he wouldn’t know how it compared until Alistair taught him how to make one with water—and letting it do its work, he kept it from moving deeper, then broke it apart partway. It resisted him. Once formed, the weave wanted to continue its work. To heal was needed to be healed, to move into him and find other injuries until it was spent.

Use and dissipate sounded more like an etching than a weave. Was that what Tibs made with Purity, even if Clara liked it to weaving? Something else he wouldn’t know until Alistair taught him.

Darran eyed the other cuts and the blood on his shirt and pants.

“It’s hers,” Tibs said, and anything not on his sleeve was. He’d tried using water to clean it out, but the stains left behind by the parts that weren’t carried away as he pulled the water through the cloth looked more out of place than the blood on a Runner, especially the one known for having been a thorn in Sebastian’s side.

“What did you do with her body?”

“I left it there. Irdian isn’t stopping everyone coming in to destroy my town. Guards find their bodies every few days as they kill each other. So long as it’s not one of the townsfolk, or someone who looks to have coins, he isn’t going to care.”

“And are they?” Darran asked. “Killing one another, I mean. Or is someone looking out for you?”

Tibs shrugged. He’d asked Jackal if he’d killed some of them, and his friend had been disappointed to admit he hadn’t come across any of them in the middle of destroying something. Mez had caught one as they were about to burn down a building, but he’d handed them to the guards. None of his rogues had admitted to taking care of them, and few had lied to him about it.

Of the other Runners, Tibs didn’t care. Quigly might, but he wouldn’t go looking for them.

“Well, since you don’t need me to look after this,” Darran said with a smirk. “What can I help you with?”

“That knife.” Tibs pointed to the ornate one on display

Darran smiled. “Finally upgrading your equipment.” He took it out of the case. “Come, the sheath is in the back, and you’ll need it. This is something to be treated with care. I’ll show you how the whetstone needs to be handled.”

Tibs followed the merchant into the backroom, then the smaller storeroom. The door and walls were thicker, with the material used muffling sounds that passed through it, making it harder for anyone outside to make out what was discussed. The material didn’t use essence, simply its thickness and what it was made of.

Darran unceremoniously dropped the knife on the table. “How can I help?”

“Have the guards been harassing you?”

“It’s not their job to harass an honest merchant like me.”

Tibs sat on a crate. “How about the less honest merchants?”

“Then, harassing is too strong a word. One has visited each of us on the row to explain how being forced to pay to be protected is against the guild’s rules. And that we should report such crimes to the guards immediately.”

“And did they?”

“I don’t believe you’d be walking about if they had.”

“I was sent to a cell,” Tibs pointed out.

“That wasn’t due to one of us. The warning came after you were arrested. I expect that was the new head of the guards making a point.”

Tibs nodded. “Do any of them want to end our arrangement?”

“If they don’t, are you in a position to maintain it? You lost a lot of Runners fighting Sebastian.”

“I’ve kept the patrols going, and we have stopped some who attacked the row and the area. So long as they don’t attack in mass, we can deal with it. Once the new Runners are

here, I'll increase the numbers as much as needed to keep Merchant Row safe if that's what they want."

Darran smiled. "You're letting us decide."

"Of course."

"You'd make a poor merchant."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "That's because I'm a rogue."

"It's because you are a decent person. To be a good merchant, you need to be willing to seize any opportunity to increase the coins you have, and that means taking advantage of those in less fortunate situations." Darran produced a sheathed knife from within the many folds he wore and offered it to Tibs. "That will be three silver."

Tibs eyed the knife. "For those, I'll take that one." He motioned to the knife on the table. "This isn't worth three coppers."

"Tibs, you wound me. I only display the best I have, easily worth three times what this one is. I couldn't—"

"Oh, then it's sharpened?" Tibs asked, feigning surprise. "That's all that's needed to make that one better than the rest, isn't it?"

"Now you're just being disrespectful," Darran scolded. "Have any of the knives I sold you let you down?"

"None of them will hit what I throw them at."

"I'm afraid that's more to do with you than them. I will sell this for a silver and six copper. It's more than fair."

"I could call the guard and hand you over for thievery. Anything more than ten copper qualifies as that."

"You've barely looked at it. Admired the work which went into the hilt, the filigree on the guard. That alone is worth the measly three copper above a silver I am asking for."

With a sigh, Tibs unhooked the pouch from his belt, and Darran smiled as he looked through it. Tibs took a silver coin out. "I don't have any copper. I'll give you a silver for it."

The smile fell. "You, my boy, are a thief," the merchant pronounced.

"A rogue," Tibs corrected. They exchanged coin for knife, and Tibs pulled it out of the sheath. "The edge needs to be ground and sharpened."

"What do you expect for a silver?" Darran asked with a huff.

"Something like this." Tibs sheathed it and looped it to his belt. "The agreement?"

"None of my associates have said anything either way. I expect they might not be aware you are still offering it, with Sebastian no longer being a threat."

"Payment will be due in ten days."

Darran nodded. "I'll discuss the situation with them. You will get pushback, now that there is an alternative."

Tibs shrugged as he stood. "If they trust the guards, they're welcome to let them do their job."

"The guards don't charge anything for the protection they offer."

"Like you often say." Tibs tapped the cheap knife he bought. "You get what you pay for." And Darran smiled.

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Tibs stood away from the transportation platform, watching the group appear.

The first of the arrivals had sent ripples through Kragle Rock and now, Runners and what seemed like every townsfolk left were gathered as another group was led down the steps and started on Dungeon Way.

“You ever seen anyone looking so pitiful?” someone asked, and no one laughed.

Scared, was what they’d looked like. And young. Tibs wouldn’t be youngest Runner to enter the dungeon, since a few of the arrivals were carried into the oldest’s arms.

“Maybe the cells they were taken from are in the habit of beating them daily,” someone replied in a serious, if disbelieving tone.

“Those aren’t guards,” Quigly stated. “They’re soldiers.”

There had to be three and zero of them being escorted; boys and girls, and half that being carried. Tibs recalled Bardik’s story of babes being thrown into a dungeon to feed it and he reinforced the ice coursing through him. That was the reason the rogue had given Tibs for trying to kill Sto, so the guild wouldn’t do that here.

Could he talk Sto into making the first floor easier for them? Wouldn’t it be better for the dungeon if they grew up to be stronger before they failed? Tibs didn’t care about the title of being the youngest Runner to survive the dungeon. He’d rather one of them held it, that they all did.

Tibs didn’t think any of them were Street, even those in nothing more than rags and dirt.

They had the beaten sense to them the Street instilled in all who lived there, but he saw nothing of the spark of defiance needed to survive it. Even the oldest of the boys and girls he watched walk by had lost all will to fight. Had it beaten out of them, by the way some limped or how an arm was bent improperly.

What kind of cell did that to someone? And held babes? How could babies deserve to be in a cell? Bardik had told stories of nobles using lower-class women, and what they did if one who had a child as a result, came asking for help. That was all it took for the mother to deserve a stay in a cell with her babe still in her arms.

Only, where were the mothers? All Tibs saw were children, not one of them older than Jackal had been when Tibs had first met him.

“Those aren’t criminals,” Quigly said, his tone so sad Tibs had to look at him. “They’re war urchins.”