

Chapter 18

Tibs crouched at the edge of the roof, looking as a group of urchins were escorted to a more ostentatious house. Two boys and a girl, each holding a child. Six seemed to be the size each couple took in. He didn't know what rules governed which Runner they got, but he'd yet to see a group with more than half of its children too young to go in the dungeon.

Well, he thought they were too young, and they hadn't been at the training. But he'd find out when the first teams of Omegas were sent in if that meant anything.

The man and woman were dressed to match the house. More like successful merchants than even low nobles, but stood apart. Not every couple who took in Omegas were together. Some had been assigned to each other by the guild. There had been negotiations, Serba had told him that, so most were okay with who they were partnered with, but she hadn't been interested in looking into who those people were for him.

"They're people," she'd told him, rolling her eyes. "That's all I care to know about them."

The man welcomed the urchins warmly, while the woman stood away and didn't react to their presence. The two had argued before the urchins arrived, but Tibs hadn't cared to bring the words to him to find out what about. The urchins got a roof over their heads, and people who'd be there to comfort them if they returned from their runs. He'd do checks to ensure no one took advantage of them, but otherwise, Tibs felt the situation was acceptable.

The urchins remained closed in, even as the man laughed at something he said. There was no light on the laughter, so an honest one. Tibs had known not all laughs were real, but he'd been surprised the first time one had come with light.

He left as the man ushered the Omegas inside. There was another house he wanted to check on. The couple there had smiled as they welcomed the runners, but while Tibs hadn't heard what they'd said, he'd seen the light as they spoke. They, he suspected, had plans for the runners, and Tibs was going to ensure they didn't come to fruition.

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"Hurry," the Runner by the door to the shop's basement called, "I think I see them."

Tibs extended his senses feeling for details that would confirm those were the guards on their way to raid Tibs's equipment stash. He shook his head when Jackal glanced his way. Not them. No swords at their hips, no metal buckles on armor. They still had time.

Tibs had hurried to gather everyone he could on finding the paper warning him of the raid under his tankard when he'd returned to his table. It had meant Quigly and his team, Jackal and the Runners who'd been in the inn. One and three. Fortunately, they all had an element, and it made moving the crates containing the equipment easier.

Once everything was moved to a temporary location, Tibs took position on a roof facing the shop and waited.

The group of guard was eight strong when they arrived. The woman in the lead showed a paper to the shopkeeper, and he stepped out of the way. When they exited a few minutes later, she wasn't happy. She questioned the merchant before rejoining the others in the distance.

Tibs waited until they were out of his range before stepping down and checking with the merchant.

The paper had explained what they were doing; he told Tibs. In this case, searching for illegal weapons and armors. They had to present the paper to the building's owner before they could act on it, and it needed to be signed by the Magistrate of the Law, who needed to be convinced something illegal had happened.

In most towns throughout the kingdoms, the position was assigned by the king or one of their stewards, but in dungeon towns, the leader of the guards was automatically that person.

So, again, the guild could do whatever it wanted.

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"What do you know about the Magistrate of Law?" Tibs asked Jackal as the team ate. The fighter snorted. "Nealy impossible to buy, and the one the king employs can't be bribed."

"That's your king?" Tibs ask for clarification. "Or are they all like that?" What he wanted to find out needed the information to apply to whatever kingdom they were in.

"They're not," Don said, then looked at his plate.

Then, the question was how many coins it would take. "Could a king decide to assign one to a dungeon town?"

Don stared at him. "Of course not. The guild is in charge here."

"But they're taking advantage of the kingdom's citizens," Tibs pointed out.

"They are not," Khumdar said.

"We're in the kingdom," Tibs stated.

"No officially," Don said, then sunk in under Tibs's, Jackal's and Mez's stares. He took a breath and straightened. "Dungeon towns are considered to be part of the Guild's kingdom, regardless of where they're located."

"The guild has a kingdom?" Tibs asked in disbelief.

"Technically..."

Tibs glared.

"Not in the same sense as what the kingdoms are," the sorcerer said. "But because they're all governed the same way, by a central organization, they are considered a kingdom. In actuality, each is more like the city states that existed before the guild came to be. Where each was able to hold the kings around them at bay through a variety of alliances or access to things that couldn't be obtained anywhere else. When we came here, we agreed to become a citizen of the guild's kingdom."

"I never agreed to something like that," Mez said.

Don shook his head. "We're different. We came here as part of a transaction."

"They can't sell my citizenship," the archer stated.

"You weren't a citizen when it happened," Don replied. "You were a criminal. We all were, and we lost our citizenships when we were thrown into cells." He hesitated. "With a possible exception of Tibs."

"I was in a cell."

"But you're Street. They always show up when a town becomes a city, no matter what's done to keep them from happening. But no one wants them there. So many kingdoms simply don't acknowledge them, going so far as to not accept the people living there as their citizens and granting them the base rights citizens get."

“Like making sure the guards keep them safe from abuse by the nobility?” Mez asked.

Don snorted. “Guards need money like everyone else, and when it suits them, nobles have no problem giving it to them.” He took a breath to calm himself. “All I’m saying, as it applies here, is that it’s possible Tibs wasn’t even a citizen of his kingdom.”

“And how did being prisoners lead to all of you becoming citizen of the guild without your approval being needed?” Khumdar asked.

“The same way any commodity changes ownership,” Don replied. “We were sold.”

“The urchins?” Tibs asked.

“War makes things... different,” the sorcerer said. “The winner makes the laws, and not every kingdom is kind to the loser. Some will punish even those who didn’t take part in the fighting. As bad as them being here is, it could have been worse.”

“Being sold as house servant is common,” Khumdar said.

“And that’s among the least horrible things that could happen,” Don said. “Taking advantaging of the losers is a grand tradition in some kingdoms.”

“You’re talking about bedding the children of those who fought,” Jackal said, disgusted.

Don’s expression was answer enough.

“You seem quite knowledgeable in the ways of kingdom, Don,” Khumdar said.

The sorcerer shrugged. “When you’re in a hurry to read through a library’s shelves, you can’t stop to choose what you read.”

“So there’s nothing anyone can do to keep the guild from just taking anything they want from the people in town?” Tibs asked. “Then why did the guard bother with the paper?”

Don looked at the others questioningly.

“Tibs’s stash was raided,” Jackal said.

“And before they entered, the lead guard showed a paper to the shopkeeper,” Tibs added. “Why? If Irdian can do anything he wants?”

“Because the guild wants people to come here,” Don said, shrugging. “They need commerce for the town to prosper. They need Runners who weren’t criminal to pay to test themselves against the dungeon. Not a lot of people want to come to a city where they’ll never know if they’re safe. Following how things are done in the kingdoms is a way to show they’ll be as safe as where they came from.”

“Unless the guild doesn’t feel like doing that,” Jackal said.

Don nodded. “That’s the thing we need to remember. The guild follows those procedures because they want to, not because they have to.”

“Same as any of the kings,” Mez said.

“Not exactly. The kings have rivals who can be convinced to act if the population is in turmoil. If the citizens aren’t happy with who you’re targeting, it’s easier to get them to help you during the war. So there’s only so far a king can go outside the rules before they have to face the consequences.”

“So there’s no one we can go to to force the guild to treat us better?”

Don shook his head. “Even if we were citizens of the kingdom and there was a Magistrate of Law here, you couldn’t get them to protect you from Irdian. The guild is simply too powerful.”

“Why is he even bothering with Tibs?” Mez asked. “He’s helping.”

“I’m breaking the rules.”

“What Tibs is doing, under the laws,” Jackal said, “is a protection racket. It doesn’t matter that the merchant approached him, and that he’s protecting them even if they can’t pay. It doesn’t matter the real reason’s probably because he’s doing a better job than the guards. He’s breaking the law, so he needs to be stopped.”

“But only according to established procedures,” Khumdar added, and Don nodded.

“Until Irdian decides he’s done with Tibs,” Jackal said.

“Who happens to have Tirania’s blessing,” Don added.

“Okay, but the stash was stuff Tibs uses to help the Runners,” Mez said. “How’s that breaking any laws?”

“He has too many,” Don said. “Even the most generous kingdom controls how well a citizen can be armed. One or two swords per adult will be acceptable there, but Tibs has enough to equip a small group of mercenaries.”

“Then,” Jackal said, “them have to get that paper done, is what gave whoever told us about it time to do it?”

“Possible, without knowing who it was, it’s not possible to be certain.” Don looked at Tibs, who shrugged.

“Then we just have to keep them in shops and we’ll always know ahead of time and we can move them.”

“That is placing an unreasonable amount of trust on this mysterious person,” Khumdar said. “How many times can this happen before the guards realize there is someone informing you? How quickly will they ensure it stops?”

“Or use it to catch you in the act,” Don added. “Not to mention how disruptive it’s going to be to the merchants. If Tibs alienates them, he’s going to lose the money he needs to help the Omegas.”

“Well, we can’t just leave them where they are,” Jackal said. “If you know who gets wind of it, I’m not going to hear the end of that.”

Tibs nodded.

Kroseph had agreed to store the crates in the inn’s cellar, but if his father found out, it didn’t matter how much they’d done for the town, or that Jackal was Kroseph’s special man. They’d be paying for it.

A whistle sounded, and the door closed. Tibs stretched his sense, and two blocks away felt the guards approaching. He shrugged when Jackal looked at him. It wasn’t like there was anything he could do. The signal was more for those to hide what they didn’t want the guards to notice than to provide time to run.

It still caused a commotion as the guards pushed through the runners, who’d decided now was a good time to head out. It got loud until Kroseph pulled them out to make space. He glared down anyone unhappy with his intervention.

The guard in the lead was the same woman who’d spoken to the shopkeeper. Kroseph spoke with her, then stepped aside, looking in their direction.

“Should we…” Jackals started, but Tibs shook his head, watching the four guards approach.

“Tibs Light Fingers,” she said, looking them over before settling her gaze on him.

“You are being brought in for interfering with the safety of Kragle Rock. If you resist, I’ve been authorized to restrain you.”

“We have a run tomorrow,” Jackal said, raising his tankard. “Come back after that.” He took a swallow, eyeing her.

“If those are that important to you,” she replied, “you should ensure no one on your team breaks the rules.”

“How has Tibs interfered with the safety of the town?” Khumdar asked. “As far as I am aware, he saved the town, twice.”

“He’s been seen casing houses the new residents have moved in, with plans to break in and cause trouble.”

“You mean those houses where they’re working the Runners under their care to exhaustion?” Jackal asked.

“There’s been no reports of unacceptable behaviors on the part of the caretakers,” she replied flatly.

“And is that because the guild doesn’t care what they do?” Don asked, “or because none of the Omegas know to go to them for protection?”

“Why they aren’t—” she stopped as Tibs stood.

“Tibs, don’t just go with them,” Jackal stood.

“I’m not going to cause any problems,” Tibs said, locking eyes with the fighter. “Not here, not elsewhere. I’m sorry you’re going to miss the run because of me.”

“The abyss take the run,” Jackal growled. “This is just because that boss of yours doesn’t like Tibs.”

She shrugged. “The complaint came from citizens, through the proper procedures.” They surrounded Tibs as he headed for the door.

Tibs would use the time to figure out how he was going to ensure those people didn’t get to take advantage of the runners under their care once he was out of the cell.

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The cell’s door shut behind Tibs and he looked at the occupants, trying to ignore how the weave pressed against him. There weren’t as many, but they look no friendlier than those from his previous stay.

Two days, the guard said as he had Tibs hand over his knives, bracers, and pouch, was the duration of his stay this time. He’d then patted him down to make sure he had nothing hidden. It would be plenty of time to plan.

A massive man stepped forward, grinning nastily.

Once Tibs had dealt with this.

“Well, well, well,” the man said. “I didn’t know runts got thrown in with the big boys. I’m going to have some fun with you.”

“Do you see my eyes?”

The man snorted. “Magic don’t work in here.”

“That’s not what it should tell you.” Tibs closed the distance before he was done speaking. Then the man was writhing in pain on the floor from half a dozen well-placed strikes.

“Now,” he said, looking at the others in the cell. “I need time to think, so if you’re considering making my time here difficult, try it now.”

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“I hope you learned your lesson,” Irdian said, as he opened the cell’s door. If he was disappointed Tibs was unharmed, he didn’t show it. That he was here confirmed that whatever other reasons there were for Tibs’s stay in the cell, Irdian had used it to make a point.

Tibs headed for the exit to retrieve his possession in silence.