

Chapter 04

Tibs looked at the names on his list; two and three of them. The Runners left who'd protected Merchant Row, and half of them were still injured because the guild wouldn't let the clerics heal them until they reached the Sto's door. Only a little more than twice that has survived Sebastian's raids.

The guild had yet to announce when the runs were starting again, and Tibs wondered if those could happen with so few Runners. Was it best to let Sto rest, instead of getting him to use up resources with little in return? After surviving the raids, the first two floors wouldn't be much of a challenge for the Runners left doing them.

He only had eight fighters left and two archers. The others were all rogues. He didn't know the distribution of those not working for him, but more fighters than the others had survived among them, too.

Was there even more than four sorcerers left? Unless the guild allowed teams to double up on a class of Runners again, there was no way everyone could have a team to do their runs. And then, that would mean, at most, ten teams, plus the nobles.

Each team would go in twice each nine days. That would make Jackal happy, at least.

"What do you think, Tibs?" Quigly asked from the other side of the table.

"It's going to be tough keeping all the businesses safe if thieves come in drove. It's a good thing Harry's guards are stopping most of them as they arrive."

"Those aren't thieves," the warrior pointed out. "Those who manage to make it past the guards, and that we've caught, are intent on destruction, not robbery. And they don't care what they destroy."

Tibs hadn't expected Sebastian's revenge from beyond death to start this quickly. He'd hoped for weeks to rebuild his forces and the town. If not for the guards, Tibs would be overwhelmed trying to stop them.

"I'll speak with the other Runners. After the raids, they have to understand how important it is we keep the town safe."

"Or they aren't going to want to have anything to do with fighting anymore," Quigly replied. "Not all survivors become hardened soldiers."

"They're Runners."

But Tibs knew that didn't make them people who wanted to fight. The dungeon didn't give them a choice, and neither had Sebastian, but how many only did the bare minimum to survive their runs? Went to the appointed training, then spent their time enjoying themselves?

Acted like their next run would be their last, instead of making sure they survived it.

It surprised him how many survive with that attitude. A handful of them were Runners who'd paid to be here, stuck fighting Sebastian's people when the Attendants vanished. Only the serious Runners had stayed once they returned. But Tibs wasn't sure he could trust them to want to keep the row safe.

They were here willingly, so they didn't suffer at the hand of the guild as harshly, so weren't as attached to Kragle Rock as the others. In their favor was the fact they weren't nobles, but they also weren't street, or criminals for whom being a Runner had been a reprieve of a more direct punishment. He'd had few interactions with them, outside of offering help with how to deal with the runs.

"We need everyone who can be convinced to help," Tibs finally said, "especially if outright destruction is the goal. When the guild brings in the new convicts, those will be easier to talk into working with us. We'll just have to manage until then."

Quigly watched him, and Tibs ignored the look. The warrior was the one who'd wanted Tibs to get back to running things, so he could accept this was how things would go.

“Alright. How do you want to divide the patrols?” Quigly asked.

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Tibs watched the workers laying down the paving stone along the end of Dungeon Way, which cut most of Kragle Rock in half on this side of the transportation platform, and over the dirt patch continuing to the steps leading up to Sto’s door.

The townsfolk were crowding into the few surviving buildings, and this was what the guild spent resources on? Turning a dirt path into a paved one? They should build housing, restoring the shops, seeing to the people who kept the town going, instead of... this. Why would Runners care if they walked on dirt or stone when going to do their Runs?

Amelia, Mez’s noble friend, was doing the work of the guild, bringing in workers to rebuild the town, while the rest of the nobles were taking advantage of the destruction to separate themselves from the rest. Mere days after Sebastian died, the rubble around the noble’s quarters had been cleared, including houses that had been untouched by the destruction. They planned to erect a wall to protect them from the rest of the rabble.

Tibs didn’t know who had owned those buildings, or if they’d survived the raids and had left using the coins the nobles paid for their houses, and he didn’t care. They weren’t townsfolk anymore, and this was simply more of what nobles did; which was whatever they wanted.

More workers leveled the ground by the bottom of the steps. Not where the path would be, but on the side. These were dressed in aprons and leather chaps to protect them from the sharp tools they used. They were townsfolk, working with whatever they could find.

He noticed Cross among them and headed there.

The people cheered on seeing him. Slapped his shoulder when he was in reach, thanked him for saving them. Hero of the Town, they called him, Killer of Raiders, and other names he didn’t care for. He wished Don had played his usual games and claimed all the fame, but the sorcerer was nowhere to be found.

He was still in the town. He had to be since he, like everyone brought here from a cell, wasn’t allowed to leave.

“Tibs,” Cross called, pausing in pulling a larger stone out of the ground with a few other workers, and wiping sweat from her brow. “Lowering yourself to our level and offering to help?”

“Don’t make me larger than I am,” he replied flatly. He didn’t care that she was making a joke, he didn’t like being made into something he wasn’t.

She looked at him with an odd expression. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He motioned to her leather armor, with the metal weights attached to it. “Wouldn’t it be easier to work without all that?”

“That’s the point,” she replied. She kept watching him for a few seconds, then went back to the stone. Around them, the others leveled an area large enough for a house. None of the area facing the dungeon was flat, even if this wasn’t as bad as where it turned into the hill going up to the town.

“Have you asked Runners to help?” Tibs asked. “This would be easier with Earth essence.”

“They’ve done enough making sure we lived,” a woman said, her accent thick, and smiling at him. “They deserve a rest before getting back to this.” She motioned to the door with the old shovel in her hands.

“We aren’t asking heroes to work like this,” a man said, using a spear to stab around a stone.

“We aren’t heroes,” Tibs said, and got amused looks in return. “You did as much as us,” he told Cross, “so why are you letting the guild force you to work here?”

“The guild’s not making us do this,” an overweight man said, his clothing sticking to him from the sweat. “This is where my new shop will be.”

“Mine’s going to be next to it,” a woman said, covered in dirt. She pointed to the other half of the area being cleared.

“We’re helping,” another said, “because what’s going to happen if all we do is rely on the guild?”

“Nothing,” a handful of the workers replied.

“Then more reasons Runners should help you,” Tibs said. “Your shops help us as much as anyone else in the town.”

The overweight man grinned. “The coins you’ll spend at our shops will be help enough.”

Tibs nodded. He’d offered, and they’d refused. What else could he do?

“Why are you doing work then, Cross? You aren’t going to benefit from the shops the way the merchants will.”

She motioned to them. “They’re paying me to stand guard.”

“What you’re doing doesn’t look like standing guard to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Look around. What’s going to tempt a thief? It’s boring, just standing and watching. And what I did during the attacks is nothing like what you Runners did. I didn’t take on dozens of thugs, like a certain fighter we both know. Or, if the stories are to be believed, how you did.”

“That the groups you took down were smaller doesn’t diminish the help you gave,” Tibs countered. “And without an element, what you did is more impressive than anything one of us did.”

She shrugged. “And what’s bringing you to this part of the land? If you’re hoping to convince them to let you in, you’re not going to have much luck.” She nodded to the guards on each side of the open door at the top of the steps. “I think they’re overcompensating for standing around not doing anything while you went and saved everyone.”

“That’s not what I did,” Tibs stated, to which she smirked. “I’m walking around seeing the state of everything after spending the morning going over the state of our people with Quigly.” He motioned to workers at the top of the hill. “I noticed them and went to see what they were doing, then noticed you down here.”

“What is the state of the Runners?” Cross asked, and a few of the workers paused to listen.

“There’s barely five and zero of us left. Half of that I need to convince to help protect Merchant Row if I don’t want to exhaust the Runners doing the patrols there.”

“We’ll help,” a young woman offered. She was muscular and had been swinging a pick at a larger boulder. She’d be at it for some time. The rock extended deep under the ground.

“It’s okay. You’ve been through enough. We’ll handle it.”

“Are you okay?” Cross asked him, that odd look back.

“I’m fine.”

“Tibs,” Sto said, while Cross looked like she was debating something, “can we talk?”

She shrugged. “I’d better get back to work. I can’t just stand around and set a bad example.”

Tibs nodded and walked away from them and to the cliffside.

“What’s going on?” Sto asked. “My door’s open, but no one’s coming in.”

Tibs waited until he reached the stone wall. “The guild’s not letting us do runs yet.”

“Until when? It was fun listening to the people I protected, but that was a while ago.”

Tibs sat and watched the workers. “It was only a few days ago.”

“Still too long,” Sto said dismissively, “and I… Tibs, are you okay? You seem, I don’t know, different.”

“Carina died.” He tightened his hold on the ice to prevent it from cracking. “Sebastian killed her before me.”

“Oh, Tibs. I’m so sorry. I know how close you were to her and—”

“It’s okay,” he said, fighting the straining ice. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, alright then. Do you know when you’ll be doing a run again? Or anyone else. I’m bored and… wait. No. You don’t just sit there being fine when someone dies. You hurt and you miss them. What’s going on Tibs?”

“Nothing.” The ice cracked, and he pushed against the reminder of the pain harder.

“Ganny! Something’s wrong with Tibs!”

“Tibs?” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Carina died,” Sto said, and Tibs closed his eyes to focus on the ice and the heat building under it.

“Oh, Tibs. I am so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Okay, there’s something wrong with him.”

“Oh, good,” Sto said with relief. “I was worried I’d been wrong.”

“You called me over, Sto.”

“Yeah, but how often do I get stuff wrong about them? You’re the one who gets them. It’s why I called you. I was pretty sure there was something wrong with him, but now I know, so we can fix it.” Silence. “How do we fix this?”

“What wrong, Tibs?” Ganny asked, her tone soft and sounding closer. Was the ground under him riddled with tunnels they could move through, now that Sto’s influence extended past the mountain?

“She died,” he said, not intending to, and cracks appeared in the ice.

“Did you make Sebastian pay?” Sto asked. “What? Don’t look at me like that. You heard the things said when he didn’t know I could hear him. Tibs doesn’t just sit down and miss someone who dies.”

"I did." His smile cracked the ice more than the pain, and if not for how quickly one could switch to the other, he'd let some of the control go. He wanted to enjoy how he'd felt, shattering that man piece by piece. "I broke him until there was nothing left of him."

"Why aren't you angry, Tibs?" Ganny asked.

He swallowed, and heat slipped through the cracks. "It hurt too much." He tried to push it down, fill them with water. "If I get angry, I'll want to burn everything down. When I'm angry, I hate everyone for letting Carina die, even those who had nothing to do with it."

"And if you did that," she said, "the guild would know you have more than one element."

He frowned, and working out what was wrong with her statement tempered the heat slightly. "Yes, but I'd have hurt people who don't deserve it." Sto said she understood people more than he did, but this showed she didn't understand them completely. There was only so much either could learn from listening in on Runners.

"Of course. I'm sorry." She was quiet. "Isn't there a place you can be angry and not hurt anyone?"

"If I get angry, I'm going to channel fire and I'm going to let it eat everything. Ice is safer for everyone. It's easier to deal with everything then."

"But is it safe for you?" she asked.

The look Kroseph gave him when Tibs told him he was fine. How Quigly had looked at him this morning, whenever they weren't addressing the schedule directly. Or how Cross had, only minutes ago.

Even those who didn't understand how he was doing it didn't like what he was doing.

"It doesn't matter." The heat was buried under the ice again, and he no longer cared about the consequences. Not that neither Ganny nor Sto could do anything to—

"Would it help if you could be angry somewhere no one would get hurt?" she asked.

"What are you doing, Ganny?" Sto asked.

Tibs chuckled at the idea anything could be safe while he channeled fire. Then clamped down, as cracks spread again through the ice.

"Remember what Robert said when he was talking about his father? All that anger he kept bottled up?"

"That was a while back, Ganny. He is the one who was eaten by the rats when I added them to the second floor boss room? Yeah, that's him. He was talking about that with the rogue."

"He said it killed his father. He had so much of it that it was like thorns growing in his chest until he died."

"But that wasn't real, was it?" Sto asked. "It's that thing you told me about. A figure of speech."

"Yes, but his father still died from being so angry all the time. Do you want that to happen to Tibs?"

"Of course not. But when you say 'somewhere no one will get hurt', I know you mean me, and that does hurt. I'm not saying I won't do it," he said in a tone that made Tibs think that if Sto had eyes, they'd be rolling. "Just reminding you it's my body you're offering for him to burn."

"Just part of it," she replied.

"No. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I can deal with it, Tibs," Sto said. "And if it's going to help—"

"I said no." Tibs stood. "I'm not hurting anyone. It'll pass. I got used to mama not being there anymore. I'll get used to Carina's absence, too."

"Who's Mama?" Sto asked.

"Tibs," Ganny said gently. "If doing this can kill you, aren't you hurting yourself?"

He shrugged. If he was, at least he was hurting someone who deserved it.