

Chapter 06

Tibs froze as he stepped into the office.

The summons to Harry's office—now he knew why the guard as referred to the man as commander, instead of by his name—had been expected.

While Tibs didn't have many Runners to patrol Merchant Row, he ensured the patrols happened, which had led to altercations with the guards assigned there and those rogues ending up in the cells. Tibs hadn't sought Harry to get them released, since there were no runs to be missed, and the stays in the cell were only a few days long, but he had expected the guard leader to summon him about it.

Except that it wasn't Harry sitting behind the desk. The man with the hard metal gray eyes fixed on Tibs looked older. Black hair, tied in a tail, streaked with gray and a short beard, also black and gray. His leather uniform had metal strips attached, which Tibs thought were more there as something to use with his essence, than to add protection.

The concentration of essence made the man weaker than Harry, but still in the range of Gamma adventurers.

"Where's Harry?" If not for the ice, Tibs would have demanded, or accused. Instead, he was simply annoyed the guard leader had delegated the delivery of the ultimatum to a subordinate. For all the problems they had, Tibs still deserved to be yelled at by the leader of the guards himself.

The silence stretched, the man unmoving. If he thought he could out-wait Tibs, he was in for a surprise.

"Not here," the man finally said in a flat tone. "He left."

"Left for where?" and when would he be back? Tibs wasn't interested in dealing with

"I don't know. And it's not what should bother you. I'm in charge. And unlike him, I'm not going to humor this little game you're playing at."

"I don't play games."

"You and your friends are playing at being guards. That ends now."

Tibs snorted. "So you can betray us the way Harry and the guild did? You're welcome to what Harry protected. I'm keeping Merchant Row and the surrounding neighborhoods. If Harry didn't tell you what's mine, the guards will know."

"What's yours," the man said, his tone not changing, "is that room you pay for, the table in the inn that you've claimed, and the team you do your runs with. Tirania might indulge you, because she finds you useful, but I don't. You will tell your Runner friends to get off the street and let my patrols do their work. The alternative will be harsher than a day or two in the cells."

"Like what?" Tibs smirked. "Feed us to the dungeon? Leave us to fend for ourselves the next time someone tries to destroy my town? We survived Sebastian. There's nothing you can scare us with."

"My job isn't to scare you. My job is maintaining order. You're interfering with that."

"I'm a rogue. Braking rules is what I do."

"Breaking the rules comes with consequences."

Tibs shrugged. "Have fun catching me doing it."

The man raised an eyebrow, and Tibs sensed the essence that opened the door behind him. "I've already caught you. Take him to a cell."

"Sir?" the guard standing on the other side asked, surprised. She didn't have an element. "They're full, after that last bunch of arrests."

The guard leader smiled coldly. "I'm sure they'll be happy to make space for him. My understanding is they are here for him, after all."

"Sir, Runners are supposed to—" she stopped as the expression was shifted to her and turned colder.

"I'm not my predecessor," the man stated. "He abandoned his post. Left behind Runners who think they get to set the rules and guards who think that's fine. When they break the rules, that are treated like any other criminals. Throw him in a cell."

"Yes, sir!" She placed a hand on Tibs's shoulder and guided him through the building. "I'm sorry about that. After everything you did for us, he shouldn't treat you this way. I'd let you go if it was up to me."

Tibs nodded, still thinking over what the man said. Harry had abandoned his post. Not left, abandoned. What could push Harry to do that? The guild was everything to him.

He was pulled from his thought at the muffled cacophony come from a barred door and the amount of woven essence behind it. He stood at the bottom of stairs he didn't recall walking down.

"The Hero's getting the tour?" one of the two guards by the door asked, amused.

His escort hesitated. "He's getting to share in the accommodations."

Tibs kept his expression neutral. All he sensed from within what had to be the cells was... he had no idea how to define it. There was no definition to what he sensed. He couldn't even tell if there were people in there, even knowing there had to be.

"What?" the other guard asked, pushing himself from the wall he'd been leaning against. "Is this a joke?"

She shook her head.

"Didn't anyone tell him what he did for us?" the first guard asked. "There wouldn't be a town for us to guard is not for Tibs and Don." He shared a confused look with the other. "I get throwing the occasional Runner in when they get uppity, but him?"

"You're welcome to go up and explain that to him," she replied, "but until you convince him to change his mind, Tibs is going in a cell."

"How the fuck does he expect us to clear a cell for him?"

"His orders are to put him in with them."

They looked at Tibs in disbelief. "They are going to rip him apart when we put him in there without his armor or weapons."

"The captain didn't say anything about taking anything away," She said.

"But the rules are that we have to disarm anyone we put in the cell," the guard on the left said.

"But not remove their armor," the one of the right added, smiling. "We've just been doing that because it takes away the one advantage a runner might have over the others." His smile faded as he looked at Tibs. "I'm going to have to take that knife." He hesitated. "And any others you might have secreted on you."

Tibs handed the one at his belt, and the one from within his bracer. If they'd told him to, he would have removed his armor. He wasn't worried about the others in the cells, or whatever the guild had that disrupted essence. He had enough to make sure he was left alone.

The guard secured the knives in one of a series of chests along the wall that had a simple-looking lock. The other unbarred the door.

"Don't bother trying to do the water thing you do," that man said. "The cells have all kinds of enchanting on them to keep anyone in them from using magic."

That could explain why he had trouble sensing inside the cell. "How?"

"How should I know?" the man replied with a chuckle. "Magic. It's got to be that, since it can do anything."

Tibs was tempted to point out all the things it seemed not to be able to do, but the man opened the door and the muffled sounds of before became loud voices speaking over one another, and arguing, laughing.

His escort urged him forward, and the loudness vanished as the prisoners noticed them, then was replaced by hushed conversations.

Men and women dressed in clothing ranging from street to wealthy looked at him as if he was the answer to all their problems. No, as if his corpse was the answer.

The few Runners among them looked concerned. And when Tibs fixed his gaze on a woman he recognized, the hungry expression was replaced with shame as she looked away. He didn't know her name, but she was one of the townsfolk, here, like the others townsfolk in the cells, because she'd caused trouble.

Tibs couldn't make out the weaves on the bars. Like every other one within the walls of the building, they were too dense for him to even clearly sense the essences he could identify. Whatever effect they had didn't stretch on this side of the bars.

"Make space," his escort told the men and women in the cell they stopped before. As far as Tibs could tell, it was the one with the fewest people in it, but only by one or two. When they moved back against the wall, it only left a third of the cell free.

"This is Tibs," she said, watching them. "He saved this town, so you're going to treat him with respect, or we're going to get in there and teach you to respect heroes; is that clear?"

The only ones who looked to take her warning seriously was the woman, and two others who had to be townsfolk and Gwenfire, one of the rogues who'd been arrested. The others looked ready to act the instant the door was closed again.

The lock to the cell was large, and its key matched. His picks would break trying to open it. Not that he intended on breaking out. Tibs was going to show that man he could take whatever punishment he handed him and still go on protecting his town.

His step faltered as he entered the cell, assaulted by essence, and he pushed back against it to keep the ice filling him intact. It was unlike anything he'd sensed before. Sheer violence without organization. This was an example of Alistair's lesson, where quantity was used to overwhelm, and where Tibs's application of precision deflected most of it. The angles he formed on the surface of the ice caught and shifted the assault around, instead of through him.

He opened his eyes as the door closed and tested his limits. He could alter the ice,

so long as he was careful to maintain the angles, but anything he pushed beyond it was ripped away. Trying to use essence from his bracers did nothing, as his method of moving it was over his body. He'd have to work out how to move them from within him later.

One and six people watched him; one and three hungrily. This time, the woman didn't look away, emboldened by greed and the others. Tibs gave a minute shake of the head when Gwenfire opened her mouth. He didn't want her involved in this. The other two townsfolk looked afraid.

These would only a small portion of the people Sebastian's coins had convinced to avenge him.

"I'm not Tibs the Hero," he said flatly. "I'm Tibs the Dungeon Runner. I've been up against the dungeon more times than I can count and survived. If you really think you're deadlier than him, come and try me."

The first was a muscular woman. Two steps and she was close enough to swing at him. He blocked and punched her in the stomach, then groin, chest and finally the face. She fell back with a pained groan. His fist hurt. The Earth he'd reflexively pulled from his bracer to harden his hand hadn't survived to reach it.

He kicked out the knee of the man who attacked next, breaking it. Then Tibs was pushed against the bars and punched in the face.

Tibs let the ice crack slightly and with an angry scream, he kneed the man in the balls, then smashed his elbow in the side of his head. As the man crashed to the floor, Tibs kicked him in the face.

He didn't care that no one in this cell was responsible for Carina, for what his town had suffered, for the pain leaking through the cracks. He needed to lash out, and these people had volunteered.

More hits made it through his defenses than he stopped, but after so many runs, so many fights against Sebastian's thugs, even without essence to lessen it, physical pain was something he was used to, and now, it had to overwhelm his emotional pain before it bothered him. His grunts each time he was hit barely registered above the pained scream of those he hit back, and that was buried under the cacophony of the people in the other cells, calling for his death, for him not to give in, for them to stop hurting him. Tibs made out bets being exchanged.

He didn't care.

All he wanted for the moment was the little revenge he could get.

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"Please," she pleaded, arms up to protect her face. "I'm sorry."

Tibs had her against the back wall. She was the last of the attackers left in his cell, and Tibs vaguely put together she hadn't actually done more than look at him hungrily. He reformed the ice. She'd actually stepped back when Tibs reached for her, raised her hand in surrender. She hadn't wanted to hurt him. Tibs had been the one needing to hurt anyone, and her momentary lapse in judgment had been excuse enough for him.

He let her go, and she scurried to the other two townsfolk, who edged away from her. Again, he shook his head when Gwenfire opened her mouth. He still didn't want to interact with anyone other than to hurt them. The groaning from the people littering the floor of his cell was the only sounds, as the people in the other cells watch in anger, fear, dismay and

satisfaction.

Tibs smiled as he dropped onto the bench and leaned against the wall. Maybe Jackal had a point about the pit and how useful hitting people was.

The door opened as conversations restarted, hushed this time, and a guard stopped before his cell. "She did tell them to treat you with respect." He chuckled. "Do you need anything?"

"Ale would be good," Tibs replied. He looked at his hands. "A cloth to clean the blood off. I'd use water, but..." he motioned around him.

"I'll see what I can do." His expression darkened as he looked over the people on the floor. "How badly did you hurt them?"

"I used my fist, feet, and any part of my body that would connect." Tibs shrugged. "They're alive, but a cleric should look them over."

"I don't think they can afford to pay for one." He considered something. "Don't worry about any of them claiming you started this. I'm sure everyone who saw this will say you only defended yourself." He raised his voice. "Isn't that right? Or should I move Tibs to your cell?"

The agreements from the other cells were loud and hurried.

"I'll bring you a tankard and some old cloths," the guard said before returning to the door.

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Tibs opened his eyes when door opened. His cellmates were conscious again, and giving him as much space as they could. He'd reassured Gwenfire that his presence here meant nothing regarding protecting the Row and the town. He hadn't gone as far as calling it posturing on the part of the new guard leader, because he didn't know him well enough, but Tibs wouldn't let him win.

Again, he considered letting go of Water to suffuse himself with Purity to deal with the aches the fight had left him with, but he reminded himself that even without the risk of losing control of his emotions, the guard has seen the cuts on his face. He'd have no way to explain how they'd gone away.

In the ensuing quiet from the cells, two sets of boots approached. Tirania was the first visible, and with her was the man responsible for his imprisonment. She looked at Tibs, the injured people in the cell, and pursed her lips.

"Why is he in here?"

"It's where criminals belong," the man replied. He looked no happier at what he saw, but he glared at Tibs in response.

She faced him. "Commander Irdian, he isn't a criminal. He is the Savior of the Dungeon. The Hero of the Town. Do you have any idea what it will look like if he isn't among there to go into the dungeon?"

"That anyone who breaks the rules gets punished?" the man replied flatly.

"Not everyone is the—"

"I enforce the rules," The man cut her off, and Tibs stared. Even Harry had never done that to her. "I was put here because the man you'd picked to maintain order did a piss-poor job of it, and then vanished. He cut them the slack you wanted him to, and look at what that left behind. I'm not having that happen on my watch. So no, I will not make an exception for

your pet. If you aren't happy about it, you know the procedures to have me replaced. See if you can get him to agree with you."

"I am in charge of this dungeon," Tirania replied in a much calmer tone than Tibs thought the disrespect deserved. "He placed me here because he trusts me to—"

"And does he know what's been happening?" he demanded. "The way it's been told to me, you hadn't informed him Harry was gone by the time I had to be assigned here. So maybe you need to stop telling me he trusts you and do the job he put you here to do."

Now Tirania glared at the man.

So this was why he could speak to her like that. He didn't report to her, but to that other man, the one who had also assigned Tirania here. Could he make use of that?

"Tibs is leaving the cell, Commander," she stated. "Now."

"You're overriding my authority?" the man asked, his tone, again, flat.

"In this one case," she answered in a conciliatory tone, "yes."

The man nodded, and a guard stepped forward to unlock the cell in response to his signal. Tibs exited the cell, and turned to follow Tirania as she headed for the door, but the Irdian grabbed his arm.

"Don't think her getting you out means you can do whatever you want. Stop playing your games, or I will throw you back in here."

Tibs locked eyes with the man. "I never play games." He wrenched his arm out of the grip, and joined Tirania, already making plans to ensure his people avoided the guard's patrols.