

Chapter 13

“You have suffered the kind of loss few people can imagine,” Irdian told the large crowd of boys and girls.

Tibs had stood by the platform watching a dozen groups appear and be escorted along Dungeon Way. Not one was older than Jackal when they’d first met. He’d followed along the last group to appear, and now stood at the back, watching and listening. This had to be close to what it had looked like on the day he’d listen to his version of the welcome speech, other than there hadn’t been any buildings or tents here.

“You have lost not only your homes, but your hearts. You had nothing to do with the conflicts those in power created; even your parents had nothing to do with it. It didn’t keep those in power from pulling them into the fighting, leaving you alone. Leaving you hollow. Leaving you afraid of what is to come.”

The commander’s voice carried all the way to where Tibs stood, the essence bouncing off metal sheets suspended on wooden posts throughout the crowd. Tibs had seen the work that went into setting them up, but hadn’t understood what they were for until moment before Irdian spoke. His voice sounded as if it came from the closest sheet. Clear enough Tibs heard the sorrow in the words.

He wished he was close enough to see if the words had light on them as they left the man’s mouth.

“I wish I could tell you that your burden is going to ease. I wish I could tell you that here, you’ll be able to put your worries for your future aside and be children again. I can’t.” Whimpers sounded in the silence. “You haven’t been taken from hardship to be delivered into peace and quiet. I’m sorry. This world you find yourself in is one that will take its toll, and possibly your life. I can’t be gentle in telling you about this. Gentleness isn’t something that will serve you going forward, and to have you believe otherwise would do you a disservice. Those of you who survive will be molded into adventurers. Not many of you will survive. I’m sorry. But those of you who do will gain power. You will be able to avenge the needless death of your parents and other loved ones. Become strong enough, and the guild may let you topple the king responsible for the events that led to their deaths.”

Tibs glanced at Jackal, Mez, Khumdar and Don, as well as the other Runner who had gathered to listen. They all showed the anger at the lie the ice kept Tibs from feeling. Tibs didn’t need Light to know this was a lie. The guild didn’t care about kings and nobles stepping on poor folks. If they did, the guild would step in and prevent it from happening. They would have kept Sebastian from causing so much destruction. They wouldn’t have added to that while they kept themselves safe.

The guild only cared about power when it served its purpose and, looking at the assembled urchins, war was also something that served the guild’s purpose.

“But you will not simply be thrown into death’s path without preparation. That is not the guild’s way. You will be tested. You will discoverer where the strengths are, and you will be trained in them.”

Runners snorted in disbelief as Irdian motioned. Tibs wondered if this was another lie, or if this group would be better prepared for their first run than his had been.

“It’s fucking unfair,” a Runner muttered and other agreed.

“You will have accommodations,” the commander said once the sweeping motion was done. “Tents to start with. But as your caretakers arrive and their houses are rebuilt, they will take you to them.”

“Caretakers?” someone muttered. “Why didn’t we get that? What’s so special about these ones?”

“Don’t wish misery on others just because we had to suffer,” Quigly said. “They have suffered enough.”

“I warn you against getting attached,” Irdian continued. “Attachments are not something that will help you anymore. Friends only lead to pain when they die before you. When you have to separate because the mission the guild sends you on is with another team.”

He looked the crowd over. “I have been where you are. What I am warning you about is what I experienced, because no one warned me. Caring leads to pain. Caring leads to death, and only if you are lucky will that death be yours.” The pause stretched. “Many times, it is those you care about who die.”

The ice cracked and Tibs swallowed the pain; the anger at that man reminding him of Carina’s death. Had he looked at Tibs as he said that? Was this Irdian’s way of pointing out how Tibs had failed?

He filled the cracks, hardened the ice. What Irdian tried to do didn’t matter. He wouldn’t shake Tibs’s resolve.

“Trainers will come and take you to be tested. Do not fight them. Their methods will be harsh, but they serve to ensure some of you can survive what is to come. You are no longer children, you are Runners. One day, some of you will be adventurers. It is a hard path, but a rewarding one. This will sound hollow; it did when I heard these words. Embrace the path, for it will make you strong. It will give you purpose, and it may give you life.”

“What a load of bullshit,” another Runner said.

New cracks appeared in the ice, and instead of anger, hope bubbled through them. Hope that maybe this group would be spared being thrown into the dungeon unprepared, have the tools needed to survive. That this was what the guild intended new Runners to start like, and not how Tirania had forced them to suffer. Was it possible some good could come from what the guild did?

“I’ve got a silver that says not even half of them come back from their first run,” someone offered as Tibs filled those cracks. There was no hope to be had here.

“I’ve got one that said not a quarter will—”

“No,” Jackal stated.

The guild didn’t offer hope. It offered nothing anyone should want.

“We aren’t putting coins on who’ll survive or won’t,” the fighter continued. “They aren’t here for our amusement.”

“I’m just—”

“I said no.” Jackal glared at her.

The guild offered only misery wrapped in broken promise.

“Did he tell the truth?” Quigly asked, and Tibs turn to point out it wasn’t something he could know, but the warrior was speaking to a woman whose eyes glowed.

“I don’t know,” she answered nervously. “I’m not good at telling when someone lies,

and my trainer—” her voice hitched “—he’s gone. I don’t know if anyone else is going to help me now. We’re just too far for me to tell anything.”

Her trainer was gone. Had it been Harry? Tibs hadn’t known the old guard leader had trained anyone. If he had, he could have gotten her to ask question on his behalf. So long as Tibs worded it in a way she’d believed it would benefit her, Harry wouldn’t have picked up on the fact it would also help Tibs.

“Jackal’s right,” Tibs told the Runners, as older men and women walked through the crowd. “We aren’t here to bet on who will live.” They looked enough like the teachers Tibs had dealt with while Omega he was sure whatever hope had bubbled up would have died now. “We’re going to make sure as many of them do.” He motioned as the teachers made small groups of children and led them through the tents. “Do you trust them to have Omega’s best interest in mind?” none of the children protested. It reminded Tibs of the time he’d watched a herd master leading his herd through the streets until they’d entered the slaughterhouse.

“If it serves the guild, sure,” a woman said. Fighter, Tibs thought.

“And what served the guild more? Having as many of them survive to gain the strength to stand up to them?” Tibs asked. How many would he need at his back when he took on the guild? How strong would he need them to be? How much of a distraction would he need them to cause so he could make it to the one responsible?

“We can’t save all of them.” Quigly stated, and the ice cracked.

Tibs glared at the warrior. “We can’t leave them to die!”

“There are thousands here, Tibs. There’s only forty-three of us. We can’t help all of them, let alone equip every team. How are we going to pay for all the armors and weapons, the repairs they’ll need? Even if the merchants continue to take your protection, paying for all that would ruin them.”

“I don’t have to like it,” Tibs mumbled, fighting to fill the cracks.

“I hate it,” Quigly replied. “These aren’t my fault, but I’m responsible for war urchins existing. If I’d known they my actions would cause that, I’d…” He trailed off, watching children being led away.

“We have to help them,” Tibs said, the ice intact again. “We can’t help all of them, but we still have to help. We know not to trust anything the guild offers. I want us to be there when they learn the same. To be there to show them someone cares about them. We’re not going to mock them. We aren’t going to put coins on who lives or dies. We will help them. Even if all it means is helping them carry the dead’s equipment, so they get the coppers the guild owes them.”

“You want us to what?” a thin Runner asked in disbelief. “Hang at the bottom of the steps all day long?”

The guy next to him stared. “What would you have done for someone to hug you that first time you came out of the dungeon?”

“I’d have stabbed anyone who touched me.”

Tibs looked at them. So many wore hard expressions. Too many of them wanted these urchins to suffer the way they had, and he didn’t know how to convince them that their own suffering didn’t make it right for others to suffer.

The ice cracked again.

Abyss, what wouldn’t he have given for someone’s comfort after Mama was taken

from him.

“Tibs,” a woman said behind him, and he stiffened, hurrying to fill the cracks. The Runners looked at her in annoyance.

He turned. “Lady Amelia,” he greeted her coolly. She’d done too much for the town, for the townsfolk, for his Runners, to be outright disrespected, but she was still a noble. Eight others stood with her. Two of them Tibs recognizes as her siblings. The others he’d seen about the town and done his best to ignore.

“If you’ll allow us to help.”

Runners snorted, and one asked derisively, “You’ll give us all the coins we’ll need?”

“We aren’t taking your coins,” Tibs stated. He reminded himself she’d done runs. Had lost teammates in them, a brother once, if he remembered. If any noble deserved to be thought of as a Runner, it was her. She was decent to everyone she met, seemed to actually care about the people of Kragle Rock.

But nobles bought people with their coins, and try as he might, she was a noble.

“If the clerics don’t return,” she offered, “we can see to it those who wait have bandages to tend the wounds of the surviving Runners. Ale to settle their nerves.”

“I’ll take that,” someone jeered.

“Shut up,” Jackal ordered.

“I thought the clerics were back,” someone said. “I saw a few earlier. Why wouldn’t they heal the Omegas?”

“Where were they when we were Omegas?” another asked.

“They were healing us when I went in,” a young woman said and was glared at by the few remaining older Runners.

“I don’t know what the guild intends,” Amelia said. “For all the words sounded true to me, there is a tradition of harshness beyond the necessary for the Omegas.”

“Let me guess,” someone mocked, “you went around trying to get into all the other dungeons, but they wouldn’t have your soft ass and had to settle for poor little—”

“I did not settle,” she replied with the first hint of harshness in her tone. “I have money. I could have paid any of the guild’s fees, no matter how exorbitant they are. I chose to come here. I did not want a dungeon where all I would do was go in until my goals were achieved. I wanted a place where my presence would matter. Where I could help.” She paused the length of a few breaths. “I did not know so many of you would have been victims of those who tarnish the title of noble.”

“You’ve helped—” he stopped himself. And filled the forming cracks. Enough? Did he really think there was such a thing as someone helping enough when they asked for nothing in return?

Hadn’t asked yet, escaped a crack. Nobles always demanded payment, eventually. They were master of the long game.

The nobles from his Streets were; from other streets, by the way so many hated them. But Mez had told him that in his kingdom, to be noble was a mark of honor and responsibility. Something people sought to achieve, instead of abusing.

She had helped before. She was offering to help now. Mez showed there were some who wanted the title to mean something better, and Amelia acted in a similar way.

“I accept your help.”

The grumbling behind him was loud.

She inclined her head. "Thank you."

"I thought you were better than lick a noble's cu—" They were silenced with the sound of a punch.

"Do you know anything about the caretakers Irdian mentioned?" Tibs asked, ignoring Jackal's low voice as he explained what he'd do if they insulted Tibs again.

She shook her head. "There are groups who help those orphaned by wars, but that isn't the sense I got from how he spoke."

So maybe it had been a lie. A promise to keep the urchins docile. Tibs had no idea how he could...

Actually, he knew exactly how to find out.