

Planning-12

“Ah Tibs!” Darran greeted him jovially, only to turn serious. “What happened?”

Tibs eyes the cuts in his shirt, and the blood that had soaked the sleeve where the knife had sliced his arm open. “I’m fine.” That had been the first attack, the only one his would be assassin got in. She’d probably thought the poison would be enough to end Tibs, but corruption in it hadn’t done its work. The other cuts had been pieces of his shirt he’d had to sacrifice to get close enough to end her.

He didn’t use essence, since killing with them might leave something behind a skilled adventurer could use to guide them to the culprit. Tibs could sense the water essence his sword left after he cut an opponent, and he could absorb that. But what else could be used to find where an attack using essence originated? Bards were full of song about adventurers doing impossible things. Maybe that was one of them. Tibs didn’t know, and he couldn’t take the chance.

With the increase in thugs, troublemakers, and would be killers coming to Kragle Rock to claim his head, and the bounty Sebastian has set on him post-death, or the lower one from destroying the town, there were plenty of skirmishes that left bodies. Hers would be one of those.

“You are bleeding,” Darran stated, stepping around his counter. “Why aren’t you wearing your armor?”

“It’s Kragle Rock. I don’t need to wear my armor in town.” He also didn’t wear it when visiting Darran. The merchant had sold him the original, and the man was attentive to details, as any successful thief should be. Tibs didn’t want to risk him realizing his armor was now one Sto had given him, and that it repaired itself. Darran might not think much of it, since the dungeon handed out loot for every run, but the guild was supposed to claim anything enchanted, and then the Runners had to buy it back from them. How many coins would it take for the type of armor Tibs had?

If Darran noticed anything, it would lead to Tibs having to tell him things that could put his life in danger. He did trust Darran, to a point, but the man was a thief, and possibly worse, he was a merchant.

“Well, let me look at it. I can’t have my favorite customer die because the wound got infected.”

Tibs added a layer of ice to the open wound to replace the essence wrap he’d had in place.

He’d used the opportunity the injury presented him with to practice with Purity essence. He’d let the weave heal the cut, but forced it to break up before it was done. It fought him. Even as his essence, once the weave was formed, it wanted to continue with its work until it was all spent. It might be another difference between a weave and etching. If he could get Alistair to teach him about weaves, he’d be able to ask.

It had left his injury looking shallower than it had been, and bleeding only slightly.

Darran studied the cut, not commenting on the blueish skin using ice as a patch caused. It wasn’t the first time the merchant had seen that on one of his injuries. “This isn’t as bad as all that blood made me think. I thought they’d cut deep enough to reach the major blood line.”

“It’s hers.” That was believable enough. He had more of her blood on him, even if the rest was much lighter. He hadn’t thought to use water essence to clean only that blood, and he wasn’t sure he could do it in a way that wouldn’t remove all of it, with would lead to questions of where the blood from the injury had gone to. Since he wanted to keep some level of injuries to avoid anyone aware he was under attack from asking questions, this was something he might need to practice.

“What did you do with her body?” Darran cleaned the cut with a cloth soaked in something astringent that stung when it got in the wound as the ice melted.

“I left it in the alley. Irdian can’t catch all the killers at the platform. The guards find a body every few days. So long as they’re killing one another instead of townsfolk, no one’s going to care.”

“And are they? Killing one another, I mean. Or are some people looking out for you?”

Tibs shrugged. He’d asked Jackal after a guard told him of the bodies, and his friend had shaken his head, disappointed. He hadn’t had to kill anyone after him. Mez had caught one trying to destroy a building and had handed him over to the guards. Tibs expected that if Khumdar stopped one, no one would ever find out what happened to them.

But that left Quigly, as well as the other Runners. Not all of them would kill someone trying to cause problem, but those who might would do the same he had with the body.

Once Darran was done applying an unguent over the cut, he wrapped it. “There. It’ll work until your next run and the cleric heals it.” He wrapped the rest of his healing pack. “Now, what can I help you with today?”

“That knife.” He pointed to an ornate on display.

Darran smiled. “Upgrading your equipment, finally.” He took it. “Come, its sheath is in the back, and it

needs to be treated with care. I'll show you how to use the whetstone on it." Tibs followed the merchant to the back room, then a smaller storeroom. The door was thicker than normal, and the walls doubled, with a material between them that made it harder for those outside to hear any discussion inside. There was no essence in the material, but Tibs had tested it and even pressing his ear to the door, it was difficult to make out anything spoken inside.

The knife was the signal Darran had set for when Tibs wanted a private discussion. Even if there was no one in the shop, the merchant was always aware someone might want to eavesdrop.

"Have the guards been harassing you?"

"It's not their job to harass an honest merchant like me," Darran replied, all smiles as he took a blade from one of the many layers he wore.

"Then about the less than honest ones," Tibs said, sitting on a crate, "who pay for protection, instead of accepting that which the guild offers?"

"Ah, then, harassing is too strong of a word, but yes, a guard has come around to all of us and explained how having anyone force us to pay protection is a crime and that it is in our interest to report them to the guards immediately."

"And have they?"

"I don't believe you'd be walking about if any of us had."

"I was sent to a cell."

The merchant nodded. "That wasn't because any of us talked. They came around with the warning after you were arrested. I expect that was the new head of the guard making a point."

"And do any of them want to end the arrangement?"

"Are you in a position to continue offering it? You lost a lot of runners fighting Sebastian."

"I've been able to keep the patrols going. So long as there isn't an assault on Merchant Row, we can deal with it. Once the new Runners are here, I'll find more to increase our numbers if Merchant Row wants us to."

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."

The merchant shook his head. "It's because you're a decent person. To be a good merchant, you have to be willing to seize any opportunity to increase how many coins you get, and that will often mean taking advantage of someone in a less fortunate situation." He handed Tibs the sheathed knife. "That'll be three silver."

Tibs looked at what Darran offered him. "For those coins, I'm going to take the one you had on display. I doubt that's worth three coppers."

"Tibs, you hurt me. The one on the shelf is among the best I have, easily worth three times what this one is worth. I couldn't—"

"So it's sharpened then? That's all that's needed to make it better than the rest, isn't it?"

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

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

"That's more on you than them. How about you give me a silver and six copper and call it fair?"

"How about I call the guards and call it thievery? Anything more than ten copper's going to be that."

"You haven't even looked at the work that went into the leather wrapping the pommel. That alone is worth the three copper above a silver I ask for."

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

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

"I'm a rogue," Tibs replied, taking it and pulling it out of the sheath. "The edge needs to be ground and sharpened."

"What do you expect, for a silver?"

"Something like this." He sheathed it and put it to his belt. "The agreement?"

"None of my associates have said anything either way. I expect that they might not be aware you're still offering it."

"I'd be expecting payments in ten days."

Darran nodded. "I'll discuss it 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 aren't charging us anything," Darran said.

Tibs nodded. "And you like saying that you get what you pay for." He tapped the cheap knife he'd bought, and the merchant smiled.

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Tibs stood away from the transportation platform, watching the group appear. The first arrival had sent a ripple through the town, and now the Runners and what seemed like most of the townsfolk watched as another group was led down the steps and on their way to the gathering clearing.

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

"Maybe the cells they were taken from are in the habit of beating them daily," another answered in a serious, if disbelieving tone.

"Those aren't guards," Quigly stated. "They're soldiers."

The group had to be three and zero in numbers of young boys and girls escorted by the soldiers. Maybe half of that carried someone in their arms. If those were sent into the dungeon, Tibs wouldn't be the youngest to go in anymore, not by a great many years. He was reminded of one of the reasons Bardik had told him for why he'd tried to kill Sto. So the guild wouldn't be able to throw babies in to feed it. Could he talk Sto into going easier on them? It's rather no longer be the youngest to survive his runs, than know they'd all died.

He didn't think any of them were Street, even those in nothing more than rags and dirt. They had the beaten down sense to them the Street instilled in all who lived there, but Tibs saw nothing of the spark of defiance that was needed to survive it. The boys and girls he watched walk by had all given up. They had no fight left in them.

What kind of cell did that to someone? And babes? How could babies deserve to be in a cell? Bardik had talked of those coming of relationships nobles had with lower classes as enough to entitle one to a stay in a cell with their mother. But where were the mothers?

"Those aren't criminals," Quigly said with enough sadness, Tibs looked at him. "They're war urchins."