

Chapter 52

“Absolutely not!” Learbel exclaimed. He was one of the survivors of Sto’s ‘rampage’ which Tibs knew mostly by sight. “I’m not putting my team at risk for a bunch of merchants.”

Tibs had gathered as many of the team leaders as he could into an unused building by the bazaar grounds. It was used to store the caravan’s goods when they were here, and unused the rest of the time, as far as Tibs could tell.

The two dozen or so Runners were mostly from before Sto reopened, with only three from after, and Tibs counted eight nobles, which confused him since he hadn’t invited any of them. Mez’s noble friend was among them, so Tibs figured the archer had told her and she’d told the others and they had come to... He didn’t know why they were here.

“I’m with Lear,” Johanson said, sitting on an empty crate. She was an older leader, not from the original group, but she’d been a Runner longer than almost anyone else here other than Tibs. “Getting in the middle of what’s going on is a bad idea. I get that you want to help, Tibs. I don’t get why you think the rest of us should make an enemy of the people who are going to run the place.”

“The guild runs the town,” Tibs said, and she smirked.

Fine, so they didn’t actually run anything, other than the guards, and barely that right now. They had still set up the town and owned the land, which Darran said meant something, not that Tibs understood it.

“Aren’t our lives hard enough already?” a girl asked softly. She was one from after Sto had reopened. Tibs didn’t know her either. The times he’d seen her, she kept to the walls, looking like she was afraid anyone would pay attention to her. “We might be dead on the next run, shouldn’t we just focus on surviving that?”

She blushed as the others looked at her, and Tibs wondered how she became a team leader.

Instead of someone coming to her aid, she got Rorgar, who snorted. “Why don’t you go back to your room and let the adults handle this?”

She glared at the fighter and momentarily looked older. Tibs realized that under the shy woman was a fierce core. Rorgar glared at the people snickering down while the nobles simply watched. Tibs couldn’t read their intentions and that worried him more than the derision directed at either the shy woman or Rorgar.

The fighter nodded to Tibs. “I’m in. Been around enough rackets like this to know merchants’ trouble always ends up affecting the small people like us. We need them to buy the stuff the dungeon gives us. Unless you think the guild’s going to pay us favorably for anything they aren’t already forcing us to hand over for a penance?”

That was one team, hopefully not the la—

“Me and my team are in.”

Tibs stared at Don as the crowd moved away from him. He had invited him, because not doing that would have been a dungeon’s worth of trouble, but he hadn’t expected the sorcerer to show up.

“What? You think you’re the only one here who wants this place to survive and not become some criminal’s playground?” he looked around. “He isn’t the only one who’s been trying to fix this quietly, just the one making sure everyone knows he’s doing it.”

Tibs kept his disbelief to himself, unlike some of the others. So he had two teams, maybe. Don would try to take over, make this about him, and Tibs would have to figure out how much of that trouble his help was worth.

“I,” one of the older Runner said, looking the room over, “could be convinced to help.” She was on the most recent recruits, and a rogue, since she ran the dungeon, but Tibs had trouble not thinking of her simply as a thief.

“I don’t have coins to pay you,” Tibs said and went back to looking at the others, hoping someone else would be willing to help.

“That’s not what I hear,” she replied, forcing Tibs to come back to her. “Word is, you’re tight with the people in charge of this place, well, those in charge for now. Why don’t you convince them my—our—help’s worth silver, if not gold.”

“Don’t include me in your racket, Embun,” another one said, and Tibs looked around as he realized he, too, was from the recent arrivals. Instead of two dozen people, he was close to three and zero. “He’s looking to end a protection racket, not switch to you running it.”

“What, you don’t want the assholes who got us into this to pay for it?”

“Weren’t you in a cell?” a younger woman said, “like the rest of us? That means you’re here because of your own actions. My understanding is that you older folk were caught doing some really bad stuff, while the rest of us were just trying to survive. Maybe you should just be happy you get a chance to live and actually do something positive with it.”

“If I may,” a tall and thin man said, stepping away from the nobles and stopping Embun’s response. He wore a sorcerer’s robe in bright orange with blue trim that looked too flimsy to survive runs, but it was woven through tightly with essence.

Tibs fought the urge to tell him to get out, to tell that to all the nobles. What did people like them care about merchants who catered to Runners?

He looked the crowd over like a...well a noble. “I understand that what is happening may be somewhat beyond your comprehension. After all, you are criminals, no matter how you came to be so, and how you are now helping society through running the dungeons. This town and this dungeon, along with everyone in them, are an ecosystem. One that corruption, no matter how inevitable it may be, does not help.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Embun said, sneering. “You, talking about corruption being bad when all you nobles do is corrupt everything you touch.”

“I beg to differ,” the sorcerer replied, barely masking his contempt. “I do not go around robbing law-abiding citizenry. I have chosen to be here. I have chosen to put my life at risk for the good of society.”

“Oh sure,” Freya said, yawning. “You’re such a credit to nobles everywhere. Must get exhausting patting yourself on the back like that, or do you get your noble buddies to do it for you? Not sure why you expect us to join in, I mean, nobles are the reason I’m in here,

something about me not living up to her expectations.” She shooed him away. “Why don’t you go back to your buddies so you can all be impressed with how you keep helping the lower class.”

The man harrumphed. “What I am looking to impress on your, girl, is that no matter what you think, corruption has no place in the world.”

“That’s a load of shit,” Don said, stepping toward the noble. “Corruption’s an element of the world, not only that, it’s considered one of the core elements. It’s my element. So if you think you can insult it without reprisal, think again. You can ask everyone here. I don’t take kindly to being insulted.”

The noble sighed, pained. “Child, do not presume to—”

Tibs elbowed the man as he got between them. “No, Don.” Tibs glared at the muscular woman who stepped forward. “Don’t even think about it.”

Don lowered his gaze to Tibs, and the hate was bright. “Are you defending that?” he demanded. “Do you have any idea what they are?”

“I’m not defending them,” Tibs replied. “I’m keeping you from making a mistake.”

“I’m not—” Don ground his teeth. “They aren’t going to thank you,” he hissed.

Tibs snorted. “I’m not doing it for them.”

The sorcerer calmed. “Fine. He isn’t worth my time, anyway.” He moved away.

Tibs relaxed. That could have been really bad.

“Thank you, you Light Fingers,” the man said, rubbing his stomach where Tibs’s elbow connected. “I am glad to see one of you—”

“Didn’t you listen?” Tibs rounded on the man. “I didn’t do it for you. Just say what you want so we can get back to the work of keeping the town safe.”

The man narrowed his eyes, which swirled with gray, and Tibs wondered what element he had.

“It’s alright, Balder,” a woman said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “They have lived under the kind of nobles that put us all to shame. While misdirected, their anger is justified. It is good to see you again, Tibs.” Her eyes were fire red. Tibs tried to remember her name; Mez had introduced her once. Amelia, maybe. “Balder’s team, as well as my own, will help.”

Her statement was met with disbelieving laughter.

The man bristled, but she didn’t react.

Tibs reminded himself that Mez vouched for her and that while he hadn’t looked in on what she did recently, he had never found her doing anything against the town or the people in it.

“That’s enough,” he told the room. He really hoped he wasn’t going to regret this. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

The door opened and everyone turned to glare at the new arrival.

Cross stopped and looked them over. “Way to make a girl feel welcome. You know, Tibs, you could have invited me. That way, I wouldn’t have had to find out about this little gathering when I noticed way too many team leaders weren’t in any of their usual taverns.”

“What are you doing here?” a muscular man in a sorcerer’s robe demanded, fire flicking over his hands.

Cross sighed. “What I’m doing here, other than pointing out that if the goal was for this to be a secret meeting, you have failed utterly. I’m surprised there’s no one out there waiting to take you out when you leave, is telling you to put that out before you I make you burn yourself with it.”

“Cross,” Tibs said with a sigh. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m paid by the merchants to watch over their stalls. It’s only a question of time before they’re targeted too, so of course, I’m here to help. I’m hurt you didn’t ask me, though.”

“This is a town problem,” Tibs said, studying her. She had secrets, like everyone, and he believed she wanted to help, even if he didn’t have the sense of truth he sometimes did.

“And I’m in town, so I’ll help. And I can make part of this easier since I have a working relationship with a lot of the merchants already.”

Embun snorted. “And what happens when someone pays you more than the merchants? Like the guy causing the troubles. You sell-swords are like that, right, working for whoever has the most money?”

“Girl,” Cross said with a sigh, “you do not want to get into this with me.”

Tibs moved between them as Embun dropped from the crate she sat on. “Enough.”

“Move it, Kid,” she said, “before I move you.”

“Touch him,” a man said before Tibs could warn her off, “and I will rip that handoff.” Quigly stepped out from the others.

Tibs was getting tired of being surprised by who was showing up.

“What are you doing here, Quig?” Embun asked. “It’s for team leaders.”

“It’s for anyone willing with the guts to help,” The fighter replied. “And helping people is how I ended up here, so I’m not going to stop.”

“That’s not what I hear,” she replied. “Butcher of Arrow Pass.”

For a second Tibs thought he’d have a fight on his hand, but Quigly simply smiled.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.” He looked around. “Look, none of us asked to be here and I don’t know what your situation was like, but this is an improvement over the hole in the ground I was shoved in. No matter if you deserved to be there or not, this is a chance at a better life. In case you missed that speech when we got here. When we get good enough, we will be allowed some level of freedom. We need the dungeon for that, we need the town and the merchants. Like the noble said, this all works together and we want it to work well so we can do our runs and gain our freedom.”

The following silence felt stunned, then broke into pockets of discussion.

“Who’s the hunk?” Cross asked Tibs, forcing him to look away from Quigly and trying to figure out what that Butcher comment had been about. She was pointing at him. “You know if he’s taken?”

“I don’t. And if you’re going to make him your special guy, keep that away from me.”

“A guy doesn’t have to be that special for me to be interested in,” she replied, looking the fighter over appreciatively. “Just good enough for me to drag him into—”

“I so don’t wanna know,” Tibs growled before walking away from her. What was with people and talking about what they wanted to do with someone around him?

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“Isn’t this just exchanging one set of problems for another?” the woman demanded, looking Tibs, Cross, and Darran over. She seemed to include the merchant in the ‘set of problems’”

“I don’t see how working with people who benefit from our continued prosperity is a problem,” Darran replied. “Not to mention that I can vouch for Tibs Light Fingers’s intentions. H has been a loyal customer since he started getting enough coins to buy from me.”

“They’re no better than those crooked swindling us,” a man said, his voice rising as he spoke. “Right now they’ll do it for free, but you’ll see. The moment the competition’s gone, they’re going to become the problem.” The man cursed. “I came here to escape that kind of stuff. I was told the adventurer’s guild didn’t stand for this kind of behavior.”

They were in the Long in the Tooth tavern. Old man Walrus had been taken away for his part in Bardik’s attack on the dungeon, but his daughter took it over. Harry had questioned her intensely and said she hadn’t been involved. She’d also been one of the harder hit by the sabotage.

“You believed that?” a man said. One of the two tailors who was still doing okay. “The guild’s always only looked after its own interests and nothing else. What I want to know is how adding more guards will help. From what I hear, the man behind the problems has a vault filled with platinum. He’s just going to pay these...” he looked at Tibs. “Questionable folks and they’ll end up working for him too. It’s not like he’s going to care which criminals he hires for the work. No offense meant, Mister Light Fingers.”

“Oh, he’s taking offense anyway,” Cross said. “He put a lot of work in convincing the others you lot are worth their help, considering all you do is fleece them.”

“Johanna,” a woman said, actively ignoring the tankard before her—she owned one of the other taverns, “do watch your language. You work for us, not them.”

“Actually, I work for them.” Cross motioned around the room, “not you, seeing how you haven’t needed a guard among all of this. Exactly why did you come?” she didn’t wait for a reply. “You hired me to help keep your some of stuff safe. What’s the use of someone’s getting to everything else you own? They’re offering to help. You don’t want it. You’re free to leave.” She looked at the seated tavern owner. “Of course, you leave now, and you won’t be able to report what’s going to be decided here and use that as a bargaining chip to try and lower the protection fee you’re paying.” She looked around. “That is what those of you here already paying are hoping for, right?”

“I don’t care!” Tibs yelled over the erupting protest. A lot of them had taken offense to Cross’s words. They stopped arguing as they shifted their attention to him. “I don’t care if Sebastian Wells knows what we’re doing. He already knows I’ve stopped some of the sabotages.” He ignored the surprised exclamations. “The only way this town gets rid of him is if we all help each other. That means those of you paying him, too.”

“I think saving the dungeon makes you think you can do anything, kid?” the grizzled old leathersmith said. “Do you have any idea what happens to people who get in the way of groups like this?” he sighed. “I’m with Randolph. I came here hoping a small town would be

easier on me than a city, but I should have known better. Mark my words, the only way to survive this is to pay them.”

Lies, Tibs almost yelled, surprised by the certainty of his feeling. He didn't know what part of what the man said was the lie, but there was a big one in there.

“It must have helped that Alan's leather was mysteriously destroyed, right?” Darran said. “It means that until he can get more, you're the only one anyone can go to. You've been making a lot more money, right? How much of that have you been able to keep?”

“I had nothing to do with what happened.” The old man said, and Tibs believed him. “If he'd paid them, they would have left him alone. And you're one to speak, Darran. You thieves do cling together, don't you?” he eyes Tibs.

“Tibs is a rogue,” Darran said. “And why are we, merchants, not clinging together? Are we not one brotherhood the same as those who pickpockets, or cast spells, or arrows? How can we simply stand aside and let this man, this Sebastian Wells, come into our town and demand that we pay him for the privilege of doing our trade? I say that we stand with the Runners and oust him.”

Rolls of the eyes and jeers answered him, and Darran's face turned red with anger. Tibs placed a hand on his arm as he was about to say something and shook his head.

He waited for the room to be quiet. “I didn't ask you here to tell you we wanted to be paid for our help. I'm here to tell you that you are going to be protected. All of you, that you are paying Sebastian or not. This is my town, our town. I'm not letting him take it from me.”

“Kid,” the leathersmith said.

“What's he going to do to me?” Tibs cut him off, “that the dungeon can't do a hundred times worse? I might die anytime I step in him. I don't want to have to worry about that when I'm in my town. I won't. He's already threatening what I care about, so I am going to stop him. If you don't want us to help you, that's fine. You can want that. But I'm still going to do it because my town needs you to survive.”

“Kids,” someone muttered, “always thinking they can do anything.”

“Well,” someone else said, “at least this one's proved he can do something. I say we let him try.”

The merchant began talking among them, even arguing. Some stormed off, others trying to sway those who were agreeing to let Tibs do what he wanted.

In the end, of the six and three merchants who had gathered, more than half gave him their blessing.

Tibs was please with that. The rest could simply complain as he went about keeping them safe from Sebastian. And once the man had been kicked out, Tibs wouldn't even expect thanks from them.