

## Planning-4

Tibs looked at the names on the list. Two and three of them. Those were all the Runners he had to protect Merchant Row. Half of those were still injured, since the guild wouldn't let the clerics heal them until it was time for their run, and they hadn't announced when those would start again. There might be twice that number who had survived Sebastian's Raid.

Could they even have runs with so few Runners?

Only two were archers were on the list. Eight were fighters. He didn't know the exact distribution among those not working for him, but he knew fighters had disproportionately survived.

There was no way all of them could be on teams unless the guild allowed more than one type of runners on them again, as they had in the start. Even then, including what was left of his team, that means they'd have, at most, ten teams plus the nobles. They'd go in twice a week.

That would make Jackal happy, at least.

"Tibs?" Quigly asked. "What do you think?" He was seated opposite, at the table in the inn.

"It's going to be difficult to keep all the business 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. "When we catch those they missed, they're intent on destroying something. They don't seem to care what."

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

"I'll speak with the rest of the Runners. After surviving the raid, they should see how important the security is."

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

"They're Runners," Tibs said. But he 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 then did the bare minimum to survive their next run? Went to the training appointed to them by the guild and then just enjoyed themselves? Acted as if their next run would be their last, instead of making sure they'd survive it.

It surprised him how many with that attitude survived.

A handful of those left had paid to be here, been stuck when the Attendants vanished, and hadn't left the instant they returned. They were among the more serious of the Runners, but Tibs wasn't sure if he should bring them into his group. They were here willingly, so they didn't suffer the guild quite as harshly. They could leave, and all it cost them were the coins they'd paid to be a Runner.

They weren't nobles, so had that going for them, but they weren't street, and Tibs had kept the few interactions he'd had with them outside the raid to offering help with the runs.

"I'll see who I can convince," Tibs finally said, "and we'll do the best we can with that until the guild brings in a new group of convicts more likely to want to work with us in opposing the guild."

Quigly watched him, and Tibs ignored the look. The warrior had been the one wanting Tibs to get back to running things. Now he could accept how he wanted to deal with them.

"Alright, how do you want to divide the patrols?" Quigly asked.

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Tibs watched the workers laying down the paving stones along the path going from the town to the steps leading to Sto's door. People were crowding buildings because of how few of them had survived the raid, and the guild wasted time turning a dirt path into a paved one. Shouldn't they be bringing workers to rebuild houses?

Mez's noble friend, Amelia, had hired workers to rebuild housing, while the rest of the nobles took advantage of the destruction to separate themselves from the town. The wall wasn't started, but only days after Sebastian had been killed, the rubble where it would be had been cleared, which included tearing down some houses that had been untouched by the destruction.

Tibs didn't know who had owned them, if they were alive and left using the coins the noble gave them. Right now, he didn't care. It was just the nobles doing what nobles did; whatever they wanted.

The workers closer to the steps, working on each side of the path, weren't hired by the guild. They didn't have the aprons and leather chaps protecting them from mishandling the old and worn tools they had to work with. These were townsfolk, leveling the ground and building more permanent structures.

He spotted Cross helping and headed there.

The townsfolk cheered on seeing him, slapped his shoulder, thanks him for saving them. He was the Hero of the Town, Killer of the Raider, and other names he didn't care for. He'd wished Don had done his usual games and diverted at least some of the attention away from Tibs, but as had been pointed out, the sorcerer was no where to be found.

If not for the fact that, as someone brought here from a cell, Don wasn't allowed to leave, Tibs would have expected the coward to be first on the platform when the Attendants returned.

"Tibs," Cross called, wiping sweat from her brow, "lowering yourself to our level and offering to help?"

"Don't make me bigger than I am," he replied, his protest flat. He didn't care that she was making a joke or that he hated being made into something he wasn't.

She looked at him oddly. "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, looking at him for a few seconds before returning to her shovel digging with the others, leveling the ground for something that would be the size of a house.

They were at the bottom of the hill that went up to the town, and still some ways from where it sloped up to the dungeon, but nowhere was flat. The workers had leveled the path as they laid the stones. Now the townsfolk were leveling the area to that height.

"Have you asked some of the runners to help? This would be easier with Earth essence."

"They've done enough," a woman said, her accent thick and smiling at him, "making sure we live. They'll be going back in there soon enough. They deserve the rest."

"We aren't asking heroes to work like this," a man said, raking dirt in place.

"We aren't heroes," Tibs replied, and got amused looks in return. "You did as much as us," he told Cross. "So why are they having you work here?"

She snorted. "They aren't having me do anything. I'm getting paid to guard this area. You know that."

Tibs indicated the shovel.

"You have any idea how boring it is standing around when there's nothing to temp the would be thief? And I'm not a Runner, like you, or someone who took on dozens of thugs like a certain fighter we both know. Or how you did, if some stories are to be believed."

"You just took down slightly smaller groups," Tibs countered, "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, I don't think you're going to have much luck." She nodded to the guards standing on each side of the open door at the top of the steps. "I think they're overcompensating for standing around doing nothing while you went and saved everyone."

"I'm just walking around. I spent the morning with Quigly going over schedules for Merchant Row. Until new Runners are brought in, we have to be careful not to over exhaust the patrols."

"We'll help," one of the younger worker said, a muscular girl who had been swinging a pick at a boulder embedded in the ground.

"It's okay, you've been through enough. We'll handle it."

Cross gave Tibs an odd look. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

She looked like she wanted to ask a question, but shrugged. "I'd better get back to work. I can't be seen standing around and being a bad example." She grinned at him and Tibs nodded.

He continued on the paved path.

"Tibs," Sto said once he was a few steps away from the townsfolk. "Finally, you're not busy with them anymore. What is going on? My door's open, but no one's coming in. How long is that going to last?"

Tibs stepped off the path before reaching the steps and walking alongside the slope. "We're still getting over the attacks," he said. "The guild isn't letting us go back yet."

"Is that going to take long? It was fun listening to the people I protected, but that was a while ago."

"Only a few days." He sat and looked at the workers.

"That's still too long, and I... Tibs, are you okay? You seem, I don't know, different."

"Carina died. Sebastian killed her before me." He tightened his hold over the ice to keep it from cracking.

"Oh Tibs. I'm so sorry. I know how close you were to her and—"

"It's okay," he said, the ice fighting him. "I'm fine."

"Oh, all right then. So do you know how long until you're doing a run again. Or anyone else, I'm getting 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?"

The ice cracked at the reminder of the pain that was pushing against it. "Nothing."

"Ganny! Something's wrong with Tibs!"

"Tibs?" She said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm fine."

"Carina died," Sto said.

"Oh Tibs, I am so sorry to hear that."

"It's okay," he said, "I'm fine."

"Okay, there's something wrong with him."

"Oh, good," Sto said. "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. That's why I called you over. I was pretty sure there's something wrong with Tibs, but now I know. So we can fix it." Silence. "How do we fix this?"

"What's wrong, Tibs?" She asked, sounding like she'd moved closer. He wondered if the ground under him was riddled with tunnels now that Sto's influence extended this far. Were they walking among them when their voice sounded closer or further.

"She died," he said, not intending to, and the ice protested.

"Did you make Sebastian pay for it?" Sto asked. "What? Don't look at me like that. You heard the things Tibs 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 easier than the pain. And if not for how quickly one could switch to the other, he'd let some control go. He wanted to enjoy how he'd felt shattering the man piece by piece. "I broke him until there was nothing left of him."

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

"Because it hurts too much. If I let myself be angry, I want to burn everything down. I hate everyone for allowing Carina to die, even those who had nothing to do with it."

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

Tibs frowned. "Yes, but I'd have hurt people who don't deserve to be hurt." Her comment was a reminder that for as much as Ganny knew, she didn't always get people correctly. Neither of them knew much about people, and most of it seemed to be from listening to the Runners.

"Of course, I'm sorry. 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 way Kroseph looked at him each time Tibs said he was fine. The way Quigly had looked at him every time they weren't talking about the schedule this morning, or how Cross had only minutes before to Tibs. They didn't like what he was doing, even those who didn't understand how he did it.

"I don't know." He didn't care enough about the consequences to bother lying. And neither Ganny nor Sto could do anything about it, so—

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

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

Tibs chuckled at the idea anything could be safe if he channeled Fire right now. Then he clamped down on it as cracks spread through the ice.

"You remember what Robert said when he was talking about his father, and all that anger he kept bottled up?"

"That was a while back. He's the one who was eaten by the rats when I added them to the second floor boss room, right? Yeah, I remember that talk he had with the rogue on his team."

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

"That wasn't real, was it? It was that thing you said, a figure of speech."

"Yes, but his father still died from it. Do you want that happening to Tibs?"

"Of course not, but I know that when you say 'somewhere no one will get hurt' you mean in me, and

that does hurt. I'm not saying I won't do it," he replied in a tone that made Tibs think that if Sto had eyes, they were rolling. "Just reminding you that this is my body you're offering for him to burn."

"Just part of it," she said.

"No," Tibs said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

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

"No." Tibs stood. "I'm not going to hurt anyone. It'll pass. I got used to Mama not being there. 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?"

But he, at least, deserved to be hurt.