

Planning-3

“How are you doing?” Zacharia asked from behind them as Tibs and the remnant of his team walked back to the transportation platform.

Jackal stopped and turned. So Tibs did the same, as did Mez and Khumdar.

“And who are you?” the fighter asked, with an edge to his voice.

“I’m Zacharia,” they answered, smiling gently. “I met Tibs when he and Carina visited. I’m glad you found your element, Tibs.”

“They’re Paolo’s special person,” Tibs said. “He was the cleric who healed me in Mountain Sea,” he added at Jackal’s questioning look. “I’m fine,” he told them.

Their smile turned sad. “Tibs, she was special to you, you can—”

“She wasn’t my special girl.” The ice cracked, and he fought the pain that tried to escape.

“She was still special. I could see that. It’s alright to acknowledge you’re in pain.”

“I’m not,” he replied sharply.

“We are dealing with her death as best as we are able to,” Khumdar said.

They smiled at him, frowned and seemed to search the cleric’s face, then shrugged. “Be there for each other, and you will pull through. It is what family is for.”

“We know that,” Mez said. “We don’t need some stranger telling us.”

They nodded. “Of course. I didn’t mean to intrude. If you ever need to talk, Tibs, or any of you, I’m here and always—”

“We won’t be able to come back,” Jackal said. “We’re Runners. They only let us leave if the dungeon’s closed.” He rubbed his left wrist. “This was a special circumstance.”

“Then send word to me, and I will visit your town.”

“We will,” Tibs said and turned to continue with leaving.

“If I may,” Zackaria said, “what is your name?”

Tibs caught Khumdar stiffening out the corner of his eyes and faced Zacharia again.

“It is Khumdar,” the cleric answered.

“Have we met?” they asked, searching his face again. “You seem—”

“No,” the cleric lied, the word bright to Tibs. It wasn’t often the cleric let a lie be visible.

“Alright. Be well then.” They turned and headed back to the others.

Tibs started walking as well, and the others fell in step with him.

“You think he,” Mez hesitated, “she?”

“They,” Tibs said. Zackaria had worn pants this time, along with a loose shirt, but both only search to highlight the combination of their curves and more masculine features.

“That they picked up on Khumdar’s lie?” the archer said. “I don’t have light, like Tibs does, but that ‘no’ sounded as false as anything I’ve ever heard you say.”

“I did not expect they would recognize me,” the cleric said, sounding defensive. “I was much younger the last time they same and less hearty.”

“You realize you just told us you’re from this city, right?” Jackal said.

Khumdar shrugged. “We have been a... family long enough that is one thing you can know about me.”

“That’s real generous of you,” the fighter said, sarcastically, “to grant us this one secret.”

“It is indeed,” the cleric agreed, smiling slightly.

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Kragle Rock appeared around them and the first sounds were that of a commotion. Guards were subduing a group of respectable looking men and women.

“Watch for the pouch,” one of them said, a knee to the back of a woman on the ground. Tibs recognize the sense of the Everburn as the man continued. “The last group had theirs filled with Everburn. I don’t want that stuff spilling out and igniting.”

Quickly, pouches were removed from their belts.

“Looks like your uncle’s finally taking his role seriously,” Mez commented once they were out of Market Place.

“It’s about time,” Jackal replied. “I just wish it hadn’t taken him standing by, watching the town be destroyed to get his head out of his ass and be a man.”

Tibs didn’t care that Harry was finally doing his job. The man had already done too much damage

doing what the guild told him. All around them, the buildings were burned husks. How long would it take to rebuild the houses, the shops that had set up at the edge of Market Place?

Filled with ice as he was, Tibs didn't care that they were people who needed them rebuilt so they could live there, instead of wherever they were at the moment. That merchants were losing their livelihood without a shop to house the wares that had survived Sebastian's attack. But he understood that to survive, the town needed them rebuilt. The town needed more merchants than those on Merchant Row, who had escaped the worse of the damage because the Runners made sure it did.

Merchant Row wouldn't deal with the needs of a growing town. It was what Market Place had done.

Would Kragle Rock even grow anymore? The numbers didn't look good for it. Darran had told him the numbers when Tibs had visited him. Not to check to see how he was doing, he didn't care about that, but to know how the merchants as a whole were managing. With so many of the Runners killed by Sebastian's people, with so much of the town destroyed and the people in it without houses or jobs, it had to affect the merchants.

Darran had gone on about it, giving him numbers, ratio, profit margins, and since he didn't care, Tibs found the numbers were interesting. He even though he understood some of what the merchant had explained through them.

What had been clear was that without those extra shops, those houses, the town was in trouble.

As soon as they stepped into the inn, Kroseph hugged Jackal tightly. They exchanged quiet words while Tibs continued to their table. Not long after he sat, Kroseph placed a bowl of stew and tankard before him.

"Please eat," the server said, squeezing his shoulder.

Tibs wasn't hungry, but he knew his friends would worry if he didn't eat.

Someone brought a chair to the table and sat.

Tibs kept eating.

"I know you don't want to deal with it right now," Quigly said, "but with how effective the guards are being. We need to pull the people we have left together or even the merchants will feel depending on the guards is enough."

"I'll deal with that tomorrow."

"Tibs, believe me, it can't wait." The warrior put a hand on Tibs's arm.

"I said tomorrow." His voice was hot with anger and the ice cracked.

Quigly's one eye searched his face. The left side of his face was still covered with bandages, but Tibs had seen the mess that the eye had been before Clara had started healing him. The warrior had stopped her the moment he was no longer bleeding, ordering her to see to those with worse injuries. She'd warned him that unless she healed his face now, it would take a better cleric than the town received to fix the damage later, but Quigly had waved that away.

"Tomorrow," the warrior said. "Be careful it isn't always tomorrow, Tibs. There isn't much left to control right now, but after too many of them, you won't have anything."

"We'll sit and deal with this tomorrow," he replied, filling the crack with ice. "I'm not letting the guild take the town away from us, no matter how much work Harry puts into it now. I won't give them the chance to betray us again."

Satisfied, Quigly left him alone.

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Tibs stepped into his team's room. He told himself he should go roof running. That he'd feel better up there, rather than in here, but he was tired.

He could use Purity to deal with that, but that meant letting go of Water and he needed the whole of his reserve to keep the ice intact, his bracer would be nowhere near enough, even if he first fill the eight reserves in it with water essence.

He looked at her bed. Could see her sitting on it, laughing, or chiding him for throwing the clay tablet aside in frustration.

The ice cracked, and he swallowed hard. He forced himself to breathe and took off his armor. He was alone in the room, but he didn't care. Jackal had Kroseph for comfort, Mez had his girl and Khumdar had... Tibs had no idea who the cleric had.

Tibs had the ice to make sure none of it bothered him.

He sat on his bed, looked at her bed next to his.

He didn't care that it was empty too, he told himself as he pulled his knees to his chest.

He didn't care that the others had someone, and he didn't.
He didn't—
The ice cracked.
He wouldn't—
The ice broke.
He—
He lost hold of Water as tears flowed.
He missed Carina.
He missed Mama so much
It all hurt so much that he couldn't reach for the one thing that took his pain away.