

Planning-7

Tirania glanced at Tibs as they walked. "I really should take the time to have you clean up," she said, pursing her lips.

Tibs pushed essence to the surface of his skin, through his armor, and formed water around the blood coating it and him. Then he brought the dirty water to his hand, leaving only enough to keep the blood and other stuff suspended in it. He could take all the essence, leaving it dry to drift to the floor, but he expected Tirania wouldn't be happy with that.

She raised an eyebrow at the display. "That is a rather... pedestrian use of your essence."

Tibs shrugged. "It's quicker than getting a bath ready, even if someone heats all the water at once. Where do you want me to put this?"

"There's a latrine on the way to my office."

The latrine was a room with stalls for people to do their business in. The whole had a complex weave of essence in it, and the ball of dirty water vanished on entering it, broken down into the base essences and then siphoned deeper into the building.

Tibs wished that was in his housing building, instead of the bucket that had to be dumped into the outhouse.

In her office, Tibs stopped a few steps in, glaring at the sorcerer in the deep purple robes with the hood up, slumped forward in one of the chairs. Tirania sat and motioned for Tibs to take the other seat.

"As I told Irdian, the runs are about to start again," she said once Tibs was seated. He forced himself to look away from Don, who hadn't even acknowledged his presence. "The new batch of Omegas will be here soon, but there are enough Runners we will have teams go in until they arrive. With all the training you've received at part of defending the town, I expect the latests floor each has explored will be much easier to survive, and in your case, we don't expect the fourth floor to be ready for a few years still."

She stipped her fingers as she rested her hands on the desk. "Because of that, it's important teams be complete, so Don will join your team, Tibs."

He stared at her, the surprise such it took a few seconds for him to react, and the ice to crack. "No."

"Yes. You've had time to—"

"I'm not letting that abyss kissing, selfish, asshole on my team. I don't care what you want, you can't make me take him."

Don didn't react to Tibs's insults.

She leaned back in her chair, studying Tibs.

"I know that while you protected the town, there were some difficulties with working together. But you overcame them and—"

"He got his team killed," Tibs said through gritted teeth. "All he cares about is looking important. If you're going to put him in a team, put him in one that can deal with not trusting him."

Tibs paused so Don could rant at him about all the ways what had happened hadn't been his fault. Then he'd bring up how the sorcerer had left Tibs to die too. But Don didn't say anything. He didn't even move. If not for sensing the essence coursing through the sorcerer, Tibs might wonder if he'd died there.

"Don asked to be on your team," Tirania said.

"You what?" Tibs demanded of the sorcerer. Don didn't even flinch. He did nothing. He also didn't answer. "Fuck that. I'm not letting him try to take over my team."

"You don't have a sorcerer."

"I'll find one."

"You had ample time for that. You're the only team left who hasn't refilled the missing positions. There are no sorcerers left for you to choose from."

"Then we'll take someone from another class."

"I'm allowing teams having two if the same class until the situation with the clerics has been resolved," she answered calmly. "But I will not allow a class to be missing. You need a sorcerer. Don will be him."

"If I can only have a sorcerer, then I'm going to wait until the Omegas are here and take one of them. We'll pass on the runs until then."

She shook her head. "I need your team to go in first. You saved this town, both of you. So it's only right that you go first. Even if Don hadn't asked me to put him on your team, I would have done it. You are a symbol of what can be done working together."

Tibs snorted derisively, but part of him wondered why Don wasn't reacting to the praise. The man lived to drink up people talking about how important he was.

"You can't make me take him," Tibs snarled.

She fixed her gaze on him. "Would you prefer I assign your friends to different teams so I could make one for you that doesn't include Don?"

"You can't do that," he snapped.

She smiled. "Tibs, I'm the guild leader. I can do whatever needs to be done to ensure the guild prospers. I think that having you two on the same team will show how, even in adversity, the guild succeeds. But if whatever mistakes Don made at so much you can't work with him now that the danger is past, my alternative is turning each of you into the leader of a team and show how the guild makes good use of the assets it has. That will also inspire people to come and try to join us."

"You're not the leader," Tibs said before he could stop himself. "There's someone else giving orders. That's how come there's a new guard leader." He ignored how none of the words she said glowed. The fact she wasn't lying didn't mean what she said had to be true.

"Of course someone gives me orders," she replied, amused. "The guild is much too large for me to be the one in charge of all of it. And yes, they assigned Iradian after Harry vanished, because they found out before I did. I was busy making arrangements for Omegas to be sent here. But this dungeon is my responsibility, so I have the authority to do what I see fit to strengthen the guild. What will it be, Tibs? Will your team be the Team of Heroes? Or do will I have five teams lead by heroes?"

Tibs forced aside the confirmation she wasn't in charge of everything. His plans were vague enough it wasn't that much of a problem and Don was what he needed to deal with right now. "Fine." Tibs filled the spreading cracks so he wouldn't scream. He stood and left. When he tried slamming the door shut, Don caught it, exiting with him, then closed it gently.

He glared at the sorcerer, getting his first look at his face. His gaze was distant, hollow. The bones showed more than Tibs remembered. In the hood's shadow, the skin looked pale. He dismissed what that meant and spun, making his way to the building's exit. He ignored Don falling in steps behind him.

He didn't have to acknowledge the sorcerer.

This wasn't the place to—the ice cracked, and he spun again. "Why the fuck are you doing this?"

Don stopped and looked away.

"What? You think you can force your way into *my* team and we're going to let you become leader? Is that it? You think that we're going to let you cower behind us until you get someone else killed?" he yelled. "Well? So something!"

"Why did you save me?"

The question was so soft Tibs wasn't certain he heard it over the pounding of his blood in his ears. "Because even someone like you doesn't deserve to be one of Sebastian's victim." The people in the hallway gave them space. Some looked annoyed, others amused, but none slowed or intervened.

Don's snort was weak. "You're wrong," he whispered. "I didn't deserve to be saved." He looked at Tibs, tear falling. "You're right. I got them killed. I didn't mean to. I didn't want them to die. But it's my fault we walked in the ambush." He started to look away, then stopped. "Yes. I hide behind them." The shame was loud, but Tibs ignored it. "I'd used up my reserve, but some of them had those fucking green stones. And I got scared. I hide behind them while I tried to think of something that would make us win. Then the arrow hit me, and I realized I was the only one left. I wish they'd just killed me, instead of using me to draw you out. I wish you'd never heard me scream. That you'd let me die. Why didn't you let me die, Tibs?"

Anger cracked the ice, but it remained muted enough Tibs could keep filling them, keep from screaming, from telling the sorcerer that he too wished he'd let him die. That he'd been the one to die instead of Carina. He was so tempted to let the ice shatter and unleash everything he felt on the man. Only a few more cracks and maybe he'd find out how much damage he could cause to the building as he obliterated Don.

Then he'd be the guild's prisoner for always.

"Too many people had died already." Too many had kept on dying.

"You should have saved someone else. I ran away from that fight and left you to die. You should have left me to die because of that."

Tibs snorted. "I survived it."

"Not because of me," Don whispered.

"That doesn't matter." Tibs was sure he'd have survived still with Don's help. It simply wouldn't have been as fun or satisfying to limit himself to only Water.

The sorcerer dried his eyes. "That's why I want to be on your team. I want to learn how to do that. Not

care about how someone wronged me so I can do the right thing.”

“I care,” Tibs said, the ice cracking, his voice growing hot.

That seemed to surprise Don. “Then I want to know how to do that. Still do the right thing when you hate me.”

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“Is this a joke?” Jackal asked as Tibs found him and Mez at their table at the Inn. Don was with him. He had fallen silent after stating why Tibs was stuck with him, and followed him.

“It’s that,” Tibs answered, dropping in a chair, “or Tirania splits us up, each to a different team.”

“This is the guild leader’s idea?” Jackal asked in disbelief.

“Don requested it. She agreed. Said it’s going to show people how well the guild works. Get more to join. A new batch of Omegas is on the way.” He motioned to a server for food and drink.

“I figured they were coming; with the tents and everything before the dungeon. Are you sure you want him here?”

“I don’t. But I’m not letting the team be broken anymore.”

“Sit down.” Jackal pointed to a free chair. “I’m not craning my neck while telling you I’m not going to take any of your bullshit. You try to order any of us during a run, and I am going to throw you at one of the monsters hard enough you’ll both break. Is that clear?”

Don nodded as he sat.

The food arrived, for both him and Don, which surprised the sorcerer and Tibs. The server put the tankard before them and move on to other customers.

“You’re going to have to talk with Kroseph,” Mez said. “If he finds out Don’s at our table by having to serve him, things are going to get ugly.”

Jackal nodded and then looked at Tibs, hope in his eyes. “Do you want to handle that?”

Tibs shook his head, and the fighter sagged.

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The argument wasn’t pretty. Jackal and Kroseph stood on the other side of the nearly empty inn and the gesticulations were sharp, with a lot of fingers stabbing Jackal’s chest and Kroseph pointing to Don, now sitting along at their table. Kroseph hadn’t forgiven the sorcerer for leaving Tibs to die.

Tibs wasn’t sure the argument was resolved by the time Jackal joined him. Kroseph threw up his arms and walked away.

“Are you sleeping in the room with me and Khumdar?” Tibs asked as they exited.

“I don’t know. Once he calms down, I’ll try to explain again how we don’t have a choice, and if I’m lucky, he won’t punish me for someone else’s decision.” They walked past damaged buildings. “You know, having Don on the team’s going to cause nothing but trouble, right? How are you going to practice with your elements during our runs?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about talking with Sto? How is that going to affect how it—”

“I don’t know,” Tibs snapped, the ice cracking. “I argued against it, but she’s doesn’t care what we want, as usual. It’s all about making the guild seem like a good place, or something like that.” He breathed and hardened the ice. “Maybe Don will get himself killed during our first run and that’ll be the end of it.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

“So,” Jackal said, “about Don getting killed during the run, how much help do you think we should give the dungeon in making that happen?”

Tibs closed his eyes and let out a breath. “None.” With how much he and Don hated each other, Tirania would know it hadn’t been the sorcerer failing Sto’s tests. Tibs needed her to be angry at him right now. As much as he hated it, he needed to be on good terms with her. Especially now that he needed to figure out who gave her orders and how he’d be able to bring them here so he could deal with them.