

## Planning-13

"You have suffered the kind of loss few people can imagine." Irdian told the large crowd of young boys and girls.

Tibs had watched close to a dozen groups arrive, and no one had been older than Jackal had been when he'd first met him as far as he could tell. Now he stood at the back, where the ground rose toward the town, watching what he thought the crowd must have looked like when he received his version of the welcome speech.

"You have lost not only your homes, but your hearts. You had nothing to do with the conflicts those in power created. Even your parents had nothing to do with it, but they were pulled into it, leaving you alone. Leaving you hollow. Leaving you afraid for what is to come."

The guard leader's voice carried all the way to the back by the metal sheets that were suspended on wooden poles throughout the crowd. Tibs seen workers putting them up and hadn't understood what they were for until now. Ardian used metal essence to have them emit his words. They even carried the sorrow in them. Tibs wished he was close enough to see if they lit up or not. He couldn't tell if Light should reveal the lies when he heard the word like this.

"I wish I could tell you that your burden is going to ease. I wish I could tell you that here, you will be able to put your worries for the future aside and focus on being children. I can't. You haven't been taken from that hardship to be delivered into peace and quiet. I'm sorry. This world you find yourself in is one that will take his toll, and probably your life. I can't be gentle about this. Gentleness isn't something you will have much of from now on, and I don't want you to believe otherwise. You are going to be molded into Adventurers, but it is a hard and deadly path. One that most of you will not survive. If it helps, does of you who do will become powerful. You will be able to avenge the needless death of your parents and other loved ones. Become strong enough, and the guild might let you topple the king behind the events that led them to die."

Tibs looked at Jackal, Mez, Don, Khumdar, as well as the other Runners listening to the speech and saw the anger on their face the ice kept him from feeling. Tibs didn't need Light to know Ardian was lying. The guild didn't care about kings and nobles stepping on the poorfolks. If they did, they would stop them. They had to power, but only used it if it made the guild stronger, and looking at the number of urchins the guild now had to send into the dungeon, wars served the guild's quest for power.

"But you will not be simply thrown onto this path with no preparation. That is not the guild's way. You will be tested to find your aptitudes. You will be given training to increase your chances of survival. And you will be given places to stay and people to look after you between runs."

Snorts of disbelief from the Runners echoes Tibs's muted one. Was this another lie? Was the guild really going to spend coins getting them ready, instead of letting Sto do the sorting for them?

"This isn't fair," a Runner muttered.

"For the time being," Ardian continued, "you will be staying in these tents. As caretakers are brought in, and houses rebuilt, you will be assigned to them. I give you this warning. Don't get attached. You no longer live a life that makes attachments useful. Making friends will only lead to you feeling the pain of their death. Those of you who survive until you can leave this place will be sent on missions with others not of your choosing. I have been where you are. This warning comes from experience. Caring hurts. Caring can kill you. Caring can cause those you care about to die."

The ice cracked, and Tibs swallowed. Were those last words directed at him? A reminder Carina had died because Tibs had cared about her?

"Trainers will come and guide you to be tested. Do not fight them. Their methods will feel harsh, but they do this so you have some chance at surviving what is to come. You are no longer children. You are Runners. One day, some of you will be Adventurers. It is a hard path, but a rewarding one. This will sound hollow now. It did when I heard those words, but embrace the path, for it will make you strong, it will give you purpose, and it can give you life."

"That's a load of bullshit," another Runner said.

Among the cracks came the hope that it wasn't. If, somehow, this group could get the preparation they needed to survive. If this was how the guild actually treated Runners and not what Tirania had put them through, then maybe there was some good that could come of this?

"I've got a silver that says not even half of them come back from their first run," someone said.

"I'll put one that says not a quarter surv—"

"No," Jackal stated. "We aren't putting coins on who'll survive or won't. They aren't here for your amusement."

“I’m just—”

“I said no.” Jackal glared at the Runner.

“Did he tell the truth?” Quigly asked, and Tibs turned to tell him that wasn’t something he could know, but the warrior was speaking to a woman whose eyes glowed.

“I don’t know,” she answered nervously. “I’m not good at telling when someone lied, and my trainer—” her voice hitched. “—he’s done, so I don’t know if anyone else is going to help me. I can’t tell anything at this distance.”

Tibs stared at her. If her trainer was gone, did it mean it had been Harry? He hadn’t realized he’d trained anyone. If he had, he could have gotten her to ask him questions about how Light essence worked. So long as he worded it in a way she believed it was for her benefit, Harry wouldn’t have picked up that it could also help Tibs.

The crowd barely moved as older men and women walked among them, taking small groups and leading them to the large tents. As when they were walking away from the platform, Tibs kept thinking there was no life left in them. They didn’t argue; they didn’t resist. They let themselves be led around the way Tibs had seen the herd master leading some of his animals to be slaughtered.

He turned to face the Runners. He wanted Ardian to have told the truth. He filled the cracks with ice. But he couldn’t afford to hope. “Jackal is right. We aren’t here to bet on who will live. We’re here to make sure as many of them do. Do you trust the guild to have their best interest in mind?”

“If it serves them, sure,” someone said.

“And do you think all of them surviving the runs, becoming strong enough to stand up to them, serves them?” Tibs asked. How many would he need to stand with him against the guild so they could bring it down? How quickly would this act of want the best chances for them last? Even one would help him bring it down, but how many of them could he get to help him?

“We can’t save all of them,” Quigly stated, and the ice cracked.

Tibs glared at the warrior. “We can’t leave them to die.”

“There are thousands of them, Tibs. There’s forty-three of us. We can only help a few of them. Let alone to equip every team. We’re going to need enough armor and weapons to provide what the damaged ones are repaired, and we’re going to have to pay for that. Even if we continue to be paid to patrol Merchant Row, we’d have to ruin them to attempt to have the numbers we’ll need.”

Tibs nodded. “I don’t have to like it.”

“I hate it,” Quigly said. “I know these aren’t my fault, but I’m responsible for war urchins. If I’d known that would happen, I’d...” he trailed off.

“We have to help them,” Tibs said. “We can’t help them all, but we still have to help them. We’ve learned not to rely on the guild. I want us to be there when they do, too. We aren’t going to mock them. We aren’t going to bet on who live or dies. We are going to help them. If that means being there to offer support as they are carrying the dead’s equipment for the copper the guild will give them, then that is what we will do.”

“You want us to hang around the steps all day long?” someone asked in disbelief.

“What would you have done for someone to hug you when you came out that first time?” the guy next to him asked.

“I’d have stabbed anyone who touched me,” was the response.

Tibs looked at the Runners. Too many of them wore hard expressions. Too many of them seemed to think the urchin should suffer the way they had and Tibs didn’t know the words to convince them that they couldn’t be allowed to suffer anymore because they’d already lost everything.

The ice cracked. Abyss, what wouldn’t he have given for someone’s comfort after Mama was taken from him.

“Tibs,” a woman said behind him, and he stiffened. The Runners looked annoyed she was there.

He turned to face her. “Lady Amelia,” he greeted her coolly, remembering Mez’s imploration he treat her with respect, and all the ways she had helped them during the Siege and Sebastian’s revenge. With her were eight nobles. Two he recognized as siblings of hers, the others he’s only seen in passing and done his best to ignore.

“If you’ll allow us to help,” she said and snorts from some of the Runners.

“You going to give us all the coins we’ll need?” someone asked in a mocking tone.

“We aren’t taking your coins,” Tibs stated. He tried to think of her as a Runner. Every encounters he’d had with her showed her to be a decent person who cared for the town and those in it. But she was a noble, and Tibs couldn’t separate that from her.

"We can see to it those who wait for the returning Runners have bandages for their injuries, ale to settle their nerves."

"I'll take that," someone said.

"Shut up," Jackal ordered.

"Aren't the clerics going to heal them?" someone asked. "They're here now, so why would they let them suffer?"

"Because they're the guild," another answered.

"I don't know what the guild intends," Amelia said at Tibs's raised eyebrow. "For all the real words the guard leader told them, there is a tradition of harshness beyond the necessary for the Omegas."

"Let me guess," someone mocked, "you went around trying to get into all the other dungeons but had to settle for poor little us."

"I did not settle," she replied with the first hint of harshness in her tone. "I have money. I could have paid any of the guild's fees, no matter how exorbitant they are. I chose to come here, because I did not want to simply do my time in the dungeon until my goals were achieved. I wanted a place when my presence would matter. Where I could help." She paused the length of a few breaths. "I did not know so many of you would have come to despise anyone bearing the title of noble due to how those around you tarnished it so."

"You've helped before," Tibs said, but stopped on what he was about to add. She'd never asked for anything in return for her help. She hadn't even asked that Tibs show her 'proper' respect as a noble. She'd always treated him, and anyone she interacted with, with the respect of being someone who mattered. He couldn't say the same of everyone with her at the moment, but she wasn't here looking to put any of them in her debt. He had to remember that She seemed to be what Mez claimed nobles could be.

"I'll accept you help again."

"Thank you," she said, while grumbling behind Tibs told him what they thought of the idea.

It was like they'd all forgotten the work she'd done to help. They should keep their animosity for the nobles who deserve it. Or at least keep it to themselves when she was there.

"Do you know anything about those caretakers Irdian talked about?" he asked.

She shook her head. "There are groups that will help those orphaned by wars, but that isn't the sense I got from how he spoke."

So maybe that had been a lie to keep the urchins docile. Tibs had no idea how he'd go about...

Actually, he knew exactly how to find out.

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The essence woven through the thick wooden door didn't react to his knock. He had no idea how to tell what a weave did, and that bothered him.

"Enter," Tirania said, her voice sounding as if the door wasn't there. Tibs didn't think the weave only allowed her voice to pass unimpeded.

She raised an eyebrow as he entered and set the quill in the inkpot. It looked out of place in the immaculate office; the pot was stained and scratched and the quill's top listed because of a break a finger's width from the tip.

"What can I do to help you?" she asked.

"I want to start by apologizing for my behavior when you told me Don would be on my team. I'm a Runner, not a child. I shouldn't have thrown a tantrum."

She studied him. "And how is he working out?"

Tibs shrugged. "It isn't the disaster I was afraid it would be."

"I'm glad to hear that." She smiled and motioned to a chair. "Now, what is the other reason for your visit?"

"The urchins." He sat. "Irdian mentioned caretakers were being brought in. What is that about?"

She took her time answering. "You need to understand," she said, and already she was lying. "When can't treat those orphans the way you were treated. You were a criminal. Your kingdom was more than happy to foster you on us in return for better considerations when they need our services."

So many lies in just those two phrases. The only thing she says that didn't glow was about the kingdoms getting better considerations.

"With the orphans, the king didn't want to just hand them over to us." Another lie. "He demanded concessions from the guild that in other circumstances we wouldn't grant." More lies, but Tibs didn't know which part was the lie or how it was a lie. "But we need the Runners." A truth. "You and the nobles aren't enough, and with your ranks, we can't keep the dungeon fed simply from those willing to pay for the chance to

become Upsilon.” Another truth.

“So there are no caretakers.”

“Oh no, they are coming.” A truth. “And we’re making sure housing his being built for them.” Not entirely a truth. The light dimmed and brightened. “It’s simply taking time, and I decided it’s best not to have them here until then.” A lie. Tibs suspected it wasn’t her decision. Irdian’s? Whoever gave them orders? He wished he could press, but this was about getting her to trust him, as well as getting information.

“Are they really going to get training before their first run?”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Did you give me a reason to?” he asked, not intending to, but the ice cracked.

“You don’t—” she stopped. Which was good. The words already had a glow to them. “Tibs, like you worked out, someone assigned me this position. I give the orders here, but orders come to me from them.”

“And they ordered you to let us die?” more cracks in the ice, and Tibs was worried his anger would make it through and ruin everything.

“No.” She took a slow breath. “I’m not proud of it.” Not a lie. “But it’s what I had to do.” Not a lie. “The guild exists to guard the dungeons and protect the world from them. My first priority always has to be that. It doesn’t matter how weak a dungeon seems to be, they can unleash creatures without warning.” Not quite a lie? The words glowed, but not in the same way as when she outright lied. An exaggeration maybe? She chuckled. “And there aren’t as many of us here able to fight as you seem to think. Most of the administrative staff stopped training once they reached Epsilon.” Not a lie, but Tibs had seen more than a few of them strong enough to be delta or gamma.

“You could have stopped Sebastian.”

She shook her head.

“You’re the strongest one here. Harry told me that. You have to be strong to become a guild leader. Harry could have stopped it.” The cracked widened, and he closed his eyes to focus on filling it, cooling the heat underneath. He was surprised she waited for him to open his eyes.

“Sebastian Wells, for the criminal that he was, was a man of power and respect within his city and his kingdom. His king paid attention to him, and because of that, my actions would have become that of the guild against him, the king. You’re right, I am powerful. The guild is powerful. But we aren’t here to hold kingdoms accountable. We’re here for the dungeon and to prepare for—” she smiled and shook her head. “There’ll be time enough for *that* once you’ve reached Epsilon. Suffice to say that if I, or Harry, or anyone directly affiliated with the guild, had taken action against Sebastian Wells, his king could have decided we were targeting him.” Mostly true. More true than Tibs expected.

“You’re responsible for some of the destruction,” Tibs said, his tone controlled, the ice uncracked. She seemed willing to talk about it, even if it wasn’t entirely honestly, so he might as well see what else he could get out of her.

“That was an unfortunate accident.” A lie so bright that if it had been from a lantern instead of essence, Tibs would have had to look away. “As I said, the administrative staff isn’t trained for situations like this, and we needed everyone to help. They misjudged how to handle Everburn.” Something of a lie. Tibs didn’t think she’d told them to sacrifice the town, but she hadn’t told them to be careful of it either, he was sure of that.

He stood. “Thank you for answering my questions, Tirania.”

“That’s what I’m here for, Tibs. You know that.”

He’d reached the door when she called his name, and he looked over his shoulder.

She smiled at him. “Tibs, I’m glad you came and talked with me about this. I was afraid the animosity was going to fester.” That was not a lie.