

## Planning-22

“Let me see if I got this right,” Don said, looking from Tibs to the merchant. “You, Tibs, found out there was something special about the pool when you tried to hire an adventurer to remove it.”

“One of the adventurers the guild brought in to clean up what was left of Sebastian’s house after we attacked it.”

“Right, a corruption adventurer because of how much of that was left behind from what I did to it.” There was no light with the words, so Don believed he had been responsible, but there was uncertainty in the tone. “So you came to this merchant.”

“Darran,” the merchant said with a smile.

“Right. And you bought the pool for Tibs.”

“After finding who officially owned the land the Garden Palace stood on, since the owner and his family died in that incident. It had reverted to the guild, by the way.”

The sorcerer nodded, then looked at the sorcerer and asked in an exasperated tone. “Why?”

The question took Darran by surprise. “Because if Tibs had gone to the guild directly, he, rightfully, worried they would have questioned why he was interested in it, and they would have looked into it and realized the potential for profits it represented.”

“Not that.” Don pointed to Tibs. “Why did you buy it for him and not for yourself?”

“Tibs approached me to buy for him,” the merchant answered, sounding as if he couldn’t understand why Don didn’t see that as evident.

“He’s a Runner. Why didn’t you just buy it for yourself? You’re a merchant; money’s what drives you.”

“He isn’t a Runner,” Darran stated. “He is a customer, and I happen to think of him as a friend.”

Don scoffed. “Sure, because he arranged to protect you and the others from that criminal.”

“I thought of him as more than a customer before then. And while yes, money is something I chase, sometimes too hard, I also value relationships. Any merchant will value them.”

“Really?” Don said mockingly. He gestured to the rest of the Row. “Then why the fuck am I not entitled to the same treatment everyone here seems to give Tibs?”

Darran’s chuckle was humorless. “Because of the use of that word.”

“What?” Don asked, confused.

The merchant sighed. “You walk into the shops demanding that we treat you ‘right’. That you are entitled to the best of what we have to offer.”

“I pay for what I ask for,” Don stated.

“Yes. That, and your well-known taste for getting back at those you feel have wronged you, is why I suspect no one has swindled you. You may be disagreeable, but you are honest.”

“I’m not dis—” Don closed his mouth on the retort. “I just—” he closed it again and deflated. “I’m not like—” He closed his eyes. And whispered, “Fuck.” He ran a hand over his face. “Why is it so fucking hard to be treated like a person in this place?”

“Act like one,” Tibs said, and Don glared at him. “Instead of acting like a noble.”

The sorcerer’s expression darkened, but he remained silent.

“It can be difficult not to start acting like those you hate,” Darran said, and now Tibs raised an eyebrow. He hated nobles much more than Don ever did, and he’d never acted like them.

“What do you know?” Don asked, sounding uncertain.

“Nothing of you and your history, other than what I saw when you all arrived.”

“Okay, fine.” Don looked at Tibs. “And now you want to sell me the pool. Why?”

“Because it isn’t doing me any good. Corruption isn’t my element. I had Darran buy it for me because I didn’t want the guild to have it. By selling it to you, I get coins I can use to help the Omega Runners.”

“I don’t have anything like the money you need to do that.”

“But you can get it from that sorceress and the people she talks for.”

“You can too.”

“She already thinks you own the pool. She’d question why I didn’t stop you from claiming you did. Then she might question why I bought it in the first place, and I don’t know how friendly she is with the guild.”

“So, I’m nothing more than your agent.” He nodded to Darran, “just like him.”

“All I care about is getting coins to buy equipment and making sure it can be repaired. Darran knows

how much I need. Anything else you can get her to give is yours.”

“Minus my commission in assisting you to write up the contract,” Darran said. “Unless you think you can write one sorcerers won’t be able to turn to their advantage?”

Don shook his head. “You can write it. Those were never something I studied.” He looked at Tibs. “And you trust me to honor my part of the deal?”

“You’re my teammate,” Tibs replied.

“Not by your choice.”

Tibs shrugged. “I guess I’ll find out if you’re being honest when you say you want to do better.” Tibs knew Don meant it, but he also knew how easy it was to slip into habits. How often had he channeled Fire after telling himself never again?

Don studied Tibs, then nodded. “Alright. You’ll get your coins, I’ll get my money and whatever I can out of them. The first thing we need to make sure of that contract is that I don’t end up indentured to that academy past my apprentice stage.”

“You’re going to let them own you even for that?” Tibs asked.

“It’s how things are done. Even as I scholar, I’d have been expected to spend something like a decade being nothing more than a servant to a master of the craft while I learned enough to do my own research and studies. I don’t know how long it’s going to be with sorcerers, but it’s got to be shorter than what it would take me to repay the guild. So I’m okay with it.”

“Are you willing to open the negotiations demanding the entire abyss?” Darran asked, smiling.

Don’s momentary confusion was replaced with determination. “You know how to write them, so I’m going to have—I am going to trust you to get me the best that can be gotten out of them.”

The merchant clapped a hand on Don’s shoulder. “I do like this new you. We are going to have fun skimming absolutely everything we can off those academicians.”

“But you aren’t scamming Don on my behalf,” Tibs stated, knowing that if he didn’t, there was a chance Darran would see it as a challenge to get Tibs more than he asked for.

The merchant looked at Tibs, hurt. “Would I ever do such a thing?”

“Yes,” Tibs and Don said together. Him seriously, while the sorcerer sounded amused.

“Well,” Darran said, acting far more offended than Tibs knew he was. “I have never—”

“Yes, you have,” Tibs replied, and the merchant chuckled, then grinned.

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“Do you have a plan?” Don asked, as they walked toward the Guild building.

“Go along with whatever Tirania wants.” Tibs was dressed in a dark blue sleeveless doublet over a pale blue tunic, with leather pants and hard boots in the same dark blue. The one thing he wore that wasn’t blue was his bracers, which were covered over by the tunic’s sleeves, which were tied at the end.

“That could turn out to make the situation worse.” Don’s robe was its usual dark purple. It had been the one detail the sorcerer had disagreed on with the clothier. She had wanted to clothe him in something not as dark. Their compromise had been to trim the robe in gold and silver.

“What do you think it’s about?”

“She sent out invitations, but I don’t know to whom. The people I know within the administration couldn’t find out. She handled that personally.”

“So they’re going to be important? Like other guild leaders or the person giving her orders?”

“Important, yes. But I don’t know who they could be. I don’t see why she’d want us there for a meeting with other guild leaders.”

“Do you know anything about the enchantments protecting the building?”

“No. As far as I can tell, no one knows what they are, or who put them on.”

“Isn’t enchanting something like that hard?”

Don chuckled. “It’s the kind of thing that kings can’t afford. I expect the guild keeps sorcerers close, just for things like that.”

Tibs nodded as the building in question came into view at the end of the street. A large box of a building, with a battlement on the roof. The windows were narrow enough only the thinnest of rogues could slip in by them, but like every surface outside, the weave of essence on them was so tight Tibs had trouble making out the essences that composed it.

An adventurer in regalia of gold and black, just like the one who had told Tibs and Don about Tirania’s request, stood on each side of the entrance. One had metal as her essence, the other’s eyes were a dark red Tibs had never seen before and were Epsilon. They nodded to Tibs and Don as they entered, but otherwise, didn’t

move.

Inside, an attendant, also dressed in gold and black, looked them over. His eyes were the multi color of crystal, but Tibs sensed no essence, so this was only a visual evaluation. He nodded and led them deeper into the building.

Tibs counted his steps, as he did every time, and again, the numbers didn't match. Now that he knew about the weaves protecting the building, one of their effect had to be to make it difficult to know how far anything was, as to make it harder for a rogue to reach their target.

Their escort opened the door to a room that seemed large enough to take the entire side of the building. People, dressed fancier than Tibs and Don were, paused to look in their direction, then went back to their conversations.

In that glance, Tibs recognized the dismissiveness of nobles, the evaluating gaze of merchants, the amused look of those who recognized what Tibs and Don represented, and other expressions he couldn't decipher.

There were a lot of people here. On the left wall, which was much further than Tibs thought it could be, was a long table with raised trays containing plates of food as well as crystal goblets filled with liquids. Fancy alcohols, he expected.

Before he could head there, Tirania was before them.

"Tibs, Don." She smiled. "I am pleased you could make." She wore a green vest of heavy fabric with crystals sewed into it in what seemed random locations. None of them contained essence. Her pants were black, and the buckle of her belt was an amulet. One with a reserve of essence nearly as deep as Tibs's own.

"I wouldn't have wanted to miss this," Don answered, and Tibs nodded.

"Come with me." She led them to the center of the room, where essence gathered and a dais of translucent stone formed with three steps leading up it. Once they stood in the center, she cleared her throat, and the room quieted.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I know that the events of the previous months have not made the town of Kragle Rock an attractive prospect as a place for you to send those who need training. I know that some of the decisions that had to be taken to ensure the protection of the dungeon did not be the guild, and me specifically in the best of light. So again, thank you for accepting my invitation." She let the murmurs quiet.

"I asked for you to attend so I could explain why I was able to make the decisions I did. Why I put the guild on the task of keeping the dungeon safe at what appeared to be the town's expense." She placed a hand on Tibs and Don's shoulder. "This is Tibs Light Fingers, Water Rogue. This is Don Arabis, Corruption Sorcerer. You may have heard their names already. They are the Heroes of Kraggle Rock. Each responsible not for one act of heroism, but two. Tibs took on attackers and protected the dungeon by himself. Slowing their progress long enough, the guild was able to stop them altogether before they killed it. Don chased away the man who tried to take the town. Who was able to infiltrate the guard and use them to sow distrust and discord. Then, together, they protected the town when that same man returned to wipe it from the world."

The responding sounds were a mix of scoffs and appreciations.

"They are the reason I was able to focus on keeping the dungeon safe from the attacks those on the town served to distract from," she lied, the light bright enough Tibs saw it without looking up in her direction. "Yes, the town suffered, and we lost people and Runners, but I knew I could rely on these two fine examples of what it means to be Runners to act and keep as many as possible safe. They looked after that town so that the guild could look after the dungeon. These are the kind of people we train. Those who can make the hard decisions you will need made when your enemies come calling. I do not promise you easy training, the way some other guild leaders do. This dungeon is hungry and takes its toll. You've heard of what I've had to do to ensure I had enough Runners. You've questioned why you should send your sons and daughters here because of it. Why send your retainers to die here? This is why. A hard dungeon produces strong Runners. Hard Runners. The kind of Runners who can walk into the enemy camp and remove them. The kind of Runners who will do whatever is needed to keep you safe."

The room was silent once she stopped talking.

The looks Tibs received were many things, but not one of them dismissive. Despite knowing she'd used him and Don to convince them to send more people to Sto, Tibs stood straighter under those gazes.

They were seeing him.

They were seeing someone to pay attention to. Someone to be watched and to treat with care. They weren't seeing an urchin from the street.

Some of the ice melted. They were seeing Tibs Light Fingers, and they were worried.