

Planning-17

The lake was now just over two and zero paces away and the ground at the town's edge was already marked to show where more buildings would be added. Tibs wasn't sure what would happen once the lake was in the town itself. Would it be turned into the place where baths would be set up? Would the clothes washing shops move around it and turn the water gray?

He crouched next to it and placed a hand in the cool water. He sensed the essence in it, looking for some difference. The corruption adventurer Tibs had wanted to hire to remove the corruption pool on one side of Merchant Row, had told him that something had happened that connected that pool to the element, making removing it impossible. The only thing that had happened, other than its creation, was that Tibs had had an audience with Corruption through it.

And he had had an audience with Water in this lake.

He sensed nothing he identified as 'different'. There was a lot of water essence, and nearly none of the other elements, but this was a lake, so he expected that. What had Alistair said when he'd taken him to the cavern with the waterfall of his first audience? Closer to the element made refilling their reserves easier and faster?

What did that mean? Tibs could already refill his reserve quickly, with access to this amount of water. He could do the same within Sto's pool on the second floor. His teacher had said something about the reserve refilling as quickly as the essence was used.

Tibs looked over his shoulder. Maybe when the town was much further away, he could try the one etching he could pour as much essence into as he had access to so he could test that, but the explosion of water that would cause would be too easy to notice now, even with the sun so low.

And this wasn't why he was here.

He stepped into the clear water and kept walking until the water was over his head. He kept going, keeping himself at the bottom of the water until he was in the center of the lake. Not quite the lowest point, as that was to his left, a hole through which water flowed into the lake.

He was surrounded by water, as close to the element as he knew how to be. Now, he needed a strong emotion.

He couldn't drown. He understood that now, so he couldn't trick himself into believing that and cause himself to be scared he'd die. Water could no longer hurt him simply by being there. He didn't have to create air to be underwater. It just made the experience more comfortable.

But strong emotions were more than fear of dying. Tibs saw how powerful Jackal's love for Kroseph was in the way the fighter had changed his outlook on life for him. He saw Mez's dedication to his ideal through the pain he endured to maintain them. Tibs had neither of those.

But he had a strong emotion buried under all the ice. All he had to do was let it shatter and Tibs would feel more than he wanted to. More than he thought he could endure. At least here, when he exploded, the town would be safe.

He chuckled. Unless the explosion was such that the lake was sent into the air and fell down on it.

He stopped channeling Water and waited for the explosion.

How much destruction would the lake cause Kragle Rock if it fell on it?

Water could cut mountains into two. That was how powerful it was. But it didn't happen quickly. It took ages for the flowing water to remove enough of the stone to make the division. Thrown at the mountain quickly, it just splashed.

He didn't remember how the question had come about, but Carina had laughed, and then explained how—

Tibs screamed as Sebastian's knife moved across Carina's throat, blood gurgling over the blade. Tibs screams as his essence was couldn't find purchase within Carina to save her. Tibs screamed as he pulled his essence out of the Water sorcerer, then the Earth, the Fire and all of them. Tibs screamed as he shattered piece after piece of Sebastian.

Tibs screamed, and the water around him boiled.

* * * * *

"That is enough," the gentle woman's voice said.

No, it wasn't. It would never be enough. Tibs wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of Sebastian's legacy or the guild. He would burn—

"I said that is enough." The voice was no less gentle for being firmer, but it pushed Tibs's anger away. It

didn't encase it in ice, the way Tibs did, cooling it until it was barely an ember. Water put distance between it and Tibs. He knew it was still rage, but the distance reduced its effect.

But it didn't remove it.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why did she have to die?" Getting to his feet. "Why did you let her die?"

Water smiled at him sadly. "I do not have influence on your world, Child of Human."

"Why not? Your essence gets there, so why aren't deciding who gets it and what they have to do to use it? Why aren't you and the others making sure we stop always hurting each other?"

"You know why," she answered. "You simply chose not to acknowledge it because you want to hurt someone."

Tibs closed his mouth on the reply. He wasn't here to lash out. He was here for answers. He forced himself to ignore the anger.

"How did I have an audience with Metal?"

"You met the requirements."

"But you didn't tell me to have one. You said that after I had Corruption, Light, Purity, and Darkness, I'd have unlocked what happened next. I can turn my reserve into any element I channel now."

"And you thought that would be the end of it?"

Tibs sighed. "Will it ever end, or am I going to have to chase after all the elements?"

She considered him. "You are not required to do anything. You are on a path..." she smiled. "You are on the steps of a stairwell, and each one of us can help you step further along it. You can stop anytime you desire, you can return to it, or not, as you decide."

"And what happens once I reach the top of that stairwell?"

"It ends."

That sounded ominous.

"But I don't have to."

"This is your path, Child of Humans. How far along it you go is only for you to decide."

"Do you have any advice for me?"

"Choose wisely. The path will bring you power, and with it comes danger."

"I already know to be careful not to let the guild know what I can do," he replied bitterly. He'd hoped for something more useful. Then he noticed the sad smile she gave him. She probably meant something else. Others in general? Was the power itself dangerous to him and those around him? He already knew fire was.

"Can you explain what you mean?"

"Warning you it exists is the limit of what I can do. The rest is for you to work out."

Tibs nodded. "Is there an order in which I should seek out the other elements?" How many of them were there?

"The order is also for you to decide, although, because of what you are, some may come to you without having to seek them. What you are will not protect you or ensure you will reach them, so remain vigilant."

Tibs touched his chest. Only a little to one side, and the sword would have killed him, instead of sending him to an audience.

"Why?" Tibs asked. "Why does the shadow exist? Why can I take it? What is this about?" there had to be a reason. He didn't want to believe it was just random.

"I do not know. The shadow was there when I became aware. Throughout what you refer to as the ages, some have noticed it, and a few took it. It is the rare one who returned to speak once they had it." She smiled. "Do not be hasty, Child of Human. There is time ahead of you to accomplish what you set yourself to do."

He frowned. "It this about—"

* * * * *

Water filled his mouth, and he trashed. He was underwater. Where was the surface? He couldn't drown right after having his audience with Water.

He closed his mouth, annoyed with himself, then angry. How could he forget so easily Water wasn't a threat to him? Was he going to be afraid of a tankard of the stuff next? Was he going to cower in fear if the next would be assassin splashed water on his face?

The blade slicing across her neck. His essence not finding purchase. The snap as he broke off another piece of Sebastian.

Tibs opened his mouth to—

He turned himself to ice so hard the water surrounding him crackled and snapped, pressing against

him. Then he sensed himself and the block of ice he was encased in move toward the surface.

He willed it to stop and fought with it. Ice floated, so it resisted being submerged. He melted it and moved to the edge, then stopped. He sensed people near the lake. Mostly townsfolk, a few guards, but the metal at their hips, and some adventurer. There was still light, so he'd be seen if he went any closer.

Was he responsible for attracting their attention? Had Water not taken him to his Audience in time to stop the boiling he'd initiated? There was no indication in the essence of what had happened, so he waited until they lost interest and returned to the town, then until the sun set fully, and exited on the opposite shore.

* * * * *

Water, it turned out, hadn't taken him before the boil exploded; Tibs found out the next morning. It hadn't sent the lake up and falling on the town, or even any water that way, but it had sounded like thunder and those on that side had seen the water erupt and fall. Stories of what had caused it circulated. Some wondered if it was left over Everburn that had found its way into the lake and caught. Others thought it was a creature that had escaped the dungeon that had caused it. On the heel of it, was a story about adventurers fighting said creature.

Jackal had asked Tibs what he thought it was, barely able to keep from smirking. Tibs had almost replied he'd been sleeping, but remembered Don now shared the room. So he told them he'd been roof running and hadn't noticed it. By the time Kroseph asked Tibs opinion too, Don had left to table, book in hand, so when Tibs repeated his story, the server patted his shoulder condescendingly.

"Of courser you didn't, Tibs. What was I thinking?"

* * * * *

The houses looked nice, Tibs thought. They were the first to be finished, and he wanted to see what guild sponsored work was like. He was impressed. Each house was two stories and looked to accommodate a family of six or seven. No nobles would want to live in one, but they were suitable for townsfolk, or the people who'd been brought to look after the urchins.

One such couple didn't seem impressed, though, commenting on the material used, the color, or the plainness of the furniture. He didn't understand their complaints, since the guild let them use the house without having to pay for it, other than by looking after the urchins assigned to them.

Even paying coins for it, Tibs had been happy with the team's room, and it was much smaller and plainer than that.

A snuffle at his calf made him look down, and the dog looked at him questioningly. This one was larger than Thump, and its fur bright red. Its brown eyes glinted with mischievousness.

He pulled a piece of jerky, then jerked his hand away as Serba tried to grab it.

"It's for..." Tibs indicated the dog.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Ravager," she said.

Tibs looked down at Ravager in surprise. He didn't see any of the violence he'd expect from that name in its eyes. "I think it tricked you," he said. "Trickster's a better name."

"She," Serba corrected, "is going to be the most dangerous of them."

"Don't listen to her," Tibs said, crouching and giving the dog the piece of jerky. "You're going to be a fun loving one, always getting the other in trouble with her, and pulling them out of trouble too." He leaned in and whispered. "You're a rogue, aren't you?"

"If you listen to one word he says, Ravager, I will—" Serba closed her mouth. "What am I doing? She doesn't understand you. She barely understands my signals yet."

Tibs rubbed between the dog's ears as he straightened. "I didn't think the guild would spend the coins for them," he said, indicating the houses.

Serba looked at him, then at the houses. "The guild didn't pay for them to be built."

"Then who's paying?"

She shrugged. "Whatever family sent their undesirable members here."

"Why would any family not want some of them?"

She stared at him and snorted. "You do remember Jackie wants nothing to do with the rest of his family, right?"

"And he left. You did too. Sebastian didn't send him away." The ice cracked just mentioning him.

She considered that. "These are from wealthy families. Minor nobles, merchant families, would be nobles. All sorts who have two things in common. Lots of money and a need to appear respectable. Those kinds of families will always produce unwanted members. Men and women not interested in behaving in a 'proper' way. Could be as simple as not dressing in the family's colors or associating with the 'wrong' kind of people, or

they bedded the wrong person and now have an heir no one can know about. Making sure those indiscretions don't come to light isn't easy. Our father had scores of people whose job it was to discover them. Those filled his coffers easily."

She watched the arguing couple. "She's the one they needed to have leave, and he is her lover, probably from a rival family, so both families might have put money toward sending them away. His family's not as rich. He's used to having less. That's why she'd doing most of the complaining. From what I gathered, the guild sent word that for a modest price, they'd take in any unwanted family members."

"So the guild didn't do this?" the ice cracked again. Why was he even surprised?

"It did it, in that he gave them the opportunity, but no, the guild isn't who put up the money to get the house built."

"Then why aren't they happy with it if they paid for it?"

Serba chuckled. "These people didn't pay for the house. Their families did. And they only paid the minimum they have to, so this would happen. The families willing to spend money on their unwanted relatives don't have to resort to sending them away to some unknown dungeon town." She glanced at him. "Are you really that surprised?"

"I was hoping..." Why had he even bothered.

"The guild makes adventurers, Tibs. Adventurers only work for money. Forget the bards and their songs. For every one adventurer out there risking her life because she thinks it's the right thing to do, there are scores and scores of them sitting in a tavern waiting until the people suffering around them a desperate enough to pay them to do something about it. You think they learn that somewhere other than the guild?"

Tibs shook his head. Every day that Alistair trained him, it was three gold Tibs owed the guild. He was fortunate in that his teacher didn't believe in useless training sessions, so only came a few times a week to evaluate where Tibs stood in his practices. Now he was here every other day, because learning the essence letters didn't take as long. But once it Tibs had to train in applying them to his essence and get them to work together, he expected Alistair wouldn't be over as often anymore.

Jackal had to see his trainer every day, as had Mez and Don, and most of the other Runners.

He would owe the least to the guild by the time he was Epsilon, and he still had no idea how he could ever repay that much gold.