

“Sit down,” Don instructed, indicating the chair Tibs had sat on the last time they’d spoken.

The conversation had gone on long in the night and consisted mostly of Tibs not knowing answers to the sorcerer’s questions. He could tell and show what he could do, but when asked about how he did most of them, or why he couldn’t do certain things, Tibs only shrugged. Then Don had asked about the elements themselves, and how it was they could change how Tibs thought, and *that* Tibs hadn’t had answers for. Almost as soon as he’d said that, Don had brought it to an end by saying there were things he needed to read up on.

That had been four days ago. Long enough for him to go to Darran’s shop and find out the merchant had left Kragle Rock for a few days.

Long enough for Jackal to comment on how, if Don was part of the team again, he should be eating at their table. Tibs only had a suspicion for why the sorcerer wasn’t with them. He didn’t think there were books in Kragle Rock that covered whatever it was Don thought he needed to read about at this point.

“I don’t think we should do this here,” Tibs said.

Then Don has showed up at the inn and told Tibs he was ready to help him with his control problem. He’d been eager to find out what the sorcerer had learned, but knowing how his training in that usually went, the room Don stayed in was not where Tibs had expected to be led to.

“Just sit down, Tibs.”

“I told you how destructive I get when I’m channeling a new element, and lightning can destroy buildings.”

“Which is why you aren’t channeling it today.”

“I thought this was going to be training.”

Don looked at him. “You’ve been thinking about this wrong.” He pointed to the chair. “From the start.”

Tibs narrowed his eyes, but sat. “Don, I think I’ve been dealing with this long enough to know more about it than you do.”

The sorcerer smirked. “You know more about throwing yourself out of windows; doesn’t mean it’s the best way to reach the ground.”

“I wish I hadn’t told you about that if all you were going to do with it was mock me.”

Don chuckled. “Sorry. It’s just amusing to me how you seem to cause the problem first, and then deal with finding a way to handle it.”

“And how should I go about dealing with something I had no idea would happen?” he asked in exasperation.

“But now, you do know what will happen.”

“No, I don’t,” Tibs snapped. “When I channel Lightning, I’m going to need to move, go places, do everything. I don’t know what I’m going to do with my essence, but I know I’m going to end up destroying something.” He motioned to the bedroom around them. “I turned the inside of a warehouse into kindling because I thought Air would be an element that wasn’t destructive. What?” he demanded at Don’s smile.

“You laid out everything you need to deal with, yet, you’re still waiting until after the problem starts to deal with it. And why a warehouse? Seems like the dungeon is a better place to practice it that way.”

“I’ll...explain that during the next run. It’s going to be easier there.” Among all the questions, Don hadn’t brought up his mention of Sto, so Tibs wasn’t sure it was something he could explain without having Sto there to help. “But even if I wanted to do it there, it’s not like I can go in anytime I want. The runs are once a week now. They weren’t as often before.”

Except that Sto had offered to let Tibs in when he wanted, make a door just for him. Why hadn’t he—

“And that shows you aren’t going at it the right way.”

Tibs took slow and long breaths before speaking. “Fine. How should I have gone about it, then?”

Don grinned. “You really want to insult me right now, don’t you?”

“You are kind of rubbing your ‘I know so much more than you do’ in my face; so yes, insulting you is tempting.”

“Sorry.” The grin didn’t vanish. “But I do know more than you.”

“Don,” Tibs warned.

“Why are you waiting until after you’re out of control to gain it?”

“How else am I going to do it?”

“The same way you didn’t insult me. The same way you’re not at the guild right now, trying to burn it to the ground.”

“I can’t do that. There’s too much magic protecting it.”

“But you want to.”

“But I can’t!”

“You could try, then deal with the consequences.”

“Don,” Tibs growled. “I know you’re trying to get me to understand something about how that relates to my training, but I don’t get it.”

The sorcerer considered something, then nodded. “You’re exercising control before the fact.”

“Because I know that trying it isn’t going to do anything. Channeling a new element is the only way to figure out how it’s going to affect me, so what I have to do to control it.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Don, I’ve tried—”

“It’s all emotions, Tibs,” Don cut him off. “It’s what the elements do to you. They increase one of them beyond what you’re used to.”

“Which is why I need to channel him,” Tibs said slowly, struggling with thinking that Don was being slow on purpose. “I need to experience it and figure out how to handle it. It’s not like I’ve experienced anything like that before.”

“I’ve seen you angry, Tibs. You don’t need an element to experience being out of control.”

“And do you have any idea how hard that is to control?”

“In fact, I do,” Don said flatly, and Tibs looked away. “But what’s important here is that you don’t fly off in a rage at the slightest insult. You know how to control it before it happens.”

“No always,” Tibs whispered.

“True, but most of the time, you do. You were able to stand by Tirania as she spewed

her lies about how great the guild is. I expected you to plant a knife in her heart. I certainly considered melting her on the spot.”

“Yes, but I had to work at it. It’s what I’m telling you about controlling Lightning and Metal. Until I—”

“You can work on that first.”

“How?” Tibs asked in exasperation. “How do I learn to control something I’m not experiencing?”

Don leaned back in his chair. “There’s this set of belief, out of the Kingdom of Terrobor, that we have grown apart from the elements. They mean we as everyone. They believe that even people who don’t have an element are connected to them. That it’s where our emotions come from. We lose control when one of them grows too strong in our lives. It was a passage in this research document I read on the validity of the elements as representation of events in the world.” He waved that aside. “It was when I was trying to decide what I’d focus on as a scholar. I read just about everything I could get my hands on back then. I went back to read more about their beliefs.”

“I can help you with that,” Tibs said. “The elements told me they don’t influence people like that.”

“Except you. But that they do or not doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does,” Tibs said.

Don shook his head. “It doesn’t, because it’s in the belief that they do that those people worked out exercises to better control how they act and who they are.”

“That sounds like...something a bard would sing about.”

Don snorted. “Not worth their time. There are no big adventures caused by someone controlling their emotions. Although you might change that.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “I’d rather not have them sing about me. It’s bad enough I heard one practice something about the Siege at the inn a while back. I’m a rogue. Being sung about isn’t a good thing for me.” He thought over the implication of what Don said. “So, those exercises will make it easier for me to gain control when the element overwhelms me?”

“No. The method, which they call Oneness, is about learning to identify the moment you go from one emotion to the other. It’s about deciding if that is what you want to feel, instead of it happening without your input.”

“They think I can decide to be sad?” Tibs asked in disbelief. “Happy? Angry?”

“You already do, to a lesser degree than they believe you can.”

“That’s not how it works. Emotions happen, and I learn to cope with them.”

“You’ve learned to see your anger approaching and take steps to keep it from taking over.”

“Because I don’t have a choice!” He was up, the chair rattling back. “I’m the one who destroyed what’s Market Place now. I got so angry Sebastian was getting away; I didn’t care what burned, so long as I took him at the same time.” He sagged. “Only he escaped, and I killed a lot of people for nothing.”

“I heard he did that. Used a magical item to cover his escape.”

Tibs shook his head, righting the chair. “Jackal spread the story so no one would wonder how it happened.”

“But that was before you learned to control Fire, so it was its anger that made you—”

“Fire doesn’t make me angry. He makes what I’m feeling when I channel him more so. I was already filled with rage then. I knew channeling Fire would just make things worse, but I didn’t care.”

The silence stretched.

“I’m sorry,” Don finally said, and Tibs nodded. “But it does show you can make a choice. You learned it as a consequence of what you did, but you did learn. The belief of Oneness says that if we learn to recognize those moments with all of our emotions, we can learn to make that choice each time.”

“Don,” Tibs said with a sigh. “It isn’t because some people wrote something in a book that it means it’s true.”

“Maybe, but what do you have to lose by trying it?”

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Tibs walked through Market Place, fuming.

Breathe.

He’d spent one fucking hour just breathing, because those Oneness people had written that by listening to his breathing, he’d learn to recognize his emotions and control them. Well, he was annoyed at them. He recognized it, and he fucking wanted to feel it.

Breathe.

What did he have to lose, indeed? Time was what he was losing. And he already had so little of it. He should be at the inn, going over the accounts, but those people said he had to be among people, learn to listen to his breath through distractions.

He stopped at the candy shop and bought a handful. The goal was to enjoy them and relax, but he ended up crushing them between his teeth instead, and swallowing them. Whatever enjoyment the spicy sweetness might have given him was short-lived.

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do!” The impact of a punch followed the scream and Quigly staggered back out of the tavern.

Tibs took a step to help his friend, only to stop as Cross exited it, looking pissed.

“I think I have a say in the matter,” the warrior said, rubbing his jaw.

Tibs turned around. He knew better than to get in the middle of that.

“The only thing you get to say is how the fuck it happened,” Cross replied. “I’ve taken precautions!”

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Darran looked through the pages carefully, raising one to the window for the light to hit the back and searched for something. “How many did you say you have?”

“One and five stacks,” Tibs replied, “but they aren’t all the same. What are they?”

Tibs had found out the merchant was back when Darran stopped by the inn to check in on how Tibs’s time away had gone. Tibs had led the merchant to his shop so they could have that discussion, which led to him handing Darran a stack of the papers.

The merchant studied the page again before putting back on top of the stack. “These are Promises.”

“What do they promise?”

“This one—” he tapped the stack “—promises that whoever brings it to the coffers of the Kingdom of Arliase will be given the equivalent of ten bars of platinum.”

Tibs nodded, then hesitated. While he'd never seen one, he knew platinum was one of the coins worth more than gold, and Archer had said a bar was worth more than the same weight in on those coins. "How much is a bar of platinum worth?"

Darran laughed. "Do you remember how afraid you were that the guild would own you forever because they charge you three gold each time you train with your teacher?"

"I wasn't afraid. I was angry."

The merchant waved the comment aside. "You don't have to worry about that anymore. This Promise, by itself, assures you that the moment you reach Epsilon, you will be free."

Tibs stared in surprise, then reminded himself he wasn't waiting that long.

"I'd think you'd be happier about this," Darran said.

"I guess it's too much for me to understand."

Darran studied him, then shrugged. "I guess it can be." He pushed the stack to Tibs. "Keep them safe. They can be used any whoever holds them. It's why I expect they were well guarded."

"They're in the safest place in town," Tibs said, setting the top page aside before tying the leather strap over the bundle.

"And that is?"

Tibs chuckled as he put the stack in his satchel, sending it to the hidden pouch in his armor as soon as it was out of sight. He handed the one left to Darran. "You can have that one."

The merchant took a hurried step back, hands raised. "I couldn't."

"Why not?" Tibs asked, suspicious.

"I'm a simple merchant," he said, the words glowing. "I couldn't take this from you." Those didn't glow. That was odd.

"You could if you wanted to," Tibs said. Was that it? Darran was honest in not wanting to steal from him? They did it all the time; it was a game between them. But was this too valuable to be part of that? "You've helped me with my numbers, in getting the merchant to work with me to protect them. You've looked after me and my team. You deserve it." He studied the merchant and decided to poke at him slightly. "Or is the problem that I'm handing it to you and not that you are stealing it from wherever I've hidden the others?"

Darran's smile was small and quickly hidden. "If you insist." With a quick motion, it was out of Tibs's fingers and vanished among the many layers the merchant wore.

"If I want to use one of them, can you handle it? Or will I have to go to that kingdom?"

"If what you need done needs that much money, it's best to just give them one of the Promises, one for fewer than ten bars. And make sure they don't know you have more."

"What if I need to play many people with one?"

"Are you planning on taking over a kingdom?" Darran asked in surprise.

Tibs shrugged. "I'm just trying to understand what I can do with them."

"Anything!" Darran exclaimed with a laugh. "With a few of these, there is nothing you cannot do."

Tibs stifled the sigh and wished that was true.