

Planning-20

Tibs opened the door after the knock and sighed. The man on the other side was dressed in fancy armor, regalia, he'd heard that kind of attire called, and the fire essence coursing through him marked him as an adventurer, Epsilon, Delta at the most, but he was still a guard.

"What does he want now?" Tibs asked.

The adventurer didn't react to Tibs's annoyed tone. "Guild Leader Tirania requests the presence of Tibs Light Fingers and Don Arabis to a function held at the guildhall on the seventeenth of Mertal two hours before zenith." He looked down at Tibs. "She will expect you to be dressed properly."

"Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Be on time."

Tibs nodded and closed the door. This was the month of Mertal, the seventeenth was in three days. He headed to the chest and opened it. The new schedule wouldn't be up until the twenty-second, so this wouldn't interfere with their run. He took the silvers from the hiding spot in his armor and sent them to his pouch. How many would he need? He wasn't dressing like a noble, no matter what she might want, but even the set of good clothing Carina had made him buy wouldn't do. He put two and zero in the pouch, and three in his coin pouch.

"What are you doing?" Don asked as Tibs headed for the door.

"I need the right kind of clothing to attend that event."

"No. What are you doing, Tibs?"

He looked at the sorcerer. He was on his bed, a book in his lap, studying Tibs.

"I just told you."

"You've just been summoned like some pet to be put on display," Don replied, his tone growing hot, "and you're just going to get the right clothing to go?"

"I need to play the part if I'm to get the information I—"

"And you're okay with it?" Don all but screamed, jumping to his feet.

The cracks in the ice refilled nearly as quickly as they appeared. He hardly had to think about anymore. "It needs to be done."

"You don't have to be so fucking calm about it! The Tibs I knew, that drove me to pull my hair out, wouldn't just be standing there calmly going about the steps needed to get his plan to work. He'd have slammed the door in that adventurer's face, he'd have screamed and bitched, and then he would have gone on with getting the plan to work."

"And that Tibs would have destroyed this building in the process. I can't afford to have him around right now. Once I've made Tirania pay, then I can afford to get angry."

Don was next to him in three steps, then grabbed his arm. He looked where his hand was holding Tibs, surprised.

"You aren't suffused with water," the sorcerer said, his anger giving way to curiosity. "How are you doing it? The little I've read of people using their element to block how they feel requires them to suffuse themselves and never let go."

"Is that what you're reading about?" Tibs nodded to the book on the bed.

"No, that's a treatise on the role corruption play in the way the world function. My teacher's obsessed about demonstrating that corruption's a good thing for the world and he's having me read all sorts of stuff that's got nothing to do with my training so I can echo his stupid beliefs."

"You don't believe corruption can be good for the world?"

Don snorted. "I know it is. I just don't feel the need to scream it in the ear of people who aren't interested in listening. Nice try at sidetracking me. How are you doing it?"

Tibs shrugged. "I just do. I've had to learn a lot of ways to get around not having much of a reserve when I started. I don't spend a lot of time questioning how I do what I do. I just do it."

The sorcerer let go of him. "That makes sense, in a way."

"It does? I'd expect you to argue that everything has to be done in a set way."

Don dropped on the bed and move the book to the floor. He leaned against the wall and opened his hand, corruption floating above it in a cloud that took the shape of a kitten, then a duck.

"Why do you think that you don't use Water the same way as the archers, fighters, or sorcerers with the same element?"

Tibs shrugged. "Because we don't think the same way."

Don nodded. "But why should that matter? Water is Water. Corruption is Corruption. Same with the other element. The element is. So how is it that who you are means it's going to behave differently?" He waved his hand, and the cloud danced around it.

Tibs looked at his hand, made a cloud of mist, and moved his hand through it. The cloud parted, but didn't dance. He took hold of it, made ice crystals that reflected the light, and moved them around, creating a dance of glints and reflected light on the wall.

"I don't know."

"Exactly." Don smiled. "You don't know. And unlike most of us, me included, you aren't letting the guild tell you how it works."

"I'm listening to my teacher."

"What did he or she tell you about suffusing yourself with your essence?"

Tibs thought back on it. "That I had to be careful in how I did it. That I could hurt myself."

"Were you?"

Tibs remembered the pain as he absorbed more and more of Bardik's essence. How what he'd thought of as his limitless reserve filled and then cracked open.

He shook his head.

"Are you sticking to the lessons your teacher teaches?"

Tibs shook his head again.

"That's what I mean. Because you couldn't learn the way I did, the way the rest of us did, you didn't learn to just follow the training you were given. I'm not anymore, but it's hard for me to not let what I've been told can't or shouldn't be done stop me." The cloud took the shape of a spearhead. It wasn't still, although it no longer looked like a cloud, but a solid object made of a dark purple material.

"Corruption isn't hard," Don said, his breathing slowing as his gaze remained fixed on the spear, what Tibs now recognized as the sorcerer focusing. Something happened to it, both in how it looked and in how the essence was structured. "By its nature, it oozes around and through cracks. There are very few places corruption can't insert itself and then affect what is there. But being hard, solid? That isn't something that is in its nature."

The edges became more defined, sharper. Almost as if the essence was pulling in on itself, while still taking as much space as it had before. When the light glinted off an edge of the object, Don was sweating slightly, but he smiled and flung it at the wall.

Tibs had ice coating it and that is what the spear head embedded itself into. Immediately the corruption spread through it and Tibs let it, moving the ice away from the wall, making it a ball of water floating between the two of them.

"Maybe you shouldn't damage the place we live in."

Don blushed. "Sorry."

"If Corruption isn't supposed to be hard, how did you make it like that?"

"The same way you make the water ice. You put your mind to it."

"It's not hard for me to make water into ice."

"Because ice is something water can be. But in the end, that's always what we're going with the essence. We use our mind to make it do what we want. Some ways of thinking about it make getting specific results easier." Don gestured, and the corruption flew out, leaving only clear water behind. "But that's still just what we're doing. Any time your teacher tells you something can't be done. What they mean is that no one's come up with an easy way to do it."

"And that's what sorcerers work on, finding easier ways to do what's hard."

Don shrugged. "Some do. Most just try stuff and write about the results and move on to something else. As a group, we don't really care about the world. Our ideas are more interesting than anything out there."

"Is that how you feel?"

Don hesitated. His mouth glowed as he opened it, but he closed it before the words left. "I don't know." There was no light with the words. "Before I got here, I had all these ideas about what it meant to know stuff. I was going to be a scholar. My families had already paid the university, then..."

The corruption around his hand slowed its dance. "Now, having to survive the dungeon so often, I can't help thinking that the only thing I should focus on is learning how to be stronger for the sake of being stronger and nothing else."

There was a faint light around some words and flashed around 'nothing else'. Don wasn't telling him

everything; but then no one ever did. It was the one thing Tibs had learned, being able to see lies and secrets. Even when there were not bad intentions behind it, no one ever told the complete truth,

Except, possibly, Harry.

Don shook himself and absorbed the essence. "Okay, you are a master as sidetracking, Tibs. This was supposed to be about you, not me. That thing you're doing with the water, however you're doing it, it's not healthy."

Tibs sighed. "I'm fine."

"Was Harry fine?"

Tibs frowned. "He did his job, what he was told to, I don't—"

"But was he fine, Tibs?"

Tibs didn't know how to answer.

"Did you see his expression when Jackal told him he was a Wells after all? That, like all of them, he'd found a master to obey without having to think?"

Tibs remember Harry looking like Jackal had struck him.

"That wasn't the look of someone who was okay."

"I'm not like him."

"Not yet. How long do you think Harry was like that? So filled with light there was no space to feel anything? Especially that one thing he didn't want to feel?"

"A long time." It had to have been. How else did a man go against his family and gave himself entirely to another group without realizing they weren't all that different? "I'm not going to stay like this. Once I'm—"

"Done, yeah, so you said." Don leveled his gaze on him. "But do you believe it?"

The cracks spread and Tibs swallowed.

"I—" He closed his mouth as the light of the lie shone in his mind. He had to have imagined it. He'd often thought lies, and this hadn't happened.

"I do," he said.

The smirk Don gave told him the sorcerer didn't believe him, but he didn't comment further. "You're really going to spend money of looking like her pet?"

"I need her to trust me if I'm going to be able to pull this off."

"So, you have a plan?"

"I have the start of one, now that I know that—"

"Don't tell me."

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

"I'll help however I can, but don't tell me what the plan might be. Once you know what it is and what you'll need me to do, then tell me." He stood. "And if you want to be dressed properly to get her to trust you, you're going to need me to help pick the right clothing."

"You know what that kind of event requires?"

The sorcerer rolled his eyes. "I've stood at the periphery of enough of them to know what's expected."