

Planning-21

Tibs exited the clothier, mildly annoyed. She's been ecstatic to make him and Don a set of good clothes for what Don say was a reasonable number of coins, but she wouldn't stop swooning over them as she measured them and how the Heroes were at her shop. Partway through, townsfolk started coming in and watching the spectacle. Even Don seemed to grow annoyed at all the people and them telling stories of the two of them and the ways they protected the town.

The sorcerer grumbled as they walked through Market Place, and Tibs ignored him in favor of thinking of a way to get information on the function they were to attend. If Tirania wanted them there, would there be people above her attending? Was she going to use them to impress her superiors? What was the point of having him and Don—

He stopped as he felt the corruption. Someone powerful. Delta, possibly Gamma.

"Tibs?" Don called as he changed direction.

They weren't moving, so Tibs took a circuitous path, keeping booths between them. When he saw them, they weren't what he expected.

She was dressed in a simple blue robe with dark trim. A purple belt held pouches, and in them he sensed every element he could and more he couldn't identify. Some were concentrated in a way he figure they were amulets, while others felt like they were an object that had a lot of that element.

She laughs at something the seller said, as he handed her roasted meats on a skewer. It caused Tibs's stomach to rumble as a reminder he hadn't eaten anything since morning. She ate and said something that caused the seller to beam. Then she walked to another booth, where she talked with that seller before receiving a tankard.

"What is it?" Don whispered, sounding concerned.

The woman paused and looked around. Her gaze passed over Tibs and Don initially as they stood seven booths away and then returned to them. She beamed as she waked in their direction.

She waved. "Are you Don Arabis?" she called. "Corruption Sorcerer in training?" she had an accent like anyone not using magic to be understood.

Tibs looked at Don, who frowned, then straightened. "I am. Who are you?"

She gave a bow. "I am Anuja Kasaju, here on behalf of Tine Lemaire."

Don reacted to that name. "What does the head of the Derbinor Academy want with me?" he asked stiffly.

"Word of the pool that formed in this town reached us, and I have been sent to negotiate purchasing it from you."

"From me?"

"I inquired with those in the know within the town, who pointed me to a merchant. While he proved adeptly terse, I gathered enough to conclude he acted as agent for one of the Runner. Which is clever of you, since if you'd tried to own it yourself, the guild would have taken it from you the moment they realized what it is."

"And you think this merchant is acting for me?" Don stated.

"You are the only Runner with Corruption as an element. Who else would it be? The guild clearly doesn't understand, not that they ever did. All they care about are dungeons. They don't see the long-term potential of that pool."

"I see." He thought about it. "What are you offering me for it?"

"To start with; in exchange for ownership of the pool. Once you reach Epsilon, the Academy will pay what you owe to the guild. You will also be granted membership to the academy and access to our research."

Tibs couldn't tell if she was lying, but she was doing something to her words. He sensed the corruption in them, as well as light and darkness. He now had confirmation she was a sorceress. They reached Don and sunk into him, dispersing through his essence, but Tibs couldn't tell their effect.

"What else?" Don asked.

She smiled. "What more would you want?"

"I could use a trainer who—"

"What's the catch?" Tibs asked, and she startled.

"Tibs, I don't think you should get involved in this," Don said. "This isn't like negotiating with the merchants."

“What’s the catch?” Tibs asked again. “There’s always one. No one’s generous like that just for some pool that eats anything you throw in it.”

“That you think of it just as a pool,” she said, her words laced with the same elements as those she’d told Don, “show that you don’t understand enough to be involved in this discussion.”

The essences went into him, and he let them move about. The corruption wove through channels of dense essence within him, while the light and darkness moved up to his head, and as they moved about there, he agreed with her. This was clearly beyond anything he knew how to deal with, so he should leave them be.

He absorbed the essences. “Maybe I don’t understand much,” he said, deciding to walk the line between what she wanted and not leaving Don alone with her. “But I do understand that no one with a lot pays fair to get something from those who don’t have much.”

Don frowned. “He’s right. Your offer is too generous for what you’d get. You either know something I don’t about the pool, and yes, I know it’s special. I can feel how deep the essence is. It’s deeper than where my trainer took me to have my audience.”

She pulled her attention away from Tibs. “You indeed know much. But I don’t think you understand what that means to—”

“The ability to ask for an exorbitant amount of money,” Don said, raising a finger, then a second. “A place where you can pull on the essence without fear of ever running dry. Access to a dungeon for anyone you need to push through training. It’s too low right now for anything significant, but in three or four decades, it’ll have at least six floors and that will put it on par with most other dungeons. The only way this would be better was if the dungeon used corruption in its structure.” He smiled. “Which you’ll have learned it does as a reaction to the attack on it.” He looked at the three fingers. “Did you orchestrate the attack?”

“No,” she replied simply. There was no essence in the word and no light, so she was telling the truth.

“Could someone else in your group have planned it?” Tibs asked. He knew enough now to understand that Bardik could have been manipulated into it by a group like them.

“If they did, they didn’t have the approval of Academy Head Lemaire.”

“Alright,” Don said, “so let’s get back to the pool itself. That you’ll pay the guild what I owe them is generous enough. Access to the academy feels like you’re making sure I can’t say no. Which means I need to be careful. So what is the catch?”

“It isn’t a catch,” she said, her words again laced with the essences. “It’s simply what is expected of anyone who joins the academy. You will have to help with the research others are doing until you have learned enough of our methods to be trusted to do your own research.”

He wanted to pull the essence away from the words, but even if he could manage the strength to beat her will, she’d know. She might not tell it was him, but it would make her suspicious. He didn’t know enough about sorcerers to know what she sensed of the other essences she used, or how easy those would be to pull away.

Don nodded.

“What if he decides he doesn’t like it?” Tibs asks.

“Why wouldn’t he like it?” she replied, directed the words at Tibs. “The Academy is prestigious. Out scholars and sorcerers have pushed the boundaries of what is known of corruption and the way the world reacts to it.”

He nodded and absorbed the essence. “What if Don prefers exploring the world?”

“That is for adventurers,” she scoffed. “Whatever he’d want to know about the world once he had qualified to do his own research, he’ll be able to pay to have one of them investigate it.”

Tibs saw Don studying him. “What if he just wants to leave?”

“Why would he ever want to leave?” she asked.

Tibs shrugged. “He has family.”

“Who let him rot here,” she countered.

Don’s expression hardened.

“What if he just wants to leave? Travel, experience the world?”

“What class have they given you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “You’re too small for a fighter. You wouldn’t be asking those questions if you knew anything about research and sorcery. You’re either a rogue or an archer. Either way, you don’t understand that to us, what’s out here is only relevant in how it can help us advance our research.”

Tibs nodded, remembering something Don said just this morning. “So you don’t care about the rest of us.”

She chuckled. "We can't care about something that small when we're looking to change and improve the entirety of the world." She turned her gaze to Don, who had his expression attentively neutral again. "You understand that, don't you?"

Don didn't react to her words, even as Tibs sense the essence seep into the sorcerer and move about. Then something happened with Don's essence. It traveled through the channels and spread through his body from them. The darkness and light essence were pushed out, while Tibs lost track of her corruption as Don suffused his body.

The smile he gave her was...

Ice cracked as Tibs remembered how he'd been when channeling Corruption. Don's smile wasn't as vile and self-serving as Tibs remembered feeling, but in it, he saw an echo of how he'd acted as well as something of who Don had been until recently.

"You make good points," the sorcerer said, and she didn't look happy. "How can I get in contact with you once I've made my decision?"

"I was hoping to be able to return to the academy with the good news today."

Don made a show of considering it. "No, I'm not going to have an answer for you today. I have too much to do. If you won't stay, return in a few days and ask for me at the inn. They'll know how to get a message to me."

"Which inn?" She asked.

Don chuckled. "This isn't a city. There's only one inn. Just ask for where the Runners go."

"Alright," she finally said. "I'll return in three days and I—"

"Four days," Don said, and she glared at him. "I'm going to be busy that day. I am being honored by the guild for my accomplishments. The day after is better."

"Four days," she said darkly, "and I'll expect you to hand over ownership of the pool."

"Four days," he said, "and I will give you my answer as to if I'll hand over the ownership." Don walked away. "Come Tibs," he said imperiously. "I still need to get ready."

Tibs considered not going, simply because of the tone, but it was best she didn't see them disagreeing right now.

Don walked back straight, looking more like a noble among common folks than he had the first times Tibs had seen him. It lasted until they were out of Market Place and he turned into an alley to put the house between them and her.

He sagged against the wall, panting, and his essence went back into its reserve. "The bitch tried to manipulate me," he snarled. "You have no idea how close I came to giving her everything she wanted. If you hadn't asked questions and distracted her, I'd never have realized what she was doing. I fucking should have." He calmed himself. "I guess she didn't think enough of you to use essence to manipulate you," he said with a hint of the smugness reminiscent of how Don used to act.

Tibs shrugged. "How did you stop her? And is that what made you act like the old you?"

Don seemed shocked by the statement. "I'm sorry. Now you're probably thinking I don't actually mean it when I say I want to be better." He watched as Tibs shrugged again. "I protected myself by suffusing myself with essence. Sort of like you're doing right now, just not had hard. I didn't realize how exhausting it is to maintain it. How are you not unconscious from doing this all day?"

"Does Corruption make you resistant, the way Water makes me slippery when I suffuse myself with it?"

Don gave him another speculative look. "I don't know if this is something Corruption does, or it's simply that once suffused, there's no space left for intruding essence. Clearly she wasn't trying all that hard, because she has to be powerful if she's second to the Head of an academy." He snorted. "One time when being thought little of works in our favor."

"And do you own—"

"Look Tibs," Don cut him off. "That there, it wasn't me. I mean, it isn't who I want to be."

"I—"

"No, you don't understand. Maybe it was because of all that essence I had through me. Corruption is reputed to be about making things easy, and it was easy to act like that. Comfortable, and I am sorry for talking to you in that tone. I wasn't thinking, I just acted."

Tibs nodded and waited. "I understand," he said once Don remained silent. "And I appreciate doing what you have to, so you'll get out of a situation. I've had to do that often enough on the street. I do have one question."

Don looked at him worriedly. "No, I don't own the pool," he said before Tibs could ask.

Tibs nodded, thinking of the possibilities. "Would you like to?"