

Chapter 17

The lake was barely four and zero paces away from where Kragle Rock currently ended, but the ground was already marked for where more buildings would be added. Cutting that distance in half. Tibs didn't know what would happen once the town grew to reach the lake. Would baths be set up, the way he'd seen in the cities he'd traveled to in his search for his city? Those also had clothes-washing shop on the shore, and the water had been gray around them.

He crouched, placed a hand in the cool water, and sensed it; sensed for a difference in it and the water from a well.

The adventurer Tibs had tried to hire to remove the corruption from the pool at the end of Merchant Row had said that something had to have happened there that connected the pool to the element and made removing it impossible. Other than the unleashing of the concentrated essence that had caused the destruction, the only thing to happen was the audience Tibs had with Corruption there.

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

He sensed nothing out of the ordinary. There was a lot of water essence, and hardly none of the other elements, but this was a lake, so wasn't that how it should be? What had Alistair told him that day in the cavern with the distant waterfall? The closer to the element and the easier refiling their reserve became?

But what did that mean? Tibs felt he already refilled his reserve quickly and easily, considering how much water there was. The same as with Sto's pool on the second floor.

He looked over his shoulder and gauge the distance. Alistair had said that close enough to the element they could refill their reserve as fast as they used it. Unfortunately, the town was too close now for him to make an etching and see how much he could pour into it without people noticing the explosion that would cause, and investigate. Even if he waited the few hours until the sun set, someone would hear.

And this wasn't why he was here.

He stepped into the clear water and walked until it was over his head. He continued to walk, keeping himself from floating up, and reached the center of the lake. It wasn't quite the lowest point. That was a few paces to his left; a hole through which water floated up and in. Water was all around him. He was as close to the element as he knew how to be.

Now, he needed a strong emotion.

He couldn't rely on his fear of dying. He understood now that he couldn't drown, so there was no way to trick himself. Water didn't hurt him. Even without creating air to breathe, he didn't suffocate.

But there were other emotions than fear of dying.

Tibs saw how powerful Jackal's love for Kroseph was in the way the fighter changed his outlook on life for him. He saw Mez's dedication to his ideals through the pain he endured to maintain them.

Tibs had neither of those.

But he had an emotion buried under the ice. All he needed to do was let it shatter, and Tibs would feel more than he'd ever wanted to. More than he thought he could endure.

At least here, when he exploded, the town would be safe.

Unless the explosion was such, the lake was sent into the air and fell down on it.

He stopped channeling water, and the thought made him chuckle.

How much destruction could the lake cause to Kragle Rock?

Water could cut mountains, given time; that was how powerful it was. That took ages of it carrying a little stone away as it flowed. Thrown at a mountain, water simply splashed.

He didn't remember why he'd asked, but Carina had laughed, and then explained how

Tibs screamed as Sebastian's knife moved across Carina's throat. Blood gurgled over the blade. Tibs screamed as his essence didn't find purchase within Carina to save her. He screamed as he pulled his essence out of the water sorcerer; then did the same with the earth, fire, and all the others. He screamed as he shattered piece after piece of Sebastian.

Tibs screamed, and the water boiled.

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

No, it wasn't. It would never be. Tibs wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of Sebastian's legacy or of 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, as he did, cooling it until he barely felt its ember. She put distance between it and Tibs. He knew it was still rage, but that distance reduced its influence.

But it didn't remove it.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why did she have to die?" He stood. "Why did you let her die?"

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

"Why not? Your essence gets there. So why aren't you 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 gently. "You simply chose not to acknowledge it because you want someone to hurt."

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 rage.

"How did I have an audience with Metal?"

"You met the requirements."

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

"And you thought it would be the end of it," she stated.

Tibs sighed. He had, hadn't he? But... "Will it ever end? Am I going to have to chase after all the elements?"

She considered him, flowing down to a knee, so they were eye-to-eye. "You are not required to do anything. You are on a path..." she smiled. "You are on a stairwell where each of us can help you move to the next step. But you can stop anytime you desire. You can return to it, or not, as you decide."

At least the choice was his. “What happens when I reach the top of that stairwell?”
“It ends.”

That sounded ominous.

“But I don’t have to go that far.”

“This is your path, Child of Human. How far along you go is only for you to decide.”

“Do you have any advice for me?”

She smiled. “Choose wisely, but with the power 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 useful. He noticed her smile had turned sad. Had he misunderstood what she’d meant? Was she warning him that others would be a danger to him? That the power itself could be a danger to him and other? He knew fire was. Did she mean... why was he asking himself those questions?

“Can you explain what you mean?”

“The warning is the extent of what I can do. The rest of for you to work out.”

Of course it was. “Is there an order in which I should seek the other elements?” How many were there? Two and four, maybe? Alistair had said something about the Arcanus and Letters.

“The order is also for you to decide. Although, because of what you are, some may come to you without having to seek them. But what you are will not protect you, or ensure you reach them. 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?” he asked before he even realized the question. “Why does the shadow exist? Why could I take it? What is this all about?”

“I do not know,” she said, sadly. “The shadow was there when I became aware. Throughout what you refer as the ages, some have noticed it. 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 for yourself.”

He frowned. “Is this about—”

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Water filled his mouth, and he trashed.

He was underwater. Where was the surface? He couldn’t drown after having had his audience with Water. He had to—

He closed his mouth, angry at himself. How could he forget so easily water was not a threat to him? What next? He’d be afraid of a tankard filled with water? Would the next assassin just have to throw water at his face for him to cower in fear?

The blade sliced across her neck. His essence couldn’t find purchase. Another piece of Sebastian snapped off with a satisfying sound out of the man’s mouth.

Tibs opened his mouth to—

He turned himself to ice so hard the water crackled and snapped, pressing against him. Then he sense motion as the block of ice, and him in its center, moved up. He willed it to stop and fought with it. Ice floated on water, so it resisted being submerged.

He melted it and swam toward the shore, stopping as he sensed people.

There were a few guards among the people assembled on the town side of the shore.

The swords at their hips marked them as such. Three had the concentrated essence of adventurers. The sun was still above the horizon, so he'd be seen if he moved closer. The lake was small enough they'd notice him no matter where he came out.

Had he attracted their attention? Had Water not taken him to his audience in time to stop the boiling he'd initiated? there was nothing in the essence in the water to tell him what had happened.

He sat and waited.

Most left before darkness fell onto the lake, the adventurers the first among them. Duties calling, or was there nothing that could hold their interest long after the lives they lived? A few were still there when Tibs exited, hidden by the lack of the sun, the light from their torched not being adequate to cover the whole shore, and darkness essence.

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Tibs heard about the lake exploding over food the next morning. The lake hadn't flown up and onto the town, not even a drizzle had made it to the buildings, but those in the inn spoke of the thunder that had sounded in that direction. Some claiming to have been close enough to see the water erupt.

Some said Everburn making its way there was the reason. Others said it was a creature that had escaped the dungeon and made its way to the lake. And on the heel of that story, someone claimed to have fought that creature.

"What do you think caused it?" Jackal asked him, the smirk barely hidden.

"I was..." Tibs glanced in Don's direction, who was focused on his meal. He would have been in the room, so might question an assertion Tibs had been sleeping. "On the roofs. I didn't hear it."

"No, or course you didn't." Jackal smirked and went back to eating.

When he was done, Don left.

"What happened?" Kroseph asked Tibs as he took the sorcerer's empty plate and tankard.

"I don't know," he replied with a shrug. "I was running the roofs on the other side of the town."

"Of course." The server smiled. "Why could I even think you'd know anything about it?"

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Tibs was impressed with the house.

He'd walk by each day to see the progress, and in one and three days, the first was completed, others almost nearly so. It, and the others, was two stories, large enough to accommodate a family of six, possibly seven. It was plain enough no noble would want to live here, but the townsfolk would love one of them. As would the people who'd been brought to look after the urchins.

Well, most would.

"Why did you have to use *that* to paint the awnings?" the man standing before the nearly completed house to the left said. "If you aren't using Darmanian paint, this is going to fade after the first rain."

The woman who'd entered the building exited, shaking her head. "They won't listen to me. The wardrobe isn't even varnished. The mattress is," she shuddered, "feathers. And

we're going to have to bring water ourselves.”

Tibs stared at them. They weren't dressed like nobles, but acted like them. Why did they care for the color of paint, or how plain the furniture was? They were getting a house to live in while looking after runners.

Tibs paid for his room, and it was smaller and plainer than that house.

A snuffle at his calf made him look down. The dog looked at him, head canted to the side. It was much larger than Thump, with bright red fur and brown eyes that glinted with mischievousness.

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

“That's not for you,” he told her. “It's for...” he motioned to the dog.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Ravager,” she answered.

He looked at Ravager in surprise. There was no violence in those eyes. “I think it tricked you. You should call it Trickster.”

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

Tibs crouched. “Don't listen to her.” He broke a piece of the jerky and gave it to the dog. “You're going to be a fun loving one. Always getting the others in trouble with you, 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—” she closed her mouth. “What am I doing? She doesn't understand you. She barely understands my signals yet.”

He rubbed between the dog's ears as he straightened. “I'm surprised the guild spent coins to build something this nice for the Omegas and those caring for them.” He nodded to the house.

Serba watched him before looking at the house. “The guild isn't paying to have them built.”

“Who is?”

She shrugged. “Whatever family sent their undesirable members here.”

“Why would any family not want some of them?”

She snorted. “You do remember Jackal wants nothing to do with the rest of his family, right?”

“And he left. So did you. Sebastian didn't send him away.” The ice cracked as the name crossed his lips.

She didn't answer immediately, watching the couple who were now speaking too softly with one of the workers for Tibs to make out the words, but they weren't making a good impression.

“They're from wealthy families. Minor nobles, merchant family, or would be nobles. They all have two things in common. Lots of money, and a need to appear respectable. They always end up producing the kinds who have no interest in behaving in 'proper' ways. Could be as simple as not wearing the family's colors, associating with the 'wrong' kinds of people, or they bedded the wrong person and now there's an heir no one can find out about. It's hard to make sure those indiscretions don't come to light. My father had scores of people whose job was to discover things like that about the 'respectable' families back home. With them, he filled his coffers easily.”

She studied the couple, now in a heated discussion together. “She's the one they had to remove. He's her lover. Probably from a rival family, so both families might have put

money toward sending them away. She's used to better things than he is. He might get used to living here, but not her." She looked at Tibs. "The guild made it known that for a small fee, they'd allow such people under their care and would ensure no one ever learned of their indiscretions. And that they'd be allowed to buy land and not pay the usual fees for having the houses build."

"So the guild isn't doing this." The ice cracked. Why was he even surprised?

She shrugged. "They made the opportunities available, but no, they aren't paying for the houses."

"Then why isn't the house being built the way they want since they're paying for it?"

Serba chuckled. "They aren't who's paying. Their families are. I doubt they paid for anything more than the minimum. Maybe specifically so that would happen." The woman looked angry now. "Families who are okay with unconventional relatives don't resort to hiding them as far as they can. And those who do aren't interested in their happiness. This is all a racket for the guild to make money." She glanced at him. "Are you surprised?"

"I was hoping..." he filled the cracks. Why had he even bothered?

"The guild's about money, Tibs. The adventurers they make? They work for gold. 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 while the town burns, waiting for the folks to be desperate enough to pay them to deal with it. You think that's something they learn anywhere other than in the guild?"

Tibs shook his head.

Everyday Alistair trained him, Tibs owed the guild three more gold. He was fortunate in that his teacher didn't believe in useless training, so he only came every few days, leaving Tibs to practice what he'd learned. But Jackal had to see his trainer every day, as did Mez, Don, and most of the Runners, he expected.

Tibs would owe the least to the guild by the time he was Epsilon, and he still had no idea how he'd ever replay so much gold.