

Planning-1

With a scream, the wind ripped the crate apart, and the broken wood flew in all directions, one shattered plank hit the wall, embedding itself in it. Tibs kept screaming as he tried to keep the pieces within the whirlwind. When the last of it flew out, the wind died, and he dropped to his knees.

He wiped at his eyes and cursed himself for it. He didn't have the time for tears or the pain of loss. He wished he could keep himself filled with ice and not feel it, but he had to train and he needed to channel other elements for that. Water was a great element to fight and defend with, but if he was going to bring the guild down, he needed to master all his elements.

They knew he had Water, and they'd have many adventurers multiple ranks above his. Tibs's one advantage was his multiple elements. So he had to train in them. Figure out how to recreate what he'd seen other Runners or Adventurers do with them.

He got back to his feet and gritted his teeth.

He'd seen Carina use Air to turn items into projectiles. He'd even seen how she'd woven the essence to make it happen.

He recreated the weave, and as the wind picked up in the center of the abandoned warehouse, it was already frayed at the edges. He concentrated, willed the edges back into place, added essence to increase the wind and fought to keep the weave from breaking under the added pressure.

Dirt from the floor rose into the whirlwind, along with smaller debris left over for the day's previous practice. There, that was how it should be. All he had to do was alter the weave like—it broke apart, dirt, small pieces of wood and nails dropping to the floor and Tibs screams.

"Why? Why can't I do this?" he demanded, but didn't wait for an answer. It wouldn't come. Air was too busy having fun to bother with helping him avenge someone who had been dedicated to her.

Killing Sebastian hadn't been enough. He'd been the one to kill Carina, but he'd only been able to do so because the guild hadn't upheld its part of the bargain with the people of the town, with the Runner it had brought here to serve as food for the dungeon. To indenture in its service when they survived.

That was what Alistair told him in a softer way. What Bardik showed him through his punishment. Everyone within the guild acted like Runners were valuable.

And yet, they'd been left to fend for themselves when Sebastian had first tried to gain control of the town, and then when he returned to destroy it.

To destroy Tibs.

Tibs screamed, as he couldn't keep from seeing the man running the knife along Carina's throat. As he tried and was kept from saving her life.

He wanted to channel fire and let it feed his rage, but there would be nothing left of the building if he did, of the neighborhood. As angry as he was, maybe the only thing that would survive would be the guild, and that was the opposite of what he wanted.

He switched to Earth. Sent it out to make the ground ripple, then flatten it. He wove it around the dirt, lifted that in the air. The weave still frayed, but not as much. There was something in the way the earth essence behaved that led to it wanting to stay.

He moved the dirt, added essence to get it to increase speed. If he couldn't get wind to make the sand blast the way Carina had, maybe earth could do it.

The problem with Earth was that it didn't want to move fast. Skilled adventurers could make columns of earth that slammed into their opponents, crushed them, buried them. Tibs had done it with some thugs that had attacked the town as a distraction.

But this wasn't what he wanted. He wanted a whirlwind of dirt and sand to blast everything it touched. He wanted the sand to fly around him and the people he wanted to protect.

All it did was move in a lazy circle. Cursing, he pulled air essence from his bracer and wove it through the earth to have it gain speed, but the weave exploded as the essences mixed, instead of working together.

That could be done! He knew it, since Sto was filled with weaves containing multiple essences. Sorcerers could pull multiple essences and weave them together. Carina had told him. She'd been looking forward to learning how to do it, had prepared for it.

With a scream, Tibs gathered the earth essence into a ball and threw it at the other end of the building, where one of the few remaining crates exploded from the impact.

"Fine!" if that wasn't going to work, he'd practice something else. He channel corruption. "Let's see how you like this one," He growled.

He let the essence spill away from him, and the air took on a putrid smell. This didn't like the smell, but it no longer made him want to throw up. The ground bubbled there something had fallen there or was trampled just under the surface. The broken planks rotted, nails melted. Everything took on a purplish tint to them as, even if some of the elements could resist corruption, they still had parts of them that could be affected.

The dirt in the ground wasn't all Earth. It had whatever had been dropped and got mixed in. There were insects, and small burrowing animals. He didn't let the essence seep into the ground. He didn't want to kill those. Even the rats he knew lived in the cracks of the walls.

He hated rats, but they hadn't done anything to him. It was the stone ones Sto made Tibs took pleasure destroying.

He pulled the essence to his hand and made it spin. He had a whirlwind of it, but other than melt what it came into contact with into putrid goo, it did nothing. He needed a weave for it to have a controlled effect, or an etching. Recreating his 'x' attack with any element other than water did nothing useful.

The knife flick worked better, since all he needed to do was pull the essence at the point of the knife and flick it at his target, but he could do that with only a thought now, and doing it with fire or corruption had destroyed the knife. One melted the metal outright, the other melted it into goo. He had to focus harder when using those to keep them from affecting the knife, so why bother?

He stilled the essence and sent it flying at a broken crate. The wood rotted away again. This element, like fire, was nothing but destruction. At least this one let him remain in control, no matter how raw his emotions were.

"What have you been doing in here?"

Tibs spun and flung the essence at the speaker. No one had any business bothering him.

He realized who'd spoken as the man's skin turned stone gray at this approaching purple cloud. It was the only sign Jackal was worried.

"No!" Tibs yelled, and dissipated the essence until there was too little for it to do much. There was always corruption around them, just like every other element. Everything was composed of most of them.

Tibs glared at the fighter and yelled. "What are you doing here? I could have hurt you."

"It's time."

Tibs spun and channel light. He'd yet to find something useful to do with it, which meant he had to practice more. "I'm not going." He made a ball of it, and it glowed over his hand.

"Tibs," Jackal said. "You have to come. She'd want you there."

"You think her parents want me there?" He demanded, whirling and throwing the ball of light at Jackal. The fighter stepped aside, and the essence hit the wall, splashing light and nothing else happened. "I got her killed!"

"No, Tibs, you didn't. My father did that. Everything that happened is on him, and you made him pay. Now it's time with Carina so her family can do the rites they need."

"They don't need me for that." He channeled darkness this time. It was more than the light's opposite. It weakened, possibly to the point of death, Tibs thought. That he could make use of—

"It's not about them, it's about you."

"I don't want to go," he repeated. How much essence would he need for something to become so weak it wasn't able to live anymore?

"You have to go."

"No. I don't!" he caught himself about to throw the darkness at his friend and let go of the essence. He let go of all of them. "I don't want to see her again! No, like that!" the tears came and let them. "It's not fair. She was going to be a great sorcerer and because your father wanted to hurt me, she's dead!"

Before the pain could overwhelm him, Jackal had his arms around Tibs. "I know. But it's what happened. Now we have to go on, and that means going to her home, being there for the rites and saying goodbye to her."

"I don't want to," Tibs said as he sobbed, holding on to the fighter.

"I know."

"They're going to hate me."

"They won't. If they have to hate anyone for this, it's going to be the guild. They were supposed to protect Carina and us. She died because they didn't do what they should have."

"I hate them," Tibs growled, envisioning that building burning, or melting to purple goo, or filling it with darkness until no one in it had the strength to draw breath anymore.

“I do to.”

Tibs shoved himself away from Jackal. He'd intended to push his friend, but even if he wasn't stone anymore, there was still Earth essence through the man anchoring him to the ground.

“How can you say that and be so fucking calm about it!”

Jackal looked at him and Tibs wanted to hate his friend for how calm he looked.

“Because if I let myself be angry, I'm going to hit stuff.”

Tibs laughed and motioned at the wreckage he's made of the inside of the warehouse. “So hit something!”

“I don't want to hit something, Tibs. I'll want to hit people. I'll want to hit those who let this happen, but I won't be able to, so I'm going to want to hit anyone that's in reach, and I can't use the pit, because there's no one to fight there. Even those who are healed aren't in a state to fight. So I can't let myself get angry. I'll do that during our next run. Sto can take the damage I'll cause.”

Tibs ground his teeth. “Fine.” He channeled Water. Then he used it to cool his anger. As before, he had to make ice before the desire to switch to fire and burn everything went away.

Jackal nodded and motioned for the exit.

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Tibs thought he recognized one of the three women holding the stretcher over which Carina's body rested. She might have been at the meal Tibs had shared with Carina's family, which would make her a sister, cousin, or an aunt. None of the five other seemed familiar.

He'd expected to arrive as they were about to step onto the platform. Instead, he now had to put up with being used for another of Tirania's show.

“Tragedy strikes in all forms,” the woman said, and Tibs contemplated letting go of water. He wouldn't pick fire. There were too many here who were innocent, had not been here when they were attacked, or were Sebastian's victims, too. But she thought him subservient, so he would catch her by surprise as she went on about those left behind. He could wrap her in corruption, watch her melt into goo.

It would feel so good to hear her screams turn to gurgles.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. Spoke of how he was continuing through the pain of loss, how everyone needed to use him as an example.

Maybe he could explode her with light. If nothing else, it might get her to admit all this was a lie. Then the down might do his work for him.

But what would killing her accomplish beyond his immediate satisfaction? The guild would simply send another one like her to rule the town. Just like they's replaced the guard leader until one did the job the way they wanted it done. They would act like they cared for the people here while secretly... what? Tibs still had no idea why the guild did what it did. Alistair spoke of it having reasons, but hadn't said what they were. He hadn't sounded like he knew.

Ice was good for that. Jackal could hold his anger away simply by deciding not to be angry. Ice did that for Tibs and kept him from acting rashly. It amused him that Water and Earth could be alike in ways.

No, if he wanted to keep Kragle Rock safe from the guild, he had to find out how to end all of it, not just the person in charge of his dungeon.

“And we will march on,” Tirania said. “We will honor the fallen by rebuilding, by becoming stronger. When the next challenge comes at us. We will know we can defeat it because together we already defeated many.”

The crowd cheered, but not as enthusiastically as on the day after Sebastian's death. People had had time to think and consider what Tirania had meant then. Maybe her words no longer sounded true to them as Tibs knew them to be false by the light they were carried on. Not all of them were lies, just too many for Tibs to care about those that weren't.

The woman Tibs thought he recognized looked particularly angry as she stood there, listening. Could clerics or any of those who had Purity as an element use it to know when someone lied? Wouldn't lies be impure? Paulo had made it so Tibs understood their language because there was something about information words carried having pure meaning. Or something like that. Tibs didn't remember. He'd been dreading going hungry in the dungeon and hadn't paid as much attention as he should have.

“May all the dead return to the Elements,” Tirania said, “as this fallen hero does.” She stepped aside, and the procession climbed the steps to stand in the center of the platform.

Tibs stepped down and rejoined what was left of his family. They would be the next ones to go. The only ones allowed to go. Others had asked, he'd been told. Tandy wanted to go, had demanded to be allowed, even begged.

Tibs could probably have helped. He might have if he'd learned about it sooner than as they walked to the platform. But he'd been too busy training. That was the best use of his time right now.

The essence shifted over the platform; the air turned golden, then the progression, along with the Attendant, vanished.

The Attendants.

They were cowards, but Tibs didn't hold them responsible for the deaths. There would have been fewer if they'd stayed to transport people away, but the guild wouldn't have let the Runners go. It never will. He might feel differently once he let go of the ice, but they had never promised to protect anyone. Their job was to ferry people back and forth. Sebastian had targeted the platform and the Attendants during the Siege. They had every reason to believe they would be attacked, so fled.

He understood cowards. He if hadn't killed Don for abandoning him to his fate, he couldn't hold the Attendants responsible either.

At least that was how he felt with the ice in him so cold it cracked as he walked up the steps and stood in the center.

Tirania hadn't even bothered having them wear the bracelet as a way to force them to return. Did she think their actions had showed they were so devoted to the town and the guild the threat wasn't needed anymore? Was she lying to herself and believing loving the town meant loving the guild?

She didn't have to worry on his account, at least. Tibs would return.

Tibs would be back and he would make her regret ever making him think she cared for any of them.