

Stepping up-11

“I’m going to the lake,” Tibs told the guard as he approached the town’s perimeter. The guards were watching it more intently since they had forced recruits again.

“You can’t—oh, it’s you,” she said, her lantern light shining on him. She studied him. “It’s fine.” She didn’t sound happy about it and turned to continue her patrol.

Tibs walked through the field in the dark, Claria the only moon visible through the cloud cover, and emptying. In a few weeks it would be Torus’s twin, before starting her voyage toward becoming herself again. He’d heard bards’ stories of the two lovers, cursed with being apart, Claria always trailing Torus, slowing turning into a copy of him, before the curse forces her back. He’d thought it a silly story, but now he knew about Sto. He’d seen the way Jackal looked at Kroseph, Pyan and Geoff, and others. He could believe stories of magic now, of transforming beings. Of people being so in love, they’d do stupid things for one another.

Tibs used the sense of the essence to guide him until his foot stepped into the water. Jackal had suggested Tibs talk to corruption. It had been a Jackal thing, the same way wanting to fight in the arena had been. Or saying the wrong thing when talking to Kroseph. It was well-intentioned, wrong, but had something smart mixed in.

There was no way Tibs was stepping close to the corruption pool, corruption was bad. Everyone knew that. And based on Don, he could just imagine how the element would be. He wanted nothing to do with it.

But he could talk with Water. She would understand his plight. Water was about comfort, understanding, support, helping people get better. She’d help him.

So long as he could get an audience with her.

He stepped into the water, letting out his breath slowly. The water was icy. Much colder than he expected. His clothing didn’t offer protection as it seeped through and around them. He’d worn an older set, along with only a knife, a normal one. One he didn’t mind losing. He didn’t expect this audience to cost him his equipment, but the one with Fire, which had left him burnt so bad only draining a golem’s life essence had kept him from dying and had destroyed everything he’d worn, had taught him to be cautious.

Water could destroy. Not as quickly or as eagerly as fire, but Tibs had realized that no element was benign. Air could shred skin, earth to pound bones into dust, fire liked to consume everything and water could cut as well as a knife. It was what his graduating test showed him.

He gasped as the water reached his waist. It was freezing. He chuckled as he waited to adjust. Maybe this would calm Jackal’s ardor for Kroseph. Wasn’t there a story about cold water calming lustful beasts? Tibs could understand how it had come about now. Even if he was interested in doing that with someone right now, with that part of him freezing, he wouldn’t be thinking about it.

He stepped further into the lake, figuring he’d stop once the water was at his elbows and ready himself. As he considered how he’d do that, the ground vanished from beneath his feet and the water was over his head.

He panicked, fought to regain the surface. Only once he was breathing again did he remember he wanted to be submerged and stopped fighting. He hadn't expected the bottom of the lake to drop off that suddenly. It had looked like a smooth angle as far as he'd been able to see when he'd come in the daytime.

Then he was surprised his body didn't immediately sink. Once he was still, his feet started moving up, tilting him, and he had to pedal and wave his hands about to keep them pointed down.

He was curious why that was, but he didn't have the time to investigate. He released his water essence, spread it around him, grabbed more of it in the lake, and used it to pull himself down until his feet touched the bottom again.

The silence was different under the water. He hadn't noticed that when in the water pool in the dungeon, with Sto laughing and mocking him. It was heavier, pressing down on him, instead of being fleeting. This silence had a solidity to it that was comforting. This, he decided, was the feeling of being utterly alone with yourself, but being at peace with it. The solitude of self-reflection.

Then his lungs began burning.

He had to open his mouth, take in the water. Ganny had said that intense emotions were needed to have an audience, and Tibs figured being about to die was as intense as it got. Surprisingly, knowing it wouldn't actually kill him didn't make breathing water any easier.

Or maybe it was because he wasn't entirely certain this would work. Alistair had warned him he could only have one audience. Getting audiences with other elements had been a way around it, technically—Tibs groaned at his own use of the word—but they had still been first audiences.

Now he was attempting to have a second one with an element. If it didn't work, like Alistair warned, he would die, and Tibs didn't want to die, not now that he had a family, a town.

He still had to do this, and he believed he wouldn't die. Alistair's certainty about what he knew no longer had the same effect on Tibs, now that he'd done so many things his teacher had said couldn't be done. He had more than one element, for one thing.

He forced his mouth open, then sucked in water.

He coughed, trashed, stopped himself as he was about to propel to the surface. Fear clamored he needed to go up, to reach air, otherwise he—

Tibs frowned, took a breath, felt his lungs inflate. His body no longer acted like he was drowning. He looked around. The water was still dark. He was still in the lake, so why was he no longer drowning. It had happened once he'd been in Water's presence the last time. Once he'd found himself wherever Water existed.

He felt his reserves and groaned, sensing that air was lower than it should be. In his panic, he'd found a way to breathe underwater. There was air essence around him, and he was calling to it to fill his lungs.

He huffed in annoyance, bubbles rising before him, and clamped down on his reserves. Why was it so hard not to use them when he'd had had so much difficulty learning to access his first one? It was like air knew what he was trying to do and was being difficult.

Which, having met Air, he wouldn't put past them.

But this wasn't the element, it was essence, his essence, and he could control what it did. That had been Alistair's first lesson. His essence wasn't the same as that which was outside it, and with enough will, he could make the essence around him his too.

Now he had to use that will to ensure he didn't use any of it. He didn't want to find out how he'd use earth to keep from drowning, or fire.

Could he start a fire under the lake? How much essence would that require? There wasn't much fire essence here, but it was there.

He was distracting himself, he realized, as he took a breath of water and air filled his lungs.

He cursed loudly, hearing only the sound of air bubbles escaping his mouth. That wasn't as satisfying.

He retook control of his essence and locked each of his reserves, hardened what he thought of as the walls around them. He made them thick enough that he barely felt his reserves through them, and when he breathed in water again, this time only water filled his lungs and his body reacted to the wrongness.

He focused on keeping himself from accessing his reserves. He couldn't breathe for this to work. He had to let himself drown.

Fuck! He was drowning.

He opened his eyes, looked for a sign of where the surface was. Remembered he had essence, nearly used it. No! He couldn't. He had to. He was going to die! He tried to kick off the lake's floor but found only water under his feet. He'd drifted while he was distracted. He swam for the surface as hard and as fast as he could. His lungs hurt. He needed air, and he was being an idiot for not using his essence to get some. Even Jackal wasn't that much of an idiot, and the man had gone up against better fighters without using his essence just for the fun of it.

His hand dug into mud, and before he understood it, his face was in it too. He took a breath, a part of his mind screaming that anything that wasn't water that to be better, and he now had earth in his lungs.

He should panic, but he was out of strength. He hated himself for making such a stupid mistake. Alistair had told him he couldn't have a second audience. Tibs had known better. His teacher knew everything. He should have listened. Now he was going to—

He eagerly sucked in water, felt so much relief at no longer feeling the burn in his lungs that he missed how bright the water was, how clear.

"Welcome back, child of humans," a soothing voice said, and immediately Tibs calmed. "It has been a long time since one of you came a second time." The suggestion of a form moved before him. Hints of a woman, nurturing, reassuring.

Tibs smiled. "Hello." She smiled back, and he felt better. She would help him. "I need your help."

She floated before him, considering him. "I see you have talked with Earth, Fire, and Air." She frowned. "There is something in you." She approached.

"That's what I need your help with. I was soaked in corruption, and I can't get rid of it

all. I need you to remove it.”

She touched his chest with a finger and the coolness soothed him. “I cannot. Such is not mine.”

“But, I need it out of me. It keeps getting in the way, it’s going to get me killed, eventually. How am I going to do what you want me to do if that happens?”

She tilted her head. “I? I have no want for you to accomplish.”

“But you said, that it had been a long time since someone had tried to get this element, that you hoped I’d do a better job of it.”

“It has. But my hope that you will be better than they were does not mean I have wants for you to accomplish.” She tapped the spot on his chest where he felt his reserve to be. “This is for you to decide how to use. It is for your wants and needs. It will burn as hot as you want, be as solid as you need, as flighty as it can, and as comforting as you desire. All those of wants for you to decide on.”

“What if I do it wrong?”

“Then you do so.” There was no judgment in her voice. “What you have is powerful, and your kind is not always good at holding power. You will not be alone if you also do so.”

Tibs remembered why he’d wanted it, and he was there again, a child listening to his mother crying as men who should protect her used her in the way nobles who came to his street used people, and left only husks or corpses.

And he was back in the water. “Am I wrong to want revenge?”

“You are human,” was her answer.

He nodded when she didn’t add anything else. Maybe the element didn’t see right and wrong the way people did. Alistair had said they weren’t like him. The elements were different, not human.

“What can I do to remove the corruption? The clerics removed a lot of it, and more left in time, but this seems to want to stay.”

“Talk with Corruption.”

“I can’t.”

“You must.”

“But it’s wrong.”

She considered him. “It is what you must do if you want to continue on the path of your choosing.”

His choosing? “You mean my element? I thought all I had to do was get an audience with you, Air, Fire, and Earth. I did unlock it when I did that.”

“Oh, child of human, that was but the first step on the path you chose. If you want more, you need to speak with Purity, Light, Darkness, and Corruption. You need their part of this.” She tapped his chest again.

“What will happen once I’ve done that?”

She smiled. “You will discover it when it is done.”

“And is that going to be the end of it?”

She looked at him; her smile turning sad, but said nothing.

No, it wouldn't. Or course it wouldn't be it. She'd told him he was embarking on a hard path, and he'd thought nearly dying had been as hard as it would get. Now that she'd set him on the next step, he had a sense of what the others would be.

How much power would he gain when he'd gotten these audiences? What would he gain afterward? When would he have too much of it?

"Can I stop?" he asked. "If I have enough, can I decide not to go any further?"

"It is your path, child of human. You get to decide how far you go on it."

The confirmation made him feel better.

"I guess I should go," he said reluctantly. He'd be back in the lake, drowning. The mud had to be because he'd swam down instead of up. But had his body moved while he was here? Had his body left the lake?

He hadn't asked Alistair what had happened in the cavern, once his teacher let go of him and Tibs found himself in Water's realm. Jackal had started above the ground and ended up under it. But was that because his teacher had buried him, or he'd moved there as part of his audience with Earth?

"I suppose you must," Water replied. "Do keep your wits about you, child of human. You will need them." She placed a hand on his chest and pushed him away.

He was in darkness again. His lungs hurt. He didn't know where the surface was. He trashed and nearly opened his mouth, but her warning came to him. He had to think, stay calm. If he swam blindly, he could hit the bottom again. He extended his senses and felt earth to his left, close enough he could touch it. This meant the surface was to his right. He turned and kicked off. Swam hard, telling his lungs that any moments now they would get air, but that didn't diminish the burning or kept his arms and legs from getting heavier.

He broke the surface and took a deep breath, then coughed and hacked out water. In the distance he saw the town's lights and swam towards them, soon finding mud under him, and walked the rest of the way, lying down and looking at the sky.

Torus was the one visible through the clouds now. Its perpetual crescent pointing to where the sun would rise. It had been something odd, the first time he'd watched the sunrise from one of the roofs. Back on his street, Torus didn't point to the sunrise; he pointed a little off from it. The sun coming from the left horn, instead of between them, like it did here.

Tibs didn't know what it meant. It was one of the world's mysteries leaving his street had revealed, such as the seasons being different. Or how it could be late evening when he left Kraggle Rock, but midday when he arrived in MountainSea, or early morning in another city, or also evening in yet another one. It was like each city had its own rules for how time passed.

He stood and shivered at the wind cut through his wet clothes. He reached for the water essence coating him and pushed it off him, only to find his mental fingers slipping through it without effect. As panic set in, he felt from his reserves and sighed in relief on finding each of them. What he'd done hadn't cost him what he had, at least.

He reached for his water essence and found it resisted moving out of his reserve. He fought the panic and felt for it and around it. The walls were thick. Very thick. He'd

visualized that so he would think of something other than drawing on his essence to keep from drowning, but he hadn't expected it to affect the way his reserve behaved. After all, this was just a mental representation of it. How he saw it, not how it was.

Wasn't it?

It was how Alistair had explained it to him. Essence wasn't what he envisioned it to be, that was just how his mind dealt with it. The way he could deal with the abstraction of essence being and not being at the same time.

He concentrated on thinning the walls, then drew water essence from his reserve, wrapped it around himself, mixed it with the water soaking his clothing, then pulled it away and off him, creating a ball of it floating in the air before him, the town's light shimmering through the water.

He pulled enough of the essence back to refill his reserve and studied the ball. The essence hung there, mixed in with the more abundant air essence. Even though he could sense the weight of the ball of water, that was enough to hold it there, floating. Like a lot of things relating to essence, that made no sense.

Heavy things fell. Air could support some weight, but as wind, and the heavier something was, the more wind it needed. There was wind, but not enough, and it was sideways to how the ball floated. It needed to be underneath to keep it from falling.

Tibs moved the water over the lake, and he didn't touch his air essence to do it. If he'd needed to, then Alistair wouldn't be able to make water float in the air, like he'd demonstrated as part of Tibs's training.

He turned it to ice, and it remained floating. That seemed more wrong, somehow, as if a stone could float on the air.

Which, now that he thought about it, he should be able to make happen. It was the same principle, just a different essence. He found a stone, picked it up and wrapped it in earth essence, let it flow through it, then willed it to rise.

It didn't.

He focused harder, and still the stone refused to move. With an annoyed sigh, he pulled the essence out of it and moved it around freely. This made no more sense than anything else involving essence, but that was how essence was.

He pulled the essence back into his reserve, and as with water and air, was left with an excess. Not as much as with either, but it could be because the stone was smaller. There had been less of it.

Was it even less in the stone now that he had some outside of it? It felt as heavy on his hand. He might not be able to tell the difference with the little essence he'd taken out of it. How long did he have to mingle his essence in for all of the stone to be composed of his essence? Would he be able to make it float, then? When he pulled it out, would there be a stone left?

He dropped it, and let the ball of ice fall in the lake. He hated not being able to ask someone. He had so many questions, but he couldn't get the answers because to ask Alistair would reveal everything he could do, and as much as he wanted to believe his teacher would do all he could to help him, the man worked for the guild, had kept working for them even

after discovering how crooked it was.

He couldn't trust him with this secret.

So Tibs had to figure things out on his own. He rubbed his temple. Like he didn't already have enough headache-inducing things to deal with already.

He headed for the town. He might as well go to bed. Roof walking wasn't something he could indulge in until all the corruption was out of his essence. He'd been lucky the first time it had cramped his leg, he'd only been three floors up. He'd fallen from much higher, but it had served as a reminder that it could happen when he was climbing a taller building.

He missed roof walking.

"Hey, you!" a guard called, lantern light shinning in Tibs's direction. "What are you doing out of—" the man stopped close enough Tibs had to put a hand up to block the light. "Oh, it's you, Light Fingers. Sorry, I thought you were one of the convicts."

"It's Tibs," he replied, too tired to put his usual annoyance in it. How was it his nickname survived Bardik's removal when none of the others had even been used by anyone *but* Bardik?

"Of course, again, I'm sorry, but the way you're dressed, you also look like one of them." He lowered the lantern.

Tibs nodded and started walking again. He missed the adventurers who'd guarded them. They'd had little respect for any of the Runners, but at least they disrespected all of them equally.

No, what he didn't like was that he was being treated differently.

Only when it didn't serve his purpose, a voice at the back of his mind whispered.

He hated that the voice sounded like Bardik.