

## Chapter 15

“I’m going to the lake,” Tibs told the guard as a way of announcing himself before he was within the circle of light her lantern created. Harry had put back the guards at the town’s periphery to keep the new Runners from running off.

“You can’t—” she immediately protested, then stopped as the light revealed his features. “Oh, it’s you. I guess it’s fine then.”

He didn’t ask why she was unhappy about it as he walked by her. He might not care for being treated special, but now was the time to take advantage of it.

Claria was the only one visible through the clouds, slowly emptying itself. In a few weeks, it would be Torus’s twin, before eating again and regain her full figure. Or so one of the bard’s stories claimed. Another was that she was in love with Torus, but he didn’t know, so she was cursed with always trailing after him, turning herself into a copy in an attempt to catch his attention, before giving up and slowly returning to herself.

He used to think the stories were silly. No one would let themselves waste away to be with another, and the two were only objects in the sky, not people. But now, he knew about Sto, a dungeon who wasn’t only alive, but able to think. He’d seen how Jackal looked at Kroseph, Pyan at Geoff, how Mez had used to look at Tandy. And he knew magic was real, that the elements were... well, they could talk and think, just like Sto did.

So maybe Torus and Claria were more than objects in the sky? Maybe they were in love but kept apart by curses, or never being fast enough, or one of them being inattentive to the other. Jackal proved it didn’t matter how much someone loved another; sometimes, they just didn’t pay attention, anyway.

He didn’t need light to find his way. He could sense the water in the distance, and he was adept at moving in darkness.

Jackal had suggested he talk to Corruption—it had been a Jackal thing to say. The same way getting into fights was a Jackal thing, or saying the wrong thing to Kroseph. He didn’t mean it to be wrong, it just turned out that way, but there was usually something smart in it.

There was no way Tibs was stepping into that pool of corruption, or even getting close to it anymore. Maybe he’d believed Corruption was just another element at one point, but now he knew it to be bad. Don demonstrated that; how it had seeped into his essence and made his life difficult added proof to it. It would probably laugh at him and increase the damage the essence was causing him just because he’d asked the element to stop.

But he could talk with other elements, and one of them would understand his situation. It was what Water did. She offered support, understanding. She helped people get better.

So long as he could get an audience with her.

His foot stepped into the water and he continued. The coldness of the water surprised him again. His clothing didn’t offer protection as the cold water seeped through the fabric. He’s worn an older set and only a normal knife for protection.

He didn’t expect this audience to cost him what he wore, but Fire had burned him and

everything he'd worn. It had only been Sto's intervention that had allowed Tibs to survive. It had taught him to be cautious about audiences.

And water could destroy. Not as quickly, or as eagerly, as fire. No elements were benign, he'd come to realize. Air could shred skin, earth could pound bones into dust, metal could be sharp, darkness could hide deadly enemies. And water could cut as well as a knife. It might not be what his graduating test was about, but it was what he had picked up from his practices in gaining control of the flow.

Uncontrolled, water simply blasted someone away and left him drained. But a narrower jet not only used less of his reserve but he's sliced the training crystal ball, instead of shattering it.

He gasped as the water level reached between his leg. How could the water have suddenly turned even colder? He chuckled as he waited to get used to it. Maybe he should suggest this to Kroseph as a way of calming Jackal's ardor. He sort of remembered a story about cold water and a lustful beast. Tibs understood how a bard might have thought of it now. With how part of him felt right now, he wouldn't be thinking about cuddling up to a special someone.

Of course, Kroseph never complained about his man's desires, so maybe it would be wasted advice.

The water rose with each step. His shoulders were where Tibs figured he'd pause and ready himself for the next part. But as he considered what *that* would entail, the ground vanished from beneath his feet and he was submerged.

He fought to regain the surface, trying to understand how it had happened, then he was out and breathing, and he remembered that being under the water was the goal. He sensed earth and felt how the ground gave out sharply. He'd been too focussed on the next part of his plan to pay attention. It had all looked like an even slope in the daytime.

Then he let go of the essence, but didn't sink. His feet moved up, tilting him and he pedaled and used his hand to keep them pointed down. There was no essence pushing on him, so he wondered why it did that. He was letting it happen again, paying attention, when he remembered he was here with a plan, not to indulge his curiosity.

He took hold of the water and instead of using it to hold himself afloat; he pulled himself onto the water until his feet touched the bottom again. Water and earth mixed so thoroughly, the mud felt like it was an element of its own.

The silence under the water was different. He'd been too surprised and angry, then scared, to notice that in the dungeon.

There was a heaviness to the lack of sounds that pressed on him. Out of the water, silence had a fleetness to it while here, it felt solid, comforting. He decided that it was what being utterly alone with yourself would feel like, but only if you were fine with it.

The solitude of self-reflection.

His lungs burned.

They wanted air, but he needed to fill them with water. Create that intense emotion Ganny said was needed. He needed to be dying to have his audience. So he had to open his mouth, breathing all this water.

He wouldn't actually die, he'd have his audience first, and then water would send him out and he'd get himself to the surface. He had nothing to worry about. So why didn't he open his mouth?

Maybe...?

Maybe he was afraid this wouldn't work? Alistair had warned him he couldn't have a second audience; that one was all he got. That Tibs had had audiences with other elements showed it was technically—he hated that word—possible, but they had also been his first audiences with each of them.

He needed to do this. The burning was becoming painful.

Only if Alistair was still right, he would die. He didn't want to die. He had a family, a town. He needed to find a different way. One that wouldn't—

The pain was too much. He opened his mouth to draw in air, and water poured in. He coughed and choked, fighting to push it out, but it didn't do any good. He needed to get out. He took hold of the water around him, then noticed the burning had stopped.

He looked around. He was still under the water. Tentatively, he breathed in and felt the water move in as his lungs inflated. So why was he reacting as if the water was air?

He groaned as he noticed the state of his reserves. Air had dropped.

In his panic, he'd found a way to use air essence to breathe underwater. He huffed in annoyance and bubbles rose before him. Maybe it wasn't that difficult. There was air essence in the water, and he'd made an air bubble around himself in the pool.

Only it wasn't what he needed to do.

Why had it acted so easily without him wanting it to when it was so hard to do anything on purpose with it? 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.

Only this wasn't the element. It was essence. Essence he controlled. That had been Alistair's first lesson. His essence wasn't the element. Use enough will and he could control the essence around him if he had it in him.

Now, he needed to use his will to ensure he didn't use any of his essences. Maybe another day he'd find out how earth would act to keep him from drowning, or fire. Could he start a fire under the water?

How much essence would that require? There was some already in the water; if he pulled on that and made one point of it and—

He was distracting himself from what he needed to do. He was still breathing air.

He cursed loudly, but only heard air bubbled escaping his mouth. Not having the sound outside to match that in his head made it much less satisfying.

He hardened what he thought of the walls around his reserved. Made them thick; enough, he could imagine sensing his essence through them was difficult. He released what essence he held around him, and his body began tilting. He repositioned himself using water.

If he needed to continue using one to stay down, how easy would it be for air to slip through the walls? He pulled himself down until the mud was to his knees and hardened that until it held him, then he released his hold on all essences.

He opened his mouth and breathed in water. Immediately his lung burned with the wrongness of it. He focussed on keeping his reserves locked. He couldn't breathe for this to work. He had to let himself drown.

Fuck! He was drowning.

He trashed, opened his eyes for a sign of where the surface was, but only darkness surrounded him. He had essence!

No! He couldn't use it.

He had to. He was going to die!

He tried to kick up, but his feet were anchored. He needed his essence to undo it!

No!

His lungs were on fire. That was the burn he felt. As when he'd breathed in flames. Why was he putting himself through this pain again? Even Jackal wouldn't do something this stupid on purpose.

He tried to kick out again, but his body was sluggish. Except for one thought, *no essence*, his mind was too.

Why had he done this? Alistair had told him he couldn't have a second audience. Tibs knew better. He knew his teacher wouldn't lie to him. He should have listened to him. Now, his family, the one he'd built and fought to keep, wouldn't even know what had happened to him.

He shouldn't have done—

He sucked in water and the relief was so strong he didn't chastise himself for having used essence.

"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 knew everything would be okay. She would help him. "I need your help."

She floated before him, considering him. "I see Earth, Fire, and Air, and—" she frowned, moving closer. "Something else."

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

She touched his chest and coolness soothed him. "I cannot," she said sadly. "Such is not mine."

"But I need it out of me," he insisted, pushing through the calm her presence engendered. "It keeps getting in the way. It's going to get me killed. How am I going to do what you want me to 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 tried to get this element. That you hoped I'd do a better job of it."

"It has. But my hope does not come with a want for you to accomplish." She tapped the spot on his chest where he imagined his reserves were. "This is for you to use, to decide on the want you wish accomplished. You will decide if it burns hot or cool, is solid or

flighty. It is your want that made you take it, was it not?"

"I haven't found them yet." Another thought occurred to him. "What if I use it wrong?"

"Then you use it so." There was no judgment in her voice. "What you seek is powerful. Your kind is not always good at handling the power they seek. You will not stand alone if you also use it so."

He remembered mama crying as men who should protect her used her in ways nobles who came to his street used people, and like them, these men left a husk when they left. A lifeless one.

With her there, his hatred for them didn't burn as hot. "Am I wrong to want revenge?"

"You are human."

He waited, and when she didn't add anything else, he nodded.

Maybe the elements didn't see right and wrong the way people did. Alistair had said they weren't like him. The elements were different, not human.

If she couldn't remove it. Maybe she could help differently. "What do I need to do to remove the corruption?"

"Talk with Corruption."

"I can't," he protested. The imagined torture was distant because of her influence, but she couldn't take it away.

"You must."

"But it's wrong, bad." He searched for another word. "Evil."

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

Hos choosing? Were they even talking about the same thing? "You mean my element? I already got the audiences you told me to get. That's how it unlocked, or whatever happened."

"Oh, Child of Human, that was but the first step on the path you chose. To get more, you need to speak with Purity, Light, Darkness, and Corruption. You need their part of this." She tapped his chest again.

More? He could have even more? "What will happen once I do that?" it wasn't like he had all that much, really.

She smiled. "That is for you to discover. Once it is done."

He wished she could be direct this time, but she hadn't lied to him. And more meant that once he did find the men responsible for Mama, it would be easier to deal with them.

"Once I've spoken with them, that's the end, right?"

Her smile turned sad, and that was the only answer she gave him.

No, it wouldn't be. She'd said he was embarking on a hard path; when he'd first chosen this. He'd thought nearly dying three times was as hard as it would get. Now that she'd told him of the next step, he had an idea of what would come after that.

More. There would be more, even after that. How much more? Did it matter? Was there such a thing as too much power? She had said humans weren't good at handling it.

"Can I stop? If I decide I have enough, can stop?"

“It is your path, Child of Human. You decide how far along you go.”

He felt better knowing that.

“I guess I should go,” he said reluctantly. He’d be back in the lake, drowning. Now that he wasn’t panicking. He remembered he’d hardened the mud around his feet, so he’d have to deal with that first.

If she sent him back in the same place. Tibs hadn’t asked Alistair what had happened in the cavern once his teacher let go of him. Jackal had started above the ground but returned under it. But was that because his teacher had buried him in the meantime, or was it Earth’s doing?

“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 before he could ask her to send him to the surface of the lake.