

Planning-23

Tibs felt the essence move within the crowd. The people who had an element. The only ones at Epsilon or above worked at the guild. The guards at the periphery of the room, the staff walking among them, taking empty goblets, serving the people there.

These people weren't powerful because of their essence, but because of their coins, or their position within society. He'd been into enough noble's homes to know not all of them had coins enough they overflowed the coffers. Some merchants had more coins than some nobles, but less power.

The way power worked within cities still seemed strange to Tibs. As an urchin on the streets, power had meant physical strength. He hadn't had that, so cunning had been his strength, but it hadn't given him power. Nobles always came escorted by guards, so he'd thought that was how they showed their strength. The coins nobles had was just how they purchased that protection; the same way those on the street paid thugs to keep them safe.

Once he'd learned about the elements, he'd thought that was power, and the guild certainly reinforced that belief. But Sebastian had shown Tibs coins were a power of their own. And watching the nobles in Kragle Rock, he'd learned that position within society was another kind of power.

It was all strange to him, but he was learning to see it, so he could use it.

The man approaching Tibs had Metal as his element, and Tibs tried to sense something about it that would let him know he was suffusing himself with it, the way Sto said Ardian always did. He could sense the density of it, somewhere within Gamma, but no details other than it was there, through the channels everyone had.

He stopped before Tibs and studied him. Tibs returned the look.

"Don't think any of this is about you," Irdian stated, then took a goblet of water from the table. There weren't many of those, as nearly everyone here preferred alcohol. "You're just her pawn."

"Why those that matter to you?"

"Just reminding you of your place." He took a sip. "I wouldn't want you to think you're more powerful than you are and reach so high your fall will pull down your friends with you."

"Don't threaten my friends. Sebastian did."

"I don't threaten."

Tibs filled the cracks in the ice and changed the subject to one that had a use to him. "Isn't it dangerous, having all those powerful people here, in the guild building, in this one room? What if one of their enemies finds out and sneaks in an assassin?"

Irdian shrugged. "If they can't ensure the people with them are loyal, that's their problem, not mine."

"What if one of them sneaks into the building?"

The smile was small. "I'd love to see them try."

"You don't think they could? Even without an element, r—thieves are resourceful."

"Your kind isn't smart enough to get through the defenses."

"My *kind*," Tibs said, emphasizing the word, "isn't interested in trying. Thieves would be. Any lock can be cracked, any trigger jammed. All it takes is time and experience. That's one thing the runs have taught me."

Irdian rolled his eyes. "The dungeon's not teaching you anything about the world. All it's doing is helping you get stronger. But that's not going to mean anything in the end. You're just going to think you can get away with everything and you're going to be crushed."

"Then the guild with teach me."

Irdian snorted.

Tibs faced the man. "For someone working for the guild, you don't seem to care for it all that much."

"I'm a guard. I guard things. Doesn't mean I have to make believe they're better than what they are."

"Then why are you trying to stop me, if you don't think the guild's doing a good job?"

Irdian turned and locked eyes with Tibs. "Because rules are what keep the world from descending into chaos. Yes, I'm well aware the guild doesn't always follow its own rules, but there are others in charge of dealing with that. My job is making sure things outside the walls don't descend into chaos. Stop what you're doing, and I'll stop bothering you."

Tibs shook his head. "I don't trust you."

Irdian shrugged. "I don't care. I will enforce the rules on you, like I do anyone else."

Tibs snorted. "I'm not seeing you enforcing the rules on the nobles."

Tibs sensed the stone essence in the crystal goblet react to the pressure as Irdian's hand tightened on it. He couldn't tell if it was what was holding it together, or if it was one of the other essences or the whole of them. The essence within object wasn't woven, it was just there. But the goblet didn't break, and Irdian loosened his grip.

"What you're seeing is me being prevented from enforcing them. Sometimes, the guild lets people who shouldn't have it, keep the power others grant them."

Don joined them. "Guard Leader," he greeted Irdian.

"Sorcerer," Irdian replied in a cool, but not as brusque a tone as the one he'd used with Tibs. "Enjoying being paraded for her benefit?"

"One's position comes with requirements. I have no problem accomplishing the one to keep the other."

Irdian drained his goblet. "Yeah, you're be a perfect fit for the guild." He put it down and walked away.

"He seems to like you," Tibs commented.

"I'm not sure he likes anyone, but I'm not making his life difficult."

"I'm not making his life difficult," Tibs replied. "He's making mine difficult."

Don smiled. "Perspective can in interesting like that."

"Is this about more than what it looks? Is Tirania just looking to get more people to do runs?"

"She wants more people to invest in the town, help it grow. The town, well, a city is as much what draws people to a dungeon as the dungeon itself. The two usually grow side by side, since the dungeon will draw more people as it goes up in rank, and with there being more people, the dungeon can grow faster. We've had a series of setbacks that disrupted the usual progress. She's looking to set that right."

"Why?"

"There are expectations placed on her. She is in charge, so responsible for what happens."

"What happens if those expectations aren't met?"

Don shrugged. "She'd be replaced, I expect. But they'll send people to judge the work she's doing first."

"Who'd do that judging?"

"I don't know. At an academy it would be the supervising master, or their master, if they were the ones being judged."

"So, whoever gives Tirania her orders would come here to judge her work, if things don't improve?"

Don glance at Tibs. "I guess. I don't know how the guild works, but they'd be the ones who know what she's supposed to accomplish."

Tibs nodded. He wanted to ask more questions, but this was not the place. What he needed was to gain more information still.

"I think we should talk with people," he said, "see what it is they are looking for in a place to send people so." He smiled at Don. "So we can make Tirania's work easier."

Don covered up his suspicion quickly, then nodded.

Tibs kept having to fill in the cracks in the ice as, time after time, he was dismissed, or talked down to. The nobles hadn't held on to their belief he was important for long. They'd realized what Tirania was doing, and Tibs felt like some of them were only humoring her, but the attitude shifted as the nobles were lower on their perceived hierarchy. Many were more amicable with what she wanted, even understanding much of it was a show. They could see a way for them to gain more privilege over other nobles.

Those of the merchant class seemed the most eager to go along with her, many not seeing through the act, but thinking of the advantage of having someone within their family with the power to protect them represented. Their distrust of Tibs came from his place as a rogue.

It was the rare merchant who could look beyond someone's larcenous tendencies to see they too were needed for a system to work. By the time a meal was served, Tibs was ravenous, and by the time it was over, he was exhausted. Fortunately, by then many of the attendees were leaving, and Tirania had no objection to Tibs leaving too.

He couldn't wait to reach his bed.

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Tibs didn't reach his bed.

Jackal met him halfway to the rooming house with the news that the guard had taken everything. And now Tibs stood in the empty storage, the ice cracking and refilling as he controlled his anger.

The only thing that kept him from outright exploding was the knowledge that this was only a setback and not the destruction of his organization.

Let Irdian think he'd stopped Tibs.

The guard leader wouldn't drop his guard because of this, but he would allow himself to shift some of his focus away from Tibs for as long as Tibs could keep from attracting it. He'd have to be careful about how he procured the new equipment, and where he stored it, but he would have the coins to make it happen.

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The sorceress sat opposite Don, with Tibs on his left and Darran on his right, reading the papers. Tibs didn't understand why there were seven sheets, when all this was about was selling the pool, but that was why he let Darran deal with it.

"This is your work, merchant?" she asked, taking a quill out of a pocket in her robe. The quill had essence woven through it, Water, Earth, Metal, and others. "You understand, I can't agree to this." She wrote on the pages and ink flowed without her needing to use an inkpot.

"Of course," Darran replied. "I would never presume a sorcerer of your caliber would simply agree to the first offer given."

"Or that I wouldn't seek counsel," Don added.

She smiled at the sorcerer as she motioned for the server. "No, but I'd hoped you wouldn't be quite this much of what we look for in a sorcerer."

"You can ask most who know me. Pleasing others isn't something I'm known for."

She scratched out a line and wrote something. "I had hoped this would be quick," she said.

"Where is the fun in that?" Darran replied.

Tibs groaned. He'd expected this to be done already. How long was it going to take?

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It took most of the day.

More than once, Tibs considered leaving the table, but the worry Darran wouldn't be able to hold on to the negotiation kept him there. He couldn't do anything about it; he was just there to witness, as far as the sorceress was concerned, and it all went well over his head when they discuss this clause or that one. They even argued over the definition of words.

Tibs understood that words changes when they were spoken or written in one of the other languages, but they were written in [need to track down Carina's language] which Darran and the sorceress understood, so how could they disagree on what a word meant?

But, by the time it was all done, and the sun was far lower in the sky for Tibs's liking, she left, smiling, Don held onto the copy of the papers she'd made appear, like they were made of gold. Darran had ordered the best food and drink for the three of them, then told Tibs what he'd gotten out of the deal.

"That's more than I asked for," Tibs said, not understanding how that could have happened.

"That's the beauty of a good deal," Darran replied, pausing only to take a bite of the fragrant slam of meat on his plate. "Everyone comes out of it with more than they wanted."

Tibs looked at Don, who had carefully rolled the papers and put them in a small leather tube, which was now strapped to his belt. "I got everything I wanted, and they've agreed to pay me during my apprenticeship."

"But all she gets is the pool. That isn't more than she wanted; it's just what she wanted."

Darran nodded. "But she expected to have to pay much more than what it cost her."

"But she said she hoped Don wouldn't be smart enough to get help." Tibs wasn't understanding of any of this. He'd haggled, but the loser always ended up with less than what they'd hoped for. That was the point of haggling.

"Of course. But she's also smart enough to know he might get someone skilled. She figured out what Don might ask for, what she was willing to agree to, and we negotiated ourselves to a point where we all ended up with a little more than what we hoped for. Which, in her case, meant not having to give out as many coins as her limit, or too many freedoms for Don."

Tibs thought it over. "Doesn't that mean we didn't ask for enough, then?"

"You can look at it that way," Darran replied. "But what do you gain with more coins, at the expense of her displeasure?"

Angering a sorcerer was never a good idea. Every story bards sang about made that clear. "I still don't get how everyone can end up with more than they wanted."

"That's why merchants like Darran are around," Don said and started eating. He stopped after a few bites. "Thank you." He looked thoughtful. "When Tibs mentioned you, I didn't expect to get such a skilled negotiator."

“That is quite alright. I don’t make much of that aspect of my trade. And I expect Tibs mentioned me because we have a history of helping each other, more than he was aware this was something I could assist with.”

“If you couldn’t, you would have told me who can,” Tibs said.

Don watched them, then turned serious. “Darran, am I really so disliked by the merchants?”

“You are abrasive, or you were. I have seen you act, and this is not what I saw. As I said before, you believe you are entitled to what you ask. That it is true or not isn’t what matters. It is the attitude you approach one of my associates with that does. Tibs is entitled to anything he pays for out of my shop, but he does not enter it with that belief. He understands it is an exchange, and that, just like the negotiation here, it can be done while respecting the other participant. To be clear, I have tried to swindle Tibs, and he has spun me stories about some of the items I bought off him. But when one caught the other, we accepted it.”

“I’ve never tried to get more than what I sold was worth,” Don stated, “or demanded I pay less than what something is worth.”

“But you still demanded. It might have been fair, but it is the demanding that is irritating.”

“So I should lie about what I bring to a merchant? Expect them to swindle me?”

Darran shrugged. “That will depend on the merchants you deal with.” He smiled. “But you could start by allowing them to negotiate.” He paused with the fork nearly to his mouth. “You might find you enjoy it.”