

Chapter 14

The essence woven through the thick wooden door didn't react to the knock from the clerk who had led Tibs to Tirania's office. He'd intended to show up, knock and get her to explain everything, but Tibs had gotten turned around somewhere and found himself back in the main hall. The clerk had asked him where Tibs was trying to go, and not wanting to waste time, he'd told her and she'd led him to the door.

Tibs was confident it was the way he'd taken, so, like before, this had to be caused by the enchantments on the building. When he wasn't busy, he'd have to work out how the clerks avoided getting lost.

"Enter," Tirania said, her voice clear, as if the door wasn't there. Tibs didn't think the weave in the door was what had allowed her voice to pass unimpeded. The clerk opened the door and motioned for Tibs to enter.

Tirania raised an eyebrow, her expression going from frustrated to curious as she set the quill in the inkpot. It looked out of place in the immaculate office; it was stained and scratched, and the quill's listed a finger's width from the top where it was broken.

"What can I do to help you?" she asked, giving the clerk a nod, who closed the door behind him.

"I want to start by apologizing for my behavior when you told me Don would be on my team." He'd prepared this part on the walk to the guild and had needed to fill the cracks often as the memory of that conversation angered him. But the ice was thick now, and the anger an amber he barely felt. "I'm a Runner, not a child. I shouldn't have thrown a tantrum."

She studied him. "And how is he working out?"

He shrugged. This one was easier to say. "It isn't the disaster I was afraid it would be."

"I'm glad to hear that." She smiled and motioned to a chair. "Now, what is the other reason for your visit?"

He sat. "The Urchins. Irdian mentioned caretakers. What is that about?"

She took the time to set the page she'd been writing on in a drawer before answering. Tibs didn't have time to make out much, but he thought there had been an M, A and R at the start of the first word. Was she writing to the guild leader?

"You need to understand," she said, closing the drawer; already she was lying. "We can't treat those orphans the way you were treated. You were a criminal. Your kingdom was more than happy to foster you onto us in return for better consideration when they need our services."

So many lies in just those two phrases. The only thing that didn't glow was the part about the kingdoms getting better considerations.

"With the orphans, the king didn't want to just hand them over to us." Another lie. "He demanded concessions from the guilds that in other circumstances, we wouldn't grant." More lies, but the light varied so much as she spoke he couldn't tell where the lies were and how much of one they were. "But we need Runners." A truth. "That the Heroes of Kragle Rock are here will draw new Runners, but they will be the more experienced ones." A truth. "Those who want to test themselves against the floors that shaped you." Another truth. "But we need Omegas. While stronger Runners will feed the dungeon more, they will also be

more likely to survive. Because of the tribulations Kragle Rock has suffered, we still have to rely on convincing kings to send us those who have nothing to gain remaining in their care, and where even feeding the dungeon is worth their chance at becoming adventurers.” Surprisingly, to Tibs, that was another truth.

“So, there are no caretakers.”

“Oh no, they are coming.” A truth. “And we’re making sure housing is being built for them.” Not wholly a truth. The way the light dimmed and brightened made Tibs think that the houses being build was true, but that the guilds was making it happen the lie. “It simply takes time. I felt it was best not to have them here until those were finished.” Entirely a lie. Tibs didn’t look at the drawer, but was that was the letter was about? She was complaining about her leader making decisions for her? Had those come via Irdian? He was here at Marger’s direct orders. Tibs wished he could get information about her leader, but this was about getting her to trust him more than any information she might let slip.

“Are they really getting trained before their first run?”

“You don’t trust us?”

“Did you give me a reason to?” he asked, not intending to, but the ice cracked. At least his tone had gained no heat.

“You don’t—” She stopped. That was good; the words already glowed. She sighed and her eyes flicked to the drawer. “Tibs. As I’m sure you have worked out. I have to follow orders too. Some of the orders I have to give come from them.”

“And they ordered you to let us die?” he asked, his tone heating. He filled the cracks, worried his anger would ruin everything.

“Not...” the brightness dimmed as she considered. “Not exactly. I was tasked with protecting the dungeon. It’s what the guild does.” Not a lie. “We exist to guard it and protect the world from them and the creatures they make. That was, and will always be, my first priority.” No lies. “Don’t let how young the dungeon is fool you. Even the weakest dungeon can unleash dangerous creatures without warning in times of upheaval.” The light did something odd. The glow was as bright as with a small lie, but it wasn’t as... there? Tibs couldn’t think of a word that matched what he sensed.

Maybe she was exaggerating? Those were sort of lies without being lies, weren’t they? The reasoning still felt right to what he sensed.

She chuckled. “And don’t think there are many trained adventurers here. The administrative staff usually stops training once they reach Epsilon.” Not a lie, but a good number of the clerks were Delta, and a few even Gamma.

“You could have stopped Sebastian,” he stated, and she shook her head. “You’re the strongest one here. Harry told me that,” he added to explain how he knew it. “You and him could have stopped him.” The ice cracked, and he closed his eyes so he could focus on filling them. Once the anger cooled, he opened them and was surprised that she’d waiting for him to get himself under control.

“Sebastian Wells, for the criminal that he was, was a man of power and influence within his city and his kingdom. His king paid attention to him. Because of that, my actions here would have been seen as the guild’s actions, not only my own, against a citizen of that king.” Not one lie. “You’re right; I am powerful. The guild is powerful. But we aren’t here to hold kings and kingdoms accountable for actions of their people.”

How could that not be a lie? Bardik had said the Guild had stopped the king warring when it was formed. That meant they got involved.

“We are here for the dungeon and to prepare for—” she smiled, but shook her head. “There’ll be time enough for *that* once you’ve reached Epsilon. Suffice to say that if I, or Harry, or anyone directly affiliated with the guild had taken action against Sebastian Wells, his king could have decided we were targeting not a man, a criminal, but the kingdom he came from.” More of that was true than not. More than Tibs expected.

“I am not proud of my decision,” she continued, the words glowing faintly, “but I saw how you organized the Runners, and saw a way to avoid drawing attention to our problem...” again, she glanced at the drawer. “I saw you hold the man and his minions back and had confidence in you.” No lies.

“You are responsible for some of the destruction,” Tibs said, his tone controlled, the ice uncracked. She seemed willing to talk about what had happened, even if not entirely honestly. He might as well see what else he could get from her.

“That was an unfortunate accident.” A lie so bright that if its light had been from a lantern, he would have had to look away. “As I said, the administrative staff isn’t trained for situations like this, and it never occurred to me the man would be brazen enough to target the guild. They had to react quickly and misjudged how to handle Everburn.” A middling lie. Tibs expected she hadn’t told them to sacrifice the town, but she hadn’t ordered them to take care not to damage it either.

Did he have other questions? Any he could get her to answer without rousing her suspicions? He stood. “Thank you for answering my questions, Tirania.”

“I am here to help, Tibs. You know that.”

He nodded, then added because he needed to be sure she considered him her ally. “As am I.” He headed for the door.

“Tibs?”

He looked over his shoulder, reaching for the handle.

She smiled at him. “I’m glad you came and talked with me about this. I was afraid the animosity was going to fester.”

The words carried no light.

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Tibs watched from the rooftop as workers cleared burned houses. He’d wanted quiet. He’d wanted to be away from people in general, as all they could talk about were the Omegas and what they meant for the Runs and the town.

He’d thought looking over Kragle Rock’s roof line would make him feel better. They had survived Sebastian. For as a pain as Ardian was to Tibs, he had the guards do their job and most of the thugs here to enact Sebastian’s revenge were stopped before they did serious damage. The few they missed, Tibs Runners handled. Things were improving. They were bright; good.

So why didn’t he feel they were?

He turned away from the the work that would lead to the rebuilding and ran. With so many destroyed houses, navigating the town from the roofs wasn’t as simple as it had been. There were few direct lines from where Tibs was to where he wanted to be. But soon it would be as it was. Almost every hole in the roof line had workers there. An army of them

working toward undoing what Sebastian had done. What Tirania, the guild, had allowed to happen.

He stopped before the noble's neighborhood, at the line of demolished houses creating a moat between them and the town. What would they do as the town grew? Right now there was nothing but a plain on the other side, but would they stretch this wall they intended to build around as the town reached there? Would they enclose themselves from everyone? Would they turn this enclave of the wealthy into a prison?

The idea should amuse him.

He used an air disk to leap over the gap and landed on a noble's roof.

He moved with care. Nobles paid adventurers to patrol their streets—and where was Irdian's protest at that—and they knew to look up every so often.

It didn't stop him from reaching a third-floor window unnoticed. Then he was inside, and moving about with even more ease. The servants were on the lower floors. People in the kitchen, he senses, and in a room on the floor below. The only locked door lead to an office.

He found the locked metal box in a locked drawer in the desk. He looked through the coins in it for copper, and not finding one, settled on taking a silver coin. He placed everything back as it should be and returned to the roof.

He rolled the coin over his knuckle absently. He'd broken into a noble's home, taken from them. What he'd taken was insignificant, especially compared to everything nobles had taken from those on his Street, aimed to take here, but he had done it. And it had been easy.

Too easy?

Was that why there was no satisfaction in it? Did he need to look for a tougher house to break into? There had to be nobles who used essence as part of their locks. Would defeating one of those make him feel like he had accomplished something?

Something to think about.

He looked up, noting where the sun was, and pocketed the coin as he ran. He had to get back to the inn before Jackal worried and came looking.

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"What did you put there?" Tibs had asked Alistair as his teacher made an etching for Tibs to use as a target. It was between two of the lines. It looked like the letter 'J', which Carina had taught him as part of his letters.

"You can make them out?" the man had sounded surprised and Tibs had nodded. It was water, so safe for him to say he sensed it. And he'd surprised his teacher enough by now another wouldn't be out of the ordinary. Instead of answering, Alistair had instructed Tibs to make the etching they were practicing.

Now, in the warehouse, alone, Tibs swung two essence lines like Radcliff's lasso with that letter a filigree holding them apart. As he moved them, they moved around each other, but never touched. Tibs didn't know what it was for, but if Alistair had used it and not wanted to teach him yet, he wanted to figure it out.

As far as he could tell, all it did was keep the essence apart.

Since it looked like a letter, he tried with the others, but he couldn't get them to hold their forms between the lines and they touched. It was simple to keep anything from happening, but it showed him that while it seemed like all he was doing was writing the 'J' in essence between the lines, recreating what Alistair did was more than that.

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“I want you to do the etching and—”

“No.”

Alistair turned and the etching he’d been about to start making for Tibs to target dissipated. “Tibs, this is how—”

“You’ve had me do this etching for three days now and only that one. I know how to make it.” Tibs had the knife in hand, forming the etching as Alistair opened his mouth for his usual protest. A line in a spiral, to increase the effect of the essence, then four lines through that meeting in a point. He didn’t need to feed it much essence once it formed. The spiral pulled from around without him having to do anything.

Then the jet of water projected at his teacher.

Tibs wasn’t worried. This was just a demonstration and Alistair had proved he was far more skilled. A gesture and he had a knife in hand, then an etching so fine Tibs couldn’t make out details at this distance. The effect didn’t manifest as water or ice, just a lattice of essence lines on which the water splashed and sent shards of ice back in Tibs’s direction.

All he needed was to impose his will on the ice and it was water again, then not there as he absorbed it.

Despite the demonstration, Alistair wasn’t happy, so Tibs made a concession. “I’ll get back to practicing it after you tell me about that letter you did. You did others too. One was like ‘J’ the others like ‘K’. I didn’t make out all of them.”

The man sighed. “I’ll tell you the basics, but that will be all. This isn’t a session on the Arcanus. Am I clear?”

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It took multiple session of Tibs insisting on more information for him to get what he thought were the basics. Alistair seemed to consider the revelation the Arcanus was something within Tibs’s future reach enough.

The Arcanus was what the letters Tibs had learned were based on. The one that looked like ‘J’ was called Jir and linked to Air. Each of the Arcanus was linked to an element, but letters had been added over the centuries to make all those Tibs had learned. There were two and four Arcanus, where Tibs had Learned two and nine letters.

Kha was the Arcanus linked to Water. Ank to fire, Bor to Earth. When Tibs asked for more, Alistair said enough was enough, and training had restarted.

He pulled Earth essence from his bracer and made a Jir filigree. The lines on each side were sluggish as they moved and stayed apart. Nearly anything he did with earth essence was. Earth was never interested in being fast.

He’d taken the time to pay attention to what Alistair did when he etched, so that when Tibs did a filigree with Kha, instead of Jir, this time it held and the Earth essence lines slammed together, instead of being held apart. He knew each of the Arcanus did something different, but he hadn’t managed to get Alistair to say. So Tibs was relegated to trying things and hope nothing resulted in an explosion.

He did a line with water, added the Kha filigree and connected another line water essence, ready for the slamming. Only it didn’t happen. Instead, when he swung the lines, they behaved as if instead of water; they were made of the syrup Mez loved to add to the seared rump of ashgar, Russel made when they could get the meat.

Making the filigree with Ank instead shattered the lines of water. As it did with any of the essence he tried it with.

If Ank shoved the lines apart, Kha pulled them together. Would using both mean nothing would happen?

He decided to test it with air, since it was the least likely to do something destructive if the unexpected happened.

Making the filigree with both Arcanus was harder than Tibs expected. He needed to shift his focus three ways. The lines, then both Arcanus. And when he finally had it, something happened. The combination expanded around him in what felt like the ripples on a pond, but had no other effect from what he could tell.

Then he coughed, and his head swam. He staggered and realized he needed to break whatever this was before... something. Thinking was difficult. He needed to... something. Breaking something.

There was little he saw he could break, but lines were everywhere, and there were ends of them. Ends he could grasp—his hands touched nothing—not that way. Think, he had to think it.

He thought about grasping them as he dropped to his knees. Then what...

End it, break it.

It was easier to pull them apart than he'd expected, and then he gasped as he breathed air again, rolling onto his back.

That had been unexpected.

He checked this ice. It was still intact. Even as thinking had been harder, his will on the ice had remained. That was good. He didn't want to think what might have happened if he'd lost it in the middle of this.

His essence had been damaged throughout his body. Small rips. He didn't know what had caused them. He didn't know what he'd done. How two Arcanus whose effect should cancel each other had caused... whatever they had caused.

A weave of purity and the rips were repaired.

He made another one and studied it. Clara called it a weave, but was it? It felt to him like what fabric looked like, which was how she'd compared it, applying a weave of fabric over an injure. But it couldn't be the same thing Alistair referred to when he walked about weaving. Not the way he made it sound like it was complicated, and something only more experienced Runners could learn.

And this compared to what he felt in the walls of the guild only in the loosest terms. Strands of essence packed together even tighter than this was. Were there Arcanus in those? How did they interact to create what they did?

No, what he did with Purity had more to do with how he used Water, or Air and Earth and the other elements. He applied his will and shaped them. It felt like a weave for purity because that was how he thought of it, but there was no over and under the way fabric was woven.

It just was.

He rubbed his temple, unsure if the headache was the result of what had happened to the air, or because Alistair was right and Tibs needed to wait until he knew more.

He needed to ask Sto if Arcanus was something he used.