

### Planning-110

The cell wasn't as effective in keeping Tibs from using essence as the trapped plaza was. The weaves in the bars and the wall, floor, and ceiling pushed essence away, it didn't remove it entirely. He could pull enough Water essence from around him to make tools out of ice, but the four guards watching him meant they'd know even if none of them had Water as their element.

He'd been stripped of his armor and clothing, then given roughly woven pants and a shirt, before being shoved in the cell. The guards had let him approach the door and study the lock. It was complex, but without essence. If he had the time, he could open it. But the moment his hand had moved to touch the lock, he'd been ordered back.

He'd been brought food twice now, and he'd slept. He figured that soon, he'd be taken to whatever they'd used to punish him.

The door to the room opened and Alistair entered, stopping only once he reached the cell's door. Tibs couldn't sense his teacher, or anyone outside the cell from the bench he sat on. Only when he was against the bars could he push his sense beyond.

"Who paid you to assassinate Supervisor Marger?"

"No one."

"Tibs, we found so much in Promises hidden in your armor you could pay an army. Who gave that to you? Where did you get that armor?"

"I stole the Promises."

Alistair rolled his eyes. "No one here has that kind of money for you to steal."

Tibs smiled. "It's not like I've been here all the time."

The man studied him. Seemed to want to say something, sighed, then tried again. Then, all that he said was, "Why?"

"Because your way doesn't work," Tibs snapped.

"My way?"

"You became like them. You stopped caring about the people. All you care about is your guild and what it can take from everyone around you."

"That's not true. I tried to help you, hoped that you—"

"That your guild would be able to use me?" Tibs was at the bars. "That I'd be good enough to be made into something they could use to keep towns like Kragle Rock under their control? Let the town burn because being attacked by someone like Sebastian is too training for us? Where were you, when your guild decided the townsfolk weren't worth

protecting?”

“I didn’t know, Tibs, I was—”

“Off doing whatever your guild told you to do. You didn’t even look around when you were here, Alistair. You walked right by the wrong your guild was doing as you came and went to train me and saw nothing. Well, I saw everything, and I did something about it.”

“You failed Tibs.”

“So I failed.” He dropped on the bench. “At least I tried.” He glared at Alistair.

“Do you have any idea what they’ll do to you, Tibs?”

Tibs tapped his left wrist.

“That is the least of what will happen. Tibs, you tried to kill a high ranking Guild representative. They aren’t going to just brand you. The only reason they won’t execute you is that we can do worse to you.”

Tibs shrugged.

“You’re going to end up in Despair, Tibs.”

He’d worked out it was a place, and not what Irdian wanted him to wallow in. He shrugged. Where they sent him didn’t matter. He’d be alive, so he’d find a way to escape and finish what he’d started. Only this time, he’d find out who was actually in charge of the entire guild.

Alistair sighed. “Tibs, I had such high—”

Tibs snorted. “No, you didn’t. You didn’t hope anything for me. You hoped for whatever you planned on turning me into for your guild.”

“I’m sorry you saw what I did that way, Tibs. I wish...” he shrugged and turned.

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It was another day, by Tibs’s estimation, before someone else entered. There had been the changing of the guards, but they were just part of the room as far as Tibs was concerned.

Irdian, on the other hand, meant things were changing.

Tibs kept from asking after Jackal. That he wasn’t in a cell next to Tibs should mean he’d escaped capture, but maybe they were holding him elsewhere. He had to hope Sto had kept him safe, as he’d promised.

“This is your last chance to convince us to lessen your sentence, Tibs,” the guard leader said. “Who paid you?”

“No one. I’m the one who saw the problem, I’m the one who set out to fix it. And I stole those promises the last time you let us leave the town.”

Irdian didn’t believe him.

The guard leader opened the cell and motioned for Tibs to exit. The guards formed around them, and now that Tibs was out of the cell, he sensed the four others outside the room. Eight guards, one for each of the core elements. Just like Sebastian had one sorcerer of each when he hurt Tibs. Maybe there was something to what he’d said about the core elements being enough to stop any of the others.

Or Irdian simply didn’t underestimate what Tibs could do with Water at this point.

They traveled through more hallways than Tibs thought were within the guild building until he remembered the enchantment protecting it. He didn’t have the medallion. He couldn’t trust what he saw or how far things seemed.

The room they entered was large, with a chair in the center with so much essence woven through Tibs wasn't certain it was made of anything else. It looked to be wood, with metal bars as reinforcement, and leather straps at the armrests and where his head would be.

He fought against balking. He wasn't giving them the satisfaction of knowing they'd scared him. They were going to take his essence from him. Bardik had been lowered to Epsilon from Gamma. So Tibs would be lowered to what? Omega?

The wall to the left had a table going the length, with crystals embedded into it. Two glowed faintly, among more than Tibs could count that didn't.

Irdian pushed Tibs into the chair and guards strapped him to it.

No one talked.

Tibs had expected gloating.

"He's secured," a guard said.

Irdian opened the door. "You can come in now."

Tirania, Alistair and the man Tibs had tried to kill walked in. Marger didn't look well, and Tibs sensed the corruption still coursing through his essence. He didn't smile. That wasn't what he'd wanted. He'd heal from that. Not that it mattered. This hadn't been the right target.

He should have told Don his plan. The sorcerer would have told him who he should target.

Marger looked at him with satisfaction. "Do it."

Pain hit Tibs hard, and he gritted his teeth, glaring at them. He wasn't going to give them that satisfaction, either. He'd burned nearly to death, had been buried, drowned. He'd stepped into liquid corruption, been hit by lightning. He'd suffered enough pain throughout his life that this wouldn't break him.

Then the pain changed.

It was no longer something being forced onto him, but something being taken from him, his essence being leeched away. A reverse of when he'd taken in Bardik. Would he get white hair too? Would this make him old? Would he die before—

His scream wrenched thoughts away from him.

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Light pierce him, and Tibs tried to greet the element, but his voice no longer worked. "His eyes are still blue," someone said, then darkness returned.

But not unconsciousness.

"Of course they're still blue," Alistair said. "You can't take his element away."

"Is he totally drained?" someone not sounding well asked. "Some idiot forgot to make sure the crystals were all empty."

"No, sir. We cleared them all, other than the primers, as is procedure."

The man snorted. "Then explain to me how they're all full from some Rho rogue."

"I can't, sir. There shouldn't have been more than four filled from someone his rank."

"He was Rho, wasn't he, Alistair?"

"That was the last test he passed..." the man trailed off.

"But?" Marger demanded.

"Tibs is resourceful. He'd grown adept at pulling essence from around him. This room isn't shielded, so he might have done so while the enchantments worked."

“I find it more likely that someone forgot to do their job. But the brand’s there, so he’s drained. Get the wagon ready. I want him shipped to the Citadel immediately.”

“The Citadel?” Alistair asked.

“He’d going to Despair,” Irdian stated.

“You want to argue with the orders that come down from on high, you go talk to the man directly,” Marger replied. “I made my report, and those are the orders that came back. He’s to be shipped to the Citadel with all his possessions.”

“The contents shouldn’t—”

“Those are going to the coffers, but the armor is going with him. Don’t ask me why, but he wants to see him in them.”

“But why a wagon?” Alistair asked. “The platform would be more expedient.”

“I’m following orders,” Marger said in a tone that made it clear they should stop questioning them. “Pack him up.”

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Tibs came awake on being pulled off the bench. He’d been dropped in his cell after being taken from the chair and had fallen asleep. He sensed around him and was relieved to still be able to do that. Eight guards again, along with the two carrying him.

What did he have to work with?

His vast reserve was still there, but without much left in it. His small reserves were there too, full of essence. He attempted to pull water essence in, and found he couldn’t, and, as he was about to panic, realized he sensed someone blocking him.

He could still do this. That wasn’t something that had been taken from him.

So what had?

He turned his sense inward, and immediately he felt the difference. His channels were barely there. Hardly more than one of the townfolk. If not for the blue tint to them, he wouldn’t know them to be different.

Upsilon. That was where he’d been sent to.

But he still knew everything he’d learned. He’d have to see how much he could do despite his condition.

He was thrown on a wooden floor hard. A door closed, and a key turned.

“He’s in,” someone yelled. And then Tibs was thrown about as the wagon moved.

It was slightly smaller than his cell, with a bench on one side and a bucket under it. The walls were woven with essence, and he had trouble sensing on the other side. So something similar to what his cell had.

The lock was also enchanted, so picking it wasn’t happening.

He sat on the bench and channeled Air pulled the essence in to refill his reserve. The enchantment made it harder, but there was always a lot of air essence around. By the time they stopped for the night and brought him food, he’d be ready to take them on and escape.

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The wagon tipped over and Tibs hit the wall before he switched to Earth. He cursed the pain, then suffused himself with—

Nothing happened.

He pushed Purity out of his reserve, and it didn’t move past the walls. They weren’t walls; he told himself. There was nothing there. It was simply a way for his mind to handle

concepts around essence that made no sense otherwise. All he needed to do was will it through his body and—

Nothing.

Fighting outside. Tibs made a Purity weave and applied it to his head, surprised after the fact that had worked.

Corruption ate away at the door and Tibs channeled water and made his ice sword. Trying to add metal to it only let to his reserve draining before there was more than a strand. Still, how hard his sword was depended on his will, not only the essences in it.

The wooden door darkened much slower than wood should.

“Almost there,” Someone said, and Tibs frowned. The voice was muffled, but had sounded familiar.

“The guards are unconscious,” an older sounding man said. Again, the voice sounded familiar, despite sounding like he heard it through a stone wall, instead of wood.

“Come on,” A third person said, “Why is it taking do long? I thought you were good at this.”

It was what and how this person spoke that had Tibs stand and stared as the door melted away to reveal Don grinning at him.

Jackal looked in. “Don’t just stand there, Tibs. We need to move.”

Tibs launched himself at the fighter and hugged him. “You’re okay.”

“Of course I am. How could I mount this rescue otherwise.”

“Right, because you’re doing this alone,” Don said.

“Mayhap this should be reserved for once we are away,” Khumdar said. “I do not know how long the guards will remain unconscious. They are adventurers so they may be able to—”

“They’re Epsilon,” Tibs said, sensing them. “Not much past their test, I think.”

“Then they should remain unconscious long enough for us to reach the forest that is toward the rising sun if we hurry.”

“Wait, stop!” Tibs pulled his arm out of Jackal’s grip as the fighter started pulling him along. “What are you doing?”

“Breaking you out,” the fighter said with a grin. “What does this look like?”

“It looks like the three of you are throwing your future away. Where’s Mez?”

They exchanged a look. “We didn’t tell him,” Jackal said. “I didn’t think he’d agree with it. You know, with his not being a child thing and that girl trying to be special to him and —”

“Good. Does anyone know you’re here?”

“Well, I told Kro,” Jackal said in his I’m not that much of an idiot voice.

“Okay, good. Then go back and no one will know you were involved.”

“Not happening,” Jackal said. “I’m not leaving you out here by yourself. You’re going to need—”

“You are going back to Kroseph,” Tibs told the fighter.

“Tibs, be serious.”

“I am serious. You have your man. You promised him you’d stop doing stupid stuff.”

“Rescuing you isn’t stupid, Tibs. You’re my brother. I’m not leaving you to them to do whatever it is they’re planning.”

“It is stupid when I have this.” He raised his arm and pulled down the rough fabric to expose the black band just above his wrist. Utterly black against his light brown skin.

“So you keep it covered.”

“That’s not how it works. They can follow it. Bardik said it leaves something wherever it goes. If you stay with me, they’ll find out and Kroseph is going to lose you. That isn’t happening!” Tibs yelled as Jackal opened his mouth.

“Is this truly what you want?” Khumdar asked.

“It’s what’s best.”

“No, it isn’t,” Jackal said. “I don’t abandon—”

“You’re going to pick Kroseph over me.”

“Tibs...” Jackal sounded hurt.

“He’s your man. I’m just your brother.”

“You’re not just...”

“He’s more important than I am.”

“Don, how about you help me here?”

Tibs looked at the sorcerer. “Are you going to sacrifice the academy for me?”

“Don, this is Tibs, you can’t—”

“Look, Jackal. I’m not an adventurer. I did this because I knew you wouldn’t manage it without me. But running away from the guild? They’re going to hunt us, and we’re going to have to live in wild, and there’s going to be—”

“You’re a Runner, how is any of that scary?”

“I’m a Runner because I wasn’t given a choice,” Don snapped. “I’m going to survive this because my future is with studying and figuring things out. Tibs doesn’t want us to leave. So I’m going to go back, reach Epsilon, then spend the rest of my life among books and experiments.”

“And you’re going to spend yours with Kroseph,” Tibs said.

“Khumdar, you aren’t bound to the guild. You can help him out there.”

“I cannot,” the cleric said, and Jackal glared at him. “While I am not bound to the guild, I shall remind you that I am not here of my own volition. If I wish to leave, I must accomplish them before I leave.”

“Tibs, I can’t let you do this alone,” Jackal pleaded.

“I’ll be okay. I’m a rogue, well, a thief now, but I’m still the best at not getting caught, and I have tricks, you know.”

“Do you still?” Don asked. “I thought that the process that put the brand on stripped away your strength.”

“I’m Upsilon now, but I still know everything I learned. And all I need to get stronger is training, and the world’s big. There’s a lot of big and dangerous animals in it for me to train against and get stronger.”

“But only if they don’t catch you,” the sorcerer said.

“I have an idea on how to make it harder to be found, even with this.” Tibs shook his head when Don opened his mouth. He wasn’t saying it out loud, not with the guard within earshot, even if they were unconscious.

“Tibs,” Jackal pleaded. “Don’t do this.”

Tibs hugged him. “It’s how it needs to be. You have to be there for your man. Tell him

I'll be okay.”

Jackal hugged him tightly, then Tibs pushed him toward the town. Jackal took a step, looked over his shoulder at him, eyes wet, then squared his shoulders and walked away.

“Tibs,” Don said, then hesitated.

“I’m the one who did this. I’m the only one who needs to deal with the consequences.”

“You should have told me.”

“I know. You’d at least have told me that guy was the wrong one for what I wanted.”

“I’d have told you that you’re an idiot for even thinking about it. The guild is... it’s everything and everywhere, Tibs.”

“If I remove the head, it will—”

“No. That’s not how the guild works.” Don shook his head. “Look, before you try something this stupid again, read up on the guild. It’s history, how it’s run. Then you’ll understand how impossible what you want to do is.”

“So I should just let them continue to abuse people like the folks in Kragle Rock? Those like us who just made a mistake, or had the world put us in the wrong place?”

“Tibs, it’s impossible.”

Tibs smiled. “When we got here, they told us our job was to die. We didn’t. They told us it’s impossible to have more than one element. That dungeons are just animals. The guild knows too much stuff that’s not true. So I’m not going to let the fact they think they’re too big to be taken down stop me. Sebastian thought that too.”

“Just be careful.” Don walked away without looking back.

Khumdar studied him. “I wish I could say that I will see you again one day, Tibs. But I suspect that this is the last time. What you wish to do will lead to your death.”

“So I shouldn’t do it?”

“So you should make sure to enjoy whatever you do until then.”

“What are you doing in Kragle Rock?”

“I now believe I am doing the wrong thing. But I am bound to my word, and my course also cannot be changed.”

“We can all change what we’re doing.”

“I believe that you know that isn’t always possible. If you didn’t, you would not remain on this course knowing where it leads.” He pointed. “If you follow the zenith sun for three days, you will find yourself among a camp. They are brigands, but they are not bad people. They will help you as best they can.”

He walked away, and Tibs was alone with the wagon, two unconscious guards, and the content of the chest that had been their seat.

First, he ensured they remained unconscious by channeling Darkness and draining their strength until their essences weren’t as noticeable.

He considered draining them of their life essence and strengthening himself that way, but they weren’t responsible for what the guild did. They were too new to be part of the decisions that kept it the way it was.

The lid wasn’t latched or enchanted. From the chest, he took his armor and braces and put them on. Every hidden place had been emptied. It was in better shape than when it had been taken off him; the weave continuing to repair it. He filled the reserves in the

bracers, then looked over the wagon. The harness was empty, so the horses had fled. He hoped they'd be okay.

Tipped over wouldn't do. The guild would know someone had helped him. He stepped inside and channeled air. He made a ball of it between his hand, adding more and more, pushing it ever tighter. How essence flowed around him felt the same. So it seemed like the only thing he couldn't do anymore was suffuse himself with an element.

When the torrent between his hands became difficult to control, he let it go.

He saw stars from the impact through the wagon's floor, then coughed as dirt and wood pieces fell on him.

Another reflexive attempt at suffusing himself with Purity led to nothing, so he had to wait until his head cleared enough he could make the weave.

All that was left of the wagon was fragments of wood and metal. He looked himself over for new rips in his armor, but it seemed he'd miss the metal when he was thrown.

Was he still immune to it? That came with him having the element, didn't it? Not being able to suffuse himself. He'd have ample time to find out once he was away from here.

He studied the guards. They were already on the ground, so hadn't received any injuries from the flying wood or metal. Tibs was happy for that, but now he had to figure out what to do about them.

Would the guild believe he'd let them live?

Well, they'd have to believe what they wanted. He wasn't killing them.

Would they believe they hadn't helped him?

He looked at the remnant of the wagon. If they'd been at their post when it happened. They wouldn't be on the ground there. They'd be... Tibs looked around and winced. That looked to be a thick thicket.

Hopefully, they wouldn't be too injured in the process.

Tibs used air to lift one, then the other and fling them hard at the thicket. Then he checked on them. A broken arm on one, a badly broken leg on the other, but neither were losing essence, so they'd be fine.

He looked Zenith-ward and considered Khumdar's words. He could get help in that direction, but as a reward, he'd bring the guild down on them. He turned in the opposite direction and started walking, weaving Darkness over and within the brand.

Until he was sure this worked, it would be best if he avoided everyone.