

Tibs couldn't see his old teacher through the thick rain, but the dense essence stood out among the natural one of the rain. His hope was to reach him before Alistair noticed, then keep him unbalanced and... He'd have to come up with something to take the man out long enough for Tibs to escape.

He wished he'd brought a sword. He couldn't make one since, even if metal wasn't Alistair's element, with training, any adventurer could become sensitive to the other essences. He needed to remain an unknown, and that meant no essence use.

The wall of raw water essence came at him with such speed that Tibs only had time to attempt to wrench control, and fail, before it hit him and sent him flying. Reflexively, he pulled water to cushion his impact, cursed himself for revealing he had an element, then channeled water. He'd need everything he had access to if he wanted to keep up with what Alistair threw at him.

When Alistair headed away from Tibs, and in the direction of the fleeing team, he rushed to interpose himself, forming a sword. When the man attempted to swat him away a second time, Tibs made an etching to for it apart before it hit him.

He formed a sword and pointed it toward his old teacher. Alistair would have been proud of how straight it was; the lack of spikes.

He slowed. "Out of my way," he demanded.

"No."

He stopped two and zero steps away. "This doesn't concern you. No matter what they paid you, it isn't worth my wrath."

Tibs snorted. "As if I'd take money to get in your guild's way."

"My guild?" The tone was puzzled. "Fine, it's not like this will cause me to lose the spear."

That answered how Alistair had known to come here. He should have expected it. How little did his old teacher have to study an item to fully sense how the water essence was structured in it? Once he had that, how far could he sense it? Tibs could sense a quarter of the city if he pushed his sense. How much of it was because of all his element, or how hard he'd pushed himself? He hadn't known anyone with his range, but he'd purposely kept well away from powerful adventurers.

Still, no matter what Alistair implied. He had a limit. Tibs only had to hope he could delay him long enough for the others to get out of it.

Essence followed the wave of Alistair's hand, a tight etching that latched onto the rain and pushed it away. Tibs readied himself for any change in it as it approached, but it passed over him, stopping the rain from falling and stopping one and five steps behind.

Without the water, all that was left to hinder sight was darkness, which gave him the

---

The essence holding the water back shifted. A ripple starting behind Alistair, causing a faint glow that spread until the area was bathed in a bluish light that matched early morning in how it illuminated them.

So much for his advantage.

"Who are you?" Alistair demanded.

Tibs's smile wasn't pleasant. "Someone who's suffered through your guild's enough not to care who you are."

“Suffered?” Alistair looked him over. “We took you in when the alternative was your death. We trained you, taught you strength. And you repay that by helping thieves steal one of our precious artifact?”

Tibs worried that Alistair already knew who he was, but as a rogue, Tibs hadn’t been heading for death, just the loss of a hand. “Aren’t you forgetting every gold your guild charge for that? Holds over us? How it’s used to indenture us?”

“And you hope to free yourself by taking criminal’s money?”

Tibs smirked. “Just following the example your guild gave me.”

The stunned silence had Tibs wondering if Alistair could be naive enough not to know the guild did business with anyone who had the gold. Or if he simply refused to notice it.

“Then, once I have taught you the folly of walking away from the training you could have received, and made those criminals pay. I will bring you back.”

“Maybe I’ll teach you what comes of not letting the guild restrict what I learned.”

Alistair’s sword manifested so fast Tibs didn’t sense it happening. Between two running steps, it was there, slashing even if he was too far. The other hand’s fingers moved, forming an etching around it that flew at Tibs when the point of the sword reached the focus of the etching.

Tibs’s shield didn’t form as quickly, but it was fast enough, and the etching of concentric lines, connected by Arcanus, was completed as he moved it to intercept the attack, causing the essence to weaken with each circle, so that what spilled over didn’t leave a mark on his clothing.

He smiled at Alistair’s frown and staggered stop. “I guess your guild never taught you to just think your etching in place? I’d think after all this time you’d have at least worked out that one out without help. Only took me a few years.”

Tibs ran, not bothering with etchings. He couldn’t hope to outmatch his old teacher in a direct fight of essence.

He should have gone for air or earth. Or anyone one of his other elements, instead of reflexively reaching for what was there.

Alistair stepped aside, and when his sword impacted Tibs’s shield, there was more strength behind it than he thought should be possible. Water wasn’t about strength.

Except that everything one element could do had a version with the other elements. If Earth had strength, then there was a way to make water have that effect too.

Alistair stepped aside again, and Tibs parried the riposte before stepping away. “You’re a better fighter than I expected.”

Was having so many elements making him underestimate what each one could do?

“Undo your sword and shield. Help me retrieve the spear. And you’ll see that we have much more to teach you than using your element.”

“You don’t get it,” Tibs grumbled. “It wasn’t me being impressed. It was me realizing I don’t know you as well as I remember.” He attacked, and Alistair was slow in responding. The tip of Tibs’s blade cut through the leather and flesh, and he etched the water to bloom into spreading ice, only for the etching to shatter before it did any damage.

Tibs staggered back from the strike he blocked with his shield.

“We’ve met?”

Tibs didn’t bother with more reproach. He attacked with quick slashes Alistair easily

diverted, never taking his eyes off him. He couldn't shake the feeling his old teacher was studying him.

He iced the water on the ground before the man stepped on it, but to no effect. Like him, keeping himself from slipping was instinct.

Again, the etching appeared faster than Tibs could react. The finger movement registering only after the fact, but instead of being an attack, the bubble of exploding water forced him away.

"Did I teach you?"

Tibs was out of attack range before he willed the water away. Alistair's control of his essence was strong.

"Why? You're wondering if I still owe you gold?" He visualized the etching around Alistair, the intertwined strands moving around his arms and legs, over his hand, between the fingers. He placed more of Kha than he usually did. He couldn't let his old teacher move within it. Qu, Sah, and Ter, before Bor, so he would be immobilized.

Seeing it, in its entirety, and moving it with Alistair as he moved, was complicated, but Tibs had decades of practice. But not quite on that scale, or with an opponent with more experience.

It appeared, strands of water woven around the other man, sticking to him, then hardening. Alistair's surprise registered in one raised eyebrow. Then, even if he was ready for it, the strain of keeping his etching intact staggered Tibs.

"I hope that I can convince you to work with us," Alistair said. "This is impressive work, for someone clearly not as skilled as he could be. You could go far."

"And turned into you?" Tibs replied through clenched teeth. He sensed the crack in his etching, but in shifting his focus slightly to deal with it, another appeared, then another, and again. And then.

Tibs was the one encased in an etching. Alistair's fingers traced between them, and more of the etching built. Tibs disrupted some, but not enough. Then he stopped. He was wasting his energy. Tibs didn't need to move to fight back. He just had to work out the right etching to use.

"What did your teacher do to you?" Alistair asked, the etching still building.

Tibs considered all the ways he could reply, then settled on something simple. "He disappointed me. He let his guild destroy what they promised to protect."

He nodded. "The guild isn't perfect. But if you stopped fighting us. If you work with us again, you can make changes from inside. Make sure it becomes better."

"The way you claim you did?" Tibs replied with disgust. "Did that work out for you? Did you make it better? Or did you end up turning into someone more interested in advancing himself than protecting people?"

Alistair's eyes widened, and Tibs detonated the etching between them, adding to the surprise and weakening the hold over the etching.

Alistair's face and armor were cut when he pushed himself to his feet.

Tibs clothing was just as cut, and he had to hope the man would think he'd protected himself in the way the etching was made.

"Tibs?" Alistair asked, voice trembling.

He cursed.

His old teacher looked to Tibs's left arm, and the brand itched.

"How?"

"What do you care?"

Alistair shook himself. And when he stood, determination filled his eyes. "I'm bringing you back, Tibs. Surrender yourself to me peacefully."

"No, Alistair. I'll never submit to what your guild wants."

"You tried to assassinate one of our leaders."

"Come back to me once you've held them accountable for every person in Kragle Rock who died because your guild didn't protect them."

"That isn't the same thing Tibs, you—"

"It should be!" he reined in his anger. "You don't get to tell me I need to be punished when not one of them paid for those deaths. I didn't succeed in killing him."

"Maybe. But you're still wanted for it. And I will bring you in, Tibs." The sword dissolved into essence, and Alistair pulled two knives, already tracing with them.

The attacks came so quickly Tibs barely got a sense of the Arcanus that were part of them. A lot of Kha, so to restrain him, Par as well, along with Qu, of course. His own etchings didn't appear quite fast enough to block or deflect all of them.

Those that hit him weighed him down, pulling him to his knee, which didn't bother him, but then he realized his focus was harder to maintain. Alistair wasn't only restraining his body, he was attempting to restrain his mind.

Tibs felt cold in a way he couldn't ever remember feeling. Alistair *would* capture him. He *would* bring him back to the guild and they *would* punish him for escaping. He glared at the man.

He was never letting that happen.

Let his old teacher sense this. Let him puzzle over how he'd done it. Part of him hoped Alistair survived, but not being captured was more important.

Tibs filled the space between them with water essence. He left it floating, didn't shape it into anything.

He'd done this by accident a long time ago, the first time.

He'd done it again, trying to understand what had happened.

He never had.

But the result was always the same.

He switched to fire and continued filling the space with that element.

Even before they reacted, Alistair's eyes grew wide, and Tibs sensed something wrong with his deep reserve. It didn't turn the orange red of fire. The two essences seemed to mix and—

The explosion sent Tibs through a wall, and pain exploded through him. Before he thought about purity, he'd channeled fever and his body repaired itself.

His reserve was the single color of fever, that deep red with some brown mixed in.

He pushed aside what he'd sensed before the explosions and forced himself to his feet, and staggered toward Alistair's stilled form. He sent the purity etching at the unconscious man before he thought about the consequences.

Whatever had happened with his reserved had been reflected in his eyes. Alistair's surprise told Tibs he'd seen something there. If he lived, he'd tell the guild.

The smart choice, considering Tibs was already hunted by them, was to do nothing. Let the leaking life essence deal with this problem for him.

But for as angry as he could be with his old teacher, Alistair didn't deserve to die. He hadn't been the one to order the guild to let people of Kragle Rock be butchered. He was just a pawn in their machinations.

Tibs added more etching of purity and hoped they would be enough.

He couldn't stay. The rain was falling again, but the explosion would still draw people. He needed to get out of the city.