

Having the trapped plaza to compare it to, Tibs found the cell wasn't particularly effective at keeping him from using his essence. The weave through the bars, floor, ceiling, and wall only acted to push on the essence. It resulted in etching being harder to hold in place while creating them, due to the added pressure, but raw essence was only a question of having more will than the weave could handle. Unfortunately, the weave became stronger the closer to the edge of the cell Tibs pushed the essence.

Effectively, he could use essence within the cell, but not send anything through the bars at the four guards standing against the wall, watching him. Each had water as their element, by the color of their eyes, which was all Tibs had to go by; his sense couldn't cross the bars.

All the weave affected, as far as Tibs had worked out over the two days he'd been here—going by how often he was fed and the guards changed—was 'unformed' essence. Once he made the essence into a tool, such as a lockpick made of ice, the weave ceased to affect it. But if he even took a step toward the door, all four guards took one too, and Tibs was confident that the weave only acted in one direction.

He scratched at his neck again. The shirt and pants he'd been given to wear when they took his clothing were roughly woven and irritating. He'd seen other prisoners in the cells wearing them during his multiple previous stays, but he hadn't been considered enough of a threat to be forced into them until now, he figured.

The guards had let him study the door's lock, so long as he didn't have a tool with him. A visual inspection told him little, and he couldn't sense anything of it. Still, so long as there were no extra weaves, Tibs expected he'd be able to open it, given enough time.

Which wouldn't happen with the guards' unwavering attention on him. So he'd remained seated, eyes closed, pulling at the essence that naturally floated within the cell to add to his immense reserve, which had been left lower than he'd expected; not even half full. He'd used a lot against the Them, but he has also absorbed most of their essence at the end. He couldn't remember where all the essence had gone in the hectic events that followed his victory.

Pulling the essences in revealed something else about how the weave worked, and why once they were formed, tools weren't affected. It didn't affect the essence themselves, but how his will interacted with them. It was why essences could flow on their own, but the moment he actively pulled on one to add to his reserve, the weave added the complication of pushing it in every direction.

If, instead, he used his old trick of 'tilting the table', and let the essence flow toward him, it slowly came without obstruction. One method meant he had to maintain a constant effort of will, while the other was extremely slow.

He endured the mounting headache, alleviated by the occasional suffusing with purity. The resulting increase was still barely noticeable by the time the unseen door leading to the cells holding the rest of the prisoners, the 'safe' ones, opened and closed. He didn't think it was time for food, so maybe now was when they were going to take him to his punishment.

He channeled water again and opened his eyes when the steps paused before his cell, but the door didn't open. Alistair looked at him without expression.

"Who paid you to assassinate Supervisor Marger?"

“No one.” Had he been so focused he hadn’t paid attention when others used the title before? Or had everyone simply referred to him by his name, leaving Tibs to make the wrong assumptions?

“Tibs.” Annoyance slipped through. “We found so many Promises hidden in your armor an army could have been hired. Who gave that to you? Who gave you that armor?”

“I stole the Promises.” It had been too much to hope the weaves would keep his hiding place secure.

“No one here has that kind of money for you to steal,” Alistair replied in a tone that was close to his ‘try again’ one he’d used anytime Tibs hadn’t been entirely honest in how little he’d practiced between training sessions.

Tibs smile. “It’s not like I’ve been here all the time.”

His old teacher studied him. He seemed about to say something, sighed and tried again. In the end, all he said was, “Why”

“Because your way doesn’t work,” Tibs snapped.

Alistair looked confused. “My way?”

Tibs was on his feet. “You didn’t change anything. You’re just like the rest of your guild. All you care about is what you can take from the people around you.”

“That’s not true,” the man said, surprised. “Tibs, I tried to help you. Tried to make sure you would—”

“Be good enough your guild would be able to use me?” He was at the bars, glaring. “That they’d be able to make me into something to use to keep towns like Kragle Rock under their control? That I’d stand there while it burns because I’m told it’s just more training for the Runners living there?”

“No, I—”

“Where were you?” Tibs yelled, fighting tears. “Where were you when your guild decided the townsfolk weren’t worth protecting?”

“I didn’t know, Tibs,” Alistair said, voice soft. “I was—”

“Off doing whatever your guild to you to do,” Tibs snapped. “Off doing something that’ll make it easier for them to do this elsewhere.” He breathed a fraction of his anger down. “Did you even look at the people here, Alistair? When you came and went for my training, did you ever look and see the wrongs your guild was doing to them? Well, I did,” Tibs growled, the anger back in its entirety. “And I did something about it.”

“You failed, Tibs,” Alistair replied sadly.

Tibs turned his deflation into a shrug. “So I failed.” He forced the glare to be hard. “At least I tried.”

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

Tibs tapped his left wrist.

Alistair’s hand went to his own; then he forced it away. “That’s the least of what will happen. Tibs, you tried to kill a high-ranking guild representative. The only reason they won’t outright execute you is that they can do so much worse to you.”

Tibs shrugged. Whatever they did to him, he’d find a way to beat it and he’d know to spend his time finding the right person to target.

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

He looked up at Alistair in surprise.

“Yes, what you did is that serious.”

The way Alistair said the word made Tibs realize that when Irdian had told him the same, he wasn't saying Tibs would be in a state of despair. It was a place. He smiled. Places could be broken out of, no matter how hard the guards tried to keep him in.

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

“No, you didn't,” Tibs said with a snort. “You didn't hope anything for me. I was just someone they forced you to teach. If you hoped for anything, it was that I'd be a good tool for your guild.”

Alistair slumped. “I'm sorry you saw what I did that way. I wish...” He trailed off, then with a shrug, he turned and left.

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It was another day when the door opened and closed at a time that wasn't for food or the changing of his guards. And this time, there were more people, although only one walked all the way to his cell door. He channeled water and opened his eyes.

Irdian watched him impartially.

Tibs kept from asking after Jackal. He was sure that if he'd been caught, he would be in one of the cells here, not the ones for the safe prisoners. Maybe Sto hadn't let him out yet, or Irdian had him elsewhere, knowing Tibs would worry.

“This is your last chance to convince us to lessen your sentence, Tibs,” the commander said in a flat tone. “Who paid you?”

“No one. I saw the problem. I set out to fix it.” When Irdian roll his eyes, Tibs added. “I stole those promises the last time you let us leave the town.” That didn't convince him.

The commander used a key that had to be woven through with essence to unlock the door, then opened it. Tibs walked out of the cell before being prompted to and sensed the eight guards before he saw them. Water, earth air, darkness, light, corruption, purity, and fire. The same as what Sebastian had used to keep Tibs from rescuing Carina.

He fought the fear that they would prevent him from rescuing another of his friends. They were here to keep Tibs from rescuing himself. Irdian wasn't underestimating what Tibs could do with the one element he believed him to have.

The prisoners in the other part of the cells were silent as Irdian escorted Tibs out, four guards before him and four after. Once up the stairs, and into the back of the guild building, they walked for longer and made more turns than Tibs thought should be possible, until he remembered he didn't have the medallion that made that part of the building make sense.

The room they entered was large. Larger than Tibs thought it should be, based on where the doors they had walked by were. Was the enchantment making him think the room was larger, or changing his memory of the corridor?

It had a chair in the center that looked to be made of thick wood, but there was so much essence woven through it Tibs couldn't be sure there was normal wood in there. Metal bars were added to the legs and back, but they felt like entirely made of woven essence too, as did the leather straps on the armrests and dangling from the headrest.

He saw the table on the side with crystals, but before he could look at it, someone pushed him toward the chair and he was fighting against the urge to balk.

He wasn't giving them the satisfaction of knowing how scared he was. This was

where they were going to do to him what they'd done to Bardik. The darkness rogue had been taken from Gamma, down to Epsilon. What would Tibs end up at? Omega?

To fight the panic as he was strapped to the chair, Tibs looked at the table he'd glimpsed. It was the length of the wall, with an enchanted device on it. He couldn't work out what it was by the shape. A wooden base, with stone slabs stacked on a quarter side of it. Metal strips and plates were embedded in them, and two third of the rest of the device were rows and columns of crystals. One and eight columns, and he couldn't see how many rows from his position. Then his head was pushed back and secured and he could only look ahead.

All this took place in silence.

Tibs had expected gloating.

"He's secured," one of the guards said as they stepped away. Tibs tested the restraints, and he couldn't move.

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

Tirania, Alistair, and Marger walked in. His target didn't look well. Even after a days of rest and healing, he still had a lot of corruption coursing through his system. Tibs couldn't muster the energy to smirk at the worried expression the man quickly masked with anger. This wasn't what he'd been after. This, the man would heal from.

Not that it mattered. Tibs hadn't targeted the right person. He should have told Don his plan. The sorcerer would have told him who he should have targeted.

"Do it," Marger said.

Pain hit Tibs hard, and he gritted his teeth, glaring at them. He wasn't giving them the satisfaction. He'd burned, suffocated in water and under the earth. He'd fallen off the side of a mountain, willingly thrown himself into corruption and was struck by lightning.

He'd suffered enough pain throughout his life. This wouldn't break him.

The pain changed.

It was no longer something being inflicted on him. It was now the pain of something being ripped out; of his essence being taken from him. The reverse of what he'd done to Bardik had felt like. Was this what the rogue had suffered through? Would Tibs get white hair too? Would he end up old? Would he die before—

His scream wrenched thoughts away from him.

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Light pierced him, and Tibs tried to greet the element, but his voice no longer worked.

"His eyes are still blue," Someone said.

Darkness returned, but not unconsciousness.

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

"Is he totally drained?" someone else asked. There was a weakness to the voice Tibs had heard in those who were sick. "Some idiot forgot to make sure the crystals were empty."

"No, sir. Other than the primers, all the other crystals came from stock that has been confirmed to be drained."

The man snorted, then had to catch his breath. "Explain that then."

"I can't, sir." The response was filled with uncertainty. "Someone at Rho shouldn't have filled more than four crystals."

“He was Rho, wasn’t he, Alistair?”

“That was the last test he passed...” his old teacher trailed off.

“But?” Marger demanded.

“Tibs is resourceful,” Alistair answered. “Because of his...condition when he gained his element, Tibs has grown adept at pulling essence from around him. This room isn’t shielded, so he might have done so reflexively while the enchantments worked.”

“Wouldn’t you have known he did that? You have the same element.”

“I wasn’t paying attention to the essence around us.”

Marger snorted, and this time the pause was shorter. “It’s more likely that someone isn’t doing their job, and these weren’t empty.” Someone grabbed Tibs’s left wrist. “But the brand’s there. So he’s drained. Get the wagon ready. I want him out of here and on his way to the Citadel immediately.”

“The Citadel?” Alistair asked.

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

“You want to argue with orders that come down from on high,” Marger said, then paused to catch his breath. “You go talk to the man directly. I sent in my report and those are the orders that came back. Him and all his possession are being shipped to the Citadel by wagon.”

“The contents—” Irdian started.

“They’re going into the coffers, don’t worry about that. But the armor’s going with him. He’s probably going to have someone look at it. It’s unique enough they might be able to work out who gave it to him, since neither of you was able to make him tell you.”

“If I’d been allowed to bring in a Light Speaker—”

“Commander,” Marger said with a sigh. “To wait for one of them to be free would have meant time for whoever funded this would be murderer to mount a rescue. Don’t worry. I’m sure that there will be a number of them at the Citadel, and that they will be happy to tell you what they learned once they’ve forced him to reveal everything.”

“Why by wagon?” Alistair asked. “The platform is more expedient.”

Marger sighed. “I’m just following orders. Unlike you, I don’t question them. Pack him up.”

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Tibs came awake when he hit the stone floor. He vaguely remembered being dragged through the building and dropped into a room he couldn’t sense out of. He’d dragged himself to a bench, and amidst the realization that if he couldn’t sense outside, it meant he could still sense around him; he fell asleep.

He didn’t react as hands grabbed his arms and dragged him. His nearly unending reserve was still there, but there was nothing left in it, or so it seemed, but the small reserves at its surface were full of their respective essences. He reached out to pull water essence in and found he couldn’t. About to panic, he realized the two carrying him had water as their element. Around them were eight more. One with each of the core elements.

This wasn’t something else that had been taken from him. They were actively blocking him.

Where did he stand then?

He turned his sense inward, and the difference was immediately noticeable. He

barely sensed his channels. This was hardly more than what the townsfolk had. If not for the blue tint to them, he wouldn't be able to tell his apart from theirs.

Upsilon. He'd been sent back to the beginning.

Except he still knew everything he'd learned. He knew how to go about becoming stronger. And even with so little essence, he should be able to use his etchings.

He was thrown and landed hard on a wooden floor. A door closed, and a key turned. The walls, ceiling, and floors were woven with essence. This didn't push against him, but he couldn't sense pasted them.

"He's in," someone yelled, and Tibs was thrown about as the room he was in moved to the sounds of horseshoes on stone.

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes.

The wagon was much smaller than his cell; wooden walls with barred openings hardly larger than his head. A bench on one side with a bucket under it. The door had no lock, but its weave was distinct from the rest of the wagon.

He sat on the bench and channeled Air. He tested pulling on the essence, and when there was no resistance, he started refilling his reserve. Even if he couldn't sense his reserve fill, as drained as it was, he would have plenty to take on however many guards were with the wagon by the time they stopped and opened the door to bring him food.

Then he'd be free and working on bringing the guild down once and for all.