

The nearly black knife floated between Tibs's hands.

He didn't need them there, like they nestled the etching, but he found it comfortable to have a visual limitation to how the essence moved.

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"Corruption doesn't flow," Don explained once they were seated inside the room above the corruption pool, "the way Water does."

Tibs had been concerned his friend would get in trouble for using it without asking permission this time, but so long as no one needed it, he'd explained, no one cared. He'd looked at Tibs and added, 'so long as it's still there by the time we leave.'

He raised a hand as Tibs started to correct him that water essence didn't flow. "I know it isn't the right word. Believe me, any scholar who researched essence knows it's never the right word. Half the books I read spend more time arguing over which of the words should be used instead of explaining the research. For the purpose of this session, Water flows, and Corruption oozes."

Tibs nodded, and Don continued.

"Unlike Water, Corruption doesn't have a condition in which it can be solid. It goes from oozing to drifting to floating. Simply put, you can make Corruption less solid with will, but not more. For that, you need an assembly starting with Ike, which—"

"Wait, won't Ike make the etching fly apart? The Arcanus is about movement. It's what happened when the lance I'd made just flew out of my control."

"Has your teacher explained how not every Arcanus interacts with the elements the same way?"

"It has come up," Tibs said, remembering the headache that had caused. Not only did the Arcanus not always act the same from one element to the other, but the same Arcanus could have a variety of behavior depending on what the other Arcanus were used in the filigree.

"In the case, Ike does add motion to the essence." Don formed a box of corruption, which drooped as soon as it existed. Tibs sensed the sorcerer add a filigree of Ike spaced well apart and the drooping stopped. "As you can sense, the essence is moving, and that motion is letting the form I will it in remain."

He was right. There was a vibration in the essence now, but instead of making the box fly out of Don's control, it went in all directions at the same time, and caused it to be solid.

"What Ike is doing is getting stronger," Tibs said, sensing the vibrations increase.

"Indeed. It's why Ike can't be used on its own." The box exploded in a formless cloud of essence that Don absorbed. "The Arcanus builds constantly, adding more and more stress on the essence lattice. You can compensate by adding more lattices, but that's a losing battle. Ike will always overcome them; it's simply a question of time. You need to use other Arcanus to...buffer its effect. Which one and how you place them will depend on the specifics you are looking for."

He'd looked at Tibs expectantly, and he'd had no choice but to describe what he needed, since learning about all the way to make corruption essence work would take more than the rest of this day.

He needed it as hard as metal, he'd explained, aiming to keep the description vague. The etching then needed to be able to have other essence wrapped around it without them

interacting, because they'd have their own filigree.

And Don set forth with explaining what Tibs needed to do. Kha was needed on each side of Ike because it could 'absorb' some of the motion it created. How close would depend on the exact 'solidity' Tibs was aiming to create, Sah, was then needed on the flow side only—Tibs had to ask for an explanation of 'flow side', and Don demonstrated by pushing the essence from himself into and etching with a filigree, the direction the essence moved was the 'flow side'—and it would serve to balance the constant growth in the movement since over time, Ike could overwhelm Kha just like it did the etching's lattice. Ool was then needed on either side, as well as any crossing of filigree, so he had control over what went where. Again, Tibs would have to experiment with positioning.

Don smiled. "But starting here, and going only with incremental changes, will keep you from causing this to explode." The smile had vanished. "Well, it should. Please don't prove me wrong."

Then he had started on the other filigree Tibs would need, to account for him adding essences and changing their effect.

Whenever Tibs asked for clarification, Don answered. When Tibs asked about something relating to the elements, or the essence, or the Arcanus that didn't impact what he was teaching, he shut down the inquiry.

When Don had gone off on a tangent about how even something as mindset when a filigree was built affected how a it behaved, and how some scholar theorized it was why the classes had been created to capitalize on and focus the similar mindsets. Which led to the creation of the fighters, sorcerers, rogue and archers. Since, even back then, Purity was a group of its own, Clerics were never studied, but observations have supported those theories.

Tibs had started to tell him about how clerics might work with their essence, because of their connection to their element, but the sorcerer had stopped him, been annoyed at himself for going off topic, and set back to teaching Tibs.

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The corruption center of his building etching was unchanging, Rys letting there be much more than he could normally push together through willing it. So he set about adding the next layer. Darkness, to decrease the chance his weapon would be detected. Since Tibs didn't have the time to practice etching it until it he could make it with barely any thoughts, he'd have to make it ahead of time; and walk about the guild with it. Then metal essence with a filigree to strengthen it for thrusting and one to sharpen the edges until it might be able to slice through weaves, if that was a thing. Then a final edge of corruption to ensure it would cut through whatever protection Marger had.

That gave him a blade. Now he had to work on the pommel, if he wanted to be able to wield it with more than his will.

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Tibs woke and immediately set about forming his knife, and he needed too many tries. He sat at the table and set about practicing.

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"In a hurry?" Kroseph asked, placing a new tankard and taking the empty one. Tibs's plate was almost empty.

“Lots to do.” He was down to six tries before the etching was proper. Still too many. He wanted to get it right on the first try, since that would let him etch it as close to the last moment as needed. But he expected that wasn’t possible in the time he had left. He wanted to make it before reaching the guild, so there would be as few distractions as possible once it was made.

“Does one of those things include visiting Jackal?” the reproach in the server’s eyes kept Tibs from protesting he was too busy. He nodded and hurried to finish his plate before racing to the stairs.

He knocked on the door, then cracked it open. Kroseph should still be working, but Tibs had lost sight of him, so he wanted to be sure they weren’t setting him up to see something he had no interest in. Even waiting to be invited in wasn’t a guarantee he wouldn’t get an eyeful. And Jackal on his own didn’t mean he wouldn’t find a way to tease Tibs.

The room was quiet, and Jackal was reclined on the bed, his lower half covered with a sheet and hand on top of that.

The fighter gave him a weak smile as Tibs stepped in. “Come to see your dying leader?” He forced a cough. “I thought you’d already moved on.”

“Been busy,” Tibs mumbles, pulling a chair next to the bed. He knew Jackal was jesting, but Tibs had forgotten about him being sick in the middle of getting ready. “And you aren’t dying.”

Jackal forced another cough. “How can you say that? I’ve been wasting away in this bed. Soon there’ll be nothing left of me.”

“I can sense what’s left of the corruption in your essence,” Tibs said, rolling his eyes. “You could get out of the bed if you really—”

Jackal had his hand on Tibs’s mouth, looking at the door fearfully. “Don’t say that,” he whispered. “Kro might hear you. And then, he’ll stop looking after me.”

Tibs leveled a look on the fighter as he moved the hand away. “Your man is never going to stop looking after you, even when you’re healthy. And if you start telling me the special stuff he does to you when you’re sick,” Tibs added as Jackal opened his mouth. “I am going to fill you with so much corruption it’s going to shrivel down to nothing.”

“I doubt there’s enough corruption to make that happen,” the fighter replied with a smirk.

“I’ve seen it, remember? I know exactly how much it’ll take. If you didn’t want me to know that, you shouldn’t have arranged for me to walk into your fun like you did.”

“You make it sound like I knew when you’d return to our room,” Jackal said, grinning.

“Oh, you have your ways of knowing.”

Jackal let himself fall back on the bed. “What’s keeping you busy?”

Tibs shrugged, and the fighter frowned

“If I threaten to tie you to that chair so you have to watch me a Kro have fun, will you tell me?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“That is why threats work.”

Tibs glared at Jackal, and the smile went away. He had simply forgotten, but Jackal knew him too well. He’d work through any excuse Tibs gave him and come to something close to the truth. And that was too dangerous for his friend.

“If you don’t want to tell me, Tibs. It means you probably shouldn’t be doing it.”

“It has to be done.”

Jackal sighed. “I hate it when you say that. Because coming from you, it’s probably true. Tell me you’re going to be careful.”

“As much as I can. I’m working on making sure it goes right.”

“Good, because we’ve already missed one run. I will be better before the next one, and I will need my rogue if we’re going to clear the fourth floor.

Tibs nodded. He didn’t know what would happen to the runs with the guild destroyed, but he was sure he’d manage to get them in the dungeon no matter what.

“Then I should let you go. Any longer and Kro’s going to wonder if I’m up to no good.”

“When are you ever not?”

Jackal stared at him. “Are you saying he already knows?” Tibs shrugged and his friend’s expression turned suspicious. “Okay, exactly what is my man up to?”

Tibs snorted. “How about enjoying not having you running around the town? Getting in fights, staying out until the late hours. Drinking with unmentionable people?”

“Hey, I mention them if I’m asked.” Jackal’s smile vanished. “Tibs, be careful.”

“I am.” He stood and left.

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The problem wasn’t maintaining the darkness sheath and his corruption knife at the same time. The problem came from the one detail he’d forgotten in his hurry to train both.

People didn’t see him.

Yes, they’d notice something if they caught sight of him out of the corner of their eye, but those weren’t the problem. It was the townsfolk looking ahead of them as they walked. Looking directly at Tibs, if they happened to heading for each other.

With him focused on maintaining the two etchings, more than once he’d nearly bumped into someone, and the jerk to avoid the collision cause his focus to break. Then his sudden ‘appearance’ caused enough of a ruckus he’d decided the sheath came first. He couldn’t afford for word of him appearing out of nowhere to reach the guild.

Now, after a few days of splitting his attention three ways, the sheath first, remaining aware of the people around him second, and then the knife, he was able to walk around and keep track of everyone around him. The split meant he couldn’t keep some of the essences from leaking away, but it wasn’t enough to keep him from going through with this.

If he could find a way to get in.

He’d approached the guild sheathed to get a sense of the weave’s reaction, looking to work out a way to defeat it, but it was beyond his ability.

And he needed a way in soon.

From listening to the clerks, Marger was close to being done. It was all they could talk about. Guessing on what he would do, who would replace Tirania. Would the Runners sent to other dungeons while he restarted everything here from scratch?

None of them had given time frames, but the sense of ‘any day now’ was there.

Breathing the urgency away so he remained careful became harder with each failure at thinking of a way in. He didn’t want to succeed, just to end up dead. He wasn’t abandoning his team like that.

He stepped out of the crowd to alleviate some of the mental strain and leaned against the wall. He maintained his sheath and knife, although it was in a sheath at his belt. The one that had contained the sword that had crumbled away with the golem holding it. Without having to remain aware of the crowd, the two etchings hardly taxed him.

Not having to focus so much also let him notice the dog sniffing the ground between where he'd been in the crowd and the wall. It was one of Serba's larger dogs. It sniffed at his feet, then searched away, letting out a whine. It sniffed back and forth before him, stopped again, looked at him, then away, before sniffing the ground some more.

Tibs looked around. This wasn't one of her dog that sometime wandered away from her. She'd set him on this search, so she would be... he found her on the other side of the crowd, some's essence at the mouth of an alley with dogs at her feet first, then he saw her there in gaps between people.

"Sorry," he told the dog, then entered an alley to go around.

The sniffing followed him, the dog's nose to the ground, a few steps behind him. When he reached where she'd stood, he wasn't there. He found her by the crowd parting to let her and her dogs return from the other side of the road.

He stepped deeper into the alley, the dog following him, and dropped the sheath. The dog let out a startled whine, looked at him and let out a bark, sitting. He released the knife, then Serba was in the mouth of the alley, glaring at him.

"About time," she said. "Just where have you been hiding? Any longer and I wouldn't have been able to warn you in time."

"In time for what?"

"For you to move your stuff before the commander raids it."

"How did Irdian find out this time?" Tibs asked in exasperation. He so didn't have the time to deal with this.

"I don't know, but he's been gathering people all morning."

He rubbed a temple. Who did he have available he could send? He had no idea. Keeping track of his rogue was another thing he'd let go to train. It was probably how Irdian had learned about it. Someone had taken Tibs's lack of oversight as their cue to push their plot forward and...

He sighed. What was the point? So he'd lose the equipment for a few days. Once the guild was no more, he'd get it back from the rubble.

Of course, that was if he could find a way in without being noticed. Which was looking less and less likely with Marger's departure growing ever closer. He straightened, staring at Serba, who took a step back, hand up placatingly.

"When is the raid happening?" he asked as she kept retreating. Why did he keep thinking he needed to get on his own?

She hesitated. "At this point? Just about now." She turned and ran as if her life depended on it, her dogs trailing behind.

Tibs ran, because the future of his town depended on it.