

Chapter 35

“Dhu,” Alistair said, “is the Arcanus representing Purity.” The shape he formed over his hand didn’t look like purity to Tibs. It was a mix of curves and lines; as if it couldn’t decide which she preferred. Purity would know. Purity wouldn’t settle for doing it partway. She wouldn’t have anything until she’d worked the problem and had a solution.

Tibs recreated it. Making the Arcanus like this, using his essence, was simple. A shaping of water into the form. It was adding them to the etching, alone or as part of a filigree where the complications came. The placement needed to be exact, for the effect he wanted it to add. The more of the Arcanus, the harder it became. If he used more than one Arcanus, the difficulty increased again. Smaller errors caused ever growing differences to the expected result.

“When used alone,” his teacher continued, “Dhu adds sharpness to an attack.”

“Shouldn’t that be metal?” Tibs asked. “Or crystal?” When fragile crystals broke into shards they could slice open skin. “Purity should be...” he trailed off, realizing he might reveal too much of what he knew of her personality. “I don’t know. Removing impurities, or something.” That made no sense. The Arcanus weren’t the element they were associated with. But he was a kid, so Alistair would—

“You know better than that, Tibs,” Alistair said in a reproachful tone. “And I can tell you aren’t paying attention. What’s distracting you?”

“Nothing.” He just wanted thing to be straightforward. None of this confusing Arcanus that were linked to an element that had nothing to do with its effect. Or his supposed friends, intent on getting in his way, instead of supporting him.

Alistair studied him. “Then, if you don’t mind. Let’s continue with the lesson you insisted on getting. Etch a line. Place Dhu at three, seven, and nine. Once done, send it at the target.”

The etching his teacher did with his knife was complex. So many of the Arcanus Tibs couldn’t follow them as they formed. As if the knife’s point wasn’t actually tracing them, but just laying the lines where they went. Another show of how his teacher knew etching didn’t need a point to be traced. Or was it part of something he would teach later, again believing it was the right way to do it? There was no light on the words when Alistair explained the need for the knife point, so he at least believed it was needed in some fashion.

On the other side of the training room, water formed into a pedestal, then a torso. That of a woman, as the water flowed and gave her chest curves, then the neck and a distinctive face.

Tibs raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you might want to let some of your anger out.”

“I’m not angry at her.” She was only the agent of the guild. Doing what she was ordered to. He formed a knife and showed Alistair it had no jagged edges to it. He quickly formed the etching as instructed, lines and spirals with the filigree, and sent it at Tirania’s representation.

The water splashed over her face without visible effect. Stepping closer, he saw fine scratches in the hard water. That wasn’t particularly impressive.

“Not bad for a first try,” Alistair said. “But you misplaced Dhu.”

Tibs frowned. He was confident he'd placed them where instructed. "How much more damage would it have done if I had placed it correctly?"

"More than this, but Dhu by itself isn't the deciding factor." Alistair walked back to where they'd been, and Tibs followed him. "How many lines you add to your etching will act to increase the damage, the spirals and how well they intersect with the lines will pull more essence, which also increases the damage." He faced the water bust. "You shouldn't worry about that at the moment. This isn't about causing damage, but having you get a sense for how to properly divide each section of the etching. But..." Alistair smiled as he quickly traced the same etching Tibs had. Even Dhu were in the positions he'd put them, as far as he could tell.

But when the water splashed on Tirania's face, blades of water sprang forth, and when the etching faded back into essence, she was gone.

"Properly etched, even one as simple as this can yield deadly results."

And used up far too much essence, which made it harder to control. Tibs wasn't looking for something that would obliterate everything it splashed on. He wanted something precise that wouldn't leave evidence of what he'd done behind.

Or, if it did, that the evidence wouldn't lead back to him.

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"He's not going to do it," Ganny snapped angrily as Tibs and his team walked up the stairs.

"He said he wouldn't," Sto replied resignedly. Good. That meant he wouldn't do something stupid when his friend insisted Tibs do what they told him.

"He helped you, Tibs," she snapped. "The least you could do is show some gratitude."

"Leave it, Ganny."

She let out a huff, then silence.

It lasted until they reached the doorway.

"Here?" Don asked.

"No," Jackal replied. "It's too close to the entrance. We don't want the guards to see him losing it. Once we're on the third floor, we'll have all the privacy we need."

Don opened the doorway, and once they were before the tiled hallway, Jackal faced Tibs.

"Alright, Tibs. Time to let go of water."

"No."

"Tibs, you promised," Mez stated.

He snorted. "If you believed me, that's your problem. We have a run to do." Tibs walked past his team, sending water essence ahead to make sure Ganny hadn't changed the triggers to the crest rooms.

"Stay here," Jackal ordered. "Me and Mister Light Fingers are going to have a talk."

"I question the wisdom of your plan," Khumdar said.

"Anyone who knows me," the fighter replied, "which includes you, knows wisdom's never been one of my defining traits." Jackal reached Tibs at the junction, stepping where he had, so he wasn't changing which corridor would be open. That was good. Tibs had expected Jackal to try that as a way to force him to obey.

Tibs stepped to the right, following the triggers which opened the way to the lion

crest. "You aren't talking me into letting go of water."

Jackal's reply was a noncommittal grunt, and Tibs narrowed his sense to push through the miasma and keep track of the fighter. He didn't know what his plan was, but he'd be ready for it.

Tibs stepped on the next trigger and tensed as Jackal put a hand on his shoulder.

"This is far enough."

Tibs let out a put-upon sigh and turned. "Jackal, as your friend, I'm telling you to stop pushing."

"Tibs, as your friend, if you weren't so full of it right now, you'd know I can't stop pushing."

"I'm warning you, Jackal. You aren't going to like what I do to make you stop."

"Jackal," Don called. "Maybe you shouldn't be doing this on your own?"

"How about we make sure this remains private?" the fighter said with a grin.

A wall of stone slammed down, behind and ahead, forming a large room with only Tibs and Jackal in it.

Tibs stared at them, then Jackal, trying to understand how he'd done it. No essence had flowed out of the fighter, and they were both standing still, so he couldn't have stepped on a trigger, not that any of the triggers had caused that result before. Ganny had made this floor so all they did was rearrange the passages.

He glared at the fighter. "You did plan this with Sto."

Jackal smirked. "What? I'm always talking to it. Sure, I can't hear what it says, but I know it hears me. And considering you heard its cry for help all the way into town, I figured it could hear me if I stood by the stairs. Had to make sure no one was around, but not a lot of people get up in the middle of the night to gaze at the dungeon."

"You can't do this," Tibs told the ceiling. "We're in the room."

"Actually," Ganny replied, sounding smug, "We can. Did you forget it's distance, not your presence that limits what Sto can do?"

"Scare to speak for yourself, Sto?"

"That you think that, Tibs," Jackal said. "Shows how bad what you're doing is for you. I'm asking you, as your friend and brother. Let it go before this turns bad."

Tibs glared at the fighter. "It's too late for that." The sword formed in his hand as he swung, the blade elongating in anticipation of Jackal stepping back. Instead, the fighter jumped back, the leap taking him nearly to the wall.

A stone ending in a point formed in Jackal's hand, and Tibs made his shield. Instead of throwing it, the fighter moved it before him, essence trailing in its wake. Tibs stared as Jackal etched... and included Arcanus within it. Kha, Fey, Bor, and two others he didn't know the names of.

It wasn't simply that Jackal could etch. He was Lambda, so he would have received the basics by now. It was how precise the etching was, spirals within waving lines, and straight ones, but going up and down, instead of pointing at Tibs.

Tibs had never thought of Jackal as someone who even knew what precision was.

"What?" the fighter said, sounding offended. "Did you think us Lambda fighters weren't taught etching? Or that you're the only one who can talk his instructor into pushing beyond what he's supposed to teach?"

What did the etching do? It caused the air to shimmer with earth a pace before Jackal, and for close to a pace in thickness, but there had to be more. Alistair hadn't mentioned waving lines at this point, or that the lines directing the essence didn't have to point forward. And the filigree? Tibs was still working with single Arcanus. He had no idea how five of them could change what he saw, even if he'd known the base effect.

"Do you think this is going to protect you?"

"I think it's going to give us time to talk," Jackal replied.

"There's nothing you can say that's going to change my mind." He made his etching, not bothering with tracing it. He used the one of his previous day's training, making sure Dhu was in the correct positions. It probably wouldn't kill Jackal, but all he was interested in at the moment was to impress on him he was outmatched.

The water flew at the fighter, hit the shimmering wall and... scattered. As it moved through it, the shimmering points sent the essence in all directions, to be caught in the waves and pushed further away. As hard as Tibs tried to force it to maintain the form of the attack, his will didn't seem to make it into the etching.

"You're hurting the Kragle Rock, Tibs."

"I'm doing what I have to, so the guild never hurts anyone one here again."

"They way you're going, there's not going to be anything left of the town for the guild to hurt."

"Anyone strong enough will survive," Tibs stated. "But you aren't going to be one of them." This time the etching was nine lines intersecting at the point with six spirals around them, and a filigree of Fey, but he didn't simply count on it pulling essence as it reached the fighter, he added from his reserve.

The attack impacted the shimmering wall faster and harder, moving deeper before it started scattering, but instead of being sent all around and dispersing, the filigree caused the thick essence to cling within Jackal's etching. Tibs send another one. If he couldn't have an attack make it through the wall, he'd overwhelm the fighter's defense.

"That's how you now solve you problems? By killing? What are you going to tell Kro, Tibs? That the dungeon did it?"

"You're always throwing yourself at the creatures in here. It's not going to be hard to convince him you finally went up against one that was too strong for you."

"You're going to break his heart, Tibs," Jackal replied sadly.

"Then don't force me to do this," Tibs snarled, and filled the cracks. He pointed the way they'd come. "Leave. Take the others with you. I'll make myself another team. Another family. One that understands me, that supports me."

"One that's okay with you becoming worse than my father?"

"I'm never going to be like him," he replied with a snort.

"Tibs," Jackal said quietly, "what would Carina think of what you're doing?"

"Don't mention her!" The crack was so sudden he thought his ears rang from the imagined noise. Heat rushed through it and he hurried to fill it before it became too much.

"Why not? All this is because of her, isn't it? Because the guild didn't act to stop my father and he killed her before you."

"It was their job to make the town safe," Tibs growled, spiderwebs of cracks spreading through the ice even as he added water to it.

Jackal snorted. “Come on, you know that’s not true. Or that, at least, it never applied to us Runners.” He fell quiet and Tibs focused on adding ice between him and the fire lapping at it. “The thing I don’t get,” he finally said, puzzled. “Really, the one thing that baffles me in all of this is why you even cared my father took her.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ice shattered, water steamed as Tibs forced it in place.

“No. I mean, it’s not like she was your girl, special or otherwise. She was just the team’s sorcerer. She was good looking, I’ll give you that, so I’m sure you enjoyed that, but —”

“Shut up!” Ice melted as heat poured through. “She was my family! I don’t need to have my dick in someone to give a fuck about them!”

“But you wanted to, right?” Jackal smirked, and Tibs’s sword and shield started smoking. “Considering how often you made sure to be alone with her. Learning your letters.” He rolled his eyes. “You kept talking about how you never wanted someone special, but you wanted her, right? You wanted her in your bed, to feel her skin against yours, hear her moans as you pushed your cock—”

Fire swallowed Tibs’s scream as it exploded at the fighter. It hit the etched wall, and scattered, but Tibs kept feeding it his rage, and it rejoiced, consumed all it touched.

How dare he reduce what he felt for her to nothing more than fucking?

When Tibs stopped, the haze of heat didn’t immediately dissipate. When it did, Jackal still stood, panting and swearing.

“Oh, I am so glad that worked,” the fighter said.

“Once,” Tibs snarled and sent fire at Jackal again, who only then realized the previous attack had destroyed his etching.

Jackal threw himself out of the way and tapped the ground on landing, earth essence pouring into it and pillars of stone leaped up to intercept the fire. They didn’t last long. As hungry as Tibs’s fire was, even dungeon reinforced stone was consumed.

Jackal yelled, but Tibs didn’t listen; his own scream mixed in with the fire’s roar being all that mattered. The fighter moved quickly, either staying ahead of the fire, or threw stones up to block it.

As Tibs got tired of the chase, he regained enough sense to see the solution.

If Jackal was going to spend his time running, Tibs was going to take that away from him. He released fire in all directions with a victorious scream. Fed it and fed it some more. Made it more than what’s he’d unleashed in the Ratling camp. Let Jackal try to survive that.

When he felt like it had been long enough, he fed the fire more. He wasn’t risking Jackal being sneaky and able to take more heat than Tibs expected. He was going to melt that stone body off until all that was left was his essence. Then Tibs was going to rip that apart.

The fire didn’t stop willingly, but Tibs was its master. Panting, he turned in place, taking in the charred walls and the empty space. He’d won. He thought, snarling. He’d killed Jackal for tarnishing Carina’s memory. He’d killed him for bad-mouthing his family.

Tibs had killed Jackal.

He’d...

“Jackal?”

No!

He looked around, the only sound the crackling of cooling stone. What had he done? He snarled, looking at the blackened and melted ceiling. “What did you make me do?”

“Hey, Tibs,” someone said, and he whirled in time for the fist to hit him in the face. “That fucking hurt!”

Tibs looked up at the smoking fighter from where he landed. His armor was charred and peeling and his stone face didn’t look right. Part of it was drooping.

“You’re alive!” Tibs stood, unable to believe he’d survived that kind of heat.

“No thanks to you,” Jackal snarled. “I swear to the abyss, Tibs. If that ruined my pouch, I will make you pay.”

“You made me do it!” he screamed, heat flaring back. Horrified, Tibs pushed it down, reached for water, pushed it up until it stopped steaming. He needed to— He was on his back again, his concentration shattered.

“Oh no,” Jackal kicked him. “We are so not fucking done.”

Tibs suffused himself with air, and the next kick went through him. Then he had a whirlwind around the fighter as he lifted himself up, trying to do the same with him so he could smash him against the walls until he was nothing more than the rubble Sto’s creatures because when they died.

He pours more and more essence into the wind. How could Jackal be so heavy? He was nothing more than stone and—the fighter’s essence went deep into the stone floor.

“You’re fucking cheating!” He let go of air and reached for corruption as the fighter ran.

“Really? You’re surprised?” Jackal exclaimed, causing stones to jump up and intercept the corruption. “Is that all you have? Did Carina really mean so little to you that —” Tibs filled the room with darkness. “Ah, fuck!”

“I am going to make you pay for that.” Tibs stalked toward Jackal. “She was the most important person to me!”

“Hey, I knew you longer!” the fighter had his back against the wall, swinging his hands before him as if Tibs couldn’t sense and avoid the blind punches.

“You aren’t the same! You’re a brother to me! She was—” He swallowed the pain, then the punch had him on his back again.

“Come on, Tibs,” Jackal mocked. “At least try, okay? It’s like you don’t know what I can do. Earth fighter here, inside an earth dungeon.”

Tibs pushed himself to a crouch. “And I’m a fucking earth rogue.” He didn’t bother with pillars. He sent essence into the floor, felt Sto resist and snarled. If he hadn’t wanted this to happen, he shouldn’t have gotten involved. With a scream, spires of stone erupted from the floor and wall. Thin and sharp; all focussed on Jackal.

The fighter didn’t move in time.

He was skewered from all sides, looking at Tibs with a pained and fearful expression. Tibs just glared as the fighter tried to say something, then stilled, his head flopping down until a spire stopped it. As Tibs watched, satisfaction growing, the stone faded from Jackal’s body, his skin returning to its usual tanned hue.

Tibs stepped up to him and smirked. “I win.”

He’d won.

Abyss, he'd done it.

He dropped to his knees before the corpse of his friend, the last of his family.

He was alone. Utterly alone, again.

And he'd been the one to do it this time. Had been happy making it happen.

He wailed, wishing he could go back. Swallow the words he'd said, take back the actions. He should have listened to Jackal; he was smarter than he let on. If he had, Tibs wouldn't be here.

He wouldn't be so utterly alone.

Arms closed around him. "It's okay, Tibs," Jackal whispered. "I've got you. It's going to be okay."