

## Planning-14

Tibs watched workers cleared away what was left of the burned-out houses from the rooftop. He'd climb up because he'd wanted quiet. He wanted away from the discussion about the Omegas who were filling the new training fields. The complaints and the demands.

He'd thought being up here would make him feel better. That looking over Kragle Rock's roofline would remind him that things were improving. They had survived Sebastian. Ardian seemed able to keep most of the thugs trying to implement the man's revenge from doing serious damage and those his guards missed, the Runners took care of.

Things were bright, things were good.

So why wasn't he feeling like they were?

He ran. He jumped from roof to roof. With so many destroyed houses, navigating the town wasn't as easy as it was before. It would be again soon. The worker he watched weren't the only ones. The guild had brought a veritable army of them, and all over, the memory of what Sebastian had brought to the town, what Tirania had allowed to happen, was being removed.

He stopped at the line of demolished buildings that separated the noble's neighborhood from the rest of the town. What would they do as the town grew? Would they stretch the wall all around them until they had created a walled district within the town? Build themselves an enclave that could be easily turned into their prison?

He should be amused at that.

Leaping the distance was simple with the use of a little air essence. Then he was on a noble's roof. He was slower on moving here. They had adventurers patrolling the streets, and those know to look up every so often. Tibs still made it into one of the houses by a third-floor window. Then it was simple to move about unnoticed. The servants were busy in the kitchen. In an office, he carefully searched through a desk until he found a metal box that was locked, unlocked it and looked at the coins. Not finding a copper one, he took a silver, relocked the box, placed it back in the drawer, made sure everything was as it had been, and made his way out.

On the roof, he turned the coin over in his fingers. He'd broken into a noble's home, stolen from them. It was something insignificant, especially compared to everything nobles had taken from those on his Street, but he'd done it and it had been easy.

Too easy?

Was that why he didn't feel any satisfaction? Should he seek one of the nobles who used more essence based locks. Would beating those make him feel like he'd accomplished something?

He'd have to think about that.

He pocketed the coin and ran out of the neighborhood. He had to get back to the inn before Jackal worried and came looking.

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The lines of air essence intertwined as Tibs swung them in the warehouse, but were kept from touching by the filigree he'd added between them. He'd pick something that did nothing, because this was about getting a sense for what it took to maintain an etching as it moved.

What Alistair had taught him to this point involved making the etching, using it to form the essence flowing through it and then having that create the result, which destroyed the etching in the process. Only that couldn't be the limit of what could happen, and Tibs knew that was true now. He didn't know if this could do anything, but etching did not have to be fixed in place.

He didn't know if this was something Alistair didn't know could be done, didn't realize that when he did it that it was nothing more than an etching, or that he was taking things slowly with Tibs. He suspected the latter, but there had been enough times when Tibs had taught something to his teacher that he couldn't be certain that was it.

He let the essence go, and pulled earth from the bracer, forming and etching it the same way, and as he swung, it shattered, sending pebbles in all directions as lines intersected and pulled essence before exploding. The symbol he'd used as the filigree hadn't kept the lines apart, the way it had with air.

He needed three small scale tries, each with a different symbol, before he had one that did the trick.

This one was called Ank, the one he's used for the air essence was Kha. Each of the symbols had a name. There were thirty-four of them. Each did something specific to the line of essence and they interacted, the way the letters written did to make words. Alistair had explained a broad stroke what the symbols did, but

it had been too much for Tibs to remember.

Alistair hadn't been surprised, and they had focused on Ank, Kha, Fey, and Bor. By themselves, they did little, which was why his teacher used them. But together made alteration.

Simply by willing it, Tibs could take water and turn it into ice. He could even do it partially, making shards of ice that floated in the water. But what he couldn't do was change the 'thickness' of the water. Turning it onto something that flowed slowly, like the syrup Mez loved for the seared Rump of Ashgar Russel prepared when they could get the meat.

Using Ank and Fey made that happen. Fey helped hardened essence, but by itself it took more than the result was worth. Ank made the essence less. Tibs had not understood one word of the explanation Alistair gave him, and even his teacher sounded more like he was repeating what he'd been told more than he understood it.

How could essence be less? It was or it wasn't. The once thing Tibs had understood was that Alistair didn't mean less in the way of more dispersed through the other element, the way Water was dispersed a lot in the air around them. This was something else entirely.

But when put together, Ank and Fey changed how thick the water was, how much of Ank, compared to Fey, determined the thickness. There were formulas, Alistair told him, but they were mainly used by sorcerers because they ended up working with multiple elements. Since all they did was work with water, making alteration to Ank and Fey until they had the result they wanted was easier.

And, as Tibs started his private practice in the warehouse with air, to see what thick air was like, he discovered why the sorcerers might use formulas.

Ank and Fey did not make the air thicker.

As far as Tibs could tell, they did nothing to the air. It was why he'd used Ank as the filigree to keep the strand of essence apart. And why he wasn't surprised when it had done something to the earth essence, not that he knew what it had been.

If the essence letters did not have the same effect from one essence to the next, a sorcerer would have a hard time remembering everything. And what about using multiple essence in an etching? How would someone remember which of the letter did what, and if it touched two different essence, what then?

And he still had no idea how a weave was different from an etching.

Or did what clerics do qualify as etching or weaves? Clara called it a weave, but it was more in the way of a cloth she applied to the wound, like the way Tibs had grown to call using his essence to wrap an injury a splint, when it was really... what was it? He'd never put thought into that. It wasn't an etching. He could tell that, now that he was working with them. Could it be a weave?

It didn't feel like what the weaves he'd sensed side. There were no filaments weaving together. It was more like how he used water when he turned it into ice. He simply willed it there and hard. The rest just happened because... it did?

He rubbed his temple.

Now he wasn't sure he should have demanded to learn about etching. It had sounded simple, but now, it reminded him of his early days learning his letters.

He let go of earth and pulled fire from the bracer. Air did nothing as a whip, and earth would only be a rope of stone? Something like the whippers used?

He needed to check with Sto if the essence letters were something he used.

But fire by its nature caused damage, so a whip of that should be a way to use it in a controlled manner.

The essence letter that kept the strand of fire essence apart was Vex. One of the multitude Tibs didn't know how it acted when used with water essence.

He stretched it until it was five times his height, then swung slowly. It took focus to keep the etching together. They weren't fighting him, but they acted as different weighed bags attached to the threads, so he had to will them to remain attached.

Once he had a sense for the motion and it no longer demanded that he actively think about it, he swung the whip as an unmarked remnant of a crate. He'd have to bring more crates as targets. He was running out of stuff to hit.

The line of essence went through the wooden face and left a barely singed mark behind. So for it to be effective as a weapon, he'd have to increase the threads until quantities would be enough to burn on contact, or figure out the letter or combination of letters that would increase the intensity of the threads already there.

Wondering if he could do more than burn with it, he willed the end into a loop and had it fall over the broken crate, then pulled on it, the way Radcliff had pulled when he'd caught Tibs's foot in his lasso.

Pain erupted as the fire essence spread from the bracer into him, turning the water essence in his

reserve into it and exploding the ice that filled him.

With a pained scream, he dropped to his knees.

It hadn't been fair! Radkliff had been a decent person. Don should have been the one to die that day and fuck the mission, fuck passing the destruction onto him and feed his unending ego. Tibs should have killed Sebastian then and there for it. That way Carina wouldn't have—

He wailed.

Why her? Why did she have to die just because she was his friend? That she'd care about him, wanted to help him achieve more than just be some other Runner who'd end up dying in a dungeon.

Ardian was right.

Tibs panted, on all fours.

Caring for anyone just brought him and them trouble.

With another scream, he forced the fire in his reserve back into water.

He filled himself with water.

If he could, he'd pushed them all as far away from him as possible. Even Don didn't deserve to be caught up in whatever Sebastian's revenge would look like.

He turned it to ice.

But that was something the guild wouldn't let him do. Tirania didn't care about the danger she put the people around Tibs in. So Tibs would stay on his guard. He would come up with a way to protect them until he'd removed the guild and could ensure he wasn't close to any of them.

And he was never, ever channeling fire again.