

## Chapter 41

“Are you sure about this?” Tibs asked Jackal, as he lit a lantern. The light hinted at a large space.

The fighter shrugged. “As much as I can be without a network in town anymore. My father’s people might have been more trouble than they were worth in the end; but at least I could get them to do stuff for me.”

“I mean having you and Kroseph here.” Tibs stepped into the darkness, using the metal he sensed to find the next lantern. “We don’t know how I’m going to be when I channel Metal. At the very least, I’m going to sharp and pointy.” He could sense all of them, and have lit them from the entrance, but he needed to do something while he worked up courage to start.

“I’m not worried,” Kroseph said, as Tibs lit another lantern. “You aren’t going to hurt us.”

“And if you try,” Jackal said, smirking. “I’ll stop you.”

Was that him admitting he had survived Tibs’s attempt at killing him by careful planning? He should stop worrying himself sick over it and ask. But what if it was just Jackal’s usual, not always justified, bravado?

It would be simple to replace a reserve in his bracer with metal essence and limit himself to that. It gave him enough to deal with any problem if he couldn’t just pull the essence from around him. And he had so many elements to use, to master the use of. He could focus on them before this one.

“Tibs?” Kroseph asked.

He nodded and moved away from the lantern he’d stood before, unmoving, and continued lighting them until he stood in a space that was now more shadows instead of darkness. He could fill it with light, but he didn’t know how to have that remain without constantly thinking about it. There had to be Arcanus that let that happen, maybe even a simple weave. Making a light that stayed had to be one of the first things a Runner with light as their element learned.

Yet one more thing he needed to work on. He stepped into the middle of the room. But for now, it was metal.

He nodded again, and Jackal stoned up.

Tibs let out a breath and channeled metal; then waited for something to happen.

“How do you feel?” Kroseph asked in the stretching silence.

“Fine.” Tibs tried to find a difference in how he thought.

“Nothing’s changed?” Jackal asked, his tone suspicious, and on guard.

Of course, he was wary. Tibs had tried to fool them when he’d channeled Corruption.

“Nothing that I can feel. Maybe I already think like metal?”

“I doubt it,” the fighter replied, not relaxing. “You channeled it in the dungeon, and you were more...intense.”

“It was in the middle of a fight,” Tibs replied dismissively, “and I didn’t know what I’d done.”

“No, Tibs. It wasn’t the same kind of intensity as when you fight, it was—”

“It was,” Tibs snapped, fixing his gaze on Jackal. “I know how I feel better than you, don’t you think?”

“There it is.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. Jackal knew nothing. Well, nothing about this.

He pushed essence over his hand and sensed the cloud; then, he made a blade from it. He ground his teeth as what he produced was similar to his ice sword, in that it was spiked and jagged, but where with ice it looked like they grew out of the weapon, this looked like broken piece put together without reason.

He didn’t mind the jaggedness; considered it sort of his thing at this point, but this was ugly. This wasn’t a sword, just something broken he’d picked up. He undid it and tried again. This was a new element, and he’d worked out that what he did with one didn’t necessarily produce the same result with another.

Again, he produced nothing more than broken metal held in place by his will.

Alright. Since it was his will, he was going to will this thing the way he wanted it. He willed the pieces to move, to align, to give him a sword. Instead, they stretched in all directions, piercing other pieces, breaking them so that he ended up with a larger mess of broken pieces.

With snarl he sent the pieces flying. Maybe there had been something wrong with the essence. Maybe he’d pulls some of another element without meaning to. Metal wouldn’t look like that by itself.

The essence pulled before him, and he grasped a smooth hilt as the rest of the sword form and he smil—

The rest was a mess of broken pieces.

“Tibs?” Jackal called.

“I’ll get this.” Jackal stood before Kroseph, with metal shards embedded in the wall around him. But his clothing was undamaged.

The fighter chuckled nervously. “Maybe you aren’t ready for swords just yet? Why don’t you try something simpler? Like coins? Can you make copper, no, silver coins? How about—”

“I said—” Tibs replied through clenched teeth, swinging his hand in the fighter’s direction. “That I’m going to get this.”

The pieces of metal came undone and flew in the fighter’s direction.

“Abyss,” Tibs cursed and Jackal tensed. He hadn’t will the metal to do that. It had just...slipped his control. How dare it do that! He controlled it.

He formed another ‘sword’, as Jackal hurriedly checked himself over for damage.

“You missed?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. He couldn’t have missed, because he wasn’t aiming. If he had aimed, there would have been nothing left of what he hit.

“I told you,” Kroseph said. “He won’t hurt us.”

He glared at the wreck of metal that tried to pass itself off as a sword. “Why won’t you do what I want?”

“What do you want?” Kroseph asked.

“Maybe you should stay behind me, Kro.”

“A sword,” Tibs told the approaching server. “What else do you think I’d want out of

this?" He ground his teeth as this time, the broken pieces slid against each other, instead of assembling into a fucking sword!

"Why?" Kroseph was next to him now.

"Because it's what I want!"

"It might be easier to start with a knife."

"I want a sword!" he glared at Kroseph, and the pieces slipped out of his control, returning to looking like an even messier thing. With an exasperated scream, he threw the mess at the back of the warehouse and formed another sword. This time, he'd get it to behave.

"Not one word," he warned the server, as another mess of broken pieces formed.

"How do you feel about a few dozen of them?"

"So long as they aren't comments on what I'm doing."

"What are you doing?"

"Making a sword. Can't you see that?"

Kroseph nodded. "Because you want a sword."

"Yes, and Abyss take this thing. I will get one."

"Why do you think it looks like that?"

"Because I'm angry." That one was easy. "It's the same with ice. Alistair says that because deep down, I'm angry; it's reflected in what I make." Tibs snorted. "Like he has any idea how fucking angry I am. Him and his fucking guild. Any time I channel fire, it's a struggle not to use it on them. Even if I know it won't do anything with all the magic protecting the building."

"Do you think getting more angry is helping you get the sword to look how you want?"

"I don't care!" Tibs snapped. "It's my essence. It's going to fucking do what I will it to."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"No. I've got this."

"Maybe you should take a break, Tibs."

"I said I have this!" He had the mess of broken pieces in the server's face, and Jackal pulled his man away.

Kroseph hadn't looked worried.

"Tibs," Jackal warned.

"I'm not going to hurt him," Tibs replied dismissively, focussing on the mess again.

"It's okay," Kroseph said.

"I really don't know about this, Kro."

"I think I understand how he's thinking."

"He's turned stubborn," Jackal said.

"No. He's unbending in his thinking. Which is interesting, if you think about it, since metal is flexible when it's well forged." Kroseph was next to him again.

"I don't want to hear it," Tibs said.

"That's unfortunate, Tibs. Because I'd like you to let go of the element."

"I've got this," he said through gritted teeth as metal silently slid against metal.

“Maybe, but I want you to let it go, anyway.”

“I’m doing this!”

“No, you’re not.”

Tibs glared at Jackal’s man. “You’re getting close to making me want to hurt you, Kroseph.”

“What is this about, Tibs?”

“Making a fucking sword.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Look at this.” Tibs snarled as he shook the mess in his hand.

“But that isn’t why you came here, is it?”

“Who cares about that?” He ignored the server’s gaze on him. He was just a distraction from getting metal to obey him. He tried to will the pieces into a line.

“I didn’t think you’d lose focus so easily,” Kroseph said.

“What did you say?” Tibs only had one piece left in his hand, the others clattering to the floor. They didn’t matter. He didn’t need a sword to cut this man. All the pieces were sharp enough for that.

Jackal stepped forward, but Kroseph stopped him with a raised hand.

“You got distracted from the reason you came here.” Kroseph watched him. “And easily, too.”

“I don’t get distracted,” Tibs snarled. “Unless someone causes it. Like you.”

“Really? Then how about you tell me why we came here?”

Tibs raised the broken piece he held. The reasons behind everything he’d done in the last...

He frowned at it. Was it?

It was what he wanted to deal with right now. But had it been the reason he, Jackal and Kroseph had come here?

No. They’d come here to find out how Metal would affect him.

“I get obsessed,” he said. “I don’t want to think about anything other than what I’m dealing with right now. I don’t care about the consequences, of course.” He smiled at the realization, then that went away as he noticed the broken piece of metal in his hand and the need to get the sword to do as he willed.

He let go of Metal, then absorbed the piece in his hand, emptying earth out of his bracers to make space for it. “This is going to be a problem until I get control.”

“Seems you got control easily enough,” Jackal said, his skin regaining its tan hue.

“I didn’t get control of Metal. I just let go of it.”

“It happened faster than with the other elements,” Kroseph commented.

“It was easier to notice I wasn’t thinking the same once you forced me to look at it. I think it’s because I had to do the same thing with the other elements. I’m learning to understand how I’m different when I channel an element if I can get myself to pay attention to that.” He smiled. “Maybe I’ll get to the point where I can get a new element and not have to destroy a building to gain control.”

“Considering the state you left the previous one,” Jackal said, indicating the shards embedded in the wall by the door. “I’d say this is good.”

“But I can’t control myself yet.”

“Do you want to channel Metal again?” Kroseph asked.

Tibs shook his head. “I need to rest.”

“Then you might want to absorb everything you sent flying in the walls.”

Tibs senses the shards in the walls and at his feet. He undid them, making them only essence again. He put the little that fit the reserve in his bracers and let go of the rest. He’d have to channel Metal again to bring this back into his core reserve, and he didn’t feel like risking it.

“Is it safe for Tibs to train here again?” Kroseph asked, as Tibs cracked the door opened and listened.

“It’s best to avoid using the same place twice. The owner might miss these holes, or not question where they came from, but any more and they’re going to get the guards to watch the building.”

The lack of sounds confirmed what his sense told him. Tibs opened the door a bit more and looked out.

“Don’t you just know if there’s someone there?” Jackal asked.

“I have to stop relying on only one sense.” He pulled the door fully open. “There’s going to be magic out there that can fool it.”

“It’s not like anyone knows you do it.”

“There’s still ways.” He exited the building. “Khumdar can hide completely from me with darkness now.”

“But he knows about your element,” Kroseph said.

“Any rogue who thinks he can’t be beaten is about to end up dead,” Tibs replied. “I’m not dying because of that one.”

“That’s Tibs,” Jackals said, following him. “Wise beyond his years.”

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Tibs walked along the guild corridors, acting like he knew where he was going. He did. He was going to the training room, where Alistair would be waiting for him soon. But he was taking the very long way to get there.

He’d never been in this part of the building. He’d had to take two corridors to their end, turn and then had come across another one going deeper. He had been looking for it, because he could now tell the previous ones didn’t reach the back.

The clerks he passed seemed too preoccupied with the stacks of papers to notice him, so he made sure not to get in their way. When a door opened, he got a flash of essence from inside, which vanished as soon as the door closed. All he had time to make out was that the essence was woven.

Was this where the enchanted items Sto put in the loot ended up? What did the guild do with them? What could he do with them, if he could make it in one of those rooms without being noticed?

“What are you doing here?”

Tibs didn’t have to act startled as he spun. The clerk was looking at him, water-blue eye severe.

“I think I’m lost.”

“How did you make it here?”

“I…” he trailed off, looking where he’d come from, then the direction he had been

heading in. "I don't know."

"And where are you trying to go?" There was clear suspicion in the man's voice.

"The training rooms." Tibs looked around again. "I made a turn because I thought I'd seen a gem on the floor, but it was just a broken crystal. Then I headed right for the training all, but..." He looked around again. "This doesn't look like it."

"No, it certainly doesn't." The suspicion didn't entirely leave the man's blue eyes, but he turned. "Come, I'll lead you back."

They made it to the training room as Alistair arrived. His teacher raised an eyebrow, then shook his head in amusement.

"Why am I not surprised?" The clerk said before leaving.

"Why doesn't Dhu do anything with Darkness?" Tibs asked once the door was closed and before Alistair started on the lesson.

"How do you know it doesn't?" With a flick of the wrist, essence assembled in the center of the room. A mix of weaving and etching. Or maybe it was a different type of weave that included etching.

The more Tibs perceived and thought he understood, the more he found out he didn't.

"Khumdar told me." Tibs had tried. He'd tried using the etching he knew with darkness to see what, if anything, would happen, and Dhu hadn't changed anything, just like Maur didn't interact with water.

"I don't know." The water took the form of a person. A watery version of Sto's people golem, only with fewer details, as the water kept moving. "You should have realized by now that if it's outside our element, I know little of it."

"Then why doesn't Maur do anything with water?"

The look on Alistair's face was shock, then amusement. "You are determined not to do things as they are expected, aren't you?"

Tibs shrugged.

"I don't know why. It simply doesn't act on a water etching."

"You didn't ask someone? You can go anywhere you want. You have coins to get whatever you want. Why don't you ask those who know stuff about everything there is? It's what I'd do if I had as many coins as you."

It's what he would have done with all the coins from the sale of the corruption pool if he hadn't had so many other things he needed to pay for. Once he was free of the guild, he'd see about getting so many coins he'd never have to wonder about something for long.

"I never had your curiosity, Tibs. I learned what I needed to accomplish my duties. If I realized I needed more information, I obtained it. But unlike you, I don't have a need to know everything. Not that I could, even if I did. Everything is much larger than you imagine."

Tibs shrugged. "I'm still going to try."

"A rogue with the knowledge of a scholar," Alistair mused. "I suspect bards will be singing about you one day." Tibs groaned and his teacher motioned to the form, who took a defensive position. "Now, I want you to use what I had you practice to take your opponent down."

Tibs made a thin knife out of ice and etched with it as he ran at the water creation.