

## Chapter 16

He was in darkness again, and his lungs hurt. He tried to kick up, but his feet wouldn't move. He wanted to scream his frustration, but her warning came to him. Think, stay calm, stay focussed.

He needed to breathe, but his reserve of air essence was nearly gone. Did he have enough to pull more? What if he didn't and made it so he could never use air again?

Focus!

He knew where there was air; up. All he needed to do was swim there, but his feet...

Of course his feet weren't moving. He'd had to anchor himself down. He sensed the hard earth around them and loosened it, then kick up.

He swam hard. Air was near, he could hold off until then. He had to.

The burn in his lungs increased, the weight of the water felt heavier. He wouldn't make it. He'd die because he hadn't thought to use water to propel him up and out. He'd—

He broke the surface and took a deep breath, then hacked out water and went back under. But this time, he remembered who he was and what he could do, and despite having trouble breathing.

He reached for his essence and found he couldn't pull it out of his reserved.

He trashed himself back to the surface.

What had happened? Had he pushed himself too far without realizing it? He forced calmness, kept his arms moving. He was no longer drowning, so he had the time to figure this out. His reserve was full, but the walls were thick and resisted the essence passing through them at his command.

He'd visualized them like that so his essence wouldn't save him from drowning as air had done. He hadn't expected it to affect how he'd interact with it. It was just a way for him to 'see' how his essence worked, wasn't it?

It was how Alistair had explained it to him. Essence wasn't what he thought it was. That was just a way for his mind to deal with it; so it could deal with the abstraction of essence being and not being at the same time. There were no boxes made of glass around them. That was just how he imagined it being, so he'd have a way to handle them.

Could he make them so thick he couldn't draw on his essence? He studied the walls, considered trying it, but his arms were getting tired, his coughing was becoming painful. Maybe this was something best left for when his lungs weren't filled with water.

He willed them thinner, then used the essence to take hold of the water in his lungs and force it out. Then he hardened the surrounding water until it held him up.

He turned until he saw the light of the town and moved toward it. When he sensed earth under his feet, he walked. His legs wobbled as he exited the water. This time, the air felt so much heavier than the water had. He dropped to his knees on the shore, then laid back, looking at the sky.

Torus was the one not covered by the clouds this time. Its perpetual crescent pointing where the sun would rise. It had been odd, the first time he'd watched the sunrise

from one of the town's roofs. Back on his street, Torus didn't point directly to the sunrise; he was slightly off. The sun covered the left horn there, instead of being centered between them here.

Tibs didn't know what it meant. Even Carina didn't, although he knew she could find a book with this answer, and then force him to read it, so he could learn not only that but more of his letters. It was why he no longer asked her every question he thought of. If he was going to have to suffer for the answer, it should be an important question.

So, why Torus changed where he pointed, or how it could be evening when he stepped on a transportation platform in Kragle Rock, but midday when he appeared in MountainSea, or early morning elsewhere, or also evening, would remain mysteries to him. It would be nice to know, but not enough to come at the expense of adding more studies.

He stood, and the wind cut through his wet clothes. He pushed the water out of his clothing, Motioning it away, and stopped, staring at the stream of water heading to the lake. It wasn't a jet of water, like his attacks were. This was a lazy meandering of the water in the air.

He stopped it and it hung in the air.

How?

He sensed it and around it. It was water, air was around it, but neither's essence was shaped in any way that explained it floating. He'd tried it before; since Alistair had made a floating ball of water. But it hadn't lifted off his hand. He could shape water, and he could shape air to support water, but this wasn't that. This made no sense.

He rubbed his temple. Hadn't he learned yet that when it came to essence, making sense didn't seem to be important?

Tibs willed the water over the lake and shaped it into a ball. He iced it, and being solid didn't affect its floating. That felt even more wrong. As if he was making a stone float on air.

Which, now that he thought about it, he should be able to make happen. How different could it be from keeping ice in the air? He picked up a pebble, filled it with earth essence, and...

Nothing.

More concentration didn't change what didn't happen. With a resigned sigh, he pulled the essence out of the pebble and moved that in the air, among the little already there. He collected that, added it to the stone, and tried it again. To the same lack of result.

He reabsorbed the essence into his reserve and, as with any time he used essence with its element, he was left with a surplus. Did the pebble now have 'less' essence? It was as heavy as it had been. He couldn't tell the quantity of essence on this small scale outside of his reserve, so sensing the stone didn't help.

If he used essence on the pebble long enough, would he convert all of it into essence? When he pulled it out, would the stone in his hand cease to be? He rubbed his temple again. Was and wasn't.

He so wanted to ask Alistair about this. Ask someone, anyone, who might know the answers. He could ask his teacher about the water, but how relevant would it be to the air or

the earth?

He threw the pebble at the lake, then let the ball of ice drop.

He wanted to trust Alistair with his secret, but everything the man said showed that, despite his misgivings, he put the guild first. He'd tell them what Tibs could do, and then... Well, Alistair would probably insist he continue teaching him, so there would be that.

Tibs had to figure this out on his own.

What was one more headache-inducing thing to the list of those trying to make his head explode?

He headed toward the town and his bed. Maybe sleep would provide rest, if not answers.

What he wanted to do was walk the roofs. That made him feel better, even when he didn't have answers. Only the corruption made that—

"Hey you!" a man called, lantern becoming bright enough Tibs had to shield his eyes. "You can't—oh, Light Fingers. Sorry, I thought you were one of the convicts."

"It's Tibs," he replied, too tired to put his usual annoyance in it. How had his nickname survived Bardik's removal from the town? Without him to remind people, it should have vanished along with the man.

"Of course." The man lowered the lantern. "Again, my apologies, but the way you're dressed... you look like one of them at a distance."

Tibs started walking again. He missed when it was the adventurers guarding the town. They didn't respect the Runners, but at least they disrespected them all equally.

No. What he didn't like was how the guard's tone had shifted when he'd realized who he was shining the light on. He wasn't one of the guild, or better than the guard. He shouldn't sound as if Tibs was owed respect. Tibs was just like any other Runners.

And how many of them get to walk out of the town with the guild's approval? A voice at the back of his mind asked.

He hated that the voice sounded like Bardik.

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Tibs looked up from his plate as Mez dropped in a chair and motioned to a server. The archer's red and gray clothes did not help his sickly complexion.

"Someone should have stayed in bed this morning," Jackal commented.

Mez grumbled something unflattering as a response.

"I meant Tibs."

"What?" He looked at the grinning fighter.

Jackal pointed to the untouched plate before Tibs. "You've had that before you for at least five minutes, any more and the cook, I think it's Russel today, is going to barge out of the kitchen demanding to know what's wrong with the food he prepared. The only thing I can think of that would make you, Tibs, not eat, is lack of sleep."

Tibs looked at the plate. Scrambled eggs, ham, sausages, and roasted vegetables. Sleep had provided neither rest nor answers, and contemplating what Water had told him to do was killing his appetite.

Carina studied Mez, and her expression softened. "Are you feeling better?"

“The fever broke last night.” The archer forced a smile. “Which is how I’m out of bed.”

“I’m sorry,” Tibs whispered, forcing himself to eat some of the vegetables. He didn’t want Kroseph’s brother to think this was his fault.

“You aren’t responsible,” Mez replied. “You warned me, and this is a small price to pay for making it to the boss and beating it.”

The server placed the tankard before Mez, and Tibs forced himself to eat with more gusto as he felt her eyes on him. If Kroseph wasn’t kept too busy by the breakfast crowd, Tibs would already have gotten an earful about not eating enough.

“Is the food not to your liking?” She asked. “You’re usually on your second plate by now.”

“Just tired,” he replied, so she wouldn’t turn this into a report for Russel about him not liking the food.

She nodded and left. Unlike Kroseph, she didn’t know him well enough to join in the stare the rest of the table gave him.

He didn’t know how to tell them what he’d found out. Corruption, he was supposed to get Corruption as an element. What would they think of that? Jackal hadn’t been thinking when he’d suggested he have an audience, and he certainly hadn’t been thinking about it meaning he’d have the element.

He forced himself to continue eating. “I’m fine, I’m just tired.”

Khumdar gave him that look he always gave when he knew someone wasn’t being entirely truthful. The slightly raised eyebrow and little smile, as if the attempt amused him. Tibs decided that having someone able to tell when he held something back was just as bad as one who knew when he outright lied.

At least the cleric didn’t pry. More out of the promise he’d find all the town’s secrets before looking into the team’s than any respect for Tibs’s privacy.

Not that Tibs could keep this secret. He’d have to tell them and deal with the consequences. He’d tell them after the fact. Telling them first meant he’d have to endure their disapproval while working up the courage to have that audience.

Or, he realized, he’d have to deal with Jackal offering to help.

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Tibs followed the crowd at a respectable distance. The noise had pulled him out of practicing his letters enough to look out the window. He’d been using them to avoid thinking about the audience he needed to have. The number of people amassing as they walked had made him curious, so he’d joined them. They were heading to the east side of the town, and he couldn’t imagine anything happening on the training fields there that would interest them.

When the crowd stopped, Tibs had to push through to find out what was going on. He elicited curses, but everyone was shoving, so he didn’t bear the sole blame, and it covered for his fumbling when his fingers cramped in a pocket. He made it to the front a few coppers richer.

Guards blocked the way, mean-looking ones, not the town’s guards, and behind them, a line of wagons approached. Among the demands to be let through from the people around

him, there were cheers. He noticed many of those in the front were merchants.

Tibs tried to understand how a merchant could be this excited at the arrival of wagons. What would excite him this much?

At one time, unguarded food would do it. Now? A well-made lock, or a high window with no obvious way to get to it.

Unguarded coins would only make him wary.

What could merchants want this badly?

A woman on horseback reached the line of guards and they parted. Tibs only now saw the group of the town's guard there and was surprised not to see Harry among them. Shouldn't the arrival of unknown wagons be enough to have the guard leader here? Not to mention how everyone in the town now seemed to be here, trying to reach them.

Would any of the new Runners try to use the commotion to flee?

The woman and a man Tibs only knew as one of those immediately under Harry spoke, then he pointed to an area to the left of the training grounds. There was some negotiating, and once it was done, half a dozen of the town's guards stepped through the ones blocking access to the field and started moving the spikes delineating the border of the town.

Whoever or whatever those wagons represented, they were important enough for the town to be made larger. He wouldn't be able to find out why until they were closer, so he started turning, intent on going back to the studies of his letters when he felt it, and looked next to him in time to see Fedora hurrying to place a hand behind her back.

He smiled. This would be better than his letters, and less headache-inducing.