

Chapter 85

Tibs ran through the crowd, forcing his problems out of his mind.

Most of the town was here, perusing the booths the caravan merchant had set up. The chaos made practicing his pickpocket easier and avoiding the guards fun. At least that was what he told himself after having had to break up two altercations between Runners and Harry's guards already.

The merchant provided most of the ones for the bazaar, but the town still needed to have a presence. If that meant Harry's or Tibs's people hadn't been established, and Tibs didn't want to have to deal with it at this moment.

This was supposed to be the time for his game, not dealing with problems. The first day the booths were up after the caravan's arrival. Run among the people, pick the pockets, and used those coins to try food and drinks from places he'd never heard of.

Enjoy candies.

This time, unlike the previous ones, the bazaar had been set up in the center of the town, around the transportation platform, filling the space the fire—his fire—had cleared. He did his best not to let the memory dampen his enjoyment.

The caravan merchants had been lucky, in a way. They had left a few days before Sto closed his door, and this was their first time back since. They'd missed Sebastian and the siege. Now, they were enjoying more visitors since the Attendants didn't charge as much to come to Kragle Rock while the bazaar was running. It had to be an arrangement with the caravan, but it benefited the town as a whole since the taverns filled up with customers. Even the Inn benefited, although it was further into the town. Tibs and his team would eat in the kitchen, since there would be too many customers for Kroseph to keep their table unoccupied.

It probably meant the bazaar would end early, since they hadn't known of the new location and more visitors meant running out of goods sooner.

Tibs saw Cross and changed direction before she noticed him. She was a guard at the moment, not his friend. She wouldn't see him pick pockets—she wasn't that good. But after he returned the last puzzle by slipping it into her carry pouch without her noticing, she'd find him at some point, loom over him and demand he had over what he'd taken. She wouldn't believe him when he said he hadn't taken anything.

The cube she'd handed him had been a fun challenge. Even one he understood it was about lining the notches so the other parts would slip into place, figuring the right order to place and insert them had been difficult. Once he'd succeeded, the second time doing it was simpler only because he knew to identify and keep track of the wooden pieces. There was no pattern to memorize, and if one piece went missing, it was impossible to assemble the cube.

He bought enough different candies from the merchant to fill his pouch, then set about locating Carina. He found her at the third booth selling books, in an excited discussion with the merchant. He slipped a few of the candies into her pouch and moved on to finding another of his friends.

Mez was with his girl and seemed happy. Tibs slipped him more candies because he could see it was a lie. Then, having to think it over, slipped one into his girl's pouch.

Khumdar vanished nearly as soon as Tibs saw him, taking a step into a shadow, and it swallowed him completely. The woman the cleric had been talking with was surprised by the action, then looked around furtively. He considered following her as she walked away to find out what his friend was up to, but decided to let him have his privacy.

Tibs let Jackal see him approach, and the fighter eyed him suspiciously. He no longer walked with a limp, and it had only taken Tibs eight tries to heal his leg correctly. He hadn't minded the hard work it required, and he thought he now knew why he had so much trouble when he simply copied what Carina did.

Alistair had been right. He didn't think like her, so he couldn't handle the essence the way she did.

Tibs raised a hand filled with candies to keep the fighter from grabbing Kroseph and heading away. Jackal hadn't screamed at any point in Tibs's practice on him, but he had kept his distances since.

Kroseph kept him from disappearing. "Just take one," he said, picking a bright pink candy from the selection. Tibs waited until the server reacted to the spices before grinning. "On second thought," he wheezed. "I think he's trying to trick us into having a reason to practice some more."

"The yellow one's safe," Tibs said. "They're called sunbeams, but they're cool instead of hot."

Jackal took it, but kept his eyes on Tibs as he placed it on his tongue. After a few seconds of it in his mouth, Jackal raised an eyebrow. "It is cool."

"Joy," Kroseph wheezed some more. He'd spit the candy out, but the spices were still burning.

Jackal grinned at Tibs. "Definitely." He pulled his man close. "Let me show you."

Cursing, Tibs ran off before his friend kissed Kroseph.

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"Enjoying yourself?"

Tibs was startled to a stop and put his hand behind his back, then remembered he wasn't doing anything wrong. Well, not right now. He smiled at the guard leader and offered him candies.

Harry eyes them. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"No," Tibs replied, insulted the man thought he'd try. Tibs knew he had nothing to bribe the guard with.

With a nod of satisfaction, Harry took a gray one. Those were sweet with some sourness to them. Tibs didn't care for them all that much.

"Are you trying to convince the merchants here to let your rogues protect them?" Harry's tone made it clear he figured the protection was more of a racket than anything else.

"No, they have their own guards."

"And yet," Harry said, "I see many of them here, not perusing the offerings."

"There's plenty of your guards, too."

“It is our job to—”

“Protect the guild interest, I know.”

Harry narrowed his eyes.

Tibs knew that wasn't what he'd been about to say, and he wasn't letting him think the town was his responsibility.

“If I were to ask you what act of thievery you have been up to? What would you tell me?”

Tibs grinned. “Ask and find out.”

He was curious if the guard leader would. Tibs wouldn't lie, there was no point, and Harry would have to act on it, even if it's as inoffensive as picking pockets. Normally, the man didn't want to know about something like this. It was for his guards to uncover and deal with. But it would be a way for him to throw Tibs in a cell, since he couldn't do it for handling the security of Merchant Row as well as the surrounding blocks, now that he had a few more Runners.

“Rogues,” he finally grumbled, as he turned and walked away.

“You know,” Alistair said, behind him, and Tibs's satisfaction disappeared as he startled. “When there is so much tension between the two of you isn't the time to push him until he throws you into a cell.”

Tibs turned and his teacher smiled as he popped a blue candy, swirled with green, into his mouth.

Tibs checked his secret pocket, where he kept his favorite candy, and he was short one Sea Drop.

“I should call Harry on you.”

“Think of it as the cost of failing a test. No matter how good you are, don't take for granted there isn't someone who can get into your pockets.”

“You're like Delta. There's no way I'd stop you.”

“True, but you can still be aware something is happening.”

Tibs was aware, he wanted to tell the man. He was aware of much more than Alistair could imagine. But in a crowd like this, there was too much for him to be aware of to make anything of it. He couldn't leave his sense active all the time, he'd go numb. So he needed to know something was about to happen for him to activate it.

And that was probably what Alistair meant. Tibs should always expect something from anyone around him. Which meant he needed to find a way to not let any of his tools distract him to the point he didn't use them.

“Does this mean this is teaching time?” he asked with a disappointed sigh. He'd wanted to enjoy the day.”

“Any time is a time to teach,” Alistair answered, walking. “Someone as curious as you should understand that.”

“When I do it,” Tibs grumbled, walking next to him, “it happens when I want it to.”

“Of course.” Alistair smiled. “Always so careful to plan those times so they'll derail the training I try to impart to you. Quite the strategist, aren't you?” He looked at Tibs expectantly.

“I know what strategy is,” he replied. “I learned the word a part of learning to fight in the dungeon, and we had to do a lot of it during the Siege.”

Alistair nodded. “Today is going to be about focus. How are you coming along with suffusing your body with water essence?”

“I manage it,” Tibs answered with a shrug. He could do it with a thought, not that he saw a point. After the novelty of being more slippery had passed, he’d realized that a shield was more efficient in the middle of a fight, and not being seen made not getting caught easier than evading capture.

“I want you to maintain it while we walk around the bazaar.”

Tibs considered how much he should let his teacher figure out. “That’s going to be hard, isn’t it?” he asked. Nothing had been easy until he had the elements, and it shouldn’t be now either.

“That will depend,” Alistair said. “Most Runners only start this type of training once they reach Rho. You had to learn to do more than one thing at a time earlier, so that might help here. Also, some have an affinity for focus and that makes exercises like this simple. Others will struggle with them most of their lives. “

So he shouldn’t make it seem too easy, but if he slipped, it wouldn’t reveal him as being different. “Will it do more than make me slippery?” He sensed his teacher’s essence. Unlike Tibs, who pushed it out from his core, Alistair’s essence radiated from the channels coursing through his body.

“Why should it do anything more?” Could his teacher sense how Tibs’s essence flowed in his body? None of his friends could, but Alistair was Delta.

“Jackal turns to stone when he does it.”

“He told you?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “He’s on my team. I’ve seen him do it. And he’s my friend. So yes, he told me what it does.”

Alistair nodded. “Earth isn’t subtle. You can expect most of what they do to have noticeable results. They’ll turn their bodies to stone, encase you in it, walk through a wall of it. Most of the solid elements tend to be like that. You could say that it’s in their nature to be obvious. Water is more subtle in what it does. No one will notice how you’re harder to grab hold of unless they are trying to do so.”

Tibs hadn’t thought about it like that. “But isn’t subtlety what Darkness does?”

“It does. But that doesn’t mean it’s the only element able to do that. You need to remember Tibs that the element doesn’t define what you can do. With enough training and determination, any element can be made to do something like what another element is known for. Even Earth can be used in subtle ways. Some elements simply lend themselves to certain effects.”

Tibs remembered something his teacher had done in one of their early sessions. “So, when you made it so no one could listen to us. You were copying something Darkness does?”

“No. I didn’t copy Darkness. And while you are correct that Darkness can do something like that, it isn’t how I realized I could. And I’m not letting you derail this lesson.”

Are you maintaining your essence?”

“I am.”

“Good. Now, to go back to your initial question, the one relevant to the exercise, there are many stages of making use of the essence within you. The effect you’re creating at the moment is the weakest of them. Yes, that means that as impressive as your friend turning into stone is, that is the least of what he will be capable of.”

Tibs nodded and pulled his essence back into his core and waited to see if his teacher would notice.

“When inside you, you can’t etch or weave the essence. There, it’s more about taking on aspects of Water than forcing a result. And you need to focus. You’ve let your essence retreat into your reserve.”

“You can tell?” Tibs stepped around someone and nearly bumped into another. He didn’t but suddenly it was as if the crowd had gotten thicker.

“I can see the results of you not being suffused by it,” Alistair replied with a smile.

Tibs looked at himself, still having to be conscious of everyone around him too. He couldn’t see any difference as he pushed the essence through his body. “You can’t sense it? The way we sense the essence around us?” He looked around as people stopped nearly bumping into him.

Only the crowd hadn’t thinned.

“Pay attention, Tibs,” Alistair said, and he brought his attention back to his teacher. “Sensing within someone else’s body is difficult. There are a variety of theories as to why, but the most accepted revolves around the reason why a dungeon can’t simply eat you when you enter it. Being alive protects us from it, and it also blocks an adventurer’s senses.”

Tibs nodded, listening and studying the people around him. They weren’t doing anything to avoid him. He was the one somehow slipping between them without effort.

“I see you’re noticing another effect.”

Tibs pulled the essence back into his core and, while he could tell nothing about the crowd changed, avoiding those walking around him took more care. He suffused himself, and he no longer had to think about avoiding them. He wasn’t slipping against them, as he’d initially thought, since suffusing himself with Water made him slippery, he was...flowing between them.

“Why aren’t we always doing this?” he asked, marveling.

“A few reasons. The main one is that after a while, people will notice an oddness about you. They won’t be able to explain it, but it will put them on edge. People aren’t comfortable with things they can’t easily explain, and adventurers aren’t so common someone will consider magic as the reason for the oddness.”

Tibs tried to imagine what it looked and felt like for the people around him as he flowed among them. Maybe they’d think he was a spirit? Some dungeon-made creature here to steal them away?

“Another reason,” Alistair continued, “and one more relevant to you. Try to pick a pocket.”

Tibs looked around for guards, then slipped his fingers into the—next to the closest

pocket. He tried again, and he couldn't tell if it was the man noticing without realizing it, or some other influence, but he moved and Tibs missed the pocket completely. He tried with a woman's coin pouch, then a man's pouch. They didn't seem to realize what he'd attempted. Even so, Tibs missed each time.

"As you can see, what's an advantage one moment can turn into a disadvantage the next."

"But that's easy to fix," Tibs said. "I move the essence away from my hand and—" he stared at his hand as the essence didn't obey him. He focused harder. It was his element. He should—his focus broke as he bumped into a woman.

"Careful there," she said, continuing.

He looked after her, trying to understand what had happened. Water still suffused him; they shouldn't have touched, right?

"There are limits as to what suffusing will let you do," Alistair said when Tibs looked at him. "For one thing, you need to remain aware of what is around you, so you can't focus on something else and expect the essence to simply keep you safe."

"Why can't I do it?" Tibs asked as they walked again. "I let the essence out of the reserve. I can pull it back in. So why can't I pull it out of my hand?"

"Right now," Alistair said, a look of concentration on his face. "It's because of your lack of training." He handed Tibs a copper coin he told from a pocket. "But even with training, it's difficult. This type of suffusing is more of an all-or-nothing proposition. As I said, when it comes to the essence within our body, it's more about taking on aspects than shaping the results."

"So, other than walking in a crowd without being slowed, does it have more uses?"

Alistair smiled. "Once you can maintain this while performing more strenuous actions than walking, we'll address the next stage."

"You mean fighting," Tibs said, the realization hitting him. "But it doesn't—" he closed his mouth, unsure if he should reveal he'd had fought while suffused with Water and the results hadn't been impressive.

Or hadn't he done it correctly?

Alistair looked at him expectantly, and Tibs turned his protest into a question.

"How is this going to help in a fight?"

Alistair's answer was simply to smile.