

## Chapter 13

Tibs looked up from the slate on his lap and chuckled at Carina's antics. She twirled in place as if her robe was a gown worn by the noblewomen. The fabric was too heavy to have much of a reaction, but she then smoothed it down, anyway.

On the slate was a list of words she'd written in neat curved letters for him to figure out. They didn't give him the headache of when he started learning his letters, but that didn't mean this was enjoyable, so he took advantage of the distraction his friend provided.

The robe had cost him the amulets, which he hadn't minded, and his shoes. That had been more difficult, but he'd realized that the only reason he wanted them was that they were the first item he'd gotten from the dungeon. He didn't need them. He was plenty adept at walking silently.

She still had to hand over coins to cover the difference, and she'd refused their help with that. She had the coin, and the robe wasn't so magical it became a team asset. She wanted it because... she wanted it.

The rest of the items, the non-enchanted ones, they sold to Darran.

Tibs sensed the essence woven through the robe and tried to determine what each did. Earth, he figured, was to make it tougher, although if there was also metal, that would help too. Air could help it move, make it lighter, cooler. She'd mentioned that it wasn't as hot and stifling as her previous robes. Fire... Tibs couldn't think why fire would be part of it beyond keeping her warm in cold weather, not that Kragle Rock got that. Cool was the worst Tibs had dealt with at this point.

There were other essences he couldn't identify woven through the fabric, and he didn't know enough about what each did to hazard a guess about what they might be. Did a sorcerer's robe need to be anything other than tougher and lighter?

She noticed him watching and stopped, blushing. "Sorry."

"What for?" He chuckled again. "There's nothing wrong with enjoying a new item." He took out an air knife and made it float over his hand. "I still like doing this."

"I should be helping with your letters, not parading."

He had the knife make a figure eight, then caught it and sheathed it. "You sitting next to me frowning when I get it wrong isn't making me learn faster." He rested his head against the wall. "I don't think anything can help."

"Don't get discouraged. I know it isn't easy, but you'll get it." She touched the amulet hanging around her neck as she sat on the chair next to the bed. It reminded him he'd wanted to address this once they left the dungeon, but he'd forgotten due to Jackal's injuries, then dealing with the loot and Fedora finding him for training on their way back to the town.

"It's not full?"

She shook her head. "It takes a few days after a run for it to be full unless I spend hours focussing on it." She indicated the slate on his lap. "You might think that's boring, but it's nothing compared to staring at an amulet and pulling essence out of the air into it. *That's* boring." She frowned. "But you know that, right?"

Tibs nodded. He remembered his early days with Walter's amulet. The hours spent actively drawing the water essence into it. It was one thing he'd worked out how to do, even if he couldn't sense and manipulate at the same time—Carina called it making himself a magnet. He didn't miss those days.

"How do you go about drawing the essence out of it?" That had been Tibs's first realization there could be a different way to recharge an amulet.

She shrugged. "I just do it."

Tibs shook his head. "We don't just do something. Your teacher taught you how to sense the," he searched for the words, "shape of your essence." She nodded her understanding. "And you've been using that ever since. It isn't that you 'just do it'. You learned, got used to it, and it became natural." He indicated her amulet. "That's the same thing. You had to figure out how to draw from it. Or your teacher taught you that, too. It didn't just happen."

She ran a finger over the stone and nodded.

"I didn't have anyone teaching me, since rogues aren't supposed to have a use for amulets. Because of how small my reserve is, it's made a lot of difference." He moved his hand through the air, pulling water essence from it until he had a small pool in his palm. "That's all I can do without help. If I spill it, I will feel it. A little larger, and spilling that would empty my reserve entirely."

"I've read that you can sever your link to your element that way." She bit her lower lip.

"Now I'm happy I never tried it. Because of it, I learned how to work with my amulet quickly." He shrugged. "I barely think about it anymore." He absorbed the water, but kept his hand extended.

She looked at it.

Tibs waited. He'd explain it if she asked, but she was smart, and she enjoyed thinking.

"Now that you know how to refill your reserve while you use your essence, you never let it get low, right?"

He nodded.

"And you didn't let this essence go back in the air; you absorbed it."

He nodded again.

"How? You just said you keep your reserve full."

Another nod.

"Did you overfill your reserve?"

He shook his head. "Alistair says it's dangerous."

"But you've done it before. When you fought Bardik."

He'd told her and Jackal the details of the fight when they'd met in MountainSea. Mez and Khumdar hadn't asked about it in their time back.

"That wasn't water, but my... core essence. I don't know if I can do it with the other essences, and I'm not sure if I should try." Having his core reserve crack and all the essence fill him hadn't been pleasant.

"Then, how did you reabsorb the essence?"

“By first emptying my reserve.” He had to think back to how he did it, since it was a reflex at this point.

She frowned at him, made a show of looking around, at the bed, then under it.

“I don’t think trickery would help me here.” He chuckled. “I’m not trying to appear better than I am. I’m showing you something.”

“Then I don’t understand how you did it. The only way to lower your reserve is to use the essence in it. If you didn’t do that, then there’s no way...” she trailed off, and he waited. What she said contained the essence of the solution, and he could tell she was working it out.

She took the amulet off and looked at it. “You said that you take the essence from the amulet and into your reserve as you use it. I pull from it and use it for what I need directly. It’s how I was taught to do it.”

He nodded. “I used to do it like that. I’d have the essence move over my body to where I needed it.

“Used to,” she mused. “Why did you change it?”

Tibs thought about it. “It’s felt quicker. If I was going to do the water flick, I’d have to move it over my arms; from the hand holding the amulet to the one holding the knife. I didn’t know how to move it directly there from outside of me without losing ‘touch’ with it.”

She nodded. “So now it goes from the amulet to your reserve and to whatever you need to do.” She frowned. “So, why would that work in only one direction?”

Tibs smiled.

“And the amulet refills faster?”

He nodded. “To me, the amulet feels like an extension of my reserve now. I can refill that as fast as my reserve. I’m so used to it now, I do it almost constantly.”

She thought about it. “If I fully drain my reserve, it only takes a few minutes of concentration to refill it. The amulet is much larger, but if I can do it at the same speed, I’m looking at a couple of hours of work at the most instead of the near-full day; if I don’t stop.” She concentrated. “How do you do it?”

He pulled out his amulet. “Like I said, it feels to me like an extension of my reserve. I first realized it when we fought the first-floor boss and I needed to ice the floor under it. When I explained it to my teacher, he was amused he’d never noticed it.”

Her nod was slow. “Right, it is a reserve. My instructor never addressed it as something that’s part of me.” She closed her eyes and gripped it. After a few seconds, she sighed and placed it back around her neck. “I guess it’s going to take more work. So let’s get back to your letters.

Tibs barely stifled his groan.

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Tibs walked onto the fighter’s training field, looking around. Two dozen boys and girls fought with swords, but they weren’t who he was looking for. On top of an instructor, he searched for Fedora. He’d given her the task of picking his pocket during the day. She was skilled, but lacked the practice of doing it while moving. It was what had led to her

being caught.

The trainees were almost exclusively Street, based on the rags they wore. Only a handful of Omega teams had gone in and he hadn't looked for who had survived. He didn't need the reminder of how easily Omega Runners died in the dungeon. He recognized two from the field when Harry gave his announcements and one from before the attack, and the girl from the team they had run into as they exited Sto. He was surprised. It had sounded like they hadn't enjoyed it and since they weren't forced to be here, would leave.

"Can I help you?" a muscular woman said. Her eyes were metal gray. She didn't wear a sword, but her belt was worn where a scabbard would be attached.

"I want to learn how to use a sword."

She looked him over. He was in his leathers since he'd figured training would involve getting hit. Jackal always came back from training with one of the instructors bruised.

"You're Light Fingers, right?"

He ground his teeth. "It's Tibs."

She nodded. "The rogue field is on the north side. They'll be the one to teach you."

"The only weapon they teach is the knife. I need something with more reach. Something like that." He pointed to an older, better-dressed, woman practicing by herself. Her sword was shorter than most, but much longer than a knife.

"You should have thought about that before becoming a rogue," she said dismissively. "You use a knife. If a sword is what you wanted, you should have been a fighter."

"Not every rogue uses a knife," Tibs replied. "Just like not every fighter uses a sword. My team leader doesn't use any weapon."

She shrugged. "What they do once I'm done teaching them is their business. I'm hired to teach fighters how to use a sword. You're not Omega, so get yourself a teacher that's waste time teaching you whatever you feel like learning today." She walked away to help a fighter.

He could get his own teacher? Why was this the first he heard of that?

He watched as she adjusted the boy's footwork, then turned and exited the field.

He wasn't getting a guild fighter to teach him. They'd probably use that as an excuse to add yet more gold to what he'd have to repay on reaching Epsilon. Did he even need a teacher? He could 'borrow' a sword from those on the field—he doubted anyone would notice—and then... what? He knew from what Bardik taught him of knife-wielding that it wasn't as simple as swinging it about. Like the boy's footwork, he'd need someone to teach him proper stances and ways to hold a sword.

What he needed was someone he knew, a friend willing to teach him. Maybe—

He grabbed the hand as it slipped in his pocket, loosening the grip as he recognized her. "You still need work," he told Fedora.

She shrugged. "I prefer taverns. They aren't moving and already distracted by the alcohol they've drunk."

"The town's too small to limit yourself like that. They'll figure it out, and either ban you or never stop watching you. Did you Street have a lot of taverns?"

"I didn't have a street. I moved about the Karnial."

Tibs had trouble imagining what he would have done with the belief he could go anywhere in his city, back then. His Street had been hard enough, and the rest would only have been deadlier.

“Let’s go find some people who won’t be too angry with you for picking their pocket so you can practice some more.”

She grumbled something about having better things to do with her time, but followed him.