

## Chapter 56

Tibs let out the breath as he moves the air essence into the knife. Three evenings now, and it was finally getting the hang of this.

He didn't have to do much, other than let his essence flow into it, the way it was imbued, the structure of it, guided it into creating the effect, the enchantment. Carina explained that for it to qualify as an enchantment in the eyes of sorcerers, it needed to generate its own essence so anyone could use it. Otherwise, it was just imbued.

Tibs didn't care, these knives could do something when he pushed essence into them. That was an enchantment to him.

The knife lifted off his hand and Tibs smiled. He felt his essence within it, and when he moved it such.

The knife drifted to the left. He altered his essence within the knife and it drifted to the right. Another change and it floated up. He concentrated and got the knife to turn until the point was down.

The door closed shut, and he startled. The knife dropped and sank into the table enough he stayed up.

"Sorry," Carina said, holding back a chuckle. "How are you coming along?"

Tibs pulled it out. Fortunately, there had been ample scratches and gouges on the wooden table before he started. This one wouldn't be noticed. "I can move it a little, but I don't have enough essence to do anything more." He sheathed it with its twin at his hip. "I can tell it can hold a lot more, and I figure that if I can fill it, I'm going to be able to make it fly around fast, but..." he shrugged.

She flung something at him. "This can help." He caught it and was looking at Carina's amulet. "It's drained. I checked with my teacher and once fully drained it can be refilled with a different essence."

"Don't you need it?"

She pulled the stone from around her neck. It was now wrapped in leather strips. "This one's better. It can hold more essence and it flows in and out easier. Do you know how the dungeon made it?"

Tibs shook his head.

"Can't you ask it?"

"I don't hear him from here. I think he needs to be thinking at me for me to hear it because he said that he and—" he stopped and shook his head. "That he liked to comment on other teams, and I didn't hear anything he had to have said about those Omegas we ran into."

"Think?"

Tibs shrugged. "It's how he describes it. I guess that since he doesn't have a mouth, it's all thinking to him." He turned the amulet in his hand. As she'd said, he felt no essence in it. "What did your teacher say when you asked if other essences could go in it?"

"He thinks I'm going to sell it to a merchant or another Runner. If he knew I'm giving it away, he would have taken it from me."

“Can he do that?”

“He’s Delta, he made sure I knew that. I’m pretty sure it means he can do anything he wants at that point.”

Tibs nodded. He bit his lower lip, then asked. “How is it with... you know?”

She sighed and dropped onto her bed. “It’s over. We had an arrangement, and he didn’t hold up his end, so I’m not staying in it. Of course, I couldn’t exactly tell him the dungeon told you he’d been talking about me, so I expect he’s going to be screaming at all his friends, but I really don’t care about the trouble it might cause them. They’re on his team, so they can take the blowback. Tibs, don’t get involved with anyone.”

He chuckled. “I already didn’t plan on getting any special anyone.”

She snorted. “He wasn’t my special guy. If I’d have had with him what Jackal and Kroseph have, or even what Mez and Tandy seem to have, I might have given him a chance to explain.”

“If he wasn’t your special guy, then why did you and him do it? I mean you did, right?”

She stared at him, skin slowly turning red.

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know what Jackal and Kroseph do when they have their ‘them’ time. But I thought that was something people did with their special person.” He raised a hand. “I know it doesn’t have to. I’ve seen what noble can do when they wander the street. But that’s not about pleasure.”

She regained some composure. “That’s just it. It’s pleasure. What Jackal and Kroseph do is about a lot more than that. Me and him, it was just pleasure. Like if you and Mez shared a drink at a tavern.”

“I wouldn’t get angry at Mez for talking about it afterward.”

She shrugged. “We’d agreed we were going to keep it discreet. Where I’m from, there’re expectations when we...” she blushed. “And his standing’s higher than mine where he’s from, so even though it doesn’t make sense here, away from both our homes, we didn’t want people to know. Or at least I didn’t. Clearly, he wasn’t as worried as he told me.”

Tibs nodded.

“So, now you know you can have pleasure with someone if—”

Tibs made gagging noises and hurried out of the room to Carina’s laughter.

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“Look,” the merchant behind the counter told the messenger, holding a small bottle in his hand. “I wasn’t told you were coming, so you are taking this back with you.”

The man facing him put the leather tube’s strap over his shoulder. “Unless you’re paying for it to be carried, I can’t do anything. I was told to bring this to the Caravan Garden and hand it over to the person at the counter. That’s you. I’ve fulfilled my contract. Anything else is opening another contract.”

“Lina!” the man yelled, and Tibs took a step back.

The messenger used the lack of attention on himself to head to the door.

“Don’t you go anywhere! We’re not done here,” the merchant yelled, but the

messenger was at the door and didn't acknowledge the call. "If that girl of mine is using the shop's money to have—" he glared at the small bottle.

"What is it?" Tibs asked, sensing the essence flowing inside it. He couldn't tell what kind of essence it was, but he could tell it was contained. Normally essence flowed through material unless they were specially imbued, and that wasn't.

"I have no idea. My daughter must have ordered it." He placed the bottle on the shelf behind him and when he faced Tibs, he was smiling. "Are you back to open the puzzle box again?"

Tibs placed the handful of candy on the counter with the coin. "It's not as interesting the second time."

"So I should find another one for you to try and crack?" The merchant counted the candies and took three out of the pile along with the coin. "A copper only gets you eight."

Tibs nodded. There had been letters on the box containing the candies and among them, eight had been drawn. "I don't know my letters." He took the candies and put them in his pouch. Now that he knew Sto wouldn't remake his, he'd bought one. He couldn't put candy in the hiding places in his armor as well as coins.

The merchant sighed. "Not a lot of you Runners do. Or even those new people."

"Nobles know their letters," Tibs stated.

"That they do, but they don't frequent a shop like mine. Back in Aruna, the literacy level is higher. I didn't think about what it would be like here. Each time someone buys something, I have to tell them how much, or make sure they don't take more than they should."

Tibs nodded. "Do you have colors?"

"I sell pigment, yes."

"For you. Just make a circle the color of copper and an arrow to the number eight. That's going to tell us what we can get."

The merchant looked over the shop. "I'll think about it. It might be too much work."

Tibs shrugged, popping one candy in his mouth as he headed outside.

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His stalker was back.

This time he hadn't heard the footsteps, but as he'd headed into an alley to get to Transport Road, he'd felt the metal gray essence follow him. He'd narrowed it down to four people. Two archers, a sorcerer, and a rogue. The lack of sound didn't confirm who this was, but he was the only one with a reason to want to hurt Tibs.

Tibs didn't want to fight. They weren't allowed. But he needed to make sure the Runner after him didn't get to do this again when Tibs wasn't expecting it.

He kept an eye out for anything obviously metal, but other than the band on a rain barrel at the end of the alley he suspected only nails were made of metal here and there was no balcony to drop on him.

He took off running.

His pursuer might not give chase, but maybe he'd stop if Tibs made it clear he knew about him. What he really wanted was the distance to prepare the terrain to his advantage. If he was going to get away with this, he had to be the one defending himself, but he also had to make sure he'd win.

He crossed the large street, dodging people and carts—when had the carts arrived—and ended the alley opposite. This one wouldn't do, but after the next street, a much smaller one, there was an alley which branched, and he could be sure he had the time to set things up.

He glanced over his shoulder as he exited the alley, and Don's Rogue was still after him. Tibs ran harder into the alley, took the first left, then stopped at the dead end and hurried to turn. He wished he'd bothered putting essence in the amulet. Even the little the day would have given it to charge would have been useful, but he hadn't been able to decide if he wanted water or air.

Water, he definitely should have gone with water. He placed his hand on the dirt ground and made a puddle of water. He needed to will it not to be absorbed by the ground, and as he stepped away, it took more effort to keep that from happening. Another thing he had to practice, controlling his essence at a distance. Was he ever going to stop having to learn something new?

He stepped back toward the wall and waited for the other Rogue to be closer. As the man turned into the alley, Tibs stepped toward the exit, coming to a panicked stop.

"Finally," the man said, grinning between panting. "How are you so fast?"

"People keep chasing me," Tibs replied. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much." He pulled the short sword out of the knife-sized scabbard. "Just to finish what we started in MountainSea."

"We're not allowed to fight."

"This isn't going to be a fight. For this to be a fight, you'd have to stand a chance. I've been training. And unlike you. I'm Rho now." He took a step forward and Tibs remained alert to all the surrounding essence. If his opponent tried something, Tibs would have to sacrifice his control over his water to stop it.

"So you're going to use all that power on someone who has so little essence his eyes don't even show it?"

The man smirked. "You can do plenty with what you have, can't you? I'm betting the eyes are a trick. You want everyone to think you have nothing, so we'll all pity you. The only problem with that is that if you were as weak as you claim, the dungeon would have eaten you at this point."

The sword glimmered as essence flowed over it. Tibs let it happen. Whatever was happening, it was too early to reveal what he could do. He stepped back, and the man stepped forward, over the patch of water.

"Nowhere to run anymore, Tibs. You cornered yourself."

"Did Don tell you to do this?"

"No, I told you, this is for MountainSea. Don's just going to be pleased that you're no longer there to claim you're so great."

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Don’s got a problem. I never claimed anything. He’s welcome to proclaim himself the voice of the dungeon for all I care.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him that.” The man lunged forward and swung. Tibs jumped aside and rolled to his feet, eyes going wide at the long gash the tip of the sword left in the stone wall. “Us metal users have a lot more versatility than you water babies.”

Tibs swallowed. He was going to have to be careful because if it could do that to stone, it would lobe his arm off without effort. He jumped to the side again and turned to face his opponent. Even if he’d wanted to run, he couldn’t afford to give him his back. If he could throw that thing accurately, Tibs would be dead before taking three steps.

He watched where he stepped as he dodged the swings, making the man curse with each miss.

“I’m really starting to hate you,” the man said. He swung and Tibs moved. The tip of the blade sliced through Tibs’s armor and his arm so cleanly he didn’t feel it. The stinging began as the blood flowed.

The man cursed. “I was hoping to cut your arm off. You have to be the luckiest bastard in existence.”

“Luck isn’t a thing,” Tibs replied, taking a step back.

“Even if it is,” the man said, stepping forward. “You’re about to run out of it.”

Tibs smiled. “No, I’m not.” He iced the patch of water just as the foot was about to come down on it. The man’s leg slipped out from under him and he was down. As he turned to get on all four, Tibs pooled the earth essence in his foot and kicked him in the head,

The man rolled back but was still conscious, the skin on his face had a metallic sheen to it. Tibs stepped forward.

“How?” the man asked. Tibs kicked him as hard as he could. He did not know how much strength the little earth essence he had gave him, but he’d take everything. The man was on his back again, now crawling away. “You weren’t touching the water. Distance manipulation is a Rho ability.”

Tibs kicked him again. He didn’t seem to do any damage, but the man was still backing, so Tibs was going to keep kicking him until he was unconscious.

“Stop!” a woman ordered.

Tibs considered kicking again, but the grin from the man on the ground made him pause.

“Thanks the High One!” he yelled. “He’s trying to kill me.” He began standing.

“Don’t move either,” she said.

“But.”

“I said, don’t move. Fighting’s not allowed in this town.”

“I was defending myself.”

“I don’t care.”

Tibs turned. The woman wore a green and black shirt over leather armor.

“Are you going to try to convince me you’re innocent?” she asked Tibs.

“I want to talk to Harry,” Tibs replied.

She snorted. “You think someone like you deserves a word with the guard leader?”

Tibs smiled. “I think Harry is going to want to be there when Alistair’s student explains himself.”

“Who?”

Tibs fought the groan. Of course, she wouldn’t know who Alistair was. She wasn’t an adventurer. “He’s one of Harry’s friends.” Which meant she didn’t know how much Tibs was lying.

“Leave the sword on the ground,” she snapped, not taking her eyes off Tibs.

“But it’s mine.”

“Kid, I don’t care if it was a gift from whoever this High One is. You touch it and I’m cutting you in two.”

Tibs wondered how that fight would go. She didn’t have essence, so even he was stronger than she was. But how much did training beat just having power?

“Alright. You two are coming with me. We’re going to see what the Guard leader had to say about you being his so-called friend.”

Student of his friend, Tibs thought. What was the point of carefully lying when people didn’t even remember things right?

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Harry’s eyes glowed as he sat behind a massive desk covered with papers. There had to be golds worth of paper on it, Tibs thought.

The man sighed. “You got the two of you here, Tibs. Now tell me why you wanted me to listen to—”

“He tried to kill me!” the other Rogue said. “I was just minding my business, and he attacked me, I want him thrown in a cell.”

Tibs did his best not to smile, and Harry’s scolding said he’d failed. “Take that one to a cell,” Harry instructed the woman while indicating the other Rogue with a wave of the hand.

“But I just told you he—”

“Do you know what Light does?” Harry demanded, his tone hard. “It shines on lies.”

Tibs said nothing, nor moved as the woman took the still protesting man away.

“I hate Rogues,” Harry grumbled, leaning back in his large chair once the door closed. “Why can’t the lot of you just go to the fields pound into one another and call it training like the rest of us do?”

“I don’t think sorcerers hit one another,” Tibs said and regretted it as Harry glared at him.

“Did you set things up, so he’d attack you?”

“No.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You’re too damned calm to be telling me the truth. Does your age issue with essence make you immune to essence?”

Tibs had never thought about that. “I’m a girl.” But it was easy to test.

Harry sighed. "So it's because you're sure of yourself. Of course, Alistair would end up with the kid who doesn't panic when I glare at him."

"Are you and him friends?"

"No," Harry replied with the force someone put when they didn't want others to question what they said.

Did having light essence mean Harry couldn't lie? The essence influenced the people who had it, but not so much as to be noticeable, Alistair had said.

"Did Jackal put you up to this?"

"Why would he do that?"

"That's not an answer, Tibs," Harry said tiredly.

"No, he didn't. No one knows he was trying to kill me."

Harry nodded.

"What's between you and Jackal?"

The expression turned so dark Tibs barely managed not to flee. "That is none of your concern, Tibs. Don't go thinking that because you have Alistair's protection, you can go poking into things that don't concern you. Am I making myself clear?"

Tibs nodded, swallowing hard. Maybe he should leave the hunting for secrets to Khumdar.

"Good. Get out of here before I decide to throw you in a cell too."

Tibs ran.

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"You are going to pay," Don said, hands on the table and glaring. Tibs forced himself to maintain eye contact despite his protesting stomach.

"You break it and you buy it," Kroseph said, behind Tibs.

Don looked up. "Do you know who I am?"

"Oh, I do. Jackal had a lot of nasty things to say about you, but I don't care. What I care about is what you're doing to the table right now."

Tibs looked at Don's hands. The wood around it was rotting.

Don moved the hands away. "You don't know what you're involving yourself into, servant."

"I'm involving myself in keeping a Runner from damaging the inn's property," Kroseph replied, sounding bored. "I get you're all-powerful, but I've seen you eat here. You want to enjoy another meal my brothers' cook, you are going to respect us and take whatever problem you have with Tibs outside."

"No, this is going to be resolved at another time. But heed my words Tibs. If what you did costs me my run, I will exact payment." The sorcerer turned and exited.

"What does he think you did?" Kroseph asked.

"Probably set up some conspiracy to keep him from his next run."

"And what did you actually do?"

"Kept his Rogue from killing me, which ended with him in a cell. Which means Don's down one team member."

"Can't he get a replacement?"

Tibs shook his head. “He can only replace a dead teammate.”