

## Stepping up-65

Tibs ran through the crowd with glee. Most of the town was here, perusing the booths the caravan merchants had set up. The chaos made practicing his pickpocket easier and avoiding the guards fun. Harry had a handful of his, but most worked for the caravan, like Cross had when she'd arrived. They did their best, but they weren't up to noticing what Tibs did.

It was his monthly game. On the first day the caravan arrived, once they were done setting up. Run through it, pick pockets, then try foods and drinks from places he'd never heard of.

Unlike the previous times, where they set up at the edge of the town, now they were in the middle of it, around the transportation platform. Filling the space the fire had cleared; his fire. He did his best not to let the memory of his loss of control dampen his enjoyment. No townsfolk had died from it.

The crowd was thick with visitors coming from the platform. From the snippets he overheard, traveling to Kragle Rock wasn't as expensive in the five days of the caravan fair. Not only the caravan merchants benefited from it, but the taverns were also packed, and Kroseph had them eat on his family's floor since they couldn't reserve their usual table with the number of people packing the common room.

Tibs saw Cross and changed direction. She wouldn't see him pick pockets. She wasn't that good, but she knew him well enough to come to find it afterward and loom over him. She hadn't appreciated that he'd returned the last puzzle she'd left him by slipping it into her carry pouch without her noticing it.

The cube had been a challenge. Even once he realized it was about lining the notches so other parts could be slipped in, finding the right ones had been challenging. Doing it once only made the second time simpler because he knew to identify the blocks. Unlike the previous puzzles, there wasn't a pattern he could memorize, and losing track of one of the pieces made finishing it impossible.

His pouch full of candies, he located Carina, who was talking with a book merchant. He slipped a few into her pouch without her noticing and moved on to his next friends. Mez was with his girl, and he seemed happy. Whatever differences seemed so often got between them; they weren't paying attention as they walked through the booths. It was one of the rare times Tibs thought they were special to each other.

Khumdar vanished almost as soon as Tibs located him, taking a step to the side and shadows swallowing him completely. The woman he'd been talking with seemed surprised by the action and furtively looked around. Tibs debated following her when she walked away, but gave his friend his privacy.

Jackal saw him coming and eyes him suspiciously. His leg was healed, and it had only taken eight tries to get it right, and Jackal hadn't screamed at any points, but he'd given Tibs a wide berth for the following days. Tibs raised his hand and offered candies.

"Take one," Kroseph said, picking a bright pink one and popping it in his mouth. Tibs grinned at the reach as the spices hit Jackal's man and made his eyes water. "On second

thought,” he wheezed, “I think he’s aiming to practice on you some more.”

“The yellow ones are safe,” Tibs said. “They’d called sunbeams, but they’re cool instead of being hot.”

Jackal took one, but watched Tibs as he placed it on his tongue. Tibs’s expression didn’t change and Jackal closed his mouth and after a few seconds smiled. “This is cool.” He turned and Tibs left before the two men kissed.

“Enjoying yourself?”

Tibs startled and put his hands behind his back before remembering he wasn’t doing anything wrong, at this particular moment, so he offered candies to the leader of the guard.

Harry eyed them. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

“No.”

The fighter nodded and took a gray one. This was one mostly sweet with a bit of sourness to it. It wasn’t one of Tibs’s favorite.

“If I were to ask you if you’ve been up to any thievery, what would you tell me?”

Tibs smiled. “Ask and find out.” There would be no point in lying, yet, but he knew Harry well enough to know he didn’t want to know the truth. This was too minor, but he’d have to act on the pickpocketing, and despite their current tension. He had better things to do than throw Tibs in a cell that would be crowded by the end of the day.

Not all visitors who came to the bazaar were here for the booths.

“Rogues,” he grumbled, popped the candy in his mouth, and walked away.

“You know,” Alistair said, behind him, “one day, you will push him to ask and he will put you in a cell.”

Tibs turned and his teacher popped a blue candy with green swirls in his mouth. Tibs checked his secret pockets. Sea Drops were his favorite and—he was short one. “I should call Harry on you.”

Alistair smiled. “Think of it as the price to pay for failing a test. No matter how good you are, don’t take for granted someone can’t get into your pockets.”

“You’re like Delta, there’s no way I could stop you.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be aware something happened.”

He was aware, Tibs wanted to tell his teacher. More than the man would imagine, but in a crowd like this, that meant nothing. So many essences around him basically camouflaged what was going on. Just like Ganny had done in the maze. He couldn’t block only specific elements. What he could do was block all except for one, which meant he needed to know which one to expect.

Which was probably what Alistair meant, even if not about how he sensed the elements. He should always expect something from someone.

“Does this mean this is teaching time?”

“It’s always teaching time,” Alistair began walking. “Someone as curious as you should understand that.”

“When I do it, it happens when I want to.”

“Of course,” his teacher replied, smiling. “You always carefully plan those times when you derail my training with your questions. Quite the strategist, aren’t you?” He

looked at him expectantly.

“I know what strategy is,” he said. “I heard it and we had to do it to defend the town.”

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

“I manage it,” he answered with a shrug. He could do it with a thought, but unlike with earth, he couldn’t tell what it does. He’d expected his body to turn into water the first time, so he’d done it in the inn’s tub. After all, with earth, his body turned to stone. But nothing had happened.

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

“That’s going to be hard, isn’t it?” Tibs asked after considering it. It wasn’t for him, but he needed a way to gauge how it would be for a normal student.

“It depends. Most Runners only start to train on maintaining focus while doing multiple things once they’re Rho. You started earlier, so it could help here. Also, some people have an affinity for focus. For them, these exercises are simple, while other aspects will be more difficult.”

Tibs nodded. So he shouldn’t act like it was easy, but if he slipped, it wouldn’t be too suspicious. “What does it do?” He spread the element through his body as he sensed his teacher do the same. Unlike Tibs, who pushed it out of his core, Alistair’s radiated out of the channels of the essence running through his body.

“Why should it do anything?”

Could his teacher tell how his essence flowed inside his body? “When Jackal does it, his body turned into stone.” Alistair didn’t give any indication he’d known before, but Tibs know better than to assume it meant he couldn’t.

“He told you?”

Tibs shrugged. “He’s on my team and he’s my friend.”

“Earth isn’t subtle, so you can expect that most of what they do will have a clear and noticeable result. Turn their bodies into stone, encase you into it. Walk through the earth and stone. Most of the solid elements tend to be that way. It’s in their nature, you could say. Water is more subtle.”

“Isn’t subtlety something darkness does?”

“It is, but that doesn’t mean it’s the only element which does it. It’s simply at the center of most it does and stretches outward from there. Remember Tibs, the element doesn’t define what you can do. Every element can accomplish nearly everything the other element can do, but how they make it happen will be easier or harder depending more many factors. The main one will be training.”

Tibs thought back to something his teacher had done in one of their sessions. “So when you made it so no one could listen to what we were talking. You were copying something darkness does?”

“No. I didn’t copy darkness, and while you’re right, darkness can do it, it isn’t how I realized it either, and I’m not going to let you side-track us today. To get back to your initial question, the one that’s relevant to our exercise.” He paused. “Are you maintaining your essence?”

“I am,” Tibs said.

“Good. There are many stages of making use of the essence within you. What I’m having you practice is the weakest of them, and yes, that also applies to earth, so as impressive as your friend turning into stone is, it is the least of what he will be capable of.”

Tibs nodded and pulled his essence back to his core and waited for his teacher’s reaction.

“When inside you, you have less control over what you can have the essence do. There, it’s more about taking on aspects of water rather than forcing a result. And you’ll want to focus, you’ve let your essence retreat into your reserve.”

“You can tell?” Tibs asked, stepping around someone and nearly bumping into someone else. He didn’t, but he wondered where everyone came from.

Alistair smiled. “I can see it. See the result of you no longer being suffused by water.”

Tibs pushed the essence through his body. “So you can’t sense it? Like we sense the essence around us?”

Alistair shook his head. “Sensing within a body is difficult, there are multiple theories as to why, but the one with the most acceptance is the same reason why a dungeon can’t simply eat you when you enter it. The simple fact that we are alive protects us, but also blocks the ability to sense what another adventurer does with their essence within themselves.”

Tibs nodded and was distracted by the realization people had stopped nearly bumping into him all the time. The crowd hadn’t thinned, but moving through it felt easier, as if people parted away ever so slightly.

“I see you’re noticing the effect.”

He pulled the essence back into his core and, while he could tell nothing about the crowd changed, he had to be more careful to avoid the people. He suffused himself and walking became simpler.

“Why are we always doing this?” he asked.

“A few reasons, the main one being that after a while, people will notice there’s something odd about you. They won’t be able to explain it, but this slipperiness water gives us when in tight crowds will put them on edge. Most people aren’t comfortable with the things they can’t easily explain. And adventurers aren’t so common everyone thinks of them when confronted with something odd.”

Tibs tried to imagine what someone slipping in and out of a crowd while barely disturbing it would look like. A spirit maybe? Something out to steal their life force?

“As for another,” Alistair continued. “Try to pick a pocket.”

Tibs looked around for guards before slipping his fingers in—next to the closest pockets. He tried again, and the man moved and he missed the pocket. Again with a woman, then another man. None of them noticed what he was going they just moved enough to make him miss without realizing it.

“As you can see, what’s an advantage in one moment can be a disadvantage in the next.”

“But all I have to do is pull the essence away from my hand and—” He frowned as he couldn’t do it. He focused harder and, despite the water suffusing him, he walked into someone.

“Watch it,” the woman said.

“There are limits to what you can do,” Alistair said with a smile, while Tibs apologized to her.

“Why couldn’t I do it? I let the essence out, and I can pull it in, so why can’t I pull in just my hand?”

“Right now, the reason is your lack of training. But even with training, it’s still difficult. Suffusing is more of an all-or-nothing proposition than one that acts in part. As I said, when it comes to the essence within our body, we’re more taking on aspects rather than directing them.”

Tibs nodded. Was it worth finding time for that, on top of everything else he was training? “Other than walking in a crowd without being noticed, does it do more?”

“Once you can maintain it while performing more strenuous actions than walking, we’ll address the next stage.”

Tibs smiled. “Oh, this is going to be great in fighting.”

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Alistair stepped aside from Tibs’s slash. He’d been impressed with Tibs’s ice sword, although he’d pointed out one flaw with it by placing a finger on the jagged blade and shattering it with a thought. Tibs had felt the will rip his control of the ice away, but he’d been unable to do anything against it. Only another water adventurer could disrupt his control, but it was a weakness he’d need to account for.

Tibs slashed again, and he almost connected.

Alistair wasn’t trying hard. He didn’t have to; he had decades of experience over Tibs, but that wasn’t the point. The point was for Tibs to keep his body suffused. And as simple as it had been while walking. Fighting was different. He hadn’t realized that suffusing his body took some focus. Not much, but enough that what he needed to fight took away from that and his essence retreated into his core, leaving him vulnerable.

“I think this is enough,” Alistair said, and Tibs’s blade dipped to the ground. Tibs panted heavily while his teacher hadn’t broken a sweat. “How are you feeling?”

Tibs glared at his teacher. He wanted to switch element, see if suffusing his body with purity would take all the aches away.

“Were you able to keep your body suffused?”

Tibs shook his head.

“You’re fighting form’s good. How did you convince one of the fighting teachers to train you?”

“Another Runner,” Tibs panted. “One of the convicts. He has experience fighting with swords.”

“True, they’re much older.” He looked at Tibs’s blade. “Raise it please.” Tibs did so, his hand shaking despite it not weighing anything. “The jaggedness of it concerns me, Tibs. The fact you can’t seem to smooth it tells me you’re deeply angry about something.”

Tibs snorted and let the blade melt away and drip to the ground. “I think the guild’s given me plenty to be angry with.”

“Anger and water—”

“That’s bullshit, Alistair. Water doesn’t care what I feel. Water’s about soothing and making nice. I’m me. I’m a kid who got pulled here instead of losing hand, and that I’m grateful with, but everything else since? Being treated like food for the dungeon, like some commodity the guild’s already planning to use when I’m strong enough. And that was before realizing the guild doesn’t care enough about me or the town to do what it told people moving here it would do. It left us to die!”

He waited for Alistair to offer a defense, but the man remained silent, his expression morose. “You need to let go of it, Tibs,” he finally said. “Anger at something you can’t do anything against will only lead you to make mistakes you’ll regret.” Alistair rubbed his left wrist. It had been a while since Tibs had seen the motion and didn’t immediately remember it. The black band the adventurers who broke the guild’s rules got.

“I’m not going to do anything, Alistair. I want to, but I know my limitations. I’m just a kid. I’m getting back at the guild by taking charge of the town’s survival.”

Alistair smiled. “Harry told me to get you to stop.”

“I’m not going to listen to you any more than I did him.”

His teacher nodded. “Just be careful that protecting the town doesn’t become turning it against the guild. You saw what it does when it doesn’t care about something. So think on what it can do if it wants it removed.”

Tibs nodded. “This is just about protecting the people here.”

Alistair looked at Tibs, then the wet grass where his sword melted, and at Tibs again. Whatever he thought, he kept to himself.