

“Come right up!” Rigel yelled over the already assembled crowd. “Come and look at goods from all over the kingdom and beyond!”

It was the first village of the trip, and Rigel had arranged for their arrival to be later in the day, so that they would all be busy with the fields or their crafts while the wagons took positions outside the town. Rigel had them arranged in a series of circles, nine rings of them, spaced well apart so the villagers could move between them.

Because villages and small town didn't have dedicated market place, the wagons became the stalls, their sides opened up to make an awning, poles and tables to display the goods.

No two caravan masters Tibs had worked for went about it the exact same way, but they all stopped even if the settlement was too small to expect anything to sell. They were the only event of note some places saw. The only source of information about what happened in the rest of the world. And, one caravan master had told Tibs in his early days traveling with them, one never knew where the next master crafter would come from. Have known them from before then always served a caravan when it came to buying their goods in the future.

“Enjoy an evening admiring cloths from the far regions of Gartaro. Gaze upon the potteries made of silys clay. And taste the sweets from sands of Zombar.”

Tibs headed among the wagons. His, and the other guards's job was to make sure none of the villagers caused problems, or merchant fleece them too hard. They already had little, so Rigel had told them this was about giving them a respite, not parting them with their last copper, or loaf of bread, if that was all they had. The merchants could wait for the larger town and cities before emptying their customer's purses.

“And what can I tempt you with today?” the plump woman asked, grinning mischievously while leaning on the high-table with the small boxes holding a variety of candies.

Tibs leveled a gaze at her. “What are you going to do when you take my last copper?”

“You're paid too well for that to ever happen.”

“But not all my coins go toward candies.”

“I don't want all your coins, young man.” Her smile stretched. “Only most of them.”

With an exaggerated sigh, Tibs pulled a copper from his pouch and looked over the selection she had out. He'd made the mistake of mentioning he liked candies when he'd first seen it was what she had, and since then, anytime he was by her wagon, she suggested one or another for him to try. She didn't charge him as much as getting them at a market would cost, but, considering how exotic some of them were, Tibs could empty his pouch if he didn't tread with care.

“One copper only,” he said, placing it on the table between two rows of boxes.

“I only have my least expensive ones out,” she replied. “In villages like this, I end up having to give some away if I want to see the joy of sweets on any of their face.”

“Oh, well then.” Tibs pulled the coin away. “I'll have one of those.”

“You have the coins, so you can pay.” Her smile had the craftiness he'd seen on many confidence artists. “Think of it this way. With each coin you pay, it gets easier for me to hand out candies to the children of this village.”

With a less dramatic sigh, Tibs placed the coin back on the table. “How is it you know to use them to get me to give you more coins?” He pushed the coin forward, and he slipped off another copper coin.

She smiled. “All I have to do is look at where you’re sitting to see the children listening to you.”

“I try to scare them away,” Tibs protested. “But caravan kids are just too brave.”

She took the coins.

“The other one is for them,” he told her, and instead of taking candies from a displayed box, she reached for a drawer within the wagon and handed Tibs three rose colored ones smaller than his thumb when held together. He popped one in his mouth without hesitation and the sweetness spread immediately. He smiled at the hint of saltiness which called up memories of another candy from long ago. With it was a copperiness that struck a contrasting cord that still managed to flow with the sweet and salty.

“The ocean,” he said wistfully as the taste gained meaning. He could envision the sun on his face, reflected from so many white stones. Then he wondered where Kroseph and Jackal were. Maybe they’d moved to MountainSea once Kroseph’s father retired, and they took over their inn there. He didn’t think Jackal would stay in Kragle Rock with the history it held.

“Maybe I should have only given you one,” she said, and Tibs shook himself.

He pocketed the other two. “You aren’t getting them back.”

“I’ll just know to charge you more when you come asking for more of them.”

Sounds of excitement approached, and Tibs gave the merchant a bow before returning to his work of ensuring no one caused trouble.

And few did, and with some exception, most could be explained by someone being over excited and forgetting themselves. One of those exceptions had been the pickpocket Tibs noticed. Even a village had someone who thought taking was a better way to get something than working for it. The girl looked too well fed to have to resort to theft to survive, and from traveling to so many villages over the years, Tibs knew it was the rare one who didn’t look after its own.

He closed his eyes the time he took to make the air etching he sent to tickle the back of her neck as she slipped her fingers into the merchants pocket and when she looked in his direction in the process of brushing her neck, he fixed her with a hard gaze, his eyes brown again. Her fearful expression told him she understood she’d been caught, but all he did was motion for her to leave.

She narrowed her eyes in defiance, and he raised an eyebrow. Her courage faltered, and she stepped away without coins.

“She’s just going to do it to someone else,” a man said, his voice gruff from an attempt at cutting his throat open, he claimed.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Tibs said.

“Then she’ll do it to someone once you’re gone.”

“And someone in her village will teach her not to take from her people.”

The man snorted. “Her kind doesn’t consider anyone ‘her people’. She’ll take everything she can, then leave.”

“And by her kind, do you mean children, girls, or thieves?” Tibs didn’t try to come up with more descriptives. They would still apply, regardless of what they were. Tibs had never met someone more hateful of others. The times he was partnered with this man were spent listening to how everything to ever happen to him was some other class of people’s fault.

“Who cares. The best thing you can do for everyone else is to chop off her hand.”

“They might not have that law here.” Tibs stepped away.

“Every kingdom has that law,” the man said, following him. “No one should suffer a thief to live.”

“Not every thief does what they do out of choice.”

“Speaking like someone who’s been there.”

“I have.” Tibs made it a rule not to volunteer information about the person he pretended to be, but he always answered questions. And because he couldn’t be someone who despised thieves simply because it was what they were, he always had a story of a few years of his youth spent on the street, having to fend for himself after his mother died.

Graiden had questioned him when Tibs had joined, like he did everyone, so his past had come up, and there had been other guards present, so his story had made the rounds.

“So that’s why you let her go?”

Tibs stopped and faced him. “I let her go because she pulled her hand out when she realized she’d been seen. We guard the caravan, not impose our beliefs on the places we go to. If she’d caused more trouble, I’d have brought her to Gray to decide how to handle. He’s in charge, not me or you.”

“I know, I’m not—”

“I know you’re not,” Tibs cut him off, not interested in his justifications. “I’m going back to my patrol. If you aren’t working, you should go rest.”

This time, the man didn’t follow him.

It was full dark before the villagers returned to their homes filled with joy and stories to keep the months from getting dull.

Tibs’s work ended then, so he retired to his tent for the night. As late as it was, they would be on the move with the sun.

Every caravan Tibs had worked on did that. It had taken him a few times to realize it was so they wouldn’t be there when parents realized their child had spent the night doing things they didn’t approve of, or blamed someone from the caravan for things going missing.

For all the good times they brought, caravans were strangers, and it was easy to accuse them of anything, real or not, the townsfolk needed to blame on outsiders. They couldn’t do anything about it; the caravan had the better, and more numerous guards. But they were delays and complications no caravan master cared do deal with.

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With the sun cresting over the horizon, Tibs was on his horse and trotting along the wagons assigned to him and his partner. Those in the village who were awake were already busy with their tasks, but soon they’d discover if someone in their family had

taken advantage of the outsider's presence to have some fun.

Tibs only had stories of what happened then, and he was grateful for it.