

## Chapter 84

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Tibs watched the cleric work.

He found her in one of the worker's barracks after hearing about her going around and healing the workers who needed it. Only a handful of clerics left their quarters to work among the townsfolk. The rest only went to the dungeon's door and back. He'd learned that the guild's inability, or unwillingness—he hadn't worked out which it had been—to go out and bring the clerics who had been caught outside by Sebastian's siege had created a rift between the two groups.

He sensed how she moved the essence through the woman's injury, the shape she gave it, how much he thought she used, and where she concentrated the essence within the wound. She was healing a man with burns on his arms.

They weren't from a fire. Tibs could identify those by the way the essence of those burned felt afterward. The way it had been...eaten away.

He's reached the point with Purity where he had its influence under control and he wanted to figure out how to heal someone. He wished he could go to her, or another of the clerics and ask how she did it, but even if she had shown herself to be more like the Runners than any of the other clerics, he didn't trust her with his secret.

He wondered if she had a sense of her patient's essence the way he did. From the discussions with his friends, mainly Carina, he knew none of them sensed anything of other's essences within their bodies. Even when it was the same element, people did not register as having essence to them other than through the color of their eyes.

But Clerics worked closer to people than anyone else, worked with the essence flowing through them. Or that was how it felt to Tibs. Did she? Or did she use the burns on the arm she was healing to guide where she sent the essence? How did clerics work with injuries that left no clues on the body they existed?

She noticed him. "Hello." She looked thinner than when Tibs had last seen her at the inn before she and the others there had been taken back to the guild hall by a high-ranking cleric. She patted the man on the cot on the shoulder. "You will be fine, but the next time you work with lye, make sure you wear the proper protection."

The man wasn't fully healed. The burns on his arms were less intense, but still present, as were the injuries of the others in the large room. The cleric's essence was thin. If he hadn't known her to be at least Rho, he'd think she'd only just reached Upsilon. It was how the other Runners' essence drain registered to him.

She staggered as she stood and Tibs caught her.

"Thank you."

"You look exhausted."

She gave him a strained smile. "Exhaustion is the price of hard work." She looked at the men and women on the cots. "It's a price I gladly pay to help these people."

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Exhaustion could kill, he nearly told her; but remembered the demands Purity put on clerics. It wasn't like other elements, whose influence wasn't even certain. And she wasn't like him, who could choose not to channel it; before he'd gained control over the influence. Some clerics—he thought of Hightower—seemed to have found ways around the aspects of the influence they didn't like, but she gladly gave in to all of them.

“Then, let me treat you to food and drink to replay your hard work.”

“You don't have to.”

“I know, but I'd like to.” He smiled. “If you want, you can consider it payment for answering some questions”

“Alright.”

The tavern, a few buildings from the workers' barrack, was called the Tired Ale, and it was busier than Tibs expected. Before he could offer they go to a different one, workers noticed them and stood from a small table. They thanked her profusely and, to Tibs's amusement, didn't seem to know who he was.

Before he could head to the bar, a server brought each a tankard and he orders them a meal.

“I was wondering why you stayed to help during the siege,” he asked, doing his best to keep his tone casual. “In the early days, it would have been easy to make it to the guild building.”

“I suspect you don't understand how chaotic the early days were,” she replied with a smile, “but I didn't try to leave. Few of us did. There was work for us to do there.” She thanked the harried server who brought them each a bowl of stew and bread. “I've found that Purity's urges to work is a good way to placate those who think they make decisions for it.”

The stew was watery, the meat stringy, and the vegetables mush. He considered complaining but noticed the relish with which she ate and he realized he'd become spoiled by the quality of the food the inn served. If he wasn't careful, he might start demanding that any place he stepped in meet his exacting standards.

Just like nobles did.

“I'm glad you did. But one of the reasons I was surprised to see you there is that I thought you were going to kill yourself trying to purify the pool of corruption.”

She looked up from her bowl, so pale eyes wide, and studied her face. “You were the boy.” She smiled. “The one who spoke to me. The one who is Street.” Her smile fell. “I had what that means explained to me. I'm sorry you lived such a hard life. Hard work is one thing, but to be in a situation where being sent to a dungeon seems liberating... I'm glad you're still among us. And I see your eyes are blue now.”

“I grew into it,” he replied casually. “Why did you stop?”

“I was forbidden from returning to that place.” The flat response and how she immediately went back to eating stopped Tibs from pressing. And it didn't matter. This was his curiosity sidetracking him.

“What is it like to heal someone?”

She sighed in pleasure. “To help those in need is a pleasure beyond any. One I don't get enough chances to feel.”

“How do you do it?” he asked before he could stop himself.

She eyed him with a mix of amusement and suspicion. “I’m afraid that without Purity, and without being a cleric, you wouldn’t understand.”

He shrugged. “I don’t understand a lot of things.” He smiled. “It’s why I ask so many questions. My teacher says it’s a good thing. Others... don’t always agree.” He filled his palm with water. “All I need to do is gather my essence to make that happen. Even making the water flow is more about moving the essence than shaping it.” The water lifted over his hand, molding into a small blade. “This is just me holding the essence so it won’t spread away.”

He realized the tavern was silent. The workers were watching them with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

“Adventurers are something they only heard of in stories,” she said. “Magic isn’t something any of them expect to see this close.”

“But the town’s full of Runners.”

She smiled. “How many of them come to this part of the town? If they do, will they show what they are?”

Tibs looked at the worker’s faces, the awe, the fear, the suspicion. He knew those expressions, had worn them himself back before he came to Kragle Rock.

He hadn’t avoided this area, or at least not on purpose, he told himself. The town was growing ever larger, so how could he visit all of them anymore? He was reminded that Samuel knew more about the town than he did now. Hadn’t he prided himself on knowing every roof and alley at one time?

Would this place become a Street? Was Tibs taking part in making that happen simply by not paying attention to it? He was the one looking after the town. There had to be something he could do to make sure there never was a Street in Kragle Rock.

“Am I breaking a rule?” he ask the server as she stared at the water floating over his hand. One thing he could do was make sure he didn’t simply trample over how things were done in the tavern.

She startled, then looked worried.

“There ain’t no rules,” a man said, dressed in the heavy and worn clothing of the workers. “Just never see water do that before.”

“Can you ask the owner?” Tibs asked the server. “If they say I have to stop, I will.” That man did not look like he was in charge here.

She nodded and stepped away.

Tibs iced the small blade, focusing on keeping it smooth, and ended with fewer jagged points than usual, but the gasp from the crowd could have been fear as much as surprise. He considered what he did to make it happen before speaking. “Making it do that just needs me to push the essence into a simple structure. It’s just interlocking the essence, really, but even then, I can’t get it to do exactly what I want.”

“So making the weapon look terrifying to anyone facing you isn’t your goal?” she asked, smiling.

Tibs chuckled. “This is the least threatening I can make it.” He looked around. “And I

think it's more because of how small I made it."

She lost the smile. "A weapon will always be threatening to someone facing it."

"That's not what I meant, I mean that I—" her expression did not soften, and he tried again. "I just think—" he melted the small blade into a pool of water. "I guess being a Runner makes me feel different about the things I need to use to survive."

She nodded. "But a demonstration like this only serves to remind them you are more powerful than they are. And you need to remember that those with power often show that power so people will fear them."

Tibs absorbed the water and looked at the table.

"What I do," she continued, and he looked up at her, "and I am not particularly skilled yet, is much the same as you did. I link the essence into a... fabric is the best analogy, and apply that to the wound."

"That's it?" Tibs asked, surprised. He hadn't felt that kind of structure to what she did. To him, it had felt like nothing more than the essence moving through the injury to reach the places where the man's essence had been affected, and that had caused the injury to heal. "I thought there was more to it. The way the clerics act when healing us at the dungeon door makes it seem more... involved."

"It can be," she replied after thinking. "There, Runners have graver injuries. But what I did is simply apply the... patch to the wound. The essence is then drawn in deeper, pulled to what needs healing the most until it is all... used up."

Tibs nodded as part of what he'd sensed became clearer. "That's why you're so tired. You can't pull the essence back into you the way I did."

She nodded.

A man wearing a grease-covered apron approached them nervously. "My Lydi said you needed to talk to me?" he was heavy-set, with badly shorn copper hair.

Tibs was taken aback by the caution in the man's expression. "I just asked her to find out if you had rules against using essence here. I was giving..." He hesitated and was stunned to realize that even after the multiple times she'd healed him during the siege, he'd never asked her name. "My friend a demonstration so I could explain how I use it, and it caused more of a reaction than I expected."

"Oh no," the tavern owner hurried to say. "I'd never think to keep one of you adventurer types from doing anything."

"I'm a Runner," Tibs corrected, but it didn't calm the man. "Has anyone with essence, magic, caused problems around here?"

"Oh no. Not since those first guards left."

The cleric looked at Tibs quizzically.

"When we were brought here at the start," he told her, "we were the first ones ever to run this dungeon. The guild used adventurers as guards. It was a form of punishment for rules they'd broken. They didn't like being here and didn't do a great job at guarding us; unless it was to make those who tried to escape pay. They were sent away after..." he pushed Bardik's memory down. "After the dungeon was attacked."

He looked at the crowd, then at the tavern owner. "Can you do something for me?"

The man nodded, swallowing and grabbing the edge of his apron nervously.

“My name is Tibs, I—”

“You’re Light Fingers,” the man hurried to say. “We all know who you are. You saved the dungeon. You helped Don protect the town.”

At least Don came first, he comforted himself. Still came first, so the Sorcerer wouldn’t hound him for trying to steal his fame.

The cleric raised an eyebrow at him. Was that because they knew him, or how he’s saved the dungeon? He’d explain that later and somewhere with fewer people to overhear.

“I want you to pass the word that if anyone uses magic to cause trouble around here, I want to know about it. Leave word with any of the servers at Fernan’s Inn, and I’ll be told.” He wasn’t letting anyone take advantage of people just because they had the power to do so.

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“I’m not sure you should do that,” Jackal said, lying on a cot in an unused section of the building after the server and Carina had laid him on it and Tibs approached, doing his best not to show his eagerness.

Jackal had won the pit fight, but the victory had come at a cost. The bone poked out of his calf. Tibs had no idea how the fighter wasn’t screaming in pain right now.

“I warned you this would happen,” Kroseph said. “If you took on that fight.”

“Isn’t he always getting hurt in this place?” Carina asked, pulling a crate closer for Tibs to sit on.

“Oh, those I don’t mind.” Kroseph patted Jackal’s arm. “When he gets hurt, I get to cuddle him.”

“Kro,” Jackal whined, blushing.

“Oh, you love it.”

“I’m a tough fighter,” Jackal protested. “See, I’m not even screaming in excruciating pain right now. Me melting under your cuddling is something no one other than you needs to know about. I have an image to keep.”

Tibs’s chuckle died partway as he channeled Purity and frivolity seemed like a waste of time. He pushed the feeling to the side and drew essence out and shaped it into what he thought of as a fabric. He’d asked a tailor about them, and then he’d destroyed an old shirt to study how the filaments went over and under.

“What I told him,” Kroseph said, “was that the next time he got seriously hurt, Tibs got to practice on him, and Arruh has been bragging about how much training he’s been getting in with that convict. Stop pouting, I’ll cuddle you once Tibs is done. I’ll even do that thing—”

“Can you not talk about that while I’m trying to concentrate?” Tibs asked. “Fighting against throwing up isn’t going to help me heal Jackal.”

“One of these days, Tibs,” Jackal said, chuckling.

“You really want me to screw this up, don’t you?” He had the essence woven into something resembling the fabrics he’s studied. He wouldn’t want to wear something made like that, with all the fraying ends, but it would pass as fabric.

“Of course not, Tibs,” Jackal said, “but—”

“This is where you shut up, love. And let Tibs do his thing.”

He smiled at the fighter. Of course, Tibs wasn't the one who'd be wearing his essence version of fabric, and Jackal kept talking about how much punishment he could take, so he could handle a little bit of healing, even if Tibs got it a little bit wrong, right? Tibs,” Jackal said, worriedly, “I really don't like the look on your face.”