

The rain ended nearly as soon as Tibs made it out of the city. He hadn't bothered with the gate, climbing the city wall, and nearly running into a guard there, before jumping over the other side, using the rain to control his fall.

The map had the wolf's head smuggler's trail being more Sunrise ward than Nadir, and it had few landmarks to guide him toward the closest marker. He didn't know how smugglers without Earth as their elements managed to find the trail. Even with it, he wandered for three days in the region he thought the map marked before sensing worked stone.

The marker was buried under enough dead leaves someone could walk on it and not feel it there. He sensed the next marker in the direction the head looked. He was far enough, he was confident no one would find him. He still made his camp away from the trail.

He'd avoided thinking about what happened until now. He'd had to push the questions away by focusing on finding the trail, but now, he needed to understand.

He channeled water, and his core reserve turned the blue of water essence. He pulled and pushed the essence, and it moved as he willed it.

The way it always had.

He let go of it and channeled fire. His core reserve became the orange red of that essence, and it too moved as he willed it.

Channeling water again, without letting go of fire, proved more difficult to do than he expected. It had felt effortless in the moment he'd made the switch to cause the explosion. Now, he seemed to have trained himself too well to let one go before channeling the other, since it was—had been—the only way he'd been able to channel a new element.

When he managed it, he readied himself for an explosion that didn't happen. The essences didn't escape him or leak out. Other than the two colors moving within his core reserve, they behaved as they always had. He kept them apart when he released them, but even when he mixed them, without that moment of change to ignite the essences, all he had was water and fire essence floating before him.

How?

Nothing had changed before the fight against Alistair, or during.

Thinking of his old teacher's reaction just before the explosion made him form a mirror out of water and look at his reflection. He'd planned on closing his eyes to hide the change, but he'd been surprised into opening them.

His reflection showed him what Alistair had seen.

Blue and orange-red moved within his irises.

This was bad.

Alistair couldn't dismiss this as a trick of the light. He'd tell the guild, and they would search for him harder. He'd tell them he'd beaten the brand. He wouldn't be able to rely on being dismissed as an ordinary Runner. The one advantage he still had was that Alistair didn't know he could let the elements go completely, appearing as one of the ordinary folks.

He was still left with how this had happened. Nothing like it had ever happened, and he wouldn't be able to look for books about—

No, something similar to it had happened before.

He'd discovered that he could channel his elements in the middle of a fight. Jackal had noticed, because Tibs's eyes had turned the orange-red of fire when they'd been brown before [need to check if he'd already been channeling water before that]. His reserve had reflected the change, but fire had pushed his emotions to the point he hadn't been aware of anything other than his anger and the need to unleash it on his enemies.

It had happened because he'd had the last of the audiences Water had told him to have. She hadn't told him what would happen, so he hadn't known to check for changes.

Just as he hadn't known to test things now.

Except he hadn't accomplished anything special.

Had he been able to do this since then and simply hadn't realized it?

It couldn't be. He'd accidentally used the explosion against the Them. If he could channel more than one element then, it would have happened.

So, what had changed?

He chuckled. He'd grown older, better trained. Had read more, become more learned. He'd had a few more audiences.

Could those be the reason?

Except Water hadn't told him to seek more audiences. She's said it was his choices how far he'd go. What he'd gained.

But if they were the reason, why now? He'd only become able to channel because Water had told him which of the elements to seek. Corruption, Light, Darkness, and Purity. They were the other core elements. And it was because he had all eight that something had changed, not before...

Only, that wasn't true either.

After fire, he'd become able to control the life essence. He'd thought it was because he'd finally gotten the core elements, since it was how Alistair and... what had her name been? It was how they'd talked about Water, Earth, Air, and Fire. They were the core elements, because they were part of everything, and the only ones as such.

Except that had turned out not to be true, and they knew it. She'd just hadn't cared for the other elements, even if hers hadn't been one of them. Crystal, that had been her element. She'd encouraged him to pick one of the four. Had told him something about the others being tougher to use.

Water, Earth, Air, and Fire. Then, Darkness, Purity, Corruption, and Light. And now, Wood, Fever, Metal, and Lightning.

Something had changed after he got four audiences. It had changed again after four more. And Fever had been his fourth.

And now, he'd discovered something had changed, again.

Did it mean there would be another change once he had four more audiences?

How many elements were left? Void, Mind, Crystal, Potentia, Force, Gravity[definitely needs a better name], Dream, and Stagnation.

Two sets of four.

Did that confirm what he thought?

He wouldn't know until he gained another four audiences, and unless he found a method he could rely on to achieve them, he didn't know how long that would take.

So, what did it mean that he could channel two elements? Other than he'd have to avoid doing it unless he fought with his eyes closed.

He replaced Water with Earth.

He formed the etching for the blast of fire, but didn't push essence in it. He reproduced it with earth, matching the Arcanus. He knew from trying it that the Earth version did nothing. If he pushed earth essence in it, it broke apart. Earth couldn't do what fire did, so it needed its own etching to produce an effect that approached the blast.

But what happened if he pushed fire essence in an etching made of earth? Etchings could be made of multiple essences. It was the at the core of how sorcerers used essences. They trained themselves to be sensitive to all the elements so they could manipulate them.

He'd seen the diagram for such etchings, but he didn't know it would be.

He pushed fire through, and nothing happened. The fire essence moved within the etching, but didn't take to it. He let the etching go and pushed earth essence into the fire etching.

The reaction was immediate. The etching took in the essence and what blasted was a mix of them, the fire of the etching infusing the earth essence he'd fed it and the blast manifested as a mud that burned and stuck to the trees it impacted, causing the fire to spread quickly.

By the time he got over the surprise, and pulled the fire back, a dozen trees were blackened, and what had felt like mud hardened into stone, embedded into the trunks.

It would be deadly against an attacker, but the stone left behind would mark the attack as essence work.

He smiled.

What if he used an essence that wouldn't be different from the body it was used against?

He replaced Earth with Fever.

Heat rose in him, made him gasp with a burning need. He pulled at his clothing, burning them when they resisted, uncaring of the pain the fire caused him. All feelings were good. Strong. Needed.

When all he had on were his bracers, he screamed with joy, anger, want, pleasure.

He wanted more. Needed more. He sense for more fever through the forest, then went stalking for more to feel.