

Chapter 39

“I thought you were going to train me every day until I reach Epsilon,” Tibs said as they walked through the guild building. Alistair had just informed him this was their last session together until he was ready to graduate to Rho, and he was more upset about it than Tibs wanted to admit.

“I’ve taught you all the essence aspect I can. The part you’re working on at the moment, drawing in while manipulating essence, is just practice for you to find the method that will let you achieve it.” He opened a door and ushered Tibs inside. “But you need to remember, you’re already more advanced than the others at your level.”

“Then why not just keep teaching me more advanced things?”

“For one thing, Tibs, until you can draw in while manipulating, you can’t move forward, for a second, it’s only once you can do that, that I’ll be able to tell if you can progress forward. It’s possible that you will be limited until your reserve grows naturally.”

Again, Tibs was tempted to tell his teacher the truth about his element. Knowing the truth, they could properly work toward harnessing it. But he hadn’t heard of anyone having this version of the elements. Everyone had one and only one. He was certain that if the guild knew what he had, Alistair would know and have asked about it. So, did he have something new? The way Water spoke of it, Tibs thought it was old. She’d mentioned a predecessor. If no one knew about his element, what would happen when the guild found out?

Tibs wasn’t sure he wanted to find out, so he simply nodded.

“Then why not teach me Rogue skills. You said you’d do that.”

“That was before I knew you found your own trainer for those aspects.”

“He just teaches me how to fight,” Tibs said.

“And that’s probably plenty at this time. If I remember my second floor correctly, you’ll encounter much more creatures to fight. And consider this, while I’m not teaching you, but guild can’t charge you for my services. I doubt your other trainer is charging you quite as excessively.”

Tibs thought about that and found saving the coins didn’t balance what really bothered him. “What if you don’t come back?”

“I will. Now, you stay here.” He smiled and crossed the room to a pedestal with a polished sphere on it. “I’m no longer the young, brash man I was. The work I do for the guild doesn’t put my life in danger like it did back then.” The older Rogue patted the sphere. “Before we continue, I want you to remember that your situation is different from the others here. Don’t let your lack of success discourage you, it’s placed you at a seeming disadvantage, but that is only within the confines of how the guild accounts for things. Considering that you have survived the dungeon in spite of your low reserve, to me, that marks you as being more advanced than anyone else.”

“But not in a way the guild measures things,” Tibs said.

“This is the graduation for water essence users. Once you pass it, the guild recognizes you as Rho and you can proceed with the more advanced training.”

“Which you’ve already given me,” Tibs added.

“Which I have. But this means Tirania won’t throw a fit anymore when I mention what I’m teaching you.”

“I thought you’d convinced her to let you do it the way you wanted.”

Alistair chuckled. “Convincing someone you’re doing things the correct way doesn’t mean they’ll stop complaining about things not being done their way.” He rejoined Tibs and took a knife off a hidden sheath under his pant leg. “Your goal is to shatter the sphere, but by using a specific technique. Take your knife and hold it as such.”

Tibs studied how Alistair had his fingers around the grip. It resembled the grip he used when Bardik had him practice stabbing in close quarters, but it wasn’t as tight.

“Good,” his teacher said. “The motion is simple. You make an ‘x’, starting at the bottom left, then moving back to the left side from the top and bringing it back down, then quickly stabbing its center.” He made the motion and Tibs repeated it. They did that until Alistair was satisfied.

“As you can already tell, this is useless against a moving opponent, the center of the ‘x’ has to be centered on your target. It’s only used to test your skill level. What you have to do is channel your essence at the right parts of the motions. You only want your essence to flow through your knife when you’re doing the ‘x’. So you need to stop channeling when you move at the top, as well as when you prepare to stab the center, remembering to fill your knife with essence as plunge it at that point.”

Tibs watched his teacher go through the motion again. “I don’t understand. If all I’m doing is filling my knife with essence the way you taught me before, what does the rest matter?”

“That’s a good question, so let’s address what I did teach you.” Alistair made the flicking motion with his knife, and Tibs paid attention to the flow of essence. It happened so fast he was left with only the impression of the flow, but a jet of water blasted out of Alistair’s knife and struck the wall. “What did I do?”

“You put your essence and then used the knife to flick it at a target.”

“Very good. What happens around the knife when I do it?”

Tibs thought back on what he felt. “Nothing.”

“That’s right. Because the knife only serves as a method of transmitting the essence. I’m not doing anything to it. Now I want you to fill your knife with essence and focus it on the point. Once you have that, keep your sense open as you trace a line.”

Doing it took Tibs a few tries. Filling his knife was one thing, getting the essence to move to one part took more concentration, and the first time he managed it, he wasn’t feeling the essence. On the next try, he felt the essence in the air change as the knife moved through it. The water essence had formed a structure with the air essence; the two becoming interwoven and staying in place instead of flowing freely. By reflex, he checked his reserve of water and air, and only his water had gone down, but so little Tibs suspected anyone with more essence than he had wouldn’t be able to tell he’d used it.

“What does it do?” What he wanted to know was how had he affected the air

essence if he had used none of his reserves, but he wasn't supposed to be able to sense air.

"It's called tracing. It lets us control and amplify the effect of our essence."

"Is that what sorcerers do?"

"Ultimately, no," Alistair said after considering it. "There's an aspect of tracing with what they do, all essence is crafted through some form of tracing, but they approach it in a manner more different from any of the other classes, which is what lets them do as much as they can. The thing to remember is that just like being a Rogue, tracing is about mindset."

"And you're having me do it by rote," Tibs finished with a smile.

"Not exactly, here the motion does more than put you in the right mindset. The tracing places the essence in the pattern that will create the effect you want."

"Then this isn't like when you took us to the cavern for my audience? You said the gestures were to create the right mindset, and that once you knew that, you no longer needed to make the motions."

His teacher chuckled and rubbed his temple. "You are making me realize how much I take for granted. Essence manipulation is complex, and while you will learn all of it, and in time you'll get so comfortable doing one or the other, you'll stop noticing the differences, they are there. Take what we are doing now. You're right, it's just manipulating essence, but we need the knife's point to split the air, the air essence, and insert the water essence among it. The knife is the tool we used to interact with an essence we can sense."

"So, if someone could manipulate both air and water, they wouldn't need the knife?"

Alistair chuckled again. "If there was such a thing, then no, they wouldn't need the knife. They could part the air and insert the water through will alone."

"There's no one who can manipulate both?"

"No, and before you ask, sorcerers do something different."

Tibs didn't know what his teacher meant, but it wasn't what he was interested in. He finally had a way to ask what he'd always wanted. "Didn't anyone try to gain more than one essence?"

"Tibs, do you remember what I told you when you thought your small reserve might be because Water wasn't right for you?"

"You said I couldn't get another audience because she'd already accepted me."

"I didn't say that simply because I didn't want you to try it. There have been documented experiments done over the centuries. Sorcerers redo one of them every so often because it's what they do. Any time someone went for an audience with another element, they never returned. They died. We don't know why, but the Elements will not share one of us among them."

Tibs nodded. Then he was the exception, and if the guild found out, he suspected his coming freedom would no longer be an option, no matter how high in rank he went.

"Now, if we've assuaged your curiosity, I want you to attempt to shatter the

sphere.”

Tibs took his time tracing the ‘x’, making sure not to do it as he moved the knife from right to left at the top. He put what he had left of his essence in the knife and stabbed the center.

He felt the entire thing pulse, but then the pull on his essence was such he was dropped to his knees and for the first time since understanding his essence wasn’t water, he felt the old exhaustion that came with using his essence.

He reached in the pouch and closed his hand over the amulet, refilling his essence and regaining his energy. If every one of his essences caused this, he would have to invest in amulets for each of them.

“You need to be careful of that reflex, Tibs,” Alistair said as he helped him to his feet. “You’ll give it away and draw attention to the fact we can tell what is in your pouch.”

Tibs pulled his hand out. “I had nothing left, at all.”

Alistair nodded. “It’s the point of this exercise. Remember, normal Upsilon Runners don’t know about their essence being different from the element. Finding a way to push yourself to your limit and past it is one of the things that defines an adventurer and these tests show that.”

“How does it push them? Their reserves are larger than mine, they’ll have enough to do this.”

“You’re missing what I said.”

Tibs shook his head. “You said I know something they don’t. It doesn’t change the fact that having their entire reserve makes this easy to do.”

“Only if they use all of it.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Alistair smiled at him.

“You’re going to get me to figure it you, aren’t you?” Tibs glared at the older Rogue but thought back to his early days of manipulating essence. It had been more difficult to grasp, back then. He could make it flow since it was water, but getting it to ice or move in specific ways had required more effort than he needed now. Had that effort come due to lack of experience, or because of how he’d misunderstood essence?

“Is there something in how the essence felt like its element to me that makes it more difficult to manipulate?”

Alistair’s smile was answer enough. “Understanding what something is leads to being able to use it better. What does your reserve feel like now?”

“It’s like a box made of glass. I can see the essence in it, it’s not water anymore, I used to think of it as a lake.”

“No one sees their reserves the same way, but that aspect of being contained is there for all of us who understand essence doesn’t equate element. Now you can tell how much you have, instead of guessing through trial and error. A quick look at your box and you know what’s left. You can tell how many times you’ll be able to perform a certain manipulation. That’s important once you do more than just create water to fling around

or coat a floor.”

“Like zero.” Tibs looked at the sphere.

“Yes, but you know it used it all. For someone who doesn’t have your training, anyone at Upsilon, they won’t understand why it’s failing because they’ll still have essence, just some they can’t access because they don’t understand its nature. For them this exercise becomes about figuring out how to get more out of the essence they think they have.”

“And for me, it’s about waiting until my reserve grows,” Tibs said bitterly.

“It will happen, Tibs, you just have to be patient.”

Only it wouldn’t. Even once he got his audience with Fire, he wouldn’t get more water, he’d get his real element, and if he showed that to someone in the guild, what would happen? He slipped a hand in his pouch. Of course, he did have a way around his limit.

“Only your reserve Tibs. This test is about your limits, not finding creative ways around them. Not to say that doing that would tell Tirania you have the amulet.”

“Then isn’t me figuring out how to draw in essence while manipulating still a creative way around my limits? That is why you have my train that, right?”

“Technically, it is.”

Tibs glared at his teacher. “That’s a word I’m starting not to like.”

“Those who understand it, usually don’t.”

“So as long as those watching the test don’t know I’m doing it, I’m fine. And unlike the amulet, I can do that without drawing attention to what I’m doing. Well, once I’ll be able to do it.”

“Yes. No one will bother sensing the essence flow around you. Everyone knows this test is just about pushing your inner limits.”

Tibs nodded. If he could master the drawing in while manipulating, he had his way around everyone one finding out his essence was different.

“Alistair, can I ask you something about the weapons the guild gave us when we started running the dungeon?”

“You can, but I’m not sure I’ll have much in the way of answers. I’m not a weaponsmith.”

“It’s more about the dungeon, I think. I found out recently that it eats arrows when it didn’t use to do that. Do you know why?”

“Ah. Yes, that I know.” He showed Tibs his knife. “The dungeons eat anything that isn’t alive. You’ll have to ask scholars for the details, but what we know is that there is something about life that negates that effect and that it radiates around us. Also, larger groups extend that effect. But what has been discovered is that essence which is structured through an item grants it that immunity. Pay attention.”

Tibs sensed, and he felt the water essence move through the knife and become ‘rigid’. It reminded him of how it had fixed in the air at the point of his knife. Didn’t this mean tracing could be done with only his mind?

The essence moved out, except for a little.

“My knife is now imbued with essence. Anything imbued like this won’t be eaten by the dungeon. It’s also the first step to enchanting items, but that’s a lesson for much later.”

“I can make magical items?” Tibs asked in surprise.

Alistair chuckled. “Learn to imbue your knives so you can throw them, first. But that is how those arrows and knives didn’t vanish.”

“But why do that with crappy things like arrows and knives? And why not also do it with our armor and the sword? Those got eaten. And what happened with the arrows we did leave behind when we left? Shouldn’t they just pile up for us to find the next time?”

“What a dungeon does with items left behind, I can only speculate at. Why the guild doesn’t imbue everything, I consider a motivation to get you, new Runners, to work toward a specific goal. Why the knives and arrows? Because it’s easier than having you carry enough to deal with all those the dungeon would eat.”

“That seems more complicated than it has to be.”

“I agree with you, but—”

“Alistair,” a woman’s voice resounded in the room, and Tibs jumped, knife in hand, looking for where she might be hiding. “If you and Tibs are done, please come to my office.” He relaxed as he recognized Tirania’s voice.

“Seems any explanations will have to wait. We have been summoned by our esteemed leader.”