

## Chapter 20

Tibs looked at the crystal sphere on the pedestal.

The room was thirty paces in length, with the pedestal against the wall, but the exercise, the test he was practicing for, wasn't about the distance. It didn't matter how far from it he was, anytime he used the 'x' attack on it, he hit it. These weren't combat conditions.

He took the knife out, channeled his essence to the point, and readied himself. For him, this was about controlling the flow of the essence as it flowed from outside and into his reserve and then to the knife as it fed the attack. He had good control over pulling the essence in, but controlling how much of it went into the attack was still a strain.

He moved the knife, traced the 'x', and stabbed its center. The essence pulled out of his reserve and he focussed on both replacing it and limiting how much went to the attack. He didn't want to balance it. He needed to bring in more than was taken out if he wanted to be useful to his team in combat.

As every other time, he studied the sensations, both to figure out how to use them to better control the flow, and because he wanted a way to describe it to someone else so they could help him.

But as with any other time trying to assign descriptions to essence, he ended with approximations that, while he knew were incorrect, didn't know how to make better.

It was like the wind flowing around him if he ran really fast, except that it flowed through him. It was like the pressure of the water against him when he'd been in the lake, but again, inside him instead. A burning, tracing the path from his reserve through his body as it reached the knife, but instead of being hot, it was wet.

He gritted his teeth with the strain of controlling both flows, and when he cut it, it was as if the string holding his hand steady toward the sphere was cut as the jet of water left the point of the knife.

Instead of being sliced, the sphere exploded from the impact.

"You may have put too much essence in it," Alistair said, and Tibs only stiffened in surprise. He didn't have the strength for more after a full morning of it, although his heart raced as if he'd run from the boss' room on the second floor of the dungeon to the exit.

"I'm still not good at controlling it." He bent and place his hands on his knees. He didn't understand why, but the position made the strain pass faster.

"Is your reserve not refilling?" his teacher asked, worried.

Tibs chuckled. "It's full. It's trying to hold back the flow that's tiring. I'm trying to not cause the sphere to explode. I can cut it like you did, once in a while." He straightened, turned, and stepped up to his teacher, hugging him. "I missed you. I don't think Tirania's happy you took so long to respond to her call."

"She'll take it up with our superiors." He hugged Tibs back. "I came as quickly as I

could. And I missed your inquisitiveness, Tibs. I hadn't realized at accepting of everything we've become until your questions." He released him. "Now, explain how you figured out how to sense and manipulate; then we'll see if that understanding is the reason talking control is straining you."

"It's like with my turning my reserve from the lake with the waves on it into the box it is now. It was about how I felt, no, thought about the essence. About how there's my water essence and then, the essence outside of me." He formed a puddle of his water in his hand, barely covering his palm while only leaving a sliver of essence in his reserve. "I can add to that from the amulet, but that's also my essence. Although I didn't understand it wasn't true before, or how true it really was. It's two things that are and can't be at the same time, again."

Tibs watched his teacher for a reaction, approval or not, as a clue if he was explaining things how Alistair wanted, but the man simply motioned for him to continue.

"I don't know if you meant it, but you gave me a hint that's what I was dealing with even before you told me to practice it. Back when you told me that I could disrupt someone else's essence. How could I do that if it wasn't mine? If I didn't have a connection to it in some way? But I only realized that afterward, again. Carina set me on the right path, but not on purpose. She told me how, when she controls the wind, it's not all her essence. She only uses hers to pull along the rest. Then I realized I could do that with water."

Tibs grinned. "I froze an entire pool of water in the dungeon that way to avoid a trapped bridge. Afterward, then I pulled my essence back to my reserve and the amulet I had leftover. Things got too hectic after that to think about, but it stayed on my mind. At first, I thought the essence was contagious, like a sickness spreading along a street, but essence isn't people, so it couldn't be that. I thought that maybe, because I'd spread my essence too wide, I'd just lost track of what was mine and what wasn't, but that didn't work either, because essence doesn't 'know' that it's mine or not. It just is."

He sighed. "I felt kind of stupid for taking so long to understand that. I was the one telling the essence it wasn't mine. The essence didn't know, didn't care. It doesn't have a preference. Once I understood that..." made the puddle in his hand a column as he pulled in more essence in his reserve and fed that into it, growing it larger. "I was trying too hard," he finally said.

Alistair smiled. "If you remember that, you'll find many of the exercises in the future will come easier to you. We grow accustomed to a specific way of thinking, dictated by how we lived. When you arrived here, you only knew the world as something to be judged by what you could touch, smell, feel with your outside senses. It was all you had access to, so that made sense to you. Getting your element forced a shift in how you perceive the world. With having to look at it differently, you now have to think about it differently." He raised a hand to stop Tibs's question. "I know, it isn't an easy thing to do, especially when there are no direct results to observe on the way to figuring it out; or no specific method for you to follow."

"But why can't there be a method? Couldn't you have explained how it's all about how I understand things? That I had to stop thinking of the essence as the element, as

something... I don't know, as the same as something real?"

"But you already knew that, didn't you? Isn't that the realization you needed to make to take your reserve from the lake you envisioned it to be, to this box that contains it?"

Tibs thought about it, then nodded.

"If I had told you it's all like that, would it have made the rest of your training any easier?"

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it. He wanted to think it would have, but how could he know? He shrugged.

"Sorcerers have looked for that simple way, that unified way, of understanding essence and making your progression easier. They did experiments, discovered exercises, classifications, methods to test you, so we'd get an idea of which might work best. Those were a long time ago, and are how we have the classes and ranks. Rogues don't think like fighters, archers, or sorcerers. So we can't use the same exercises as they do. It's also why rogues gravitate toward the more subtle of the elements: air, water, darkness. We're not limited to them, but they mess best with how we think."

"But that's just to help, right? To make learning how to use my essence easier."

Alistair nodded.

"Then why does the guild dictate what I have to use?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

Tibs took the knife out of the sheath at his belt. "I was handed a knife when I first entered the dungeon and told that was my weapon. The rogue's weapon." He indicated the one at Alistair's belt. The only weapon his teacher carried as far as Tibs knew. "Do you have any idea how useless this is for me? I can't hit what I throw it at, and if I'm going to stab a creature, it's going to be able to claw or bite me. And before you say it. This dungeon isn't made to sneak around them. When I asked Bardik to teach me how to use a sword, he told me it was a stupid idea."

Alistair raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I know I shouldn't have taken what he told me seriously, considering what he did. I think he was trying to make me like him, instead of helping me. But even the trainers on the field all tell me the same thing. I'm a rogue, so I should go practice my knife. I had to go to a Runner friend for someone finally willing to listen to me."

"And how did that go?" Alistair asked. There was no suspicion in his tone, only curiosity and some expectation. As if he knew what the answer would be, but still wanted to listen to Tibs's.

"It didn't," Tibs said with a sigh. "There's still corruption in my body and it caused my hand to cramp as I was trying to show her I could hold a sword. She wants to wait until that's passed before trying to teach me." He considered the pool of corruption again. He had to believe Water when she said he needed to talk to Corruption to resolve this. But that was Corruption just the name said it couldn't be trusted.

Alistair's nod was more contemplative than decisive. "Do you think learning how to wield a sword will affect how you learn to use your essence?"

Tibs stopped the roll of the eyes as it started. As annoying as having to always think

things through around Alistair, his teacher always had a reason for pushing him. He smiled slightly, although maybe it was just the man getting back at him for all the times Tibs had forced him to think outside what he considered normal.

“First,” Tibs said, raising a finger. “A rogue can use a sword. Don had one who used it. He was metal, too. He tried to kill me with it.” He grinned. “I won.” He raised a second finger. “Two. How would using a sword change how I think about my element? I’m still going to use water. If a sword caused me to crave metal for some reason, a knife would do it, too. It is made of metal, not water.” He raised another finger and lowered it. He couldn’t think of a third point.

“It’s possible,” Alistair said, tapping a finger on his crossed arm, “that the reason you are trained with a knife is because that is how it’s always been done. The reason may be written in a tome, in a university, but if it was ever told to me, I don’t remember. My early days in a dungeon didn’t go as yours. I was sent by my family because tests showed I had an aptitude for thievery. A trainer was paid to get me to the point I could join. A team was found for me to be part of, and they protected me while I searched for traps and secrets. The dungeon was also many centuries old. It might not have been as aggressive as this one.”

Alistair moved the tapping finger to his chin, his gaze distant. “I think that once the corruption is out of your system, I should see about finding you a sword trainer. It would be interesting to see how, or if, it causes a shift in how you train with your essence.”

“I have someone already.”

“A guild trainer would be better,” Alistair said. “They follow a specific regiment that can be linked to—”

“Charging me even more gold,” Tibs stated. And hadn’t they just gone over how ‘the way things were always done’ might not be the best? Even his teacher kept going back to that.

The tapping finger stopped. “Yes, it is your decision, and I understand your reluctance to give the guild more hold over you.” He motioned to the pedestal where the crystal sphere stood. It reformed within a minute of being broken. Tibs couldn’t identify the essence woven in the pedestal, but he expected it was mainly crystal. “Now, how about we get back to your practice? The sooner you get full control over the flow of essence, the quicker you can officially graduate to Rho.”

Tibs looked at the knife he held. The mention of graduating brought his problem to the fore. “Do I have to?”

“You have to practice if you want to improve, Tibs,” Alistair replied, sounding perplexed.

“Do this test. Graduate to Rho. I can do a lot of what they learn already, so why can’t you just continue teaching me without the cursed test?”

“Because—” Alistair stopped, and the finger was tapping again. He motioned beside them and two ice chairs formed.

Tibs studied the weave as he sat, but it was still too complex for him to work out. It wasn’t simply essence packed together. Strand moved up and down and around in something Tibs swore was a pattern, but he couldn’t grasp it. It would be why the seat was soft, while

the legs and armrests were hard.

“My reflex is to say you have to take it because that’s how things are done.” Alistair smiled. “But we’ve established your opinion of that. Then, while in the end, that is the reason, let me explain it this way. There’s only so much I can get away with when it comes to diverging from established methods of training. So long as I, or any teacher, can explain how their student requires specific training and that we get results within the accepted range, we will be allowed to continue. In this case, the result I’m expected to get with you is passing your test.”

He motioned to the crystal sphere.

“As I said, sorcerers have done many experiments before determining this was the best way. You are demonstrating that we could be too adamant about following them, but they exist not only to keep you safe, but because we know they work. We know that by the time a water rogue can control the tsunami of his reserve to perform this sphere test, they have built an understanding of how their essence works that will let them absorb the exercises they learn at Rho, and those will set them on the path to becoming Lambda. There will be another test before that happens, and once they pass it, they will be ready for the teaching that comes with that rank.”

“But doesn’t that mean the ranks don’t mean anything?” Tibs asked. “What about—” he closed his mouth. He’d almost asked about those who gained essence outside a dungeon, outside of the guild’s control. If they couldn’t know how far they had progressed in using their element, were they progressing at all? Only, the two people he knew had an element without the dungeon’s help didn’t know they did.

“What about Tirania?” Tibs hoped the shift wouldn’t seem too odd. “Is she really Beta, or is it just that she hadn’t satisfied the guild’s criteria yet?”

It was Alistair’s turn to close his mouth on opening it. “That’s a good question. One I don’t have an answer for. But as the ranks progress, what they mean becomes even murkier than you feel they already are. At their base, they measure how powerful someone is, but how power is measured will vary from one person to the other depending on what they consider important. If Harry, who is Delta, really less powerful than Tirania? In a fight, which one of them would win? Harry is the better fighter, has more training, so he probably would, in a direct confrontation.” He sighed. “Thinking on it, at those levels, they seem to be mostly titles to show where we stand within the guild’s hierarchy. I can only think of a few times when rank came up while I was in the field. I expect that if Harry was offered a guild leader position, the rank of Beta would come with it, regardless of if he passed the test or not.” He tapped a finger on the armrest. “I actually don’t know what the test to reach Beta is.”

“Didn’t you take it?”

Alistair smiled. “I’m Delta. I have ways to go before that test; if I even had an interest in taking it. I’m comfortable where I am and the duties that come with this rank.”

“So you can choose not to take the test?” Tibs asked, grinning.

“I can,” Alistair agreed. “Because I am no longer indebted to the guild. You are still being formed. Even if you were content with remaining where you are, which, let’s both be

honest, you aren't, the guild won't let you. It is investing in you and doesn't get any returns if you stagnate. It will demand that test eventually since, just by surviving the dungeon, you are becoming stronger. Remember, I am here to help you progress, not cause that progress to happen. I speed things up, nothing more."

"What happens if I wait until the guild forces it?" he asked, voice trembling. Instead of answering, Alistair looked at him expectantly. Tibs sighed. "Jackal's Lambda now. No one else on our team is officially Rho."

"Which will change soon."

Tibs eyed his teacher angrily.

"You have to explain yourself, Tibs. Mind is not my element."

He sighed again. "We can only have one person about the rank of the dungeon, which is Upsilon, since it only has two floors. We're lucky they haven't sent him to another dungeon, but as soon as one of us had to take their test and graduates, one of them is going to have to leave it."

Alistair's confusion turned to understanding. "Of course. Your team is your family. I'd..." he trailed off, smiling wistfully. "I'd forgotten how tight the bonds of that first team can be." He became serious again. "They won't be dead, Tibs. They won't even be far, just on another—"

"No! I'm not losing my team!" Tibs was out of the chair, pacing. "I lost too many people already."

"Tibs," Alistair sighed. "They won't—"

"How do I know that other team's going to do everything they can to keep them alive? How good is their rogue going to be? That they aren't going to let her die because they resent that she took the place of one of their friends? What good does my team being broken up do?" Tibs demanded.

Alistair watched him in calm silence, and Tibs couldn't maintain his anger, faced with that expression. He sat.

"If one team outpaces the dungeon," Alistair said, "it can destroy it. They can cause more damage than it can sustain from the other teams who don't survive. A dungeon does have limits, Tibs. It might be difficult for you to believe that, having only been subjected to what it can do, but a dungeon can be killed."

Tibs wondered if his disbelief looked anything like dismay; it would explain his teacher's reaction. The man had it so wrong. Yes, a dungeon had limits. Bardik had nearly killed Sto, but he'd used concentrated corruption to get to that point. How could any Runner in Kragle Rock come even close to that? Even an entire team of Lambda would only challenge Sto, not make him fear for his life.

And it would be the other teams who would pay for it. It was why Sto had told Tibs not to use his ability to drain the essence that gave the creatures life. Sto would have to compensate, so Tibs would have a harder time, and the other teams weren't ready for that level of difficulty yet.

And this was another reminder of the primary flaw in everything the guild thought about dungeons. They thought they were nothing more than cunning animals only interested

in eating those who entered them. Sto wanted the people exploring him to get stronger.

Tibs wanted to tell Alistair that. It was infuriating that to keep himself and Sto safe from the guild, other Runners had to keep suffering. He sighed and looked for something he could say that might get his teacher to think in the right direction without revealing any secrets.

“You said that sorcerers are always performing experiments, right?”

Alistair nodded.

“Do they do any on dungeons?”

Alistair chuckled. “Why would they do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know?” Tibs replied, annoyed. “Maybe to see if the guild had got yet another thing wrong?”

His teacher studied him, finger tapping. “Tibs, it isn’t because the guild doesn’t do things the way you want them to, that it isn’t doing it the right way.”

“You’re saying that because you’re part of it.”

Alistair sighed. “I’m saying it because there are at least a thousand years of history telling us this method works. If it was the wrong one, it would have been changed by now.”

And yet, Tibs thought angrily, not one of you knows a dungeon can think like a person in all that time.

“I’m not taking the test,” he said with as much finality as he could muster.

“You are going to have to, Tibs.”

“Then I’m taking it after the dungeon has a third floor.”

“What about the rest of your team? There’s no telling when the dungeon will graduate, especially since it’s rebuilding itself after nearly dying. You said most of you could be Rho. Most teachers test their students after each run.”

“Then we don’t do runs anymore.”

“Tibs, do you seriously think you can make that happen?”

“Yes,” he answered through gritted teeth. He’d make it happen. He didn’t care what his teacher or Tirania believed. He was a rogue, and he’d find a way. Maybe he’d send another time in his place. He knew he could talk his team into it. As much as he loved the loot, Jackal didn’t want them broken up. Carina would stay. Khumdar wasn’t governed by what the guild wanted, so he wouldn’t mind, and Mez...

Mez had his cursed sense of honor. He hadn’t chosen to be a Runner, but that was what he was, and that meant doing the runs assigned to them. Maybe he should be on another team, Tibs thought bitterly, and immediately regretted it. Mez’s inclination toward nobleship might strain their relationship, but they were still family.

And Mez would do what he could to ensure the team did what was right, the way he saw it. Would he leave if he was the only one thinking differently? Tibs thought it was already much the archer didn’t consider the test that important.

“I understand this is difficult, Tibs. Life, the world, is difficult. This is only the start of the situations that will push you in directions you’d rather not go into. Hard decisions you will have to make, or be on the receiving end of. I won’t insult you by claiming your life was easy until now, but while the hard decisions will become ever so rare as you grow in

strength, they will become ever so harder.

“That is a truth of being an adventurer those stories the bard regale people with tend to avoid mentioning. There is nothing romantic about saving a caravan full of innocent travelers when to do so, you have to let a child be taken by slavers.”

Tibs stared at his teacher. “Is that something you...”

Alistair nodded. “My first mission for the guild once I reached Epsilon, a caravan taken by a band of slavers. Another on the team went after the fleeing slaver holding the child, but I told myself they would handle it. When they didn’t return, we were too busy seeing to the survivors. It was a long time before I made peace with my decision. If you can learn to accept that some events are outside of your control, Tibs, your future will be... if not easier, then easier to live with.”

Alistair looked old as he sighed. Tibs knew he was older than he looked. He had another word for Runners, and Carina had told him that over the years—lots of them—words changed meanings. So Divers became Dwelvers, then Runners. But it was rare that Alistair seemed to be older than any of the people in the guild, who also had to be older than they looked.

His teacher pushed himself out of his chair. “How about we spend something focussing on something within your control, instead of out of it?” He motioned toward the crystal sphere.

Tibs did his best. He followed his teacher’s directions, answered his questions, but he had trouble focussing, or even caring about not being able to maintain his hold on the essence as the attack drained him faster than he could replenish his reserve.

What was the point in training if all it would do was cause his family to be broken up? Of having to be among strangers again. People he’d have to keep secrets from.

When the corruption caused his arm to cramp, he didn’t curse it this time. It provided a needed excuse for Alistair to bring his training to an end.