

## Chapter 97

“Tibs,” Alistair greeted him stiffly as Tibs entered the training room. “I’m glad to see you came.”

Tibs let out the breath he’d been holding. “I’m sorry for how I said what I said at the bazaar.”

“But not for what you said?” his teacher said coldly.

“Have you—” Tibs closed his mouth on the anger and took more breaths. “Have you talked with the townsfolk, or are we too Street for you?”

“I haven’t, but not for the reasons you imagine.” He stepped around Tibs, making him feel like he was on display. “I’m an adventurer. There’s nothing I can do to hide that.” He looked Tibs up and down, and Tibs did his best not to see judgment in those vivid blue eyes. “When an adventurer shows up in a town, or a city, it is because something bad has happened, or will happen. We are not people the common folk want to speak with.”

“Kragle Rock isn’t just another town,” Tibs replied. “We live among them here. They know we aren’t any different than they are.”

“Only you are.” Alistair stepped before Tibs and put his arms behind his back. “You, Tibs, wield essence. Magic. Something the common folk can only dream of doing because they can’t imagine putting themselves through the hardship required to unlock the possibility. You’re right that Kragle Rock differs from most places, but again, it isn’t for the reason you imagine. It has nothing to do with Runners living among the people, but with how young the dungeon is. How not too long ago, you were one of them, without essence, without power. Many here remember you as the Omega you were. As the child filled with fear, unsure of his future. Even now, many who come to brave the dungeon are little different from the people living here. But in a few years, after the dungeon has graduated a few times, the Omegas will be lost among all the others who come here to strengthen themselves. The people here will no longer see those similar to them, but powerful adventurers, here to become more powerful. They might even see Gammas or Betas, should the dungeon become strong enough. Then, it will not be adventurers they see, but forces of nature.”

“Not all dungeons graduate to the point where all levels of adventurers can train there?”

“No, but you will not sidetrack me this time. This isn’t about dungeons, but about the reality you are still too young to fully understand. A Zeta adventurer can level a house with a thought. It doesn’t matter the element they wield. Even a Purity fighter can cause it to happen. Bards tell stories about how we travel the world and stop monsters. They leave out the destruction caused in the process. Or if they leave it in, they do so in a way that the monsters shoulder all the blame. After all, if they weren’t out there, the destruction would not have happened.”

He collected himself. “Monsters are rare, and everyone is grateful for it. I am grateful for it, for if I have to go after a monster, no matter how careful I am in taking it down. There will be little left of the area the fighting takes place in. The monster will not be

the one causing all that destruction. And keep in mind that I will take care to cause as little of it as I can manage. Not every adventurer is as careful about the power they wield as I am. Few are, really. Our position within society leads to many be, as you would refer to them, nobles.” There was no anger or disdain in his teacher’s voice, but sadness.

“You say the people here are different, but they have heard the same stories sung in every city in every kingdom. They have heard the darker stories told by traveling merchants. Few will be true, but when one tells of a village or town no longer being there as they pulled in to sell their wares, it will leave an impression, regardless.”

Alistair sighed. “We are both saviors and destroyers. We can not escape one role without abandoning the other. And people forced to flee the place they were born to quickly forget the danger that led to that happening, but remember the people who forced them to leave. So some stories whispered between people are true, and in those stories, who is the monster is rarely as clear as in the bards’ songs.”

“Is it really that bad?” Tibs asked in dismay.

He could envision an adventurer bringing down a house. He’d done it with Sebastian’s; but a town, a city? Even a group of them couldn’t do such a thing, could they?

“You’ll find out for yourself in time, Tibs.” Alistair sighed. “There is a reason most adventurers remain with the guild once they have repaid what they owe. There are few other places where we are welcomed with open arms, and not drawn swords.” He raised a hand as Tibs opened his mouth. “We’ve delayed your training long enough. Let’s start with what you did at the bazaar when I went to grab you.”

“I’ve been practicing suffusing my body while doing other things, like fighting in the dungeon.” That was true enough. “It’s become easier to not be distracted.” Again, that was true. “And it’s causing most attacks to miss me.” Which was only true when he was suffused with Water. Which he no longer spent all his time in the dungeon doing. “When you grabbed me, I thought you were... well, I just reacted.”

Alistair’s smile was small. “You simply reacted. I suppose the dungeon is honing your survival instincts quickly.”

Tibs shrugged.

“Tell me, because I don’t believe I asked this. How did you first cause your body to be suffused with your essence?”

Tibs frowned and tried to figure out how to answer him. He could sense what it was like for Alistair, when his essence filled the channels of life essence with water, but that didn’t tell him how his teacher did it. He hadn’t asked his friends because he hadn’t considered the question might come up.

All he had to go with was what had happened. “I... I pushed more essence in my reserve than in can contain.” He still remembered the pain of pulling in Bardik’s essence into himself, of forcing it into what he thought was of as his unending reserve and having to pull in more when it was full, the walls cracking and it spilling out through his body.

“Really?” Alistair asked, surprised.

“I couldn’t think of another way,” he said, hoping his reasoning made sense. “When I overfill a tankard, it spills over. I thought that if I could get it to do the same in my reserve,

the spill would go in my body.” He bit his lower lip. “Isn’t that how it’s done?”

Alistair laughed. “Tibs, you should have realized by now that there is no fixed way something is done. The brute force approach is more of a fighter’s way of doing it than a rogue’s, but what matters is that you survived what you did.”

Tibs stared at his teacher. Others died learning to suffuse their body with essence? He’d felt like he was dying even before the corruption was trying to do the same, but had thought it was the circumstance, not the process, that had caused all that pain.

“Did you have to overfill it the second time?”

“Yes,” Tibs said, feeling that was more believable, “but it became easier the more I did it. How did you first do it?”

Alistair smiled. “What is essence, Tibs?”

He nearly groaned. That question again. How often had Alistair asked him that? How often had he been right to ask? Tibs thought about it and gave the same answer as the previous times. “It is, and it isn’t the element.”

His teacher nodded. “If it isn’t, how can the walls of your reserve contain it?”

Tibs opened his mouth and closed it when he realized he had no answer. How did his reserve contain something that was and wasn’t?

“You force your will on it,” Alistair said. “I realized that my reserve was my will and what I willed to be contained could be willed to be released, in part or in whole.”

Tibs frowned. That felt... not right. Or maybe... Tibs’s situation was different? He couldn’t affect his small reserves, other than channeling the essence in them, and as soon as he started on that, his core reserve became that essence.

He rubbed his temple.

“Yes,” Alistair said in an understanding tone, “essence never stops being confusing.” Alistair placed a hand on his shoulder. “Tibs, now—”

“This is it, isn’t it?” he asked, unable to keep the despair from his voice.

“What do you expect is about to happen?” Alistair asked cautiously.

“Jackal told me that when he was able to suffuse his body with essence, they made him graduate to Lambda.”

“That is the clearest way to know you are ready for the next stage.”

“There can’t be two Runners at Lambda on a team. The rule is that only one can be a level higher than the dungeon.”

“I was under the impression there had been changes implemented due to the dungeon being more aggressive than expected.”

“The rules went back when he graduated.” Or at least Tibs expected they had. With how he and the guild viewed each other, he wasn’t asking Tirania if she was willing to leave them be.

“Not graduating will hold you back, Tibs. There are resources I would call on that will help in the coming training.”

Tibs shrugged. “I haven’t had a family in a long time, Alistair. I don’t want to lose them.” The reason was true, if not the entirety of his feeling. His official level within the guild might be Rho, but with all the elements he could channel, what difference did it make

if he couldn't advance with Water for a while? It would let him look for ways to train with his other element, wouldn't it?

"I know you're going to tell me that even if I'm on a different team, Jackal, Carina, Mez and Khumdar will still be my family. Or that it doesn't matter what I do. I am going to lose them one day, so I should get used to that now. But I have them now, and I'm going to do what I have to stay with them."

Alistair nodded. "I know you think the guild is uncaring in how it does things, but you'll find that how it acts have come about as a reaction to how the dungeons behave." He became thoughtful. "But I don't see any harm in keeping your level from the guild. I've already had to be unorthodox about how I trained you, so I can use that to justify some request, and for those I can't?" He smiled. "Well, I think that forcing myself to train you outside my usual method will be good for me. You've shown me that I have grown complacent in how things can be done."

Tibs stifled his sigh.

At least that resolved one potential problem.

Now he simply had to hope Alistair wouldn't take over all the time Tibs wasn't busy keeping the town safe, because he needed some of that for the training he had to do on his own.