

Chapter Twelve

After her fifteenth birthday, Jeremiah began to release Sharie from her Limiters, one joint at a time. Each Limiter he took off made Sharie feel ridiculously free and nimble to the point of sheer joy every time. He pared down her Limiters over the months until she finally only had Limiters on her hands and elbows.

They had been in the middle of the Fourth Technique of the Earth Element when the messenger arrived. He was a young, dark-haired teenager dressed in a longsleeved white shirt and trousers. The hems of his uniform were embroidered with silver bands, and there was a very distinctive emblem stencilled in silver on the left side of his shirt. His hands were adorned with white Limiters that were cut at the fingertips. As soon as Jeremiah saw him, he halted the training immediately.

"Sorry, kiddo. Go over the First and Second Techniques for a while. I'll be right back."

Though she couldn't help looking curiously over at the boy, she nodded obediently, and Jeremiah breathed deeply before walking over to him.

"Master Jeremiah. It's been a while, but you look as strong as ever," said the messenger, and Jeremiah smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Long time no see, Rindo. You've grown." He glanced at the canvas tote bag over Rindo's shoulder. "So have they come to get me, then?"

Rindo pulled out two thick envelopes from his bag, and handed them to Jeremiah. "Yes."

"I see." Jeremiah had always known this was going to happen at some point, but he couldn't stop the sinking sensation deep in his gut. "When do I need to be there by?"

"Two months, Master Jeremiah."

"Alright." The envelopes felt heavy in his hands.

"Also... Maven Rayhart asked me to give this to you." Rindo took out a small package and handed it to Jeremiah, who took it, his expression darkening further.

"Ah, I see. Thank you."

Rindo hesitated, and then asked a bit apprehensively: "Master Jeremiah... I was wondering if this package had to do with Master Tyrn."

Jeremiah pinned Rindo with a look and said extremely quietly, "Perhaps. You shouldn't address him as 'Master', Rindo."

"S-sorry," Rindo said, quite abashed, and Jeremiah sighed and gestured towards the cabin.

"These will take me a while to go through and sign. Why don't you come in and have some tea?"

"Er, yes." Rindo was a bit distracted; he glanced over Jeremiah's shoulder quickly before smiling brightly at Jeremiah. It was only then he realised how curious Rindo must be about Sharie. Grinning inwardly, Jeremiah led the way into the cabin and said casually, "If you don't mind, after your drink, perhaps you could entertain my disciple for a while. The kid'll probably get bored waiting for me."

Rindo perked up. "Oh! Er, if you don't mind, Master Jeremiah, I would be glad to."

"Great."

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Rindo walked around the cabin to the back, where Jeremiah's

disciple was standing still, eyes closed and looking meditative. For a while, he didn't introduce himself, and instead studied the youth from the edge of the herb garden that lined the back of the cabin wall.

He had seen young disciples before at Whitefields, but they usually grew up in the Academy and not outside of it. Rindo himself had grown up at Whitefields most of his life, and he was supposed to be the youngest Lethian to qualify for Fifth Shield so far at the age of eighteen. Jeremiah had not said how many shields his disciple was at, but everyone at Whitefields knew that if it was a disciple of Jeremiah's, the kid was likely to be a skilled one. After all, Jeremiah was the most talented Fire Element Lethian at Whitefields, hands down.

The truth was, for years, Rindo had always wanted to be Jeremiah's first disciple. That was why he was here in the first place; when they had been scouting someone to go and deliver the summons, Rindo had jumped at the excuse to go see his favourite Lethian artist and also catch a glimpse of his new student. It had been crushing to find out six years ago that Master Jeremiah had had taken in a disciple while he was supposed to be in the middle of nowhere, learning botany. No one knew the circumstances of how he'd managed to do that, and Rindo was desperately curious and wanted to test the skills of this mystery kid.

"Uhm... Who are you?"

The young disciple had turned around during Rindo's train of thought, looking uncertain.

"Er-- sorry. Didn't mean to be rude and just stare," he said embarrassedly, walking forward. "I'm Rindo. I'm a fellow Whitefields practitioner, and I came to deliver a message to Master Jeremiah from the Academy. I hear you're Master Jeremiah's first disciple. What's your name?"

"I'm Sharie," The disciple replied, and Rindo was taken aback by

how high the disciple's voice sounded. He had to be a young teenager whose voice hadn't broken yet, to sound like that. Actually, now he was closer, he could see how slender the disciple was. He had long hair tied back in a bun, and was wearing very loose-fitting clothes that did nothing to hide his small frame. To top it all, his name was 'Sharie'. What a girly name, Rindo thought, but he smiled at him.

"So... how many shields are you at?"

He blinked at Rindo, his confused blue eyes partially obscured under messy bangs. "Shields? Oh, right. I don't know, yet. Master Jeremiah hasn't put me through any tests."

"Really?" Rindo was shocked. "But you've been here for six years, at least, haven't you?"

"Yeah... well, I don't know," Sharie replied, flustered, and Rindo wondered whether his expectations of the kid were overshot. Maybe Jeremiah hadn't spoken much of his disciple to Whitefields because he was pathetic.

"Master Jeremiah said, if you like, we could have a sparring match for fun." Rindo fibbed on a whim. Well, it was only a technical lie. He was sure Jeremiah wouldn't really mind.

"Really?" Sharie said, looking surprised. "Right now?"

"Why not?" Rindo said lightly, lifting the tote bag off his shoulder, "we won't do anything drastic. Just keep it light, our Limiters stay on, and nothing past the Second Technique for any of the elements. Sound good?"

"Well... alright," Sharie said, looking quite interested now. He stepped back, allowing Rindo some space, and the two of them got into stance. He noticed Sharie's stance was the same as Jeremiah's, and a stab of jealousy went through his chest.

No, don't let yourself get distracted, Rindo told himself sternly,

and made himself calm down and focus. Wind Element First Technique: Breath. Carefully, he eased out a good layer of Wind Spirit around him while keeping his eyes trained on Sharie, who hadn't moved an inch. As far as Rindo could tell, Sharie hadn't engaged in opening up his Spirit yet at all.

Well, that was to his loss. Feeling that Sharie was open, Rindo dashed forward and whipped his arm around, placing a precise palm strike against Sharie's loose guard. The Breath around him made him feel as light as a feather, and his movements were swift. Sharie was blasted back a metre or two from the impact; he staggered but managed not to fall over, his blue eyes wide and shocked.

"You're fast!"

"Thanks," he replied, and lightly stepped into Sharie's range before throwing a series of jabs at him. Sharie seemed to have gotten a good idea of his momentum from the first attack, however, and to Rindo's shock, countered all his jabs with his hands. It took him a moment to realise that Sharie was actually using Stone Shield, Earth Element Second Technique, in his hands to counter Rindo's Breath. The speed with which he had recognised which Spirit Rindo was using and erected Stone Shield was frankly amazing.

Time to kick things up a notch. Rindo gathered Spirit to his heels, for the Wind Element Second Technique: Flight. Without giving pause to his attack, Rindo feigned a kick into Sharie's midriff. As Sharie twisted his waist slightly, raising his arms quickly to guard against it, Rindo dropped his foot, pivoted and spin-kicked into Sharie's defenceless side. Sharie let out a harsh gasp of pain, but to Rindo's surprise, he rammed his elbow - hard - into Rindo's diaphragm.

Whoa! Rindo fell back quickly, clutching at his stomach and grimacing. Judging by the disproportionate amount of pain and the slow burn spreading in his stomach, it seemed like Sharie had actually managed

to shove a Fire Blade into him. From his elbow, of all places. Only Jeremiah was known to be able to pull a Fire Blade out of any part of his body like that. Did this mean Sharie's real strength was in the Fire Element? If that was the case, then the Earth Element technique he'd used just now was impressive, to say the least.

"Fire Blade's a Third Technique," Rindo said, smiling ruefully, "I thought we were only going up to the second." Sharie bit his lip.

"I'm sorry... it was a reflex. I'm not used to holding back when I spar with Master Jeremiah." He gave Rindo a pained grin, rubbing at his side where Rindo's foot had connected. "But you know, Master Jeremiah's never used Wind Element techniques against me like that before. You're incredible."

"Thanks again, but I think you're the incredible one." Rindo laughed. "You've let me be on the offensive so far. This time, why don't you try attacking me?"

He spread his stance, kept his Breath and Flight in check, and raised his arms to guard. Sharie breathed in deep and let it out slowly, keeping his eyes on Rindo and waiting for a gap to attack. It took all of Rindo's concentration to not balk at the intensity of the heat he could sense from just Sharie's Dragon Breath. *Damn, it's like a furnace!*

Apparently deciding not to bother waiting for an opening, Sharie dashed forward and rained a barrage of punches against his guard. Rindo barely managed to deflect the furious rush with his Breath and Flight-enhanced footwork when Sharie mixed in a haphazard combination of kicks into it. Rindo couldn't stop himself from being grazed here and there. Multiple times Sharie attempted to grab the back of his head so he could smash his knee into his stomach, but he avoided each attempt by the skin of his teeth. Sharie spared him no breaks and stayed right in his face, his eyes blazing as he threw his punches.

This is the most violent style I've ever seen, Rindo realised, Jeremiah is so much calmer; I would have never expected such a scary, unpredictable pattern to come from a disciple of his...!

Looking frustrated, Sharie finally pulled back just slightly, and Rindo guessed he was probably going to try and throw a Dragon Breath powered double-punch at him. Sure enough, Sharie suddenly lowered his body and curved both his hands, setting his elbows back at waist-level. Rindo took the opportunity to step back and raise his hands, gathering Water Spirit there for the Water Element Second Technique: Ice Shield. To his shock, Sharie dashed recklessly into his space, just inches from his chest, and threw both hands with alarming force into his gut. He barely managed to get his hands there in time to defend himself before he was thrown back by the tremendous force of Sharie's open-palmed shove.

He landed on his feet, but immediately collapsed onto his back, unable to fight against the momentum. A split second afterwards, Rindo let out a yell of pain; even with the Ice Shield, the Dragon Breath had seared through a part of it, and was burning his hands like crazy. That's an insane level of Spirit concentration, he thought bewilderedly, how is that even possible at his age?!

"Are you okay?!" Sharie shouted, eyes wide, as Rindo managed to sit up.

"I'm fine," Rindo wheezed, managing a weak smile, "Totally my fault for overestimating myself and asking you to attack me."

"I agree."

Rindo looked behind him to see Jeremiah standing there, looking amused.

"Master Jeremiah! Were you watching?" Sharie asked, looking flustered again, and Jeremiah shrugged.

"Only caught some of it. Not bad, kiddo. Of course, if Rindo had

actually been fighting to his full ability, you wouldn't be the one standing right now." Jeremiah winked at Rindo. "Ain't that right, Rindo?"

"I don't know, sir," Rindo said, wincing, "he really gave me a run for my money there." He accepted Jeremiah's proffered hand to help himself up, and Jeremiah smirked.

"Well, *she* is still just a baby chick, but I do think she'll be quite formidable with a bit more polish."

"Uh... she?" Rindo suddenly realised, with white-hot shock and embarrassment, that 'Sharie' was indeed a girly name for a reason. He looked over at Sharie, his face red as he blurted out, "I'm so sorry!"

"I'm used to it," Sharie replied, and he couldn't believe how stupid he'd been not to have realised Sharie was a girl. But that violent barrage of attacks... wow. That really hadn't been girly at all.

Reaching a hand out, Rindo smiled as he said, "Thank for you the match, Sharie."

"Uhm..." Sharie looked terrifically awkward as she hesitantly took his hand. "Thanks."

He shook her hand firmly, still smiling as he added, "It was an honour."

She looked somewhat confused, but kept her spine straight and nodded curtly at him before letting his hand go.

"Mind waiting for me at the cabin, kiddo? I'm just going to bid our friend goodbye, and then we have to talk about something."

"Yes, Master Jeremiah." Giving Rindo a last glance, Sharie turned and began to stalk towards the cabin.

"You'll have to excuse her," Jeremiah muttered out of the side of his mouth at Rindo, "that was her first sparring match against anyone other than me."

"That's very impressive," Rindo said, watching Sharie's back, "you picked someone very... interesting, sir. If you don't mind me asking, what shield is she at?"

"Hmm, that's a good question. If I ran a standard Whitefields test on her, she would probably qualify for Fourth Shield." Jeremiah laughed, and handed Rindo one of the thick envelopes he'd been given. "Here you go. Send Maven Rayhart my regards. And it was good to see you again after so long."

"I will. It was good to see you, too."

"Oh, and..." Jeremiah gave him another envelope, but this was much smaller, and not from Whitefields. "Do me a favour and post this in the city on your way back, will you?"

"Sure." As Rindo put the items into his tote bag, he glanced at the cabin Sharie had disappeared into.

"Don't worry, I'm pretty sure you'll meet her again at some point," Jeremiah chuckled, and Rindo turned red.

"I-- I wasn't--"

"It's fine, she's cute, isn't she?" He grinned at Rindo, and Rindo chose not to embarrass himself any further and instead saluted Jeremiah. He hitched the tote bag over his shoulder, and began to take off towards the mountain path. Before he had gone far enough, however, he quickly turned around and called,

"Master Jeremiah?"

"Yes?"

"Completely off the record and between just the two of us, I would very much like to know what you personally think Sharie's shield level is at when it comes to just her fighting abilities."

"Sharp as always, Rindo." Jeremiah tapped his chin thoughtfully,

and then gave Rindo a sly grin. "I'd say Fifth."

