

Chapter 08

“You’re the first ones!” Sto exclaimed as Tibs and his team walked up the steps. “I’m so glad for that. I can’t wait for you to see what I’ve done.”

The cleric by the entrance was an older woman; older than any Tibs had seen there, before Sto was attacked, maybe even in the town. He’d expected only the young ones to have had this healer duty; as part of their training, with the older ones acting as teachers. It was how it had been with the Runners when Tibs was sent here. They didn’t need guards to ensure they stayed. The clerics Tibs had tried to speak with all believed in Purity in a way that made him stop trying.

She looked them over with an attentiveness not matched by the guards on either side of the door. A man and woman, in the green and black of Harry’s people, who looked more bored than anything else. Her so pale eyes narrowed on settling on Khumdar and she signed in resignation before placing a hand on his shoulder.

Tibs sense essence flow, knowing it was purity only because it was the only element she could manipulate. No one but him had more than one element. He couldn’t perceive the details of what she did. Only that the essence entered Khumdar where she touched him, and concentrated on his injuries. He knew it spread throughout the body from experiencing this kind of healing, but he couldn’t make that out among the Khumdar’s darker essence.

He straightened, no longer needing the staff for support. “I thank you, My Lady of Light,” he said with reverence that surprised Tibs, until he noticed the amusement in his eyes at how she narrowed her eyes at him even more.

He was the only one needing healing, so she nodded to the guards and Tibs followed Jackal into the dungeon.

“If you give me a nickname,” Tibs warned, “I will stab you. I’m still stuck with the one Bardik gave me.”

“It is the name of her family,” Khumdar replied. “Of the Light is one of the families duty-bound to come to dungeons and heal.”

“How do you know that?” Tibs was distracted by the walls in the hall leading to the first room. Something was different about them, other than the hall was wider now. The lights were in the same places, the stone was the same earth-red color that matched the outside and was only slightly darker than the eye color for those who had Earth as their element.

“Oh, Tibs,” the Darkness cleric replied, amused. “I know a great many things.”

“Just all those secrets you accumulate.” The walls shifted to gray as they approached the trap room, and Tibs decided his impression was from being away so long. Or maybe from the previous changes being obvious each time Tibs came in.

“Of course, that too.” Khumdar still sounded too amused for Tibs’s liking.

“That’s been improved,” Jackal said, standing at the entrance to the room. “Looking nice, Dungeon.”

The trap room was now a room, and no longer a smoothed-out cave. The walls were interlocking flat stones, just like the floor, going up maybe three times the fighter’s height.

Unlike the floor, the tiles on the walls had designs on them, and Tibs recognized those that used to be on the floor. As he wondered where the spears would come out from, he realized that the three walls he could see were identical in how the tiles on them were arranged, and he thought they matched where the triggers were located on the floor.

Then he noticed how many of the tiles had gaps where the spears could come from. Knowing where they came from would be more difficult, but the observant rogue would notice how the patch across the room was there for them to see.

At least until they no longer needed to use a set path.

He took out the amulet and extended his senses. He could now reach to the other side of the, which made it about double the last time he'd been here. He'd noticed his larger range recently, but he didn't know if it was the result of his denser essence, or how he'd used and practiced it during his travels. Until the lake and now, how far he could sense water hadn't been something he'd paid attention to.

He sighed, attracting the other's gazes. "I need to start thinking of everything as a form of training, again."

"You shouldn't stop doing that," Mez said. "Everything's a form of training."

"He's right," Carina said, reluctantly.

"Just make sure you have fun doing it," Jackal said. "Like with your excursions into certain houses at night."

Tibs flexed his hand, the ache in it reminding him there wouldn't be any of those for a while.

The air was dry, but there was water essence in it, more than he expected, for how dry it was. A subtle way that reinforced what Alistair told him; essence wasn't a representation of the world. Instead of pulling on the amulet, he spread his reserve, pulling on the essence around him, refilling his reserve so he could keep extending his essence until he had a sheet of water essence in the air, the width of the room.

He smiled as he extended his hand into the room above the sheet, then snapped his fingers as he made the essence liquid. It splashed on the floor and he kept it from landing on them. There was less than he'd expected.

"Tibs is becoming a showman," Jackal said with a groan.

The coating on the floor was barely visible.

"Don't listen to him," Sto said. "I like showmanship."

"Is your amulet empty?" Carina asked, concerned.

"I didn't use it." Tibs crouched and looked at what he'd done. He'd expected more. He would have to learn to judge what the essence around him represented. If he'd tried this as part of a fight, his attack would have been... insignificant. Still, there was enough there for their purpose. He took hold of the water on the floor—and lost his concentration as Carina pulled him up and into a hug.

"You figured it out!"

Once over the surprise, he chuckled and hugged her back. "I did. And now I'm going to have to train myself so this kind of distraction isn't going to break my concentration."

"Sorry." She still grinned as she let him go.

“I’m missing something.” Jackal raised a hand to forestall comments. “I know, when am I not. So why don’t we skip the at my intelligence, and just explain things to me?”

“I couldn’t sense and manipulate at the same time. Carina, Mez, and even you figured it out a while back. It was annoying because without it I couldn’t do anything without having the amulet. I worked out how yesterday.” He chuckled. “It was so easy once I understood it that; I can’t believe it took me so long.”

Tibs took hold of the water again.

“I am amused that you did not mention me,” Khumdar said.

“How could he?” Mez replied. “It’s not like we know what you can do, being all mysterious and stuff about what do know.”

“I believe you are mistaking not bragging about what I am capable of doing, with being mysterious.”

“No,” Tibs replied, icing the water. “You’re just mysterious and stuff. You can’t help yourself.” Knowing how slippery the ice was, he formed small ripples on it to give them traction.

The cleric laughed. “You have seen through my deepest secret.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Mez grumbled.

Tibs stepped into the room and studied the walls. The tiled walls made it so the cache was no longer obvious to him, but he still found it. He ran a hand over the stones. It was a set of nine, with the gap slightly larger around the whole. He pressed, and it clicked. When he moved his hand back, it moved with until he could take it out. Instead, he checked for traps.

He wouldn’t die because he was overconfident on his first day back, in the first room of the dungeon. He removed it and smiled at what it contained.

A pair of shoes

He studied the walls for traps before reaching in for them. He recognized the way the essence was woven through them. His Silent Shoes. He held them against his chest, realizing how much he’d missed them. His first magical item, found more or less like this time, the first time opening the cache in this room.

He’d lost them when he walked into a room filled with fire.

“I’m keeping them,” he told the others once he joined them on the other side of the room.

The boulder room gave them no problems, even if the number of rats had increased. Tibs took pleasure in cutting them up as he crossed it. The warren room was the same. More creature, but not particularly difficult.

Jackal looked the room over as Carina unlocked the door. “This is going to give the Omega teams a lot of trouble.”

“Only if they don’t work together,” Mez said. “That’s the secret to this floor. It’s forcing us to learn with work with strangers and people might not trust, and only those who can overcome that, make it this far.”

“And how many teams were able to do that?” Jackal asked, “back when the rooms were a lot simpler?”

“Maybe this time it’ll be different with them,” the archer said.

The lock clicked and Carina stepped back. “A bunch of criminals who’ve been thrown together against their wills.” She shook her head. “It’s going to be no different than how it was for us. Only a few of them will survive to make Upsilon.”

“Does your experience not show it can happen?” Khumdar asked as Jackal pulled the door open. “You were all criminals, thrown together against your will, and here you are.”

“I tried working with the teams I was on,” Mez said, “but egos kept getting in the way.”

“Says the noble,” Tibs grumbled and hated himself for it. Mez was a friend. His status in society didn’t; shouldn’t matter. He felt the archer’s eyes on his back.

“How about we use that building aggression against that thing?” Jackal pointed to the golem, turning to face them in the raising light. “It’s better than using it against each other, and that was not appropriate, Tibs.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Tibs took out his knives, looked at them, then the golem, with its whip for a hand. He had to get way too close to what he killed for his liking. He shuddered at memories of a clawed hand coming at his face.

A sword. He had the time now, so he was going to learn to use one as soon as he was done with this run. And he was getting Carina and Mez to teach him about their elements so he could use them in battle, too.

Jackal gave the signal, and seconds later, the golem was rubble.

“No comments?” Tibs asked, watching as the back wall lowered to reveal the chest and stairwell.

“I could comment on how long it took you to get here,” Sto replied with a chuckle. “The first floor’s not made to give you trouble. That’s where the second floor comes in.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called, as he caught the amulet lobbed in his direction. It was identical to the one in his pouch, which he’d also gotten from the dungeon. “Two more and you get a full set out of this run.”

“Only if there’s nothing more important you guys will want.”

“I think we need to give you priority until you have four,” Mez said. “The more of your essences you can use fully, the better the odds we’ll all survive the runs.”

Tibs nodded. “I am sorry for what I said. You’re not like them. I know that.”

“I understand why it’s difficult for you to accept it. You’ve only experienced the bad side of nobility, and the more of them I meet, the more I realize that those like me will have a difficult time convincing anyone there can be good to come from nobles. But we will do so, I promise.”

“Hug already!” Jackal said in irritation. “We have a second floor to clear,”

Tibs and Mez looked at one another, then at Jackal. “No,” they said in unison, then grinned. The fighter rolled his eyes and started down the stairs.

At the bottom, Tibs frowned and turned away from the room to look at the alcove next to the stairs. There was something in that recess.

“That’s interesting,” Ganymede said, and Tibs smiled on hearing her voice. He’d been worried after Sto told him the attack had hit her harder than him.

“Tibs?” Carina called.

“Give me a minute. There’s something here.” He ran a hand over the wall. The essence in it was different. It wasn’t a weave, but there was still—

“Minute’s up,” Jackal called. “Unless you found loot, we know there’s some on the other side of this room, and we need you to get across.”

Tibs ran a hand on the wall. “I will figure this out.”

“I know,” Sto answered.

“I’m surprised you could tell there’s something there,” Ganny said. “Sto was really careful.”

Tibs thought about how the essence had felt as he reached the edge of the pool. “The essence isn’t quite the same as the rest of the wall.”

“Do you want me to lower you to the water?” Jackal asked, trying not to smile.

“You dropped me the last time.”

“Only after you iced the water.” He lost the fight, and the smile formed. Jackal was planning something.

Fortunately, Tibs no longer needed the fighter’s type of help. He sent his essence to the water and used it to form stairs to the edge, then he pulled more essence into his reserve and sent that back into the pool, spreading in through all of it, even beyond his sense. He’d already done this, so he knew it would work. He simply wasn’t sure if how he wanted it to work would happen.

Jackal took a worried step back as Tibs raised his hand between them.

“I’m good.” He snapped his fingers, and the ice formed so fast that it cracked and snapped as it expanded through the pool.

“I wouldn’t have dropped you,” Jackal protested.

Mez patted the fighter on the shoulder. “Give it up. Your face is betraying you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a maniacal grin before.” He walked down the ice steps.

“I’m not—” Jackal touched his mouth and cursed. “Why am I betraying myself? I’m supposed to be on my side!”

Carina stepped by him. “Don’t worry about it. It’s endearing how you get so excited about your evil plans you can’t contain yourself.”

Khumdar followed it. “I would simply ensure you do not make such plans while in the presence of someone who would truly be angered by them.”

“It is kind of amusing watching you try.” Tibs followed them down the stairs. The way the ice broke took care of the problem with it being slippery.

“But I’m Jackal,” the fighter insisted, following him. “I’m supposed to be evil without anyone realizing it.”

“You can,” Tibs replied. “You’re too nice.”

“I am not nice.” Jackal pouted, then grinned.

Tibs rolled his eyes, but a shudder through the ice cut off his reply.

“Did you do that?” Jackal asked, alert in the following calm.

“No.” Tibs sensed through the ice. The floor was within his range, as were the walls on each side and— “Run!” He pointed to the other side as he ran in that direction.

The ice shook again, and Tibs felt the pressure the floor exerted on it, as well as the cracks forming below as a section of the floor pushed against it. He cursed his shorter range when it came to earth essence.

“Hurry!” the ice was being pushed against by another section of the floor. He hardened it as much as he could, but he was fighting against Sto. He wasn’t going to keep this from happening.

Where the ice stairs were, the ice exploded as that section of the floor erupted. More sections were pushing against the ice, and they were catching up to them. Another pillar exploded behind them.

“Earth up!” he told the fighter as he felt the pressure build ahead of them. “This isn’t going to be fun!” he should have put earth in his amulet, now that he knew how to draw water and he use it. Or practice with his other element. There were so many things he needed to do!

The ice cracked under their feet as they approached the end of the section. They were going to make it, Tibs thought. Just before pain exploded in his leg as he set a foot down. He slide forward as the ice exploded under him.

He cursed the corruption and Bardik for being the cause as he tumbled through the air and fought through the pain to get a sense of what was happening.

His friend and Sto called to him in horror as he fell toward jagged ice. At least his friends had made it to the end.

Not that Tibs intended to die. He didn’t have enough of the other essence to help him survive. But ice was his element. He sent essence at where he was approaching, pulled in what was around him to ensure he had enough and melted the peaks, then kept melting the ice as it entered his range. It wasn’t as fast as he wanted, but he’d survive a pool of water.

It splashed, and the cold was almost enough of a shock to keep him from getting out of it. But he felt the pressure building in the ice under him. He cursed as he realized it was also building in the section ahead of him.

He watched Jackal leap and crash onto the ledge.

“Come on, Tibs,” Sto encouraged. “You can make it. You can’t die from ice.”

He couldn’t make it. Even if his leg wasn’t still protesting, by the time he crossed the distance, that section would erupt under him.

So there wasn’t even a point in running.

“Tibs?” Sto yelled, “don’t just give up!”

Tibs crouched and called his essence back to him, into the ice below him rearranging its structure. He hoped this worked.

The explosion that sent the block of ice he stood on in the air covered Sto’s scream, then Tibs exploded the block, sending him toward the ledge. He grinned at his success. Then cursed as the next section exploded and pelted him with ice, sending him tumbling.

He should still be heading for the ledge, but he couldn’t tell with all the ice around him. He pulled on it, surrounded himself in water, then wondered if he should ice it as extra protection, or if that would—

The impact sent the water around him flying in the air and he slid down the wall to a

victorious cry from Sto.

“Tibs!” Carina called, then was next to him. “Are you alright?”

He chuckled giddily. “Sto might have made changed to the room.”