

Chapter 79

The stairs leading up to the door had changed. Tibs had noticed they were no longer simply flat stones in the ground, as he walked by to check in on Sto previously, but more like steps in a normal building, with gold edge and black spots. He'd stayed far enough he hadn't realized the spots were designed to be rats and bunnies, made to seem like they were running up the stairs.

The two guards by the door ignore them. Like all of Harry's guards in the town, they were simply leathers, with a badge emblazoned on the breast. The white shield with the crossed sword wasn't painted on anymore, but silver, delicately engraved with black filigree Tibs couldn't identify. There was essence woven through it, but he couldn't tell which, or what the effect might be.

The cleric was who stood in front of the door; an older man with a hard expression. He looked them over, placed a hand on Mez's shoulder without asking, then stepped away.

Tibs went over how the essence had moved and shaped itself within the archer. He'd decided purity was the next element he'd work on, now that Water's influence was mostly unnoticeable. He wanted to properly heal his friends and felt the hard-work mindset of the element would be the least destructive.

"Was it my imagination," Khumdar said, one out of earshot from the entrance, "or were the guards wary of us?"

"I don't think they know what to make of the job they have to do," Carina answered. "You've seen them in town, edging away anytime they realize there's a Runner nearby. I don't think any training they got in whatever kingdom they came from covered how to keep adventurers in the making under control."

"You'd think the guild would take care of that," Mez said.

"You'd think," Jackal replied. "But we had the adventurer rejects first, then drafter thugs, and now, men and women utterly out of their depth. It's almost like they have no idea how to handle a new dungeon or the Runners they send in it."

"Why don't they just get guards from other dungeons to come help or train these?" Tibs asked. "They'd know how to do it." He studied the walls, looking for noticeable differences, but they were much like the last time.

"Maybe not," Carina said. "It's been a long time since there was a new dungeon. I think nearly a century. The city that grew up around the last one would have proper militia now, and the Runners all pay to go through it. And I doubt they had as many recruits pulled from cells as we did. This dungeon had a tumultuous start. I won't be surprised if books are written about it."

"Is that good?" Sto asked, and Tibs relayed the question.

Carina shrugged. "It'll probably affect the next dungeon, especially if there are still people left of that group who tried to kill you. But just to make sure it's better guarded, I think. Until the guild understands that you're a person, I doubt they'll be able to properly

prepare for what a dungeon will do. What works for an animal won't work on someone who can reason."

"Ganny doesn't like the idea they might learn I can think," Sto said.

"She's right." Tibs shook his head at Carina's quizzical expression. "What happened to clerics being part of the teams once Sto was Rho? I haven't seen one team with one of them."

"Maybe they meant Lambda?" Mez said.

"Who knows?" Jackal replied, walking past the hidden doorway.

"Jackal," Carina called. "The door's here."

"I want to go through the first floor again. You know, to see what changed."

"The loot isn't going to be worth the trouble," Carina said.

Tibs looked up.

"I can't force you to use the doorway," Sto replied. "But I didn't make any changes to this floor that will mean anything to your team. This is just for Omegas. Omegas who aren't supposed to be trained, or have good equipment," he added in a miffed tone.

Tibs smiled.

With the coins the merchant had paid him for the security the Runners now provided, Tibs had gotten Darran to get enough cloth armor and basic weapons for two teams. Tibs had spoken with some of the Runners who survived their first runs, those who had been sent in with nothing but the armor and weapons the guild provided and offered to help them with better armor and training, although he made sure they weren't told anything about the traps and dangers they would face within Sto. The only thing he couldn't provide them with was the amulet for the team's sorcerer. The starting ones were all in the guild's possession, and the ones the merchant sold needed the sorcerer to have an element to be used.

The guild hadn't complained about what he was doing.

Yet.

"Sto doesn't mind," Tibs said.

* * * * *

"Well, this was a waste of time," Mez said as they walked down the stairs to the second floor. "Sorry dungeon. I mean no offense."

Sto chuckled. "I can't be offended that you guys barely had to do anything to make it through. Although watching the Stone spears break on Jackal was a surprise."

"No higher rank teams have done the first floor?" Tibs asked.

"Of course, but none of them have been brave enough to step on a trigger and see what happened."

"Sure, brave is how I'd describe what he did."

"Idiotic," Carina said.

"Are you talking behind my back?" Jackal called, already at the bottom of the stairs.

"Where else are we going to do it?" Carina replied, "with you all the way down there?"

"I'm excited to face the upgraded second floor."

“He just wants the loot,” Mez muttered.

“Why do you always sound surprised when you say that?” the fighter asked.

Mez startled, then answered. “Because I keep thinking there has to be a point when you’ll have enough.”

“That is blasphemy.” Jackal had his arms over his chest as they reached him. “Even without the guild holding our debt over our head, there is no such thing as having enough money.”

“Now, that is a noble’s way of thinking,” Carina said, stepping past the fighter, “if I ever head one.”

Jackal sputtered at her while Tibs went to the alcove at the back of the stairs, drawn there by the new essence, besides the hidden doorway leading back to the first floor. It had the same essence lock, so Tibs used water, but nothing happened.

“Sorry, Tibs. You have to unlock it from the other side first.”

Tibs studied the pattern closer. Sto’s warning simply meant he had to be cleverer about how he went about unlocking it here. He noticed that each of the essence tubes that had to be filled also had a thin string extending deeper into the wall until it was out of Tibs’s sensing range. He sent water along it, but he couldn’t tell what happened once it was out of his sense, other than the doorway remained closed.

“Do you think I can get other elements?” Tibs asked as he rejoined his friends.

“Don’t you have enough already?” Mez replied.

Tibs shrugged. “I can’t do much with essences I don’t have.”

“What do you mean, much?” the archer asked. “What can you do to other essences that we can’t?”

Tibs kept his irritation at Mez’s accusatory tone in check. “At some point, you’re going to be taught how to sense the other essences. It came up for me as part of learning to absorb water essence as I use it. All I know about that at this point is that being able to sense them lets you defend against other Runners using their essence against you.”

“I thought you could do that because of your element,” Carina said, surprised.

Tibs shook his head. “My teacher showed me how to disrupt another Runner’s weave. My element just makes it easier for me to do it.” He couldn’t find a way to explain how knowing what color the essence was in the Runner gave him a better idea of how to disrupt it.

“How about you use that element to get us across the pool?” Jackal asked.

“My element can’t let me do that,” Tibs replied, trying not to smile. “I need water for that.”

“Well, blue-eyes,” Jackal said, grinning. “Get to it.”

“Sto will have something in place. You know that, right?”

“Why don’t you just walk across the bridge?” Carina asked Jackal. “That idiotic idea worked well enough for you in the trap room.”

Jackal smiled at her. “I guess that is the limit of my idiocy.”

Mez snorted.

Tibs sent essence ahead of him as he stepped off the edge and he landed on a solid

disk of ice, wobbling on the water as it expanded. He stopped its expansion and controlled how deep it went. He didn't have to make it thick, his will determined how solid it was.

"Someone is trying to out-think me," Sto said, amused.

Something impacted the ice, making it tilt before breaking, and Tibs used essence to keep himself secured as Jackal yelled in surprise, sinking in the water. He solidified the water under the fighter and raised him.

"I'm not ready," he said, reconnecting the ice. He considered leaving him dripping, but decided to be the nice one and pulled it off.

"It looked ready," the fighter said.

Tibs made the ice harder, compacting the essence on top of willing it so. "If you're in such a hurry, you should have used the bridge. I'm trying to think of a way to keep Stop from using the stone pillars in the pool against us."

"That was fun," Jackal said.

Tibs glared at him and considered removing the ice from under his feet. Forcing him to walk to the other side under the water would be a proper punishment for that statement. Only he didn't know if Jackal needed to breathe when he was stone. He went back to working on the ice platform.

"How is this going to be different?" The fighter asked. "It can turn them on as we cross."

"He can't make changes once we're in the room." Tibs extended a path across the pool. "That means the pillars have to be on some sort of trigger. The last time I iced all the water. And somehow it got larger. I think that's what triggered it. Now I'm making sure it's not going to press against the walls or the floor." When there was enough space for his entire team, he called up. "It's safe to come down."

Mez was the first one, freezing in place, then carefully walking around, then looking perplexed. "Why isn't it slick?"

"It's my essence," Tibs replied, taking hold of the water around the platform to keep the wobbling from tipping them too far as Carina dropped to it. When Khumdar landed, it hardly reacted. He smiled as their safe path to the other side of the room solidified and hardened.

He started forward. He had outsmarted Sto.

That feeling lasted until they were in the middle of the pool and Tibs felt something move deep in the water.

"Oh, come on!" How had he forgotten about that thing? "This is a trap room!"

His friends were already running, and he ran after them. He shaped the water on the other end into stairs. He couldn't wait until they were—

The creature was approaching quickly. It was going to—

The Ice exploded under him, and Tibs pulled chunks under him and his team, reinforcing it as it tipped and wind buffeted him.

"Tibs!" Carina yelled with urgency.

He cursed. They were sliding toward the edge and even her wind wasn't enough to stop them. He pulled more ice and made a wall to arrest them.

“What was that?” Jackal demanded.

“Hold on!” Tibs called as the platform started falling. He steadied as Carina added winds under it, but it wasn’t enough.

It impacted the water, and Tibs took hold of it to keep the platform steady.

Heat bloomed behind Tibs and a glance showed him Mez firing arrow after fire arrow at the water. “I don’t know what it is,” he muttered, “but dead is what it’s going to be.”

“That’s not helping!” Tibs added essence to the rear of the platform to compensate for the heat.

“I don’t see you do anything!” the archer snapped.

“He’s keeping us from falling in the water,” Carina snapped in return.

“Yelling isn’t going to help anything,” Jackal said.

Tibs put them out of his mind and sensed for the creature in the water.

“Should you not hurry us to the other side?” Khumdar asked in a soft tone.

“It’s not attacking, so it’s planning something.” It was swimming back and forth ahead of them. Did it not know where they were? Was it clever enough to anticipate Tibs’s actions? Was Sto controlling it directly? That seemed to be the one exception to him not being able to change a room. He could control his creatures. Or was it just the brutes? Or the boss creature? Tibs much preferred things when he thought trap rooms meant only traps and creature rooms only that.

“We can’t stay here,” Carina said, standing behind him.

“I know. But I don’t think it can tell where we are if we aren’t moving. I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep up together if it shatters the ice again.”

“Get that water jumper out of the water, and I’ll deal with it,” Mez said angrily.

“I—” Tibs started, his anger rising at the tone, then realized something. “—might be able to make that happen.”

How crafty was Sto? How crafty had he made the creature? He formed a platform of ice ahead of them. Hardened it. Then made human-like shapes on them. Five of them. It wasn’t reacting.

Did it know they weren’t real? Did it not sense them? They had been walking before it attacked. But they’d been walking for a while by then. So, a range in its senses. Or had Sto wanted to be certain they’d be too far from either side? The second, he decided. Sto was clever that way. He wobbled the fake them. When that didn’t make the creature react, he tried to figure a way to imitate them walking. He had no idea how Sto got stone creatures to move.

Instead, he changed their shapes and broke pieces so the ice fell on the platform at the rate of steps. As soon as the first piece of ice hit the platform, the creature swam for it.

“It’s coming!” Tibs yelled.

“I’m right here,” Mez muttered.

The creature broke through the platform, sending ice and water everywhere. Tibs watched in awe as it sailed through the air. It was translucent blue, shaped like an elongated barrel with fins around it and a snout in the front, and a flat tail at the back.

Then it exploded in a ball of fire and shards of it rained around them.

Tibs pushed the platform to the edge as fast as he could. He couldn't sense another one in the water, but he didn't care to risk it.

They were up the ice stairs he made and on the stone platform. Tibs leaning against a wall, panting. "What was that?" He demanded. "Sto?"

"Well," the dungeon hesitated. "I was going to call it a swimmer. But I kind of prefer Mez's name for them. So it's a Water Jumper now."

Tibs laughed. He laughed hard enough he slipped to the ground. When he finally got it under control, he saw the worried look on Mez's face and he was laughing again.