

Chapter 61

Tibs stared at the column blocking his way. It was in the doorway, and he couldn't understand why there would be a column where a door should be. It was made of twelve thick disks, stacked one atop the other, and each had a part taken out, as if some stone-eating creature had bitten into it once, then put it back, but hadn't bothered lining up those bites to allow him to use the gap that opened to go on the other side.

"I think we broke him," Craren said, "finally."

That was inconsiderate of that creature. Tibs had to get to the other side. Although he couldn't quite remember why.

This had happened a few times before. He remembered that, this loss of knowing why he was pushing forward. This time, he also knew it had to be because of how little sleep he got. Anytime he lost consciousness, those two would just start screaming until he woke and not stop until... did they ever stop?

"I think you're right," Val replied.

It wasn't because of his hunger or his thirst. His hunger had decided quite a few unconsciousness ago it wasn't even worth clamoring for the pit to be filled, and the smell of food almost repelled him now, instead of pulling him to the tables that lined the corridors. Thirst, meanwhile, had simply closed his throat as a protest against his decision to no longer imbibe ale. Even swallowing was painful.

His elements. That was why he was here.

No, one of them, but which one? And couldn't they help with this, somehow?

He looked around, then headed for a table.

What he needed was a nap.

He crouched to move under. Craren and Val raised their voices. They weren't saying anything, just making sounds. Loud sounds. Far too loud.

But Tibs was exhausted, so maybe he'd still...

He wanted to scream at them, but his throat constricted at the thought of pushing air through it.

Air! That was why he was here.

He stumbled to the column and stared at it.

No, that couldn't be right. It was made of stone, mostly, and the other elements, of course, like everything.

But the column had to go. It was blocking his way.

He put his shoulder to it and started pushing. Val and Craren laughed. They kept on laughing as he pulled earth from the floor to increase his strength.

They were right to laugh because the column won. Tibs's feet slid out from under him and he landed face-first on the floor.

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He woke with a start to Craren screaming in his ear.

Abyss, what had he done to deserve this kind of treatment. And they said Corruption

was the bad one.

He slowly got to his feet and blearily stared ahead.

Right. He needed to get that column out of his way. He sighed resignedly and put his shoulder to it again, this time couching to he had the edge of a bite as a leverage point.

This was about determination, so he just had to keep going and he'd... what? What was he doing this for?

Something clicked. He moved forward, slipped, then his head hit the floor, but he fought through the flashing lights to stay conscious. Craren's screaming was helpful for that.

He ignored the bloody handprint he left on the floor as he pushed himself to his feet. How often had he cut himself at this point? So often that he could actually feel a gap in his essence's reserve. He couldn't remember that ever happening before.

It had to be wrong since he was a Runner and remembered that getting hurt was what a Runner did, but he didn't remember those times, so they didn't matter.

He stared at the column.

It was still right there.

He kicked it weakly. It has clicked, so why hadn't it gotten out of the way? That was it we worked. He did stuff, they went click, then he passed through!

No, that wasn't quite right.

He hit his temple with his palm. Come on Tibs, think. He was usually good at that.

He also usually slept and ate well.

He stared at the column, cursing its presence, its very existence. Why couldn't it just have moved?

He canted his head.

Wait. Something was different.

He touched the place where he'd rested his shoulder, moved to put his shoulder against it again, but couldn't put as much weight against it because it was deeper.

Yes! He'd moved it.

He repositioned himself and pushed. He ever pulled earth essence to him for more strength and remembered to anchor himself to the floor this time so he wouldn't slip.

It didn't move.

With a painful croak, he wanted to be a scream, he grabbed the other edge of it as he stepped away and pulled.

It clicked and rotated toward him.

He stared.

Then he kicked the column. It had clicked, so what was it still there?

But it had clicked in the opposite direction he wanted to go.

That was why.

He pulled on it again, but it didn't move. He pushed, and it clicked. He pushed again and did nothing. He pulled and clicked, pushed and clicked; did it again and again.

He stopped when his throat hurt from trying to laugh and frowned.

He grabbed hold of the bite above the one he'd moved. This one was more toward the center, so moving it wouldn't help him get through, but...

It didn't move; in either direction.

"Do you think that—"

Val shushed Craren. "He hears us, remember?"

He tried another of the bites, one higher than the floor, it was close to the edge and if—it clicked when he pushed it and it opened the gap, letting him get his arm through.

Yes, he had it now. He needed to move them to that side, and he didn't even need to move all of them. He was small enough that if he got the one below and above there, he'd be able to squeeze through.

The one below wouldn't move, but the one above did, moving to the center, but no further. He pushed as hard as he could, then in frustration grunted and kicked the one at the floor. He hurt his foot, but he ignored that. The one he kicked had moved. Not enough to click, but closer. He pushed it and it clicked. Then it wouldn't move anymore. Two more and it would open the gap.

He pushed harder.

He pushed as hard as he could, but it didn't more. Neither did the one he'd moved before.

But he'd made progress.

Progress was good. It meant he hadn't given up. And that was the most important thing.

And that they had moved meant something. It had to be important because Craren had almost said something when he'd started this.

Air, it was about air.

No. It wasn't air. The column was stone, so earth.

But there was something about air.

It was around him. Could he get it to push with him? He didn't have much reserve, so it would take longer to gather what he needed, but he had time—that wasn't right—to gather as much as he needed.

And it meant he was still pushing forward. That was the important thing.

He pushed the air essence out, and it spread, letting him make more of it his. He stepped to the column and concentrated what he had on the side of the bite at the floor. When he used it to push, it spread around it, instead of moving it, letting Tibs sense its shape, the thin gap between it and the one above it and...

What was that?

The disk was hollow, and in the center was...something.

Many somethings.

Rods and gears, and holes for some of them to move in and out of.

It was important, he almost had it. That was the solution. It had to be. It was...

Something.

He rested his head against the column in frustration; he'd tried banging it at some

point and it didn't help.

Think, Tibs, think.

Sense.

The center of the column was hollow from the bottom disk to the top, and the hollowness was filled with all those things, and they connected to each other and the disks via rods and gears, and...

He almost banged his head, but stopped.

And he could sense what happened to them when he moved a disk. He pulled the floor disk, and the motion turned a gear. That turned a shaft that turned many gears, some of which pulled a rod deeper into the center or against a disk. Against a hole in a disk, which could hold it in place.

That was it!

So...

How did he use that to move the column out of his way?

He pushed and pulled on the bite and sense the ... mechanism, that's what that was a mechanism, move, trying to understand what the motion meant.

It meant that what he did with this disk affected the others, and what he did on them would affect this one. He just had to work out which ones affected the others and in what way.

He tried one slice after the other, and the seventh from the floor moved forward.

He kept his elation in check. This could be a trick from the dungeon. Dungeons were tricky that way.

He reached the top without any moving, and almost gave in to despair, but went back to the bottom again. The fourth one from the bottom pushed toward the edge and Tibs danced with joy. He was right. That was how it worked. All he needed to do was push until they were the gap was open and he was through!

On the next pass, the eight from the ground moved!

One the one after that, none of them moved.

How could that be? They weren't all in place. Only three were in the opening, and not two of them were next to another.

No, he had been so sure this was the way. It had to be.

He went through each disk again, pushing as hard as he could.

He slumped on the floor and felt like crying.

He wanted this to be over. He wanted to go home to Kragle Rock, hang out with Jackal and Carina and Khumdar and even Mez, because even if he wasn't nice to be around right now, he was still his friend.

"You can leave," Val said, or had said. "There is no shame in it." He couldn't tell anymore when they were talking or when he was remembering them talking.

Unless they were yelling, that was always what they were doing then. He never remembered them yelling.

He stood.

He wasn't leaving until he was done.

And that meant getting through this door.

He tried pushing them again, and of course, they didn't move. The only one that would move was the last, but only to put it back in its previous position. He did it a few times, sensing the gears and rods move, trying to understand why they wouldn't move forward anymore.

Then he tried again to push the disks that weren't in the right position, at one point putting his back on the edge of the bite above and his foot on the one below to give himself more of something he couldn't remember the word for that would make it work better.

He ended up on his back.

When the pain of hitting his head cleared, he stared in horror at the bite, which had moved back one step.

That was impossible. They had to move forward, and that wasn't the one he'd moved last. He hurried to put it back in position and hoped no one noticed.

Then he looked at it again.

Could the dungeon be *that* cruel? Could she get him this close and just force him to undo everything?

Yes, Val could be that cruel, especially with Craren giving her ideas, but no, she wouldn't get him to undo everything. She was a dungeon and dungeons existed to test people.

They could cheat, Sto did, but Val stuck to the rules. She'd even complained about doing it too much.

Tentatively, Tibs pushed on the other bites and one moved forward. Immediately he tried to put the one that had moved back in its proper position, but it didn't want to move.

Why?

Why was this so hard?

He banged his head against the column in frustration, and a thought came to him.

He had trouble grasping it. Something about a cylinder that had been given to him, not lent. She'd made that clear and how there were rings on it like on this column and... something.

Something in how he moved the pieces.

The tiles on the floor in one of the previous rooms. More than one, how they slid and something he had to do so he could get to the solution, find the...

He wailed. He almost had it, it was right there in the patterns of the idea—

The pattern.

There had been a point with each of them where he couldn't move forward anymore unless he moved back.

That made no sense.

No, it did, because he didn't move back blindly. He'd had to find the pattern in moving back that let him move forward.

With a shaking hand, he tried each disk, pulling and pushing. He almost stopped when one that was in the right position pulled out of it with a click.

He closed his eyes. He saw his surroundings with the air essence he had spread. He forced himself to stop thinking of this as a door he needed to get through. It was a puzzle, nothing more. One that he solved by lining up the bites in this position. Not because it let him pass, but simply because that was how the solution was.

He pull and pushed each one in turn, noting how and if they could, sensing the mechanism. The pattern was long enough that more than once he woke to Craren screaming at him. And he had to start from the beginning because he forgot what he was trying to do.

When he had two adjacent gaps in the right position, Tibs tried to squeeze through and broke down when he couldn't.

Once he was done, he got back to it, getting close to lining up a third gap, before the pattern he had to follow undid everything. Then he had four of the bites in position, but none there adjacent.

It undid again, and he continued through the despair. What else could he do, give up? Have Craren beat him? She was the vicious one. Val was just the dungeon, doing what she was told. She wouldn't do this if not for Craren. Tibs was sure of it.

He had three adjacent bites lined up, only to discover that it wasn't enough. No matter how he contorted himself, his shoulders wouldn't fit.

His world collapsed as the pattern undid his work. The idea that it would reform was difficult to hang on to, as it seemed to take even longer for it to reform. Only the glee he imagined Craren expressing as he gave up kept him going.

She might have tortured him for an eternity, but she wasn't going to beat him.

The clicking of the turning disks became a drone, and more than once, he wanted to stop just to have some silence.

Click, click, click.

Clicking was the world. That and pushing and pulling in time with the clicking. Stopping would end the world, he was sure of that.

When he had four adjacent gaps, he hesitated. They were three off the ground, but he wasn't worried about the short climb.

What if he didn't fit?

Could he survive tearing his world about again and hope he could reform it?

"Is he really doing it?"

It was the awe in Craren's voice that prodded him forward. He didn't have long until she told Val to do something to stop him; he was sure of it.

He pulled himself up, then got stuck partly in. He wriggled and pulled and pushed. Was that her trap, to get him stuck here forever?

He croaked in fear as he unstuck himself and fell forward, and kept on falling.