

Planning-31

Tibs followed Brogan Roche as best as he could throughout the day. He spent most of his time on duty within the guild, relaying orders, talking with other officers of the guards. His duties seemed to revolve around making sure everyone else had something to do. Tibs sensed a magical item on him, but couldn't get close enough to locate it on his person. When he left at the end of his shift, he no longer had it.

So Tibs would have to either get it within the guild, which he felt was a last choice thing, or come up with a way to get the man to leave the guild while he was on duty and hope he kept it then.

Two more days of trailing the man revealed another complication. He didn't simply leave the item, a disk, as far as Tibs made out at a distance, in his office, but he handed it to the guard's quartermaster, before ending his shift.

That meant Tibs couldn't simply take it and hope the man thought he'd misplaced it. He had to take it, use it, and return it all in the span of time Tibs could keep him outside the guild.

Or, he realized, he had to get himself a working copy of it in that time.

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Tibs tested the walls while Jackal gathered the loot from the bodies. "There should be a time shield in here so we know how much time we have left."

"With the moving walls, I don't think it can be done," Don said. "They'd either get ripped off as a wall move or tell us one can't be moved."

Once he'd tested them all, he was left with only the one that opened the way to the switch.

"Wasn't this a risk?" Don asked.

"Why?"

"What if you'd found one that moved and it blocked the others in the process?"

"The first one doesn't move any other. The dungeon wants us out of the path before something will block the way."

"You can't know that."

Tibs shrugged as he pushed the wall. "It hasn't happened."

"Three attempts are not enough to make that kind of statements. You need to be more careful with the team. Of your friends," Don added at Tibs's shrug.

"We got armor," Jackal said, joining them, "a magic sword, coins, and bottles that rebuild essence."

"Can you keep me one?" the sorcerer asked. "My training's been draining. This will let me push harder."

"We can keep all of them for you," Mez said. "The stronger you are, the better it is for the team, right Jackal?"

Tibs opened the way to the switch.

"It's best if I only take one," Don said after a stretching silence. "I don't want to learn

to depend on them. I don't know if you've noticed, but a lot of what we're learning can be done by over using essence, instead of being precise with what we have."

Tibs tested the walls and the one opposite the switched moved.

"Tibs has mentioned that at one point," Khumdar replied.

"It's the way some of the adventurer forgot how difficult what we're learning is," Tibs replied, as he pushed. "They have so much essence they can do it just by using brute force." It moved again and stopped. The left one moved.

"That is often how things are," the cleric said. "If one is willing to over use one thing, similar results can be achieved to doing it the 'correct' way."

"Or if you don't care about what else gets broken in the process," Jackal said.

"A lot like if you over saturate yourself with essence," Don said, "it might have unintended consequences."

Tibs ignored the comment and pushed. Three times and an opening was revealed.

"Yes!" Jackal exclaimed at the chest in the middle of the room. Tibs had a wall of hard water up with a quick gesture. Tibs had noticed how simply it was to insert Fey within the essence. The fighter collided with it with a surprised 'ow,' then looked at Tibs, rubbing his nose.

"Don't rush in until I've checked it."

Don tapped the water, then peered through it. "How advanced is your training?"

Tibs shrugged, pulled Fey out of the etching, and Don jumped out of the way of the falling water.

"You did that on purpose."

"Yes." Tibs moved the water over the room's floor. "The essence was already here, so I'm using it to check the floor for traps. Of which there are." He sensed the trigger, then felt for where it was. Distances weren't always easy to determine through water. Something about how it flowed made it imprecise as a measuring tool.

"You could have warned me."

"You afraid of water?" Jackal asked.

"I don't want my robe getting wet. This isn't fabric you just let get wet."

"But letting it get ripped and bloody's fine, right?" the fighter asked.

Don sighed. "Okay, yes. It's not rational. But this was expensive. I'd like to try and not get it needlessly damaged."

"Jackal," Mez said, "maybe now's the time?"

"Tibs, what do you think?"

Tibs shrugged, trying to determine if turning the water into ice within the mechanism would lock it up or trigger it.

"It can wait," Jackal said.

"Something else you aren't telling me?" Don asked, his tone sharp.

"Just as there is much you are not telling us, is there not?" Khumdar countered.

"Like you're so forthcoming with information," the sorcerer replied.

"We all have secrets," Jackal said. "Believe it or not, we are used to that."

There, Ganny was clever, but not clever enough. So long as he only iced that one part of the trigger, it would jam. “The room’s safe.” He absorbed the water. “I’m going to check the chest.”

He made it halfway to it when he felt essence shift above him.

“Trap!” he yelled, forming a sword and shield.

“Someone’s getting overconfident,” Ganny cackled as Gnolls dropped through doorways in the ceiling.

The ice cracked as Tibs berated himself for missing a trigger, and snarled, slashing the closest creature before it could react. More of the ice cracked. If he was going to get angry, he might as well unleash it on those who were here for that. He slammed his shield into another; the spikes cutting it as he staggered away. He yelled as the Gnolls charged him, and more of the ice cracked.

Tibs saw the danger coming, but he was too busy defending himself to see to the cracks.

“What’s going on Tibs?” Ganny taunted. “All that essence and not able to handle a few Gnolls? Come on, tell me you’re not that weak.”

Tibs snarled, elongating his blade as he slashed and an arc before him opened up, but more filled in the gap. What was Ganny doing? Tibs worried. Was she looking to kill him? He added metal to his armor, along with the ice and earth, in time to take a club to the shoulder. He dropped to a knee, but nothing broke.

He stretched his shield over his head as blows came down hard enough it too was cracking. He couldn’t move or do anything other than focus on keeping the ice around him from breaking until the assault.

Ice wasn’t going to save him, Tibs realized. He needed to go on the offensive. Something brutal. Something that would teach Ganny not to mess with him.

He reached for fire.

An angry roar accompanied the lessening of the attack. Then someone was beside him, filled with Earth. “I’m here,” Jackal snarled. “What the fuck are you up to?” he yelled and sent Gnolls flying.

Tibs was finally able to breathe, and with that he realized what he’d been about to do. He filled the cracks and stood. He flung water with Kha and Ank, turning it gummy. The Gnoll he hit were slowed and those whose limbs were caught weren’t able to swing their clubs.

The heat of fire finally reached him as arrows cut down the creatures at the edge, progressing closer to the center as more of them fell. Tibs cut any that came within reach. He caught sight of Khumdar slipping between Gnolls as he struck them as if there was more space there than Tibs could see.

He formed an ice knife and threw it at the Gnoll about to hit the back of the cleric’s head. The pommel hit instead of the point, but it distracted the creature and made Khumdar aware of its presence.

Then Tibs was busy staying alive.

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“What’s the big idea?” Jackal yelled at the ceiling, when it was only the five of them still alive, if not all standing. Khumdar was lying down, catching his breath. Mez was seated against the wall next to Don, the two for them drinking a healing potion.

“It’s okay,” Tibs said. “I know what it tried to do. It failed.”

“That makes one of us,” Don said. “Is the dungeon going back to eating everyone?” he asked, sounding scared.

“No.”

“Are there going to be other attacks like that?” Don asked.

“I don’t know,” Tibs replied when Ganny didn’t say anything.

“Maybe we should head out,” Mez said, “the switch—”

“No.” The ice cracked. “I’m not letting her get away with this.” Tibs headed for the chest, coating it in water, pushing it in whatever cracks were there. He added Fey to it and pulled. The chest resisted for a few seconds, then—

“Tibs, No!” Sto yelled as the chest exploded.

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Tibs groaned.

“Oh, you’re alive,” Sto said.

“What happened?” He mumbled, turning on his side to push himself up. He checked the ice and filled the cracks. Now was not the time to lose control.

“I think,” Don said, “that you might have broken the dungeon.”

“It takes more than that to break me,” Sto replied. “But that did hurt.”

Tibs force an eye open, then both snapped open, and he stared at the hole in that side of the room. It was six sections of wall deep, and formed a ball where the walls, ceiling, and floor weren’t there anymore.

“How?” Tibs asked.

“You broke open the chest and destroy it,” Sto replied.

“I think,” Don said, “that you gave us a demonstration of what happens when Void Essence is exposed to the rest of the world without control.”

Tibs tried to understand what the sorcerer meant. “The Attendants use Void essence outside. That doesn’t happen.”

“That is controlled essence,” Don replied. “Void isn’t an essence that’s found—” he motioned around them. “I don’t know why, never came across a book touching on that, but I read one where there was the summary of an experiment where sorcerers created a point of void, then just let it go.”

“What happened?” Jackal asked.

“They didn’t survive. What was left of their bodies was mist sprayed over the walls of the experimental chamber. If you’d been any closer to that, Tibs, you’d be just like them. As it is, the concussive blast that resulted from whatever happened threw you and us across the room. It’s a good thing some of us still had potions in us, because that hurt.”

“You knew it would happen,” Tibs said.

“I didn’t know those chests could even be broken,” Don replied. “So not really.”

“I have been experimenting with the essences, Tibs,” Sto said, “but I’m with Don. I didn’t think they could be broken open.”

“And you want me to let go of the ice?”

“Sorry, am I missing something?” Don asked.

“So much,” Jackal replied.

“If you don’t let it go willingly, and in a safe place, Tibs. What will happen when something pushes you to the breaking point?” Sto asked.

“I believe this demonstration gave us much to think about,” Khumdar said. “As to the necessity of keeping yourself so controlled.”

“Well, that’s it for this run,” Jackal said. “Hopefully, the switch still works, otherwise we’re going to find out what the dungeon’s like overnight.” He looked at the damage. “I hope that’s fixed by morning, because I don’t want to think what the guild’s going to say if the first Lambda team of the morning tells them some rooms aren’t working.”

“Jackal doesn’t have to worry about that,” Sto said. “This is easy to repair.”

Tibs looked at the damage again and wondered if he could sneak a chest like that in the guild.