

## Chapter 19

Tibs sensed the guards posted around the house. Four of them, not quite hidden from view. If their goal was to catch him getting in, they were doing a poor job of it. If getting in was his intent, they were just warning him of what they were paying attention to. It would make it harder, but, just like how he'd picked a location on this roof where they couldn't see him because he knew they were there. He'd be able to get in when they looked away.

Not that he needed to be inside the house to teach those two not to take advantage of their charges.

He used air to pull the conversation through the wall to him, followed their movement through their essence. As faint as it was, it followed the same channel as it did in Tibs, so he could tell when one raised an arm and the swift motion connected with the Omega. He couldn't stop it, but he could make the following moments bad enough that person would believe luck was a thing, and that it had been stolen from them.

He used Air, and a basket tripped them. Fire made the pot's handle so much hotter than they expected. Lighting a candle caused a flame that singed their face. The bucket of water was too hot to wash themselves with, their meal always cold when it should be hot, their ale too hot to be enjoyed.

Tibs sacrificed his other work and had to apply weaves of purity over himself to deal with the exhaustion. Those weren't as efficient as suffusing himself, but after six days, neither dared raise a hand against the Omegas under their care anymore.

There were others who took advantage, and Tibs would deal with them in time, but this couple had been the worse, and when he finally slept, he slept quite well.

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Tibs studied what the stalls lining the now fully paved path offered, as well as the Omegas passing by. This was the second day the guild let them go in. He'd missed the first one because he'd slept through it.

What he heard of the results was as he expected. Few of the runners made it out. The one difference he saw on those now waiting their turn was the lack of a confused expression that had been so prevalent in Tibs's early days running the dungeon. At least they had been told what to expect. They were called, were handed their equipment, and put on a team. They followed instructions, then waited.

Sto stayed silent, for which Tibs was grateful. He didn't want to know *how* poorly they were doing. Seeing the team be sent up without one exiting was enough.

The expressions he saw on the Omegas were a mix of fear, bravado, determination, and resignation. Bravado and resignation wouldn't help them survive, and Tibs hoped their failure didn't drag the rest of the team down with them.

He spied an Omega at a booth displaying swords and shields, and stepped next to her. He nodded to the man; he assisted at the Sharp Edge shop, on Merchant Row.

"Can I ask a question? It's for her," Tibs added at the man's surprised expression, "but I'd rather no one noticed."

"Me?" she asked, confused and looking at him.

"Might be best if you check the weight of the shield, Miss," the man said, handing her one smaller than the one she'd been looking at.

“What did they tell you about the rules of the runs?” Tibs asked, taking a short sword and studying its edge.

“Rules?” she held the shield with both hands and didn’t seem to know what to do with it. “To help each other survive.”

“Did they say anything about how far you need to go?” He sensed the metal of the blade. Like all the shops on the Row, it was good quality, but now that he had Metal, he could tell the differences that would let one keep an edge better than the other, or one that might snap under strain, where a better made one would continue to hold.

“No.” She hesitated, turning the shield in her hand and raising it to look at the bow in and imitation of how Tibs had looked the length of the sword. “They said we need to reach the end to make it to the other floors so we can graduate.”

Tibs changed for a slightly longer one. “You don’t have to finish the floor on your first try. If you don’t think your team can survive the room, you can turn around and try again on your next run.”

She stared at him. “How do you know that?”

“He’s one of the first to have gone in,” the merchant said. “He’s Tibs Light Fingers.”

Tibs stifled the sigh. There went any chances the new Runners wouldn’t call him that. “They didn’t tell us anything. We had to discover the rules as we went. You don’t graduate by reaching the end of the floor. You graduate by surviving until you are strong enough.” He didn’t add what for. He expected the Omegas had worked out adventurers had elements, and that this was how it happened, but he didn’t know how the guild would react if one of them outright told them that.

Tibs wasn’t worried about what Irdian might do to him, but he didn’t put it past the man to make the Omega pay for the infraction in his stead.

He looked at her. “What that means is that you need to walk out that door each time. Even if you’re the only one doing it.”

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The man tripped as soon as he took a step, after grabbing his charge and yanking her away from the other Omega she’d been speaking with. He stood and glared at those laughing, blood flowing from his broken nose. He angrily reached for the girl and his foot slipped out from under him, and his face hit the ground again.

The guard glared at Tibs, who shrugged. How could *he* be responsible? It wasn’t like he could control what the ground did; his element was Water, everyone knew that. Unless Irdian came in person or put adventurers on Tibs, he would be able to keep this going until all the caretakers learned to handle their charge with care, or the Omegas graduated to Upsilon and either moved to the rooming houses with their team, or became capable of keeping those people in their place on their own.

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Tibs looked at the mess he’d made of the crest. If he was right, once he was done with the next sequence, the dragon would be formed and the door unlocked.

This puzzle had stolen enough of his confidence in his skill at them he wasn’t certain he was right. He glanced that the time shield. If he was wrong, or made a mistake in how he followed the sequence, he wouldn’t have the time to redo it.

He wasn’t even certain he’d have the time needed to go through the sequence and

leave them enough time to tackle the room.

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, and he gave the fighter a nod before focusing.

He turned piece after piece, following the sequence. Cracks formed through the ice as he fought the need to go faster, give his team more time with the room.

Haste could undo all his work.

The last piece turned into place and the click came.

Tibs sagged in relief, and Jackal pulled him away from the rising door.

Nothing happened, but it had been stupid of him to stay there. This could have been the room where Ganny placed a trap, ready to pounce, as the door opened.

Instead of a room, they looked at a corridor. Three paces wide at a glance with a line across the floor, three paces in, and another one after than and again. There would be another one after that, but Tibs couldn't make it out, and the essence that made out the floor was too different for him to be able to work out that kind of detail through the miasma that was everywhere on this level.

The walls and floor were so white it reminded Tibs of the buildings in MountainSea. There, it had been the sun shining on them that made them brilliant; here, Sto had made simply them that bright of a white.

“What are they?” Jackal asked, standing at the threshold. “That isn't stone.”

“Don't,” Tibs warned as the fighter went to touch it. He pushed the exhaustion away with a quick weave of purity and stepped forward, looking and sensing inside the room.

Now that he focused on it, Tibs could tell there was little earth essence in the weave that made out the surfaces. In fact, it was so tight that he got little more than an impression of the essences it was made of. There was some of each of his elements, and more.

Corruption flew past the two of them and hit the wall. Instead of dripping, it moved along in what reminded Tibs of a hand feeling a surface for difference that you reveal a hidden panel.

“It's resistant to corruption,” Don said.

“Like the rest of the dungeon,” Mez replied.

“No. This is different. Everywhere else, it's woven into the stone as an afterthought. The dungeon reacting to an attack, the way an animal reacts after surviving a trap. I can feel around those threads, and if I had to, I'm confident I could undo at least some of them.”

“I told you that's what he was doing,” Sto said triumphantly.

Don continued to move the essence on the wall. “This is... purposeful. It's more advanced than anything I've read, but with how tightly it seems woven, I'd say this is so no one essence can interact with the wall. And with that in mind, if we wanted to attempt to do something to them, we'd need a twenty-four Runner each with a different element working as one.”

“Okay,” Ganny said. “I didn't think anyone would work out that part.”

“Why twenty-four?” Jackal asked.

“That's now many elements there are,” Don replied, the sneer slipping into his voice. “Didn't you know that?” Don fell silent, then mumbled, “Sorry.”

“That many?” Jackal looked at Khumdar.

“I am unsure why you would expect me to be able to corroborate Don's statement.”

“You mean that in all that 'traveling' you've done,” Jackal said, smirking, “you didn't

learn everything there is to know about the elements?”

Don studied the cleric surreptitiously, or tried to, Tibs expected. Only Jackal and Mez would miss the look.

“I am amused that you still keep trying to get me to admit to something I made clear I have no interest in discussing. But no, my traveling was geared toward learning what it meant for me to be a cleric of Darkness. Not investigate all there might be to know about the elements. I leave those types of inquiries to those better suited for them.” He smiled, leveling his gaze at Don and causing the sorcerer to hurriedly look away.

“So, we can’t undo the walls,” Mez said. “Which means going through whatever the corridor is about.”

“It’s a room,” Tibs said, looking at the corridor.

“Looks like a corridor to me,” Jackal said.

“They other two were rooms. This is going to be a room.” He looked at Don.

The sorcerer startled. “You want—” He shook himself and his confidence returned. “I agree with Tibs. The previous two crest revealed rooms, so this will be one too. The dungeon is predictable that way. Each floor has a style and maintains it. This one is the most different, but it still has one. It combines physical trials with mental ones. Each crest has been a type of scattered puzzles, and we had to figure out the rules that moved the pieces to complete them. The—”

“Let me guess,” Jackal said derisively. “You’d have worked them out on your own.”

“Of course.” Don straightened, while Tibs and Mez glared at the fighter goading their sorcerer. Don looked at them and sunk in slightly. “I mean, I’m pretty sure that given time, I’d have managed it. They’re complex puzzles, but it’s always possible to think your way through those. But it’s clear Tibs is more adept at solving them.”

“You’ve got that—”

“That’s enough,” Tibs stated. “Don is trying to work with us. Stop prodding him.”

Jackal looked at him in surprise and hurt, while Don’s surprised expression was tinted with suspicion.

Tibs glance at the time shield. They so didn’t have the time for this.

“Stay here.” He stepped into the corridor, and nothing happened.

He studied the floor and walls. The weave went three paces under him, then he sensed normal stone. There was no difference in his sense of the weave within the floor and walls that would make him think a trigger was hidden, but this was so different that he wasn’t sure he’d know what a trigger would feel like.

He stepped to the line in the floor and crouched to study it. A groove in the floor, instead of two blocks abutting. There was one where the walls met the floor, but as far as his sense told him, all this was one massive weave.

It had to be wrong.

The line on the floor went up the wall and the ceiling, roughly three paces above him. It was easy to miss, and wasn’t there at all to his sense, but he decided that this division had to play a part in how the room worked.

He stepped over the line.

Again, nothing happened.

At the next groove in the floor, he found the corresponding one going up the wall and

to the ceiling. It divided each part of the corridor into a three pace by three pace... block.

“Anything?” Don asked.

“It’s...” he was tempted to push on the wall to test his idea, but did he have the time to deal with what that might trigger? “I think the walls are a series of blocks. It might be possible to move them.”

“The floor?” Jackal asked,

“I don’t think so.”

“The ceiling?” Don asked, and Tibs looked up again. He couldn’t take for granted that holding in place meant they couldn’t move, but he senses normal stone three paces above them.

“I think it’s like the floor.”

“I can lift you so—”

“Stay there,” Tibs told the fighter as he noticed something. He stepped to the left until he nearly touched the wall. “There’s a turn six... blocks ahead.”

“That makes this room larger than the one where we played Conquest,” Don said.

“It was already bigger,” Tibs replied. “Those were closer to two paces across. I think this is going to be larger than the shifting floor room.”

“Do you think it’s going to be a maze? The way the entire floor is one?” the sorcerer asked.

Tibs shrugged and stepped over the next line.

Nothing happened.

He made it halfway across the block, and then the floor shook to the sound of stone groaning against stone. He turned and watch Jackal and Don step away as the left wall slid across the floor.

Tibs ran, but the entrance was blocked before he reached it.