

## Planning-24

Tibs sliced up, and the Gnoll fell away. He blocked the other's attack with his shield and skewered it. The heat struck him in the back and unbalanced him, but the ice over his armor kept the damage down. It wasn't the first time one of the Gnolls used fire essence on him, and each time one of them showed up, they were slightly more clever about how they used it on him, like this time, ganging up on him from the front so he'd be distracted and forget about that one.

If not for the fact they were created by Sto, Tibs would think they were training and learning how to use their essence when the Runners weren't killing them.

Tibs etched water essence quickly. The lines as a spike, the letters pulling more from the air as it flew, making it stronger, harder.

It didn't survive the blast of fire the Gnoll sent at it; the etching had been too quick to have the precision needed to create the full effect Tibs had intended. But as a distraction, as Tibs ran after it, it did exactly what he wanted it to.

He leaped through the wall of steam the two attacks had created, giving himself a little more height with the help of air essence, and came down on the Gnoll sword first, impaling it in the creature's head.

He spun and readied himself for another attack.

Jackal slammed his last one against the wall. Khumdar had two in a cloud of shadows, a determined look on his face as they dropped to a knee, then fell on the floor, and after a few more seconds, were absorbed into it. The cleric dropped to a knee, panting and using his staff for support.

Don was still battling three, but they were melting from his attacks before they could get close and Mez was—

Tibs ran to the archer, who was leaning back against the wall, holding onto his bleeding side. The wound was grave enough Tibs could see the essence diminishing. On a normal person, they'd have died long before Tibs reached them.

He had an essence wrap over it before pulling out bandages. Then he tightened it as he applied them.

"I'm missing when you could just heal us," Mez whispered, resting his head back.

Tibs nodded, glancing at Don. The last of his attacker was writhing on the ground, and the sorcerer had a self-satisfied smirk that reminded Tibs of the old Don.

"We have the potions," he said.

"We only got two at this point. It's best we keep them for when we have a battle that can challenge us. This was just one of them getting in a lucky throw. And yes, I know luck's not a thing," Mez added as Tibs opened his mouth. "But it's better than me admitting I wasn't paying attention to the metal user just because it'd only made swords for most of the fight. I didn't notice the javelin it threw until I felt the pain. Good thing it was a bad shot." The archer smiled. "I wasn't. Even in pain, I had my next arrow in its eye."

"Are you okay?" Don demanded.

"I'm fine," Mez replied, and the sorcerer nodded.

"Jackal, Mez needs a—" Don stopped as Jackal narrowed his eyes. "I mean, shouldn't he get one of the healing potions?"

"I'm fine," the archer replied. "Tibs got the bleeding stopped with the bandage. We don't know what's going to be beyond the dragon room."

"The boss-room," the fighter said.

Mez nodded. "Then I'll take one before that fight if no one else needs it."

"It might be best to take it before entering the dragon room," Khumdar said. "There is no telling what kind of challenge it will pose."

"It's just moving walls, right?" Mez asked Tibs.

"I don't know. I just know the walls move from the last time. This is going to be the first time exploring it."

Mez started walking, then slowed, putting a hand over his injury. "Then let's go. We're making good time, but if we just stand here talking about it. We'll never reach the boss' room."

Tibs looked at the time shield. Only half of it was used up, so they should have ample time.

The shifting floor room was quick now. Tibs had the pattern, so it was just a question of moving among them until the passage opened, and no one falling and undoing the pattern. The game of conquest was also faster now. Tibs didn't think he'd win against an experienced player, but the setup Ganny gave them to

deal with was more like puzzle, where the rules dictated the method needed to tackle it. It was more complex than the shifting floor or sliding puzzles, but Tibs was good with them, and Don knew the game better than Jackal.

Without being able to take with Ganny, Tibs couldn't find out if she was keeping herself from making them too difficult, or if they were simply so used to them at this point. They hadn't lost one runner to the third floor over the last week of runs at this point.

Of course, that would change once the Omegas started graduating and testing themselves on the lower floors. Already, there were two full teams at Upsilon.

Unlike when Tibs started, the guild pulled those runners out of the teams they had formed and created Upsilon only teams. The two Tibs had heard of that had been sent on the second floor hadn't fared well.

He finished the dragon shield marginally faster, he thought, then looked at the corridor. Five large tiles, then it turned to the left. He studied the first, confirming it had no triggers, then stepped in. The second one also had no triggers. He looked at his team, waiting on the other side of the threshold.

Did he want to give Sto a chance to lock him in, just to talk and ask Ganny? Or give them a chance to explain why they didn't like what he was doing with water? He missed talking with Sto, but until the dungeon stopped bothering him about that, Tibs appreciated the quiet.

"Get in, stay on the tile behind me. That way, we'll be together if the walls shift without notice."

"Or we'll end up crushed together," Jackal said.

"No," Tibs replied, glaring at the fighter, who raised his hand to placate him and grinned. "And I don't think there are triggers. I just want to be sure before I let you walk around."

He reached the turn with his team at his back, and no triggers found. Three tiles more and the corridor turned to the right and ended four tiles in.

"Did we take a wrong turn?" Jackal asked.

Tibs retraced his steps, looking for clues about how to proceed. The walls could be shifted, but he didn't know how or what the result would be. Sto had moved the first one that time to lock Tibs in, so he didn't think that was part of how it worked.

Other than the lines on the floor and up the walls dividing them into tiles and sections, there were no marks on them. Like the shifting floor, this would be trial and error until he worked out the pattern.

He picked the fourth tile from the entrance as his starting point. "Get on this tile," he told the others. Tibs studied the right wall again, in case he'd missed something, then ran a hand over it. The surface was uncomfortably smooth, but not slick. It was as if he could tell at a touch there was something unnatural about the way the essence formed it. He applied pressure, and when it didn't move, he pushed.

It resisted, then, with a grind, began moving. When Tibs stopped pushing to study the walls on each side, this one kept on moving, stopping only once it had cleared the tile. There was no changing his mind once he pushed one into motion.

"Don't move."

The entrance was still opened. He walked to the end and back. Nothing had changed.

Tibs frowned. He'd been certain each move would create a cascade of others, like the shifting floor. He returned to his position and placed his hands on the wall again.

"Are we staying here?" Mez asked.

Tibs looked. They were on the previous tile. He didn't think two walls so close together would respond to one another, but...

"Move here." Once they were in position, Tibs pushed. Like before, there was resistance. Then the wall moved and kept moving without his assistance. He cursed as the wall on his right was missing, and his team tensed.

Sword and shield in hand, Tibs moves onto the widening tile, looking into what turned out to be a room. Three tiles deep and wide, with a chest in the middle.

"Loot!" Jackal exclaimed and rushed it. He kneeled before it, hand almost grabbing the lid when he stopped. "I guess you should look it over," he said, standing.

"Don't you ever get enough chests?" Don asked in annoyance.

Mez snorted and Jackal looked offended.

"How many runs have you done with us?" the fighter asked. "And you still don't understand the wonderfulness of loot?"

"It's an act, isn't it?" Don asked as Tibs did a visual check of the chest. "Like the idiot you spent a long time convincing everyone you were."

"I am an idiot," Jackal stated, "when compared to you, Tibs, Mez and Khumdar and just about every Runner who does more than run it, bash things and swoon over loot. This thinking thing, before I act, is so I'll keep my man. He got tired of me nearly getting killed in this place once too often."

"I have no idea what part of that's true or not. How can any of you deal with this?"

Tibs ran a hand over the joint where the lid touched the bottom of the chest. He hardly had to think about what he did anymore, but he had to pay attention to what his fingers told him. Sto and Ganny learned from the Runners just like Tibs did from them, and the traps on the chest had gotten more subtle.

"You get used to it," Mez said.

"What you must keep in mind," Khumdar added, "is that Jackal will only depreciate himself. Putting himself down is something he has mastered, and there is nothing he will not say to maintain that, even now that he has agreed to be smarter about how he act for the sake of not leaving Kroseph alone. If he is downplaying himself, it is most likely a lie. If he is raising others, that will be true."

"I will never get used to all of you."

"You will," Mez said as Tibs opened the chest. Jackal grumbled something under his breath Tibs didn't make out, but the tone wasn't flattering.

He took a small round shield out of the chest with air essence woven through it and handed that to Jackal.

"That's it?" the fighter asked. Opening the chest again. He looked up. "Really? You give us amazing stuff in the other two rooms and this here? What's going on?"

"And is that an act?" Don asked. "Or does he expect a dungeon to understand him?"

"How do you know it doesn't?" Mez asked.

Don stared at the archer. "Do you expect a dog to understand you?"

"Yes," Tibs said, walking before Don on his way to the wall. "And the dungeon isn't a dog. That's insulting."

"To whom?" Don asked. "The dog?"

Tibs stopped and turned. The others were also staring at the sorcerer.

"Did you... make a joke?" Jackal asked uncertainly. He stepped to Don. "Is that stick actually pulled out of your ass far enough you can joke about something?"

"I do not have—" he tried to shove the fighter away. "I have acted in perfectly reasonable ways with—"

"Acted," Jackal said, leaning in. "Don't think I can't see what you're doing, *acting* like you belong with —"

"That's enough," Mez said, interposing himself between them. "Don is trying, Jackal. Just like you're trying to be smarter about what you do. I don't see you succeeding all the time."

The fighter took a slow breath and let it out. "Tibs, any idea how we continue?"

"I'm going to have to test each section of the wall until we reach wherever the trigger is."

"There's going to be a pattern," Don said.

"I know, I haven't worked it out yet." Tibs headed out of the room, and back to the main corridor and stopped. "We aren't exiting the way we entered," he said, stepping to the wall now closing the room's entrance. He tried pushing it, but it didn't move. It was large then the doorway, so that made sense. He tried to grab hold of an edge, but even water essence couldn't get between the section.

"Did that happen in response to the section you pushed?" Don asked. "Or is locking us in the room always the first thing that will happen?"

Tibs shrugged.

"Is it possible other section of the walls have also moved in response?" Khumdar asked.

"Stay here," Tibs said. He went to the end and back. "Nothing changed, but that doesn't mean it won't the next time."

"So we stay close while you test the walls?" Jackal asked.

"And listen for anything else moving when I push." He sensed the wall. Its weave, along with the saturation, meant Tibs couldn't get details from the other side. He knew it was the room with the chest, but his sense only registered it as more of the wall. He pushed, and the wall didn't move.

This would be a maze again, but one where he needed to not only work out how to get through it but also open the path as he went. He tested the walls on the left and right, and one section on the left before the one that had moved on the right, the wall moved in.

"I hear an echo," Mez said.

"I'll check," Jackal said. He returned quickly. "Nothing's changed."

"Then any move Tibs make can have repercussions we can't account for," Don said, then hesitated. "It might be best to work out how to open the entrance, so we aren't stuck here when the time runs out."

"Nothing will happen," Tibs said, taking position before the section of wall already in. "Other than we might encounter the next team."

"How do you know?" Don asked. "It's not like anyone's risked it since the time shield appeared."

"Are you ready?" Tibs asked, and his team moved on the tile. He pushed, the wall moved, and he heard the echo again.

"Should I check again?" Jackal asked, and Tibs nodded. "We lost the left turn," he said once he was back.

The first move had done nothing each time, other than taking them out of the main corridor and kept them from seeing what had happened. Was that on purpose? He'd check when the next time one in that corridor moved.

He pushed again, and the wall didn't move. He put his shoulder to it, and Jackal helped, but it wouldn't budge. Tibs pushed the one on the left, and it moved. He pushed, and it moved again, and another sound came along with it.

"That wasn't a wall moving," Mez said, just as steps sounded behind them.