

Planning-19

Tibs paused and looked at the mess he'd made of the crest. If he'd done this correctly, 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 ability that he wasn't certain he'd done it correctly. He glanced at the shield at the top of the corner. If he made a mistake, he wouldn't have the time to redo it. As it was, he wasn't sure if they'd have enough time left to tackle the room.

"Tibs?" Jackal asked, and that was enough to get him to focus.

He gave the fighter a nod and began turning the pieces, moving through the sequence. Small cracks appeared in the ice and he fought the desire to pick up speed as more of the dragon formed. Haste could undo all his work.

The last of the pieces turned, then clicked into place.

Tibs's relief as the door lifted stole his strength and Jackal had to pull him away. Nothing happened, but it had been stupid to simply stand there. This could have been the room where Ganny had a trap, ready to pounce, as the door opened.

Beyond the door was a corridor instead of a room. At a glance, it was three paces wide, and it had a line in the floor running across every three paces. The walls and floor were so white it reminded Tibs of the building in MountainSea, but they had had the sun shining down on them, while there was simply very white stone.

"What are they?" Jackal asked, standing at the threshold and examining the wall. "The isn't stone."

"Don't," Tibs warned as the fighter went to touch it. He pushed the exhaustion away and stepped to the doorway. Jackal was right. They might look like stone, but they were a weave different from any Sto used in the dungeon. It was so tight Tibs could only get an impression of the essences in it, instead of feeling the threads.

Corruption essence flew at it and spread, moving in a way that reminded Tibs of feeling a wall for a hidden panel.

"It's resistant to corruption," Don said.

"Like the rest of the dungeon," Mez replied.

"No, this is different. The way it's woven into the stone elsewhere is clearly an afterthought. The dungeon reacting to something done to it, the way an animal who survives a trap become wary of anything resembling it. I can feel around those threads, and I'm confident that if I had to, I could undo some of it."

"I told you that's what he was doing," Sto stated.

The essence continued to move against the wall. "This is... purposeful. It's more advanced than anything I've read, but if I had to make a guess, I'd say the essences are woven in such a way as to make it impossible for any essences to interact with the walls. Guessing further, I'd say all the essences are involved and that only if we had thirty-two Runners, each with a different essence, would we have even a chance of undoing it."

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

"Why Thirty-two?" Tibs asked, trying to sense anything of the wall that would give him that kind of impression.

"That's how many elements there are, didn't you know that?" some of the sneer slipped into the sorcerer's tone and he mumbled a; "sorry."

"That many?" Jackal asked, looking at Khumdar.

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

"You mean in all that 'traveling' you've done, you never learned everything there is to know about the elements?"

Don surreptitiously studied the cleric, or he 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 investigating all there is to know about the elements. I leave those types of queries to those better suited for them." He leveled his gaze on Don and smiled, causing the sorcerer to look away, blushing.

"So we can't just undo the walls," Mez said. "Which means we need to go through whatever these corridors are about."

"It's a room," Tibs said, looking at the corridor.

"It looks like a corridor to me," Jackal said.

"The other two were rooms. This is going to be a room, too." He looked at Don.

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

"Let me guess," Jackal said with a smirk. "You'd have worked them out."

"Of course," Don replied, straightening, while Tibs and Mez glared at the fighter's attempt to goad their sorcerer. Don looked at them and lost some of his confidence. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I could, in time. It's complex, but it is primarily about thinking. But Tibs is clearly more adept at solving them."

"You've got that—"

"That's enough," Tibs said. "Don is trying to work with us. Stop prodding him."

Jackal looked at him with surprise and hurt, while Don's surprise was tinted with speculation.

Tibs didn't have time for this. "Stay here." He stepped into the corridor.

Nothing happened.

He studied the floor, then the walls. The weave went about three paces deep under him, then he sensed regular stone. There was no change he could sense within the floor or the walls that would indicate triggers, but with this kind of weave, Tibs wasn't sure he'd be able to tell the difference.

He crouched at the line in the floor. A groove in it, instead of marking where two blocks abutted. He sensed at the junction of the wall and floor for another, but as far as his sense told him, it was all the same weave.

It was wrong, he decided, on noticing the line doing up the walls, where the groove in the floor reached the wall. It was faint, and going by his sense, wasn't there. That would play a part in how the room worked.

He stepped over the groove and waited.

Again, nothing happened.

The walls had the same line going up between them, the same sense of being one weave. He was tempted to push and see if anything happened, but with so little time left, triggering some trap could strand him inside for far too long.

"Anything?" Don asked.

"The walls aren't one unit," Tibs replied, looking over his shoulder. "But I think the floor is. So that's one part we won't have to worry about."

"The ceiling?"

Tibs studied that. It was a little over twice as tall as Jackal and had matching grooves. He couldn't tell if they were actual grooves at this distance. "It seems to be like the floor."

"I can lift you," Jackal said hopefully. He was pacing the hall, looking bored. Mez sat, eyes closed, and Khumdar simply stood a few paces away from the door, looking into the distance.

"Stay there until I figure out what this room is about." He looked ahead, then stepped to the left. "There's a turn to the right six tiles ahead."

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

Those tiles were closer to two paces across, so it was already larger. "I think it's larger than the shifting floor room."

"You think it's a maze, the way this entire floor is?" the sorcerer asked.

Tibs shrugged. He stepped onto the next tile and waited.

Nothing happened.

He took a pace toward the other side and the floor trembled in time to stone groaning against stone. Tibs turned in time to see the Don step back before the wall on the right of the first tile closed against the wall, sealing Tibs in.

"You cheated," Tibs said, looking at the floor, sensing it for anything. "I didn't trigger anything."

"Yeah, I did," Sto replied. "Tibs, we need to talk."

"Ganny, are you going to let him cheat like that?"

"This is the only way we could think of getting you away from Don, since you wouldn't let Sto get rid of him."

“He’s on my team, and—”

“And that’s the problem,” Sto said.

Tibs frowned. “We need a sorcerer, and Tirania assigned him to my team.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

The ice cracked, and Tibs filled them before answering. “It’s what it is.”

“Stop that,” Sto said. “Just let the abyss water go and answer me.”

“I have answered you.”

“Tibs,” Ganny said gently. “This isn’t good for you.”

“The alternative isn’t good for everyone else. They matter more.”

Sto sighed.

“You’re not going to do anyone any good,” Ganny said, “if you can’t feel anything.”

“I can think. That’s more important than what I’d be feeling. And I do feel; just not as strongly. So it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” Sto sounded exasperated. “Just let go to the water, channel fire, let it out. It’s safe to do that in here.”

Tibs looked around. The walls, the weave. How Don said it would take every element to have a chance to do anything. “Is that why you made this room? Because you think I want to let fire loose?”

“No,” Ganny replied. “I designed this room so those facing it would have no choice but to rely on themselves. It’s only when you returned the way you are Sto realized it was a place where you could let it go.”

“Thank you. I appreciate what you’re doing, but I’m fine.”

“No, Tibs, you’re not,” Ganny pleaded. “You feel. That’s what makes you, you.”

“I can still feel; the ice is just letting me stay in—”

“You don’t stay in control, Tibs,” Sto said harshly. “You’re someone who gets angry when I ate someone you hardly knew just because he was nice. You screamed at me and you made me break rules I know better than to break because your pain hurt.”

Tibs swallowed as more cracks formed.

“I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Then stop fighting me!”

Tibs chuckled. “When have I ever done that?”

“Tibs, I’m trying to help you.”

“I know. But I don’t need the help. I am grateful, but I’m fine.”

“Tibs,” Sto pleaded.

“We did what we could,” Ganny said. “Tibs. We’re here when you come to your senses.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“I’ll make you a door that isn’t guarded,” Sto said.

Tibs closed his mouth. “You can do that?”

Sto sighed. “I’m Stone Mountain Crevice. Of course I can. This is all me. I can affect anything I can reach, and anywhere we can talk, I can reach.”

“I heard you call for help when I was in the town. Does that mean you can reach there?”

“No. That was desperation. Yelling as hard as I could and hoping you’d rescue me.” The silence stretched. “I wish you’d let me return the favor.”

“I’m not yelling to be rescued.”

Sto sighed. “You would if you weren’t so filled with ice.”

“That isn’t what people are meant to be like,” Ganny said.

“How do you know?” Tibs asked. “You admitted you know little about people.”

“But I’ve seen others who did what you’re doing.”

“You did? Who?”

“Harry,” She answered. “He was so filled with light that the first time he stepped where we could see him, he blinded us.”

“The new guard leader,” Sto said, “Ardian. He’s the same with metal. He feels like he could cut his way through my stone just by leaning against it. Tibs, I can feel the cold emanating off you from the floor above.”

“I’m not like them. I’m doing this to protect everyone else.”

“No,” Ganny said. “You aren’t. You’re doing it because you think it’s protecting you. I just hope you realize it isn’t before you turn into an ice version of what those two are and come to us for help.”

“Alright. If this becomes a problem, I will come. Just tell me where the door will be.”

Ganny’s sign stopped him.

“I just agreed with you. What is the problem?”

“It already is a problem, Tibs. You just don’t want to see it.”

He didn’t reply. She only saw what she wanted to see. Nothing he said would change that. “How do I explain to the others how I undid the trap?”

“Think of something,” Sto snapped.

“Sto, I’m sorry that you aren’t understanding what I’m going thought, but—”

“He left,” Ganny said.

“I’m sorry he feels hurt, but this is my decision. It’s only affecting me.”

She sighed again. “Just push on the wall to your left.”

Tibs looked at the wall, three paces wide, and twice Jackal’s height. It felt cool and solid to the touch. He wondered if this was a trick to get him to let water go to channel earth.

Instead, he pulled the essence from his bracer and wrapped his arms and legs in it. He tried to anchor himself to the floor as he put his shoulder against the wall, but just like the corruption hadn’t been able to find a way in, earth couldn’t. He’d have to rely on his increased strength and the traction from his boots.

He put all that strength into the push, then he was on the floor as the wall moved back far too easily. The one before the door moved slower, revealing the rest of his team. The only one of whom looked concerned was Don.

“I told you he’d be fine,” Jackal said. He started to step forward and stopped. “Is it safe?”

Tibs stood. “The walls move along the grooves.” He indicated the new one that was revealed.

“So it’s safe to move around?” Jackal asked.

“I didn’t see Tibs touch anything before the wall closed the entrance,” Don said.

Tibs shrugged. “There must be something still wrong with this room, so we shouldn’t risk it until our next run.”