

## Chapter 12

Tibs joined Mez at the chest as the archer pulled an amulet out of it. "I think that's a full set."

"If I get to keep them." Tibs took it without looking, his eyes on the wall next to the chest. Mez said something, but he didn't pay attention. There was something about that section. He sensed the stone as he ran a hand on it.

Sto had done something to part of it. The essence before him was different. It wasn't a weave or an etching. Sto didn't work that way unless it was the point of the trigger. This was just... different.

It was the size of a doorway, slightly taller than Jackal and wide enough for one of them to pass through if it was a door. Because it was in the dungeon, Tibs knew there was a way to activate it and find out what it was, but he couldn't think of how to do it.

Carina exclaimed something, and Tibs spun, hand on his knife.

"It's beautiful!" She held the robe against her and ran a hand over the heavy material.

"If she doesn't like the color," Sto said, "I can change it."

"What?" Tibs asked, and realized he was still looking around for a threat.

"I've noticed sorcerers like to use colors representing their elements, but I can't take that into account in the loot rotation, so that ends up randomized too. If she puts it back in the chest, I can change it to whatever color she prefers."

"Are you allowed?" the others were looking at him and he raised a finger to postpone any questions.

Sto sighed. "Probably not. Feels like I'm not allowed to do anything, but it's just a color. I doubt Ganny's going to complain too loudly."

Tibs nodded. "The dungeon says that if you want a different color, just put it back in the chest and say which one you want."

"No, this is perfect." She spun, but the heavy fabric didn't move much.

Jackal looked in the chest. "Can you change that into potions?" Tibs peered in and a sword, too long for the size of the chest, rested at the bottom.

"Not risking her anger on that," Sto said. "Sorry."

Tibs shook his head, then considered something. "Maybe you can change things so there's always potions in this chest? That way those who survive the fight can have a chance to leave?" judging the size of the sword was difficult since he couldn't trust what he saw of the check, but Tibs thought it was longer than Jackal was tall. It was a normal sword otherwise.

Who would use something like this? Who had used one? Tibs didn't recall seeing one like this before. So it had to be from the nobles. Maybe theirs had been enchanted to be less unwieldy.

"No. The previous room is because I want the teams able to appreciate this fight. How they leave is entirely up to them." The pause was long enough Tibs looked up when Sto continued. "It isn't like there are any real challenges on the way back, right?"

“What did you do?” he demanded.

“Me? Nothing.”

“We need to be on our guard on the way back,” Tibs warned. Sto had sounded far too innocent. “The dungeon changed something.”

Sto didn’t protest, and that worried Tibs more. Maybe Sto was simply playing on the paranoia the previous runs had instilled, but Tibs wasn’t taking a chance.

The walk out of the room was slow, to keep pace with Jackal, who had to be careful not to jostle his cracked stone body, and it gave Tibs the time to sense around them for new traps. Mez deactivated the corridor maze by slapping a hand on the plate, and Tibs stayed by it, telling the other he wanted to make sure the dungeon wouldn’t alter things while they were crossing it.

Sto had shown enough craftiness no one questioned him.

He waited until they were past the halfway point. Jackals speed meant he had time.

“Sto,” he whispered, to be safe. “Why aren’t you using the mind essence to talk with other people?”

“I can’t talk to others, you know that. Ganny doesn’t even know why I can talk with you.”

“I know, but wouldn’t mind essence let you talk to anyone with a mind? You have mind essence right?” He tried to remember if what essence Sto had reserves of had ever come up.

“I do. I have all the essences. But that’s one of the few essences I have no idea what to do with.”

Tibs frowned. “If you have an essence, shouldn’t you be able to just use it?”

“Not really,” Sto answered after a few seconds. “Is that something you can do, just use essence?”

It was Tibs’s turn to be silent as he thought about it. “Well, yeah. I mean, most of it won’t work at first, but over time I can figure out how to arrange the essence so it will do something, even if that isn’t much. But I can then find out more. Just by pushing air essence around, I can cause a breeze. That wasn’t something I was taught, I just did it because I’d seen Carina do it.”

Sto was quiet again. “That doesn’t seem to be working for me.”

“Then how did you manage to do everything you do with essence?”

“By watching you and the other Runners. By absorbing those who died. I gain some of their knowledge then. There haven’t been any Runners with Mind as their element. Once I have a base of information, I can work with that, but I can’t seem to do anything with what I have until then.”

“I’d have thought there would be Runners for each element by now.” No, he was wrong. Tirania had stirred him toward only four elements. Even after he’d gotten her to mention more, she’d made it clear they were inferior. There was also more of certain essence within the classes. Fighters seemed to have more metal and earth than anything else. Rogues had water, air, and darkness, mainly. Archers and sorcerers seemed to be more evenly distributed, but still more of those four main elements Tirania had told him about.

Had every teacher pushed specific elements, instead of encouraging the Runners to figure out which one was best for them? Tirania has certainly insisted he decide there and then.

“What about the silent shoes? You made those before anyone had essence.”

“Before Runners started coming in, the guards were throwing bodies in me. A few of them had essence woven through pieces of clothing, and once I knew that was a thing, I experimented using other essences, changing how it was within the item. I didn’t have a lot else to do and I can reabsorb what didn’t work. Other than your pouch, which I was working on for the second-floor boss, everything else was simple stuff.”

“And doing that with mind essence doesn’t like you figure it out?”

“I’ve played with it, but nothing I apply from what I know of the other element did anything.”

“Tibs!” Carina called. They were on the other side. The essence walls hadn’t returned, so Tibs ran to join them.

The Bunnyling and Ratling rooms were much the same, minus whatever bodies hadn’t been absorbed by the time they’d left. The pool no longer had any ice in it, only water.

“I can’t cross the pool,” Jackal said. “Even if the dungeon doesn’t have the pillars to break us and the ice, I can’t pull earth essence from that far. Without it, I am going to fall apart.”

“You could walk by the edge,” Mez said. “You can pull from the walls, right?”

“Unfortunately,” Khumdar said before Jackal answered. “That does not resolve the issue of the rising floor. And if Jackal can’t move any faster, it renders crossing the bridge less than practical.”

Tibs sighed. “I’ll deactivate the room.” He wasn’t looking forward to the headache manipulating so much essence at once would cause him, but at least this time he wasn’t exhausted.

He made it halfway to the maze before a section of the ledge broke, but this time the one right after also broke, making crossing the larger gap more difficult.

“You’re making it harder on purpose,” he grumbled.

Sto chuckled. “No. Which of the section will have a condition is set randomly when I reset the floor. One of those conditions is how much weight each of the sections can support.”

Couldn’t that mean there was a possibility some rogues wouldn’t be able to get close enough to the maze to complete it? Was that fair?

The complexity of the maze as it came fully into his range amazed him. He hadn’t been in a state to fully take in how the lines moved over, under, behind, in front, and doubled back on themselves without ever touching another line. The deep pattern was beautiful, but that didn’t take away from its difficulty.

This time, his starting point was at the top. So it changed each time. He adjusted his fingers in the cracks as well as his footing and began willing water essence to move into the line. He focussed on keeping it thin and not overflow, figuring it would be easier to fix problems as they came, instead of trying to get everything within the lines afterward as he’d

done the last time.

He lost his concentration and had to restart a few times, but then he noticed a change in how he perceived what he did. He was able to look ahead and decide how to approach it without losing track of how his essence flowed through the lines he'd already filled. It was as if his mind had split into two, no, three sections. The one looking ahead, the one looking behind, and the one taking it all in and deciding how to proceed.

It let him think without losing track of anything in the maze.

What he did lose track of, was the state of his body. He was reminded it existed as pain shot through his left arm, the spasm making him lost his grip on the wall. He screamed in pain as he tried to get his hand back to the wall as he fell back, unbalanced to the point his other hand slipped.

His friends' screams vanished as he hit the water, then was submerged and Sto's laughter.

Once he was done cursing the corruption coursing through his body, Tibs pulled air essence out of the water and around him so he could breathe and let himself drift.

"You should see your face," Sto said between bouts of laughter. "It's hilarious."

It wasn't funny, Tibs thought as hard as he could, hoping the dungeon heard it

If he did or not, Tibs couldn't tell as Sto exploded into laughter again.

Tibs rolled his eyes, unable to stop the image of Sto falling off a chair because of how hard he laughed. He sighed.

Maybe, from the outside, it was funny. But Sto was supposed to be his friend. Friends didn't laugh at each other's misfortune. He purposely ignored the times he'd laughed at Jackal after one of the stupid things he did came back to smack him in the face; sometimes literally.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet.

He knew his friends were worried. But after the fighting, the yelling, the stress of the run, this was nice. He extended his senses to reach his friends, but they were too far, but there was something closer, a mass of his essence moving in his direction through the water.

There was a creature in the water.

Tibs choked on the water as his concentration broke and paddled to get away.

Sto's laughter intensified.

Focus.

Water was his essence. He didn't have to rely on his body to move in it. He wove it into a funnel around him and propelled himself up and out. He flew out of the water similarly to when he'd used the pylon bursting through the ice to propel him, except that this time he could see when he was going and with a fling of the hand, water flew ahead of him to form a cushion for him to crash into.

It wasn't graceful, but at least, he was on the floor and not the wall.

"There's a creature in the water!" he yelled at the ceiling once the water sloshed off him.

"More than one," the dungeon replied. He burst out into laughter again.

“That’s against the rules!” Tibs stood and used fire to dry himself and hoped the steam would show how angry he was.

Sto had trouble not laughing, but managed to ask “says who?”

Tibs tried to reply. To come up with a reply. His anger flowed away as all he was left to fuel his protest was. “This is a trap room. There can’t be creatures in trap rooms.”

Sto got his laughter under control. “Again, says who?”

“But there haven’t been any before.” Was he whining?

“There’s never been a need before,” Sto replied. “The first floor is tough enough as it is for brand new runners, and the pool was always set up for them to activate when someone fell into the water.”

Tibs sighed. “So we can’t take for granted what any of the rooms will contain based on what it looks like.”

“Was that not already the case?” Khumdar asked. “Never accepting anything as what we see within a dungeon?”

Tibs nodded. He’d gotten complacent. At least this reminder of the dangers he lived with hadn’t cost him any of his friends.

“Sorry for yelling at you.”

“It’s okay,” Sto said. “I do aim to create strong reactions, so yelling is expected. You should hear what some of the other teams call me. It’s a good thing they don’t know I can hear them. We good?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “We’re good.” He tried to move his arm, but the corruption was being stubborn. He was going to need help getting back to the maze. “Carina, can your essence reach where I was when I fell?”

She looked there. “I think so, but it’s too far for me to feel the essence in the wall. Pushing my essence at a spot isn’t the same as manipulating what’s there.”

Tibs stared at her. He hadn’t considered that someone from another class would try to solve the maze. He’d thought of it only as a rogue problem.

“That’s not what I have in mind.” He tried to move his cramped arm and winced. “I can’t hold onto the wall, so I need you to use your wind to support me, as I get there and while I’m solving the maze. It’s not going to be quick.”

“Time isn’t going to be an issue. This is simple stuff and I’ve rebuilt enough of my reserve for the initial push of essence.” She looked at Jackal. “So long as no one breaks my concentration, you’ll be fine.”

“Sorry,” the fighter replied. “Too busy holding myself together to be the annoying little brother.”

Tibs chuckled. At least Jackal wasn’t in so bad of a state he couldn’t try to be funny. He approached the wall and looked at Carina. She sat, leaning against it, and nodded. As he placed a foot on the ledge, wind pushed him to the wall. With it and one hand for added steadiness, Tibs made it back to the maze.

He wasn’t able to achieve the mental state he had before, but without having to worry about gripping the wall, he had enough attention to devote to the maze he solved it faster than his last time.

He felt the ledge tremble at the rumble of the raising stone and water rushing out. He looked over his shoulder. Vents under the ledge let the water escape. He didn't see the underwater creatures.

As he stepped onto the now level floor, he realized his arm had uncramped. He moved it without more than the usual ache.

When they reached the hall leading to the dungeon's exit, Tibs wanted to study the section of the wall that was different, its dimensions were similar to that in the second-floor boss room, but Jackal's need for healing took precedence.

The cleric was a man and his too pale eyes went wide on seeing Jackal. He took his arm, and immediately let go as small stones fell from it. "You," he told one of the guards. "Go fetch Maria and Louis."

"I can't leave my post," the man replied. Older than those there, except the cleric, and with a stern face and angry eyes.

The cleric got in the man's face. "I am here to ensure any Runner who steps out of that door lives. I can't heal him myself." He looked at Jackal over his shoulder. "I don't even understand how he's still alive. You are going to go and fetch Maria and Louis, or you will find out just how difficult your life can be when you piss off one of us."

The man closed a hand on the pommel of the sword at his hip.

The cleric glanced at it and raised his hand, which started to glow. He smiled. "Please, do test me. there are things we aren't allowed to practice as part of our regular training."

The guard's resolve broke. He sidestepped the cleric, then hurried down the steps. The other guard had moved as far as he could without leaving his post.

"I was not aware purity clerics had the ability to inflict harm," Khumdar said, his tone cautious.

"We don't." The cleric stepped close to Jackal. "But we're surrounded by so many stories, exaggerations, and outright lies that it's easy to fool most people at least once." He grinned at Jackal. "Count yourself lucky no one pulled that trick on him before."

Carina's hand stopped just before she patted Jackal's shoulder. "You can take for granted that no Runner had Jackal's knack for getting himself into the kind of trouble requiring this level of healing."

"Next time," Jackal said. "You can be the one to go toe to toe against the boss."

"Can you sit?" the cleric asked, cutting off Carina's reply.

Jackal looked at the steps before lowering himself.

"Good, now, I recommend you all avoid distracting me. I have no idea how this will proceed." The cleric's hand glowed again and Tibs winced along with Jackal.

This healing didn't look to be soothing at all.