

## Chapter 52

“I think we’re far enough,” Mez said, looking back the way they came. They were halfway to the trap room. “They shouldn’t be able to hear us.”

“Is it necessary to do this here?” Khumdar asked as Carina took the papers out from inside her robes. “You have done the first floor multiple times, and it is aimed at Omegas.”

“I want to make sure nothing’s changed,” Jackal said. “It would be just like the dungeon to change everything on us.”

Tibs watched Jackal look over the charcoal map, but he was listening. The hissing had always happened in response to something one of them did or said. He wasn’t entirely certain he’d heard the voices anymore. It had been over a month now, and Carina’s explanation that he’d been dying and his essence was trying to save him had made more and more sense. But the hissing had been around long before that, so he was alert for the next time it sounded.

“Everything is the same,” Carina said, pointing to writing. “You looked it over in the room.”

“It’s not all the same.” Jackal indicated the marks. “Tibs said those aren’t where the triggers were the last time. Right Tibs?”

“Yes,” he answered, distracted by his vigil. “But the dungeon always changed them now. So that’s normal.”

“There’s more rats in the boulder and warren room,” Jackal said.

“I’m starting to think this exchanging information wasn’t a good idea,” Mez commented.

Tandy had given Tibs three pages a few days after the first free-for-all, so they could draw their maps, and then Pyan’s team would add what they’d encountered. Jackal had wanted Tibs to get them paper, but Tibs wouldn’t steal from the merchants. Wealthy or not, they were part of his town. If he found paper in one of the noble’s houses, he’d take some, but as yet, he hadn’t. For as many coins as they had, paper was valuable enough they didn’t leave it lying around where any passing Rogue could get it.

Pyan’s team had gone in a second time only a few days ago, having landed before Tibs’s in the random assignment of those who hadn’t given coins to determine where they were in the order. Harry had been there when the list went up, and he had glared at Jackal as if the man knew it was his idea, but he hadn’t ordered anyone to the cells or grabbed Jackal to have a private talk.

Jackal had been sufficiently smug Tibs was sure the guard leader had talked with his team leader at some point, but they’d gotten away with that part of the quiet thumbing of their noses at what the guild wanted.

“Jackal, it doesn’t matter how many rats there are,” Carina said. “We can deal with them easily.” Tibs disagreed with her. It mattered. But she was right. “Let’s clear this floor and then we can go over the information.”

“Alright.”

She put the papers away.

Squaring his shoulders, Jackal led them to the trap room, where, as he'd predicted, the triggers had been changed again, but Tibs easily found them and led the way. Jackal moved slower and with a thoughtful expression. He just smiled when Tibs raised an eyebrow.

To his disappointment, the cache produced a set of archer's gloves, which Mez put on. Tibs thought he was owed at least his shoes back since they'd been destroyed in the dungeon, but he'd been the one to walk into the fire, so he didn't grumble too loudly.

The boulder and warren rooms were simple, even if both had more creatures. Tibs knew where the creatures were, even if he couldn't see them. They had his essence in them. Much less than people, or even the animals in the town, but enough for him to not be surprised once by the rat in the boulder room.

In the warren room, even knowing where the rabbits were, he only hit one out of the five throws of his imbued knives, and he figured it had been a lucky shot. On the practice range, he couldn't hit a stationary target once out of ten throws. He wasn't sure if throwing things would be something he got good at, but he enjoyed not having to get close to what he wanted to hit.

The first boss fought back harder, managing one strike that could have ended the run before they'd reached the second floor. Jackal had rushed it as they'd agreed, and the golem's whip caught him in the leg, sending him against a wall and out of the fight while Carina and Mez brought it down at a distance.

Tibs was next to Jackal before the golem crumbled.

The fighter cursed loudly.

"Don't move," Tibs said.

"Oh really?" Jackal replied. "Do you think that's funny?"

Tibs glared at the fighter. "No, I just need you to not move. I want to try something." He could sense the break in the lower leg, in the way the flow of essence staggered. Everyone had small staggers like this one, but this was the first time Tibs could tell why it happened. The injury to the body affected how the essence flowed.

Could the flow affect the injury?

He reached out for the essence in the leg and tried to move it back into place, but he couldn't 'grasp' it. It wasn't because there was earth tinting it. It still felt like his essence. He didn't have the time to investigate that now. Yet something else to work on.

He took his essence and pushed it into Jackal's leg. There was resistance, but the fighter didn't react to the intrusion, so Tibs decided it wasn't a problem. He couldn't grab the Jackal's essence with his, but there was some interaction. He could feel where they made contact.

Tibs wrapped his essence around the flow of Jackals, creating a tube that made him realized the flow was in the center of the leg. Sort of where the bone was. Another question for later, if he could ever think of a way to ask it without revealing his secret. He made his essence as dense as he could, using up a quarter of his reserve. When he was done, he had an 'opaque' shell around the staggered essence of the fighter.

Right, staggered was injured. He willed it straight.

Jackal yelled in pain, then was panting. “What in the infinite abyss did you do?”

“I’m not sure. How do you feel?” to him the essence felt like it was flowing properly.

Jackal opened his mouth, clearly ready to yell, but paused, then frowned. “Not bad, actually.” He got to his feet.

“Did you heal him?” Carina asked, awe in her voice.

“I don’t know,” Tibs replied, observing how his essence reacted to Jackal putting weight on the leg.

“I think he did,” the fighter said, also awed. He smiled. “Do you have any idea how much this changes things? Tibs, so long as we can survive a fight, you can heal us. We’re going to get to the second-floor boss without any problems.

“Don’t be too sure,” Tibs replied. “That used a lot of my reserve, and I don’t know how to speed up refilling it.”

“Can’t you do like I do with fire now that I can sense it?” Mez asked.

“If Tibs is our healer,” Khumdar said at the same time, “shouldn’t we keep him at the back, so he won’t get injured himself?”

“I’m not staying out of the fighting,” Tibs stated. “And the only place I can sense my essence is in other people and the creatures the dungeon makes.”

“What happens if you pull it out of someone?” Jackal asked as he headed for the chest.

“I don’t know if I can,” Tibs said, trying to explain it. “I couldn’t affect your essence directly. What I did is wrap mine around use and put it back in place.”

“So you splinted my essence?” the fighter asked as he opened it.

“I guess.”

“But is his leg healed?” Carina asked.

“He can stand on it,” Mez said, “isn’t that what healing means?”

“Not if the damage remains or returns once Tibs removes his essence,” Khumdar said. “This is different from anything I have heard regarding healing.”

“You’ve heard a lot?” Carina said in a snide tone, and Tibs glared at the cleric before he opened his mouth. He needed to figure out what the problem was. They’d seemed to do okay these last weeks.

“I have heard enough.” Khumdar stopped there, and Tibs thought the man would throw a tantrum.

“Full set of leather armor,” Jackal called. “I’m not seeing any place to hide things on it, do you want to check Tibs?”

“What’s the quality like?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the sorceress and cleric.

“Not much better than what the guild first gave us. Did the dungeon lower the rewards now that the second floor is there?”

“It’d make sense,” Carina said, joining him. “If we got things like the shield or the other stuff we had before, there wouldn’t be much incentive to go on the second floor.”

“I’d still go.” Jackal motioned Mez over.

“Yes, but you are unabashedly greedy,” she replied. “Not everyone is.”

Tibs waked up to Khumdar, glaring at him. “Stop doing that,” he said, lowering his voice.

“And by *that*, you mean?” the cleric asked, his voice also low.

“Acting like you know something about Carina.”

“Why do you think I am acting?”

Tibs closed his eyes and reminded himself Khumdar was a teammate. He didn’t stab teammates. Even Jackal didn’t deserve that. He opened them as he let out the breath. “If you’ve found out some secret about her, you don’t use it to hurt her. She’s a teammate. A friend.”

The man’s lips tightened. “I think you may be giving her more credit than she deserves. And what I know isn’t a secret, she is simply—”

“Well, I don’t know what the problem is with having white blood, and she doesn’t. She bleeds red like everyone else. She bled defending us. She helped you. If you want off the team, you need to tell us.”

Khumdar’s face darkened momentarily, then he relaxed. “I do not wish to leave your team. You have taken me in when I suspect no one else would have. I apologize for letting my prejudices affect my interactions with our teammates. I will do better.”

“It might help if you told us what the problem is.”

The man shook his head. “I fear all my confession would do is make matters worse. I thank you for your understanding, Tibs. You are a special kind of person.”

Tibs snorted. “I’ve just lost too many friends to the dungeon. I don’t want to lose them to stupid stuff like arguments.”

“Are you two done conspiring against us?” Jackal called. “There’s a second floor waiting to be cleared.”

Tibs looked at Khumdar, who nodded.

“I’m not conspiring,” Tibs said, heading for the stairs. “I’m convincing Khumdar we’re all his friends.”

“And you are very convincing, Tibs,” the cleric answered.

“Maybe you can convince the dungeon to be our friend and just give us all the loot?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t think it’s that nice,” Tibs replied, starting down the stairs.

“Why does it do that?” Jackal complained on entering the first room. “Carina, show me the papers again. I’m certain that path is wider on it.”

“It was wider on our first run,” Tibs said. He didn’t like that there had been no hissing at any point. It made him feel like the dungeon wasn’t paying attention to them. He couldn’t decide if that was a good thing.

“Do you think it’ll get narrower each run until it’s gone?” Carina asked.

“Seems to me the dungeon always gives us choices,” Mez said. “Taking it out would remove that. We’d have to take the ledge.”

“Or the water,” Tibs added, looking down. That looked like the last time. Even the essence mix felt the same.

“If the path becomes no wider than the ledge,” Khumdar said, “maybe it is so we will take it. Jackal should attempt it since he will be able to climb out of the water even with a lack of ladders.”

“I just like how you assume I’d fall.”

“You will,” Tibs replied. He could climb out too, he had earth essence, and it hardly took any to make handholds. He wondered how much water he could freeze with the essence he had. He knew how much water he could generate, but since Carina could use her air essence to affect the essence in the air around her, he should be able to do something like that with water.

“Regardless,” Jackal said. “I’d rather stay dry. We’re taking the path.”

Tibs stopped the fighter before he stepped on it. “After I check it.”

“Why? It doesn’t matter where that trigger line is. You remember how slow the slab drops. I can walk fast enough not to be crushed by it.”

“You’re not remembering things correctly,” Carina said. “You’d have to run to not be crushed. But Pyan’s team didn’t indicate it drops any faster.”

“It’s been eight days,” Mez said. “I’m with Tibs. I want to know if the dungeon had done changes in that time.”

“I believe we can take for granted that it has made changes,” Khumdar said.

“And we need to know so we won’t die.” Tibs fixed the fighter with a glare, and Jackal raised his hands.

“You’re the smart one, I concede.”

Tibs’s sense for the essence as he inched his way along the path. Now that the dungeon could work with essence, he didn’t trust it not to pull some trick, like getting the essence trigger to condense just as he stepped on it.

This time it was closer than it had been on their previous run, and from what Pyan had indicated on the map. If he’d gone by that, he would have crossed it before even checking.

“The line’s here,” he said. “And it’s not fixed.”

“That’s two things different from the map,” Carina said. “Can we trust it at this point?”

“Seems early to just throw it out,” Mez replied.

Tibs studies the line as it moved up and down, from his chest to the path. “Everyone can sense the essence now, right?” Everyone but Khumdar answered they could. Tibs looked at the cleric.

“I will point out that unlike you, I have not received formal training, and that as a cleric, the expectations Darkness places on me are different from on you.”

“Darkness’s got nothing to do with me,” Jackal said.

“The point remains.”

“You don’t sense essence,” Tibs stated.

“I do not.”

Tibs wondered if now was the time to put Khumdar’s words to the test and decided against it. “Mez, you guide him under this one, I can sense another one and I’m

going to check it.” He slipped under when it was at its highest and made it a dozen steps to the next one.

This one moved left to right and back, simple to pass, but it was the one after that which worried Tibs. He stepped around the line as it one on the left side of the path and stood before the last one. The two previous triggers on the same spot. Up and down and left to right. At least they weren’t too fast. He slipped in the opening and waited on the other side.

“Khumdar first,” he said as they approached, and the shuffling to get him to the front of the line was awkward. Any narrower and they’d have to cross it one at a time. Tibs indicated the right side at the height of his hip. “When I tell you, you get through there, that’s as high as you can be.”

“I am beginning to think this dungeon does not like anyone tall.”

“You aren’t that much taller than anyone here but me. You ready?”

Khumdar nodded, and when the lines were synchronized, Tibs gave the signal and the cleric was across. Carina and Mez crossed, then Jackal who was nearly past it when the slab came down before anyone could react. Jackal was lying on the path, writing in pain. His left foot a crushed and bloody mess. Khumdar and Mez pulled him to the hall, and Tibs crouched next to him. Just like his foot, the essence there was shattered.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to do anything, this is not like your leg.”

“Try,” Jackal groaned.

Tibs created an essence wrap around the shattered essence, then reinforced it, having to use half what he had left, even if the area was smaller before he was confident it was dense enough to not let anything through. He tightened it slowly, using what he felt of the right foot to guide the form.

Jackal screamed and Tibs stopped.

“Unless,” the fighter panted, “you’re ripping my foot off. Keep going.”

In the pause, Tibs was surprised to feel Jackal’s essence shift on its own, moving to resemble the right foot. If the essence wanted to have the right shape, this would be easier. He did his best to ignore the screams as he tightened his essence until it was a sheath over something identical to Jackal’s other foot.

Jackal no longer screamed, but he was panting hard and covered with sweat. “I think it’s best if we keep Tibs for really bad injuries.”

“You mean liked a crushed foot?” Carina asked.

“I’d rather not go through that again.”

“I don’t think I could do this again,” Tibs said, feeling strained. “And whatever I do next is going to have to be simple. The more damaged the area is, the more essence it takes.”

“It is none the less impressive,” Khumdar said. “I would love to know what you have done.”

“If you get hurt, I’m guessing you’ll find out,” Mez said, helping Jackal to his feet.

The fighter moved cautiously. “What amazes me is that I’m not feeling any pain.

It's like I've taken numb weed, but it only affects the area you've healed." He headed for the next room and Tibs hurried to join him.

"Are you going to run in like nothing can hurt you?"

"Not if you can't heal me," Jackal replied, grinning.

"I couldn't heal you the last time."

"But last time I was making a point."

Tibs rolled his eyes.

Jackal cursed at the entrance to the room. "Carina, the map said three, right?"

"Yes."

"Either no one on Pyan's team can count."

"Or the dungeon's changed things again," Mez said.

"Five of them," Khumdar said with a shudder.

"We can take them," Mez said, stringing his bow. "I can take one down by myself, but I'm going to have to stick to my regular explosive arrows after that." He smiled at Tibs. "My version of the flame arrow is much more impressive than theirs."

"I'm with Mez," Jackal said, "but this is a team decision, and I will listen this time."

"We take them," Tibs said, watching the essence in the golems and feeling how empty his reserve felt. He didn't know how he'd done it with Big Bad, but he knew it he could do it, and BB had also been a golem, just like these.

"If Tibs is willing," Khumdar said, taking his staff off his back, "then so am I."

"I'm not leaving you four to get yourself killed," Carina grumbled.

"I thank you," the cleric said.

"Mez, you start," Jackal said before Carina replied. "Then Khumdar, Tibs, and me rush in. Carina, I would love it if you could pull that wind clap that earned you the first win and the FFA."

"I can't promise that in an enclosed space like this, but I have a few new tricks that will help."

"Keep your distance Tibs until you're out of knives."

Tibs said nothing. If he didn't answer, he couldn't be accused of lying.

The heat from the arrow that formed as Mez pulled on the string was nothing like what Tibs had felt from the other fire archers. It was intense but also focused. Even the essence was nothing like the others. It was in the arrow's form the fire made, with more at the tip and almost nothing at the string, which Tibs thought explained why it didn't burn through it.

Mez let go, and it detonated on impact, sending rubble all over the room, and pushed the other golems away. Tibs stared. No fire archer had ever done anything like that, Tibs would have heard.

"If you're counting on me to do all the damage," Mez said, notching a regular arrow, "you will be disappointed."

Jackal shook himself. "Go!"

Tibs followed the fighter in, sensing the essence in the golems. Unlike that of the

Runners, it had no color to it. It was identical to that in his reserve. He threw a knife at the wall and one of the golems struck that spot. Tibs stepped for it, then cursed as his shoes creaked and jumped out of the way from another whip.

Jackal was pounding one to rubble. One had chunks missing as another arrow exploded in its chest, the third was in the middle of a whirlwind that seemed to lift it off the ground and the fourth...

Tibs cursed and Khumdar fell, his staff flying into two different directions from blocking a whip strike. Tibs ran and jumped on the golem's back, wrapping his arms around its neck.

He'd touched it. That was all that had been needed the last time. The contact had been enough to suck the essence into him. So why wasn't it happening now? He lowered his head as the golem reached back for him.

He had been dying.

He wasn't going there for this one.

He reached for the essence in the golem and pulled on it as he would when looking to refill any of his reserved. Instead of the slow trickle, as soon as he willed it to happen, Tibs fell through the rubble the golem turned into.

"Wait," someone said, as Tibs got to his feet. "How did he do that?"

Tibs grinned as he looked for where the voice came from.

"Ganny! Did you see that! That was amazing, but how did he do it?"

"I knew I'd heard you," Tibs yelled at the dungeon.