

Chapter 11

Tibs remembered the damage to the walls of the long corridor as he stepped into it, but didn't let that distract him from potential danger. What Bardik had done to Sto with the corruption had been horrible, but that was in the past. That couldn't hurt him any more than it already had.

He felt the essence ahead and counted his steps. While it still looked like the same corridor, it was a room, and the same number of steps separated what he felt from the room they'd just left as every other room before.

He stopped before entering it, and Jackal stopped next to him. As Tibs tried to make sense of all the essence he sensed, Jackal extended a hand, then moved it sideways. Tibs watched him move along the closest of the multiple lines of essence before them.

"What are you doing?" he asked the fighter.

"Unlike you, I can't feel those things unless I'm almost touching them," Jackal answered, then added. "Unless they're in the earth or stone, those I can feel at a distance, like that bundle in the pool room."

"Really?" Tibs looked at the others and Mez nodded.

"I can feel essence through mine," Carina said. "all I need to do is send it out, and I can feel how they interact. There's a lot ahead of us and I can't figure out what we're supposed to do. This feels like it's just there to kill us. Shouldn't there be a way to get through it?"

"There is," Sto said.

Tibs sliced an essence trigger with his hand, and spears traversed the corridor nearly faster than he could follow. It was like a wall of them moving from there and away.

"Yeah," Jackal said. "That's made to kill us."

Tibs tried not to feel as defeated as his friend sounded.

"What is that?" Khumdar pointed to where the spears stopped appearing. It was a pedestal with the top angled toward them, and Tibs thought there was a plaque there.

"I think," Carina said, studying it, "that it's how we turn the trap off."

"Why put the thing all the way over there?" Jackal asked. "By the time we can turn it off, we've already crossed the room."

"Maybe it's for when we come back?" Tibs said, trying to map out the lines and understand how the trap worked. There was a space behind what was effectively a wall of triggers. It was narrow, and there was an opening in the wall.

"I think that it's for the one among us," Carina said, "who happens to be smaller and agile. He can go through and turn it off so the rest of us, who are large and clumsy, can walk through without danger."

"I'm not—Oh," Jackal said.

Now that Tibs understood the essence wasn't so much triggers as limits, he could make out the path between them to nine layers in, which was maybe a quarter of the way. It wouldn't be easy. The path was relatively linear for him, but it would require using the walls,

and getting under low triggers. He trusted Sto that there was a path through the whole thing, but that it would—

Tibs was on the down on the floor as the ‘twang’ registered and something flew over where he’d been. He looked around for who had been hit, and his friends were looking at Mez, lowering his bow.

“What did you do?” Tibs demanded.

The archer shrugged. “Turned off the trap, I hope.”

Tibs looked at the hall, and the essence walls were gone. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t. I just figured that wasting one arrow on the chance it would be worthwhile.”

Jackal moved his hand where the essence had been. “It was.” He stepped forward.

“Okay,” Sto said, miffed. “That wasn’t how it should have been done.”

Tibs followed the fighter. “You wanted me to get in there, step around, under and over those walls, didn’t you?” He extended his sense as far as it went, in case Sto had surprises for them.

“You or someone else. This is supposed to be an agility test.” He was quiet.

“Although, I guess it works as one testing cunning. Not every team’s as smart as yours.”

Some were a lot smarter, Tibs thought.

On the other side, Tibs studied the pedestal. Like almost everything in the dungeon, it was stone. The plaque easily moved in when pushed. If nothing else, Sto would change that for their next run, if nothing else.

He joined the others at the entrance of the next room and tried to suppress the shudder as he remembered what had happened in it. He hadn’t had the time to look at it properly the previous time, and it was larger than he remembered. Larger than the Ratling and Bunnyling rooms. eight columns held up a high ceiling on each side and would provide a lot of blind spots for Ratlings and Bunnylings in the room to hide behind.

At the back of the room, at the end of this path created by the columns, three golems stood. One Bigger Brute with one Big Brute on each side. Sto had changed them slightly. Bigger Brute was more massive, while the Big Brutes leaner.

He remembered them in pieces on the floor, Bardik throwing vials of Corruption everywhere. Sto whimpering, Ganny sounding scared. Then he did what he could to save his friend and pain consumed him.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, but it kept him from stepping into the room.

“Will you be well?” Khumdar asked, tone gentler than Tibs was used to. “If this is too much, we are not required to step in this time. There will be other runs.”

Jackal nodded his agreement, and Tibs forced himself to see the room as it was today. The gray polished stones of the floor and walls. The floor had large hexagonal tiles in different shades of gray, while the walls had designs on them Tibs couldn’t make sense of. Abstract was what Carina had told him things like them were called.

Sto had survived. So had he. He owed it to both of them to finish the floor.

“I’m good.”

Jackal smiled with pride, then looked to the room. “We have Ratlings, Bunnylings, and two types of golems.”

“The smaller ones at Big Brutes, the larger us Bigger Brute.”

The fighter rolled his eyes. “At least we don’t have to worry about those Whippers. Rats and bunnies we know we can handle, but they will be a distraction that lets those brutes reach us and might keep us from effectively defending ourselves. Ideas?”

“The previous encounter we had with the smaller brute,” Khumdar said, “showed we could hardly hurt it. We have all grown in power, but I still believe we should focus on the larger one, as it will be the biggest threat.”

“No,” Mez countered. “We can’t ignore the Ratlings and bunnies. There’s a lot more of them and if they gang up, they will tear us apart. We need to thin them first and then focus on the Brutes. They aren’t exactly fast and the room is large. We should be able to stay out of their reach easily.”

“Come on,” Jackal said, grinning, “Khumdar said it. We’re stronger than when that Brute showed up to save Tibs. We’ve dealt with the Ratlings and Bunnylings easily enough. I saw we run at the Brutes, give them all we can and them clean the rest out.”

Carina glared at Jackal. “That is stupid. Mez is right. We need to remove the easier ones because they have the numbers to overwhelm us. Me and Mez can attack groups of them, but that’s not doing us any good if one of you is in the middle of them. I have no way to make my attacks ignore you while hurting them.”

“So it’s just a question of you figuring that out?” Jackal asked, and she glared harder.

“There could be traps,” Mez said. “Tiles do lend themselves to that.” He looked at Tibs.

He sensed what he could of the room. “I don’t sense anything like that. There aren’t any warrens under it within what I can sense, but the dungeon knows my range with stone is very short, so he could have put that further in, same with me not sensing Bunnylings under the floor. He knows how far I can sense them. There are no essence triggers or normal ones.” He hesitated. “I don’t think it can have traps, since it’s got creatures. It’s been one or the others.”

Sto remained silent

“Can you tell if some of the tiles can be flipped open?” Carina asked.

Tibs considered how he might be able to tell, then shook his head. “Unless there’s a mechanism, I can’t know what a tile can do. The first four around us have only more stone beneath. That’s all I can say. And other than colors, they all look the same to me. If they start jumping out, I’ll look for a pattern, but that’s only going to help us next time.”

“If the dungeon doesn’t change things,” Mez said.

“I count at least thirty of the Ratling and Bunnylings,” Jackal said.

“Thirty-six,” Khumdar said.

“How did you count them do fast?” Jackal looked at the mass of mixed creatures. “And with them moving.”

“I have noticed that twelve seems to be a significant number for the dungeon, although I do not understand why. There are twelve light stones on each wall between the entrance and the first room. Forty-eight of the floor tiles in the trap-room have are triggers. Twenty-four rats in the boulder room, twelve before that. Twenty-four rabbits and twelve

rats in the warren room.”

“One Whipper,” Jackal countered, grinning.

“A boss creature.”

Jackal frowned. “Five Whipper on the second floor.”

“Along with nineteen rats.”

The fighter counted on his fingers. “That’s twenty-four. The encampment and Bunnyling room?”

“I have not been in a position to be able to count the Ratlings, as many of them hide among the tents for Tibs and Carina to deal with, and the Bunnylings are still enough of a danger I have focussed on fighting them, instead of counting. I suspect the numbers will be either thirty-six or forty-eight.”

“Thirty-six Bunnylings,” Sto said, surprised. “Forty-eight Ratlings. How did I never notice I’m always using twelves? Ganny!”

Tibs didn’t bother confirming what Khumdar had worked out. Now that Sto was aware of it, he would make changes.

“I still say we—”

Tibs glared at the fighter, and Jackal sighed, then nodded, turning to study the room.

“Alright. The three of us engage and keep the horde busy. We have a lot of rooms, so we make use of it and give Carina and Mez as many chances to take them out in groups while keeping an eye out for the Brutes and letting us know where they are. Once we’ve thinned the horde enough, you can start taking shots at the Brutes in preparation for us attacking them.”

Tibs took his knives, looked at them and the creatures. Maybe he could grab one of their clubs or stone swords and give himself more range? How quickly could he unleash his ‘x’ attacks? So many things he needed to practice.

He followed Jackal and Khumdar into the room and they split apart. Instead of splitting up into three groups, the Ratlings and Bunnylings divided into four. Once for each of them and—

“Carina, Mez!” Jackal called, but the explosion told them the two were aware of what was happening.

Tibs ducked, blocked, and parried, cursing the first set of claws easily dug into his ice armor and added earth to it again. They were too fucking close.

He sliced, stabbed, and shoved, trying to give himself the space for an ‘x’, but they were too close and used any opening he gave them. He should have stayed with Carina and attacked only at a distance. It wasn’t like he’d run out of water essence anymore.

“Tibs,” Mez called. “Jump back.”

Carina called for Khumdar.

Tibs did so, then kept retreating, managing an ‘x’ into the pursuing mass that took out a Ratling. Then a flaming arrow hit the ground before them and exploded. The creatures flew in all directions, and those still in one piece immediately got to their feet and took up the chase again.

Grinning at half of them not getting up, Tibs ran into the fray, and immediately cursed

himself as his ice and earth armor was chipped away to the point he received injuries. He should have remained at a distance. He had to stop thinking of himself as a close-range fighter anymore.

The last Bunnyling fell, and Tibs put his hand on his knees, catching his breath. He wanted to go help, he could hear fighting still going, but he'd used up his fire reserve making his knives deadlier as well as his earth, and after that, he'd had to constantly replenish his ice armor as the corruption made it so brittle it broke nearly on contact with claws.

The one good thing out of this fight was that his body hadn't betrayed him to the corruption. He straightened once the amulet was filled. Only Jackal was fighting; his body turned into stone, the amount of rubble around him an indication the horde, as he called them, had considered him the larger threat.

A leaping Bunnyling shattered under a kick, a Ratling broke under the strength of a punch, Jackal grabbed another and used it to bash a Bunnyling. He grabbed the last one and broke it over his knee.

The creature had been right. Jackal was the bigger threat. If any of them had been made with a survival instinct, they'd all have fled, instead of taking him on. His friend was a scarier fighter when stoned-up like he was.

Tibs opened his mouth to congratulate the fighter, but the ground shook in time with a ponderous slam. It happened again, and Tibs turned to face the Brutes, who were only now moving. Bigger Brute was in the lead, the ground shaking as his massive foot came down slowly. The other two trailed behind it, their steps lighter, if not faster.

"If anyone needs Tibs to heal them, hurry," Jackal called. "We aren't getting long before they reach us."

An inventory of his injuries told him they were all minor, cuts and bruises. Fatigue was his biggest problem, and he couldn't do much about that. Maybe they should keep the healing potions for this point in the dungeon. He had felt more alert after drinking it.

Jackal looked fine. He seemed impervious in his stone form. Khumdar shook his head when Tibs offered.

"How are you two on essence?" Jackal asked, as Mez and Carina joined them.

The archer patted his bow. "I'm good."

"I'm low," Carina said. "I need either another amulet, or be more careful about how I use my essence."

"Then you stay behind," Jackal said, cutting off Tibs. "If you run out, you go by the exit in case we need to run. No arguing," he snapped as she started protesting. "I'm not losing the team's sorcerer to stubbornness." He faced the approaching Brutes, grumbling about this being the one time he wished Don was in his team so he could throw him at the enemy.

Tibs chuckled as he sheathed his knives. Mez had the time to raise an eyebrow at the action before Tibs pulled one out and flicked it at Bigger Brute. The jet of water splashed without visible effect, but he was proud to have thought about it.

Mez shot fire-arrows after fire-arrows, leaving scorch marks on the Brute. The

ground shook again as another foot came down. Tibs kept flicking water at it, then did an 'x' attack, and nearly drained himself without more than a few flecks of stones flying off to join those Mez was causing with his arrows.

Tibs went back to flicking water as he refilled the amulet, trying it with two knives, but that threw his aim off.

A blade of air hit Bigger Brute's face, shearing off part of it, but it didn't affect his approach.

"Our turn," Jackal said, punching his palm. "You take the left. Keep bashing with your stall. The moment it focusses on either of us, we draw it away so you three can keep attacking. If the smaller ones join the fight, you guys will have to keep Bigger Brute busy."

Jackal stepped to the right with a deliberateness that Tibs felt should cause the ground to shake. He got out one jet of water before Jackal and Khumdar were in striking range.

Instead of the darkness trailing his staff, as with his previous attacks, it amassed at the end, forming points that cut deep into the golem. The cleric swung as BB raised its arm and the dark edge sliced through the elbow, causing the arm to fall to the ground.

Khumdar hurried to back as BB turned its head in his direction in what Tibs could only think of as an angry glare, even if he had no eyes.

"Your turn!" Jackal called, also stepping away. His strikes didn't have the effectiveness of the staff, only leaving cracks against the golem's stone where the punch connected.

Tibs did an 'x' attack, working to control when to cut off the flow, so it wouldn't drain him, but was distracted by the accelerating Big Brute. The attack hit Bigger Brute and Tibs was panting again, but forced himself to watch as he hurried to refill his reserve and amulet. Once they coordinated their attack, Tibs couldn't see how they'd win this.

Instead of attacking Jackal, or going for the still retreating cleric, Big Brute threw itself at Bigger Brute and broke into rubble. Tibs stared as he felt the essence move into the larger golem, some of the new rubble reforming his arm instead of falling to the ground.

"What?" Jackal demanded, staring too.

"Of fuck," Carina cursed.

"Keep fighting!" Mez yelled, as Bigger Brute took advantage of the surprise and slammed an arm into Jackal. The fighter blocked, but the impact sent him across the room. "Carina, Tibs, whatever you have left, we need to take out the other small one. We can't let them pull this trick a second time."

With only one opponent to focus on, Bigger Brute sent blows after blows against the cleric, and Khumdar deflected them, the darkness over his staff causing the fists to slide away, instead of impacting.

With his attack being ineffective, Tibs ran toward the cleric as some of the blows still seemed to stagger him. He cursed Sto under his breath for cheating, but the dungeon didn't comment. Which was good. Tibs wasn't sure he could stop himself from arguing, and now was not the time.

Jackal was at his side, screaming in rage. Tibs took his knives out, made a water slide,

and used it to get between BB's legs, slashing at him as he slid by. His knives bit deep, but unlike with people, the golem kept moving, keeping up with Khumdar's retreat.

The next blow didn't deflect away from the cleric, the stone fist sliding and connecting with the man's shoulder. Khumdar didn't react more than move to a one-handed hold of his staff, but the break in the essence was clear to Tibs.

Jackal landed on the golem's back as Tibs hurried to Khumdar's side. The fighter punched it in the head and stone flew away with each impact.

"We don't—" Khumdar protested as Tibs places his hand on his shoulder.

"Shut up." Tibs poured his essence in and shaped it around the injury. "You can't fight with only one arm." The bone was shattered in the shoulder and the arm. It was a good thing a cleric would heal this afterward because he doubted that even with his splint, this could heal properly. He tightened it into place, then hardened the essence and focused on the fight.

Jackal flew over them, but BB's head was a mess. Half of where the face should be was only broken stone.

Tibs flicked water there. Even if the eyes weren't visible, it needed to see. If he could break the other half, it would be blind and easier to defend against. His attacks splashed without obvious effect. Maybe his aim with his water jet was no better than when he threw knives and he needed to stick to larger targets.

The one advantage his water flicking had over knives was that he could keep trying, instead of having to worry about running out of knives.

"Tibs," Khumdar said calmly, as he stepped before him and deflected the blow that could have taken off his head. "Move away."

Tibs did as told. The remaining Big Brute kept approaching, slowed by the barrage of flaming arrows Mez shot at it. Carina was by the exit, looking worried and scared.

Khumdar dropped to a knee, blocking an overhead hit, then Jackal slammed into the golem, staggering it away. The fighter's essence was broken in multiple places, but his stone body seemed to keep everything together.

Tibs had to step further away, and each punch sent stone flying off Bigger Brute. Jackal's stone fist was covered with spikes that left gouges into the golem.

Big Brute was still advancing, and despite Mez's attacks, it still had a lot of essence. Unlike with his friends, the golem's essence didn't break as a result of its injuries. It didn't match an internal structure. Some of it simply flew away with the chunks of stones. Tibs hadn't kept track of how much damage Bigger Brute had received, but a visual check told him it was significant.

But it meant nothing if Big Brute reached it.

Tibs stepped further aside and took out his knife. He pulled essence out of around him as he channeled water into it, refilling what it took from his amulet. He cleared his mind of the danger his friend was in, his anger at Sto. He focussed on the flow of essence through his reserve and he traced the 'x'.

He stabbed the center and the watery jet materialized and immediately his essence dropped. It wasn't as fast as before, but still faster than he could replenish it. It hit the golem

but didn't cause damage he could see and he was too busy to sense it, but that didn't matter. What he had to do was ensure he could keep the jet going.

He took hold of it and diminished its intensity, forced it to use less of his essence than he was pulling in. It was hard; the flow was raw, strong. Like what he thought a waterfall was, based on how the one in the cavern sounded. But it responded, and he smiled.

Yes! He thought.

And his control broke.

His reserve drained, and he dropped to a knee. He tried to pull more in, to restart the attack, but all he could do was breathe, try to slow his pounding heart.

When he finally heard something other than that, it was silence. No. Panting. Other people panting. He looked up, around. Carina was next to Mez, holding him up. Khumdar was lying on the ground, breaking. Jackal was standing eerily still.

Tibs rushed to his friend. "Jackal, are you okay?" He sensed his essence and couldn't stop the gasp.

"No," the fighter said through gritted teeth.

"How..." there was nothing in Jackal's essence that wasn't broken?

"Will." He closed his eyes. "I am not dying here. I am not putting Kro through losing me."

Tibs tried to think of something he could do, but the damage was so extensive. Even his stone body was cracked and was missing pieces in place. "I don't know if I can splint everything that's wrong."

"Don't."

"Jackal, you need to—"

"Your essence stops me from using earth to make my body stone." He stopped and Tibs sense the earth essence move from the ground and into the fighter. "I have to keep refilling myself with earth to maintain this, Tibs. Don't worry, the cleric will heal me. She has to. because I'm not sure how Kro's going to feel about me being made of stone all the time." He grinned. "Of course there one part of me that being hard all the time would—"

Tibs gagged, which made Jackal laugh, then groan.

"You cheated!" He yelled at the ceiling.

"I didn't," Sto replied.

Tibs pointed to the rubble. "You healed Bigger Brute! You can't—"

"I just did for them what you do for your friends," Sto said, calmly.

Tibs tried to contradict him, but he was right. Tibs had done it first, and Sto had never prevented Tibs from doing it. If he didn't consider it cheating. Tibs couldn't either.

He looked at his friends. They were tired, injured, but alive.

They'd survived, and based on the chest at the back of the room, BB had been the boss.

"Someone go check on the loot," Jackal said. "I'd love to be the one to do it, but I'm worried that if I move more than I have to, I might fall apart." He looked at himself. "Quite literally."