

Stepping up-9

Tibs joined Mez at the chest as he pulled out an amulet and grinned. “Another one for you,” the archer said. “I think that covers them all.”

“It’s just three,” Tibs answered, distracted by the wall behind the chest. “We only found two this run.” He took it and put it in his pouch, then stepped to the wall, studying it. Mez said something, but he wasn’t paying attention. He ran a hand over it.

Sto had done something to the wall. Tibs felt the way essence was woven in a space the size of a door, but he couldn’t tell what it was supposed to be, nor how to activate it.

Carina exclaimed something, and he spun, reaching for a knife.

“This is beautiful!” She held a silvery robe over an arm, running a hand over the material.

“If she doesn’t like the color,” Sto said, “I can change it.”

“What?” Tibs asks. He shook his head to clear it.

“I’ve noticed sorcerers like to use colors that represent their elements. I can’t take that into account in the loot rotation, so like the rest the color’s randomized. But if she put it back in the chest, I can alter the color to something she prefers.”

“Are you allowed?”

The others glanced at him. And he raised a finger to have them wait.

“Probably not,” Sto sighed, “feels like I’m not allowed to do anything, but it’s just a color, so I doubt Gany’s going to complain too loud about it.”

Tibs nodded and looked at Carina. “The dungeon says that if you prefer another color, just put it back in the chest and tell him which one you want.”

“No!” she held it against her. “It’s perfect!”

“Can you change the sword into healing potions?” Jackal asked. Tibs looked down. And there was a too-long sword next to the chest.

“Sorry,” Sto answered. “That I’m not risking her anger on.”

Tibs shook his head. “Maybe you can include some next time, so those who win can heal.” What could anyone do with a sword that big? It was longer than Jackal was tall. There were no essences woven through it, so just a normal way-too-big sword.

“Sorry, I want people in good shape for this fight. How they leave it is entirely up to them. It isn’t like there are any real challenges on the way back, right?”

Tibs glared at the ceiling. “What have you done?”

“Me?” Sto replied, sounding far too innocent. “Nothing.”

“We need to be on our guard on the way back,” Tibs warned the others. “The dungeon did something.”

Sto didn’t protest, but the damage was already done, and Tibs wondered if he’d done it to make him paranoid.

They walked slowly, more to keep pace with Jackal, who had to ensure he was always in contact with the stone floor so he could draw in essence to keep himself together, than for any danger.

Mez slapped a hand on the plate, on their side of the long corridor to deactivate the trap, and Tibs stayed by it. Sto couldn't change rooms while they were in them, but that didn't mean he couldn't set up something so the trap would rearm itself after time passed. In his current state, Jackal took much longer to cross the corridor than they had on the way in.

"Sto," Tibs whispered. Voices carried in the stone corridor. "Why aren't you using the mind essence to talk with other people?"

"I can't, you know that. Gany doesn't even know why I can talk with you."

"I know that, but mind essence should let you just talk to any mind, right? You do have mind essence, don't you?" Tibs tried to remember if Sto had said anything about what essence he had.

"I do. I have all the essence. But I have no idea what to do with the mind essence, that one and a few others."

"Really?" The surprise took Tibs's attention away from the corridor for a second and he hurried to return it there. "If you have it, shouldn't you just be able to do something with it?"

Sto was quiet for a few seconds. "Not really. Is that something you can do?"

It was Tib's turn to be silent as he considered it. "Well, I try stuff, ways to arrange the essence to see what it'll do. Most of the time nothing happens, but I've been able to use some of the things with my water essence with air."

Sto was quiet again. "That doesn't seem to work for me."

"Then how did you manage to do all this essence stuff?"

"By watching you and all the other Runners, also by absorbing those who died. I gain some of their knowledge when I do. But there haven't been any Runners with Mind essence yet. Once I have a base to start with, I can play with it, but without it, I can't seem to do anything."

That was strange. "I'd have thought there would be every essence." Immediately, he realized he was wrong. Tirania had stirred him toward the four basic ones. Even when he'd asked about others and she'd answered him, she'd dismissed them. He couldn't remember the details of what she'd said, but the sense they didn't matter had been there. If everyone explaining essence to the newly graduated Upsilon had the same mindset, it would explain why so many people were water, air, fire, and earth.

"But, when it comes to items with essence woven through them, you could do that before anyone had essences."

"Yes, but only because the people with those items had been thrown into me. With a few of them, I was able to experiment, weave other essences through and get more effect, but except for your pouch, which took a lot of work, everything else was simple stuff."

Tibs nodded. "Then can't you do that with mind essence?"

"I've played with it, but nothing's worked."

"Tibs!" Carina called. Everyone had crossed the corridor. He pressed the plate and ran to join them.

The village rooms were the same, minus the dead creatures. Sto had reabsorbed the rubble. The trap room had also not changed, except for the ice being fully melted.

“I can’t cross the iced-over pool,” Jackal said, his voice strained. “Even if I could move fast enough to avoid the rising floors, I can’t reach the earth essence at the bottom of the pool.”

“If you stay by the side,” Mez said, “you’d be able to draw it from there, right?”

“Only,” Khumdar answered before Jackal could, “that would extend his travel time, and it does not resolve the issue of avoiding the rising floor.” The cleric looked at Tibs.

He sighed. “I’ll deactivate the room.” He wasn’t looking forward to the headache-inducing essence maze, but at least he wasn’t exhausted this time.

This time, he was halfway to the maze with a ledge stone broke, and the next one after that also broke, forcing him to stretch his leg precariously to get over the gap, but he made it.

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

“No,” Sto chuckled. “Which ones will break is random, as is the level of weight they’ll support.” Which meant there was a possibility deactivating the room would be impossible for some people. Tibs didn’t think that was fair.

He reached the maze, and the complexity of the essence channels amazed him. He hadn’t been in a state to take in how they moved over, under, behind, and in front of each other. None of them crossed, forming a large and deep pattern that was beautiful in itself but didn’t take away from how difficult this was.

This time, his starting point was at the top. He focused on keeping the line tight from the start, figuring it would be easier in the long run than having to tighten it all as he had the last time. He lost his concentration a few times, but then fell into an odd mindset where he could think clearly about what he did, looking ahead a few turns to work out the correct one, while not losing track of the flow of his essence through the maze or its state.

What he lost track of was the state of his body, which is yanked back to itself as pain surged through his left arms, making him lose his grip on the wall. It only intensified as he tried to reach for it with both hands as he fell back off the ledge.

His friend’s scream vanished as he fell into the water, submerged by it.

Once he was down cursing the corruption in his body and the laughing Sto, Tibs pulled air essence out of the water to breathe as he drifted under the water.

“You should see your face,” Sto said between laughs. “It’s hilarious.”

This wasn’t funny, Tibs thought as hard as he could at the dungeon, wishing he could hear his mind.

“It is so funny.” The dungeon’s words fell apart in laughter again.

Tibs rolled his eyes, unable to stop himself from imagining Sto falling off a chair from laughter. He sighed. Okay, maybe, from the outside, it was funny. But Sto was supposed to be his friend. Friends didn’t laugh at one another. Tibs purposely didn’t think of the times He’d laughed at Jackal after one of the stupid things he’d done had come back to smack him in the face, sometimes literally.

Tibs 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 and tried to reach his friends, but they were too far. What wasn’t that far was the essence

form approaching him through the water.

With a start, Tibs realized there was a creature in the water. His concentration broken, he choked on water and paddled to get himself to the surface, away from whatever that was.

Sto laughed harder.

Tibs took control of himself hard. Water was his essence. He wove a funnel around himself and used it to propel himself up and out. Just like when he'd used the ice to send himself to the ledge, he flew out. Unlike the last time, he expected it and with a fling of the hand, he sent water ahead of him to cushion his landing.

He ended up sprawled in the water, but at least it was a soft sprawl this time.

"There's a creature in the water!" he yelled at Sto once he was out of the water and dry.

"More than one," the dungeon replied, bursting out laughing again.

"That's against the rules!"

"Says who?"

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it. "This is a trap room, there's aren't any creatures in trap rooms."

"Again, says who?" Sto's laughter was quieting.

"There haven't been any before," Tibs replied, and knew that meant nothing.

"Because the first floor is tough enough as it is for new Runners, and you didn't fall in the water until now."

Tibs nodded and sighed. "So, going forward, we can't take for granted what we'll find in any of the rooms."

"I believe we can never take anything for granted in a dungeon," Khumdar said.

Tibs nodded again. 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," he told Sto.

"It's okay. I do aim to create strong reactions, so I expect screaming. You should hear with some of the other teams have called me. It's a good thing they don't know I hear them. We good?"

Tibs rolled his eyes. "We're good."

He tried to move his left arm, but this time the corruption was taking longer to dissipate back through the rest of his essence. He couldn't navigate the ledge like this.

"Carina, can you reach where I was when I fell with your wind?"

She looked at the wall. "I think so, but I can't feel the essence there. Maintaining the airflow isn't the same as reaching into what you described the last time."

Tibs looked at her. He hadn't even considered one of the other classes might try to solve the maze. He'd only thought of the other rogues he knew and had seen. There were a lot of smaller and lighter people in the other classes, even among the fighters. They weren't all big thugs like Jackal or Pyan.

"That's not what I have in mind." He winced as he tried to move his left arm. "That's going to get in the way. I need you to support me, hold me against the wall as I get there, and

work on the maze. It's going to take a while."

"Time isn't an issue. Once I have my essence out, I can hold it as long as I want or," she looked at Jackal, "until someone breaks my concentration."

"Sorry," the fighter replied, "too busy holding myself together right now to be the annoying little brother."

Tibs chuckled. At least Jackal wasn't in too bad a state. He stepped to the ledge again and felt the wind gently pressing him to the wall. Carina sat, leaning against it, and nodded to him.

This way, reached the maze was easier, and without having to divide his attention between making sure he kept a good grip on the cracks in the wall and moving the essence through the maze, his focus was easier to maintain. Even without reaching the strange mental state he had before falling, he thought he solved it faster.

He heard the rumble of stone grinding against stone, of water rushing out of the way, and looked at the pool. Vents had opened in the side for the water to flow out of as the floor rose. Wherever the creatures were, he didn't see them.

At some point, while he worked, his arm unbunched and was fine when he stepped onto the wet stone floor.

The first floor was easy, if slow, because of Jackal. In the hall leading out there was something in the wall he wanted to check, but Jackal needed healing, so he stayed with him.

The cleric was a man, and he took one look at Jackal and pull his hood down in shock. His eyes were the same pale, almost color of all purity clerics. Tibs thought they might have been green before. He was older than most he'd come across, but much younger than their leader, that intolerant man Tibs grouped in with all the nobles in the town.

"Sit," the man said, taking Jackal's arm, then letting go as small stones fell out of the cracks. He looked at one of the guards. "Send for Maria and Louis."

"I can't leave my post," the guard replied. A man, much older than any of them, with a stern face and angry gray eyes.

The cleric got in his face. "We are here to ensure any Runner who steps out of that door will live. I cannot heal him by myself. I don't even understand how he's still alive. You are going to go and get Maria and Louis, or I will show you just how hard your life can be when you piss off a cleric."

The man only narrowed his eyes and put a hand on the sword at his hip.

The cleric noticed the gesture, raised an eyebrow, and his hand, which began to glow. "Please, do test me. There are things we are not allowed to practice as part of our regular training."

The guard's resolve broke. He stepped away, then was hurrying down the steps. The other guard also stepped away from them.

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

"We don't," the cleric replied, kneeling next to Jackal, "but we're surrounded by so much exaggeration and outright lies about what we can do, what we are, that it's easy to fool most people at least once." He grinned at Jackal. "Just count yourself lucky no one pulled

that trick on him before now.”

Carina patted Jackal on the shoulder. “I think you can take for granted no other Runner has Jackal’s knack for getting himself into the kind of trouble that requires this level of healing.”

“Noted,” Jackal said. “Next time I’m letting you take the brunt of the bosses’ attacks.”

“I recommend that you stay quiet,” the cleric said. “I have no idea how this will feel.”

Tibs winced at Jackal’s expression as the cleric began working. By it, it didn’t feel nice at all.