

Chapter 55

Tibs looked over the room with the path over the water basin. He walked ahead until he reached where the essence triggers were and felt them move. “Stay there,” he told the others. Mez was now supporting most of Khumdar’s weight, Jackal was limping heavily, and Carina was pale. Tibs couldn’t sense what was wrong with her, and when he asked she’d just said he’d overextended herself and needed food and rest.

“Sto,” he whispered. “Do you think this is fair?”

“What do you mean?”

Tibs indicated the path before him, then felt silly without someone there for him to see that they understood. “The triggers are still there.”

“Of course. That’s the puzzle.”

“But I solved it, we went through with only Jackal getting hurt.”

“He did? How?”

“The last slab crushed his foot.”

“But he’s walking. Oh, I see what you did, although I don’t understand how you did it.”

“Sto, the triggers.”

“That’s how the room’s designed, Tibs.”

“So the room is here to kill us then?” he asked, anger flaring.

“No, it’s here for the teams to figure out how to cross the path, or how the ledge works.”

“I know how to cross the path, Sto.” He stopped himself, his voice was getting louder and he might say his name loud enough the others would hear. He wanted to respect the dungeon’s wishes about that until he determined he didn’t deserve the respect. “This one is about waiting until both essences move in time to make a space large enough to pass through, the next one is just about waiting until it’s on the opposite side of where you’re standing, the last you wait until you can pass under it.”

“That’s right.”

Tibs waited.

He looked up.

“I don’t know what you’re waiting on,” Sto said.

“Look at my team. We know how to cross the path, but we can’t do it because we’re injured. How fair is that?”

“Oh.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Ganny said.

“Tibs’s right, Ganny.”

“There are rules, Sto. You can’t intervene in how a room works. You can’t even make changes while they’re in it.”

Tibs turned back the way he came.

“That’s easily dealt with, Ganny,” Sto said.

“We need to leave the room,” Tibs told the others.

“Sto, if they find out about this, you are going to be in so much trouble.”

“Who’s going to tell them?”

She didn’t answer.

“Look. Tibs made a good point. None of this is supposed to be about just killing them. You said so yourself when I started making the rooms. It’s about testing and getting them to improve. This doesn’t do either. They already know the trick, and what about trying to cross it injured leads to them improving? That’s what the fighting is for.”

“But you can’t just turn it off because you’re sweet on Tibs.”

Sto sighed. “That’s not why I’m doing it. And I’m not sweet on him, he’s just the most entertaining of the Runners.”

“Sure.”

“Tibs, I’m going to turn them off this time, but I’m going to have something in place for the next one, I already have it ready for when the room reset. You’re going to have to work for getting them to shut off on your next run. Oh, and do me a favor, don’t tell that to that team who’s helping you. They need to work for it too.”

“Okay,” he said, wondering how Sto knew they were helping each other. Then realized he could see everything they did, and they’d taken out the map Pyan’s team that drawn for them, even made alterations to it. He had to hope Tammy would be attentive. There would be enough changes from when they’d last gone in, she’d hopefully be looking for them even in this room.

As soon as they were outside, Sto said the triggers were inactive.

“I’m a little disappointed you don’t trust me,” the dungeon said when Tibs told his team to stay by the entrance while he checks.

“You’re all about testing us. This could be another test.”

“At least he doesn’t let you being sweet on—”

“I am not sweet on him. I’m a dungeon and he’s human. That wouldn’t even work. You need to get out more Ganny.”

“I would if I could, but—”

“The rules, I know.”

“The path is clear,” Tibs called to the others and then helped them across. “How’s your leg?” he asked Jackal.

“It hurts, but it’s still in one piece and not crushed, so I’m keeping the complaining to a minimum. One thing though, the thing you did to keep my leg together does something to my essence, I couldn’t coat that part in earth.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know that would happen.”

Jackal chuckled. “I didn’t know you could heal my leg, so that wasn’t a complaint.”

“I don’t think it’s healing, I’m pretty sure the bones are still broken, they’re being held in place.”

Jackal stopped by the exit and turned to the room. “Hey, dungeon!”

“He doesn’t have to yell,” Sto replied.

“He’s listening.”

“Good fight!” With a smile, the fighter exited the room.

When Sto didn't say anything, Tibs turn to follow.

"Thank you," Sto finally said, a distinct catch in his voice.

"He said thank you," Tibs told Jackal once he caught up to him and the fighter beamed.

At the top of the stair, the room was dim and empty.

"I was expecting the golem to be there," Mez said, studying the space.

"Whipper," Tibs corrected.

"If you're going to name everything, you need to come up with better names," Carina said.

"I'm not the one who names them." He crossed the room and studied the door. From this side, it was a plain slab of stone cut in the wall. He pushed on it, then put his shoulders against it. He thought he felt it move; of it was his feet sliding back. He turned and found his friends watching him.

"Are you going to help?" Tibs asked.

"Do you need our help?" Jackal replied, trying not to smile.

Tibs rolled his eyes and stepped out of the way.

Carina took Khumdar from Mez and the archer joined the fighter at the door, and they pushed. The door resisted, then with a groan opened and a scream was heard. With a curse, Jackal put more of his weight against it, and as soon as the gap was wide enough, Tibs slipped through.

A girl a little older than Tibs was on her back, arm broken. She wore the gray robes of an Omega sorceress. A stone bunny was flying at her, and Tibs flung a knife at it. It impaled in its side, causing it to land next to the girl, instead of on her. The bunny crumbled, leaving coppers behind.

"Jasmine!" another girl in the entrance yelled. Tibs saw a broken bow in her hands, but focused on the two rats running in his direction. One jumped the last of the distance, but before Tibs could slice it, air caught it and sent it tumbling away. The other Tibs happily cut in two.

"You're not supposed to help them," Sto said.

Tibs stopped himself from replying. There were people he didn't know here. What was left of a team. The boy looked to be the oldest. A rogue, by the knife he held.

"Are you all okay?" Tibs asked.

"Who are you?" the archer asked, inching in the room toward the sorceress who was still screaming, eying him warily

"He's Tibs," Jackal said. "I'm Jackal, that's Carina, Mez, and Khumdar. Are you guys planning on going in there?" the fighter indicated the open door.

"No," Tibs said at the same time as Sto and the rogue. "They need to figure out how to open it themselves."

"Rabbit and rats killed two of my friends," the boy retorted. "I don't fucking care what's in there, this place was supposed to be fun."

"Who sold you that bucket of shit?" Jackal asked. "The dungeon's about pushing you harder than you want so you'll get stronger."

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” Sto said.

“Look,” Carina cut the boy’s reply off. “I think the three of you should head out before us. No one said anything about teams running into each other, but I don’t think they want us helping you. So as thanks for saving her life, We’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention us. We’re going to wait awhile before exiting.”

“Leave it,” the archer said, helping the sobbing sorceress toward the exit. “They saved Jasmine’s life. You saw what the rats did to Aaron. That rabbit was going to kill her. Let’s just leave and go home.”

“You don’t get to hold this over my head,” the boy said before turning and following the girls out.

“Someone’s had a rough life,” Mez said.

“Street,” Jackal replied.

Tibs didn’t think so. They’d had to pay to come here, and he couldn’t think of anyone living on a street being about to afford it. No matter how little it cost.

“I wasn’t going to let them die,” Tibs told Sto.

“This is supposed to test them,” the dungeon replied. “It doesn’t do that if they have help.”

“Then move the way out so we don’t run into them. I’m not going to let someone die just because it changes things for you.”

“He does have a point,” Ganny said. “Actually, I’m surprised it took this long for one of the exiting teams to run into one of the Omega teams.”

“This team took longer to get here,” Sto replied. “They stopped for a while after the second room. If they’d just kept going, they would have been done while Tibs was still convincing me to remove the trigger lines.”

“Because that took so much work on his part,” Ganny replied.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, “if I close the door and you unlock it, will there be a golem on the other side?”

“Yes,” Sto answered.

Tibs glared at the fighter.

“What?” Jackal asked.

“Do you really want to fight one of those again?” Carina asked.

“I am afraid I would be of no help,” Khumdar added.

“I can handle one of them on my own,” the fighter said.

“You seem to forget Tibs had to splint your leg after the last time you rushed one without support,” Mez said.

“Then you can cover me.”

“Why do you even want to fight one again?” Carina asked.

“Because once it’s dead, there’ll be a chest with loot.”

“Mediocre loot,” Mez pointed out.

“It’s still loot,” Jackal replied, sounding like he couldn’t believe they weren’t interested.

Tibs nodded to the open door and Carina made a sweeping gesture, air trailing

after it. It slammed into the stone door and forced it shut.

“Yes,” Jackal said, rubbing his hands. “Tibs, your turn.”

Tibs turned his back to the fighter and the door and headed for the exit.

“Tibs, come on, be a friend and unlock it for me. There’s loot on the other side.”

“You can get it next time,” he answered.

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Jackal let out a sigh of relief as the cleric placed her hands on his leg. Tibs watched and sensed. Whatever his essence splint had done to interfere with Jackal’s essence, it didn’t do to the cleric. He could feel the flow of the essence straightening and flowing smoother in response to the bone healing fully, as well as the multiple other minor injuries the fighter had received in the dungeon. Unlike his splint, what the cleric did healed the entire person. Tibs had felt it this time, since he was conscious, and his body had relaxed under the touch. He’d felt better overall, as if the cleric had cleansed not only his injuries but his emotions too.

Khumdar put up minor protestations but gave in when the guard told him he wasn’t proceeding until he was fully healed. The cleric still grumbled afterward about not having his wishes respected and how he’d worked too hard to live his life the way he wanted to be forced to be healed when he didn’t want to now.

While Carina tried to convince him it was better than the alternative, she at least sounded like she understood his plight. Jackal had told the cleric to suck it up. Mez that “things are the way they are, there’s no point complaining about it.”

Tibs had stayed quiet because he had nothing useful to offer.

At the table, they placed what they’d found, both in loot and coins, setting aside the amulet that had been in one of the chests, a set of two knives, and the staff. Tibs kept his eyes on the items to keep from looking at the blinding essence standing behind the thin man seated on the other side of the table. He took one item after the other, studying it, then made a note in a book. Tibs couldn’t tell if they were letters or numbers, and when he looked at Carina, even she seemed puzzled.

“I have seen better,” he finally said. “I’d expected more of the team who managed to keep items from the guild.”

“We did things by the rules,” Jackal said. “And we’re still doing them that way.” He indicated the items. “That’s what we’re keeping. How much is it going to cost us?”

“You are keeping the better of what you found, I am afraid that—”

A hand slammed on the table next to the book and another kept the man from jumping out of his chair.

“Do not lie,” Harry growled.

Jackal cursed from a few feet away. “Don’t do that, Knuckles!”

Harry ignored him. “Did you hear me, Gleason?”

The man swallowed and nodded. “The staff is imbued, but not enchanted. The knives are imbued with air, someone of that element will have to study them to tell you more. The amulet had no essence in it.”

“Hand them what the guild owes them,” Harry instructed, and the man opened a

metal box. He placed eight silvers and eleven coppers, then closed the box. When Harry didn't say anything, Jackal grabbed the coins, Khumdar the staff, and Carina the amulet. As Tibs reached for the knives, the seated man snorted.

“Those are useless to you, they're air imbued.”

“They're knives,” Tibs replied, taking them. “I know how to use knives.” He followed the others, sensing the way the air was imbued in the blades, trying to determine what they could do. If he was careful, everyone thinking he only had water was going to be very useful.