

Chapter 10

The Bunnyling room was the same as the last time, down to the twitching nose poking out of one of the floor tiles, letting them jump out without warning.

“Okay,” Jackal said, “last time we underestimated those fluffing stone things that shouldn’t be able to hurt anything. Let’s not make that mistake again.”

Tibs sensed the Bunnylings running under the floor from one cover stone to the other. The fundamental problem for his team, except Jackal and Khumdar, was that the room was bare of anything to use as cover. Stealth was impossible, which meant his role was that of a not particularly competent fighter. Carina would have trouble with her strong magic, since that needed time to focus, and Mez would have to fire his arrows on the move.

Unlike with the Ratlings, the Bunnylings seemed to know how much of a threat she represented. They spent the entire last battle targeting her, forcing the rest to interfere with their attacks, rendering theirs less effective. She touched her amulet, looking unhappy.

“I will protect Carina,” Khumdar said, slowly spinning his staff. Whatever else he’d been up to while away from Kragle Rock, the cleric had become proficient in fighting with it.

“Mez, stay with them,” Jackal instructed. “Khumdar can cover you, too. Me and Tibs will do what we can to keep them distracted and at a distance so you can both take your shots.”

Tibs drew his knives. There were a dozen Bunnylings within his range, but the room was large enough there could be twice, if not three times, that number under the floor. He’d tried to keep track of them the last time, but the fight had deteriorated too quickly into one of pure survival.

He and Jackal stepped into the room as one and the nose poking out between the floor and lifted tile stilled. Jackal continued walking toward it, while Tibs stopped, attentive. It screeched, and the Bunnyling ran for the closest cover stone, jumping out of their warren.

They were a good head smaller than the Ratlings. Human-shaped bunnies with thick legs, scrawny arms ending with thin hands and long claws. Even then, they looked like they should be easy to defeat, especially after fighting the bigger and more savage Ratlings. But on top of being strong and fast, the Bunnylings were coordinated.

Four ran at Jackal, three for Tibs and six, no seven, spread around the room as more exited the underground warren.

Tibs coated his body with a thin layer of ice for extra armor—he remembered the ease with which those claws cut through his leathers. One rushed at him and Tibs stepped aside, slashing, and claws cut his leg, nearly throwing him off balance. He cursed their coordination and his weakened ice as he threw his knife at the retreating Bunnyling. The other was already out of range, joining two more circling him.

They weaved in and out, the retreating one joining them, adding to the difficulty of keeping track of which one was readying for a leap, a feint, or a rush, and instead, they came at him as a unit.

He coated his knife in fire as he drew another one, turning as he slashed the first to

reach him. He felt claws in his side this time, but it was worth it as one Bunnyling turned to rubble as it landed on the floor, and silver coins rolled away. He stabbed another one, then dropped to the floor, and the jumper flew over him.

Not this time.

He was back to his feet and used his essence to wrap his cuts, stopping the bleeding. The pain still pulsed with each step, and he added earth to the ice, hoping that would compensate for how brittle it now was.

They circled him, and Tibs moved with them, taking in the rest of the fight while not letting it distract him.

Jackal was fighting six, two of them armed with clubs, but the rubble at his feet and grin on his face told Tibs he wasn't in trouble. Mez was firing arrows after arrows, but the Bunnylings dodged most of them, and they were able to maneuver him in such a way that as Tibs watched, the archer nearly fired at Khumdar as a Bunnyling got out of the way of the arrow at the last moment.

Even with the cleric keeping Bunnylings away from Carina, she had to stick with quick air-blade attacks as the moment she began focusing on something bigger, they were mobbed. Her attacks and Khumdar's staff seemed to do little more than keep them at bay.

Motion out the corner of his eye had Tibs jump and reflexively slash at the lunging Bunnyling; he missed. He rolled to his feet, then claws had him falling forward due to their impact, but at least, this time, they hadn't cut through his earth-reinforced ice armor. He put a foot under him and his leg buckled as corruption erupted there.

He fought the pain, and the new weight on his shoulder as teeth dug in it and bit down. He screamed at the pain and skewered its head. It crumbled away and showed him another of the Bunnylings running in his direction, head down.

Memories of impacts from stone bunnies and Bunnylings alike made him react before he could stop, and it crumbled to rubble paces away from him as its essence was added to his large reserve.

He cursed as the stone settled at his feet. He'd promised Sto he wouldn't do this again.

Khumdar finally had the upper hand on the group of Bunnylings targeting him and Carina, his staff trailing darkness with each swing and sending any it impacted flying away. Mez and Carina used their attacks on those.

The bulk of the Bunnylings was before Jackal, keeping the fighter focused on them, at the cost of a few of their numbers, while one exited a swivel-tile well behind him.

"Jackal," Tibs called, trying to draw his attention to his hidden attacker, but he was too busy to look away. Tibs pulled water essence in as he made the 'X' with his knife and when he stabbed it in its center, it was ripped out of him nearly as fast as he replenished it. He dropped to a knee as the focus required meant he had to let the corruption weaken his leg.

Once he stopped the attack, he panted, and stared at the incoming Bunnyling, frozen in place by fear and exhaustion. Where had it come from? he wondered. Then saw the raised floor tile. So had his answer, not that it helped him move.

It exploded, and Tibs covered his face to keep the hot stones from hitting it. He then pushed himself to his feet, tightening the essence wraps over his injuries corruption had eaten at.

“Jackal,” Carina called. “Throw one of them away from you.” All the Bunnylings that had been around her and Khumdar were rubble.

The fighter kicked on, and she raised then lowered her hand, a feral grin on her face. Wind picked up the Bunnyling, then slammed it on the floor. Jackal kicked another, and Mez shot it with an exploding fire arrow. Khumdar joined the fighter, and together, they finished the Bunnylings that were left.

“Someone tell me they aren’t any left,” Jackal said, holding his side. Tibs walked around the room, sensing under the floor.

“They’re all dead.”

“Thank the abyss.” Jackal dropped to his knees. “I never want to fight one of those again.”

“He’s going to be disappointed,” Sto commented. “I’m glad you survived, Tibs.”

“Thanks. Sorry about draining one of them. I just reacted.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m guessing you haven’t had a lot of chances to practice.”

“Yeah.” Tibs let his voice trail off, wondering who Sto was unbothered. The last time Tibs had drained the essence out of one of his creatures, the dungeon had sounded like he’d have no choice but to take action if it happened again.

“Do you need me to heal you?” Tibs asked Jackal.

“No.” The fighter took a step back. “Sorry. I’d rather not get that fever again.”

“But the cleric will heal us when we leave.” Mez sounded worried. “Isn’t that going to take care of everything?”

“If it does, then next time I might get his help, but he still has corruption in him, no matter how much they tried to purge it. And his wraps interfere with my stone body.” He smiled at the fearful archer. “But don’t worry. If you get a fever, I will take very good care of you.”

“I warned you,” Tibs said when Mez looked at him.

“I didn’t think it—” he swallowed and nodded. “Are we continuing?”

“We are searching this room,” Jackal instructed. “We are not leaving with all the loot after I had to go through this fight.”

Tibs looked at the room, empty except for the stone piled and errant silver coin. “That means looking in the warren.”

“You said they’re all dead,” Carina asked. “Right?”

Tibs nodded, toeing the closest tile open. He dropped in, not looking forward to this. The others opened other tiles and went in too.

Tibs was closer in height to the Bunnylings than the others, so he only had to bend down as he walked through the dark tunnels. He made flame in his palm to provide illumination.

Instead of chests, Tibs found small bags, each containing coins and gems. He had three when he exited. Carina was seated with Mex, holding a vial with a greenish liquid in it.

“What is that?” Tibs asked, joining them.

Carina continued studying it. “I think it’s one of the healing potions they used to hand out at the training grounds; before we had the clerics.”

“It is a healing potion,” Sto confirmed.

“How did you make it?” Tibs asked. “I mean, how did you know to make it. You said that you need to have something before you can copy it.”

“I need a basic form of it, yes, but after that, I can alter what makes it and see what happens. But in the case of this, a Runner had it on her and she died before she got to use it. The rest of her team couldn’t get to her in time to keep me from getting her.”

That happened before Bardik’s attack, since Tibs and his friends were the first in. “Who were they?” How had a Runner stolen a potion from the guild?

“One of the nobles. A pack of Ratlings got her.”

“Why would a noble settle for one of those?” Mez asked. “If I didn’t have a choice, I’d never have drunk one.”

Tibs bit back his reply. Mez wasn’t a noble, he reminded himself. Well, not one like the others. It would be so much easier if his friend dressed in his old clothing and armor instead of the expensive ones. “The good potions are expensive. Enough that Tirania is careful in how the guild uses those they have.”

“There’s five vials,” Carina said, indicating the bag in her lap.

“One for each of us,” Tibs mused. Was Sto cheating again? He wanted to ask, but if Ganny was around, it would start an argument between the two of them. Because he’d promised he would keep her existence secret from his friends, he couldn’t ask Sto if she was still busy on the third floor.

“We should keep them,” she said. “It’s extra money for us.”

“Will we get anything for them from the guild?” Mez asked. “They were just giving them to us when we got hurt.”

“We’re going to pay for them,” Tibs replied, with only a little bitterness. “Once we reach Epsilon.”

“Pay for what?” Jackal asked, pulling himself out of a hole. He reached in and pulled out a bag, then joined them. Carina showed him the potion.

“Is that a healing potion?” he asked, taking in.

“There’s five,” she said. “One for each of us.”

“Then everyone drinks theirs,” Jackal said.

“Are we allowed?” Carina asked. “Won’t the guild force us to pay for them?”

Jackal drank his in a quick swallow, made a face, then sighed in relief. “I’m not telling them those were in there.” He threw the empty bottle over his shoulder. “If it’s not with the stuff we bring out, how are they going to know?” the bottle bounced on the floor and rolled until it melted away.

Tibs took the one she handed him. He hesitated, then drank it. He started to choke on the taste, but as with the previous time, that disappeared in time with his injuries healing. Tibs placed his bottle on the floor.

“If it is not too much to ask,” Khumdar said as he climbed out of the warren, then

stretched, his back popping. “I will pass on warren crawling duties on future runs.” He placed two bags with the others and sat.

Carina handed him the last vial, and he narrowed his eyes in suspicion, then sniffed it. “If you plan on poisoning him, Carina, you will need to be more subtle.” The cleric’s sounded amused, but his expression was serious.

With a roll of the eyes, Mez took the vial out of the cleric’s hand and drank it in one swallow. “Abyss, I’d forgotten how vile this was.” Then he sighed. “Good thing it doesn’t last.” He handed his bottle to the cleric.

“You’ve never drunk one of these in your travels?” Jackal asked.

“I have heard of them,” Khumdar said, looking at the greenish liquid. “But from all accounts, they are prohibitively expensive. Less than a respectable Purity Cleric, but still beyond the means of a common traveler.”

“Not like you’re exactly common,” Mez scoffed.

“Thank you. Should we not keep it and hand it to the guild? The money will allow Tibs to get more of the amulets.”

“Drink it,” Jackal ordered.

Khumdar eyed the fighter, then drank it. He gagged, “This is horrib—” His face brightened. “Interesting. As the taste does not remain, using this is palatable, but something better tasting would still be appreciated.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Sto replied sarcastically, but Tibs didn’t repeat it.

Jackal motioned to the ceiling and Tibs nodded.

“Dungeon, These are so we’re going to be ready for what’s in the other room, isn’t it?”

“I like him,” Sto said. “Very perceptive.”

Tibs covered his mouth to hide his snicker, and Jackal looked at him. “He said that you’re right.”

Jackal stood. “Makes sense. After the beating we get to make it this far, it’s the only way to keep us going. I was going to turn us around once we’d caught our breath.”

“And give up whatever loot is there?” Carina asked innocently.

“There’s still going to be loot the next time we’re here.” The sorcerers and cleric followed the fighter, but Mez kept Tibs behind.

“Did it heal the corruption?”

Tibs sensed the essence wrap he’d placed around the archer’s broken arm. Dissolving and reabsorbing it since it was not properly healed. He didn’t sense corruption in that essence or Mez, but he knew that meant nothing.

“I don’t know. The corruption that’s tainting my essence doesn’t stay in it when I put the wrap on your wound. It leeches into your body, and after that, I can’t tell what happens. Just like I can’t see your essence in you, just the way it tints my essence coursing through your body.”

“I have your essence in me?”

Tibs nodded. “Everyone does. Even ordinary people, although theirs is so faint, I don’t notice it unless I’m paying attention. The Omegas are like that before their first run.”

“Does theirs have a tint to it?”

“No, only people with an element have essence, and that’s what tints the essence.” He didn’t mention the blacksmith or baker who did have a tint to their essence. It wasn’t his place, and he still had no idea what it meant beyond the obvious.

As they rejoined the others, a comment Ganny made, back when Tibs asked Sto he’d been able to make it so Tibs had an audience with Fire. What was needed for an audience, she’d said, was the element and intense emotions.

Other than the audience with Water, he’d nearly died in the process of getting an audience. Tibs couldn’t think of anything more intense than that. If that was true, didn’t it mean that it was possible for someone other than a Runner to have an audience?

Did the guild know that?

Did anyone?