

Chapter 59

Tibs stood among the supplicants—Peolo had called them—in the uncomfortable clothing that had been provided. A shirt and pants of rough fabric, and hard leather sandals that did nothing to protect his feet. He pointed that out to the cleric who smiled and said Tibs wasn't going to the section of the dungeon where the fighting took place.

No one looked at him, or each other, as they were led to the dungeon's entrance. Unlike Sto, this entrance was at ground level, in the sloped face of the mountain, the corridor stretching out in white marble veined with gold and silver.

"Oh," a female voice said excitedly once Tibs was within knife-throwing distance of the opening. "The next group's here! Craren, you have to come see..." she trailed off. "Craren, get yourself here. What's with that one?"

Tibs fought the urge to look around for the unseen voice. He hadn't expected to hear this dungeon. He and Sto were good friends. Had considered him so even before Tibs could hear him. He'd thought that had been the reason he could hear him and Ganny. If he could hear this dungeon also, could he hear others?

"Hun?" another unseen voice said, sounding like she was approaching. "What is it?" she said, bored, "a rogue? Okay, we don't see a lot of those."

Tibs frowned. How did she know he was a rogue?

"Not that, look." The dungeon said.

"I'm looking, Val."

"You're looking," Val replied dismissively. "But I need you to Look."

"I'm—what's that?" was that fear in her voice? "What in Purity's light is that?"

"I'm wondering the same thing. You ever seen someone with more than one element? Did we ever have one come in? Your memory's better than mine."

"No, we haven't. And I've never seen one. That's not possible. Why is he here?" Craren sounded more concerned than afraid now.

"How would I know?"

"Keep him out," Craren stated. "Whatever he is, it can't be good."

"Okay, how do I do that? If I close my doors, it's going to raise questions, it's been what... a long time since I've done that? And I can't just keep him out, look where he is. If I close the door just before him, I'm going to crush those in front."

Tibs forced himself to ignore the dungeon and her assistant as they stopped and a man stepped before the entrance. He wished that, like his ability to sense the surrounding essence, he could stop hearing them.

"Welcome supplicants." The man's voice carried over the crowd of five and zero people—Peolo had told him how many were entering with him.

"He's after Purity," Craren said excitedly. "Look, he has seven of the elements, that the one he's missing."

"I'm not giving it to him."

Tibs closed his eyes and wished they'd be quiet. He needed to listen to the

instructions.

“Today, you are embarking on a journey that will last you a lifetime. Those of you who return with your element will become the guardians of our world. Through your swords, your bows, your halberds, your shields, and your dedication, you will keep corruption and chaos from gaining a foothold. You will fight them back where they try to enter. You will protect your brothers and sisters in your element as they go about healing the damage that has already been caused. And when you fall, even if it is today, you will do so knowing that your hard work has made the world safer to those who don’t have the privilege of serving Purity.”

“To serve is to be Pure,” Tibs chanted with the crowd, although he was out of step. The girl on his left glanced at him before looking ahead. Peolo had taught him the responses, but he didn’t have years of practice giving it.

“Your devotion began years ago, but your test starts today. The dungeon will test your dedication to Purity through hard work. Through testing your willingness to endure hardship and resist temptation. Your start as many, but your journey will be alone as the world will not often grant you support in your ordeals. At each junction, you will take the one the person before you did not, and once you are walking alone, you will be tested.”

“Oh you can be sure we’re going to test him,” Craren said in the pause as the man looked the group over.

“You can turn back at anything,” he continued. “There is no shame in finding your limit and realizing you are not yet worthy of your audience. You will be welcomed back, and returned to your studies and meditations.”

“To know is to be Pure!” Tibs was in step this time.

“We are not like the adventurers, who will throw anyone in their dungeons simply to make it grow stronger and profit from it. Our dungeon is here to help you along your path so you can grow and fight the enemies of the world. Some of you will fall, as part of your training, or against the enemies, but it will not be because you are unprepared. We are the world’s army, and we will be ready!”

“To fight is to be Pure!” As Tibs said the words, he realized the dungeon had fallen silent for a time. He wasn’t sure if the silence was good or bad. The man stepped aside and they entered.

Unlike Sto, the entrance had no decorations. The marble formed an archway wide enough for two, but as they approached, the supplicant formed a single line. The entry hall was shorter than Sto’s, maybe no longer than what extended outside the mountain.

Instead of ending in a room, the hall split into two. The man before Tibs took the left branch, and he took the right. The light diminished for a few more steps away from the entrance, then settled to something resembling late dawn, but there were no light stones, the light just was. Sensing for the essence, it permeated the walls without discernible form.

At the next junction, Tibs took the left, then he took another left, and two rights. Then he could no longer see the person before him, but he heard their steps. Peolo had warned him against hurrying to catch up. At the junction, he had to strain his hearing to figure out which branch they had taken. He went left.

He thought he was alone, but he came across another junction. He closed his eyes and listened.

“I’ll give him that,” Val said, and Tibs nearly jumped in surprise. “He takes this seriously.”

“If he’s hunting all the essences, he’d have to,” Craren replied.

“How do you think he does it? Don’t the element kill anyone trying to have more than one?”

In the pause, Tibs thought he heard a sound in the distance.

“I thought they did,” Craren said. “You think he can make out the one who went left?”

Tibs stopped himself from moving. He’d been about to head in that direction.

“The sound doesn’t travel that far. If he didn’t think to keep track of the splits, there’s no way he knows which to take.”

Tibs went right and was annoyed at himself for not thinking to do that. Anything in the dungeon could be a test.

“You think him being a rogue has something to do with surviving the audiences? The few rogues that have come through have been tricky.”

“Then he’s about to find out you don’t trick Purity,” Craren replied in a mocking tone. Then she sounded uncertain. “Still, I don’t think we should risk it.”

“Are you saying you don’t have faith in the element we represent?” Val asked.

“It’s our job to make sure only the worthy have their audience, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes.” There was a sense Craren was stating the obvious in Val’s tone.

“He isn’t worthy, so we can’t let him have the audience.”

Tibs smiled at the finality in those words. He was going to prove to Craren who, of the three of them, was the most determined.

Of course, being able to listen in on their conversation gave him an edge they might consider unfair, but he was simply using one of the skills he had access to as a way to survive his run.

He stopped as the path ended in a featureless wall.

Okay, having listened to them didn’t prepare him for that.

“Turn around, essence boy,” Val said. “This is the end of your quest.”

Not happening, Tibs thought. This was his one chance to have his audience. He wasn’t missing it.

The gray walls, floors, and ceilings looked like stones, and that was one of the essences they were made of, it wasn’t the primary one. Unlike Sto’s walls, which were mostly stone and then had what Tibs expected some of all the other essences, since there was so much he couldn’t identify, this wall only had one element he couldn’t identify, the seven others were those he already had.

The dungeon didn’t want him to continue, but maybe she couldn’t simply prevent him. Dungeons were about testing what the Runners could do, forcing them to push forward. Maybe she didn’t know any other way to stop him than to give him what she thought was an uncrackable puzzle.

It would certainly stop anyone else.

Tibs reached for the earth essence and gently pulled it out of the weave that made out the wall.

“What is he doing?” the dungeon asked.

“Being tricky,” Craren replied, “he’s a rogue. It’s what they do.”

“But he’s pulling the essence out,” Val replied, offended. “He can’t do that.”

“Of course I can,” Tibs whispered as he started on the water, then cursed himself as the dungeon and Craren fell silent. He concentrated on holding earth aside, without his bracers, he had no space for more essence in his reserve. He didn’t alter how quickly he worked, worried that any change would make the dungeon more suspicious.

“Did he just reply to me?” Val asked, the uncertainly making her sound afraid.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Craren said. “They can’t hear us. He’s talking to himself. You’ve seen them doing that once they have no one else to speak to. Talk talk talk. Humans just don’t appreciate silence the way we do.”

Tibs would appreciate some silence right now. The weave wasn’t causing him problems, but he’d grown so used to talking with Sto during his runs he wanted to reply to them.

Fire followed water, then air. Then darkness and light. He was surprised there was corruption and he moved that away, but then, the dungeon wasn’t the people making the proclamations, she knew how the elements were all vital.

He stepped through the opening he made.

“How... how is he walking through like that?” Val asked.

“Because purity isn’t solid,” Craren said, “you know that. No essence is solid unless it’s woven that way, and here you have them solid because of the way the essence interact with each other, just like the real stuff.”

“Are you telling me I’m going to have to rebuild everything?” Val said, horrified.

“Only if you expect another one like him to show up. They aren’t supposed to have purity yet on this floor, let alone seven elements. Cheater, that’s what you are.”

Val sighed. “It is sort of what rogues do.”

Tibs smiled. Considering Val said she hadn’t seen many rogues, they must have left quite an impression. The other side of the wall was another long corridor. Was that all this dungeon was, a series of unending corridors?

“I hate that I can’t just encase him there. Craren, how bad would it be if I changed things so he got crushed further down? I mean, it isn’t like anyone would know.”

Tibs kept walking but sensed as far as he could ahead. A dozen-pace was the distance Sto needed to be able to make changes, and the only thing keeping him from changing rooms when they were in them, other than the rules, was because of how interconnected he made the essence in them.

“You’d know,” Craren replied. “So you can do it, so long as you’re comfortable with the thought, and the memory. I doubt anyone else will come to check how you work after millennia without causing trouble.”

“Why do I have to be so cursed strict about what I can do,” Val grumbled and Tibs relaxed. “I’m still making changes ahead, I’d like to see him get through those.”

Ahead proved to be far enough Tibs didn't sense the changes. When the count for his steps reached nine and nine after the opening he made, he still hadn't encountered anything. He stopped counting. He know how to go higher by just adding another number, so one, zero, and zero, but it was too much of a hassle at that point.

The hall widened into a semblance of a room, with stalagmites and stalactites growing until they almost touched, reminding Tibs of a growling dog, like one of Serba's.

He snorted. "You think that's going to stop me?" He stepped forward gauging the space between the 'teeth' for the best way through, then stopped. "Yeah, this is too easy."

The dungeon chuckled.

Tibs studied the floor, visually and by sensing the essences. Like the wall that had blocked his way, this was earth woven through with other essences, although Val seemed to have learned from what he'd done because there were a lot more essences he couldn't identify. There were no traps on the floor or among the stones. Without regular visits by rogues, she might not have a lot of traps or situations she could use them with.

Purity was about hard work, and Val had said that was her element, just like Sto was about stone, so that would be a large part of how this room could be overcome.

He studies the gaps. They varied in size but they would all require squeezing through in some way, then how to get there would take work. The stalagmites didn't have handholds, but they also weren't perfectly smooth. Even without resorting to using earth, he'd find a crack here and there to make the climb.

He picked a path, and in a few minutes of climbing, he was up. There was no ledge for him to stand so he grabbed onto the end of the stalagmite to steady himself and immediately let go with a cry of pain, then fell down the side and ended on the floor.

"I bet you think this is funny," Tibs growled once he had his breath bed, as the dungeon laughed. His hand was cut open in multiple places. He senses the state the rest of his body was in, only bruising, then wrapped his essence over his hand to stop the blood.

"Craren!" Val cried out. "He's got life!"

"That's impossible," she replied, sounding as if she was returning. "Only dungeons have that one."

"Then explain how he did that?"

The silence stretched as Tibs got to his feet.

"How did I miss he had that?" Craren mused.

The same way anyone missed important details, Tibs mentally answered, by getting distracted by the not-so-important ones. Like how he's let the ease of the climb distract him from sensing ahead. He flexed his injured fingers to ensure the wrap moved with them. It was his first time using it on such a nimble part.

This time, the climb took much longer. His hand slowed him, pain lancing through each time he put weight on it as he pulled himself up, but he also paused to sense ahead, and that way caught the places where Val added small spikes of stones to some of the handholds. Most of the obvious ones, forcing him to detour.

Val and Craren discussed what his ability to use life essence meant. Val suggested Tibs was a dungeon creation who'd gotten out and was...she couldn't come up with a reason

why he'd been here. Craren pointed out a creation wouldn't be able to manipulate essence. Only living creatures could do that. Could he be a dungeon how had figured out how to... she couldn't complete that, and asked Val asked how she'd go about putting her core into a body. Which Val couldn't answer either.

As Tibs reached the opening between the 'teeth', they decided that he had stolen the essence, just like he clearly had stolen the other essence he used. He was a thief after all. They were now more determined to stop him from getting an audience and stealing Purity's essence.

Tibs couldn't identify the essence that coated the other side of the teeth. He decided metal, based on how his hand was sliced up. With only his personal reserve, all he could coat was a hand with water and added earth. He iced one, made the other as hard as stone, then reached in for purchase.

"Cheater," Craren said as Tibs pulled himself in enough to look. Thin metal blades lined that side of the stalagmites' peaks. Sensing, that same essence only went down as far as he could reach with an arm. The stalactite above didn't have any, so he reached up, found handholds, and pulled himself through and over the blade. His landing on the slope was awkward and he tumbled his way to the ground.

"You have to give him that," Val said, chuckling, "he's resourceful."

"We don't have to give him anything, do we?" Craren replied dismissively.

"You know, you are right, we don't."

Tibs readied himself for something as he got to his feet.

"We certainly don't have to give him any light."

It was dark

The kind of dark he'd only experienced once, and even if it had resulted in an audience, it still made a shiver run down his back. Even with darkness as an element, he saw nothing at all. This was the darkness of bard's songs, moments before they announced the truly evil thing of the story came at the hero. It was the dark that hid creatures that sucked the life out of people, which the bards also sang about.

He had to stop listening to the bards.

The light he called was a reaction to those stories, to the fears he'd had when Mama was still there to comfort him and make the bad things in the dark go away. His breathing slowed as he made out the floor a few paces around him. He wanted more light, but it was all paltry reserve let him do.

"He is such a cheat!" Craren complained.

"He has light as an element," Val said with a sigh. "I should have thought he'd use it."

"Okay," Tibs told the darkness beyond his light. "That was well played."

"And he can appreciate a cunning plan," Val said with pride.

"Because he beat it."

Tibs preferred Ganny, Craren was too bitter. Ganny didn't need to win so much, she could enjoy watching the Runners succeed.

Maybe it was because she was younger. Craren spoke of millennia. Tibs didn't know how many years that was, but the word had a sense of weight to it, so it had to be a lot.

Taking that first step into the little light he created was harder than it should be. He could see where he stepped, but a voice, little and terrified, at the back of his mind, clamored that anything could hide beyond the light, and the darkness was close enough it might jump at him easily.

Only staying here, staying still, ensured it didn't find him.

And it wasn't like he needed to move, another part said. It wasn't afraid, but still willing to side with his fear. He would grow hungry and he was in a purity dungeon, so he would get his audience.

He agreed with it that he could. But it was Val and Craren's plan to scare him into remaining where he was. He would not let them win.

He moved a foot, then the other, and took another step. His progress was slow, but it was progress. He looked ahead and saw nothing, but he imagined the other room, the other challenge he would face.

And oh, abyss, did he imagine that one with a lot of light.