

Chapter 81

Tibs grunted as his ice shield took the fist. He felt the impact all the way to his feet and ice fell off, but he kept it whole.

“You okay?” he asked the cleric, who pushed himself to his feet using his staff.

“The blow took me unawares. It will not happen again.”

“Will you two move!” Mez yelled as a series of small explosion caused the Brute to stagger back. “I can’t use anything bigger with you so close!”

Keeping his shield between the brute and them, Tibs backed away along with Khumdar. The explosions slowed as the distance increased, but their intensity increased. A glance to the side showed him Carina, keeping the other Brute from moving closer to Jackal and Bigger Brute. The stone creature had cuts all over its surface, but none were as deep as the last time they fought the boss creatures.

It raised a foot to step forward, and he felt the air essence accumulate under as it brought it down and explode. It barely caused any damage, but it staggered back, effectively keeping it where it had been.

Mez’s exploding arrows also didn’t have the effect they used to.

Jackal yelled happily as he pounded away on the Bigger Brute. The two rock-being punched each other to little visible effect and Tibs wasn’t sure Jackal was trying to destroy it.

The explosion was large enough Tibs felt it around his shield.

“Finally,” Mez snarled.

A peek around the shield showed Tibs red hot rubble, and he ran toward the Brute Carina fought as it was able to put a foot down through the exploding air and move forward.

While their need to get close to cause damage was a serious flaw in their creation, the Brutes didn’t get tired or have to worry about their reserve running low.

“Coming through!” Tibs yelled as air buffeted him. He melted the shield and reformed the water into a sword. The wind died and Tibs slashed at the Brute’s leg. The cut wasn’t as deep for him either. Sto had increased their over all resistance to the elements. He rolled out of the way of the coming fist and coated the ground with ice, but the Brute didn’t chase him.

Sto had also changed how they fought.

That been Tibs’s biggest problem with the fight. He’d expected the Brutes to do as they’s done before. Chase whoever was the closest until they could move toward Bigger Brute to heal it. Then, getting them to slip on his ice was simple, and he could hit them with minimal risk to himself while they got back up until they couldn’t anymore.

Sto said they weren’t alive, so Tibs didn’t know if their actions were them adapting to all the fights they had gone through, or if Sto simply added new reaction to them.

“Remain down,” Khumdar instructed, sounding too far to help, but Tibs did so. A wave of darkness passed over him and impacted the Brute, causing it to stagger, and step on the ice as he attempted to keep his footing.

As soon as it was on its back, Tibs sliced at it and added as many cuts as he could before it was standing again. Khumdar joined him and got in a few piercing blows too.

“Step away,” Carina called.

They moved and the ball of air that flew at the Brute was so dense with whirling essence it was visible to the eyes. It exploded on contact, the air ripping into the cuts and breaks already there, sending stone flying away until there was nothing left of the Brute.

Carina was panting, hand on her knees.

Mez wasn't out of breath, but the reserve in his bow was nearly depleted. “Jackal,” he called. “You planing on ending your fight at any point? We can't get to the third floor until that.”

“You guys done?”

“Yes,” Mez replied, then lowered his voice. “He's showing off, isn't he?”

A fist through the Bigger Brute's chest, and then Jackal ripping it apart was the answer.

“I was waiting for you to be done,” the fighter said, dusting his hands off with a grin.

“Of course you were, Carina said, still panting slightly. “That why you didn't end it before Mez called to you. You weren't even paying attention to our fights.”

“I was kind of busy,” Jackal replied without any bashfulness. He picked up the bracers from the rubble. They were leather, and had stone and air essence weaved through them. A set of knives with an essence Tibs couldn't identify was within the rubble of the Brute Carina destroyed, and a red sorcerer's robe in Mez's.

Stone grinding against stone announced the opening of the door in the far wall.

“And that's our stairwell to the third floor.” Jackal headed in its direction and Tibs hurried to join him. The ornate chest was on the left before the stairs.

“I'll check it,” Tibs said before Jackal could step toward it.

“But we won,” the fighter protested.

“And such is how many a great warrior died,” Khumdar pronounced.

“What he said,” Mez added.

Tibs searched for a lock, and didn't find out. Then he looked for traps and found something. The left hinge had a pin connected to it through a spring mechanism that went through a hole in the chest. He'd never seen something like this, either in his own training or what he'd received when he was an Omega.

He could work out that as the hinge moved it would compress the spring until it released and struck the pin which would... He wouldn't know that part until he opened the chest, but not with the pin there. He made a small pick of ice and used one to move the spring out of the way and the other to pull the pin out.

He showed it to Jackal before gently opening the chest.

Attached to the back was a crystal vial with a dark green mist inside.

“There's a lot of air packed in there,” Carina said. “It wouldn't take much to make it explode.”

“There's corruption there too,” Tibs added and studied it more carefully. “Also earth, and other element I can't identify. The pin would have cracked the vial, and the air would

have sent the mix in the face of whoever opened the chest.” He glared at Jackal. “And you have to know it wouldn’t be good for them.”

The fighter nodded thoughtfully.

“And you knew it was trapped?” Mez said, the accusation clear.

“No,” Tibs replied, and kept the rest to answering the archer. “I’m a rogue. I survive by not taking for granted that winning means I’m safe. And Sto’s always changing things. He know how over confident Jackal it, so it’s why I’ve made sure to check all the chest before him, or did you forget that?” He couldn’t keep his anger from slipping through. “I’m just surprised this is the first time it’s happened.” Once they were done with the run, he was letting Mez have it. “I’m guessing he either didn’t think of it until now, or he didn’t want to put too many problems until we were able to deal with the rest.”

“A bit of both,” Stro said.

Tibs sensed the essence withing the vial and had an idea. “Jackal, I’m going to try something with earth.”

“I don’t think now’s the time to channel an element you haven’t practiced, Tibs.”

“Now’s the prefect time,” Tibs replied. “Sto’s the only one I can damage if something goes wrong, but Earth shouldn’t cause that. And I’m not going to channel him. I can sense the essences, so I want to see if I can manipulate them without channeling the element.”

“Haven’t you tried that before,” Carina asked.

Tibs shook his head. “Other than my training with Alistair, I haven’t done any work with the elements since we were waiting to make sure I had Water under control. The only time I’d manipulate essences is to refill my reserves, but their all full, except for my core one, and I’m not risking hurting anyone to fill that.”

He placed a finger on the crystal container. “If I can get this to work, it’ll give me more versatility in fights, but I’m also trying it with Earth instead of Corruption, because I’m easier to talk into letting him go if I end up channeling him in the process.”

He found a strand of earth essence in the mix within the vial and mentally took hold of it. He stopped as he felt his hold over water slip. His reflex was to channel what he manipulated. He tried again. Alistair had taught him to split his attention as part of his training, and this shouldn’t be anymore different, other than he was splitting it between two element, rather than to condition of the same element.

The earth essence withing the vial responded to his pull and he smiled. He pulled everything that was inside into a tiny pebble. Now, could he work with more? He reached for the earth essence into the wall and pulled some over the vial. The crystal became dirty with dirt, then earth grew over it, and Tibs made that stone.

He sighed.

“Still you?” Jackal asked.

“I’m always me.” Doing this had left Tibs more tired than he expected, but now didn’t have to worry about needing to act on another element in a small way causing him to switch to that element. It should mean he could pull from his bracers, but he didn’t want to try it yet.

He used water to break the ties holding the now rock covered crystal vial and

pocketed it. He couldn't tell if the vial broke in the process, but that didn't matter. The stone would keep the gas from escaping.

"Tibs?" Sto said as he moved to let Jackal access the chest.

"Yes?"

"That's mine."

Tibs smiled. "Not anymore. Think of it as another reward from the chest."

"No, no, maybe," Jackal mumbled as he pulled items out. Two sets of nice clothing, but without essence. The maybe was a pair of leather boots. Carina eyed them, they had air woven through. "Anyone needs amulets?" He set down two. Then a crystal bottle containing a yellow liquid. "This is different." Jackal studied the set of two leather bands as Tibs picked up the bottle.

"Tibs, look." Jackal had placed the leather strips over his fists and they had metal knobs where they went over his knuckles.

"I really wish that hadn't made it into this chest," Sto said.

"What's in it?" Mez asked as Tibs sense the composition

Was that? "I don't know. I think it's essence, but I've never felt something like this."

"The guild is sure to know what it is," Khumdar said, as Mez turned so Tibs could put the bottle in the pack.

A boom had Tibs on his guard, making a sword as he turned in Jackal's direction. The fighter move his first from the wall, where cracks were spreading

"You guys mind if I keep that?"

"You just used them," Mez said, "which means we don't have much of a choice."

"Right. Sorry. I just wanted to see if they did more than protect my knuckles."

"They go boom," Carina said, putting the amulets in Khumdar's pack. "That was air detonating on impact."

"Like he isn't already strong enough," Ganny commented.

"You're the one who said it all had to be random," Sto replied.

"I prefer he get that, than you give them whatever Tibs asks for."

"Down we go?" Mez asked, heading for the stairs.

"Anything else on them?" Jackal asked, stepping next to Tibs.

Tibs nodded. "But I can't tell what they are."

"Metal would make them harder," Khumdar said.

"There should be someone at the guild who can tell you more about them," Carina said.

Jackal scoffed. "I'm not giving them anymore of my coins. They go boom, and that's plenty for me."

They joined Mez at the bottom of the stairs. Tibs glances at the junction before them, then went to the alcove next to the stairs, where he sensed the doorway. He activated it and looked at the bridge over the pool.

"We can come down to the third floor directly," he announced.

"That's a lot of loot we'll be missing on," Jackal commented.

“This floor will have better loot,” Carina said. “Although I’m not sure how this will work.”

Tibs looked at where they were meant to go. The hall was a dozen paces of roughly carved floor and walls which reminded Tibs of Sto’s entrance in his early days, then it split into three.

“Are we supposed to split up?” he asked. His friends looked at him questioningly. “I’m asking you. Sto doesn’t give that help, anymore.”

Ganny let out a bark of laughter.

“You’re done tricking me,” Sto stated and Tibs smiled.

“If this is about splitting up,” Carina said. “I feel there should be five options, not three.”

“Then it’s about picking the right one?” Mez asked.

Tibs studied the junction from where he stood. “I’m not seeing anything that would let a wall slide down to block a way, so we can turn around if the one we pick doesn’t go anywhere.”

“But the dungeon can just close it anyway,” Mez said. “It doesn’t need actually doors.”

“It doesn’t make changes to a room while we’re in it,” Carina pointed out.

“But is this a room?” Khumdar asked. “And are we certain what the rules are for hallways? As has been demonstrated, the rules are not always what we believe them to be.”

“The dungeon said it doesn’t make changed,” Jackal said.

Mez snorted. “Right, and do we know it was honest?”

“Yes,” Sto replied.

“He’s got no reason to lie,” Tibs said, although he didn’t think the jab as honesty was aimed at Sto. “The rules are there for everyone. I think we’d have noticed by now if he lied about what he does.”

“Remember, the dungeon is here to make us stronger,” Carina said. “There have to be rules for Runners to work out. I think Khumdar’s right. Here, the challenged might be working out what those rules are in relation to what is a hall, what is a room, and what else there might be. And if the rules are always the same.”

“Whatever it is,” Jackal said, “we aren’t going to figure it out standing here. Let’s pick one and move.” Before anyone could comment, the fighter headed for the central hall.

“Jackal!” Carina and Tibs called after the fighter. When he didn’t slow or anything happen, Tibs ran to catch up. With a huff of exasperation, Carina joined them, followed by Mez and Khumdar.

The uneven floor and walls continued. Even the lighting was more of when Tibs was Omega, with torches causing the shadows to dance instead of the light stones. The passage width varied, as did the direction they went in.

After a few minutes, they reached an intersection. The corridor they were in bent to the right, while a section jutted to the left.

“Is tgeh goal to have us die of boredom?” Jackal asked, peering into the left junction.

“Or hunger,” Mez said. “If we get lost, that could become a problem.”

Jackal placed a hand on the wall. “We won’t get lost. There’s stone essence in everything so I can remember the way we take.”

“What can you tell is of what’s ahead, Tibs?” Carina asked.

“Not much.” Tibs sensed ahead of them. “Ganny knows I can do this, so there’s essence everywhere. Its’ denser in places, and that might be a creature, but I’m too far to be sure.”

“So we need to make a decision again,” she said, looking at one junction then the other. “I think Mez is right, this will be a maze.”

“Then we go that way.” Jackal stepped into the right turn and froze as something clicked under his foot. He turned to stone as everyone moved away from him. Nothing happened and Tibs looked for anything that could be the part of the trap the trigger activated.

“I believe,” Khumdar said, “that we are being confronted with one of those potential rules. If there are no distinctions between rooms and halls on this floor, then traps could be anywhere.”

With the trigger still not having activated something else, Tibs went to Jackal and studied the area around his foot. The roughness and unevenness of the floor made noticing it harder, but there was a tile there. He poured water over it. The mechanism under it was complex, but didn’t seem to go anywhere.

“I think this one’s a decoy.” He iced it in place.

“Maybe it warns the creatures we’ve arrived?” Mez asked, holding his bow at the ready.

Tibs sense, but he couldn’t make out any essence filaments among the essence saturating everything. The denser spot hadn’t moved, at least. Maybe those were decoys too?

Jackal raised his foot. “Then Tibs takes the lead again.”

Looking for traps along this would slow them down. If Sto had made the floor, there would be a pattern Tibs could work out and use that to go faster, but he had no idea how Ganny thought.

He move cautiously, searching for tiles. When he found one, he iced it. There was no point in trying to work out how they were set up this time. On the next run he’d take the time since they wouldn’t bother with the second floor. The easiest way would be for him to ice the entire floor, but Ganny knew he could do that. And just like Sto had come up with a way to make it problematic in the pool, He suspected Ganny would make him pay for such a thoughtless approach.

They reached another branching of two path, them sent like a ‘v’ ahead of them. The trap tiles continued along both. The essence also felt saturated the same.

“We’re going to die of hunger,” Mez stated.

“We can go back,” Tibs replied, stepping to the right branch and looking for something to tell him which was the right one. “The doorway to the second floor’s back there.”

“Oh sure, unless the trigger fearless leader stepped on closed the path.”

Tibs opened his mouth, then closed it with a shrug. Without studying each trigger he couldn’t tell is one signaled behind them. He thought they should have felt a wall coming

down, but maybe there was a way to make that happen quietly.

“Locking us in doesn’t seem right,” Carina said. “That has the feel of setting us up to die, instead of challenging us.”

“And how is walking around with just traps challenging anyone other than Tibs?”

“There will be more,” Khumdar said before Carina could reply. “Of that, I am certain. Mayhap this challenge is regarding maintaining our alertness?”

“Hey dungeon,” Jackal told the ceiling.

“Ganny,” Tibs corrected. “It’s her floor, so she’s the one making the decisions.”

“But this is still the dungeon, so it’s the one doing all this.” the fighter motioned around them.

“Jackal,” Carina said. “When you want something at the inn, do you ask Kroseph, or his father for it?”

Jackal opened his mouth, closed it and thought. “Okay, that’s a good point. Ganny, just a reminder that fighting is part of how we’re supposed to be tested.” He then looked at Tibs.

“Alright,” she said, “I will answer this one. There will be fighting. And when it happens, I don’t want to hear any complaining about it.”

“You’re going to get your fighting,” Tibs translated. “Possibly more than you want, even.”

Jackal snorted. “I will never get enough fighting.”

“Is it too early to point out that his is the type of responses that has doomed entire adventuring parties?” Khumdar asked.