

Chapter 60

Tibs rested his head against the stone. He stopped fighting the exhaustion and closed his eyes. The climb, and falling, of the stalagmites, had only been the first of the challenges the dungeon put in his path.

After a long walk in the dark, there had been blocks blocking the way, and he had to punch through them. Tibs wanted to take them apart through essence use, but the dungeon knew which he could control, and had made sure they were in the minority this time.

He'd coated his fist with ice, earth, and corruption, and hit them. The corruption helped degrade the essence that made up the block, while not interacting with his. Craren was unhappy about that realization.

After that was a challenge clearly aimed at rogues. A large pit with too many spikes glinting in the light at the bottom. Columns were spread through the pit, ending in small platforms at floor height, and if Tibs had his bracers, he would have been able to make the jumps between them. Without it, the only way he could cross was to use the beams from the stack by the side of the entrance.

It was a puzzle, where he needed to find the right beam among the varying length provided to create a path from one platform to another until he made it to the other side. He suspected that if he got one wrong, he would either lose it as it fell in the pit or be in a position where he had to bring them back and start anew. There were more beams than he thought he'd need, but he had no way to know if he'd reach a point where he'd lost too many to make it.

An added complication was the weight of the beams. From the shortest to longest they were all the same, and as he had to carry more and more of them over the previously narrow beams he put down, the strain increased. The beams weren't flat, which would make walking along them a problem, if not for Tibs's experience walking roofs, as being able to pull earth essence from the floor to secure the ends.

He lost two of the beams and watched them shatter as they hit the spikes. He shuddered at the idea that was what waited for him if he wasn't careful. Their loss didn't keep him from reaching the exit, but forced him to take a longer way around the platforms.

Then there was the talking. Val and Craren were much more talkative than Sto and Ganny.

Unfortunately, other than Craren's complaints about Tibs making it through this clever trap of theirs or that impossible challenge, they didn't talk about him, or the ways they planned on stopping him. They didn't even seem to talk about the other Runners trying for their audience.

They were reminiscing about previous Runners while he worked. That supplicant they had sent back running and crying after he'd broken a hand trying to make it through the blocks, that girl, who had bragged about how strong she was on the way to the entrance, and how she'd thought climbed the wall they had set before her would be easy. Hadn't it been sad when that cleric died because he relied on his faith instead of fighting the monsters that populated the lower floors?

On and on they jabbered. Nearly causing Tibs to fall once as Val exclaimed at a fighter's battle they had lost, as if it was happening right now, next to Tibs.

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He woke with a start and looked around.

How long had he slept? How long had it taken him to cross the room? Unlike Sto, there was no sense the dungeon had a schedule to keep. All the Runners had entered together, and Peolo said weeks could go by before more supplicants were ready to enter. They weren't interested in feeding the dungeon, so they took the time to get them ready to reach their audience.

He stood and started walking again.

More blocks he needed to break, a wall he had to walk along, and nearly fell because he forgot to sense for traps in the handholds and cut his hand. Craren had laughed, then been annoyed when he'd regained a hold and kept going. Other than adding more cuts to his hands, the previous ones seemed to heal quickly. Having clerics heal him when he left the dungeon made it hard to know if his wraps did more than keep any injuries from getting worse. Those he got while training went away quickly, but he'd always thought of those minor injuries.

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Tibs woke up, again.

Or was he waking up for the first time?

Val was going on about something, speaking loudly and quickly enough it took Tibs a few seconds to assemble that another Runner had just returned from their audience.

He closed his eyes again, but the two of them kept on talking excitedly. Why did they have to do that here and not wherever that Runner was? He could only head them if their focus was 'near him'.

The next room was a floor made of sliding tiles he needed to move until they were in the right pattern to mark the path. If he had it wrong, they would crumble under his foot, opening onto a deep chasm.

Val seemed to have a thing for long falls.

In the middle of his sixth attempt, his stomach loudly reminded him his last meal had been a while ago.

"Time to set up the feast," Val had announced, and Tibs barely kept from sighing in relief.

"You can't do that, Val. They need to fast so they can have their..." Craren trailed off. "Oh, sneaky."

Tibs lost track of the puzzle as he worked through what they'd just said, then remembered clerics used fasting to reach their audience. They might be so set in their ways the dungeon forgot that high emotions were the actual reliable trigger.

But her plan still worked against Tibs's. It had taken him nine days without eating to have his audience with darkness. How long would it take him to have one with Purity if he ate? Tibs didn't usually reach strong emotions normally, so he didn't know if it would happen at all.

He put Craren and Val out of his mind and had to restart this attempt from the start. It

took him three more before he had the path to leave the room.

He was assaulted by smells.

Spices, sweets, meats, bread. Oils and char. His mouth watered before he looked toward the tables laden with food.

Cakes and bread, platters of meats and vegetables, bottles of drinks, tankards of ales. It was indeed a feast. One that if Sto ever recreated, would have people clamoring to do runs just for the chance to look at it, let alone taste what the smells promised.

Tibs quietly cursed the dungeon for how close to the tables he needed to be as he headed for the next room. Halls were supposed to be safe places.

He had a tankard in hand before he realized it, and his throat constricted as he forced himself to put it down.

Val could put a noble to shame with her cruelty. How could she claim purity as her main element and do this?

“Come on,” Craren cooed, “you have to be hungry. Just one bite. It’s the best Val ever made. Trust me on that.”

He made fists and walked to the next challenge as she laughed.

This one forced him to lift and pushed beams out of his way until he reached the other side, where, exhausted, he was confronted with a puzzle on the door.

A square with one and five tiles in it, leaving one empty space. It was a sliding puzzle like the one in a previous room, but each tile had a scene drawn with multiple creatures on them. Val was not the artist Sto was. Tibs had no idea what creatures they were supposed to be. Or what the pattern was.

He slid them around aimlessly for a time, wondering if they would fall in the right order before his exhaustion, thirst, or hunger caused him to have his audience.

When he noticed the detail, he felt like hitting his head on the puzzle. The exhaustion had to be the reason he’d missed such an obvious one. No two scenes had the same number of creatures on them, not only that, but they made out the first one and five numbers, so the answer was clear. He needed to arrange them in order.

Getting them there in his state took time, even with his practice working the one in the other rooms.

He groan when the smells enveloped him as the door opened and he forced himself against the wall away from the table to avoid temptation, or his fingers moving for the food on their own.

He’d considered taking a nap there, but now, he might end up eating something in his sleep.

The next room and another puzzle on the door. A square with nine spaces in it, and nine tiles on the table he had to put in them.

“You’re done,” Craren had said in satisfaction.

Each tile has a number from one to nine on it. He placed them in order.

“How?” Craren demanded. “How can he read the numbers? There’s no way he’s from around here.”

“Rogues are clever,” Val replied. “He probably studied them because he was coming

here.”

Tibs silently thanks Carina for teaching him.

Them in order wasn't the solution.

He noticed the arrows etched on the side of the square pointing inward, marking each line and diagonal as being important. This time, he rested his head against the door and cursed. He was too tired for this. It wouldn't be only numbers, this had to be some form of calculation.

Without a number, as the answer, marked anywhere on the door or in the room, the answer would have to be self-evident within the puzzle and relate to the arrows.

Tibs wished he could strangle Val.

It took him a long time, once snapping awake as his head touched the door's cool stone, to work out the answer. The floor had lines on it where Tibs had to use them once he ran out of fingers to count on.

One and five was the answer.

It was possible to put the nine numbers in the square so that each line gave him one and five as the answer.

He was done after this, he promised himself.

He was never doing numbers again.

Carina could scream at him as loud as she wanted. He was done.

“Oh, come on!” he cursed as he smelled the food.

Craren laughed.

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Tibs snapped awake because of the pain in his stomach.

Again, he hadn't meant to sleep, not with food so close, but again, he hadn't eaten anything in his sleep. His stomach made sure to remind him of that.

He tried to recall how many times he'd slept to equate them to how many days he had been in the dungeon, but he couldn't. There were times when he couldn't even tell if he'd been dreaming of being in the dungeon or awake.

He was definitely awake now, but he didn't want to be.

He closed his eyes. He'd woken up without having eaten enough now, he thought it was safe and being able to think would help him ensure he survived the rooms.

“Then, you remember what she did?” Craren said excitedly, her voice increasing, as if she was walking in his direction.

“She threw herself off the ledge!” Val replied, as if it was a revelation.

Tibs groaned. As if the smell of food wasn't enough to make sleep difficult, now those two had to show up. The quiet had been so nice recently.

“Yes! She was almost there; I could tell. All she had to do was make her way across and I know Purity would have been waiting for her.”

“Purity was still waiting,” Val said, her tone turning somber. “But there is no returning from that embrace.”

“Then there was that sorcerer!”

And on they went. He wanted to scream at them to shut up, had his mouth open, but stopped himself in time. They were telling stories Tibs had already heard them talk about again, as if it had just happened.

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He snapped awake to a cry of excitement.

He'd fallen asleep through their jabbering?

Or had he imagined he was sleeping? He certainly didn't feel any more awake.

He shambled to the other room, looked at the differentially raised tiles there, and closed the door. He was in no condition to deal with it.

He sat, closed his eyes, and...

Had to listen to them talk.

He banged his head against the wall, hoping pain would somehow cover their voices. He did it until he felt wetness down his back. Sensing, he noticed his broken skin and wrapped essence over it, cursing.

They didn't even notice he'd hurt himself, too busy talking about a sorcerer who had read from a book as he proceeded through the rooms on the seventh floor, instead of seeing of looking around and dealing with the challenges.

The third room killed him.

Once Val absorbed the book, she found it was something about mathematical equations, instead of about her.

They laughed loudly at the sorcerer's insanity.

"Will you two shut up!" Tibs yelled at the ceiling.

The silence that followed was profound, and Tibs closed his eyes.

Finally.

"He can't have said that," Craren said fearfully.

Tibs groaned as he realized he had said it out loud.

"Maybe he's insane too and imagining someone's talking," Val offered, her tone doubtful.

"I wish," Tibs grumbled.

He tried to enjoy the ensuing silence, but the idea it would break kept him from relaxing. These two just couldn't stop, so they would—

"Hello?" Val said, tentatively.

"Isn't it kind of late for that?" Tibs said with a sigh. "I've been here a while now. That's what you say when someone arrives, but you were too busy gawking at my essence to say anything then. So how about you shut up now and let me sleep? And take away the food. I'm not going to eat it."

"Well, aren't you bossy, for a human trapped in a dungeon?" Craren said haughtily.

"I'm fucking tired because you two never shut up, so forgive me if my manners aren't up to your fucking standards. And what is it with you and recounting everything that happened before? Go watch the others instead and leave me alone."

"You can't hear us," Val said with determination.

Tibs let his head fall forward. “You have no idea how much I wish that was true. Sto never yammers on like you do.”

“Who’s Sto?” Craren asked.

“Don’t encourage him,” Val chastised her.

“He’s my dungeon.”

“Your dungeon?” Val demanded. “No one owns us!”

“Sorry, sorry.” Tibs waved his hand, hoping that would quiet her down. “He’s my friend. And he happens to be a dungeon, like you. I saved his life.”

Craren snorted. “Ph, sure. A human saving a dungeon. Like that ever happened.”

Tibs shrugged. “Look, is it too much to ask for some silence? I just want to sleep and get through everything you have planned and be done.

“Why are you here?” Val demanded.

Tibs sighed. No, he wasn’t getting his silence. “You worked out why I’m here pretty quickly. You know which one I’m missing.”

“What are you after?” Craren asked. “Why do you want another element? You’re just a greedy rogue.” Tibs snickered, and she huffed. “You think this is funny? Val, why don’t you bring a bunch of creatures to that room he needs to go through next?”

“You can bring a creature from a lower floor to here?”

“What if I can?” Val asked.

“What, don’t have a dungeon you can ask?” Craren said mockingly.

“Sto’s working on his third floor, and it never came up. And he’s also never threatened to change a floor I’m already on.” He chuckled. “Then again, his first floor’s tougher than yours, even if it isn’t this large.”

“This floor isn’t about killing supplicants,” Val replied, offended. “I test them. I make sure they have the determination needed and are worthy to have their audience.”

Tibs smiled. “How do I rate?”

“Too well,” Val said bitterly.

“Look. I’m not asking that you make things any easier on me than you do on the others. I understand what you’re about. Ganny explained it to me. You’re pushing me to be better. Like you said, you test us. If we fail, we might die.”

“Except that you’re cheating,” Craren said.

“I was,” Tibs corrected. “You’ve made sure I don’t have much to work with.”

“You still have all that essence,” she snapped.

“I’m not letting you have the audience,” Val stated. “Do you think you’re the first person to come here and try to lie and cheat their way to an audience?”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re a rogue,” Craren said. “That’s all you do.”

“I’m a roof runner,” Tibs said with pride. “And a pickpocket. I lied to get it, but I’ve done everything else according to the rules.”

“The rules say you can’t use essence,” Craren said.

“I don’t think so,” Tibs replied. “I’ve gone through Sto’s first floor while having

essence. A lot of us got our element before his second floor was ready. It didn't help everyone survive." He felt something on his cheek and was surprised to wipe away tears. "I lost a lot of friends to him."

"And you're saying you are friends?" Craren asked, no, demanded. She didn't like Tibs calling Sto his friend.

"I was angry at first, and I thought he just wanted to eat us. That was before I could hear him."

"You couldn't always hear us?" Val asked.

Tibs shook his head. "I didn't even know I could hear another dungeon until I came here. You're just the second dungeon I've been into... that I've met."

"What happened to make you hear him?"

"I had four audiences," Tibs said with only a slight hesitation. He was in no state to manage anything believable. And who would Val and Craren tell? "Water was first. She told me to get the others. Then Earth, Fire, and Air. That's when I heard them for the first time. Well, that's when I was able to understand them. I'm pretty sure I sort of heard something before that."

"So you decided that if four let you talk with a dungeon more, would let you control us?" Val was suspicious again.

"Water said I needed to get the next four."

"You said she sent you after the first four," Craren replied.

"That was the first audience. On my second with her, she told me about getting these. My essence got corrupted as part of saving Sto, and it wouldn't go away, so I went to Water, hoping she'd remove it. She said to ask corruption when I had my audience as part of getting Light, Darkness, Purity, and Corruption."

"You went to Corruption before us?" Craren demanded.

"You aren't easy to reach," Tibs replied, "and there's a pool of it in my town. I was in pain, angry and Don was having people laugh at me, so throwing myself in it was easier at that point."

"So you want me to believe that you aren't trying to control us?" Val asked, the suspicion still loud.

"Why would I want that?"

"Power, what else? You're corrupt, so that's what you're after."

"I think you're listening to the clerics too much. You have to know the elements aren't like they're saying. Corruption is needed. I don't know why, but if he wasn't, he wouldn't be an element, right?"

When they didn't reply, Tibs closed his eyes and hoped that—

"Fine," Val said. "You know more than the usual supplicant."

"Thank you. Can I sleep now?"

"Leave. Just get up and get out. I'm going to let you do that. If you keep going, I am going to make sure you fail."

Tibs sighed. Hopefully, being so tired wouldn't lead to a fatal mistake. He'd just have to take it slow. At least Carina wouldn't wait for him indefinitely. Once her bracelet

changed, she'd return to Kragle Rock. If he wasn't there by then, it would mean he hadn't survived.

"I guess we both have to do what we feel is right."

"No more using your essence," Craren said.

"That isn't how this works," Tibs replied. "I'm going to use every tool I have so I can survive, and you're going to make it as hard as you can for me to do so. Enemies don't make deals."

"Is that what we are?" Val asked, sounding slightly disappointed.

"I'm too tired to think of a better word. I don't want you dead. I just don't plan on letting you kill me."

"You can't stop us," Craren said.

"I'm not looking to kill anyone," Val said. "That isn't what I'm about." She paused and sounded sad. "But my challenges can kill you."

"I know." Tibs yawned. "Now, if you don't mind. I'm going to try to sleep, so go back to talking among yourselves." He closed his eyes, and it felt to him that the next seconds of silence had an offended feeling to them.

Then, Craren and Val were talking.

Loudly.