

“Tibs,” Don said, “three squares diagonally on your right.”

“I think he’s got you,” Sto said.

Tibs looked at everyone’s positions, but didn’t see how it was. He certainly didn’t have a line on the Lord.

Ganny’s sorcerer moved, ending before the Lord. Only there was no one on that line either.

“Khumdar, forward by two. Feel free to blast the sorcerer out of the way so you can threaten the dungeon’s Lord.”

The cleric spun his staff as he moved, darkness trailing the tips, as the sorcerer etched a crystal barrier between them.

“Go ahead, Cleric,” Ganny taunted. “See what I’ve learned of what you’re capable.”

Khumdar turned, letting his staff slip until he held it at the three-quarter point instead of the center, and as the tip of the long side scraped over the floor, something happened that had Tibs staring.

With each spin and scraping, the burst of darkness that flew at the sorcerer contained clumps of earth essence. The crystal shield deflected the darkness, but the earth stuck within the etching, deforming it, pulling it down until it shattered and a series of burst tore the sorcerer apart.

“You are now in danger of losing your Lord,” Don announced.

“How did he get earth mixed in?” Ganny demanded. “Even the sorcerers can’t do stuff like that yet.”

“That’s new,” Jackal stated, while Tibs tried to figure out what had happened.

He’d been so surprised he hadn’t thought to sense details, but he was confident that if there had been an etching or filigree, he’d have sensed them. “How could you do that?” he finally asked. “I’m with Ganny. I thought only sorcerers could pull essence out of stuff.”

“And they can’t do that yet,” she repeated.

Don had the smile of when he knew something no one else did.

“I shall start by establishing that is it the guild who claims only sorcerer can do so,” The cleric said.

“In their defense,” Don interrupted. “I’ve yet to come across a book contradicting them, the mindset required—”

“Then,” Khumdar continued, sounding slightly annoyed, “I shall continue was pointing out I am a Cleric of Darkness. As such, I have access wot a wealth of secrets that even the guild wishes it knew. And I shall end with—”

“You are so full of it,” Jackal said, grinning. “Do you think I haven’t noticed you hanging around the fighter’s field? Or speaking with some of us there?” He looked at Don. “How did you know he’d pull that off?”

“I fail to understand your surprise,” the cleric said, smiling back. “I was, after all, simply following your example.”

Tibs stared at the fighter. “You’ve been... asking questions?”

“What can I say, Tibs,” Jackal replied. “You’re a bad influence on me.”

“Wait, so that’s where you keep vanishing to?” Mez asked. “Going around prying secrets out of other Runners?”

The cleric smirked. “I am not required to answer you.”

“Does that mean anyone can use the essence from more than one element?” the archer asked.

“No,” Don said. “As I was going to say, the mindset to allow that is difficult to reach even for us, and we start with a more open way of thinking about the world than anyone else. But we need to take that up later, since I’d like to know if the dungeon has a way out of my trap, or it wants to abdicate.”

Tibs looked at Ganny’s Lord. It hadn’t moved, neither had her remaining archer and infantry. Tibs didn’t understand the problem until he looked beyond her pieces and where Don had positioned his team. If the infantry moved to position itself between the Lord and Khumdar, it opened the Lord to Jackal, who, for this game, was the Lady. If the archer moved in any way, Tibs would be able to take on the Lord, since he was a sorcerer this time.

He didn’t know enough to claim there was nothing Ganny could do to change the situation, but it didn’t look good for her.

The huff she let out agreed with him. Then the Lord crumbled. “I so hate you right now.”

“And that’s another win for us,” Don stated, a broad smile on his face.

“You always say you like a good challenge,” Sto said.

“He’s not a challenge,” she replied. “He and Quigly keep defeating me. They aren’t any fun.”

“Quigly’s good at this?” Tibs asked, heading to the chest. He’d expected the warrior to let his sorcerer make the decisions in this room.

“He did go to war with a king,” Jackal replied, while Ganny grumbled something incomprehensible that hadn’t sounded like a compliment.

“Which he lost,” Don said.

“Yeah, but you don’t piss off one of them to the point they’ll throw you in a catacomb instead of executing you for everyone to see, just by losing. He had to make that king fight for it hard, and that takes a lot of strategy.”

“You and him should have a game,” Mez suggested to Don, while Tibs inspected the chest for triggers.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” the sorcerer replied. “I didn’t make the best of impression on him.”

“Like that matters,” Jackal said dismissively. “You made the worst impression on us, and look where you are. I’m sure that beating you will make him feel better.”

Don snorted. “Like that’s ever going to happen.” He paused. “You aren’t suggesting I let him win, are you?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Jackal said with a chuckle, stepping next to Tibs as he opened the chest. “Are we going down another one of Don’s memory here too? I’m hoping for something better than that...” he trailed off.

Tibs pulled a sword out. “Maybe we are. Considering how many people have wanted to plan one of these into him.”

Jackal leaned over Tibs and looked in. “I doubt that would come with armor, if that was the case. No one’s owned something that good until recently. Unless the dungeon things Don needs protection, in case we’re going to use the sword to stab him.”

“Like you’d wait for me to give you the tools, if you felt like stabbing him.” Sto

commented.

Tibs took the metal chest plate out. "He'd need something, otherwise he's punching, not stabbing Don."

"Before the conversation progresses any further," Don said. "Can you confirm this is theoretical? I thought the training was giving you enough of an outlet for causing me pain."

Tibs grinned. "Jackal can turn any time into a training session."

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"I want you to channel Lightning," Don instructed.

Tibs froze. "What?" He looked back where they'd come from, in case they'd missed one of the creatures, but there was no trace of the fight against the Gnolls and people golems there.

"You heard me."

"Don, there's nowhere for you to hide. Lightning travels far. This isn't the right place."

The sorcerer smiled. "This is the perfect place. You can't destroy anything."

"You didn't tell him what you did to the Ratling camp, did you?" Sto asked. "Or when Jackal pushed you to the point where you melted your ice?"

"You know what I did before," Tibs said, swallowing the pain of nearly killing Jackal.

"But the dungeon can remake everything here. Unlike, say, a warehouse. That takes a lot more work."

"Like you have any idea how much work it takes me to fix the damage," Sto grumbled. "And it hurts."

"It hurts Sto," Tibs stated.

"Then don't hurt him. Also, don't hurt us."

Khumdar and Mez had taken a step back at Don's announcement. Jackal hadn't moved. He hadn't even stoned up.

"I trust Don," the fighter said. "Hey," he added at the stares. "It's not the first time I've said it. I let him order us about in the Conquest room, don't I?"

"Because he's the best chance we'll win, and get the loot," Mez replied. "This is about training Tibs, and we know how that goes better than he does."

Jackal shrugged. "Tibs's not going to hurt us."

"Hurt you," Khumdar said. "We have yet to truly put to the test how much Tibs can resist the elements when it comes to *our* safety."

"That's what you can't seem to grasp," Don said. "Tibs never 'resisted the elements'. What he does is reach an understanding of what they are, and that he isn't them. It's been confrontational because Tibs didn't have a way to keep from being overwhelmed."

"And that Oneness thing is how he's going to keep it from happening?" Mez asked, dubious.

"Khumdar, care to step in and help?" Don asked.

"How would I—"

The sorcerer glared.

The cleric sighed. "Very well. Oneness is a way of living based around the idea that the elements flow through people, and that they affect their emotions. Within certain circles of the belief, they claim the elements are our emotions, but that is a minority. But

the elements are not our emotions. They are beings, they think, they feel, they have their own desires. And that is why I do not believe this will help Tibs gain control.”

“Why haven’t you ever suggested he try something like that?” Mez asked.

“Have I not just said I do not believe this will help? Also, while I am aware of the existence of the philosophy and its underpinning from discussing with believers. That does not mean I have learned how it is taught.” He narrowed his eyes at Don. “And I will ask how it is you believed I would be aware of its existence.”

“That I’d know, you mean,” the sorcerer replied with a smirk. “You mentioned seeing the Austratium during your travels.”

“I have,” the cleric replied cautiously, but also sounding like he didn’t see how it meant anything.

“The Austratium is located in Arkidian.”

“I believe you are correct.” His tone didn’t lose its caution.

“Arkidian adopted Oneness as their dominant philosophy a little over three centuries ago. Became rather militant about it a hundred and sixteen years back. It would be impossible for you to have traveled through that kingdom and not learn about it. I’m surprised you managed not to get dragged into being taught. If you really don’t know anything about how to learn it.”

“How would you know of the kingdom’s beliefs?” The cleric asked in one of the rare moment of being dumbfounded Tibs had witnessed.

“I read about it,” Don replied.

“You...read about it?”

“It was from a scholar who was researching if it was possible to teach someone the sorcerer’s way of thinking. She wasn’t impressed with it, but I found more of her works when looking for how to help Tibs.”

“He isn’t lying,” Tibs said at the questioning look Khumdar gave him. There had been no light on any of the words. Just Don’s usual sense of superiority when he spoke of things he knew so much about.

“Then I would like to know why you felt the need to read about something I mentioned in passing,” Khumdar said, tone darkening.

The sorcerer looked at him in surprise. “I read that years ago. Back when I was going to be a scholar. Back then I was always in the library, reading anything they’d let me take off the shelf.” He sighed. “When my family could afford the entry fee.”

“Am I to believe that—”

“How about you two talk this over later?” Jackal said. “We have a run to finish, and while I’m willing to spend that precious time with Tibs training, this discussion isn’t helping that happen. Your unhappiness at Don borrowing your thing and unearthing some of your secrets is for later.”

Don snorted. “I have better things do to with my time.”

“Jackal,” Tibs said. “It’s not safe to do that here.”

“Like anything is,” the fighter replied. “But Don’s right, here is safer than anywhere in Kragle Rock.”

“But I can hurt you,” Tibs insisted.

“Think of it as an incentive to be careful, then.”

Tibs looked at the others. Even with the distance they'd put, he'd expected protests out of Mez at least.

"It'll be fine, Tibs," Don reassured him.

He doubted it, but that was his fear talking. He took a slow breath. It had some basis from his past experiences; he couldn't deny that. Another one. But his fears were usually disproportionate to what ended up happening.

He let go of Water, and it took him many breaths to be able to channel Lightning.

There was so much to do! The shifting wall room, the boss room. Finding how to get through it. He had to bring Marger to the town so he could kill him and have that bring the guild down around his body. All the runners that needed his help so they wouldn't die the way the guild wanted them—

He breathed.

He was being impatient.

There was too much to do to waste time. He couldn't stay here, still. He needed to move, make it all happen. Talk to Darran, give him the Promises to get the armor, the weapons, trainers, good trainers who'd—

He breathed.

There was time.

No, there wasn't. He was—

Tibs.

He breathed.

Lightning was who needed everything to happen at once.

Tibs knew things took time.

He breathed.

Tibs opened his eyes. Don had been right. He was going to be so fucking unbearable about it.

He had to tell him, no, keep it secret, explode so Don would think it hadn't worked. Thank him for giving him a way to control, to help, to—

He breathed.

He didn't have to do any of those things right now.

He breathed and felt the desires flit through him, the needs to be and do. He focused on one. He wanted to find out if Clara was here, now that the Clerics were back. Would she find a good team? Maybe Quigly would take her on his, when he lost one of his archers. Maybe she wasn't back, still punished for going against her orders and helping his town against Sebastian.

He let the thought go.

Yeah, Don was never going to let him forget that this Oneness thing was his idea.

He turned to face his friends and smiled as they had all, even Jackal, stepped back. Then frowned at the spiderweb of black lines emanating from where Tibs stood. As he watched, lightning coursed from the wall to his body.

"Sorry about that." He absorbed the essence.

"Are you okay?" Jackal asked.

A bolt escaped his attention as his mind reeled with answers to the question. Was he okay? Of course he was. No, he wasn't. He still missed Mama and Carina, and—

He breathed.

All those things were for later. For when he made time for them. Now, he was keeping Lightning from hurting his friends. Keeping his thoughts from flying all over the place and sending bolts chasing after them.

“This isn’t as easy as you said, Don.”

“I never—”

“But it’s easier than not understanding what’s happening. Maybe it’s because lightning is everything and everywhere at—no, that’s not right. It isn’t that. It wants to be that. And I’m doing it again. Letting it carry me away. But I see it happening. When fire consumed me, I could only see him, not what I should do, or that there was even a me in there. It’s the same with learning the other elements. I want to more. To be there, and here, and there and over there, right now. But I also know that it’s not me who wants that. It’s Lightning. It’s really weird, and it’s distracting. I don’t know how much help I’ll be while I’m channeling him. I mean, this helps, but it takes a lot of my attention on thinking and I’m thinking about a lot of things right now.”

“It’s okay,” Don said. “This isn’t about doing the run while channeling the element. You can let go of it now.”

“But this is good. I can think about so many things. I could work on all the triggers while solving the puzzles if I spent more time like this, learning to—no, I wouldn’t. This is Lightning, not me. But I can tell. That means it’s time to let go.”

He did and felt like he was wrapped in water filled with Gur. Everything was so slow. What had he been thinking; there was so much he could do if—

Only it wasn’t true. While he thought faster, it had been a jumble of them. None of them had turned into something he did.

“You were right,” he told Don. “This Oneness thing is making it easier.”

“I’m glad.” The sorcerer’s smile broadened. “How about we continue with the run?”

Tibs narrowed his eyes. “You want to brag, don’t you?”

“You have no idea how badly I want to brag,” Don admitted, grinning.

“Why don’t you?”

“Because it wouldn’t be right to brag about being right.”

“You have met Jackal, right?” Tibs asked, the suspiciousness thick in his voice.

“I was right!” Don burst out and did a little dance. “You doubted me, and I was right!”

“He is going to be so unbearable now,” Jackal said.

Tibs shrugged. “No more than you when you think you’re right.”

“Hey, I don’t think I’m right.” The fighter straightened. “I know I’m right.”