

Chapter 09

“What?” The sorcerer looked at them as if only now realizing he wasn’t alone. “I’m not—” His protest was cut short by Jackal.

“You know the game, don’t you? King Killer is what Tibs said you call it.”

Don looked at Tibs, and there was flash of anger—as if he’d shared some secret when mentioning the game—then it was gone and he looked away.

“I shouldn’t. I’m not in charge.”

“I’m in charge,” Jackal stated. “You’ve pulled your weight in the fights, and now I was you to do the same here.” He motioned to the room. “How do we do this?”

Don hesitated, then stepped to the door. “The first thing we need to do is determine which pieces each of us represents.”

“I’m the lord,” Jackal stated.

“What?” Don replied in dismay. “No.”

“Let me guess,” Jackal said derisively. “You’re the lord.”

“Of course not,” the sorcerer replied, sounding like his confidence was returning. “Why would you want to have a king on the board?”

“Because,” the fighter said, “without a *lord*, we lose the game.”

“Only if this is a standard match.” Don motioned to the room. “We lose this game if we die. Have you done this before? How the fuck did you survive it?”

“They cheated,” Sto said.

“More like exploited how I think,” Ganny said.

“Same thing.”

Jackal and Khumdar exchanged a look.

“We got lucky,” the fighter admitted.

“Luck’s not a thing,” Tibs and Don said at the same time. Tibs did so reflexively, while Don sounded annoyed at having to point it out. They stared at one another in surprise, then the sorcerer shrunk in slightly.

“Don.” Jackal pointed to the room when the sorcerer remained silent.

He studied the golem people in the room. “Jackal and Tibs are Infantry. Khumdar, you’re the queen. Mezano, you’re an archer and I’m a sorcerer.” A few seconds looking the placement over and he pointed to the position each was to occupy.

“Now, what?” Mez asked once they were all in place, his bow at the ready.

“We wait for the dungeon to make its move,” Don replied.

“You think I can wait them out and get them to move first?” Ganny asked, and Tibs glared at the ceiling.

“What’s your thoughts on the dungeon, Don?” Mez asked.

“How about you try that with the next team?” Sto replied.

“I don’t have any.”

Ganny’s archer moved as Sto snorted. “Okay, what did you do to him? He has more idea about what I am and how I think than anyone. More than even that noble sorcerer who claimed to have read an entire library explaining everything there is to know about us.”

“Jackal, one forward.”

“Don, you’re a sorcerer,” Mez insisted. “You have to have read something on dungeons. Carina had...” The silence that fell was complete for a few seconds. “Sorry, Tibs.”

Tibs nodded.

Don sighed. “According to a treatise I got my hands on, dungeons evolved as a way to keep the flood of monsters that came from the World Rifts under control, back in the Days of the Dawn.” Ganny moved one of her infantry forward. “It’s why nearly every dungeon has the same set of base templates. Like those Gnolls. They come from those original dungeons, so they know what they knew. As they grow, they can make more and more powerful types of creatures. Khumdar, a diagonal to your right, three squares.”

“Would the Days of Dawn refer to the time Purity created the world?” Khumdar asked once he reached his destination.

“Purity didn’t create—” the sorcerer stared at the cleric. “I didn’t think you were a believer of *that* doctrine.”

“I make not claims to believe,” Khumdar replied. “But I have heard of how, before there was more than the elements, Purity formed the world, and how the other elements took advantage to place what they wanted within it; ruining the perfection Purity created. I have encountered other stories in my travels, so understand how each kingdom believes the world came to be in a way that advantages them, but this one has always felt... more credible.”

Don snorted. “The elements came after the world, not before.”

“How can that be known?” the cleric asked. “Something must have created the world, and so the elements must have been there before it.”

“No. Obviously, no one knows how the world came to be. We just have stories to support each belief and people arguing over who’s right. But no one has been able to establish that the elements were there before.”

“By your own words,” the cleric said smugly, “the elements might have come before the world. Therefore, Purity might—”

“Fine!” Don snapped. “Yes. Maybe that’s what happened. We don’t know, so anything’s possible. You need to believe Purity created everything to keep going? Good for you. It doesn’t help me.” He ran a hand over his face.

“Don?” Jackal motioned around them. “What’s the next move?”

Ganny had moved her sorcerer to the center of the floor while Don had been talking. It could move in many directions now, but none that endangered them.

“Okay. Tibs, you’ll be moving next, but after that, the sorcerer will move in position to threaten Jackal or Mez, so be ready.” Once they acknowledged him, Don pointed to the opposing infantry. “Tibs, take it.”

Tibs formed ice swords as he stepped to the fire infantry and is responded with blades of fire. He tested its skill, then went on the offensive, dodging as he swung. Heat made it through his armor as he sliced his opponent’s side, and Tibs gritted his teeth at the pain. He kicked it away, then lunged with a scream. He slammed both swords in its chest, and the fire blades went out a second before it crumbled away.

Tibs looked at the cut as he straightened. Instead of the gaping hole in his armor it had felt like, the line was thin, and the cut already seared closed.

“Mez,” Jackal called, and by the time Tibs looked up, the archer was landing away from the sorcerer’s beam of light, firing fire arrow after arrow as he rolled to a knee, then stood. Tibs stepped forward to help, but couldn’t move past the edge of the square he stood in.

The arrows splashed against a faint curved surface of light before the sorcerer.

“Can you see the shield?” Tibs asked.

“No.” Mez sidestepped another beam. “But I’m getting sense for it from the fire curving around.” He snatched an arrow from the quiver at his hip and fired it between two fire ones; the shield also deflected it. “So much for that idea.”

He angled the next arrow lower, and the shield moved to intercept it.

Tibs pushed through the miasma and reached for the essence that made the shield, but it slipped from his mental grip.

“Okay,” Ganny said. “This is odd.”

Tibs focussed. Precision over brute force. If he couldn’t rip it apart, something else might work.

“What is?” Sto asked as Mez fired another fire arrow. Tibs nudged the shield aside and some of the fire burned the sorcerer.

“Not odd,” she said, annoyed. “Just Tibs finding a way to help.” The shield moved back into place.

“Go Tibs,” Sto said.

“Really?” The composition of the essence changed. Forms manifested between lines, and Tibs had a tougher time maintaining his hold.

“I mean. Bad Tibs, no helping your teammate.” Sto didn’t sound convincing.

When the sorcerer staggered, a wooden shaft piercing its calf, it caught both Tibs and Ganny by surprise. Mez bounced another arrow off the floor and under the shield’s edge, piercing its other calf.

“Cover your eyes!” Mez called as the sorcerer flayed and fell to the side. Essence accumulated at the tip of the arrow in the archer’s bow.

The explosion had Tibs blinking spots away, but the pieces falling throughout the room made it worthwhile.

“Forgot he could do that,” Ganny mused.

“Tibs can manipulate essence away from him,” Sto replied.

“I meant Mez, but yes. I also didn’t take that into account. I thought the interference I placed on this floor would keep him from doing it. I wish he could tell me how it affected him, but with Don here...”

Tibs considered what he’d done. The resistance hadn’t felt different from the previous run. It might have required more effort to sense through it when he’d entered, but he had gotten used to it quickly enough he didn’t remember when he’d stopped thinking about it.

“Jackal, diagonal on your left,” Don instructed, “and get ready. That archer might go for you if the dungeon’s confident of its king’s position.”

The archer didn’t attack, and the following moves centered on Don maneuvering Ganny’s archers until the sorcerer was able to destroy one of them, leaving only the other one and the lord.

Three moves later, Khumdar fought the lord, and the fight ended with the cleric's staff through its crumbling chest.

The wall opened to the loot room, and Don strode through, only to stop a few steps in.

Tibs followed him into the smaller room, and instead of the five pedestals from their previous run, it only contained a chest.

"Check it for traps," Don instructed.

"Don," Jackal said as Tibs headed for the chest. "Don't start giving orders."

"I'm," the sorcerer said, tone harsh as he turned to face the others, then faltered. "We...we can't trust that the chest is safe."

"It's good advice," Mez said in a gentler tone than Tibs thought Don deserved, "but we know our jobs."

"Yeah," Jackal added. "We don't have to order people about in this team."

"Unless it is to keep our leader from doing something idiotic," Khumdar said.

"There's no need to order me about even then."

"No," Mez said. "We tried suggesting you stop trying to get yourself killed. It only started working when Tibs threatened to kick you in the shin."

"Higher," Khumdar corrected, "and at that time, stone was not something he could turn them into."

"The only person who gets away with suggesting you do something," the archer continued, "and you listen, is Kroseph."

"Whose suggestions come with far more weight than our orders," the cleric added.

Tibs glanced over his shoulder. Don looked at the others, baffled.

"How about we get on with this instead of bashing the team leader?" Jackal asked in exasperation.

"I do not believe we have much else to do until Tibs has confirmed the chest is safe to open."

Jackal gave Don his 'can you believe I'm being treated this way?' look, then scowled. "Fine. Anyone think it's odd the dungeon's just giving us a chest again, instead of a choice of item?"

Tibs glanced at the ceiling, then focused on the chest again.

"Oh, right," Sto said. "You only had one run after you asked me to help arm the Runners. The way I did it at first was to let them take all five, instead of having to choose one, but they found it odd. You often mentioned how doing anything that gets the guild to ask question's a bad idea, so I went back to the chests. I don't know if I'll go back to the pedestals."

Tibs's check didn't find traps, so he opened the chest and stepped away. "It's safe."

Jackal and Khumdar joined Tibs, and the fighter pulled items out. Tibs watched Mez and Don on the other side of the door, speaking in quiet voices. He considered shaping the air to hear what they said, but he'd have to push through the miasma, and Ganny would use that to find out how to change things to make it even harder and in the end, what could the sorcerer say that was going to be of use to Tibs?

"Tibs?" Jackal called in a low of voice and indicated the items laid out before the chest. He mouthed 'enchanted?'

Of course. Mez wasn't over there having an important conversation with Don. It was just to keep him from noticing this. Tibs sensed the items, then used his foot to push the leather chest armor and shield to one side, and the knife and amulet to the other. He didn't bother with the three potions. They were always magic.

Jackal glanced to the archer and sorcerer before slipping the knife into his pouch. Khumdar turned and Tibs helped put the armor in his pack, and attach the shield to it. Then they left the room.

"Just remember," Mez was saying as they reached them, "that you are a member of the team."

The sorcerer stepped away, looking angry, but then it cracked with indecision.