

“Can you recreate this with your essence?” Tibs asked Don as he recreated the pattern he sensed, using light, over the floor.

The sorcerer studied it, then the floor, tracing the one of the lines that Tibs hadn’t noticed matched the pattern he’d sensed. “You want me to make it within the mess of essence in the floor?”

“Yes, but when I tell you. This is a twin trigger. I’ll do the same around the other column.”

“Both need to be done with the same element?”

Tibs nodded. “It’s in part why it triggered last time. I only used essence on this side of the trigger.”

“What are the odds a team is going to have two Runners with the same element?” Mez asked as Don stood and moved between the two columns. “This feels like something the dungeon set up to make sure we have to fight all the creatures.”

Tibs looked up, but Ganny didn’t comment.

“It can be done.” Don sent essence to the other column, and recreated the pattern. “This is a test of strength and fineness.” The patterns became fuzzy. “And focus. It definitely requires that at this point. I’ve never had to stretch my attention this far before and maintain it.”

“That’s why we’re cheating,” Tibs said, grinning.

“Why am I not surprised,” Ganny commented.

“How are you going to get the timing right?” Jackal asked, crouched next to the column, hand on the design.

“We prepare the pattern over where it goes,” Don said.

“Then, when I give the signal,” Tibs continued, “we lower it into the lock.”

Jackal frowned. “How can you tell where the lock is? I can barely tell where my essence is in this mess.”

“You have to find the matching line,” Don said, back to the column and tracing the one that followed corruption.

“Like that’s any easier,” the fighter said.

“The dungeon is trying to kill you,” the sorcerer replied. “So you shouldn’t expect them to make it easy on you.” He paused. “Although this doesn’t seem all that difficult.”

“Do you have any idea what it took for me to work this out?” Tibs asked, outraged.

“No, since the two of you were shrouded in darkness.”

“Let’s remember,” Mez said, “just how much smarter than the rest of us you are.”

“Even without Tibs explaining this, for me to work out how I’d have figured it out,” Don replied. “Anyone who paid attention would eventually realize the pattern of their essence has a matching line etched into the floor. And once you can sense it, there is a faint trace of the essence stretching to the other column where they’d notice the same. How likely is it that once they tell their team’s rogue they’ll realized they are in step, Tibs?”

Tibs didn’t answer immediately, searching for that trace essence Don mentioned, then was annoyed at not having noticed it before. “Two identical locks with a connection. They’d work it out as soon as they’re told.”

“Hence,” Don said, “this is somewhat easy for the third floor.”

“I’ll always take easy,” Mez said, sounding dubious.

“Unless it’s a fight,” Jackals said. “Those we should earn.”

“I’ll take an easy fight too,” the archer replied.

“Wimp,” the fighter said, grinning.

“We’re not all as thick headed as you,” Mez said, mockingly.

“Do you think I missed something in how it works?” Tibs asked Don, sensing for anything new.

“I trust what you worked out. But we should stay alert. The dungeon’s too smart not to have something ready.”

Ganny’s chuckle confirmed what Don said.

“Then we go slow.” Tibs stepped to the other column. “I’m making the pattern.” He formed it over the matching line in the floor, and essence under it. “It’s done.”

“Make sure it’s correct,” Don instructed, and Tibs breathed the annoyance away. This was Don making sure.

“It matches,” Tibs replied after checking.

“Mine too. On your mark, Tibs, we lower it.”

“On the count of zero, it needs to be in the weave. I’ll start at four.”

“I’m ready.”

“Four,” a beat, “three,” a beat, “two,” a beat, “one.” He moved it down as he said, “Zero.”

“It’s in,” Don replied, then hurried to add, as Tibs sensed it. “Something’s happening.”

“You were right.” The essences moved around the pattern, and Tibs couldn’t tell what they were doing. But he knew letting go, or pulling the pattern out, would activate the trigger.

“When I tell you,” Don called, “Turn the pattern left-ward a quarter turn. It needs to be fast.”

Tibs searched for what he’d sensed and noticed the corruption’s alignment was shifting within itself—

“Now.”

Tibs turned as the corruption moved, stopping as Don called.

“Stop.”

“It’s not done,” Tibs said. The essence was still shifting, but now he could sense what it meant. “We need to…” How was he supposed to describe that motion?

“Rotate the pattern on an axis aligned with the floor and aimed toward the column,” Don said.

Tibs had no idea what that meant, other than Don had also worked it out. Only. “The pattern’s going to change as it moves.”

“I don’t see…oh. Clever dungeon, very clever. Alone, I’d been too focused on getting ready for the rotation to notice how the rest of the essences has moved. Oh, and I apologize for not using names. There’s something about saying it that makes…”

“Makes it too—”

“Now,” Tibs called, cutting off the archer, as the essence…solidified in place. He rotated it, shifting the corruption to match the moving essence and once the top was in the center of the column, all the essence dissipated as if caught in a breeze.

He kept hold of the essence, waiting for something to happen.

“Do you think it’s done?” Don asked.

Tibs carefully split his attention to confirm there were no essences remaining around the column, then let go of the corruption and sat down, panting

“So it’s done?” Jackal asked eagerly.

“This one,” Tibs replied, standing. “Two more sets of columns means two more triggers like this.”

“And yes,” Don told Mez. “Using names makes it too much of a person and I can’t resolve that with what I’ve been told of dungeons.”

“It’s okay,” Sto replied, “Until Tibs, my opinion of Runners wasn’t particularly high.”

“If the other triggers activates, we’ll have to fight just as many creatures?” Mez asked.

“There’s no way to know without triggering them,” Don answered.

“Which we aren’t,” Tibs told Jackal, his tone firm.

“Hey, I’m good with you cheating our way to the dragon.”

“You guys remember Quigly’s team beat the boss the hard way, right?” Mez asked, sounding awed.

“We could do it,” Jackal replied dismissively.

“We aren’t,” Tibs said.

“Maybe one of you should do this one with Tibs,” Don said. “So you can practice.”

“I’d rather keep my energy for fighting the dragon,” Jackal replied.

“And I’d rather do them with you,” Tibs said. “You know what to expect, so it’s going to be easier to deal with the way they’re going to be different.”

“Then on the next run, one of you is disarming them with Tibs,” Don instructed.

Jackal snorted. “On the next run, we’ll be on the fourth floor.”

The next trigger had two extra steps after aligning the pattern with the column, and the one after that moved much faster, and they nearly triggered it. Tibs was panting when he let the essence go, and suffused himself with purity as he straightened.

The dragon was no more than the equivalent of three sets of column away now, and it was big.

“Is that what dragons really look like?” Mez asked.

It was a lizard lying on the floor, with its back reaching nearly halfway to the ceiling. Its scaled skin was green, with a golden sheen to them. Its head, at the end of a serpentine neck, rested on thin forelegs that ended in claws long enough to cut through half a column. Its rear legs were thickly muscled and reminded Tibs of those on the rabbits.

“It’s missing the wings the one on the crest has,” Jackal pointed out.

“The few times I’ve come across descriptions of them,” Don said, “they didn’t entirely match. The lizard like body with scales that have a golden sheen matches this one, as do the long claws. They all agreed dragon breathe fire, so this one probably does too. Actually, it’s surprising there are so many similarities, since dragons, like all monsters in the wild, started as dungeon made creatures. Each one should have made something completely different.”

“Dungeons can talk to each other,” Tibs said, admiring the dragon.

“I can?” Sto asked in surprise. “Ganny?” his tone turned suspicious.

“If that’s the case, then it’s not as surprising.”

"I don't know where Tibs got that from," She replied.

"The purity dungeon," Tibs said. "Val and Kraven talked about her having a conversation with another dungeon, before they went wild." He felt Don's eyes on him.

"Val's old," Ganny mused. "Did they say anything about the relationship between Val and the other dungeon?"

Tibs pieced together what he remembered of the conversation. "Not that I remember, but I did get the impression there were familiar? Like with a family."

"That would be it," Ganny said. "Really old dungeon can send a spark of themselves into the world, and if it lands in a place that allows it, it becomes a core. When the dungeon is strong enough, they can speak through that link."

"Is that how I came about? Is there a dungeon out there I'll be able to talk with at some point?"

"No, Sto," she said, amused. "You're one of the special dungeon who came to be all by themselves."

"Are those rare?" Tibs asked.

"Quite," Ganny replied, "So, yes, Sto. You're going to have to rely on me for information about the others."

"Dungeons can only talk with their child," he told Don.

"Dungeons have children?" Don asked, incredulous.

"Except for Sto, he didn't need anyone."

"Oh, now he's going to be insufferable about that," Ganny said. "Won't you?"

"Don't worry. I will always need you," Sto replied.

"Until I point out you are breaking rules."

"Bending."

"Breaking," she stated.

"I'm learning to be gentle about it," he offered.

"You do realize that it doesn't matter how gently you don't listen to me. Once the rule breaks, it remains broken."

"Unless you don't want us to get on with this fight," Tibs said, and ignored the horrified look from Jackal. "You're going to have to continue this elsewhere."

"We'll pick this up later," Ganny said, glee slipping into her voice. "I really want to watch this."

That, and the shadows clinging to the dragon, confirmed something for Tibs. "We need to be careful. Ganny has tricks setup for this fight."

"Then we hit it hard and fast." Jackal ran at the dragon.

With sigh, Tibs hurried after the fighter.

"One day," Mez said, letting loose arrows, "He's going to get himself killed with that attitude." The fire spread over the dragon, who didn't seem to notice.

"We tell Kroseph how he rushed a dragon," Don replied, balls of corruption splashing onto the dragon's scales. "And it might be today." Instead of seeping into the scales, the shimmering pushed the corruption away. "The shimmer's a protection. It might be against more than just corruption and fire."

"Good thing there's three of us who don't require essence to cause damage," Jackal said, halfway to the dragon as it raised its head and blew essence at them. The essence

ignited before Tibs grabbed hold of it and engulfed Jackal. Tibs pulled it away, absorbing enough to refill his reserve and sending the rest at the wall.

“Did you think that was going to hurt me?” Jackal asked. “Tibs burned me with fire hotter than that.” Jackal turned to his team, motioning to his intact clothing. “How great is that? I learned how to give my clothing the—”

The large paw hit the fighter leisurely and Jackal hit the center of the burn the fireball had left on the wall. The dragon chuckled as it stood on its four legs and stretched in the way Tibs had seen cats do.

“Ow.” Jackal got to his feet, and the dragon motioned him close with a clawed finger. “Oh, you’re controlling that thing.” He rubbed his hands together. “This is going to be so fun!” He ran at it again.

“Controlling?” Don asked.

“Sto can enter his creatures,” Tibs replied, throwing himself out of the way of the paw that came down. “He’s hoping to kill Jackal that way.”

“Does it mean we should let the two of them go at it without interference?” the sorcerer asked.

Tibs sliced at the leg. “No.” The cut was thinner than he’d expected. The shimmering had negated a lot of the damage caused by the essence in his ice and metal sword.

With Jackal running under the dragon, Tibs realized the legs were shorter than he’d thought. It roared as Jackal punched its underbelly, then stepped aside and around, revealing a tail that swept across the floor.

Tibs jumped back, and Khumdar scored a hit with his staff as he stepped back that earned him a hiss.

Jackal stayed under it as the dragon moved, punching the underbelly, then kicked a leg that tried to crush him.

When the dragon connected, the swipe sent Jackal at the wall again, but Tibs caught him in a mass of thick water that plopped him on the floor.

“How about we fight together this time?” Tibs glared at him.

“That works for—”

The roar made the walls shake, and this time, essence responded in them.

“Something’s happening,” he called out. Doorways opened on each side of the room, disgorging creatures of all kinds.

He used water and air to deflect them, but there were so many, all running in their direction from both sides, it was impossible to keep them all away. Then Tibs was on the floor from an impact, his head ringing, his concentration broken, and his arm limp.

He bashed those within reach with his ice shield as he got to his feet, wrapping his arm in an essence splint. Purity was out of the question at the moment, with so many creatures passing him, trying to hit him. An etched wave of water with Dhu pushed some aside, leaving them pierced with water spikes, but more crashed over and around them,

“We need to get out of this!” Jackal called.

Tibs used the dragon as reference and moved away, blasting and bashing any creatures he encountered.

“I’m glad to see you’re smart enough to know when you’re not going to win!” Mez yelled, fire arrows removing creatures from their path.

“When I end up in this shape,” the fighter replied. “I know I’m not winning.” His stone body was cracked everywhere, and Tibs senses how the only thing holding the fighter’s essence together was strands of stone. Jackal’s face had a crack through it from above one ear to under the other and the halves weren’t correctly aligned.

“Why aren’t they following you?” Mez asked as Tibs rushed to help Jackal, suffusing himself with purity to deal with his injuries.

“I am content with the fact they are not, and will not question the reason,” Khumdar said. His robe was cut and bloody and the essence through the cleric’s left arm was shattered, but it held strong.

He formed a weave of purity large enough to wrap Jackal in it. Once it moved through the fighter, Tibs turned to Khumdar, wrapping his arm in a weave of its own, then noticed Mez and Don were injured too.

“How did you get hurt?” he asked, placing weaves of purity on the archer’s injuries.

“They had archers.”

“And sorcerers,” Don added. “Their aim wasn’t good, but the number of them made it impossible to avoid everything.” He sighed in relief as Tibs applied a weave to his torn side.

“So there was someone to deal with everyone in that horde.” Jackal worked his arm and jaw, watching the creatures standing between them and the dragon.

“It makes sense,” Don said. “Every fight we’ve had had a mix of all classes, or their creature equivalent. The dungeon has to, since we’re just as dangerous to it as the three of you.”

“Are we attacking again?” Tibs asked, after making sure everyone was healed.

“No,” Jackal replied after a long silence. “Don’t be so surprised. They nearly broke me in half, and I don’t have enough essence left to hold myself together a second time. Mez, Don, Khumdar, how are you reserve?”

“I’m good,” Mez replied. “I refilled my bow from that fireball Tibs diverted.”

“I lost a lot of my amulets when they did this to me.” He indicated his healed side. “I was forced away, and the dungeon absorbed them. Without them, I don’t know how much use I’ll be against the dragon in our next run. I can’t afford to get more, and even with Tibs refilling those I have left before the fight, I doubt I’ll have enough.”

“You won’t have to worry about running out of essence during the next run,” Tibs said. “Carina’s robe holds a lot of it.”

“Are you sure, Tibs?” Jackal asked, while Don looked puzzled by the statement.

“It’s not helping anyone at the bottom of the chest. And she’d want our sorcerer to use it.” He paused for a few breaths, paying attention to the emotions her memory brought up. Pain and regret weren’t as strong as he’d expected.

“How do you feel about grayish-blue?” Mez asked.

“It’s not my preferred color, but if it does what Tibs implies, I’ll just get it dyed.”

“That might be tough to do,” Jackal said. “It repairs itself. It might include things like dyes.”

“Sto?” Tibs asked.

“The enchantment in it causes it to return to the condition it was when I made it. But if you’re sure about letting him have it, changing the color is easy for me to do.”

“Dyeing won’t work, but Sto can change the color for you.”

“Just like that?” Don asked, surprised.

Tibs grinned. “He likes me.”

“Then why do they seem so determined to kill you along with us? You got hurt in that rush, too.”

“I’m a Runner. I’m not going to get stronger if he doesn’t push me as hard as you. If that means I die because I’m not strong enough?” He shrugged. “I am a Runner.”

“He’s not going to die,” Jackal said. “He can’t. He’s the one who came up with the no dying rule.” He turned to the dragon. “Enjoy this victory. Next time, you are getting broken.”