

Chapter 53

The guards on each side of the dungeon's door eyed Tibs, ignoring Jackal. The cleric was a woman of Carina's age with pale skin.

"Do any of you need healing?" she asked.

"You're not doing anything for them," the smaller of the two guards said in a flat tone.

"It is my duty to—"

"Unless you want to be healing yourself," he said, tone turning hard, "you're going to do what you're told."

"We're fine," Jackal said as she started to protest. "We take it easy between runs." He grinned as the guards looked at him hatefully.

For the last week, they, as well as the other team who had agreed to help, had been busy discretely guarding the shops. Serba had slipped Tibs information via her dogs on which were due to be targeted for sabotage, as well as which of Sebastian's people were posing as guards.

It has led to days of the fighters dragging the posers into alleys for beatings or interfering with the guards who were in Sebastian's employ, and nights of chasing down saboteurs and thieves looking to cause trouble.

Tibs's nights had been more troublesome than the others, since many times, he was the one being hunted by Sebastian's people, instead of the reverse. But, the result was the same, they ended up hurt, instead of him.

"Hey Dungeon," Jackal called as soon as he stepped inside. "I hope you're ready for a fight because we've been getting a lot the practice in recently."

The taller guard looked at Jackal as if he was crazy. From the conversations Tibs had overheard, it seemed to be the consensus among those working for Sebastian who knew of Jackal that he was insane for not working for his father. His actions now only served to add to the belief.

"Oh, I am ready," Sto replied smugly. "This time you aren't breaking my avatar."

Tibs could imagine Sto's impatience as he walked in silence.

"Come on, Tibs, tell him," Sto let out in a huff. "How am I supposed to gloat if you aren't going to tell him."

Tibs looked over his shoulder to confirm he was far enough. "Sto's going to kick your ass."

"Good enough," The dungeon said as Jackal snorted.

Tibs paused by the doorway and looked at the glowing stone on the wall, sensing the essences that made it. It was mainly stone and light, as he expected, with a little of something else he couldn't identify. He figured metal since the stone was decorated with metallic filaments.

"These are the best vegetables Kro could get me." Jackal had dumped the content of his pack on the floor. They really like what you've been providing, especially those nut

things, Russ loves those. But I figure that the more kind you have, the better it is for everyone.”

“I’d complain about him expecting me to be some sort of food booth,” Sto replied, “but I’m liking the arrangement. ‘I’ve been keeping more of my reserves since we started this. I hadn’t realized how much coins took overall to make. Especially silver.”

“He’s okay with the arrangement,” Tibs said, back to studying the stone, trying to work out how the light essence got to it. “Sto, how do you get the essence to all the light stones?”

“The... oh, those. I just move it there, why?”

“Could you make one that has a reserve?”

“Probably,” Sto said, hesitatingly. “Tibs, I thought you didn’t want me doing you favors anymore.”

“No, not for me. Well, not as something to give me. It’s just something I think would be useful for people and the town. The roads at lit with torches and lanterns and that’s a lot of wood and oil, so there are a lot of dark places where thieves can hide. With these, we could just put them up and it would fix the problem.”

“Don’t you like dark places?” the dungeon asked.

Tibs smiled. “I don’t think many people will put them on the roofs.”

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

Mez stood before the shimmering opening. “Are you done bribing the dungeon?”

Tibs ignored the jibe and stepped through, studying the tingling as he passed.

“It’s not a bribe,” Jackal said, his voice too high. “It’s for the town.”

“You understand that it’s not going to last,” Carina said, her voice deep. “Sebastian isn’t going to be able to meek this embargo going forever. Eventually, food will start flowing from outside again.”

“Is she right?” Sto asked.

“Probably,” Tibs replied, sensing the triggers on the bridge. They were moving as fast as they had before. “She knows those kinds of things.”

“Then... Ganny,” Sto called. “We need to figure out how to make the food I drop better than anything they can get elsewhere.”

“And how do you expect to do that?” she replied, sounding as if she was joining them.

“I don’t know, you’re the smart one here.”

“You know you only say things like that when you want me to do something you should be taking care of.”

“So that isn’t something you can do?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good, then I’ll leave it with you,” Sto said proudly.

“How are we crossing?” Jackal asked, distracting Tibs from Ganny’s less than forceful protests. He was glad that their arguing had more playfulness to it.

“You take the bridge. I’m going to get what’s in the cache.” He stepped to the edge of

the pool.”

“Is that wise?” Khumdar asked. “Will the creature in the water not attempt to stop you?”

“Just let him do whatever he wants,” Mez snapped, “like always.”

“Mez,” Carina said in a chastising tone as Tibs plunged into the water.

He propelled himself along the wall, looking for the color variation that marked the cache. He also sensed the stone, but Sto had empty pockets in multiple places in the wall to keep him from finding it that way.

He found the cache opposite the entrance, by the bridge, and set to work on it, and quickly found the stone panel and how he needed to press it in, then up to be able to remove it. The ‘keyhole’ was a cylinder with spinning four rings. They didn’t have tiles to move, but it was clearly inspired by Cross’s puzzle.

He spun the rings to get a sense of how they worked and realized he could feel the mechanism move within the water. As he lined the gates, he felt a presence at the edge of his senses and smiled.

This time he could consider how he’d deal with it.

It was twice as long as Tibs was tall, thin, and moved by undulating its body. It reminded Tibs of a flattened worm.

He pulled water to him, packing it tight until moving his arm through it became difficult. He stopped trying and continued pulling more water, making it even tighter. Tight enough that even if it wasn’t iced, he thought it would stop this creature from reaching him; not that that was his plan.

When it was within lunging distance, Tibs let go of the water. Like a clump of straw he’d held in a closed fist, the water expanded on being released, only much faster. So fast that it pummeled Tibs into losing his concentration and he choked on the water until he was about to pull air out of it again to breathe.

He smiled as he sensed the creature, fleeing.

I rotated the rings until the gates aligned, then pushed them down to unlock the panel, the ‘click’ more felt through the water than heard.

Inside, he saw the nearly invisible wire before the wrapped bundle before he felt it. Or rather felt how the water reacted to it. It was a physical trigger. Sto wanted to trick any Runner who thought this floor only had essence triggers. With it, he felt the thin gap along the top of the cache. Too thin for any blade Tibs had ever encountered, but Sto didn’t have to limit what he made to something that could be hammered. Any overconfident rogue would lose a hand to this, and then, possibly their lives to the creature.

Tibs carefully took the bundle without disturbing the wire, then, out of curiosity, he used water to pull on it.

The blade cut the water with ease as it dropped and it was no thicker than a page from Carina’s books.

Could a cleric regrow a hand?

Could they reattach it, if the rogue was able to bring it to them?

He pushed himself up, then the water took him to the edge, where Carina and Jackal

pulled him into a hug.

“I’m fine,” Tibs protested.

“What happened?” Carina asked. “The water bowed up as high as the edge.”

“I thought you’d be hurt,” Jackal said reproachfully. “Mez almost jumped in the water to rescue you.”

Tibs looked at the archer in time to see the glare he gave the archer, then he was scowling. “We have a run to do.”

“I exploded the water to chase the creature away.” He massaged his chest, which was still sore from the pummeling he’d received.

“You chased it away?” Jackal asked in disbelief. “I didn’t know they could do that.”

“I’m experimenting with autonomy,” Sto said.

“He’s experimenting with autonomy,” Tibs repeated. “I don’t know the last word.

“It means letting it do what it wants,” Carina explained.

“Letting it run off like that wasn’t what I wanted, but you’re the first to manage it. The other teams have been acting like, well a team, distracting it from above while their rogue gets what’s in the cache. How did you like the lock?”

“I liked it,” Tibs said, keeping to himself how it had been so easy.

“What’s in there?” Jackal asked, and Tibs undid the oiled skin and revealed a shirt and pants, both in vibrant green with some gold in them, along with a set of supple leather boots.

Tibs was disappointed. Considering the lock, and the creature guarding it. He’d expected something with essence in them. Those were just normal clothing.

“May I?” Khumdar asked, and Tibs handed him the bundle and the cleric studied the shirt. “This is exquisite quality.” He ran a hand over the shirt. “Silk. The embroidery might be actual gold, and the design is reminiscent of those from Paltanin.”

“You know your shirts,” Jackal said in a slightly mocking tone.

“I have...” the cleric’s pause was purposeful. “Traveled.”

“Oh sure.” Carina rolled her eyes. “That explains it.”

“So it’s worth a lot of coins?” Tibs asked. He knew better-made clothes cost more. He had a set Carina had insisted he get had that cost him all the coppers he’d made on the first floor that time. When she wasn’t there to ‘help’ him buy his shirt and pants, they only cost him a few coppers.

“This is something a noble will be willing to pay silver for,” Khumdar said, folding the shirt. “A handful of them for the ensemble. I expect one of them was wearing what inspired this when they died here.”

“How about someone else in the town?” Tibs asked. “Someone who can use clothes, instead of just spending the coins to show they have coins?”

“This is not something one wears out to the shops, or even behind the counter serving customers. This is made to impress, and in the appropriate crowd, it indeed will.”

“And since it’s just clothes, the guild isn’t going to want it,” Jackal said. “So those coins are ours. And think of it this way, Tibs. The noble is buys this will be out those coins we get. We’ll be why he’s a little poorer.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Nobles don’t notice silver.”

“But I do,” the fighter said with a grin, “and of the two, I’m far more important.” He placed the clothes in his pack. “Onward!” he proclaimed as he shouldered it. “We have Whippers to whip!”

Sto groaned as they left the pool room.

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“You can’t do it,” Tibs said and Mex glared at him, notching an arrow.

Tibs wasn’t insulting the archer. Sto had added a crystal wall on each side of the pedestal with the plaque that turned off the maze, on top of the one that was already in front. Mez was the best archer Tibs knew, but this wasn’t just about bouncing the arrow of a wall anymore. He’d have to bounce it off something behind, then on a crystal wall.

Unless Mez could use fire to move the arrow the way Tibs could move his air knives, there was no way to make that shot.

Tibs considered it. Could he do it? The pedestal was in his range, and he had ample reserve with the bracers, but his control diminished the further away from him the knife was. He could get it to the other end of the hall, but get it to turn around the walls? He wasn’t sure. Would dropping the knife on the plaque be enough to turn the maze off?

With a growl, Mez lowered his bow.

“This was never meant for you, Mez,” Khumdar said in a conciliatory tone. “That you outsmarted the dungeon so many times is something to be proud of.”

The archer closed his eyes and let out a breath. “You’re right.” He glanced at Tibs. “I’m sorry you... that I...” He sighed and shook his head.

“Ar you going to be insulted,” Sto said with relief, “if I’m happy you finally have to do this?”

“No,” Tibs replied, sensing the walls of triggers. “This is a rogue room more than the pool.”

“Exactly!”

“How many others have tricked you?” he asked.

“No one tricks me,” Sto stated.

“How many have been smarter than you so their rogues didn’t have to go through the maze?”

“Oh. Only Mez.”

“You’re the only one who was able to outsmart Sto here,” he told the archer. “Khumdar is right. You should be proud.”

The basic setup was the same as the other essence triggers, each line was made of all essence so anyone could attempt to go through the maze. So long as they could contort themselves to avoid breaking one of them, or sense further head than their hand. Some turns required preparing for them early.

Even if he was agile enough, Jackal wouldn’t be able to do it.

Tibs broke the first line, and three spears [need to go back and adjust the first time they see the maze to match this] crossed where he would be if he’d broken them from inside the maze. He couldn’t see how someone could position themselves to survive it, and trying to move once the trigger was broken would almost guarantee more of them broke.

“You don’t have to do this,” Carina said.

Tibs waited for Jackal’s protest and looked at the fighter when he didn’t.

“Tell me you can do this, Tibs. Otherwise, we’re turning around.”

“Is he joking?” Sto asked.

“I don’t think so,” Ganny answered. “Looks like you come second to Tibs.”

“Third,” Sto grumbled. “Loot comes before me.”

Tibs smiled. “I can do this, but it’s going to be slow.” He was happy that unlike some Runners he kept his armor free of decorations. Anything dangling would be a hazard in the maze.

“Then you go and show the dungeon that you’re better than it is.”

“I’m not showing up anyone. I’m just going to survive this.”

Jackal grinned. “And that’s going to show it, won’t it?”

Instead of answering, Tibs stepped into the hall, between the line marking the start of the maze. The space between the two trigger walls was minimal, and it reminded Tibs of the essence maze in the pool room that turned the triggers on the bridge off. Only here, he needed to keep himself within the space, instead of essence.

The passage narrowed as it angled, forcing him to bend forward as he turned to the side. In place he had to crouch as it turned again as the maze’s ceiling lowered, others, step over triggers in his path as he avoided touching the wall. In some, it was as simple as walking sideways between a narrower section.

He was crawling on the floor when he heard stone rub against stone and realized he’d broken one of the triggers.

Jackal yelled his name as Tibs gritted his teeth at the pain of the spear piercing his leg. He wrapped essence around it as soon as the spear was gone and tightened it.

“I’m okay,” he called and looked in his friends’ direction. They were further back than he expected. Looking toward the pedestal, he thought he was in the middle of the hall. So long as the maze didn’t backtrack, he was halfway to the end.

He crawled, slower to ensure he kept his dragging leg away from the triggers when he had to turn. When he had to walk, he extended the wrap to his entire leg for extra support.

He nearly lost the use of his arm the next time he broke a trigger. He saw it happen and coated it in earth and the spear pushed him aside, instead of through, and he was able to keep from stepping into the wall. He didn’t want to see what would happen if he broke so many triggers at the same time.

He paused, leaning against the stone wall and looking up at the opening in the triggers. He’d tried to come up with another way of doing it since he’d sensed the elevated location, and hadn’t come up with any.

He was no more than two and zero paces away from the pedestal, so if not for his injured leg, he might run it, not that he had many hopes even then. They were a lot more holes in the walls for that last part. Sto wasn’t to discourage anyone from that tactic.

The wall had handholds, but his leg would make it harder.

He looked at the holes in the walls, plotted angles, and tried to find one safe spot he could run to and let the spears retract before continuing.

There weren't any.

He sighed.

But there was an option.

If he was fast enough and he had the angles right.

If he was wrong, the spears wouldn't shove him to the side, they'd push down and through whatever protection he gave himself.

He looked at the handholds again, the opening, his leg.

He had no good option.

He coated his chest and back in ice and earth, then threw himself diagonally to the other side of the hall and made himself into a ball against the wall. Pain erupted in his back as spears raked it hard enough to break his armor and cause the ice, earth, and leather to cut him.

"I'm okay," He said breathlessly as the pain diminished and he used his essence to stop the blood. His friends kept yelling his name so he raised his voice. "I'm okay!"

He used the wall to carefully stand.

Three turns to go and he was out.

The last one was going to be a problem.

He hobbled his way to the first turn and as he headed for the second, he maneuvered himself sideways, since the space past it wouldn't let him do it. So close. Could he run it?

Not with his injuries.

He approached the last turn and bent to match the way the passage did and nearly losing his balance and causing his injured leg to take more of his weight, and while he cried out in pain, he remained standing and didn't break.

When he was able to breathe, he used water to create a wall over the triggers he could use for support and he crept into he angled turn. Then he was outside and leaning against the pedestal.

He slammed his hand on it, then let himself fall to the floor, leaning against the pedestal while his friends joined him.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it for a moment," Sto said.

Tibs looked up. "Yeah, me too."

He closed his eyes and decided unconsciousness would be nice right about now.