

Chapter 09

Instead of using water to dry himself, Tibs used fire. He'd used most of his water essence surviving and he needed to practice with the other ones. He brought it to the surface, and the water steamed away.

Once he and clothes were dry, he absorbed the essence back—this hadn't cost him any—and stepped to the edge of the pool. The surface was a jagged field of broken ice, now that the stone pillars were down again.

"I guess this means there's no safe way across anymore," Jackal said, while Tibs pulled water essence from the iced pool to refill his reserve and amulet.

"Unless I deactivate the traps." Tibs nodded to the wall. He could just make out the edge of the essence maze there.

"Is it worth it?" Mez asked. "You made the ice because it was simple. The bridge isn't that difficult."

"Unless the dungeon has changed that too." Khumdar stepped on the bridge. "What I am able to feel of this trigger and the next one seems to be unchanged."

Tibs felt Jackal's gaze as he finished filling his reserve. "He isn't talking. Other than to encourage us, or mock us, he doesn't talk about the room or how he set them up."

"I don't—" Sto stopped. "Hmm. Okay, I do mock you once in a while, but there are times your team deserves it."

"No, we don't." Tibs stood. "You're just evil." He saw the way the others looked at him and hurried to add. "I'm not serious." As the only one who heard Sto, he needed to remember the others took his comments about the dungeon seriously. "How about we keep going? Loot and all that."

The others headed through the exit, and Tibs didn't move. "Did you..." He swallowed. Visions of the massacre he ran through when chasing Bardik. "Is it different now? Than before he..." his throat constricted.

Pain filled him, ate him alive. The corruption wouldn't leave anything of him, as it turned his own essence against him.

He jumped at a hand on his shoulder.

"Tibs?" Carina asked gently.

"I'm okay," he hurried to reply, then forces his breathing to slow. The pain was only a memory. He'd already lived through it. Survived the corruption.

"If this is too hard, we—"

"I'm fine," he snapped. "Sorry."

She nodded.

He forced himself to walk to the other room, and she stayed with him.

"No obvious changes here," Jackal said of the five Whippers and dozen stone rats. "Let's stay on our guard for any surprises the dungeon might have added, but otherwise, we know how to do this."

Tibs nodded and took out his knife.

It was quicker than the last time they fought them, and this time only had small cuts and bruises by the time everything was destroyed. No one needed his help, and he was glad for it. After how his help to Jackal had left the fighter, he'd rather not risk using his corrupted essence on his friends.

"Tibs," Jackal called, lobbing an amulet at him.

"You're in luck." Mez pulled another one from the rubble. "This makes a full set."

"Sto," Ganny said, an edge to her voice while Tibs added the two amulets to his pouch. Three in one run was a first.

"Hey Ganny, I didn't notice you returning. How's the work going?"

"It's going, but don't change the subject. We need to have a talk."

"But they're heading to the Ratling camp."

"If they survive this run, you can watch them the next time."

"But."

"Now, Sto." The sternness in her voice was new, too. Tibs wondered what the coming scolding was about.

"The dungeon's going to be busy for a while," he told the others as they exited the room.

"Meaning?" Carina asked.

He looked at Jackal. "Pleading with him for more loot isn't going to do anything."

"Does it ever?" Mez asked.

"I don't plead," Jackal said. "I ask."

"May I suggest working on the tone in your voice when you do so, then?" Khumdar said. "There has been a definite edge of pleading in it the previous times."

"I don't—you know what? I'm not falling for this. There will be loot and I will not plead."

The changes to the encampment were small. The fires no longer had the same number of tents around them, ranging from three to seven. They were also no longer identical, each having differing adornments, or were made from different material.

The tents no longer looked like they were made of stone, but Tibs identified leather and fabrics as well as colors added to them in design Tibs didn't recognize, as if the Ratling had decorated their homes.

Had they done so? Or had Sto placed everything? The dungeon said everything within him was there by his design, but this felt... alive.

The differences didn't extend to the Ratlings. They were still stone and fighting them was much the same. Carina and Tibs went around the edge, clearing the tents and moved inward, while Jackal, Khumdar, and Mez headed for the center, attracting the bulk of the attention.

By the time this room was cleared, the only serious injury was Mez's broken arm.

"Don't worry about it," The archer said as Tibs hesitated to use his essence to create the splint and bring the bone back into line. "Once we leave, the cleric will heal me. It'll take care of that, too."

Tibs had explained what had happened to Jackal after he'd helped him, but Mez wasn't

impressed.

“Look, I can’t use my bow with a broken arm. If I get sick because of it, I’ll have to time to get over it. It’s probably going to be a month before our next run.”

Tibs tried to keep the corruption from moving into Mez with his essence, but as always, it didn’t obey him.

“Well, that was fun,” Sto grumbled while Tibs searched the tents for chests.

“What did Ganny want?”

“To complain that I’m ‘breaking the rules’, what else would it be.”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you change the list of drops for the grouped Whippers,” She scolded.

“Of course I made changes,” he replied, slightly exasperated. “I’m always making adjustments to how things work. Why was this time deserving of a ‘I’m cheating’ talk?”

“Because you added more amulets to the drop list.”

“They’re the cheapest and easiest of the magical items I can put in, of course, I added them.”

“And it just happened Tibs got three of them?”

“That was random. There are plenty of other things on the list for them.”

“Was it?” she asked.

Had it been? Stop could affect what was in the chest, but not while they were in the room. That was how he’d arranged for Mez to get his bow; after Tibs suggested it while they’d been in the previous room.

“She’s impossible,” Sto grumbled.

“I take it she left.” Tibs didn’t know what Ganymede was. She seemed to act as Sto’s guardian and assistant. She knew more than he did, and she made sure he followed the rules, so there wouldn’t be repercussions. Who would enforce them, she didn’t say, and Sto didn’t seem to believe there was anyone to do so. There had been hints she could leave, but that Sto couldn’t be left unattended.

“She’d gone back to work on the third floor.”

“So, did you?” Tibs cleared another tent. This one had been arranged as a tannery, but didn’t have the smells the tannery in the town created. There had been talk of getting it moved closer to the Corruption pool since they both stank, but the tanner wouldn’t have it, and the guild refused to get involved in town disputes.

“Did I what?” Sto demanded, hints of anger in his voice.

“Affect the loot.”

“Of course not.” The anger turned into indignation and Tibs moved on to the next tent. This one had a cooking pot. It was the third such tent he’d entered. All were identical in how they were laid out, with only the material being different. Like in the others, and the previous time Tibs had been in one, the pot was empty. He couldn’t help the shudder as he remembered the Ratling on his back, the clawed hand coming at his face.

“Why did they talk like you need more amulets?” Sto asked.

“For my essences. My reserves are so small I can’t do anything with them. With the amulets, I’ll be able to train and use them the way those with them do.”

“Why aren’t you filling them now, then?”

Tibs touched the pouch. “Because if I use them now, the guild is going to force me to keep them. I don’t want the team to have to give up an item that will be more useful to us just because I’m forced to keep the amulets.”

“I thought you got to keep all the loot.”

Tibs adjusted where he thought the limit of Sto’s awareness was. The tables where the guild looked over their items were at the side of the waiting area. If he made a straight line from where he knew Sto could perceive, since he’d spoken to Tibs there, those should have been included.

This tent only had bedrolls and a chest. “Everything we take out of here belongs to the guild.” He took the leather boots out. Well-made ones, but normal. “We have to pay for what we want to keep.”

Sto snorted. “I made the loot, so it’s mine. I get to say who gets it, and you do.”

Tibs smiled, exiting the tent. “They aren’t going to believe me if I tell them that, and if they did…” He thought of Harry, and how he always knew when someone lied to him cause his element was light. “Then I’m going to have to explain how it is you can talk, and that I can hear you. Neither of us wants that.”

“So, you really could use the pouch of hiding, then.”

Tibs shrugged. “Yeah, but you said it was too costly to make.”

“You saved my life. I can sacrifice a little.”

“Will Ganny let you make it?”

“She can’t stop me,” he snapped. He sighed. “But she can yell at me. I don’t like making her angry.”

This tent was the last in his quarter of the camp, so he rejoined the others. Nothing enchanted this time around, so more they’d be able to keep; since unless it was enchanted, the guild only kept armor and weapons. He looked at the boots before placing them down. Would those be armor or clothing? He couldn’t tell. Among the clothing were a bow and a short sword.

He picked it up, and it was heavier than he remembered the once Bardik had gotten him to hold have been. He used earth to strengthen his arm, then it was easier to wield.

“Planning on switching weapons?” Mez asked, chuckling.

“Yes.” He swung it and he was pulled off balance. The archer caught him before he fell. “Thanks. I’m no good at throwing knives, and I’m tired of how closed those rats have to be before I can stab them.” He looked at the blade. “I don’t think I’m the kind of rogue who sneaks around and plants knives in people’s back.” That was the kind of rogue Bardik had been, even if the knife had been figurative, and the corruption only on him before Tibs had run to catch it.

“And we love you for that,” Jackal said.

“Is this a good sword?” he asked the fighter.

“It isn’t good quality,” Sto answered as Jackal shrugged.

“Those aren’t my thing.” The fighter closed his fists. “These are my weapons.”

Tibs chuckled. “I’d have to let the rats get even closes if I used my fists.” He

shuddered, putting the sword back with the rest.

“Can you even get training?” Carina asked. “Fighters are who get trained with swords.”

“Use enough coins,” Jackal said, “and everyone says yes, eventually.”

“Is the dungeon back?” Jackal asked, and Tibs nodded. “What’s with the junk? An entire camp of Ratlings, and this is all we get?”

“That isn’t junk,” Sto replied, offended.

“He’s just pleading for better stuff,” Tibs said.

“I am not pleading.”

“There’s definitely some whining in there,” Carina chuckled. “That makes it pleading.”

“Don’t you want better stuff?” Jackal asked.

“Of course I do, but it isn’t junk just because it isn’t as good as you want. The guild will let us keep most of this, so that’s money for us. Money we can use to buy whatever we need that doesn’t show up in the loot we find.”

“What do you need?” Tibs asked, relaying Sto’s question, then wondering why the dungeon was interested.

Carina fingered the cut in her robe. “It’s time I look for a better one. This was on sword swipe from a Ratling, and the creatures are only going to get harder as we go further. I’m going to ask Darran if he can get me a robe like the one you had Khumdar. With armor in it.

The cleric nodded, putting the items that fit into Jackal’s backpack. “That should not be a problem for him. I purchased mine from an armorer in Virdan, but I have seen the like in stores catering to sorcerers.”

“Those were sorcerer’s robes?” Mez asked.

The cleric smiled, “Of course. Cleric’s robes only come in white.”