

Chapter 96

The building Tibs slipped into through the window was lit only from the lanterns placed on the floor where the group was crouched around papers. As he landed silently, two spun and unsheathed weapons. A knife for Gerald, and short sword for Armania. They put it away on recognizing him.

Tibs joined the eight of them around the papers, and the routes marked on them. Jumian placed a finger on a spot where the corridor hadn't been marked in. "That passage continues forward."

"No," Gerald said. "It turns to the left."

"So it's another one with multiple ways to be unlocked," Bea said, writing letters next to the spot. "Anyone noticed the triggers that might affect them?"

Shakes of the heads all around.

Each of the Rogues here was on a team that had made it to the third floor, and Gerald had been the one to suggest they do their own version of the sorcerer's map, but one with information they could use, instead of theorizing about things that meant nothing to the run.

Having listened to Carina talk about some of those theories, Tibs knew they had their uses, but this was something he could take an active part in.

The only path they could all agree on led to the three crests, as well as the crest with the lion. This was the path that not stepping on any triggers opened. It meant that they all agreed on it until the first intersection. After that, it depended on which trigger had been stepped on by accident.

Tibs had decided it was Ganny's way of teaching them triggers weren't always meant to be avoided, which was the ingrained reaction after two floors of the way Sto did things.

Armania was who had picked the attic of the unoccupied house as their meeting point. It was at the edge of the noble's neighborhood, one of those they had bought to prepare for building their wall, but they still had ways to go since many owners of the houses the nobles needed were being difficult.

Which might have something to do with the nobles plans having been learned by the townsfolk.

Tibs had hoped it would lead to them rallying against the plan, but they were holding out until the nobles offered a lot more coins.

"From the bottom of the stairs to the first intersection," Tandy said, "it's sixteen paces."

"Twenty-three," Bronze corrected at the same time Armania said.

"Nineteen." They shared a look. "If we can't agree on that, it's going to make everything a lot harder."

"It would be easier if the floor was tiled instead of this cracked pattern."

Tibs took a piece of paper from his—he had no idea where the others had come from, and he wasn't asking—and drew the layout of the floor leading to the intersection. "This is what it is." He identified the triggers, using symbols to show which he knew worked

together. “I’m not good enough to show it this way, but the way the cracks make the tiles isn’t random.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed a repeating pattern,” Nataniel said. “I was planning on figuring out what they did.”

“Okay, that might be what I noticed,” Gerald said. “I hadn’t made the connection.” He used a blank space to draw a pattern.

“I’ve seen one like that,” Bea said. “We nearly lost our archer to that trap. If she’d been just a little slower, she’d have lost her head instead of an arm. We had to turn around right then to get her back and the arm to the cleric.”

“Anyone noticed if the tiles change from one run to the other?” Armania asked.

“They haven’t on my runs,” Tibs said.

“They haven’t for us either,” Bronze said. “But we know better than to trust that doesn’t mean they’ll be the same tomorrow.”

Tandy studied the drawings. “I don’t know. This entire floor seems predicated on us working out how to get the walls to open so we can reach the rooms we need to unlock that final one.” She tapped where the three crests were on the map, then the one with the lion. The boar and dragon were drawn on the map too, but without corridors leading to them since Bronze and Bea’s teams had been the only ones to see the dragon, and couldn’t agree on how to get there, and only Tandy had reached the boar and how she’d gotten there didn’t work with what they agreed on of the layout.

“The boar’s door has seven locks,” she continued. “Even after unlocking all of them, it still didn’t open. The locks are mechanical, with some essence in play. I’m not sensitive enough to tell you what it did, but I didn’t get a sense they interfered with the locks. If I have to put the feeling I got into words, it’s that it reacts to what I did to the locks.”

“What did you see in the room?” Armania asked.

Tandy shook her head. “The dungeon’s flooded the entire floor with essence. It makes it impossible for me to change the distance I can see at and look through doors.”

“Same with me,” Bronze said. “I haven’t been able to get a resonance going on that floor.” His element was crystal, and when Tibs asked about it, he’d explained that they were more than the gems everything thought of them as. Crystals were part of a lot of other things, not simply as essence, but physical crystals. They were in stones, in metal, even in the air. He was able to use his essence to make all those crystal resonate and get a sense of the space they were in.

What Ganny had done hadn’t been to interfere specifically with Tibs, he realized, as more of the rogues had shared stories of the third floor. Any who had a way to get a broader sense of their surroundings through essence was now unable to rely on it.

“Nat, your team’s next,” Tandy said, “I need you to—”

“Don won’t let me do anything yet,” she said. “He’s still certain the only way to get through the maze is to not trigger anything and follow the right wall. If it doesn’t take us to the other crest on this run, I might be able to convince him to let me test the triggers.”

“How confident are you he can win the game in the lion’s room?” Armania asked.

“He was taught it,” Tibs answered. Tibs hadn’t made the connection, back during the

siege, because Don referred to the game as King Killer. It had come up after a strategy session where Tibs had asked how he knew so much about that. “Listening to him talk, he mastered the game, but it’s Don, so he might be boasting; but I think he’s good enough to win against the dungeon, anyway.” He looked at Nataniel, “but if someone else on your team knows the game, they better be on his good side because they see him make a mistake. They are going to have to be careful with how they suggest an alternative.”

Nataniel snorted. “You think we don’t know that already?”

“My team’s the next one after Nat,” Tandy said. “I’m going to pick one shape and see what happened with I activate all of them. Hopefully, I’ll survive to report the result.”

“Don’t joke about dying,” Tibs ordered. “We can’t afford to lose anyone. Each death will set us back. We have time, so if it takes months, or years, to work it out, then that’s what it takes.”

“How adamant are you all about bringing in the next Runner whose team reaches the third floor?” Armania asked. “The more people we have working the problem, the faster it’s going to be.”

“Only if we can trust them,” Bronze said. “With all those new Runners, and how some convict’s have been acting, there’s no way to be sure one of them won’t go to the Guild thinking we’re breaking big rules with this in the hopes of getting favors from them.”

“It won’t help them,” Tibs said.

“That doesn’t mean they won’t do it anyway,” Bronze said.

Nataniel chuckles. “If they get that favor, Don will have something to say about it. He’s very protective of his position as Hero of Kragle Rock and Voice of the Guild.”

“I know,” Tibs grumbled. “I wouldn’t be surprised if how the guild treats him is what leads some to rat us out.” Sticks was definitely one of those, Tibs had decided, and wished he could keep him out of the official meetings now. “Those convicts you’re thinking of see how he gets to ‘decide’ when he goes on his run and figure they can avoid the runs altogether if the guild likes them well enough.”

“It only looks that way because of how eager Don is to be first all the time,” Nataniel said.

“Those types,” Gerald said, “never see what’s there, just what they want to be there.”

“Which is why we need to be careful,” Bronze said. “We’ll get to know the rogues who’ve made it to the third floor, then decide.”

Armania looked around. “Is there any other information to add to the map?” they shook their heads. “Unless you learn something from your run, Nat, we’ll meet up after Tandy’s, to go over what she found.”

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“You can’t do that,” Jackal said, taking the Infantry piece and moving it back to the square it had been on.

“It’s right there,” Tibs replied in exasperation, pointing to the sorcerer before it, no one four squared away.

“The Infantry is on foot, so they can only move one square. They have a halberd for a weapon, so they can only reach one of the three squares in front of them for their attack.”

“This is a stupid game,” Tibs complained, dropping his head on his arms and wishing he’d never heard of Conquest, or Strategion, or King Killer, or whatever some other kingdom used as its name. Ganny was evil for using it and forcing Tibs to learn yet again something new.

He had too much to do already.

“It’s a very smart one, actually,” the fighter said casually. “It forces you to think within boundaries, and to maximize your options with each move so that you can win, even if your ploy is defeated.”

“Losing to Ganny means one of us dies,” Tibs said dejectedly.

“Then it’s even more important you learn the game, don’t you think?”

He wanted to glare at his friend, but Jackal was right. With a sigh, Tibs straightened and studied the board.

He had eight infantry, two sorcerers, two archers, two fighters, the Lord and the Lady. Sixteen pieces over six types, each with their own rules as to how they move or killed another piece. No piece could interact with another, unless it was to kill it.

Tibs moved the infantry piece one square ahead and Jackal shook his head sadly. The facing sorcerer killed it. Three moves later and Tibs’s Lord was dead.

Instead of letting Tibs go, Jackal reset the board.

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Tibs ran among the booths, doing nothing more than enjoying the scents and sights, and making sure neither Jackal, Carina, nor Khumdar could find him. Over the last week, the three of them had worked together to ensure Tibs couldn’t escape his daily game of Conquest against Jackal. For someone claiming to not be very good at the game, the fighter kept on killing his Lord each time.

So today, on the first day of this bazaar, Tibs wouldn’t let them get their hands on him and—

“There.” A hand reached for Tibs, and he reacted without thought, suffusing his body with water essence and twisting as the hand closed around his arm and slipped over it. How had one of his friend gotten ahead of him to—Alistair stared at him in surprise and Tibs tripped on seeing his teacher there.

“I—” Tibs stammered. Wasn’t suffusing his body supposed to be hard? At least he’d channeled water and not one of the other elements. “What are you doing here?” he asked, getting to his feet.

His teacher raised an eyebrow. “Can’t I enjoy the vendors too?” then added. “And take advantage of a chance meeting with my student?”

Tibs kept on staring. Chance meeting his ass.

Alistair nodded. “It’s time you went back to daily training.”

“The guild just wants more gold.”

“No, Tibs. I want you to survive what the dungeon will pit against you as it gets stronger. That means taking your training more seriously.”

“I’m too busy,” Tibs complained.

His teacher chuckled. “I think your attempt to drive Harry to insanity can wait.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” Tibs stepped forward. “He let the people in the town be hurt. We don’t trust him to keep us safe.”

“Tibs,” Alistair said, sounding tired, “things are not always as—”

“I don’t care,” he snapped. “I’m street. I know better than to trust a guard to care about me. But guards look after cities. Folks like me don’t matter, but merchants and townsfolk do.”

Alistair sighed. “That’s not true, Tibs. You—”

“I don’t care!” his yell caused the people to look at them. Instead of moving away, they paused and watched. “I don’t care what the guild wants, Alistair. What it thinks of me, of us, Runners. This is my town. If you won’t keep it safe, I will. The guild can go sleep in the noble’s shit for all I care.”

“Making an enemy of the guild isn’t wise, Tibs.”

“I didn’t make an enemy of it, Alistair. It made an enemy of the town when it broke its promise to them.” He motioned to the people around them. “I’m not going to do that.” He let water cool his temper. “I’m not going to cause the guild problems, Alistair; I told you before. But I can’t wait here and let the guild let us die, either.”

They stared at one another silently.

Alistair let out a slow breath. “Tell me you at least understand I am saying this because I want you to be safe.”

Tibs snorted. “I’m a Runner. The guild didn’t take me out of my cell, so I’d be safe. You tried to fix things your way. I didn’t work. I’m going to make things better for the people I care about, for my town. The guild can deal with tit whoever it wants.”

“Hope that it never gets to that, Tibs,” his teacher said calmly. “It’s possible the guild broke trust; I don’t know what the agreements were. But don’t make the mistake of thinking this town can survive without the guild.”

“Really? Because it sure as shit didn’t look like it was going to survive with the guild until us Runners got involved.” He let more of water cool his still raising temper and the image of it turning to steam under the heat of his anger helped. “I’ll go through my training, Alistair. I’m forced to be indentured to the guild right now. But I’m not going to let it make my decisions for this town. And once I paid off the coins I owe it, it will never see me again.”

Tibs turned and walked away toward the bazaar’s exit. There was no way he’d be able to enjoy his time here today anymore.

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“As far as I worked out, these don’t do anything.” There was a pause. “That one’s a fire trap, so if you plan on triggering it, do that at a distance.”

“Tibs?” Armania called. “Aren’t thinking of joining us?”

Tibs turned away from the window. “Sorry. I’m having trouble focusing.” He stepped to the group.

Tandy had marked circles with an ‘x’, and drawn a flame inside another one. He had trouble matching them to his mental map of the dungeon floor until he saw the drawing of the tile she’d followed; then he had a sense of it.

“I’m not surprised,” Bronze said, grinning, “after declaring war on the guild the way you did.”

“I didn’t declare war,” Tibs protested.

Only hours after his altercation with Alistair, Don had found him at the inn, and interrupted Tibs’s attempt at losing himself in his work. He’d been livid that Tibs’s little outburst had undone all the good work Don had been toward getting the guild to see to it the town was properly protected. And Tibs hadn’t been able to keep his feelings to himself.

He laughed at the sorcerer and pointed out how Tirania was manipulating Don into getting the townsfolk to bend to the guild’s will, instead of getting the guild to change how it did anything.

The sorcerer wasn’t happy with Tibs at the moment.

“No,” Gerald said. “The way I understand it, you served notice to the guild.” Tibs joined the others looking at the rogue in confusion. “It’s something that needs to be done, back home, before you can duel someone. You lay out their offense and set the terms of what they need to do to avoid the duel.”

“I was just angry.”

“You can’t afford to be angry,” Nataniel said. “Don is... well, you are basically the reason for his mood, so I don’t need to tell you. But it’s having more of an impact than you might have planned. People have been slamming their door in his face.”

“There was a brawl at the Crawler yesterday,” Bea said, “with guards. From what I heard, it was started by a few of the townsfolk.”

Tibs groaned. Why was anyone taking the words of an angry kid and using them to start trouble? “I’ll... do something.”

“It might be best if you don’t,” Nataniel said. “Don’s going to get over his anger and he’ll smooth things over with the town.” Tibs snorted. After that talk, he expected Don would want to melt the town just to get back at him for what he’d said. “You need to trust him, Tibs. In his own way, he’s looking out for the down.”

He swallowed his reply, his angry reply. “It would be easier to do if he didn’t let his pride do the talking so often. What has he gotten the guild to do for the town in all the time he’s been the Hero of Kragle Rock?”

“What have you let them do?” Tandy asked.

“I didn’t start this!”

She raised an eyebrow.

“The merchants came to me for help.”

“After you’d already saved everyone.”

“Don did that,” Tibs replied. “I just helped.”

Their laughter was mocking.

Tanya was the first to gain control of hers. “No one who’s had a conversation with Don believes he can lead the Runners to oppose someone like Sebastian and his army of thugs.”

“Actually—” Nataniel said.

“Okay,” Tanya admitted. “No one who has an idea of the level of danger actually

involved believes it. Which includes the merchants. Why do you think they went to you instead of him?"

Because Darran was his friend and was already aware of the work Tibs had quietly put toward protecting the merchants before the siege. Not that, even if he hadn't done that, Tibs thought any of them would have gone to Don for help.

"Nat's right. Let this be. Anything you say will be used to fuel the town's anger." She indicated the map. "Focus on unraveling the puzzle that is the dungeon's third floor with us. It's going to distract you from the rest."