

Chapter 93

“We’re lost,” Jackal said, looking around the hallway.

“You *can* get us back to the entrance, *can*’t you?” Carina asked.

“Yes.”

“Then, we aren’t lost,” she replied smugly.

“Except I have no idea where we’re going.” He pointed at the dead-end before them.

“That should keep going. Help me out here, Tibs,” the fighter said.

Tibs stared at his friend. What did Jackal want him to say, or do? It wasn’t like he could force Sto to remove the wall.

Walking through the third floor had turned into a series of *rooms* with fights, finding caches, and *halls* where he had to figure out what trigger was a trap, was a decoy, or changed what passageway in intersections would be open to them. Or, as it turned out, would be open entirely. And, because there were not always a visual cues when they went from a ‘hall’ to a ‘room’, Tibs had been caught a few times when Gnolls dropped on them while he looked for triggers.

He had thought that avoiding every triggers would lead to the floor remaining open, as well as ensuring they weren’t caught by the traps, but it was now clear Ganny had outsmarted him on this. This floor would be about working out the sequence of triggers that opened the halls to where they wanted to go.

He smiled at the scope of the puzzle Ganny had given him to solve.

“At least,” Mez said, “all this walking means we’ll have more fights.”

“But the real loot is at the end of the floor!” Jackal pointed to the closed-off passage.

“That is not the end,” Khumdar said. The cleric stood away from them, from Tibs.

While Tibs’s refusal to let the cleric tell him the secret about himself he’d uncovered, had helped heal the rift Tibs’ weaponized use of the truth had caused, he remained cautious each time they were together since.

“Sto?” Carina called, then looked at Tibs and had Jackal and Mex stare at her.

“I’m here,” Sto answered, and Tibs nodded.

“I know what I want.”

“Oh good,” Sto replied, giddy, making Tibs chuckle. “What is it?” He nodded to her to continue.

“You’re doing this now?” Jackal asked, as if he was affronted that this level of loot was requested before they’d reached the boss room.

“I want wizard’s robes,” she said, pointedly ignoring the fighter, “the dame gray-blue as these. Actually, I’d like it to look exactly like what I’m wearing, down to how it’s scooped in places. It needs to be armored. I don’t expect it to resist everything you’ll throw at me, but I am tired of getting hurt anytime something gets close enough to me to be hit. But the one thing I really need it to have is hidden reserves like you did for Tibs’s bracers, but for every element, not just a few of them.”

“Must you not be higher in rank before being taught how to extract essence from objects?” Khumdar asked.

“Yes, but if there’s one thing Tibs showed me is that I’m not gaining anything by waiting for the guild to teach me.” She smiled. “They’re holding me back. So that robe, especially with that enchantment that keeps anyone from knowing it has essence through it, is exactly what I need to start figuring things out on my own.”

“The guild’s going to be pissed when they find out,” Jackal said.

She snorted. “They aren’t going to find out.”

“Anything else?” Tibs asked, and she shook her head.

“I can do that,” Sto replied. “I’ll have it at your next run.”

“Next run,” Tibs told her, and she beamed.

“Well,” Jackal said with reluctance, “since you got this started, I’ll go next. I want a pouch like the one you gave Tibs after Walter died. The one that no one can tell what’s in it,” he added. “But I also want it to be like those chests that are larger inside than out, and the stuff I put in the pouch won’t weigh anything.” Jackal smiled proudly.

“No,” Tibs replied, cutting off Sto.

“The dungeon can’t make that?” Jackal asked, confused.

“You’re just going to use that to hide all the loot we find.”

The fighter’s grin was enough of an answer.

“The guild’s going to know you’re scamming them,” Tibs snapped, fighting to keep his anger in check. “We always come out with loot.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Jackal stated, still grinning.

“What about the second, third and all the following ones?” Mez asked. “You’re not going to stop with just one, Jackal.”

“Exactly!” Tibs exclaimed.

“I will,” Jackal said smugly. “Look, I’m going to do it once, then I’ll just hide one or two things from each run, I swear.”

“Sto,” Carina said, “don’t make it so the items’ weight is removed.”

“Carina,” Jackal exclaimed, offended. “That’s *my* reward.”

“And your greed is going to get us thrown in a cell and get Tibs in even worse trouble. How are we going to explain this when the guild finds the pouch and all it’s going to have in it? You think they’re going to stop with you? Sto, how many people have items no one can detect even when touching them?”

“One,” the dungeon answered.

“Just me,” Tibs said.

“But they can’t tell he has it,” Jackal insisted.

“Until they cut them open and find the gems. They aren’t going to miss anything we’re wearing after they find your *ordinary* pouch filled with more items than a shipping crate can hold. They’re going to find out about my robes and whatever Mez and Khumdar as for, and—”

“I don’t think I’ll ask for anything,” Mez interrupted.

She nodded. “Even if it’s just the three of us, that’s going to be suspicious. You think they’re going to believe it’s just random we have such perfect items? Or that it’s just us? They’re going to look at every Runner, and when they confirm it’s just us, they’re going to want to know how we managed it. Someone with mind as an element will be questioning us at some point. Questioning Tibs.”

Jackal looked at Tibs, and his expression finally showed worry. His shoulders slumped. “Okay, the stuff can weigh what it normally does.”

“You’re strong,” Tibs pointed out. “You’ll be able to take a lot.”

“But not everything,” Jackal said, dejectedly. He forced a smile. “Which is for the best. It’s not like I’d be able to sell everything, anyway.”

“I will also not ask for a reward,” Khumdar said. “This staff and the robe have been enough of a boon, and if it were to change, that we draw attention to us as well.” He took a breath. “Jackal, unless you object, I would like to speak with Tibs in private.”

Tibs nodded when Jackal checked with him, then followed the cleric back the way they came until they were at the site of the previous fight. Not that any signs of it remained.

Khumdar turned to face him, looking uncomfortable. Tibs was surprised. He usually maintained a detached attitude to what happened around him that gave the impression nothing unsettled him.

“I understand you told me I do not need to tell you this, Tibs. And then, I was relieved at the prospect of being able to keep this to myself. But have I observed how I behave, how I think, and now I believe that you were wrong in letting me keep this secret.”

“I told you not to pry into ours. I can’t then tell you to tell me yours.” Tibs kept a tight hold on his curiosity.

“And that is the danger of good intentions. So here I will remove the guilt from your shoulders, because I need to say this so I will be kept from believing the story I have been telling others.” He took a few breaths, and essence gathered around them. The Darkness didn’t affect the light, but the sounds of the team, muffled by the distance because even more difficult to make out.

When Khumdar spoke, his voice shook. “As you have worked out, I wear the patronym ‘of Temerity’ not because I wish to appropriate it, but because I am from that family.”

“A family of Purity Cleric,” Tibs said with a nod.

“Of fighters,” Khumdar said. “The Temerity family has the strongest fighter serving Purity. They are proud, they are strong, they are,” he said with disdain, “unbendable. No Temerity shall ever be something other than a warrior.” He leaned against the wall, resting his head. “I have the pride of my family, the will. What I lack is the physical strength. I am told I nearly died on birth. My father refused to allow the cleric to heal me. What good was a son of his if he couldn’t win such a fight without help?”

He closed his eyes. “Thinking back on this, I am surprised at how little being told about the story of my birth hurt. In part, it was the understanding... no. It was trusting that my father had been right. That initial fight could do nothing but make me stronger. Another part was that by the time I was told, I had grown used to ridicule. My brothers and sister and

other relatives, including my father, were not kind with their words each time I tried, and failed, to lift a sword or halberd.”

His tone grew hard. “What proved too much, what finally put on the path to despise him and my family, to turn my back on them, is the pride when he told me how he never let my cries, my pain waver from the path of Purity.”

He paused and caught his breath. “I told you all of how I sought Darkness because I was drawn to it. I have told that lie so often I have grown to believe it. Darkness was not the first element I considered. Corruption is what I wanted. If Purity hated me so much, I would ally myself with its antitheses. But I hard work is ingrained into me. It includes researching what I intend to do. What I discovered of the people following Corruption sickened me. It may be a core element, but the people representing it do not make following it seem appealing.” He looked at Tibs and smiled. “Most of them.”

Tibs almost pointed out he didn’t follow Corruption, but he didn’t want to interrupt the cleric.

“I do not know why Darkness allowed me to have my audience, let alone allowed me to return. I approached it filled with deceit and the belief I could outmatch it.” He smiled. “I supposed that is as good an introduction as Darkness can ask for. Having no others to ask, I did not know what Darkness had made me of until much later. I was not a fighter, I knew that. I was also not a sorcerer, but while never skilled, I had learned the bow, and deceit is the realm of the rogue. I found out when I encountered a group of adventurers whose fighter had Darkness as her element. I could not keep my connection secret from her, but she kept my secret from the others. I... suspect I know why.”

“She was special to you, to each other,” Tibs stated, and Khumdar’s surprised expression nearly made him roll his eyes. He’d noticed that when it involved their special person, people often made the ‘not best decisions’.

“She did not understand what I was anymore than I did. I do not believe she would have been able to justify keeping the existence of a cleric outside of Purity a secret from the guild. I lived under the pretense of being a rogue then. But my interaction with her, watching how she interacted with her essence and how she viewed darkness, showed me I was not like her. I also knew enough of clerics through those living around my family to recognize in part how I was connected to Darkness.”

He sighed. “Knowing what I do now, I regret not choosing the other option. That shadow you picked would have let me show my family’s hypocrisy, show Purity. I would have been able to make them regret not acknowledging the hard work I put into wanting to be its fighter.”

“But Purity wants people to work hard,” Tibs said. “That’s the core of what it is.”

Khumdar nodded. “But its people are not the element. They say hard work is good, but most only include the type of work leading to the outcome they want when they say that. Or only include that hard work done by the kind of people they approve of. After all, I know of no one in that city who will congratulate the thief who works hard and breaks through the security of their house to rob them. When confronted with their hypocrisy, they fall back on the mantra of ‘Purity demands it’. Purity does not care what is done in its name, neither

does Darkness.”

“I don’t think any do,” Tibs said. “They don’t think like us. They don’t see consequences, just what they are. You saw how I was when I channeled Light. All I cared about was exposing the truth without care for what happened after. They don’t have to deal with what happened after.”

The cleric nodded. “I crafted the story of how my affinity to Darkness is what led to me seeking it out, and there may be truth to it after all. But the lie existed so I would not have to confront the pain that set me off on the path that led to it.”

“Okay, but I don’t get why they acted like that.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re a good fighter. I mean, you aren’t Jackal good, but you’ve killed your share of Ratlings, Bunnylings and Gnolls. If you could do something like that then, why didn’t you family let you?”

Khumdar shrugged. “I will not attempt to explain their behavior. I have spent the years I lived among them, and after, trying. Hoping that in that explanation I would find the way to make them accept me, acknowledge me. They are flawed, as are we all. I have accepted that, and it is enough for me.”

“Why don’t you want the others to know?”

Khumdar thought about it. “In part, because I enjoy having my secrets. But Carina would enjoy having been right about me too much. I am content letting her believe it is mere coincidence I share the name with that family. I am telling you, because you reminded me that I too am flawed, and in that reminder exposed that I am as proud as my family. And that pride, I will not allow to control me.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Tibs hugged the cleric, who stiffened, before hugging him back. Tibs pulled away. “We should head back to the others before Jackal loses patience and finds another way to the other fights without us.”

Khumdar smiled. “Our esteemed leader does enjoy his fights.”

“And it’s our job to make sure he’s able to go back to Kroseph after the run.”