

Chapter 10

“I’m fine,” Don muttered under his breath as Tibs look over the shallow cut along his arm. “It’s not like you can do anything about it, so stop trying to be a hero.”

The sorcerer’s dark robes only had the base armor enchantment Sto put on the robes he handed out as loot. It hadn’t proved effective against the golem person using void essence to blink from place to place, dodging attacks, until she were close enough to cut Don. It had put her within reach of the sorcerer, so he’d grabbed hold and pushed corruption in. She blinked away until she was done melting.

“We look after each other on this team,” Tibs replied. “Even if it’s the asshole who’s hurt.”

When Don didn’t snap a protest, Tibs looked up from the arm. The sorcerer was looking away.

“Tell me you have more bandages,” Mez asked Khumdar, who handed him a roll of linen. The archer glanced in Tibs and Don’s direction as he wrapped his hand. “I hate that I forgot to being some.”

“Traveling as I did,” the cleric said, “I have discovered that bandages are something one never has too many of.” He handed a roll to Tibs, who used it on the long cut. He made a splint with his essence at the same time to speed up the healing.

“Are you really a cleric?” Don asked.

“I do not care what you believe,” Khumdar replied flatly, then walked away.

“I wasn’t—” the sorcerer called, then closed his mouth. “Is he?” he asked Tibs.

“What do you care?”

“Don’t you care that he might be lying to you and your team about what he is?”

“We’re all lying about something,” Tibs replied.

“I’m not.” The words lit up, but Tibs already knew Don was a liar, so he didn’t call him out on it.

“The only thing I care about is that Khumdar has out back; and he does.” He secured the bandage and re-rolled the rest of the linen.

“I—” Don closed his mouth and look away.

Tibs was mildly curious as to what he’d intended to say, because there had been no light.

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The last line of the boar’s crest slid into place, completing the design, and the door raised up, revealing the uneven floor of the room.

Don whispered a curse.

“Wait here while I make sure the pattern is the same,” Tibs instructed before stepping in.

“Pattern?” Don asked.

“There’s an order to which column causes the others to move,” Mez said as the one Tibs stepped on rose and others reacted.

“I never noticed that,” Don replied, sounding awed.

“Did you even let your rogue try to work it out?” Jackal asked derisively.

“Jackal, that’s not helping,” Mez replied.

“He—”

“I agree with Mez,” Khumdar cut Jackal off as Tibs looked the landscape over. He leaped to the next column and he crouch as it went up again, ready to jump off if it didn’t stop when he expected it to.

“Didn’t you walk away from him asking you a question?” the fighter demanded.

It stopped, with barely enough room for Tibs to stand. The other column also looked like what he expected.

“Yes, so the situation would not become aggravated.”

Tibs climbed down, then, making sure Don was still distracted by the conversation, jumped, then leaped again on an Air disk to reach his target, which moved down as he landed on it.

“None of us gains anything by fighting and arguing. You know this. I believe your early days here were filled with the results of teams who could not work together during their runs.”

Don’s presence meant he’d have to rethink his usual path, since many of those jumps required a disk to complete.

“That we agree with the decision or not, Don is part of our team. We must put our conflict aside while inside the dungeon, lest we not survive the run.”

Another leap.

“I didn’t expect you to just let him be intolerant of you,” Jackal said.

“I’m not—” Don started.

“I have lived with intolerance directed at me my entire life,” The cleric cut him off, voice still neutral.

The columns stopped moving, again matching his expectations.

“It is a large part of the reason behind becoming who I am. I no longer care how people feel about what I am. I find it easier to ignore them, instead of engaging and wasting time, explaining something they have no interest in understanding.”

The next column Tibs landed on lowered almost to the floor, and his view of most of the room was hidden by the higher ones, but that too was as he’d anticipated.

“I’m not intolerant,” Don whispered in the silence.

Tibs jump onto the side of a column and hurried up it so he could see the others move. Everything matched, and those closest to the entrance were at a height he knew his team could handle. Except.

“Don, how are you at jumping?”

“Don’t worry about me,” the sorcerer replied, then added in bright words, “I’m going to be fine.”

Jackal snorted.

“Don,” Mez said softly. “He needs to know so he can point you to columns you’ll be able to reach.”

“I misjudged my capabilities during our first time through this room,” Khumdar said. “Recovering from that improper leap proved difficult.”

Don gave the cleric a suspicious look. “I’m not...great at jumping.”

Jackal closed his mouth from being glared at by Mez.

Tibs looked over the options, evaluating what ‘not great’ might mean, then assigned the columns for his team to get on. Weight wasn’t relevant, so all that mattered was that the correct ones were occupied for the floor to rearrange itself as Tibs needed.

“How did your team get through this room?” Jackal asked when they were roughly halfway through.

“Don’t move from your platforms,” Tibs said, studying the wall of columns still blocking their way. “I need to test the path.” He jumped to another column.

“Setareh rushed it,” the sorcerer said. “She ran through, jumping from one column to the other before the center path closed.

“Setareh did have a love for jumping and running,” Khumdar said.

The landscape shifted and Tibs glanced back to his team. Mez laid down as his column rose, but it stopped before coming close to the ceiling. The others, even Don, didn’t seem worried about how theirs moved.

“You knew her?” Don asked, surprised.

“She and I shared interests.”

“I had to melt a column that rose in her path the first time,” Don said, and Tibs stopped, about to jump, and turned.

“You melted a column? With corruption?” He looked up.

“Don is powerful,” Sto said.

“It only worked that time. I thought I’d just melt a path through on the next run, but the dungeon made them resistant.”

“I learn fast,” Sto said proudly.

Tibs focused on Don. His essence was dense. It marched Jackal in that way, but that couldn’t be all there was to it. Tibs had used up most of his fire reserve before the Ratling camp’s walls were damaged; and Sto hadn’t woven protection against fire into them the way he had for corruption. Skill had to have played a part.

Alistair showed Tibs how skill could defeat brute force, and what was an indiscriminate weaving through the walls as protection than a brute force application of essence? Don must have used skill to melt the columns, woven or etched the essence in a way that made it stronger than what Sto had done.

Only they weren’t supposed to learn about weaves until after Lambda, and Don couldn’t be so far in his studies of etching he could overcome Sto, could he? Wasn’t he forgetting that Sorcerers read books? Each one Tibs had met was a Runner because they’d been caught stealing books. Could Don have read enough to progress beyond what he was taught?

Tibs would have to think of a way to get the sorcerer to tell him about what he’d read so he could figure out how to apply that to his essence.

He put that out of his mind. Made it yet another thing on his list, and focused on working out the proper path to open the wall of columns and cross to the other side. There, a push of the lever brought the columns down and turned them off so his team could walk to him, and they could continue on.

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Tibs glanced at the shield at the top of the intersection. Reaching the dragon crest had taken longer than they’d planned. Since he couldn’t ask, he couldn’t know if the

information that had been accumulated by the previous teams had been wrong, or if Ganny had changed the triggers leading to opening the path. Whatever the reason, what had been written down had gotten them lost and cost them time.

“How long do we have?” Jackal asked.

Tibs shrugged. The line on the shield was low enough they didn’t have much time left, but beyond that, he had no idea.

“A candle’s worth, at most,” Don said, studying the shield.

“Are you sure?” Jackal asked.

“Yes. Didn’t you bring one and work out how much of the line one took to burn completely?”

“We worked out that when it’s out, the next team’s coming in,” Jackal replied, with a roll of the eyes. “But unlike you, candles aren’t something we waste coins on.”

Don was the one rolling his eyes now. “Being able to know how long you have isn’t a waste.” He motioned to the jumbled crest. “Is one candle enough time to solve that lock?”

Jackal narrowed his eyes at the tone, and Don looked away. “Tibs?” the fighter asked.

“I don’t know yet.” He hadn’t studied the puzzle.

The idea was to reform the dragon, but it wasn’t like the previous two. He also didn’t know how long a candle took to burn. He knew that all the candles the merchants on the row sold were the same and took the same amount of time to burn; Garran had mentioned it at some point, but Tibs only used them for light if he felt the need to read in his room. The inn had the lanterns. And if he needed to know the time, he had the sun, Clara and Torus in the sky for that.

A glance at the puzzle told him this wouldn’t be about sliding the tiles. Each tile had a dot at the corners that acted as a pivot point for the four that touched the dot. They resisted, so that they didn’t continue turning if he let go, and when they were aligned with the others, there was subtle click telling him that whatever else was expected, that was their neutral position. From there, he could pick a different dot to turn those tiles around.

There was essence throughout the crest, but from the way the edges of the tiles passed through each other as he turned them on the pivot, he figured that was it was for, and not part of what he needed to overcome.

He turned tiles until he had a line, then looked at the time shield. Half of what had been left was gone. “I can’t finish it in time,” he admitted. “It’s going to get harder as more pieces are in their right place until I work out the system.” He looked at the crest. Nine tiles up and across. “I don’t know how long that’s going to take me to work out.”

“Then we come here first on our next run,” Don said.

“No.” Jackal glared at the sorcerer. “We do the other two first, then we come here.”

“Jackal,” Mez said. “Don’s making sense. Loot’s not so important—”

“It’s not about the loot.”

Tibs joined the others in staring at the fighter, who sighed.

“It’s not just about the loot, but yes, it’s in part that. And no, it’s not me being stupid. One of the reasons for the runs is to get the loot. The coins from the fights, and the caches Tibs finds on the way, are nothing like what the rooms give us, especially now that we can take everything in the chests instead of one item per room. With the new guard leader not liking Tibs, there’s no telling if the merchants will be forced to stop paying for the

protection Tibs gives them. And Tibs's not going to stop helping them, or the Omegas when they get here. That takes coins. Unless one of you knows something I don't, we aren't in a hurry to clear the floor. So we take as long as it needs to work out this door after we clear the previous rooms."

Jackal looked at them, and Don looked back suspiciously, as if he had trouble believing the fighter had thought of that himself.

"Now we head back. If we're lucky, the dungeon will throw more golem people or Gnolls in our way. I still want to hit stuff."

"I can make that happen," Sto said.

"Is it only I who considers it odd that Jackal had stated he is not in a hurry to reach the boss room?" Khumdar asked.

"Maybe Kroseph replaced our leader with a more sensible one?" Mez replied.

"No," Tibs said, following Jackal. "He just threatened to withhold *them* time, if one of us tells him Jackal's been stupid. Not you Don. He doesn't care what you think."