

Chapter 95

The slash bite deep and the Gnoll fell away from Tibs. It dissolved and left behind two silver coins. He spun, searching for the next enemy, but only his friends were left stand

—
“Tibs!” Mez yelled, kneeled next to Carina, who was on the ground, bleeding heavily from her side.

He let go of the sword along with Water as he ran to her. He had the weave of Purity formed by the time he was beside her, cursing the fraying edges. It still worked, but he figured it would work better if he could get the essence to behave.

He applied it to the wound and the bleeding immediately slowed, then stopped. The weave melted inside her, the Purity gathering around the most ‘wrong’ parts within her, which was how he saw the injuries when only looking at them through Purity. He kept weaving and adding essence until all her injuries were healing.

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “When you’re done, this one’s yours.”

A glance at the large shield on the wall at the end of the hall didn’t tell him why his friend thought that. It was blue, with gold and brown. He returned his attention to Carina’s injuries.

Once they all had Purity essence mixed within them, he joined Jackal, who had a hand on the shield and his eyes closed.

“There’s a room behind this. Straight walls like the caches on this floor. Thirty paces or so wide, deeper than I can sense.”

“You’re getting better.” Tibs studied the shield and pieces that made up its face. Up close they were squares, and he smiled as he found the square hole at the top.

“I think,” Sto said as Tibs slid pieces around, using the empty one. “That you’re making it too easy on him.”

Quickly, he had the bottom of the lion’s head recognizable.

Ganny sighed. “I was hoping he hadn’t come across something like this before.”

“Val used something like this,” He said. And he realized this kind of puzzle was like the cylinder Cross had lent him. He proceeded quickly; until he was on the last row and two tiles were flipped. He stared at them, trying to remember how he’s resolved it on the one Val had given him.

He had been awake, hadn’t he? So much of his time in the Purity dungeon was a blur. Tibs wasn’t certain which puzzles he’d done half asleep or fully awake. But he had gotten through her version of this, so he should be able to figure it out even if he didn’t remember the method.

“Looks like you have him stumped,” Sto said.

He almost had it. He moved the tiles until he could use the hole above the shield to put them in the two in the right order, but now they were in the wrong place, and he’d flipped a set of tiles that had been fine before in the process.

He thought about just pulling the pieces off. There was enough play for him to slip

ice under and dislodge them, but that was definitely cheating. Too much of it, even for him. There was a way, and he'd find it. It would be a pattern, a set of moves that put everything right after... After seemingly mixing them up.

That was the solution to the cube. He had to allow the pattern to mix everything up so that it would then get back into the order with the piece he'd been trying to adjust also properly places. Here, he'd been trying to stay within the row of mix squares.

Once he allowed himself to undo some that were already in place, the chain of moves came quickly, and he had the face of the roaring lion. Once he slid the last piece from the position above the design into place, there was a click, a motion of essence, and the wall slid aside, revealing the room Jackal had sensed.

It was a large square, with tiles on the floor alternating between silver and ebony. Eight squares on each side. On the opposite stood five golem people, but instead of being at the back, each one stood on a square.

The most imposing was a woman in full metal armor, standing tall, holding a sword with both hands, the point resting on the floor of the ebony tile she stood on. A man in sorcerer's robes stood on a silver tile three rows before the lady and to the left of the room, with an archer on the opposite side, but on the same row as the lady, also on a silver tile. On the left and right of the sorcerer, two rogues were crouched. One on a silver and one of an ebony tile.

With a sigh of annoyance, Tibs stepped forward, only for Jackal to hold him by the shoulder.

"I have to figure out what's the trap or puzzle," Tibs told his friend.

"Unless you know the game," Jackal said unhappily, "this one isn't for you."

"Game?" Tibs studied the room, trying to figure out what game he might be referring to.

"Strategion," Khumdar said.

"We call it Conquest," Jackal replied.

"I am surprised you know of the game. I was under the belief it was used to teach commanders about the difficulties of battle."

"My father had big plans for me," Jackal said, and added unhappily. "Prophecy big. He brought in a few teachers of the game, but I wasn't good. The first thing we need to figure out is if the point is to get to the other side, or conquer the board."

"That is the Lord," Khumdar pointed to the armored woman.

"Don't you mean the Lady?" Carina asked. "It's a popular game among Purity fighters and I watched some of them play. That looks like the Lady."

"You can't have a game without the Lord on the board," Jackal said. "it's the one piece you can't afford to lose. Without any other that fits the role, she's it. That's the sorcerer, that the archer, and the last two are the infantry."

"They're rogues," Tibs said. The way they crouched was definitely roguish.

"The dungeon appears to have replaced some pieces with Runner roles," Khumdar said. "And to answer your question. I believe this is about conquering the board. Strategion is always only about a complete victory over your opponent."

“And we do that by taking out that Lord lady?” Mez asked, drawing his bow.

“Yeah,” Jackal replied, still studying their opponents.

The arrow exploded over the tile before the Lord and she didn’t react to it.

“I do not believe the dungeon will allow us to play by any other rules than those of Strategion.”

“Then we walk up to them and kill them one by one.” Tibs figured that was the point of the squares. They could only move one at a time or something like that.

“It’s not that simple,” Jackal sighed. “Each piece has to move in a specific way. The Lord can move in any direction, but no more than one square in the turn. It can also attack in any direction, but only one square immediately around it. The archer can only move one square too, but its attack covers the full lines ahead and behind, as well as to the left and right. In a normal game, the attack will automatically take the target out, but Sto hasn’t made anything that easy on us yet.”

“The sorcerer,” Carina said, “can move along any straight lines, but it can only attack a piece that’s more than one square away from it. If it has line of sight to the Lord, instead of attacking, it can switch place with it.”

Tibs rubbed his temple, trying to keep track of all the rules. “Why is a game so complicated?”

“Because it is not simply a game,” Khumdar answered. “It is a tool of war.”

“Which is why it’s called Conquest back home,” Jackal said.

“Okay, so are we the pieces we represent?” Mez asked.

Khumdar studied the two rows closest to them. “Unless the dungeon indicates otherwise, I believe that figuring this will be part of beating this room.”

“I’m leaving this to you,” Jackal said. “I’ve lost every game I played.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” Khumdar said, stepping to the edge of the room. “You enjoy acting the idiot, but an act is all it is.”

“You willing to bet your life on it?” Jackal grinned. “Because I don’t think that losing a fight here will just get us put on the side of the board until the game’s over.”

“How far can you jump?” Khumdar asked Jackal.

“Far, why?”

“Fourth row, Second square from the left.”

Jackal frowned. “That puts me next to the sorcerer. I’m clearly the Lord, so I’m not going to be able to protect myself once it moves.”

“I know. It is part of my strategy.”

Jackal backed away. “Give me room.” He ran and leaped the distance, landing in the middle of the square and used his essence to keep from having his momentum pull him to the next one. Jackal looked at them and grinned.

When Khumdar didn’t give instructions, Tibs looked at him.

“I was waiting to determine the game began with the first piece set, or waited until we were all on the board.” He pointed to a silver square by the entrance. “Mez, here.”

“I can’t shoot at anything from there,” the archer protested.

“You will have a target,” Khumdar stated. “Carina, can you reach the fifth row, third from the right?”

The wind picked up around them, and Carina leaped and was carried to the square by it.

“Mine was more impressive,” Jackal said, “since I didn’t have anything helping me.”

“I think all the hot air in that head of yours is what kept you aloft,” she replied.

“Don’t you keep saying my skull’s all iron?” the fighter asked.

“Which should impress on everyone just how full of yourself you are.”

Khumdar used his staff to jump to the third row, two squares away from the archer.

“Doesn’t that make you a sacrificial piece?” Jackal asked, studying where they were on the board.

“Only if Tibs cannot reach the position I need him in.”

“Isn’t that putting a lot on him?” Carina asked.

“Tibs,” the cleric said, “can you stand one square away from in the Lord, before her?”

“Oh, you sneak,” Jackal said, grinning.

“Can he make that?” Mez asked. “I don’t think Carina could even with her air.”

“I’m not Carina,” Tibs said. He channeled Air, pushing and shaping it ahead of him. Once it was as he wanted it, he locked it in place. He wove more essence through the shape, then stepped up on the step, and onto the path it made. He crossed the board and stepped down onto the target square.

“How did you do that?” Carina asked in dismay.

He pulled the essence back and switched back to water. “I poured almost all my reserve into making the air hard.” He smiled. “I understand now why the adventurers never seem to think about the early stuff they learned. Just putting a lot of essence into what you do means you don’t have to be all that precise with it.”

“Okay, is anyone else annoyed that Tibs, yet again, can do something the rest of us can’t?” Mez asked, grinning.

“Only if that makes him stop studying,” Carina said. “If you lose access, you’ll only have your low reserves and you have to know how to work with those.”

“If you’re done talking,” Ganny said, sounding annoyed, “it’s my turn. I didn’t count on the level of mobility you all have.”

“Does that mean we win?” Tibs asked.

“No, because you have to win the fight first.”

The Lord stepped forward.

“What kind of move is that?” Jackal asked. “All Tibs has to do is take the Lord.”

The cleric glared at the woman as she raised her sword.

“Khumdar?” Tibs asked.

“Can you beat it?” he replied.

Tibs sensed the Lord’s essence. “She’s not as strong as Jackal. I’m guessing she’s metal because of all she wears. Without eyes, I can’t tell for sure.” He considered it as he formed his sword. “It’s going to depend on how good she is with that sword.”

“You weren’t listening when I said Sto wouldn’t make this as easy as just taking a piece, were you?” Jackal asked.

“I was,” Khumdar said darkly, “but I let the challenge of the strategy push any other thoughts back. I am sorry to say that the reality of the situation was not what my thinking was on.”

“Carina,” Jackal said, “switch with me.”

“No,” Khumdar ordered. “That will leave Tibs vulnerable.”

“I’m lined up with Tibs,” Jackal said, “but I don’t have range. She does. I don’t care what else Sto wants, unless the dungeon specifically plans on killing Tibs. The rules of the game don’t let it sacrifice the Lord because that means we win.”

“Why can’t we just all move so we can protect him?” Mez asked.

“The rules only let each side move one piece at a time, in turn,” Jackal said.

“Khumdar?” Carina asked.

“Tibs, you are the one at risk,” Khumdar said, sounding defeated, “and you know the dungeon better than us.”

Tibs nodded. “I trust Jackal.”

“And scarier words were never uttered,” Mez said.

“You keep coming up with stuff like this,” Carina said, “and no one’s going to believe the idiot act anymore.”

“What happens in the dungeon stays in the dungeon,” Jackal replied. “How do we do this? Do we have to jump at the same time?”

“They can walk,” Ganny said.

“Walk,” Tibs repeated.

Jackal stepped and stopped, pressed against the edge of his square. Carina had the same problem.

“What’s going on?” Jackal demanded as he slammed his shoulder against the unseen barrier. “Is the dungeon cheating?”

“No,” Tibs said, even as he made out the tight weave, keeping his friend stuck on their squares through the concentration of all the others in the room. Ganny didn’t cheat, which meant they’d missed a detail.

“Then why can’t I pull the rescue move with Carina?” Jackal asked.

“Jackal,” Mez said, sounding worried, “that’s a move only the Lord can pull, right?”

“Yes.” Another shoulder slammed against nothing.

“And the Lord is the most important piece on the board, right?”

“Yeah, we lose that and the game’s lost.”

The archer fixed his gaze on the fighter. “Then why did you say you’re the lord?”

“Because I’m the team...” Jackal turned pale. “Oh Abyss.”

“No,” Khumdar said, “that was not...” He looked like he was about to be sick.

“What?” Tibs asked, and they looked at him.

“You’re the most important piece,” Carina said, weakly. “You’re our Lord.”

“I thought I was the Infantry,” he said.

“I planned on using you as such,” Khumdar said, sounding like he was forcing himself to speak. “But you have yet to move, and we did not begin with the starting position. This means that we assigned your importance because... because you are. I am...”

“Then Tibs can move back,” Carina said. “the Lord can move in any direction. I have line of sight on the square behind him. I’ll be able to switch with him then.”

“Can you take on that fighter?” Jackal asked.

“I’ve beaten you before,” she replied.

“Once, and that was a while ago. And that’s a dungeon creature, not a runner.”

“But that’s going to keep Tibs safe.”

“You’re not dying for me,” Tibs replied.

“Enough,” Khumdar said forcefully. His face was stern, almost angry. “Now that I understand the role each of you must play. I have a strategy. I need all of you to trust me as Tibs trusts Jackal. I may tell you to move in ways you do not understand, but if you follow my instructions, we will be capable of trapping the dungeon’s Lord.”

“Hun?” Ganny said.

“I trust you,” Tibs said.

“Thank you.”

“I certainly trust you plans more than Jackals,” Mez said.

“I trust you, too,” Carina said.

“Jackal?” the cleric asked when the fighter didn’t say anything. Finally, he gave a curt nod.

“Mez, two squares ahead of you,” Khumdar said. “Please do not ask questions. I do not wish for the dungeon to discern my strategy.”

“What is he doing?” Ganny said as Mez took the assigned position.

“Ganny, doesn’t that leave Tibs open to you?” Sto asked cautiously.

“It does, so why did he make that move?” she asked back.

“Don’t look at me. This is your game. I don’t understand any of it.”

“Okay, then I have to...”

“You don’t have to hesitate on my account,” Sto said, and Tibs readied himself for the fight. “I knew this was going to happen, eventually.”

The sorcerer moved to threaten Mez.

“Wha—” Carina started

“Quiet,” Khumdar ordered. “Tibs, move back a square.”

Tibs did as instructed.

“Okay, that move I get,” Ganny said, although she sounded uncertain. The Lord stepped forward.

“Jackal, tell me you are capable of beating the sorcerer.”

“Of course,” the fighter replied, but his scoff sounded forced to Tibs.

“Then make the one square move you are allowed as Infantry, I will maneuver the board so you get the opening, then we will move on to the next step.”

“It’s not good if you lose the sorcerer, right?” Sto asked.

Ganny didn't reply, but the sorcerer moved two squares back.

"Carina, two squared to the left and forward, that will put in on line for the sorcerer's next move."

Ganny cursed. And the sorcerer moved three squares forward.

"Tibs, one to the diagonal left. We almost have it where we need it."

Tibs moved.

"No, you don't," Ganny said, and the sorcerer walked across the board, out of reach of any moves Tibs thought they could—

The blast of dark energy blasted the Lord right out of her square and spread over her as she fell, then she dissolved.

Tibs turned to look at Khumdar, who was using his staff to support himself and shaking heavily.

"What just happened?" Mez asked at the same time as Ganny.

"He played the commander," Jackal said. "That was dangerous."

"I don't get it," Tibs said.

"I don't either," Ganny said.

Jackal looked at the cleric, who shook his head. "Khumdar got Sto—"

"Ganny's who we were going against," Tibs said.

"He got Ganny to believe that the sorcerer was critical to his plan, so she'd forget to pay attention to her Lord. Any experienced player would have seen the ploy for what it was." There was anger in Jackal's voice.

"I could not think of another way," Khumdar replied weakly. "That miscalculation had doomed Tibs, and I..."

"Wait," Mez said. "How come your attack work when mine didn't?"

"The game had not started when you did so."

"But that was a sorcerer's move, right? Attacking something you had a line of sight to? Carina's the sorcerer."

"Each side has two," Jackal said.

"So, we won?" Tibs asked.

"You won!" Sto said, sounding far too happy about it.

"I'd argue the point," Ganny said, still sounding perplexed. "You shouldn't win by tricking me. But my Lord is dead, so I definitely lost."

Carina hugged Tibs tightly.

"I'm okay."

"You could have died," she said.

He tried to tell her it was okay, but he hugged her back instead. "Did you sense something about Ganny that let you do this?" he asked Khumdar when she let him go.

The cleric shook his head, still looking mildly sick. "I cannot tell what secrets here are whose, or what they are. The dungeon is young. I hoped it meant so was the helper with it and not experienced with the game. I asked Darkness to protect you, but ultimately, Tibs. I believe we simply got lucky."

“That’s not a thing,” he replied.

Khumdar shrugged. “It is nonetheless how I feel about it.”

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “We’re going to need you here.”

“Go, I shall need more time to settle myself.”

“Don’t think too much about what might have happened. That’s one thing from Jackal I’m trying to do, too.”

“That is easier to accomplish when one does not spend so much time thinking.”

Over the chest, at the back of the room, was another blue shield, with the same lion roaring on the wall. He sensed filaments of essence from it vanish into the mire of essence that filled this floor. None of them stayed, which could indicate a trap. They were all waiting for someone to provide essence and activate something in the distance.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked Jackal.

“Tell me why there’s so much essence, and what it’s for?”

“Why would I know that?”

“You’re our expert when it comes to this,” Carina said.

He looked at her. “Did you try to figure it out? Wasn’t it you who said I shouldn’t depend too much on something?” she blushed and he turned his gaze on Jackal.

The fighter raised his hands. “Hey. I’m the idiot here. Of course I didn’t think to check. If I don’t know something, the smart thing is always to call you over.”

Tibs sighed. “You aren’t that stupid.” He pointed to the shield.

Jackal placed his hand on it and closed his eyes. “What am I sensing for?”

“What’s there?”

Jackal shrugged. “There’s a lot. I’m guessing all of them, but earth is just one thread in there, going too far for me to sense.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to need some help here, Tibs.”

“What do you know about essence?”

Jackal looked at him. “Nothing.”

Tibs stared at him.

“It can be used to do stuff.”

“And?”

“You’re starting to sound a lot like Carina, Tibs.”

“Good. And?”

“No, not good. You’re not supposed to like it when she teaches you, so you shouldn’t
—”

“No one’s going to know you can think, Jackal.”

The fighter sighed. “To do something, essence has to be etched or woven. Etching is something that happens, then it’s gone. Weaves stay.”

“And that?”

“This is more like the way we open the doorways, except I don’t know where the other end is.”

Tibs nodded, proud of his friend. "I can't tell what's at the other end, but it's not going to affect this room."

"So this could be locking up another corridor?"

"Or open one," Carina said. "We did win."

Jackal looked from one to the other, then pushed essence into the thread. Tibs felt it brighten, and a few seconds later something in the distance rumbled.

"Any idea what that was?" he asked.

"Other than the background," Mez said. "It's the same crest as on that other wall where the three are."

"So, we have to look forward to two other rooms like this?" Carina asked.

"Then I shall ask that it not be Strategion again," Khumdar said, joining them.

"I'm with you."

"Other than the Gnolls and people golems," Carina said, "this floor does put a demand more on our minds than on our fighting."

"That's because I'm the thinker in this dungeon," Ganny said.

"You do know I'm the dungeon, right?" Sto said.

"You're the body and I'm the mind," she replied smugly.

"That's not how it works, Ganny."

"How would you know?" she said, chuckling. "You're just the body?"