

“Mez,” Don said, “Three and to the left. Prepare to defend yourself.”

The archer moved and found himself lined with the opposing sorcerer, who acted immediately. The ball of earth formed and flew. Mez crouched as he tapped one end of his bow on the ground. A wall of flame shot up, consuming the ball.

Tibs felt its heat all the way to the other side of the board.

“That’s new,” Jackal commented.

“There’s only so much I can do shooting arrows,” Mez replied, dusting himself off as he stood. “My instructor made it clear he wasn’t letting me take my test until I showed I could do more than shoot trick arrows.”

“They do get annoying, don’t they?” Don said, “with their constant push for us to be better. Tibs one forward. You should be safe, but watch for how the dungeon moves its archer. It could set up two against you if we’re not careful.”

“Ah!” Ganny exclaimed. “Like I’m falling for that again.” Her archer moved to a position that Tibs thought might be setting it up to go against Jackal, their Lord for the game.

“Yeah,” the fighter said. “It’s almost like they want us to survive our runs. How inhumane of them.”

“Especially since you all agree the guild has no interest in seeing to it you survive,” Khumdar added.

“Individuals aren’t the guild,” Don replied. “Khumdar, left diagonal, three squares.”

“Are you certain?” the cleric asked, looking the board over. “Is not Jackal more—”

“I’m the strategist,” the sorcerer snapped. “Jackal can take care of himself.”

The fighter shrugged when Khumdar checked with him.

Tibs tried to work out the consequences of the move, but he didn’t understand the game well enough. What he knew was that while Don didn’t understand Ganny was intelligent, he was aware there was a cunning involved in everything the dungeon did. And that the dungeon understood something of the people doing the runs. A lot of what he’d done throughout this game was attempt to trick Ganny into making a mistake. Tibs simply had no idea if it was working.

“I think someone’s in for a surprise,” Ganny gloated as one of her sorcerers lined up with Jackal. “I’m sorry Tibs.” She didn’t sound it as the ball of fire hit the fighter and stuck to him until it went out.

Jackal dusted himself off. “I’m quite fine with just improving on what I can already do.” His armor lost the gray hue that had matched Jackal skin.

“I am getting tired of how you’re always getting stronger,” Ganny grumbled, and Tibs smiled.

“Mezano, if you’ll do the honor?” Don instructed.

The archer moved diagonally one square, lining him up with Ganny’s lord and pulled on the bow while her fighter raised its shield.

“How?” Ganny exclaimed as the arrow became so bright Tibs had to look away. The explosion sent pieces across the room.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Mez said, awed.

“The archer can’t move like that!” Ganny yelled as her other pieces crumbled away.

“How was Mez able to do that?” Tibs asked. “He’s the archer.”

“According to whom?” Don asked. “I never stated which role he had.”

“Each motion you had him do was that of the archer,” Khumdar stated.

“Were they?” the sorcerer smiled.

“You had him move and turn,” Jackal said. “It was two or three ahead, then to the left or right for the rest of the move.”

Don beamed. “Did any of you pay attention to how many squares Mezano moved? I never told him that.”

Tibs thought back on the game. Like Jackal said. Don had instructed the archer on how many forward and then a direction. He’d been too focused on looking ahead and listening to Ganny for an idea of what was to come to pay attention to the rest of the move. It seemed Ganny had been in a similar situation.

“But he’s an archer.” Jackal motioned to Mez.

“Which I counted on the dungeon also assuming since it’s the only role I’ve used him in before. After the board allowed that first move without me having to state by how many he had to finish it, I figured it was an autonomous system independent of the one that decides how to move the pieces. Then it was just about making sure that part was focused on defending it pieces so it wouldn’t notice Mez wasn’t moving as an archer did, but as the Lady could.”

“You two worked this out ahead of time,” Jackal said, not entirely pleased, as Ganny growled.

“I hate you, Don. I truly do. One of these days, I will get the upper hand.”

Mez crossed the board and tapped the shield over the chest. “Tibs,” he called as the distant rumble vibrated the floor.

Tibs checked the chest, then opened it. Three healing potions, two of essence, a sword and shield. Don got the essence potions, Jackal, Khumdar, and Tibs, one healing each. Mez still had those he’d entered the dungeon with.

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“I swear,” Don grumbled, scrambling up the side of the pillar. “You are trying to kill me.”

“It wasn’t that hard of a jump,” Tibs replied, distracted by studying the landscape of shifting floor room. Nothing moved, so that while it looked like the sorcerer’s feet that brushed the other platform, he had grabbed onto the side before sliding too far.

“Not hard for you.” Don panted, rolling on his back once he pulled himself onto the top. “You will throw yourself off a chasm for fun. I am a sorcerer. My idea of exercise consists of lifting heavy books.”

Clearly, he’d over estimated Don’s ability this time. He couldn’t remember how he’d judge them while iced, but that last run, while pissed at the sorcerer, he’d definitely made sure he had all the short ones, so he wouldn’t have an excuse to cause one of them to die.

“As a Dungeon Runner,” Khumdar said, “it may be to your benefit to expand to something more physical.”

“Clearly, you haven’t seen the books I’ve been reading.”

“Khumdar’s right,” Jackal said. “You might be a scholar one day, but you need to survive the dungeon first.”

“I have survived.”

“You almost fell,” Mez pointed out.

“The fall wouldn’t have killed me,” Don replied disparagingly.

“It could have killed one of us,” the archer replied.

“What do you want me to say, Mez? I’m sorry, okay? I’m doing the best I can, but this isn’t my kind of room.”

“I want you to say you’re going to accept Jackal’s offer to train you.”

“You do want me killed!” Don replied, horrified.

“I’m not that hard of trainer,” Jackal said, smirking.

“You are stone through and through. It doesn’t get any harder.”

“Think of what it’ll do to have some of that rubbing off on you.”

“Kroseph won’t be happy,” Tibs said, deciding on a longer, but more suited path.

“Not that kind of rubbing,” Jackal protested.

“It better not be,” Don said, pushing himself to his feet. “Otherwise I’ll corrupt something off you and Kroseph can come complaining to me all he wants.”

“He wouldn’t complain to you,” Mez said. “He’d chastise Jackal for doing something stupid yet again. Then he’d get him to use his loot money and pay a cleric to grow it back so he could force him to go without until he begs for it.”

“It’s scary how well you know my man,” Jackal said, grinning, “considering not one of you shares a bed with him.”

“It is possible that it has everything to do with how you are both far too willing to share the things you partake of in said bed,” Khumdar said in a neutral tone that sounded forced. “Even those of us doing all they can not to play attention end up learning things we would rather not.”

“I thought you loved learning secrets,” Don said.

“Nothing these two do is secret,” the cleric grumbled.

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“You know,” Jackal said, as he and Tibs pushed the wall and revealed the passage. “This is almost too—”

Don had the fighter against the wall, hand on his mouth. “Don’t even think of finishing that.”

Jackal moved the hand. “I was just pointing out that—”

Tibs kicked him in the shin.

“You know I don’t feel those anymore, right?”

“Just stop talking,” Tibs said.

“The dungeon listens,” Don said. “And it might consider anything you say is a challenge.”

“Fine.” Jackal threw his hands up. “I won’t say anything.” He grinned. “It probably knows how I fell already, anyway.”

Since neither Ganny nor Sto commented, they had to be busy elsewhere.

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“How are we doing this?” Jackal asked from the open door to the boss room.

As with the last time, the dragon was at the far back. But this time, the row of monster already stood between the closest set of columns. They stood still as statues, and

even to Tibs's sense, they were the only ones there. Not that he sensed much through the ever present miasma. Still, there would be many more. Quigly had confirmed that.

"We might have to sacrifice fighting the boss to work out how to avoid triggering the other attacks," Don said.

"Quigly beat the room," Jackal replied.

"And nearly lost some of his team," Mez pointed out. "None of us at the strategist Quigly is."

"I'm stronger than he is," Jackal said.

"This is not a room meant for pure strength and toughness," Don stated. "Being smart is how we beat it."

"Fine. Can we beat those and then be smart?" Jackal asked.

"Tibs?" Don asked.

"I want to check the floor to make sure there aren't any triggers that will activate the next set of creature between us and those."

"There won't be any," Jackal grumbled, but leaned against the wall.

Tibs was as meticulous as he could while remaining aware of how much time they had. They'd made good time through the other rooms now that they were familiar with all of them, but he couldn't waste it here. Especially without knowing how long it would take to work out how to undo each of the following triggers.

"The floor's clear," he said, returning.

"I don't sense anything in the air set to react to us," Don said, and Tibs raised an eyebrow. "I described what this floor feels like to my teacher, and he gave me exercises to pierce through this kind of fog."

"You didn't say anything about that before," Mez said.

Don shrugged. "We knew the way and the traps. Nothing I picked up contradicted that."

"Good to know," Jackal said, walking toward the creatures. "Now, we fight."

Tibs joined the fighter. "You're not rushing ahead after the fight."

"I'm going to need to heal a bit before that."

"Not even then," Tibs warned. "You let me and Don do what we can first. Then we think about fighting."

"I'm the one in charge, Tibs."

"You want me to repeat that to Kroseph?"

Jackal grinned. "Actually, I'd like that. He feels the need to show me how I'm actually wrong, and the way he pushes—"

"I don't want to know."

"Stop," Don ordered, and they both stood still. "There's a difference in the fog ahead of you," the sorcerer said. "It is probably the trigger that activates them."

Tibs tried to sense the difference Don was noticing, but it was just an undefined miasma to him.

"Then you and Mez get ready," the fighter instructed, as Khumdar stood at their side. "Once the fight's done, sense ahead for the next one." He stepped forward, and the creatures came alive.

Tibs ran at the Ratlings, ice sword and shield forming. He cut one, then another.

Blocked the Bunnyling that joined the attack, grabbed it, and pulled it in the way of the spear that formed where Tibs had been. He smirked at the metal sorcerer, then etched a quick sticky attack to keep it from etching anything else.

Sto's creatures all seemed to need to perform the etching the way Alistair taught him.

He jumped out of the way of the wave of metal essence, and the Gnoll which had been sneaking closer was cut apart.

Of course, he couldn't ignore what raw essence could do.

He blasted the sorcerer with a wave of water strong enough it shattered when they hit a column.

His smirk was broken by pain in his side. He turned and hit the rogue with a stone fist, breaking its face. How had it sneaked this close without Tibs noticing or sensing the sword? How had the abyss blasted thing hurt him? Metal couldn't—

Bone. The fucking thing was made of bone. He pulled it out and filled himself with purity. He'd drink a potion to explain it once the fight was over. He threw the sword at a rushing Gnoll and missed. He slammed his spiked shield into it, growing the ice until they came out his back. He kicked it off and search around for another creature to kill.

They were crumbling away, leaving behind silver pieces and knives and jewelry. Those were new.

Mez drank a potion, reminding Tibs to do the same before Don questioned the lack of an injury to match the damaged armor.

"Don, Tibs," Jackal called. "Do your thing while the rest of us collect the fallen loot." He looked up. "I knew there was a reason I liked you" The lack of response surprised Tibs. He'd expected Sto to be interested in these fights.

Tibs stayed a pace behind Don as the sorcerer took careful steps until Khumdar called out to them.

The cleric indicated a column. "There is something purposely hidden there."

It was decorated with symbols that went all the way onto the floor, forming a circle around it roughly two paces across. He crouched on the outside, trying to work out the symbols.

"Are these Arcanus?" he asked Don. "I haven't learned all of them yet."

The sorcerer shook his head. "They aren't anything I've read about." He caught Tibs's hand. "Don't. There's something about the essence within the circle."

Tibs sensed around the column, but didn't learn anything. The miasma wasn't an even spread of all essence, but unlike Don, he wasn't making out any pattern to the differences, so he had no way to know if this was a new kind of trigger or just more of the same mess.

He placed a hand on the floor outside the circle. "This is going to take time," he said, the water spreading through the carved symbols. "There doesn't seem to be any cracks that would be a physical trigger, so this might be—"

Essence flared through the water where some of the symbols were located.

"I triggered something!" He yelled as the air shimmered on the other side of the two columns and creatures appeared.

They were new.

Tibs noticed scaly skin and elongated muzzles; then he was too busy fighting.