

Planning-46

“Mez, three and to the left, prepare to defend yourself,” Don instructed, and the archer moved to the indicated square. The opposing sorcerer acted instantly, forming a ball of earth and sending it flying. Mez crouched as he tapped one end of his bow on the ground. A wall of flames shot up, and the ball vanished into it. Tibs felt the heat from the other side of the board.

“That’s new,” Jackal commented.

“There’s only so much I can do with 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 said, “with their constant push for us to be better, don’t they? Tibs, one forward. You should be safe, but watch for how the dungeon moves its pieces. Two could be used against you.”

“Ah, like I’m falling for that again,” Ganny stated. Her archer moved in what Tibs thought was a plan to set up an attack against Jackal, their lord for this game.

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

“Especially since all agree the guild has no interest in seeing any of us survive,” Khumdar said.

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

“Are you certain?” the cleric asked. “Is not Jackal more—”

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

Khumdar looked at the fighter, who shrugged.

Tibs tried to look at the repercussions of the move, but he didn’t understand the game well enough. He did know that while Don didn’t understand how intelligent Ganny was; he had realized there was a form of cunning there, and that the dungeon understood something of the people doing the runs. A lot of what the sorcerer had done in this game was try to trick Ganny into a mistake. Tibs just had no idea if it was working.

“I think someone’s in for a surprise,” Ganny gloated as one of her two sorcerers lined up with Jackal. The ball of fire wrapped around Jackal, then went out.

The fighter dusted himself. “I’m quite fine just improving on what I can already do.”

“You know,” Ganny grumbled, “I am getting tired of how you’re always getting stronger.”

Tibs smiled.

“Mezano, if you will,” Don said.

The archer moved sideways until he was lined up with Ganny’s lord, pulled on his bow’s string and held it, the fire arrow becoming so bright the others had to look away.

“How?” Ganny exclaimed as her lord exploded.

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

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

“How could Mez move like that?” Tibs asked. “He’s an archer.”

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

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

“Were they?” Don smiled.

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

Don beamed. “When did I tell him how many squares to finish the move by?”

Tibs thought back on the game. Each time he’d had Mez move, Don told him two or three, then a direction. He’d assumed the archer simply finished the usual movement, just as Ganny had.

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

“Which I counted on the dungeon also assuming,” Don replied. “That’s the only role I’ve used him in until now. And after the board allowed that first move, I counted on that being an autonomous system independent of the one that decides how to move the pieces. Then it was just about keeping it enticed by the rest of you so it wouldn’t notice that Mez was not moving as an archer did, but as the lady could.”

“I hate you, Don, I truly do,” Ganny said. “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 a shield. Don got the essence potions, Jackal, Khumdar, and Tibs, a healing one each, then they headed for the next room.

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

“That wasn’t a hard jump,” Tibs said, studying the landscape. Don had grabbed onto the pillar Tibs had told him to, so nothing had changed.

“Not hard for you. You will throw yourself across a chasm for fun.” Don panted, on hands and knees. “I am a sorcerer. My idea of exercise consist of lifting heavy books.”

Except that he’d over estimated Don’s abilities. Had he underestimated them during the last run? The sorcerer hadn’t had this kind of trouble then.

“As a dungeon runner, it may be to your advantage to expand to something more physical,” Khumdar said.

“Clearly, you haven’t seen the books I’ve had to lift.”

“Khumdar has a point,” Jackal said. “You might become 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.”

“It could have killed one of us.”

“I am sorry. What do you want me to say, Mez? I am doing the best I can. This just isn’t my kind of room.”

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

Don looked horrified. “You do want to kill me.”

Jackal grinned. “Now, I’m not that hard of a trainer.”

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

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

“Kroseth won’t be happy,” Tibs says, settling on a longer, but more suited path.

“Not that kind of rubbing,” Jackal protested.

“It better not be,” Don said, “otherwise I am going to corrupt something off you and Kroseth can come complaining to me all he wants.”

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

“You know, it’s scary how well you know my man, considering none of you share bed with him.”

“It may have something to do with how willing both of you are to share some of the things you get up to in said bed,” Khumdar said. “Even those of us trying not to pay attention will end up learning a thing or two 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 pushed the fighter against the wall, hand on his mouth. “Don’t you even think of finishing that sentence.”

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

Tibs kicked him in the shin.

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

“Just stop talking.”

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

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

Neither Ganny nor Sto commented, so they were busy elsewhere.

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“How do you want to do this?” Jackal asked, standing at the open door to the dragon room. As with the last time, the dragon was at the far back of the room, and the line of creatures an eighth of the way before them, standing, unmoving. The rest looked empty.

Even to Tibs's sense, he couldn't make out any of the other creatures he knew to be there.

"We might have to sacrifice this run to figure out how to avoid triggering the other attacks," Don said.

"Quigly's team beat the room," Jackal said.

"And nearly died," Mez pointed out. "None of us is the strategist Quigly is."

"I'm stronger than him," Jackal said.

"This is not a room pure strength or toughness will beat," Don pointed out. "We'll have to be smart about it."

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

"What do you think Tibs?" Don asked.

"I want to check the floor first. There might be triggers that activate the next set of creatures."

"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 it through the other rooms quickly, but he couldn't waste that time here. Especially without knowing how hard the fights would be.

"The floor's clear. He said, returning to the others.

"I'm not sensing anything set to react to us," Don said, and Tibs raised an eyebrow. "I described what this floor feels like to my teacher, and I've been practicing sensing through this kind of miasma."

"You didn't say anything before?" Mez asked.

"We already know the way. Nothing in what I picked up contradicted what we already know."

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

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

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

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

"I am the one in charge, Tibs."

"You want me to repeat that to Kroseph?"

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

"I don't want to know." He stopped Jackal with a hand. "This is where they attack."

"Don, you get anything here?" The fighter asked.

"There is a difference in the essence," the sorcerer said. "It might be the trigger for them. Or it could just be how the flow of essence causes it to be."

Tibs tried to sense what Don said was there, but it was all a mess of essence to him.

"Then we figure it's the trigger. Once we've won the fight, see if there's another like it." Jackal stepped through and the creatures became alive.

Tibs ran at the Ratlings, ice sword and shield forming. He cut one, then another. Blocked the Bunnyling that joined the attack, then grabbed it and put 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. Sto's creatures all seemed to need to move to etch; the way Alistair was teaching him.

He threw himself to the side as the wave of metal essence came at him, and the Gnoll who 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, shattering it against a stone column.

His smirk was broken by the pain the sword piercing his side caused. He turned and hit the rogue with a stone filled fist, breathing its face. How had it sneaked so close without Tibs noticing? How had he not sensed the sword?

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

They were melting away, some leaving a silver in their place, or a knife, or piece of jewelry. Those were new. Mez drank a potion, reminding Tibs to do the same before Don question the damage to his armor and lack of matching injury.

"Don, Tibs. Do your thing while the rest of us collect the fallen loot," Jackal said. He looked up. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

Tibs was surprised at the lack of response from Sto. He'd expected him to be interested in these fights.

"Over there," Khumdar said, indicating a column. "Something is purposely hidden."

Tibs approached cautiously. The column was decorated with symbols that meant nothing to him and continued on the floor, forming a circle of them around it.

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

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

Tibs focused and thought he sensed something. But he wasn't sure. The way Ganny had filled the floor with essence wasn't even, so this could just be that, as far as he could tell.

"If I can't touch the floor, I can't check for triggers that way." He placed his hand on the floor before the circle and had water flow. He didn't feel any cracks, only the etching in the stone that formed the designs.

He had more than half the circle covered with water when he felt the essence react to something. A flare in his water matching some of the symbols.

"I triggered something!" he yelled, letting go of the essence and moving away.

The surrounding air shimmered, and creatures appeared.

They were new. Tibs had the time to notice the scaly skin and elongated muzzles before he was too busy fighting.