

Stepping up-75

Tibs stood on a platform, watching the others move as his teammates followed his directions. His didn't; which was why he was on it. Trying to observe the board and make notes was too hard when he had to worry about how his platform would react. There was a pattern, he was sure of it, and now that he'd made it to the center, he was getting a sense of what it was.

At least enough he could get his friends to the other side. "Jackal," he called once the platform steadied. "Two ahead and to your left. Can you make it?" It was twice the fighter's height, but Jackal was hidden behind more platforms.

"I think so."

"Okay, if you do, none of the others should be affected."

"And if we start feeling our platform," Carina continued, "we jump to our previous one."

"Or if I miss and fall," Jackal said.

"No. Only if the others' platform moves. You all start moving without a plan and we're not going to make it."

"Don't worry, Tibs," Mez said. "We're not as scared of this as Jackal."

"I'm not scared. Just worried my actions will kill one of you and then I'm going to have Tibs wanting to kill me."

"I wouldn't kill you. Kroseph wouldn't forgive me."

"I don't know," Carina said. "If Jackal kills one of us, he might find it acceptable. He'd forgive you in time."

"I am not killing Jackal, and he isn't going to get anyone killed, so we don't have to worry about what Kroseph will think." Tibs shook his head. "Now stop delaying and get on it."

With a grunt, then a groan of sliding stones, the landscape of the room shifted as platforms rose and dropped. Looking around, he counted one and one which had moved. That meant he'd missed one. He was almost certain each platform was connected to one and two others. He made his notes, then instructed Carina. It was slow going, but he hoped that there was a fixed and quick way through; once they worked out how each platform affected the others. It would take multiple runs to get it all, but it had to be the only way to get through the three crest rooms to unlock the boss one.

So Tibs moved his friends and himself slowly through the rooms and only had three near-death, two because of a miscalculation on his part and one when Khumdar couldn't reach his assigned pillar, and the one he fell on sent Carina's flying to the ceiling. Her element saved her, as she threw herself off and used it to stay afloat until they all settled and Tibs could direct her to a safe one.

Jackal didn't look in her direction once while she was in the air.

Tibs got the others off the platforms before him and he made more notes.

The chest was open, with Jackal looking unhappy, and the crest had been touched. The

fire essence filament shone from it to where it vanished in the distance.

“It’s empty,” the fighter said, pointing at the chest.

“Yes,” Sto replied. “I didn’t want to risk *someone* taking something not for him, and causing problems. Have him close it.” Tibs instructed Jackal and when Sto said so, had him open it again.

Jackal took out a belt pouch.

It was different from the usual coin pouches Sto had on the first floor. It was larger—the length of a hand to the middle of the forearm—and made of sturdy leather, instead of cloth or thin leather, and boxiness to it, instead of the usual formless bagginess. He’d seen some like it at the workers’ belt. But theirs would have extra loops for tools.

Looking at it with his sense, it felt... odd. He couldn’t sense the essence that had to be woven through it—Jackal put his arm in it to his shoulder—but he could still tell there was something not quite right about it.

“Khumdar, can you tell anything about it?”

The cleric shook his head. “Despite the evidence, I sense no secret from the pouch.” Jackal took Mez’s bow and put it in. The cleric stepped back when the fighter approached, putting his staff at his back.

So it wasn’t a darkness thing that let Tibs know something was different about it. Light maybe?

Jackal gave up and pulled armor pieces out of Carina’s backpack.

“He is having a lot more fun with this than I expected,” Sto said. “Close the chest, Tibs. I’ll tell you when to open it, but Carina needs to take what will be in it.”

He did as instructed, closing the lid on an empty chest, then opening it to one containing a blue-gray robe.

“I thought you couldn’t change anything in the room when we’re in it.”

Jackal was putting dented metal breastplate in his pouch and the way it distorted to fit into the opening gave Tibs a headache.

“The chests are an environment of their own. I can’t move it while you’re there, but what happens inside it can be determined ahead of time and will keep happening. In this case, each time the lid closes, something else is put in it. Before Jackal asks, the other chests don’t work like this one, and it won’t work like this next time. This was the simplest way I could come up to distribute your rewards without one person trying to take everything for himself.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Tibs called Carina over and instead of fighting with Jackal, who was pulling something else from the pack, she took it off.

She pulled the robe out and Tibs closed the lid. Again, there was something odd about it to his sense. She ran her hands over the fabric and admired the imperfections in it that matched the wear and damage her robe had taken over time.

“Like she asked, it has reserves hidden throughout for essence. A few only accept air essence, but there are enough of the others she’ll be able to fill them with all the other essences. It’s also woven through with a mix of metal, earth, water, and fire essence to make it as resistant as possible and to keep her from overheating in it. Mez next.”

Surprised, Tibs called the archer over.

Mez opened it and took a quiver. Tibs paid attention this time and as soon as he touched it, all essence vanished from his sense, leaving behind the sensation of something not quite right.

“Mez has mentioned a few times how running out of arrows can be a problem, so this quiver never will. It’s set to remake any arrows put into it when it’s fed fire essence. Don’t ask how that works, I needed a way for him to be able to change arrows if needed. The arrows take time to remake, so he is going to want to be careful with how he uses them, and of course, people will notice it happening so something else he needs to be careful of.”

Mez looked awed once Tibs was done explaining. “Thank you. For it and the bow.”

“I had nothing to do with the bow,” Sto said. “That was just a randomly assigned loot.”

Tibs grinned. “He says you’re welcome.”

“Khumdar next.”

The cleric hesitated. “I have not asked for anything. Nor did I contribute to the ideas which led to the dungeon awarding these.”

“Jackal and Carina wouldn’t be who they are if not for the three of you,” Sto said, and Tibs repeated. “It felt wrong not to acknowledge that.”

Khumdar opened the chest and pulled out a black robe. It had the same protection as Carina’s, plus something just for him. “You mentioned how aren’t particularly suited at hiding, in spite of darkness being your element, so it’ll help take care of that. When you feed your essence directly into the robes, it will create a field that lets you and anyone close to you blend into the shadows. The darker the shadow, the easier it will be, but with enough essence, you should be able to hide even in a faint one.”

“This is more than I deserve, Sto.”

“It’s a gift, not something you needed to earn. And now you Tibs.”

“Are you sure? You gave me the bracers, the pouch, the shoes.”

“Two of which you no longer have.”

“Because I destroyed them.”

“Still, what I said to Khumdar applies to you too, more so.”

He opened the chest and in it was an armor. Other than the essence woven into it, it looked like the one he wore, minus the bracers.

“I considered remaking the pouch for you, but even if people can’t tell what’s in it, it’s still a pouch and it’ll draw the attention. So I altered the hidden places on it to accommodate more coins, and larger things, like an amulet. There’s also a variation on Jackal’s pouch included in the belt. It might take you trial and error to get it right, but you can use your darkness essence to move things from the compartment to your hand. It’s more complicated than that, but it felt like an appropriate way to trigger the sequence of essences to make it happen, darkness being about hiding stuff and all that. It’s limited to something the size of a long knife, and only six of them. That’s because I needed to limit the essence it uses and you now make your sword and shield out of ice, so a place for your knives felt it was enough.”

Tibs tried to think of something more appropriate than thank you to say. “Thank you,”

he finally said. Everyone was silent. Even Jackal had had enough of playing with his pouch and taken everything out of it.

He looked at his friends and asked the one thing that was bothering him. “Don’t you think all this gives us an unfair advantage over the other teams?”

“Not as much of one as you think, Tibs. As you noticed, this floor is more about how you think. The fights are there because I reminded Ganny not everyone on the teams are thinkers like you, and the sorcerers tend to be. They need to be challenged too. Once I’m closer to opening the fourth floor, I’ll shift the loot list to have more defense-heavy items like what’s part of your armor and the robes because you are all going to need it for that floor.”

“So there’s going to be a lot of fighting on the next floor?” Tibs asked, looking at Jackal, who grinned.

“Oh yes. Enough that—”

“You can’t tell them more,” Ganny interjected. “I swear, I leave for a few minutes to keep them from getting out of control and you go and tell them everything.”

“Hi, Ganny.”

“I didn’t tell them anything.”

“You told them there’s going to be fighting, that’s something.”

“It was that or have Tibs give me back the armor.”

“What? You wouldn’t. Sto put a lot of work into it. Into all of them.”

“I…” Tibs sighed. “I’m just glad to know this isn’t going to be so special soon. You’re the one always telling him not to be so sweet on me.”

“Oh, I gave up on that. He’s smitten and every time you have a run and out-think him, he just gets more so.”

“I am not smitten,” Sto grumbled. “Anyway, there’s one item left. Tell Jackal to open the chest.”

Jackal opened it eagerly, then frowned. He reached into the chest, but stop. “If it’s for Kroseph, can I touch it?”

Sto laughed. “He thinks! Yes, he can touch it. Since I didn’t expect you to bring his man to me, I couldn’t use the same method to hide what it does as I did for the rest of you. It’s like your old pouch. Anyone touching it will be able to sense the weave in it.”

“It’s safe.”

Jackal pulled a simple golden band out of the chest.

“So, I’ve worked out how special Kroseph is from the way you guys talk about him. To Jackal and the rest of you. From other teams, I’ve also picked up on the fact that Runners tend to live longer than ordinary people. And Tibs has often mentioned how one of your friends dying hurts. I didn’t make all the connections as fast as I’d like to have. Things like growing old and dying because of it just seems wrong to me, so something like Kroseph getting old and dying of it, while Jackal doesn’t, took a lot longer to understand. But I do now. And I don’t think it’s fair. So I made this ring for him. It’s going to make him age slower. I don’t know if it’s going to match Jackal because even with as much thinking about it as I’ve done time is a fuzzy thing and no one has talked in much detail about how and why

Runners don't grow up the same way other people do. But it'll give you time to find out and explain it to me, then I'll be able to make him another one."

Tibs stared at the ring, eyes wet.

"Tibs?" Jackal said. "I'm no longer sure I should keep it."

"You keep it." He wiped at his eyes. "And you make sure you live, okay? That ring makes it to Kroseph can be with you for a long time. He'd not going to get old like others, but like Adventurers."

"I can't," Jackal said, his voice cracking. "Tibs, I can't give him that. I can't ask him to live long when I'm going to die."

"No. You aren't going to die."

"Tib's, I'm a Runner," Jackal snapped. "If I survive this, and don't you fucking dare go easy on me because of my man, I'm going to be an adventurer indentured to the guild. I'm not one of the heroes the bards sing about. I'm the kind of adventurer the guild throws at monsters to slow them down while they prepare a defense. We get eaten."

"Then you get better. You stop playing at being an idiot so the guild knows to keep you alive."

"I'm not—"

Tibs glared his friend silent. "You stop. You do that for Kroseph. You do that so you come back to him every time."

"I don't know how. I've fought that part of my life so hard, Tibs. That's who my father wanted me to be. He wanted me to learn and to do, and to rule. I didn't, because it was the only way I knew to hurt him."

"We'll help you," Tibs said. "You're doing it for Kroseph, not your father."

"We're all going to help," Mez said.