

## Stepping up-74

“Okay,” Tibs said, looking at the tiles on the floor. “Black, Red, and Yellow are safe to step on from here to the intersection, stick to those. I’ll handle the triggers.”

“How about we wait until you’ve done then?” Jackal asked.

“No. There’s a sequence to reset them. If one of you accidentally steps onto one, I can fix it, unless you die, I can’t fix that so no stupid stuff, Jackal.”

“Why—” Jackal closed his mouth at the glare Tibs gave him and grinned. “Okay, I’ll do my best not to think at all. Should ensure I don’t come up with something stupid to do.”

“If absence of thought leads to a better performance out of you, Jackal,” Khumdar said, “then I will suggest that once Carina has become an Alpha Sorceress, she locks up into a tower for study, for that will be an accomplishment that needs to be replicated.”

“Not stone,” Mez said. “It’ll be too easy for him to escape and go right back to thinking.”

“I’ll use metal manacles to hold him,” Carina added.

“Kro is so going to be pissed.”

“No, I’m pretty sure he’d enjoy having you someplace you can’t get yourself hurt.”

Jackal smirked. “He likes taking care of him.”

“So I should stop healing you?” Tibs said, then focused on the floor. He and the other rogues had spent so much time looking over the drawing and what each one had found out that Tibs had been dreaming about it for days now. Unfortunately, in his dreams, the sequence kept changing and it left him now uncertain of the right one. He was happy Tandy had insisted he bring a copy of everything, and not just where they needed to add information.

The others argued good-naturedly about Jackal’s need to be restrained and Kroseph’s willingness to help as they walk to the intersection. It was covered in the same tiles, but as far as anyone had tested, none of them were triggers. No intersection had them and the consensus was that the dungeon use them to let them rest since, on top of the triggers, there would be fighting in the halls. At least, there were no trap triggers in those.

Yet.

Everyone was nervous about the dungeon changing things up on them, and Tibs hadn’t asked Ganny about it because he was worried he’d give her the idea.

“We’re in place,” Jackal called.

Tibs shook himself and consulted the paper for this hall. It was blue, purple, green, orange, green, orange, purple, and orange. The first five were easy, as he could step from one to the other, but he had to jump to reach the orange. He made it, then stepped the rest of the way. Each tile clicked and he felt a rumble in the ground. On the third one, the middle path had opened in the intersection.

“Is stepping on all the triggers supposed to make it easier?” Carina asked, “or harder?”

Tibs shrugged. “What we’ve worked out is how to make sure we don’t block off any

of the paths.” He pointed left. “One of the team worked out how to reach the door with the three crests. We’re almost certain of the one that lets us reach the lion crest, which has the Conquest board behind it. The Dragon crest has a board for a game Gerald called Climb, it’s platforms that raise and lowers according to which one has someone standing on it.”

“So that’s another Strategy kind of game?” Jackal asked. Tibs shrugged. The way Gerald had described the way the room worked it felt more like figuring out patterns, but he wouldn’t be able to tell until he experienced it.

“The team who reached it isn’t certain of the triggers for the last three halls, so I’d like us to head there so I can try to work it out. Oh.” Tibs pointed to a crest shield at the corner, near the ceiling. Instead of a drawing, it only had a line from top to bottom. “That’s how long we have until the entire floor resets.” At the moment, the line was almost all green, except for a little red at the time.

“So, that means the loot chests refill?” Jackal asked gleefully.

“How long does that give us?” Mez asked.

“I suspect,” Khumdar answered before Tibs could, “that it will come to an end near zenith. It would explain the new arrangement of the schedule.”

It had caused an uproar, but a week before, in the middle of the schedule, it had been changed. Now the teams were divided by the floors they could reach, ten Omega teams were going in each day, which caused them to go in much more often. Upsilon teams had six, and Rho, two. They hadn’t been told why, and the rogues who worked on the map with him had mentioned the timer. Tibs hadn’t thought about it beyond figuring out what it meant for the run itself. There were three and one Rho teams now, with two going in each day that was one and five days until their schedule was reset. It would change as Runners died and Teams graduated, but it now meant two or three runs per month.

“That’s what, six hours?” Mez asked.

“Is that enough to do the entire floor?” Carina said.

“Not until we’ve worked out how to get to each room,” Tibs replied. “So right now, we’re working on confirming the path to the dragon room and the triggers to make sure the way there is open. Hopefully, by the time we have another run, one of the others will know how to reach the Boar room and what the game we have to play there is.”

Jackal nodded. “Okay, we get to the Dragon room, do the game, get to the lion one, play Conquest, then we wait for the floor to reset and play another game of Conquest so—”

“No,” Carina stated.

“That’s not how this works,” Ganny added and Tibs smiled.

“How did you not expect Jackal to try for more loot?” Tibs asked.

“The dungeon’s weighing in on Jackal’s obsession?” Mez asked.

“Ganny is.”

“How is it I’m the only one who considers the loot to be a good thing?”

“No, we all consider it good,” Khumdar said. “But we understand that seeking it at the expense of the rules will be detrimental to us coming back again for more loot. This is a situation of looking at the long term gain, instead of the short term.”

“Long term, we get more loot if we get more loot in the short term,” the fighter

replied.

“Only if running into another team doesn’t impose some form of penalty,” Carina said. “Are you willing to risk it? Considering Harry is the one who’ll make the decision?” she added as Jackal was about to argue.

He closed his mouth, unhappy.

“If it’ll help,” Sto said, “if he promises not to hang around to redo a room, I’ll have the rewards I promised him.”

“Didn’t you say it would take longer for what he wanted?”

Jackal frowned, then his face lit up.

“We’ve come across something in starting to work on the next floor that changed that. Changed quite a few things actually, but it’s given me access to more of the essences I needed, so it’s done.”

“Sto had your pouch ready,” Tibs told the fighter, “and he’s willing to give it to you if you promise to leave before the timer runs out.”

Jackal thought it over. “So I can get it now, if I don’t try to redo a room, or next time if I do?”

Sto groaned.

“What did you expect?” Tibs told the dungeon.

“His greed knows no limit does it?”

“Probably, but I don’t think you can make enough loot to reach it.”

“Is it offering more loot?”

“No!” Sto said. “Okay, let’s try this. Tibs please repeat what I say. Jackal, Please don’t say past the end of the timer.”

Tibs looked at the ceiling, raising an eyebrow, but when Sto didn’t explain himself, he repeated the words.

Jackal stared at him, then looked up. “Really? You think asking nicely is going to be enough?”

Sto groaned. “What if I add a little something for Kroseph?”

“Can you do that?” Tibs asked.

“I can make it, but it’s going to be up to Jackal to decide if he wants to be greedy or give it to his special man.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

“Actually, I have,” Ganny said. “Sto didn’t believe me when I told him Jackal was going to be difficult.”

“If you agree, Sto will add something for Kroseph.”

“What is it?” Jackal demanded suspiciously.

“You’ll find out when you get your pouch,” Tibs replied before Sto could say anything.

“And I only get it today if I agree to leave before the timer runs out.”

“Promise to leave,” Carina said.

“Promise,” Jackal corrected darkly, waited a second then brightened. “Okay, I

promise to leave before the timer runs out.”

“That’s it?” Mez asked, surprised. “You’re not going to argue any more than that?”

“It’s for Kro. I’m not going to deny him a present.” Jackal beamed. “Do you have any idea how grateful he’s going to be? He is going to—”

“I don’t want to hear that,” Tibs said.

“I kind of have liked to,” Sto said. “Humans have really strange rituals”

“It’s *them* time,” Tibs said. “It’s none of our business.” He glared at Jackal. “No matter how willing someone is to talk about his.”

The fighter raised his hand in defeat, but grinned. “Then, how about we get on with the reward giving?”

“Once you’re done with the room you’re going for,” Sto said. “I can’t wait to see how you work that one out, Tibs.”

“Are you hoping Jackal is going to die there and you won’t have to give him his reward?”

“No,” Sto replied, offended. “Even if I give it to him now and he dies, I still get the essence back.”

“Well, I am,” Ganny said. “No offense, Tibs, but he needs to learn some patience. And if the price is him getting hurt I am all for it.”

Hurt, not dead. Tibs could deal with hurt.

“It’s going to be part of the loot for winning the game,” Tibs said and stepped to the hallway.

“Shouldn’t we go for the lion room then?” Jackal asked. “We know how to beat that one.”

“I said we were going to the dragon room. This is about more than you getting your loot.”

Jackal closed his mouth at Tibs’s glare and he was somber this time.

“There’s going to be a fight along this hall. Avoid the purple tiles. Some have traps triggers and I’m not trying to explain which ones.”

“How do we deal with unlocking the hallways?” Carina asked.

“After the fight.” Mez looked at Tibs. “Right?”

Tibs nodded and stood.

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This fight was different.

Yellow and green were the tiles to avoid, and along with the Gnoll, a team of dungeon-made Runners had dropped in on them. It made the fighting more difficult since the Runners had a degree of tactics beyond rushing headfirst at them. Two Gnolls were taken out when they stepped on triggers and traps killed them. One in a fiery explosion and the other as the tile surged up, carrying it and crushed it against the ceiling.

The question of how a tile only a little larger than his foot had managed that distracted Tibs enough the fighter nearly skewered him. They were both water since it was still Tibs best element for close combat. But it wasn’t his only one.

He switched to fire, using the reserve in his bracers to keep his ice sword and shield active, and blasted it with a get of flames. It resisted for a few seconds, but Tibs had the larger reserve, and then the ice armor melted and the creature burned.

Tibs felt his smile turn maniacal and let go of the element. While he had control now, fire remained the one that demanded the most care. It felt too natural to let his emotions go to extremes when channeling it.

His shield suffered the most from the heat and he reformed it, then rejoined the battle.

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Tibs looked at the notes already written and added his own. Indicating the three tiles he wasn't entirely certain was part of the sequence to open the passage leading to the door. He'd check them if they had time after the room, if not, the next team would.

Like with the lion crest, the dragon was a puzzle. It was also a sliding puzzle but worked differently. Instead of one square missing and using that gap to reform it, full rows and columns slid, vanishing at one edge and reappearing at the other.

"How does it do that?" Jackal asked.

"Essence," Khumdar replied. Tibs felt it as he pushed a row in one direction. It was the same sort of feeling as the doorways that took them to the different floors. Void essence used in a way Tandy was still too new to understand.

Once over the surprise of how it worked, forming the crest was straightforward, although, as with the lion, the closer he got to finishing it, the tougher it got. But it was also simply about finding a sequence of moves that let him change specific tiles while getting everything else back in the same position once he was done.

The last column slid into place to complete the dragon crest, there was a click, and the door slid down with a groan of stone against stone.

Inside, the room consisted of a grid made of one and eight tiles on each side, large enough for a person to stand on them, but at various heights. Most too far apart to be climbed or safely jumped from and some locked in place. Which ones those were changed each time the floor reset as far as they're worked out from the three teams who'd made it in. On the other side was a lever that lowered everything to floor height. So all they needed to do was get one person across.

Tibs jumped to grab the edge of the tile before him, and before he climbed onto it, he lowered half its height, then clicked to a stop. While it did that. One of the left, three tiles away went up close to Jackal's height, and one on the right, six tiles away lowered, to the floor. While he couldn't see them, Tibs knew more tiles over the room were changing heights in response to this one.

Tibs sat on the tile, looking at his friends. "And that's the puzzle in this room. Anytime one of us steps onto tile, it will lower, and others will change in response."

"So you move on them and we use these to adjust your path when you can't pass," Jackal said.

"It can't be that simple," Carina said, then closed her eyes. "If the room is square, that's eighteen times eighteen. Three hundred and twenty-four tiles. There's no way these

eighteen will affect all that.”

Tibs nodded. “Only three teams have made it here before us, so the information isn’t complete, but with the exception of the tile fixed in height, every tile will affect some of the others. Some affect the same ones but in different ways. One might make it go up, another down, up a little, up a lot.”

“Then there is the problem of being on a tile if it hits the ceiling.” Khumdar pointed to one they could see in such a position.

“If that’s going to happen, you jump off,” Jackal said.

“That’s pretty high,” Mez said, looking around. “You can survive it, being stone and all, Tibs likes throwing himself out of high windows so—”

“I only did that trying to get my audience with air.”

“I was under the impression it was throwing yourself off a mountain that allowed it to happen.”

Tibs glared at the grinning cleric. “I tripped.”

“Still,” the archer continued, “you have experience. Carina can use air to float. That leaves me and Khumdar. I don’t see myself jumping those heights.”

“No to say what will landing on a new tile cause to the rest of the floor,” Carina said. “I can probably float across.”

“Ganny made this floor, so I’m pretty sure she set up something to keep us from cheating.”

“Are you saying I can’t do that?” Sto demanded.

“How many tries did it take until Tibs had to go through the maze you made for him?” Ganny replied.

“Tibs, find a way to cheat,” Sto demanded.

“We can still try to come up with something, but I can’t reach that far with essence so I can’t try to activate the lever that turns this off.”

“Do you know where it is?” Mez asked, trying to look over the tiles.

“On the other wall, next to the crest, which is over the loot chest. I don’t think destroying it will do anything.”

“The lever has to be pulled down or up?”

Tibs shrugged. It hadn’t come up in the conversations.

“Then crossing it the intended way might be the only way to do this.”

Tibs smiled and stood. “I’ll tell you what tiles to lower and I’ll look at the result and we’ll go from there.”