

Stepping up-72

The Gnoll fell from the slash Tibs administered and dissolved, leaving behind two silver coins. He spun, searching for the next enemy, but they were all gone. He melted the sword and absorbed it.

“Tibs!” Mez yelled, and he was next to him, next to Carina, lying on the ground, bleeding from her side.

He channeled Purity and placed his hands on the wound. He pushed it in, weaved it around the less pure areas, and the wound closed. He left the essence in her. He’d noticed that his friends healed faster when they had some.

“Tibs,” Jackal called, “when you’re done, I think this one’s yours.”

A glance showed a large shield on the wall at the end of the hall. A blue shield was on it with pieces of gold and brown. He focused on Carina again until she smiled and nodded. Then he joined the fighter, who had a hand next to the shield, eyes closed.

“There’s a room behind this,” Jackal said. “Straight walls, not the caverns of the previous floors. About thirty-two paces wide, but I can’t tell how deep.”

“You’re getting better.” Tibs studied the crest and noticed the square piece missing at the bottom. The piece above it easily slid into the spot, and Tibs smiled.

“You’re making it too easy on him,” Sto commented as Tibs slid squares around, using the one available spot to shift them into the picture of the lion.

Ganny sighed. “He’s too good at puzzles. I was hoping he hadn’t come across this one.”

“I haven’t,” Tibs replied, “but how it works is simple enough.” He frowned as he ended up with another reversed set of tiles. He’d gotten it trying to fix another one. He was down to a handful of them, and the lack of places he could move the empty square to without ruining the image was making this harder than he’d expected.

“Seems like you’re stumped,” Sto said.

Tibs shook his head. He almost had it, he could feel it. He just had to work out the pattern, but he needed more space to work with. Those seven tiles weren’t enough. Anytime he put two of them in the right place, two others became reversed. He considered pulling a tile off but figured that would be cheating, and Ganny had to have considered that. So he needed to think beyond these tiles and use some already in place.

Once he allowed himself to do that, the pattern was easy to see. Create a chain of tiles that let him move two in place, then use the space to move the others back where they should be.

The design ended with the empty square in the top corner of the shield, the lion standing on two legs and roaring and a click, then the wall slid into the side, revealing the room Jackal sensed.

It was square, with large tiles on the floor alternating between silver and ebony. Tibs counted eight on one side and the same deep. On the other side stood five constructed people, but instead of being groups, they were spread among the two back rows, each

standing on a different square, two on ebony ones, three on silver.

Tibs moved to step into the room, ready to look for the traps, but Jackal placed a hand before him, looking unhappy.

“Unless you know the game,” the fighter said, “this one isn’t for you.”

“Game?” Tibs looked at the room again. He didn’t know any games like this.

“Strategion,” Khumdar said.

“We call it Conquest,” Jackal replied.

“I am surprised you know of the game. It is used to teach commanders about the difficulties of battle.”

“My father had big plans for me,” Jackal said. “Prophesy big,” he added unhappily. “He brought in teachers for the game, but I wasn’t very good. The first thing we need to work out is if the point is to get to the other side, or beat the pieces.”

“That is the Lord,” Khumdar pointed to a woman in armor standing tall, featureless, face looking ahead, large sword point down, grasping it with both hands.

“Don’t you mean the Lady?” Carina asked. “It’s a popular game among Purity fighters. I’ve watched a lot of them.”

“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. No other pieces fit the role, so she’s it. That’s the sorcerer.” He pointed to the man in the robe on the silver tile. “The archer, clearly, which means those two are the Infantry.”

“Rogues,” Tibs said, by their half crouched position.

“The dungeon is replacing some of the pieces with Runner roles,” Khumdar said. “And to answer your question, I believe this is about beating the board. Strategion is always about complete victory.”

“And taking out that Lord lady is the way we win?” Mez asked.

“Yeah,” Jackal said, studying the opponents.

The arrow exploded over the tile before the Lord. And she didn’t react.

“I don’t believe the dungeon will allow us to play by any other rules than those of the game.”

“So we walk up to them and kill them one by one?” Tibs asked. He figured that the point of the square was to control the movements.

“It’s not that simple,” Jackal said. “Each piece moves in a specific way. The Lord can go anywhere, but only one square at a time. It can also attack in any direction, but one square. The archer also only moves one square, but it can attack along any straight line. Normally any attack automatically takes the target piece out, but I think Sto isn’t going to make it that easy on us.”

“The sorcerer can move along any straight line,” Carina said, “but it can’t attack any pieces one square away from it. And, if it has a line of sight to the Lord, it can switch place with it, but then, it can’t attack.”

Tibs rubbed his temple. “Why is it so complicated if it’s just a game?”

“Because is it not only a game,” Khumdar said. “It is a tool of war.”

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

“So are we the pieces we represent?” Mez asked. “Or does this work another way?”
“Unless the dungeon tells us, I believe working that out is part of how we beat this room.”

“I’m leaving this to you,” Jackal said. “I always lost.”

“I do not believe that,” Khumdar replied, stepping to the edge of the room. “You enjoy the act of the idiot, but that is all it is.”

“You willing to bet your life on it?” Jackal grinned. “Because I’m pretty sure here, if one of us gets taken out, we aren’t simply going to be put on the side until the game’s over.”

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

“Far, why?”

“Fourth row, second from the left.”

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

“I know, I am keeping that in mind.”

“Okay, I’m going to need running space.” They moved and Jackal backed away, then ran and leaped the distance, landing in the middle of the square.

When nothing else happened, Khumdar nodded. “The game does not start until all the pieces are on the board.” He smiled. “Mez, on this one.” He pointed to the silver square by the entrance.

“I can’t shoot anything from there.”

“You will have a target. Carina, can you get yourself to the fifth row, third from the right?”

Wind picked up around them, and Carina leaped and was carried to the square in question.

“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 helped keep you aloft,” She replied.

“I thought my skull was all iron,” the fighter replied.

“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, looking at their positions.

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

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

“Tibs, can you go stand one square away from the Lord, in front of her.”

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

“Can he even make it?” Mez asked. “I doubt Carina could even with her air.”

“I’m not Carina,” Tibs said, channeling air and pushing it before him. Once it was in the shape he wanted it, he locked it, adding essence to it until he knew it would do. Then he stepped up the air steps onto the path he’d created and walked to the designated square.

“How did you do that?” Carina asked.

Tibs pulled the essence back into his reserve, then switched to water, making a sword and shield. “I poured a lot of essence into making the air hard. It took nearly half my entire

reserve. I understand now why Adventurers don't seem to worry about the early stuff we're learning. There is a lot you can do if you have a large enough reserve that needs precise skill otherwise."

"Okay, is anyone else annoyed that Tibs, yet again, can do something the rest of us can't?" Mez asked.

"Only if he doesn't grow to depend on that instead of studying," Carina said. "If you lose access to it, you're back to the low reserves and your bracers. Remember that when you start feeling too sure of yourself."

Tibs nodded.

"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 actually have to win the fight."

The Lord stepped forward.

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

Khumdar glared at the Lord.

"Khumdar?" Tibs asked.

"Can you beat it?"

Tibs sensed the fighter's essence. "Metal, not as strong as Jackal, but I don't know how good she is with that sword."

"She'll be good," Jackal said. "You didn't take into account we'd have to actually fight them, did you?"

The cleric shook his head. "I let the challenge of the strategy blind me to the reality of our situation."

"Carina, I need you to switch with me."

"No," Khumdar said. "That will leave Tibs vulnerable."

"I'm lined up with Tibs," Jackal replied, "but I can't attack that far; she can. I don't care what else it wants; unless the dungeon specifically wants to kill Tibs, it can't sacrifice its Lord. That gives us the victory."

The cleric looked at the pieces.

"Khumdar?" Carina asked.

The cleric shrugged. "Tibs, you are the one at risk, and you are the one who knows the dungeon better."

Tibs nodded. "I trust Jackal."

"And scarier words were never uttered," Mez said.

"If you keep doing stuff like this," Carina said, "we're going to have a hard time believing the idiot act."

"So long as it never leaves this room, I'm fine with it. How do we do this? Do we have to jump the distance at the same time?"

"They can walk," Ganny said.

"Walk," Tibs said.

Jackal took a step, but couldn't move out of his square. Same with Carina. "What's going on?" the fighter asked, pushing against the unseen wall. "Is the dungeon cheating?"

"No," Tibs answered. Ganny wouldn't.

"Then why can't I pull the rescue move with Carina?"

"Jackal," Mez said hesitantly. "That's a move only the Lord can pull, right?"

"Yes."

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

"Yeah. We lose that, the game's lost."

Mez looked at the fighter. "Okay, then why did you say you were the Lord?"

"Because I'm the figh..." Jackal turned pale.

"What?" Tibs asked, as they all looked at him.

"You're the most important piece," Carina said. "You're our Lord."

"I thought I was the Infantry."

"I was using you as such," Khumdar said, "but you didn't move, and even if you had, other than being fixed with moving forward, you and the Lord can only move one square."

"Then shouldn't I switch with him?" Carina asked.

"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 we have to keep Tibs safe."

"Not if it means you die," Tibs replied.

"Jackal, you can take on that sorcerer, correct?" Khumdar asked.

Jackal scoffed. "Of course."

"Mez, two squares ahead of you," the cleric instructed.

"Why?" the archer asked.

"It gives the cover Tibs needs."

Mez nodded and moved.

The opposing sorcerer moved and ended two squares behind Tibs.

"That's two ways it has to take out Tibs," Jackal said angrily.

"And one for me to take out a piece," Khumdar said, spinning his staff, then leveling it at the sorcerer. Darkness built up at the end and blasted the sorcerer in the back, sending it crashing at Tibs's feet.

"How?" Ganny demanded.

"Shouldn't that have not worked?" Mez asked. "Like my arrow?"

"What you did was an unallowed move," the cleric replied. "A sorcerer can attack in any line-of-sight direction except the squares surrounding me."

"Carina's the sorcerer," Tibs said.

"Each side had two of them," Jackal replied. "That was quite a risk."

"A calculated one. We made Tibs our Lord by how we act toward him. I counted on not having down anything, and on my appearance matching that of the sorcerer to let me do it."

“So now it’s the dungeon’s turn,” Jackal said, smiling, “And it’s got one less piece to defend its Lord with.”

The archer moved to threaten Tibs, but that put it in Mez’s line of fire and an explosive arrow removed it. Carina blasted one of the Infantry as it moved in her line. Then Khumdar had Jackal and her play a game of chase as the Lord moved to avoid being cornered until it was over and it had to fight Jackal.

The fight left the fighter injured, but smiling. When Tibs was done healing him, he noticed Khumdar was missing. He found him in the hall, on the floor, knees to himself and hugging them.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I nearly got you killed.”

“But you didn’t. You were able to out-think Ganny, you and Jackal.”

The cleric shook his head. “We didn’t win. The dungeon lost and the only reason it did is that it cares about you. The proper move to make, both as a strategy for the game and for the dungeon to win, was to attack you with its Lord. You couldn’t win that fight.”

“And you knew Ganny wouldn’t. You could sense it.”

“I cannot tell what secrets are, Tibs. Only that they are. I hoped. I asked Darkness to protect you, but I did not know what this Ganny would do. I did not know, for certain, it cared enough about you to not take advantage of the situation. We got lucky.”

“That’s not a thing.”

The cleric shrugged. “It’s still what happened.”

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

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

“Don’t think too much about what might have happened. That’s one thing Jackal taught me.”

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

Tibs nodded and rejoined the others.

Over the chest at the back of the room was another shield with the same lion. He sensed it and there were filaments of essences connected to it and vanishing into the distance. He couldn’t sense any traps or triggers, only them, waiting for someone’s essence.

“What do you need me for?” he asked the fighter.

“There’s a lot more than earth there.”

“So?”

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

Tibs looked at her. “Didn’t you tell me not to grow dependent? Did you try to determine what it does?”

She blushed.

Jackal raised his hands when Tibs turned his gaze on him. “Hey, I’m the idiot here. Of course, I didn’t think to check. If I don’t know something, the smart thing is to call you.”

“You aren’t that stupid,” Tibs replied, and pointed to the shield.

With a sigh, Jackal places his hand on it and closed his eyes. “What am I sensing for?”

“How complex it is?”

Jackal shrugged. “There’s a lot of essence, I’m guessing all of them, but earth is just this thread going from here to somewhere too far for me to sense.”

“Triggers have to be complex, don’t they?” Carina asked.

“No, but the simple ones have to be broken. Anything that will do something will be complex, and if it did something here, which, it shouldn’t, since that was the problem the room posed us.” He pointed to the floor. “If it goes into the distance, whatever it does isn’t going to be here.”

Jackal sighed. “So this could be locking up another hall.”

“Or opening one,” Carina said. “We did beat this room.”

Jackal pushed essence to the thread and Tibs felt it brighten. After a few seconds, he heard a distant rumble.

“Any idea what that was?” Jackal asked.

“The crest does match one of the three we found the other time,” Carina replied.

“Which would mean there will be two other rooms like this,” Khumdar said.

“So long as it’s not another game of Conquest,” Jackal replied, “I’m fine with it.”

“This floor does seem to demand more of our minds than our bodies.”

“I’m the thinker in this dungeon,” Ganny said.

“You do know I’m the dungeon, right?” Sto said.

“You’re the body, I’m the mind.”

“That is not how it works, Ganny.”

“How would you know?” she replied, chuckling, “you’re just a body.”