

Stepping up-67

A slash up, then across and the Gnoll fell. Tibs raised his arm, shield over his head to block the mace another brought down on him, turning and slashing again. It fell back and Tibs slowly turned, ice shield up and sword ready.

The tunnel had widened into something resembling an irregular room, and everyone had been on guard. Ganny only got the drop on them once, and this time, they were ready when the Gnolls dropped from the ceiling and walked through doorways in the wall.

“Did anything drop?” Jackal asked.

“Silvers,” Mez replied.

The fighter cursed. “Is Sto getting greedy?”

“That’s your job,” Carina said.

“Thank you,” Sto commented.

“There is... something here.” Khumdar’s eyes were closed. “A secret, but one we are meant to discover.” He frowned. “This...” he sighed. “It’s new. I’ve never felt this kind of secret before. Normally secrets aren’t intended to be found out.”

“So a cache?” Jackal asked, rubbing his hands. “Tibs?”

“Looking.”

“I would have thought I’d have felt it before if that were the case,” Khumdar said. “There is a cache in the trap room, in the pool, and where the key to the first-floor boss room is hidden would also be a cache.”

“You’re getting stronger,” Carina said. “Maybe for you that means being able to discern subtle details you couldn’t before. The room’s sealed. I mean, other than the entrance and exit, there are no hidden panels.”

“This is going to be essence again,” Tibs said.

“A puzzle?” Mez asked.

He shrugged, walking along the wall, sensing. They were stone and corruption and little else. They didn’t have to be more. Ganny had the doorways to bring in the Gnolls, and those disappeared afterward. Unlike the ones to bypass a floor, these weren’t locked in the walls so—

“Tibs,” Jackal called. “There’s something here.” The fighter was looking at a section of the wall on the other side. Tibs felt what he meant as he approached. It was still stone and corruption, but the structure was different. It wasn’t like that of the hidden corridor. Tibs could tell they were meant to interact with this. He could even yell how he could change the structure so it would go away and started doing it, then stopped.

Maybe this was a chance to let someone else learn.

“Hey, Khumdar,” Jackal called, “is this what you felt?”

The cleric looked in their direction. “I do not know. There is no direction to the sense. Only a sense of here in this... space.”

The fighter nodded. “Tibs?”

“You can open it,” He replied.

Jackal looked at him. "I'm not a rogue."

"No, but you have earth as your essence, so this is something you can handle."

"There's air half a dozen paces in," Carina said, joining them, "but nothing else."

"Does that mean you can do something about it?" Jackal asked.

"This one's yours," Tibs said before Carina opened her mouth.

"I'm a dumb fighter, Tibs. If it can't be done by hitting it, it's not my thing."

Tibs shrugged. "So try that."

With a roll of the eyes, Jackal tapped the stone, then punched it. He made his arm stone and stuck it hard to no noticeable result. "Not doing anything."

Tibs leaned in and lowered his voice. "You don't always have to be the dumb one on the team, Jackal."

The fighter looked offended, then resigned.

Carina chuckled.

"I hate you two sometimes," Jackal said, placing his hand on the wall and closing his eyes.

"You realize that anyone who knows you knows the dumb fighter's an act, right?" Carina asked.

"Not next to you two, now quiet, I'm focusing and that's hard."

Tibs sensed Jackal's work. The way he pushed his essence into the wall, around what was there, pushed and pulled on it. Then moved it between the essence already there and forced the structure to change. It wasn't big. It wasn't what Tibs would have done, but that was the point. Jackal wasn't him. The fighter moved his hand away, made a fist, turned his arm to stone, and struck the wall.

Where nothing happened before, the time the stone cracked. Jackal smiled and struck it again. The crack widened. A third time and chunks of the wall fell.

"I'm not feeling any fire there," Mez said, watching Jackal work. "Does that mean only someone with earth as their element can open it?"

"And corruption," Tibs replied. "After Bardik's attack, Stop added corruption to his walls so it couldn't be used against him."

"Doesn't that go against the rule that anyone on a team can get through something?" the archer asked.

Tibs considered it, then the source. "That's something my teacher told me. He believes it, but he also believes Sto is a mindless creature."

"Which you know I'm not."

"But if that's a rule, I think it's about traps we have to survive. Sto's testing us then, and that's one set of rules. This is about getting loot, so it doesn't have to follow those rules. Maybe there are other caches that can only be accessed by someone with a different element. Also, Ganny is who made this floor, and she isn't as straightforward as Sto is."

"Got that right," She commented.

"Why do I feel that's a dig on how I designed the first two floors?"

"It's not," she said, "you have your set of strength, I have mine. That's why we're

supposed to work together.”

“Okay, that’s a dig,” Sto replied.

“Are they talking to you?” Mez asked.

“Each other.” Ribs frowned. “How did you know?”

“You get a distracted look when you’re listening to them.” The pounding stopped and Tibs looked at Jackal, who was looking at him.

“You realize that if you’re right. It means we can get a lot more loot than anyone else. You can open all the caches.” His grin was broad.

“Not all of them. And Don can open as many since corruption is mixed in.”

“Ohhh,” Sto said. “You missed something.”

“Yeah, I did. Of course, that’s not really a problem unless you only want Tibs to have an unfair advantage.”

“I don’t—you made this floor.”

Tibs smiles.

“Don’t you float away with that grin on your face, Ganny. You’re the one who—” Sto’s voice cut off as if a door had closed.

Tibs frowned. He’d always assumed that when Sto said he was busy elsewhere, he meant his focus was there, but this had sounded like they could both move around. Was there a place in the dungeon where he and Ganny lived? Were there corridors behind the walls hidden from his senses and that was where they were when they watched the teams?

Had Bardik been after something more specific than simply melting the dungeon with that corruption?

He looked at the others, who were silently watching him. “Later,” he said. “Do you want that loot or are we moving on?”

Jackal went back to punching his way to the cache.

“Have you guys given anything thought as to what you’re going to ask the dungeon?” Mez asked as he watched Jackal work.

Tibs shook his head.

“I am uncertain I should take the dungeon up on his offer,” Khumdar said. “I understand this staff is supposed to have been a random item, but it is still more than I could have asked for. And I was not one of those who provided a suggestion.”

“I wasn’t either,” Mez said, “But Tibs said we all get to pick one thing and if the dungeon can make it, we can have it, right?”

Tibs nodded. Instead of rewarding Jackal or Carina, and in the process telling them which idea Sto had picked. He offered the entire team each one item that he could make. It would be theirs alone, locked to them, the way Tibs’s bracers were essence locked to him. Sto had been surprised when none of them had jumped on the offer. And it was Jackal who had explained how they all felt.

“It’s too much to just tell you something right now. I need to think about it, figure out what’s going to really be useful to me.”

Tibs felt the way Khumdar did. He had the bracers and Sto had helped him get his audience with Fire. Asking for more felt like taking advantage of him.

“I’m through!” Jackal yelled. The passage he’d punched was narrow, barely wide enough for the fighter to fit through, but the room it opened to was wide enough they all stood in it.

“Okay,” Carina said, looking at the five pedestals. “Maybe this is worth locking it behind a specific element.” Each pedestal had an item on it. The one on the left had a quiver; next to it was a book, next to that a leather roll that reminded Tibs of the one Darran had shown him that first day, the one with all the lock picking tool in it. A shield was on the next one and an amulet on the last one.

“That’s mine,” Mez said, reaching for the quiver.

“Don’t touch it,” Carina called.

Mez stopped and looked at her. “That’s clearly for an archer.”

“That will have lock picks,” Tibs said of the leather roll.

“The shield is clearly for a fighter, and the book for a sorcerer,” she said, “which leaves the amulet for the clerics.”

“One item for each class,” Jackal mused. “No fighting over who gets what.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little excessive?” she asked. “For the fight we had?”

“No,” Jackal replied.

“Khumdar, tell me there isn’t a secret to this room,” he demanded.

The cleric opened his mouth, then closed it. “You are correct. There is something hidden. No, not something.” He closed his eyes and frowned. “A thought or an idea.” He shook his head. “Had gaining strength in your element been this confusing for you also?”

“Mine been mainly about making myself tougher and punching harder,” Jackal said.

“Shooting bigger exploding arrows.”

“Yes, it’s confusing for me too,” Tibs said.

Carina chuckled. “You two as the only ones without an established system. The rest of us are simply doing what we’re told when we’re told, as we get stronger.” She paused and smiled at Tibs. “With a few exceptions.”

“So there’s a trap in here?” Jackal asked, annoyed. “It’s a cache, it should just be about rewards.”

“How did you know?” Mez asked Carina.

“Something Tibs said in combination with having too many items as rewards. Ganny isn’t straightforward, and she made this floor. We’ve seen how she takes what we expect and tricks us. We expect a cache, so she added something. Tibs, what can you sense?”

“Essences,” he replied immediately. Then focused on trying to tell them apart. “The eight I can sense, mine, and others. I don’t know enough about weaving them together to tell what they might do.”

“So this might be a death trap,” Mez said. “That’s just great. Maybe we should just leave it be. It’s not like we’re going to keep any of it, right? I don’t need a quiver. Tibs doesn’t need picks, Jackal doesn’t use shields. What do you think the book’s about? The amulet has to be a reserve, right?”

“The book will be about learning something,” Carina said. “That’s what books do. Amulets have been reserves until then, but is that all they can be?”

“So, you’re all agreed on not taking anything?” Jackal asked.

Carina nodded. “I think Mez is right. Until we figure out what it does, we shouldn’t risk it.”

Jackal looked at Tibs, who shrugged, then at Khumdar.

“There is nothing of obvious use to me, so it is not something that matters.”

“Good.” The fighter turned and grabbed the shield off the pedestal before Carina had time to object.

“Jackal!” she yelled, but Tibs sensed the shift in the essence. Around the four other items, the air shimmered multicolored, and they vanished. “What kind of stupid move was that?”

“Tibs said I don’t always have to be the idiot.”

“And you do that?” she demanded.

“The dungeon wasn’t going to kill us,” Jackal said. “This is a cache. Not a death trap. Since you all decided you didn’t want yours, I took mine.”

“And the rest disappeared,” Tibs said. “That’s the secret Khumdar felt. We only get one, but we get to pick it.”

Jackal looked at the pedestals. “Unless we are fast enough to take them before they vanish.”

“I’m not trying that,” Mez said. “What if your hand’s on it and it vanishes with it?”

“It’s not a death trap,” Jackal repeated.

“Maybe,” Carina replied angrily, “but that doesn’t mean the dungeon isn’t going to stop you from doing something stupid and lose a hand.” She took a breath. “You were right, but pushing more is being an idiot. You don’t put your greed ahead of our safety.”

“Okay. I won’t.” Jackal motioned toward the exit. “Let’s move on to the next one and see if Tibs can find us another cache.” He stopped Khumdar and attached the shield to the pack.

“You are agreeing too easily,” Carina stated.

“I know when I’ve lost a fight,” Jackal replied cheerily.

“No, Jackal, you usually don’t,” Mez said. “At least not until you’re unconscious on the ground.”

Tibs started at the archer. Did he go to the fighting club too?

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Another fight with Gnolls, this one along a narrow passage that made it difficult to move out of each other’s way, and resulted in some of the injuries Tibs healed to be administered by his teammates. The cache’s entrance was hidden with light essence woven through the earth and corruption. When Tibs added some of his light to it and expanded it. He could step through the wall as if it wasn’t there.

Behind it was another set of pedestals, an arrow on one, a knife on the other, a helmet, another book, and another amulet. The helmet was the one with the clearer value, so they took it. After that were a handful of intersections, then they reached a dead end with a door in it.

The door looked to be made of dark wood, set in a golden frame. Only the essence

didn't match how they looked. It was mainly light, with stone and corruption and other essences. Unlike the caches, Tibs couldn't affect the essences he could identify. The weave was tight.

The door had no handle or keyholes. Only three shields on them, each with a different design. The one at the top was like a bird, its wings spread, but they didn't seem to be made of feathers.

"That's a dragon," Carina said. "I've seen paintings of them."

"The way it's posed makes me think it's a crest," Mez added. "Same with the boar, and whatever that is." He pointed at the bottom one, the animal face with a dark mane around it.

"A lion," Jackal said. "The arena in MountainSea had them every so often. They'll set them up against some of the stronger fighters. They're deadly."

"Alright," Carina said. "But what do they mean?" she ran a hand over them. "They're painted on the door, so they aren't hiding keyholes or a puzzle. Tibs, any idea how we open it?"

"Maybe it's a distraction," he said, although he didn't believe it. "I don't know. There's more of the floor we haven't seen."

"We're going to have to make maps," Carina said, "otherwise we're going to be lost in here forever."

"No," Jackal said.

"I can get us back," Tibs said.

They looked at each other, and Tibs motioned for the fighter to continue.

"I can sense the way we came in the stone. It's not the dungeon doing it. I just remember the stone around me."

"Alright then, how long do we keep going?"

"Until we've cleared the floor," Jackal replied.

"I don't know if we have that kind of time," Mez replied.

"We did not bring provisions," Khumdar pointed out.

"What happens if two teams are on the same floor at the same time?" Carina asked.

"No idea," Sto replied. "But there are no rules against it. I wouldn't want you working together since the floor's designed for one team. But I guess that if you're willing to share the loot, I couldn't do much to stop you."

Tibs grinned. "If we don't mind sharing the loot, we can have a second-team here."

"Nope," Jackal said. "No sharing of our loot. Can you tell us when a team's heading this way?"

"Actually," Ganny said, "maybe we should have a countdown based on when they've sent in each floor's team. It's always been more or less the same time frame."

"It has?" Sto asked.

"Yes. Maybe the countdown will help you learn how people count time, too. You've been in about half the time it takes for another team to come in for this floor."

How long had they been in here? "We have as much time as we've been in already. Sto and Ganny aren't clear on how we keep track of time, and I don't know how long we've been in."

“I sort of lost track myself,” Jackal said.

“Same,” Mez said.

“A few hours, at least,” Carina said, hand on her amulet. “I know how fast it recharges, but with the constant use of my essence, it’s not exact.”

“Then we go on for more loot,” Jackal said, and walked the way they came until the previous intersection.