

Sto had changed the designs on the steps again. He'd added creatures from the third floor on the higher steps. The last one having a particularly graphic depiction of three Gnolls ripping a Runner apart. Sto hadn't greeted him by the time they reached the entrance.

The cleric by the door looked them over and nodded, while the guards barely glanced in their direction as they stepped inside. Still no greeting.

Tibs hurried to the doorway.

"We have half the day," Don called. "There's no need to hurry."

"You're on the wrong team," Jackal replied with a laugh, keeping up with Tibs, "If you think loot should be delayed."

"I'm more concerned with you making mistakes," the sorcerer said.

"You can stop being concerned about that," Mez said, "and be certain it's going to happen, no matter how slow our leader—"

Tibs lost the rest as he crossed the doorway to the third floor and hurried to the center of the hall, avoiding the triggers. "Come on," he called to his team as they stepped through the doorway. He could feel the strain from his grin; it was so wide.

"What's with him today?" the sorcerer asked. "I get he likes the runs, but this morning it's like there's a gift waiting for him at end."

"There's loot," Jackal replied in a tone that said he didn't understand how Don still wasn't getting that.

"Sto," Tibs called. "You here?"

"Is this wise?" Khumdar asked as the others stopped walking to stare at Tibs. Don's expression was thoughtful and slightly perplexed.

"You said that name," the sorcerer said, "when we started talking about everything you can do."

"And I said I'd explain some of it here," Tibs replied, eyes on the ceiling. "Sto?" Silence. "Ganny?" He looked down. Maybe they were still busy getting the fourth floor ready for them? He looked up again. Or maybe they were enjoying the new runners going through the first floor. Sto had always liked watching how people who had no idea what to expect failed his traps.

"Tibs?" Don asked, his tone uncertain. "Who are you calling out to?"

"I'll explain when one of them answers."

The sorcerer looked at the others. "Any of you know what's going on?"

"Yes," Mez answered cautiously. "But I don't think we can explain it. It's not exactly...."

"Believable," Khumdar finished.

"Tibs?" Sto asked, sounding like he was moving closer. "Did you say something?"

"Sto! You're back."

"Yes. With Don on your team, I figured it was best I be elsewhere and avoid the temptation to comment and have you reply."

Tibs ignored the look Don gave him. "He found out I have multiple elements. Then we talked, and I told him everything. Only some things I couldn't explain without you there to help."

"Tibs," Don said cautiously. "What's going on?" He looked at the others who, other than Jackal, shared a concerned expression. The fighter looked impatient.

“Don,” Tibs said, smiling. “I’d like you to meet Sto.” He motioned around them. “The dungeon.”

“Is he serious?” Don asked Mez. “He named the dungeon?”

“He didn’t name it,” Mez said.

“You realize he can’t hear me, Tibs?”

“I thought you could do like you did with Jackal. Bring a Big Brute here to interact with him.”

“I don’t have them roaming about on this floor.”

“What’s a Big Brute?” Don asked.

“The big golems in the boss room on the second floor,” Mez answered, “and in the final boss room.”

“Tibs named those too?”

“Sto did,” Tibs replied. “There has to be something you can do to convince him. Bring one of the Gnolls, or the people golems.”

“The Gnolls aren’t things I can—”

“Dungeons don’t talk, Tibs,” Don stated.

Tibs faced the sorcerer. “According to who?”

“Everyone,” Don replied, hints of exasperation slipping in.

“Not me.”

“Everyone else.” Don ran a hand over his face. “Is this because of all his elements?”

“Yes,” Tibs replied.

“I wish you’d told me it’s affecting your mind.” Don looked at the others. “Shouldn’t a cleric see to him? One who can heal,” he added. “How come the one at the door didn’t notice anything? She seemed old enough to—”

“Only initiates have door duty,” Khumdar said. “I do not expect working with the mind is something they have learned yet, if it is something anyone outside those with mind as their elements can do.”

“Then we should get one to see Tibs,” Don said. “Because this can’t be good.”

“I might...have something,” Sto said. “But are you sure this is something you want him to know?”

“Yes, I’m done keeping secrets.”

“Then make sure *he* wants to know while I check on something with Ganny. Ganny!” he called, his voice fading.

“Sto can prove he’s a person,” Tibs stated, “If you want it proved.”

“Tibs, this is a dungeon,” Don said, the exasperation clear now. He looked at the others. “Why haven’t you done anything about this delusion of his?”

“Just say you want the proof so we can go on with getting the loot,” Jackal said. “Unless you forgot, we have a floor to clear and a new one to look at.”

Don studied Tibs. “Alright, give me your word that once whatever you think the dungeon is going to do doesn’t happen, you will come with me to someone who can help you.”

“After the run,” Jackal said.

“Sure,” Tibs said.

“Take Don to the first cache,” Sto said. “You’re going to need what’s in it. Ganny agreed this is worth bending the rules for.”

“Okay. It’s going to be at the cache after the first fight,” he told Don, sensing for the changes to the triggers Ganny had made.

“Of course it will,” Don said, sounding amused.

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“Cover your eyes!” Tibs yelled, waited a second, then released the compressed light essence. He followed it with rushing the Gnolls before him. He sliced the first one, flung a ball of corruption at the next, leaped over another and stabbed it in the back as he landed, then grinned at the one in front of him, stepping back in surprised, and iced it.

His grin broadened as he made the metal hammer, then swung it as hard as his earth filled arms let him and it exploded into shards. He turned to look at the rest of his team as the hammer dissolved back into essence.

“We’re going to have to rethink every fight,” Ganny said. “If Tibs’s not going to hide everything he can do.”

“Or we can remind him that if he makes it too easy on himself, I’m going to have to make it harder on everyone,” Sto replied. “Why didn’t you use lightning?”

“I haven’t practiced it yet. Don won’t let me.”

“You’re letting Don control your training?” Sto asked, surprised.

“He read about it, and he thinks his method will work better. I owe it to him to at least try.”

“He read about how to train someone with more than one element?” Sto asked in disbelief. “I thought you were the only one.”

“I told him what I went through to learn to control a new element, then he went to do some reading and came back with this Oneness thing. I don’t know that it’s working, but I said I’d stick with it.”

“Tibs,” Don said, challenge in his tone, as he absorbed the corruption left over from the fight and pushed it into one of the many amulets in his robe’s pockets. “The fight’s over.”

“Better get on with proving to him you’re a person.” Tibs located the cache, checked it for traps, then grinned as he disarmed it. “Did you think I’d rush in because of this?”

“This was setup before Sto made changes,” Ganny replied, sounding insulted.

He checked inside for more traps, then took the content out, looking the lasso over.

“Is that supposed to prove the dungeon can think?” Don asked, smirking.

“Even you know a dungeon thinks,” Mez said.

“You know what I mean,” Don replied dismissively.

“Sto, I’m with Don.”

“It isn’t *a* lasso,” the dungeon said. “It’s *his* lasso.”

Tibs frowned, tuning it over in his hand. How did Sto expect him to know whose lasso this was? It wasn’t like he’d ever known anyone who... “Oh. But how do you have it?”

Tibs swallowed as Sto told him.

Tibs offered it to Don. “In your first run after the Siege, when you made it to the Ratling camp. You sent everyone on your team to search the tents for chests. When you were alone, you held Radcliff’s lasso you your chest, and you cried. When you were done, you put it in a tent, then walked away to meet with your team.”

“How?” Don asked, drying his eyes. “How do you know?” his tone hardened.

“Sto’s the dungeon, so he can watch anything that happens, and he enjoys watching how we’ll deal with the traps and creatures. Usually he moves on after a fight since watching us talk can be boring, but you’d never sent you team away like that, even in that room you usually went ahead so you’d be the one to find the chests and then tell your rogue to check for traps. He was curious as to what you were doing.”

“Cliff was suck a pain in my ass,” Don said with a laugh. “I don’t think he ever took me seriously when I ordered him about. He’d do what I said, but I could see him rolling his eyes. He called me out on the stupid stuff I got hung up on. You have no idea how often I wanted to strangle him. I even threaten to melt him once. And you know what he did? He laughed, shook his head, and promised he’d be a good little rogue. He never changed how he acted and...” he swallowed. “He might have been the bravest person I ever known. After all the screaming I’d do at him because he hadn’t done exactly what I’d told him but something that worked better, once we were at the inn, he’d buy me a tankard. No matter how hard I pushed, unlike the others, he stayed by me. Fuck, I know of two times when he talked the others in to staying on the team. Then, he went and died because I told him to come with us.”

Don clutched the lasso. “I hadn’t realized how much of a friend he’d become until you were screaming at him not to die.”

“I tried to save him,” Tibs whispered, a lump in his throat. “I used as much purity as I could, but I didn’t know what to do with it then, and his essence just faded away.”

“I couldn’t let anyone see me cry, and all while we were taking down that house, I had something else to focus on, then it was focussing on helping the people of Kragle Rock. Be the Voice of the Guild.” He spat. “If I hadn’t been so full of myself, I’d have told Tirania to go fuck herself, but it kept me busy, kept me from having to think about what I’d lost. In the lull after that fight was the first time I wanted to be alone, and they didn’t know how I normally did things, so they didn’t question them when I sent them away to look for chests. I finally said goodbye.” He dried his eyes and took a shuddering breath.

“You didn’t have to go through that alone, you know?” Tibs said.

Don’s laugh broke. “You have no idea how terrified I was that I’d look weak in front of everyone.”

“Mourning isn’t being weak,” Jackal said. “It’s normal.”

“Caring made me weak, as far as I was concerned. Leaders didn’t care,” Don spat. “They send friends and family to their death and never shed a tear.”

“Someone’s been listening to the bards too much,” Jackal said.

“I didn’t have to. I watched nobles and created this image of how leaders had to be. Then I promised myself that’s who I’d be. That I’d never be weak again.”

The silence stretched.

“If any of you are waiting for me to make a joke about this,” Jackal said, “we’re going to end up missing the run entirely.”

Don rolled his eyes. “So, the dungeon is named Sto.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sto said.

“He’s happy to meet you,” Tibs said.

Don snorted. “He has seen me act, right? How happy can he be to meet me?”

“I was also happy to meet jackal,” Sto replied dismissively, “even if he’s always winning the fights. So, you know, take that for what it’s worth.”

Tibs chuckled. “He’s always happy to meet people.”

“Who’s Ganny?” Don asked.

“She’s his helper and adviser. She tries to keep him from breaking the rules.”

He frowned. “The dungeon as a woman helping him?”

“She’s not a person like you and me. Her voice sounds like a girl, Sto sounds like a guy, so that’s how I think of them, but they don’t care when someone referred to him as ‘it’.”

“And the dungeon needs to follow rules?” Don asked. “Wait, who came up with them? How are they enforced?”

“No, no, no!” Jackal said. “We’re in the middle of a run. It was bad enough when it was just Tibs going off asking question instead of moving us toward the next cache. But now you two are just going to go on and on with questions. We have a floor to clear, so deal with everything you want to know once we’ve looked at the fourth floor.”

“Someone’s sure of himself,” Ganny said with a chuckle.

“He has a bet with Quigly that we’ll reach the fourth floor first,” Tibs said.

“So,” Don said as he walked next to Tibs. “You can talk to the dungeon and they answer you. Can you get them to tell you how to beat the boss room?”

Tibs shook his head. “That’s one of those rules Ganny keeps Sto from breaking.”

“Hey, I never tell you how to beat a room. Where’s the fun in that?” Sto protested.

“Sure,” Ganny said, “and how many times did Tibs almost get you to reveal something?”

“Almost doesn’t count,” he replied petulantly.

“It does if I was the reason it didn’t happen,” she said triumphantly.

Tibs smiled.

He’d missed the banter.