

The dungeon's chuckle turned maniacal.

"You are doing this on purpose," Tibs said through clenched teeth while Carina made notes on the map.

"Me? It's just a few rats, they're not even upgrades from the first floor," Sto said, finally calming.

"You know how much I hate them."

"How would I—"

Tibs glared at the ceiling. "You can see and hear anything that happens in here. You know how I feel about rats."

"I'm trying to help you get over your fear of them?" Sto offered, snickering.

"I'm not afraid," Tibs snapped. "I hate them."

"Tibs?" Jackal asked. "We good?"

Tibs nodded and squared his shoulder. He'd show the dungeon that he wasn't afraid of rats. "I'm going to deal with the rats."

"That's a lot of them," Jackal said. "Are you sure?"

Tibs glared at the fighter who raised his hands. "Okay, you deal with the rats." He looked at the others. "Mez, Carina, do you think you can keep one of them busy each?"

"I can destroy one outright," Mez stated.

"But will you have anything left?"

The archer shook his head.

"Then I'd rather you keep one busy and maintain enough essence for the next room. We got lucky there last time." He turned to the cleric who spun his staff before him, trailing darkness at the ends.

"I will be more useful this time. This staff is attuned to my element. It was a fortunate find."

Sto snorted. "It's a good thing Ganny isn't here. I wouldn't hear the end of it."

Tibs didn't ask. He was too angry at the dungeon.

"Alright," Jackal said. "Mez, Carina, start us off."

As soon as the first explosion happened, Tibs ran into the room. He coated his knife with fire, then sliced the closest rat. He lost some of the essence, but the scream from the rat made more than made up for it. He stabbed the next one, cut a third, a fourth.

"Tibs, down," Mez called, and he dropped. Something exploded, and he was up again, skewering the rat that had used the opportunity to climb on his arm. He flung it aside, threw the knife at one heading for Khumdar. Took his air knife and cut two rats with one swing. One landed on his back. A large one by the weight, and with a scream Tibs reached back, grabbed, and slammed it on the ground over and over until another rat ran at him and he had to focus on that one.

Tibs was panting, looking around for the next rat. He heard a snarl and realized it was him. He saw no rats, only copper coins all over the floor. The golems were rubble, and Carina pulled an amulet from under some.

"This is new," she said. "First time one of them gave us something other than coins."

“The others didn’t give anything,” Jackal said, sounding miffed as he searched among the rest.

“Tibs,” Khumdar said, offering him his knife back, “are you well?”

He nodded, taking it. Were there more rats? There had to be more rats. There were always more rats. He shuddered, fragments of his nightmares coming to him.

“Maybe I went too far,” Sto said, and Tibs snarled.

“Tibs?” Khumdar asked.

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

“I want you to breathe, Tibs.”

“I’m—” he realized his lungs hurt, and he took a deep breath. As he let it out, he found he was shaking. There had been so many rats. But he’d killed them. “I’m okay,” he said, and he sounded better.

Khumdar smiled.

“Twenty-four coppers,” Carina said, hands cupped with the coins in them. Tibs put them in his pouch without even counting. There were just coppers. “And one amulet, if there’s another one in the ratling village, that’ll be two on this run.”

“There might not be,” Tibs said. “The chests have random stuff in them.” Unless Sto changed his mind. With Ganny being busy, the dungeon might be looser with the rules. “But I think a better bow for Mez is what we should hope for. You already have an amulet.”

“Armor is always nice,” Jackal said. “Tibs, what’s the deal with just one of the golem giving us something?”

“You’re going to use me to try to get the dungeon to give you more stuff, aren’t you?” Tibs asked, not bothering hiding his annoyance.

“Tell him it’s because the amulet is worth a lot more than the silver they normally dropped,” Sto said.

“I’m going to be stuck between your two,” Tibs grumble. “Jackal’s not going to be happy until he gets more, and you’re not going to give him more because there are rules. This would be easier if you could just talk to him directly.”

“Nah,” Jackal said. “I don’t want to piss off the dungeon, and we all know how great my interpersonal skills are.”

“Says the man who seems to know a lot about what’s going on in town,” Carina said.

“That’s because I can get people drunk. Everyone likes me once they’re drunk.”

“The five golems are treated as one creature for the way things happen in this room,” Sto said. “The random assignment has a bunch of multiple small items dropping, or just the coins, like your last time. This time it’s one of the items at the top of the list, so there’s just one.”

“It’s random,” Tibs said. “Sometimes it’s one, sometimes it more than one, sometimes it’s coins.”

“And you said there are rules,” Khumdar said. “Are those rules set by the dungeon?”

“I wish,” Sto snorted.

“No.”

“Let’s move on,” Jackal said, while the cleric looked pensive. “There’s going to be

more loot with the ratlings.

The village looked much the same. Tents everywhere, in small clusters around a campfire with a larger center deeper inside the cave. Tibs hadn't appreciated how large it was the last time.

"I take it we want to get all the chests," Mez said, and Jackal just looked at the man. "And last time Tibs mentioned they won't be in the same tents. So we have to kill the ratlings."

"That's why they're there," Jackal said.

"Is it?" Tibs asked, and the others looked at him. He waited. There was only one person who could answer the question.

"It sort of is," Sto answered. "Why else would they be there?"

"So they can live?"

"They aren't alive, Tibs. They're just monsters."

He nodded. "It is."

Carina looked at the village. "Being able to talk with the dungeon might make this more complicated. What happens when it makes something and it evolves into its own person?"

"They can do that?" Sto and Mez asked at the same time.

"I don't know, but if a dungeon and evolves into a thinking being, why not its creation?"

"I didn't—oh, I get what she's thinking. You can tell her she's wrong."

Tibs didn't. Telling her she was wrong would lead to her asking how, and he'd have to be in the middle of her and Sto. "How about we deal with the ratlings instead? We can try to sneak around as long as we can, taking them out as we find them."

"You're about the only one among us who can sneak," Jackal said.

"I think I can do something about being silent," Carina said.

Tibs looked at the cleric.

"I am afraid I am better at rooting secrets than I am at hiding myself."

"So the three of us go in," Jackal said. "We kill as many as we can, and you two sneak around, finding the chest so—"

"No," Tibs said, and Carina glared at the fighter. "We look for the chests after they're all dead. Me and Carina will kill those who attack at range, or who aren't as fast rushing you. There were a few of them last time. The chests aren't going away while we're fighting."

"Although..." Sto said, pensively.

Tibs sighed. "That might change on the next run. We keep giving the dungeon ideas."

"If you want an idea, dungeon," Jackal said. "More rewards for the fights is a great idea."

Sto chuckled. "I'll take that under advisement. And you don't need to look all down, Tibs. Everyone's been giving me ideas. You just happen to know."

"It doesn't make me feel any better about it."

Jackal raised his hand to get their attention, looking into the cavern. By the time Tibs

looked to, no one was visible and Jackal motioned for them to move. Jackal, Mez, and Khumdar went down the center path. Carina motioned to herself and the left, then Tibs and the right.

He didn't like letting her go on her own; she hadn't gone alone the last time, but she knew her capabilities, so he nodded. He looked in the closest tent, empty, then each one as he moves around. His plan was to go around the periphery, clearing each small encampment. He should meet up with Carina eventually, then they could help the others.

When he heard fighting, he reminded himself they were Upsilon, just like him, that they'd survived this cavern when they hadn't known what to expect. They would be fine until he joined them.

In the fourth encampment, he came across a ratling in a tent. It seemed to prepare a meal of some sort and had its back to the entrance. Tibs slipped in and had his knife at the ratling's throat when it bucked and screeched. The knife nicked it, but then it was on Tibs, claws raking at his armor. He shouldered it away and slashed as two other ratlings entered.

He kept them away from him, trying to maneuver himself toward the tent's opening. He needed more space to move, but anytime he moved in that direction, a ratling blocked him, even if it resulted in them getting cut. They weren't alive; he reminded himself. They didn't have a fear of dying. They only existed to try to kill him. The fact some had stayed behind had to be because rogues preferred sneaking around, which left them alone. Vulnerable.

How many had Sto killed this way?

He slashed as he made another attempt for the exit, and this time the ratling caught his hand as the knife sank into it, and wouldn't let go. It pulled him deeper into the tent, and then another of the ratling had his other hand. Tibs kicked it and it let go, but he lost his knife. Before he could pull another one. The third ratling was on his back, claws raking at his chest and neck, catching in the joints of the armor and looking to peel it off.

The rat was back trying to grab his hand and shouldered it away. Then he tried to pull the arm off him. He had the claws out of his armor when the ratling pulled it out of his grip, the claws came close to his face. Tibs screamed, then the ratling on his back fell off and the other let go of his arm.

Tibs turned, pulling his last knife out of the sheath, but he was looking at stone rubble. A check of his reserve confirmed what had happened. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it."

"I know," Sto replied. "And I'm not worried about those two. It's the third one that concerns me."

Tibs turned, readying himself. In his surprise, he'd forgotten about the one he'd shouldered away. But that ratling was also rubble.

"I thought you needed to touch one of them to drain their essence."

"I thought so too. I've never done this before." He didn't even know what he'd done. There had been no thought. He'd been terrified of those claws, and then the ratlings were dead.

"Go help your friends, Tibs. I'm going to have to talk with Ganny about this. I'm not

going to be watching the rest.”

Tibs collected his knives and ran out of the tent.

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Tibs only got to kill one ratling that had also been sneaking around, on his way to the rest of his team. Carina was already with them, and there was enough rubble Tibs wondered if they'd be able to find the coins each ratling dropped.

“What kept you?” Jackal asked, “we had all the fun.”

“I got jumped,” Tibs replied.

“Are you okay?” the fighter asked, all levity gone. He looked at Tibs armor. “Are you bleeding? Is that something you can heal?”

“I'm not bleeding, and I don't know. Are you okay? Is everyone okay?” He looked them over, sensing the essence coursing through them instead of waiting for the answers. Mez was the only one with an injury that registered in the essence, and Tibs went to him. The cuts on the others were superficial. “What happened?” Tibs asked, indicating the leg the archer favored.

“One of the ratlings surprised me with a club. I don't think it's broken, but I can't put much weight on it.”

It wasn't broken. The essence broke with those injuries. This was an inflation. Like it was pushing against something. Bruising? He pushed his essence into Mez's leg, shaped it around, and as gently as he could, tightened it.

Mez hissed, then. “Stop, Tibs, stop, this is starting to hurt worse.”

He relaxed the essence and hardened it in place. “Sorry. I don't know how this works. Is this helping?”

Mez put some weight on the leg, then nodded. “It's more like it's sore now. Hopefully, I won't have to run, but walking isn't going to be a problem. Thank you.”

“Whatever the rest is, the cleric will take care of it when we leave.”

They collected the loot from the tents, and as Tibs had hoped, one of them was a bow. It was made of dark wood and was encrusted with red gems. Tibs felt the way fire essence was imbued in it.

Mez was in awe as he held it. “Jackal, I have to keep this. If I have to repay the team for the rest of the year, that's fine. You have no idea how deep the reserve in this bow runs. I'll never have to worry about running out of essence with this.”

“Is there anything else we want to keep?” the fighter asked, indicating the loot. It was mainly pieces of armor, most metal of some sort, with one leather glove. There was a sheath, like the one Francis had had, that let him put a sword in something that looked to only house a knife.

“We should keep the amulet,” Carina said. “For Tibs.”

“I have an amulet.”

“But you can put another element in this one. You could build up a reserve in your four elements with enough amulets.”

“Alright. If Mez's bow isn't so expensive we can keep the amulet we do so, otherwise, it's going to wait until next run, agreed?”

They put as many of the armor pieces in the backpacks and were left with plenty they had to carry in their arms.

“Maybe the dungeon should give us special packs,” Jackal said, “like those chests which are larger inside than out.” He looked at Tibs expectantly.

“The dungeon’s dealing with something elsewhere. He said he can’t pay attention to everything and only hears us when he’s paying attention.”

“So he didn’t see the fight?”

“He left partially through it.”

Jackal sighed. “It was such a great fight.”

They reached the next room and stopped.

“This can’t be good,” Carina said.

The cavern was empty. It looked to be of a similar size as the one the ratlings lived in, but there was nothing there.

“Do you think it’s a trap room?” Mez asked.

Tibs crouched at the edge and looked in. He didn’t get the sense it was, but he couldn’t explain why. Traps didn’t come with signs, and if essence wasn’t used, looked no different from normal floors, so why didn’t he think it was one? Something else his essence let him do?

No. He felt essence in the room, his essence, the one that coursed through people and the monsters in the dungeon. It was in the floor, under it.

As he realized it, a section of the floor a foot around lifted and a nose poked out, twitching. Hands took the floor tile and moved it aside. Small, furry, hands. Not like the ratlings. A head poked out.

“Is that a bunny?” Jackal asked.

It looked like one, with long ears, large eyes, and a small muzzle. It was stone, like every creature in the dungeon, but unlike the ones on the first floor, the head was larger.

It pulled itself out of the hole and sniffed around. It was half the size of the ratlings, but clearly the same thing. A humanoid rabbit.

“How many of those things do you think are in there?” Mez asked.

“I’m guessing something like the ratling village,” Jackal answered. “You want to test out your new bow?”

Mez smiled.

“Are we sure we want to take them on without knowing how many there are?” Carina asked.

“They’re bunnies,” Tibs replied, unsheathing his knives. “How tough can they be?”