

The doors swung in hard enough under Jackal's push they hit the walls with an echoing 'boom'.

"We're here," he announced as he stepped into the boss room, dusting his hands off.

"He knows I've been following your progress, right?" Sto asked, and Tibs simply shrugged. The dungeon should be used to the fighter's antics by now.

"We do this the same as last time?" Jackal asked, turning to them. "Fight this first group, then you and Don work out how to not trigger the next attacks?"

"And if we can't," Tibs replied, "we blast those, too. We know what to expect, and I don't have to hold back this time."

"This raises a question for me," Don said. "Why have you been holding back in the previous fights? You said that your life essence flows through the creatures the dungeon makes. Why not just drain them? It would have made all these fights easier."

"Boring, you mean," Jackal said.

"Me and Sto have an arrangement," Tibs said. "I don't use my element to win fights, and he doesn't make things so hard no other team can survive."

"They can do that?"

Tibs shrugged. "He's the dungeon. He can do anything he wants here."

"What about those rules you said he needs to follow? What I got from how you talked about them, and the run, is that they're there in part to keep them from killing everyone outright, since they exist to force us to grow stronger."

"But if he uses us as the criteria to set how strong a team is, he's going to be justified in making it ever harder until we're the only ones able to survive."

"Alright, then how do they account for all your elements? That makes you the equivalent of multiple people on a team, if not multiple teams."

Tibs looked up.

"We're still figuring that one out," Ganny replied. "This is the first time you've used multiple elements consistently on a run."

"But," Sto added, "it isn't like you're good with any other than water. You're basically Upsilon with all of them, except—"

"I'd say Rho," Ganny interrupted. "Just from the raw volume of essence he can use."

"But they're going to be on the fourth floor soon, and that's going to balance things."

"But," Ganny said, "if you overdo it on this floor, we are going to have to make changes."

"They're working on it," he told Don. "But I'm not good enough with most of my elements to have much of an effect, and they don't think it will have any once we're on the fourth floor."

Don nodded. "Meaning that if we linger on this floor as you get more skilled, we're going to be causing everyone else problems."

"Two things," Jackal stated. "I say, let it bring on the harder fights, so long as the loot increases to match. And who is even thinking of us staying on this floor after we clear this room? I want the good loot, and that's going to be on the next floor, so how about we set on clearing this room so we can go and see it?"

"That's three things," Mez said.

Jackal counted on his fingers. "Two. Clearing the room isn't a thing. It's what's

happening now.” He stepped over the activation threshold, and the mass of creatures rushed them.

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Tibs skewered a golem person, a fighter wielding water, and looked around. The last of the attackers crumbled to rubble, and anywhere one had fallen and they’d moved away as they fought. All that was left were a few silvers, or small jewelry.

“I want another one like this!” Jackal yelled at the ceiling, grinning. He and Tibs were the only ones without serious injuries, and Tibs had had to suffuse himself with purity to heal during the fight. Don was pale, hands on knees and panting. Khumdar limped, and Mez’s arm hung at his side. Tibs had no idea how he’d stayed in the fight if he hadn’t been able to shoot arrows.

“Don’t get closer to them,” Tibs ordered Jackal as he headed for the archer. “You do, and you’re fighting them alone.”

Jackal’s hands were up defensively. “I wasn’t—” He looked at here he stood, then took a step toward Tibs. “I’m the new, smarter Jackal, remember?”

“That was a low bar to clear,” Don said. “And clearing it doesn’t mean you’re that much smarter.”

“He’s smart enough to stay on Kroseph’s good side,” Mez said. Then sighed as Tibs wrapped a purity weave around his arm.

“Isn’t that a given, seeing how they’re special to one another?”

Tibs snorted. “You weren’t there to hear Jackal explain his mistake to his man, and make things worse each time. You’d think he would have learned to shut up after the first time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jackal said, sounding bored. “Just nod and accept my punishment.” The grin that formed was filled with mischief.

“Don’t start talking now,” Tibs warned. “We don’t want to know.”

“Maybe you don’t, but—”

“No,” Khumdar stated. “Tibs is correct. However your man goes about keeping you in like is for you and him to experience and then keep to yourself. I do not believe any of us has done anything to warrant the torture of you describing it.”

“You’re just jealous of the love my man shows me,” Jackal replied dismissively.

“Isn’t it fun how our leader’s always talking like we don’t have someone of our own?” Mez asked, slowly testing his arm’s range.

“I…” Don trailed off.

“Really?” The archer asked in surprise. “I thought that this new you had an easier time keeping people on your good side. It should make it easier to find someone special.”

“I’m surprised you consider what you have special,” the sorcerer replied, eyes focused on his hands as they pulled and put back amulets in the pockets. “You didn’t sound like you felt your arrangement was… favorable the last time you mentioned it.” He looked up as Tibs stepped to him.

Tibs hadn’t seen anyone close enough to Don to hit him, but the essence in his chest was broken the way someone being punched hard caused. On top of that, his reserve was drained. The sorcerer closed a hand around an amulet and pulled the essence within him as Tibs placed a purity weave on the wound. The sorcerer regained colors and straightened.

“I accepted my position at her side,” Mez said, tone firm, instead of resigned as Tibs expected. He hadn’t brought that girl up in a while, and the archer hadn’t mentioned her. “In time, I will see the light through this storm.”

“That is quite...honorable of you,” Khumdar said.

Don pulled another amulet from a pocket and absorbed the essence. Tibs took it from him before he put it back and pushed essence in.

“I wish to be a man,” Mez said, then the expected sigh sounded. “But there are times she makes me wish I could stay a child.”

Raising an eyebrow, Don took hold of one end as Tibs offered it to him, and pulled on the essence within the amulet as Tibs kept pushing more in.

“Not the kind of noble you said lived in your kingdom?” Jackal asked.

“She is... She tries.”

Tibs saw the light on the word from the corner of his eye, but stayed silent. Don stopped pulling once his reserve was full and Tibs stopped when the amulet was filled.

“I had...” Mez continued, then sighed again. “A Tibs’s problem, but in the opposite direction. Where all he saw were bad nobles, and couldn’t imagine any could be good. I was raised with the ideal of the good a noble does. Encountering the ones here dampened my illusions, but I still believed my kingdom was different. It is not as...different as I would like to believe.”

“That sucks,” Jackal said as Tibs moved on to the cleric.

They were silent as Tibs healed Khumdar, then moved on to the next problem.

The pattern around the column was the trigger that made the next group of creatures appear. He’d triggered it just by interacting with it the last time, and he couldn’t know what in that interaction had activated it, unless he interacted with it again; he’d like to avoid that fight. The one detail he remembered as it had triggered was that it had sent out signals through the room.

His problem was working out where those signals had gone to without triggering this one.

“Khumdar, are there other secrets in the room?”

“Many.”

“How are they connected?” He looked at the cleric when he didn’t answer.

He had a perplexed expression. “I am uncertain what you mean.”

Tibs motioned to the floor around the column. “You sensed the trigger. It reached out to others and I need to know where they are.”

“I believe you misunderstand what I sense. There are secrets throughout this dungeon. Some it is hiding actively, while others are hidden through circumstances. Some have the feel to them of a secret wishing to be discovered, while others desire to remain hidden. I can easily indicate eight of that kind in this room, but I do not sense any connection between them, or that they will trigger anything. All I know is that they are secrets that do not wish to be noticed.”

Tibs nodded. “It’s that mindset thing. You aren’t a rogue, so you don’t think about secret the way I do.” He scanned the room. He had the sense of the kinds of secret this trigger was, but he didn’t have the experience using Darkness that let Khumdar sense more about them. Or maybe it was that as a cleric, his awareness of the element was different.

What Tibs had, were options. He let go of water and channeled darkness.

The darkness that marked the trigger sharpened. It didn't follow any of the essence that flowed through the pattern, only marked it as a secret. He sensed more such pools of darkness throughout the room. The floor, the ceiling, the walls; even the unmoving dragons at the end of the room was shrouded in shadow.

But that didn't tell him enough.

He took a breath and suffused himself with darkness, then looked around again.

"Tibs?" Jackal called, surprised. When Tibs glanced at his friend, the fighter's gaze was searching, passing over Tibs as if he didn't see him.

"Is that how you vanish?" Don asked the cleric.

"I suppose there is no point in keeping this hidden. Tibs had filled himself with darkness. He had made himself a secret you cannot easily perceive."

"But you can?" the sorcerer asked, sounding dubious.

"I have more experience. And he is not seeking to hide; this is nothing more than what happens when engulfed by the element."

Tibs looked at his hands. They looked normal. With a shrug, he returned to what he'd been doing. Each shadow was clear, even those where the light didn't reach, and looking at them, Tibs had a certainty they were connected. It was how Ganny did things. So why wasn't he seeing that connection?

"What are you seeking?" Khumdar whispered.

Tibs looked in his direction, but the cleric wasn't there. He focussed and had the impression of a secret, crouched next to him, but it was faint enough it might be his imagination.

"I'm trying to sense how the secrets connect to each other. I thought that by suffusing myself, I'd sense more, and I do, but it's either not enough or just not something darkness does."

"Darkness does what we will it to do," the cleric said. "Some will be because you think of it in the proper way. Other will be using etching and weaving. And yet more will be about how much essence you pour into what you want." The pause had a sense of thinking to it. "Can you suffuse yourself with more darkness than you currently do?"

Tibs considered it, then tried, but nothing changed in what was within him. "No. It just pours through me until I'm... filled, is the best word I have for it. Isn't it like that for you?"

"It is, but you are different. I do not desire to assume you are limited in the same way I am."

Tibs nodded. "What would happen if I filled my channels with Darkness?"

"I do not—"

"I can sense them in you," he said, cutting off the protest.

"Now?"

"For a while. I don't know when I started realizing they were there, but it was before Don and Jackal got theirs." He looked where he thought the secret that was Khumdar was, then realized he couldn't sense his element this way, so he thought back. "Yours are..." he sighed. "Denser isn't the right word, but I can tell you had them longer than they have, unless it's something that happens if you train them more."

"Does Mez have them?"

Tibs focused on the archer. “Not really. I can sort of sense there’s something there, but it’s nothing like what we have.”

“So you have them too,” the cleric stated.

“When I absorbed all that fire, I couldn’t put all of it in my reserve, even by pushing it as tight as I could. So I did what I did the last time I had too much essence and pushed it into the rest of my body. The first time I discovered suffusing that way. But instead of making me more suffused, it went into those channels, filling them ever denser. Then, when I let go of all that essence, they were still there. Don said they’re used to create specific effect, but he didn’t tell me what or why. I didn’t think to ask. He was already giving me Oneness to work on and that’s been too much.”

“Where do the channels go?”

“Everywhere?” Tibs said, unsure, as he focused on himself.

Khumdar chuckled. “If it is such for you, I suspect I will not be able to help.”

Tibs separated the sense of the channels from the rest. They weren’t as clear as they were in the others because he was suffused. “It starts at my head,” He said, once he had a sense of them. “It goes down to my chest, there it splits to my arms, legs and crotch. There’s sort of... knot in my chest, my head, my crotch, my hands and feet.”

“Only one in your head?”

“Yes...no.” He focused harder. “It’s like four smaller ones. Close together, kind of in the middle of my head.”

“Is one closer to your forehead?”

“Yes.”

“That is... I call it the node of sight,” Khumdar said. “Don will have the term the guild and scholar use of them. Guiding more essence to it allows me to gain more understanding of the secrets surrounding me. It is how I see you now.”

He tried harder to sense the cleric, but he couldn’t manage it. “Then,” he said, relenting on that. “All I have to do is—”

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“This is not something simple, or without risk. There is a danger to knowing more about secrets. To letting darkness in so deep within your mind.”

“Then I’ll be—”

“It did something to me,” Khumdar whispered, even if Tibs was sure no one heard them, both cloaked in darkness as they were. “In that first attempt. Even after this time, I do not understand what. But Tibs, I advise against doing this without proper training.”

“I’ll take it slow.”

“Tibs,” Khumdar warned.

“I need to find out how the triggers are connected, and this is the only way I have that doesn’t mean I activate it, then hope I get something before we need to fight more creatures. The point of me doing this is so we don’t fight them.”

The cleric sighed. “Very well. Then you must use no more than the smallest amount possible. It is easy to have too much going in and then...”

Tibs nodded. He pulled darkness from his reserve, keeping it within his body, then thinned it until there was less there than faintest threat of a weave he’d sensed. He touched

it to the channel under his head and gasped as it was nearly ripped from his control and pulled into it. It took nearly more than he could manage to wrench it out. Then he was panting.

“Are you well?” Khumdar asked.

“It was like the channel was famished for it. It wanted more of it. It fought me when I tried to pull it out.”

“That is why you require training. We can return when—”

“No. It just took me by surprise, that’s all.” He pulled essence out of his reserve again. “I know what to expect this time.” He thinned it, tightened his hold on it, and resisted when the channel pulled. He realized it was pulling in both directions. “What happens if I just let the essence filled my channels?”

“At this time,” Khumdar replied, tone severe, “I do not believe it would be pleasant, or that you could survive it. If you cannot maintain control and guide it where it must go, stop. Accept that this is something that will require patience.”

“I have it under control,” Tibs replied, forcing the essence along the channel and to his head. When the channel split, his control nearly slipped, the strand splitting and starting along each path. He pulled back, then forced it into the right one. Then had to fight against the pull into the node.

The difference was immediate. The secrets around the rooms almost had a shape to them.

“If I use more, will it let me see more of...whatever it is I’m almost seeing?”

“Yes,” Khumdar said after a stretched silence. “Be cautious. It is easy to let in too much. This is not where you wish to make that mistake.”

Tibs let a little more of the strand into the node and the forms became more defined. One caught his attention, and he realized it was within Mez. A secret that, as he let a little more of the strand in, took a shape. Two people holding hands. Wanting to see more, he let again a little more in, and then more. Mez was quickly identifiable, and Tibs could make out enough to see happiness there. The person holding his hand took more, then he looked away, hurrying to pull the thread out as he started to recognize her. Shame crawled up at having pried into his friend’s secrets in such a way.

His hold on the thread slipped a little in surprise at what he saw in the room, intensifying the lines that criss-crossed it. Showing him how the secrets were connected.