

Story begins-4

Omar Grindgear stood in the market square closest to the eastern gate of Tofen. He wasn't a fan of the city, too much elitism, too many guards protecting the players controlling the city, but Tofen was the closest to the dungeon he wanted to propose. And if the others weren't interested, from here there were a lot of other dungeons with decent loot they could clear.

A handful of guards eyed him suspiciously. Tofen wasn't racist, but the majority of the players based here were Syleant and it created an 'other world natives aren't part of us' atmosphere. It didn't matter that most races weren't expensive to buy, or that the Ameritek players controlling the city weren't all Syleant, the bulk of the city's players were natives of Gaia who Omar suspected didn't have a lot of money to spend of the game and were trying to attach themselves to Tofen as a way to gain prestige without having to invest time in actually playing the game.

"Always a friendly welcome here," a raspy voice said in his ear and Omar jumped, a shield spell activating with a quick hand gesture. "Jumpy, aren't you?" Marc said, a smile on his skeletal muzzle.

"Sneaking up like that will get you blasted one of these days," Omar replied, extinguishing the spell.

"In a city? Even here PvP can't happen in a market square. The Ameritek elites who control it can't bribe the developers."

He shook himself to settle his fur, the motion making the metal plates of his body clank. "Maybe they haven't yet, but one of these days you'll find out they did by going kaboom." He needed to adjust the translation algorithm since Omar didn't have fur. Or he could keep it like that. He'd have to play with it and see if it was an expressive motion. "And what are you doing sneaking around, anyway?"

"The gate guards were being difficult. I couldn't prove I was an 'approved' traveler, and I didn't feel like bribing her." Marc shook his head. "I don't see why this is even allowed. Cities don't have caerns for a reason."

"You don't need one to control a city, just a large enough army to guard any place of worth."

"What's of worth?" Paul asked, nodding to a guard. The Syleant raccoon stopped before them as Marc eyed the tabard he wore. "What? I'm a Tofen approved adventurer, I did all the quests required."

Marc growled. "Those aren't quests. They're just jobs other players gave you. Quests have to be system approved."

"Someone doesn't like Tofen I take it," Paul said with a chuckle.

"Unless you're approved here," Melor said, "there aren't many reasons to like it. I just had to pay fifty gold for the privilege of setting foot in here. Why did you pick here to meet? I didn't think you were all that interested in making Ameritek richer."

"This isn't Ameritek," a stern foam like vulpine said, his body deep red, and wearing yellow and orange armor. "It's Tofen." Like Paul, he wore the Tofen tabard.

Omar studied him. He was familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd seen him

before.

“That’s Tracent, isn’t it?” Melor asked.

“Good memory,” The vulpine said. “He’s approved to be in Tofen, although it’s been years since I played him.” Nori, Omar realized. That’s who this was.

“What level is he?” the bear asked.

“Thirty-two.”

“You realize that as much as you play, if you’d stuck with one character, you’d have maxed it out,” Marc said.

“There’s a maximum level?” Paul asked. “I thought the Lands kept going and adjusting.”

“Figure of speech,” the skeleton replied.

“Who cares about maxing out anyway,” Tracent said. “I like exploring the variety. So where are we going?”

“There’s a dungeon I found not far from here a couple of weeks ago,” Omar said. “It’s pretty tough, I couldn’t solo it. If you guys are interested, I thought we’d give it a try.”

“I’m good for that,” Paul said, “I cleared my day, so other than the occasional pit break, I can spend all of it here.”

“I have twelve hours,” Marc said, “then I need to sleep. I have a board meeting in the morning.”

“I doubt we’ll need twelve hours to clear it,” Tracent said. “I’m in, I’m officially on vacation, so no duties but the guild.”

“Marc?”

The Necalium’s eyes focused on the Brastok. “I’m in, sorry, I was checking the boards, seeing if there was any thread about shutting down Tofen.”

“Leave it,” Paul said with a roll of the eyes. “They spent close to a century taking control of it, they earned it as far as I’m concerned.”

Omar pushed them out of his mind and set about casting the portal spell. Anchoring it on a specific destination made the combo more complex. Arms moved, fingers shifted through the configurations. Something came at his face and Omar caught it by reflex, shattering the combo. He glared at the stone, then the direction it came, but he couldn’t tell who in the crowd had interrupted him.

“Maybe we should do this outside the walls?” Marc offered.

Omar shook his head. “I’m not giving them the satisfaction. Just give me a few seconds to let my mana recharge.” Arms moved, fingers shifted through the configurations, body flowed along with them. Maybe he should see about taking dancing lessons? Theo had made this kind of movement seem effortless. Would building a macro for this be allowed?

He concluded the combo and his mana bar was down below ten percent. He needed to raise the level of this spell. He set it visible for the guild only as well as the only ones allowed to use it and stepped through.

He appeared a hundred meters from the mouth of the cave.

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Marc Bonesword looked around as he stepped out of the portal. He stood at the foot of a mountain, the terrain leveling off quickly. In the distance, he could see the monstrosity that the Ameritek Elite had turned Tofen into. Why had Constantine allowed the exploit? It was no better than cheating. The Lands of Farr was supposed to be about having fun, adventuring, not power-mongering. That would never be allowed to happen on the Colony version of Gaia. He'd talk with the beta after he was done playing.

He joined the others at the mouth of the cave.

"Of course," Omar said with a grating sigh. "Now it's marked as a group dungeon."

"Iranil's collectibles," Marc read aloud as the dungeon's information appeared. "Yeah, that's always been a group dungeon."

"You did it before?"

"No, but it's been mentioned on the forums," Marc said. It was his reflexive lie since finding out none of his guild friends enjoyed reading them. It had been decades since he'd done this dungeon, and by the time code his access gave him, Constantine had only activated this one three years ago.

"Any information on those forums about tricks to get through it?" Omar asked.

"Bring an army," Marc replied, remembering the team of twenty he'd done the dungeon with, back on Churchill. He'd been a kid back then, they all had. Barely thirty. "But that was by a level fourteen player. We can probably manage it with the five of us."

The Brastok's eyes did a full roll in their brass socket. "You can probably do it alone. Sneak in, avoid all the monsters and traps and just stab the boss in the back."

Marc smiled. "I expect I could, but that wouldn't give me the items I need to collect. The developers were smart enough to make it so killing the boss isn't sufficient to complete those kinds of quests."

"I made it three-quarters of the way through on my own," Omar said. Which Marc found surprising. He remembered it being far tougher, but he reminded himself they'd been between level twelve and fifteen when his Colony guild had done this quest.

"What should we expect then?" Tracent asked.

"Most rooms are just mobs," Omar replied, "so that'll be easy, even as the number of them will be higher than what I encountered. The problems are the boss types every four or five rooms. Those were tough and I have no idea how they'll adjust to deal with a group." The Brastok looked at Marc.

The Necalium shrugged. "They change each time the quest resets. Until I see them, I can't tell you what they'll do, and according to what I read, the moment we'll enter the room, they'll attack." He brought up the data on the quest and queued it. He didn't want to rely on his memory for this.

"One last thing," Omar said. "We need to search each room and each kill. The quest items aren't all with the bosses." He placed his hand on the entrance and vanished. Marc set his display to highlight the locations the items could be in, based on the algorithms, if no one could locate one of them, he'd 'accidentally' find out.

“You going to abandon us to sneak to the end and just wait on the throne again?” Paul asked, stepping to the entrance with Marc.

“I’d never do that,” the Necalium replied, with a hurt tone, entering the dungeon and going into stealth mode immediately.

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Tracent’s rapier traced a quick symbol in the air as he performed the damage buff combo before stabbing the Rock-orc. It fell to the ground as Melor’s health readout began flashing. Tracent had them set to do so when they dropped below a quarter. The barbarian had his own healing, but he seemed distracted by the fight.

Tracent ran across the room, rapier tracing the healing combo, and touched Melor’s back before blocking another Rock-orc’s attack.

“Thanks,” Melor said, then “Toramok!” and swung his ax through the largest of the Rock-orc.

A handful of seconds later and all the orcs were dead. “I found Iranil’s Tome,” Paul said standing next to one of the orcs. “Other than it the room’s haul was six hundred gold, two magical swords of unknown property. A shield and a helmet and a dozen healing, stamina, and mana potions.

“Marc, anything on the forums about if the layout of the dungeon changes?” Omar asked.

The Necalium shook his head. “This one has a set configuration. The contents alters to adjust for the levels, but not the layout.”

“Then the room down that hall has the first boss.”

“So we go in and hit it with all we’ve got,” Melor said, grinning.

“Without seeing it first, I can’t offer anything else,” Marc replied as the others looked at him.

It didn’t work.

Tracent stepped through the portal and joined Paul and Melor before the entrance. “Do we wait for them to join us? Or do you think we can make it back there before they die?” the vulpine asked.

“The Tome vanished from my inventory,” Paul answered, “so they’re dead.”

“Does that mean the boss is going to change?” Melor asked. “Does this reset the quest entirely?”

“I will have the quest as active,” Tracent said. “That usually means it doesn’t reset, but that’s something Marc will know.”

The Necalium stepped through the portal, shaking his head.

Omar was behind him. “I told you to wait until she dropped her shield.”

“That’s not the indicator her defenses are down. I told you. That’s a feint. The best time is the five-second window before that when her brown glows. I just got the time wrong.”

“So there is a way to hurt the bitch?” Melor asked, “because none of my attacks seemed to do anything.”

“That’s Caleandra,” Marc said. “She sensitive to electrical attacks, immune to

cold, the rest only does a quarter normal damage, except in the five seconds when her crown glows, then her defenses are down, everything does triple damage to her.”

“But that’s when she fires those ice breaths,” Paul said.

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“Yes, so it’s a question of timing it right,” the Necalium replied confidently.

Paul nodded, listening to the tone more than the words. He’d grown up with a conman as a father, so he’d learned to pick up on lies. In the game, it was tougher since body language could be a fabrication of macros and preprogrammed actions, but the voice was tougher to mask and Marc had the confidence of someone who’d done more than read about this dungeon.

Paul had decided a while back that Marc had lied about being a beta tester. His knowledge was too intimate on things like this dungeon, which he claimed to only have read about. He was one of the developers, and possibly one of the developers of the Lands as a whole. His knowledge of Ceril had been too good.

Paul didn’t call him out on it. Marc was a guild member, and it didn’t matter who he was outside the game. Here he used whatever he knew to help them, so what did it matter how he came to it? And really, Paul would be a hypocrite to call out someone on lying about who they were outside the game.

“So Omar shields us from the ice breath and we pile in the damage in that window,” Marc said. “Outside of that, we deal with the mobs she sends. Tracent, you’re the only one with the ability to heal others, so keep an eye on that for us. If you can’t reach us, call out, we all have healing potions, right?”

“With the numbers of them dropping from our kills,” Paul said, “I’d hope so. At least the dungeon is giving us a chance.”

They went back in and easily cleared the first three rooms. This time Tracent was who found the quest item, Iranil’s set of keys, hidden in a crockpot. They rushed into the boss’s room and went through the mobs there. The boss, a tall female Rock-orc holding a shield and wearing a silver crown remained behind, something about her being the mother of the orcs attacking them, according to the game lore.

“Get ready!” Marc called and Paul set his macros. A purple shield appeared around him, his settings taking the defensive buff Omar’s spell applied on him and giving it a form. Paul liked making things real here. He suspected it was how he compensated for how little of it he got in the real world.

The crown began flashing as the orc took a breath.

Paul activated the attack macro, and he rushed through the icy breath, watching his health bar drop. He got in three sword swipes before backing out, downing a health potion. He was covered with frost, the visualization of the slowness buff the breath had applied to him, and he shivered, the cold seeping through his armor and foliage.

He didn’t have the time to do more than breathe before the next wave of mobs attacked, the mother sending more of her children to die.

It took eight waves to kill her, and they were rewarded with a full set of magical armor, three thousand gold, and fifteen each of mana and health potions. And she was

just the first boss. This could be worth it after all.

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“Tell me this is the last boss,” Melor said, checking the time. “I think this is the longest dungeon we’ve ever done.”

“That was the fifth boss?” Marc asked, which Paul confirmed. “Then there’s one left.”

“I have two hours left,” Melor said.

“You’re the boss, you can have them wait on you,” Omar said.

Melor rolled his eyes. *I wish*. “I’m a boss. Like this dungeon, there are bosses above me and I can’t tell them I’ll be late, nor can I show up at less than my best. Sorry, but my position isn’t maintained by being half asleep. Vanguard doesn’t tolerate slackers.”

“Is that a dig at us, Orrs?” Paul asked.

Melor grinned. “I don’t know, is it, Mister runs an entopic company and can clear his calendar for days at a time?”

“At least I’m my own boss,” Paul replied.

Eight years, Melor reminded himself, Paul’s replied to his playful dig hitting deeper than he’d expected. Then he’d been able to find a position where he’d be in charge of his own life.

“Melor?” Omar called.

“Sorry, just trying to decide if an Orr company leader amounts to anything resembling a Vanguard corporate leader.”

“Ouch,” Tracent said. “Anyone has a spell to put out the fire?”

“Fuck you,” Paul said.

“Unless we hurry this along,” Melor replied, “there isn’t going to be any time left for you to do that.”

“Then let’s get going,” Marc said. “We have three or four rooms of mobs to clear, three quest items to find and just under two hours. And if we don’t do this in one shot, we need to clear each and every boss again to get here.”

Melor groaned. “We’re doomed.”

“Not if you do what I say,” Marc said. “I’ve read up on this last boss. The timing is complex, but at this point, I think we have timing down to an art form.”

“I’m not even going to ask when you had the time to read,” Paul said with a smirk. “Just tell us what to do so I can pound the bear’s ass before he leaves the game.

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“Now,” Marc said, and Omar unleashed the lightning. The creature before them had the amusing moniker of Archeboulder the mountain troll. He was twenty feet tall, made of stone, and wore armor made of his previous kills.

The lightning his the shoulder and the section of armor there shattered.

What made this final boss difficult was that each piece of armor needed to be destroyed before they could damage him, and Omar was the only one with high power range attacks. If he was lucky, he could destroy two pieces between waves of monsters.

And the troll's attacks caused the ceiling to rain stones on top of his giant club. Marc was good at warning them and telling them where to stand to avoid the falling rock, but one misstep and the two healers were put to the test.

Out of eighteen pieces, Omar had destroyed nine, and now that only the lower body was left, the others would be able to add their damage to it, or so he hoped before he was running low on mana potions. "Marc, I need more many potions if anyone can spare them. I'm down the four."

Omar switched to low-cost attacks to deal with the mobs and managed to keep from being shifted into the blast damage of the falling ceiling stones. In the few seconds between the mob and the next opening against the boss, Marc handed Omar six potions.

"That's all anyone can spare."

"What will it do once the armor's off? I can't believe it'll stand there for us to attack."

"Once out of armor, it joins the attack, each step causing a ripple on the floor that throws the people caught off their feet and takes them out of the fight for a few seconds."

"Enough to get them dead. We need fliers. For this."

"No, just to know the pattern." Marc smiled. "Which I do."

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"Arglon!" Melor screamed, bringing down his ax. "The lighting traveled from the contact point up the leg, breaking the last of the troll's armor." He down a stamina potion, happy he didn't feel the character's exhaustion. Eleven hours of near-constant fighting would be deadly in and of itself.

"Everyone back away!" Marc yelled. "The free-for-all is about to start!"

Melor ran back as the whole room shook.

"Watch for the lead ogres, the one with the shield. They mark the safe cones from the boss's stomping. You want to in front of one of them if you want to be able to fight and defend yourself."

Three ogres appeared and Melor moved to stand in front of one, finding Paul next to him.

"Don't die," Paul said.

"Don't plan on it."

"Good, that ass is mine today."

"Try not to die first," Melor replied.

The ground shook, but both of them remained on their feet to face the attack. The ogre was followed by two dozen orcs, which pushed Paul and Melor apart. Tracent ran by healing them, then fighting. Melor called on his falcon to do his own healing. When the wave was done, they rushed the troll on Marc's command, bringing its health down by barely a few percents by the time Marc had them back away and prepare for the second wave.

Melor looked at the time. He couldn't abandon his guild, but there was no way they could kill it before he ran out. How well could he perform on stimulants?

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Paul leaped the dying ogre, and grabbed the pouch at his belt, quickly running it over his blade to activate the damage over time buff. He sliced at the orcs, ignoring their blows, his armor took all but a small percentage, and he attacked the troll.

The boss was down to the last quarter of health and there were barely fifteen minutes left before Melor would leave the game. Not only did he want to pound that ass, but he didn't think they could win this one man short, no matter how close to victory they were. Six quick slashes before the orcs caught him to him and Marc's panicked yells drew his attention.

The Necalium was waving for him to get away.

Paul did as he was told and the shock wave threw him across the room. He landed and rolled, reaching for a health potion. That explosion had taken it down to a sliver and if an orc even touched him, he was dead.

The point of a rapier touched his chest before he had it out and his health stopped flashing dangerously. A potion down and he was above fifty percent.

"What was that?" Paul asked.

"That," the vulpine replied, "was a certain raccoon not paying attention to instructions. The boss detonates once he hits twenty percent of health. It takes him down to ten percent, but it would kill anyone other than an over tanked tank like you."

"You okay?" Marc called.

"I'm alive. The others?"

"Everyone was out of range," Omar said.

Paul nodded. "So how tough is he going to be now?" he asked Marc

"Now it's just a question of getting through his horde to reach him." The Necalium indicated the mass of orcs and ogres standing between them and the troll who was now a quarter the size he'd been.

Paul smiled. "Hordes of monsters we can do easily."

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Tracent danced through the orcs, buffs, and debuffs going with flicks of his rapier. Paul was already through them, he, Marc and Melor attacking the troll, how, for as little health as he had left, still had a good amount of defenses, if no special attacks left. His and Omar's job was to keep the horde busy while they finished the job.

And with a pained roar, the troll died. Which seemed to enrage the orcs, letting them shake the debuffs Tracent had laid on them. He'd expected them to lose the will to fight, not redouble in their attempt to kill him. He slashed and kick, having to fall back on early level attacks by the sheer volume of orcs around him. Those were quick and cheap and came with useful debuffs, like two seconds stuns, or push back.

When they were finally all dead, Tracent panted, hands on knees. Who the fuck ever said playing the Lands did nothing for your health, didn't do it the Independent way. He was exhausted. Not every attack was coded to a corresponding motion with his suit, but he liked feeling like he was there, not just standing in the middle of the action watching. If he'd wanted that, he wouldn't have invested in a full sensory suit.

"I need to go," Melor said. "Any chance we can get together later in the week for

the victory celebration? I owe Paul my ass.”

“My next two weeks are clear,” Tracent said. “The joys of vacation.”

“I have cases to clear,” Omar said, “but I can take Saturday off.”

“Saturday works for me too,” Paul said, eying the bear lewdly. “You going to be there?”

“I will. Marc?”

“Yeah, Saturday works.”

“Then I’ll see you then.” Melor vanished.

“I don’t want to leave you guys with the cleanup,” Tracent said, “but I’m realizing these suits weren’t designed to be worn for twelve hours, I can smell my stink in here. I need to take it off and shower.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll put your share of the quest reward in the guild coffer. Grab it whenever you have the time.”

Tracent clapped his hands in relief and didn’t bother with the game lobby or his. He needed to get out of this thing before the stink permeated him.