

“Tibs,” Ganny whispered hurriedly as he and his team walked among stalls on their way to the stairs. He froze at the furtiveness in the tone. “You can’t talk to Sto. There’s.... We’re not.... Just don’t talk to us.”

“Ganny?” he whispered back, to avoid drawing attention. “What are you talking about?”

“Is everything okay?” Jackal asked.

“I don’t know.” When she didn’t answer him, he motioned for his team to follow and they went back the way they’d come until he was sure they were out of Sto’s range. That put him much closer to the town than he’d expected.

“We are doing the run, right?” Jackal asked as Tibs stepped off the path and out of the way of people. “I’m not letting Quigly be the first to explore the floor.”

The warrior and his team were scheduled for the next morning.

“Ganny warned me not to speak to Sto,” Tibs said.

“Why would they do that?” Don asked.

“I don’t know, but she sounded...” We’re not.... There’s.... “Scared.” How did she expect him to help if he couldn’t ask them what the problem was?

“We can’t talk to him,” he finally said, deciding the best he could do was trust one of them would tell me when they could. “We can’t talk about him like we know he’s a person either.” There’s.... “Whatever’s going on, I got the impression that showing we know that will make things worse.”

“How can talking like that inside the dungeon cause problem?” Mez asked. “It’s not like there’s anyone to overhear us, is there?” He looked at Don.

“I don’t know,” the sorcerer answered, thinking. “The guild could have something that lets them do that, like whatever it is they used to know when one of us makes it to a new floor.”

“I believe our team leader’s face was more than ample evidence for the guard to report it,” Khumdar said.

“But if they had,” Don continued. “They would have heard us talk about them before, and I don’t think they would simply ignore Tibs having one-sided conversations. As for anything else that might cause that to be a problem.... At this point, Tibs is the only expert I can refer to.”

“Until one of them tells me more, it’s all I have,” Tibs said.

“Okay.” Jackal headed for the cliff wall. “Then it’s the run as usual, just without you talking. Come on,” he called to them. “I know I saw Quig there, probably waiting for us to be declared late so he can go in today.”

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Tibs fought the urge to look up as they walked toward the doorways. He wanted to give Sto a sign he was listening, ready to help.

“Stop!” he called as soon as the section of the wall Jackal had opened shimmered. Then he had to work out why, as the fighter looked at him questioningly.

“There’s something different about the doorway.” But what?

“I did it the same as before,” Jackal said, then. “Oh.”

“You need to see this, Tibs,” Don sounded puzzled.

Instead of the alcove’s walls and the bottom of the stairs that Tibs should see, he

looked into darkness.

“You must have done something wrong,” Mez said.

“If Jackal had,” Khumdar replied, “nothing would have happened.” He sent strands of essence at the doorway, but stopped before they touched it. “We would be observing stone.”

“It changed things?” Jackal asked, surprised.

“He wouldn’t—”

“It’s a dungeon,” Don cut Tibs off. “Of course it changed something. It exists to trick us into dying.” He fixed his gaze on Tibs, who nodded. He’d told them to be careful, and he was the one who’d almost said too much. “Mez, Khumdar, test the other doorways.”

“Can you sense what it is?” Jackal asked.

Tibs shook his head. “Doorways don’t let essence through. I mean, if I send some, I can’t sense it once it’s on the other side.”

“It’s the distance,” Don said. “While it’s only a step for us to cross it, it’s still somewhere deep below us, far beyond our ability to maintain our hold over it.”

“Wherever the other sides are,” Mez said, “it’s not here either.” The archer was shielding his eyes from the light shining through the doorway.

“The doorway to the third floor leads to mist so thick it cannot be seen through.”

“The dungeon added complexity again,” Don said, while Tibs studied the doorway itself. “Anyone who’s been taking things for granted will have suffered for it.”

“How many teams do you think fell for it?” Tibs asked, tracing the channels of essence used to unlock it. He hadn’t heard anything about whole teams not returning, but he’d been busy, and there were too many deaths among the low ranked teams for him to inquire about them. He had enough of the rogues he trained talking of the members they’d lost, of the difficulties in filling the positions since most had come with friends and had to pick strangers if they wanted to continue. More than a few Runners had left after the first death, but there always seemed to be more to take their place.

“I doubt any team going to the second floor did,” Don said. “That’s just too different.” He peered through the doorway to the third floor. “This...the team might think the dungeon added a fog of war to complicate the maze. We’ll have to ask around to know which team didn’t return.”

“That’s two we could lose,” Jackal said, looking toward the exit. They were the first team in to give them the most time on the fourth floor. Tibs didn’t know when the team for the third would be up, but probably not before the guards could tell they’d stepped through.

The channels were the same. All that was needed was for one to have the corresponding essence travel from one end to the other.

“Not counting those we already lost,” Mez said. “Three teams didn’t make it back in the last four days.”

“Did the other teams mention the doorway changed?” Don asked.

Tibs frowned and pushed his attention...deeper wasn’t the right word, but there was something under the channels.

“No, but with everyone knowing we’re on the fourth floor, they only tell me about the third, if I ask.”

Whatever it was, there was more of it. No, not quite. It was because each channels were thinner. They blended into each other.

“How about you, Khumdar?” Don asked. “Heard anything?”

“I have no interest in who lives or dies as a result of the runs,” the cleric answered. “Therefore, I have not inquired.”

“Not enough secrets in that,” Jackal stated.

Don was right, this was added complexity. Both in making out the new channels... layer, and in how tortuous the channel’s paths were. He located the one for water and moved the essence through it. When nothing happened, he had to go over to sense where the essence was out of the channel. It was so faint it was difficult to make it out.

On the fourth try, the doorway shimmered, and the stairs replaced the darkness, along with the distant roofs.

“Is it safe?” Jackal asked. “Or did it pull another trick? You know how crafty dungeons are. They’re like animals that sneak around and—” Tibs glared him silent.

He lobbed a knife through. It clattered to the ground with the usual distorted sound.

“Looks safe enough.” Jackal stepped through before Tibs could stop him.

“Once more thing we can threaten him with,” Mez said, following through.

“I’d rather he think.” Tibs crossed the threshold. The tingling felt the same, as did the shifting of the essence, as if they were pushing against each other, without being able to touch.

He tried to discern the Arcanus that had to be the cause, but then he was through and looking at a city illuminated only by lights lining the streets and some windows. Other than the lack of stars, as well as Claria and Torus, he could be looking down at any city set in a valley. He wondered why the light that had been above the city wasn’t there today.

“Alright,” Jackal rubbed his hands, starting down the steps. “Onto the gaining of loot.”

“Abyss, stop!” Tibs yelled. “I have to check for traps.”

“It’s a city,” the fighter replied, continuing down. “It’s not like there’s going to be traps in the streets.” He made it down with nothing happening.

“Maybe he’s right and—”

“How about we don’t give the dungeon ideas?” Tibs said, cutting Mez off. He stomped down the steps and glared at the grinning fighter. “I’m not saving you when you walk into a trap.”

“It’s okay. I’m letting you go into the buildings first.”

“How are we doing this?” Mez asked on reaching them. “Do we split up and—”

“We are not splitting up,” Don stated. “This isn’t a city. It’s a dungeon floor.”

“We split up in the Ratling’s camp,” Mez replied.

“This isn’t that. We know the dungeon can make golem people who wield essence, then there are Gnolls, who can also have essence. Then there are the golems that—”

“Those are easy,” Jackal said dismissively. “They were on the second floor.”

“And part of the mass of creatures in the dragon room,” Don said. “But they were also constrained by the size of the rooms. There are only so large they could be before their size hindered them. Here, that can mean they will be giants. We can’t take anything for granted.”

“Including that the streets are safe,” Jackal said. “I get it.”

“That is highly doubtful,” Khumdar replied.

“Then here’s a question for you, Don,” Mez said, “and Tibs. Are which buildings is a dungeon room or just a building going to change with each run?”

“We’re here all day,” Jackal said. “So, is anyone going to care if we stay overnight and leave when the door opens in the morning?”

“Dungeons use the night to…” Don trailed off, eyes growing distant.

“To what?”

The sorcerer shook himself. “There have been experiments done to discover what happens at night. All we have, as far as I’ve read, are theories for why the dungeons close their door. The most popular one is that night is when dungeons make the larger, more significant changes to the layout of a floor. In those experiments, people are sent in to spend the night so they can report what happens. No such group ever returned.”

“Where they sent in naked?” Mez asked. “We were threatened with that often in those first months.”

“No, these were fully equipped expeditions.”

“Can we stop it with the talking?” Jackal whined. “We have loot to go look for.”

“We’re not stopping you,” Mez replied.

“Have you seen the glare Tibs is giving me? If I walk off without his approval, he’s going to do something nasty to me.”

“He does know what to remove to make your life truly miserable,” Khumdar said, and Jackal’s hand went to his pouch.

“Not what he’s talking about,” Tibs said, grinning.

“See. I can’t move until he’s okay with it, and we all know that he’d rather fill his curiosity than his pockets. So, how about we stop waiting for the dungeon to send something after us here and go get to the looting?”

“And do you even have a plan on how to proceed?” Mez asked, dubious.

“I do. We do it the way my father had his thugs deal with finding someone hiding too well. We go building by building, break the doors in. When we’re sure there’s nothing left we want, we move on to the next one. On the next run, we’ll find out if they have changed and deal with it then. Don will keep track of the rooms and we keep going, taking the loot from those that have it and passing by those with nothing of worth until we reach the boss room.”

Don looked down the large road. “Do we want to take a chance the dungeon’s respecting the importance of building in a city and start with the city hall?” He considered something. “I didn’t make out a castle, but if we find there’s some sort of ruler, their house could be where it will be, or wherever they rule from. If not, then after the city hall, I’d expect barracks, since the guards are responsible for enforcing the ruler’s will. Then, offices of law and money could be possibilities.”

“Would it know how cities work?” Mez asked Tibs, who shrugged.

“We start here.” Jackal motioned to the houses along the street. “We go as far as we can today. On the next run, we check them enough to know if they’re the same or if this is something we need to go through each time until you and Tibs have enough clues to tell where the boss room is.”

“How do we know when we need to leave?” Mez asked. “I’m not seeing time shields anywhere.”

“I believe,” Khumdar said, pointing to their right. “That will be our indicator of time passing.”

Light poured over the distant roofs as Tibs made out the top of a bright circle.

“The sun was well past the roofs when we entered,” Jackal said.

“I cannot account for how a dungeon maintains time, so it is possible we will be required to adjust, but I believe that will be the most reliable method to know how long we have been in.”

“Alright,” Jackal replied with a shrug. “Tibs?” He motioned the first house.

The door was made of polished stone bars stacked and held in place with two metal strips. The lock had no essence through it, but still gave Tibs trouble. Its mechanism of gears and levers were like nothing he’d encountered. But it had a keyhole, so there would be tumblers, and there were only limited placed they could be within this. Once he worked them out, what the other parts were fell into place, and using ice to move them in position was simple.

The room was small, but luxurious. The chairs before the fireplace were metal, with plush gray velvet covering. The table only sat two, but the stone was carved intricately and inlaid with metal. There were not traps on the floor, or the other door, which had no lock and, like the outside, one was lighter than its stone composition implied. How it could be Tibs wasn’t sure, because while there seemed to be less earth essence in the door’s stone than the walls, there was no more air or other essence.

It opened onto a small room with a bed and wardrobe both carved of stone, but the bedding was plush enough his hand sank to his elbow. There was not weave through any of it, but Tibs still worried he’d vanish if he laid down on it.

“It’s safe,” Tibs called, after opening the empty wardrobe. “There’s nothing here.”

“I wouldn’t say nothing.” Don was studying the table as Tibs exited the bedroom. “This is exquisite work. I wonder if they made it, or if it was already here when they found the city.” The sorcerer’s mouth snapped shut, and he looked at Tibs worriedly.

He shrugged. Unless Sto screamed in terror, or something happened when one of them slipped, he couldn’t know how much of a problem this was.

“Considering how long you took to open the lock,” Jackal said, hand searching up the chimney, “I’d expect loot.”

“The dungeon’s tricky. You know that,” Mez said.

“Not that tricky.” The fighter looked at his clean hand once he pulled it out.

“If Tibs hadn’t yelled for you to stop, you’d have walked into that darkened doorway.”

Jackal shrugged and exited.

The house facing it was the same. A stone door with metal strips. A complicated lock, which Tibs opened quickly, now that he understood how it worked, and an ordinary set of rooms, just as luxurious. The next four were much the same.

The fifth door was already opened and sounds came from inside. What Tibs sense made the creature on the smaller side, and on all fours, but it was a dungeon creature. Their essence told him that much. Jackal motioned for him to pull the door the rest of the way, and he ran in with a grin as soon as there was enough space.

Stone broke, Jackal let out a terrified yell, then the creature ran out of the house too fast for Tibs to make out more than it ran on all four. Inside, Jackal was seated against the

far wall, stoned up and looking scared. Tibs looked back to where the creature had vanished between two houses and wondered what it might have been to scare the fighter this badly.

“A dog,” Jackal whispered, voice shaking. “That was a fucking dog.” He swallowed, looked up, and yelled. “Did my sister fucking put you up to this?”