

“What’s wrong?” Jackal asked, turning to stone as Tibs froze.

Tibs sensed the fog, tried to push further than it reduced it, but this was different from the one Ganny had filled the third floor with.

“The fog is back,” he whispered. Trying to understand what it meant.

“Are you sure?” Don asked.

Tibs stared at the sorcerer. “Can’t you sense it? You could before.”

Don closed his eyes, and soon after shook his head.

Was that what was different about it? This targeted his sense specifically?

“What does it mean for the run?” Jackal asked.

“I think the real question is, why did it return now?” Don said.

“And how we need to deal with it for the run,” Jackal snapped. “If Tibs can’t sense anything, we have to change our strategies.”

“I still can.” He tried to get a sense of how far he could reach. “Two blocks for sure. Maybe three. It’s not as uniform as it was on the third floor.”

“Is that why none of the golem people have magic?” Mez asked. “The dungeon was keeping it for this?”

“Possibly,” Don answered, rubbing his temple. “There are too many unknowns.”

“We can keep going,” Tibs said. “The doorways have always opened close enough I’ll still be able to sense them, and two blocks is enough to prepare for approaching guards.”

“How about the dogs?” Jackal asked. “Can you still sense them?”

“There aren’t any now, but I should be able to. They’re strong enough their essence is dense.”

“Just stay on guard for them while we continue.”

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The library was large enough Tibs couldn’t sense it completely. They walked along the sandy colored stones of its wall for two blocks of houses before reaching the doors, and it continued as far past it. Columns of darker stones had gone up between the windows, as well as on each side of the double doors, up the three stories and seemed to support the roof.

“Is it safe to go in?” Don asked, grinning the way Jackal did when loot was in sight.

There were no essence triggers, and looking over the lock, hinges and frame did not reveal traps. It didn’t reassure him. With the fog targeting him specifically, he couldn’t know what else it kept him from sensing.

He had sensed the triggers within the house, as well as the golem people that had waited in ambush, but was that because his sense wasn’t affected that way? Or was it Ganny trying to trick him?

He grabbed the door’s handle before Don could, glaring at the sorcerer. When he tested with a pull, the door creaked open, and dry, dusty air pushed out.

It was enough unlike any of the other buildings that he looked at Don, who sniffed, smiled, then squeezed into the gap, vanishing inside as Jackal ordered him to stay.

Tibs didn’t rush in after the sorcerer. Don knew better, and if a trap caught him, he could wait until Tibs made sure there weren’t others as he made his way to him.

The entryway was the size of the inn. The floor was in the same sandy stone as the outside, but polished until the light stones on the columns supporting the ceiling reflected

on it. The walls were close enough to white Tibs could imagine purity having been applied to the sandy color until it became this. Faded paintings of people lined the two walls demarcating the entryway.

Unlike the golem people they had fought, what Tibs made out of them was lanky and thin. Pale colors for the skin and hair. The frame had been painted in gold, which was peeling.

He wondered who they were.

They'd all decided the short gray skinned golem people had been who lived in the city. But there had been the question of why the houses seemed made for regular people. Were they Sto's creation? What about these lanky people in the paintings; had lived here too? Instead? If so, then why was the furniture been down to the size of the golem people?

Don's yell of joy pulled him out of the puzzle.

"Why didn't any of the traps I walked in make me that happy?" Jackal grumbled.

"Maybe the trap buried him in books?" Mez offered as Tibs followed the footsteps in the dust, clearing it to make sure there weren't traps the sorcerer had stepped over.

There weren't any by the time Tibs made it to the opposite archway. He looked over his shoulder at the entryway. More portraits between the windows, each someone lanky. There was a lot of floor that could hide triggers under the dust, but other than stepping off this path to study the paintings, there was no reason to have traps there.

Whenever Sto spoke to him again, Tibs was going to let him know how little he enjoyed having him play with his nerves like this.

"He isn't buried," Jackal grumbled, and Tibs looked into large room.

Don sat on a table, an open tome on his lap and more stacked next to him. Three such tables, devoid of sorcerer and books, were next to it, with enough space for chairs and someone to walk between them. Then, bookshelves filled with books, and he sensed more behind them, and going as far as his sense reached ahead of him, as well as on the balconies above them. Above the sorcerer, a glowing orb provided light for him to read by.

He looked up, grinning. "How many can you fit in your pouch?"

"Why?" Jackal replied cautiously.

Don motioned around them. "I need to bring them back to study."

"What do they say?" Tibs asked, stepping into the sorcerer's steps, then pausing as an orb appeared over his head.

"I don't know," Don replied, while Tibs studied the weave of the orb. "It uses the Arcanus, but arranged in a way I've never seen before, and there are a two characters I also don't know."

It was light essence. Nearly exclusively so. With just a hint of air; maybe to keep it afloat. The filigrees were simpler than he expected, and he memorized them as best as he could. This might be something he could only do in the privacy of his room, but not having to bother with candles, or willing the essence to remain, would make working there easier.

"If they even say anything," Mez said, and Tibs realized he'd missed most of what Don had said. "They might just be things the dungeon made to mess with you; sorcerers, I mean."

Don raised the tome, looking at Tibs.

"They aren't woven with essence, but that doesn't mean he didn't make them. The

normal armor and clothing don't have essence in them, and we know he made those. The only things he weaves essence in are those he doesn't want destroyed."

"Other than by you," Jackal said.

"He doesn't want me to destroy them either," Tibs replied.

Don pushed himself off the table and offered the tome to Jackal, who stepped back, hands raised. "Put that in your pouch," the sorcerer said. "We're starting with those two bookcases." He motioned to the one on their left and right. "If they're arranged the same way as back home, those are core primers regarding the subjects contained in the rest of the library, and they will have the ordering scale that makes finding them easier."

"You have a backpack," the fighter stated.

"I can't fit all those books in it," Don replied dismissively. "Your pouch can hold everything in here, so—"

"No, it can't," Jackal said, glaring at Tibs. "Some people argued for it to have a limit. Supposedly do I wouldn't leave the dungeon with everything not attached to the floors."

"And wall," Mez added, earning himself the fighter's glaring.

"And ceiling," Tibs said, distracted by something he couldn't quite make out within his sense. It was like the fog had shifted. He suffused himself with darkness, and his vision filled with secrets. Fear made him swallow. Was he back in that realm of secrets Khumdar had told him about? Then he realized they had no shape. They were just clouds enveloping the books. All of them. If what he sensed was a secret, then he was lost among all those.

Suffusing himself with light didn't help. There were no lies in here. Did that mean the books were real?

"Guys," Mez said, but Don and Jackal kept arguing about the value of the books here. "Guy! Be quiet!" Tibs looked at the archer, losing track of his own search. "I think I hear something," he said in the following silence.

Without the voices, and Tibs not so focused on his sense, he heard it too. The slow shuffling of approaching steps. He sensed in that direction, but the fog was...

"Guards?" Jackal whispered, moving next to Tibs, his skin gray.

"Those don't sound like boots," Mez whispered behind Tibs.

"Does a library have guards?" Tibs asked Don, on his other side.

"Some of them might come in to read," the sorcerer whispered his answer, "but books aren't something thieves usually go after. You think this is the dungeon respecting the theme? Like it did with the permit building?"

"Didn't you say this wasn't a dungeon made building?" Mez asked, and Tibs nodded.

"That is not to say a dungeon is incapable of making use of an already existing structure," Khumdar whispered, staff in hand. "After all, there is essence here, as within any ordinary or dungeon made place."

"Then these are just going to be scholars?" Jackal asked, disappointed.

"Golem people," Tibs said, "made to look like scholars." But that sounded wrong to his ears.

"There," Mez whispered, pointing in the darkened distance. Tibs realized only the five of them had orbs of light over them. The forms he could just make out, stout and wide, were bathed in darkness.

"How dangerous can scholars be?" Jackal asked.

And why bother hiding them from his sense?

“I mean, unless they throw books,” the fighter added in the silence. “Then, this will be a dungeon worthy of the abyss.”

“It’s worse than that,” Don said.

Tibs ignored the certainty in his voice. Whatever etching it was they used did something to the fog around them. Made it less... something. He didn’t have time to come up with a word, but it was clear they were doing it and—

“Abyss.” His sense shattered at the realization.

“They’re sorcerers, aren’t they?” Don asked.

“I...I think so. The etching hiding them used multiple essence.”

“Oh,” Jackal said, all dismissiveness in his voice gone. “How many?”

“Too many,” Mez replied.

By the sounds, there could be more than a dozen of them.

“How strong are they?” Don asked.

“I can’t sense them,” Tibs replied, “but it wouldn’t matter. Golem people aren’t like us. I can just tell the kind of essence they use.”

“So they could just be Upsilon?” Jackal asked hopefully

“Not on the fourth floor of a dungeon,” Don replied as one of the forms became visible at the edge of their light, but on the balcony instead of the among those still approaching around the tables.

What Tibs made out was the gray skin and compressed form, but the hair was thin and white and the skin wrinkled. Old, the combinations said to him. Another appeared next to it as they both reached the rail, and this one had a beard so long that as it leaned forward to look at them, it fell over and hung below their floors. Another stepped next to them, as Tibs caught motion on the other balcony, where five stepped into the edge of their lights.

And now he could make out enough details from those among the tables to count heads. They’d been right, a dozen. Which meant there were one and nine sorcerers around them.

“I really hope they’re Upsilon,” Mez whispered.

“We need to leave,” Don said, “before they can focus on anything.” He sent corruption at those among the table.

Tibs channeled lightning. He knew from experience how hard it made thinking, even when it barely caused damage. He sent it at those on the left balcony, leaving it to jump between the golems as he sensed fire essence being etched. He channeled that and pulled on the etching hard, undoing it and adding that essence to his reserve.

“Don’t use the books!” Don yelled. “They’re priceless!”

Jackal was throwing those on the table, each hit sending one golem onto its back, but not keeping them there.

“The dungeon is going to remake them overnight,” the fighter replied, throwing the last one. “Tibs, can you absorb all their etchings?” he motioned for them to step back toward the archway.

Tibs willed the etching he sensed forming apart, but the golems were too strong for that. One dropped as a fire arrow exploded in their chest. The next one was doused by water before it reached another.

“I have to be channeling that element, otherwise I have nowhere to pull the essence into.” He channeled lightning and pulled that essence into him before the bolt reached his friends, but with it focused on that, metal and water in the form of spikes and ice were on their way. Darkness intercepted them, but they had enough as they hit that Don staggered and Mez cursed.

“Might I recommend we make haste?” the cleric said through pain clenched teeth.

“If we turn our back to them,” Jackal replied, “they are going to cut us down. Tibs?”

He had a moment of annoyance that Jackal looked to him, again, for a solution. He made a wall of ice that broke, intercepting the stone, and dissolved more metal spikes with corruption. He could hold them back while his team escaped and then he would...

What he needed was a way to block the sorcerers that didn't leave him behind. He used air to send bookshelves flying at the sorcerers, but only the books caught in the air, and he had no control over how they flew and most hit columns instead of the sorcerers and—

“Jackal! Break that column!” He had no idea if it was going to work. “Everyone else, cover us!” He ran to the one under the opposite balcony, suffusing himself with earth and making himself as hard and strong as he could. He punched the column and sent chunks flying.

“Jackal!” he called when he didn't hear corresponding hit from the fighter's side. A glance over his shoulder showed him the fighter with both hands against the stone column, pushing essence into it.

Tibs cursed. Of course, he didn't have to hit it. There was more to earth than making himself harder and stronger. He pushed essence into the existing cracks within the column and used that to push it apart.

The snap of breaking stone came from Jackal's side first, then the ground shook and stone rained down as his finally broke, exploding, instead of just breaking. Then he ran for his friends, already making their way to the archway, keeping the stone from falling on them.

They made it out just ahead of the cloud of stone dust and continued running until they were on the other side of the road. He turned, panting, essence ready, lightning cracking between his fingers for any sorcerers who made it out. Then his attention was pulled up in awe and horror as the entire building collapsed in on itself.

“This wouldn't have happened if you'd just taken the books!”

“Of course it would have,” Jackal replied dismissively. “They didn't hear us argue. They were some trap you probably triggered by running in without having Tibs make sure it was clear. At least I kept you from pulling us any deeper.”

“Like any of it was about keeping us safe,” Don snapped, “You're just an ignorant fighter, scared of anything that might show him better ways of thinking.”

Jackal snorted. “You say that like there's something wrong with how I think.”

“Will you two stop!” Mez yelled, then groaned, and Tibs pulled his attention away from the ruins and how breaking two columns might have caused it.

He cursed and ran for the archer. “Keep watch in case they weren't destroyed.” He crouched next to Mez and formed a weave of purity. “Sorry, I shouldn't have let the building falling keep me from checking on you.”

“I'm not dying, Tibs. It's fine.”

Mez had some deep cuts, but while many channels were ruptured, they weren't leaking a lot of essence. He sense for Don and Khumdar while he applied the weave and while neither of them showed it, their injuries were as severe as the archer's.

After applying weaves to them also, he joined Jackal in watching the ruins for a potential attack.

"This isn't my fault," Jackal stated after a long silence.

"You could stop playing at hating books so hard."

"I'm not playing. Books are bad."

Tibs rolled his eyes. "You don't like books. It doesn't make them bad."

"I remember this friend of mine," Jackal said wistfully, "who, not long ago, would run away at the mere mention of learning his letters. I wonder whatever happened to him?"

"He got over his fear," Tibs answered. "Because it was what he had to do to help as many people as he could. So he could help his team."

"You—"

Tibs faced his friend. "You don't have to learn your letters, Jackal. But you have to stop getting in the way of Don when he wants books."

"They're probably not even real books."

"Maybe. But that's not what matters. Don likes books. If he'd gotten one of them out, he wouldn't be angry right now."

Jackal stared at the remnant of the library, then turned with a huff and headed for the sorcerer. "I'm sorry for being an ignorant fighter scared of books. If you want, I'll go in there and get you one."

Don looked around the fighter, and Tibs shrugged. He hadn't expected Jackal to do that. He'd just hope he wouldn't cause problems next time.

"It's okay," the sorcerer replied. "Like Mez said. They'll be back on our next run." He poked the fighter in the chest. "But I am filling your pouch with them."

Tibs didn't catch Jackal's grumbled reply.

"How come the whole building fell?" Tibs asked Don.

"I don't know."

"Poor structure," Jackal replied. "The columns didn't just support that balcony, but the one above it and so on. When we broke them, the other columns had to hold more of the weight and they failed."

The smile grew on his face as they all stared at him in silence.

"What? You think this is the first building I made come crashing down on my head? How about we take a rest? Even if they survived, they probably can't leave the room."

"But it's not a dungeon made building," Mez said. Pulling an ale skin from his pack.

"It's didn't stop the dungeon from using it as one," Don said, unwrapping the wheel of cheese. "It also makes more sense that creatures staying within a room is a result of the dungeon wanting us to know what to expect, instead of something that's intrinsic to the room."

"But on the previous floors," Jackal said, taking the loaf of bread from his pouch, "we had to make it through each room to continue. Here, we're wandering about until we find the right building."

Tibs made a plater and tankards out of ice. And Khumdar placed the chunk of cured

meats on it. Tibs added the dried fruits, and they stacked slices of cheese, meats, and fruits on bread.

“I think you’re wrong about wandering about,” Don said after swallowing. “The dungeon always arranges things so that being smart helps. I think that if we decide to go over the permit building again, and any other the dungeon added, we’ll find clues as to where the boss room will be located.”

Jackal smiled. “So, what you’re saying is that we really should go to the permit building again and collect all that loot?”

Don stared at the fighter, had a shudder, and nodded. Then he muttered. “I’m staying in the middle of that carpet.”