

The doors had locks, but they weren't engaged.

Tibs focussed on sensing the door harder, trying to find a trap, but there were no weaves through the stone.

"Is this place like the permit office?" Tibs asked. "Where anyone can come and go?"

"Not just anyone will be allowed in, I expect," Don replied, "but yes, merchants and the nobility would simply go in."

"Why have a lock, then?" Jackal asked.

"Because the city hall wouldn't be accessible all day long," the sorcerer answered.

So it made sense for the door to be unlocked. It didn't reassure Tibs. Ganny was going to use that against them at some point. He pulled on one door, and it slowly opened.

The floor to the large lobby had a layer of dust that Tibs would guess at a few months old in a normal building. Instead of one long counter, divided for each teller, one and three desks were set through the room with seats on each side. Opposite them, a large stairwell led to the balcony supported by four gray stone Columns decorated with inlaid metal, which went around the—

"Where is everyone?" Mez asked.

Tibs looked at the floor again, and the lack of tracks in the dust registered.

"I don't know," Don replied. "I doubt it would be as busy as the permit office, but there should be city servants waiting for people."

"Maybe no one talked about how the city hall works?" the archer offered, and the sorcerer shrugged.

"At least," Jackal said, "there's no danger of you getting in line with the others."

"Which means, there will be another kind of danger," Don replied.

Tibs used air to remove the dust from the floor before them, and exposed six-sided tiles of the same deep brown color the size of his palm. The walls were lined with stone benches and pots between them, with a dark-colored leaf plant in them. That had to be something Sto had created, since Tibs couldn't guess how a plant would survive without care for however long the building had been here.

That and the dust.

He sensed the floor, and again there were no weaves. Or at least, none he could sense. He couldn't forget this fog might block his sense in ways he didn't understand yet. He sent water over the floor, sensing for cracks and gaps through it. He sensed none, but he also couldn't entirely rely on this either. Even on the third floor, Ganny had become adept at masking the physical triggers. Still, he had one way to neutralize those she couldn't do anything about.

He ices the water.

"I don't sense essence triggers, but stay on your guard. The fog is messing with that. The only thing dungeon made are the plants and the dust."

"Are the plants creatures?" Don asked.

Tibs considered that. They had to be, since Sto had made them, but... "They don't have anymore essence than real plants. I think they're just decorations." For now.

"If the building's empty," Jackal said, "maybe I was wrong about there being loot here."

"I saw movement at the windows on the other floor," Mez said before Tibs could go

along with Jackal's idea.

The fighter smiled. "Well then. We know where to start."

"It would be wise," Khumdar said, "to remember that regardless of what you expect, it is possible the golems Mez noticed are nothing more than props in how the dungeon believes this building functions."

"And it's possible those shadows against the windows on this floor," Don added, "were golems standing still and waiting for someone to enter."

"Can you sense any, Tibs?" Jackal asked.

Tibs breathed his fear down. It wasn't because he usually pushed his sense in every direction when he extended it, that he had to do that now. He often focused it on something. Only those tended to be close by items. Extending his sense in only one direction wasn't the same.

To be safe, he began with the floor above them. Pushing his sense up, instead of around. That was working, and with his worry easing, he could focus on studying the fog for an indication of the golem Mez had noticed.

There! A ripple in the fog. This wasn't like the sorcerers in the library. They'd used an etching to hide. This was the fog interacting with... the form was like a person, like a person from outside, not the ones Sto had made as living in the city.

Now that he knew what to sense for, he could make out more of them. A lot more. Some were seated, some stood, but didn't move, while others walked back and forth along the wall before the window. It was a short walk that had the feel of only being there to attract attention from outside.

"There's definitely golem people upstairs," he said, lowering his sense to this floor. There were there, there were also many of them, and there was something else; below—

"Tibs!" Jackal held him, sounding near panic. "Tibs, come on, talk to me!"

"I'm okay," he replied, but his voice sounded...off. Why was Jackal holding him? And why did his head feel like lightning had exploded in it?

"Are you sure?" Don asked, sounding concerned. "He's been calling your name for a while."

"I... was sensing the floor, then..." he tried to piece together the fragments, then shuddered. "My sense brushed the thing under us."

"You screamed in pain," Jackal said. "I caught you before you hit the floor, but you weren't answering me."

At least he'd reflexively pulled his sense in. "I don't think I should use my sense this close to it. I don't want to accidentally sense more of it."

"At least that mistake of yours is good for something," the Them said.

"If you'd tell me how to undo it, I would," Sto replied.

"And I have told you. I don't know what it is. Everything here is older than what I know. I don't understand how you don't know how you caused it."

"Sto doesn't always pay attention to what he does when he's just playing around with essences to see what will happen."

"You weren't paying anymore attention to it," Sto protested.

"That isn't why I'm here," she replied in a stiff tone. "I warned you about the dangers of using void without care, but you didn't listen to me."

“I did listen. That’s why I did it in that room.”

“Doing it in a room you have no idea what it does isn’t being careful! It’s the opposite! I’m with Them on this one.”

“Tibs?” Jackal asked, sounding worried again.

“Sorry.” He rubbed his temple and tried to tune out the argument. He couldn’t tell if Ganny was really angry or if she and Sto were acting for some reason. “Don is right. There are people golems on this floor.”

“This is a big building,” Jackal said, eyeing the stairs. “Maybe we should just do the second floor. That’s where the boss will be, and with the boss is the best loot.”

“You can’t be certain of that,” Don said.

“Tibs,” Jackal said, grinning. “How about you tell Don where the boss is?”

“No.” He ignored the look of betrayal. “I didn’t sense anything that could be the boss creature, and I’m not extending my sense again to look for it. I’m not risking…” he shuddered.

“I understand. But they have always been at the end of—”

“The dungeon gets craftier with each run, Jackal,” Don said, exasperated. “How many buildings have we gone through that didn’t have a boss?”

“The houses don’t count,” the fighter replied. “The permit building did.”

“The library probably has one too,” Mez said.

“We don’t know that,” Don replied. “Everything the dungeon does is a test. If I were the dungeon, after sending us to the end of each floor to find the boss, I’d put it right by the entrance and laugh at all the runners passing it by just because they expect it to be on the other side of the city.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Ganny said.

“I wouldn’t laugh,” Sto replied solemnly.

Tibs rubbed his temple and wished they wouldn’t comment.

“Searching the entire building just because the boss might be on this floor is going to take too long.”

“Starting with the upper floor, just because you think that’s where the boss will be, is going to take just as long. And what is the hurry? We can afford to be systematic, since it’s all going to still be here on the next run. And considering there’s only four teams doing this floor, I’m sure we can convince someone to put us back on the schedule early.”

“Who’s the fourth?” Mez asked before Tibs could point out that getting on the schedule again would take coins. “I only heard about Miranda’s team clearing the third floor.”

“I don’t know. Some team of knights.”

“Mayhap we should retrain the focus on what is important, instead of discussing who else runs this floor?” Khumdar says. “If we do not have a method by which to determine what is the best way, does it matter which one we pick?”

“Oh, it does,” Don replied, pointing to the door to their left. “That’s the closest door, which means the closest one to potential loot,” he added, and Jackal shut his mouth.

“You’re just playing on my love of loot,” the fighter grumbled.

“Of course,” Don replied, then his confidence faltered. “Is it working?”

Jackal let out a defeated sigh and headed for the door.

“That’s a yes,” Tibs said, grinning as he followed the fighter.