

Tibs glared at the door.

“What’s wrong?” Jackal asked.

“There’s no lock.”

“The other doors didn’t have locks,” Mez pointed out.

“Those weren’t boss rooms,” Tibs grumbled. “Boss rooms have locks.”

“You may be ignoring the fact this is not the dungeon,” Khumdar said, “but simply one room within it. Its rules may not be identical.”

“The crest rooms had locks,” Tibs snapped, then forced himself to breathe. Khumdar was right. Rules within rooms were specific to the room.

That didn’t make him feel better. There were too many hidden triggers in this room. This could be the same, and his team would pay for his inability to sense it.

Jackal grabbed the handle. “Why don’t I open it? The rest of you move to the side. I can take whatever happens.”

“I can too.” Tibs suffused himself with earth, turning his skin the same gray as the fighter.

“That’s cute.” Jackal patted Tibs on the shoulder. “But I’ve been working with earth since the start. I know things to keep me in one piece you don’t. As I’ve showed before.”

Tibs fixed the fighter with a glare. “You’re teaching me after the run.” He moved back.

Jackal looked to ensure they were all out of the way, then pulled. He stood there, watching in shock.

Tibs stepped next to him and looked into a room filled with papers.

The piles on the left and right nearly reached the ceiling. A few paces beyond them, stacks of papers, looking about to fall over, formed a wall blocking their way. There might be a right turn, but Tibs wouldn’t be sure until he stood there.

“Do you think there’s only paper in there?” Mez asked, and Tibs could only shrug. His sense wasn’t giving him anything of use.

“The plaque said Paper Pusher,” Jackal said. “I guess it’s been pushing a lot of them.”

“Make space,” The archer said.

“That won’t—”

But the arrow was already formed and released. The etching had a filigree of Jir, Ank, and Dhu. Jir and Ank added to the spiral in the etching, causing the arrow to explode into a larger ball of fire than the essence that made it should allow. Dhu did something to it Tibs didn’t quite get. Its core attribute was to sharpen, but fire wasn’t something that took to sharpening, but it was interacting with the other Arcanus, and did... something.

The fire died out faster than it should, unable to consume anything.

“Does the dungeon ever make things easy?” Jackal asked.

“Paper should burn,” Mez grumbled.

It only looked like paper. The weave that made the pages was the same as what made the rest of the building.

“And I should have all the loot in the dungeon. Got to learn to deal with disappointment. I do it by hitting things.” Jackal looked at Tibs. “Is it safe to go in?”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “No.”

The fighter grinned. “Should we go in anyway?”

“We aren’t going to defeat the boss from out here.” Tibs stepped in and waited. Jackal joined him, then Mez and Khumdar.

When nothing happened, Tibs focused on the papers, sensing for anything he might have missed. He pushed against the pile, and as expected, it didn’t move.

“It’s a prop?” Mez asked.

“Isn’t everything in the dungeon that?” Jackal replied.

“That’s not what I mean,” the archer snapped. “Everywhere else, stuff acts like what it looks.” He pushed against the unmoving pile. “This feels like the dungeon just wants us to think the room is about paper.”

“The dungeon may have stretched its capability on this floor,” Khumdar said, “and must resort to such tricks to maintain it.”

The path turn right at the wall of papers, then, afterward, left.

“A maze?” Jackal asked.

Tibs sensed around. “There’s only one way. Which only makes sense if it’s to have more traps before we reach the end, but I can’t sense anything out of the ordinary.”

“That’s really bothering you, doesn’t it?”

Tibs glared at the fighter. “I’m the rogue. It’s my job to find them.”

He breathed. This was him having grown use to easily sensing the traps and the triggers. This was Sto and Ganny forcing him to go back to the basics. It was them, forcing him to grow by reminding him he couldn’t always get the easy way.

He crouched and placed a hand on the floor. Sometimes, he had to be the one to work at locating the triggers. He spread water ahead of him, finding cracks. Most were just that, but three between them and the next turn has something there. Some mechanism that might, or might not be a trigger.

He might have to do things the harder way. He iced the water over the floor. But he was still a rogue. He made it so it wasn’t slippery. He’d cheat where he could.

The walls were more complicated; the pages created many places for something to come out, and he couldn’t rely on them seeming solid.

“Stay here.”

He cautiously crossed the distance, more ready to react than sensing for a trigger. He was mildly disappointed when he reached the turn and nothing happened, but reminded himself it wasn’t over.

“Join me.”

He did the same to the next turn, and again after that. On the fifth one, he wondered if this wasn’t so he’d be driven mad expecting something that wouldn’t happen, and as if Sto knew what he was thinking, the sound had him encase himself in ice. A page slipped out of the wall and cut through the ice at the height of his ankle, but missing it. If he’d thrown himself down, expecting something aimed at his chest, that would have caused a lot of damage.

“Tibs?” Jackal called.

“I’m okay. Stay there.”

He took a step back and iced the walls. He hadn’t seen where it had come from, but it moved from his left to his right. He stepped where he had, sensing for the trigger, since the floor was iced. The page cut through the ice and passed at neck height right behind him. He

needed something harder.

He coated it in metal and did it again. He felt the pressure where the page tried to cut through. Belt height. Right where he stood. He turned, "Alright, it's—" the page cut through the metal and sliced Tibs' hip deep enough he was on the ground before he had suffused himself with purity.

"Stay there!" he yelled, his voice strained. Then the wound healed, and he caught his breath.

"You okay?" Jackal asked as Tibs got to his feet.

"No. I'm annoyed." He breathed. Paper shouldn't be able to cut metal. But it hadn't been as easy as when it cut through his ice. He coated the rest of the corridor's walls and ceiling in metal, then ran to the other turn. Three pages pushed against the metal, bursting through only well after he'd passed.

He smirked as he turned to face the way he'd come, then chastised himself for assuming he was safe. Nothing had happened at the turns at this point, but thinking that was the norm would kill someone.

He reformed the metal on the walls. "One of you run and don't stop until you reach me."

Khumdar was the first, and four pages burst through the metal behind him. Tibs added more metal for Mez's run. They took longer to burst through, but the pressure increased until they did. Tibs had the sense they had no limit to how hard they pushed, just that they did so at a steady rate.

The papers pushed through only once Jackal had reached him, giving Tibs a sense of how much metal was needed to ensure his whole team crossed. So long as he took for granted nothing changed in the other corridors.

That was how people died.

So he continued to take his time.

When the path finally opened to the large room, Tibs had to suffuse himself with purity to chase the tiredness of being on guard so much had caused. But it had been warranted. Two more traps had nearly caught him.

He looked at yet more papers, this time in piles of various heights scattered randomly about. The room might be large enough to cover half the building.

Tibs had reached the point of hating paper well before Sto had started using them as weapons. They were enough of a headache when they were confined to his ledger.

"Relax Tibs," Jackal said. "We've got this." Tibs glared at the fighter for the eager smile that accompanied his words.

"Whatever this is going to be." Mez formed an arrow in his bow.

Khumdar stepped to the side, remaining against the wall. "Which, unless I am mistaken, will stand between us and that."

Tibs joined him, and from that angle saw the table like the one that had been at the stairs, but having only one tray on it.

"Do we have any pages left from the clerks we killed?" Jackal asked.

"They all went to unlock the stairs," Tibs answered.

"No clerk on this floor dropped any," Khumdar said.

"So it's going to be hidden in those piles?" Jackal sounded worried.

“Unless they’re props too,” Mez said.

“They aren’t.” Tibs sent a wave of air at the closest pile to demonstrate, and the pages went flying.

“Tell me any paper will do,” Jackal said, his worry deepening. “That we don’t have to find one specific page among all that.”

“We can try it and find out.” Tibs took step and crouch to pick up a page that had landed close to them.

“Tibs,” Jackal warned, as he sensed one pile shudder.

He jumped aside as it picked up speed toward where he’d been. Fire arrows exploded against it, but only a few of the pages scattered and burned.

The pile exploded against the wall, but they’d all moved out of the way. Tibs thought he caught a form among the flying papers, large, like a person, but too much of them, was what he got. Then there were so many papers in the air he couldn’t see anything.

“This is like a snowstorm,” Tibs grumbled, forming his sword and shield, trying to find what he’d seen again. Even his sense was useless. The papers acted like the fog had on the third floor.

“Not being able to see is going to make—” Mez let out a pain expletive.

“What—” Jackal cursed.

Tibs cursed as he opened his mouth from the pain of the cut. He swung and only cut paper.

“Mez, are you—” He cursed again as pain lance up his back. Then his other arm as he swung, then cheek, and he raised his shield. It took no impact, but something cut his thigh.

“It’s the papers,” Khumdar announced, “acting as thrown blades.”

Just like in the corridors, only here they came from all around. Tibs exploded a ball of air, which scattered most of the papers away, giving them visibility back as those left flew at them.

He made his shield larger and caught those aimed at him.

“Incoming!” Jackal yelled.

In the distance, another piled moved in their direction.

“Move away from the wall!” Mez yelled, and they hurried into the room.

Jackal stepped in its path and slammed his foot down, then did it again. “Abyss, this isn’t stone!” he hunkered down, shoulder forward to take the impact. The pile exploded against him, and for a second, they couldn’t see anything again.

Tibs scattered the pages, but this time, on top of those left, flying at them like thrown knives, Jackal was covered in them. He ripped a handful off, but more stuck to him, making it harder for him to move.

“Tibs!” the fighter called, struggling to face him. “I’m not in—” Paper covered his mouth, then his face. He took a hesitating step in his direction. Tibs blasted him with air, but the pages only fluttered in the wind. He pulled fire and—

What if he—

Then, pages were on him, not as if thrown, but as if wielded. “Mez! Burn the pages off Jackal!” He swung, but without someone to hit as a way of making them stop, he was reduced to targeting them individually.

The grunt warned him of the attacks the pages were distracting him from. He threw

himself aside. “Mez!” He rolled to his feet and faced the paper covered Jackal. All he could see of his friend were his eyes, and he was scared. Papers kept adding to his face, giving it a...was that a muzzle?

Hadn’t Jackal said he’d taken his name from some animal? Or had that been someone else trying to mock him? He caught the punch on his shield and it chattered under the impact.

“Mez!” Only the archer was busy with the papers darting around and at him.

Tibs swallowed as he called fire to his hand. “Jackal, I—”

Scream echoed through the inferno he unleashed on Market place. Jackal yelled for him to stop as Tibs sent ever more fire at him, determined to kill him. Sto pleaded for him to stop as Tibs summoned enough fire even the mountain was getting consumed.

How many ways had fire destroyed everything he cared about in his nightmare? How many times had Jackal been his target, fire hungry for his death?

What if he lost control?

The staff deflected the punch, then struck the fighter on the left.

“Tibs, whatever is troubling you, I implore you to overcome it before you friend is forced to hurt one of us. I will not be able to hold him back, let alone subdue him.”

Tibs opened his mouth to tell the cleric all the reasons he couldn’t risk it.

He closed it and breathed the fear down. And without it clouding his thinking, he saw he didn’t have to confront fire today.

Hopefully, this would work.

He channeled darkness and released that on the fighter. Khumdar was caught in the blast, but Tibs counted on him being able to deal with the effect. Jackal staggered, but continued standing. His essence didn’t fade much under the onslaught.

He etched darkness while still pouring the essence at the fighter. Papers fluttered as if it was air, but remained stuck there.

A page came at him, its edge looking sharper than others, and Tibs readied himself for the pain. He couldn’t split his attention further. A jet of darkness sent it flying, then Khumdar was next to him, staff spinning.

Kha, to make sure the darkness stuck; Fey so it would keep the papers from moving his friend elsewhere. There should be more. He needed it to be stronger.

Jackal pushed through the darkness.

It would have to do.

The etching wrapped around the fighter like a blanket, and immediately, he tried to step back. Pages fell off as they weakened faster than the fighter, and Tibs blasted each with fire as soon as they were away from Jackal. There were too many pages still on the fighter when he dropped to a knee, his essence thinner than Tibs thought it should be. Jackal had a lot of it. More than any Runner short of Don. He shouldn’t be this weak already.

He shifted his attention to his essence and immediately understood the papers were making this worse. They clung to Jackal by pulling his essence into them to fight off the darkness.

Tibs ran into the darkness and pulled the papers off.

“Fire would be faster,” Jackal panted once his mouth was free.

“I’m not burning you again.” He glared, still pulling off papers. Then Mez and

Khumdar were helping.

The archer had so many cuts his dark tanned skin was red. Khumdar was in better condition, having less exposed skin, but he had a long gash on the side of his face.

Finally, Jackal was free. "I'm going to need a minute," he wheezed. His essence was thin, but no longer thinning.

"I do not believe you will be accorded that chance," Khumdar said, taking out a potion as he straightened.

Another pile of papers shuddered.