

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Mez asked Jackal as the fighter stood and stretched, wincing in the process.

“I’m fine,” Jackal replied, in that tone he used when being asked a question was what annoyed him, instead of having to give the answer. “Tibs healed me.”

The archer looked at him.

“His body is healing,” Tibs corrected.

“There isn’t much that can be done about his mind,” Don added. He was slower in standing, even if there had been less damage. The only time the sorcerer had been more injured, as far as Tibs knew, was when he’d been tortured. And this time, he hadn’t complained, or even demanded Tibs heal him as soon as Jackal was able to talk.

“Ah, Ah,” Jackal said.

“Okay, but how wise is to continue with Tibs nearly out of essence, and all our items drained?” Mez asked. He looked up. The ‘sun’ was a hand span past the zenith. “Actually, considering this doesn’t match outside, shouldn’t we turn around? It’s what, the middle of the afternoon now? It’s going to take us a while to make it back to the floor’s entrance.”

Jackal looked up, then at Tibs. “How sure are you that moves at the same speed as outside?”

Tibs shrugged. It wasn’t like he could ask Sto, but he had no reasons to trick them that way. Jackal wasn’t happy, but it was the best Tibs could offer until he knew the reasons behind Sto’s silence.

“Alright. But we’re going by a different route. And we’re checking all the buildings for loot.”

“And for guard dogs?” Don mock whispered. He grinned at Jackal’s shudder.

“You are not funny.”

“He kind of is.” Mez grinned at the glare leveled on him.

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“I.” Jackal kicked the dog, sending it back through the door. “Am.” His punch crushed the back of the dog biting his other leg. “Not.” He grabbed the one that had jumped on his back. “Afraid!” And threw it at the wall, where it left a crack, and crumbled away as it slid to the ground.

The fighter looked around, eyes wide and panting.

“I’m convinced,” Mez said.

“You could have helped!”

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself,” Don replied.

“My bow’s still pretty much drained,” Mez said. “I figure it’s best I keep it for real danger.”

Jackal looked at Tibs.

“You barged in without letting me check for traps. You deserved what happened.” The dogs had been lying in wait inside to throw themselves at whoever opened the door, and Jackal hadn’t even waited for Tibs to tell him what he’d sensed.

“There haven’t been any traps in any of the other buildings!” Jackal replied, exasperated.

“Until now,” Khumdar said, and didn’t react to the fighter’s glare.

“And, hopefully,” Don said. “Now that you’ve beaten them without help, you won’t be

as scared of them.”

“I’m not scared of them! They’re dungeon creatures.”

Mez and Don exchanged a look, then grinned.

Tibs left the others to their ribbing and entered the building. Another home. On the left was a fire pit with stone chairs and a low table on one side of it. On the table was a plate with two pastries and one cookie. They were filled with essence; the pastries felt the same, while the cookie had a different mix. I took the wrapped pastries he’d taken from other houses and set them next to these. Unwrapping them, they were different kinds. Both in how they looked and how the essence in them felt.

There was a way of working out what they did. There would be a pattern to how they were made that told them that. Possibly the nuts and fruits would match the boosts they gave, but for now, the only way he had to test them was to let Jackal eat one and watch the result. His friend was not in a state to deal with Tibs being wrong at the moment.

He wrapped them up. The guild would take them, he expected, but hopefully they’d let them know what they did before the next run.

A door opened to a sleeping room, the other was like Zacharia’s art room. He didn’t know if the people who had lived here had all done art, but such rooms were common. Some, like this one, had easels, brushes and bowls with dried colors. Others had chisels and stones, partially cut and not. What none of them had had was a wardrobe with intricate patterns woven on it. So it would be a chest.

It was stone, like everything else, and the essence through it was what he’d expect. It didn’t feel like the chest did. He opened it and the only thing there was a sword resting against the back. Possibly this had been left by the occupant, who had been a fighter?

The weave could account for it not rusting away. It was half Tibs’s height; the blade was thick and metal was the main part of the weave.

“Magic,” he told Jackal on exiting the building, and they tied it to Mez’s pack.

“You can check the next building,” the fighter said.

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“Tibs,” Don said, pointing to a large building visible above the roofs. “What can you tell from it?”

“It’s like the rest. The essence I mean.” It was four stories tall, the tallest building they’d come across at this point. Some, deeper in the city, were taller, since they could see them over the roofs from where they stood, but the permit building had been the tallest one before this.

“We’re checking it out,” Don said, heading in that direction.

“I’m the one who says that,” Jackal called after the sorcerer.

“No,” Mez said, following Don. “You say ‘Get me all the loot!’”

The road bifurcated in front of the building, and ached so that Tibs expected they reconnected on the other side. It was about half the width of the permit building but deeper than wide, and the walls had column supporting outcroppings from the other floors.

“Tibs has stated it is made the same as the other buildings,” Khumdar said. “Does that not mean it cannot be a dungeon room?”

“Even if it is,” Mez said. “We don’t have the time to deal with it.” He motioned to the sun, which was approaching the midpoint between zenith and the ‘horizon’.

“What’s got you so excited?” Jackal asked Don, who was walking around it, gazing in a mix of awe and disbelief.

“I’ve seen it before.” The sorcerer grinned.

“How?” Jackal asked.

“A book,” Tibs replied.

“No. The part of the library that holds the ancient texts looks exactly like this.”

“How is that possible?” Mez asked, looking first at Tibs, then Khumdar.

“I do not know,” the cleric said. “This is Don’t expertise, not mine.”

“I have no idea how it’s possible,” the sorcerer said excitedly. “How do dungeons know what they know? However they do, that is the Repository.”

“Maybe the dungeon knows what the people it ate know,” Jackal said. “Has there been anyone from your city among the new runners?”

Don laughed. “How would I know?” He faced them. “You don’t understand. I wasn’t allowed in the Repository, and it was filled with books. And it’s right here.” He grinned. “Imagine what we can find it in.”

“Traps,” Tibs said.

“Dungeon creatures,” Mez added.

“Books,” Jackal said with a shudder.

They all looked at him.

“Okay…” Jackal began, and Don rushed for the door. “Don, stop!”

“But!” He motioned excitedly to the large double doors.

“Let me finish. We don’t have a lot of time left. We don’t have a lot of essence left. Those aren’t good things to have when planning on exploring something that large. How are we dealing with whatever creatures the dungeon put there? The traps? This is the kind of thing we want to be rested for, and start on early.”

“I just want to take a peek,” Don sounded almost like he was pleading.

“It’s going to be here for our next run,” Tibs said.

“And with full reserves,” Mez said, “we’ll be able to deal with anything there.”

Don looked at the door, then straightened. “We come here directly.”

Jackal nodded. “We deal with this, then go back to looking for the boss room.”

“It could be in here,” Mez said.

Jackal scoffed. “Don says it’s filled with books. There’s no way the floor boss is going to be among that.”

“The sole aspect which supports your statement,” Khumdar said, “is that the building is somewhat close to the entrance.”

“Which would make for a perfect place for the boss,” Don said. “Every Runner is going to dismiss it because we all know the boss room would never be so close to the entrance.”

“We’ll find out during the next run,” Jackal said. “Right now, I want to leave because I’m getting hungry and Tibs won’t let me have any of the pastries I know he’s hoarding.”

“I’m keeping them so the guild will take them,” Tibs replied.

“Just one,” Jackal pleaded. “I’m sure it won’t do anything bad.”

Tibs rolled his eyes. “Then we should ignore all the buildings on the way, so you get

to eat sooner.”

“I’m not that hungry,” the fighter replied.

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Tibs slashed angrily at the gray-skinned person golem as he backed up the steps. It took the blow on its shield, and Tibs nearly tripped, the heel of his boot catching on the next step, and the sword pierce his side. How could he have been so careless after the constant chastising of Jackal not being careful?

He slashed, but the golem’s colorful clothing caught his blade and instead of cutting through, he unbalanced it.

The stairs were only paces away, then it would be a quick trek to the inn and Russel’s excellent cooking. The day had made him hungry too, and he’d figured they were done. This close, what could Sto throw at them?

Golem people, that was what. They’d scattered as soon as Tibs yelled about the doorway forming, but the golems were already falling. And Jackal, being Jackal, had thrown himself at them without consideration for how low his reserve was. His skin hadn’t turned quite as gray as usual and hadn’t stopped the sword as it usually did.

They had extricated him, but Don and Mez were carrying him up the steps while Tibs and Khumdar dealt with the remaining golem people while trying to keep up with the others. Jackal wasn’t dying, but he had to be in pain and Tibs was too busy to help.

Tibs parried, then ducked under the staff coming at him from behind. Khumdar’s staff impacted the golem person’s shield and spilled darkness over and onto the arm. It didn’t react, but Tibs sense the darkness weakening the essence it came in contact with.

The shield caught his sword, but it cut through it and the arm. Then Tibs angled himself to deal with another of the golem people, trusting Khumdar with this one.

“We’re at the doorway!” Don yelled.

Tibs glanced up to judge the distance and cursed as the impact against his poorly angled shield staggered him.

“We will need to run,” Khumdar said.

“We turn our back to them and they’ll cut them,” Tibs replied. “Do you have enough essence to keep their swords from opening yours?” He tried to think of some way to get distance. He’d iced the steps already, only for the golems not to slide down. They were too heavy for how much air he could send at them right now. Same with the earth or fire.

“I am disappointed to state that darkness does not make for an effective shield against weapons such as swords.”

“Tibs,” Mez yelled. “Protect Khumdar!”

At the top of the steps, he sensed the fire essence form into an arrow. Did Mez have enough left? “Behind me,” he told the cleric, and Khumdar moved.

Tibs slashed to keep the two front golems away, but they took the hits, one moving up to occupy the space Khumdar had vacated, making room for a third golem to step forward and—

The fire exploded against the new golem, stronger than Tibs expected, and his essence wall only deflected part of the heat. He ignored the pain it caused before he absorbed it in favor of turning and running after Khumdar. He felt a sword add another cut in his armor. Then they were up, and following Mez through the doorway.

“We need to better manage our essence,” Jackal said, seated against the opposing wall once Tibs had disrupted the trigger and the doorway became stone again.

“What you need,” Don snapped, “is to stop throwing yourself into fights.”

“Or going into room before I check them for traps,” Tibs added, hands on knees, suffusing himself with purity, but not getting the usual quick restoration.

“As we are close to the dungeon’s exit, and the cleric stationed there,” Khumdar said, “it might be wise to head that way and avail ourselves of the service. We can discuss all the things we should have done with a tankard in a hand, and a meal before us.”

“Best idea,” Jackal replied, pushing himself to his feet, then starting to topple forward, only to be caught by Mez, who barely looked able to stand himself. “I might need help to make it to the exit.”

“I think he might have left some of his mind behind,” Don mused, getting under Jackal’s other arm.

“That is what our leader wishes you to believe,” The cleric said. “Jackal still has all the mind he began this run with.”

“Stop revealing my secrets,” the fighter grumbled.

Don sighed. “That’s what I was afraid of.”