

“Definitely a dungeon room,” Don said as they stood before the large building. “Corruption is woven through the walls, like those on the upper floors.”

It was twice as large as Tibs’s rooming house, but only two stories tall. The double doors in the center of the long side looked like wood, but were made of the same essences as the walls, which looked like uneven slabs of stones stacked atop each other. The placement looked precarious, but they were actually one structure. Windows lined each floor, with ten and two steps between them. The essence flowing through them was sufficiently different Tibs figured he could see through them if he went to one.

That, or they were trapped.

“That is one big room.” Jackal rubbed his hands. “There’s going to be lots of loot.”

“Why does it look like a building?” Mez asked.

“Because they’re all buildings?” Jackal replied.

“I saw that,” Mez said, annoyed. “But the others are there because it—”

“Dungeons,” Khumdar interrupted the archer, “will sometimes establish a theme.”

“More than sometimes,” Don said, continuing to study the walls.

“They will then follow said theme regardless of how unnatural it might be to the rest of the floor. You need remember that dungeons are no more than animals. They do not understand that some things will not feel appropriate to the people exploring them.”

“Like a city under the ground,” Tibs added.

“Right.” Mez mouthed a silent, ‘sorry’.

“To the loot,” Jackal ordered, and Tibs ran for the door.

He glared at the fighter. “I’m checking for traps first.”

“This is clearly some sort of public building,” the fighter replied. “Those don’t have locked doors.”

“And how would it be a dungeon know such a thing?” Khumdar asked.

“Because Runners can’t stop talking and it’ll... Right.” Jackal’s expression became sly. “Right. It’s not like it understands people. Right?”

Tibs sighed and turned to the door. Why couldn’t Jackal use the same slyness that had fooled Tibs all the time? Instead of playing at being such an idiot when he didn’t have to?

The double door had no visible lock; only a large handle on each one. There was no difference in the weave, but he still studied it. Done, he stepped back, perplexed. Jackal was right that Sto would have heard Runners talking. So he’d know enough about public buildings to set something in them to trick them.

Ganny certainly would jump at the opportunity.

“No traps?” Jackal asked.

“No traps on the door,” he replied.

Jackal grabbed the handles and pulled. The doors protested loudly as they moved apart. Tibs stopped as he stepped in, plans to look for traps superseded by the scene.

There were a lot of people in the room, which seemed to take up half the length of the building, with the doors also in its center. Tibs could tell it wasn’t so deep as to reach the rear, but he couldn’t tell by how much. A counter ran the length, at what Tibs thought was ten paces before the back wall. It was divided by wooden planks on top with a line of people standing before each formed section, and a person on the other side, facing them.

Unlike the people golem they had fought, these looked like townsfolk, representing

most categories of people in Kragle Rock, although nobles would never stand in such a way, behind and before common folks. The person at the counter gestured to the one on the other side. They exchanged something, stepped aside as the next person stepped forward. The one who was done moved to the back of the line, while the one now at the counter gestured to the one on the other side.

Talking. They were talking. Or mimicking it, since Sto still couldn't get the golem people to speak. The large room was quiet, except for the sound of footsteps and rustling of cloth. It all seemed so normal it made Tibs uncomfortable.

What was the point of this room?

"What is this?" Jackal asked, his voice hushed and awed, standing next to Tibs.

"It looks like some sort of permit office," Mez answered, then elaborated as Tibs and the fighter stared at him. "My father's second cousin runs a tailor's shop. I was sent to help him during a trade festival. We spent hours in a place like this the day before so he could get the permit for his festival booth."

"It feels highly unusual for a dungeon to make such a place," Khumdar said, "considering dungeons cannot know of them."

Jackal smirked at the cleric's slip, and Tibs elbowed him before he could say anything.

"You better hope this isn't about standing in line until we reach the teller," Don said. "We'll die of boredom before that happens. My family was mercantile before that was taken from them, remember?" He said at the looks directed at him. "I might not have been expected to help run in, but I have had to stand in a line with my father or a brother far too often to ever want to do it again, even as part of a dungeon puzzle."

"There are other doors." Tibs pointed to the ones on each side of the far walls, then jumped to make out the top of the door he sensed in the back wall, and pointed to it. "Maybe we need to reach one of them without disturbing the lines?" He didn't think that was it. While the lines were long enough to reach the blue carpet that went the length, in the center, there was still ample room to walk. Unless the door they needed was at the back. That one Tibs couldn't tell how to reach it without disturbing someone, since they'd have to go over the counter.

He stepped forward, but Mez caught his arm.

"Wait." He searched the crowd. "If this is like the office I went to, there should be agents of order. They're like guards, but work for the institutions. They make sure everything proceeds in an orderly fashion. That one." He pointed to a woman in a gray robe with a golden collar. It was the same as what he could see from the persons on the other side of the counter. The tellers, as Don called them. "There, and there." A man and another woman in the same robes. Tibs thought they were in line too, then realized they stood next to them.

"Those don't look like guards," Jackal said. "They look like the clerks."

"It's what they are, back home. But this is a dungeon. If, like Tibs thinks, the point is to make it to a door, they are what's going to get in our way."

"Those in line can also cause trouble," Don said. "If they think we're trying to cut ahead of them. I've seen it happen. Too many people, not enough time or patience. It didn't make me want to return the next time I was tasked with keeping one of my siblings

company.”

“Then this is a maze.” Now that he knew what to look for, Tibs found two more agents among the lines as he considered how close to the center of the carpet they’d need to remain, to avoid bumping into the back of the lines. The agents moved, and he noticed another one. Seven of them moved through the lines without a pattern Tibs could discern. It would take longer to see that.

“What happens if we step close to a line?” Jackal asked. “I get to kick those agents’ asses?”

“Doing that could start a riot,” Don replied.

“Tibs, how do you expect a dungeon might force us to join the lines?” Khumdar asked.

“There are a lot of essences that can do it,” he replied, sensing for anything out of place among the extensive weaves that made the structure.

“We should be able to fight off most of those types of compulsions,” Don said. “Mind essence needs to make its way into you before it can force anything. Anyone with enough essence and will can push it back.”

“This doesn’t seem made to kill us,” Jackal said.

“That’s because you never had to stand in a lineup like this,” Mez replied. “I was ready to kill for a chance to leave before the hour was up.”

“Why didn’t you leave?” Don asked. “You couldn’t have been that old.”

“Did you leave?” the archer countered. “I was given a responsibility, and I wanted to prove I wasn’t a child.”

“There’s something to be said about being a kid,” Jackal said, cutting off Don’s response to Mez. “Tibs, how do we do this?”

“I can’t make out triggers from the rest of the weaves. It all seems to just be what’s making the building. I think this is about avoiding the agents and, if Don’s right, not disturbing the lines. If we stay in the center of the carpet, we can make it to that door without getting close to the lines and there’s only two agents on that side right now.”

“The agents are going to easily see us,” Mez said.

“I’ll deal with them,” Jackal replied.

“I’ll check the floor for triggers. Don keep watch on the agents. There’s probably a pattern to how they move. That might be part of how this works.” He looked at Khumdar. “Anything?”

Essence flowed away from the cleric. “Theres is…” the cloud spreading through the room had an odd structure to Tibs’s sense. It wasn’t exactly a weave, but also not an etching. There was something… musical to what he sensed, not that the word actually matched what it was, as usual.

“I am unsure how to describe this secret. That we are being watched is a poor approximation of it.”

“It’s the dungeon,” Jackal said. “It’s always watching us.”

“Not always.” Tibs crouched as studied the floor between them and the carpet. Tiles, six of them made the width of both doors. The colors weren’t uniform. Grays and peach and oranges and brown. There was something natural about how the colors were splotched. Like the cliff face, if it was polished flat.

“This is not that,” the cleric said, sounding distracted. “I have felt the secret that is the dungeon observing us, and it is...less secret.” Khumdar rubbed his temple. “I dislike having to express what I sense. It is so...clumsy.”

“Tell me about it,” Don said, and grumbles of agreement came from the others.

“Can you tell if the secret is linked to how we pass the test?” the thought of filling his node with darkness came, and was immediately chased away by memories of the days following his last attempt. He focused on the tiles while Khumdar thought. There had no play, no gap and he sensed only the same weave under as through them, as through everything.

“I do not believe so,” the cleric said when Tibs was halfway to the carpet. “There is a sense of distance. Of not being involved.” He grumbled something under his breath.

“Line up behind me.”

He led them to the center of the carpet, then turned toward the door, studying the carpet for any indication of a trigger. The edges were more red than blue, not quite purple. He could make out the weave of the fabric, but there was no pattern beyond that. He stepped carefully, waiting for the trap he was certain Ganny had laid somewhere along the way for them.

Mez cursed, then Don and Jackal. By the time Tibs stood and spun, they were fighting two of the agents. Two Tibs hadn’t noticed, so focused he’d been on the floor. He made a sword as Jackal shoved an agent away, and into one of the lines. The people there turned, their expressions angry as they surged forward.

“How do we turn off this trap?” Mez demanded. Swinging his unstrung bow like a staff.

“We don’t,” Jackal replied. “We fight them off.” He broke the arm of the closest golem person, then kicked them. They staggered into another line.

“Then stop angering more of the customers!” Don yelled. “We have enough of them to deal with already!” A motion, and he grabbed the line of corruption, swinging it and hitting the approaching people.

Tibs cut the hand off the one grabbing for Jackal, then the leg out from under someone on the other side. Heat erupted next to Tibs, then Mez backed into him, nearly sending them both down as he hit a customer with his flaming bow.

“We need more space!” the archer yelled.

“Don’t!” Don yelled back, panic in his tone. “Stepping off the carpet is—”

Tibs turned in horror as he realized that in his focus on fighting, he’d stopped paying attention to the surrounding essence. Don was nearly entirely encased in the weave, his voice cut off as it covered his face. Then he was wrapped in it completely and the customers settled down, returning to their lines. Don’s terrified expression turn calm under the weave as he moved to the back of the closest line.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Jackal caught Tibs as he rushed to help his friend. “We stay on the carpet. Mez, back away from the edge.”

Tibs tried to slip out, but Jackal held him too tight. “Let go. I have to help him.”

“What happened?” Mez asked.

“Didn’t you see! It wrapped over him. I have to get it off him.”

“I didn’t—”

“Essence,” Khumdar said. “We do well to remember Tibs senses far more than we.”

“Help him from here,” Jackal ordered. “You don’t need to be next to him. What is the essence doing to him?”

Tibs breathed his fear away. He couldn’t help if he couldn’t think. The weave surrounded Don, clung to him, but that was all. His essence was fine. Then why wasn’t Don fighting this? Corruption could melt anything if enough was used, and Don could suffuse himself in it. He should be able to get out.

“He’s alive. I can’t sense what it’s doing, but it has to affect his mind.”

“His expression did turn unnaturally calm,” Khumdar said.

“Where’s the trigger?” Mez asked, looking at the edge of the carpet. “Tibs, how to I get to him without triggering it?”

“I don’t know!” He sensed the floor again, but there was no difference between the carpet and the tiles. It was all the same weave, or so close he couldn’t tell them apart. He’d been sure he would sense a trigger among them. It would have to stand apart to react to them.

“Do…” Jackal sounded scared. “Do you think any of them are other Runners?”

Tibs focused on them individually, as the cleric said. “We are the first to step onto this floor. If anyone here shares similarity with someone we have known, they are no more than a golem made of flesh and given their form.”

Tibs shuddered at the memory of Pyan as a golem person.

“Right.” Jackal sounded better. “So, how do we get him back to the carpet? Tibs, air? Can you grab—”

“I would advise against doing anything to disturb the line,” Khumdar said. “Don warned us they would retaliate, and you demonstrated it. He is now part of one, and I believe that whatever enchantment has him will force him to retaliate if he is disturbed.”

“So, does it let him go once he reached the front of the line?” Jackal asked. “Is the trap to kill him with boredom and if he makes it there, he walks away?”

“They don’t walk away,” Mez said. “They go to the back of a line.”

“Why are they here?” Tibs asked. This felt like something Ganny made more than Sto, and she’d put how the trap worked inside what this was.

“To stand in line,” Jackal said.

“I mean in a real one. Mez. What happens in a place like this?”

“You get a permit. The people explain what—”

“What does that mean? You said you needed it for a booth. Why? The merchants here don’t need that for theirs, do they?” he looked at them, but they shrugged.

“Getting the permit means he showed he could do something with the booth. I think it was about how much he’d be able to sell. He handed papers over, they looked at it. Then he paid and got a—”

“How much?”

“What?”

“How many coins did he have to pay?” Pay what was owed and free Don?

“I don’t know.” Mez looked around. “Would it matter? How would the dungeon know how much my father’s cousin paid?”

Tibs cursed. He was right, and even if he knew the amount, he’d have to reach the

counter. He could make it without touching the floor, but he couldn't see how he'd land and not disturb someone.

The solution to a traps was always something everyone in the party could manage. So it wasn't at the counter.

"Can a customer go at the back?" That was the only place they could reach.

"I don't know. I only went that one time."

"What if something goes wrong with the teller? If you think the teller is swindling you?"

"I don't know, Tibs. Nothing went wrong the one time I went. Don's the one you'd want to ask. Even if it never happened to him, I'm sure he read something about it."

Tibs looked at Khumdar.

"I am afraid that in this, I have no help to offer. I was never trusted by my family to assist in matters that would necessitate visiting such a place. Once I left. Once I became what I am. I had no reasons for such visits."

"If you think the person handling the papers is screwing you," Jackal said, "you talk to their boss."

"Let me guess," Mez said. "You've been hiding that this is also something you have experience with."

Jackal scoffed. "I've never stepped within blocks of a place like thing. But you forget what my family did. Keeping the number of organizations we did under control creates a lot of unhappiness. Anytime something happened. They arguments went up the chain of command. A few times it reached my father. It never went well for anyone who couldn't fix their problems before that."

"Where do we find that person?" Tibs asked.

Jackal shrugged, "where ever those in charge of a place like this are? Their homes if they're powerful enough."

Tibs shook his head. The solution wouldn't be outside the room. He looked at the door they'd been heading for. In the guild, those who ran things, like Tirania and the people she ordered about directly, had offices in the back. Out of the way. Where the enchantments kept anyone other than those properly appointed from reaching.

He looked at the counter, sensed the door beyond it. It was no different from the ones at the end of the carpets, but something told him it would be the direct one to the solution. Only to reach it meant stepping off the carpet, and he was the only one who could do it. So it had to be the door before them.

There was more than one way of reaching Tirania's office. It wasn't only the enchantments that made the halls go around all over the place. Even protected from it, they still did, just in a more orderly manner.

He headed for the door.

"Tibs?" Jackal called. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to demand to speak to their boss."