

Tibs turned and studied the room.

Visually, all it contained were the stairs, the table, and the two trays; with one containing papers.

Through his sense, there was the wall preventing them from stepping onto the stairs. There was the essence that made up the structure and furniture, but that couldn't be all there was. He hadn't been able to sense the trap that had snared Don until after it triggered, and he only sense what it did, not the trigger itself.

Sto and Ganny were getting clever with how they hid their work, and he wanted to ask how they did it. What they did. He probably wouldn't get answers. Ganny would see to it Sto let nothing slip, since this was about Tibs overcoming an obstacle.

But whenever Sto was done dealing with his problem, Tibs was asking. Ganny would do her thing and Tibs would do is. Asking questions was one way he went about overcoming stuff. And if he could trick Sto into revealing something?

Well, he was a rogue.

But now, he needed to work this puzzle the way Ganny intended it.

He couldn't undo the unseen wall. Even if he was able to, he expected Ganny had set up something in response to show it was the wrong way.

What did he have to work with that could be the puzzle? The table couldn't be moved, it was part of the structure more than a component. On it were two trays. One had papers—he grabbed one, but couldn't take it off the pile. The stack was a whole. He also couldn't move the trays from the table.

He couldn't sense a connection between them, but that meant little.

“Why two trays?” Mez asked.

“Too much paper for just one,” Jackal replied dismissively.

That felt wrong, but was that because he couldn't imagine clerks wasting space with two, when a taller one would suffice, or because he knew this was a dungeon created puzzle and Ganny wouldn't leave useless items? Unless they were decoys. He reminded himself of the empty room he'd fallen for simply because there had been no doors.

Then, he needed to remind himself that he didn't know how places like this worked. Had there been such trays in the offices within the guild? He didn't remember them from glancing at in them, but Tirania did, and both had been filled each time he's been there.

Would Runners have talked about that? Was she how it was done, or did she not care about taking up more space on her desk? Nobles would know how things like this actually worked. Most Runners came from cells, so would only have being called in to speak with Tirania as a model. The nobles might, or might not, talk about how things worked, but Runner certainly would.

What did that leave him with? Blank papers in a stack. He took one of those that had been left behind after fighting a golem person and dropped it on the pile.

He waited for something to happen, then tested if he could remove it and it came away, while none within the stack could be taken still. He dropped it in the empty tray, and the flash of essence was immediate and fast enough he couldn't make out details. Grabbing the page showed it was now part of the tray.

When he looked at others, Jackal was offering the two pages he'd collected. “I get to kill more of them, don't I?”

Tibs took them and considered his next action.

“If you are not careful,” Khumdar said, “it is you who might end up dead.”

Jackal snorted. “I’m only surprised once.”

“Until the next time you do not know to expect the attack that takes you down.” The cleric shook his head. “You rely on your inherent stubbornness to allow you to survive attacks that would kill anyone else.”

“And my toughness.”

“I question that it plays any part. You are simply too stubborn to understand you have been defeated.”

“How many pages do we need?” Mez asked. “If we have to kill everyone here, we won’t have time to explore the rest of the city once we’re done.”

“Then we get great loot out of this,” Jackal said, his grin widening.

Could the tray really be about simply collecting the papers from the dead golem people? Loot came from killing a room’s creature, and the creatures themselves. The room was the building, which made where they stood what? A corner of the room? Was it really about killing all the creatures? If so, why bother with a seeming puzzle? And how about the second floor? Since that was also part of the room, wouldn’t they have to kill every creature there too for it to count?

“Let’s just kill them and add the pages as we go,” Jackal said. “If the wall goes away before we’ve killed everything, we’ll know we can stop there, right Tibs?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have a better idea.”

“Is there not a danger the room will reset when we exit it?” Khumdar asked.

“The building’s the room,” Jackal said. “It’ll be fine.”

“I wish you hadn’t said that,” Mez grumbled, while Tibs considered what Jackal said. The only thing that stopped Sto from making changes to a room was how everything in it was usually interconnected. Because he couldn’t change anything close to Runners, what was in the room couldn’t be changed as well.

It was the ‘usually’, that bothered Tibs. In a room as large as this building, there might be sections that weren’t connected to the others. Then, what kept Sto from having changes happen there? Were there concepts within offices that might impact what Sto would do? How hard would he want to respect the idea of such a building?

Tibs made a stone as they exited the room and placed it down to keep the door from closing. From what he’d noticed, work only seemed to happen when the doors were closed. Anytime one had been opened, it stopped until what had opened it was handled.

“I don’t think that’s going to keep the dungeon from resetting it,” Mez said.

“It can’t hurt,” Tibs replied.

They dealt with the next two rooms simply. Jackal opened the door and Mez exploded arrows inside. Then, Tibs and the fighter ran in to deal with what was left. Khumdar and Mez added supporting shots from the door.

The room resulted in three pages, one from each golem person, as well as a chain-mail shirt woven through with air essence, which Tibs figured accounted for how light it was.

The door to the stair room remained opened each time they returned to add the papers, and the inside was unchanged. Each page added to the tray flashed with essence, but

nothing else. He left the nagging that it was too simple in the room as he left. Maybe Ganny had been busy with other parts of the floor and she'd add to this one later.

The next room made Tibs hesitate as he sensed nothing in it. He set to open it, instead of Jackal, and readied himself for something... only to find an empty room.

The one after that had ice exploding out of it as soon as the door was cracked opened, and while Jackal only got an arm encased, and didn't seem to be bothered by it, already being stoned up, Mez caught the brunt of it, and even suffusing himself with fire did not let him escape the attack uninjured.

Tibs cursed himself for falling victim to what had caused too many thieves to lose a hand while healing the archer. He'd gotten complacent. He'd sensed two golem persons inside and nothing else and hadn't even thought about how, if Sto could hide essence from him, he could alter what Tibs sensed.

The only reason Mez hadn't died was that fire was his element, that he'd reacted quickly, and that Tibs had so much essence to devote to healing him. He doubted even all the healing potions they'd accumulated over the previous runs would have been enough.

Once done, Tibs channeled water and refilled his reserve from the essence was contained in the room. Otherwise, it was empty. It had been nothing more than a trap.

From then on, no one stood before the door, and Tibs was the one to open them. Three rooms later, and three pages added to the tray, metal spikes coated in corruption flew out almost as soon as Tibs touched the door. He tried to push it out of the way so they could go in, but it was so thick it had nowhere to go. He couldn't absorb it without overflowing his reserve. He'd considered continuing on, but Sto had made sure he could sense the weave in the middle of the room. Corruption and others. His curiosity got the better of him, and after suffusing himself with corruption and weaving that through his armor to protect it, he stepped inside. He avoided the metal spikes that left little room to maneuver and returned with a bow made of a deep purple wood that reflected a sickly tint.

The next room had three golems people, who attacked as soon as Tibs opened the door.

Before he could react, he felt the knife in his side from the one who appeared next to him. She was gone before his sword was in motion, and only the essence concentrating on his other side let him raise his shield in time to intercept the next strike.

Then she was before Jackal, and gone again, the fighter off balance as his punch carried him forward. She was behind him; the knife shattering as she slammed it in his back. Tibs leaped over the fighter, managing a cut before she vanished.

He swung where he sensed the essence concentrating, but she was already stepping aside and vanishing. He stepped away from where she reappeared and she vanished. He stepped back further, and now it was only the two of them. Mez, Khumdar and Jackal were fighting the room's other occupants.

He thought he saw frustration on her face at the distance still separating them, and he was etching as soon as he sensed her about to cross the distance. The metal needles that floated around him were thin enough to be nearly impossible to see. She appeared before him, arm in the air, a new knife in hand, but remained still as the needles within her ripped the essence apart. The paper appeared as she crumbled away, and Tibs caught it as it flitted down. By the time he reached the door, the others had dealt with the two golem people

there.

The added pages didn't remove the unseen wall.

The room facing the one with the void using golem person had five people in it, but they proved no stronger than normal folks, even if their essence was as dense as that of runners. The room itself gave Tibs pause. Instead of an office, it was arranged like a noble's lounge. Seats and loungers for people to relax in, low tables next to them with platters containing pastries.

"There—"

Jackal snatched one and popped it in his mouth.

"—essence in that!" Tibs finished.

"Good essence," Jackal moaned in delight.

"You don't know what it'll do to you," Tibs protested.

The fighter patted his stomach. "Make it so I'm not hungry."

"Russel made us food." Tibs glared at the fighter.

"But these are sweets," Jackal protested.

"Our leader does not appear to be dying," Khumdar said.

"Because I'm not done with him," Tibs snapped.

"Tell Kroseph and save yourself the trouble," Mez said, stepping around the chairs and studying the foods, but keeping his hand away.

Tibs breathed his temper down. He had more important things to do. The fighter's essence didn't have a reaction to what was spreading through him.

"Don't do that again," Tibs threatened his friend, snatching the papers from him, then hurried to the stair room, focusing on his breathing the entire way. He dropped the pages in the tray and turned to leave as the pulse spread out.

As it washed over the unseen wall, its weave came undone. Tibs approached it cautiously, sensing Jackal and the others enter the room. His hand encountered no resistance.

"I guess we don't have to fight everything," Jackal said, walking past Tibs.

His annoyance at how wrong this puzzle felt had him glaring at the trays instead of at the fighter's back for not giving him time to make sure the rest of the stairs were safe.

"Maybe it's about showing we're strong enough?" Mez asked.

"We're alive," Tibs snapped as he heard fighting coming from the stairs, and he ran.

Jackal glowed faintly as he grabbed one of the larger golem person and threw him down the hall. Even as strong as Jackal was when stoned up, the golem landed much further than Tibs thought it should have.

Mez fired arrows at two golem persons further along the hall, while one had spikes of darkness flying at the fighter. Tibs fought to wrench control of them, but etching came apart as it encountered the glow surrounding Jackal.

The fight was over quickly, Jackal crushing the golem people he reached, while Mez and Khumdar dealt with those who were further. Tibs was too stunned to act, and he cursed himself for it.

"How did you do that?" he asked, while Jackal picked up the coins left behind at his feet. The glow hadn't been light essence.

"No idea. They attacked as soon as I got here, and I started glowing. It's making me

stronger, tougher, and it makes etchings weaker too.”

“The pastry?” Khumdar offered.

“The dungeon doesn’t usually help us.”

“The potions have been noticeably absent on this floor,” the cleric said. “These may be its attempt at those while remaining within the theme?”

“I don’t think it gets where lounges go then,” Mez said.

“It is nothing more than a dungeon. To expect it to get so much correctly is clearly demanding too much of it.”

This corridor went to the left, right, and ahead. Like under them, doors lined the walls.

“Do we check each room?” Mez asked.

“The boss room is the last one on the floor,” Jackal replied, looking his glowing self over.

“The last room we check? Or the one further from the entrance?”

Jackal glanced at Tibs.

“How would I know?” he replied, annoyed. “You’re the one with so much confidence you don’t bother letting me do what I’m supposed to do.”

“I’m sorry, Tibs.” Jackal spread his arms, grinning. “But look, it was a good thing I ate it.”

“That’s not the point!” Tibs breathed. “You didn’t know it was going to be. You just acted; did another Jackal thing. It could have been poisoned.”

“And you would have healed me.”

Tibs breathed and glared. “How?”

“With purity, or you’d removed the corruption. Or done something—”

“Taking away corruption doesn’t heal anything,” Tibs said. “And how am I supposed to know how to fix that? We’ve never been poisoned. There has to be ways to do it without corruption too, because I can take that out of alcohol and still get drunk. And this is a dungeon, so how about you stop thinking I can fix everything? You promised Kroseph you’re stop being stupid!”

Jackal looked at his feet. “Sorry. I didn’t think—okay, that’s too normal for me to use it.”

“You told Kroseph you were going to stop doing Jackal things.”

“I don’t think he can—” Mez closed his mouth at Tibs’s glare.

“I’m going to be more careful.”

Tibs returned the glare on the fighter.

“I… promise?” Jackal added.

Tibs breathed, and he wondered if he shouldn’t just abandon Oneness completely for all the good it seemed to be doing. Still, what else could he ask from his friend? Short of giving up the runs, Jackal would always be in situations that could kill him. And Tibs wasn’t immune to being overconfident. It had almost killed Mez this time.

He pushed his sense until he filled the building. “I don’t sense creatures in the halls, or behind the doors, but it doesn’t mean anything anymore. Let’s walk the floor onces, in case the room we want has a crest on it. Then, we go room by room again and we find the boss before the end of the day.”

Jackal went to the right. Six doors later, they were at an intersection. Ahead, it continued for three doors and ended at a window. On the left and right, too many doors before another intersection. Tibs headed to the window. Roofs as far as he could see, with a some high than the others. It was brighter out, but he couldn't see the orb from this angle.

"Looks like late morning," Jackal said.

"So, it's past midday?" Mez said. "Considering when the 'sun' here came up compared to where it was when we entered."

"Should we not also be mindful of the fact the dungeon controls everything? It may not have the globe move at an even pace. This may be an attempt at keeping us beyond when the door has closed."

"You really think spending the night here is bad?" the archer asked.

"Unless Tibs asks—" Jackal closed his mouth. "No way to know unless we stay, and I'm not doing that." He grinned. "My man is waiting for me to tell him all my adventure and make sure I know how much he appreciates that I returned to him."

"Even with how he sick he's been?" Mez said.

Jackal narrowed his eyes. "Do you think the only way he shows his appreciation is by ___"

"Don't," Tibs said.

"Yes, please spare us those details." Mez grinned.

Jackal rolled his eyes and stepped away from the window. "I can't believe how dirty your minds all are."

They went left, then right at the next intersection, and a group of four turned into the corridor from the other end.

"I've got this," Jackal said, rubbing his hands together, then yelped two steps later as his feet flew out from under him and he landed on the ice.

Tibs glared down at him. "What did you promise?"

"That I wouldn't eat pastries from the dungeon anymore?"

Tibs narrowed his eyes.

"I've got this." Jackal pointed a glowing hand to his other glowing hand.

"Tibs," Mez said, as he shot an arrow. "They're coming."

"Think," he told Jackal, absorbing the ice and forming a sword and shield. Jackal stood as a golem person, etched something Tibs barely sensed, reached them. The fighter stepped in the way of the attack, only for his glow to vanish before it impacted and sent him flying.

"I'm okay," He wheezed from where he crashed.

Tibs etched the cloud of needles from before, this time adding Eif. Instead of sending them at the approaching golems, the way he expected since Eif imparted motion according to what he'd been told, the needles exploded in all directions.

He absorbed those heading for him and his team and reminded himself he wasn't supposed to experiment with Arcanus during a run, especially not with one he'd learned about from other Runners instead of his teacher.

It did, at least, ripe apart the foremost golem person.

Khumdar stepped to his side, sending dark blasts from and striking with his staff when the golems were close enough.

Tibs darted blows against the golem, who also held a sword and shield, leaving shallow cuts. Its attacks were slower, but when they connected, Tibs felt them in spite of his armor, as well as the earth and metal coating him.

“Tibs, Down,” Mez called.

The heat that came as he hit the floor warmed his back. He looked up as the fire died off and the golem finished crumbling. The other two were also nothing but rubble.

He headed for Jackal, sitting against the wall, arms over his chest. Bones were broken, by the sense of the essence, and it did something else, but it wasn't fading, so Jackal wasn't dying.

“I thought—”

Tibs raised an eyebrow as he wove purity.

Jackal sighed. “I hoped it would last longer.” Tibs applied the weave, and the fighter's breathing eased. “What essence was that?”

“I don't know.” All he could tell was that he had never encountered it before.

“Tibs,” Khumdar called. “Once you are done with our leader, I believe I have located the room we are looking for.” The cleric stood on the other side of the intersection, studying something by a door.

He helped Jackal to his feet, then went to Khumdar.

The door was in the center of the wall, the only one there. It faced a door, which had one on each side, as evenly spaced as all the others. The cleric studied the plaque of polished brass. Letters were etched on it, and while he recognized them individually, the words made no sense to him.

“Is that a language?” Mez asked.

“Cifanian,” Khumdar said.

“What does it say?”

“This is the office of the Official Paper Pusher. I believe this is the boss room.”

Jackal snorted. “How tough—”

Tibs slammed his elbow in his friend's side. It hurt, but it stopped the fighter from speaking. They might not be able to speak with Sto, but he had no doubt he was listening. Tibs wasn't letting Jackal goad him into making the fight tougher than it already was.