

“Get it off!” Jackal yelled, his stone arm in the large dog’s mouth. “Get it off me!”

“You know,” Mez said, essence forming into an arrow as he pulled the string of his bow, “you are strong enough to punch it off you.” He loosed the fire arrow, and it exploded in the dog’s side, sending it tumbling off the fighter.

Jackal scrambled away as he got to his feet.

Tibs stepped between the growling dog and Jackal. “Bad dog! No treat for you!”

Its head snapped up, and the growling itched. Tibs thought he saw confusion in its eyes, then it lunged and Tibs swung, stepping aside. He’d added filigrees of Duh to the metal edge of his ice sword, and the added sharpness caused it to cut half its muzzle and head off with hardly any resistance. It turned to face him on landing.

A real dog would have died, one of the first dogs they’d encountered on the floor would have too, but this loss only diminished its essence slightly. Even its growl wasn’t affected. It ran at him, and Tibs smashed his shield into the remains of its head, staggering it, then pinned it to the ground with his sword. It still didn’t die, but while it struggled to get itself free, Tibs formed another sword and cut it apart until it crumble away.

“They’re tougher,” he commented, absorbing both swords.

“And bigger,” Don said.

“And sneakier,” Jackal snarled.

Within blocks of leaving the plaza where they’d eaten, one had jumped out of an alley at the fighter. Then, one had burst out of a door to reach him, and this one had jumped on him from a roof.

“Is it me,” Mez said, “or as the dungeon picked up on Jackal’s love for those animals?”

“I don’t like them!” Jackal looked at the rip in his arm and armor, both of which were stone. “This is going to take weeks to have repaired.”

“Buy a new one,” Don said, while Tibs formed a purity weave to deal with the injury.

“But I like this one,” Jackal replied. “It’s the one I’ve worn since Tibs burned the last one off me.”

And now, he was responsible for Jackal losing another armor. Even if his was in worse condition, at least Tibs’s armor would repair itself over time.

“Have you considered that his may be the dungeon’s attempt as instructing you to your unwise habit of throwing yourself at your opposition?”

“They’re throwing themselves at me!” Jackal sighed in relief after Tibs applied the weave. “Where’s the next building?”

“Over there.” He motioned toward the... oddity in his sense, and they were on the move again.

He didn’t know what it was, since it registered as a hole in the essence, but it was the closest thing that wasn’t like the rest of the buildings on this floor.

They checked houses, most of which had nothing of interest, other than the occasional essence laden food on plates like offering for them, which Tibs and Don didn’t allow Jackal to touch.

At one, a ‘family’ attacked them, which included a child that took advantage of Tibs’s surprise at its presence, and how odd a child looked when gray and squished down like all the people that were part of the city, to grow its fingers into claws and scored one gash in his side, and then Tibs dispatched it, cursing himself for never realizing that Sto wasn’t limited to making adult golem people.

More dogs attacked, and Tibs figured there was something random about their placement, while the golem people were limited by the roles they played. Guards patrolled, so could be avoided. Thugs stuck to the alleys, so they could stay away from those, and families only came from houses.

The shops yielded loot, and the occasional shopkeeper and customer to protect them.

“Yes!” Jackal exclaimed after one such fight, as he shoved amulets, jeweled daggers and necklaces into his pouch, leaving the pieces of armor for the others to put in their packs.

“You’re really going to put all that in there, aren’t you?” Don said, motioning to the other displays.

“Don’t you want the loot?” Jackal replied, adding bracelets to it.

“Don’t you want to keep your pouch?” the sorcerer replied.

“They can’t know it’s magical.”

“But they know you’re greedy.”

“Which is why you guys are carrying the armor. They know we’re going to sell that.”

“You mean this?” Mez showed a leather armband with an intricate design. “Tibs, how much do you think Darran will give for this?”

“A few silver. Two and zero at most. One of the artisans might give more because it looks good.”

“And that necklace Jackal is shoving in his pouch?”

Tibs snorted without bothering to look. “Hundreds of silvers. He knows a lot of people who like jewels.”

“Darran isn’t going to tell anyone what he buys from us,” Jackal said.

“But won’t the guard think it’s strange,” Don said, “that Quigly leaves his run with enough jewelry to please a king, and all we found are common armor? Won’t they question how the great Jackal couldn’t manage to find the good loot? Or maybe they’ll start wondering if it isn’t more that you found a way to hide loot from them?”

“They can’t tell the pouch is magical,” Jackal repeated in a tone of ‘why aren’t you getting that?’”

“Until they reach in it to check what’s there.”

The fighter stared at the sorcerer, his jaw working silently. But fear was building in his eyes.

“That’s why we have to carry most of it,” Don said.

“But you know they’re going to take it,” Jackal protested. “It’s not just magical things they keep. It’s anything they can make good coins with, and that is the best coins. They’re my coins!” He clutched the necklace to his chest.

“Only if they don’t realize you’re cheating them. You have to know they need to think they’re scamming you if you want your scam to work.”

Jackal looked at Tibs for support, but he shrugged. “I can’t help that he’s right.”

“Fine,” Jackal grumbled and put the necklace in the pouch. “You can have the rest.” Then he lunged for a large red jewel in a gold broche. “But I’ll take that.”

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The nothing in the essence was a building in the center of a large plaza, much like the first one. But only in looks. Unlike the other, where he could sense something blocking his sense. Here, the more or less circular building simply wasn’t there according to his sense.

“Are any of you creeped out by this?” Tibs asked, approaching it. There couldn’t be something that wasn’t made of essence. Essence was everything.

Jackal reached for the stone wall, but his hand stopped before touching it. “Don, tell me this is some sort of enchantment.”

The sorcerer hesitated. “I’ve never read anything like this. Even that stone your father brought to the city felt like something. I mean, it pushed our essence away from it, so it generated an essence that did that. This...? The essence that crosses the wall just ends.” He shuddered.

“So the wall keeps you from sensing inside the building?” Mez asked.

“No. It’s not coming back.”

“If you can’t sense it, you can’t call it back,” Jackal said with an edge to his voice.

“But I can etch instruction into it to return,” Don snapped.

“You’ll show me how to do that,” Tibs said, interrupting Jackal’s reply.

Don took a breath. “What do you sense Tibs?”

“Nothing. There’s a hole in the essence where the building is.” The wall felt like the stone it looked like. It was the gray of stone, cool to the touch. But there was no essence there to explain how it could exist.

Was this the room Sto had talked about? He’d said the building was still there, but the inside was gone. Is that what it would be like to his sense?

Only, hadn’t Ganny said Sto had moved the room out of the way until they figured out what had

happened? And Sto wouldn't leave something he didn't understand that could hurt Runners. He had to understand it to make it something that forced Runners to get stronger.

"There's a door," Mez called from where his walk around the building took him.

"Open it," Jackal said, reaching him, Tibs on his heel and Don and Khumdar arriving last.

"I'm not touching that," the archer replied, before Tibs could veto the idea. "You want to see in, you open it."

"No." Tibs stepped before Jackal. "I'm opening it."

The door looked like any of the stone doors he'd seen on the other buildings native to the floor. Stone bars held in place with metal strips. He could even scratch the stone and metal with the point of a knife. The only thing of note was the handle; there to let someone pull the door shut. There might be some trap on it, but he couldn't sense it, or anything.

The door resisted his initial push, and only opened a crack when he pushed harder. He stepped away, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, he moved close and went to push it some more, only to pull his hand back as soon as it crossed the threshold.

He looked at it and confirmed it was fine, then tried to understand what had happened. His hand had still been there. He'd sensed it and the essence in it. But the essence in his glove had vanished. It hadn't been the push back from the green stone that prevented him from pushing his essence out of his himself. This made anything past the surface of his skin simply no longer there. He put his hand in and moved it. It behaved as it should, but the lack of surface essence was disconcerting.

He pushed it further in, then out again as he lost the sense of some of the reserves in his bracer. The reserve registered again, but not the essence it had contained. Air and Earth were drained. He hurried to refill air and breathed easier when it did. Whatever this was hadn't broken them.

"This empties amulets," Tibs said, considering how to go about pushing the door open further.

"How quickly?" Don asked.

"As fast as it took for me to pull my hand out," he replied.

Mez stepped back. "So that thing destroys the essence of anything in it?"

"Does anyone have an item they're willing to hand over for a test?" Don asked.

"No." Mez pulled his bow to his chest.

"Not that," the sorcerer said as Tibs formed his sword. "Something small that you won't miss."

"If it's magic, we're going to miss it," Jackal said.

Tibs moved the sword toward the door, but anything that crossed the threshold vanished and didn't reform when he pulled it out. The essence just stopped, as if cut by a knife.

"We're going to have to reach in to opening further," Don said. "Mez?"

"I'm not doing it."

"I didn't think you armor was enchanted."

"It isn't," the archer replied.

"Then I'll hold your bow while you—"

"I'm not getting close to that!"

Jackal reached past Tibs and gave the door a shove that opened it. "There's a chest!"

Then, Tibs's understanding that the weave of his glove was fine, even if it had been inside the building, was disrupted by the fighter stepping inside.

"Get out of there!"

"This is weird," Jackal said, looking at his hand that had turned back to its usual tanned hue. "I'm still suffused with earth, but it's not doing its usual thing."

"Jackal, get out of there," Tibs ordered.

"It's not doing anything else," the fighter replied, looking around.

Breathing in anger down, since screaming wouldn't do any good, Tibs leaned forward to do the same.

Unlike the other building, this one only had the chest, set partially behind the... stack of disks in the center. Five of them with the bottom one slightly smaller than the one atop it. Then the other three tapered in until the top disk was the size and thickness of the fighter's stone-filled head.

The chest was positioned in such a way that it could only be accessed by—

“It's a—”

Jackal was already next to the chest, brushing the largest disk.

Before Tibs let out the sigh, the disks spun once, then the nothingness from inside the room was all around them, stretching he had no idea how far since the abyss-cursed thing removed all essence.