

“Who needs to recharge?” Jackal asked as Tibs healed him.

The first fight of the boss room had taken a toll again, but mostly on Jackal. The creatures had focussed their attention on him to the almost complete exclusion of the others. Those who hadn’t had done so to keep anyone from coming to the fighter’s help.

Mez and Don had been the most successful ones, but the attacks had also bled off onto Jackal, so that what Tibs was healing was almost equally caused by his friends.

“I’m good,” Mez replied.

“I will last this coming battle,” Khumdar said, “and so long as we take the time for Tibs to assist in recharging me afterward, I will continue to be fine.”

“You need to carry amulets,” Jackal said.

“Should you know follow that same advice?”

“I’m a fighter. I don’t have time for that sorcerer stuff.”

“And I am a cleric. Darkness will provide me with what I need.”

“Then why are you letting Tibs help you?” Mez asked.

“Because as someone who has spoken with Darkness, he too follows its will.”

“Someone’s become good at justifying,” Jackal said, carefully moving his newly healed arm.

“I have not become anything,” Khumdar replied smugly, and Tibs chuckled at the admission.

“Don?” Jackal called. “Don!”

“What?” The sorcerer looked away from the dragon, which had taken so much of his attention he hadn’t participated in ribbing Khumdar.

“I asked, how’s your reserve?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” he replied distractedly, looking at the dragon again.

“I haven’t seen Tibs help you in this run.” Jackal sighed. “Don, any chance you can stop your mind from wandering?”

“It isn’t wandering,” the sorcerer replied. “The path it’s on is well marked.”

“Then how about you take the path that takes you back to us?” Jackal asked.

The glance Don gave him was filled with annoyance, which vanished as he looked at the others watching him. “I’m sorry. What are we discussing?”

“Tibs hasn’t helped you recharge,” Jackal said.

“Of course not. The reserves in the robe can easily last me through this floor a dozen time over.”

“Don’t give Ganny a challenge,” Tibs warned.

She snorted. “I don’t care about Don. It’s Jackal who is getting all of my attention this time.”

“I think we’ve noticed,” Tibs replied darkly.

Jackal chuckled. “Don is safe, isn’t he?”

“Angering the dungeon might be among the least wise things you have done,” Khumdar stated.

“I’m not angry at him,” Sto replied. “Ganny is. Is Don sure he doesn’t want me to change the color of his robe? He just has to put it in the cache by the entrance.”

“Sto wanted to make sure you’re okay with the robe as it is.”

Don chuckled. "As I said when he changed it so I could sense the essence it contained. I am fine with it. It's going to be simple to have a seamster add highlights when I decide on them. I checked and the robe's healing enchantment won't undo that."

Tibs focused on Jackal again to confirm he was fully healed. "You keep getting Ganny angry, and this is just going to get worse."

The fighter grinned. "I know!"

"So," Mez said. "This is something to add to the list of things we can threaten to tell Kroseph when you annoy us?"

"How is there anything left on that list?" Don asked. "Doesn't he annoy you daily and you've had to tell it all to his man?"

"It seems," the cleric replied, sounding perplexed, "that we have grown accustomed to Jackal's... eccentric ways."

"How can anyone get used to that?" the sorcerer demanded.

"Give it time," Jackal said, amused, "and you're going to love me just as much as they do."

"We don't love you," Mez said. "We tolerate you."

Don looked at Tibs. "How about we disarm the next traps? Instead of getting drawn into what I'm sure will be a deep and philosophical discussion."

"But you love me, right Tibs?" Jackal asked, as he followed Don to the columns.

"Ask me again if you survive the room. Didn't you want one of them to work with me this time?"

Don shook his head. "I can't afford a mistake and the cost of another fight before the dragon."

"We have time for another fight," Jackal said. "If it comes to that."

"What are you planning?" Tibs asked.

Don shook his head, pointing up.

Tibs took position, and in unison they disarm the trigger. Ganny had added an extra step to the second one, which made them more alert on the last one, so that while how the speed at which the lock moved changed proved challenging, it didn't cause them to trigger it.

"You run off to punch it," Tibs warned Jackal, "and I'm letting you hit the wall each time it knocks you into it."

"I would never think to abandon my team just to get a few hits in on my own," Jackal said with pride, the words glowing. Tibs glared. "Well, not a second time."

Only a second time in this room, Tibs felt like pointing out.

"We must—" Don started in the silence, then closed his mouth and shook his head. He looked at Jackal for instructions.

"Tibs, Khumdar and me rush it," the fighter said. "You and Mez hit it with everything you have. See if you can come up with something that gets through its protection. When the wave starts, thin it as much as possible before it reaches us."

Don looked like he wanted to say something, but finally nodded and they faced the dragon.

"Now!" Jackal ordered.

Tibs ran, etching a spear of Duh filed water. It exploded into shards over the scales,

but only left scratches on them. He had his ice sword and shield formed by the time he had to jump over the large paw swipe. The slash at it hardly left a mark, so a filigree of Fey didn't help.

Again, the dragon focused on Jackal, mixing swipes with attempt at smashing him under a paw. Tibs iced a front leg, but that shattered as the dragon moved to follow the fighter. He ran under the dragon, adding as much metal essence with filigree of Dhu into the blade. If swings weren't effective, it was time to see what earth backed stabbing did to—

“Retreat!” Don ordered, and Tibs changed direction. Two steps later, the dragon roared, and the essence in the walls shifted. He, Jackal and Khumdar were by the Sorcerer as the lines of creature ran to where they had been fighting the dragon, passing each other and vanishing into the opposite doorway.

“What was—” Jackal started as the doorways disappeared.

“Attack!” Don ordered.

Tibs spared the sorcerer a look before running at the dragon, dodging the paw that he ineffectually swung at reflexively, then was under the belly and stabbed. The sword didn't go in as deep as it should have, most of the essence dispersed by the golden shimmering, but it was more damage than what Tibs had done before, even if the dragon didn't react to it. He made another sword and slammed it back in, and made another—

“Retreat!”

This time, they were by the sorcerer before the doorway finished forming and the roar resounding off the walls.

“What is going on?” Jackal asked, as the creatures again ran out to where they had been fighting, not even looking at where they now stood. Not even those with spears looked away.

“A form of automated response,” Don replied. “I don't know what the trigger is yet, probably the damage we're inflicting, but its eyes will glow red and it roars regardless of what else it's doing. The two serve to trigger the doorway, I think. But they happened each time.”

“But why aren't they coming to fight us?” Jackal asked as the creatures entered the doorways.

“Be ready to attack,” Don said, instead of answering. He ignored the fighter's glare. “Now!” he ordered once the last creature vanished.

Tibs ran at the dragon again, putting aside the whys, and focusing on killing it. He stabbed it with a fourth sword, then the dragon shifted position faster than Tibs expected and a rear paw came down on him. He formed a metal spike around himself, then he was sent sliding as the dragon ripped it out of the ground and shook the paw. Fortunately, it was toward Mez so that—

“Retreat!”

—he was ready for the run.

“Why isn't it blowing fire?” Mez asked, watching the creature run.

“Could be something it only does if we keep our distance,” Don said.

“Or it knows it's a waste of time,” Jackal offered.

Don ordered the attack, and they returned to the fight.

Tibs added the etching that spread ice to his sword, and it took him three stabs, each

time adding essence to it, before enough survived the shimmering it ate away at the dragon's life essence. It also took enough from Tibs he could now sense the dip in his unending reserve.

As he let go of the seventh sword, the scales glowed red, and the essence within the dragon changed.

"Retreat!" he yelled, running out from under it, just before Don yelled the same. "This is going to be different!" The flash of light as he reached Don had them rubbing their eyes.

He turned and watched in awe as the glowing dragon expanded, broke into eight balls of essence and reformed into eight smaller dragons, each without injuries.

"That's not fair," Jackal yelled as the dragons shook themselves. "All that damage we inflicted is—"

With a unified roar, the dragons rushed them.

Tibs sent an etched ice spear as he moved away from his team, and the dragon he'd targeted launched itself in the air, spreading its wings. Others were also taking off in response to being attacked.

It flew around a column and came out the other side maw opened and essence pooling there. Tibs exerted his will over the essence and accomplished nothing as it ignited and the fireball came at him.

He threw himself aside, and the fireball splashed on the floor as if it was water. He cursed as some fell on him and burned.

Light shot out of a dragon's mouth as Tibs doused the fire sticking to him with far more water than it should have needed. His thoughts of coming to Mez's help were interrupted as the fire-breathing dragon dove at him. He dodged it, then slammed it down with a column of air as it started to go up. He grew stone around its legs to hold it in place and formed an ice sword, then had to jump aside as it spat a ball of fire at him. He had to jump again, its long neck letting it keep targeting him as he moved about, approaching.

When he was in reach, he swung as hard as he could, adding earth to his arm, then nearly fell as it cut through the neck with far more ease than Tibs expected. The head rolled away as he regained his footing, then it and the body crumbled into rubble.

"Tibs," Don called. "I need help."

He ran to the sorcerer, doing a count. Six dragons remained, each airborne. One spewed corruption at Khumdar, who made a wall of darkness that survived long enough for him to no longer be in the way when it failed. He sensed Don try to wrench the corruption away, but with the same result Tibs had achieved with the fire.

The sorcerer pointed to a dragon flying above all the others as it opened its maw and blasted one of its compatriot with purity, healing it.

"We have to kill that one," Don said. "They're vulnerable to their opposed element, but that one—" he pointed to the dragon attacking Khumdar with corruption "—will break-off to intercept my attacks each time."

"They're immune to their own element?"

"Just about. If we attack from multiple directions, one of us will get a hit through."

Tibs hurried through the room, blasting the dragon breathing earth on Jackal apart with a whirlwind. When he turned, the corruption dragon was nimbly catching each blast

Don sent at the purity one.

Tibs blasted it with raw corruption essence, counting on strength to make up for the lack of form to it. The impact sent it against the wall, and Tibs kept it going until it had melted to nothing.

Then he switched to purity and needed a few tries to hit the corruption dragon as it darted around, then its rubble fell to the floor.

The ground shook and Tibs turned in time to watch slabs of stone fly at the dragon diving at Jackal, on his knees, hand on the floor. Below that, light and darkness flashed, then darkness swallowed it. The dragon crashing next to the fighter was the last sound in the room.

Jackal downed a healing potion before Tibs reached him. "Is everyone alive?" he asked.

"Only those on our team," Mez replied.

"Good enough for me." The fighter let himself fall to his side. "I'm taking a nap." A click and a rumble felt through the ground had him on his feet.

The back wall split open, revealing a chest, and behind it, the top of a stairwell.

"Right," Jackal said, tiredly. "We won."

"I'll take the fact he isn't jumping with joy as a victory," Ganny said.

Jackal looked around. "Tibs, check the chest; the rest of us gather the coins or whatever the dragons left behind. Then we're going down. I want to see that fourth floor before heading out."

"Are you okay" Tibs asked.

"I'm fine," the fighter said, the words glowing. "Really, I am," he added, the words still glowing. "I'm just in a hurry to rub in Quig's face that we reached the fourth floor before him."

"And collect that gold?"

"Yeah, that too."

Tibs didn't press. Whatever was bothering Jackal wasn't physical. The potion had put his essence back in its place.

The chest wasn't trapped. It had a bow like Mez's but containing metal essence. A sword contained so much of the same Tibs was reluctant to touch it, but it did nothing when he pulled it out. The green sorcerer's robe was next, then—

"Don," he called on seeing the book that had been under it. It too had essence woven through it, and that, he wasn't touching.

The sorcerer took it out without hesitation, then flipped pages. "It's blank."

"Why would Sto put a blank book woven with essence as loot?"

"More importantly," Don mused. "Why such a book in a boss chest? Can you ask them what it is? Or is this something they can't talk about?"

"The enchantment lets it record knowledge," Sto said.

"Sto," Ganny complained.

"What? They have it. What's the harm in me telling them."

"Telling Tibs, you mean?" she countered. "Part of this is to get them to work some of the reasons you include items, not to give all the answers."

"I haven't given them all the answers," Sto replied, miffed. "They don't know it just

needs to be focused on with the information they want recorded for it to work.”

Ganny sighed.

“He wasn’t supposed to tell us,” Tibs said, amused. “But he let it slip that it’ll record knowledge you focus on it.”

“How much can it hold?” Don asked, flipping through the pages.

“I don’t know,” Sto said, sounding defeated. “Mind essence is more complicated than the others to work with.”

“He doesn’t know,” Tibs said. “Is that important?”

Don stared at Tibs. “Do you know what the most arduous thing a sorcerer, or any scholar, has to do?”

“Read,” Tibs replied flatly.

“The opposite. Write. Taking the ideas we have, having to translate them into something words can express, it’s like... like trying to explain the Elements, but I have to do that with every word, not just a few. Academies had archives filled with books no one understands because the sorcerers couldn’t be bothered to properly document what their research entailed. With something like this, all I’ll have to do is pause long enough to focus my thought on it, and I can get back to my work.”

“So, this is important to you?” Jackal asked.

“Of course, but—what are you doing?” Don asked as the fighter snatched the book out of his hands.

He slipped it into the much smaller pouch. “Making sure the guild doesn’t screw you over for this.” Tibs looked away. The weave that was part of the pouch did something as it let the larger book in that gave him a headache if he paid too much attention.

Don rubbed his temple. “That will never look right.”

Tibs confirm there was no hidden compartment at the bottom of the chest, then headed for the stairs and froze in place on reaching the bottom and seeing the vista.

“Wow,” Jackal whispered.

“That... is an understatement,” Don said, awed.

Tibs didn’t understand what he saw. Where he’d expected a room or a hall, it was open. Open as in, he was looking outside at a city’s rooftops with light coming from a pale sun that was most of the way through the afternoon.

Then how far the roofs were registered, as well as the stairs going down the side of the opening in the cliff.

“How is a city down here?” Mez asked. He looked at Tibs, who only had one reaction.

“Sto?”

“Remember when I said we found something while working on the fourth floor? It was when I made all the items for your team.” Tibs nodded. “This is it. I made the stairs first, and as I pushed them down, suddenly I became aware of all this. I don’t know how to explain it. Think of it as discovering you have a third arm attached to your back, but it’s not new. As soon as you realized it’s there, you also realize you know all the things you can do with it as if you had always known. I know nearly everything about this city and I didn’t have to use any essence for that. I mean, it has essence for me to use.”

“You didn’t make this?” Tibs had trouble understanding how that could be.

“No.”

“Then who did?”

“No idea. There are no ways in or out, except the stairs I made.”

“Ganny doesn’t know?”

“Sorry Tibs,” she said. “No one ever said anything about this.”

“How are we supposed to clear this floor?” he asked. How could they go through every building in half a day? Even a full day couldn’t be enough.

“Here,” Sto said, “clearing the floor isn’t so much doing each room, but finding the boss room. Ganny has clues all over the place to help, but even without them, you’ll eventually find it since you don’t have to go over the rooms you already checked on your next run. And this is where things get interesting. Did you notice how I said I know nearly everything about this floor? There are rooms here I have no idea what they are.”

“How can you not know what they are? This is all you, isn’t it?”

“Again, I can’t explain it. They’re there, and I can sort of make use of them, but the one where I tried to do something special sort of... went away? I mean, the structure is still there, but inside it is... strange.”

Tibs looked at his friends, watching him expectantly. Behind them was the alcove, where the doorway waited to be activated. “I’ll tell you what he said once we’re at the inn.” He rubbed his temple. “I need a drink.”